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IRIS Summer Fieldwork Report (2018)

In July and August of 2018, with support from the IRIS Summer Fieldwork Award, I travelled to London to complete important archival research for my dissertation, *Kingship and Collusion: Advowson in the Age of Edward III*. My research examines fourteenth-century English royal court records of advowson, which is an English legal right, also called an *ius presentandi*, associated with presenting candidates to ecclesiastical benefices. These presentations could be to offices as small as the vicarage of a small parish church, or as wealthy as a prebendary in a major cathedral. My research uses the surprisingly voluminous litigation pertaining to these presentations to explore the ways in which medieval people understood and used the law, negotiated overlapping legal traditions, and reacted to changing legal circumstances. I will show how Edward III, as king of England, used both legislation and personal litigation regarding these rights to achieve political and economic goals. More importantly, I will show that he did so while negotiating these cases outside the bounds of the courts, fabricating evidence and legal bases for argument, and colluding with associates and ministers to achieve these ends.

I spent my time in the UK working at The National Archives, which house the manuscript court records for the royal courts, as well as a large collection of medieval correspondence. This collection contained letters to and from nobles, kings, bishops, and popes; in these letters, I had hoped to find circumstantial evidence in this collection that there existed a social network of traded favors that would support the possibility that claimants to advowsons could be politically motivated when they attempted to gain control of these positions through the courts. The collection held many letters that will speak to these sorts of issues, particularly if I am able to match individual letters with writs in the plea rolls – though this research will take

more time. More important, for me, was the discovery of a letter from Edward III himself to two of his ministers. At several key moments in the 1340s and 1350s, Edward III took control of the secular holdings (or temporalities) of large bishoprics, including the Bishopric of Exeter. Both cases hinged on *Quare non Admisit* writs, which were powerful legal documents used by the king as a method by which to force bishops to admit his chosen candidates to benefices. In this case, the *Quare non Admisit* was issued for a very small parish church, and it is this case that I will argue has been an example of collusion. In short, based on the available legal documents, Edward III helped a close friend regain control of an advowson by bringing his case into the royal courts. This friend, Ralph, baron of Stafford, recovered on the basis of an ancestor's wardship. At the earliest opportunity, Edward III then sued the baron, based on this same wardship, claiming that on the basis of the long-standing medieval legal fiction that "no time ought to run against the king" he actually held this right. The baron immediately handed over his claim to the advowson, offering a one-time presentation to the king, which Edward III then took. When the bishop of Exeter refused to allow this presentation to move forward because the vacancy had been filled, Edward III issued the *Quare non Admisit* and, winning the case, took the lucrative properties of the bishopric into his own control. In the archives, I was not only able to discover that this wardship was fabricated – and thus the entirety of the case was false – but also discovered this letter of the king's from 1355, in which he explicitly states that his ministers are to find a way to take the temporalities of the Bishopric of Ely. I am thus now able to connect this case of extra-legal negotiation – which frankly, previously did not make much sense – to what may be a larger agenda. Other research has been done to suggest that Edward III's removal of alien priors from ecclesiastical positions (abbacies, bishoprics, etc.), which thus brought their landholdings, advowsons, and wardships into his control, was a way that he could support his

political allies. By giving these men control of such wealth, he could tide them over until baronies and earldoms became available. This letter, along with the evidence for networks of favors and collusive litigation on advowson, suggests perhaps that Edward III had become both more desperate for funds, and more sophisticated in the ways that he used the church to fill his coffers.

My time at The National Archives also allowed me to work on a second part of my project, which examines the materiality of the plea rolls as a method by which to explore ideas of royal legal authority. Specifically, I argue that while some scholars have suggested that the explosion of legal records-keeping in medieval England was a boon to the populace, but hurtful to royal power, I suggest that the increasingly monolithic collection of plea rolls and legal writs became not only a singular object that loomed large in the minds of litigants against the king, but also created a way for the king to make false assertions in legal cases. The very limited access to these documents made it nigh impossible to dispute such claims – as we have seen in the case of the bishop of Exeter.

My research in this instance focuses heavily on the acts of creation and recreation, modification and alteration. As such, I am most interested in evidence for the order in which these plea rolls were written and collated, how long they existed as individual documents before they were bound, how storage could affect their form, and how their changing forms thus altered their function. Based on my work in the archives this summer, I am now able to pinpoint at least three phases of storage: as individual rolls, as bound codices rolled, and as bound codices flat. The lines and margins are not scored, as in most medieval manuscripts, but rather folded – these folds are important, because they are of similar depth and definition to fold lines that I would suggest are indicative of individual membranes having been stored in a rolled form. This

similarity suggests that these fold lines could be as old as the earliest creation of the membrane, while still being visible. My archive time also gave me the opportunity to examine more closely several additions to the rolls, in the form of tipped in pages, sewn in amendments or changes to cases, and alterations made in the text itself. Such modifications again speak to both form and function, but more importantly, to the audience of these documents and their use.

I am deeply grateful to the Institute for Regional and International Studies for this award, which has allowed me to make incredibly important discoveries for several chapters of my dissertation. The documents that I have found on this trip will be instrumental in three of my chapters, and thus this grant has been a significant benefit for my progress.