A GROWING TRUST: EDWARD III AND HIS HOUSEHOLD KNIGHTS, 1330-1340

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Edward III (r.1327-1377) relied on a fairly narrow group of men to provide the retinues of men-at-arms and archers who served at the core of his forces during the 1330s as he fought to assert control over Scotland. The majority of these men came from expected sources—the group who were trying to regain their lost Scottish titles, collectively known as the Disinherited;¹ the northern lords of England defending their regional interests; and the earls and major members of the household identified by James Bothwell as part of the “New Nobility”²—men such as Henry Grosmont, Thomas Beauchamp, and William Montague. Among the groups who provided Edward with the bulk of his men-at-arms, the most reliable were the lesser knights of the royal household. Not only did they provide consistent numbers for every campaign; but also from among their ranks came the generation of retinue leaders such as Thomas Bradeston and Reginald Cobham who formed the linchpin of Edward III’s campaigns in France. This paper will investigate the reciprocal relationship between Edward III and these men during the first decade of his independent rule, and detail how Edward’s trust in them was built as much through their non-martial services to the crown as through their direct contributions on the battlefields of Scotland.

I. The Role of the Household Knights

The traditional role of the household knight was obvious—to serve the crown as a highly skilled, heavily armed soldier, particularly in times of war. Alongside the squires and sergeants-at-arm also retained by the crown,

they provided the center of the English cavalry force from the eleventh century to the mid-fourteenth.\(^3\) It was also anticipated that these men would bring their own individual retinues to receive royal wages, multiplying their military power several-fold. This effect was enhanced by the addition of various knights who were not in receipt of robes and fees, yet were paid through the wardrobe and identified for accounting purposes as members of the king's household \(^4\)

The primary role of the lesser household knights was to provide military force for the king, both in respect to quantity and quality. However, these individual contributions were tiny when compared to the number of men-at-arms provided by magnates such as the earls of Lancaster and Warwick. While the greatest bannerets of the household such as William Montague could match what established earls could provide, those of lesser rank could not compete.\(^5\) Even though Lancaster provided 113 men-at-arms to the campaign in 1335, the typical household knight brought with him only half-a-dozen.\(^6\) Nevertheless, these numbers did add up. Not including the great bannerets, the household could provide approximately 350 men-at-arms for Edward’s major campaigns and sizeable, though smaller contingents for lesser actions.\(^7\)

The greatest military utility of the household lay in its consistency: it could be counted on to provide similar numbers over the course of many campaigns. During the Great Offensive of 1335, which saw the largest English army assembled in the 1330s, the 334 men supplied by the household only comprised twelve percent of Edward’s force; it was dwarfed by far by the 2242 men provided by magnates.\(^8\) However, the previous winter campaign to Roxburgh in 1334 had seen magnates contribute only 818 men as compared to the household's 379.\(^9\) This situation had enfuriated Edward to the point that he angrily threatened numerous knights for their failure


\(^4\) This was often done with contingents too small to be accounted for independently in the way that the retinues of the great earls or bannerets would be; see British Library [BL] Cotton Nero C VIII, ff. 233-47.

\(^5\) Of course, Montague himself would be made an earl in 1337 along with Robert Ufford, William Bohun, and William Clinton.

\(^6\) BL Cotton Nero C VIII, f. 236v.

\(^7\) BL Cotton Nero C VIII, ff. 233-47.

\(^8\) BL Cotton Nero C VIII, ff. 236-39v.

\(^9\) BL Cotton Nero C VIII, ff. 233-35v.