

## Ralph de Limésy, Great Yarmouth and St. Albans: An Additional Note.

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On May 1997, I published a short article in *Prosopon* on the source of the long-exploded claim that Ralph de Limésy, a substantial tenant-in-chief in post-Conquest England, was a nephew of William the Conqueror.<sup>1</sup> The claim is first recorded in the collections of the sixteenth-century antiquary Thomas Talbot, who apparently found it in a mid-fifteenth-century entry in the (lost) register of the Franciscan house at Great Yarmouth, where it is attributed to the community of the Benedictine house at Hertford, founded by Ralph c. 1095 as a cell of St. Albans. In the article I made one or two suggestions (neither, I confess, especially convincing) as to how this story could have travelled from Hertford to Yarmouth. The purpose of the present note is simply to strengthen the link between these two communities, apparently so disparate, by pointing to two connections between Yarmouth and Hertford's neighbouring mother-house at St. Albans.

First, St. Albans was much involved with the herring-fishing trade at Great Yarmouth, both as landowner and as consumer.<sup>2</sup> As customer, in 1350 the abbot bought over 130,000 fish, the largest single purchase made by any monastic house between 1340 and 1360;<sup>3</sup> while as landowner, Abbot William of Trumpington (1214-35) acquired a herring-fish-house at Yarmouth for St. Albans, and a second 'house' (placeam), possibly for the same purpose, was bought later in the century by Abbot Roger de Norton (1263-90).<sup>4</sup> A fish house at Yarmouth must have been an important source of income for St. Albans – as well as a fairly substantial physical structure<sup>5</sup> – and no doubt monks from the house must occasionally have visited the town to inspect it.

Secondly, at some point in the fourteenth century one 'John Zernemouth', or 'John of Yarmouth', was keeper of the chapel of St. Mary at St. Albans; he had organs installed and donated a silver-gilt chalice and paten.<sup>6</sup> It was just at this time, of course, that toponymical by-names such as John's were hardening into hereditary surnames,<sup>7</sup> making it impossible to be absolutely sure that John himself came from Great Yarmouth; but it must be practically certain that he did so, not least since in the fourteenth century the surname was still very largely confined to the eastern counties.<sup>8</sup> It is easy to imagine either an occasional St. Albans visitor to the fish-house at Yarmouth, or one with closer associations with the town like John, repeating there the story of Ralph de Limésy's ancestry, which would eventually have been reduced to writing in the register of the Franciscan house.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> P. Jackson, 'Ralph de Limésy: Conqueror's Nephew? The Origins of a Discounted Claim', *Prosopon*, no. 6 (May 1977), [1]-[2].

<sup>2</sup> On the importance of the herring industry at Yarmouth throughout the medieval period, see A. Saul, 'Great Yarmouth in the Fourteenth Century: A Study in Trade, Politics and Society' (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1975), pp. 177-209; idem, 'The Herring Industry at Great Yarmouth, c. 1280-c. 1400', *Norfolk Archaeology*, 38 (1983), 33-43; R. Tittler, 'The English Fishing Industry in the Sixteenth Century: The Case of Great Yarmouth', *Albion*, 9 (1977), 40-60.

<sup>3</sup> Saul, 'Great Yarmouth in the Fourteenth Century', p. 323 (Appendix VIA); cf. p. 183 n. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Gesta Abbatum Monasterii Sancti Albani*, ed. H.T. Riley, 3 vols. (Rolls Ser., London, 1867-69), I, 289-90, 477.

<sup>5</sup> 'Fish-houses were probably tall with small floor area... Fish-houses might have cellars, first floor rooms, gardens, yards or warehouses and a building might hold more than one fish-house; usually a salthouse was attached': Saul, 'The Herring Industry at Great Yarmouth', p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> John Amersham (attrib.), *Annales Monasterii S. Albani*, ed. H.T. Riley, 2 vols. (Rolls Ser., London, 1870-71), II, 327 (Appendix I); V.C.H. Herts., IV, 395 n. 77 (citing BL, Cotton Nero D. vii, fos. 81d-85).

<sup>7</sup> The shift to fixed by-names, which had begun in the mid-twelfth century, though 'virtually accomplished by the mid-fifteenth century', was 'by no means universal' even then: C. Clark, 'Onomastics', in *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, 2: 1066-1476, ed. N. Blake (Cambridge, 1992), 542-606, at pp. 581-82 (see also pp. 572-74 and 577-83 *passim*).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. J. Greatrex, *Biographical Register of the English Cathedral Priories of the Province of Canterbury c. 1066 to 1540* (Oxford, 1997), who records a cluster of seven bearers of the by-name '(de) Jernemuth' (or variants) among the clergy at Norwich Cathedral Priory between the mid-fourteenth century and the mid-fifteenth, but finds no reference to the name elsewhere in the province of Canterbury.