

Amaury Chauou, Les Plantagenêts et leur cour. 1154–1216, Paris (Presses universitaires de France) 2019, 420 p. (Hors collection), ISBN 978-2-13-074976-9, EUR 23,00.

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The Angevin Empire, constructed by Count Geoffrey le Bel of Anjou (1129–1151) and his son, King Henry II of England (1154–1189), has received enormous attention from scholars. However, there are significant differences in the approaches taken by historians working in the British-American tradition and those in the French academic tradition. The former tend to focus on institutions, military and diplomatic history, and broadly the ways in which the Angevins held together their disparate lands over a period of 60 years. French scholars, by contrast, tend to focus on the Angevins as temporary obstacles to the achievement of Capetian dominance throughout the French realm, and therefore to downplay the achievements of Henry I and his second eldest son King Richard I of England (1189–1199).

Moreover, as Amaury Chauou, research fellow at the University of Rennes, observes in the introduction to this study of the Angevins/Plantagenets and their court, the ongoing influence of the Annales school has pushed the study of military history, diplomatic history, the history of institutions, and biographical studies to the margin of French scholarly research. As a consequence, the history of the Angevin court, which represents the nexus of these areas of historical inquiry, is treated much more fully in Anglo-phone than in Franco-phone scholarship.

Chauou's goal in this study, therefore, is to bring to a French audience interpretations of the success of the Angevins over the course of two generations that are current in British and U.S. scholarship, through the prism of his own *œuvre* that focuses on the literary production and presentation of the Angevin court, particularly the patronage of the Arthurian legends.

This volume is divided into seven chapters with a brief historiographical introduction and short conclusion that serves to review the main arguments set out in the text. Chapter one, which is titled »The Principality of the Counts of Anjou«, offers a brief overview of the creation of the Angevin Empire before turning to a discussion of the highly variable administrative resources available to Henry II and his sons Richard I and John (1199–1216) to rule the conglomerate realm composed of England, Normandy, Anjou, Maine, Touraine, and Aquitaine.

Chauou makes the conventional claim that Normandy, and particularly England, were effectively administered in contrast to the regions south of the Loire. However, despite identifying the substantial administrative apparatus developed by the counts of Anjou before the accession of Henry II, Chauou asserts that the Angevin rulers had substantially less control here than they did in Normandy or England. Such a conclusion is at odds with



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most of the scholarship dealing with Anjou, and Chauou offers no explanation and cites no scholarly works or sources to support his contention.

In chapter two, titled »On Horseback with the Plantagenets«, Chauou takes as his starting position the now long discredited model of a »feudal« society that gradually developed governing institutions over the course of the twelfth century, particularly due to the efforts to the Angevin rulers. As a consequence, Chauou asserts that the only way in which Henry II and his sons could rule their vast realm, which was held together by putatively »feudal« ties of fidelity, was to travel throughout their congeries of territories to make their presence felt personally.

In making this argument, Chauou apparently was unaware of the lengthy historiographical traditions dealing with the itinerant Carolingian and Ottonian imperial courts that have demonstrated the use of permanent governmental institutions at the local level that provided for the permanent »morale presence« of the ruler, to use the term coined by Karl Ferdinand Werner, in his physical absence. The irony with regard to Chauou's argument is that he explicitly discusses these permanent governmental institutions, such as the garrisoned fortresses and palaces, while ignoring their integrative role in Angevin politics.

The title of chapter three, »In the Service of the Plantagenets: The Men and the Women of the Court«, suggests a prosopographical discussion of the members of the Angevin court, with an analysis of how the ever-changing membership of the court reflected the governance of the Angevin Empire. Chauou does make some gestures in this direction, drawing on the insights developed by Nicholas Vincent in the latter's analysis of the witness lists of Henry II's charters. However, the discussions in this regard are superficial. Chauou mentions, for example, that the Angevin court offered opportunities for social advancements for »new men«, and that the court was cosmopolitan, but was not populated by an imperial aristocracy of the Carolingian type.

But the reader does not learn anything about the recruitment of courtiers, their roles in knitting together the disparate lands of the Angevin realm, or even very much about their specific duties. Also conspicuously missing from this discussion is the model provided by the court of King Henry I of England (1100–1135), the grandfather of Henry II, or the analysis of the Anglo-Norman court by J. O. Prestwich, whose work is neither cited in the text nor appears in the bibliography.

In chapter four, titled »Governance and Power Relations at the Plantagenet Court«, Chauou returns to the model of a precocious »modern« government that relied on administration and bureaucracy juxtaposed with »classical feudal court« (p. 152). In this context, Chauou describes Angevin government as being composed of three elements: the court, itself, the permanent bureaus of the central administration such as the Exchequer, and finally royal administration at the local level, such as the sheriffs in England and the *prévôts* in Normandy.

As elements of the supposedly feudal constitution, Chauou points to the general oaths of loyalty imposed by Duke William II of Normandy, that is William the Conqueror, suggesting that



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these oaths were somehow »Saxon« in origin. In fact, as Stefan Esders has shown in numerous studies, general oaths of loyalty were Roman in origin, were utilized by both the Merovingians and Carolingians in conscious imitation of the Romans, and represent an ongoing element of Roman legal and governmental institutions in the governing structures of the Latin West.

The discussion of the oath is one of many ways in which Chauou seeks to juxtapose supposedly new elements of »modern« administration with supposedly feudal elements of governance. The latter, he argues, include the granting of offices to reward loyalty, the marrying of wealth heiresses to the ruler's supporters, and public rituals such as installation ceremonies as duke in Normandy and Aquitaine. In drawing these putative contrasts between feudal structures and institutions of government, Chauou ignores the lengthy scholarship dealing with the integration of all of these elements of governance in societies that no scholar has ever labeled »feudal«, including the late Roman Empire.

Chapter five, »Education and Apprenticeship at the Court: The Plantagenets and the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century«, ostensibly focuses on the education provided to members of the Angevin family, both boys and girls, as well as others at court to prepare them to govern the Angevin Empire. Chauou makes the conventional observation that the Angevin, Norman, and Aquitanian courts all emphasized the importance of a broad liberal education for boys alongside military training.

In discussing this education, Chauou resorts to the topos of the »Twelfth-Century Renaissance« rather than recognizing the centrality of a broad liberal education in courts across the Latin West, including the German realm, dating back to the immediate successors of the Late Roman Empire. At the end of the chapter, Chauou turns to the question of whether affection was an element of medieval aristocratic life in the context of the history of emotions. Chauou concludes that the environment at the Angevin court was conducive to the development of affection.

In the sixth chapter, »Culture of Power, Power of the Culture: The Chivalric Ideal and Arthurian Representation at the Plantagenet Court«, Chauou turns to his own area of research with a focus on the patronage and production of literature at the Angevin court. Chauou emphasizes the efforts by both Henry II and Richard I to use Arthurian legends to enhance the luster of their own rule. He argues that the court was a locus of literary output throughout the second half of the twelfth century. However, he observes that this outpouring of literary, and historical works, was not universally positive with regard to the Angevins, particularly with respect to their policies vis-à-vis the church.

The final chapter, »The Plantagenets: Rebels against God?«, considers the claim made by contemporary French writers that the Angevins were the spawn of the devil. Chauou points to the various conflicts that the Angevin rulers had with the church, including the murder of Thomas Becket and King John's conflicts with the papacy. He also observes the anti-Cistercian sentiment that prevailed at the court of Henry II and Richard I. However, Chauou concludes that the Angevins were conventionally pious, and sought to work with rather than against church officials in their realms.



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The numerous generalizations, broad claims, limited discussion of source materials, other than in the treatment of Arthurian literature, and very limited apparatus of notes, make clear that Chauou intends this volume for a popular audience. Chauou succeeds, to some extent, in his stated goal of bringing to a French audience a discussion of the Anglo-phone treatment of the Angevin Empire. However, in doing so, Chauou does not escape the gravitational forces of French scholarly tradition, including its continued insistence on the value of the now long discredited feudal paradigm. Chauou does not even include Susan Reynolds' »Fiefs and Vassals« in his bibliography, much less digest its implications for the putative turn toward »modern« government in the twelfth century. Similarly, Chauou ignores the long traditions of governance in Anjou, as well as Normandy and England, which provided the basis of Henry II's effective rule. It was not some new rationality that inspired Henry II, but rather the institutions and traditions of his grandfather King Henry I and his father Count Geoffrey le Bel. It is to be hoped that future works on the Angevin Empire will take account of this aspect of British-American scholarship as well.



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