History Scholarship Exam 2017 : Sources Booklet

Why did the Pilgrimage of Grace break out in 1536, and how serious a challenge was it to Henry VIII's rule?

The Pilgrimage of Grace was the largest and most serious of all the Tudor rebellions and it affected the whole of the north of England when it broke out in October 1536, although the rebels never came close to threatening London. It has been estimated that between 30,000 and 40,000 people took part.

Historians continue to debate the causes of the Pilgrimage of Grace. It occurred at a pivotal moment in Henry's reign. Henry's quest for a male heir had led him (from 1527) to seek a divorce from his first wife (Catherine of Aragon). When the Pope refused, Henry adopted a more extreme approach in the early 1530s, breaking with the Pope in Rome and establishing himself as the Supreme Head of the Church in England, with Thomas Cromwell (resented by many for his political dominance, reformist religious views and low-born status) as his deputy. In 1535, Henry carried out an assessment of the wealth of the Church, raising people's fears about whether he intended to try and take the wealth from their parish churches. In the spring of 1536, he started dissolving (closing down) the smaller monasteries. Many disliked all these reformist steps, and feared what Henry might do next, especially if Cromwell was allowed too much influence.

The north of England remained traditional – i.e. Catholic and opposed to reform – in a religious sense, and hence the dissolution of the monasteries was particularly resented here, and was certainly a cause of the rebellion. There were many other causes too, including the poor harvest of 1535 which caused a significant rise in grain prices, and the impact of a tax which parliament had voted to introduce in 1534 (unusually in peacetime).

Robert Aske was the leader of the rebels in Yorkshire. He was a lawyer who provided the rebels with a clear sense of purpose: to persuade the king, by a show of armed force, to abandon his attacks on the Church, to stop any further monastic closures and to return England to obedience to the Pope. It was Aske who gave the rebellion an identity as a 'Pilgrimage', and he insisted that all who took part swore an oath to bind the rebels together and ensure their obedience.

Henry's natural response was to crush the rebellion, but initially he could not do this as his forces (under the Duke of Norfolk) only numbered 10,000 men, so he was forced to negotiate. Norfolk met Aske at the end of October 1536, and again in December 1536, and the rebels now disbanded having been promised consideration of their demands and a pardon. Aske spent Christmas at court in London, clearly trusting Henry's assurances and advising him on the government of the north. But further unrest in the north in early 1537 gave Henry the excuse to break his promises and now he took his vengeance. A total of 178 executions are recorded, including Aske himself.

SOURCES

SOURCE A

Ye shall not enter into this our Pilgrimage of Grace for the Commonwealth [the community], but only for the love that ye do bear unto Almighty God, his faith, and the Holy Church militant and the maintenance thereof, to the preservation of the King's person and his issue [children], to the purifying of the nobility, and to expulse all villein [low-born] blood and evil councillors against the Commonwealth from his Grace and his Privy Council of the same. And that ye shall not enter into our said Pilgrimage for no particular profit to yourself, nor to do any displeasure to any private person, but by counsel of the commonwealth, nor slay nor murder for no envy, but in your hearts put away fear and dread, and take afore you the Cross of Christ, and in your hearts His Faith, the Restitution of the Church, the suppression of heretics and their opinions, by all the holy contents of this book.

This oath was devised by Robert Aske and it was first taken by the gentry and then the rest of the pilgrims in October 1536.

SOURCE B

On Friday 15 December [1536] the king sent a message to Robert Aske…. He wrote that he had a great desire to meet Aske, to whom he had just offered a free pardon, and to speak frankly about the cause and course of the rebellion. Aske welcomed the opportunity of exonerating [*explaining*] himself. As soon as Aske entered the royal presence the king rose up and threw his arms around him. 'Be you welcome, my good Aske; it is my wish that here, before my council, you ask what you desire and I will grant it.'

'Sir, your majesty allows yourself to be governed by a tyrant named Cromwell. Everyone knows that if it had not been for him the 7,000 poor priests I have in my company would not be ruined wanderers as they are now.'

The king then gave the rebel a jacket of crimson satin and asked him to prepare a history of the previous few months.

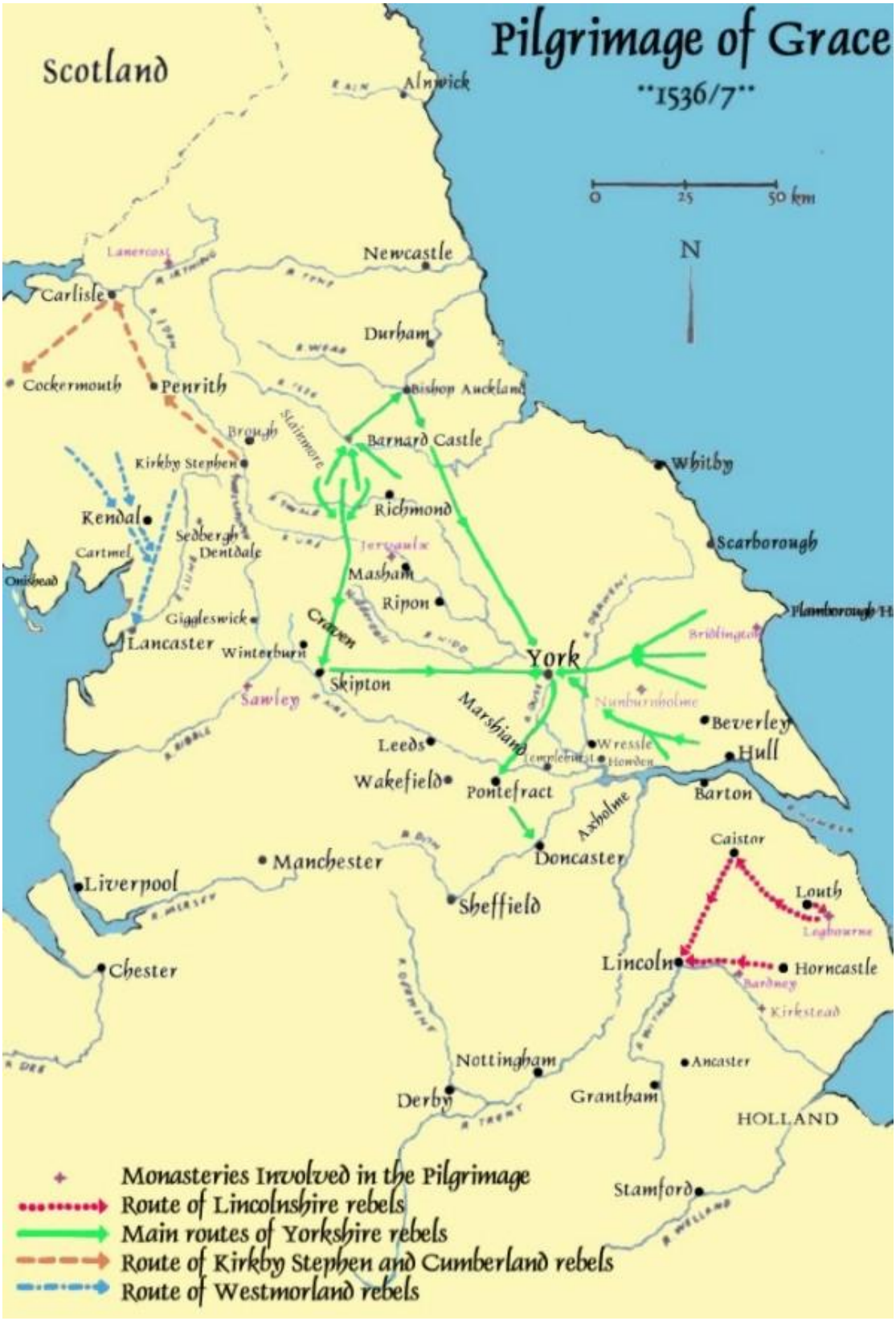
From a recent book on the Tudors published in 2012.

SOURCE C

Cause such dreadful executions upon a good number of the inhabitants hanging them on trees, quartering them, and setting the quarters in every town, as shall be a fearful warning.

Henry VIII's orders to the Duke of Norfolk in January 1537 about what should happen to those who took part in the Pilgrimage of Grace.

SOURCE D



A map showing the course of the Pilgrimage of Grace.

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