

THE ALLEGED ILLEGITIMACY OF EDWARD IV: A WINDOW ON A SCANDAL

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To argue that a medieval king of England could have been illegitimate may seem to readers of *Foundations* a high-risk occupation. For the slander of bastardy was part and parcel of the political infighting of this time. And a birth abroad (Edward was born in Rouen on 28 April 1442) made the intended target particularly vulnerable to such an aspersion. Given this, the story that King Edward IV may have been illegitimate, which was in circulation in the fifteenth century, has never been taken seriously by historians. It has just seemed too unlikely.

In *Bosworth 1485 – Psychology of a Battle* (Jones, 2003), I presented fresh evidence strongly suggesting that this astonishing accusation – made by the Italian, Dominic Mancini, in 1483 and repeated by the French chronicler Philippe de Commines – may actually have been true. Here I would like to share with you a first intriguing clue that set me on this road – a quite remarkable discovery in the archives of Rouen cathedral.

Let me put this in context. In the summer of 1441 the powerful nobleman Richard, Duke of York, had travelled to France as the king's lieutenant. His command headquarters was Rouen in Normandy. Accompanying him was his beautiful young wife, Cecily Neville. The couple was of royal blood, and a son and heir was of paramount importance. They had a daughter, Anne, but her brother, Henry, had died

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in infancy. Success soon appeared to be theirs. On 28 April 1442 they celebrated the birth of the future King Edward IV. Then on 17 May 1443 they produced the 'spare' – Edmund.

Edward was the son they needed; Edmund the necessary back-up. One might expect fanfares for the first and a more muted reception for the second. But what happened was precisely the opposite. Edward was christened in the seclusion of a private chapel in Rouen castle. A year later², his younger brother was feted in Rouen cathedral, the most public and impressive venue available. The couple had negotiated long and hard with the cathedral chapter for the display of sacred relics at the ceremony and had brought in a magnificent choir for the occasion. By special arrangement, the baby Edmund was baptised in a precious and historic font, which had been out of bounds for centuries since the conversion of the Norman Duke Rollo to Christianity. This was an exceptional honour (Hearne, 1728) – and contemporaries were quick to notice it.

For an aristocratic family to differentiate in this way was extraordinary. Primogeniture was the bedrock of this rigorously structured society and it was unprecedented for a second son to be so much favoured over a first. It appears inexplicable, and I began to wonder what on earth could have brought it about.

It struck me that the couple must have been much happier about Edmund than Edward. The obvious explanation seemed unbelievable, but I looked again at the likely dates of conception of the son and heir. Was he what he seemed? It was known that Richard, Duke of York, was away from his wife in the summer of 1441, but his absence was thought to be a short one – two weeks on campaign in Pontoise. I considered this absence more closely and examined a variety of obscure French archival sources. The result could not have been more dramatic. Prayers for the safety of the Duke of York during his dangerous expedition were being said not for a fortnight, but over five weeks that summer. Richard was away from his wife from 14 July to 20 August 1441. Her son Edward was born in late April the following year. Dates of pregnancy are not an exact science, and medieval knowledge was hazier than our own. But this long absence falls right across the time Cecily is most likely to have conceived.

There might be other explanations. Edward could have been conceived later in the year and delivered prematurely, and this could explain the hasty ceremony in a private chapel. But this was supposedly a child with royal blood. We know that Henry VII's first son Arthur was premature. Yet his arrival was still celebrated lavishly in Winchester cathedral. And his frail condition was noted by contemporaries. Edward gave no cause for concern.

The events of 1441-3 give a tantalising glimpse of the inner workings of the house of York. The seeds of the rumours which were later to dog Edward IV were sown at this time, and observers would look back on them with increasing suspicion. If they are really true, the implications are enormous.

References

Hearne, T (editor, 1728). *Wilhelmi Wyrcester Anekdotia apud Liber Niger*. Oxford, p.525.

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² 18 May 1443 - *Archives Départementales de la Seine-Maritime*, G 2130.