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‘Caplimet’ in *Seinte Margarete* and ‘Eraclea’ in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*

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Seinte Margarete is a saint’s life from Herefordshire or thereabouts; the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* is a drama from Suffolk. The first is of the thirteenth century, the second of the fifteenth, and they might seem to have little in common. Yet identification of ‘Caplimet’ in one and ‘Eraclea’ in the second suggests how textual emendation may cast unexpected light on each.

First, the Middle English life of Margaret of Antioch. When she suffered martyrdom, so did others:

At the time this happened five thousand men were converted to our Lord, and this not counting women and children; and all of them were, as the governor commanded, beheaded at once in Christ’s royal name, in a city of Armenia called Caplimet [*in a burh of Armenie Caplimet inempnet*], all honouring God with upraised voices, and all ascended as martyrs joyfully to heaven.

This massacre, uneasily foreshadowing genocide of Armenians in the twentieth century, has as yet been mysterious, since ‘Caplimet’ has been unidentified. Millett and Wogan-Browne follow Frances Mack in taking it as perhaps Limenia.¹ But that cannot be, since Limenia is on Cephalonia, an island west of Greece and nowhere near Armenia; it is a small place, whereas the thousands of Christians in ‘Caplimet’ show it was a metropolis; and it does not explain *Cap-*. More recent accounts of *Seinte Margarete* give no lead on the matter.²

However, maps of the ancient world allow a way forward. The Romans distinguished Armenia Major (east of the Euphrates) from Armenia Minor to the west of it. The latter became part of Cappadocia, and on its edge was Melitene, near a strategic crossing of the Euphrates. Melitene, the ancient Hittite capital of Milid, became vital for imperial defence. Trajan gave it municipal status; Justinian rebuilt its walls. It was still a city during the Crusades (when the cult of St Margaret was growing in western Europe). Thanks to its position on natural routes, Melitene is now the Turkish railway junction of Malatya.³

¹ *Medieval English Prose for Women*, ed. by Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 76, 77, 217.

² Karen Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 24–29; Helen Phillips, ‘Nation, Region, Class, and Gender’, in *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English: To 1550*, ed. by Roger Ellis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), pp. 45–69.

³ E. W. Gray and Stephen Mitchell, ‘Melitene’, in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edn, ed. by Simon

‘Capilimet’ and ‘Eraclea’

Although its Armenian population is now a remnant, Melitene or Malatya allows emendation of ‘in a burh of Armenie Caplimet inempnet’ (‘in a city of Armenia called Caplimet’), which must be corrupt. If we posit an original Latin *in civitate Armeniae Cap(padociae) Melit(ene) vocata* ‘in a city of Cappadocian Armenia called Melitene’, this makes sense. The source would have located the place west of the Euphrates in Armenia Minor, and so in Cappadocia. No Latin textual critic will be surprised to see *Melit* as ‘Limet’, a corruption aided by the verticals of *Melit(ene)* in early script, which would confuse scribes, especially those unfamiliar with Armenian geography. If the source had abbreviated *Cap(padocia)*, its obscuring a toponym that it was meant to clarify will be a further commonplace textual error.

The text of *Seinte Margarete* adds freely to its Latin original.⁴ The account of the Armenian martyrs will be one of the translator’s additions. If his source is discovered, it may hence vindicate the explanation of ‘Caplimet’ proposed here. If it does, it provides an unexpected link between Armenia and England, showing that Melitene in Cappadocia, where Armenian Christians died for their faith, was known (if in mangled form) to the far-away author of *Seinte Margarete*, writing somewhere on the border of Wales.

After Armenia, Spain. Some years ago this writer identified ‘Hyspalensy’ in one early English text as Seville, and ‘Mawltriple’ and ‘Flagott’ in another as Martorell and the river Llobregat, near Barcelona.⁵ What follows does much the same for ‘Eraclea’ in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*. The piece, surviving in a sixteenth-century manuscript, presents the miraculous conversion of a Jew who tried to destroy a consecrated Host. Its colophon claims that this happened in 1461 ‘in the forest of Aragon, in the famous cité Eraclea’.⁶ The play itself must be from Bury St Edmunds, as it refers to Babwell (now a Bury suburb), site of a Franciscan friary.⁷ It also mentions a performance at Croxton, surely the village north of Thetford (and not those by Fakenham in north Norfolk or on Cambridgeshire’s western fringe). The play is often seen as a challenge to Lollards.⁸ One may doubt, however, if they warmed to its astounding, surreal combination of orthodox eucharistic teaching and knock-about farce.⁹

If the piece’s East Anglian provenance is clear, the whereabouts of ‘Eraclea’ has not been.¹⁰ But the colophon calls it a ‘famous cite’ and we know it had many Jews. Now, the ‘forest’ of Aragon is the northern part, going up into the Pyrenees. A map of its medieval Jewish communities shows one possibility only for ‘Eraclea’. This is Urgel, in the Catalan part of the kingdom of Aragon.¹¹ It is a historic place of Romanesque buildings and a bishop who (with the French president) is Andorra’s head of state. Its Jewish community was important and has

Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 954.

⁴ J. A. W. Bennett, *Middle English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 281–83.

⁵ A. C. Breeze, ‘Caxton’s *The Book called Caton* and Seville’, *Notes and Queries*, 243 (1998), 434, and ‘*The Parlement of the Thre Ages* and Martorell, Spain’, *Notes and Queries*, 245 (2000), 295–96.

⁶ E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), II, 427.

⁷ E. K. Chambers, *English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), 45; Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Suffolk*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 153–54.

⁸ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 106–7.

⁹ Seth Lerer, ‘The Culture of Spectatorship in Late-Fifteenth-Century England’, in *Bodies and Disciplines*, ed. by Barbara Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 29–62; Douglas Gray, *Later Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), pp. 576–79.

¹⁰ See now *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, ed. by John T Sebastian (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2012). It is an excellent edition, even though Dr Sebastian takes Eraclea as an ‘imaginary town’ (p. 66).

¹¹ Béatrice Leroy, *Les Juifs du bassin de l’Èbre: témoins d’une histoire séculaire* (Biarritz: J & D Éditions, 1997), p. 10.

left a major archive; one Catalan scholar observes that it ‘mereix una monografia’.¹² Hence the continuing research in *Urgellia*, a learned journal with a Latin title meaning ‘Urgel’.¹³

Urgel’s situation in the kingdom of Aragon’s uplands, its wealthy Jewish quarter, and its Latin name *Urgellia* allow us to identify it as ‘Eraclea’. Despite corruption, the sequence of vowels and of *r-c/g-l(l)* lets us take the forms as the same. Urgel’s status as cathedral city also accounts for the bishop who baptizes Jews *en masse* at the play’s end. It is true that Urgel is eighty miles from the sea and that ‘Eraclea’ has a harbour (where Aristorius the Jew sends his clerk). But the play’s allusion to Babwell shows we must not demand narrow geographical realism. Finally, the forms *Urgellia* and ‘Eraclea’ indicate use of a Latin source, which suits the play’s frequent use of Latin, its ending in a *Te Deum*, and its claim that Rome had authenticated the miracle. If the ‘Eraclea’ of the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* is accepted as Urgel, a Pyrenean city that once had a major *judería*, it opens the way for investigation on how a tale of miracles in Spain reached a playwright in Suffolk; perhaps the ‘R. C.’ who signed a note on the text, saying of its twelve characters that ‘IX may play it at ease’.

¹² Carme Batlle i Gallart, *La Seu d’Urgell medieval: La ciutat i els seus habitants* (Barcelona: Dalmau, 1985), pp. 101–8.

¹³ Carme Batlle i Gallart, ‘Els primers jueus prestadors a la Seu d’Urgell’, *Urgellia*, 15 (2002–5), 337–414.