THE KINGS’ SERGEANTS-AT-ARMS AND THE WAR IN SCOTLAND, 1296–1322

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In an illuminating article published in 2001, Richard Partington observed that ‘the king’s sergeants-at-arms have, by and large, been overlooked by late medieval English historians; what attention they have attracted has focused firstly on their function as the king’s bodyguard, and secondly on the infamous role they played in the reign of Richard II.’ Seeking to right this historiographical wrong, he went on to show that during the reign of Edward III these sergeants-at-arms were mainly men of humble and obscure origins, trusted by the king to enforce his will in the shires. Drafted into local government in increasing numbers during the 1340s as part of Edward’s campaign against corruption, they became ‘part of a coherent and sophisticated governmental strategy that increasingly regarded the two sides of his kingship – defence and the maintenance of order – as an indivisible whole’.

Given Partington’s focus on the sergeants-at-arms’ governmental duties, it is understandable that he does not pursue a sustained discussion of their campaigning in the king’s armies. He mentions that ‘on the Crécy-Calais campaign in 1346–1347 the keeper of the wardrobe accounted for some 90 sergeants, of whom 30, listed by name, seem to have been a core group’, but in what capacity they actually served on the campaign, their military raison d’être, remains open to doubt. This raises an interesting question: is the service of the king’s sergeants-at-arms in France during 1346–1347 simply the tip of the iceberg, or did these men not take up arms in Scotland or on the continent as much as one might expect during what was, after all, one of the most intensely militarised reigns of the Middle Ages? If the latter, this would be rather surprising, because, as Partington

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3 Ibid., pp. 90–91.
writes, all the evidence points to the fact that these were violent, muscular men, more than capable of looking after themselves should occasion demand it. Moreover, with Edward III’s knights and esquires playing such an important role in his wars with Scotland and France, it might be expected that the sergeants-at-arms, those most trusted of royal officials, would also serve in the royal host. In fact, despite Partington’s mention of the sergeants-at-arms’ capabilities ‘as fighting men’, this aspect of their duties during the reign of Edward III remains largely unexplored. It is, however, known that as many as 28 sergeants-at-arms (almost half of the total retained by the king at the time) appear on the pay-roll for the Sluys-Tournai campaign of 1340, that at least fourteen seem to have served in Brittany during 1342–1343, and that ten took out letters of protection for service on the Reims campaign of 1359–1360. There is also evidence for the service of a couple of these men in Scotland during 1334–1335. Therefore, the military role of the sergeants-at-arms was clearly of some importance in the reign of Edward III, even if the details of the individuals involved and of their careers in arms remain to be worked out.

The aim of this paper is not, however, to seek out evidence of military service by the king’s sergeants-at-arms during the reign of Edward III; rather, it is to show how under the two previous kings, Edward I and Edward II, the kings’ sergeants-at-arms were already performing a significant and specialised military role during the wars in Scotland. In these earlier reigns, as later, the sergeants-at-arms were royal agents with significant duties as enforcers of the royal will in the shires, but on top of these responsibilities (and for much of the time trumping them) was their position as soldiers spearheading the English conquest and occupation north of the border. This is not a potted history of the sergeants-at-arms during the reigns of Edwards I and II as nothing will be said of their administrative and governmental duties, significant as these undoubtedly were even

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4 Ibid., p. 93.
5 Ibid., p. 93.
6 TNA, E 101/389/8, mm. 14–15.
7 TNA, E 36/204, ff. 87v, 88r, 89v, 109v, 110r; C 76/17.
8 TNA, C 76/37, m. 6; C 76/38, mm. 5, 11, 15, 18; C 76/40, m. 4. My thanks go to Dr Andrew Ayton for the references in this and the two preceding footnotes.
10 In August 1316, for example, four sergeants-at-arms were given orders to arrest all persons who, pretending they were members of the king’s household, were taking food and goods from various clerks and laymen; CPR 1314–1317, p. 534.