The Secular Clergy in England, 1066-1216

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As Hugh Thomas points out in his introduction to *The Secular Clergy in England*, the secular clergy of medieval England are an unjustly neglected group. Despite existing in large numbers and playing an important role in medieval society, they have been the subject of relatively little academic study.⁽¹⁾ This volume therefore sets out to fill a significant historiographical gap, through a comprehensive study of the English secular clergy below the level of bishop during the long 12th century.

The book opens with a section on 'Models of clerical behaviour'. Chapter one ('Introduction') establishes the rationale for the volume and defines its subject, whilst chapter two ('The model priest and his antithesis') reconstructs medieval models of clerical status and behaviour. Priests enjoyed a greatly exalted status, being compared to angels and gods, and celebrated for their religious authority and importance. It was, however, extremely difficult for men to live up to such high standards, and it is surely no coincidence that many of these standards are known to us primarily through texts which are extremely critical of clerics who had fallen short of the ideal. Such critiques highlight the tensions inherent in the role of the secular cleric, seeking to emulate the angels whilst living in the world.

Chapter three ('The aristocratic cleric') delves further into the question of the secular cleric's position in the world, and in particular his place amongst the social elite. In particular, Thomas ponders the extent to which high-ranking secular clergymen should be considered as part of the aristocracy. The result is a nuanced depiction of the secular cleric's social standing, which builds on (and is largely, although not entirely, in agreement with) the recent work of Stephen Jaeger and Martin Aurell.⁽²⁾ Thomas' cleric is powerful and influential, and not wholly distinct from his lay counterparts, with whom he shared many cultural ties. Yet he is subtly differentiated from them, and indeed there were some tensions and rivalries between the two groups – especially in relation to low-born priests who climbed the career ladder, and to clerics who became a little too fond of the aristocratic lifestyle.

Section two ('The clergy and the world') opens with a chapter on 'The wealth of the secular clergy'. Thanks to well-endowed benefices and widespread pluralism, high-ranking clerics enjoyed substantial incomes. Indeed, even parish priests may have been better off than has previously been suggested: Thomas claims that many had incomes equivalent to those of the lower gentry. Whilst acknowledging the existence of an

underclass of impoverished clerics, he stresses the collective economic clout of the secular clergy, which was enhanced by their non-ecclesiastical activities. Many clerics were also private land-holders, or servants of the crown or aristocracy, and therefore at the heart of the 12th-century drive towards commercialisation. However, such activities sat uncomfortably alongside models of priesthood, and there was much handwringing over clerical wealth. Attempts were made to limit its causes (especially pluralism), but also to justify it, for example by arguing that excess income could be used for charitable purposes. Nevertheless, it is hard to disagree with Thomas' conclusion that the gap between clerical wealth and ideals of poverty was almost unbridgeable.

Chapter five ('Patronage and advancement') exposes the intense competition for benefices, detailing the mechanisms by which they were obtained. Clerics scrambled to secure promotion, and laymen doggedly defended their right of patronage. Thomas admits that it is difficult to gauge the relative importance of the various factors which influenced the acquisition of benefices, but it is all too clear that simony and nepotism were extremely prevalent. Despite the decline of hereditary succession to ecclesiastical office, nepotism continued to thrive – thus Alexander III's reported quip that God had taken sons away from bishops, but the devil had given them nephews. The clerical elite was not an entirely closed group: many patrons were clearly keen to appoint educated men of good morals, and this created some openings for low-born clerics. By and large, however, the patronage system granted great opportunities to the lucky few, but left many disappointed.

The focus of chapter six ('Courtiers, bureaucrats and hell') is the role of secular clerics in households, courts and bureaucratic systems. Clerics infiltrated all levels of bureaucracy, and dominated both ecclesiastical and royal administration. These men helped to put literacy and numeracy at the heart of English systems of government; their university education also enhanced their value as bureaucrats. The downside of such service was that it exposed the cleric to ferocious criticism, centring on the moral depravity of the court and of courtiers. Gaining promotion was hard, and often depended on activities which could be classed as sinful and corrupt. Clerics who chose this career path could find themselves staring into 'the chasm between the demanding ideals of moralists and their own conduct.'

Chapter seven ('Clerical marriage and clerical celibacy') tackles one of the biggest challenges facing the 12th-century priest: the imposition of clerical celibacy. Its centrepiece is an illuminating examination of resistance to the campaign for clerical celibacy. Opponents produced copious writings detailing their numerous objections, which included the demands of human nature, the lack of scriptural authority for this change, and the genuine affection many priests felt for their families. This textual resistance was accompanied by more practical strategies, including blatant defiance of episcopal orders and bribery. Although many authorities turned a blind eye to clerical sex, Thomas detects an emerging culture of exhortation, in which priests were encouraged to embrace celibacy. In particular, efforts were made to stigmatise clerical wives and offspring as whores and bastards. As for the thorny question of impact, most of the higher clergy fell into line relatively quickly; lower down the clerical ladder the transition was slower, and never complete. The chapter is rounded off with a fleeting consideration of same-sex relationships (which were condemned, but not perceived as a particular priority or problem amongst the English clergy), and concludes that nowhere was the gap between angels and clergy more apparent than in relation to sexuality.

The next chapter ('Kinship, household, hospitality and friendship') considers some other forms of personal relationship in which a cleric might engage, beginning with kinship. Helping one's kin was an important social obligation, and clerics certainly tried to provide for their relatives. Yet it was also a potential sin, and cause of tension, as churchmen had to balance familial demands with the strictures of their conscience. Being head of a household brought more troublesome demands for patronage and hospitality. An engaging discussion of clerical friendship reveals that 'friendship could encompass a more formalized version of the modern phenomenon of networking: making contacts for mutually beneficial relationships'. Medieval secular clerics formed large, influential and complex networks which provided spiritual and emotional support, but also more practical benefits such as patronage and mediation. Unfortunately, friendship also

entailed a sense of mutual obligation, which could lead to bitter fallings-out if favours were not reciprocated.

Such ruptures might even end in violence, the focus of chapter nine ('Violence, clerical status and the issue of criminous clerks'). The long-standing belief that clerics should neither suffer nor use violence was reinforced by the Gregorian notion of separation from violence as 'a crucial marker of clerical distinctiveness'. In practice, the distinction was not always terribly clear, since clerics acted as judges and facilitated (and sometimes accompanied) military campaigns. Such behaviour was excused since these men did not themselves shed blood; crusading clerics, for example, were not meant to bear arms, but simply to pray and to motivate lay participants. Priests also engaged in personal acts of violence frequently enough to create widespread concern about criminous clerks. Thomas attempts to quantify the problem, and concludes that 'if one looks at the percentage of crimes attributed to clerics, Henry II chose to pursue a costly and not very productive fight in the battle over criminous clerks'. Regardless of the figures, it seems doubtful that Henry's main motivation was a phobia of violent priests. The chapter concludes with a brief attempt to uncover the causes of clerical violence, and makes the intriguing suggestion that violent disputes between churchmen were relatively common.

Next comes an exploration of some more positive activities, in a section on 'The cultural and intellectual impact of the clergy'. Chapter ten ('English secular clerics and the growth of European intellectual life in the twelfth-century Renaissance') opens a quartet of chapters which successfully demonstrate the importance of the English secular clergy in the intellectual and cultural developments of the 12th-century Renaissance. Many English clerics studied and taught at the great continental schools, and Thomas argues that 'intellectual life in England benefitted enormously from interaction with the continental scholars'. He also emphasises the role of secular clerics in the foundation of universities at Oxford and Cambridge. Whilst admitting that 12th-century England lacked 'intellectual giants', he points to the existence of many 'clerical intellectuals of middling or minor importance' (e.g. Gerald of Wales) and to the rapidly increasing numbers of English *magistri* as evidence for a massive expansion of intellectual activity. Monks, shut away in their cloisters, were partially excluded from these developments, which allowed the secular clergy a chance to shine.

Chapter eleven ('Secular clerics as collectors and donors of books'), which suggests that secular clerics owned large numbers of books. As Thomas admits, determining private book ownership in the Middle Ages is a thankless task, and his suggestion that there were up to 20,000 volumes (excluding service books) in the private collections of 12th-century secular clerics must be viewed as highly speculative. Nevertheless, the argument that these men were substantial book-owners seems convincing, as does the evidence that they owned a wide range of books – not just service books and glossed Bibles, but also works of theology, natural history and literature. Book ownership allowed clerics to keep up with intellectual trends, to supplement their reading from institutional libraries, and to familiarise laypeople with the use of books. It also created a market for books, with secular clerics being one of the driving forces in the growth of the book trade.

Furthermore, the secular clergy were more than just consumers of books, as chapter 12 ('Secular clerics as authors and intellectuals') demonstrates. They authored numerous works of theology and Bible studies, including tracts, annotation and sermons. They also produced writings on topics including law, the liberal arts and the natural sciences, compiled collections of anecdotes and letters, and engaged in historical writing, the composition of poetry, and translation. Overall, the evidence points to the secular clergy (both as individuals and as a group) being engaged in a wide range of intellectual pursuits. Yet their scholarly activities were not uncontroversial, since clerical learning could provoke accusations of pride, greed and heresy. Priests who dabbled in magic and divination were especially vulnerable to criticism.

The final chapter of this section is entitled 'Secular clerics as cultural patrons and performers'. The employment of entertainers and musicians by the clergy was frowned upon, but nevertheless commonplace – even St Hugh of Lincoln hired them for his feasts, although he proved his sanctity by ignoring them. In addition, many clerics themselves engaged in forms of performance, both spiritual (the conduct of the liturgy or the playing of religious music) and secular (skilled conversation and reading aloud). Secular clerics were

enthusiastic patrons of material culture: they purchased luxury items such as gemstones and tapestries, and employed architects and artists to redesign and decorate their dwellings and churches. The evidence presented here (as in the previous three chapters) is fragmentary, but substantial enough to support Thomas' belief that the secular clergy exercised a 'profound cultural influence'.

The final section of the book focuses on 'The religious life of the clergy', beginning with a chapter on 'Clerics and religious life'. 12th-century attempts to improve the training of the secular clergy and thus the quality of pastoral care are outlined, although no firm conclusions are reached about the success of this movement. Thomas then considers the role of the clergy in providing the sacraments, and stresses their place at the heart of Christian worship- an obvious point, but one which for that very reason is worth restating. The emergence of chantries in the late 12th century shifted the focus of intercession from the regular to the secular clergy, and thus gave the latter group an even more important place in the process of 'sustaining and intensifying the already thorough Christianisation of English society'. There is also substantial evidence for priestly piety, including donations to religious causes, devotion to saints' cults, and charitable deeds. Yet piety also caused misery, in the form of terrible doubts or fierce intolerance.

Chapter 15 ('The war against the monks'), which explores the intense rivalry which existed between secular clerics and monks during the 12th century. Thomas goes beyond the well-known invectives of Walter Map and Gerald of Wales to provide a valuable unravelling of the complex differences between the two orders. Competition for resources and disputes over respective rights provoked many squabbles, but the question of authority and morality was also crucial: secular clerics used their duty of pastoral care to claim authority over the monks, who in their turn claimed moral superiority over the seculars. Some writers expressed disapproval of such strife, and promoted re-conciliation; there is also some evidence of real-life co-operation between regular and secular clerics. Nevertheless, the idea that the secular clergy were somehow second-best remained deeply entrenched in 12th-century England, and their lives were made even harder by the imposition of impossible new standards of behaviour which made them targets for even more criticism. It was, Thomas posits, the failure of the secular clergy to defend themselves against such criticism, in combination with the rise of pastoral care, which gave the mendicant orders an opening in the decades after 1200.

The book is rounded off with a concise conclusion. Thomas argues that the secular clergy were particularly influential in the intellectual and educational spheres, as transmitters of knowledge and as the founders of schools and universities. On this basis, he proposes a new model of English participation in the 12th-century Renaissance, in which 'England was, in some senses, on the periphery of this renaissance, but its clergy were not'. This group of men were also central to the bureaucratic revolution of the long 12th century; this gave them great power, and considerable social and economic influence. In religious terms, their influence was stabilising; they did not provoke dramatic change, but played a crucial role in the successful functioning of the church. When all of these strands are pulled together, it is hard to dissent from Thomas' view that a better understanding of the secular clergy is needed to truly understand the medieval world.

With *The Secular Clergy in England*, Hugh Thomas has himself made a substantial contribution to our understanding of both the secular clergy and the Middle Ages. This is a magisterial work which provides an effective synthesis of existing knowledge on its subject alongside compelling new material and arguments; it thus sheds new light on this hitherto somewhat elusive social group. Ranging widely, it presents a compelling case for the significance of the secular clergy in many areas of life; from now on it will be harder for medievalists of many kinds to ignore the role played by these clerics in their particular field of interest. Despite being a big book, both physically and intellectually, this is an accessible volume, well-written and very readable, which will be of use to both specialists and students of medieval church and society.

In his conclusion, Thomas suggests that the secular clergy offer historians a valuable opportunity to explore the intersections between the sacred and the secular, since the very notion of a 'secular cleric' seems such a paradox to the modern mind. Yet the combination of the two spheres was a relatively common phenomenon in the 12th century, and one which caused a great deal of anxiety to many people. One of the great strengths

of this volume is the manner in which it brings to the fore the constant struggle of life as a secular cleric, with one foot in the heavens and the other firmly on the ground. Whilst these men did not endure the ascetic deprivations which monks were supposed to endure, their lives were in many ways much harder, not least because they were attempting to live up to an impossible ideal, and being constantly censured for failing to do so.

If the volume has a weakness, it is that it is perhaps too ambitious in its scope: it attempts to cover the entire of the secular clergy, from wealthy and powerful archdeacons down to the lowliest parish priest. The rationale for doing so is clear and sound: these men formed a coherent social group, and should be approached as such. On the other hand, this broad sweep does cause some problems, not least because of the inevitable variations within such a large cohort. For example, Thomas' claim that the secular clergy played a crucial part in the intellectual life of 12th-century England is a convincing one, and yet it does not sit entirely comfortably alongside his later statement that many parish priests were poorly educated- are we to take it that the intellectual achievements of the secular clergy were actually the intellectual achievements of relatively high-ranking members of the secular clergy?

From the perspective of this ecclesiastical historian, the book might have been enhanced by a lengthier consideration of the secular cleric's religious functions. After all, the ability to perform these function was one of the secular cleric's defining features and (as Thomas himself states) these men were profoundly important to religious life during the long 12th century. Given this, it is curious that religious life is rather downplayed, being explored only in the final section of the book, and then in a briefer fashion than intellectual life or social status.

These are, however, minor criticisms, and in many ways indicative of one of the volume's best features: its ability to provoke detailed reflection on its subject. This is a book which answers many questions, and is surely destined to become one of the definitive works in the field for many years to come. It is also (and I mean this as a compliment) the type of book which provokes as many questions as it answers. With this book, Thomas presents a strong case in support of his belief 'much more research on the secular clergy is needed for an adequate understanding of medieval history'; happily, he has produced a volume which will surely inspire much of that research.

Notes

1. They are, however, the subject of a forthcoming monograph by one of the leading experts in the field: Julia Barrow, *The Clergy in the Medieval World: Secular Clerics, Their Families and Careers in North-Western Europe* (Cambridge, 2015).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) and *The Envy of Angels* (Philadelphia, PA, 1994) and Martin Aurell, *Le chevalier lettré* (Paris, 2011).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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