Review Essay: Bernard Guenée, States and Rulers in Later Medieval Europe

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This is a welcome English translation of Bernard Guenée’s important *L’Occident aux XIVe et XVe siècles*, first published in Paris in 1971 and enlarged in 1981. It is a valuable study of the development of political power in Europe during a time referred to as “late Medieval” or “early Renaissance,” depending on one’s point of view. Guenée, professor of medieval history at the Sorbonne, dislikes both labels, preferring to think of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as an entity of its own, which was no longer feudal but not yet modern, whose characteristics were already evident in the second half of the thirteenth century and which persisted, in some ways, into the first half of the sixteenth. It was a time of great movement and change when many of the institutions and attitudes of later political life were spawned or greatly enlarged, an age when the rulers’ power grew at the same time democratic institutions temporarily flourished.

The scope of the book is broad, ranging from an examination of the concepts of “sovereignty,” “kingship,” “state,” “empire,” “West,” and “Europe”; through notions of “nation,” “language,” “people,” “country,” and “religion,” to detailed analyses of ceremony as it pertained to political rule, the relationship between law and the ruler, and the purposes of the state. The author’s examination of the extent and limits of royal power is particularly focused and insightful as is his discussion of the resources of the state and its administrative bureaucracy. In my opinion, Professor Guenée’s most illuminating chapter is the one on justice and finance, while his weakest is a rather superficial glance at war and diplomacy.

Finally, in a subdivision he calls State and Society, the author takes a careful look at the formation of orders and estates, parliamentary assemblies, and the shifting balance between the monarchs, the nobility, and the other estates. Here, in dealing with such topics as the formation and integration of estates, the nature of oaths and contracts, and the development and decline of representative assemblies, the author is at his most original and thought provoking. The volume ends with an all-too-brief glance at late medieval social unrest and revolts.

Although it purports to look at all of Europe, this study is understandably weighted toward France and England. Occasionally the author gives interesting examples or statistics from Castile or Catalonia, or from Wurtemberg or Wettin, but only France and England are treated systematically.

*States and Rulers in Later Medieval Europe* is a book that should be read and reread for its many insights into the political life of the time. The translation is smooth and generally reliable, although at times an effort to reproduce the informality of the French original results in strange phrasing. Two other features of the book add considerably to its value: the
first is a thirty-page appendix summarizing a number of notable historiographical debates; the other is an extensive bibliography—some 1,433 titles, covering all aspects of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century political history.

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Thomas Becket, one of the most famous men of the Middle Ages, hardly needs an introduction. Over the centuries he has been the subject of voluminous literature and numerous controversies. Surprisingly, for one of the most popular saints in Western Christendom, there are few biographies. Out of the maelstrom of materials, Frank Barlow's new work is a beautifully written and eminently readable history of the life and death of Thomas Becket. This is a good biography and one every student of medieval history should read. Barlow sets out to explain how and why everything happened (xi), and this goal he achieves admirably. He does not, however, analyze the personality of Becket in any significant way, and Becket never really comes alive throughout the narrative. Previous biographers have had the same problem of capturing the man Becket.

For example, when Barlow discusses Becket's preparation for exile, he states that "Becket, by dramatizing situations, by foreseeing the worst and making provision for it, helped it to come about" (97). This statement implies a characteristic of Becket's personality, but Barlow fails to elaborate. How did Becket feel about exile? According to Barlow, he hoped that Henry would change his mind (127). What does this mean? Was Becket a passive figure in this event? While Barlow does a superb job in the narration of events and happenings, he merely hints at Becket's hidden depths and then moves on to the next event. In this sense, the book lacks direction because it is not clear what motivates Becket to his actions.

Barlow bases his research on the fifteen or so primary sources written by Thomas's contemporaries in the immediate years after the martyrdom (4-8). There are twelve chapters separated chronologically. The first three sections examine Thomas's early life, and the remaining nine detail his tenure as archbishop until his death at age fifty. The notes are copious and illustrations ample. Charts help to clarify the relationships between early biographers (5), the genealogy of Thomas (14), and the scene of the martyrdom (shown inside front cover). Particularly useful to readers are the general bibliographies which conveniently precede the notes of each chapter.