

52. The flagellants

Almost every European chronicler described the penitential movement which swept across continental Europe. This account is one of the fullest, and it continues with a detailed analysis (not printed here) of the configuration of the heavens at the beginning of the astrological year (3 a.m. on 12 March 1349, when the sun entered Aries) to demonstrate that the movement and its characteristics were prefigured in the stars. For instance, the conjunction of Mars and Mercury foretold blows and the shedding of blood; while the fact that Scorpio (associated with deceitfulness) occupied the mid heaven forecast the movement's numberless lies.

A. Portnast (ed), *Chronicon Henrici de Herfordia*, Göttingen, 1859, pp. 280-4.

In 1348 a race without a head⁵³ aroused universal wonder by their sudden appearance in huge numbers. They suddenly sprang up in all parts of Germany, calling themselves cross bearers or flagellants. They were said, as if in confirmation of the prophecy, to be without a head either because they literally had no head – that is to say no one to organise and lead them – or because they had no head in the sense of having no brain and no judgement; they were fools, laying claim to a form of piety but, as will appear, spoiling everything when their stupidities began to ferment. They were called cross bearers either because they followed a cross carried before them on their travels, or because they prostrated themselves in the form of a cross during their processions, or because they identified themselves with a cross stitched to their clothes. They were called flagellants because of the whips [*flagella*] which they used in performing public penance. Each whip consisted of a stick with three knotted thongs hanging from the end. Two pieces of needle-sharp metal were run through the centre of the knots from both sides, forming a cross, the ends of which extended beyond the knots for the length of a grain of wheat or less. Using these whips they beat and whipped their bare skin until their bodies were bruised and swollen and blood rained down, spattering the walls nearby. I have seen, when they whipped themselves, how sometimes those bits of metal penetrated the flesh so deeply that it took more than two attempts to pull them out.

Flocking together from every region, perhaps even from every city, they overran the whole land. In open country they straggled along

⁵³ The race without a head is a reference to the 'Cedar of Lebanon' prophecy; see 23. The prevalence of the prophecy meant that the phrase occurs in various contexts at this time. The English chronicler Knighton, for instance, uses it of the French invaders of Gascony in 1348. *Chronicon* II p. 57.

behind the cross in no particular order, but when they came to cities, towns and villages they formed themselves into a procession, with hoods or hats pulled down over their foreheads, and sad and downcast eyes, they went through the streets singing a sweet hymn. In this fashion they entered the church and shut themselves in while they stripped off their clothes and left them with a guard. They covered themselves from the navel down with a pleated linen cloth like the women's undergarment which we call a kirtle, the upper part of the body remaining bare. Then they took the whips in their hands. When that was done, the north door of the church, if it had one, was opened.⁵⁴ The eldest came out of the church first and threw himself to the ground immediately to the east of the door, beside the path. After him, the second lay down on the west side, then the third next to the first, the fourth next to the second and so on. Some lay with right hand raised, as though taking an oath, others lay on their belly or back, or on their right or left side, representing in this way the sins for which they were performing penance.

After this, one of them would strike the first with a whip, saying, 'May God grant you remission of all your sins. Arise'. And he would get up, and do the same to the second, and all the others in turn did the same. When they were all on their feet, and arranged two by two in procession, two of them in the middle of the column would begin singing a hymn in a high voice, with a sweet melody. They sang one verse and then the others took it up and repeated it after them, and then the singers sang the second verse and so on until the end. But whenever they came to the part of the hymn which mentioned the passion of Christ they all suddenly threw themselves down prostrate on the ground, regardless of where they were, and whether the ground was clean or filthy, whether there were thorns or thistles or nettles or stones. And they did not lower themselves gradually to their knees or steadying themselves in some other way, but dropped like logs, flat on their belly and face, with arms outstretched, and, lying there like crosses, would pray. A man would need a heart of stone to watch this without tears. At a sign given by one of them they would rise and

⁵⁴ Because the north side of the church is the dark side in the northern hemisphere it acquired negative connotations. Burial there was often reserved for those whose state of grace was compromised; suicides, victims of violence or still-born babies. If a northern door existed at all it was rarely used, although in some places it was opened at baptism, a practice popularly believed to create an escape route for the devils cast out by the sacrament. In preferring the north door the flagellants were thus making a statement about their own unworthiness.

resume their procession as before. And usually they sing the hymn three times, and prostrate themselves, as described, three times. And then, when they have returned to the same door by which they left the church, they re-enter and resume their clothes, taking off the linen cloths. As they leave the church they ask for nothing, requesting neither food nor lodging, but accepting with gratitude the many offerings freely made to them.

However, just as annoying tares and persistent burrs often grow among the corn, so the ignorant and stupid, not content with penitential whippings, annoyingly and persistently took upon themselves the job of preaching. They did not think or speak of the clergy and the sacraments of the church with proper reverence, but rather with contempt; spat back rebukes and criticism, and despised persuasion. When they met up with two Dominicans in a field they were so infuriated by their exhortations that they tried to kill them, and although the more nimble managed to make his escape they stoned the other, and left his body under a pile of stones on the outskirts of Meissen. And they did similar things in many other places.

If somebody said to them, 'Why are you preaching, because you have not been sent, as the apostle says: "How shall they preach, unless they be sent?"³⁵ and why do you teach what, because you are illiterate, you cannot understand?' they would reply, as if clinching the argument, 'And who sent you, and how do you know that you are consecrating the body of Christ, and that the gospel you are teaching is the truth? If somebody answers them (as that Dominican answered them) that we have received these things from our Saviour, who consecrated his body and ordered his disciples to do likewise, thereby instituting the form of consecration which has come down to us through them, and that we have been sent by the church and that the gospel that we preach teaches the truth and cannot err, for it is guided by the Holy Spirit, they say that they have been instructed and sent directly by the Lord and by the spirit of God, according to Isaiah 48.16: "The Lord has sent me and his spirit".'

But Pope Innocent III said this about heretics: 'Since the order of teachers is almost pre-eminent in the church, no one ought to usurp the office of preacher casually. For according to the apostle, how can they preach unless they are sent?' If someone should reply that such things should be sent invisibly by God, rather than visibly by man, for

³⁵ Romans 10.15.

an invisible sending is of higher dignity than a visible, and divine things far better than human; it can reasonably be answered that since an inward sending is invisible, it is not enough for anyone just to say that he has been sent by God, as a heretic would claim, but it is necessary that he should demonstrate his invisible sending by working a miracle or the testimony of scripture. Thus when God chose to send Moses to the children of Israel in Egypt, he gave him a sign so that they would believe that he had been sent by God, and turned his staff into a snake and back again. On the other hand, John the Baptist pointed to scripture as witness of his special sending, saying: 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Isaias' [John 1.23].

However the flagellants ignored and scorned the sentence of excommunication pronounced against them by bishops. They took no notice of the papal order against them – until princes, nobles and the more powerful citizens started to keep them at a distance. The people of Osnabrück never let them in, although their wives and other women clamoured for them. Afterwards they disappeared as suddenly as they had come, as apparitions or ghosts are routed by mockery. Horace puts it well towards the end of his letters: 'Do you laugh at nocturnal ghosts or Thessalian portents?'³⁶

55. The flagellants in England

(a) Robert of Avesbury, E. M. Thompson (ed), *Robertus de Avesbury de Gestis Mirabilibus Regis Edwardi Terii*, Rolls Series, 1889, pp. 407-8. The description follows immediately upon the account of the plague printed above [14].

In that same year of 1349, about Michaelmas [29 September], more than 120 men, for the most part from Zealand or Holland, arrived in London from Flanders. These went barefoot in procession twice a day in the sight of the people, sometimes in St Paul's church and sometimes elsewhere in the city, their bodies naked except for a linen cloth from loins to ankle. Each wore a hood painted with a red cross at front and back and carried in his right hand a whip with three thongs. Each thong had a knot in it, with something sharp, like a needle, stuck through the middle of the knot so that it stuck out on each side, and as they walked one after the other they struck

³⁶ Horace, Epistles II.2. Thessaly (N.E. Greece) was regarded by classical authors as a country of witches, who had a reputation for wonder-working.

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