Reinhard Lamp

Thomas Brounflet, d. 31.12.1430
St. Lawrence, Wymington, Bedfordshire

Site

The beautiful church of St. Lawrence was built entirely at the expense of John Curteys, who had been mayor of the staple of Calais, and who had come home an extremely wealthy man and had his and his wife's table-tomb decked out by a fine sepulchral brass in the chancel. Two more important brasses lie on the chancel-floor, one to Thomas Brounflet, another to his wife Margaret.[1]

Biographical

Thomas Brounflet (or Bromflet) was cupbearer to Richard II, until that king was deposed and superseded by Henry IV in 1399.[2] Between 1401 and 1403, Thomas Brounflet acquired the manor of Wymington out of the sale of the heritage of his predecessor, John Curteys, who has his brass quite near this one.

In 1407/8, Brounflet was entrusted by the new king, Henry IV, with the functions not only of Treasurer, but also of Keeper of the Wardrobe of the Household (from 1407 to 1412)[3] – a noteworthy fact, because it means that Henry placed utter confidence in this high dignitary of the king whose place after all he had usurped. Brounflet was indeed an eminent man of the realm. After Henry's death, however, in 1 Henry V (i.e. in 1413–1414), Brounflet had to give up his office to one John More. The epitaph reveals how embittered he was about this treatment, which he considered unjustified and disparaging. In his will he directed his body to be buried *sub bassa petra* – "under a slab" – before the high altar of St. Lawrence, if he should die in Wymington.[4]

Description of the brass

The monument shows a man in complete plate-armour, praying, hands in delicately articulated gauntlets, feet resting against a lion. The armpits are additionally protected by big, targe-like palettes, his elbows by big coutières with escalloped and striated flanges. His throat is protected by a big gorget, a bascinet with a chin-guard sits on his head, which reposes on a big mantled tournament-helmet, with for a

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1   See author's article on „Margaret de Brounflet" in the section „Brasses to Ladies", Pegasus 2/2009.
2   Kings' reigns: Richard II 1377–99; Henry IV 1399–1413; Henry V 1413–22; Henry VI 1422–61.
3   In 9 Henry IV, i.e. 1407/8, the acts show the indenture as to delivery of the jewels and plate by John Tiptoft, late keeper of the wardrobe of the household, to Thomas Brounflet, his successor. This information was kindly provided by Mrs. Susan Edwards, Archivist of the Bedfordshire and Luton Archives.
4   *The Bedfordshire Wills and Administrations Proved at Lambeth Palace and in the Archdeaconry of Huntingdon*, the abstract of Thomas Brounflet's will of 1426, pp. 39 ff.

crest a dog's head, langued, issu-ant from a delicately crafted ducal coronet. On either side of the figure a shield (the right-hand one slightly damaged): Sable a bend flory coun-terflory or [Brounflet]. The sword's hilt and lower half are missing.

Apart from these (minor) damages, the brass is in good condition, is in-deed considered by many (and not without reason) one of the finest fig-ures of a knight in plate-armour.

Overall measurements: 222 x 85,5 cm.

Appreciation of the script

The text is set upside down above the figure's head, to accommodate the reader, because the brass lies – feet first – hard against the altar steps, thus a foot inscription would have made awkward reading, as would a text in line with the figure's stance.

The inscription consists of seven double lines of Latin verse, arranged in two blocks, separated (somewhat irregularly) by scrolls, but to be read consecutively. Playfully wavy lines serve for line-end fillers, coming in two recognizable patterns, some of them, however, following but their own whim, similarly to the punctua-tion-marks which – more often than not – appear strewn across the text quite arbitrarily.

The lettering is in incised Gothic minuscule, having capitals for line-beginnings and initials of personal names – not consistently, though. The characters are drawn in a regu-lar, stylish hand that reduces letter-
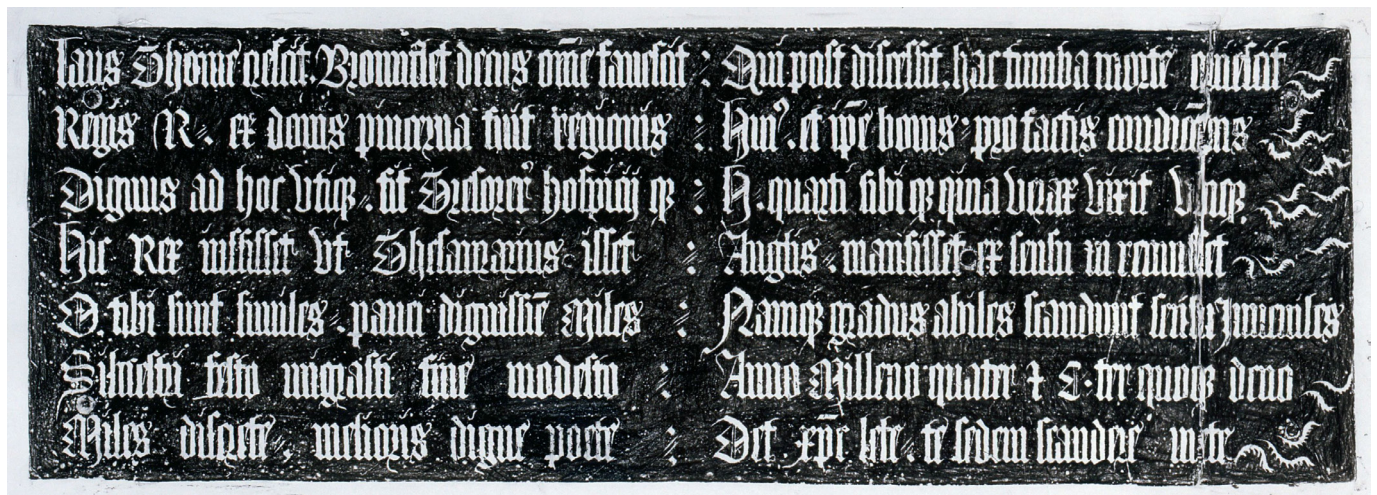
shapes in a very personal manner, and are quite decorative and pleasing to look at. There are many abbreviations. The minims of 'u', 'm', 'n', and 'ı' (often unclearly dotted) are frequently identical, also the letters 'e' and 'c' look alike, all this making for difficult reading.

Transliteration

Legend:	Is in the inscription:	Signifies:
Small script	text needing treatment	author's intervention
(…)	text needing treatment	expansion of abbreviations
[…]	text needing treatment	author's correction or alteration
underlining	superscript-bar	abbreviation mark
italics	ligature	

Transcription

1a Laus Thom[æ] crescit Brounflet[i] decus om(n)e favescit

 b Qui post discessit hac tumba morte quiescit

2a Regis R(icardi) ex donis pincerna fuit regionis

 b H(uius) et ip(s)e bonis pro factis condi[t](i)onis

3a Dignus ad hoc utiq(ue) fit Tresorer hospi[t]iiq(ue)

 b H(enrici) quarti sibiq(ue) q[ui]a verax vixit ubiq(ue)

4a Hic Rex iussisset ut Thesaurarius isset

 b Anglis mansisset ex sensu ni tenuisset

5a O tibi sunt similes pauci digniffi(m)e miles

 b Namq(ue) gradus [h]abiles scandunt sensu [i]uveniles

6a Silvestri festo migrasti fine modesto

 b Anno [m]illeno quater et C ter quoq(ue) deno

7a Miles discrete melioris digne poet[æ]

 b Det (Christus) l[æ]t[æ] te sedem scandere met[æ]

Clear text

With appropriate punctuation added

1a Laus Thomæ crescit, Brounfleti decus omne favescit.

 b Qui post discessit, hac tumba morte quiescit.

2a Regis Ricardi ex donis pincerna fuit regionis,

 b Huius (et ipse bonis pro factis) conditionis

3a Dignus. Ad hoc utique fit Tresorer hospitiique

 b Henrici quarti, sibique quia verax vixit ubique.

4a Hic Rex iussisset ut Thesaurarius isset,

 b Anglis mansisset – ex sensu ni renuisset.

5a O, tibi sunt similes pauci, dignissime miles,

 b Namque gradus habiles scandunt sensu iuveniles!

6a Silvestri festo migrasti, fine modesto,

 b Anno milleno quater et C ter quoque deno.

7a Miles discrete, melioris digne poetæ,

 b Det Christus lætæ te sedem scandere metæ.

Translation

1a Thomas' praise is growing, all honour favours Brounflet, more and more.

 b Since he died he rests in death in this tomb.

2a He was by King Richard's endowment cupbearer of the realm,

 b And of this condition, and also by reason of his own good performance,

3a Worthy. And in addition he naturally became treasurer, and Keeper of the House-
hold

 b Of Henry IV, also because in all his ways he ever lived true to himself.

4a Had the king concerned willed that he be treasurer

 b For the English, he would have remained in office – unless he had (after his own
discretion) refused.

5a Oh, few resemble thee, worthiest knight,

 b For opinionated upstarts are now climbing the rungs.

6a On the feast-day of Saint Sylvester thou wentest hence, in a humble end,

 b In the year 1430.

7a Distinguished Knight, worthy of a better poet,

 b May Christ grant that thou ascend to the seat of thy happy destination.

Commentary

1a   *favescere*: "grow in favour"[5]

2a   *R.*: Richard II, (1377–99), deposed by Henry Bolingbroke, who became
Henry IV (1399–1413).

2a   *pincerna*: The "cupbearer", was one of the highest court dignitaries in the
Frank realm and German Empire, whose ritual duty in official functions was to serve
the monarch wine. In Germany, the Cupbearer later became one of the prince elec-
tors, i.e. one of the council that elected the future German king (who afterwards was
crowned emperor) – therefore, after him, the principal detainers of power in the land.
These titles were adopted also in England.

2a   *regionis*: *regio* originally means "land, district", but here it is "realm", in-
stead of *regni*.[6]

3a   *utique*: literally means "at any rate, by all means", so the word does not fit
too well into the context, and was probably chosen to serve the rhyme scheme, which
is very exacting in this poem.

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5   *favescere* is rare; Rutilius Namatianus uses it. *[Ed.]*
6   H. K. St. J. Sanderson, *Transactions of the Monumental Brass Society*, Vol. III., 1897–1899, Lon-
     don, p. 36, gives a perfect transliteration of this text. He, and the translator of the inscription as
     published in the Wymington Church Guide, both misunderstand the word *regionis*, translating it
     by "region".

3a   *Tresorer hospicii que*: The treasurer, or *camerarius*, was another of these highest court-functions of the Empire, and of the English Kingdom. Here is a fore-shortening in the titles. Brounflet was Treasurer, and also Keeper of the Wardrobe of the Household, so some Latin equivalent of "Keeper of the Wardrobe" is missing; however, the introduction of *custos garderobæ* would have disturbed the poet's composition. He probably trusted that one would understand that that function was also something akin to a treasurer, because in this quality Brounflet administered important assets of the kingdom. Possibly, too, the two functions were so similar that the term *tresorer* covered both domains.

3b   *sibi que quia…*: he wanted to say *et quia…* "also because…". This unorthodox structure is to be ascribed to the enormous constraint of the rhyme scheme fettering the language.

3a/4a   *Tresorer*: and in the next line *Thesaurarius* – one reason why the same word should appear in two forms, the first in Norman French, the second in Latin, is again the metre, although only v. 4a scans correctly, and v. 3a does not. But the reason why the same word should appear twice at all in consecutive lines is a bad reason, because it sounds clumsy and makes awkward style.

4a   *Hic Rex*: means "This King", but which king is it here? Brounflet died in 1430, therefore "this present king" would be Henry VI, who reigned at the time of his death, thus there can be no question of Brounflet's "remaining" in an office which he had given up already long ago. Brounflet's life-story points to Henry V (1413–1422), at whose succession to the throne after Henry IV he had had to give up his high office, which he felt so bitter about. What is meant by *hic* is probably "the king in question, the king concerned" – namely Henry V, the only king that came to mind, the person whose injustice had been tormenting Brounflet all those long years, until his very end.[7]

4a/b   *isset*: A conditional clause lacking the subjunction *si*, as in this case, is possible in Latin (no different indeed from English, German, French), but how is one to explain this misplaced *isset*, a form of the verb *ire*, "to go"? Instead of the inappropriate past subjunctive *isset* "he would have gone", which makes no sense, it should have been *iret*, "he should go", but then why he should "go" to the English when he was there already is not clear at all, either. It all seems to be yet again the effect of the huge pressure of the rhyme scheme weighing on the poet, who may have chosen *isset* to fit *iussisset*, *mansisset*, *renuisset* – instead of what he really would have needed, namely *esset* – "that he should be", the poet perhaps thinking that the words sounded enough alike for him to get away with it – with a wink at his conniving reader, whom he trusted to understand.

4b   *mansisset*: means "he would have stayed", supposedly "in office".

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7   The word *hic* could technically also mean "now", even "although"; but that does not seem to make sense.

5b   *abiles*: "limber, flexible, quick, competent". In Old French, the Latin *habilis* had become *habile*, and *able*, and in Middle English, it was *hable*, and also *able*, the modern word. The letter *h* therefore must have confused the author, who relied on his English knowledge.

5b   *iuveniles*: a synonym for *iuvenes*, "young, strong", but can be used in a pejorative sense, perhaps here meaning "youngsters throwing themselves about, show-offs, or upstarts". The word comes spelt with a capital and thus looks like a parallel to the rhyme-word *Miles*, of the preceding line, and is probably intended as contrasting with Brounflet's knighthood or nobility. The sequence *habiles sensu iuveniles* is seen as belonging together[8], and thus would say "men who in their opinion of themselves are dynamic and competent, and make others feel it". It must probably be taken to be a glance at his successor in office. The line is difficult, and there is some darkness about the sense.[9]

7a   *discrete*: is a parallel to *digne*, the words apostrophizing Brounflet. In medieval Latin it could mean "noble, distinguished".

7b   *xpc*: This logogram must be read as *Christus*; it follows the Greek spelling.

7b   *lætæ*: The word could also be read *læte*, and as such it would be an adverb. But for "joyfully grant" it would be better Latin to have *Christus lætus det*, so there seems to be only one meaning here after all.

Stylistic Appreciation

The poem is composed of seven double-lines, consisting of hexameters. Most scan nicely, but there is a lot of claudication – no matter how one turns it – in vv. 3a, 3b, 4b.[10] The condensed names in vv. 2a and 3b (*R.* and *H.*) have to be read unexpanded in order to conform, which sounds very strange (*Regis R. ex …* scans *Regis R ex …* !), but in vv. 3a/b no emergency-measures save the metre, either. After that turbulent and erratic passage, the lines flow easily, the poet even managing to make the date-line scan.

Although one should not be over-critical of wrong distribution of syllables in medieval Latin poetry, our author fell rather short of standards. The versification therefore is not one of the glories of this text. Greater merits are to be found in other poetical aspects, among others the complex, rich, and consistent rhyme system.

Set out below is the verse arrangement and the rhyme scheme. Arrows in the left and right margins (↑↓) show the vertical rhyme-linkage within the respective hemistich-

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8   SANDERSON sees *habiles* as belonging to "stairs", has "easy stairs" – it does not seem to make much sense.
9   SANDERSON's translation of the whole verse is: "for young men by their sense (?) climb easy stairs." He himself evinced doubts about what he had written, and quite rightly so.
10   *mansisset* (v. 4b) is wrongly given a stressed long last syllable. The unorthodox stress of *discrete* in vv. 7a and b, though, is covered by cæsura-licence.

pair, the double arrows (↔) mark the horizontal connection between the two hemistichs of a verse. The X marks saltire-rhymes.

1a	↓	Laus Thomæ cresc<u>it</u>,	↔	X	Brounflet decus omne fav<u>escit</u>.	↓
b	↑	Qui post discess<u>it</u>,	↔		hac tumba morte quiesc<u>it</u>.	↑
2a	↓	Regis Ricardi ex d<u>onis</u>	↔	X	pincerna fuit regi<u>onis</u>,	↓
b	↑	Huius (et ipse b<u>onis</u>	↔		pro fact<u>is</u>) condici<u>onis</u>	↑
3a	↓	Dignus. Ad hoc ut<u>ique</u>	↔	X	fit Tresorer hospici<u>ique</u>	↓
b	↑	Henrici quarti, sib<u>ique</u>	↔		quia verax vixit ub<u>ique</u>.	↑
4a	↓	Hic Rex iuss<u>isset</u>	↔	X	ut Thesaurarius <u>isset</u>,	↓
b	↑	Anglis mans<u>isset</u>	↔		– ex sensu ni renu<u>isset</u>.	↑
5a	↓	O, tibi sunt sim<u>iles</u>	↔	X	pauci, dignissime m<u>iles</u>,	↓
b	↑	Namque gradus hab<u>iles</u>	↔		scandunt sensu iuven<u>iles</u>!	↑
6a	↓	Silvestri f<u>esto</u>	↔	X	migrasti, fine mod<u>esto</u>,	↓
b	↑	Anno mill<u>eno</u>	↔		quater et C ter quoque d<u>eno</u>.	↑
7a	↓	Miles, discr<u>ete</u>	↔	X	melioris digne po<u>etæ</u>,	↓
b	↑	Det Christus l<u>æte</u>	↔		te sedem scandere m<u>etæ</u>.	↑

The two halves of the double-lines are each linked by their respective end-rhyme and additionally have identical interior rhyme. This generalized saltire-rhyme is a formidable exploit, especially when one realizes that most are dissyllabic, well-crafted rhymes, and not just declension-endings. Conceivably, it put very heavy strain on the poet, who, under such duress, rather than be found wanting in the system, took into his stride daring construction and creation of nonce words, which not a little hampers understanding. In most of the lines, however, the poet carried it off, rather brilliantly, too, and that he called himself not worthy enough of the deceased should perhaps be taken *cum grano salis*, and not at face-value, perhaps even as begging for a compliment, for he must have known that his poem in many respects is not a small achievement.

The text is one long eulogy extolling the merits of Thomas Brounflet. The words expressing his honour abound: *laus, decus, dignus, dignissime miles, melioris digne poetæ* – *dignus* appearing three times. Another category of words underlines his character qualities: *verax, tibi sunt similes pauci, fine modesto*, making him out a truth-loving man, of upright and modest character, and a far cry worthier than his competitors, who here are presented in contrast with Brounflet's noble descent and mind. *Miles* is a word that appears twice, and twice is his high office named. However, his dignity is not seen as founded only in his lineage, but also in his competence: *bonis pro factis* mentions his good performance, as opposed to his successor's mere show of competence, and he is called *discretus*, "distinguished, noble".

There is also some impressive use of meaningful repetition. In v. 4b, *sensus* means "discretion, personal assessment" and is used to underline the freedom of choice, the

dignity of the commemorated, but when the word reappears in v. 5b, it goes together with *abiles*, and here – by contrast – it castigates his inflated successor in office.

In vv. 5b and 7b, *scandere* is used twice, and also with a different undertone altogether. In v. 5b, it brands his competitors as social climbers, but in v. 7b the word conveys the movement of Thomas' soul on the stairs leading towards Heaven, the seat of his final destination. In v. 6a, the idea of movement that is inherent in the climbing of the ladder in vv. 5b/7b is taken up by the verb *migrare*, so the image is forcefully underpinned.

The author must have been some Latin scholar, a churchman most likely, someone near Thomas, who knew his soul, and who, more than sixteen years after his friend had been ignominiously pushed out of office, still felt with him the shame and the pain of the deposition. As a document of such white-washing of the deceased and vilification of his more successful rival, the text is a quite remarkable specimen of funerary inscriptions.

The text affects us from the beginning as somewhat tedious, owing to the reiterated compliments paid to the deceased. Such hagiography does not go down too well with us, and the cumbersome style, with its sometimes ungainly repetition, enforced rhymes, difficult syntax, and at times uneven prosody does little to allay such reserve. However, in the second half there is the ring of true feeling, the text shows fervour, empathy, friendship, the language comes with impressive imagery, has sweeping movement, and the poem rises to greatness.

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Reinhard Lamp, Hamburg