

**Martin Aurell.** *The Plantagenet Empire, 1154-1224*. Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007. x + 359 pp. \$37.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-582-78439-0.



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At first glance this book seems seductively like a textbook. The straightforward title, with its clear chronological markers, promises to fill an expected place in both English and French national narratives, and its reference to a royal house meshes nicely with a traditional dynastic framework for those narratives. The rub, however, lies in the term "empire," with its obvious historiographical baggage. By crediting the Plantagenet family of Henry II and his successors, rather than the county of Anjou (as the rival designation "Angevin Empire" does) with ownership of the "empire," Martin Aurell makes his first point: the empire depended for its cohesion on the individual Plantagenet monarchs. Yet Aurell does not leave the matter there; he weaves an argument about *imperium* and the Plantagenets' use of it into every part of the work, most emphatically in its organization, which is thematic rather than chronological. Thus the work concludes not with *Magna Carta*, the regency of William Marshall, or the coming of age of Henry III, but with the Becket Controversy, which of course dominated the second decade of seven under consideration. Such a structure may make the book somewhat opaque

to beginning undergraduates, but certainly enhances its value as an original contribution to its subject.

That Aurell's book can even be termed original is a great compliment, for all the greatest historians of high medieval England have trod this ground, so much so that it would be self-indulgent to list them all here. The reign of Henry II in particular has been the focal point of most inquiries into the origins of English administrative and legal institutions, despite the efforts of such scholars as C. Warren Hollister to call attention to the achievements of Henry I, and of the various Anglo-Saxonists who sought to downplay the extent to which the Anglo-Normans and Angevins improved upon earlier English administration.[1] Aurell, however, seeks not origins, but the political and cultural meaning of the exercise of royal power in the High Middle Ages. In this regard, Aurell aligns himself with Marc Bloch and J. E. A. Jolliffe, who pioneered a "re-invented political history, where events are less important than analyses of power, and ... the history of ideas is extended into the study of symbols and political theory" (p.

10).[2] In a study of royal power and its representation, the term "empire," recognized as cognate with the Latin *imperium* and *imperator*, is indeed valuable. Against historians who have rejected the term "Plantagenet [or Angevin] Empire" as either anachronism or exaggeration, Aurell argues that modern definitions ought not "to discredit terminology which medieval sources openly and freely use" (p. 3).

For Aurell, then, the Plantagenet *imperium* refers to both authority and geography, and practically speaking encompasses the extension of that authority across an unusually wide geographical range. Authority, as he shows in the second half of the book, was understood differently in different parts of the realm and by different constituencies. Thus, the title gives the author free reign to discuss both the ideological firmness and the practical deficiencies of Plantagenet power.

Aurell divides his work into two parts: "Government and Royal Will," and "For and Against the King." This allows him to outline the ideological and institutional foundations of the Plantagenet rule, before demonstrating how the nobility and clergy reacted against its innovations, and its broad claims to jurisdiction. Drawing on recent work on prosopography and royal administration, Aurell begins with a magisterial discussion of the royal household, focusing almost entirely on the reign of Henry II. The king himself is never far from the discussion, but by beginning with royal officials (clerical and lay alike), Aurell places him at the center of a complex web of ambition, failure, literacy, and administrative acumen. He judiciously avoids endowing the medieval terms for "court" with too much transparency, and instead emphasizes its conceptual instability and geographical mobility.

Although the cast of characters here is rather standard--Gerald of Barry, Walter Map, Peter of Blois, John of Salisbury, et al.--Aurell views the oft-studied anecdotes and satires of court life in a fresh and unusually rich way. Without resorting

to jargon, he introduces not only the way the clerks at court operated the machinery of government (about which there are few details here), but the way that the court made and broke careers, arbitrated manners, and served as a laboratory for revisions to clerical morality. This is also one of the few studies of the subject to take seriously the religiosity of the court (especially on pp. 79-81).

Aurell then turns his attention to "Plantagenet Ideology," that is, the set of representations constructed around the monarch to legitimate and reinforce his power. He makes a smooth transition from the previous section, for it was the elite class of learned clerks who sold the image of the monarch to his subjects. The justification of power was not its own end; rather, it sprang from the fiscal demands on the monarchy, which were sometimes novel and therefore unpopular. Aurell's approach here is marvelously interdisciplinary as he ranges over literature, epistolography, art, and architecture. All the foundations of Plantagenet power find their way into what the author sees no anachronism in terming "propaganda": the learning of the court that turned the king into a "literate knight"; his martial prowess as equestrian warrior; sacral kingship of a fashion demonstrated, with varying degrees of success, through a variety of ritual; and his historical relation to kings of the past, especially the legendary Arthur.

This section moves with a light touch, as for example in an instructive discussion of Plantagenet ritual. While most scholars have interpreted the Plantagenet tendency to fail at rituals (as for example, when Henry II successfully cured scrofula but left the patient paralyzed), and their paucity of crown wearings, as examples of a fatal lack of sacral authority, Aurell sees the ritual of crown wearing in rather pragmatic terms: "The crown wearings--whose theocratic implications were all too obvious, had ... no practical purpose in imposing a lawful authority which was already widely accepted" (p. 119). Plantagenet rule operat-

ed in a transitional phase of royal ideology between earlier notions of Christomimetic kingship and later theories of royal absolutism. This book makes perfectly clear the contradictory and fluid nature of twelfth-century kingship, so it is odd that occasionally Aurell takes some rather slippery sources as face value. For example, often accepting uncritically the word of sycophantic authors, he argues that Henry II was a vigorous patron of Latin and vernacular literature (pp. 99-100), when the work of Walter Schirmer and Ulrich Broich (here cited in another context), and more recently of Karen Broadhurst, has revealed relatively few instances of direct patronage by either Henry or his queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine.[3]

The second section of the book, "For and Against the King," relates in turn the struggles of the aristocracy and the clergy to resist Plantagenet authority. The subtitle of the chapter on aristocracy, "Between rebellion and submission," points to Aurell's continuing use of an elastic notion of *imperium*. This study benefits greatly from its use of recent scholarship showing that the twelfth-century nobility was still being defined legally; like the royal court, it was in a transitional phase. By the same token, the gradual mitigation of the knightly warrior ethos by chivalric morality was just as important to political life as the rival jurisdictional claims of kings and their barons. The claims the barons embedded in *Magna Carta* in 1215 were an *ad hoc* response to the effectiveness of Plantagenet authority in England, rather than a confident assertion of ancient and established custom. Aurell thus avoids a teleological reading of the Charter (which itself receives rather scant attention—a detail that might disappoint undergraduates looking for straightforward definitions), and instead presents it as an instance in which both the contradictions and possibilities of contemporary power were realized. Moreover, the barons who brought the king to heel at Runnymede were also those whom Henry II and Richard I had most effectively integrated into the royal administrative apparatus. Aurell shows this

regional distinctiveness of the nobility through an elegant and persuasive tour of the sphere of Plantagenet influence. His subtitles neatly summarize his argument: "Aquitaine: permanent rebellion"; "Greater Anjou and Brittany: uneasy submission"; "Normandy and the British Isles: obedience to the tough master."

Aurell concludes with a highly original and provocative study of the Becket affair, one that manages to crystallize a number of ecclesiastical problems rather than simply the jurisdictional issues surrounding the prosecution of criminous clerks. Rejecting past theories, such as that of W. L. Warren, which held that personality conflicts drove the dispute between Archbishop Thomas Becket of Canterbury and Henry II, he plots the ideology and events surrounding it on a broad grid of cultural meaning. After a thorough introduction to the wars of polemic by partisans of king and archbishop, in which he effectively synthesizes the work of Beryl Smalley, Charles Duggan, and others, he embarks on an extraordinary account of the murder itself, which he sees as the culmination of a series of rituals.[4] The first is Becket's carrying a processional cross, to the horror of Henry II and his partisans, at the council of Northampton, the second the kiss of peace proposed between Becket and Henry in 1169 and 1170, and finally his murder itself. Everything from the processions at Northampton to the location of Becket's wounds (nearly all on his head, rife with symbolism given contemporary corporate theories of church and state), take on immense meaning.

The book hangs together beautifully, with details such as the Plantagenet brothers' inability to get along being revisited in momentous episodes over a hundred pages later in the context of *Magna Carta*. The second half of the book offers exemplary case studies of the argument presented in the first. I would quibble with the notes, which are entirely in short form with no proper bibliography. It strikes me that an undergraduate, or

even a beginning graduate student, might have difficulty tracking down the following reference: "BAUTIER, 'Conclusions,' 'Empire Plantagenêt'" ( p. 139). Some might object that its broadly cultural approach and lack of narrative structure might detract from its usefulness as an introductory text, and the work admittedly tells us little about the years after 1215, but as an exploration of political power in the twelfth century, the book is masterful. I shall soon be rewriting several lectures based on what it has taught me.

#### Notes

[1]. C. Warren Hollister, *Henry I*, ed. Amanda Clark Frost (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001); the debate over the relative merits of Anglo-Saxon and Norman administration is summarized in Marjorie Chibnall, *The Debate on the Norman Conquest* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999).

[2]. Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, trans. J. E. Anderson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973); J. E. A. Joliffe, *Angevin Kingship*, 2nd ed. (London: A. & C. Black, 1963).

[3]. Walter F. Schirmer and Ulrich Broich, *Studien zum literarischen Patronat im England des 12. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne and Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1962); Karen Broadhurst, "Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine: Patrons of Literature in French?" *Viator* 27 (1996): 53-84.

[4]. W. L. Warren, *Henry II* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973); Beryl Smalley, *The Becket Conflict and the Schools: A Study of Intellectuals in Politics* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973); Charles Duggan, "The Becket Dispute and the Criminous Clerks," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 35 (1962): 1-31.

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