



The King's Bishops: The Politics of Patronage in England and Normandy, 1066-1216,

Everett U. Crosby

(London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Review by: Paul Webster

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Patronage: a word one lecturer banned from student essays in the late 1990s. High-status political interaction was deemed more complex, and the term imprecise, in assessing political society in medieval England. Fashions in historical writing change. In *The King's Bishops*, Everett Crosby explores 'one of the oldest engines of social mobility and control' (1) in the context of the Anglo-Norman elite. The reader is promised 'the first detailed, comparative study of patronage as an instrument of power in the relations between the kings and bishops in England and Normandy during the century and a half after the [Norman] Conquest' (back-cover).

The book sets out its aims in a short introduction, followed by four chapters exploring the work's broad themes. This is an analysis of power and the relationship between church and state. The king dominated the appointment of bishops: 'In the beginning was the word of the king' (17). He needed to do so to maintain control. Bishops were not just men of the cloth. Their office came with a landed inheritance, local and judicial authority, and a military role. When they died, this reverted to the crown. Kings were therefore keen to make appointments that reinforced, not separated, royal and ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Bishoprics (seventeen in England and seven in Normandy) were relatively scarce but valuable assets. Unsurprisingly, vacancies increasingly prompted a flurry of diplomatic activity. Money often changed hands, but the cost to the king was modest, because of the value of the bishop's inheritance. From the royal point of view, the maintenance of authority was paramount, and if kings had an ecclesiastical policy, it was not a consistently pursued programme, but rather 'determined by custom based on self-interest, and ... developed according to the exigencies of the moment' (28).

Crosby acknowledges that 'bishops served collectively' (3), but highlights the value of studying them as individuals, to reveal the 'inner workings' (6) of the church, through analysis of 'the thoughts and actions of the men involved' (5). The difficulties of achieving balanced biographies are acknowledged. Medieval writers constructed an image of the ideal prelate, creating a nigh-unachievable standard for a group who were also the king's men. Crosby therefore suggests a more profitable approach than the 'sharp distinction between the good bishop in his diocese, and the bad bishop in the *curia*' (13). Instead, he asks: 'how did so many of them maintain their spiritual integrity while they remained loyal to the monarch?' (14) Bishops came from a variety of backgrounds, and 'it will not do' to brand a group with the tag *curialis*: 'once a bishop, also a baron, and none was immune from feudal obligations or royal demands' (37).

In turn, those appointed often promoted and advanced the interests of a host of relatives. In this sense, *The King's Bishops* is as much a study of nepotism as of patronage. Here, Crosby avoids being judgemental. This was a natural phenomenon in the twelfth-century, with power centred in the hands of leading families. It did not have to involve rewards for immediate relatives, but in many cases a cluster of sons, brothers, cousins, and nephews reaped offices, livings and other rewards from their relatives' promotion to episcopal office.

The meat of the book lies in chapters five and six, considering 'Structures of Power', first in England, then in Normandy. Crosby's coverage does not extend to include Anglo-Norman and Anglo-Angevin bishops in Wales and Ireland. Nonetheless, he presents a wealth of detailed research. After opening respectively with the archiepiscopal sees of Canterbury and Rouen, the chapters proceed alphabetically by bishopric, discussing each bishop in turn and exploring the process of election, the background of the successful candidate and any rivals, the king's role, bishops' connections with him, and the provision appointees made for their kinsmen. This is set in the context of the immediate political circumstances that shaped careers and episcopal relations with kings: the Norman Conquest, the crises involving Archbishops Anselm and Becket, the disputed royal succession between King Stephen and the Empress Matilda, and the effects of King John's efforts to manage episcopal elections. Crosby identifies a diverse range of men, each responding according to their own view of the priorities of the political moment. The themes introduced earlier in the volume are developed and reinforced in individual context. Even St Hugh of Lincoln had no difficulty advancing his relatives within his diocese. Many, such as Bishop Geoffrey of Coutances, divided their time between England and Normandy, served duke and king in secular matters, and attended to the affairs of their diocese, chapter, and cathedral. Others, such as Arnulf of Lisieux, struggled to strike a balance.

In its concluding chapters, *The King's Bishops* presents first a case-study. Henry, bishop of Bayeux (1165-1205), 'illustrates so well the way in which a devoted and responsible prelate and patron could distinguish himself in diocesan affairs, while at the same time serve as a loyal and useful servant of the king' (255). Here, a central point of Crosby's argument is reinforced. Contrasts in sources and source types, reflected in the interpretations of later historians, belie a world in which bishops like Henry did not see there to be a dilemma for them to solve. This conclusion is reinforced in chapter eight: 'the man who attained a bishopric by the nod of the king found little purpose in taking a stand in opposition by wrestling with the logic of distinctions between *regnum* and *sacerdotium*' (273). The book concludes with emphasis on the ubiquity of patronage, the political nature of the high medieval

church, and the importance of bishops to the Conqueror and his Anglo-Norman and Angevin successors. More broadly, nepotism was a Europe-wide phenomenon characteristic of the elite, which endured beyond the Middle Ages. In the twelfth century, the bishops were generally 'a reliable, durable and constant body of men ... who proved to be key figures in successful kingship' (278).

One frustration for the reader lies in the use of endnotes rather than footnotes, especially for the chapters presenting the bishopric by bishopric survey. Chapter five covers some 130 pages, with a further sixty of endnotes, whilst chapter six spans sixty-three pages, plus thirty-five of endnotes: a substantial proportion of the volume as a whole. The findings presented (in the text) are clearly based on analysis of a wealth of evidence (revealed by the endnotes). Students and researchers seeking to link findings with evidence might wish to find both on the same page. Could the book have been divided into two parts, one containing the shorter chapters of broad analysis, the second – divided into chapters for each diocese – presenting the see by see, bishop by bishop information? The endnotes make chapter five, in particular, hard to use, because the admirable attention to evidence-gathering results in 1,223 references. The reader keen to identify sources turns repeatedly from one end of the book to the other, as bookmarks or post-it notes proliferate. Endnotes may well reflect house-style. Footnotes would make the volume much easier to use.

Overall, this meticulously researched and carefully written study surveys a wide range of evidence, and considers it in the wider context of the kingdom of England and duchy of Normandy, of individual bishops, and of their dioceses. The diocese by diocese and bishop by bishop analysis, whilst it could be more researcher-friendly, is a valuable contribution. Meanwhile, in the study of royal-episcopal relations, and of how bishops used the opportunity presented by advancement to high office, patronage is back as a term in the historian's toolbox.

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