

William Wallace Working Group Meeting Notes 5 August 2010

Attendees

Mr George McKenzie (National Archives of Scotland)
Dr Alan Borthwick (National Archives of Scotland)
Dr Alexander Grant (Reader in Medieval British History, Lancaster University)
Professor Nicholas Vincent (Professor of Medieval History, University of East Anglia)
Professor Marc Smith (Professor of Palaeography at l'Ecole Nationale des Chartes, Paris)
Dr James Ross (The National Archives)
Dr Sean Cunningham (The National Archives)
Ms Jackie Marfleet (The National Archives)

Apologies: Dr Fiona Watson (independent researcher)

The terms of reference for the working group were:

- **To establish provenance and original intent of the 'Wallace document' (SC 1/30/81)**

The group agreed that the document, which is certainly not a safe conduct as has often been asserted, takes the form of an original writ (what the French, in this instance, would call a 'mandement') in the name of the King of France, Philip IV, written in Latin, ordering his (unnamed) representatives at the papal curia to request the Pope to favour William 'le Walois' (i.e. William Wallace) of Scotland, knight, in the (unspecified) business that William had to expedite. It is dated at Pierrefonds, in Picardy, on the Monday after the feast of All Saints, almost certainly to be construed as 7 November 1300.

A number of hypotheses have become attached to the document, for example that it is a 'copy' rather than a French 'original', that it proves the presence of William Wallace at the French court and his intention to visit the court of the Pope, and that it was amongst the correspondence seized from Wallace at the time of his arrest in 1305. These conjectures or hypotheses command varying degrees of plausibility and deserve to be treated in turn.

1. The experts are unanimous in judging that the letter itself, far from being a 'copy', is an 'original' produced in the French royal chancery and would originally have been sealed on a parchment tag, now torn away. The absence of the evidence of wax on the back of the document is of itself not significant. It remains uncertain whether it was sent as letters 'close' (i.e. sealed so that the seal itself had to be broken before the letter could be opened and read) or 'patent' (i.e. readable without the seal having to be broken), although standard practice, and the fact that it is dated by the feast of All Saints but without the regnal year, might suggest that it was more likely sent 'close' than 'patent'. Similarly, it is not possible to tell how the document was originally folded. In all other respects it follows standard French royal practice, up to and including the use of the 'gemipunctus': the two full stops '..' which are used in place of the name of the King's representatives or the Pope himself, intended to ensure that the letter

retained its validity even should the reigning Pope or the King's ambassadors be replaced between the time of the letter's issue and the time of its delivery.

2. Taken on its own, and although it indicates that Wallace was in contact with the French court and shows that the French king (unlike the English) recognised that Wallace was a 'knight' ('militem'), it neither proves nor disproves that Wallace visited the French court. Likewise, even if one allows that the phrase 'apud eum' (preposition + pronoun) in the final line of the letter should be translated in the sense of business to be expedited by Wallace 'with the Pope' rather than as business 'concerning Wallace' to be expedited with the Pope, there is nothing here either to prove or disprove the conjecture that Wallace either visited or intended to visit the papal court. Since standard diplomatic form would have rendered it highly unlikely that a layman such as Wallace would plead his own cause at the curia, the likelihood is that in any case Wallace's business would have been entrusted to professional advocates, just as the King of France's business was transacted via ambassadors and professional pleaders rather than in person.
3. In these circumstances, there is no firm evidence that the letter itself ever passed through Wallace's hands. It might have done. As Wallace had at least three letters of safe conduct on him at the time of his arrest, it is likely that he would have kept this document had he had it in his possession after it was written, and like the safe conducts it would have come into English possession after his arrest. Alternatively, and just as plausibly, it might have been intended for delivery, by a third party, from the French royal chancery to King Philip's envoys with the Pope. It might have come into English hands after 1305, following Wallace's arrest, by means unclear. As a third alternative, it could have been intercepted at any time after its issue, by English spies or officials anxious to interrupt and to gain intelligence from correspondence passing between France and the papal court, without its having reached its intended destination. Such intelligence-gathering and interception of diplomatic correspondence was a regular feature of Anglo-French relations from at least the twelfth century.
4. All that we know of the early history of the 'Wallace Letter', following its issue by the French chancery in 1300, is that it finished up in the English royal archives, where it was endorsed, in an indisputably English hand of the early fourteenth century, as 'the fourth letter of the King of France' ('quarta littera r(egis) Franc(ie)'). The endorsement may have been made in 1323 as part of Bishop Walter Stapledon's 'array' of the archives in the Tower, although the letter itself is not listed in the brief summary of other such letters recorded in Stapledon's surviving inventory of the documents said to have been seized on or about the person of William of Wallace at the time of his arrest and since to have been stored in 'a hamper of sticks marked with the symbol VII' (PRO E 36/268 pp.238-40, c.1323/4).

The Working Group agreed the following areas of further research:

1. We will undertake to try and identify the scribe of the document (Marc Smith?)
2. Since the assumed date of the letter, in November 1300, is of crucial importance, it must be established that Philip IV was at Pierrefonds in November 1300 but in

no other year. This is best done by consulting the recently published itinerary (in essence also an inventory of Philip's known letters) edited by Elisabeth Lalou. Likewise, advice should be sought on the use of the festal rather than monthly dating in the final clause to the letter: was this standard in French chancery practice or, as in England, reserved for particular types of diplomatic correspondence? (Olivier Canteaut?)

3. Since the question of who precisely was to prosecute Wallace's business with the Pope – Wallace himself or a proxy – turns upon the translation of a few Latin words, themselves transcribed onto the parchment by a scribe who almost certainly thought and spoke in French, it needs to be established whether the Latin terms 'apud eum' and 'expedire' have any technical precision in other French royal letters of a similar date and form. (Olivier Canteaut?)
4. Because the question of the 'original ownership' of the letter (whether by Wallace or by the King of France and his envoys) turns upon the means by which such letters were dispatched from France to Italy, it would be worth seeking expert advice from Dr Patrick Zutshi (the acknowledged authority on such matters) as to the standard procedures here. Dr Barbara Bombi of the University of Kent at Canterbury might also be asked, since she has recently edited a highly significant collection of papal diplomatic correspondence from the 1320s
5. It remains to be established whether the English archives contain other examples of original diplomatic letters, not least those emanating from the kings of France or from the papal court, which were intercepted en route by English officials and thereafter preserved in London. A similar search should be made for equivalent materials emanating from the kings of England but preserved in the French royal 'Trésor des chartes' (now part of the Archives nationales in Paris).
6. The purpose of Wallace's journey should be established, within both the general Anglo-Franco-Scottish-papal diplomatic context and the Scottish political context (?to be done by Scottish medievalists and others)

Next Steps

1. Some of the areas for research mentioned above have queries which it is hoped may be resolved by particular individuals, and we need to agree soon who will approach whom for their help
2. It was agreed at the meeting that the summary findings should be made available to Professors Geoffrey Barrow, Archie Duncan and Michael Prestwich for their input (this will be actioned by NAS)
3. A second meeting is to be convened at The National Archives of Scotland in February/March 2011 (this will be actioned by NAS). After that meeting a report of the group's conclusions will be published on the NAS website.
4. After the second meeting, the group expects to prepare an article on the "Wallace Letter" for publication in 1 – 2 years time (to be borne in mind by all)