

The Ransom of Olivier du Guesclin

OLIVIER DU GUESCLIN is probably best known for the fact that he was the younger brother of Charles V's constable, the legendary Bertrand du Guesclin. The du Guesclin brothers had an unfortunate knack of getting captured. Bertrand himself was captured four times by the English and their allies between 1359 and 1367,¹ while another brother, Guillaume, the youngest, had to be ransomed for 2,000 francs from the king of Navarre and an English esquire called Henry Cormie in 1365.² Olivier's turn came in the winter of 1378-9, during the siege of Cherbourg. Until Bertrand's death in 1380, Olivier spent much of his life in the shadow of his elder brother,³ and the siege of Cherbourg was no exception: it was Bertrand who commanded the besieging French army, Olivier serving as one of his captains. Cherbourg was one of the fortresses in the Cotentin owned by the king of Navarre, Carlos II (the Bad). In July 1378, in return for a promise of English help against Castile, Carlos had agreed to lease Cherbourg to the English for three years,⁴ and during the subsequent French siege in the autumn and winter of 1378-9 it was defended by a joint force of English and Navarrese. The siege was a failure. Although there had been some preliminary skirmishing in the autumn, it was not until early November that the main body of the French army with its heavy artillery arrived. In early December Sir John Arundel, marshal of England, crossed from Southampton to take charge of the defence.⁵ Olivier's capture seems to have occurred within a few weeks, if not a few days, of Arundel's arrival, and soon after this the siege was abandoned, mainly because the weather had turned bitter.⁶

Both Froissart and the author of the *Chronique des Quatre Premiers Valois* treat Olivier's capture as the main event of the siege,⁷ but the accounts of the episode

¹ P. Contamine, *Guerre, État et Société à la Fin du Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1972), p. 578. I would like to thank my friend Dr. Michael Prestwich for his comments and suggestions on the first draft of this paper.

² *Le Compte des Recettes et Dépenses du Roi de Navarre en France et en Normandie de 1367 à 1370*, ed. E. Izarn (Paris, 1885), p. 217.

³ Despite the fact that Bertrand's contemporary biographer records that the two brothers quarrelled in childhood, Olivier seems to have served under his brother on most of the latter's major expeditions (*Chronique de Bertrand du Guesclin par Cuvelier*, ed. E. Charrière (2 vols., Paris, 1839), i. 6; ii. 20, 38, 100, 128, 137; and R. Delachenal, *Histoire de Charles V* (5 vols., Paris, 1909-51), iii. 129; iv. 508 n. 7). *Chronique de Bertrand du Guesclin*, i. 78-95, also records at length an episode which occurred at the siege of Dinan, when Olivier was mischievously captured by an English knight, Thomas de Canterbury, during a period of truce, and Bertrand rode into the English camp to secure his brother's liberty.

⁴ P. E. Russell, *English Intervention in Spain and Portugal in the time of Edward III and Richard II* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 255-8.

⁵ Arundel agreed on 12 Oct. 1378 to take 300 men-at-arms, 200 archers and 60 ballistars to strengthen the garrison, and on 12 Dec. a royal warrant ordered 1,000 marks to be paid to him for the revictualling of the town (see the notes by M. Gaston Raynaud in his introduction to *Chroniques de Jean Froissart*, ed. S. Luce and others (15 vols., Paris, 1869-1975, continuing), ix, pp. lv-lvi).

⁶ Delachenal, v. 221-2; *Chroniques de Froissart*, ix. 98; *Chroniques des Quatre Premiers Valois*, ed. S. Luce (Paris, 1862), p. 277.

⁷ *Chroniques de Froissart*, ix. 95-8; *Œuvres Complètes de Froissart*, ed. Kervyn de Lettenhove (28 vols., Brussels, 1867-77), ix. 96-8; *Chronique des Quatre Premiers Valois*, p. 276. The *Chronique de Bertrand du Guesclin*, i. 78, merely remarks that Olivier 'Puis fust à Chierebourc devant le chastel pris/Et avec les Engloiz de la mer tramis'; while the *Chronique des Règnes de Jean II et de Charles V*, ed. R. Delachenal (4 vols., Paris, 1910-20) does not mention the capture.

which they provide are somewhat divergent. According to Froissart, Olivier had ridden from Valognes (about seven leagues away) with a party of forty soldiers to make a reconnaissance of the town.⁸ Arundel was at the time being shown around Cherbourg by a Navarrese esquire called Jehan Cocq (or Jehans Coc), and when the latter heard that Olivier and his party had been spotted in the woods near Cherbourg, he told Arundel and urged that Olivier be followed. He said he thought he could lead Arundel to a place where Olivier could not escape capture and he suggested that the proceeds of the capture should be shared half and half ('et d(ou) conquès tout soit moitié à moitié'). 'By my faith', replied Arundel, 'I wish it'. The two men took about a hundred soldiers, laid an ambush for Olivier and his party, and, with cries of 'Our Lady! Arundel!', set upon them. Despite Olivier's desperate attempts to save himself, he and about a dozen of his companions were duly captured.⁹ It was Cocq himself who actually captured Olivier. The unfortunate prisoner was then taken to Cherbourg castle, where he was told that he would pay 'bien quarante mil frans' for his ransom. Froissart is strikingly accurate here: 40,000 gold francs was indeed the sum at which the ransom was set.

Froissart concludes his account of the episode by relating that 'Oliviers de Claiequin' remained a prisoner for a time at Cherbourg in the custody of Cocq but that Arundel shared in the profit. Later Olivier paid the ransoms for himself and for all those who had been taken with him, but it took a long time ('mais ce ne fu mies si tost').¹⁰ There was of course rather more to it than this. The circumstances of Olivier's capture created understandable problems as to the division of his ransom, problems which it took nearly a year to sort out. John Arundel returned to England in March 1379, presumably bringing Olivier with him,¹¹ and he acted as a trier of petitions in the parliament which met at Westminster at the end of the month.¹² It was during this parliament that the question of Olivier's ransom first seems to have been discussed, for on 3 May a sergeant-at-arms of the king was directed 'to arrest and bring before the council in the present parliament at Westminster Oliver Claykyn, knight'.¹³ Unfortunately the records of this parliament contain no notice of any debate concerning the ransom, and the matter seems to have been shelved during the summer. It

⁸ This would seem to place the timing of his capture at a date before the siege began in earnest, which contradicts the evidence of the *Chronique des Quatre Premiers Valois*, which also states that Olivier had about 70 knights and esquires with him, including Olivier de Mauny and the Sire de la Roche, both of whom were also captured. Delachenal, *Charles V.*, followed closely the account of the *Chronique des Quatre Premiers Valois*, apparently ignoring Froissart's evidence. If Delachenal was right about the timing of the siege—and he probably was—then it is unlikely that the capture occurred before December, for John Arundel was certainly in Cherbourg at the time of the capture. Froissart may be wrong in stating that Olivier had come from Valognes; if the capture occurred in December, then the siege was by this time in full swing, and the French would hardly have been encamped 7 leagues away. On the other hand, Froissart's account is full of convincing circumstantial detail, and it is also true that the ease with which an Anglo-Navarrese party was apparently able to ride out of Cherbourg to effect the capture hardly suggests a close investment of the fortress. The evidence of the two chroniclers is irreconcilable.

⁹ The *Chronique des Quatre Premiers Valois* relates that a total of about 60 knights and esquires were captured.

¹⁰ *Chroniques de Froissart*, ix. 98. A variant of Froissart, printed by Kervyn de Lettenhove in *Œuvres de Froissart*, ix. 99, says that Olivier was sent to England, and remained for a long time a prisoner in London; then he was ransomed for a great sum.

¹¹ On 20 Feb. Arundel was still at Cherbourg (T. Rymer, *Foedera*, ed. A. Clarke, F. Holbrooke and J. Caley (4 vols. in 7, 1816-69), iv. 56). On 1 Apr. he was granted an annuity of £100 from the king, perhaps as a consideration for his success in helping to defend Cherbourg (*Calendar of Patent Rolls 1377-81*, p. 347).

¹² *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, iii. 56.

¹³ *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1377-81*, p. 362.

was re-opened, and decided, in October and November 1379. There is clear evidence for the competing claims of a number of parties. On 4 October 1379 Arundel and three other knights, Thomas Percy, Walter Pavely and William Clinton, acting as his sureties, entered into a recognizance with the king for 20,000 gold francs; on 10 October Matthew Gournay and Thomas Trivet, two English knights who had close connections with the king of Navarre, joined in the recognizance. The condition of the recognizance was that

if before Easter next it shall be found or proved that the king ought to have the ransom of Oliver Claykyn, brother of Bartholomew [Bertrand] Claykyn, a prisoner, or part thereof, the persons hereby bound shall content the king of so much as pertains to him, and in case it be not proved before Easter the same shall be null and void; and if the said Oliver shall die before proof so made, they shall not be bound to pay more than a proportion of what they shall receive of him.¹⁴

If the ransom had already been set at 40,000 gold francs, and the recognizance was made out for 20,000 gold francs, it seems the council was hoping to claim half the ransom for the king. Meanwhile the Crown had laid claim to the prisoner's person and lodged him in the Tower. On 6 October the constable of the Tower was ordered to 'bring before the king in chancery on this instant Thursday the king's prisoner Oliver Claykyn'.¹⁵

We do not know what decisions were arrived at when Olivier was brought into chancery, but within a further ten days the English king's claim to a share in the ransom appears to have been invalidated. On 20 October three highly experienced soldiers, Guy Brian, Matthew Gournay and Richard Abberbury, were commissioned by the council to hear the dispute between John Arundel and Carlos of Navarre 'et alios' concerning Olivier's ransom; they were to decide between the claims and report back to the council.¹⁶ The 'et alios' clause could hardly refer to the king, for he would surely have been named in person if his claim was still being considered. It must refer to Jehan Cocq and/or any person(s) to whom he had transferred his rights in the prisoner. As we shall see, it is highly probable that he had in fact sold his rights in Olivier to others.

The normal tribunal for deciding competing claims between rival claimants to a prisoner or his ransom was the court of chivalry, presided over by the constable and marshal, from which appeal lay to the king in chancery.¹⁷ It may have been that the court of chivalry dealt with this case in the summer of 1379, and that Olivier's appearance in chancery in October was as a result of an appeal from that court's decision, but this seems unlikely. The personnel of the court created a problem, for John Arundel himself was marshal of England at this time, and so was unlikely to be allowed to act as both defendant or plaintiff and judge. Moreover, there was some confusion as to whether England had a constable at this time.¹⁸ These circumstances must explain why a commission of three knights was set up to hear the dispute.

¹⁴ *Calendar of Close Rolls 1377-81*, p. 336.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

¹⁶ Rymer, IV, 72.

¹⁷ G. D. Squibb, *The High Court of Chivalry* (Oxford, 1959), p. 17.

¹⁸ The king's uncle Thomas of Woodstock had been appointed acting constable in 1376, and in fact he was to retain the office until his death in 1397, but he acquired the office in the first place only in right of his wife, and when Richard II confirmed the appointment it was made clear that it was temporary (*Cal. Pat. Rolls 1374-7*, p. 279; Rymer, IV, 1, 5). In 1379, in answer to a petition from the commons requesting a restriction of the activities of the court of chivalry, the lords of parliament replied that, 'since the heirs who claim the office of Constable are of tender age, and in the wardship of the king', they could not deal with the petition, which implies that Woodstock's tenure of the post had still not been confirmed on a permanent basis (*Rot. Parl.*, iii, 65).

The commission reached its decision within three weeks. On 10 November the constable of the Tower was ordered 'to deliver Oliver Claykyn knight, imprisoned in the Tower at the king's command, to the proctors or attorneys of the king of Navarre, the attorneys of John Darundell and to Thomas Tryvet knight'.¹⁹ The English king's claim was clearly dead, and although the decision of the commissioners with regard to the division of the ransom is not recorded here, we know of it from another source. It was as follows: Carlos of Navarre was to have a third (33.3%); Arundel was to have a third of the residue (22.2%); the remainder (44.4%) was to go to two men called Johanco Dartaisso and Amcot de Solle.²⁰ The latter were jointly styled 'masters of the prisoner'.²¹ It may be that Froissart's 'Jehan Cocq' was in fact 'Johanco' Dartaisso, but it is more likely that Dartaisso and de Solle were third parties to whom Cocq had sold his rights in the prisoner. Dartaisso is elsewhere called a Gascon,²² and de Solle may have been one too.²³ This decision was communicated to Carlos of Navarre some time before the end of the year, and on 31 December 1379 he wrote from his castle of Tassaille confirming the agreement, in the following terms:

Whereas an agreement has been made between Thomas Trevet, knight, and Master Pascal Dylardye, clerk, acting on our behalf, Eneco de Sole and Johanco Dartasse, masters of Sir Olyver de Claekyn, of the second part, and Sir John Darondell, claiming the third part of the ransom of the said Sir Olyver, of the third part, in accordance with which we ought to have the third part of the ransom aforesaid . . . which agreement we confirm by these presents, we acquit the said Eneco and Johanco as regards the value of the said ransom, and the said Sir Olyver, on condition that the latter pay us the third part of such reasonable amount as shall be determined between the said masters and Sir Thomas and Master Dylardye . . . our general proctors . . .²⁴

Once the division of the ransom had been agreed, and the amount of the ransom set, the problem for the claimants was to secure payment. Like most prisoners of the Hundred Years War, Olivier found the raising of his ransom a difficult business, and we do not in fact know just how much of it was ever paid, although some of it certainly was. A variety of factors served to complicate the issue still further, and eventually a dispute arising out of the case came to be heard in the mayor and aldermen's court of the City of London on 19 September 1381. It is from the record of these proceedings that we gain most of our knowledge of the case.²⁵

¹⁹ *Cal. Cl. Rolls 1377-81*, p. 278 (warranted by the council).

²⁰ *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London, 1364-81*, ed. A. H. Thomas (Cambridge, 1929), pp. 297-300.

²¹ *Ibid.*; Rymers, IV, 128.

²² Dartaisso is a character of some interest. Despite apparently sympathizing with the Appellants in 1387-8, he later joined Richard II's household, undertook a diplomatic mission to Italy and the Empire for the king in 1392, and accompanied him to Ireland in 1399. Nevertheless in Nov. 1399 he was retained for life by Henry IV, granted annuities totalling 200 marks *per annum*, and made constable of Dublin for life as well as being showered with other grants and favours in the early years of Henry's reign. See M. Jones, 'The ransom of Jean de Bretagne, count of Penthievre: an aspect of English foreign policy, 1386-8', *ante*, xlv (1972), 20, 25; *The Diplomatic Correspondence of Richard II*, ed. E. Perroy (Camden 3rd ser., xlviii, 1953), p. 114; *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1396-9*, pp. 93, 279, 498; *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1399-1401*, pp. 74, 99, and see index; J. L. Kirby, *Henry IV of England* (1970), p. 100.

²³ I can find no mention of de Solle in the English records except in connection with this ransom.

²⁴ *Calendar of Select Pleas and Memoranda of the City of London, 1381-1412*, ed. A. H. Thomas (Cambridge, 1932), pp. 8-9.

²⁵ *Plea and Memoranda Rolls, 1364-81*, pp. 297-300. Unless otherwise stated, the details of the dispute are derived from this source.

