

## The Count of Hainault's Daughter

[adapted from Appendix 1 of my biography of Edward III, *The Perfect King*  
(published by Jonathan Cape, 2006; Vintage, 2007)]

The register of Walter Stapeldon, Bishop of Exeter, contains a delightful description of a daughter of the Count of Hainault, dated 1319, which has long been thought to refer to Philippa.<sup>1</sup> Bishop Stapeldon writes that the girl was, according to her mother, aged 'nine on the next Nativity of St John the Baptist' (24 June). He mentions that her hair was 'between blue [i.e. blue-black] and brown', her eyes were 'brown and deep', her forehead large, and her nose was 'large at the tip' but not snubbed, and 'her neck shoulders and all her body and limbs of good form'.<sup>2</sup> Many historians (including the author of Philippa's article in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*) have accepted that this relates to Philippa, and have assumed as a result that she was slightly older than her husband, Edward III, who was born on 13 November 1312. However, this is demonstrably wrong.

How can we be certain? The answer lies in treating contemporary documents, created by people who had direct contact with the individuals concerned, as possible eye-witness testimonies, and testing the veracity of each one against the others. If they all tally in some regard, and there is no evidence to the contrary, you possibly have the makings of a historical certainty. (The theory is outlined in the methodological introduction to my book *Medieval Intrigue*.) In this case we have first hand evidence that the girl was not Philippa from four different contemporary sources who were directly connected with the arrangements. The only evidence to the contrary comes from someone who was not a first-hand witness, not in Hainault, and not writing until the next reign. But to be specific:

1. Count William of Hainault wrote to the pope on 10 December 1318 seeking dispensation for his daughter, Margaret of Hainault, to be married to Edward of England.<sup>3</sup> Permission for the marriage was granted by the pope in 1321. Although nothing came of the arrangement, the fact that her father mentioned Margaret as a prospective bride for Edward in 1318, and the pope agreed to the same match three

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<sup>1</sup> The original is now in Devon Record Office, Exeter, ref: Chanter 2.

<sup>2</sup> Hingeston-Randolph (ed), *Register of Walter de Stapeldon*, p.169.

<sup>3</sup> A. Wauters, *Table chronologique des Chartes et Diplômes imprimés concernant l'Histoire de la Belgique*, viii, 1301-20 (Brussels, c.1907).

years later, is very good evidence that the girl examined by Bishop Stapeldon was Margaret, not her sister.

2. Margaret was the eldest daughter of the Count of Hainault. Although people have questioned this, there is a very strong *prima facie* case: if Philippa had been the eldest she would have inherited the county on the death of their brother William in 1345 (under the *declaratio legum* issued by Baldwin, count of Flanders and Hainault, in 1200).<sup>4</sup> She did not. Nor is there any evidence of any discussion about Philippa inheriting Hainault. This is significant as we know from other sources that Margaret of Hainault was born in 1311.<sup>5</sup> It follows that Philippa was born in 1312 or later, and so cannot have been ‘nine on the next Nativity of St John the Baptist’ in 1319.
3. Bishop Stapeldon made two trips to the courts of Flanders and Hainault in 1319: one from January to March, and another in the summer. Those who have accepted that Bishop Stapeldon’s description relates to Philippa have assumed that the description was made on Stapeldon’s return to England after his first trip in March 1319. This would mean that the girl he described was born on 24 June 1310 (which, of course, contradicts the evidence that Philippa was born after 1311, as noted above). They have also ignored the evidence that Edward II sent Stapeldon back to see Count William of Hainault a second time in 1319, urging the count to pay special heed to ‘certain matters’ which Stapeldon would discuss with him.<sup>6</sup> Stapeldon received his letters of safe-conduct – the equivalent of a passport – on 27 May, when he was at York.<sup>7</sup> These letters stated he should return from his mission by Michaelmas (29 September). In the register Stapeldon’s description of the Hainaulter girl appears on folio 142, after entries for June and July 1319.<sup>8</sup> The description therefore dates from his second trip to Hainault. This took place between 6 July (when he was at Canterbury) and 7 August (when he was in London). He did not return to see the king at York, but returned to the West Country, and sent his report by letter: hence the appearance of a copy in his register.<sup>9</sup> Therefore his reference to the girl as nine on the ‘next’ 24 June refers to her being nine on 24 June 1320 – and it follows that

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Lee Wolff, ‘Baldwin of Flanders and Hainaut, First Latin Emperor of Constantinople: His Life, Death, and Resurrection, 1172-1225’, *Speculum*, 27, 3 (1952), pp. 281-322 at p. 284. This states that ‘a daughter inherits if there is no son’ and in a later clause refers to precedence of age in respect of daughters as well as sons.

<sup>5</sup> Nederlandse Genealogische Vereniging, ‘Karel de Grote (I)’, *Gens Nostra*, nos. 10/11, Oct/Nov 1990, p.382.

<sup>6</sup> *CCR 1318-23*, p.132.

<sup>7</sup> *CPR 1317-21*, p.336.

<sup>8</sup> Devon Record Office: Chanter 2, f.142r.

<sup>9</sup> See Hingeston-Randolph, *Register of Walter Stapeldon*, p.555 for his itinerary.

the girl he was describing was born on 24 June 1311. This was Count William's eldest daughter, Margaret, who was born in that year, as mentioned above.

4. Jean Froissart, who knew Philippa in her later years, states in his chronicle that she was in her fourteenth year at the time of her marriage in 1328.<sup>10</sup> This implies that she was born between 25 January 1314 and 24 January 1315, and thus about three years younger than her sister Margaret, and about two years younger than Edward. This tallies with the implication above that Philippa was born after March 1312.
5. Stapeldon's register is stored in Devon Record Office. The entry in question has an annotation in the margin that states that the description relates to Philippa. However the annotation is not in the same hand as the main text but a later one (probably that of Bishop Grandison). Therefore the attribution to Philippa is not part of the original description but a jotting by a later commentator who did not know that another daughter of the count of Hainault had been considered as a potential bride. This jotting has been the sole cause of the problem all these years.

To sum up, we have four separate corroborating first-hand statements or implications in eye-witness accounts that the girl Stapeldon was looking over as a potential bride in 1319 was Margaret of Hainault. These four are Count William, the pope, Bishop Stapeldon himself, through the internal evidence of his own description, and the chronicler, Froissart. Considering that one of those, Count William, was the girl's father, you would have thought that that made for as clear a case as you could wish for. Clearly the clerk who inserted the note that Stapeldon's description related to Philippa was doing so on an assumption that only one of the count's daughters was ever proposed as Edward's marriage partner. It is gratifying to see some academics noticing that the reference cannot apply to Philippa, such as J. R. S. Philipps in his book on Edward II (Yale University Press, p. 337). But all over the internet and in many other books you will see the erroneous assumption that it does apply to her. There have even been people (the Black Cultural Archives) who have claimed on this basis that Philippa was a black woman and that her son was called the Black Prince because his mother was black – despite everything we know about them, their genetic background and culture of the period.<sup>11</sup> It makes you wonder what the value of historical accuracy is, when even people with an interest in the past cannot be bothered to sort the wheat from the chaff, and even *ODNB* authors do not amend their analysis to reflect the evidence.

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<sup>10</sup> Luce (ed.), *Froissart*, i, p.285.

Does it matter? Is it not just a very minor point? Well, how do you decide what is a very minor point? The 100 Greatest Black Britons project decided on the evidence of a marginal jotting that Philippa was a black woman. Frankly, that hugely undermined the entire value of the project – if white medieval queens could supplant worthy black men and women from such a list. To say ‘it does not matter’ because it is a ‘minor point’ is to miss the key issue, which is people should not deny the well-evidenced past if they have no good evidence to the contrary. They should not invent the past to suit themselves and then foist that on other people. Does it matter that some people claim that Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare’s plays, despite there being not the slightest shred of evidence that anyone but Shakespeare wrote them (and plenty of evidence that he did)? Does it matter that people have invented stories that the famous ‘man-midwives’ of the eighteenth century murdered pregnant women to order so they could dissect them – purely on the assumption that no one could have drawn any pictures of dissected pregnant women unless they had been murdered to order? Does it matter that people deny the Holocaust happened? Yes, these things do matter. No one should invent the past and purvey demonstrably false stories – it is fraud. Our knowledge of ourselves and our capabilities, crimes and laws are grounded in being able to determine what happened in the past with a reasonable degree of accuracy and reliability. And while we cannot always prove everything we would like to prove, a huge number of things can be said for certain.

Although the ‘does it matter’ question is indeed a philosophical argument far greater in scope than the identity of a girl described in 1319, it is clearly not possible to address the larger question unless we can be certain about such apparently ‘minor’ details. This is the irony: failure to treat the minutiae seriously undermines one’s ability to talk about anything other than the minutiae. If you insist the ground is questionable you cannot build anything more meaningful on top of it. It is only our ability to establish some things about the past for certain that allow us to discuss the meaning of history, and establish what really matters.

Ian Mortimer,  
13 November 2011  
(Edward III’s 699<sup>th</sup> birthday)

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<sup>11</sup> For example, 100 great Black Britons: [http://www.100greatblackbritons.com/bios/queen\\_phillipa.html](http://www.100greatblackbritons.com/bios/queen_phillipa.html).