



Jones, E. T., & Condon, M. Henry VII's letter to John Morton concerning William Weston's voyage to the new found land

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**Margaret M. Condon and Evan T. Jones (eds.), 'Henry VII's letter to John Morton concerning William Weston's voyage to the new found land' (University of Bristol, ROSE, 2011)<sup>1</sup>**

The following letter was first published and discussed in 2009, in an article by Evan Jones.<sup>2</sup> Given the importance of this letter, which concerns the first English-led expedition to the New World, we decided to publish a fuller annotated transcription here. This is accompanied by a photograph of the letter itself, reproduced by permission of The National Archives, UK. The letter must have been written on either 12 March 1498, 1499 or 1500. Since the letter refers to the 'new founde land', it must post-date John Cabot's discovery in the summer of 1497; since Morton died in September 1500, it cannot be later than that. Moreover, the years 1498–1500 are the only three during the chancellorship of Cardinal Morton (1494–1500) in which the king was at Greenwich on 12 March.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The National Archives: Public Record Office, UK [TNA:PRO], TNA:PRO, C82/332 piece 61, out of 74. The following conventions were employed when transcribing the documents: the line spacing, spelling, capitalization, underlining, deletions 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. Squared brackets indicate editorial additions – in this case to indicate reconstructions as a result of damage to the manuscript. As with other documents of the same type, the letter has been damaged: initially both by the physical act of filing and by the removal of the seal wax, with further damage occurring over time.

<sup>2</sup> E. T. Jones, 'Henry VII and the Bristol expeditions to North America: the Condon documents', *Historical Research*, 83 (August, 2010), 444-455. First published in 'Early View', August 2009.

<sup>3</sup> M. M. Condon, *Itinerary of Henry VII* (unpublished MS); TNA:PRO, E101/414/14 (1498); C82/188 (1499); E101/415/2 (1500). For March 1497 the record is incomplete, but the king appears to have been at Westminster throughout February and during the first part of March, moving to Sheen by 20 March: Condon, *Itinerary*, March 1497.

*Endorsed:*<sup>4</sup>

To the moost reuerend fader in god our right  
 trusty and right entierly welbeloued the  
 Cardynall Archiebisshop of Canterbury *Primat*  
 of all England and Chaunceller<sup>5</sup> of the same

HR<sup>6</sup>

By the king<sup>7</sup>

Mooste reue[r]end fader in god right trusty and right entierly welbeloued We grete you  
 hertly wele And wher as we bee enfourmed that upon certain matiers of variance  
 depending before you in the Court of oure Chauncery<sup>8</sup> betwixt John Esterfelde of *our*  
 Towne of Bristowe marchant on the oon partye and William Weston of the same  
 marchant [on t]he other.<sup>9</sup> A certain Iniunccion<sup>10</sup> lately passed out of our said Court ayenst<sup>11</sup>  
 the said Wi[ll]iam. Soo it is that we entende that he shall shortly *with goddes* grace  
 passe and saille for to serche and fynde if he can the new founde land.<sup>12</sup> Wherfor  
 and for other causes and consideracions us *specially* moeving we wol and desire  
 you to see that almaner *processes* and *suytes*<sup>13</sup> concernyng the said matiers and  
 Iniunccion bee utterly put in suspense and d[el]aye till that the said William shalbe  
 retourned from the said *Journey* Soo that by reason of the same he susteine noo  
 losse ner *dammage* during his absence As our grete trust is in you Yeuen undre  
 oure signet<sup>14</sup> at oure Manour of Grenewiche<sup>15</sup> the xij<sup>th</sup> day of Marche.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The reverse of the letter has a round red wax stain, which is all that remains of the king's signet seal. This would have been broken in order to read the letter, which was sealed 'close', and the wax recovered. The fold and cut marks used to conceal the contents, secured by the seal and a tag until the point of delivery, are clearly visible on the reverse.

<sup>5</sup> John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury 1486-1500, Chancellor 1487-1500 and cardinal 1493-1500. Died 15 September 1500.

<sup>6</sup> A script 'HR' was the form of Henry VII's autograph after 1492 (M. M. Condon, 'An anachronism with intent? Henry VII's council ordinance of 1491/2', in *Kings and Nobles in the Later Middle Ages: a Tribute to Charles Ross*, ed. R. A. Griffiths and J. Sherborne (Gloucester, 1986), pp. 228-53, at p. 228.

<sup>7</sup> 'By the king': this is a standard formulary indicating that this letter is directly authorised by the king, and was to be obeyed.

<sup>8</sup> The Court of Chancery was presided over by the Lord Chancellor, in the King's name. It was a court of equity, which means that it was supposed to try cases on grounds of 'fairness'.

<sup>9</sup> E. T. Jones (ed.) 'John Esterfeld vs. William Weston of Bristol: Chancery petition transcript, c.1499' (University of Bristol, ROSE, 2009) <<http://hdl.handle.net/1983/1273>> [accessed 25 March 2011].

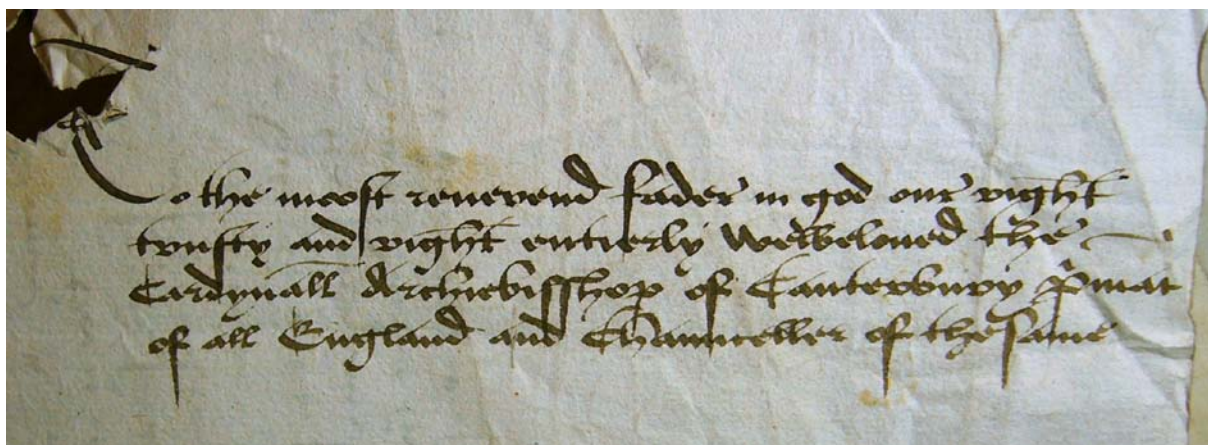
<sup>10</sup> 'Iniunccion': injunction. The chancery 'petition', transcribed by Jones from TNA:PRO, C1/199/76, is an official transcript in a Chancery hand. It includes Esterfeld's petition, Weston's answer and Esterfeld's replication. Sewing holes on the left hand edge indicate that a writ was once attached: an order to take depositions, or for an arbitrement, is perhaps a possibility, since the transcript is endorsed 'Estrfeeld Bristoll'; but it would be unwise to speculate too far in the absence of the writ. As is normal for suits in Chancery at this date there is no indication of the outcome of the case. However, the mention in the letter of an 'injunction' having been issued against Weston suggests though that the court had made or issued some form of order to his possible detriment which, if effected, so the King's letter implies, might result in Weston having to abandon the voyage.

<sup>11</sup> 'ayenst': against.

<sup>12</sup> 'new founde land': this is the first known use of this phrase to describe the lands found by John Cabot in 1497.

<sup>13</sup> 'almaner processes and suytes': all manner [of legal] processes and suits'.

<sup>14</sup> 'Yeuen under our signet': Given under our signet. The signet seal was officially in the custody of the king's secretary. Despite the increasing bureaucratisation of the signet office in the late fifteenth century, it is still possible to read individual letters, especially when further authorised by the king's sign manual, as the direct expression of the king's will. In this instance, the unusual form of words, with its reference to the 'new founde

**Photograph of the endorsement: reproduced by permission of The National Archives**

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land', taken in conjunction with the king's sign manual, suggests his direct intervention on Weston's behalf, even if the final form of words is a product of the writing office. For a recent study of the late fifteenth century signet office, and a useful survey of the literature, see now T. Westerveldt, 'Warrants under the Signet in the reign of Edward IV', *Historical Research*, vol. 83 (2010), pp. 602-616.

<sup>15</sup> 'Manour of Grenewiche': Greenwich Palace – one of the King's residences, five miles downriver from London. It was one of the king's favoured residences throughout the reign; and extensive building works were undertaken there between 1499 and 1506: *The History of the King's Works*, ed. H. M. Colvin *et al.*, Vol. IV (London, 1982), pp. 97-101.

<sup>16</sup> No year is given: see above, n.3. The left hand margin of the document is annotated with a mark of process, applied by a Chancery clerk.

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