

Review Article:

‘He hardly touched his food, but talked with me all the time’: What Niclas von Popplau really wrote about Richard III.

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REISEBESCHREIBUNG NICLAS VON POPPLAU, RITTER, BÜRTIG VON BRESLAU. Edited by Piotr Radzikowski. 1998. Trans-Krak s.c., ul. Królewska 57, 30-081 Kraków, Poland. ISBN 83-910076-1-8

Thanks to the hard work of Professor Radzikowski we can at long last read for ourselves the actual details of how the Silesian knight, Niclas von Popplau, met Richard III, and where, and what they said to each other. After the Polish translation, which came out in 1996 — most of its introduction was translated into English and appeared in *The Ricardian* in March 1998 (vol. 9, pp. 239-48) — the same editor has produced a German edition in which von Popplau’s journal is printed in its original language, i.e. German, from the best surviving manuscript copy. The text about the knight’s meeting with Richard makes fascinating reading. As I do not want to leave any Ricardian who cannot read German in suspense until a proper translator has turned up I will give you the most interesting and personal sections in a provisional, but I hope fairly accurate, translation which preserves some of its idiosyncracies. In some cases the exact meaning of the fifteenth-century German is not clear to me and I had to guess.

At the end of his description of English women, manners and food von Popplau mentions how he travelled north through Newark, Doncaster and Pontefract to York, which he reached on 1 May 1484. He thought the Minster was more beautiful, though a bit 'shorter', than St Paul's in London and he describes its crypt. In York — and not, or at least not yet, in Middleham, which he never mentions by name — he found the king.

The next day he graciously gave me audience in the presence of all princes, earls, councillors and all his nobility. I spoke to them in Latin. The king was very much amazed at my eloquence — although it was not very great. I gave His Majesty the King letters from His Imperial Majesty and from the duchess of Burgundy,¹ which were all letters of recommendation. His Majesty the King accepted them very graciously, with great pleasure. Having read them the king himself came to me, took me by the hand and led me apart. He answered me through an interpreter, in the Latin language — though in rather simple words — that His Majesty the King would do with pleasure whatever I wanted and whatever His Majesty the King was able to do, for the sake of His Imperial Majesty the Prince of Burgundy and also for my own sake, out of respect for my learning and eloquence, which he had not expected in me and would not have believed if he had not heard it himself. Graciously prepared to consider my well-being he said to me three times — which is usual in England — before I departed from His Majesty the King's presence: *Ick heit ju willkom, und sit bey mir free willkom* (I bid you welcome, and you are very welcome to me).²

Afterwards the king's courtiers in their turn talked to the foreign visitor and a large group accompanied him to his inn. They were followed by many people, women and girls among them, who secretly watched him with the permission of the innkeeper's wife.

The next day the king sent a nobleman to me, that I would go to his church. There I heard the loveliest music I have ever heard in all my life; in the purity of the voices it was to be compared to the blessed angels. After mass the king sent to me John, Lord of Bergen op Zoom³ — which is a famous trade town in Brabant. He took me by the right hand into the church when the king was about to leave the church after mass, and next led me before the king into the building or tent which had been erected near the church. Here I saw the king's bed decorated from top to bottom with red samite and a gold 'piece' (*einem golden Stück*) which the

Lombards call *altabass* and which also decorates His Imperial Majesty's bed. In the king's tent there was also a table set up next to the bed, covered all around with silk cloths of gold emboidered with gold. The king set himself at the table and he wore a collar of an order⁴ set with many large pearls, almost like strawberries, and diamonds. The collar was quite as wide as a man's hand, went over his shoulders [*sic*] on the left side to his back and to the front under his right arm. His princes and lords went with him to the table. When he had seated himself at the table two princes of the royal blood and the earl of Northumberland, who is the most powerful man in the whole of England, [also sat down],⁵ but they sat very far away from the king, and almost at the end of the table. But when the king saw me standing before him — although the royal magnificence was so well displayed after the manner of his court⁶ that I could see him at the table as a king in his royal splendour⁷ — the king told me to sit with the above mentioned princes of the blood at the table. I answered that it was my greatest pleasure and desire — because I would have to leave shortly — to look upon the countenance and very famous virtues of His Royal Majesty, [rather] than sit with His Majesty's companions at the table. These words pleased the king very much ... [words missing?] my answers, so that he hardly touched his food, but talked with me all the time. He asked me about His Imperial Majesty, [and] all kings and princes of the empire whom I knew well, about their habits, fortune, actions and virtues. To which I answered everything that could add to their honour and high standing. Then the king was silent for a while, and then he began again to ask me questions, about many matters and deeds ...

Other passages of von Popplau's journal reveal some of the 'other matters' that he and Richard talked about. For example, when von Popplau discusses the legend of St Edward the Confessor, the miraculous properties of cramp-rings and the ceremony during which they are distributed, he says some people had told him that the ceremony was performed on Good Friday, 'but the king himself told me it happened on Easterday'.⁸ Elsewhere he says that the name 'Pontefract' is derived from the Latin *pons fractus* [broken bridge] 'as the king himself informed me and made me understand with his own mouth'. But this was not all:

... and finally about the Turks. Then I answered the king that His Royal Majesty of Hungary, together with men sent by His Imperial Majesty and from His Majesty domains had defeated 12,000 Turks of the Turkish emperor before St Martin's Day

1483. When the king heard this he was very pleased and answered: 'I would like my kingdom and land to lie where the land and kingdom of the king of Hungary lies, on the Turkish frontier itself. Then I would certainly, with my own people alone, without the help of other kings, princes or lords, properly drive away not only the Turks, but all my enemies and opponents.' O dear God, what a great-hearted lord I recognised in the king. About eight or more days I stayed there and almost every day I was present during his meals at the court.⁹ But when I took my leave from the king on the last day he said to me that because I was decided to leave soon he did not wish to put any obstacle in my way, but if at the end of the wanderings that I had planned, I should like to return to His Majesty on my way back, His Majesty would be better pleased than if I did not. He would grant me his favour in every way. He presented me with a gold collar that he took from the neck of a free or high-born lord and gave to me himself. Three days earlier, and before I left His Majesty and before I took my leave of His Majesty, he sent Lord John of Bergen op Zoom to me, who explained to me that His Royal Majesty had given [him?] fifty nobles, which His Majesty the King was presenting to me. When I wanted to take leave of the king, however, I begged His Majesty not to give such a present to an undeserving person; because I came to His Majesty not for gifts or presents, but to obtain His Royal Majesty's grace. To this the king answered that if, for the sake of *my* honour, I refused his gift which concerned *his* honour, how did I think to obtain his grace? So if I desired his grace I should also accept his gracious gift of honour and not refuse it at all. So I thanked the king and took it in the end, because I always respected honour more than profit and put honour in the first place, like the very learned philosopher and orator Marcus Cicero writes and teaches in the third book of *De officiis*. The collar that the king gave me weighed thirteen London ounces in gold ... I also took leave of the princes, lords and councillors. The king made me hire an inn and sent me a letter patent to all his subjects that allowed me and my companions to travel safely on land and water whenever I would want to visit him. I also invited a number of the gentlemen of the king's chamber and several members of the nobility, and I had the king's musicians, shawms, pipers and luteplayers. The king also gave me fifty nobles, which I sent back to him and refused to

accept. The king was angry at this, sent to me again and had me asked whether I was of royal or princely blood, that I looked down on his gifts; I answered I had not refused His Majesty's gifts and presents out of contempt, but for the sake of my honour. He spoke to me harshly then and persuaded me to take it. The King's herald, his luteplayers and pipers also came to me, to whom I gave four crowns.

King Richard is of the house of the land called Gloucester; a high-born prince, three fingers taller than I, but a bit slimmer and not as thickset as I am, and much more lightly built; he has quite slender arms and thighs, and also a great heart.

Edward and Henry who ruled before him were his brothers of the same blood from both parents. Common rumour has it that King Edward had King Richard's brother drowned in Malvesey, because he had threatened his life and wanted to destroy him; and they were both King Edward's brothers. And King Richard, who reigns at the moment, has, they say, also killed King Edward his brother's sons, so that not they, but he was crowned. However, many people say — and I agree with them — that they are still alive and are kept in a very dark cellar.¹⁰

Von Popplau goes on to describe how Salazar gave him letters to his friends in Spain, and then mentions Durham and Newcastle, places that Richard visited in the course of the next week, though von Popplau does not say so. The knight travelled on to the court of Portugal, where he had his *combats de générosité* all over again with King John II. When he leaves the Portuguese court he is offered an unusual present, which makes him write: 'The king of England had given me a dead boar (*ein todt Wild-Schwein*), but His Majesty [of Portugal] wanted to give me two live Moors'. A present of black slaves was not unknown, but what concerns us more is whether Richard had given von Popplau a boar to eat (during the farewell party he gave at his inn?), or was the knight perhaps facetiously referring to the collar Richard had given him and from which hung the king's White Boar? It is possible that a man who described a king as having 'slender arms and legs, *and also a great heart*' was capable of making such a joke.

For his edition Radzikowski had to research the extremely varied background of von Popplau's wide-ranging travels and he has succeeded very well. English — and particularly Ricardian — commentators will no doubt quarrel with some of his comments, such as the rather simplistic, though not incorrect, 'Pontefract was the prison and place of execution of many members of the higher nobility' (n. 155), or that Richard received von Popplau with particular honours because as a usurper he was not well regarded at the continental courts (n. 159). The book has 196 pages

and is nicely produced in paperback, with the Popplau arms in colour on the front and the first page of the edited manuscript on the back. No less than thirty-eight maps are provided; curiously large for the little information they give, they could have been reduced to more attractive half-page ones. Most of all, more explanation and translation into modern German of von Popplau's many curious phrases and confusing sentences would have been very welcome to most ordinary readers. For Ricardians, however, all these considerations are minor compared to the pleasure of finally being able to read the best version of what von Popplau actually wrote — and wrangle more informedly over the proper translation and the author's real meaning.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The editor assumes that *Hertzogin* (duchess) is a scribal error for *Herzog* (duke) because Mary of Burgundy was already dead by 1484, but in fact it is quite possible that von Popplau had letters from Margaret of York, the Dowager Duchess.
2. The editor comments that these words are Middle Low German and if they are the exact words that Richard pronounced it may mean that his interpreter, Jan van Bergen (see below), who probably was more fluent in Low German than High German, instructed him. Richard could, of course, have picked up this 'phrase-book' formula when he was in Holland and Flanders.
3. It is interesting to find one of the members of the house of Glymes at Richard's court. Von Popplau is either referring to John II of Glymes, Lord of Bergen op Zoom (9.10.1417 - 7.9.1494), or, more likely, to his son and eventual heir, John III, better known as John of Walhain (15.10.1452 - 20.1.1532), a contemporary of Richard and known to have been very pro-English — von Popplau rather familiarly calls him *Hanssen* and John the younger may have been fluent in English as well as in Low German. John of Walhain fought with Charles the Bold at Nancy (5.1.1477), where he was taken prisoner, and with Maximilian at Guinegate (7.8.1479). He did much for Bergen op Zoom's commercial activities, meeting English ambassadors and negotiating with Newcastle merchants; it is possible he was in the north of England on similar business in 1484 and was asked by the king to speak to von Popplau because of his knowledge of languages. In November of the same year he was back on the continent. See e.g. C.J.F. Sloomans, *Jan metten Lippen, zijn Familie en zijn Stad*, Rotterdam and Antwerp 1945, pp. 48-56.
4. The word used is *Gesellschaft*, 'company', 'society', which may mean 'order' (of chivalry) and therefore also the insignia of an order, i.e. a collar. Von Popplau's description appears to refer to a baldric, however, and it is not clear what Richard was really wearing.
5. This section is probably incomplete and difficult to follow.
6. Or, perhaps, 'by the wise men of his court'?
7. The exact meaning of this parenthesis is not clear.
8. And — not surprisingly — Richard was right, see *The Coronation of Richard III*, ed. A.F. Sutton and P.W. Hammond, Gloucester and New York 1983, pp. 6-7, and references given there.
9. According to Richard's itinerary the king left York for Nappa on 4 May and then stayed at Middleham and Barnard Castle until at least 10 May, R. Edwards, *The Itinerary of King Richard III, 1483-1485*, London 1983, pp. 18-19. Von Popplau does not mention any journeys, but perhaps he did travel north with the court: he does mention Durham and Newcastle, where Richard stayed after Barnard Castle.
10. I hope that what von Popplau really meant was that they were imprisoned somewhere very secretly, where nobody could find them.