A Lost Manuscript of the ‘Rymes of […] Randolf Erl of Chestre’

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One of the mysteries that continue to surround Robin Hood’s first appearance in literature is that of his companion. In Passus V of the B-Text of Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, the figure of Sloth laments:

I kan noght parfitly my *Paternoster* as the preest it syngeth,
But I kan rymes of Robyn Hood and Randolf Erl of Chestre,
Ac neither of Oure Lord ne of Oure Lady the leeste that evere was maked.¹

The reference here is intriguing because, unlike the early Robin Hood ballads,² no medieval narrative verse is known to survive which has any of the three Ranulfs who were historically earls of Chester as the protagonist.³ There are several studies which explore this mystery — most significantly those by J. W. Ashton in 1905 and Glyn Burgess in 2005.⁴ Their

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³ Ranulf le Meschin (d. 1129) was Ranulf I, Earl of Chester; his son Ranulf de Gernons (d. 1153) was Ranulf II; and Ranulf II’s grandson, Ranulf Blundeville (1170–1232), was Ranulf III. Useful accounts of their lives are in the *ODNB*: Edmund King, ‘Ranulf (I), third earl of Chester (d. 1129)’, *ODNB*, online at http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23127; Graeme White, ‘Ranulf (II), fourth earl of Chester (d. 1153)’, *ODNB*; online edn, May 2007, online at http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23128; Richard Eales, ‘Ranulf (III), sixth earl of Chester and first earl of Lincoln (1170–1232)’, *ODNB*, online edn, Oct. 2008, online at http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/2716. A fuller account of Ranulf III’s life is J. W. Alexander, *Ranulf of Chester: A Relic of the Conquest* (Athens, GA, 1983).

work provides a necessary context for interpreting Langland’s reference. Ashton and Burgess both focus on Ranulf III, and consider his historical role in the politics and warfare of his time. They examine those few surviving brief allusions to Ranulf, earl of Chester, or to an unnamed earl of Chester, in more literary medieval works – notably as a minor character in *Fouke le Fitz Waryn* and *Syra Launfal*, as well as (to an extent) in medieval chronicles. They look closely at the references to a Randolph or Randall which appear in ballads about Robin Hood (none of which can however be said with certainty to refer to Ranulf, earl of Chester). They also discuss a sixteenth-century poem in praise of the earls of Chester which includes a long enumeration of Ranulf III’s achievements. And they investigate the appearances of Ranulf, earl of Chester (and of any unnamed earl of Chester) in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century plays. These include one lost play which featured Ranulf, earl of Chester, as the title character; there are also three surviving plays about Robin Hood where Ranulf has a role. This evidence, however, is spread over several hundred years, and seems to point in different directions. The absence of a surviving medieval narrative about Ranulf has even led some scholars to speculate whether Ranulf was ever the central character in a narrative poem, or whether he might instead have been a companion – or enemy – to Robin Hood. Others, most notably James W. Alexander, have argued that the Ranulf ‘rymes’ are more likely to take Ranulf II, earl of Chester, as their protagonist than Ranulf III, on the basis that Langland was writing for ‘folks of humble or middling status’ who would not have been interested in a ‘chivalrous or feudal ballad’, but only in a tale of an outlaw who opposed corruption, and that Ranulf II had revolted against King Stephen. The identification of Ranulf II has met with some scepticism: Glyn Burgess in particular provides a detailed case against this identification.

However, none of the scholars who have investigated this question have yet, to my knowledge, discussed the evidence described below, a catalogue entry recording an early lost manuscript copy of verses about the deeds of Ranulf, earl of Chester, which once formed part of MS. Cotton Otho B. III. In this article I will therefore describe the evidence for the lost manuscript copy, analyse what can be learned from the surviving catalogue entry, discuss

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6 An alternative explanation for these references is that they may refer to a Reynold Greenleaf, another supposed associate of Robin Hood with the same first name: see note to l. 1171 of *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, in *Robin Hood*, ed. Knight andOhlgren, online at http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/Teams/gest.htm.  


10 ‘Rymes’, pp. 57-8; see also Eales, ‘Ranulf (III)’. 
possible analogues for parts of the text, and make some suggestions about what this entry might mean for helping us to understand the passage in *Piers Plowman* and the early Robin Hood tradition. I will also identify those historians and antiquaries who saw and made notes from the manuscript before it was damaged.

In Thomas Smith’s 1696 catalogue of Sir Robert Cotton’s library, the first item in the manuscript Cotton Otho B. III is described as follows:

Annales a Christo nato ad annum Ch. 1255 : in quibus multa de rebus Angliæ adnotantur, præsertim post adventum Normannorum in Angliam ; & versus finem de obsidione Cestriæ, et de prælio ibidem, & de gestis Ranulphi, Comitis de Cestria. F . I.

[Annals from the birth of Christ to the year of our Lord 1255: in which many things concerning English matters are noted, especially after the arrival of the Normans in England; and lastly verses about the siege of Chester, and about the battle of the same, and about the deeds of Ranulf, earl of Chester. Folio 1.]\(^1\)

Unfortunately, Cotton Otho B. III is one of the manuscripts that was badly damaged in the fire at Ashburnham House, Westminster, on 23 October 1731. In the 1732 report on the library’s holdings it was noted that the manuscript now consisted of 84 damaged leaves.\(^2\) The manuscript was further harmed in a fire at a bindery in 1865.\(^3\) Only 2 folios apparently containing text from item 1 remain (folios 1 and 2 in the manuscript as now extant). These folios contain fragments of a chronicle in Latin prose in a small hand from the second half of the thirteenth century, and the text has been rendered largely illegible by damage. None of the verse material appears to have survived.\(^4\)

The entry in the Smith catalogue would probably have been noted before now by modern scholars looking at the ‘rymes […] of Randolf’, except that a manuscript of John of Fordun’s

\(^{11}\) Thomas Smith, *Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Cottonian Library, 1696 / Catalogus librorum manuscriptorum bibliothecae Cottoniaeanae* (Oxford, 1696); reprinted, ed. C. G. C. Tite (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 69-70 (at p. 69); my translation.

\(^{12}\) [David Casley], *A Report from the Committee Appointed to View the Cottonian Library […]* (London, 1732), pp. 59-60 (at p. 59).


\(^{14}\) I am grateful to Dr Julian Harrison, Curator of Medieval and Earlier Manuscripts at the British Library, for his advice on the date of the hand and for sharing his description of the manuscript in advance of its publication online at [http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/manuscripts/index.asp](http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/manuscripts/index.asp) . The manuscript is also discussed in *Annales Cestrienses. Chronicle of the Abbey of S. Werburg, at Chester*, ed. R. C. Christie, Publications of the Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, 14 (London, 1887), ‘Introduction’, pp. 5-38, online at [http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=67174](http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=67174) . Christie speculates that Otho B. III was once in the library of St Werburg’s Abbey, Chester, and that the chronicle it once contained may have been a source for the *Annales Cestrienses* (a set of annals from the end of the thirteenth century from St Werburg’s).
Scotichronicon was apparently classified as Otho B. III after the 1731 fire, and described under that shelfmark in a rather confused entry in the 1802 catalogue of Cottonian manuscripts:

Fragmenta chartacea, in pyxide asservata. [Paper fragments preserved in a box.]
Annales: ubi multa de Anglia et Scotia. [Annals, in which there are many things about England and Scotland.]

The volume described by Smith under the above reference is said by Casley to have been written on vellum: it may therefore be doubted whether this was a part of it. This fragment is too much damaged to be of any use.

A transcript of the articles 7, 8, and 9 of this vol. as described in Dr. Smith’s Catal. has been purchased by the trustees of the Brit. Mus. in the year 1793. See the Catal. of Additions to the Library, N° 5444.15

The Scotichronicon manuscript was subsequently reclassified as Cotton Otho B. III*, and the original Otho B. III returned to its earlier shelfmark.16 However, the 1802 catalogue has not yet been superseded as the main reference guide for the Cottonian manuscripts.

The Smith catalogue’s reference to Otho B. III’s verses ‘about the siege of Chester, and about the battle of the same, and about the deeds of Ranulf, earl of Chester’, is valuable as confirmation that at least one medieval narrative poem which featured Ranulf as the main character did indeed exist. The catalogue entry is also useful for what we can infer from it about the lost ‘Ranulf rhymes’. While it is not certain from the entry whether the Ranulf of the poem would have been involved in the siege and battle at Chester it apparently described, it certainly seems possible. No siege or battle at Chester is recorded during the lives of any of the three Ranulfs who were historically earls of Chester, but Ranulf III played a role in other sieges, and Ashton, R. M. Wilson, and Burgess have all suggested that chronicle accounts of two of these might represent material that could have been found in the lost ‘rymes’ about Ranulf.17 As none of these scholars examined these possible analogues in the light of their medieval manuscript contexts, I have identified and discussed these below.

The first of these was the ‘fair of Lincoln’, the battle that took place at that city during the conflict with Prince Louis of France shortly after the death of King John. The account of this siege which features Ranulf III most prominently appears in a chronicle created by William de Whittlesey in the 1320s and preserved in a single medieval manuscript. Whittlesey, a monk at Peterborough Abbey, was the creator, and one of the authors, of the historical manuscript, written in Latin c. 1322–29, which is now London, British Library, Additional MS. 39758.18 In one passage, at ff. 77rv, the manuscript recounts how Ranulf III defeated and killed the Count


of Perche as those loyal to Henry III confronted Louis and his forces at Lincoln, before capturing Louis, forcing him to renounce his claim to the throne, and installing Henry as king. In fact Louis was not at the battle, despite some other later chroniclers placing him there; and the earlier History of William Marshal attributes the killing of the earl to Reginald Croc with William Marshal’s assistance. Whittlesy’s version of events became known to later historians via William Dugdale’s Baronage of England but I have found no evidence of it circulating more widely in later medieval England.

The second siege in which Ranulf III was reported to have been involved was however recorded within several versions of a genealogy of the constables of Chester: it is preserved in at least two extant medieval manuscripts, London, National Archives, DL 42/7, and London, British Library, Cotton MS. Cleopatra C. III, as well as in a transcript by William Dugdale from a medieval manuscript roll. These three versions of the text describe how Ranulf, during a campaign against the Welsh, had to take refuge in a castle and sent word to his constable Roger de Lacy at Chester. The constable gathered a crowd of minstrels and shoemakers and marched on the castle as if they were an army, and duped the Welsh forces into retreating. Some

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19 The relevant passage is not edited in the extracts from Whittlesey’s chronicle which were printed in Joseph Sparke, Historiae Anglicae Scriptores varius [...], 2 vols (London, 1723), ii, pp. 125-216.
24 In Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. hist. c. 242 (SC 39868), ff. 78v-79v (74v-75v in earlier foliation) which, Dugdale writes, was taken ‘Ex Rotulo quodam antiquo in pergamina de tempore Rex Henr: viiß (vit videtur) penes Petrum Daniell de Tabley com. Gevr. armig. September Anno 1640’ (f. 78v) ‘from an old parchment roll from the time of King Henry VI (it seems) belonging to Peter Daniell of Tabley, squire of the county of Cheshire in September 1640’ (my translation). This version is similar, but not identical, to the version provided in the Monasticon. According to The History of Cheshire Containing King’s Vale-Royal Entire Together with Considerable Extracts from Sir Peter Leycester’s Antiquities of Cheshire [...], 2 vols (Chester, 1778), ii, pp. 809-10, Peter Daniell of Over-Tabley, Cheshire, was a Member of Parliament in 1625 and died 18 April 1652, aged 68.
later versions, beginning apparently with Humphrey Lhoyd and David Powell’s *Historic of Cambria*, identified Ranulf’s place of refuge as Rhuddlan Castle, about 30 miles from Chester. However, the medieval texts of this account which I have identified do not name the castle, although it is clearly outside Chester even in these cases.

Ranulf III was also involved in other sieges. He participated in Richard I’s siege of Nottingham Castle in 1194. During the Fifth Crusade, he was also present at the siege of Damietta in 1218 and 1219.

Ranulf II, another possible protagonist in this lost work, had also seen his share of sieges, notably at Lincoln. He had been besieged by King Stephen in Lincoln Castle in 1141; he later besieged Lincoln twice, in 1147 and 1149.

Chester itself was besieged in the thirteenth century after Ranulf III’s death. In 1265, while it was held by the de Montforts, royalist forces besieged the castle. However, no siege or battle recorded at Chester that I have identified involved any of the three Ranulfs who were earls of Chester.

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Peter Leycester, *Historical Antiquities in Two Books [...]*, 2 vols (London, 1673), ii, p. 141, gives a version of this narrative naming Rhuddlan, citing as his source ‘an ancient Parchment Roll, written above two hundred Years ago, wherein the Barons of Halton with their Issue were carefully collected’; however, the passage makes clear that Leycester was also familiar with the accounts in *The Historie of Cambria*, Camden’s *Britannia*, and Dugdale’s *Baronage*. There are also post-medieval versions of the story which mention Rhuddlan in manuscripts, probably taken from these printed sources. I have noted versions in BL, Harl. MS. 2099, p. 530, and in BL, Harl. MS. 2159, f. 58v, both of which belonged to Randle Holmes IV of Cheshire before passing into the Harleian collection; and in BL, Add. MS. 11334, ff. 43rv, a manuscript of Dr Foote Gower (on whom see below, p. 7 and n. 36).


In summary, this catalogue entry, not previously noted as evidence about the ‘rymes […] of Randolf’, makes clear that there was indeed once a written narrative verse text about Ranulf, earl of Chester, in existence, apparently since the second half of the thirteenth century and until 1731. It seems likely that Ranulf III was the subject of this poem, and the focus was apparently on his military exploits, which fits well with some other semi-legendary references to Ranulf that appear in late medieval sources.

If the lost text was a later-thirteenth-century verse narrative about Ranulf, this would have been around two hundred years older than the earliest extant manuscript containing a poem about Robin Hood, and around a hundred years earlier than the reference in *Piers Plowman*. Smith’s catalogue gives no indication of the language, but what are probably the surviving pages of the chronicle are in Latin. If the verses were also in Latin, they would not necessarily present an obstacle to a parish priest such as Sloth, who describes himself as being able to understand administrative language, even though he cannot interpret religious Latin texts. The placement of the verses next to a chronicle parallels some of Robin Hood’s earliest literary appearances in chronicles and in marginal notes accompanying chronicles; it seems both narrative traditions had a semi-historical status.

It should also be noted that the verses about Ranulf were in a manuscript which was seen by several historians and antiquaries prior to the 1731 fire. The manuscript was lent to Richard Bancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1608, and had also been borrowed by Hugh Barker and James Ussher (later Archbishop of Armagh) by 1611. Roger Dodsworth made notes from the chronicle which preceded the verses about Chester and Ranulf. Dr Foote Gower may also have had access to information from the chronicle. Henry Wharton too...
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appears to have noted information from this chronicle, and it seems that Bishop Kennett later made his own notes from some of Wharton’s notes.37 Other sections of Cotton Otho B. III were transcribed on behalf of the antiquary John Bridges, in what is now London, British Library, Additional MS. 5444.38 John Le Neve also made use of information from other parts of Cotton Otho B. III.39 Perhaps more traces of the ‘rymes […] of Randolf Erl of Chestre’ may yet be discovered among the unedited notes of one of these scholars.


39 Christie notes that John Le Neve, Fasti Ecclesiæ Anglicanæ […] (London, 1716) cites Otho B. III as its source for the date of Ralph de Maidstenstune’s resignation from the bishopric of Hereford (at pp. 108-9), but the information is from the Annales Londonienses; cf. Annales Londonienses, ed. Stubbs, p. 36. Le Neve, Fasti, also cites Otho B. III as a source at pp. 56, 258, 285, and 256; in each case the reference is to the Annales Londonienses (cf. Annales Londonienses, ed. Stubbs, pp. 134, 233, 133-4, and 238 respectively). Le Neve drew heavily on Kennett’s materials for his Fasti (see Nicholas Doggett, ‘Le Neve, John (b. 1679, d. in or before 1741)’, in ODNB, online at http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16439); Le Neve might also, of course, consulted Otho B. III directly.

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