

The Holy Forgery of Bromholm

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Abstract: *This article describes the history of a medieval English True Cross relic, known as the Holy Rood of Bromholm, supposedly acquired from Constantinople by an English cleric during the Fourth Crusade. It compares the English monastic accounts of the Holy Rood's translation with accounts of the Fourth Crusade and its aftermath to explore the biography of the English cleric who gave the relic to Bromholm Priory and determine the historicity of his account. However, in exploring the supposed origins of the Bromholm Cross, this article demonstrates that not only can it not be the relic it claims to be, because that relic continued to be used in Constantinople after its supposed departure for England, but points out that the descriptions and artistic depictions of the Bromholm Cross match a very different True Cross relic from Constantinople than the relic it purports to be – thus proving it to be a forgery.*

Keywords: *Holy Rood of Bromholm, Bromholm Priory, Relics, Relic Forgery, True Cross, Fourth Crusade, Latin Empire of Constantinople, Constantinople*

In February 1537, a year after Parliament had approved Henry VIII's suppression of the monasteries, Richard Southwell, former High Sheriff of Norfolk and Suffolk and tutor to Gregory Cromwell, son of Thomas Cromwell, the Chancellor of England, rode into the precincts of Bromholm Abbey and declared it suppressed.¹ He took with him that day the abbey's most cherished relic – a cross which the monks had claimed was brought to the abbey from Constantinople in the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade. Relics of the True Cross were nothing new to the agents of Henry VIII, they had seized dozens on their journeys across England, most only the size of a splinter, but the relic of Bromholm was different because of its massive scale, larger than a man's forearm. In fact, if genuine, it would be one of the largest true cross relics anywhere in the world.² Southwell informed his friend Cromwell of the acquisition of the relic and Cromwell requested the relic be

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¹ Francis Wormald, "The Rood of Bromholm", *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 1/1 (1937), p. 43.

² Anatole Frolov, *La relique de la Vraie Croix: recherches sur le développement d'un culte*, Institut Français d'Études Byzantines, Paris, 1961, pp. 68-72, 81-94.

sent to him personally in London, which Richard sent on Feb 26th, 1537.³ What became of it once it reached Cromwell's desk is unknown, did he keep it for private devotion, or as a Protestant iconoclast, strip its silver reliquary, and toss the wood into his fireplace?

It is clear to see why Cromwell may have been interested in the Rood of Bromholm. The relic had a long and storied tradition in England and the Cluniac monks who protected the cross grew rich, receiving patronage from king and commoner alike. In fact, King Henry III was one of the first converts to the cult of the Holy Rood. Henry travelled to Bromholm on pilgrimage many times during his reign, normally during Lent or shortly after Easter.⁴ On his first visit to the site in 1226 he granted the monks the right to hold a weekly market day and an annual fair around the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross.⁵ The pious king's devotion to the relic did much to strengthen the cult at Bromholm. Bromholm eventually became a famous pilgrimage site in England, perhaps only second to Canterbury. Of the relic, the early fifteenth century hagiographer John Capgrave wrote that no fewer than forty-nine people were raised from the dead and nineteen blind people were restored to sight by the Rood of Bromholm.⁶ Edward I granted the priory a manor in the nearby town of Bacton and just after his victory at Agincourt Henry V granted the monks of Bromholm five pipes of wine a year (that is 725 gallons or 3700 bottles) in perpetuity for their prayers.⁷ The site was so well known that it was referenced in the two greatest classics of Middle English William Langland's *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.⁸

While Protestant iconoclasts certainly held the cross to be a forgery, and some medieval monks – as will be seen below – had some serious doubts, modern historians have almost completely accepted the Constantinopolitan origins of this relic. In the seminal article on the cross, Francis Wormald opens his article by defining his subject: “Briefly it may be described as a relic of the true cross brought to England from Constantinople between 1205 and 1223 and the object of a pilgrimage at Bromholm Priory during the Middle Ages.”⁹ In his discussion of the relic D. J. Hall writes:

The events leading to the defeat of Baldwin I in 1205 are historical, the rest of the account given here is a composite of writings which vary only in detail. Nothing has ever appeared to confute them so we may accept, as the

³ Wormald, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-3.

⁴ His documented trips were on 5 April, 1226, 16 February, 1232, 1 July, 1234, 16 February, 1234, 13 March, 1235, 23 March, 1242, 28 March, 1245. F.M. Powicke, “The Oath of Bromholm”, *The English Historical Review* 56/224 (1941), p. 531.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 533-4.

⁶ D.J. Hall, *English Mediaeval Pilgrimage*, Routledge, New York, 2020, p. 211.

⁷ Wormald, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁸ Wormald, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-41.

⁹ Wormald, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

poor prior and monks did, that in some such way there came to a remote corner of north-eastern Norfolk this holy relic from the imperial feretory. Originally accepted by the Greeks or looted for the greater glory of the Eastern Church, it was looted by the crusader-pilgrims of the West as a treasure for the new Western emperor, only in turn to be taken by a humbler rogue into a simple place where it acquired fame far greater than it had in its distant, exotic home.¹⁰

This acceptance is mirrored in subsequent commentaries on Bromholm's cross relic by many English historians, including Diarmaid MacCulloch, Kathryn Hurlock, Margret Aston, and Michael Schmoelz.¹¹ True, a few scholars will toss on a qualifier such a 'supposedly,' but to date no scholar has yet laid out the case for the Rood of Bromholm as a forgery.¹² This article will demonstrate that not only is the Rood of Bromholm a forgery, it is a forgery of a different Constantinopolitan relic than the one it claims to be. Through this investigation, this article will also explore the identity of the Bromholm forger and try to fill in the gaps in the accounts of its origins.

Accounts of the Holy Rood

Any details about the origins of the Holy Rood of Bromholm from the monks who venerated it disappeared with the suppression of Bromholm Priory in 1537. Instead, the only substantial independent accounts were written by a pair of contemporary monastic historians, Ralph of Coggeshall and Roger of Wendover. Ralph was a monk and later the abbot of Coggeshall Abbey in Essex.¹³ Roger was a monk at St. Albans Abbey, whose history lies in the shadow of his continuator at St. Albans, Matthew Paris. Matthew

¹⁰ Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

¹¹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: A Life*, Viking, New York, 2018, p. cclxx; Kathryn Hurlock, "A Transformed Life? Geoffrey of Dutton, the Fifth Crusade, and the Holy Cross of Norton", *Northern History* 54/1 (2017), p. 20; Margret Aston, *Broken Idols of the English Reformation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015, p. 724; Michael Schmoelz, *Pilgrimage in Medieval East Anglia. A Regional Survey of the Shrines and Pilgrimages of Norfolk and Suffolk* Unpublished PhD Dissertation (University of East Anglia, 2017), pp. 39-42.

¹² In the most recent article on the Holy Rood, Gail writes that it "was supposedly taken there following the Sack of Constantinople in 1204". Byzantinist Michael Angold also uses "supposed," but more or less accepts the story. David Perry, who wrote the definitive account of relic transfer after the Fourth Crusade, refers to it as "legendary", but does not directly address or debunk the myth, and uses the story to put forward his arguments, something also done by Filip van Tricht in his history of the early Latin Empire of Constantinople. Gail Turner, "An Early-16th-Century Prayer Roll and the Holy Rood of Bromholm", *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 174/1 (2021), p. 23; Michael Angold, *The Fourth Crusade, Event and Context*, Routledge, London, 2014, p. 230; David M. Perry, *Sacred Plunder: Venice and the Aftermath of the Fourth Crusade*, Penn State University Press, University Park, 2015, p. 39; Filip Van Tricht, *The Latin Renovatio of Byzantium*, Brill, Leiden, 2011, p. 90.

¹³ Andrea, *op.cit.*, p. 265.

repeats Roger's account of the arrival of the Holy Rood in Bromholm almost verbatim in his *Chronica Majora*, and references it in two of his minor works, providing no new information about the Holy Rood.¹⁴ There is also a two-sentence description in the *Annals of Dunstable*.¹⁵

In the most general terms, the accounts of Coggeshall and Wendover both relate how the cross was brought from Constantinople by a former chaplain to Emperor Baldwin I, who gave the relic to the monks of Bromholm in return for a comfortable retirement for himself and his two sons. While they agree on the broad strokes, there are significant differences in their accounts. Generally speaking, Ralph of Coggeshall's story is more detailed on events in the Aegean, whereas in this area Roger of Wendover talks in generalities, and even makes important factual errors, such as saying Emperor Baldwin ruled for many years (his reign lasted barely a year) and died in battle with unnamed infidels (he died in captivity after being defeated by the Christian Bulgarians).¹⁶

In his account Coggeshall relates that "it happened that a certain priest (English by birth), having completed his pilgrimage, returned from the land of Jerusalem to Constantinople because he had heard that the Franks had just gained possession of the land of the Greek emperor, Kirisac [Isaac II Angelos], and had made Count Baldwin emperor."¹⁷ While this priest might have been on a simple independent pilgrimage, it is more likely that he is part of one of the contingents of the Fourth Crusade who sailed to Acre, rather than travelling from Venice with the main army to Zara and Constantinople. This is what happened to Emperor Baldwin I's wife, Marie, as well as several prominent nobles including Stephen of Perche and Renaut of Montmiral.¹⁸ Several of these contingents, unable to accomplish much in the Holy Land, sailed to Constantinople to take part in the consolidation of Latin power in the region after they heard news of the city's capture.

Next Coggeshall's account says that the chaplain, by his diligence in singing in the imperial chapel, became entrusted with the keys for relics and treasures by Emperor Baldwin.¹⁹ Now comes an important difference in the histories of Coggeshall and Wendover. Both agree a crucial turning point in the story is the battle of Adrianople, where the Bulgarians and Cumans defeat and capture emperor Baldwin I in 1205. Both authors ascribe the defeat to

¹⁴ The minor difference is one word in the description of the battle of Adrianople, see Wormald, *op.cit.*, p. 34, n. 3.

¹⁵ *The Annals of Dunstable*, ed. Henry Luard, *Annales Monastici* 3 (London, 1866-7), p. 97.

¹⁶ Roger of Wendover, *Flores Historiarum*, ed. Hewlett, ii, p. 274; trans. Giles, ii, p. 447.

¹⁷ "contigit ut quidam presbyter natione Anglicus rediret a terra Hierosolimitana in Constantinopolim, peregrinatione sua peracta, eo quod audisset quod Franci terram imperatoris Kirisaci Graeci jam obtinuissent, et comitem Balduinum imperatorem fecissent" Ralph of Coggeshall, *Chronicon Anglicanum*, ed. Stevenson, p. 201; trans. Andrea, p. 288.

¹⁸ Geoffrey Villehardouin, *The Conquest of Constantinople*, ed. Faral; trans. Smith, § 315.

¹⁹ "Coggeshall, *Chronicon Anglicanum*, ed. Stevenson, p. 201; trans. Andrea, p. 288.

two primary causes, first being the decision of Baldwin to charge into a far superior Bulgarian force, and second the fact that he went into battle without the relic of the True Cross that Byzantine emperors traditionally brought with their armies into battle.²⁰ Wendover's English priest does not go to the battle, instead staying in Constantinople – but when he hears about the battle he makes off with a trove of sacred and secular treasures.²¹ Coggeshall's account instead tells how on the eve of battle Baldwin realized he did not bring the relic of the True Cross that Byzantine emperors traditionally used as a battle standard, and sent his relic-keeper back to fetch it, but engaging in battle before the relic-keeper returned, Baldwin was defeated and captured.²² Hearing the news, Coggeshall's protagonist, like that of Wendover, takes the cross and runs for home.²³ In opposition to this, the one-sentence version of the story found in the Dunstable Annals does not suggest the relic was stolen, saying instead that the English cleric received it directly from Baldwin, but this account can be dismissed as uninformed.²⁴

There are the echoes of historical truth in Coggeshall's account. Geoffrey of Villehardouin recounts how Baldwin rushed into battle with the Bulgarians refusing to wait – not for a cross – but for the reinforcements from his brother Henry.²⁵ The account of the battle in Coggeshall also contains important and correct historical details of the battle, knowing the name of the Bulgarian opponent, John the Vlach, and also that the battle took place on Easter Week, as well as the participation of Louis of Blois, and that the loss was due to a fatal foolhardy charge into their opponents with small numbers – sixty knights in Coggeshall, one hundred-forty in Villehardouin.²⁶ Likewise, mirroring these accounts, after the defeat, Villehardouin describes a mass exodus of crusaders from Constantinople, 70,000 men in total, though that number is clearly exaggerated.²⁷ Before the city's capture, all the crusaders had vowed to stay on a year after the conquest of the city to help complete the conquest of the empire; now that time had come and gone, and with the situation in Constantinople on the verge of collapse, it seemed like a good time to go.²⁸ In this chaotic period, when the crusaders prepared to

²⁰ “Coggeshall, *Chronicon Anglicanum*, ed. Stevenson, pp. 201-2; trans. Andrea, p. 289; Wendover, *Flores Historiarum*, ed. Hewlett, ii, . 274; trans. Giles, ii, p. 447.

²¹ Wendover, *Flores Historiarum*, ed. Hewlett, ii, p. 274; trans. Giles, ii, p. 447.

²² Coggeshall, *Chronicon Anglicanum*, ed. Stevenson, pp. 201-2; trans. Andrea, p. 289.

²³ Andrea 289, Wendover, *Flores Historiarum*, ed. Hewlett, ii, p. 274; trans. Giles, ii, p. 447.

²⁴ ‘Eodem anno multiplicata sunt miracula apud veram crucem de Bromholm, que fuerat Baldewini, imperatoris Constantinopolitani; et quam ab eo accepit quidam caellanus suus Anglicus, et eam in Angliam attulit, et loco contulit memorato’ *Dunstable Annals*, p. 97.

²⁵ Villehardouin, *Constantinople*, ed. Faral; trans. Smith, § 347-8

²⁶ Coggeshall, *Chronicon Anglicanum*, ed. Stevenson, pp. 201-2; trans. Andrea, 289; Villehardouin, *Constantinople*, ed. Faral; trans. Smith, § 348.

²⁷ Villehardouin, *Constantinople*, ed. Faral; trans. Smith, § 376-9.

²⁸ Villehardouin, *Constantinople*, ed. Faral; trans. Smith, § 235.

depart for home, there was also a large spate of relic thefts. For instance, in another account of a similar crime, a knight by the name of Dalmase of Sercey stole the head of St. Clement and brought it to Cluny after misunderstanding a papal legate that he could take home a relic, but that it was sinful to buy and sell relics. He thus stole the relic at sword point, instead of simply asking for a relic from a church, as the legate intended.²⁹ Hence the account of an English cleric stealing a relic in Constantinople as the empire seemed on the verge of collapse after Adrianople, is altogether plausible and lines up with the conditions of this period.

Once the pilgrim returns to England the narratives diverge again. Coggeshall writes how the priest settled in his native Norfolk near Weybourne Priory; there he kept the existence of the cross a secret. However, wishing to care for his two sons he offers the relic to the priory of Weybourne, if they take care of the boys. This request is turned down, being suspicious that they never heard about their neighbor having such an important relic before. Thus, the cleric offers it to nearby Bromholm Priory, who accept the gift.³⁰ In Wendover's account, the priest visits Wendover's own community, the monastery of St. Albans, where he sells a silver gilt cross, two fingers of St. Margaret, and some rings to the monks.³¹ However, the monks get suspicious when the cross is also offered; they refuse to buy it, and later hear that he went everywhere trying to sell it off until Bromholm accepted it.³² Now these stories, while different, are not mutually exclusive. Perhaps our priest first went to St Albans, selling off some of his treasures there, before shopping around the cross to several monasteries including Weybourne, before Bromholm accepted his offer. One detail that lends credence to this account is the reference to the relics of St Margaret, as her relics were kept in Constantinople and another Fourth Crusader, Abbot Martin of Pairis, is recorded to have taken back part of her relics to his monastery.³³

Now with the cross installed at Bromholm, miracles began to be attributed to it, and the old worn-out buildings at Bromholm were replaced by a new beautiful priory. This building was partly financed by Richard de Marsh, bishop of Durham and Chancellor of England, who donated all his supplies of marble to help furnish the church; this is confirmed by a note in the close rolls dated to October 12, 1226.³⁴ Exactly when the relic arrived at

²⁹ Paul Edouard Didier Riant, *Exuviae sacrae constantinopolitanae: fasciculus documentorum minorum, ad byzantina lipsana in Occidentem saeculo XIII translata, spectantium Historiam Quarti Belli Sacri imperii; gallo-graeci illustrantium*, Société de l'Orient latin, Paris, 1877-8, i, pp. 136-8.

³⁰ Coggeshall, *Chronicon Anglicanum*, ed. Stevenson, p. 202; trans. Andrea, p. 289.

³¹ Wendover, *Flores Historiarum*, ed. Hewlett, ii, p. 274; trans. Giles, ii, p. 447.

³² Wendover, *Flores Historiarum*, ed. Hewlett, ii, p. 275; trans. Giles, ii, pp. 447-8.

³³ Gunther of Paris, *Historia*, p. 127.

³⁴ Wormald, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

Bromholm is unknown, the first definite reference to it is only in 1225, but based on a later papal indulgence, Wormald suggests that the relic may have been officially installed there on Passion Sunday, March 15th, 1220.³⁵ However, Wendover explicitly dates the arrival to 1223, and Coggeshall's account precedes and follows his account with events from the same year, so that date should be preferred.

Who was the English Cleric?

Trying to discover a name for the English cleric at the heart of the Holy Rood accounts is an exercise in frustration. Compared to all crusades but the First, the Fourth Crusade is incredibly well documented because alongside a mountain of documentary evidence, there were more than half a dozen book-length eyewitness accounts, likely because its participants felt the need to write down a history that justified their widely-criticized actions. In 1978, Jean Longnon published an extensive prosopography of the Fourth Crusade, there is no record of any English crusaders, let alone clerics with ties to Norfolk, in the volume.³⁶ Longnon's prosopography, however, has clear weaknesses, being based heavily on evidence from French chronicles, rather than the full array of available diplomatic document and thus, for example he does not include a single Venetian in the volume! Looking at the registers of the Latin Empire of Constantinople compiled by Benjamin Hendrickx and the Venetian and papal documents compiled by Tafel and Thomas, there are also no recognizably English surnames.³⁷

Trying to figure out which contingent of the crusade the English crusader travelled with at least yields possible candidates. As mentioned above, he did not accompany the main army from Venice to Zara and onto Constantinople. In this, he is not alone, there were half a dozen contingents who broke off from the main force, many of them making it to Acre. Looking for English connections among these, the most prominent is Simon IV of Montfort, who was Earl of Leicester by marriage.³⁸ G.E.M. Lippiatt discovered an Anglo-Norman crusader, Gerard of Furnival, in his discovery of a charter made by the contingent in Acre.³⁹ However, because neither of

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

³⁶ Jean Longnon, *Les Compagnons de Villehardouin: Recherches sur les Croisés de la Quatrième Croisade*, Droz, Geneva, 1978.

³⁷ Benjamin Hendrickx, "Régestes des empereurs latins de Constantinople (1204-1261/1272)", *Byzantina* 14 (1988), 7-222; Gottlieb L.F. Tafel, and Georg M. Thomas, *Urkunden zur älteren Handels- und Staatsgeschichte der Republik Venedig, mit besonderer Beziehung auf Byzanz und die Levante: Vom neunten bis zum Ausgang des fünfzehnten Jahrhunderts*, K.K. Hof- und Staatsdr., Vienna, 1857)

³⁸ For this period in his career, see G. E. M. Lippiatt, *Simon V of Montfort and Baronial Government, 1195-1218*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017, pp. 56-79.

³⁹ G. E. M Lippiatt, The Zaran company in the Holy Land: an unknown fourth crusade charter from Acre, *Historical Research* 94/266 (November 2021), p. 874.

these men were known to travel to Constantinople, and Simon especially was vehemently against any attacks on fellow Christians – since that is why he left the crusade at Zara, the most likely candidate for a lord for our cleric to accompany is Stephen of Perche, who came to Constantinople from Acre and received rich promises of territorial rewards, including the duchy of Philadelphia, and a place in the hierarchy of the new Latin Empire.⁴⁰ Stephen of Perche had built a career for himself in the service of King Richard I of England in the 1190s, that he had an English chaplain attached to his retinue would not be out of the question.⁴¹ Stephen of Perche also dies at the Battle of Adrianople, giving any cleric associated with him, or with Baldwin I through the patronage of Stephen, an especially good reason to want to leave after the defeat. However, while plausible, this association between the English cleric and the entourage of Stephen of Perche can only be an educated conjecture.

Trying to trace records associated with the imperial chapel, where our cleric allegedly held a post, is another dead-end. We know that Baldwin I set up thirty conventual churches, or *praepositurae*, in Constantinople which he received in the partition of the empire, including the chapels of the imperial palaces.⁴² Control over who could appoint the *praepositi* and deans of these churches was a point of contention between the emperors and the Venetian-controlled patriarchate of Constantinople, leading to the Patriarch excommunicating the non-Venetian clerics in charge of these churches and two papal legates being sent to settle the dispute.⁴³ We do not, however, have any list of appointments to these churches. Perhaps the English cleric was appointed to serve in the chapters of one of these conventual churches, perhaps even the chapter of the Boukoleon palace, where the imperial relic collection was kept. However, it is unlikely that our cleric was the keeper of the relics. We do know that under Baldwin's brother and successor, Henry, there is a recognized role of guardian of the imperial relic collection, but that was delegated to a cleric from Hainaut, the Benedictine abbot, Hugh of St. Ghislain.⁴⁴ Abbot Hugh may have held that role under Baldwin as well, or it may be that the role of keeper of the imperial relics was part of his other recorded job as chancellor of the Latin Empire and that the two previous chancellors, John of Noyon and Walter of Courtrai, both Flemish clerics, had been relic keepers before him.⁴⁵ In what is a particular ironic parallel, one of

⁴⁰ Villehardouin, *Constantinople*, ed. Faral; trans. Smith, §315.

⁴¹ Kathleen Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship in Medieval France: The County of the Perche, 1000–1226*, Boydell & Brewer, Woodbridge, 2002, pp. 140-1.

⁴² Robert Lee Wolff, "Politics in the Latin Patriarchate of Constantinople, 1204-1261", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954), p. 245.

⁴³ This dispute is explained in *Ibidem*, pp. 244-6.

⁴⁴ Benjamin Hendrickx, "Les institutions de l'empire Latin de Constantinople (1204-1261): la Chancellerie", *Acta Classica* 19 (1976), p. 126.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 124-6.

the two surviving documents of Hugh's time as keeper of the relics collection is a letter validating the fact that he also left Constantinople to go to the West with a relic of the True Cross which he bestowed on a monastery as he took up the life of a simple retired monk there, albeit with imperial approval.⁴⁶

Another place where the cleric might have left a trace was in the records of the abbeys of Weybourne or St Albans. Weybourne, founded in the reign of King John, was always a small and poor community down to its dissolution in 1536 and leaves no evidence to help corroborate the story.⁴⁷ St Albans was one of the largest and wealthiest communities in England with an unmatched tradition of history writing, however here too, most of the records were lost in Henry VIII's suppression and the search for additional evidence does not turn up a name.⁴⁸ It does however turn up two small mentions of note, namely that in the twelfth century St Albans had previously acquired a relic of the True Cross, with full documentary proof of authenticity, from an English cleric who had served in the kingdom of Jerusalem, and that the abbot Robert of Gorham prayed to St Margaret to save him from a shipwreck and that afterwards the community maintained a special reverence to her.⁴⁹ Perhaps having a True Cross relic with definite provenance made them less interested in the cross that would go to Bromholm, and that their interest in St. Margaret's relics was due to the community's record of devotion to her.

The Wrongly-Forged Cross

Having discussed the accounts and having tried to trace the identity of the English cleric, this paper will now demonstrate that this relic is a forgery. This is simply done because the cross relic supposedly taken to Bromholm continued to be used in battle by crusader emperors of Constantinople long after the cleric returns to England. While Baldwin may not have used the cross relic at Adrianople, there are plenty of records of Baldwin's successor, his brother Henry, using the cross in battle. This is attested in the chronicle of Henry of Valenciennes and in Emperor Henry's own letters to the West.⁵⁰ This relic would remain in the hands of the Latin emperors, until it was mortgaged and then given to Louis IX by the last Latin

⁴⁶ Riant, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 78.

⁴⁷ William Page, "Houses of Austin canons: The priory of Weybourne", in William Page (ed.), *A History of the County of Norfolk*, 2, Victoria County History, London, 1906, pp. 404-406. British History Online <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/norf/vol2/pp404-406> [accessed 16 July 2022], pp. 404-6.

⁴⁸ I want to express my thanks to the curatorial team at St. Albans Cathedral, and particularly Rob Piggott, who helped me with this part of my research.

⁴⁹ *The Deeds of the Abbots of St Albans*, ed. James G. Clark, Boydell & Brewer, Woodbridge, 2019, pp. 225, 413.

⁵⁰ Günter Prinzing, "Der Brief Kaiser Heinrichs von Konstantinopel vom 13. Januar 1212. Überlieferungsgeschichte, Neuedition und Kommentar", *Byzantion* 43 (1973), p. 416; Valenciennes, *Histoire*, §524.

Emperor Baldwin II.⁵¹ At this point, it is taken to Saint-Chapelle in Paris and stored with the Crown of Thorns and the other passion relics acquired by Louis IX from Constantinople. There they remained until the royal relic collection was dispersed and largely destroyed in the French Revolution.

In 1247, Baldwin II describes the full relic trove given to Louis IX. There are three pieces of the true cross included. The first is described as “a large portion of the life giving cross of Christ,” the second “another large portion of the wood of the Holy Cross” and the third, “another small cross, which the ancients called the triumphant cross because the emperors used to take it to wars in hope of victory.”⁵² That final cross is also described by Gerard of St. Quentin, who wrote the official account of their translation to Paris, as “*mediocris*,” but he also links it in detail with the triumphal battle cross used by Constantine.⁵³ All three relics of the True Cross are visible in medieval and early modern depictions of the passion relics of Saint-Chappelle. Below are two of the earliest examples, as well as an image of the first of these relics being displayed on arrival by Matthew Paris, who was an eyewitness. Compare them to the images of the Bromholm Cross compiled by Wormald, also below:



Fig. 1: Images of the Cross of Bromholm.

⁵¹ Jannic Durand and Mathilde Avisseau-Broustet, *Le trésor de la Sainte-Chapelle: Paris, Musée*

du Louvre, 31 mai - 27 août 2001, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris, 2001, pp. 38-41.

⁵² Riant, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 134-5; translation in Nicolotti, *Mandylion of Edessa*, p. 190.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, iii, pp. 108-9, Erat cum hoc quedam crux mediocris, sed non modice viuitis, que propter causas inferius annotatas dicitur triumphalis. Cum enim olim investissimus et Deo acceptissimus imperator Constantinus se quadam vice ad preliandum contra incredulos prepararet, et de progressu suo sollicitus procuraret, datum est ei a Domino certum et omnino infallibile. victorie ac future salutis indicium, quia manifestissime ostensum est ei in celo victoriosissime crucis signum, et statim vox celitus emissa subsecuta est dicens : « In hoc signo vinces. » Ad cuius rei ostensionem et stupendi oraculi visionem effectus hylarior miles Christi, hostium cuneos securus aggreditur, ac superatis eis victor in pace revertitur.



Fig. 2: Matthew Paris' sketch of the True Cross relic



Fig. 3&4: Relics of Sainte-Chappelle

In the Sainte-Chapelle images, the two larger cross reliquaries stand front and center, while the smaller triumphal cross is hanging on the top right and are labelled 'cruc. vittorie' and 'Crux Victorie.' Both images show the relic surrounded by pearls and the Morgan Library image shows its edges covered with gold. Instead of looking like the smaller cross, images of the Cross of Bromholm instead look nearly identical to the largest of the three cross relics, which is on the right in both images. Compare also the image of Louis IX carrying this relic upon its arrival in Paris, and the image of a monk of Bromholm holding that cross. From these images it is clear to conclude that the Bromholm cross is a forgery, not of the smaller imperial battle-cross of Constantine, but instead the largest of the three True Cross relics kept in the imperial chapel in Constantinople.

What can be concluded from this? While the relic itself is a forgery, the details from the narratives provided by Coggeshall and Wendover lines up with the fact the forger might have been a Fourth Crusader, the story told has enough true details to make it seem like the story was not made up of whole cloth. Perhaps he was a chaplain to Stephen of Perche or another lord in the crusader host who, after seeing his lord die at Adrianople, fled home to England. Whether or not he served in one of the conventual churches set up by Baldwin I, he could have seen the cross relics of the imperial chapel during his time in Constantinople. We know from the descriptions of Robert of Clari that ordinary crusaders were allowed to view the imperial relic collection after the capture of Constantinople.⁵⁴ Thus his mistaken forgery would be the result of him visiting the chapel and seeing the relics, but

⁵⁴ Clari, *Constantinople*, pp. 100-3.

misunderstanding or perhaps later forgetting the difference between the three cross fragments kept there. He likely left after the defeat at Adrianople, taking with him the relics of St Margaret and other treasures. Inventories of the relics of the imperial chapel from before 1204 do not mention the relics of St Margaret, so he likely acquired them from another church, or from another crusader.⁵⁵ Perhaps he also acquired a piece of wood from Constantinople with a similar shape to the True Cross relic, or he forged it later based on his memories of the chapel. The fact that he misremembers which cross he was forging, and the reference to Coggeshall on no one having heard of the relic in his possession until the sale, make the latter option more likely. The mistake also means it is less likely he had the close contact with the imperial chapel and the precious relics than he claims.

This also fundamentally answers the obvious critique – what if the ‘real’ relic was stolen and Emperor Henry and his chaplains forged a replacement? Why would Henry forge a much smaller cross than the one taken by the forger? Clearly someone would notice that what was once a grand relic was now quite small. Also, for this to be true, generations of pilgrims to Constantinople would have recorded three large crosses (the two sent to Paris and the Bromholm battle cross) in the imperial collection, however none record more than two.⁵⁶ Moreover, all of the major chroniclers of the Fourth Crusade were still actively writing in 1205, that none of them would mention the theft of one of the most valuable relics in Christendom seems unlikely. Thus, we can safely conclude that the Holy Rood of Bromholm is a forgery.

Unanswered Questions

While it has been conclusively demonstrated that the Bromholm cross cannot be the relic it claims to be, there are many unanswerable questions left in this account. For instance, why does a supposed cleric have two young sons? Was he unfaithful to his vows, or is the fact that he was a cleric in Constantinople another invention? Also why does Wendover say that immediately on his arrival in England he began to sell his trove of relics, when he fled Constantinople in 1205 and the relics only arrived in Bromholm in the early 1220s?

Perhaps another possible answer comes in the papal response to the flood of relics that flowed out from Constantinople after the Fourth Crusade, at the Fourth Lateran Council, the sale of relics was explicitly banned.⁵⁷ Wendover clearly states that the monks bought relics from the Bromholm forger, but Coggeshall says the forger offers the cross in return for a promise

⁵⁵ Michele Bacci, *Relics of the Pharos Chapel: A View from the Latin West*, in: Alexei Lidov (ed.) *Eastern Christian Relics*, Moscow, 2003, pp. 243-5.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem.*, pp. 243-5.

⁵⁷ Perry, *op. cit.*, pp. 180-1.

to take care of his sons. Perhaps this suggests that the sale of the rings and relics of St Margaret occurred shortly after his return to England, following his flight from Constantinople in 1205, before the decrees of Fourth Lateran; but that the transfer of the cross to Bromholm happened only in 1223, after those new rules were in effect, that decree might also be part of the reason he was reportedly turned down by several monasteries before being accepted by Bromholm.

This reading of events, however raises the question about whether or not the Holy Rood had its origins in Constantinople or whether it was forged in England. Roger of Wendover says that the forger tried to sell the cross to the monks of St. Albans shortly after his return. This would mean that his quest to pawn off the last of his supposed ‘treasures’ took him nearly two decades of on-and-off work. But, this raises a question with Coggeshall’s account which says the monks of Weybourne, near where the forger lived, had no idea about the existence of the cross – if he were actively hawking it around Norfolk for two decades, this would make no sense, also if he came right from St Albans to sell it, they would not have known him long enough to make that comment about not knowing about it. That suggests one of three options. First, Wendover was wrong about the cross being offered to St Albans shortly after his arrival, the forger sold relics to them initially, but – perhaps needing money or a place for his children – fabricated the cross in the early 1220s. He may have then approached St Albans again and Wendover conflates the two visits, or he hears second hand of the relic’s path and misremembers him offering the same relic years earlier. The second is that Coggeshall’s account of the monks refusing it on the grounds they did is incorrect, perhaps he did not know the full context, or just invented a reason. The third and least likely is that both accounts are correct and the monks at Weybourne were somehow ignorant of their neighbor possessing a gigantic relic of the True Cross for almost two decades. Ultimately the answer to this last riddle is unknowable, my personal guess is that the Bromholm forger invented the relic in the 1220s as a ‘retirement policy’ to help find a home for himself and his sons.

Conclusion

The Bromholm forger was not the only charlatan exploiting the legacy of Baldwin of Flanders in the 1220s. The historical Baldwin I died in a Bulgarian prison, leaving Flanders to his daughter Jeanne, then only a toddler. After a long regency, she married Ferrand, the brother of the king of Portugal, who promptly was imprisoned in Philip Augustus’ dungeons after his capture at the battle of Bouvines.⁵⁸ Jeanne had no children, and with an

⁵⁸ Robert Lee Wolff, “Baldwin of Flanders and Hainaut, First Latin Emperor of Constantinople. His Life, Death and Resurrection, 1172-1225”, *Speculum* 27 (1952), p. 293.

imprisoned husband that was unlikely to change, meanwhile the people of Flanders were growing increasingly unhappy with her rule.

At this moment a cadre of twenty-eight men dressed in Franciscan habits purportedly arrived in Flanders, saying that they had gone on the Fourth Crusade, fought with Baldwin and Henry and after Henry's death joined a crusade to help the king of Portugal, the brother of their new Count; tired from their adventures they had become Franciscans and returned to Flanders.⁵⁹ Rumors soon began swirling that Baldwin himself was also soon to come into their midst. Attention swirled around a beggar and hermit living outside Valenciennes, although he initially denied being Baldwin, after a cabal of the most prominent anti-Jeanne lords in the Low Countries met with him, he changed his story and claimed to be the true emperor of Constantinople.⁶⁰

Everywhere the common people rose up in support of the imposter and Jeanne was forced to flee to France. At Pentecost, the hermit appeared wearing his 'imperial crown' and participated in a ceremony where he knighted ten of his followers, issued charters, and divided fiefs.⁶¹ The false emperor then made a triumphal progress throughout Flanders dressed in a purple robe, with his banners as Count and Emperor, and bearing before him a triumphal cross.⁶² Two contemporary chroniclers single out this cross, explicitly linking it to the cross of the emperors of Constantinople, a clear reference to the same Cross of Constantine that the English cleric had passed off to Bromholm two years earlier.⁶³

However, Jeanne found an ally in King Louis VIII of France who in 1225 summoned the imposter to an audience – there he brought out Baldwin's sister, Sibella of Beaujeau, who could not recognize her 'brother', the false Baldwin then failed to answer basic questions at the audience that the real Baldwin surely would know.⁶⁴ The false Baldwin could not remember the whereabouts and details of his having done homage to Philip Augustus for Flanders, of his having received knighthood, or of his marriage to Marie of Champagne. His partisans maintained his truth, but the imposter sealed his fate by fleeing the castle at night. The fraud unmasked Jeanne had the false Baldwin hanged, and after a cleric buried the body against her orders, she had it dug up and left to rot on the gallows, meanwhile all who supported the imposter faced harsh fines or fled the county.⁶⁵

What became of the cross that the false Baldwin used is lost to history. That forged relic of the imperial battle cross did not find its way into

⁵⁹ *Ibidem.*, pp. 294-5.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 295.

⁶¹ *Ibidem.*, p. 297.

⁶² *Ibidem.*

⁶³ *Ibidem.*, p. 317, n. 146.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem.*, pp. 297-8.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem.*, pp. 298-9.

a monastery which then found royal patronage and hosted scores of supposedly miraculous healings. However, they both demonstrate the lasting relevance of the Fourth Crusade in the life of medieval Europe, even though two decades had passed since Baldwin and his knights charged foolheartedly into the Bulgarian lines at Adrianople, the battle cross he forgot to carry could serve as the basis of two great forgeries on both sides of the English Channel. All great relic transfers need a great story and the story of the Rood of Bromholm is epic in its own right. Although the truth of the story is demonstrably false, like the hermit of Valenciennes who became the returned Count Baldwin, the story told about it was epic, and served the interests of its backers. While this article can, like Louis VIII's audience, pull the mask off what is, in retrospect, an obvious forgery, it cannot erase the fact that the story behind the forgery was compelling enough to turn a simple piece of wood into the second most famous pilgrimage destination in Britain for more than three centuries.

List of illustrations:⁶⁶

Fig. 1 Images of the Cross of Bromholm

From: Wormald, Bromholm, 33.

Fig. 2 Matthew Paris' sketch of the True Cross relic.

Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 016II: Matthew Paris OSB, *Chronica maiora* II, 142 v <https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/qt808nj0703>

Fig. 3 & 4 Relics of Sainte-Chappelle

Images from Durand and Avisseau-Broustet, *Sainte-Chapelle*, 114, 116.

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⁶⁶ All images are faithful photographic reproductions of a two-dimensional, public domain, work of art from Wikimedia Commons <https://commons.wikimedia.org>. The images has been identified by Wikimedia Commons as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighboring rights.

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