How to Create Political Meaning in Public Spaces?

Some Evidence from Late Medieval Britain

JÖRG ROGGE

In this paper I would like to make some remarks about the methods that had been used to create political meaning in late medieval Britain. Furthermore I will show the relevance of the public spaces for the creation of political meaning. This creation was for example particularly necessary in regard to the inauguration of new monarchs. Thus I will present some political settings which had been used to introduce a new king to the public. This introduction was – as we will see – sometimes compounded with the intention to evoke a certain political meaning. In most cases this meant to convince the public that the new monarch was also the legitimate one. My examples are from Scotland in the middle of the 13th century and from 1399, 1461, and 1483 in England.

Political settings are interesting because they open up a perspective of political action which is not restricted to examining the decision-taking actions of political leadership groups.[1] In this perspective, the communication about rule is also meant by politics which is expressed not only in discourses, but also in the form of symbols and representations. If one were to assume that political (and social) orders are constituted through communication of the individuals participating in them, then political institutions cannot be presumed to be a given. Institutions such as the monarchy, for instance, only achieve stability and durability through permanent communication of their concrete organisation. In principle, all interested parties can participate in this communication.

In the perspective just sketched out, the political aspect is thus a scene of communication and action in which it is a matter of collectively bringing about

1 SCHORN-SCHÜTTE, 2006, p. 86.

and implementing binding decisions. These settings can be constituted both in the places envisaged for them (rooms, places) and spontaneously through gatherings of groups of persons. And in the case of the constitution of political order categories, institutions, claims to recognition and rule, communication in the form of symbolic practices and discursive structures played a fundamental role. What are the consequences of such considerations now for the research practice, especially with regard to political meaning?

One can, for example, examine how claims to power were put up for discussion in political setting, examined for acceptance or rejection and finally – possibly in a modified form – made collectively binding. In order to examine the degree of importance of communicative practices in these connections, cases in which competing claims to power clash with one another and open conflicts of interpretation break out are especially revealing.

I.

Until the end of the thirteenth century, the coronation stone (Stone of Destiny) located in Scone, in or near an Augustinian abbey, was the most important object in the inauguration of Scottish kings in their office.[2] This stone was at the centre of a ceremony in which, apart from the king, representatives of the higher nobility (earls of Fife and Strathearn), the higher clergy (bishops) and a poet, the "king's poet" were actively involved.[3] The earls had the task of setting the king on the stone draped with silk cloths. Afterwards the bishop of St. Andrew's and the abbot of Scone would clothe him. Then the king would pledge loyalty to his subjects and promise to defend the faith. However the candidate only became the lawful king of the Scots with the subsequent act. The poet would hand him a sceptre, then recite his royal lineage and become the first to wish him good fortune and blessing.[4] The poet presumably spoke Gaelic and – beginning with the current king – would enumerate all his predecessors back to Iber, the son of Gathelus, a son of a king of Athens and Scota, an Egyptian pharaoh's daughter, who are said to have lived at about the time of Moses (thus around 1200 BC).[5] The recitation of the names of all predecessors on the throne back to Scota and

2 A description of the stone by AITCHISON, 2000, p. 39 and HILL, 2003, p. 11.

3 BARROW, 2004, p. 380; BANNERMAN, 1989.

4 A Report of the coronation of Alexander III in 1249 is published in the annals in the appendix to Fordun's Chronicle, p. 289f.; BANNERMAN, 1989, p. 133.

5 Detailed account of this in MATTHEWS, 1970, p. 291f.

Gathelus was of the utmost significance. The dynastic classification of the new king was comparable with a legal document and proved the legality of the claim to rule. And even more: through the custom of sitting on the stone (attested to since the 6th century in Ireland) the king was wedded to the tribal soil and the deity inherent in it by symbolic physical contact.[6]

The coronation stone thus stood for Scottish sovereignty and the king's independence, dating back to biblical times. At this place – in Scone – it became clear that political order in the island of Britain included an independent kingdom in the north. However, this order was permanently unsettled after 1286, when the Scottish King Alexander III had been killed in a fall from his horse. Alexander had no direct heirs and so several candidates contended for the throne based on their relationship with Alexander. Among them, John Balliol and Robert Bruce were two of Scotland's leading nobles.[7] A decision had to be made among the applicants under the supervision of the English king, Edward I, as arbitrator.[8]

In September 1292, Edward I. pronounced his decision for John Balliol who, after being placed on the throne in Scone on 30th November 1292, swore an oath of fealty to the English king for the kingdom of Scotland. King Edward thus carried through his conceptions of the relationship between the two kingdoms, namely English supremacy over Scotland. On account of this overlordship, Edward I expected John Balliol to appear in person before his court and vindicate himself, as well as perform military services for his actions in Gascony in the following years. This policy became the reason for Scottish opposition and resistance. In 1295, the Scots concluded an alliance with King Philip IV of France and refused military service.

For Edward I this was a breach of the oath of fealty and he marched into Scotland in the spring of 1296. His troops took the important border town of Berwick, wreaking a bloodbath among its inhabitants, beating a Scottish force

6 Barrow, 2004, p. 380; a further aspect was that there was still a tribal or clan structure in Scotland and the feudalisation of society has still not been completed. In this context the king embodied the people (the community) and stood for the common identity of the people; on this Webster, 1975, p. 14f.

7 Barrow, 2005, p. 494. The claims of John Balliol and Robert Bruce were particularly well founded, because both were descended from King David I (1142-53) through Earl David of Huntington (d. 1219).

8 Watson, 1998, p. 9-11. In July 1290, it was agreed that Alexander III's six-year-old granddaughter, a Norwegian princess, would marry Edward I's son. However, Scotland's freedom, rights and customs were not to be restricted by this. But in September the girl died during the crossing from Norway to Scotland.

at Dunbar and finally capturing King John Balliol. Edward deposed of Balliol and had him publicly divested of his symbols of power (his seal was broken into pieces, the royal coat of arms cut out of is his mantle). In addition, Edward I had the coronation stone removed from Scone and brought to Westminster Abbey as a gift for his patron saint, Edward the Confessor.[9]

As a result, on one hand, Edward had taken away the symbol from the Scots which represented their connection with the past and origin; the stone upon which Scottish kings had been officially legitimated for their rule since time immemorial and which showed the nation's independence. On the other hand, Edward I placed the stone in Westminster Abbey in a different tradition, inserting it into the English variant of the history of the Anglo-Scottish relationship. In 1301, the stone was incorporated into the English kings' coronation chair so that, at the time of their coronation and inauguration as English king, the rulers would at the same time also sit on the Scottish coronation stone, thus being simultaneously inaugurated to rule over Scotland.[10] The new use of the stone thus demonstrated that the English king would also be the king of Scotland.

II.

The second example for a throne seat as the place for the illustration of political order and the creation of political meaning comes from England. On September 30th 1399, the lords spiritual and temporal of the realm of England and a significant number of further persons assembled in the great hall in Westminster around a vacant throne that was ceremoniously covered with a cloth of gold.[11] On the day before, King Richard II had accepted the renunciation of the throne that had been forced upon him. He had been brought as a prisoner to the Tower of London, by his rival Henry, duke of Lancaster, and with reference to serious offences against his coronation oath, the law and jurisdiction, had been compelled to abdicate by the lords spiritual and temporal.

9 Barrow, 2005, p. 95-97; Brown, 2004, p. 229; Rogge, 2012, p. 88.

10 Edward I would have most liked to have also removed the abbey and Moot Hill from Scone; especially after Robert Bruce had been enthroned there in 1306, Barrow, 2005, p. 196.

11 *The record and process*, in: Given-Wilson, 1993, p. 172. On this see also Strohm, 1998.

Archbishop Thomas Arundel asked the assembly whether they consented to the deposition, whereupon all called out loudly "Aye, Aye!"[12] As a result, the kingdom of England was considered vacant at the moment when the persons assembled around the throne. However this state did not last long. Because Henry, duke of Lancaster rose from his seat and declared his claim to the vacant realm. He referred to his lineage (thus hereditary right) and the help in his attempt to gain the throne and the kingdom accorded to him up to then by God. The assembled lords and representatives of the estates knew that Henry would officially declare his claim to the throne – and were not surprised. But Henry could not be certain that all the magnates would accept his claim to power. He had to wait and see how the lords spiritual and temporal would answer the appropriate question by the Treasurer, John Norbury. One after the other, the lords declared that they accepted Henry's claim to the throne. But the verbal declaration of consent – the duke knew – said little about the assembled persons' real attitudes. Therefore he said: "I ask you lords spiritual and temporal here assembled to assent to my claim not only with your mouths, but also with your hearts. But if some of you do not assent with your hearts, that is no great surprise for me."[13]

Once those present had accepted Henry's claim to rule and thus assented to the change of dynasty on the English throne – from the Plantagenet to Lancaster – this decision was communicated symbolically. The Archbishop of Canterbury took Henry's right hand, kissed it and led him in front of the throne. Henry knelt down before it and said a prayer. Then he made the sign of the cross in front of and behind the throne, and finally the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, to the applause of the assembly in the hall and also of those standing outside, set him on the throne.[14] The vacancy of the kingdom shown by the empty throne was thus ended; Henry IV now filled it with his person.

III.

Now I would like to present political settings or spheres of political action in London, which were constituted, among other places, at preaching crosses in 1461. During the fifteenth century it can be observed that political settings also

12 Mortimer, 2007, p. 189.

13 The *Manner of King Richard's Renunciation*, in: Given-Wilson, 1993, p. 166. Given-Wilson believes this is a report of an independent eye witness, and no propaganda of the Lancastrian party, ibid., p. 162.

14 ibid., p. 185f., somewhat divergent version in: ibid., p. 166.

came into being outside of Westminster Hall. Since the late Middle Ages, public urban settings in London played an important role for the assertion of claims to power and maintenance of political order.[15]

The connection between a successful assertion of a claim to power and the support of a public urban setting can be shown particularly clearly during the so-called Wars of the Roses. In February 1461, Queen Margaret, King Henry VI's wife defeated an army of the York party at St. Albans (February 17th). But the Londoners refused her and her army entry to the city. Rather, on February 28th they opened the gates to Edward, the son of Richard, duke of York, who had fallen on the battlefield at Wakefield in December 1460.[16] Edward had his claim to the throne and power disseminated by intensive preaching activity in London.[17] On March 1st the chancellor and bishop of Exeter, George Neville (Warwick's brother), preached before 3000 to 4000 people in St. John's Field outside the city. On this occasion the listeners learned that King Henry had violated the realm, namely – according to the bishop – because Henry VI had disdained the articles of the *Accord* of October 1460 with Richard of York. The king had allowed for his contractually accepted heir to be attacked in combat. And this heir had not survived the battle. Was this man – the bishop asked – still worthy to rule the realm? "No" the crowd cried out. Then he asked further whether they wanted to have Edward (of York, earl of March) as king. The answer was "Yes". Thereupon a delegation informed Edward *that the people had chosen him as king*.[18]

After Edward's claim to power had been accepted in this setting, it was important to communicate this decision symbolically. At nine o'clock on the morning of March 4th, the Londoners were invited to meet him at St. Paul's Cross, the most important meeting place in London, at the churchyard of St. Paul's Cathedral. At the given hour, the pretender to the throne came to St. Paul's Cross in a solemn procession with the clergy. A countless number of Londoners had already gathered there. Once again, the bishop of Exeter spoke to the meeting. At the close of his sermon, he explained to those present why Edward's claims to the throne were legitimate and asked whether they wanted to have him as king. After their vociferous assent (i.e. the people now acclaimed him), those

15 Gransden, 1982, p. 125.

16 Ross, 1974, p. 32. Edward was expected as a kind of rescuer/redeemer who would bring peace and prosperity. In London a rhyme circulated: *Let us walk in a new wine yard, and let us make a gay garden in the month of March with this fair white rose and herb, the Earl of March*.

17 Report in the *Six Town Chronicles*, in: Myers, 1969, p. 288f.

18 Ibid., p. 289.

present were invited to march with Edward and the clergy to Westminster in order to watch how Edward would take possession of the realm (*to see him take his possession*). In the Hall of the Palace of Westminster he was clad in the royal mantle and set on the royal throne (Marble Chair). Then they went into Westminster Abbey in order to celebrate a solemn high mass. The coronation proper took place later on 28th June 1461.[19]

The example of Edward shows that in the second half of the fifteenth century, one prerequisite for the assertion of disputed or contested claims to power was to spread the same by sermons in London and to have them approved in various settings. Once again becomes clear that in fact communication of the question who should rule was as important for Edward's success as the decision of leading political groups for his candidacy or even his actual or alleged hereditary right.

IV.

This assumption is further supported if one considers the circumstances surrounding Richard III's accession to the throne in 1483. The eight weeks from Edward IV's death in April 1483 until his brother's accession to the throne as Richard III on 26th June 1483 are undoubtedly among the most stirring periods of English history. We are going to examine more carefully how Richard employed sermons and speeches in order to achieve his goal, i.e. to ascend the throne with the Londoners' assent.

As so often in the past, on 22nd June 1483 a large crowd of people had assembled at St. Paul's Cross in London. They were waiting for a sermon by the Augustinian Hermit Ralph Shaa, a brother of the mayor of London. Richard and his closest helper, Lord Buckingham, were also present. The Londoners will probably have hardly believed their ears and would have been shocked when they heard Shaa's sermon.[20] The preacher informed the dumbfounded audience that Edward IV's sons had no hereditary right to the throne because the late king had, even before his wedding to Queen Elizabeth Woodville, made a promise of marriage to a certain – and in the meantime deceased – Eleanor Butler and had

19 Ross, 1974, p. 41.

20 Myers, 1969, p. 334f., Dominicus Mancini, in: Armstrong, 1966 and the Crowland Chronicle, in: Pronay/Cox, 1986, p. 161 agree on this matter. See also the compilation of sources in: Dockray, 1988, p. 76-83; Wood, 1975, p. 271; Gairdner, 1898, p. 79f.

betrothed himself to this lady. Edward's generally known second marriage was thus invalid and the children of this marriage – the heir to the throne, Edward V, and his brother Richard – were therefore not legitimate heirs. Therefore, only Richard of Gloucester, as the last representative of the direct line of the House of York, was qualified to become king. Richard's claim was thus substantiated by scandalising Edward's marriage and the sons born of it. However at first he failed to gain any acceptance for this matter. Therefore his intimate friend – Lord Buckingham – spoke on 23rd June before an assembly of the lords spiritual and temporal.

And on 24th June 1483 he gave a speech before the mayor, aldermen and many other burgesses of London who had assembled in Guildhall. According to the report in the *Great Chronicle of London*, he confirmed once again that when Edward married Elizabeth he already had a wife. Thus all the sons of this second marriage were illegitimate. Prince Edward, whom all had considered being the heir to the throne until then, was not entitled to inherit.[21] Richard's right to the throne resulted as a political consequence of Edward IV's moral transgressions. He was the only living rightful heir to the throne. Buckingham then expanded his argumentation by stressing Richard's capabilities and his services for the realm. He emphasised his intention to secure peace and to guarantee property. He finished his address with the reference that the kingdom needed a man at its helm, and not a boy, such as the twelve-year-old Edward V. This roughly half-hour speech was said to have been a previously unheard elegant and rhetorically polished address which sent the listeners into raptures. In response to the question whether they wanted to have Richard as king, the persons assembled cried out "Yes! Yes!"

Richard's claim had thus received assent in an important political setting. And not just that – the supplicant became a bidden guest. The burgesses of London, together with the representatives of the lords and commons in parliament drafted a petition which was read out in parliament on 25th June 1483. In it they called on Richard to accept the crown. His capabilities as ruler were emphasised, but also the reasons for not taking Edward IV's sons into consideration were repeated.[22] On the following day (26th June), Buckingham read out the petition before the Protector in Baynard's Castle and requested him to take the sceptre. After a moment's hesitation, Richard agreed to this. On the very same day he took his place on the Marble Chair in Westminster Hall and declared

21 Ibid., p. 83. The late king was said to be in fact a womaniser: *No women, rich or poor, young or old, were safe from the king's attentions*.

22 German translation in: Winter, 1998, p. 95f.

that his reign would begin on that day.[23] It was not possible to ascend the throne against the will and without the consent of the Londoners (or even of the people of England).

V.

In conclusion it is worthwhile to summarise some observations which make it clear that political structures and claims to power were indeed articulated at places specially marked for the purpose. At these places, settings could be formed through the presence of spectators where these claims and concepts of order could be discussed, reviewed and either rejected or collectively accepted as binding. Such settings came into being when the lords spiritual and temporal gathered around the Stone of Scone or in Westminster Hall at and around the (sometimes empty) throne, when people forgathered in the open air – at St. Paul's Cross for example – in order to hear sermons.

Furthermore, the significance of the throne as the material incarnation of the kingdom and as the medium for symbolic communication is to be stressed. The idea of a Scotland free and independent of English supremacy was linked with the Stone of Scone. Pretenders to the throne made their claim to power public by speeches and gestures at the throne. And if the collective acceptance of a claim was to be communicated after the recognition of a claim to power in a setting, then the pretender to the throne would be accompanied by bishops to the throne and would then be allowed to take his place there. Political legitimating was thus produced at these places and in the spheres of political action (settings) – admittedly, it was not a matter of the foundations of power. The constitution and the monarchy as the form of government were not questioned. It was rather a matter of making clear who occupied which position in the political order or who was able to assert which claim to the highest position, the realm.

In this context, the importance of the spoken word is to be emphasised, in particular the sermons at St. Paul's Cross in London. Already at the end of the 14th century, Thomas Brunton, bishop of Rochester, had recognised the importance of the meeting place. Brunton thought highly of the effect and influence of sermons at the cross because he felt the people in London to be more sensible than elsewhere. Thomas Brunton evidently already knew that one can let the facts of a matter become real within the context of sermons, so to speak, by mentioning them or preaching them. Thus, in 1461 and 1483, the preachers

23 Dockray, 1988, p. 82.

attempted to influence Londoners' ways of perception in accordance with the wishes of Edward IV and Richard III. The residents, who gathered at the crosses for the sermons, were intended to agree with their definition of "political reality" in each case and to recognise the claims to power linked to them.

In actual fact, the prerequisites for the redistribution of power were created by the sermons, because the sermons created and named effective reasons for the validity of asserting a claim. For that reason, even ten years after his accession to the throne (1471), Edward IV still stated that his right to the throne had been proved by Bishop George Neville's sermon and the crowd's reaction at St. Paul's Cross in 1461.[24] I would like therefore to conclude that the aim of the practices on, before and around the stone, throne and pulpit shown in this paper was to evoke a specific political meaning which was designed to stress a new monarch's right to rule even though his claim to the throne was disputed.

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