



7TH MAY 2020

War Games at the Field of the Cloth of Gold

Professor Glenn Richardson

My lecture is about an extraordinary meeting that took place in northern France in the summer of 1520 between King Henry VIII of England and King Francis I of France, known ever afterwards as the Field of Cloth of Gold. The two kings and their vast entourages, each some 5-6,000 strong, were accommodated in tents and pavilions that were dressed in luxuriant fabrics, especially the cloth of gold that gives its name to the event. 500 years to the day after the foundations of Henry's temporary banqueting palace at the Field were completed and one month until the 500th anniversary of the two king's meeting on 7 June 1520, what should we make of this evocative but often rather misunderstood diplomatic event?

In 1520, Henry, who had acceded to the throne in 1509 was 29 years old. Francis was 25. He had become king of France in January 1515. Both had experience of warfare; Henry in France in 1513 when he had taken the town of Théroutanne and the city of Tournai from Francis's predecessor Louis XII. Francis had conquered the duchy of Milan from the Sforza family in September 1515 and, since that time, a keen rivalry had existed between the two monarchs. Henry still claimed the crown of France. Their meeting was not, however, intended to enable them to resolve that rivalry or negotiate directly with each other. Instead, they jointly hosted a tournament to inaugurate a 'Universal Peace' throughout Christendom of which they had become part and that had been concluded in London in October 1518. The tournament was the conventional way that medieval elites celebrated the making of peace and friendship. It was characterised by a spirit of demonstrative, competitive masculinity, articulated through the knightly or chivalric code. The Field of Cloth of Gold was therefore, in that sense literally a war-game, but one whose rules and stratagems had important implications for real politics in early sixteenth-century Europe.

This view, that the Field meant something of itself politically, sits somewhat at odds with a wide-spread scepticism about its significance among 19th and 20th century historians of the reigns of Francis and Henry. The consensus seems to have been that the meeting was essentially inexplicable. It had either to be an elaborate sham designed by each side to deceive the other as to its 'real', belligerent, intentions or else merely an excuse for a party on the grandest scale', as Joycelene Russell who wrote in the 1960s called it, and one, moreover, that had 'no tangible result'. To my mind, however, such a view raises more questions than it answers. Why, for example, would two national elites whose centuries-old rivalry had been rekindled during the early years of Henry's reign, even want to entertain each other at a huge party merely for the sake of doing so? That medieval and Renaissance elites valued theatrical 'extravagance' is beyond doubt, but this was a very different thing from pointless frivolity. Proceeding from the premise that people do not generally spend huge amounts of money on major social and political events unless they really mean something to them, my contention is that it was taken seriously by the participants. It was an event at which both sides made serious claims for themselves and about each other in the turbulent politics of the 1520s.

Why and How?

The Field of Cloth of Gold has to be seen against the background of nearly two centuries in which most European states, large and small and not least England and France had experienced prolonged periods of foreign and/or civil warfare. Defeat in the Hundred Years War in 1453 led directly to the Wars of the Roses in England. The same year, Constantinople fell to the Ottomans, never to be recovered. The kings of France, meanwhile, turned their military, might first used against the English, to pursue dynastic claims in the Italian peninsula. This intervention exacerbated existing conflicts between Italian republican and ducal city-states. Into the 'Italian Wars' as they became known, the crown of Aragon, the papacy and the Habsburg emperor Maximilian were routinely and destructively drawn. The accession within a few short years of each other, of three monarchs, Henry, Francis and Charles of Spain, took this dynastic conflict into a new generation. By 1517 the Ottomans had conquered Persia, Egypt and Syria and advanced into the Balkans. Against the background of



apparent danger from without, and weariness of relentless turmoil within, the ancient ideal of peace throughout Christendom brought about by rulers acting in concert began to be articulated anew. Somewhat ironically, the fact that Henry, Francis and Charles were all still young and had been well educated in a Christian humanist curriculum stimulated these hopes even further.

The rhetoric of peace as a noble Christian virtue worthy of the greatest princes, as articulated by the likes of Erasmus of Rotterdam and Sir Thomas More, was given political form in 1518 when Pope Leo X proposed a five-year truce between Christian princes. It was Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, Leo's legate in England and Henry's Lord Chancellor, however, who proposed instead a multilateral treaty, as the basis not for a truce but a permanent European peace. This was a non-aggression pact that banned war between all signatories and promised collective action against any one state that broke the agreement.

The treaty of Lodi of 1454 had essayed something similar between Italian states, but the 1518 multi-lateral treaty can plausibly be seen as the ancestor of modern international collective security organisations like the UN or perhaps more directly NATO. The linchpin of the league was an over-arching alliance between two ancient enemies England and France, and the example, as it were, for others to follow.

It was to be secured by the betrothal of the Dauphin François, born in February 1518, to Henry's daughter, Princess Mary, then two years old.

Despite the idealistic and somewhat abstract rhetoric with which it was enacted, peace-making of this kind between sixteenth-century princes was never done for its own sake. It had always to result in peace 'with honour' or advantage. In 1518, Francis agreed to an alliance because it seemed to secure the prominence that he had acquired with his victory in Milan in 1515. He may even have been hoping to wrest the leadership of the league from Henry. Francis had already begun negotiations with the Electors of the German empire to succeed the ailing Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian.

By autumn 1518, when these talks concluded, he had some expectation of success. Being part of the league suited his plans. Maximilian died in January 1519. Francis was disappointed when, in June and despite his own hopes and negotiations, Maximilian's grandson Charles of Spain was elected Emperor. Since his accession, Francis had wanted to get back the French city of Tournai lost to the English in war in 1513. In 1519, as an ally, he was allowed to purchase Tournai expensively from Henry. He had also to increase annual payments to Henry that his predecessors had paid Henry VII and Edward IV to secure peace. These payments Francis regarded as a pension, well worth paying because they kept Henry quiet. Henry regarded them as 'tribute' for 'his' kingdom of France. Each monarch therefore gained by the alliance. It affirmed their own power and significance rather than detracting from it and in this circumstance, the two kings could meet each other as the 'good brother and friend' that they always afterwards called each other.

Location

The meeting finally took place in June 1520 between the towns of Guînes in an area known as the Pale of Calais, held by the kings of England since its conquest by Edward III in 1347, and the French town of Ardres in Picardy, quite close also to Habsburg territory in the county of Artois. The French entourage of about 5,000 people was accommodated in Ardres, in villages around and in a multitude of tents and pavilions erected at the foot of the town. The materials for them were prepared some 320 miles away in the city of Tours, an important cloth town.

By early May, 1520, there were some 170 men and 120 women working in the great hall of the bishop's palace to produce an estimated 300 to 400 tents, the tallest and largest of which were for the king and his immediate entourage. Over 400 pack horses then brought the canvas and timber needed for the tents up from the Loire Valley to Ardres. Once there and erected, the pavilions were covered with hundreds of yards of the cloth of gold, as well as lengths of cloth of silver, damask, silk, satin, velvet and velour mostly of blue, violet and crimson. Many were strewn or powdered with *fleurs-de-lis* together with many lengths of material in the royal livery colours of white, tawny and black. The English court established a similar number of pavilions in the fields around Guînes.



Francis also had accommodation in a temporary town and banqueting house, some form of 'hôtel particulier', specially constructed for him in Ardres which may have been designed by the Italian architect, Domenico da Cortona. He worked on various projects for Francis, included temporary banqueting houses at other locations. An unidentified Italian observer thought the hôtel 'very beautiful, but neither so beautiful nor so costly as that of England'.¹ The English chronicler Edward Hall describes Henry VIII being received by the French queen in a reception hall in the building that was hung with blue velvet embroidered with gold *fleurs-de-lis*. Francis's hôtel had a principal banqueting hall. Another reception room was hung with cloth of gold and cordelières or 'friars knots', one of the personal emblems of Francis, a punning allusion to his patron saint, Francis of Assisi.

The English were determined not to be outdone by the French. They constructed a temporary banqueting palace just outside Guînes. Its basic structure and decoration seems to have been as it is rendered in the Hampton Court painting of the Field of Cloth of Gold.² It was begun in April and when completed, it was 328 feet square with four blocks, ranged around a central square court. It would have fitted snugly within the confines of Tom Quad at Christ Church, Oxford which is 382 feet square.

The walls of Henry's palace were built on stone foundations and were of brick to a height of 8ft. Above the brickwork, the timber-framed walls were 30ft high. The palace was crenelated and had brick-built towers at its outer corners. Its roof was of oiled canvas painted in lead colour to simulate slates. The most prominent feature of the elevation was the ornate towered gatehouse with its scalloped-shell pediment surmounted by a figure of Saint Michael between two monumental roses and capped with another smaller figure of Saint Michael.

These were probably intended as a compliment to the French king and his nobles who entered and left the palace through this gateway. A range opposite housed a large hall on the upper level. The ground floor of the palace contained offices for household officials. A gallery led from the king's side back to the castle which the English Chronicler Edward Hall noted was designed 'for the secrete passage of the kynges persone into a secrete lodging within the same castle the more for the kings ease', although this does not appear in the painting.³

It is unlikely that the palace could have been made on site entirely from scratch in barely two months. Support for this view comes from Martin du Bellay's account of the meeting which states that Henry's palace was made in England and shipped across to Calais 'all made'. This cannot literally be true, but sections of the building were evidently prefabricated in England and transported to the site. A great deal of wood was still purchased in the Netherlands, shipped and worked up onsite. One of the most striking features of the palace beyond the gateway was the amount of high-quality Flemish glass with which it was lit; the French nick-named the building 'the crystal palace'.⁴ As much as 5000 feet of such glass was purchased in Saint-Omer, as England did not then have a large enough glass-making industry.

To the left of the 'principal entry' on the first floor level, were three apartments for Cardinal Wolsey, 'two halls and a chamber' in lodgings which extended from the gate house around the angle of the building and about half way along the left side wing. To the right of the main entrance were the same arrangements for Henry's sister Mary, Duchess of Suffolk.⁵ The remainder of the two ranges at right angles to the main façade contained the royal apartments. Henry had three chambers in the left-hand range and Katherine had the same number on the right-hand side. Their quarters were connected by a passageway under the floor.⁶ The interiors were richly furnished with hangings. For example, Queen Katherine's principal chamber displayed nine tapestries of gold and silk in floral and foliage, or 'millefleurs,' design, estimated by a Venetian observer to be worth 7 ducats per yard.⁷ The fourth range, opposite the gateway, housed a large hall on the upper level which seems to have been divided into two separate dining spaces by hangings.⁸ Evidently a chapel projected out from the range opposite the gateway and so was, in effect, at the back of the building, reached via a short gallery leading out from the middle of the banqueting hall.⁹ Nothing of the chapel is, however, shown in the Hampton Court painting.¹⁰

The Field

The place set out for the tournament or war game which the English called 'the field', was rectangular in shape, covering an area 900 feet long and about 328 feet wide roughly along an east-west axis, with Ardres at one end and Guînes at the other. Alongside stands for an audience, it featured a royal pavilion used sometimes by the kings, but mainly by the queens and ladies of the two courts, to observe the competitions.¹¹ The preparation of the tournament field was a joint enterprise between the two nations.¹² This raises the intriguing and likely



prospect that English and French carpenters, bricklayers and pioneers worked alongside each other and, so far as their different languages allowed, shared and probably argued, about different materials and building techniques. This situation, unique in the history of early-modern Anglo-French dealings, where technicians and labourers of both nations worked together on a joint civil project, would not be repeated until the construction of the Concorde aircraft in the 1960s and the Channel Tunnel in the 1990s.

Meeting

Francis made his way to Ardres by stages from the Loire Valley, where he had begun the year, to Ardres, via Paris, collecting and assembling his entourage along the way. He arrived on the appointed date of Friday 31 May, together with his heavily pregnant Queen, Claude, his mother Louise of Savoy and his sister Marguerite of Navarre. His final entourage of 5,000 or more constituted itself as he travelled, joining him Picardy and coming on to Ardres. Meanwhile in England, noblemen and gentlemen, their wives and servants in comparable numbers to the French, had organised themselves to be at Dover in the last days of May and were progressively shipped across to Calais.

Henry left London on 20 May and came to Canterbury where he entertained Emperor Charles who had demanded to see him as he travelled between Spain and the Netherlands. Henry assured his nephew that nothing would be done to his prejudice at the forthcoming meeting. Henry and Katherine boarded the *Katherine Plesauance* to cross to Calais. The painting *The Embarkation at Dover*, at Hampton Court Palace, was once thought to document Henry's crossing that morning and it shows him standing on the main deck of the *Henri Grace a Dieu*. Like *the Field of Cloth of Gold* painting, however, it evokes the spirit of the event rather than documenting it. The *Great Harry* as the ship was also known was too large to enter Dover harbour. Art and naval historians are now more inclined to accept the painting as a general evocation of the strength and power of Henry's navy. Nevertheless, it gives a lively impression of what the scene might have been like that May morning. The *Katherine Plesauance* was much smaller, an ancestor perhaps of the royal yacht. She and the other English ships made good sail in sunny weather. The king and queen arrived in Calais around 11.00am.

From Calais, the royal couple moved at Guînes on 5 June taking up residence in the castle of the town. Over the next two days, Cardinal Wolsey made several trips to Ardres to make final arrangements for the meeting of the two kings. Then at about 5.00pm on Thursday 7 June, the two kings set out from their respective towns to a specially prepared meeting point, known as the Golden Vale, closer to Ardres, but still on English territory in the Pale of Calais. Each was accompanied by hundreds of nobles and gentry, escorted by mounted troops and footguards as Henry is shown doing in the Hampton Court painting. The processions stopped several times while scouts were sent ahead to check on the other, for tension remained high and both sides still feared a political or even military ambush.

The moment of the king's meeting is depicted in a series of bas reliefs made in the 1530s in the courtyard of the Hôtel de Bourgtheroulde in Rouen, Normandy.¹³ They are shown on horseback, almost about to embrace, Henry on the left and Francis on the right.

Each holds his hat in his right hand, his arm extended in a flourish of greeting, just as the written accounts describe.

Their horses canter and prance towards each other spiritedly, and there is a vibrant sense of movement and drama in the moment of meeting somewhat lacking in the Hampton Court processions which, despite appearance, shows that for 7 June, not Henry's entry to Guînes two days earlier.

After dismounting, the two kings embraced again and then entered a tent specially set up, as they are shown doing in the Hampton Court painting.

The tournament began on 11 June. Henry and Francis did not compete against each other. Rather, as brothers-in-arms, they led mixed teams of French and English knights as the challengers for the tournament and fought similarly constituted teams of answerers. In return for Francis agreeing to honour Henry by meeting him on English territory, he was allowed to devise the tournament. It comprised three competitions: jousting, mounted combats in the arena between groups of knights, and foot combat between knights over barriers.



Both kings wore a succession of spectacular tournament costumes decorated with dynastic and chivalric allusions. For example, on each of the four days he jousted, Francis's costumes progressively spelled out in words and symbols of book, chains, feathers and the like, the phrase 'heart fastened in pain endless/ when she/ delivereth me not of bonds'.¹⁴ Like his salamander badge and motto 'nutrisco et extinguo', this costume apparently alluded to Francis's passionate nature; that through learning and wisdom he endured the pains of love.

Henry's tournament costumes used symbols familiar to the English court such as roses and pomegranates to spell out his potential as friend, or enemy, and his mastery of the waters of the Narrow Sea.

The surviving score checks show that the two kings did quite well but due mainly to inclement weather the standard of jousting was not that high.

For the foot combats some days later, Henry had wanted to wear a revolutionary suit of armour made for him by the royal armoury at Greenwich. It completely enclosed the wearer from head to foot with none of the gaps at the arms and groin typical of conventional suits of armour. It was a technological masterpiece and a compliment to him as the patron of such skilled workmanship.

Much to Henry's chagrin, however, Francis forbade the wearing of this snazzy new armour as disadvantageous to other competitors. Henry's foot combat armour had hastily to be adapted to conform to the rules.

On the two Sundays of the event the tournament was suspended. On these and the final day, the court of one monarch hosted the other at a banquet. In order to keep strict equality and reciprocity, at no time did one king formally host the other. Instead, Henry and his close courtiers went to Ardres to be received by Queen Claude and Louise of Savoy, while Francis and the leading members of his entourage went to Guînes where they were entertained by Queen Katherine and Cardinal Wolsey.

Time prohibits a detailed description of these banquets, but they were conceived as deliberately ostentatious entertainments and acts of self-referential hospitality; a form of gift-giving in themselves. The court of each monarch strove to outdo the other in the number and variety of courses, their culinary ingenuity and the panache with which they were served. For example, peacocks were presented in their full plumage arrayed on a serving dish amidst foliage and other decorative touches.¹⁵ The English kitchen accounts record payments for no fewer than 98,050 eggs. The expenditure on the French side more than matched the English and they, too, had field kitchens like the English ones shown in the Hampton Court painting, together with stores based at the nearby town of Marquise.

After the meals, the tables having been cleared away, there were masques in which both kings participated enthusiastically. These were based around formal dances, usually the *basse-danse* and the *pavane*, where dignified balance and control, elegance and ease of movement was demanded of all participants, but especially the men. At the last of these banquets on 24 June, Henry led a masque as Hercules, equipped with a club covered with green damask and a lion's pelt made of cloth of gold of damask and ears of flat gold. He led the Nine Worthies, well-known figures of royal soldierly courage and generalship. Their appearance at the concluding masque was intended to celebrate the meeting's overtly chivalric nature and to honour the ancient heritage of England and France as Christian nations led by chivalric warrior-kings.

Strict protocols governed the whole meeting so that, in theory, neither king was able to upstage the other.

Both of them found this frustrating, however, and this probably explains Henry's famous impromptu wrestling match with Francis. Not appreciating his rival's skills, Henry shaped up only to be thrown on to his back - to his deep embarrassment. It was recorded in several French reports of the meeting but ignored completely in all English ones. Francis, too, made his own impromptu gesture when he visited Guînes castle early on the morning of Sunday 17 June. The astonished governor of the castle was requested to take the French king to Henry's chambers. On entering them, Francis theatrically declared himself Henry's prisoner. He asked to be allowed to attend on Henry as he dressed, an extraordinary request at once complimentary and intimidating.



Henry was more or less forced to respond generously. He offered Francis a jewelled collar as a gift; to which Francis responded with expensive bracelets for Henry. He had obviously come prepared! Francis then spent the rest of the morning with Queen Katherine, until the banquet scheduled for that afternoon was ready. Observers were amazed and impressed with Francis's unconventionality. Most praised this dramatic declaration of faith by the French king. Perhaps less surprisingly, a few days later, Henry made his own apparently impromptu, return visit to Ardres.

The Field ended formally with a High Mass celebrated on 23 June by Cardinal Wolsey. An outdoor chapel was built over the tiltyard the previous night. Before a large congregation of the leading members of the two courts, the cardinal enjoined peace and Christian confraternity upon the kings and proclaimed a papal indulgence for those in attendance. The chapels royal of England and France sang alternative parts of the Mass and the kings and queens exchanged greetings of peace. At or about the moment of the elevation of the Host, there appeared in the sky above the tiltyard chapel, at a height of a crossbow bolt shot, a 'dragon'.

This was according to the main source for the incident, a hollow monster:

stretched out in the sky, over the earth, a dreadful monster,
of immoderate size, thanks to the cunning art of the English
constructed on the inside from hoops and on the outside
woven from cloth. This shapeless monster is a dragon.
Its eyes blaze, and with quivering tongue it licks its mouth,
which opens wide; the dragon hisses through its gaping jowls.¹⁶

This was evidently a kite drawn on a cable from Ardres towards Guînes and over the site. The blazing eyes and hissing mouth indicate pyrotechnics of some kind were involved. Such kite devices, were known in Italy at the time and evidently in England too.¹⁷ One Thomas Wright was paid 20s 4d for 'canvas for the dragon'.¹⁸ It may have been the Welsh 'Tudor' dragon, in tribute to Henry.

However, a French description calls it, 'une grande salemandre ou dragon faite artificiellement' and this seems more likely. A fire-breathing salamander decoration had specifically featured at a banquet given at the Bastille in December 1518 for the English ambassadors who had come to ratify the Anglo-French alliance.¹⁹ The following day, 24 June, after final banquets in the afternoon, the two kings farewelled each other. They exchanged expensive gifts of jewelled collars, horses, cups and plate and cash. They also rewarded all the close members of each other's entourages. They parted with promises of meeting again regularly. There was even talk of building a permanent chapel of peace on the site of the tournament field.

Meaning of All This

As noted at the outset, the Field formally inaugurated an international peace and an alliance that as Wolsey understood, would only work if both kings profited by its terms. In 1520, therefore, each king met the other to reinforce his own position through an offer of cooperation and threat of its opposite. This was made clear in their special meeting tent on 7 June. Francis, apparently hoping to put Henry at his ease but also impress him with his sincerity and power, told him that he had been happy to have crossed his vast kingdom to meet him. To which Henry is said to have replied a touch brusquely:

Sir, neither your realmes nor other the places
of your power, is the matter of my regard, but
the steadfastnes and loyal kepyng of promesse,
comprised in charters between you and me;
that observed and kepte, I never sawe prince with
my iyen, that might of my harte be more loved.²⁰

In other words, Henry reminded Francis, as large as his beautiful kingdom was, he needed his cooperation to have any importance in Christendom beyond it under the new dispensation of the Universal Peace. Why else, after all, had he come? Francis's view was equally clear. When a few minutes later in the same meeting their alliance agreement was formally reviewed and Henry's title as 'King of France' was read out, an embarrassed



Henry said 'expunge that title' and that it was 'good for nothing'. Francis's counter-intuitive reaction was first to insist on the value and honour of the title 'King of France' by ordering that the reading continue. Then he said:

My brother, now that you are my friend
you are the King of France, king of all
my possessions, and of me myself: but
without friendship I acknowledge no other
king of France than myself..

Francis was really saying that Henry could call himself whatever he liked; he remained dependent upon Francis's goodwill and active support if he was to have the kind of significant role in Europe envisaged by the Universal Peace whose champion and arbiter he claimed to be. If he was such, then he expected Henry's support in the defence of France, and by extension his own just claims against Charles. Francis welcomed Henry's presence and proffered friendship as an acknowledgement of *his* own power over France and his importance beyond it. Why else, after all, was Henry there? For all the sport, the jousting and the banqueting and gift giving, the two kings' interaction on the afternoon of the first day summed up, in a few words, the whole reason for the Field of Cloth of Gold and the deals they offered each other.

Immediately after the Field, Francis returned to Paris via Amiens, where he inspected the fortifications and ordered new works undertaken. From there, he moved to Chantilly and eventually arrived at the royal château of Saint-Germain-en-Laye. There, on 10 August, Queen Claude gave birth to her fifth child, Madeleine. Throughout his journey back to the capital, Francis had been kept informed of a meeting at Calais between Henry and Charles during July. Francis was assured that nothing had been agreed there that was against his interests, and such evidence as survives confirms that. The Field has often been explained as a deliberate deception of Francis by Henry and Wolsey, but this same evidence just does not support that contention.

Unfortunately, despite genuine effort initially, Francis could not repose enough confidence in the Universal Peace to allay his (not unreasonable) fears that it would merely allow Charles V to consolidate his power and threaten Milan. Ill-advisedly perhaps, Francis therefore attempted to distract Charles, and to trigger the collective security mechanism against him, by launching a covert attack on Imperial territory on the north eastern border with France and in Navarre in the Spring of 1521. It proved a disastrous miscalculation that almost cost him his kingdom.

Charles counter attacked very effectively. Both sides appealed to Henry more as an ally than an arbitrator of their dispute. Wolsey called a conference at Calais and initially at least genuinely tried to mediate the conflict in accordance with the ideals of the 1518 peace. In the end, however, it was axiomatic for him that Henry be kept on the winning side if it came to open conflict in Europe, so in August 1521 a secret treaty allied Henry to Charles, much to Pope Leo X's delight. War ensued, during which Francis lost not only Tournai, so recently and expensively acquired from Henry, but the entire duchy of Milan to Charles V. Henry attacked France for the second time in his reign in 1523 but to no strategic effect and emptied his coffers in the process. The war was effectively ended at the Battle of Pavia on 24 February 1525. While attempting to wrest Milan from the Imperial grip, Francis was comprehensively defeated and taken prisoner to Spain. Henry was thrilled at this news and expected that he and Charles would soon divide France between them, although he had no money to bring that about. Charles was in any case utterly indifferent to the idea, determined as he was to make best use of what he saw as literally a God-given opportunity to force Francis to a favourable settlement of their rival dynastic claims. This was eventually signed in January 1526 as the Treaty of Madrid. Francis had to give his two sons as hostages to Charles for the performance of his treaty obligations.

Desperate for assistance, Francis turned to Henry and found him, under Wolsey's guidance, more than willing to help - but at a price. Peace with England was soon agreed under the Treaty of the More in August 1525. With backing from Wolsey, Francis repudiated the treaty of Madrid as soon as he returned to France in March that year on the grounds that it had been signed under duress. It remains, incidentally, an object lesson in how not to make peace successfully as, unlike Anglo-French settlements of the time, Francis gained nothing (as he saw it) apart from his freedom. It was a classic win-lose scenario and, as we surely know by now, such deals never work.



By then, Wolsey had swung Henry behind the idea of a renewed, and yet more financially advantageous, Anglo-French alliance.

After a year's further negotiation, it was formally agreed by the spring of 1527 just when Charles's rebellious troops sacked Rome to the outrage of Christendom. This gave Henry and Francis a joint *cause-celebre*, as the apparent champions of the papacy against the unruly power of an over-mighty emperor. That, and Henry's need for support for an annulment of his first marriage, and Francis's need of Henry's support to obtain the release of his two sons in Spain.

This 1527 alliance, arguably a legacy of the 1520 meeting lasted for almost twenty years and certainly gave Henry some room to maneuver as the implications of his break with Rome worked themselves out. The two kings met a second and final time at a scaled-down version of the Field at Calais and Boulogne in October 1532. Henry was accompanied to that meeting by Anne Boleyn, the newly made Marquis of Pembroke. She met Francis informally and was evidently persuaded by his talk during the event of ensuring that Pope Clement would, at his behest, finally grant the annulment of Henry's marriage so long sought. For, by the time the couple had returned to London early the following year, Anne was pregnant with Henry's child. Henry now needed his 'good brother and perpetual ally' more than ever before. The subsequent break with Rome (which Francis subtly encouraged at times) kept Charles and Henry apart and at no time did Francis ever seriously contemplate action against the king of England at the behest of pope or emperor, even if the alliance did less than he had hoped it might to help him regain the duchy of Milan - his abiding strategic aim throughout his reign.

Conclusion

From Henry's initial point of view particularly, it seemed that the Field of Cloth of Gold had worked like a charm. The use of temporary buildings such as the palace and pavilions allowed him to demonstrate a 'magnificence' and to create an impression of an apparently infinite capacity to innovate and respond swiftly and effectively to any agenda he faced. It spoke for itself of Henry's potential, as did the whole event. Francis invested real, if perhaps more limited, hopes in the Field than did Henry. Yet it was still a useful demonstration of his own personal, political and material power in Europe not just to Henry, but to the papacy, and of course Charles V. Francis knew well enough that meeting Henry might not of itself guarantee his security, but he also reasoned that doing so was unlikely to harm him. It was a risk worth taking. His enthusiastic and compelling participation in all aspects of the Field got him noticed and added to the high European esteem in which he was then held.

The Field of Cloth of Gold was indeed an idealistic phenomenon that looked back towards an imagined age where royal chivalry had seemed to serve peace and Christian unity among European states. Each of the two kings appeared at his strongest and seemed to have everybody where he wanted them. That the Field could not, of itself, prevent the fifty years of intermittent conflict between Christian rulers that followed and that exposed the limits of the high-flown rhetoric of the occasion, does not prove insincerity on every side. Vast sums of money were spent hosting a short-lived event which declared to a wide audience beyond those participating in it, the capacity, confidence and competence of the hosts and protagonists. Whatever its failings in the wider European context, the Field certainly set the tone for Anglo-French relations for the remainder of the reigns of Henry VIII and Francis I. They established a personal connection between them, discovering each other to be, in Margaret Thatcher's famous phrase 'A man that I can do business with'. During long periods in the 1520s and 1530s the rivalry between them was, paradoxically, expressed in extravagant demonstrations of 'peace-making' and of royal brotherhood. During the late 1530s when Henry's finances allowed him to patronise ambitious projects, he was largely isolated in Europe due to the break with Rome. Throughout that decade the French court was the principal conduit of artistic influence in England. Henry was kept well informed by his ambassadors of Francis's architectural and artistic patronage and a number of artists and artisans who had worked for Francis also worked for Henry. Conscious of the extraordinary portraits Jean and François Clouet produced for Francis and his court, Henry secured one of the greatest European artists ever to serve an English monarch. In Hans Holbein he found an artist of truly international standing whose iconic images of Henry helped to make him the most famous king in English history.

The idealism of the Field was as real as any in human experience and it should be seen like other aspirational moments in European, indeed world, history. International peace treaties and attempts to regulate international



violence have rarely worked for very long, and often not at all. Yet even the total failure of the League of Nations and the indifferent record of the United Nations since 1949, do not prove that their establishments were not genuine efforts at conflict-resolution. It is perhaps pointless seeking to find any particular ‘outcome’ or ‘consequence’ of the 1520 meeting that would satisfy the dictates of conventional ‘diplomatic history’ and render the meeting ‘significant’ in its terms. With their jousting, dancing and the like in 1520, Henry and Francis can seem very remote from the ways of our own world leaders – and indeed in many ways they are. Yet, despite the manifest changes in the institutions and practices of government and society since the sixteenth century, the fundamentals of communication and personal chemistry between leaders are not so different in our own time. Some of the most important shifts in patterns of international relations of the twentieth century, for good or ill, were initiated by strong personalities at high profile ‘summit’ meetings, at Potsdam and Yalta. The meeting in Reykjavik in 1986 between Reagan and Gorbachev was called a diplomatic failure, but there was personal chemistry between them and did not that meeting play its part in making the world safe enough for *perestroika* and *glasnost*, and all that followed?

It is now a commonplace of early-modern cultural history to observe that the size of a king’s retinue, the lavish hospitality he provided for his guests and his personal demeanor with them were all crucial elements in displaying a winning magnificence which expressed his personal power. It is always difficult fully to appreciate past events in their own contexts. Issues of peace and war are viewed very differently in the 21st century than they were in the 16th. Nevertheless, if we can suspend skepticism at what, at first sight, can seem a very bizarre event indeed and try to make sense of gestures and actions initially inexplicable (based on what we have learned about aristocratic culture in the period), then the Field of Cloth of Gold can make sense and be significant. It opens a window on the ideals and practices of sixteenth century statecraft, of war and of peace-making and through this, on how Renaissance monarchy worked.

¹ Dubois, pp. 77 and 160-65 *CSP Ven III*, 69 at p.54.

² Sydney Anglo, ‘The Hampton Court Painting of the Field of Cloth of Gold Considered as an Historical Document’ *Antiquaries Journal*, 46 (1966): 285-307.

³ Hall, p. 606; *Chronicle of Calais*, p.80.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *CSP Ven II*, 94; Thurley, ‘The domestic building works of Cardinal Wolsey’ p.95. Thurley’s conjectural plan shows the layout of rooms opposite to Soardino’s description but cf. his *The Royal Palaces of Tudor England, Architecture and Court Life 1460-1547* (New Haven and London, 1993), p.46 where another conjectural plan does conform to Mantuan ambassador’s report.

⁶ Hall, p. 606; *Chronicle of Calais*, p.80.

⁷ *CSP Ven. III*, 20.

⁸ *CSP Ven II*, 50 at p. 23.

⁹ Anglo, ‘Hampton Court Painting’, p. 290 and further explanation in footnote 6 citing *CSP Ven. III*, 94 Soardino to the Marquess of Mantua, June 26 1520. “In the middle of the long entrance hall a small building was added, containing two oratories for the King and Queen, looking down on the very large church below where High Mass was occasionally celebrated.”

¹⁰

¹¹ *CSP Ven, III*, 50]; Anglo, ‘Hampton Court Painting’ pp. 300-03.

¹² *LP III i*, 738 Commission to deal with French commissioners dated Greenwich, 10 April 1520.

¹³ Montfaucon, IV, pp. 201-6 describes the bas-reliefs which are illustrated by line drawings. They were once thought to represent the assembling of the Council of Trent or the reception of Charles V in France in 1539. Montfaucon states that they were first identified as scenes from the Field of Cloth of Gold by one Abbé Noël in 1726.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 614.

¹⁵ *Boke of nurture*, pp. 28, 49.

¹⁶ Dubois, pp. 95-7; *CSP Ven. III*, 50 (p. 29).

¹⁷ *Ibid* and pp. 28-32 of the Introduction; Anglo, *Spectacle*, p.157.

¹⁸ TNA, SP1/20 fo.80 [*LP III i*, 826]

¹⁹ TNA, E30/1111 Francis I’s ratification of the Treaty of Westminster [Starkey, *European Court* fig V.31]

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 610. My italics.



© Prof. Glenn Richardson 2020