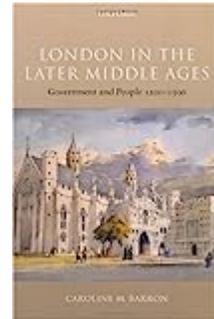




Caroline M. Barron. *London in the Late Middle Ages: Government and People, 1200-1500.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. xvi + 472 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-925777-5.



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London and Late Medieval Urban Historiography

Two key debates dominate modern scholarship of English urban history. The first considers the economic and demographic fortunes of towns, deliberating the respective “growth” or “decline” of urban centers in the two centuries after the Black Death, while the second considers the increase or decrease of oligarchic government in late medieval English cities. Both these questions are necessarily dependent upon individual case-studies, to provide detailed evidence of civic finances, the wealth of individual urban inhabitants, and the membership and methods of government. While the predominance of such isolated studies can make broad historiographical generalizations more difficult, nonetheless this form of detailed analysis is essential if we are to obtain any accurate overview of English urbanization in this period. London, as England’s leading city throughout the Middle Ages, clearly requires this form of concentrated study, although its pre-eminent position means that it was atypical in many respects. The uniquely large corpus of source material available makes detailed analysis a particularly daunting task, but in her latest book, *London in the Later Middle Ages*, Caroline Barron provides a thorough and sophisticated analysis of these numerous and complex

records.

This book concentrates upon the civic administration of the city, with particular emphasis upon relations between the city government and the Crown and the communal activities of the citizens. Throughout, the fact that the London administration exercised power within the framework of royal authority is emphasized and a convincing picture of the interdependence of monarch and city is conveyed. Nonetheless, the frictions of this relationship are highlighted and the opening section concerning the “City and Crown” in particular provides a wide-ranging yet thorough analysis of the underlying tensions and preoccupations which informed interaction between London and the monarchy (pp. 9-42). In broad terms, it is argued that between 1200 and 1500 the city became more orderly and better governed, but had less weight in terms of national politics: by 1485, it is claimed, “the great age of the city as kingmaker was past” (p. 29). Close proximity to Westminster, and hence to the royal bureaucracy and often the royal court, differentiated London from other urban centers in England, a point which has been emphasized by Doctor Gervase

Rosser.[1] Unfortunately, however, the narrow focus of Barron's work precludes lengthy comparison or discussion of this point.

In addition to discussing relations with the Crown, the book also considers the internal administration of the city. The secondary literature on late medieval town government overwhelmingly agrees that, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the size and complexity of civic bureaucracy increased. Modern scholarship often associates this with the growth of oligarchic government of late medieval urban centers. It is surprising, therefore, that there is relatively little literature available providing precise details of the scale of this change, and Barron's detailed consideration of civic officers, administrative practices, and ceremonial is undoubtedly one of the strengths of the work. In particular, it will inform the historiographical discussion of the so-called "flight from civic office" which is often cited as an indication of urban decline in the fifteenth century (see especially pp. 141-151). Before accepting the analysis provided here in terms of other cities, however, it is important to note that certain aspects of London's administrative practices were atypical: the fact that the London mayor did not receive any salary, for example, contrasts with other provincial centers, such as Norwich and Bristol, where mayors were indeed paid annually.[2]

The focus upon London's "public" life necessarily means that numerous aspects of social life in the capital are omitted, making the phrase "government and people" in the title somewhat misleading. This is largely a *male* history of London and those who did not possess the freedom also receive somewhat cursory treatment, although arrangements made by the civic government and other institutions for the poor do receive some attention. The disenfranchised, and women in particular, are often notoriously difficult to locate within governmental source material and the reader may wish to consider if this absence is a reflection of their real lack of influence, or whether the sources are misleading in this regard. Barron does consider matters such as street-cleaning and the treatment of disease which would have affected all inhabitants of London. The chapter on the urban environment is particularly useful in terms of the city topography, although it is worth noting that discussion of the London Guildhall, which was re-built in the early fifteenth century, is omitted from this work, but can be found in Bar-

ron's earlier book, *The Medieval Guildhall of London*.[3]

London in the Later Middle Ages will prove essential reading for any researcher considering English urban history, and the history of London in particular. The style is engaging and the use of the source material is extensive and carefully judged. In terms of undergraduate study, the narrow geographical focus may prove somewhat problematic for courses which are not directly related to the capital, although the overview of three centuries is impressively handled throughout. The 60-pound price tag (99.00 USD) will also put it well beyond the budgets of most students and junior researchers, although it is to be hoped that a paperback version will follow in due course. The two appendices, giving the names and occupations of civic officials, will prove an invaluable resource for those considering late medieval urban administration, or wishing to trace individual members of London's government.

London in the Later Middle Ages provides a stimulating and detailed analysis of the theory and practice of government in England's medieval capital. The book rarely, however, sets London within a broader urban context, in terms of either other English cities, or its continental counterparts. In 1339, Londoners, as Barron highlights, claimed that their city was a "mirror and example to the whole land" (p. 302), yet the interaction between the capital and other urban centers in the country receives relatively little attention. It would be churlish, however, to criticize too heavily such an accomplished and useful work: it is a rare occurrence indeed to find an academic book of nearly 500 pages that leaves the reader wanting more, and *London in the Later Middle Ages* certainly achieves that unusual but desirable feat.

Notes

[1]. G. Rosser, *Medieval Westminster, 1200-1540* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 35-41.

[2]. W. Hudson and J. C. Tingley, eds. *The Records of the City of Norwich* (2 vols. London and Norwich, 1906), vol. 2: p. 98; L. Toulmin Smith, ed. *The Maire of Bristow Is Kalendar by Robert Ricart* Camden Society New Series 5 (1871), pp. 79, 81.

[3]. C.M. Barron, *The Medieval Guildhall of London* (London: Corporation of London, 1974).

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