

## POLITICIANS AND STATESMEN I: THOMAS WOLSEY (1470/1-1530).

### WOLSEY AND THE STATE PAPERS: WAR, DIPLOMACY, GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS IN EARLY TUDOR ENGLAND

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**Summary:** This essay, the first of the two case studies on major figures of the Sixteenth Century, examines how the State Papers shed light on five areas of Wolsey's career: war, diplomacy, the administration of justice, politics, and the attempt to secure the King's divorce from Catherine of Aragon.

Besides the King himself, two men dominate the State Papers of Henry VIII's reign. These are his two great ministers: Thomas Wolsey (1470/1-1530) and Thomas Cromwell (c.1485-1540). Both men's correspondence dominate the State Papers series SP 1 for their respective years of influence (for Wolsey from 1513 until his fall in 1529, and for Cromwell from the late 1520s until his execution in 1540) for the same reason: both fell foul of the King whom they had served and their papers were seized on their arrest. Eventually the papers were incorporated into the Public Records. Wolsey's correspondence which survives in SP1 and elsewhere illustrates how he, in effect, governed the realm in Henry VIII's name.

#### Early life and career

Thomas Wolsey was born in Ipswich around 1471. Often described as a butcher's son, his origins were undoubtedly modest.<sup>1</sup> He graduated from Magdalene College, Oxford, in 1486, but he was not ordained until 1498. He seems at first to have set his sights on a career in the church and began studying for a degree in theology. His ability in administration was soon recognised however, and in 1498 he became senior bursar of the college. Wolsey was clearly ambitious: he continued to acquire livings and in 1503 he became chaplain to Sir Richard Nanfan, the governor of Calais. It was Nanfan's influence that secured him a position as a royal chaplain, and by November 1509 he had become almoner to the new King, Henry VIII. Wolsey's influential patrons at Court, most importantly Richard Fox, Bishop of Winchester, pushed their protégé to serve the King in his Council as well, but before long Wolsey had broken free of the aged councillors whom Henry had inherited from his father. By 1513 he was interposing himself between the King and his aristocratic councillors: as his biographer George Cavendish later observed Wolsey showed Henry he was 'the most earnest and Redyest among all the Councell to avaunce the kynges oonly wyll & pleasure without any respect to the Case. The Kyng therefore perceyved hyme to be a mete Instrument for the accomplishment of his devysed wyll & pleasure'.<sup>2</sup> Henry's appreciation of his new chief minister's abilities was evident in further promotion and offices. In February 1513 he became Dean of York, in February the following year Bishop of Lincoln, in August Archbishop of York, and in September 1515 he became a Cardinal. A councillor since at least 1511, in December 1515 Wolsey was also made Chancellor of England.

## Wolsey as servant to Henry VIII

Wolsey rose to pre-eminence because he would ‘fulfyll & folowe to the uttermost’ the King’s will, ‘wherwith the kyng was wonderfully pleased’. In 1512-13 this meant fulfilling Henry’s desire to invade France: as Polydore Vergil put it, the King ‘was not unmindful that it was his duty to seek fame by military skill’.<sup>3</sup> In 1513 Wolsey followed the King to France and was instrumental in the organization of the campaign. Moreover, the campaign showed Wolsey had finally broken the shackles of his patron, Bishop Fox. Fox’s letters to Wolsey (of which seven survive)<sup>4</sup> are full of advice, but the protégé was now at the heart of royal decision-making and Fox’s increasing exasperation at the lack of news from France is evident.

In 1522 Henry once again embarked upon war with France and Scotland. By this stage in his career, Wolsey’s pre-eminence was almost complete and, although he was almost certainly less enthusiastic about the war than Henry and his nobles, he again played the leading role in organizing and financing the campaigns. Moreover, war was vital in shaping the dynamic of the relationship between Wolsey, Henry and his noble commanders in the field. In October 1523 Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, wrote to Wolsey concerning the progress of his march on Paris. His letter caused the Cardinal to declare confidently to the King that ‘ther shalbe never, or like opportunitie geven hereafter for the atteyning of Fraunce’. Soon after, however, Suffolk was forced to retreat, a failure for which he later blamed Wolsey. Absence on campaign deprived noblemen of direct access to the King and increased the importance of Wolsey as an intermediary. In November 1523 Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey and the King’s lieutenant in Ireland, wrote a vivid account of the physical and emotional strains of military service to Wolsey: if not relieved of his post and allowed to return to Court the Earl feared he would die. In part the stresses of serving on the borders were due to the Earl’s perception that he was being sidelined politically by his absence from Court. In November he was allowed to return south. Wolsey’s letter to that effect juxtaposed the physical and emotional reasons for Surrey’s return with the political, but also shows how war, perhaps inadvertently, contributed to Wolsey’s power.

## Wolsey’s diplomacy

Wolsey is better remembered for his conduct of England’s diplomatic relations with its neighbours, most importantly France and the Empire. His diplomatic correspondence allows us to assess some of the key questions concerning his career. To what extent did he follow a foreign policy independently of Henry? Was he merely an opportunist, or did he subscribe to some romantic, humanist ideal of peace among Christian nations? Wolsey conducted foreign diplomacy both in person (writing to foreign princes and their ambassadors and meeting Francis I, King of France, at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520 and the Emperor Charles V at Bruges the following year, for example) and by correspondence. He was, however, as in other aspects of his career and contrary to contemporary perceptions, always beholden to Henry, seeking the advice of his royal master and constantly reporting the progress of negotiations to the King. In November 1521, for example, Wolsey wrote a long and detailed letter to the King reporting Charles V’s explanation for why now was not the time to conclude a truce with the French king. Rather than pursuing his own policy of ‘Universal Peace’, the letter shows clearly that Wolsey’s intention was, as ever, to fulfill the King’s wishes. Nevertheless, despite Wolsey’s undoubted skill as a diplomat, England remained a third-rate European power in the early sixteenth century and his conduct of Henry’s foreign diplomacy was always subservient to the whims of the

wider struggle between the houses of Valois and Habsburg.

### **Judicial Reform**

Alongside the defence of the realm from foreign enemies, the other chief measure of effective kingship was the provision of justice at home. Wolsey also strove to improve royal justice through reform of the judicial functions of the Council and the court of Chancery. The King's Council had always exercised a judicial function, but the precise extent of that role in the later middle ages is obscured by the lack of conciliar records. Similarly, for the period of Wolsey's ascendancy the evidence is obscure. The number of cases before the Council appears to have increased from about twelve cases per year at the beginning of the reign to 120 or so by the mid 1520s, and in 1519 Wolsey let it be known that the conciliar court of Star Chamber would be impartial and have no regard to local political sensibilities. Wolsey, it seems, sought to implement a policy begun by Henry VII to increase people's direct reliance on the Crown, rather than on local landowners, to settle their disputes. The attraction of conciliar justice backfired, however, and by 1520 Wolsey was forced to send many cases out to local arbitration. Similarly, Wolsey's Chancellorship saw an increase in the number of cases coming before the equitable jurisdiction of Chancery. More importantly, perhaps, the dispensation of justice in Star Chamber and Chancery was the most tangible expression of Wolsey's power, one satirized by the contemporary poet John Skelton among others.<sup>5</sup> It was, nevertheless, a real power: in 1516 he made an important speech in Star Chamber in which he stated that those who dispensed justice (judges and landowners) should not be above the law and that the crown was the fount of all justice. To underline Wolsey's 'new law of Star Chamber' the fifth Earl of Northumberland was summoned into court for his contempt of the Council's judgement and committed to the Fleet prison, while JPs and other local agents of law enforcements frequently found themselves before the Council to account for their behaviour.

The grandiose style in which Wolsey conducted himself in dispensing justice and the exemplary punishments handed out (such as that to Sir William Bulmer, a servant of the Duke of Buckingham, punished for wearing the Duke's livery before the King in 1519) did much to make the Cardinal unpopular with his aristocratic rivals both at Court and in the localities. This unpopularity was further increased by his control over the means of communication with the King. The State Papers reveal much of the politics of Wolsey's career and the ways in which he struggled to maintain his position about the King. Contemporaries, both in England and abroad, assumed that Wolsey was hostile to the nobility as a class, but the evidence suggests that Wolsey was, in fact, following the King's will in his relations with the nobility. In 1518-19 Henry wrote to the Cardinal advising him to keep watch on at least five named noblemen, including the Dukes of Suffolk and Buckingham, whose subsequent execution for treason in 1521 was widely believed to have been engineered by Wolsey. Other evidence, nevertheless, suggests Wolsey's concern to maintain his position about the King. In 1519 Wolsey secured the replacement of the so-called 'minions' – young, aristocratic companions of the King – with four older and more discreet knights in the Privy Chamber. In 1525 Wolsey set about an ambitious reform of the expensive royal household, swollen in number by the recent wars. The revolt over the Amicable Grant earlier the same year had compromised his position about the King and there were calls from the Dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk for a reassertion of the wider Council's role in government. At Christmas that year Wolsey drew up, in his own hand, a list of household officials who were to be dismissed and the compensation to be offered them. In January

the Cardinal joined the King at Eltham and the so-called 'Eltham Ordinances' were promulgated. Wolsey succeeded in regulating the size and membership of the Council, and in halving the size of the Privy Chamber to fifteen. The Eltham Ordinances probably marked the high point of Wolsey's domestic political ascendancy. Despite these successes, just as he had risen to power by fulfilling the King's will, his fall was not due to the machinations of his noble opponents but his simple failure to meet Henry's most important wish.

### **The King's "Great Matter"**

From 1527 Henry's principal desire was to secure his divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Wolsey's success in 'The King's Great Matter' would prove to be the acid test of his ministerial career. The State Papers show that the Cardinal was well aware of the stakes at play: in 1527 he assured Henry of his commitment to the cause, but already the King was conducting negotiations independently of him. In 1528, in order to put pressure on the Emperor Charles V, war was declared on the Habsburg Netherlands, a move which was universally unpopular and for which Wolsey was blamed. As the negotiations for the divorce stalled in Rome, so Wolsey became more desperate to assure Henry of his intentions. The Cardinal was faced with a no-win situation: if he failed to secure the divorce his influence with Henry would perhaps be fatally undermined; on the other hand, a divorce meant marriage to Anne Boleyn, whose family and supporters could destroy his influence about the King. By September 1529 Wolsey's position seemed untenable: a Franco-Imperial alliance had hamstrung his diplomatic efforts, while at home Anne and her followers were in the political ascendancy.

### **Wolsey's fall**

Henry's loss of confidence in the Cardinal is evident from a letter written by the Duke of Suffolk reporting a conversation with Francis I the previous June. Francis articulated the widely-held belief that Wolsey was in league with the papacy and had conspired to prevent Henry from obtaining his divorce. On 9 October 1529 Wolsey was indicted in the court of King's Bench on charges of *praemunire*, and on 18 October he surrendered the Great Seal. Wolsey was not executed or imprisoned, however, and throughout the early months of 1530 rumours abounded of his rehabilitation. Nevertheless, in November Henry apparently became convinced that Wolsey was conspiring against him and ordered his arrest. From his York diocese, the Cardinal, now wracked with illness, began the long ride to the Tower of London. On 29 November he died at Leicester Abbey before the King could take his revenge on his erstwhile chief minister.

Contemporary opinion had little doubt that Thomas Wolsey was ambitious and proud, as well as hostile to the nobility and institutions such as the Common Law. Mid-Tudor chroniclers, notably Edward Hall,<sup>6</sup> played on the Cardinal's unpopularity and presented him as an enemy both of the King and of his subjects. The evidence of the State Papers, however, cuts through much of the Tudor propaganda and presents a strictly contemporary view of Wolsey at work. What becomes clear is that Wolsey, for all his ambition and pride, was first and foremost the King's servant, determined to advance Henry's will. The Wolsey that emerges from the State Papers was no great innovator: he refined and implemented existing trends in early Tudor diplomacy, government and political culture. The successes – the reform of legal institutions, royal finance and the household – were due in no small part to the energy and ability of the Cardinal, but the failures – the French campaign in 1523, the Amicable Grant in 1525, and the negotiations over 'the

King's Great Matter' – reveal the weaknesses of the early Tudor state, factors over which even Thomas Wolsey could not triumph and which ultimately cost him his career.

### **Citation:**

David Grummitt, 'Politicians and Statesmen II: Thomas Wolsey (1470/1-1530). Wolsey and the State Papers: War, Diplomacy, Government and Politics in Early Tudor England', *State Papers Online, 1509-1714*, Thomson Learning EMEA Ltd, Reading, 2007

### **Further Reading:**

P. Gwyn, *The King's Cardinal: The Rise and Fall of Thomas Wolsey* (London, 1990). The standard biography: especially strong on Wolsey's diplomacy.

S. J. Gunn and P. J. Lindley, eds, *Cardinal Wolsey: Church, State and Art*, (Cambridge, 1991).

For Wolsey's reform of judicial institutions and the Council see:

S. J. Gunn, *Early Tudor Government, 1485-1558* (Basingstoke, 1995)

J. Guy, *The Cardinal's Court: The Impact of Thomas Wolsey in Star Chamber* (Hassocks, 1977)

J. Guy, 'Wolsey and the Tudor Polity' in *The Tudor Monarchy*, ed. J. Guy (Oxford, 1997), pp. 308-30.

For politics and the court see:

D. Starkey, 'Court and Government' in *The Tudor Monarchy*, ed. J. Guy (Oxford, 1997), pp. 189-212.

D. Starkey, 'Intimacy and Innovation: the Rise of the Privy Chamber, 1485-1547' in Starkey et al, *The English Court from the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War* (London, 1987), pp. 71-118

### **Notes:**

(Endnotes)

1 The standard biography of Wolsey remains P. Gwyn, *The King's Cardinal*, but see also S. M. Jack, 'Thomas Wolsey' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

2 George Cavendish, *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey*, ed. R. S. Sylvester, Early English Text Society, original ser., 243 (1959), pp. 11-12.

3 Polydore Vergil, *Anglica Historia*, ed. Denys Hay, Camden Society, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 74 (1950), p. 161.

4 SP 1/4, ff. 4-5, 19, 22, 29, 67, 78; BL, Egerton MS 2603, f. 5 (*Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of Henry VIII*, ed. J.S. Brewer, 1862-1932, I, ii, 1858, 1881, 1885, 1899, 1912, 1960, 1976).

5 *John Skelton: The Complete English Poems*, ed. J. Scattergood (London, 1983), esp. p. 283.

6 *Hall's Chronicle, containing the History of England during the Reign of Henry IV and the Succeeding Monarchs to the End of the Reign of Henry VIII*, ed. H. Ellis (1809); repr. (1965).