



Criminal Churchmen in the Age of Edward III: The Case of Bishop Thomas De Lisle

John Aberth

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Thomas de Lisle, Bishop of Ely from 1345 to 1361, was not a typical English churchman. As John Aberth shows, de Lisle was leader of a local gang of thugs and bullies who terrorized both the poor and the rich of East Anglia and assisted the bishop in his extensive, unholy activities, including arson, kidnapping, extortion, theft, and murder. His criminal career culminated in a final, disastrous assault on Edward III's cousin, Lady de Wake, in 1356, which resulted in his banishment by the king.

Aberth looks at the social and economic side of De Lisle's term as bishop, an aspect of Episcopal history mostly ignored by historians. An unusually rich body of primary sources, including plea rolls, gaol delivery rolls, and ancient correspondence written in medieval Latin and Anglo-Norman French found at the Public Record Office in London, enables Aberth to create a comprehensive picture of de Lisle's activities. Aberth explores the motives for de Lisle's involvement in crime, the makeup of his criminal band, and the paradox of a bishop as criminal. By placing de Lisle's career within the context of bastard feudalism and magnate crime in fourteenth-century England, Aberth explains why de Lisle's criminal behavior was not typical of his fellow magnates: his inexperience and naïveté in manorial administration and court politics resulted in his mismanagement of funds and isolation from his colleagues in the Episcopal hierarchy. Bishop de Lisle's strange clashes with the law, which led to his eventual demise, provide an able means by which to analyze crime and justice during the reign of Edward III.

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