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Anderson, Mark, "The Glory of Cambresis" (1992). *Undergraduate Honors Capstone Projects*. 410.
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The Glory of Cambresis

by Mark Anderson

In the Sixteenth century, Paris dominated France as the economic, social, and political center of all that happened in the Western world. For a brief moment, at the close of the Habsburg-Valois War, a small and virtually insignificant town snatched away the center stage; the final negotiations for peace would take place in Cambresis. Each power involved in the treaty wanted to see a quick end to the war, but not at their own expense. France and Spain, the "superpowers" of the negotiations, struggled to come out on top, but while their differences appeared to take precedence over all else, it was the English, looked down upon by both their allies and enemies, who had a major impact on the development of the treaty. A military victory in the war was virtually impossible; likewise, no victors emerged from the negotiations.

The war had to find a conclusion. Fernand Braudel explains in his epic dealing with the Mediterranean during the time of Philip II, "Financial exhaustion forced the adversaries to a settlement."¹ Even with tons of gold and silver arriving from the Americas, Spain stood on the verge of bankruptcy. Philip had expended nearly everything to maintain his armies of mercenaries in the field. France and England fared no better. Not only had they both stripped themselves financially, but also felt the pressure of domestic struggles over religion. Henri needed peace to stamp out the Protestant dissent in France;² in England, the undermining of Catholicism and the implementation of Protestantism by Elizabeth and Parliament had already taken its toll.

Enthusiasm for a quick conclusion to the negotiations (and especially to the war), ran rampant through the courts of Philip, Henri, and Elizabeth. Clearly, everyone involved wanted peace. Philip's court in Brussels so anticipated peace that "they omit no possible means for attaining it."³ In the first few days of the negotiations, Henri, because of the great hope for peace that existed, called for a parade in Paris.⁴ Even in England, the Queen's coronation, a spectacle and pageant of great proportion and expense, took place just two weeks before the negotiations began at Cambresis.⁵ The festivities did not exemplify a country crushed under the pressures of war. All sides anticipated and expected peace to arrive soon, especially since both the French and Spanish Deputies were instructed to make peace as quickly as possible.⁶

Even though England's enthusiasm for peace equaled that of France and Spain, in their eyes, England did not qualify to participate in the negotiations. The Spanish looked down on the English with pity and played the role of protector, always showing concern for the rights of England, but in reality, only looking out for themselves. In one letter to the Count of Feria at Elizabeth's court in London, King Philip writes, "they [the English] should be included like the rest of our friends in the settlement... [and] we insisted most positively that nothing should be done without the English."⁷ However, if things did not proceed the way Philip wanted, the Count of Feria counseled that "it will be best to pick a quarrel with them...so that we can press them again in that way or open the door for your Majesty, if nothing else can be done, to act in your own interests."⁸ Spain could not afford to offend England and would attempt to settle in their favor; England controlled the English Channel and was a valuable friend. But, if necessary, the Spanish would not conclude in their favor just to obtain peace. Feria, personally, had little or no use for the English. On one occasion, Feria mentioned to Philip that the English received very poor treatment in Scotland, and as far as he was concerned it could not have been bad enough.⁹ The need for peace outweighed (albeit slightly), England's importance to Spain.

Early in the preliminary meetings at Cercamp the French and Spanish disagreed over the involvement of the English in forming the treaty. The French did not want to deal with the English at Cambresis at all.¹⁰ They even offered to hold a separate negotiation only with the English; rumor had it that they would meet in Bologna.¹¹ In any case, after the recent death of Queen Mary, the English were not expected to play a leading role in the negotiations.

While peace beckoned, ambassadors and deputies met again to fight the most important battles in the conference chambers on February 9, 1559, scrambling to steal the advantage over their enemy at the bargaining table; the peace talks at Cercamp had earlier ceased because of the sudden death of Queen Mary. Philip's court hoped for peace, but wanted it kept secret "lest it reach the ears of the French, with

slowed the talks to a crawl. The English demanded the restitution of Calais, and the French refused outright; messengers immediately left on February 12 for London, Paris, and Brussels, seeking instructions from their respective rulers. The Queen had deceived King Philip into believing that they would accept a treaty without receiving Calais in return.¹⁵

When talks resumed, the French remained firm, having received no new instructions from King Henri.¹⁶ Likewise, the English stood their ground. Finally, tempers flared and the French threatened to brake off the negotiations because of the insistence of the Spanish concerning Calais, and returned to their quarters.¹⁷ Only on account of the Duchess of Lorraine, who "interposed and caused them again to confer,"¹⁸ did the negotiations continue. After much dispute, the French proposed two new possibilities: (1) if the Queen marries and her eldest son takes the daughter of the King Dauphin to wife, then he would receive Calais as a present, or (2) the French restore Calais in 8 years.¹⁹ Talks ceased while a messenger left for London. The answer came back; the Queen said no.

The French and Spanish obviously wanted a hasty end to the war, but the English seemed intent on killing time. Were the English stalling on purpose to disrupt the flow of the negotiations? The evidence appears to confirm exactly this. The English Deputies constantly delayed the talks with stubborn refutations of all the French proposals, and often halted the talks completely until messengers could arrive with word from London. Queen Elizabeth and England walked a fine line. She had an image to uphold and she could not immediately give in and relinquish Calais—popular support for her would fall apart if she appeared weak. The more she stalled and balked the French, the more her popularity grew.

Elizabeth also needed to keep the Catholic population in line, especially in Parliament. It appeared that she leaned toward Protestantism; and the Pope threatened her with excommunication. King Philip offered marriage and she used his offer to her advantage.²⁰ As long as she seemed interested in a Catholic marriage with Philip, she could avoid excommunication and dangerous popular dissent. Stalling gave her the advantage.

The most revealing facts that support her intent to stall for time are the secret negotiations which took place between England and France. The French, from the beginning of the truce, had made it clear that they wished to make a separate treaty with England, but, as early as January 9, King Philip received information from the Queen that France had made attempts at secret negotiations.

The French had made an attempt, although not openly, to commence peace negotiations, and although she thought they would not return to the subject she wished me to be assured, in case they did, that she would not listen to them... and to agree to nothing with the French without my [King Philip] knowledge and co-operation.²¹

Philip cautiously believed her, and on about January 20, an unknown "Englishman" arrived in France, spoke "in secret with the Constable and the King, to whom he brought some letters, received replies to them, and was then accompanied to the seaside in great haste."²² He was believed to have brought news of restoring friendship with France—nearly three weeks before talks began in Cambresis. The unknown "Englishman" was Guido Cavalcanti.

Guido Cavalcanti's name first appears in a letter of the Count of Fria on January 31, who discovered that he was hiding in the Treasurer's chambers in the Queen's palace in London. Fria believed him to have brought word from France.²³ Giovanni Michiel, Venetian Ambassador in France, also writes in his letter to the Doge on February 14, that Cavalcanti returned to France with another letter from the Queen, which "is now supposed to refer to another separate conference between the Commissioners of France and England," to be held in Bologna or Montreuil.²⁴ The Queen had not kept her word to Spain.

The Queen's espionage also left the French doubting. As of February 27, the English remained firm on the question of Calais, not relinquishing their demands of restitution. The Queen's messages said otherwise.

[The Queen's] mode of proceeding hitherto seems to cause much doubt and surprise to the French Commissioners, because the Lord William, who was sent by her lately to the Conference, either from craft, owing to the presence and interposition of King Philip's Commissioners, and in order not to divulge anything to them, or from some other cause, spoke in a very different tone to the message brought lately by [Cavalcanti].²⁵

William stood firm on the matter of Calais; unless the French restored Calais, he would proceed no further. King Henri, in order to avoid deception, sent Cavalcanti back with La Marque, a French nobleman from his court, to determine the Queen's thoughts concerning Calais.²⁶

By the time Cavalcanti and La Marque arrived in England, the Queen told Feria that she had sent a letter on February 21 to her Commissioners at Cambresis. She showed him a copy of the letter which declared that they intended to make peace with France on their promise to return Calais in six years and halt the war in Scotland within two months.²⁷ However, it is more likely that this letter was the letter she sent back to France via Cavalcanti and La Marque on March 1. The English deputies still would not budge.

On March 5 the English stand remained unchanged, despite Queen Elizabeth's letter of the 21st. The English Commissioners then hinted at their contentment if the French destroyed the fortress of Calais. The French refused completely, responding that Calais fell under the French Crown and that after all these setbacks and offenses "they were resolved to end the negotiations and leave."²⁸ They were about to do so when the Deputies of King Philip asked them to first write King Henri for his response. The Spanish, by this point only interested in reaching an agreement, were trying to save face in the eyes of the English.

Henri's response argued that "in no way will he return or destroy that fortress and that he wants, in any case, in eight or ten days, an end to the negotiations."²⁹ Hope had all but dissolved completely and the fear of not reaching an agreement began to set in.

Whether England or France came to a secret agreement separately, or the differences at Cambresis found a release, the dispute over Calais finally came to an end on March 12. England accepted France's new proposal on Calais. With a security of 500,000 crowns and hostages to be named later, Calais would be restored to England within 8 years under the arbitration of King Philip.³⁰ Some had their doubts; the Count of Feria believed the French very willing to promise to restore Calais, "and then keep their word in their usual fashion, [not keep it]."³¹ In any case, the English, and not the Spanish or French, as first led to believe, had dictated the pace and direction of the negotiations. The Queen had effectively controlled the game, paralyzing the others until she made her own moves.

After resolving the question of Calais, the talks continued briskly with a few minor interruptions. March 18: Corsica returns under jurisdiction of the Genoese, with a small indemnity for repairs made by the French, Montferrat returns to the Duke of Mantua, the French give Philip all their holdings in Tuscany including the Republic of Siena, both kings give up all fortresses conquered in the late years of the war, the Duke of Savoy will marry Henri's sister Marguerite, and Isabella, daughter of King Henri, will marry Don Carlos, Philip's son, or Philip himself.³² Only the distribution of a few fortresses in the Piedmont in Italy plagued a quick resolution of the treaty. Henri wanted to keep Torino, Chieri, Pinerolo, and Chiavasso. The Spanish did not want to create any more problems, but had trouble with Henri keeping these four fortresses.³³ Finally, on March 21 the Deputies decided that Philip would keep Vercelli, Asti, Cuni, and Fossano, and Henri the aforementioned fortresses.

One of King Philip's Commissioners wrote,

I thank God that during these last two days things have passed so prosperously, for we have agreed with the French to all the articles, and no further alterations will be made.... Nothing remains but to draw up the articles and sign them, which will, I hope, be done tomorrow or next day³⁴.

The treaty, signed on April 3, 1559, concluded the war and commenced the peace. In Paris, peace was published with trumpets and demonstrations of joy.³⁵ Celebrations crowned the achievement and marriages attempted to join the once enemies as brothers. However, the peace was not won without great struggles on both sides. How long would it last? For countless years the war had raged, and what did they have to show for it all? France had lost its influence in Italy, lost thousands upon thousands of men, and virtually bankrupted itself in the process. Spain spent enormous amounts of money and lives, and gained only a few fortresses. England lost Calais. No winners emerged from the Habsburg-Valois War.

Financial exhaustion forced the belligerent countries, bereft of any possibility of winning the war, into a settlement for peace. France and England longed for peace in order to settle the domestic problems

they faced. Spain's endless supply of American silver dwindled; there was not enough money to support the armies any longer. They all wanted peace, but not at their own expense. King Philip and King Henri sought to keep England in its place, subservient and inferior, but Queen Elizabeth would not play the game and held the reins of the conference, leading it where she wished. But in the end, no one came away with the prize. And Cambresis? With the treaty signed and the negotiations over, it's brilliant moment on center stage came to an end... almost as quickly as it had begun.

List of Abbreviations

ASV - Archivio Segreto del Vaticano
 SPR - Calendar of State Papers, Rome
 SPS - Calendar of State Papers, Simancas
 SPV - Calendar of State Papers, Venetian

¹ Fernand Braudel, The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, vol. I, trans. Sian Reynolds (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 945.

² Ibid..

³ Calendar of State Papers, Venetian, 1558-1570, eds. Rawdon Brown, G.C. Bentick, & Horatio Brown (London: H.M.S.O., 1864-1898), 7.

⁴ Rome, Archivio Segreto del Vaticano, Lettere di Principi, vol. XI, F., 377.

⁵ SPV, 11-19.

⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁷ Calendar of Letters and State Papers, Relating to English Affairs, Simancas, vol. I, Elizabeth, 1558-1567, ed. Martin Hume (London: H.M.S.O., 1892), 14.

⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁹ Ibid., 26.

¹⁰ Ibid., 14.

¹¹ Calendar of State Papers, Relating to English Affairs, Rome, vol. F, Elizabeth, 1558-1571, ed. J.M. Riggs (London: H.M.S.O., 1916), 3.

¹² SPV, 24.

¹³ SPR, 2.

¹⁴ SPS, 31.

¹⁵ Ibid., 28.

¹⁶ ASV, 380.

¹⁷ Ibid., 381.

¹⁸ SPV, 33.

¹⁹ Ibid., 33-34.

²⁰ SPS, 22.

²¹ Ibid., 21.

²² SPV, 11.

²³ SPS, 26.

²⁴ SPV, 32.

²⁵ Ibid., 40.

²⁶ Ibid..

²⁷ SPS, 32.

²⁸ ASV, 392.

²⁹ Ibid., 394.

³⁰ SPV, 48.

³¹ SPS, 32.

³² ASV, 404.

³³ Ibid., 409.

³⁴ SPV, 61.

³⁵ Ibid., 70.