

Space and memory in the testimonies of William Cragh's hanging

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In *The Book of Memory*, Mary Carruthers discusses a medieval memory technique (*ductus*) where the rememberer figuratively houses retained images in buildings down streets they grew up in.¹ According to her, “‘place’ is required’ and essential ‘for the mental task of recollection’ in the medieval and classical periods.”² It seems ironic, then, that representations of remembered spaces should expose the fallacy of memory and testimony. If medieval memory techniques were so focused on using space for mnemonic purposes, we would expect spaces and the negotiation of them to be well remembered. However, this does not seem to be the case for the testimonies dealing with the hanging of William Cragh. As David Lowenthal puts it, ‘[r]emembered places tend to converge unless highly distinctive’.³ The idiosyncratic and differing representations of spaces across these testimonies expose issues with both the concept of memory, and the accurate recording of testimony. This would have problematized the validity of some of the testimonies for the papal commission assessing whether Cragh’s ordeal was a miracle; it also makes it difficult for modern historians to deduce exactly what happened and where. Yet, representations of space are useful in some ways: they reveal insights into the different cultural value space had for individuals.

There are discrepancies in the representation of space across the testimonies which obscure the events they recount. After Cragh’s hanging, Mary de Briouze ordered for him to be measured to St. Thomas. This seems to be a fact, undisputed by any testimonies. However, it is unclear who actually enacts this duty. In her testimony, Lady Mary claims that she ‘sent a certain maidservant named Sonehild, to the locality of Swansea to which the said William

¹ Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 75-76.

² Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 13.

³ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 208.

had been carried, and the said maidservant measured the said William'.⁴ Her son-in-law echoes this in his testimony. He too states that 'the said lady sent one of her ladies in waiting' (p. 12) to perform the act (although names the servant Jovanta). Both remember space being traversed slightly differently, but their memories mirror one another. However, John of Baggeham implicitly disputes their testimonies. He elides the servant's journey. Instead, he positions himself in 'a whole house full of named men and women' where '[i]n [their] presence he measured him [Cragh] length and breadth' (p. 34). Baggeham not only situates himself with Cragh, but states that he himself measured the body. His testimony is anomalous. Nobody else situates him at the site of the measurement, despite his almost too defensive insistence that he was surrounded by witnesses (who remain unnamed despite the testimony's wording). Yet, as neither William nor Lady Mary were present at the measuring, it is difficult to judge who performed the act.

We can only guess at the true course of events. Baggeham seems to misrepresent them for personal gain. Mary Carruthers notes 'the crucial role memory was thought to have in the shaping of [...] excellence of character' in the medieval period.⁵ Here, she is noting how rehearsed memories improve character by creating patterns of experience: i.e. things learned in the past shape moral judgement. Ironically, Baggeham seems to manipulate memories in order to add excellence to his own character in a different way. He actively emphasizes his role in the account by having himself act, rather than oversee action. Baggeham was, as Robert Bartlett notes, 'the captain of the execution squad',⁶ so he would have had a large role in the hanging. He could well have been in the room with Cragh's body, then; his spatial positioning is not entirely implausible. However, Baggeham claims to have travelled so much throughout the course of the hanging that it is problematic to accept that he

⁴ 'The miracle of the resuscitation of the twice hanged William Cragh', ed. and trans. by Harriett Webster, p. 6.
NOTE: All subsequent references to this text will be given by page reference in parenthesis in the body text.

⁵ Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, p. 68.

⁶ Robert Bartlett, *The Hanged Man* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 30.

was actually at any of the locations he lists. Even if he were in the room with Cragh's body, it seems unlikely that he would have measured Cragh. This is too trivial a task. Although Jussi Hanska believes that all the testimonies of the hanging 'were trustworthy and given *in bona fide*',⁷ Baggeham's seems to defy this. I would argue that he purposefully manipulates his memory in order to upstate his role in the events which ensued after Cragh's hanging. However, as none of the other testifiers were present in the room (other than the unconscious Cragh) when Baggeham claims to have taken the measurement, we will never know the truth.

Locating the site where Baggeham may or may not have measured Cragh is also complicated by discrepancies across the testimonies. Lady Mary (amongst other witnesses) suggests that Cragh was carried 'to the said chapel of Blessed John' (p. 3), but, upon arrival, 'he was removed from there and carried to above-said town of Swansea' (p. 5). Where exactly the body goes to is unclear. One source elides that it is moved altogether, though. For William Codineston, Cragh's body halts in the chapel. However, the recorder of this testimony uses parenthesis to make it clear that his account of Cragh's movements follow what 'people commonly reported' and do not represent 'what the said witness saw' (p. 19). Codineston's spatial positioning makes his testimony unreliable. He makes it clear that he 'was not present in person' (p. 18) for many of the events which took place, because owing to 'his priestly office he did not wish to accompany the said criminals' (p. 18), so he may well be incorrect about the movement of Cragh's body. Codineston differs from Baggeham here. Baggeham uses his job to stress his role in the events; he manipulates space and memory to make himself a more active participant. Codineston's job, on the other-hand, takes him away from the action. Because of his clerical role, he tries to assert morality by dissociating himself from criminals. Codineston does not feign to have witnessed and remembered, or indeed

⁷ Jussi Hanska, 'The hanging of William Cragh: anatomy of a miracle', *Journal of Medieval History*, 27:2, (2001), 121-138, (p. 136).

done, things he was not present for. He simply recounts public opinion. He seems personally more reliable than Baggeham, even if his account is not.

Ironically, Baggeham is amongst those who seem to most accurately represent where Cragh's body is moved to. He notes precisely whose house the body is taken to: 'a certain house of Thomas Mathew, near the church' (p. 34). Disappointingly, he does not tell us which church this is near, nor does he allude to any church at other points in his testimony to give a clue. Although contemporaries of Thomas Mathew may have been able to identify his house, its location poses a difficulty for modern scholars. As most other witnesses have stated that the body was first taken to St John's, we could assume that the house is located near there. However, John ap Hywel, one of the few witnesses who indicates where the house might be situated, does not support this idea. His testimony states that Thomas Mathew's house is 'neighbouring the aforesaid church of St Mary' (p. 41). This seems to be a mistake either in the remembrance or recording process. None of the other witnesses place Mathew's house near St Mary's, so the testimony is anomalous. The particular wording of the testimony implies that the mistake is the scribe's and not Hywel's. Hywel does not mention that Cragh's body was taken to St Mary's before being taken to Mathew's; he simply states that it was taken to *a* church. Describing Thomas Mathew's house as 'neighbouring the *aforesaid* [my italics] church of St Mary' seems inappropriate, then: this could be any church. The only time Hywel mentions St Mary's is when he states that he stood 'in the square in the town of Swansea near the church of Saint Mary' (p. 41) during the execution. As M. T. Clancy points out, 'errors in documents [...] are quite common'.⁸ Hywel's testimony seems to show this. The scribe seems to conflate the church which Hywel stood at with that which the body is taken to. It seems highly unlikely that Cragh's body would be transported through the city of Swansea to a house near St Mary's after finding that it could not be kept in St John's.

⁸ M. T. Clancy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 3rd edn. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 132.

Another important site which is hard to locate is where Cragh was actually hanged. Topographical names such as 'Gibbet Hill' give clues to modern scholars in search of the site, but it is still difficult to judge precisely where Cragh would have been hanged or where witnesses were stood in relation to him. Thomas Marshall claims in his testimony that the gallows were situated 'about two crossbow shots away from the castle' (p. 29). Adam of Loughor measures his distance from the gallows the exact same: 'in his estimate about two crossbow shots from the place where the witness himself was standing on the wall' (p. 39). This seems suspect. Yet as the walls surround much of Swansea, it is possible that Loughor was positioned in a spot equidistant to the castle's distance from the gallows. As Loughor does not specify his exact position on the walls, we cannot tell if this is or is not the case. Marshall, on the other-hand, gives us a more exact clue to his position during the hanging. He too is at the walls. He tells us that he 'was at the west gate' which 'is one crossbow shot away from the gallows or around that in his estimate' (p. 29). They occupy similar positions but are different distances away. However, again, this does not mean that Loghor's estimate of distance is incorrect. We cannot comment on how accurate his memory of the event is, but we can at least infer that, because the details of his spatial positioning are so vague, his recollection and recounting of the event is less thorough than Marshall's.

These two representations of space (away from the gallows) reveal a cultural preoccupation. Robert Bartlett notes that crossbows were 'the customary armament of town guards and garrisons'.⁹ It therefore seems that these two individuals, a priest and a labourer, are using this common item as an easily understandable measure of space. More interestingly, Bartlett points out that the two are giving a 'distance by referring to a human activity over space'.¹⁰ This seems bizarre as universal scales to measure of distance did exist. Cragh, for instance, claims that he was hanged from 'gallows on a certain high hill positioned near the

⁹ Robert Bartlett, p. 66.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 66.

said castle a quarter mile away or around that.’ (p. 24) Despite this, we still find that Loghor and Marshall chose to measure their distance from the gallows in (now unfamiliar to us) practical terms. There is a cultural pattern. Medieval figures appear, in some cases, to be more comfortable visualising distance practically than numerically. Unfortunately, as this form of measurement is so inexact (there is no set distance a crossbow bolt travels), it does not help to locate the exact site Cragh was hanged at.

Different figures involved in the Cragh incident seem to have different understandings of space. Visualising distance in terms of human activity is not the only way in which space is differently mapped in the testimonies. Saskia Sassen notes that medieval space was characterized by ‘the existence of multiple crisscrossing jurisdictions’.¹¹ It was mapped over with numerous meanings and spheres of influence. The witnesses differ in the degrees to which they are aware of and represent this. Lady Mary seems most aware of the different territorial significances of Swansea. When asked where Cragh was captured, she answers with incredible detail. We are told that Cragh ‘was captured at Swansea, in the region of Gower, in the diocese of St Davids, and the region was in the temporal jurisdiction of the said William, formerly her [Lady Mary’s] husband’ (p. 2). She is acutely aware of the separate institutions both secular (her late-husband) and spiritual (St David’s) which had influence over Swansea, as well as the regional/geographical area it belongs to. No other witness is so precise in locating Swansea. Some highlight who its Lord was, or the diocese it belonged to, but none go to as great lengths to represent the overlapping jurisdictions which control it. For this reason, Mary appears to be the most experienced at providing legal specificity. Ironically, Bartlett notes that the commissioners dismissed Mary’s testimony because, as a woman, they felt that she had little experience of legal communication. However, as I have shown, and

¹¹ Saskia Sassen, *Territory. Authority. Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 32.

Bartlett corroborates, ‘the commissioners obviously underestimated her experience in lawsuits’.¹²

Despite Lady Mary’s specificity and her obvious understanding of testimonial procedure, her account is not the most believable because of her spatial positioning during the course of events. If we were to map Lady Mary’s movements throughout the course of the hanging we would need little ink. She remains static in the castle until after Cragh’s recovery when ‘the lady herself led the said William who was hanged to Hereford Cathedral’ (p. 7). Her responses to many of the inquisitor’s questions are hedged with phrases such as, ‘she said that she had not witnessed the above-said [event] herself’ (p. 3), in order to acknowledge this lack of movement. Yet, having told her inquisitors that she was not present at the hanging, Lady Mary gives some anomalous details of events. She states that ‘William was carried on a certain wooden wheel’ (p. 2) to the chapel. No other witness corroborates this; they either do not know how Cragh was carried away, or claim that it was on a ladder. It is baffling that Lady Mary would suggest that Cragh was carried on a wheel when she was neither close enough to see the event, nor was it public opinion that a wheel was used. Harriett Webster, in her gloss of the Cragh testimonies, usefully implies that the wheel is associated with martyrs, particularly St Catherine of Alexandria.¹³ Catherine Sanok also notes how women took ‘the legends of female saints as examples for their own ethical and devotional practices’ in the medieval period.¹⁴ This does not quite seem to be what Lady Mary is doing, but it is clear that the hagiography of a female saint has sculpted her way of thinking. Mary seems to invent this wheel (whether on purpose or by accident) in order to equate Cragh’s suffering with that of a saint so that his story is more plausibly miraculous.

¹² Bartlett, p. 102.

¹³ Footnote 6: Harriett Webster, ‘The miracle of the resuscitation of the twice hanged William Cragh’, p. 2.

¹⁴ Catherine Sanok, *Her Life Historical* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p. ix.

Although Mary's positioning during the events of the hanging mean that her testimony is not the most reliable, it does reveal insights into the level of her power. Michel DeCerteau claims that 'elevation transfigures' a person 'into a voyeur' who can only watch a city.¹⁵ However, Mary, constrained by her elevated position in the castle, is not a voyeur. It is true that she must watch the events, but she also has some agency in them. Mary does not move herself, but, unlike John of Baggeham, she does not seem to tactically reposition herself in order to play up her role in the events. Instead, she asserts her power by ordering the people around her to negotiate space on her behalf (as demonstrated when she ordered for Cragh's body to be measured). There is a tension. We see that Mary lacks power in her own constrained spatial practices. Unlike Codineston, there is no suggestion that she actively chooses to distance herself from the hanging. In fact it appears to be the opposite. She cares for Cragh's welfare, but has to pray for him 'in a room in the said lord's aforesaid castle of Swansea' (p. 6). Her role and gender seem to limit her movement; she is, as Judith Bennett quotes from medieval-feminist scholars, 'circumscribed by patriarchal constraints'.¹⁶ Yet, conflictly, Bennett also notes that feminist scholars have read some medieval women 'as active agents who, despite some obstacles, asserted control'.¹⁷ Mary also seems to fit this model. As the wife of a lord, she has the power to control others, sending them to see the body for her. Her role simultaneously gives her power and constrains her.

Representations of space across the testimonies dealing with Cragh's hanging are complicated. They often contradict each other, making it difficult to assess the exact spatial locations of those involved in the events. These discrepancies also expose the fallacy of memory, or, if these memories have been purposefully edited, the integrity of the testifiers. It therefore stands to reason that, as Hanska notes, 'the story was rejected in the final phase of

¹⁵ Michel de Certeau, 'Walking in the City', in Simon During, *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 156-163, (p. 157).

¹⁶ Judith M. Bennett, 'Medievalism and Feminism', *Speculum*, 68.2, (April 1993), 309-331, (p. 321).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 321.

canonisation'.¹⁸ Although the testimonies were not deemed useful to the papal commission, they can still be useful to modern scholars. These representations of space give an insight into medieval culture. They reveal alternative ways of measuring distance and show how space and the negotiation of it can be used to assert and manipulate power.

Word Count: 2,678

¹⁸ Jussi Hanska, p. 121.

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