

Routiers et mercenaires pendant la guerre de Cent ans

Review Number: 1961

Publish date: Thursday, 21 July, 2016

Editor: Guilhem Pépin

Françoise Lainé

Frédéric Boutoulle

ISBN: 9782356131492

Date of Publication: 2016

Price: £19.13

Pages: 358pp.

Publisher: Ausonius

Publisher url: <https://www.leslibraires.fr/livre/9265119-routiers-et-mercenaires-pendant-la-guerre-de-ce--boutoulle-ausonius>

Place of Publication: France

Reviewer: Christopher Allmand

Presented as the record of a small colloquium held in 2013 to honour the contribution of Lord Jonathan Sumption to the study of the Hundred Years War, this volume consists of some 18 papers (three of which are in English) on the theme of *routiers* and *mercenaires* operating in France during the Hundred Years War. The subject is hardly a new one; the valuable work of William Caferro, Kenneth Fowler and Nicholas Wright (to cite only authors writing in English) springs immediately to mind, while John France edited a volume of wider scope on the *Mercenary and Paid Men* less than a decade ago. With two exceptions, however, this collection of papers concentrates on what we now call France during the rather more limited period of the conflict against England. Containing full references of manuscripts cited and a valuable bibliography of secondary literature, it has much to offer those interested in war and in military society in the 14th and 15th centuries.

Many questions arise from a reading of these papers, notably what was a *routier*, and to whom could this label be attached, questions to which John France's collection had not always provided clear answers, and to which no easy answers are to be found here, either. Generally speaking, however, *routiers* were those who, for one reason or another, did not 'fit' into, or were at odds with, the societies from which they came, men who chose to live a form of internal 'exile' within them, all too often in a state of conflict. Considered sympathetically, they could be seen as victims of a society which would not, for one reason or another, absorb them. Some may have fallen heavily into debt; others were escaping the effects of local vendettas, while others still may have been avoiding the outcome of adverse judgments from the courts. Unfortunately for France, their activities only exacerbated an already difficult social and military situation, in which violence and destruction became bywords in, and characteristics of, society. The emotion conjured up by the word *routier* was fear, fear for self and for property, a pessimistic attitude which corresponded all too easily with the view of the world created by the Black Death and the war between England and France which, after an interval, was resumed in the 1340s.

While there were explicable reasons why the groups of armed men should have emerged from within

society, largely in southern and south-western France (very loosely, the *Midi*), it was the renewal of English military activity (never entirely ended) by Edward III which created a theatre of conflict which divided the loyalties of local society, and which opened up the field of military activity to many, some of whom fought for legitimate authority, others (perhaps the majority) more brazenly for themselves. The conflict drew men to fight on one side or other, their numbers increasing markedly at times of truce or negotiation between the main French and English protagonists, when many moved to take part in other, more local conflicts, such as those involving the papacy, whose base at Avignon became well known to many *routiers*.

Both French and English, at odds in these regions, could make good use of the skills and knowledge of local conditions which the *routiers*, and in particular their leaders, might bring to the conflict, knowledge which helped counter the often built-in superiority of royal forces, normally better provided with their everyday needs, notably provisions. The capture of an important town or fortress might be on the agenda. In such a situation the *routiers* could have the advantage. It is clear that their activities were well planned in advance: reconnoitring and the use of spies (*écoutes*) were normal, as were ambushes and the dawn raid (more effective than one carried out at dusk). All such methods involved using surprise to maximum effect. The contribution of the *routiers* to the capture of towns or fortresses, which might then be used as centres of activity in, and control over, a particular area, countered the activities of the English who sought to weaken these urban centres by destroying the sources of supply upon which they drew (largely for food and other provisions), while also reducing the revenues which economic activity might give to the *routiers*.

What evidence is there of self-help on the part of those susceptible to attack by the *routiers*? As just suggested, it was difficult for villagers, for instance, to counter the threat presented by such attacks. But recent interest and research in the subject indicates that they did not take everything lying down. In 1355, at the time of the Black Prince's first great *chevauchée* (or raid) through Languedoc, the estates general of the area passed legislation permitting both communities and individuals to use force in defence of their property and interests against those called *soudoiers*, a term which, in the circumstances, could mean whatever one wanted it to mean. Acts of vengeance were not uncommon, so much so that the *routiers* often went in fear of violent reactions to their treatment of communities and individuals, which might lead to the call of the *clamor publicus* (a kind of hue and cry) being raised against them. On the other hand, this book also contains a number of examples of communities being obliged, for lack of support from the recognised authority, to buy off groups of *routiers* who had seized them and their members largely with the intention of forcing them to do just that.

How far is it possible to distinguish a *routier* from a *mercenaire*? The task is not always straightforward, since the criteria for each are not predetermined. Most contributors to this volume were conscious of the difference, but only a few felt the inclination to discuss it at any length. In general, *routiers* were those who, as members of a *route* (a group or gang) used (collective) armed force as a weapon of terror to perpetrate acts of violence and physical destruction against persons and property (essentially criminal acts rather than acts of war) for the sake of gain.

By contrast, as the words used to describe him suggests, the *mercenaire* or *stipendarius* was a man hired specifically to fight for a wage, agreed in a contract, paid by one with whom he had no political or social link (the *mercenaire* was essentially a 'foreign' fighter); and for whom he fulfilled no other office which involved fighting. While unashamedly acting for personal advantage (his rewards usually came in the form of money or, sometimes, in land) he did so only for a specific master, for an agreed period of time, and for a previously agreed reward or wage. The indenture made between the duke of Bar and a group of Breton *mercenaries* in 1372 allowed them to take what food and other necessities were required for man and beast when not on active service in exchange for payment. When 'campaigning' ('chevauchant par le plat pais pour la guerre'), however, they could commandeer for themselves a reasonable quantity of provisions as circumstances demanded.

The *mercenaire* knew when his military assistance was needed, and could act accordingly. In this case, the loyalty of the group (all men of impeccable family connections) was short lived. At the end of the period of

service specified in their contract, for reasons not entirely clear, they parted company with their ducal employer and transferred their 'loyalty' to his rival. As Sir John Thornbury showed in 1380, when faced by a Sienese administration which was not sticking to the terms of service previously made with him, the confident *mercenaire* could show who held the aces by threatening to break off relations with an employer that was allegedly not keeping its word.

Granted these facts, it is not difficult to imagine that the *mercenaire* enjoyed rather higher standing, both moral and social, than did the *routier*. He might be a specialist fighter, like the German miners and gunners or the Genoese crossbowmen who were well paid, sometimes even more than knights, for the hire of their valuable skills. Several contributors emphasise the fact that mercenaries were often of good social standing, including bastards of noble families who could not expect to inherit land or wealth, but who none the less regarded themselves as men of honour. Stress may be placed upon a common culture which, as the records of cases heard in England before the Court of Chivalry testify, included an appreciation of the value and importance of heraldry which brought together a wide, international set of men, respectful of one another and of their various skills in arms.

For those not born into such circumstances, military activity and, above all, success in war could lead to both wealth and social advancement. Bernard de la Sale, for instance, came to assume both political and social respectability as a result of his leadership of large groups of *routiers* in the 1360s. His capture of Figeac, an *exploit* based on surprise, won him reputation and prestige, as well as a knighthood and the rank of captain of the town for the king of England. His military skills were now recognised and put to good purpose by legitimate authority. Later, he would be found working in the service of the papacy in Italy. The man who had started his military career as a simple *escuier* had made good. Yet, as Jean-Philippe Genet points out, there was no one who, from beginnings as a *routier* or *mercenaire*, made such an impression upon French aristocratic society as Francesco Sforza or Bartolomeo Colleoni were to do in Italy. Does the explanation for this lie simply or largely in the social circumstances of the two very different spheres of activity? Perhaps so.

The 14th-century French monarchy showed itself incapable of resolving the military and social problems posed by the companies who, for long decades, showed themselves to be a seriously disruptive element within French society at a period characterised by conflict with England. After the defeat of a French royal army by the *routiers* at Brignais in April 1362, the effective power of royal authority was further questioned. Not surprisingly, the attempt to control the unruly element in society through the publication of laws and ordinances demanding obedience to that authority was shown to be an inadequate measure. Edward III proved equally powerless when, in November 1364, he issued an order at Westminster commanding English soldiers fighting in France to submit to discipline, a step which he must have known it was impossible to enforce or police effectively.

The solution (if it may be so called) would finally be found in harnessing the energies of the companies into the king's service through the recruitment of a royal army created to pursue the military interests of the French kingdom as a whole, and answerable to the crown. This took time, but eventually led to the fundamental reforms of the 1430s and 1440s associated with Charles VII. During these years the *routiers*, now more generally known as *écorcheurs*, who included a considerable number of foreigners, continued to cause much trouble, particularly in eastern France at a time when authority in those parts was divided between the king of France and the dukes of Burgundy. Yet, it can now be seen that the threat which they posed to society was in decline. War dominated by sieges was no longer proving as attractive and profitable to those seeking a quick return for their efforts as it had once done. Gradually, the challenge which they posed to legal authority came to be met. A prominent leader of a force of *écorcheurs*, Perrinet Gressart, who had defended La Charité-sur-Loire against royal forces for several years, eventually yielded to the crown, and was appointed captain of the town on the king's behalf. Like Gressart, Antoine de Chabannes, another leader of *écorcheurs*, having made a modest fortune out of his activities, chose royal service and a royal paymaster to end his career, suggesting that those of the 'middling' nobility who had previously lived off their illicit gains, were now ready to enter royal service as the most acceptable way of furthering their ambitions. Such appointments signalled the success of a major development with far-reaching effects and

consequences: the absorption of large numbers of *écorcheurs* into the army now being created as a 'state' army to serve the king and the kingdom, a development which, as Genet points out, would direct the development of military institutions in England and France in different directions for the next two centuries.

This volume of essays constitutes a valuable contribution to an aspect of French history which cannot pass by unnoticed, the laying bare of the many weaknesses of the French crown from the 1320s through to the 1440s, of its inability to control its people, and of the varied factors which contributed to that failure. At the same time, such a series of papers makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of the military society and the *routier* 'phenomenon' of which any study of French history at this period must take account. It underscores the difficulties experienced by the crown in ridding itself of this 'internal' threat (the adulation showered upon Bertrand du Guesclin stemmed in part from his ability to bring large *routier* elements under royal control); and adds significantly to our appreciation of how the revival of the crown's fortunes under Charles VII was to be advanced by the re-direction of military experience and energy in the cause not of individual gain but of more effective governance from the 1430s onwards.

Presented with a broad range of papers on a variety of sub-themes, the editors have done well to produce an attractive volume which, while recognising the many aspects of the subject under consideration, hangs together successfully. Its practical value would have been even greater had it included an index, particularly a subject index which, although not easy to draw up, always enhances the value of a book of this kind.

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1961>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/163178>