

REVIEWS

C. M. Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 288 pp., 54 black and white and 24 color photos, 8 maps, and 11 tables.

In *The Great Household in Late Medieval England*, C. M. Woolgar undertakes to combine a finely detailed description of the daily life of the late medieval nobility and gentry with an assessment of the social and material forces that shaped it over time. Woolgar distinguishes his work from previous studies that have approached the topic of the household in the limited context of a specific subject such as servants, entertainment, or knighthood.⁴³ Instead, he sets out to present the medieval “household in use,” examining the “basic characteristics of the household—size, membership, dynamics, economics, social context”(3). The material Woolgar has gathered is truly engaging, both for the vivid picture it conveys and because the author frequently lays bare his methodology, demonstrating how documentary data can be interpreted to reconstruct a feast, a stable, or a funeral. The book addresses population, service, architectural plan, schedule, meals and other aspects of household life in a series of loosely-connected chapters.

Drawing on household accounts, ordinances, archaeological sources, and contemporary treatises, Woolgar is able to show that the physical design, rituals, and organization of the household grew more elaborate between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. He attempts to tie these changes to increased social stratification, a phenomenon he demonstrates in the first chapter (“Household Antiquities”) with reference to the development and growth of the peerage⁴⁴ and a survey of gentle and noble incomes (5). The inference is that, given additional means, the nobility were able to emulate the lifestyle of the king, and gentle families that of the nobility, which resulted in the development of more elaborate household practices.⁴⁵ While financial data is sufficient to

⁴³In addition, he notes, “Much work has been coloured by an emphasis on bastard feudalism. ... Other deficiencies lie in those works looking at life in the medieval household which are centred primarily on the architectural setting or its archaeology ... (2).

⁴⁴“There were 11 earldoms in existence at the end of Edward I’s reign. ... During the fourteenth century, a further 24 non-royal earldoms were created. With the establishment of other ranks—dukedom, marquises—and the persistence of baronies, there were probably 60 to 70 families who were effectively distinguished by what became a hereditary right to receive a summons to Parliament” (4).

⁴⁵“There will be found many examples of the use of limited resources husbanded to

support a conclusion about changes in economic stratification, Woolgar's assertion that the nobility and gentry rose in status through material display—and the underlying assumption that they were motivated to do so—lacks the evidentiary backing and theoretical rigor one would hope for. In the discussions of entertainment, clothing, and intellectual life that follow, the author misses opportunities to present more direct evidence of contemporary definitions of and cultural expectations pertaining to different ranks of society. The sources upon which Woolgar bases his claim of social stratification are drawn in part from Chris Given-Wilson's *The English Nobility in the late Middle Ages*, but he leaves unquestioned assumptions about status-consciousness and social identity, subjects which Given-Wilson himself approaches quite circumspectly.⁴⁶ An argument concerning status-defining cultural and material practices might also have benefited from some exploration of the psychology or sociology of cultural politics.⁴⁷

However, the author's initial comments suggest that the work is intended for general as well as academic audiences. Here and throughout the book the subject of medieval material culture is cast in a somewhat romantic light,⁴⁸ the expressed goal being to convey as intimate an understanding of that culture as possible. This may also account for the presentation seeming at times to drown in detail.

Records from seven households furnish Woolgar's primary data for

achieve particular effect on a small number of prestigious occasions, allowing even the lowest gentry to reinforce their standing among their peers and to delineate their difference from other ranks of society" (5).

⁴⁶In discussing the emergence of multiple ranks in the peerage during the fourteenth century, Given-Wilson takes pains to distinguish legal definitions of status from social ones. Although no one piece of evidence is studied in depth, he alludes to numerous sources that indicate more directly a heightened awareness of the relationship between cultural practices and class identity: "... the popularity of books of courtesy (which, *inter alia*, clarified rules of social precedence), and the blatant social overtones of, for example, livery laws, or sumptuary legislation, all point to the fact that status was becoming ever more defined" (Chris Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Later Middle Ages* [London and New York 1987] 57).

A corollary to Woolgar's failure to draw out the differences between economic and social definitions of status is an occasional laxness in distinguishing documentary from literary evidence, most notably in his recourse to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* for examples of hospitality (25), impressive architecture (68), and illicit love affairs (96).

⁴⁷Woolgar cites but does not discuss N. Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. E. Jephcott (Oxford 1983); and D. Starkey, "The Age of the Household: Politics, Society and the Arts c. 1350–c. 1550" in *The Later Middle Ages*, ed. S. Medcalf (1981) 225–290.

⁴⁸"This was a society in which display, lavish hospitality, prestige and social competition were all important, in which such distinctions came to be carefully weighed, nuances closely regarded and the overwhelming detail of ceremony recorded for posterity" (1).

presentation and analysis:

Two aristocrats: Joan de Valence, countess of Pembroke (d. 1307); the Stafford Dukes of Buckingham in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Two gentry families in the fourteenth century: the Multons of Frampton in Lincolnshire; the Catesbys of Northamptonshire and Warwickshire.

A knight: Sir John Fastolf (1380–1459).

Two bishops: Richard Mitford, bishop of Salisbury (d. 1407); Thomas Arundel, bishop of Ely, archbishop of York and Canterbury (1353–1414).

One's first impression is that for such a wide-ranging study the sources seem unusually weighted toward the later period. Woolgar readily admits that "the primary motive for selecting these households for closer study has been the existence of documentation for their activities," and his investigation mitigates the limitations of these initial sources somewhat by making liberal use of additional records for the households of Eleanor de Montfort (1215–1275); Thomas, earl of Lancaster (1277–1322); Thomas of Lancaster, duke of Clarence (1388–1421); John of Lancaster, duke of Bedford (1389–1435); and Edward IV (1442–1483).

Woolgar begins in the second chapter by laying out the size of the household and the classes of people who comprise it. His explanation of how numbers for each household are calculated—using the recorded daily consumption of food portions (*fercula*) to estimate how much ale and bread was required by each person present, then applying these figures to the earlier accounts, in which amounts, but not individual *fercula*, are recorded—offers an informative illustration of practical methodology. A table comparing the income of and number of persons present in various households between 1265 and 1508 suggest that the average size was greatest before the Black Death, with numbers decreasing throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (in contrast with the royal household, in which the number of servants grew) (9–10). Woolgar next considers departmental organization, discussing divisions—the pantry, the buttery, the kitchen, the marshalsea, and the wardrobe (17)—and listing the most common chief officers—the stew-

ard, the clerk of offices, the marshal, and the treasurer.⁴⁹ Woolgar first approaches the question of social hierarchy within the ranks by examining the Rules of Robert Grosseteste (a thirteenth-century source which Woolgar uses frequently⁵⁰), which separates the *gentis homines* and *seriaunz de mester* (officers) from *garcuns* (grooms) and those who worked outside the house. A helpful analysis of the diverging signification of the terms *esquier* and *valet*, paired with documentary evidence pertaining to changes in the quality of livery and wages distributed, strongly supports his conclusion that as the household was itself shrinking, the social status of its member functionaries was rising. The remainder of the first chapter is devoted to the subject of hospitality, its costs and substance, and Woolgar takes the opportunity to deliver a few figures pertaining to the expenses a visiting royal entourage might impose on a noble host. He closes with a short discussion of the employment and social status of minstrels.

The third chapter considers the conditions of service in the great household. In the thirteenth century the arrangement of serjeanty tenure (land in return for service) was disappearing, and servants were instead increasingly being paid in money and board. Woolgar turns to his previous work on English medieval household records⁵¹ to show that the daily cash wages of skilled and unskilled laborers increased between 1299 and 1468. Officers of the household might also be paid in food or other necessities, quarterly stipends, livery, perquisites of office,⁵² or bequests upon the death of the master. Servants were predominantly male until the end of the fifteenth century, and were expected to live apart from spouses and children (36). Unlike work outside the house, which was often seasonal, servants living and working within the household did so year-round, although as the preponderance of positions came to be filled by those of gentler rank, they were organized into in-waiting and out-of-waiting groups.⁵³

⁴⁹The sample selection of officers is derived from a household ordinance of the Wiloughby family of Eresby, from either 1319 or 1339 (18).

⁵⁰Robert Grosseteste compiled the household rules (Cambridge University Library EDL D5) for the countess of Lincoln, ca. 1240–1242.

⁵¹*Household Accounts from medieval England*, ed. C. M. Woolgar, Records of Social and Economic History, new series vol.17–18 (London 1992–1993).

⁵²The examples provided involve chiefly servants connected with food provisioning and preparation: “the cellarer of Prince Edward [IV] had the empty vessels of wine”; in Margaret Luttrell’s household the cook received the skins of calves and rabbits (32).

⁵³In the household of the fifth Earl of Northumberland this arrangement was made on a quarterly basis, so that the magnificence of the lord could be appropriately served on all

In connection with the subject of employment of children, Woolgar outlines the development of new ranks of servants, most notably the child page. Pages appear in the records in greater numbers after 1320; this may be the result of “diminishing availability of adult labour due to the Black Death,” or it may “reflect a development of courtesy.” Another colorful detail included here is the fact that the persons appointed to act as body servants in the lord’s bathing and lavatory use were of a much higher rank by the fifteenth century, as this, too, became a position of some honor (42).

In the fourth chapter, the size, shape, maintenance, and decoration of residences is presented. With household itinerancy decreasing, by 1300 buildings and their furnishings were designed with extended periods of residence in mind (46–47). In the thirteenth century the structure was simple: the common layout was oriented around a hall, with the domestic offices (pantry, buttery, and kitchen) at one end and the lord’s living quarters at the other (47). In this early period, the lord’s accommodations comprised few rooms that might be put to different uses during the day—“sleeping, dressing ... washing ... eating, receiving guests”—but by 1300 specialized chambers appear. The first establishment Woolgar examines extensively is Goodrich Castle in Hertfordshire, which William de Valence rebuilt between 1280 and 1296, possibly as part of a system of fortifications in Edward I’s campaign against the Welsh, in which he took a leading role. Despite its reinforced outer wall, moat and barbican, Goodrich’s accommodations were more than utilitarian; Woolgar notes that the rooms were exceptional in both their number and “consistent quality” (57).

Photographs, floorplans, and detailed descriptions of the arrangement of rooms in Goodrich, and other residences⁵⁴ illustrate a general trend toward smaller, more numerous residential rooms with sanitation and other features, “coincident with the rise of the use of formal indentures of retainer for military purposes,” but also tied to a “pattern of domestic usage emphasizing status and magnificence”(61). Woolgar’s aim of conveying a sense of the “household in use” is realized spectacularly in the coupling of a floorplan of Caister Castle (reconstructed by Sir John Fastolf between 1431 and 1459) with a table listing the

occasions by persons of rank” (38).

⁵⁴Roger Bigod III’s renovation of Chepstow ca. 1292–1300, construction undertaken for Roger Mortimer at Ludlow ca. 1320, and Cardinal Beaufort’s renovation of Bishop’s Waltham 1438–1443 are examined (59–61).

furnishings and functions for each of the rooms, derived from inventories of 1448 and 1462.⁵⁵

In discussing household furnishings generally, Woolgar seems to endow them with social and ideological significance,⁵⁶ but the topic of tapestries and hangings elicits a particularly perplexing remark: “To a world that was largely unlettered, images were a powerful means of communication” (73). This may be a transmutation, from the religious to the secular realm, of the controversial notion that pictures were “books for the unlettered.”⁵⁷ It also suggests, however, that the nobility and gentry—the people whom it would be most desirable to impress—were generally illiterate, an opinion Woolgar cannot possibly hold, given his treatment of intellectual life in the household in the eighth chapter.⁵⁸ Since he is all but silent on the subject of class identity, and subsequently approaches education in terms of its economics rather than its substance, however, it is difficult to know exactly what this comment signifies.

In the fifth chapter Woolgar turns to the daily schedule of the household, but is able to provide information only for establishments from the fifteenth century onward, due to the unavailability of further records. The accuracy—within a quarter of an hour—stipulated in the household ordinances reflect a reliance on mechanical clocks, which were in domestic use from the second half of the fourteenth century. Woolgar states that the household day was “dominated by liturgical celebration” (84), but a table comparing seven noble and royal household timetables from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries suggests that just as much attention was given to the timing of meals. A common

⁵⁵One interesting development that Caister reflects is the division of the lord’s chamber into a “parlor,” or public space, and a “withdraught,” to which one *withdrew* for true privacy (65).

⁵⁶With decreased itinerancy, for the nobility “prolonged periods of residence at a small group of sites were not unusual”; “...by concentrating expenditure on comparatively few residences, it was possible to use high-quality or luxury materials, decorations and images, all of which enhanced the lord’s standing and displayed his magnificence” (46).

⁵⁷The utility of images as vehicles of Christian doctrine appeared in a letter from Gregory the Great to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles, and is referenced in *Dives and Pauper* ca. 1405. It was “endlessly cited during the image controversy between 1390 and 1410” (Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al., *The Idea of the Vernacular* [University Park, PA 1999] 251, n. 6).

⁵⁸Woolgar notes that “the literacy and numeracy of the nobility and aristocracy should not be underestimated” (180). Given-Wilson observes that “it is now widely accepted that by the middle of the thirteenth century, at the latest, the ability to read was pretty general among the lay as well as clerical nobles ...” (*The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages* [n. 4 above] 4).

order of daily events can be identified, running from about 5:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.:

gates opened;
 daily accounting;
 Matins/mass; breakfast (an irregular meal thought by some to be extravagant, (87));
 high mass;
 lunch—the principal, sometimes the *first* meal, began between 9:00 and 12:00, later in summer. Meals would take at least two hours—shorter for servants (88);
 free time, perhaps a rest period;
 Evensong;
 supper;
 prayers and “all night” ceremony (lighting and food in the lord’s chamber);
 gates locked, offices (kitchen, pantry, etc.) guarded (89)

The diet of the household was punctuated by periods of abstinence, weekly according to custom, and annually as set out by vigils of feasts such as Christmas, Saint Stephen, Holy Innocents, Circumcision, and Epiphany (90–91). The entertainment and other rituals associated with religious and agricultural holidays are also explored in detail here (albeit in a somewhat scattershot manner), including descriptions of the costumes made for a performance at Guildford, where Edward III’s household was celebrating Christmas in 1347 (94), of the special loaves baked for the workers at harvest by Dame Alice de Bryene’s household in 1413 (93), and the gifts given by Richard Mitford, bishop of Salisbury to servants of his chapel at New Year’s 1407 (95).

The remainder of the chapter covers rituals surrounding the life events of marriage, birth, childhood and education, knighthood, illness and death, but these cursory treatments are likely of more value to those studying the families that furnish Woolgar’s chief primary sources than to a student seeking extensive information on these topics. Highlights include the arrangements for royal births ordained under Henry VII in 1493 (98–99), and the burial of and observances upon the death of William de Valence in 1296 (107–08).

The procurement, preparation, consumption, and service of food is covered in the sixth and seventh chapters. A trend toward demesne farming in the thirteenth century made fresh food readily available from the lord’s lands; in the fourteenth century landlords rented out their lands to peasant farmers and purchased goods at trade fairs and,

increasingly, urban markets (111–112). Fresh food was a high-status item—especially fresh meat in the winter—and thus the hunting parks and fish ponds incorporated into the household lands provided more than sport. Several other staples are treated in detail, such as the production of different grades of bread, the importation of wine, the brewing of ale, and the use of dairy products. Spices and sugar had to be procured at fairs and urban markets, and the service of imported spices and wine after dinner was an aristocratic ritual (129). Garden-grown herbs were used as seasonings, but there was a “prejudice against salad.”⁵⁹ Fruits were grown in household gardens, or purchased.⁶⁰ Woolgar identifies major dietary changes between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries: among the aristocracy, more salt fish and fresh meat was consumed, and pork fell into disfavor; peasants likewise moved from a heavy-grain to a wheat-bread-based diet with more fresh meat and fish (133).

The observation that by the fifteenth century the lord was less likely to dine publicly in the hall than privately in his chamber (145–146) directly supports Woolgar’s argument that household service was becoming more elaborate. There was still much luxury in the hall, however, and household ordinances and accounts, as well as wills, prove essential to an appreciation of the potential for magnificent display. While simple utilitarian pieces such as trestle tables and benches were still common in the fifteenth century, the fourteenth century saw the development of buffet dressers and cupboards for presenting and distributing food, and which might also be used at feasts to display the household’s collection of rich plate (149). Woolgar includes here an exhaustive survey of the quality and style of table linens, serving vessels, ceremonial dishes and cups, cutlery and glasses used between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The service of the meal seems to have been regulated by a combination of custom, ordinance, and concern for appearance. A thirteenth-century view of the meal is drawn from Robert Grosseteste’s *Rules* (157–158). Although a 1336 statute dictated that no more than two courses might be served at a meal, this likely indicated that “more than two courses were now usual,” and that “by the fifteenth century, the

⁵⁹Woolgar’s source here is F. J. Furnivall, ed., *Manners and meals in olden time*. (EETS, OS 32, 1868) 124.

⁶⁰“The service of a fruit course probably represents a continuing tradition: it was the custom in France by the end of the fourteenth century” (131).

normal service of a meal, lunch or supper, was three courses. . .with fruit, followed by spices to conclude” (159). The order in which various dishes were served is suggested by a menu from the feast at the enthronement of John Chandler as Bishop of Salisbury, ca. 1417, and a suggestion of seating and serving procedures is furnished by a fifteenth-century courtesy manual.⁶¹

Chapter 8 attempts to address a great number of topics pertaining to “The Senses, Religion and Intellectual Life.” There is a detailed discussion of clothing regulation, purchasing and maintenance (170–176) and trends in bathing (167–168), as well as interesting “unmentionable” information pertaining to the disposition and upkeep of latrines (170). Woolgar’s recourse to records and regulations, however, overburdens his treatment of household religious practices with lists of materials purchased for the decoration of oratories and the production of breviaries.

Of chief interest in the ninth chapter on “Travel, Horses, and Other Animals” are the description of different sorts of vehicles used (181–182); and a discussion of the function and maintenance of various grades of horse (190–193).

The book is amply illustrated with images from the Tickhill Psalter (ca. 1303–1314), the Holkham Bible picture book (ca. 1320–1330), the Luttrell Psalter (ca. 1320–1345), the Queen Mary Psalter (early fourteenth century), and the Beauchamp Pageant (ca. 1483–1487). There is a quite detailed index of topics and names, and a short glossary of terms defined for the purposes of their use in the text.

Woolgar largely achieves his purpose of bringing the great household to life by synthesizing a great deal of information in a relatively compact series of discussions. The very abundance of detail that makes this possible, however, at times eclipses the topic at hand and becomes a distraction. In addition, the presentation would have been stronger had the author taken the time to expand on the motivations behind and social effects of the “magnificence” he describes so well. Ultimately the book’s greatest value lies in its demonstrated use of household accounts to piece together a vision of an institution central to medieval aristocratic life, and for its substantial bibliography of the documentary sources (consolidated in an “Abbreviations” list) consulted in reconstructing the activities of the families on which it focuses.

⁶¹BL MS Harley 6815.

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