



The Household and Court of James IV of Scotland 1488-1513.

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DOI: 10.21039/rsj.509

Abstract: Review of William Hepburn, *The Household and Court of James IV of Scotland 1488-1513*, (The Boydell Press, 2023).



***The Household and Court of James IV of Scotland 1488–1513.* By William Hepburn. The Boydell Press, 2023. ISBN 978-1-78327-690-5. viii+192 pp. £65.00.**

The reign of James IV is synonymous with cultural advancement, dynamic kingship, patronage of the arts and architecture, and institutional refinement. Against a backdrop of such reputational accolades, it is no wonder that the king is lauded as a “Renaissance prince” and viewed by historians as one of Scotland’s most successful monarchs. Yet despite the wealth of scholarship pertaining to this charismatic ruler and late medieval Scotland more broadly, Hepburn notes that the historiography is predominantly concerned with political history, where the term “court” is employed “as a broad label for the centre of royal government or with specific reference to its cultural aspect” (6–7). This monograph strives to rectify this, affording the court the attention it deserves as being “key to understanding the politics of James IV’s reign, rather than a backdrop against which politics played out” (7). Crucially, Hepburn seeks to address the prevailing notion of the court as a somewhat amorphous subject, providing a distinction between the court as a space occupied by the king and those around him, and the household as “a bureaucratic structure which governed that space and group of people” (154).

Hepburn’s study is the first to undertake a focused examination of the royal court of James IV and the institution of the royal household which underpinned it. Utilising contemporary literary sources, primary documentation relating to both finance and governance under James IV, and documentary parallels from across Europe, this publication complements seminal works on Scotland’s Stewart monarchs and their courts undertaken by historians such as Norman Macdougall and Andrea Thomas. It also provides a dynamic reinterpretation of the court as the central vehicle through which James IV was able to govern his kingdom, and the impact of the household on its efficacy.

The book is split into five distinct sections which explore fundamental aspects of the court and household in Scotland during the reign of James IV. Readers are guided through an analysis of their structure; those who attended the court and enjoyed membership of the household, and their ability to successfully curate their careers within it; a reappraisal of the role of the household in rituals and performances undertaken on the “stage” of the court; and the evidence of the influence of the machinations of the court and household (and individuals’ association with the latter) in documents such as the Register of the Great Seal.

Though each section contributes to the overall importance of this study, the first three sections (exploring the structure of the household, attendance and service, and careers in the household) provide a crucial foundation on which to base an understanding of current perceptions of the court in late medieval Scotland, allowing readers to fully appreciate the scope of this study and its importance to future examinations of this subject. The depth of the discussions across these sections is achieved through close inspection of the treasurer's and comptroller's accounts, but their value is further bolstered by Hepburn's use of the 1508 bill of household which "modest though it may be in a European context, represents the earliest surviving household ordinance of confirmed Scottish origin" (155).

Of particular note is Hepburn's analysis of the existing sub-divisions within James IV's household, and how the details contained within the 1508 bill of household allow us to compare its organisation to other courts and households across Europe, such as that of Charles the Bold in Burgundy or the royal households of late medieval Portugal. Whilst the term "household" represents the bureaucratic framework which governed the court, the structure of the framework was based on the existence of several sub-divisions which "provided a means by which those in attendance at court could identify themselves in relation to the wide variety of people and activities around them" (45). Indeed, Hepburn adeptly utilises the comptroller's accounts to identify distinct offices, drawing our attention to the unique insight these accounts provide into the hierarchies which existed within these offices through the fees awarded to those affiliated with them. The ability to view these relationships on such a granular level not only provides an opportunity to better understand the working relationships between those within the household. It also allows those studying the political fortunes of specific families to trace their advancement within the court and the impact that royal favour may have had on the fees they received from the comptroller (or other material rewards) as a reflection of their importance. Further, Hepburn's discussion of the responsibility of the household to look after the welfare of its servants – evidenced by payments made to members of the household in "times of need" or illness, or in recognition of significant moments in their lives – is a poignant example of the personal nature of the relationships formed. This offers a rare glimpse into the humanity of these connections and the arenas in which they played out that is often missing from analyses of the courts of late medieval Scotland.

Finally, this review looks to draw attention to what it deems to be one of the most engaging aspects of this study, Hepburn's exploration of the role of the household in ritual

and performance (designed as they were as a means of showcasing the majesty of the court to as wide an audience as possible). Hepburn states that the existing historiography adheres to the view of the court as a 'stage,' where "the household might be assumed to be involved in the 'backstage' element of such performances, the insiders preparing the message for wider consumption" (102). Contrary to this established view, Hepburn suggests that the concept of "immersive theatre" is a more appropriate analogy, particularly when exploring the art of performance in the court of James IV, with the audience playing a much more direct role in the activities of the court. Comparative reference to studies undertaken by Clifford Geertz, Andrew Brown, Barbara Sparti and Stephen Kolsky writing on the "theatre-state" in nineteenth-century Bali; the Burgundian "theatre-state" under Charles the Bold; and music and dance in Renaissance Italy respectively provides a richness to Hepburn's discussion that further supports his desire to reevaluate the nature of Scotland's courtly performances (103–109).

Hepburn's study is concise and convincing, and each chapter provides a useful introductory summary of its contents, with a clear conclusion that will enable readers to appreciate the points made and the importance of his analyses. It should be noted that the discussions contained within the chapters oscillate between a more general commentary on the existing historiography alongside comparative assessments with Europe, and a thoroughly detailed focus on the subtle nuances of the documentation used to underpin the conclusions drawn. Whilst the text may prove formidable to those who are new to the subject or beginning their venture into the workings of the court in late medieval Scotland, this will only encourage readers to engage more fully with the historiography that Hepburn uses to reinforce his own analysis, leading to a deeper appreciation of his masterful discussion of the household and court of James IV.

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