

HENRY KNIGHTON & THE PEASANTS' REVOLT

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Although all of the chroniclers of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 denounce the actions of the rebels, Henry Knighton stands alone as the author capable and willing to attempt to understand the motivations of these men. He does not condemn the rebels as irrevocably wicked and sees in the background to the revolt and the unfolding of events, a spread of blame. While the *Anonimale Chronicle* is more accurate in detail, Knighton's chronicle might provide more insight into the deeper causes and responsibilities of the crisis.

Knighton acknowledges that the rebels initially gathered for a just reason. This contrasts sharply with Walsingham and Froissart. Neither chronicler mentions any justification for the rebellion; both men lay the blame sharply upon the greed and wickedness of the peasantry. Even the *Anonimale Chronicle*, while mentioning the tax commissions and the corruption in the administration of the tax system, does not allow this to mitigate the rebels' guilt. Knighton however is more specific in his chronicle, laying the blame for the fomenting of rebellion at the hands of the tax commissioners in general and John Leg in particular. He claims that Leg and his minions, when investigating supposedly unpaid taxes, would extort money from the villagers by threatening the abuse and humiliation of their female children. This, and the tax burden itself, proved an "almost unbearable burden" for the Essex villagers and they gathered to help each other "in the face of so urgent a necessity."¹ This is a remarkably sympathetic view of the rebels, especially in the face of the hostility of other chroniclers. The rebels did not gather for personal gain or malicious intent – as Walsingham would have a reader believe – but out of desperation. That circumstances had come to such a pass was the fault, not of the rebels, but of the agents of the government.

¹ Henry Knighton, *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (), 135–6.

Yet, the reasons for gathering might not necessarily diminish the rebels' guilt. Certainly, the author of the *Anonimale* believed that such actions were not justified, whatever the cause. At first glance, it would seem that Knighton believed the same. He decries the rebels' actions as wicked and, describes the agents of the burning of the Savoy as "servants of the devil."² Yet, Knighton's characterization of the rebels is mild in comparison with that of Walsingham or Froissart. Knighton consistently refers to the rebels as "the people" or "the rebels," rarely resorting to insults or demeaning names. Walsingham, on the other hand, often calls them "rustics," "villeins," (although many of the rebels were freemen) and frequently refers to them as agents of the devil. Knighton, thus, continues to see and characterize the rebels as men – albeit misguided and sinning men – unlike the animalistic ruffians of Walsingham's chronicle.

Knighton is also the most critical of the government's response to the crisis. Froissart portrayed the king and his company in a sympathetic, noble manner and Walsingham did the same. The latter also elevated the death of Archbishop Sudbury to the holy martyrdom of the most courageous kind.³ Knighton, however, does not show the king's attendants in the same light. Instead, he accuses the king's knights as showing "no spirit whatsoever" and "[being] struck by womanly fears."⁴ Only the king remains free of direct criticism. However, Knighton is the only one of the chroniclers to mention that the charters that the king granted at Mile End, he later had quashed. Was this an implicit criticism of the king that he went back upon his word, that he should betray the commons?

There is thus a great difference between Knighton's chronicle and those of his contemporaries, especially in the

² Ibid, 183

³ Walsingham, 174

⁴ Knighton 182.

analysis of the crisis and the motivations of the rebels. Walsingham and Froissart conclude that the rebels acted from malice and with barely controlled animalistic wickedness, threatening a faultless and noble king and government. The *Anonimale Chronicle* sees a reason for the rebellion but still lays the blame squarely at the feet of the rebels for acting as they did. Knighton alone evaluates the situation differently. John Leg and his agents provoked the rebels so sorely that violence was likely and probably inevitable. Knighton even reiterates Leg's responsibility when describing Sudbury's death.⁵ The government and those men around the king were slow, uncertain and weak in their response, allowing the rebels to gather and commit their crimes unhindered. They too, bore some responsibility for the unfolding of events. Certainly, the rebels committed wicked acts, especially the murder of Sudbury and the sack of the Savoy, but they do not bear the responsibility alone.

Of all the chroniclers, Knighton seems to be intent upon writing an analytical history of the rebellion. Unlike Walsingham's hysterical diatribe or Froissart's romanticization of the noble king, or even the relatively balanced account of the *Anonimale Chronicle*, Knighton attempts to look beyond the mere events to the causes. He cannot approve of the actions of the rebels, but he can understand them, and try to transmit some of that understanding to his readers, contemporaneous or in the future.

⁵ Ibid, 183