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London in the Later Middle Ages: Government and People, 1200-1500

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Caroline M. Barron's book on London traces the history England's largest medieval city, including its governmental structure, relations with the crown, its economy and guilds and its physical environment. The study is largely institutional and administrative in focus; the city's society and political involvements are introduced by way of example, but do not occupy the main thrust of the book's outline. Administrative and institutional history have fallen out of favour, and that is an unfortunate loss for the historical profession. Barron's book is a wonderful read, and the epitome of fine historical research and clarity of explanation. It is a reminder that we have ignored the eloquence that great writing on administrative history can achieve. Like T. F. T. Tout, she has selected the right examples, added personalities and elucidated a complex history that has been difficult to access. Her mastery of primary source materials, both from London and from the Public Record Office, is breathtaking. No one else knows the records of London better than Barron, and this is obvious as one looks at the careful documentation that has gone into building this great study of London.

By bringing the examination of London up to sixteenth century, Barron completes a discussion of London's administrative and judicial structure begun in the introductions to various volumes of London records edited and translated by R. T. Riley, R. R. Sharpe, A. H. Thomas, P. E. Jones, Helena M. Chew, William Kellaway and many others. Until now, historians of London have relied on these learned introductions, and also on

two previous monographs: Gwyn A. Williams, *Medieval London. From Commune to Capital* (1) and Christopher Brooke, *London 800?1216: The Shaping of the City*.(2) But Barron?s book clearly lays out the whole structure, whether for researchers in London history, or for anyone interested in the development of a medieval city?s practical compromises with political realities and with traditions of law.

Barron begins with the symbiotic relationship of the city to the crown. The city could not exist without the licence and charter of the crown. London derived its right to govern itself from royal grant and that right was constantly endangered; the crown could revoke the charter at any time. In the baronial wars of the thirteenth century, the chronicler and eyewitness Arnald fitz-Thedmar recounted the shaky ground on which London stood in supporting the rebels against Henry III. Again in the reign of Richard II London ran afoul of national politics. These are but two instances of royal displeasure. However, London paid heavily for these lapses in loyalty with large gifts. As a type of propitiation, Londoners also offered the kings and queens pageants and parades celebrating coronations, weddings, victories and reconciliations between the crown and the city. The crown also relied on London for political support, as in the insurrection against Edward II, and, probably more importantly, for financial levies. Some demands for money were routine, but many were made under the threat of the removal of the city?s charter. Londoners paid to keep their freedoms.

The city needed the royal approval as much as kings needed London?s wealth and power. London needed to preserve its self-government and the freedom to elect its sheriffs and mayors. The mayor took his oath of office before the king or his representative and, for the most part, elections remained free. The king also allowed the city to manage urban property, goods and chattels, and debts in its own courts, but the administration of royal justice was not independent, and the king reserved the right to visit his justice on them through an eyre, which he did in 1321. That eyre was a special judicial review of the way that London courts and officials were handling cases that related to royal justice. To keep royal intervention at bay, the city was careful to maintain order within its boundaries. For instance, in 1384, when John Constantine threatened to cause a riot, city officials immediately tried and executed him, getting royal permission to do so after the fact. But London also needed help with the regulation of foreign traders. The crown relied heavily on them for loans and gifts, but if foreigners exercised too many financial rights, they would put local merchants out of business. So the city had to seek compromise with the crown.

London maintained an infrastructure of walls, bridges, ports, adequate food and water supply, inns and eating places, markets and stalls and standard weights and measures. All these matters needed regulation, and that meant that the city had to oversee hostellers, food and drink vendors, porters who carried goods, the keepers of the weights and measures, and so on. London also had to provide courts for the redress of grievances and collection of debt. Initially the sheriffs and mayor held a piepowder court, as was typical of medieval towns and fairs, which dealt with these matters. By the late thirteenth century, however, royal statutes empowered the sheriffs and mayors to register bonds and keep rolls of debts, even giving the debtor a copy. The sheriff?s court seems to have handled larger debts (50 percent of their business involved debts of £50 or more) and been more attractive to foreign merchants. The mayor?s court attracted more business of smaller debts and gained greater prestige in the fourteenth century. Like other cities, London taxed its citizens and charged its clientele for various services, but relied on civic generosity for some of its amenities. Thus some of the larger, covered markets for the sale of cloth were individual gifts.

London was not only a large commercial city, but also a manufacturing centre. The sixteenth century shows that three-fifths of its population were involved in some sort of craft or occupation (butchers, bakers, brewers) that resulted in goods for consumption or for manufacture and sale. A valuable table in chapter 4 lists the variety of occupations in London compared with other English cities. While the information is not systematic, it is a valuable indication of the diversity of trades. London catered to a consumer society, producing fine gold and silver objects, cutlery and swords, leather goods, tableware and, later, fine furniture. It also provided professional services such as scribes and surgeons. London was also the centre for distributive trade to outlying areas of England. Fortunately, from the time of Henry I, London citizens were free of paying taxes and tolls as they traded through the countryside. By the fifteenth century, much of London's trade was with England; products made in the city, as well as imports such as wines, fine cloths and furs, were carried by London traders into the countryside.

It would have helped the reader to have some comparisons to the economies of other medieval cities. London, for instance, was not the great weaving centre that Ghent was during the same period; although there were weavers, London was not famous for its cloth. On the other hand, London was more of an administrative centre than was Ghent. Much of its profits in hostels, victualling trades, and even the consumer trade in luxuries grew out of its administrative associations. In overseas trade, citizens managed to retain control over the export of raw wool despite competition from foreigners. Compared to the rest of England, London's merchants came to dominate the export of cloth by the fifteenth century. But England always faced competition from foreign traders, particularly the Hanse, who enjoyed royal protection. Commercial rivalries led to the outbreak of violence against foreigners on several occasions.

The most valuable part of the book is part 3, which covers the functioning of the city courts, government and bureaucracy of London. Barron traces the evolution of city courts from the folkmoot to the hustling court. Her discussion of the administration of wards and the court of aldermen shows the origin of neighbourhood courts. The chapter on the annually elected officials is one of the most interesting because it shows the evolution of the offices of mayor and sheriff, noting that during the fourteenth century prestige was lost by the sheriffs and gained by the mayors. Among the new information presented in this chapter is the development of the mayor's equity court in the fifteenth century. As the political and social position of mayor improved, and as his court gained in influence, the office went to the older, most prestigious men of the city, and the office of sheriff was bestowed upon younger men and seen as a stepping stone to higher office. One has the sense that London's mayor and aldermen were constantly busy with duties involving keeping the peace and resolving disputes. In addition, they bore the brunt of ceremonial responsibilities and of paying the demands of the crown. It is not surprising, therefore, that by the fifteenth century, mayors tended to serve only one term, and aldermen were seeking respite from an expensive and time consuming office.

With the city involved in so many aspects of urban social control and regulation, it is not surprising that a civic bureaucracy arose. The recorder's office emerged in parallel with the legal profession. Although elected and a member of the aldermanry, the officer did receive pay for his work of running the hustling court. His responsibilities also often included arbitration. The chamberlain was the other major city officer. Selected by the mayor, his duties included the city finances, the court of orphans and a number of other essential matters. John Carpenter, who compiled the *Liber Albus*, and William Dunthorne, who put together the *Liber Dunthorne* in 1474, both held this office. The chamberlain had access to the various city records, and it was from these that he assembled his books. In addition to these important officers, the city had other paid civil servants.

While London had no merchant guild, the powerful guilds and companies of London came to play an increasing role in municipal politics and in staffing the offices of alderman, mayor and sheriff. Barron traces the creation of the guilds from their earliest appearance as craft guilds to livery companies. While she discusses their rivalries, she spends less time on the way in which these interacted with London politics. Instead, she traces their rise to power and their declining influence in the sixteenth century when other companies, such as the East India Company, replaced them.

The final part of the book concerns the practice of civic government. Here Barron examines population, health provisions, sections of the city, walls and building, housing and other matters pertaining to the physical environment. She accepts an estimation of London's population at 100,000 or higher, which is improbable given the sample from which it is drawn, the physical size of London and the amount of open space there. Again, a comparison with European figures would help the reader place this information in a better context; London could not have been larger than Ghent, for instance. Indeed, continental observers felt that London was a bit of a backwater. The chapter on welfare provisions includes the court of orphans, care for the poor, hospitals and alms houses. Some of these institutions were city operated, others were run by religious groups, some were private endowments and others belonged to guilds.

The research is largely based on Barron's painstaking search through the archives of London. It is a book driven by primary source research and it is a most impressive accomplishment. At times, however, the absence of a secondary, supporting literature is disappointing. One has the sense that the secondary works cited are those in Barron's library and not the product of research on recent contributions to London's history. The sections on economics and on welfare would have benefited from the inclusion of this literature. Some comparative materials would have made the book more significant as an engagement with European urban history. But that criticism aside, Barron's book is a great contribution to our understanding of London and to medieval urban history in general.

Notes

1. Gwyn A. Williams, *Medieval London. From Commune to Capital* (1963).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Christopher Brooke assisted by Gillian Keir, *London 800-1216: the Shaping of a City* (1975).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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