
POLYDORE VERGIL'S HANGINGS IN THE QUIRE OF WELLS CATHEDRAL

OLIVER HARRIS

SUMMARY

This paper examines the evidence for the armorial hangings given to Wells Cathedral by the scholar Polydore Vergil in the early 16th century. It makes particular use of material collected by the 17th-century Leicestershire antiquary, William Burton.

POLYDORE VERGIL AND WELLS

Polydore Vergil of Urbino (c. 1470–1555) was a humanist scholar of Italian origin and European stature who served for some 40 years as Archdeacon of Wells (Hay 1952; Ruggeri 1992; Galdieri 1993; Ruggeri 2000; Bacchielli 2003; Connell 2004). His early reputation rested on two books written and published in Italy, the *Proverbiorum Libellus* (1498) and *De Inventoribus Rerum* (1499). The latter, a survey of discoveries and origins, would eventually run to over a hundred editions and translations. In 1502 he moved to England, where he was invited by Henry VII to write a new national history: this became the *Anglica Historia*, drafted by 1513 and printed in 1534, which continued to underpin and shape English historiography for the next three centuries.

Vergil came to England as the delegate of the papal official and diplomat Adriano Castellesi (also known as Hadrian de Castello). Technically Castellesi's deputy in the office of Collector of Peter's Pence, Vergil was in practice to serve as his agent in a variety of affairs. The assumption in England seems to have been that the two were kinsmen, as Vergil is sometimes given the alias of Castellen (Maxwell-Lyte 1939, 126, 131, 149; Historical Manuscripts

Commission 1907–14, 2, 207, 209; Rymer 1726–35, 13, 290–1). Castellesi had been appointed Bishop of Hereford early in 1502, was created cardinal in 1503, and was translated to Bath and Wells in 1504: Vergil acted as his proxy for the enthronement in Wells Cathedral (Historical Manuscripts Commission 1907–14, 2, 180). Vergil himself was installed as Archdeacon of Wells in 1508 (Horn and Bailey 1979, 9). In 1510 he was naturalised English (Rymer 1726–35, 13, 290–1). The 'Old Archdeaconry' in Wells, now the Cathedral School Music School, has traditionally been identified as his residence, but there is little firm evidence to associate him with it, and it is unlikely that he in fact spent much time in the city (Reynolds [1880], liii–liv; Collinson 1791, 3, 404; Bailey 1982, 123–5). However, his office was no sinecure, and he was active as the Chapter's representative and advocate in London (Hay 1952, 8–9, 19–20). In 1546, as a concession to Henry VIII's appropriation of church wealth, and perhaps also in anticipation of his own retirement to Italy, he resigned the archdeaconry to the Crown; but he continued to be known as archdeacon of Wells, and in 1550 received the office back as a royal grant for life from Edward VI (Hay 1952, 20; Horn and Bailey 1979, 9; Rymer 1726–35, 15, 234–5). Having left England for the last time, probably in the summer of 1553, Vergil died in Urbino in April 1555.

THE WELLS QUIRE HANGINGS

Vergil donated a set of hangings, featuring his coat of arms, for the quire stalls of Wells Cathedral. The hangings probably replaced an older set, recorded

as being washed in 1504–5 (Colchester 1984, 180). Vergil's gift is first mentioned by John Leland in notes of a visit to Wells made in either 1542 or 1544–5 (Chandler 1996). Leland and Vergil were scholarly rivals, vehemently opposed over the veracity of the 'British' legends of Brutus and Arthur: one of Leland's contributions to the debate was a tract entitled *Codrur*, meaning an ignorant wretch, in reference to Vergil (Carley 1996). This hostility, however, did not prevent Leland taking an interest in the hangings, though the account he gives is brief. He writes: 'About Polydorus armes in the clothes hanging over the staulles in the quier: *Haec Polydori sunt munera Vergilii* ['These are the gift of Polydore Vergil']. About his armes in the same clothes: *Sum laurus virtutis honos pergrata triumphis* ['I am the laurel of virtue, beloved, a mark of honour in triumphs']' (Toulmin Smith 1906–10, 1, 293).

This second motto alludes directly to the arms, which depicted a laurel tree flanked by two lizards (see Appendix). Vergil refers to the design in passing in the 1521 and later editions of *De Inventoribus Rerum*: 'my ancestors considered [the laurel] sacred to the name of our family of Vergil. Together with two lizards, it was the family's device' (Vergil 1521, pt. 2, 27; Vergil 2002, 378–81). He goes on to recite a verse in honour of the tree, of which the phrase '*Sum laurus virtutis honos pergrata triumphis*' provides the opening line, and which concludes with further references to the family arms:

'See – twin lizards play beneath my leafy bough.
You ask, Why leaves with lizards? – And I answer:
I am Spring eternal, early Spring they cry;
And thence the house of Vergil takes its name.
That house will never long lie still nor die
So long as I shall grow eternal green.'

The verse and the arms therefore play on the name Vergil and the Latin word *ver* ('spring').

In 1628–9, Leland's notebooks reached the hands of the Leicestershire antiquary William Burton, who, planning to donate them to the Bodleian Library, began to make transcripts for his own use (Harris 2005, 467–9). Vergil's reputation remained controversial (Ellis 1844, xx–xxviii; Woolf 2000, 23–4), but his admirers included both Burton himself – who later described Vergil as 'a man of singular invention, good judgement, & good reading, & a true lover of Antiquities' – and his brother Robert, author of the *Anatomy of Melancholy* (Staffs. R.O. D649/4/1, fol. 149v; Burton 1989–2000, *passim*; Kiessling 1988, 313). Seemingly intrigued by the mention of the arms, when Burton came to this point

in his transcription (uniquely, in what was otherwise an unembellished working copy) he left a blank space, in hope of later being able to add a drawing (Bodl., MS Gough Gen. Top. 2, p. 90).

He had probably already sought further details from a Somerset contact, William Gregory, rector of Chelvey (Foster 1891–2, 2, 604; Weaver 1889, 250; Collinson 1791, 2, 318). However, it was some time before Gregory could make the 15 mile journey to the cathedral, and when he did he found himself hampered both by the condition of the hangings and by the limits of his own heraldic expertise. The two lizards he could only guess to be ermines. His observations to Burton may nonetheless be quoted in full:

'Good Mr Burton –

Better late then never I shall now absolve my selfe of that bond wherein I engaged my selfe to you: though not in coine so current as you desired, but answerable to your old antiquated closet pieces, yet not voluntarily but necessitated for want of something towards an herald: I have viewed the hangings in the quire at Wells, & I find there no more then you know by your Leland. The circumferentall compartment of the Armes I could not take for want of an helper – only this it is dented in on the sides as old coates are, a lawrell in it, & on each side I & the rest with me supposed two Ermines climbing, but we were not certaine, because age hath obscured their shape, & our ignorance in such thinges could bring no light to itt: over it in a winding labell: 'Haec Polydori sunt munera Virgilij'; under in a straight line 'Sum laurus virtutis honos pergrata triumphis'.

This is all I can say – I would my information were better able to satisfy your curiosity, & so funder your diligence.

I pray you excuse mee, I wrote not sooner, having many occasions to hinder mee from Wells, where I seldome come, & had not now but for your businesse.

I doubt not but this is enough if not too late for your booke. If it bee your author hath sufficiently explained the matter, which is of no great consequent in the Itinerary, & can set no man out of his way though there bee a mistake: Thus with remembrance of my service to your selfe & M^{rs} Burton, I take my leave & rest,

The desirer not deserver of your present love & future labours,

W^m Gregory

Chelvey Nov 17 1630

(BL, MS Egerton 3510, fol. 119)

Gregory's mention of Burton's 'booke' almost certainly alludes, not to his volume of Leland transcripts, but to the projected (but never published) second edition of his 1622 *Description of Leicester Shire* (Williams 1974–5). Vergil's ecclesiastical sinecures had included the living of Church Langton, Leicestershire, and this local connection gave Burton the excuse to pen a biographical sketch of him for the new edition, including a brief mention of the Wells hangings. As first drafted, this passage was heavily indebted to Gregory's letter. Burton reported that Vergil had 'beautif[ie]d the Quire of the Cathedrall church of Welles with fair Arras Hangings (which are there at this day) wherein in indented compartementes are his armes vz. a lawrel tree, supported with two ermines'; adding the texts of the two inscriptions, the first over the arms 'in a winding label or scroule', the second below 'in a streight scroule'. In pursuit of information on Vergil's preferments, he had 'made much enquiry, & sent of purpose to Welles for farther satisfaction, but there could learne nothing' (Staffs. R.O. D649/4/1, fol. 149^v). But Gregory's description was not enough to be adapted into a drawing of the arms, and when, towards the end of 1632, Burton gave Leland's notebooks to the Bodleian, the secondary transcript that accompanied them, intended to serve as the library's consultation copy, still carried a blank space on the relevant page (Bodl., MS Bodl. 470, fol. 160).

Shortly afterwards, however, Burton did manage to procure further information on the arms, not least a clearer sense of their reptilian charges, which he now understood to be crocodiles. Possibly he made the journey to Wells himself, but more probably he found another local informant: his most likely contact would have been Thomas Gerard of Trent, then working on his 'Particular Description' of Somerset (Dunning 1996, 62–4). At any rate, Burton was able to amend his description to refer to 'fair Arras Hangings ... wherein in many scocheons are his armes vz. Arg: a lawrel tree vert, supported with two crocodiles proper' (Staffs. R.O. D649/4/1, fol. 149^v; Nichols 1795–1811, 3.1, 538–9; pl. lxx, fig. 22; Nichols inserts the date 1636 without justification). Better still, he was able to make two drawings: a full-page rendition of the arms for his general volume of church notes (Fig 1); and a thumbnail sketch in the space always intended for it in his personal transcript of Leland's notes (Fig 2). The larger drawing shows convoluted catkin-like growths sprouting from the tree, which must be intended for the laurel's springtime clusters of yellow flowers.

Burton gave both drawings short dated captions: on the large drawing he seems initially to have written that the hangings 'nunc 1633 sunt ibidem', and on the smaller similarly that the arms 'stand in this manner in the Hanginges in the quire at Welles 1633', but the first date has afterwards been amended to 1630. Given the absence of any drawing from the transcript given to the Bodleian, however, it is unlikely that he had a drawing before 1632, so both sketches almost certainly date from 1633. The correction may be either an error, or perhaps an indication of the date of the prototype drawing supplied by his informant.

Already in poor condition in 1630, the hangings seem to have disappeared soon after Burton's time. Although apparently without religious symbolism, they most probably – like hangings in the cathedral quires of Canterbury and Peterborough – fell victim to the depredations of iconoclasm, civil war, or the neglect of the interregnum (James 1905–6, 506–11; Carøe 1911, 355–6; Thomson 1914, 42; Gunton 1686, 96). They may possibly have been torn down by parliamentary soldiers on 10 May 1643, when damage at Wells included the destruction of 'seates in the quire the busshups see besides many other villanies': in 1664, the prebendaries were called on to pay for the (re-)decoration of their stalls (Guy 1982, 159; Wells Cathedral Archives, Documents III/153). Thomas Fuller refers to the hangings in a short biographical notice of Vergil published in 1655: under the heading that Vergil 'Be-lawrelleth the Quire of Wells', he records that 'on the Quire he bestowed Hangings flourished with the Lawrel Tree, and as I remember, wrote upon them SUNT POLIDORI MUNERA VIRGILII' (Fuller 1655, bk 5, 198). However, his claim to 'remember' does not necessarily imply personal acquaintance, and there is no reason to suppose the hangings were still in existence at this date. We may be fairly confident that they had gone by 1678, when Ralph Sheldon fails to mention them in his notes of the monuments and heraldry in the Cathedral (Bodl. MS Wood C.10, fols 89–92^v). Similarly, Nathaniel Chyles overlooks them in his outline of Vergil's career and links with Wells written a year or two later (Wells Cathedral Library, Chyles c.1680, bk 1, pp. 13–20).

CONCLUSION

The information gathered by Burton is not as complete as we might wish, but it does give us a

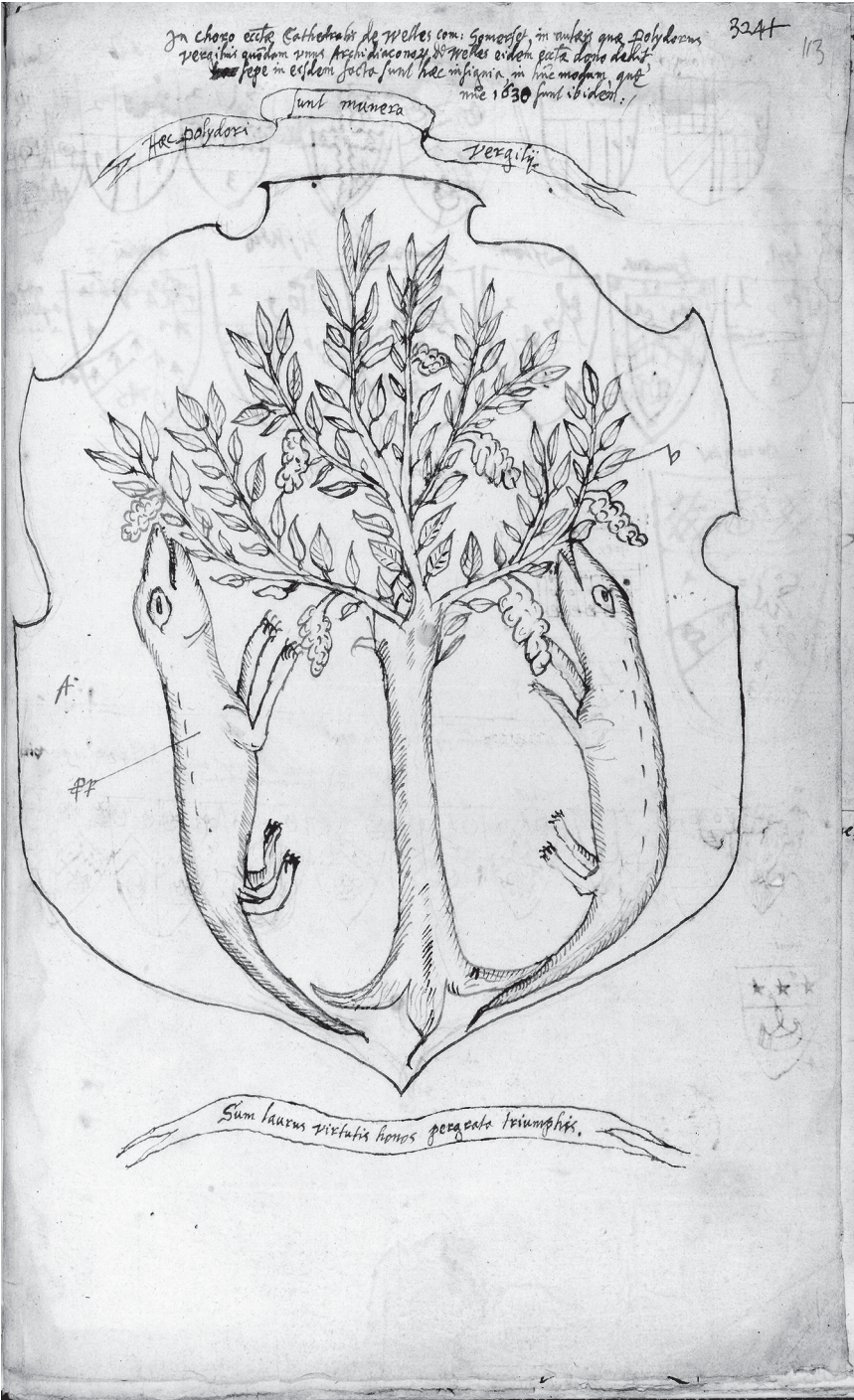


Fig. 1 William Burton's full-page drawing of the arms of Polydore Vergil, from his volume of church notes. British Library, MS Egerton 3510, fol. 113; with permission

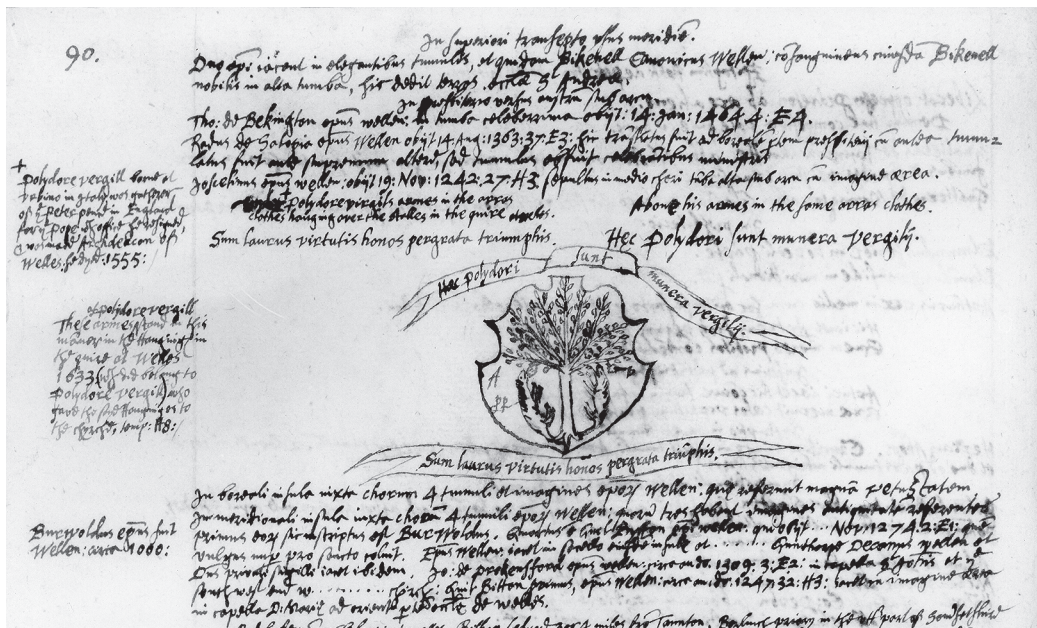


Fig. 2 William Burton's transcription of John Leland's notes on Wells Cathedral, with a sketch of Vergil's arms added. Bodleian Library, MS Gough Gen. Top. 2, p. 90; with permission

number of insights into the nature of Vergil's gift, and so into the decorative appearance of the quire at Wells in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. His phrases 'arras hangings' and 'arras clothes' in English, and *aulea* in Latin, imply a set of tapestries filling much of the quire (and not, as Connell (2004) suggests, a single banner above Vergil's own archidiaconal stall); while his reference to 'many scocheons', and his Latin word *s[a]epe* ('often'), show that the heraldic design was repeated (Staffs. R.O. D649/4/1, fol. 149^v; Bodl., MS Gough Gen. Top. 2, p. 90; BL, MS Egerton 3510, fol. 113). Vergil made occasional journeys home to Italy, in 1513–14, 1516–17 and 1533–4, and it is not impossible that the hangings were commissioned *en route* from one of the great tapestry-weaving workshops of Flanders or northern France; on the other hand, they may have been products of the English industry which was just starting to emerge in this period (Thomson 1914, 15–22; 46–54; Hefford 2002).

Vergil was buried in Urbino cathedral, in the chapel of St Andrew that he had endowed. In 1613, it was agreed that a memorial stone should be raised over his tomb, incorporating his arms: this was

eventually placed in 1631, presumably with the arms, and with an inscription declaring that his fame would 'live for ever in the world' (Negroni 2003, 42–5; 49). It appears to have been lost, however, when the dome of the cathedral collapsed in 1789. Otherwise, Vergil's public memorials have been relatively few: in Oxford, his portrait within the frieze of worthies painted in the Bodleian Library in c. 1618–19; and, in Urbino, a plaque on the family home, installed in the 19th century and replaced in 1955, and a bust unveiled in 2000 (Bacchielli 2003, 75, 277; Bullard 1991–4; Negroni 2003, 41, 48; Osborne 2003, 148). At Wells, one of the mid 20th-century embroideries in the quire substalls commemorates Vergil, with a design featuring the two inscriptions from the hangings and a laurel tree, but no lizards (Friends of Wells Cathedral 1985, 13–14). Coincidentally, however, the embroidery in another subhall, in front of the stall commemorating Bishop Castellesi, depicts a lizard climbing a piece of foliage. It is based on the 13th-century corbel of this subject in the passage leading to the chapter-house, but it is not inappropriate that an alternative image of 'leaves with lizards' should now appear in textile form in the quire.

APPENDIX

The arms of the Vergil family

GB di Crollanza's *Dizionario Storico-Blasonico* blazons the Vergil arms as '*Un albero sradicato, accostato da due lucertole affrontate, rampicanti sul fusto*' ('A tree eradicated, between two lizards respectant climbing the trunk') (Crollanza 1886–90, 3, 82). This description, however, fails to specify either the species of tree or the tinctures. Francesco Canuti (who, like Burton, misidentifies the lizards as crocodiles) gives the blazon '*Di argento alla Pianta di alloro sdradicata di verde con due coccodrilli di verde arrampicantisi lungo il tronco*' ('Argent, a laurel tree eradicated vert, two crocodiles vert climbing the trunk') (Canuti 1955, 21).

A more satisfactory blazon in English might be *Argent, two lizards erect and respectant proper, supporting a laurel tree eradicated vert*. In view of the canting association with springtime emphasised by Vergil, it could be argued that the laurel's flowers are an integral part of the design, in which case the tree should be described as *a laurel tree eradicated vert flowered or*.

In 1534, on one of Vergil's return visits to Italy, the Duke of Urbino admitted him and his family to the ranks of the nobility in honour of his literary achievements (Negroni 2003, 42).

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