The battle of Sandeford: Henry Tudor's understanding of the meaning of Bosworth Field

Tim Thornton
University of Huddersfield

Abstract
This article considers the way in which Henry Tudor understood the significance of his victory on 22 August 1485 at Bosworth Field. It does so by examining the reasons why the battle was initially associated with the name 'Sandeford', relating these to the prophetic traditions of the time. This allows a direct insight into the new king's understanding of his place in history: at the end of a long period of civil strife, and potentially at the beginning of a new phase of expansion and crusade.

When the news of Henry Tudor's victory on 22 August was proclaimed by Windsor herald in York three days later, Richard III was described as having been slain at a 'place called Sandeford'. Chrimes and others have pointed out that this proclamation must have been issued very shortly after the battle, since Thomas, earl of Surrey is included among those listed as killed, and his survival must have been clear relatively quickly. Several attempts have been made to account for this name connected with the battle, chiefly in terms of a search for a geographical location in Leicestershire with which it might be associated. This fits with the tendency of virtually all studies of the battle until the very recent past to concern themselves with its location above all: an increasingly ferocious debate has arisen around the different topographical and geographical names associated with the battle, with claim and counter-claim being

---

1 Francis Drake, *Eboracum: or the History and Antiquities of the City of York: Together with the History of the Cathedral Church and the Lives of the Archbishops of that See* (1736), pp. 121–2 (also L. C. Attreed, *The York House Books, 1461–90* (2 vols., Gloucester, 1991), ii. 734–5); J. O. Halliwell Phillips, *Letters of the Kings of England now First Collected from the Originals in Royal Archives, and from other Authentic Sources, Private as well as Public* (2 vols., 1846), i. 169–70. The author would like to thank Philip Morgan for his generous advice on the material covered in this article; the overall argument and any errors are the author's.

made for its exact site. Very recently, however, there has begun to be a significant transformation in the way that we approach the naming of battles. It is now possible for us to consider such names as a source of information not simply for where a battle was fought but for its perceived significance among those using the name.

Philip Morgan, in particular, has recently developed the idea that the naming of battles might reflect several factors. Battle names might, he argues, be topographic, toponymic or iconic. One example of the latter is the Standard, fought near Northallerton but recalling the divine sanction offered by St. Cuthbert’s possession of the land and the presence of the banners of St. Peter (from York), John of Beverley and Wilfrid of Ripon.

The earliest recorded name for Bosworth Field, that found in the York council records, is ‘the feld of Redemore’. This appeared, as ‘bellum . . . apud Redemore’, in a Latin note enrolled in the York House Books under the date of the battle itself. The name also occurs in the report made by John Sponer, on 23 August, of news from the ‘feld of Redemore’, and the following day the council had news of Henry Tudor ‘proclaimed and crowned’ at the ‘feld of Redemore’. It therefore most likely represents a second-hand report, picked up from someone carrying news northwards. Other names soon appeared, but they too represented ideas generated outside the immediate circuit of the victor. With the name Sandeford, however, encapsulated in an official proclamation and delivered by Windsor herald, who was close to the new king (Henry even paid for his wedding clothes), we get a hint of what, in the immediate aftermath of the battle, Henry Tudor believed his victory to represent.

---


5 York City Archives (hereafter Y.C.A.), House Books 2–4, fos. 169r–v; Drake, p. 121 (printed in Attreed, i. 368–9; ii. 734–5).


Yet Sandeford does not seem immediately explicable: it does not fall simply into any of Morgan’s categories. It was not obviously topographical or toponymic, nor did it have the iconic resonance with objects, landscape or the course of the battle itself.\(^8\) It will be argued here that some of the most significant naming acts for battles sprang not from a retrospective search for location or relevance, but from prophetic expectation.\(^9\) Late medieval English and Welsh men and women were powerfully aware of several possible patterns of history laid out in prophecies. Within these patterns, battles were not unexpected occurrences, but part of the predicted unfolding future. In this sense, the name of a battle might tell us what its victors believed its place in that prophesied history to be, and therefore what they believed to be the meaning of the events in which they had just participated.

Sandeford was a long-established name for an expected battle, made popular through the prophecies associated with the name of Thomas the Rhymer of Erceldoun. Thomas the man seems to have lived during the thirteenth century; the author of *Sir Tristrem*, in the Auchinleck Manuscript, claimed Thomas of Erceldoun as an authority in \(c\). 1330–40.\(^10\) About 1330, Robert Manning, too, knew of Thomas of Erceldoun as an authority in connection with *Sir Tristrem*.\(^11\) The first distinct reference to Erceldoun as a prophet is to be found in John Barbour’s *Bruce*. According to Barbour, writing at some point from about 1372 onwards, when William Lamberton, archbishop of St. Andrew’s, was told of the murder of Comyn and his associates by Bruce on 29 January 1306, he responded by saying that he hoped Erceldoun’s prophecy would be verified in Bruce, and that he would be king.\(^12\) This reliance upon Erceldoun as a prophet was taken up by Andrew Wyntoun, for example, in describing the death of Athol at Kilblane.\(^13\)

\(^8\) If one discounts the suggestion of Jones, p. 154, that marshy land around Fenny Drayton might have been the site of a place so named, without offering any specific examples of such a place-name there.

\(^9\) Philip Morgan discusses one example of this: Shrewsbury (1403). This was named Berwick by Adam Usk, in reference to a prediction that Sir Henry Percy would die at Berwick, and Bull Field in other sources, which Morgan sees as relating to Galfridian prophetic tradition (P. Morgan, p. 45). This remains, however, an explanation rooted in the alleged fate of one individual, not in a prophetic understanding of the course of history.


In Scotland, there then developed a highly influential tradition in which Thomas’s reliability was represented by a story of his successful prediction of the death of Alexander III. This began with Walter Bower in c.1440, in the tenth book of his Scotichronicon. There also emerged a tradition associated with Thomas which provided an account of the history of England and Scotland from the time of Robert the Bruce, probably taking its first form in pro-Scottish hands on the eve of the battle of Halidon Hill, almost certainly in a ‘ballad’ tradition, only recorded in written form in 1800. This tradition was revised to produce a romance version, more favourable to the English, at some point during the period between 1388 and its appearance in the Thornton manuscript in c.1430–40.

There are signs that some versions of these prophecies were considered unacceptable in many quarters in England. They drew heavily on Celtic tradition and tended to retain a distinctly Scottish flavour, even after they had entered English tradition. Despite the increasingly English orientation of later versions, all the signs are that they then remained primarily northern, at least in terms of the sense of priorities that they expressed. They may have been particularly associated with the continuing support for Richard II after 1399, and with Lollardy. Certainly, Lesley Coote, working on prophecy in the fifteenth century, found little trace of them until the middle of the century, and then only in material related to the indictments of rebels. Indeed, one preacher in the early fifteenth century explicitly mentioned fascination with Erceldoun, in the same breath as

---


18 Coote, p. 199.
Robin Hood, as being a sign of the lack of respect for priests and for scriptural prophecy.  

Yet, even though they did not manifest themselves in written form, it seems very likely that the prophecies retained currency through the early part of the fifteenth century. The first record of the ‘Cock in the North’ in an English manuscript is in British Library, Cotton Rolls, ii. 23. Dating from the time of the revolt of Jack Cade, it was probably used in the prosecution of rebels in the aftermath of the rising, and therefore likely records some of the ideas current amongst Cade’s men. Interestingly, it includes some of the key features of the Erceldoun type of prophecy, such as the dead man who would rise again and threaten London, and, crucially for us, the idea of a battle at ‘sondyford’.

In the main Erceldoun tradition, Sandeford plays an important role in the sequence of future events towards the end of the poem. In the Thornton manuscript itself, which forms the earliest survival of this prophetic poem, the relevant section has been destroyed. It survives, however, in Cambridge University Library, MS. Ff. 5. 48, which is from the middle of the fifteenth century, and in British Library, Cotton Vitellius E. x, which is from the latter part of the century. A bastard, not born in England, comes from a forest (or in some versions from the west) and holds a proud parliament, putting down false laws. According to the Cambridge manuscript, he shall be leader of all Britons; the later versions vary, saying that after him all shall be Britons. Then, the sources agree, there shall be a terrible battle at Sandeford, which is described as the last battle.

This is not an isolated example. It partly derives its meaning from its relationship to a previous battle, that which we know as Barnet, 1471. There was a powerful tradition of referring to Barnet as Gladsmuir.
Once again this arose from the Thomas the Rhymer prophecy. The Cambridge manuscript refers to a battle of ‘gladys more’ at which crowned kings would be slain. This is the precursor to the advent of the bastard, and hence to the final battle of Sandeford.

Where does this leave our understanding of the perceived significance of Bosworth in 1485? Undoubtedly, Bosworth was interpreted by Henry in many contexts, but one of these which has been too long ignored was prophetic: as Sandeford. After all, soon after his birth, prophecy traditions had already been adapted to apply to Henry. Particularly influential was the idea of the son of prophecy who would conquer the Holy Land – derived from prophecy of the ‘Six kings to follow John’. Henry had been greeted as this promised heir as early as 1458 and was again, especially in Wales, in 1485. Prophecy’s interest in Henry Tudor is, admittedly, better documented than Henry’s interest in prophecy, and Henry’s specific knowledge of the Erceldoun tradition is not directly evidenced. Yet Henry’s own engagement with ancient prophecy is apparent from a manuscript produced for him in 1490. This includes a considerable body of prophetic material, concluding with the prophecies of Bridlington, the visions of St. Bridget, the prophecies of Merlin Ambrosius, prefaced by Geoffrey of Monmouth’s epistle to Bishop Alexander of Lincoln, and those of Merlin Silvester, followed by the short prophecies usually described by the collective name of the ‘Prophecy of the eagle’. It seems likely that, in August 1485, the idea of a battle of ‘Sandeford’ would have struck a chord with Henry and close associates such as Sir Hugh Conway.

And what of the precise meaning to be drawn? Fundamentally, the lesson seems to be that the battle might be seen not only in terms of English civil conflict, in terms of the policies and patronage of Richard

---

26 Nixon, i. 73. Unfortunately both the Thornton and Cotton MSS. are deficient at this point, but appear to be following a similar line. By the time of the Sloane MS., the battle is called Claydon Moor.
III, or even in terms primarily of the dynastic drama of the house of York and the probable fate of the princes in the Tower, but in potentially more cataclysmic terms. The tone of the Erceldoun tradition, seen in the Thornton, Cotton and Cambridge manuscripts and elsewhere in the fifteenth century, lacks the eschatological emphasis which is so common in prophecy; there is no glorious happy ending in prospect, except perhaps in the good fortune of the yeomen who marry the rich widows of noblemen fallen in the general slaughter, and, crucially, the sense that this might be the end of the general bloodbath.

This is surely the key to understanding Bosworth as Sandeford. In this context, one can perhaps understand the sense of uncertainty which led those minuting the York council meetings of August 1485 to record that the throne of England was unoccupied. Yet, prophecy of this kind perhaps also made uncertainty, because it was expected, less shocking. The Erceldoun tradition had also begun to cross-fertilize with other, more optimistic traditions common in England. From a variety of perspectives, English prophecy looked to a glorious future in terms of domination over the British Isles, over Europe and ultimately over the Holy Land as part of the recovery of the True Cross and the final confrontation towards Doomsday. The idea of a ‘last world emperor’ had been influential earlier in the century. It squared with a revival of interest in the crusade, such as that shown by Henry V, who enjoyed crusading literature, borrowing from the countess of Westmorland the chronicles of Jerusalem and the voyage of Godfrey of Bouillon. He had commissioned a survey of Egypt and Syria, and when he died his last words, allegedly, were ones of regret that he had not had the chance to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. That interest had been all but lost in the conflict of the mid century, although the Cotton Rolls version of the ‘Cock in the North’ already has the victor of Sandeford winning the Holy Cross and dying in the Holy Land. It was therefore ripe for a powerful rebirth under Henry Tudor, whose continental ambitions drew some of their strength from his interest in prophecy. In this sense, Sandeford could possess a more dramatic meaning still. If this was the last battle in a bloody domestic conflict, then the next stage in the story would be a turning outwards, to pursue the conquest of the remainder of the British Isles, of France and Europe and then on to the Holy Land.

31 This is evident after 19 Aug., when dating is by Richard’s regnal year: the first date given without a regnal year was 23 Aug. This continues until, on 27 Aug., dating by Henry VII’s regnal year commenced (Attreed, ii. 734–7).
34 Brit. Libr., Cotton Rolls, ii. 23, art. 9 (Robbins, Historical Poems, pp. 115–17, at p. 117, ll. 61–76).
Copyright of Historical Research is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.