



Condon, M., & Jones, E. T. Warrant for the payment of John Cabot's pension, 22 February 1498

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Margaret M. Condon and Evan T. Jones (eds.), 'Warrant for the payment of John Cabot's pension, 22 February 1498' (University of Bristol, ROSE, 2011)¹

On 13 December 1497, John Cabot was granted a pension of £20 per year from Henry VII of England.² This was a reward for his successful exploration voyage that year, which had resulted in the European discovery of North America. Cabot, however, appears to have had difficulty in realising payment of the pension, which was meant to be paid out in two instalments per year from the customs revenues collected in the port of Bristol. He claimed that the customers were reluctant to make payment for fear that it would be disallowed on audit in the exchequer for lack of a sufficient warrant. In other words, while the customers did not dispute the validity of Cabot's patent, finally issued at the end of January 1498, they said (so it was claimed) that they lacked a direct order from the crown in a form that would be acceptable to the barons and auditors of the upper exchequer. Without such a warrant they were not prepared to make the payment. The king's response, which is likely to have been triggered by a petition from Cabot, was to order the issuance of the privy seal warrant that follows. This set out the procedure necessary to secure payment on this and future occasions, and ordered that it should be done with immediate effect. A tally was to be raised in the exchequer, ordering payment to Cabot specifically charged on the Bristol customs.

Somewhat in the manner of a modern cheque and stub, the tally, which was a small squared-off hazel stick, was marked on both sides with the name of the accountant from whom the money was to be drawn, whilst a series of graduated notches across its width denoted the sum involved.³ It was then split unequally along its length, leaving one half with a short stub at one end the full width of the tally, so that it was longer than its counterpart. This was the 'stock' (also known as the 'tally'), which was marked also with the year and term of its issue. The 'stock' (at least in theory) could then be presented by Cabot or his representative to the customers, who would then pay him, retaining the stock as their receipt. On audit of the customers' account in the exchequer, this stock could be matched to the foil (also known as the 'counter-tally'), the unique second and shorter part of the same wooden tally, which had been retained in the exchequer. Both parts contained in written and notched form the details of the payment, and each would only match its pair. There was little possibility of counterfeit, since a piece of wood will always split unevenly along its grain, so that it would be almost impossible to produce a forged stock that would exactly match the foil. Forgery was also made difficult because the notches, carefully cut to record pounds, shillings, and pence before the tally was split, had also to match. The 'receipt rolls' of the exchequer, like the tally itself, recorded the sum as a payment by the customers into the exchequer, although at Westminster no money had actually changed hands. A '*pro*' ['for'] entry on the right hand side of the roll recorded the name of the payee, and the word '*pro*'

¹ The National Archives: Public Record Office, UK [TNA:PRO], TNA:PRO, E404/82, under date of 22 February 13 Henry VII. The following conventions were employed when transcribing the document: the line spacing, spelling, capitalization, emphasis, and punctuation follow the manuscript; reconstructions of suspensions are in italics; 'u' and 'v' have been rendered according to the document rather than to modern usage. Elided words ('thesaid') have been separated for the sake of comprehension. Squared brackets indicate editorial interventions. As was the convention for privy seals, the document was written on parchment. The reverse of the document is blank, but the original fold marks, and the outline of the perimeter of the seal, are both obvious. This transcription was undertaken as part of the 'Cabot Project' (University of Bristol, 2009-) funded by the British Academy (SG100194) and Gretchen Bauta, a private Canadian benefactor. We would like to thank Jeff Reed and Heather Dalton for commenting on earlier versions of this transcription.

² Margaret M. Condon and Evan T. Jones (eds.), 'The grant of a pension of £20 per year to John Cabot, 13 December 1497' (University of Bristol, ROSE, 2011) <<http://hdl.handle.net/1983/1792>> [accessed 4 Oct. 2011].

³ For £20, for example (the full amount of Cabot's pension) the notch would be the width of the little finger: H. Jenkinson, 'Exchequer Tallies', *Archaeologia*, vol. 62 (1911), p. 373 and Plate XLIX, Fig. 1, no. 12 (a tally with two £20 notches).

would have been marked on the tally itself indicating that it was, in modern parlance, a third-party cheque.⁴ As a result, a tally, once issued, was fully transferable, and could be used as a medium of exchange that might change hands a number of times before being presented to the accountant – in this case the customers of Bristol. The arrangement recorded in the warrant thus constituted both an official order for payment to Cabot as payee and provided for the customers' own exoneration on presentation of their accounts for audit.

Payment by tally had an important advantage for Cabot. By the time the warrant was issued he had begun to prepare for a second and larger expedition to the new land, which he hoped would prove to be outlying regions of the Orient.⁵ Given that his ships were said to be 'provisioned for a year', it appears that he expected to be gone for a considerable period.⁶ Indeed, Cabot may even have warned the king that he could be longer, should he actually reach Japan or China and be able to secure additional supplies while there. If his trip was prolonged, the payment of his pension by tally would be useful, since it absolved Cabot from the need to provide signed letters of acquittance to the Bristol customers so that they could claim the pension payment against their accounts. While a letter of acquittance would have required Cabot's presence in Bristol, payment by tally enabled a trusted representative to collect the tally from London on his behalf. The tally could then be presented at Bristol's customs house for payment. Given this, it seems possible that the claims made about the difficulties Cabot had encountered with the Bristol customs officers were not the real reason for his subsidiary appeal to Henry VII. Rather, when Cabot approached the king in February, he may simply have been looking to secure a method of payment for his pension that would ensure that his family would continue to receive it while he was away.

The privy seal warrant of 22 February 1498, addressed to the treasurer and chamberlains of the exchequer, was first published in 1896 by Henry HARRISSE, who was given the transcript by the British naval historian Michael OPPENHEIM.⁷ To HARRISSE, the chief import of the find was probably that it bolstered his argument that John Cabot was the true 'discoverer' of North America, following three centuries in which it had generally been believed that his son, Sebastian, led the Bristol expeditions.⁸ The warrant did not play a major part in HARRISSE's argument, however. This was probably because neither the warrant to the exchequer, nor the letters for the grant that lies behind it, specify why the king had awarded the pension. On the other hand, by the time of the warrant's publication, enough narrative accounts had been found of John Cabot's 1497 voyage for it to be clear that the pension must have been granted as a reward for his successful expedition that summer and to encourage him to undertake further voyages from Bristol.⁹

The standard text for the warrant today is that of James Williamson, who repeats the transcript earlier published by Henry Biggar.¹⁰ An annotated and slightly revised transcription follows here, accompanied by a photograph of the original document.

⁴ For tallies, see M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record* (London, 1979), pp. 5-6 and Plate VIII, with clear illustrations of £20 and £1 notches in a thirteenth century tally; H. Jenkinson, 'Exchequer Tallies', pp. 369-70, 373-76; H. Jenkinson, 'Medieval Tallies, Public and Private', *Archaeologia*, vol. 74 (1925), p. 294. Fewer than 2,000 tallies now survive among the records of the exchequer of receipt (TNA:PRO, E402/1-3G) and most are either of the thirteenth century or the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

⁵ Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp. 210-11.

⁶ 'Pedro de Ayala to the Spanish Sovereigns, 25 July 1498' in Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp. 228.

⁷ H. HARRISSE, *John Cabot the discoverer of North America and Sebastian his Son: a chapter of the maritime history of England under the Tudors 1496-1557* (London, 1896), p. 394.

⁸ For a brief summary of this historical confusion, P. E. Pope, *The Many Landfalls of John Cabot* (Toronto, 1997), pp. 54-68.

⁹ HARRISSE, *John Cabot*, pp. 48-9.

¹⁰ J. A. Williamson, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery under Henry VII* (Hakluyt Society, Second Series, No. 120, CUP, 1962), pp. 217-8; H. P. Biggar, *The Precursors of Jacques Cartier, 1497-1534* (Ottawa, 1911), pp. 24-5.

Transcription of the warrant

Henry by the grace of god King of England and of ffrance and lord of Irland To the Tresourer and Chambrelains of oure Eschequier greting¹¹ / Where as We by oure warrant under oure signet¹² for certain consideracions haue yeven¹³ and graunted unto John Caboote xx . li yerely¹⁴ during oure pleasoure to be had and perceyved¹⁵ by the handes of oure Customers¹⁶ in oure poorte of Bristowe and¹⁷ as we be enfourmed the said John Caboote is dilaied¹⁸ of his payement bicause the said Customers haue no sufficient matier of discharge for their indempnitie to be yolden¹⁹ at their accomptes before the Barons of oure Eschequier²⁰ / Wherefore we wol and charge you that ye oure said Tresourer and Chambrelains that now be and hereafter shalbe that ye unto suche tyme as ye shall haue from us otherwise in commaundement do to be levied in due fourme ij severall tailles²¹ every of them conteignyng x li upon the Customers of the revenues in our said poort of Bristowe at two usuell termes of the yere²² Whereof oon taill to be levied at this tyme conteignyng x li of the Revenues²³ of oure said poort upon Richard Meryk²⁴ and Arthure Kemys²⁵ late Customers of the same²⁶ And the same taill

¹¹ The treasurer and the two chamberlains were the senior officers of the 'exchequer of receipt'.

¹² This is a reference to the pension grant of 1497: Condon and Jones, 'The grant of a pension of £20 per year to John Cabot'.

¹³ 'yeven': given.

¹⁴ 'xx . li yerely' – i.e. £20 per year.

¹⁵ 'perceyved by': perceived by – i.e. received from.

¹⁶ 'Customers': customers, also known as 'collectors'. The customers were responsible for collecting and accounting for the king's customs duties on overseas trade.

¹⁷ Written over an erasure.

¹⁸ 'dilaied': delayed.

¹⁹ 'yolden' – i.e. yielded / handed-over.

²⁰ The barons of the exchequer were the judges of the court of exchequer and had overall responsibility for the audit of accounts.

²¹ 'ij severall tailles' – i.e. two separate tallies.

²² i.e. one tally for the payment of £10 in each of Michaelmas and Easter terms, these being the way the receipt rolls were organised. The rolls recorded both payments in cash and by [tally of] assignment in the exchequer of receipt.

or tailles in due and sufficient fourme levied ye delyuer unto the said John Caboote to be had of oure gift by way of rewarde *without prest*²⁷ or eny other charge to be sette upon hym or any of them for the same And thies *our lettres* shalbe youre sufficient warrant in that behalf **Yeuen** undre oure *priue seal* at oure manour of Shene²⁸ the xxijth day of ffebruary The xiiijth yere of oure Reigne.²⁹

Bolman³⁰

J Cabote³¹ [*at bottom left hand side, by seal tag (missing)*]

²³ Written over an erasure.

²⁴ Richard Ameryk or ap Merrick, customer of Bristol 1486-1502.

²⁵ Arthur Kemys, customer of Bristol 1493-1503.

²⁶ These two words, 'the same' have been elided in the original but are separated here to aid comprehension.

²⁷ 'without prest' – i.e. the money was a gift rather than an advance for which he would later have to account.

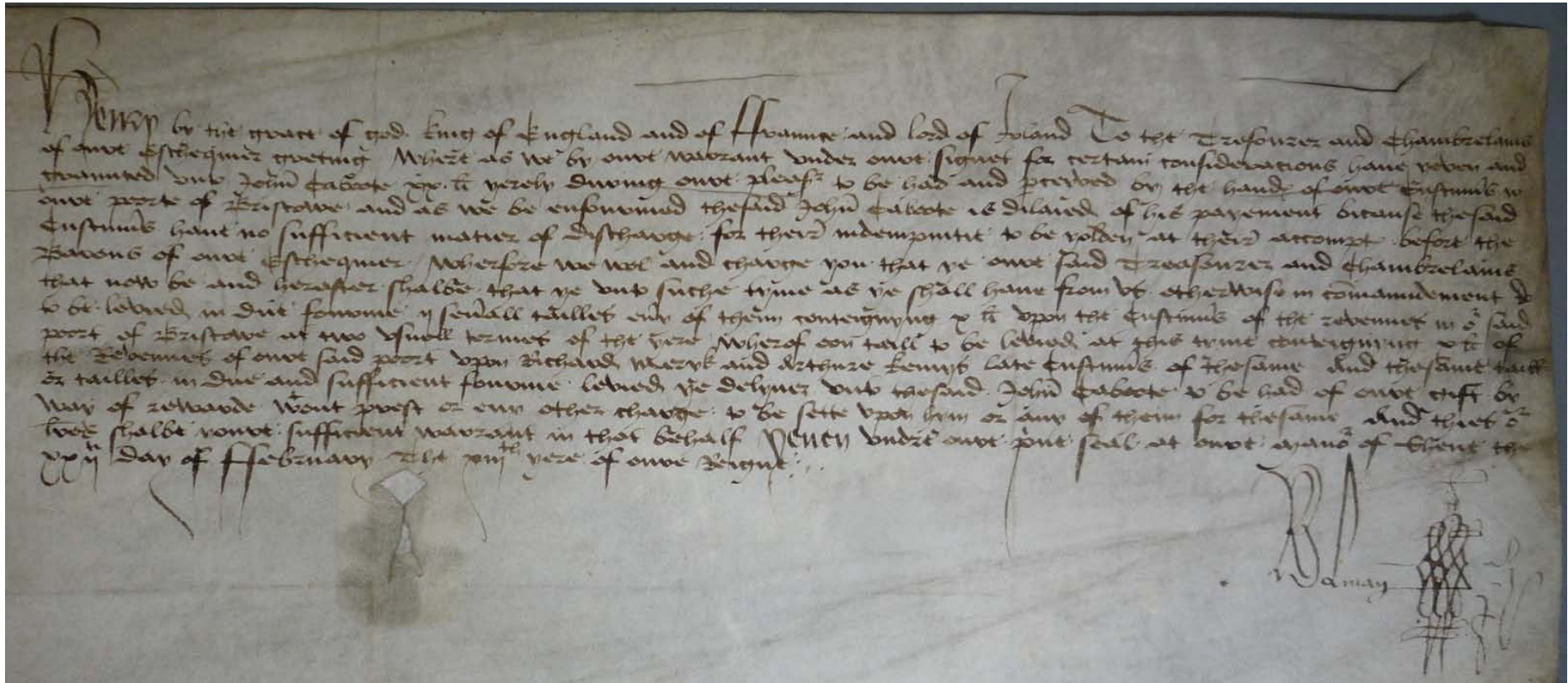
²⁸ Sheen, near Richmond, Surrey. The old buildings were at least partially destroyed by fire at the end of December 1497. The king had already begun to rebuild, and from 1501 Sheen was renamed as the palace of Richmond: H. M. Colvin, *The History of the King's Works*, vol. 4 (London, 1982), pp. 222-23.

²⁹ 22 February 1498.

³⁰ Robert Bolman, clerk of the privy seal: cf. R. Horrox and P.W. Hammond (eds.), *British Library Harleian Manuscript 433*, ed. (4 vols, Gloucester, 1982), ii, p.190.

³¹ Written in the hand of the document, this is not a signature. The name of the beneficiary is invariably written at this position in all similar warrants for which the stub of the seal tag still remains.

Photograph of the warrant: reproduced by permission of The National Archives



Cabot's name by the seal tag

