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The hanging of William Cragh: anatomy of a miracle

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Abstract

This paper is a case study of a miracle story, the hanging and resuscitation of William Cragh. It studies the metamorphosis from a historical event to a miracle story. The miracle itself, on the first impression, seems to be relatively insignificant. Most of the persons involved are unknown from other sources, and the story was rejected in the final phase of canonisation. It is the very weakness of the story that makes it important. The testimonies of the witnesses are often contradictory and there are obvious deviations from the truth.

Why were the witnesses economical with the truth? Some stood to gain, some simply did not remember correctly, some wanted to emphasise their own role, and some wanted to meet the expectations of the papal commission. There is, however, no evidence that the witnesses would have been manipulated by the proctors of the Hereford chapter which stood to gain from the canonisation. It is also evident that the papal commission was not satisfied with merely having the witnesses' statements written down. The commissioners did everything possible to produce an objective and informative file of each miracle for the use of the pope and cardinals. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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On Monday 12 November 1291, Welsh rebels, William Cragh and Traharn ap Howel, were dragged from the dungeons of Swansea Castle and hanged on the nearby gallows. That, by all reason, should have been the end of the story – except that it was not. William Cragh did not die on the gallows, but lived on for years. He was alive and well when he was personally interviewed by the commission set up by Pope Clement V in Hereford on 6–7 November 1307. The task of the papal com-

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mission was to gather information on the case of Thomas of Cantilupe, bishop of Hereford, so that the pope and cardinals could decide whether he should be canonised.¹ This essay is an anatomy of one particular miracle, that of William Cragh. Medieval miracle collections have been the subject of several excellent studies. In most cases they have been analysed precisely as that – collections. Analysing large quantities of sources with quantitative methods has produced valuable information. Nevertheless, it is possible to capture information that is beyond quantitative analysis by carefully examining individual cases.

The miracle of William Cragh is not particularly significant from the perspective of historical importance. It was one of the thirty-eight miracles whose witnesses were personally interviewed by the papal commission. Twenty-six of these miracles made it to the final scrutiny by the pope and cardinals. The case of William Cragh did not belong to these. It was dropped sometime during the bureaucratic process of saint making. Even though the case of William Cragh was not important with regard to the outcome of the canonisation, it is nevertheless very interesting for the historian. It contains valuable information on several interesting topics such as memory, the use of *exemplum*, and the mentality of a late thirteenth-century individual. The key issue in this paper, however, is the miracle itself.

What exactly was considered to be a miracle? How did the metamorphosis from actual historical event to hagiography take place? Were the miracles authentic or forged by those people who stood to gain from the canonisation? Naturally it is impossible to draw any definite conclusions from the analysis of a single miracle concerning the whole system of saint making, or even the individual case of Thomas of Cantilupe. Nevertheless, a detailed study of a single miracle is bound to draw attention to a few details which would be lost within a larger corpus of miracles.

1. Sources and witnesses

The main source of this paper is the notarial record of an inquisition upon the life and miracles of Thomas of Cantilupe, bishop of Hereford (*Inquisitio de fide, uita et moribus, fama et miraculis recolende memorie domini Thome de Cantilupo quondam episcopi dicte ecclesie Herefordensis et ea contingentibus*, as it states in the document).² This record was produced during the year 1307 when the papal commissioners interviewed 205 people in London and in Hereford, and the notaries wrote down their testimonies.³ It is important to acknowledge the role of notaries

¹ On Thomas of Cantilupe, see *St Thomas Cantilupe bishop of Hereford. Essays in his honour*, ed. Meryl Janney (Hereford, 1982).

² Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015.

³ As a source it is very similar to those inquisitorial records used by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie in his study of Mountaillou. Therefore I have been able to benefit from criticisms of Ladurie's book, especially L.E. Boyle, 'Mountaillou revisited: mentalité and methodology', in *Pathways to medieval peasants*, ed. J.A. Raftis. Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Papers in medieval studies, 2 (Toronto, 1981).

in the process. We cannot assume that the witnesses are speaking with their own voices. The message is definitely theirs, but the language is that of civil servants who wrote for other civil servants.⁴

Three papal commissioners were present at the interrogation sessions: William de Testa, a papal tax collector in England, Ralph Baldock, bishop of London, and William Durand the Younger, bishop of Mende. Not all the commissioners were always present, for William de Testa and Ralph Baldock were often absent because of their other duties. There was also a proctor or official representative of the Hereford chapter, and sometimes also a co-proctor. The role of proctors was important for they called most of the witnesses. The Hereford chapter stood to gain from the possible canonisation so it is understandable that they sought to present witnesses whose testimonies would be positive for the canonisation.⁵ The first three witnesses who were interviewed in London in July were called either by Henry of Shorn, archdeacon of the chapter, or by Thomas of Orleton who was also nominated as proctor. Which one is not clear, for the records only tell that they were summoned by *predictus proctor capituli Herefordensis*.⁶ It is known for certain that Thomas of Gynes summoned the last six witnesses interviewed in Hereford in November 1307. He had become a proctor after the sudden illness of Henry of Shorn.⁷

There remains one important person to be introduced, Richard Swinfield, who was the successor to Thomas of Cantilupe in the see of Hereford. Swinfield's name is not mentioned in connection with William Cragh's miracle, but his influence, nevertheless, was considerable. It was Bishop Swinfield who was the prime mover behind Thomas' canonisation process. Ronald Finucane emphasises that no miracles were attributed to Thomas before Bishop Swinfield had his body translated with a ceremony closely resembling the official translation of a saint. Then the miracles began and Swinfield was not slow to propagate them. He used all the means available to convince the pope of Thomas' sanctity. He recruited Kings Edward I and Edward II to Thomas' cause as well as several bishops and cardinals. Their letters persuaded the pope to open canonisation enquiries.⁸ Swinfield also had a say in the selection of the proctors.

Nine witnesses were interviewed in the case of William Cragh. Three of them were interviewed on 14 and 15 July in London, and the rest gave their testimonies between 6 and 9 November in Hereford:

⁴ P. Mariani, 'Racconto spontaneo o memoria costruita? Testi al confronto in alcuni processi di canonizzazione del secolo decimoquarto', *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome. Moyen âge*, tome 108, 1 (1996), 260–261; L.A. Smoller, 'Miracle, memory, and meaning in the canonisation of Vincent Ferrer, 1453–1454', *Speculum*, 73 (1998), 430–431.

⁵ R.C. Finucane, *Miracles and pilgrims. Popular beliefs in medieval England* (New York, 1995), 175–178.

⁶ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 2r and 5r.

⁷ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 182r–v.

⁸ Finucane, *Miracles and pilgrims*, 174–178.

1. Lady Marie of Braose, widow of late William of Braose, lord of Gower, who had sentenced William Cragh to be hanged. She was interviewed in London on 14 July, and gave her testimony in colloquial French (*deposuit in gallica ulgariter*).⁹
2. William of Braose, son of above-mentioned William of Braose, knight and baron of Gower after his father's death, stepson of Marie of Braose. He was interviewed in London on 15 July 1307 and gave his testimony in colloquial French (*deposuit in uulgari gallico*).¹⁰
3. William of Codineston, priest and rector. At the time of the hanging of William Cragh he served as a chaplain in the household of William of Braose senior. He was interviewed in London on 15 July 1307 and gave his testimony in colloquial French (*deposuit uulgariter in lingua gallica*).¹¹
4. William Cragh also known as William ap Rees. Some of the witnesses say that he was a thief (*latro famosus, malefactor*), others imply that he was simply a rebel against English rule. In any case he was an important man at the time, otherwise his friends and relatives would not have been willing to pay one hundred cows to William of Braose as compensation to save him from the gallows. The witness who describes this offer says that it was a common custom in Wales that condemned men were allowed to compensate their crimes with money. This was possible if the temporal lord who imposed the sentence was willing to accept it.¹²

The fact that this offer was declined seems to favour the theory that he was indeed a rebel. There is no good reason why William of Braose should have decided to decline good income just to hang a thief, unless of course he simply did not want to acknowledge the Welsh custom and wanted to observe English custom. English common law did not allow compensation, but demanded that full sanctions be applied to the criminals. The Welsh customs in connection with criminal law were abolished in 1284 by the statute of Edward I in the rest of Wales; in the Marches, however, it would still have been possible to follow the ancient Welsh custom.¹³

Michael Richter assumes that William Cragh may have taken part in the rebellion of Rhys ap Maredudd in 1287.¹⁴ The rebellion gained most of its support in the south-west parts of Wales, that is, the area under the control of Swansea Castle. William of Braose's son, William, took part in the expedition against the rebels with around five hundred armed followers.¹⁵ This makes the hypothesis of Richter quite plausible. The rebellion was crushed in January 1288. Perhaps Wil-

⁹ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 7v–10r.

¹⁰ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 10r–13r.

¹¹ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 13r–14v.

¹² Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 12r–12v. Testimony of William of Braose the younger.

¹³ R.R. Davies, *Conquest, coexistence, and change. Wales 1063–1415* (Oxford, 1987), 368.

¹⁴ Michael Richter, *Sprache und Gesellschaft im Mittelalter. Untersuchungen zur mündlichen Kommunikation in England von der Mitte des Elften bis zum Beginn des Vierzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1979), 198.

¹⁵ John E. Morris, *The Welsh wars of Edward I. A contribution to medieval history, based on original documents* (Oxford, 1968; first published 1901), 215–216.

liam Cragh was caught then by the younger William of Braose. Perhaps he managed to escape and was only captured some considerable time later. Perhaps he was outlawed and supported himself as a highwayman – hence he was known to some witnesses as a rebel and as a robber to others. William Cragh was interviewed in Hereford on 6 and 7 November 1307 and gave his testimony in Welsh. Two Welsh Franciscan friars translated it.¹⁶

5. Thomas Marshal, priest. He was interviewed in Hereford on 7 November 1307 and gave his testimony in French (*deposuit in gallico*).¹⁷
6. John of Baggeham, a freeman living in Swansea under the jurisdiction of William of Braose. At the time of the hanging he was a steward in the household of the elder William of Braose. He was personally involved in the hanging as a member of the group of soldiers sent to supervise it. He was interviewed in Hereford on 7 November 1307 and gave his testimony in French (*deposuit in lingua gallico*).¹⁸
7. Henry the Tanner, freeman. He used to be a servant of the elder William of Braose and was a member of the group of soldiers overseeing the hanging. He was interviewed in Hereford on 8 November 1307 and gave his testimony in English (*deposuit in anglico quia nesciebat loqui litteraliter nec gallicum sicut dixit*).¹⁹
8. Adam of Loghorne (the name Adam de Lowarne is also given in one part of the manuscript), freeman. He was standing upon the town wall at the time of the execution and was close enough (a quarter of a mile) to see personally what happened. He was interviewed in Hereford on 9 November 1307 and gave his testimony in English (*deposuit in anglico quia nesciebat loqui litteraliter nec gallicum sicut dixit*).²⁰
9. Johannes ap Howel, freeman. He was interviewed in Hereford on 9 November 1307 and gave his testimony in English (*deposuit in anglico quia nesciebat loqui litteraliter nec gallicum sicut dixit*).²¹

2. The historical event

The witnesses told very different stories and their recollections contradict in some details. Without any further evidence, it is impossible to know for sure what actually happened. The following reconstruction relies on the testimonies of those witnesses who were actually present at the time of the scene in question. Testimonies given on the basis of hearsay are used only when there are no eyewitnesses available.

The story starts with the capture of William Cragh by the men of William of Braose the younger. He was taken to Swansea Castle. William Cragh states in his

¹⁶ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 219v–222r.

¹⁷ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 222r–223r.

¹⁸ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 223v–225r.

¹⁹ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 225r–226r.

²⁰ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 226r–226v.

²¹ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 226v–227v.

own testimony that he spent fifteen days in dungeons before he was questioned by the elder William of Braose who accused him of killing thirteen men, which he denied. Nevertheless, he was convicted and sentenced to be hanged.²² We do not know from other testimonies how long William had to spend in the dungeons of Swansea Castle, but we do know that he spent some time there before the hanging. When William Cragh was captured, the elder William of Braose was away from his lands, but he was back when the hanging took place. Thus some time must have elapsed between the capture and the hanging.²³

Sometime during the morning of the day appointed for the hanging, William Cragh and Traharn ap Howel were taken out of the dungeons and prepared to be taken to the gallows. When they were brought out of the cell, William Cragh showed signs of contrition by shedding tears for his sins. He also asked those present to pray to God on his behalf and to forgive him all the harm he had caused them. Before the final trip to the gallows William Cragh wanted to confess his sins to William of Codineston, but since the priest only spoke French and Latin, and the condemned man only Welsh, it was not possible. Luckily another priest who understood Welsh was found.²⁴ After the confession both prisoners were taken to the gallows. All the witnesses agree that William Cragh was hanged first. He had to climb up a ladder, and then a kinsman of his put the rope around his neck. There were several friends and kinsmen of William present at the execution by order of William of Braose senior. The one forced to carry out the actual hanging was a certain Ythel Fachan.²⁵ All three witnesses stress in their testimonies that they did not actually see what kind of knot was made nor did they know exactly where it was placed.²⁶ It is not plausible that they all spontaneously mentioned the quality and placing of the noose; it is more likely that this detail was given in response to a question from the papal commissioners who suspected foul play on the part of Ythel Fachan.

Although there was a prepared list of questions to be asked of the witnesses, the case of the knot, and several other similar examples, prove that the commissioners took their assignment seriously. They were ready to ask specific questions if they noticed something dubious; the testimonies of the witnesses were not accepted at face value.

After the rope had been placed around William's neck, the ladder was removed and he was left to hang and suffocate to death, or at least that is what the people present thought. They were sure that William Cragh did die on the gallows. John of Baggeham and Henry the Tanner both told the commissioners that soon after the hanging William lost control of his lower muscles and let *natural superfluities* come out of the lower parts of his body. That was according to common understanding a

²² Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 220r. Testimony of William Cragh.

²³ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 10v. Testimony of William of Braose the younger.

²⁴ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 13r. Testimony of William Codineston.

²⁵ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 220r–v. Testimony of William Cragh.

²⁶ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 220v. Testimony of William Cragh; f. 223v. Testimony of John of Baggeham; f. 225v. Testimony of Henricus Pelliparius.

sign of death (*signum mortis*) in hanged persons.²⁷ Soon after, or as the witnesses testified, ‘as long as it takes a man to walk a quarter of a mile’ later, William of Braose’s men started to hang the other victim, Traharn ap Howel. He was not allowed to climb the ladder himself, but was hauled up from the ground. The only problem is that he was to be hung from the same beam where William Cragh already hung. Traharn ap Howel was a big and heavy man, as some witnesses report, and he struggled a great deal when being hauled up to the gallows. This caused the beam to break in the middle and both men dropped to the ground.²⁸ At this stage both men were considered to be dead, but since it was the custom of the country to keep the condemned on the gallows until the local lord gave permission to take them down, they were hanged again on separate beams.²⁹ This time both men hung on the gallows until sunset.³⁰

During the hanging, Marie of Braose (according to John of Baggeham), or William Cragh’s kinsmen (according to the younger William of Braose), asked the lord of Braose for the body so that they could bury it the following morning. The permission was given, but it is not entirely clear what happened immediately after the bodies were cut down. Marie of Braose claimed that William Cragh’s body was carried at her request to a chapel of St John the Baptist near the town of Swansea. William of Codineston confirmed this testimony. They, however, were not personally present, but spoke on the basis of hearsay.³¹ Other witnesses fail to mention the said chapel, but instead claim that the body was taken to the church of St Mary inside the town. For some reason not specified in the testimonies, they could not enter the church, and were forced to take the body to the house of a Swansea burgher, Thomas Matthaiei, situated next to the church.³² Whether the body was taken straightaway to the house of Thomas Matthaiei or to the chapel of St John the Baptist first, is unclear. Nevertheless, it was in the house by the time of vespers. The priest, Thomas Marshal, testified that he was on his way to church for vespers when he saw people gathering at the house of Thomas Matthaiei, where it was said the body of William Cragh had been taken. He entered the house and found the body.³³

Different witnesses have somewhat different recollections of what happened in

²⁷ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 223v–224r. Testimony of John of Baggeham; f. 225v. Testimony of Henricus Pelliparius. The same information was told to commissioners by Marie of Braose, but she was at the castle during the hanging and was merely repeating hearsay; f. 8r. Testimony of Marie of Braose.

²⁸ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 225v. Testimony of Henricus Pelliparius. The only witness who says explicitly anything about Trahern’s struggling was Johannes ap Howel; Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 227r. ...et cum dictus Trahern erat magnus et ponderosus et traheret uiolenter, fracta trabe ceciderunt ambo ad terram,....

²⁹ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 224r. Testimony of John of Baggeham.

³⁰ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 10v. Testimony of William of Braose the younger.

³¹ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 8r and 14r.

³² Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 11r. Testimony of William of Braose the son; f. 224r. Testimony of John of Baggeham; f. 226v. Testimony of Adam de Loghorne; f. 227r. Testimony of Johannes ap Howel.

³³ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 223r. Testimony of Thomas Marshal.

the house during the evening, but there seems to be a consensus on at least three things. Firstly, William Cragh was absolutely dead at the time. Secondly, they all agreed that his body was measured for the saint, Thomas of Cantilupe, at some time during the evening, and thirdly that around midnight he was miraculously resuscitated. Several witnesses described his appearance and swore that he was indeed dead. Suffice it here to give an abbreviated account of the testimony of the younger William of Braose. He testified that William Cragh's face was all black and partly covered with blood. His eyes were hanging out of their proper places and they were filled with blood. His mouth, throat, neck, and even his nostrils were filled with blood in such a manner that it would have been impossible for him to breathe. His neck was swollen beyond normal measures and his tongue was hanging out of his mouth. It was also black, bloody and swollen to the size of two hands held together. Even if William Cragh had been alive it would have been impossible for him to draw his tongue back into his mouth and breathe.³⁴ Other witnesses gave similar descriptions of William Cragh's appearance right after the hanging.³⁵

The second point on which the testimonies are unanimous is that at some time during the evening the body of William Cragh was measured for St Thomas of Cantilupe. Measuring people in the need of help with thread, and then preparing an appropriately sized wax candle to be offered to the saint in question, was a common custom in England, and it was not completely unknown in continental Europe either.³⁶ Most witnesses recall that it was done by a household maid of Marie of Braose. Marie of Braose testified that she and her servants prayed for Thomas of Cantilupe to intervene on behalf of William Cragh. Then she sent one of her maids to measure him. The order was carried out and the maid came back to tell her about it. All the witnesses except John of Baggeham confirmed this. He stated that he was the one sent to do the measuring by the lady of Braose and he did it too.³⁷ The most plausible explanation for these divergent testimonies seems to be that John of Baggeham wanted to look more important in the eyes of the papal commissioners, and overstated his own role.

This fits well with the hypothesis of Laura Smoller who has argued on the basis of Vincent Ferrer's canonisation process that to know who invoked the saint was vitally important for the witnesses. In her opinion that was because being able to invoke the aid of a saint successfully brought social, and even religious, authority for the person in question. Smoller remarks quite correctly that in many miracle stories the actual hero was not the saint, but the invoker. Thus attempts to gain higher

³⁴ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 11r. Testimony of William of Braose the son.

³⁵ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 223r. Testimony of Thomas Marshal; 224v. Testimony of John of Baggeham; 226v. Testimony of Adam Loghorne.

³⁶ A. Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du Moyen Age: d'après les procès de canonisation et les documents hagiographiques* (Rome, 1988), 533; Finucane, *Miracles and pilgrims*, 95.

³⁷ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 9r. Testimony of Marie of Braose; f. 11v. Testimony of William of Braose the younger; f. 224v. Testimony of John of Baggeham.

spiritual status led to conflicting testimonies from different witnesses.³⁸ However, in the case of John of Baggeham it is not likely that he was after recognition of his spiritual powers. A more likely explanation is simple human vanity. It is a typical human trait to overstate one's own importance when describing events of the past.³⁹ It has been documented that autobiographical memory is partly remembered and partly subconsciously constructed. It is understandable that individuals tend to overestimate their own role and importance in such reconstruction. There are well documented, modern cases very similar to John of Baggeham's case.⁴⁰

Everything described so far has been based on at least one eyewitness. This is not, alas, the case with the awakening of William Cragh. None of the witnesses interviewed were present at the time, save the obvious exception of William Cragh himself, and even he could not remember anything that took place before the following day.⁴¹ Thus what we know of the actual resuscitation is based on hearsay evidence.

William Cragh testified about his awakening that everyone said that he moved his tongue a little and after a while also one of his feet. This took place around cockcrow, though he said that after hearing a noise when the other man was hanged, he did not feel anything before the next day around the time of nones.⁴² Such a recovery from hanging was not an altogether unheard-of novelty. When the hangman was inexperienced, or indeed, did not want to do his job properly, victims sometimes survived. The victims of medieval hanging were not meant to break their necks, but to suffocate to death. A wrong kind of knot placed in the wrong position could save the victim. Occasionally these miracles happened many hours after the actual hanging.⁴³

The miracle of William Cragh was only partial. He did recover, but was not totally cured. All the witnesses who saw him during the next day and days following agreed that he still looked extremely bad, although better than he had been on the evening after the execution. William of Braose junior, who went to see William Cragh four days after the hanging, testified that his tongue was still partly hanging out of his mouth and though he could breathe, he nevertheless was unable to speak. Similarly his eyes were partly healed and certainly looking better, but nevertheless, he was not able to see or recognise people around him. His neck was still swollen, but not

³⁸ Smoller, 'Miracle, memory, and meaning', 443 and 449.

³⁹ As Smoller remarks, this tendency is noticed also by modern psychology: Smoller, 'Miracle, memory, and meaning', 440.

⁴⁰ M.A. Conway, *Autobiographical memory. An introduction* (Philadelphia, 1990), 96–101.

⁴¹ John of Baggeham claims that he was present at the time of the awakening, but his testimony contradicts with everyone else's. Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 224v.

⁴² Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 220v. Testimony of William Cragh.

⁴³ John Bellamy, *Crime and public order in England in the later middle ages* (London, 1973), 187–188; Ronald C. Finucane, 'Sacred corpse, profane carrion: social ideas and death rituals in the later middle ages', in *Mirrors of mortality. Studies in the social history of death*, ed. Joachim Whaley (London, 1981), 49.

as badly as it had been four days previously.⁴⁴ Marie of Braose stated that she had her people make and serve liquid food for William, who was not able to eat anything solid. William of Codineston testified that William Cragh only slowly regained the ability to use and control his hands and feet and had to stay in bed for eight or ten days. Johannes ap Howel adds that after fifteen days William could hardly manage to stay on his feet.⁴⁵ Normally the miraculous cure was supposed to be immediate and complete, but in practice partial miracles were occasionally accepted. Incomplete cures were explained by the lukewarm faith of those who had made the vow. In fact, such an excuse was used when the cardinals were evaluating other miracles of Thomas of Cantilupe.⁴⁶

When William Cragh was completely recovered, the lord of Braose and his wife took him to Hereford to thank Thomas of Cantilupe for his miraculous resuscitation. He did this pilgrimage barefooted with the rope with which he had been hanged around his neck. In Hereford they visited the shrine and donated the rope and a wax image of a hanged man on the gallows to St Thomas.⁴⁷ Afterwards William Cragh bade them farewell and told them he was going to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Some witnesses testified that he never left Wales, but stayed there and died two years later.⁴⁸

3. The miracle

3.1. *The ad hoc version*

The reader might wonder what exactly was miraculous about the ‘death’ of William Cragh. Did he not simply survive the hanging, which, of course, was not something that happened every day, but neither was it an unheard-of event? The resuscitation of William Cragh was miraculous precisely because he was considered to be dead. He probably was not dead from the viewpoint of modern medical science, but that is totally beside the point. In the eyes of his contemporaries he was definitely beyond the point of no return. Thus we must ask, when exactly was a person considered to be dead in the Middle Ages? Christian Krötzel has written an interesting essay on the subject using Scandinavian miracle stories as sources.⁴⁹ The conclusions

⁴⁴ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 11v. Testimony of William of Braose the younger.

⁴⁵ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 8v. Testimony of Marie of Braose; 14r. Testimony of William of Codineston; 227v. Testimony of John ap Howel.

⁴⁶ Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident*, 575.

⁴⁷ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 221v. Testimony of William Cragh; f. 11v. Testimony of William of Braose the son.

⁴⁸ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 9v. Testimony of Marie of Braose.

⁴⁹ C. Krötzel, ‘Evidentissima signa mortis. Zu Tod und Todesfeststellung in Mittelalterlichen Mirakelberichten’, in: *Symbole des Alltags, Alltag der Symbole. Festschrift für Harry Kühnel zum 65. Geburtstag*. Herausgegeben von Gertrud Blaschitz, Helmut Hundsbichler, Gerhard Jaritz und Elisabeth Vavra (Graz, 1992), 765–775.

of Krötzl's article can be summarised as follows: there were no sure and generally accepted signs of death, save in a few obvious cases such as plague victims, but there were two common ways of establishing that a person was indeed dead. The first one was simply to wait and see if any signs of life appeared over the course of time. The second one was public opinion. It was common that when people were dying there were always plenty of people around – family, relatives and those who were simply curious. The *exitus* was determined by the opinion of those present.⁵⁰

Both these means of confirming death can be seen in the case of William Cragh. According to custom there were a considerable number of people of both sexes present at his wake, most of them seemingly attracted by the fact that he was a hanged criminal. Furthermore, the witnesses emphasised public opinion on numerous occasions to convince the commissioners that William was indeed dead when they saw him.⁵¹ It is noteworthy that all the witnesses state that they truly believe, and, as they often add, others present believed too, that William Cragh was dead. None of them brings forward any positive evidence of his death with one sole exception: those people who were present at the actual hanging seem to put great emphasis on the loss of control over bodily functions.

Thus it was established that William Cragh had indeed died and his resuscitation was a miracle, but where does Thomas of Cantilupe come into the picture? William of Codineston testified that William Cragh, while he was being taken to the gallows, prayed out loud to Saint Thomas. No other witness testifies that such a prayer ever took place, and even William of Codineston did not hear it personally, but heard it later from many who claimed to have heard it themselves.⁵² William Cragh himself testified to having made such prayers, but as we shall see, there might be a very good reason for him to spread such a story.⁵³ One might ask how likely it was for a Welshman who did not even speak English and who may have been fighting against the English to invoke the help of an English saint who was not yet even officially canonised.

The only unquestionable fact seems to be that Marie of Braose was extremely devoted to Thomas of Cantilupe. This could be due to the fact that she was distantly related to him.⁵⁴ It was she who ordered Cragh to be measured for St Thomas. This measuring is the only firmly documented action that ties together the resuscitation of William Cragh and Thomas of Cantilupe. Thus it could be said that the person who brought St Thomas into the story was not William Cragh, but the lady of Braose.

⁵⁰ Krötzl, 'Evidentissima signa mortis', 769–775.

⁵¹ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 10r and 11v. Testimony of William of Braose the younger; f. 224r–v. Testimony of John of Baggeham; f. 225v. Testimony of Henricus Pelliparius; f. 227r. Testimony of John ap Howel.

⁵² Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 13r. Testimony of William of Codineston.

⁵³ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 221v. Testimony of William Cragh.

⁵⁴ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 12v. Testimony of William of Braose the younger. Thomas of Cantilupe's oldest brother William III was married to an heiress of the de Braose family; N.D.S. Martin, 'The life of Saint Thomas of Hereford', in: *St Thomas Cantilupe bishop of Hereford*, 15.

William Cragh was not slow to pick up this detail and to use it to his personal advantage. When he regained consciousness he soon realised that he was still in mortal danger. Even though the survivors of hanging were customarily pardoned, it was not a certainty. There are known cases where the survivor was simply hanged again with better success.⁵⁵ Knowing that the lord of Braose had rejected an offer of a hundred cows in return for his life, William could not count on his mercifulness.⁵⁶

While in bed recovering from the hanging William Cragh had plenty of time to learn of what had happened after he was hanged. By the time he was summoned to the castle he had convinced himself that he was rescued by St Thomas of Cantilupe, or perhaps more plausibly, had decided to go along with the story. We have two witness statements regarding the discussion between William of Braose senior, his wife, and William Cragh that took place in Swansea castle. Marie of Braose testified:

...that when he was taken to the gallows the said William begged God that He would release him from such a vile death because of the merits of Saint Thomas of Cantilupe, the aforementioned bishop of Hereford. Furthermore he reported that when he was hanged a certain bishop, as it appeared to him, held his feet and prevented him from being hanged.⁵⁷

Notaries wrote down William de Codineston's testimony concerning the same situation as follows:

The said William Cragh having regained his health in the presence of the witness himself told the lord of Braose, who then was, and the lady Marie his wife, who was examined before, that he had prayed as he said before, and all this the said William told in the room of the said lord of Braose in his castle in Swansea with a great fear and distress, for he thought he might be hanged again...Secondly he said that when he was hanged, a certain bishop in white clothes held his legs holding him upwards in the gallows so that he would not be killed. When the said William Cragh was asked by the aforementioned lord of Braose, the witness himself being present, who that bishop was, he replied that he did not know.⁵⁸

We learn that William Cragh was indeed sufficiently afraid of rehangings that it was apparent to an outside observer like Thomas of Codineston. This alone does not justify calling William a storyteller, but the fact is that the story of a thief saved in the gallows by being held by the legs was already an ancient one by this time. It is

⁵⁵ Bellamy, *Crime and public order*, 188; Finucane, 'Sacred corpse, profane carrion', 49–50.

⁵⁶ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 12v. Testimony of William of Braose the younger.

⁵⁷ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 8v. Testimony of Marie of Braose.

⁵⁸ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 13v–14r. Testimony of William Codineston.

one of the most popular *exemplum* stories of the Middle Ages.⁵⁹ It originates in a collection of miracles attributed to the Holy Virgin written by William of Malmesbury in the early twelfth century.⁶⁰ The French Dominican, Etienne de Bourbon, told the most well known version in his book *Liber de septem donis spiritum sancti*:

We read that there was a certain thief who had this one merit, that he fasted with bread and water on the vigils of Mary's feast days. Also when he went out to rob, he always read the Hail Mary and begged the Virgin not to allow him to die in this state of sin. He was caught and hanged, and he hung on the gallows for three days not able to die. He shouted to the passers-by and asked them to fetch a priest. The priest came along with several others and when they took him down from the gallows he said that a most beautiful virgin had held him by his feet for three days. The thief promised to mend his ways and was set free.⁶¹

The parallels between William Cragh's miracle and this *exemplum* are obvious. There is plenty of evidence for the popularity of this *exemplum*.⁶² It was even used in another miracle of Thomas of Cantilupe. The situation is nearly exactly the same as in William Cragh's case. A woman called Cristina Cray was hanged for theft because she had mistakenly taken into her herd a young pig belonging to someone else. Cristina survived the hanging and regained consciousness after being taken to the local church. There the royal judge who had sentenced her demanded that she should be hanged again on the basis that it had not been done properly. Cristina answered by telling a similar story about Thomas of Cantilupe keeping her alive on the gallows.⁶³

How did William Cragh learn about the story of Holy Virgin and the thief? The most likely explanation is that he had heard it in a sermon. This, however, we cannot know for sure, nor does it really matter. The important thing is that he decided to use it to save himself from being hanged again. It would have been much more difficult to hang a man saved by the saint than to hang him simply because he had survived the first hanging. Marie of Braose had already made known her devotion to Thomas, and she therefore was likely to believe in his intervention. This is the point at which the resuscitation of William Cragh was transformed into a miracle by Thomas of Cantilupe.

William Cragh's resuscitation was accepted by the Braose family as a genuine miracle. The lord of Braose who was not willing to take a hundred cows as compen-

⁵⁹ See F.C. Tubach, *Index exemplorum. A handbook of medieval religious tales*, FF Communications, 204 (Helsinki, 1981), 2235, and numbers 2234, 2236, 3796 for variants of the story.

⁶⁰ B. Ward, *Miracles and medieval mind: theory, record and event, 1000–1215* (London, 1982), 155–156.

⁶¹ A. Lecoy de la Marche, *Anecdotes historiques, légendes et apologues tirés du recueil inédit d'Étienne de Bourbon, dominicain du XIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1877), no. 119.

⁶² See Baudouin de Gaiffier, 'Un thème hagiographique: le pendu miraculeusement sauvé', in: B. de Gaiffier, *Études critiques d'hagiographie et d'iconologie* (Bruxelles, 1967), 194–226.

⁶³ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f.230v–234r. Testimonies of John Alkyn, Nicolaus the Barber, Gregorius de la Birthes, John of Eton, and Robert of Widemerstrete.

sation for William Cragh's crimes was now ready not only to pardon him, but to go on pilgrimage with him and have votive presents made at his own expense.⁶⁴ William Cragh on the other hand was possibly not equally enthusiastic about the idea of travelling together with the Braose family. It seems plausible that he came up with the idea of going to the Holy Land simply to be rid of his companions. This would explain the testimony that he did not actually leave his native country but returned home.

3.2. *The version of 1307*

When William Cragh was interviewed by the papal commissioners, he denied having seen any vision at all while he was hanging on the gallows. In fact, he testified to having been unconscious, or as he believed it, dead from his hanging until late that night.⁶⁵ This does not mean that William denied that a miracle had happened. He told the commissioners of a miraculous vision, but in a completely different version from that told to the Braose family.

According to William, the Holy Virgin had appeared to him in prison early in the morning of the execution. Accompanying her was a certain lord. She told William that the other person was Saint Thomas who would save him from the gallows. William described to the commissioners the clothing of the Holy Virgin which, hardly surprisingly, was similar to her iconographic representations. He did not, however, remember anything about the clothing or appearance of the other person. When the commissioners asked how William knew it was Thomas of Cantilupe, not St Thomas the apostle, or Thomas of Canterbury, he replied that he had made a pilgrimage to the shrine of Thomas of Cantilupe and furthermore he had bent a coin for him.⁶⁶ This manifestly different version of the miracle brings us to the question of the integrity and honesty of the saint-making process. It is indisputable that some aspects of William Cragh's miracle were falsified or at least wrongly remembered by the witnesses. If there was conscious manipulation of the witnesses, it was most likely committed by the proctor of the Hereford chapter.⁶⁷

There are some dubious details in the testimonies of William Cragh's miracle. The first is the dating of the miracle. At the beginning of this essay it was stated that he was hanged on Monday 12 November 1291. This conclusion was reached by looking at the testimonies given by a group who all agreed that the hanging of William Cragh had occurred on the Monday immediately following the feast of St

⁶⁴ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 9v. Testimonies of Marie of Braose and William of Braose the younger.

⁶⁵ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 220v. Testimony of William Cragh.

⁶⁶ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 220v–221r. Testimony of William Cragh.

⁶⁷ It was Richard Swinfield, bishop of Hereford 1282–1317, who was the most urgent supporter of Thomas of Cantilupe's cause. Ronald Finucane takes the view that Swinfield did more than just promote the existent cult of Saint Thomas; he in fact created it, for the first known miracle occurred only five years after the bishop's death, and the first miracle occurred nicely in coincidence with quasi-translation of Thomas' bones orchestrated by Bishop Swinfield: Finucane, *Miracles and pilgrims*, 181–182.

Martin fifteen or sixteen years ago.⁶⁸ All these witnesses testified in November 1307 in Hereford and were invited to testify by Thomas of Gynes, the proctor on behalf of the diocese of Hereford.⁶⁹ The earlier witnesses who gave their testimony in July 1307 in London were not as unanimous on the date of hanging. Marie of Braose thought it was roughly fifteen years ago; she could not remember the day or even the month, but thought it was in winter. Her son thought it was eighteen years ago between the feasts of St Michael and All Saints. Their chaplain William of Codineston said it was sixteen years ago, but he could not remember the day or even the month.⁷⁰ It is odd that these three witnesses who were all central figures in the story could only vaguely remember when it had happened, but another group of witnesses, who with the exception of William Cragh himself were not so personally involved in the case, remembered without difficulty the exact date.

If the hanging took place fifteen or sixteen years earlier on the Monday right after (*postinstans*) the feast of St Martin, the only possible dates would be 12 November 1291 and 17 November 1292. The latter date seems unlikely for there were a full six days between the feast of St Martin and the following Monday. Furthermore, the feast of St Edmund of Abingdon fell in between. The date 12 November 1291 on the other hand seems very plausible because in 1291 Monday was indeed the next day after St Martin's day. Thus everything seems to confirm this date.

Everything, but one little detail – William of Braose senior who had sentenced William Cragh was already dead on 12 November 1291. An order of Edward I to the echeator on this side of Trent to take into the king's hand the lands late of William de Breus, deceased, tenant-in-chief, is dated 6 January 1291. There is no possibility of error since there are two other royal documents on the same matter. One of them mentions the names of William of Braose the younger as new tenant in chief and Marie of Braose as widow of the said William of Braose. These are dated 7 February and 1 March 1291.⁷¹ It is likely that William of Braose was dead already in 1290.⁷² Thus the witnesses who gave this date either remembered wrongly or lied.

It is not unthinkable that several witnesses should have similar inconsistencies, although it is an odd coincidence. This, of course, does not prove that the witnesses were necessarily manipulated by the Hereford proctor to give this specific date. There is no evidence of such manipulation in connection with other miracles of Thomas of Cantilupe. There seems little point in manipulating only one case of thirty-eight.

The other problem is that we cannot know for sure whether the William Cragh who testified on 6–7 November 1307 in Hereford was indeed the same man who

⁶⁸ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 220r, 222v, 223v, 225v, 226r, and 227r. Testimonies of William Cragh, Thomas Marshal, John of Baggeham, Henricus Pelliparius, Adam Loghorne, and Johannes ap Howel.

⁶⁹ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 119v.

⁷⁰ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, ff. 9r, 10r, and 14v. Testimonies of Marie of Braose, William of Braose the younger, and William of Codineston.

⁷¹ *Calendar of Fine Rolls*. Edward I, Vol. I, 1272–1307 (London, 1911), 287–290.

⁷² I.J. Sanders, *English baronies. A study of their origin and descent 1086–1327* (Oxford, 1960), 108.

was hanged in Swansea and who allegedly had died few years back. The witness may have been an impostor brought forward by the proctors to give more credibility to the miracle. It would have made sense from the point of view of the proctor and the chapter to use such an impostor. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that the witness was indeed William Cragh. Firstly, if the William Cragh who testified in front of the papal commissioners was an impostor, he was very well briefed by someone. He was aware of numerous details of the hanging and what took place afterwards. His testimony is so long and so meticulous in its details that it seems impossible that it was completely invented.

Secondly, several witnesses who testified at the same time in Hereford positively identified him as William Cragh. If he was not, they were all lying to papal commissioners. All the witnesses had sworn an oath upon the Gospels that they would tell the truth.⁷³ It was a solemn oath and there would have to be a good reason to break it by deliberately lying. Thirdly, papal commissioners physically examined the witness. They did not find any traces of hanging on his neck, but they did find a scar on his tongue. According to the witness, the scar was caused by the fact that he had bitten his tongue when being hanged.⁷⁴

The last problem is the mysterious difference between the two miracle stories told by William Cragh. Perhaps William Cragh simply did not remember the story he had told more than sixteen years ago; after all, he did not know that he would be formally interviewed someday. Perhaps he was encouraged by someone to change his story. Be that as it may, the fact remains that he changed it.

4. From historical event to hagiographic story

The overall impression one gets from reading the testimonies is that all in all they were trustworthy and given *in bona fide*. The same applies to the activities of the papal commission and the proctors. Papal commissioners were obviously keen to collect reliable information for the pope and cardinals to use in making the actual decision on canonisation. Their role, however, was not to pass judgement on the credibility of witnesses or some details of their testimonies, but to gather all the information necessary for others to make such decisions.⁷⁵ The Hereford proctors were naturally keen to produce the best possible evidence to support the case of Thomas of Cantilupe. It seems, however, that they were not producing forged evidence and false witnesses. The testimonies of different witnesses have too many differences between them to have been invented by the proctors. Furthermore, some witnesses called by the proctors even deny any knowledge of the miracle itself. Had

⁷³ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 3r.

⁷⁴ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4015, f. 222r.

⁷⁵ Smoller, 'Miracle, memory, and meaning', 432.

they been bribed to produce false testimonies they would probably have told detailed stories of the miracle so that there would have been no room for doubt.⁷⁶

Furthermore, there is no positive evidence that the proctors in this case or any other miracle attributed to Thomas of Cantilupe would have produced manipulated evidence. The only persons to hint that something was not as it should have been were the four witnesses of the London Franciscan convent; they witnessed that one of the miracles was a fraud, but even they did not explicitly claim that the proctors orchestrated it. Perhaps the educated Franciscans were simply more sceptical than other witnesses.

Nevertheless, not all the testimonies corresponded to the exact historical events, not even when the witnesses were testifying as honestly as they could. The inquisition was carried out more than fifteen years after the actual events. Therefore it is only natural that sometimes the witnesses were betrayed by their own memory. They did not know that one day they would be called to testify and thus they had no specific reason to memorise the details particularly well. Sometimes the details may, but just may, have been manipulated by the proctors who wanted to have the testimonies given in the best possible form. They knew what sort of miracles were required to qualify. This does not mean that they necessarily would have dreamed up evidence or summoned false witnesses. Nevertheless, if a genuine miracle was in danger of being presented clumsily by the witnesses, it would have been only natural to guide them to present their testimonies in a more credible form. However, the chances for such manipulation were very limited because the interrogation followed a pre-established pattern of questions.

Even if the proctors did not manipulate the witnesses, they might still have presented their testimonies according to the generally recognised pattern of a miracle story. This was done to give meaning to their memories and recollections of the events.⁷⁷ They had heard miracle stories in sermons and saint's day readings and thus were aware of the characteristics of a real miracle story.

Sometimes the witnesses, like the above-mentioned John of Baggeham, overemphasised their role and importance through arrogance; some were carried away by the situation and added some extra colour to their stories. Finally, sometimes witnesses had personal reasons to break the solemn oath and lie when giving their testimonies. That is what probably happened to William Cragh, who had to create a miracle to save his life. When his miracle finally became an object of official inquiry he hardly could have said that no miracle had happened. All these possible elements build up to make the difference between the actual historical event and the hagiographic miracle story.

⁷⁶ André Vauchez has reached the same general conclusion, namely that the proctors did not normally try to manipulate the evidence given by the witnesses; Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident*, 557.

⁷⁷ Smoller, 'Miracle, memory, and meaning', 433.

5. Epilogue

William Cragh or William ap Rees exists in history only in connection with the canonisation process of Thomas of Cantilupe. We encounter him first as the central figure of a miracle story that took place in the late 1280s. He is introduced as a rebel and a criminal. Then he is met as a witness before the papal commission in 1307, that is as a saintmaker.

The miracle of William Cragh's resuscitation was one of the thirty-eight posthumous miracles of Thomas of Cantilupe that were studied by the papal commission in 1307. Twenty-six of these miracles were eventually discussed by Pope John XXII and his cardinals when considering their final decision. Hundreds of other miracles meticulously collected and written down by the Hereford canons were simply ignored; amongst the rejected stories was the miracle of William Cragh. Eventually Thomas of Cantilupe was enrolled in the register of official saints. This was done at the formal canonisation ceremony on 16 and 17 April 1320.⁷⁸ Whether William Cragh lived to see the outcome of the process in which his hanging was a minor part, we do not know. He disappears from known history after finishing his testimony on 7 November 1307.

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⁷⁸ Finucane, *Miracles and pilgrims*, 177–178.