

UCLA

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title

The Household Knights of King John (review)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1233x5wc>

Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 31(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

Author

Over, Kristen Lee

Publication Date

2000-10-01

Peer reviewed

REVIEWS

S. D. Church, *The Household Knights of King John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999) 177 pp.

Assembling and building on previously published articles,⁵ S. D. Church offers a compact study of King John's household knights. The result of a meticulous "trawl" through contemporary documentary evidence, *The Household Knights of King John* confirms the importance of household knights for both the defense as well as for the administration and governance of the realm. Individual knights emerge from this study as much more than warriors, and the most prominent and successful of them rose to positions as organizers and leaders of wars, paymasters, negotiators, counselors, royal wards, "sheriffs, castellans, diplomats, and custodians of escheated lands" (13). Church here echoes J. E. A. Jolliffe by insisting on the distinctive positions enjoyed by England's royal household knights.⁶ But Jolliffe avoided identifying more than a few of John's household knights, arguing that they were not distinguished by any formal status. Church in contrast provides extensive lists, examining surviving muster rolls among other sources to show that John's household knights were indeed recognized by contemporaries as a separate group with a privileged relationship to the king. Subsequent chapters continue to stress their distinctive and essential function in John's government, detailing the multiple roles entrusted to the *milites de familia regis* by focusing on questions of their recruitment (chapter 2), function (chapter 3), remuneration (chapter 3), and loyalty (chapter 4). His fifth chapter traces John's household knights into the minority of Henry III, and in his final chapter Church assembles information dispersed throughout the book to reconstruct five individual careers in John's service—saving his readers "a laborious trawl through the index" (134). The result is a narrowly focused, exhaustively researched examination of the knights themselves, one that can contribute considerably to current opinion on "Angevin governance in general and John's style of kingship in particular" (152).

John's knights—the visible corps of over one hundred fighting men on which John relied to protect his person, showcase his military strength, and bolster the administrative arm of his rule—were decidedly not baronial. Church identifies only eleven knights of baronial status to have served—and only three were from the north, the seat of the rebellion during John's reign.⁷ None of these baronial knights remained in John's household for long, and none was significantly rewarded for his service (36–37). Largely underrepresented in

⁵Notably, "The knights of the household of King John: a question of numbers" in *Thirteenth-Century England IV: Proceedings of the Newcastle upon Tyne Conference, 1991*, ed. P. R. Coss and S. D. Lloyd (Woodbridge 1992) 151–165; and "The rewards of royal service in the household of King John: a dissenting opinion," *English Historical Review* 110 (1995) 277–302.

⁶J. E. A. Jolliffe, *Angevin Kingship* (2nd ed., London 1963).

⁷Church finds that this geographic exclusion applies to the men of knightly status as well—very few knights of leading northern magnates made it into John's household. Church hints that this may have had some repercussions: "When both great financial and political gains were to be made through contact with the king, exclusion of the baronial elite and their representatives, the knights, must have caused much resentment" (37).

barons, John's household retinue similarly lacked the foreigners so decried in the Magna Carta.⁸ Though *alienes* formed a "significant minority" of John's military retinue, foreigners in the royal household likewise failed to reap the benefits of significant royal patronage.⁹ The majority of John's household knights—and the majority of those rewarded—were Englishmen "of the middling sort" (36). These are the men who, both in and out of wartime, accumulated wealth, power, and social status, and John bestowed the bulk of his patronage on the "lesser of God's creatures" whom he could control with the promise of rich reward. Men like Geoffrey Luttrell and John Russell held little to no land before entering the ranks of John's trusted *familiars*. Their loyalty and lengthy service earned them wealthy brides and numerous land grants, "catapulting" both of their families into the baronial elite (137). As Church explains, "the knight who owed everything to the largess of his master would provide a dependable custodian much preferable to an independent-minded magnate" (50).

So Church's evidence isolates a notable trend in John's kingship, a policy of extending royal influence in the localities by the strategic placement of trusted household knights. When not fighting the king's wars, household knights became custodians and guardians of land, recurrently acting as royal spokesmen and representatives, the king's officials, his reporters, his "eyes and ears" (57, 59, 60).¹⁰ This "extended arm" ultimately fails to support the king, however, and it is only when read in tandem with other accounts of John's reign—those of J. C. Holt and Warren,¹¹ for instance—that Church's book can be used to explore the baronial discontent and rebellion of John's later years. Church catalogues strategic and lucrative offices conferred on John's household knights, but rarely does he identify those necessarily displaced to free up the post.¹² In this system one man's gain is another's loss, and John's penchant for rewarding trusted members of his household retinue with power- and land-based patronage dismembered large baronial holdings (chapter 3). But this

⁸Church lists twenty-four, roughly twenty-five percent of the royal household knights (34).

⁹The terms of the Magna Carta make it plain how resented these men [*alienes*] had become by 1215," yet "if John's *milites alieni* were a cause of discontent it is certain that this was not a result of the rewards which they received" (34, 35). The "brood" so hated by John's barons were, according to Church, not members of the royal household but rather captains of John's *routiers* (35). These were the men who led John's northern expedition against the rebel barons in 1216—what Church terms a "Flemish affair" as opposed to the "English affair" of the Irish campaign of 1210 (112–114).

¹⁰Unlike a W. L. Warren, Church never refers to these men as the king's "henchmen" or his "strong-arm agents": W. L. Warren, *King John* (3rd ed., New Haven 1997) 189, 140.

¹¹J. C. Holt, *The Northerners: a Study in the Reign of King John* (Oxford 1961).

¹²Favoritism extended to Falkes de Bréauté and Gerard de Athies is in Warren's account persecution and harassment of William Marshall and William de Breosa. "John began harassing tactics . . . Marshal lost the posts of sheriff of Gloucester and custodian of Cardigan and the Forest of Dean. Briouze was replaced as bailiff of Glamorgan. In their stead John moved in two of his foreign mercenaries, Gerard d'Athée and Fawkes de Breauté" (185). Church mentions Athies only as custodian of Bristol castle (48, 148); Falk as John's steward and sheriff. Church does not mention John's destruction of Breosa, or the starvation of his wife and son while in John's custody.

comes through only subtly and indirectly in Church's account. The volume of such patronage reveals the extent to which John redispensed wealth and status to predominantly landless knights.¹³ Thus the king's *familiars*, in Church's account, were knights, not barons and magnates, and the nature of John's rewards—bestowing as they did “considerable economic opportunities, political power, and social status”—created a privileged arm of royal support dependent solely on the king for prosperity (96). Such “unwise” exercise of a previously effective system of reward leads John into civil war.¹⁴

The barons were not alone in their discontent, and the spread of rebellion from the barony into the ranks of the royal knights seems to take Church by surprise. True, ties of kinship and local interests can explain the defection of several of John's knights to the rebel side, and many of the household knights had gained land in areas of large-scale rebellion. But Church is baffled, for instance, by the defection of John of Bassingbourne (“the most surprising man to succumb to the influences of his neighbours”), whose land holdings “in no way explain his extraordinary decision” (107). Discontent with John is not an explanation explored by Church. Dissent here is rather “sordid self-interest,” and “baser instinct” fuels the desertion of a third of the royal household knights, making traitors out of those who enjoyed the most royal favor (109).¹⁵ Church appears outraged by this “remarkable picture of disloyalty,” shocked at the mass betrayal of so generous a benefactor: “. . . these men who had supped the king's wine, eaten his food, received his *benevolentia*, rejected their master and chose instead to look after their own and their families' interests” (111).

All of this smacks of misplaced sympathy for the king, especially in light of broader accounts of John's reign. There is no hint here of John's “sinister reputation,” his murderous temper and excessive suspicion. Nothing like Warren's portrait of a generous but merciless king, “secretive and suspicious, oversensitive to the merest flicker of opposition, relentless in revenge, cruel and mocking when he had men in his clutch.”¹⁶ Indeed, from Church's study little comes through of John other than his belief that patronage—however carelessly and unjustly dispensed—would ensure loyalty. Thus, though admittedly outside the stated scope of Church's study, this book would benefit from a consideration of John's failure to retain loyalty and to appease dissent. His “extended arm” of government was effectively stripped of Englishmen in his moment of greatest domestic crisis, and this essential failure screams of much more than a

¹³Before the civil war nearly one half of John's household knights acquired a well-dowered wife (88). During his reign, John distributed twenty-eight wardships to sixteen knights (90), and forty-six knights received escheated land. The civil war provided a glut of confiscated properties, and between 1214 and 1216 thirty-four knights received eighty-four grants of escheat (90–91, 100).

¹⁴Church suggests as much by citing Holt: “John's refusal to dispense his patronage to those outside the royal orbit contributed to the events of 1215” (97).

¹⁵This number is uncertain. “During the course of the confrontation with his rebels, John lost the support of almost a third of his household knights” (97–98). But a few pages later: “A sixth of John's household knights deserted to the rebel faction” (104). Presumably, not all of those who withdrew their support actually went over the barons' side.

¹⁶Warren (n. 10 above) 191.

“self-interested” household retinue.¹⁷ But the rebellion is here chalked vaguely up to “powerful forces.”¹⁸ In an otherwise illuminating and useful study of documentary evidence, a reticence to criticize John’s policies, or to consider his brand of royal patronage as a perceived abuse of power, seems a notable absence in his analysis.

KRISTEN LEE OVER, Comparative Literature, UCLA

¹⁷John’s success in 1216 was in amassing such a large army of foreigners (112–114). It is diminished by his failure to avoid large-scale rebellion and civil war.

¹⁸The final sentences of the book: “Evidently, the means by which John ensured the loyalty of his household knights . . . had failed catastrophically. The forces that prompted these men into rebellion must have been very powerful indeed” (155).