

The Visit of King Sigismund to England, 1416

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In their chapter-length account of Sigismund's visit to England in 1416, James Hamilton Wylie and William Templeton Waugh remark that, though this was the first and only visit by a Holy Roman Emperor to England during the Middle Ages, aside from an immediate political gain, in the treaty signed by Sigismund and Henry V to defend each other against the French, the impact in terms of anecdote or literature is virtually nil; and they conclude somewhat ironically, "The most notable memento of Sigismund's stay in England is his sword, which is now one of the insignia of the corporation of York."¹ I would like to review the events of Sigismund's visit, particularly expanding on what Wylie and Waugh offer, and to suggest that Sigismund's visit did indeed have an influence on English literature, not a major influence of course, but more than these two historians recognize. Though Sigismund grew up in Prague and was known elsewhere as a German prince, in England he seems to be recalled as a Hungarian knight. He is also written about as "German" Emperor. His influence on literature may therefore be characterized as a near-crystallization of the image of Hungary in the late Middle Ages as a land of Christian knights on the frontiers—indeed, the embattled frontiers—of Europe and the encroaching Ottoman menace.

Because of his striking appearance while in England in 1416 he seems to have emphasized a vogue for calling many otherwise vaguely identified romance heroes as "Hungarian knights" and for making it fashionable to give Middle English narratives a setting in "Hungary" which in their continental versions are indeterminate. While I have elsewhere discussed these more oblique and somewhat speculative consequences of Sigismund's visit to London, in this paper I wish to draw together some of the particular references to that visit itself. My purpose is not to interpret the political or economic consequences of that royal tour in the Emperor's career, but,

by synthesizing the evidence in various sources and above all in citations from ceremonial writings of the period, to indicate his dramatic impact as a romanticized image of Hungarian knighthood.

Sigismund of Luxemburg, who became King of Hungary in 1387, was in Switzerland to attend the council of Constance, which was seeking to heal the schism in the Papacy, and the Emperor took the occasion as well to try to end the longstanding contention between England and France. Coming to London especially to heal the rift, Sigismund left with another accomplishment, establishing a defensive-offensive treaty with Henry V, and furthering the English encirclement of the French. It is not our purpose, however, to discuss and evaluate the political meaning of Sigismund's visit,² but rather the image, as it were, he made for himself in England.

Sir Walter Hungerford acted as Henry V's ambassador to deal with Sigismund, being appointed on 22 July 1414. He is probably responsible for making the initial arrangements for Sigismund's visit to England in 1416 representing Henry both at the imperial court and in the Council of Constance. A soldier and diplomat, and Speaker of the House of Commons in 1414, Sir Walter and his family were the kind of people who promoted and enjoyed the arts in England.

Both Henry and Sigismund put on full displays for one another at this time, and it is therefore likely, as chronicles and the later romances seem to indicate, that Sigismund made a lasting impact on Englishmen. His original Paris entourage of 800 was swelled to 1500 with French and other dignitaries when he landed at Dover in early May, after a ceremonial reception and send off at Calais. His May Day arrival with 400 ships on English soil was symbolic, as he represented the vigor and manliness of new hopes. Legend has it that certain English nobles waded into the water before the emperor's boat landed and demanded that he give assurances he would not seek to overwhelm Henry's sovereignty.³ But these knights, led by Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, should be seen in the same role as a Maori challenger, ceremonially establishing the honorific grounds for Sigismund's visit and not really threatening him with their drawn swords. According to John Rous, in the Warwick Roll, the Emperor brought his gift which he first offered to Richard Beauchamp, the Earl of Warwick, who had accompanied him from Calais, but was told "the delivering of it by his own person should be more acceptable": this gift was reputedly the heart of St. George.⁴

The king's progress from Dover to London is outlined by Bernard Andrew in his *Versus Rhythmici de Henrico Quinto*.⁵ At Canterbury, the continental party of Sigismund was welcomed by Archbishop Chichele, at Rochester by the Duke of Bedford, at Dartford by the Duke of Clarence, at Blackheath by the mayor of London and his aldermen, and finally about a mile from London Henry V came out to greet the Emperor. The king rode

out with about 5,000 nobles and knights, and escorted Sigismund to the royal palace of Westminster, the king himself politely taking up residence at the manor of the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth. The visitor arrived in London on the 7th of May. He then brought his gift, either the heart or "a ymage" of St. George made of pure gold, to Windsor.⁶ There, on the festal day of the saint, delayed four days for the convenience of the Emperor, he was inducted into the Order of the Garter.

The ceremonial banquet afterwards at Windsor Castle is described by William Gregory, skinner, who left a mid-fifteenth century chronicle of events in London. Note how the chronicler calls Sigismund by the title he only received formally in Rome on 31 May 1433. This already shows how the later honours of the Holy Roman Emperor were being read back into his English visitation, investing the memory of his English visit with greater glory.⁷

What follows during the banquet is a series of *sotelletes*, a form of quasi-dramatic entertainment first recorded at this dinner, according to Walter F. Schirmer. They are a form of artistic dessert, modelled confections, served with great ceremony between the courses of the meal. As Schirmer writes, "they are representations in miniature of the pageants served in the streets,"⁸ and may actually be a recapitulation of the procession leading Sigismund to and from the church earlier in the day.⁹

Whether or not the mottoes attached to the *sotelletes* were actually declaimed during the service is difficult to say; the text of Gregory's *Chronicle*, as with Lydgate's texts later on, suggests an elaborate dumb-show performance of placing the confections on the banquetting table before the leading guests.¹⁰ At this banquet Sigismund was given the gold collar with the Lancastrian emblem of SS which he is known to have worn on all ceremonial occasions thereafter, along with the ribbon of the garter. That he wore them at the Council of Constance in 1417 must have been tangible proof to the French of the Anglo-Imperial alliance.¹¹

Sigismund also visited a session of Parliament which was especially held over for his benefit. Wylie and Waugh outline virtually all the known details of Sigismund's subsequent four-month stay in England, including the lavish cost for much of the ceremonial entertaining. For example, his month at Leeds Castle in the north of England cost the then substantial sum of £300.¹² It is important to remember that especially during the personal and ritual reign of monarchs, statecraft is very much the art of ostentation and largesse.

E.F. Jacob writes neutrally that "Everything was done for his comfort and entertainment,"¹³ and M.H. Keen goes a bit further in speaking of "lavish ceremonial . . . fitting to his high station,"¹⁴ while Peter Earle more cynically and probably more truthfully sums up the situation: "During four months of 1416, in which Sigismund and enormous entourage enjoyed

themselves at the expense of the English taxpayers, Henry managed to persuade the Emperor to support his claim to the French Crown.”¹⁵ For by the 15th August, 1416, a treaty was signed to this effect in Canterbury, and soon after Sigismund formally regressed to Dover and returned to the continent, where Henry followed him for further negotiations. But at his departure, there was further ceremonial, beginning with mass at Canterbury Cathedral, the kind likely to stick in the minds of poets and the patrons of the arts. To cite John Capgrave’s *Chronicle of England*:

Sone aftir that the emperoure went oute of Ynglond, andd in his goyng he mad his seruants for to throwe billis be the wey, in which was writyn swech sentense:—

’Farewel, with glorious victory,
Blessid Inghlong, ful of melody,
Thou may be clepid of Angel nature;
Thou servist God so with bysy cure.
We leve with the this praising,
Which we schul evir sey and sing.¹⁶

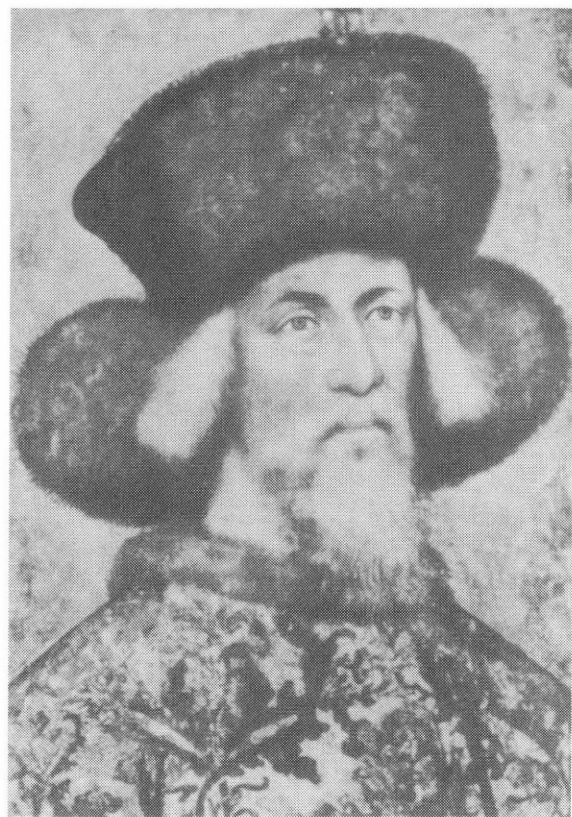
Bernard Andreas’s *Metrical Chronicle of Henry V* offers the following Latin version of this valedictory poem of Sigismund’s:

Vale et gaude, gloriso cum triumpho, o tu felix
Anglia, et benedicta,
Quia, quasi angelica natura, gloriosa laude Jesum
adorans, es jure dicta.
Hanc tibi do laudem quam recto jure mereris.¹⁷

In Robert Redmann’s *Vita Henrici Quinti* we have the reputed response of the Duke of Bedford, as England’s farewell to the central European visitor:

Summa illius principis felicitas, qui praestantes
dignitate viros imperio coerces; nec minor
subditorum beatitudo, quibus obtigerit in
magnanimum principium, omni laude dignissimum,
incidere.¹⁸

Throughout these contemporary reports Sigismund is spoken of as the emperor, (*Sigismundus imperator* or “the Emperoure of Alamayne”), so that, while it would be most likely to speculate that he brought among his 1,500 retainers not only French, German, Croatian, Polish and Italian knights but also Hungarian knights, we know that at least Capgrave was aware of what principally Sigismund was, namely a German prince. Nevertheless, it is important to see that he was also identified as a Hungarian. Whatever our modern concerns for nationality, in fifteenth century England



Germans could be confused with Hungarians and vice versa. Speaking of the reconciliation between the emperor and the Duke of Burgundy, Capgrave fills in some background, saying that when Burgundy had been taken prisoner as a young man by the Turks, Sigismund had undertaken his ransom: "which summe he swore treuly to pay to the emperoure, which was than but Kyng of Hungari."¹⁹

The year before his arrival in England, Sigismund had arranged for John Hus to travel on safe-conduct to Constance and then sentenced him to death as a heretic. This action was recalled favourably by the English, and they seemed to couple his name therefore with Henry V as a noble champion of Holy Church. For example, at the coronation of Henry VI a series of *sotelletes* were written by John Lydgate, the confection at the second course of the banquet being recorded in these terms:

A sotelte. themperour and the kyng that ded is, armed, and here
mantelles of the garters; and the kyng that now is, knelyng bfore
him with this resoun:

Ageinst miscreantes themperour Sigismound
Hath shewid his myght which is
imperial;

Sithen Henry the Vth so noble a knyght
was founde
For Cristes cause in actis martial;

Chjerisshyng the Church Lollardes had a
falle,

To give exaample to Kynges that
succeede

And to his braunche in especiall
While he dothe regne to lou God &
drede.²⁰

In his "Ballade to King Henry VI upon his Coronation," Lydgate also made a connection between Sigismund and Henry V as defenders of the faith.²¹ William Gregory cited this from Lydgate's *sotelletes* in his account of Henry VI's coronation, St. Leonard's Day, 1429, indicating that he, on behalf of the citizens of London, found it movingly true.²²

Certainly the year before, the Pope had called on all Christians to march in procession the first Sunday of every month "ayanste the eretykes the whyche were in the londe of Hungary," and on the 2nd of June "The Kyng [Henry VI] and the quene, and alle othyr lordys spyrytuale & temporalle, went on processyon thouroughe London. . . ."²³ Note again the tendency in Middle English to smooth out central European national identities by

referring to Hungary. Here even the Hussites of Bohemia are called Hungarians.

When Sigismund died in 1437, his memory was honoured and his loyalty towards the treaty of friendship he signed with Henry V recalled, as "requiems were sung for his soul in every cathedral in the country."²⁴ In many ways, of course, Sigismund was not an exemplary character. His vindictiveness against Hus alienated his Czech subjects. Stanko Guldescu writes of how he neglected his Croatian domains:

As a ruler Sigismund was improvident and extravagant. His imperial obligations, internecine strife, his Bosnian ambitions, the Venetian wars, and the invasion by the Turks of Dalmatia in 1414–15, tremendously complicated his financial position.²⁵

We have already mentioned what the French thought of his personal habits. The defeat at Nicopolis also served to diminish his reputation as a warrior.²⁶ After all, Sigismund was the Holy Roman Emperor, and for almost a half century he played a significant and often central role in the political life of Europe. In office, he was to be respected, and as a glamorous figure around whom anonymous or more nebulous romantic characters could coalesce he was clearly important in making the name of Hungary a powerful literary device. If the chroniclers of the period seem to us strangely unaware of the profound danger threatening Europe from the Ottoman East and of the vital role played by the Hungarians, it is nevertheless apparent that for the romance-writers Hungary stood for Christian valour, and Hungarian knights for an old-fashioned Christian chivalry. And if the geography of the romances may be a bit puzzling to us, Hungary to those 15th century writers was not an exotic land – after all its king was a Knight of the Garter, wearing the double S emblem of the house of Lancaster.

NOTES

- 1 *The Reign of Henry V*, vol. III (1415–1422) (Cambridge, 1929). The pertinent chapter is pp. 3–35; a long note on p. 35 traces the history of Sigismund's sword to the York emblem (n. 6).
- 2 A good account of this political meaning may be found in E.F. Jacob, *The Fifteenth Century, 1399–1485* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 161–66, etc.
- 3 Harold F. Hutchinson, *Henry V, A Biography* (London, 1967), p. 138; also C.L. Kingsford, "A Legend of Sigismund's Visit to England," *English Historical Review* 26 (1911), 750–51, which are cited in the relevant Latin texts.
- 4 C.L. Kingsford, "A Legend of Sigismund's Visit to England," 751.
- 5 Published in Charles Augustus Cole, ed., *Memorials of Henry the Fifth, King of England* (London, 1858), pp. 132–33. For English paraphrase, see H.F. Hutchinson, *Henry V*, pp. 138–39; and of course Wylie and Waugh, *The Reign of Henry V*, pp. 10–11.

- 6 John Capgrave, *The Chronicle of England*, ed. Francis Charles Hengiston (London, 1858), p. 313.
- 7 James Gairdner, ed., *The Historical Collections of a Citizen of London in the Fifteenth Century*. Camden society, new series, vol. 17 (1876–1877), p. 113.
- 8 Walter F. Schirmer, ed., *John Lydgate—A Study in the Culture of the XVth Century*, trans. Ann E. Keep (London, 1961; German edition, 1952), p. 132.
- 9 Following is the account of events leading up to the *sotelletes* in Wylie and Waugh, *The Reign of Henry V*:

The garter and the blue silk were supplied as required by the statutes, and on Friday, May 22, they journeyed down [to Windsor], escorted by the existing knights, each booted and spurred and in his habit. On the following day the earl of Suffolk conducted the candidate [i.e. Sigismund] to the bath, and he was then ushered into the chapter house to be invested as a knight elect, . . . The installation took place on the Sunday in St. George's Chapel.
- 10 *Historical Collections*, p. 114.
- 11 H.F. Hutchinson, *Henry V*, p. 170.
- 12 *The Reign of Henry V*, p. 18.
- 13 *The Fifteenth Century*, p. 164.
- 14 *England in the Later Middle Ages—A Political History* (London, 1973), pp. 361–62.
- 15 *The Life and Times of Henry V* (London, 1972), pp. 148–49.
- 16 *The Chronicle of England*, p. 134.
- 17 Cole, ed., *Memorials of Henry the Fifth*, “Capitulum XVIII. — De Regressu Imperatoris ad Calesiam per Doroniam; et de Cedulis in Plateis et vicis per suos Dimisses, ad Laudem Anglorum,” p. 141.
- 18 Cole, ed., *Memorials of Henry the Fifth*, pp. 49–50.
- 19 *The Chronicle of England*, p. 315.
- 20 *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken, reread by Merriam Sherwood, volume II, “Secular Poems” (Oxford, 1934; 1961), E.E.T.S. 192, No. 30, pp. 623–24.
- 21 *Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, No. 31, p. 154.
- 22 *Historical Collections*, pp. 169–70.
- 23 W. Gregory, *Historical Collections*, p. 162.
- 24 W.F. Schirmer, *John Lydgate*, p. 235.
- 25 *History of Medieval Croatia* (The Hague, 1964), p. 235.
- 26 For an account of how the defeat at Nicopolis affected English consciousness, see N. Simms, “Chaucer and the Fourteenth Century Englishman's Awareness of ‘Walaky’,” *Balkan Studies* 17: 2 (1977). The events leading up to Sigismund's behaviour at this battle are given in Razvan Theodorescu: *Itinerari medievale* (Sibiu: Editura Meridiane, 1979), pp. 144–47. Similarly the Turkish defeat of Wladyslaw Jagiello, Polish King of Hungary, at Varna in 1444, brought closer the possibility of the final collapse of Constantinople eight years hence. Nevertheless, the relief of Belgrade in 1456 by the Voivode of Transylvania, János (John) Hunyadi was so spectacular that the Pope ‘ordered all the Church bells of Catholic Europe to ring daily at noon, that the faithful might pray in unison for it.’ Though Hunyadi's reputation—and that of his more learned successor, Mátyás Corvinus—were significant, it was above all Sigismund's memory which

stands out in the fifteenth century as King of the Hungarians in England. (See Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, vol. III [Penguin Books, 1965; Cambridge U.P., 1954], pp. 455–57; also Frederick G. Heymann, *George of Bohemia, King of Heretics* (Princeton, 1965), p. 125.