

**Daniel M. G. Gerrard, *The Church at War: The Military Activities of Bishops, Abbots and Other Clergy in England, c. 900–1200***

**(Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2017). Print, 320pp., £110.00,**

**ISBN: 9781472423757**



*Review*

The figure of the warrior cleric is not an unfamiliar character in medieval studies, with the iconic image of Bishop Odo of Bayeux and his club at the Battle of Hastings readily brought to mind. The problem, according to Daniel Gerrard in the foreword to this volume based upon his 2010 PhD thesis, is that scholars have tended to view the ecclesiastical office of such men as a mere curiosity, treating them primarily as members of the nobility. Gerrard proposes to amend this oversight by introducing a number of case-studies (Odo being prominent among them), examining the practicalities of these clerical contributions to warfare, and analysing the societal reception of clerical involvement in secular conflict. It is this methodological framework that defines the three sections of the book.

Before continuing to a summary of the three sections of Gerrard's work, and an outline of his thesis, it is worth noting the coincidence of two substantially overlapping volumes being published within a year of one-another. In 2016, the Boydell Press published a volume by Craig M. Nakashian entitled *Warrior Churchmen of Medieval England, 1000 – 1250: Theory and Reality*. Gerrard and Nakashian both note the short-fall in focused scholarship on the fighting cleric as conceptualised within the social context in which they operated, and seek to redress that short-fall. Yet more than this, both historians focus their attention upon the same geographical region, similar temporal parameters, and access many of the same exemplars of the fighting cleric, arriving at similar conclusions relating to the ambiguous societal and political space these clerics filled. It is thus in methodology

that the two books are distinguished, for while Gerrard advances the topic thematically, Nakashian approaches the warrior cleric of Angevin England from a distance, tracing the evolution of the fighting priest chronologically from the first millennium. While neither book renders the other redundant, it remains that, in comparison, the authors do cover much of the same ground.

Gerrard's introduction provides a brief summary of the state of current scholarship relating to clerics in war. However, the author's primary intent is to highlight the dichotomous relationship between clerics as feudal vassals within secular contexts, and clerics as faithful observers of canon law in ecclesiastical contexts. In so doing, Gerrard rejects the simplistic categorisation of the military activities of clerics as either 'a function of land tenure' or a criminal enterprise (p. 21). Rather, he proposes to demonstrate that the theological and political justifications underlying clerical involvement in war were contextually fluid, as was the societal reception of that involvement.

Part 1 – 'Occasions and participants' – contains only one chapter. In it, Gerrard undertakes to provide the case-studies that contextualise the analyses of the practical realities and societal perceptions of clerics in war that comprise the bulk of the book. Identifying the episodic nature of England's political milieu between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, Gerrard considers the historical evidence for the warrior cleric in each of late Anglo-Saxon England, the Conquest generation, the Anarchy, and under Angevin rule. By providing examples of fighting clergy across this rapidly shifting political landscape, the author seeks to demonstrate that clerical participation in war was neither uncommon, nor easily categorised.

Part 2 contains four chapters that examine the practical contributions of the clergy in war: as providers of fighting men (2); as commanders of fortresses (3); as the wielders of spiritual weapons (4); and as men invested with direct military

command (5). Chapter 2 addresses the obligation of ecclesiastical lords, across the full period under consideration, to provide the king with troops for the lands they held, like their secular counterparts. In doing so Gerrard highlights some of the unique problems that faced the clerical overlords when raising said troops and delegating appropriate leadership. Chapter 3 looks to the matter of castle administration. Gerrard argues that ecclesiastical magnates did not only administer castles held by right of land ownership, like secular lords, but were granted mandate over castle defence on campaign as functional military commanders. Chapter 4 deals with a more common form of clerical involvement in war – that of accompanying clergy, offering intercessory prayers, hearing confessions, giving sermons, and bearing religious standards. While Gerrard’s overview of the topic is skilful, his argument, based on the hyperbole of the 1137 entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, that the perceived power imbued by these clerics waned during ‘the Anarchy,’ is unconvincing. Chapter 5 addresses the matter of ecclesiastical leadership in the field of battle and his conclusion, not unlike the one he reaches in chapter 3, is that ecclesiastical magnates were actively engaged by the king as campaign commanders.

Part 3, comprising of three chapters, then turns to perceptions of clerical involvement in warfare – canonical (6), political and judicial (7), and narrative (8). Gerrard makes clear the contextually conflicted nature of the figure of the warrior cleric. Canon law expresses a variety of opinions relating the clerical involvement in secular law, but invariably frowns upon the practice. Meanwhile, kings actively sought the involvement of clerical lords as commanders in battle and rewarded them for their loyalty and successes. Narrative reaction to clerical militancy therefore is reliant upon motive. Where the warrior cleric displays hubris and fights

for personal gain, his actions are frowned upon, and where he fights loyally to the king's benefit, his actions are lauded.

Gerrard has produced a book that, while an interesting and thoughtful exploration of the warrior cleric, does not resolve the fundamental duality of political consent and canonical prohibition. His conclusion that ecclesiastical magnates cannot be viewed as undertaking the same fundamental military responsibilities as secular magnates is somewhat vague, while the argument that clerics as a broader group fulfilled many roles on campaign is not entirely innovative. Nonetheless, as a resource to provide a useful framework for further research into the role of warrior clerics, it performs admirably.

Matthew Firth

University of New England



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).