

AUTHORS OF THE MIDDLE AGES · 2

English Writers of the Late Middle Ages

John Trevisa

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ABBREVIATIONS

BL	British Library, London
CCR	<i>Calendar of Close Rolls</i>
CPR	<i>Calendar of Patent Rolls</i>
EETS	Early English Text Society
ELN	<i>English Language Notes</i>
MÆ	<i>Medium Ævum</i>
MLQ	<i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>
NM	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
NQ	<i>Notes & Queries</i>
OHS	Oxfordshire Historical Society
PRIA	<i>Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy</i>
PRO	Public Record Office, London
VCH	<i>Victoria County History</i>
WHS	Worcestershire Historical Society

JOHN TREVISA

Trevisa's Origins

Nothing certain is known of John Trevisa prior to the record of his arrival at Exeter College, Oxford in Lent, 1362. The name *Trevisa* 'lower town', is Cornish¹, and the connection with Cornwall implied by the name is supported by the interest in the county expressed by Trevisa in his translation of Higden's *Polychronicon*; following a list of the shires of England, quoted from the *Annales* of Alfred of Beverley which omits Cornwall, Trevisa adds:

Hit is wondre why Alfred summeth the schires of Engelond somdel as a man þat mette; for Alfred telleþ þe som of schires in þis manere: þere beþ in Engelond sixe and þritty schires wiþoute Cornwayle and wiþoute þe ylondes. Why seiþ he nouzt in þis manere: þere beþ in Engelond six schires wiþ Cornwayle, and þritty oþer schires wiþoute þe ilondes? Eyþer manere summynge is as vnredy as oþer. For to make a redy somme it schulde be i-write in þis manere: In Engelond beþ seuen and þritty schires, and so is Cornewayle accounted wiþ þe oþere schires; and þat is skilful. For Cornwayle is a schere of Engelond; for as he seiþ, Cornwaile is in þis Bretayne hym self, as it is aleide in þe fourþe chapitre of þis firste book. Pan hit is in oon of þe chief parties of þis Bretayne, þat beþ Engelond, Wales, and Scotlond. But Cornwayle is nouzt in Wales, for þere is a grete see bytwene; noþer in Scotlonde, for þere beþ many hondred myle bytwene. Pan Cornwayle is in Engelond, and is departed in hundredes, and is i-ruled by þe lawe of Engelond, and holdeþ schire and schire dayes, as oþere schires dooþ. 3if Alfrede seiþ nay in þat, he wot nouzt what he maffleþ.²

Further support for Trevisa's Cornish origin appears in the fact that prior to his ordination as priest by bishop Sudbury, letters dimissory were required from Exeter diocese (Devon and Cornwall).³

Abbreviated references are to the Bibliography, under Editions, Documentary Sources, and Secondary Sources (given by name and date).

¹ For the IE. roots, see H. Lewis & H. Pedersen, *A Concise Comparative Celtic Grammar* (Göttingen 1937), 46, 123; O.J. Padel, *Cornish Place-Name Elements*, English Place-Name Society vols. 56/57 (1985), 237–8; J. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern 1959), 790, 1090.

² Ed. Babington and Lumby, II. 91.

³ *Reg. Simonis de Sudbiria*, Appendix II, 76–87.

Identifying Trevisa's home in Cornwall is beset with difficulties, but there is some indirect evidence. Four localities bear some form of the name *Trevisa*: Trevessa in Towednack, Trevessa in St Erth, Trevease in Constantine, and Trevessa in St Enoder. A case can be made for identifying Trevessa in St Enoder as the probable birthplace and early home of John Trevisa. In the register of John de Grandisson, bishop of Exeter (1327–69), is an entry dated 27 October 1328 in which the bishop appoints John de Trevysa, among others, to a sequestration of the revenues of the late rector of the church of Roche.⁴ This is too early to be a reference to Trevisa himself, but it may refer to an ancestor. Furthermore Roche is less than ten miles from Trevessa in St Enoder. This possible connection of John with Trevessa in St Enoder is strengthened by an entry in the County Court Roll for Cornwall (Hundred of Powder) for 7 Edward III (1333):

Iohannes de Trevisa per attornatum queritur de Guidone de sancto Albino et Willelmo Aly apparentibus per attornatum in placito capcionis averiorum. Et unde queritur quod iniuste ceperunt vi boves ipsius Iohannis in villa de Medeshole in loco qui vocatur Goenmargh et ea imparcaverunt apud Argalles et cetera ad dampnum suum C s. Et Guido advocat capcionem pro se et Willelmo pro ea quod invenit ea in villa de Argalles dampna facientes et non in villa et loco predictis et petit quod inquiretur.⁵

This places John de Trevysa at Mitchell (*Medeshole*), less than a mile from the farmstead of Trevessa, in the year 1333, five years after the sequestration ordered by bishop Grandisson.

The next Trevisa of whom there is record is Ralph (Radulphus). For a period of twenty years (1351–71) he was a member of parliament from Lostwithiel, Liskeard, Bodmin, Helston, Truro, and Launceston.⁶ It is impossible to deduce Ralph Trevisa's home from this, but a fourteenth-century list of rentals for the manor of Tygembreth (*Degembris*) in Cornwall belonging to the Berkeley family suggests that this Ralph, like John before him, was associated with St Enoder. Included in this list of thirty entries is one which specifies:

Trevysa et Penscawen: Heredes Radulphi Trevysa tenent ibidem i acram terre

⁴ *Reg. Grandisson*, I. 421. A further order in connection with this sequestration was issued on 12 November 1328 (*Reg.* 424), and again John de Trevysa is mentioned.

⁵ PRO SC2 161 74 m. 2, dated 5 July 1333. See Hall 1978, 169–96; the extracts printed cover the period 9 July through 10 September 1333, so do not include the case involving John de Trevysa.

⁶ G.C. Boase 1890, col. 1090; also Lawrance, 36, 125, 141, 154, 168, 182, 195. Specific dates are: Lostwithiel, 13 January 1351/2; Liskeard, 5 February 1357/8; Lostwithiel, 15 May 1360; Bodmin, 24 January 1360/1; Lostwithiel, 13 October 1362; Helston, 1 May 1368; Truro, 3 June 1369; Launceston, 24 February 1370/1 and 8 June 1371.