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# The Execution of William Wallace: Saint Bartholomew's Eve, Monday 23 August 1305

John Reuben Davies (Research team)

William Wallace died on Monday 23 August 1305 at the Elms, an area of Smithfield in the City of London. The manner of Wallace's end is generally known, not least because of a film released in 1995.<sup>1</sup> The more committed students of Wallace have descriptions written by fourteenth-century monastic chroniclers to inform them; these accounts give sufficient detail of the method of execution to unsettle any humane person. There is some slight difference between, on the one hand, the reported directions for Wallace's punishment delivered by the justices at his trial and, on the other hand, the account of the execution itself given by the Westminster chronicler. The sequence of events can nevertheless be put together in the following way.<sup>2</sup> As a traitor, Wallace was drawn to the gallows on a hurdle by horses through the streets of London; as a robber and homicide he was hanged by the neck until not quite dead; still alive, although probably unconscious, he was cut down in order that, as a desecrator of churches, he could be deprived of his genitals and internal organs, which were then burned on a fire; finally, as an outlaw, his head was cut off. The spectacle complete, the head was displayed on London Bridge and the rest of the body divided into four parts. The dismembered corpse was sent northwards to Scotland, with one quarter being deposited on the way for display at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the other three parts going in turn to Berwick-upon-Tweed, St Johnstone (that is, Perth), and Stirling (although the chronicler of Lanercost thought the last was Aberdeen).

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<sup>1</sup> *Braveheart*, dir. Mel Gibson (Icon Entertainment International, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> A description of the execution is given in the Westminster continuation of a chronicle kept at St Albans, *Flores Historiarum*, ed. H. R. Luard, Rolls Series 95, 3 vols (London, 1890), III.134; another account, together with the destination of the body parts, is given in the 'Annals of London', from London, BL, MS Add. 5444, and the fragments of BL, MS Cotton Otho B. iii, in *Documents illustrative of Sir William Wallace, his Life and Times*, ed. Joseph Stevenson, Maitland Club 54 (Edinburgh, 1841), 192–3, or *Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II. I. Annales Londonienses and Annales Paulini*, ed. W. Stubbs, Rolls Series 76 (London, 1882), 141–42; for Aberdeen as a destination of the fourth part of Wallace's body, see the Chronicle of Lanercost, *sub anno* 1305; ed. Joseph Stevenson, Maitland Club 46 (Edinburgh, 1839), 204; transl. Herbert Maxwell (Glasgow, 1913), 176. The sentence of execution is also described in the Pipe Roll for London and Middlesex of 33 Edw I, for which see my [Feature of the Month for May 2011](#).

Wallace's execution is a classic scene from one of history's great tragedies: the death of a national hero, a bloodthirsty judicial killing, the demonstrative and exemplary justice of an English king. The principal actors are at centre-stage, and the critics have laid down their review of the performance for posterity. Behind the set, meanwhile, rarely visible, history's stagehands have been working the pulleys, preparing the costumes, prompting the actors. And all along, the master playwright has been composing and adjusting the script, adapting the plot as circumstances demand and as inspiration suggests.

Let us now return to the scene of Wallace's most famous victory – a victory accomplished in conjunction with, if not under the leadership of, Andrew Murray – which led, upon Murray's death, to Wallace's sole guardianship of the realm of Scotland, and to the charges upon which he was condemned, and the crimes for which he was executed. One important account of the battle, written at Lanercost Priory in Cumberland, uniquely preserves an unsavoury episode, an act of bloodthirsty – and to the modern mind, even psychopathic – vengeance by Wallace, perpetrated in the dénouement of the confrontation between the Scottish 'rebels' and the forces loyal to King Edward.<sup>3</sup>

[The Scots] allowed as many of the English to cross the bridge as they could hope to overcome, and then, having blocked the bridge, they slaughtered all who had crossed over, **among whom perished the Treasurer of England, Hugh de Cressingham, of whose skin William Wallace caused a broad strip to be taken from the head to the heel, to make therewith a baldrick for his sword.**

It was in this beginning, it would seem, that Edward later decided Wallace should find his end.

The manner of William Wallace's execution, by drawing, hanging, evisceration, beheading, and quartering, was not a novelty. We know of several other men who had served as precedents for Wallace's judicial butchering. The most closely analogous

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<sup>3</sup> Chronicle of Lanercost, *sub anno* 1297; ed. Stevenson, 190; trans. Maxwell, 164.

case, and one which showed that justice under Edward I had form in this respect, was Dafydd ap Gruffudd, prince of Gwynedd, who died at Shrewsbury in 1283.<sup>4</sup>

Because he was a betrayer of the lord king, who had made him a knight, he was drawn by horses at a slow pace to the place of hanging. Because he had committed the homicide of Fulk Trigald, and of other noblemen of England, he was hanged alive. Because he did it during Passiontide, on account of his blasphemy his innards were burned on the fire. Because he had plotted the death of the king in many places in England, his limbs were divided, and sent throughout the regions of England as a warning to evil-doers. And his head was placed on a very high stake in the Tower of London, facing outwards; and this was done during the eleventh year of the aforesaid lord, King Edward.

Edward I was not an innovator, however, in this variety of punishment. A man who had tried to kill Edward's father, Henry III, had been drawn, hanged, beheaded and quartered in 1238. In the Pipe Roll for 1237–8, we find this 'traitor' hanged and drawn at Coventry; his dismembered body-parts sent to Northampton, Gloucester, Nottingham, as well as Coventry itself. Only in Matthew of Paris's account do we have a full description of the crime, capture, and execution of this 'literate man-at-arms' (*armiger literatus*), who made an attempt on the king's life.<sup>5</sup> In a related case, William Marsh was 'divided and drawn through the cities [*presumably* of Westminster and London]'. Again, Matthew of Paris provides the full details of the capture, trial and execution, explaining that Marsh was implicated in the attempt made on the king's life by the *armiger literatus* in 1238.<sup>6</sup> William Marsh seems to be the only precedent for a convict of treason being brought to London for execution. The most prominent rebel of Henry III's reign, Simon de Montfort, was the victim of an *ad hoc* military assassination in the

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<sup>4</sup> Annals of Dunstable, *sub anno* 1282; ed. H. R. Luard, *Annales Monastici* 3, Rolls Series 36 (London, 1866), 294.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Paris, *Chronica maiora*, ed. H. R. Luard, Rolls Series 57, 7 vols (London, 1872–84), III.497–8. The Pipe roll is TNA, MS. E372/82 (Pipe Roll of 22 Henry III, Michaelmas 1237–1238), image available on line at

[http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT4/H3/E372no82/aE372no82fronts/IMG\\_4641.htm](http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT4/H3/E372no82/aE372no82fronts/IMG_4641.htm)

<sup>6</sup> TNA, MS. E372/86 (Pipe Roll of 26 Henry III, Michaelmas 1241–1242), image available online at

[http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT4/H3/E372no86/aE372no86fronts/IMG\\_5037.htm](http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT4/H3/E372no86/aE372no86fronts/IMG_5037.htm)

Edited by H. L. Cannon in *The Great Roll of the Pipe for the Twenty-sixth Year of the reign of Henry the Third AD 1241–1242* (London, 1918), 283.

Battle of Evesham in 1265. The man-at-arms, Henry III's would-be assassin, had been executed at Coventry; Dafydd, the Welsh traitor, at Shrewsbury; and another Welsh rebel, Rhys ap Maredudd, 'the king's enemy', at York in 1291.<sup>7</sup> The bringing of the victim to London, rather than the more rapid execution at or near the place of capture, was not an established custom.

Wallace had been captured near Glasgow on 5 August, and could have been dealt with at any number of places in southern Scotland or northern England. Instead, Edward took the risk of having him transported to London over a period of nearly three weeks. One is forced to suspect that the English king had something special in mind.

And indeed he did, since William Wallace's capture had occurred at a propitious moment. His execution could be timed to form the opening pageant – a crowd-pleasing entertainment – for England's largest communal event, the Bartholomew Fair, which began on Saint Bartholomew's Eve, 23 August, and lasted a further two days. Hence the place of Wallace's execution, outside the priory church of St Bartholomew the Great in the City of London; St Bartholomew being the patron saint of butchers; the church being situated beside Smithfield, the famous meat market.<sup>8</sup>

There is, however, one further contrived coincidence in the timing of Wallace's end. Saint Bartholomew the apostle is not only patron saint of butchers, but is famously the patron saint of tanners, for the apostle's martyrdom had been perpetrated by flaying. In other words, like Hugh Cressingham, who had been the victim of Wallace's vengeful trophy-hunting, Saint Bartholomew had been skinned by his persecutors. King Edward was pulling off what we might now call an act of poetic justice.

The chroniclers pointed to the date, to the vigil of Saint Bartholomew, but we must admit that no explicit association was made between the suffering of Saint Bartholomew and the quasi-martyrdom of Cressingham, who died as a witness to the truth of Edward's claim to overlordship. Yet one cannot help thinking that Edward I had a fertile and associative imagination. Perhaps this was Edward's private joke: one imagines the smug self-satisfaction of the English king who had written and directed the final scene of Wallace's life to such dramatic effect.

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<sup>7</sup> TNA, MS. E372/137 (Yorkshire Pipe Roll, Michaelmas 1291 to Michaelmas 1292): Et in iustic' faciend' \de/ Reso ab Mereduk' inimico Regis, hoc anno . xvj . s . ii . d ('And for justice done in respect of Rhys ap Maredudd, an enemy of the king, this year, 16s. 2d.').

<sup>8</sup> On the history of Bartholomew Fair, Henry Morley ([\*Memoirs of Bartholomew Fair, London, 1859\*](#)) gives chapter and verse.

But as Edward's clerks inscribed '*Exit Wallace*' at the end of the folio, others were taking up the pen; for if history is written by the victors, King Edward's script for the Scottish war would soon become redundant.