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### Kings, Lords and Courts in Anglo-Norman England

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NICHOLAS KARN, *Kings, Lords and Courts in Anglo-Norman England*. Woodbridge, UK:

Boydell, 2020. Pp. xii, 259. \$99. ISBN: 978-1-7832-7486-4.  
doi:10.1086/712194

This is an important book, filling a significant gap in scholarship on late Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman law, lordship, and administration. Its primary focus is on the hundred court and its relationship to lords' local courts. Nicholas Karn argues (204) that, following the creation of shires and hundreds across England in the tenth century, by the middle of the eleventh "the unitary model of the hundred was starting to break down, and decay accelerated and became general into the twelfth century." Lords either "claimed whole hundreds themselves, or they created lesser units which were originally subsets of hundreds and which were accountable to them, which came to be known as the *halimota*." The social and economic consequences were considerable, particularly for manorialisation: "The hundred managed by a lord and the *halimota* were mechanisms which allowed lords to raise exclusive claims over their dependents, and to monopolise lordship."

Chapter 1 draws on recent scholarship to show the complexity of Anglo-Saxon lordship, with multiple lords through commendation, landlordship, and soke. From the later eleventh century, a long process replaced this with a unitary model, "in which one lord held exclusive jurisdiction over some peasants within a defined area, and no other secular person could claim anything from those peasants, except the limited and specified claims of the king" (50). Having in chapter 2 explored the aspirations of lords in eleventh- and twelfth-century England, the book moves on in chapter 3 to examine "how lords were able to take control of hundreds and subordinate them to their own interests" (72) and in chapter 4 to "suggest that lords' courts originated because lords broke parts off from the functions of hundreds" (101). Such developments related to a change in ideas as well as practices: "the appearance of these numerous courts depended on the development of an idea that courts were entities that could be owned" (72). Both these chapters contain excellent detailed analyses of local arrangements to support their arguments. Chapter 5 proposes a further effect of these changes. Whereas previously cases went to the hundred or perhaps the shire, "the appearance of lords' courts meant that, in many cases, there was henceforth a choice over where individual pleas might be aired and settled" (128), the result being the rise of jurisdictional thinking, that is, debate over the association of particular types of plea with particular courts. The king acknowledged such developments, including lords' jurisdiction over their dependents, but also—chapter 6 suggests—asserted his own position, notably by stating that hundreds and shires belonged to him and claiming certain pleas as the king's. Henry I's activities in or around the year 1108 may have been particularly important in this respect, and in the last chapter it is suggested that this is when local justices came to prominence, not as judges but "to bring and manage

pleas in the interest of the king, so that the king's claims to some kinds of plea and to the financial consequences arising from them would not be lost once lords took much business into their own courts" (203).

There are places in the book where legal aspects of discussion might have been refined. For example, it needed to be considered more carefully whether a distinction was sometimes made between theft and robbery (for example, 159–61). There is routine but unexplained use of the word "claims" to refer to what contemporaries probably considered rights or customs or dues (for example, 32, 91, 101). The repeated emphasis on the importance of the notion that courts could be "owned" is questionable on various grounds, including the applicability of the notion of ownership to landholding at the time. The statement that "These interests will here usually be covered by 'own' and related terms, because this avoids the problematic ideas implicit in possession and seisin" (73 n. 2) does not provide a way out of the difficulty. Such matters are important, given the emphasis placed on conceptual change: "The story here is not simply one about claims and control, but also about intellectual change, and how ideas about ownership came to be spread more widely over time" (100).

The author is pleasingly aware of the difficulty of telling whether changes are real or only apparent and in fact a product of documentary change (for example, 106, 122). However, there may have been greater similarities across much of the period than the author allows. Had we the discussion underlying Cnut's provision that no one should seek the king unless he had been unable to obtain justice in his hundred (*II Cnut*, 17), or perhaps a decree announcing this measure to reeves, it might suggest some similarity to Henry I's provisions about courts issued by writ in 1108. Pre-Conquest issues of jurisdiction, be they based on status, plea, or geography, might also have been more prominent had the shire court featured more in the book. Also largely absent is the type of lord's court that may have been the primary concern of the 1108 writ, that covering all of a geographically extensive and dispersed honor, the lord's court as conceived of by F. M. Stenton and S. F. C. Milsom. However, such is not the subject of the present book, and the author has produced a highly stimulating study of a neglected topic.

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