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«ERACLEA, THAT FAMOUS CITÉ»
IN THE MIDDLE-ENGLISH *PLAY OF THE SACRAMENT*

The late Middle-English miracle play commonly known as the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* – which, as I have contended elsewhere, should be more appropriately entitled *The Conversyon of Ser Jonathas the Jewe*¹ – has received in recent years all the critical consideration it had long, and undeservedly, failed to attract; various editions have appeared, as well as a crop of often very perceptive scholarly contributions. Surprisingly, however, no editor, commentator or critic, has attempted any serious investigation into the dramatist's claim, in the play's Banns, of «in Aragon [...] Eraclea, that famous cité» (ll. 11-12)² as the alleged geographical setting of the action, consisting in the outrageous profanation of the miraculous holy wafer performed by the Jewish merchant Jonathas and his four servants, ending in their final repentance and conversion. This disregard may be partly due to the fact that, besides that initial statement, and notwithstanding the two toponyms' seven further occurrences in the text (at ll. 60, 86, 87, 130, 138, 341, as well as in the final rubric), the play shows no trace whatsoever of an identifiably Iberian setting. On the contrary, to the extent that a regional locale is recognizable at all in this miracle play, this is East Anglia, as repeated allusions in the comic interlude of the quack doctor Master Brundych of Braban unquestionably show. My impression, however, is that the silence of the critics ill conceals their embarrassment at being unable adequately to account for the association of a city called *Eraclea* with the region of *Aragon*, an historically implausible coupling.

Although the toponym *Herakleial/Heraclea* – *Eraclea* being a distinctly Italian modern form – is attested with extraordinary profusion in the classical world, the existence at any point in recorded history of a “real” Aragonese *Eraclea* can be excluded with sufficient certainty. In his geographical dictionary *Ethnica*, compiled in the sixth century v.e., the grammarian and lexicographer Stephen of Byzantium lists no less than twenty-three cities

¹ In the *Introduction* to GIACCHERINI 2013, pp. 10-2; and see the bibliography therein contained.

² Quotations are from DAVIS 1970.

carrying that name.³ They all owe it, directly or indirectly, to the greatest of all Greek heroes, Herakles/Hercules, whose role as *ktistes*, ‘city-founder’, is exceptionally prominent in his characterization.⁴ Most cities of that name, as may be expected, lie scattered between Greece and Asia Minor; Italy too has its fair share⁵, and a few are to be found as far north and east as the Netherlandish coast and India, respectively. None, however, has any connection with the westernmost European peninsula of Iberia.

The message thus implicitly conveyed is that the toponymy of the *Play of the Sacrament* is at best whimsical, and that any attempt at finding a rationale for the playwright’s choice is simply not worth the effort – just like trying to explain, for example, the fact that, while both l. 60 and the final rubric further specify that the events took place in «the forest of Aragon»,⁶ in the course of the action the Christian merchant’s *Clericus* explicitly says that he will search «at the waterys side» (l. 142) and «seke the haven both up and down» (l. 146) on his master Aristorius’ behalf, to see if strange «shyppes» (l. 147) are docked there. None of the modern editors of the play – Davis 1970, Bevington 1975, Coldewey 1993 or Walker 2000 – has thus found these toponyms worthy of serious attention; at the same time, however, a passing remark in Greg Walker’s latest essay on the *Play of the Sacrament* betrays that shared embarrassment I alluded to, when he tentatively – but unconvincingly – observes, at footnote level, that the play’s narrative is placed «*somewhat confusingly*, in “Heraclea in Aragon” (perhaps the ancient city of Heraclea Minoa in Aragonese Sicily)».⁷

Rhetorical conventions may also have weighed considerably in the dramatist’s choice. Independently of its verisimilitude, the apparent matter-of-fact precision of the location functions as a typical authenticating device; at the same time, the declared, though unfulfilled, Iberian setting confers on the action a touch of exoticism which is soon going to be almost disproportionately amplified in the two tradesmen-accomplices’ “boasts” with which the play opens after the Banns (ll. 85-124 and 149-96, respec-

³ BILLERBECK – ZUBLER 2011, pp. 220-23. Cp. PAULY – WISSOWA, VIII, 1, 404-5 (*Heraclea*); 423-39 (*Herakleia*).

⁴ See BRELICH 2010, p. 161.

⁵ Among which the ancient Greek colony of *Heraclea Minoa*, on the southern coast of Sicily not far from Agrigentum, of which more below.

⁶ An otherwise plausible detail: its northern, Pyrenaic area still exhibits a thickly wooded natural scenery, doubtless extending over a much wider territory in the Middle Ages than it does now.

⁷ WALKER 2009, p. 54 n. 8 (my italics); see above, n. 5. Walker’s suggestion is clearly reminiscent of the Crown of Aragon’s long domination over Sicily, which began in 1282 and lasted until 1516, when, following *Aragon’s* union with Castile, the island became part of the Kingdom of Spain.

tively). Yet, as noted above, the references to *Eraclea* and *Aragon*, albeit hardly varied, are numerous enough to resist a simple dismissal as entirely fantastic and arbitrary, especially if we take into account the historically documented fact of the more than millennial Jewish presence in the Iberian peninsula, starting with the first century v.e. under Roman domination⁸ and continuing, with changing fortunes, under the Visigothic reign, then Islam, and finally the Catholic Kings until the expulsion of 1492.⁹ Following the Reconquest, during the thirteenth century in particular, the Jewish communities of *Aragon* knew an unprecedented flourishing, but with the turn of the century the tension between the hegemonic Christian majority and the Jewish minority began to increase again, to become dangerously high in the second half of the fourteenth century. The critical point infamously coincided with a series of accusations brought against Jews precisely for the theft and desecration of hosts, followed by show trials, principally in Barcelona in 1367, Huesca in 1377, and Lleida (Lérida) in 1383.¹⁰ In addition to this, the Aragonese legendary tradition centred on that narrative core has left us highly significant late-fourteenth-century iconographic witnesses coming from Las Monjas, in the parish of Lleida, and from the monastery of Sijena near Huesca, which provide vivid illustrations of episodes strikingly close to the events later dramatized in the *Play of the Sacrament*.¹¹ The prominent role of medieval *Aragon* within the widely ramified European legendary circuit related to the Jewish sacrilegious profanation of the host thus enhances the probability that localized versions of the legend took shape and circulated within that region. These stories, developing from simple anecdotes to more elaborate narrative *exempla*, were also eminently suitable for stage adaptations. Although no documentary evidence of such works has survived, their existence might have easily left a memorial trace capable of reaching to a much wider geographical, cultural and linguistic horizon. In fact, as early as 1916 Gordon Gerould contended that the origin of our play should be looked for in some stock *exemplum*; however, while that added nothing substantially new to what was, and is, already known on the subject, his subsequent assertion

⁸ The earliest evidence for Jewish Diaspora settlement there remains Paul's epistle *ad Romanos* 15:24, 28, where the apostle, in conclusion, announces his intention to travel to Spain. Christ's first followers were mostly Jews, of course, and Jewish communities were the natural incubators for the earliest Christian ones.

⁹ The classic study is BAER 1961. For the Jewish population of *Aragon* at the time of the expulsion, see in particular MOTIS DOLADER 1995, pp. 32-54.

¹⁰ See RUBIN 1999, pp. 109-15.

¹¹ RUBIN 1999, pp. 155-60.

that «[s]uch anecdotes [...] were not infrequently given a Spanish setting at that period»¹² sounds unacceptably vague for today's scholarly standards. In my view, instead, the issue cannot be tackled correctly without giving due weight to the play's Banns' explicit reference, at ll. 56-58¹³ and in the final rubric, to an authoritative antecedent: another play, which, according to our dramatist, had been staged in Rome in the year 1461, based on the identical, well-known "miraculous" episode.

That an Italian *marycle* based on that legend was already in circulation at such an early date remains entirely conjectural. Yet, our first fragmentary albeit reliable information concerning the existence of an Italian *rap-presentazione* on the subject of «quello iudeo che rosti il corpo de Christo» ('the Jew who roasted Christ's body') – not a single line of which has survived – credibly places its performance in Rome, in 1473, twelve years later than claimed in the English miracle play.¹⁴ The occasion was provided by the sumptuous festivities offered by Cardinal Pietro Riario in honour of Eleanor of Aragon, daughter of the King of Naples Ferdinand I of Aragon, during her Roman stay while en route to Ferrara to celebrate her wedding to Duke Ercole I d'Este – who had himself been educated at the Neapolitan court – after the annulment of her previous marriage to the Milanese Sforza Maria Sforza. It is tempting to imagine that the Italian *rap-presentazione* thus intended to pay homage to the noble bride also by moving to *Aragon* the setting of the dramatized «miracle of the Host» episode, whose original background was late-thirteenth-century Paris,¹⁵ as indeed an early critic perceived many years ago.¹⁶ In the total absence of documentary support, it is of course perfectly idle to ask ourselves whether the celebratory Aragonese backdrop, here hypothesized, of the Roman production of 1473 might – fortuitously or not – represent the legacy of a pre-existing dramatic tradition of Iberian origin. What should not worry us overmuch, however, is the chronological discrepancy between the two dates. If the play performed in Rome according to the *Play of the Sacrament* is in fact to be identified with the historically attested one commissioned by Cardinal Riario, the earlier date our text assigns to it – «a thowsand fowr hunder

¹² GEROULD 1916, p. 304.

¹³ «At Rome þis myracle ys knowen welle kowthe. / SECUNDUS [VEXILLATOR] Thys marycle at Rome was presented, forsothe, / Yn the yere of our Lord a Mⁱ cccc lxi».

¹⁴ See GIACCHERINI 2012, p. 111.

¹⁵ RUBIN 1999, pp. 40-8.

¹⁶ BARNS 1926.

sixty and on» (l. 58)¹⁷ – could be convincingly explained, as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁸ with the necessity to preserve the rhyme with the «Aragon» of l. 60: a supposition resting on the reasonable assumption that the play's popular audience was little if at all concerned with a philologically correct dating of the alleged Italian antecedent/source.

These considerations may help us solve not only the riddle of the name of the country chosen by the playwright, but also that of the name of the city, on which all earlier critics and commentators, as noted, have preferred to remain prudently silent. In fact, once one accepts the identification of the *Play of the Sacrament's* «myracle [...] knowen welle kowthe» with the Rome performance of 1473, the simplest of explanations offers itself naturally, and seducingly: just as the name of the region was meant as a homage to the bride, Eleanor of Aragon, so the name of the city – perfectly believable in itself – was chosen as a parallel homage to the bridegroom, and Heracles' namesake, Ercole I d'Este, Duke of Ferrara. Like the protagonists of a well-matched marital union, the two hypotheses support and strengthen each other.

The solution here proposed for *Eraclea*, besides, presents a further advantage, in that it does, after all, establish, or possibly maintain, also a credible connection with the actual historical toponymy of the region. Even though, as shown above, none of the many *Eracleas* on record, let alone «famous» ones, can be either mythologically or factually associated with *Aragon*, or with the rest of the Iberian peninsula, nevertheless the *Via Heraclea* – later to be known as *Via Augusta* – was indeed the most important road of the Roman province of *Hispania*, obviously deriving its name from the close association of the Greek hero with that part of the ancient world. According to late accounts of Heracles' expeditions, in the course of his tenth labour, aimed at retrieving the cattle of the giant Geryon, he reached the farthest limit of the known world, where Africa and Europe face each other, and established there the «pillars of Heracles/Hercules», variously identified now with islands, now with rocks or mountains, now with actual bronze pillars visible in the hero's temple in Gades, the modern Cádiz.¹⁹ From Gades, the route followed by the hero on his homeward journey back to Argos leading Geryon's cattle traversed all the eastern part of the Iberian peninsula; on leaving Cartagena, it went all along the Mediter-

¹⁷ As DAVIS 1970 renders the manuscript's Roman numbering (p. 59).

¹⁸ See GIACCHERINI 2013, explanatory notes to ll. 11-12, 58.

¹⁹ Ancient beliefs are reviewed by Strabo in his *Geography*, 3.5.5-6 (JONES 1923, pp. 134-43).

ranean coast as far north as the Pyrenees, where the *Via Heraclea* joined the *Via Domitia*, crossing into modern France to reach Narbonne. All its northern, coastal stretch, therefore, covered precisely the territories which, from the twelfth century onwards, were to be gradually absorbed into the Crown of Aragon – the composite monarchy whose political and administrative centre, including the royal court, intricate dynastic vicissitudes would eventually move to Italy, in the same city of Naples whence Eleanor, the future Duchess of Ferrara, set forth in 1473.

In conclusion, if the theory is admitted that the play performed in Rome in 1473 relocated in an imaginary *Aragon*, for the congratulatory reasons we have seen, the original «miracle of the Host» pious – and deeply anti-Judaic/Semitic – legend, originally set in Paris, it is conceivable that the anonymous English dramatist of the *Play of the Sacrament*, directly or indirectly acquainted with the Italian antecedent – as the unmistakably Italian form *Eraclea* suggests –, adopted its nomenclature, so conveniently exotic. Subordinately, it is not unthinkable that the playwright may have chosen those toponyms independently of all sources. In the latter case, however, the odds are that – relying on his own, at best, imprecise recollections of the geography of Iberia – he combined the relatively familiar name of a continental region, *Aragon*, with the historically plausible toponym *(H)Eraclea*, only attributing this to a city instead of to the ancient Roman road that touched most of that region's major urban centres. Finally, if one were to imagine – for sheer hypothesis' sake – an actual Aragonese city where the *Play of the Sacrament* might be credibly set, a suggestive assonance would point to Tarragona, a coastal city on the *Via Heraclea*, under Aragonese domination since the twelfth century, where the Jewish presence was such that, according to Arab geographers of the tenth and twelfth centuries, it could be called a «Jewish cit[y]».²⁰

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²⁰ BAER 1961, vol. 1, p. 23.

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