

Military Communities in Late Medieval England. Essays in Honour of Andrew Ayton

Review Number: 2274

Publish date: Thursday, 9 August, 2018

Editor: Gary P. Baker

Craig Lambert

David Simpkin

ISBN: 978-1783272983

Date of Publication: 2018

Price: £60.00

Pages: 324pp.

Publisher: Boydell Press

Publisher url: <https://boydellandbrewer.com/military-communities-in-late-medieval-england-hb.html>

Place of Publication: Woodbridge

Reviewer: Christopher Allmand

A word still a little unfamiliar to some historians (although not to those with a social science background) and not yet to be found in every dictionary, prosopography has made its influence felt through the work of a number of historians, notably Andrew Ayton, the recipient of this collection of essays, whose contribution to the development of the possibilities offered by the method's techniques has been all important.

The systematic study of the details of hundreds, perhaps thousands of military careers may not be everybody's idea of what the work of the historian should be. However, there can be little doubt that certain kinds of history can benefit enormously from the application of such methods. Granted the relative completeness of some categories of England's public records, it is possible to collect and collate them for meaningful analysis. Among the method's advantages is the ability of the evidence to bring historical personnel together, to draw parallels and make contrasts, and to establish social, familial and geographical links between individuals and groups, thus facilitating the study of patterns of social movement (to take but one example) which might otherwise be an enormous, if not an almost impossible task for the historian, working on his/her own, to achieve. The results are the outcome of team work at its most productive.

The second word to appear several times in these papers is 'dynamics', meaning (in this case) the 'force'/'influence'/'factors' which lay behind the creation and functioning of 14th-century English armies. What dynamics helped create military power in the reigns of the three Edwards? In a useful introduction the book's editors set out Ayton's methodology, founded on the insistence that the medieval army, its nature and function, should not be conceptualised in the way we understand the modern army to be. A 14th-century knight might have argued that the army was an organism or extension of the social fabric of the time, with the duty of serving society. What factors might assist in the raising such an army? Essentially these were 'social'. Rank meant lordship, often of a territorial kind, which implied the lord's ability to use his tenants as a source of manpower in time of war. It was thus that the existing socio-economic system provided a solid basis for the army, largely raised and led by the gentry.

It is this kind of conclusion, based upon the systematic consideration of surviving evidence covering lengthy periods of time, which the evidence invites. Upon such work depended the conclusion that the army developed out of the country's social fabric, of which it formed an essential part. Thus the most important public responsibility shouldered by the gentry was that of ensuring the defence of the kingdom and the rights of the king abroad. Peter Coss reminds us of the role played by the retinue, so important in the private and military life of the period. Men bound themselves by indenture to serve a master in time of both peace and war, thus helping to create the social unit (in effect, the social glue) which, multiplied many times over, would give coherence to the larger groups of which that unit would eventually form part when on campaign. The indenture, a means of securing peace and order in an unruly society, also had a vital role to play when the country was at war.

With Peter Coss' pivotal essay on the military community and the emergence of the gentry in the 14th century we enter the world so effectively developed by the researches of Andrew Ayton. Coss spells out the important observation that Ayton 'avoids seeing military history as a discrete area of life but looks rather at the interaction between military and 'civilian' dimensions'. This is surely a step towards accepting that much of what is today described as *military* history is, in reality, a form of *social* history when placed within the broader context which should include the 'civilian dimension', giving greater significance to that well known pair, 'war *and* society'. It was within the context of war that the gentry rose to the fore, their contribution to the good of English society being the military *service* which they offered to that society.

Other factors, social and economic, bound men together when temporarily outside their normal environment. War service with and under one's lord played its part in developing a social bond between leaders and their tenants. Looking at the broader picture, the days spent on the march from the initial point of muster (Warrington, perhaps, for men from the north-west of England) to the place of embarkation could help create a common spirit which might be exploited when it came to facing the enemy in battle. The importance of being prepared for the day when the call to arms might come was incorporated into the day-to-day social foundations of military service which emerge from David Simpkin's paper. Seeking to describe the important role played by English knights-bachelor (who existed between c. 1180 and 1420), he demonstrates that it was the part which they played in recruitment which gave their position, both social and military, its importance. Half the English army which confronted the Scots at Falkirk in 1298 was raised by knights-bachelor who, while recruiting for others, performed the same service for themselves, creating small retinues which, it can be argued, were more coherent and effective in action for being based on stability and continuity of service. By the 14th century their importance was waning, as the organization of war was re-formed, and professional recruiters with less local knowledge and influence began to take their place, reflecting important changes, such as the growth in size of the indentured retinue, then taking place.

Andy King's essay gives flesh to some of the generalisations made by other contributors. His subject, Sir Henry de Beaumont, was a Frenchman who made his career and reputation serving three English kings between 1297 and 1340. Land and titles, rewards for service to the crown, mostly close to where English and Scottish spheres of influence clashed, gave him territorial rights which needed to be closely defended. Large estates should have enabled Beaumont to raise greater numbers to serve in the retinues which he brought into royal service. Yet he may have had difficulty in maintaining the loyalty of those retained. Perhaps it was because he had little of a 'core' team to build around; perhaps because he was a 'foreigner'; perhaps, too, because he had a reputation of being a 'difficult' character, who quarrelled easily with others. Influential, too, may have been the development which saw landowners ceding power to raise forces to the growing number of recruiters, a development which allowed men to exercise choice in deciding which leader they would serve. Was there as much stability and continuity in the raising of retinues as David Simpkin has suggested? Whatever the answer given, the fact that the king's army reflected, in different ways, the country's social system was still inescapable.

The introduction of pay created a change in the dynamic linking the crown (as employer) and those who accepted money for services given in time of war. As Matthew Raven emphasises, new dynamics created

new problems. Paid service could change the character of the bond uniting crown and nobility at such, often crucial, moments. One problem reflected the need to collect sufficient money to pay those fighting for the king. The difficulties which a shortage of cash created for Edward III around the year 1340 are well known. The need for the crown to find the money separated it from many who might otherwise have supported it. Those such as Hugh Courtenay, earl of Devon, who did not enjoy large revenues from their estates, and had to rely on the king's favour to be assigned the revenues required to pay their soldiers, faced a major problem. Raven argues that the practical difficulties arising from the mutual dependence of king and nobility, particularly in time of war, should be regarded as another aspect of the dynamic regulating the distribution of moneys needed for the furtherance of the conflict with France. The departure of some of the earl of Northampton's men from the siege of Calais in 1347, in this case resulting from the failure to produce and distribute the moneys concerned, underlined the significance of 'the crucial link between provision of cash and retinue retention'. The dynamic created by a major new development, such as payment for service, might easily create significant problems for those trying to translate ideas into practice.

Clifford Roger's persuasive essay, 'The symbolic meaning of Edward III's Garter badge', stresses the different interpretations given by historians to both the badge itself and to the motto which accompanies it. While there may be some truth in the familiar story (dating from the 15th century) of the king picking up a lady's garter while joking that 'shamed be he who thinks ill of it', Rogers asks the reader to consider other evidence. He points out that in the mid-14th century the garter was more commonly associated with a male user than with a female, thus casting doubt on the veracity of the story. The shape of the garter, 'broad, decorated with precious metals, and with a hanging end', more like a belt than a shoelace as in the case of a woman's garter, strongly suggests that it was intended for use by a male. More significant is the fact that, on founding the Order of the Band (*Orden de la Banda*) in 1330, Alphonso XI of Castile had given his new knights a symbol of their membership of what was intended to be an elite order. The *Band* signified more than a simple badge of honour. The intention behind it was not dissimilar to that which supported the idea of the indenture for mutual assistance and defence, in that it bound or linked knights to their sovereign and to one another. Members of the order were expected to give one another support, and to uphold the English cause, just as a garter 'upheld' a stocking. Edward III, fully aware of the advantages to be gained from emphasising chivalric display, chose that object because a garter, or *banda*, was intended to give support, just as the knights of the new order he was founding would support him as he pursued his rights in France. The knights could be seen as members of a special kind of royal retinue of limited personnel, each knight chosen by the king himself largely for his military prowess and/or experience.

Sir Robert Knolles's expedition into France in the autumn of 1370, studied by Gary Baker, was remarkable for certain changes which would be associated with it. The most notable of these was the upsetting of the traditional pay structure, which reflected the financial difficulties being experienced at the time. In the place of a daily rate, Knolles was paid at a flat rate, his men receiving wages at twice the usual rate, but only for three months. Thereafter they were to fend for themselves. Knolles was the first non-earl to be given charge of an expedition into France, the low rate of pay for which he worked underlining this fact. Furthermore, the command he was given was shared with three others, appointed as if to compensate not for his lack of military experience (of which he had plenty), but for his relatively low social standing as a member of the gentry, in an age when status was an important social matter. In the event, neither the financial arrangements nor the quadripartite command proved successful. Neither would be repeated in the years to come. Knolles was accused of sacrificing military interests to those of personal gain. Both his leadership and his apparent greed met much opposition.

There were other areas of conflict than those of France and the Low Countries which drew the attention of England's military community. One such, considered by Adrian Bell and Tony Moore, was the Baltic region. Armed forces sent there were recruited in much the same way, with a leading magnate drawing upon existing tenurial, social, even quasi-feudal links. They were to take part in the conflict being pursued in the Baltic area by the Teutonic Knights. When once again recruiting for the war against France, these same men could use networks, developed on campaigns in areas such as the Baltic and Asia Minor, to good effect. Not unnaturally, men preferred to go on campaign with those whom they already knew, or whose leadership they

had experienced. 'Horizontal' links, formed between men who had fought together in the past, could therefore be as important for future employment as those based upon 'vertical' ones. Many different reasons, it is stressed, brought and kept men together. Increasingly, these might choose under whose leadership they would fight. The system was becoming increasingly flexible.

Turning to consider the role played by the Cinque Ports in the long war against France, it is fair to ask whether the period 1330 to 1450 was one of decline or not. Over the years the verdict appears to have become increasingly gloomy, although to see the Ports as being in a terminal state would be wrong. The fact remains that there was great value in what the Ports could offer the English crown as it became increasingly involved in war overseas. They constituted important bases (whose inhabitants were brought up in a sea-faring tradition) from which to attack the ports and mainland of northern France. At the same time, they provided England with ships and much experience of life at sea, valuable in the defence of English ports and coastline. While changes in activity in the Ports towards greater involvement in naval war would, Gary Baker argues, eventually lead to the decline of the Ports as the war against France turned increasingly into a naval war, so Craig Lambert argues that while there was decline in the Ports, this was a nuanced, not a general, decline.

Much emphasis in this collection of essays is placed on the contribution of 'communities' or groups to the dynamics of England's involvement in war. Seen in this light, it is possible to see how far and how successfully the coastal communities of southern England could create an ambience which encouraged the recruitment and training of men ready to pursue the war against France at sea. Lambert shows how these coastal communities made their contribution to naval raids launched from their ports, to the wider needs of defence, as well as to the requirements of transportation. Several families in Sandwich helped to bind that community together; some of their members represented the town in Parliament, where they took part in discussions involving the interests of both king and country as a whole. Active participation in war helped advance the status within the community of both families and individuals. Lambert argues that continued naval activity in this period 'meant that the residents of the Ports were highly militarised'. The long and valued experience of many aspects of war at sea meant that the men of the Ports, united by their common experience, had much to offer those who, higher in the social order or as members of Parliament, had important decisions to make regarding English policy, military or commercial, in time of active conflict.

The final paper, in which Anne Curry takes readers into the 15th century, is a useful demonstration of the value of detailed garrison lists in calculating the number of English soldiers involved in the major effort to block a French offensive into territory held by the English in Normandy in the mid 1430s. Whereas in October 1434 these had accounted for 4366 men, by the spring and early summer of 1436, Paris having recently fallen to the French king's forces, the number had risen to 6845, an increase of 63 per cent. In these figures can be read the perceived need to increase the size of garrisons, particularly that of Rouen, the effective centre of English authority from the summer of 1436 onwards. Likewise, the move to increase the size of certain garrisons, notably those guarding towns along the river Seine, reflects the fear which the English had of what might happen if the French were to achieve control of the river which, snake-like, linked Paris to Rouen. While the high numbers were not maintained for long, they none the less reflected the concern felt by those in charge of royal policy in the early months of 1436. Curry suggests that the records are clear evidence of the exceptional level of militarization which the English armies could achieve in what must have appeared to be a moment of serious crisis.

The quality of *Festschriften* may vary a great deal. In this case the editors have managed to hold their contributors to a broad, central theme, often closely interpreted. Those who consult this valuable collection will learn not only how prosopography can enhance our understanding of the forces available to 14th-century English kings, but also how English armies grew 'organically' out of the country's social system.

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2274>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/298001>