

Ralph de Limésy: Conqueror's Nephew?

The Origins of a Discounted Claim

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The name of Ralph de Limésy is well enough known to medieval prosopographers, both as a substantial tenant-in-chief in several counties in post-Conquest England and as the founder (*ca* 1095) of a Benedictine house at Hertford as a cell of St. Alban's. From the seventeenth century, attempts have been made to put some flesh on the bones of this powerful but obscure figure by asserting that he had a very specific claim to royal patronage: that he was, in fact, the 'sister's son' of William the Conqueror.¹ The purpose of the present note is not to test this claim (which has long been discounted),² but to trace its origin a little further back – and to demonstrate its surprising resilience. The claim was first made in print by the seventeenth-century poet and antiquary John Weever in his *Ancient Funerall Monuments*: 'Here in this Towne [Hertford] was a Priory of blacke Monkes ... founded by *Raph Limsey*, a Noble man ... I have my authority out of the Collections of *Thomas Talbot*, sometime keeper of the Records in the Tower, a great Genealogist; these are his words. "*Raph Lord Limsey* buried in the Priorie of Hertford which he founded: he came into England with the Conquerour, and was his sisters sonne, as the Monkes of the same house report".³ Talbot's numerous surviving manuscripts in the Bodleian and in the British Library show him actively researching and extracting about the middle of the sixteenth century.⁴ The specific source of the passage cited by Weever (not previously identified) is in BL, Cotton Vesp. D.xvii, a collection of Talbot's notes on genealogical and heraldic matters drawn from monastic registers and similar documents, many of which are now lost. Talbot typically indicates his source at the head of each collection of extracts. Among these are some notes beginning on fo. 85v taken from 'y^e regestre of y^e ffriers minors at yernemuthe', that is, the Franciscan house at Great Yarmouth. The next statement of source is not found until fo. 88r, when a series of extracts from Dunmow Priory begins. Talbot's main interest in the Yarmouth register was to record details it preserved of the powerful Fastolf family; but at fo. 87v he noted: 'Raufe Lord *Lymesey* buried in the priory of Hertford w^{ch} he founded, came in to England wth y^e Conquiro^r & was *his sisters son*, as the monkes of y^e same house report' – as Weever later faithfully repeated it.

This passage is undated, but on either side are notes concerning the marriages of Margaret, *suo jure* Duchess of Norfolk (d. 1399), and the dates of death of two fifteenth-century bishops of Norwich, William Alnwick (later Bishop of Lincoln, d. 1449) and Thomas Brown (d. 1445), and of John, fourth Earl of Worcester (d. 1470). The Norfolk interest of most of these entries suggests (but does not prove) that they (and the note about Limésy) were also drawn by Talbot from the Yarmouth register. The register itself no longer survives. Similarly, the surrounding dates suggest that the claim about Ralph's connection with the Conqueror was already current in the mid-fifteenth century.

The register of a Franciscan monastery at Yarmouth is a puzzling place for such an assertion to be made. Neither the Limésy family nor Ralph's foundation at Hertford had

much obvious association with the Norfolk coast. One or two possible routes by which the story might have travelled from Hertford to Yarmouth do suggest themselves, though neither is at all likely: 1) the Conqueror had granted Ralph de Limésy lands in Norfolk at Oxborough and Didlington, both, however, far inland in South Greenhoe hundred (*DB*, fo. 245a); and 2) in 1239-40 William de Weyland held the third part of a fee at Shipden in North Erpingham hundred from Hugh de Odingsels, who married Basilia de Limésy, great-great-granddaughter of Ralph.⁵ In any case, it is not possible to trace the story further back than this fifteenth-century report. There is no evidence from Hertford that the monks themselves believed it in the earlier medieval period, though presumably it must have circulated orally for some time before being committed to writing. A surviving *curia regis* roll from the reign of Richard I shows that the house then claimed to have charters of Ralph de Limésy ‘the elder’ and his uncle (? or possibly cousin, or wife’s uncle: *Au_culi sui*), but makes no mention of any relationship with the Conqueror;⁶ and the obit list of Belvoir Abbey (like Hertford, a cell of St.. Alban’s) commemorates both Ralph (*fundator ecclesie de Herteford*) and William without asserting any connection between them.⁷ The claim, then, would seem to originate, as perhaps one might have expected, in a late medieval attempt by the Benedictines at Hertford to exaggerate the connections of their founder. Some colour may have been lent to it by the supposed marriage of one of William’s sisters, Adelaide, to Lambert of *Lens*.⁸ That there were connections of patronage, and perhaps of kinship, between the Limésys and the dukes of Normandy is not in question. Indeed, the granting of so many estates to Ralph by the Conqueror virtually proves as much, and bearers of this name witnessed Norman ducal charters before the Conquest;⁹ but there is no contemporary evidence whatever for a marriage between a sister of William and a member of the Limésy family. Nevertheless, the story has died hard: the editor’s notes to the Phillimore edition of Norfolk Domesday (1984) report that Ralph was ‘the sister’s-son to King William’.¹⁰ It is a salutary reminder that a claim made orally in a medieval monastery and committed to writing by an early modern antiquary can still circulate in print even in our own day.

NOTES

¹ See n. 3 below; F. Blomefield & C. Parkin, *An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, 11 vols (London, 1805-10), VIII, 102; J. W. Linzee, *The Lindeseie and Limesi Families of Great Britain*, 2 vols (Boston, 1917), I, 186; *Domesday Book*, gen. ed. J. Morris, 38 vols (Chichester, 1975/92), XXXIII/2, n. to ch. 28.

² For accounts of the Conqueror’s family, see *Complete Peerage*, ed. G. E. C[ockayne], 13 vols (1910-59), XII, pt 1, App. K, esp. p. 33; D. Douglas, *William the Conqueror* (London, 1964), pp. 380-1.

³ J. Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments within the United Monarchie of Great Britaine, Ireland, and the Islands Adiacent* (S.T.C. 25223, London, 1631), p. 543. On Weever, see E. A. J. Honigmann, *John Weever* (Manchester, 1987), esp. pp. 57-79. The passage cited is not found in Weever’s manuscript collections for the *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (London, Society of Antiquaries, 127 and 128).

⁴ On Talbot, see *D.N.B.*

⁵ Blomefield & Parkin, *Essay*, VIII, 102.

⁶ *Feet of Fines of the Tenth Year of the Reign of King Richard I...*, Pipe Roll Soc., old ser., XXIV, 219.

⁷ Printed from Cambridge, Trinity College, O. 9. 25, in J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, 4 vols (London, 1795/1815), II, pt 1, App., pp. 2539 (Ralph: 23 April, p. 28; William: 9 September, p. 35).

⁸ Douglas, *William the Conqueror*, p. 380; but others have argued that this supposed marriage never took place: Guy of Amiens, *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*, edd. C. Morton & H. Muntz (Oxford, 1972), Notes, Table III, p. 127.

⁹ See, e.g., *Recueil des actes des ducs de Normandie de 911 à 1066*, ed. M. Fauroux (Caen, 1961), pp. 2223 (no. 84: Saint-Trinité-du-Mont, 1030H1035), 343-4 (no. 158: Rouen, 29 June 1063).

¹⁰ See n. 3 above