

Episcopal Power and Local Society in Medieval Europe, 900-1400

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It is acceptable to like bishops again. Perhaps this change in the historiographical weather (would it be too much to label it an ‘episcopal turn’?) is not so much a result of the opening up of new sources, but a reflection of academics’ own positions in the wider world. The 1970s and 1980s fixed us with a standard of bishops as intolerant heresy hunters and seekers-out of deviancy. Better to stand with the rebels and subversives, to extricate their voices from inquisition records, than to excavate the lives of their persecutors (a tendency most famously embodied in *Montaillou* (1)). And yet, over the ensuing decades, slowly, creepingly, the poor old bishop has morphed into an altogether more sympathetic figure. His experiences, too, might seem strangely familiar: having spent years tossed about on the perilous seas of the ecclesiastical job market, when one did ‘make it’ to a see, one found oneself overworked, deluged by endless requests and an increasingly demanding bureaucracy, snapped at from below by truculent canons or monastic chapters, and vulnerable from above to changing winds of papal, royal or aristocratic demands. High and late medieval bishops battled to be allowed to apply their expertise, to be left alone to get on with their jobs. This is something of a caricature, perhaps, but not entirely.

Episcopal Power and Local Society in Medieval Europe, 900-1400, is a contribution to these changing currents. This collection of essays, published in Brepols’ Medieval Church Studies series, arises from the ‘Power of the Bishop’ Conference at Cardiff in 2013 – one in a series of conferences, from which further published volumes are anticipated. This volume represents an auspicious start, and much stimulating research is presented here. The volume divides into three sections: the first on construction of episcopal power in local society; the second on the ways in which local actions enhanced episcopal power, and the third discussing how episcopal power was expressed in local society, especially in its symbolic dimensions. The overall emphasis is that this is not to be read as a series of individual studies, but as pointing the way to a broader evaluation of bishops in this period.

The editors of this volume position themselves as examining an aspect of episcopacy otherwise overlooked. They acknowledge that recent years have been a boom time for writing on bishops, but suggest that current

work continues to overlook one fundamental dimension: bishops in local society, in their dioceses. Whether these two terms – local and diocesan – are coterminous and interchangeable, or whether they merely intersect and overlap, is another question. ‘Immediate’ as (as in the ‘immediate context’ of a bishop’s power) is also a word which enters into the reckoning. One might have hoped for more reflection on how these terms fit together in the otherwise admirably clear introduction. Yet what this collection aims at – putting the bishop back in the locality – is important, not least because of a tendency in medieval studies to associate what is ‘local’ with the most humble; to think of the diocese as the level on which we analyse ‘popular’ religion and the community, not the stage for the great office-holders of medieval Christendom.⁽²⁾

‘Localness’ and locality is clearly a problem category, for nothing is straightforwardly local. The contributors are aware of this, and some of the most interesting discussions in the volume move far beyond ‘locality’, or at least point to the complexity of that term. Chris Dennis, in his chapter on the diocese of Coutances after 1066, makes the case for how the conquest of England altered the dynamics of the Bishop of Coutances’ power. As Dennis shows, the same bishop (Geoffrey de Montbray) had connections to Robert Guiscard and the Hautevilles, and also made a journey to Apulia where he received considerable treasure from southern Italy’s new Norman masters. In turn, Geoffrey took that treasure and purchased half the town of Coutances, completing the cathedral and constructing a bishop’s balance. Nor was he the only Norman bishop to bag loot through such connections. The ‘local’ here is a manifestation of a much wider set of networks.

What is also left ambiguous in the introduction is quite how important, exactly, local power was – although perhaps the reason for this is that it must inevitably vary between bishoprics and over time. Here the volume pulls its punches a little: the editors wisely do not claim that the diocesan context is the most important for understanding the power of bishops, but assert that it certainly was significant, and that in certain contexts, a bishop’s diocese could be the foundation for his other extra-diocesan activities. But those of us whose knowledge of medieval bishops is limited to particular figures or particular regions are bound to ask – what were those contexts? In which circumstances (social, political, geographical) did the diocese become most important stage for making or breaking episcopal authority?

There is a wealth of detail in the collection, and many chapters which will no doubt prove rewarding for specialists. It is testament to the value of the volume and to intelligent editing that there are also compelling synergies across the sections. Peter Coss and John Jenkins, for example, both engage in careful analysis of the texts which tell us about bishop’s lives. The techniques being applied to these texts, and the questions asked of them are not new, but there is newness and potential in their significance for examining the ‘local’ lives and reputations of bishops. Both ask *who* controlled the way in which bishops were remembered by posterity. In Coss’ chapter, the 12th-century bishops of Coventry and Hugh de Nonant in particular were unfortunate enough to have been memorialised by unhappy monastic authors. Working from an alternative set of sources for episcopal lives, as Coss reveals, casts those bishops in quite a different light. Coss also teases out several phases in the relationship between bishops and Coventry priory, a background which must be understood before reading the chronicle evidence. For Jenkins, examining John Grandisson, Bishop of Exeter 1327-69, the problem is exactly the opposite: too much has been taken on trust from Grandisson’s own accounts of his office, and Jenkins is alert to the difference between episcopal ambition and the rather more limited reality of Grandisson’s accomplishments. Here desire for reform ran up against ability and opportunity to do so, a particularly acute limitation for Grandisson, a man unwilling to compromise on personal principles in order to use local society to get what he wanted. As should be evident from this brief sketch of these two chapters, what is highlighted here is the still-pressing need for medievalists to think through old and inherited narratives of episcopal success, failure, or even the coherence of episcopal ‘policy’.

A second strength of the volume is that many of these case studies offer readers a valuable insight into societies, sees and bishops which have been relatively neglected by Anglophone historiography. Heidi Øvergård Beistad’s chapter, for example, examines Árni Þorláksson, Bishop of Skálholt, in Southern Iceland, from 1269 to 1298. Studying Þorláksson allows her to trace how ‘*libertas ecclesiae*’ (both a battle-cry and a programme for reform), was applied in 13th-century Iceland by a reforming bishop. More broadly,

Beistad sets out the circumstances which could make or break Icelandic bishops, who navigated between powerful archbishops, local power and royal authority. The emphasis on *libertas ecclesiae* – and how it might be worked out in practice – is especially valuable for those of us who are most familiar with the term from English and French conflicts. Again, it provides another example of what a ‘local’ lens might do, for *libertas ecclesiae* is a concept with both a local application and an international dimension: contested in Skálholt as it was contested across medieval Christendom; working within similar parameters but with significant local variations.

For those who are interested in the broader question of what, exactly, is to be done with the medieval bishop when we put him back into local society, a number of a number of chapters offer some particularly useful methodologies and approaches. Particularly to be reckoned with is Christine Axen’s chapter on Zoen of Avignon (1241-61). Zoen, in his first five years as bishop, managed to achieve exactly the task the papacy had set him to: drawing the city away from imperial power, and to assert episcopal authority in an urban community where power was complex and contested. Axen’s contribution draws out the complexity of Avignonese politics in this period, and just how problematic ‘local’ might be in our handling of medieval bishops. Axen expertly situates Zoen in the world of Avignonese politics, where local loyalties intersected with international allegiances (imperial, Capetian, papal). What made Zoen capable of navigating these currents, she suggests, was the precision and subtlety of mind he had developed from his studies in Bologna. ‘Local’ change in the diocese did not go untouched by the intellectual and legal revolutions of the period, and Zoen, though bishop of Avignon, maintained his ties to Bologna, his home town, and where he funded Avignonese scholars to study. Axen’s study highlights that being an ‘outsider’ (that is, a bishop not drawn from local aristocratic circles) could be as much an advantage as a hindrance: although a non-local bishop did not have the same resources to fall back on, being set apart from the fraught world of local politics and political disputes might at times strengthen his hand.

Similarly, Aaron Hope’s contribution, ‘Bishops’ deputies and episcopal power in medieval law, c.1150 to c.1350’, provides what might otherwise be lacking in this collection – a frame for comparison. That frame is legal, focused on understanding the evolution of diocesan episcopal duties across the 13th century, through examining the legal status of bishops’ deputies and their increasing importance across the period. The desire for consistent administration was something common to every bishopric. As with Axen’s contribution, here too we see how legal and administrative frameworks were coming to structure the life of the diocese; and how new technologies of law might conceptualise and represent a bishop, itemise his functions, and allow his person to be separated from his office. It is surely an important aspect of ‘locality’ to understand the thinking which made it possible for a bishop to act in his diocese even when the bishop himself was absent.

Another kind of representation is addressed by Melissa Julian-Jones, in her chapter on ‘Sealing episcopal identity’, which examines the increasing use of seals as a means of episcopal expression in England, c.1200 to c.1300 – another ‘new’ manifestation of power. Julian-Jones makes the point (easily overlooked) that as the majority of episcopal business was local, so too was the ‘audience’ for episcopal seals. By taking a broad overview of English bishops, she is able to come to nuanced conclusions as to when it was most useful to a bishop to have their personal heritage represented on a seal, and what those representations meant. She concludes it was not a demonstration of ‘individual’ pride in genealogy or status, but rooted in the local: an appeal to the local community and local solidarities which a bishop needed to prosper. The account is convincing, and the framework which Julian-Jones here applies to England has the potential to be applied more broadly.

Those three chapters, in particular, suggest considerable potential for further studies of ‘local’ bishops, but others offer a great deal too. To many medievalists, the aspects of local life examined here may be familiar in outline: how a bishop interacted with canons and with local abbots. But the detail proves much richer and more complex than we might surmise. Andrew Fleming, for example, draws out how the contentious life of Thomas de Cantilupe, Bishop of Hereford 1275-82, was replicated in local memories of him post-mortem. Melanie Brunner demonstrates how the jurisdictional conflicts of the bishops of Sion could be writ large, but might also come all the way down to arguing for control over a single kitchen. That kitchen mattered so

much, as Brunner suggests, because local and particular challenges easily took on universal significance. Maria Chiara Succurro brings to life the disputes between the bishops of Brescia and the local and powerful abbots – including the details of the scurrilous allegations and ‘hate speech’ bishops were whipping up against high-profile abbeys; and offering the observation that the conclusion of these conflicts was often more ambivalent than we assume. Jelle Lisson in ‘Edges of episcopal power’ examines the diocesan borders of Liège from 900 to 1200, and sketches out the complicated relationship between bishops and the region of Leeuw. This chapter usefully brings a longer-term perspective to the collection, charting local ‘growing pains’ beyond the actions of a single bishop.

If there is a gap here, then perhaps it lies in thinking about the beginning of episcopal careers, and how bishops came into their dioceses. Relatively little is said about election and appointment. Yet if one is thinking about ‘local’ society, those considerations might matter a great deal. As almost every chapter demonstrates, one diocese was not like another – each had its own political, religious, aristocratic and saintly geographies to deal with. One cannot help but wonder if some dioceses were easier to handle than others, and how much the circumstances of the bishop’s election made a difference. My own knowledge derives from English cases, where one suspects that new bishops often arrived at their see with very little knowledge of the conditions on the ground and of local politics. This might especially be the case where a chapter could not get its own man in place but had to be satisfied with a compromise candidate – a distinguished but non-local archdeacon or abbot. The new appointee might not have much sense of what made the see of Ely different from the see of Worcester, though he would have to learn quickly. ‘Local’ knowledge could be picked up by acting as a judge and judge-delegate, and a change of office-holder could be compensated for by continuity in the personnel of the episcopal household – but nonetheless, this is a dimension which needs exploration. How did a bishop adapt, and what was it most crucial for him to learn, when a new see, and its accompanying local politics, were thrust upon him?

The question of how well a bishop knew his diocese is tackled by Angelo Silvestri in his chapter ‘The life, education and deeds of Robert Grosseteste’. Silvestri posits that Grosseteste had particularly close ties to Lincoln, something which he draws out from a meticulous reconstruction of Grosseteste’s possible biography – including a hypothesised period of study in the grammar schools of Cambridge, then part of the diocese of Lincoln. Implicit in this chapter is the suggestion Grosseteste was an outlier in terms of the closeness of his connection to his diocese (though given Grosseteste’s intellectual interests and pastoral passions, he was an outlier in other ways too). Silvestri puts forward his argument convincingly, and his case usefully follows up clues about Grosseteste’s life. But if we accept his premises, what, then, should we do with Grosseteste? How should we assess his apparent ‘localness’ against that of his predecessors and successors in the see? Was 13th-century Lincoln under Grosseteste a kind of ‘local shop for local people’?

What Silvestri on Grosseteste shows up too is the question of how we select our subjects. I find myself wishing that questions of exceptionalness or representativeness had been addressed here. Zoen of Avignon and Árni Þorláksson seem, on my reading, to be exceptional, and exceptionally successful, men. One might ask (and hoping Pete Seeger will forgive the paraphrase) – where have all the mediocre bishops gone? The bishops examined here are grand strategisers. All operated on multiple levels; they were as adept at manipulating hagiography as they were at crafting architectural and legal claims to power. They were consummate performers: Pieter Byttember describes Gerard of Florennes, Bishop of Cambrai 1012-51, as ‘continually performing his own centrality’ (p. 176); Lisson’s bishops of Liège were ever plotting how to make theoretical power real. Even if John Grandisson failed, his aspirations were vast. There is some exception to this: Charlotte Lewandowski brings into view how these played out in late 11th-century Durham, and how it was that canons could sometimes ‘win’; that strategies for harmony and episcopal assertion did not always work and sometimes resulted in a rupture in the ecclesiastical body politic.

But even so, did every bishop do quite as much? Was each of them so thoroughly ambitious in his diocese? Perhaps this is the nature of the historical record: the most ambitious bishops have left the greatest traces. It may also reflect the nature of this period (as Succurro’s chapter suggests), with long-term historical trends favouring the growth of episcopal power and making it relatively easier for the bishop to assert himself. Yet

surely there were bishops (bishops whose existence we ought to note) who did little for their position in the diocese, whose time in office was a holding pattern, whose local interactions were unremarkable, who did not strategise or who did so only half-heartedly?

Episcopal Power and Local Society may not have ‘solved’ locality, but it certainly advances the discussion. The volume demonstrates the manifold ways in which the topic might be handled: it is well-judged and timely. It highlights the excellent work being done on the bishop and his diocese, just as it underlines the continuing need for a clearer comparative framework for discussing the local lives of bishops.

Notes

1. E. le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294-1324*, trans. B. Bray (London, 1978).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For example, K. L. French, *The People of the Parish: Community Life in a Late Medieval English Diocese* (Philadelphia, PA, 2012).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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