

Wishing Upon A Star: King John, the Order of the Star, and Politics

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Within a few months after King John ascended the French throne, the political and social relationships of the king and the aristocracy of France were severely strained. While the coronation on 26 September 1350 and the royal entry into Paris on 11 November were enveloped in that special enthusiasm and support reserved for new monarchs, the summary execution of the Constable of France, Raoul, count of Eu and Guines, on 19 November brought a startling end to the joyousness of the new reign. Raoul had been a prisoner of the English since 1346, and his captors had allowed him to return temporarily to France in order to raise a ransom for his release. When Raoul went to the royal palace to deliver his greetings to the new king, this man, "who was so polite and so amiable in every way [that he was] loved and esteemed by great seigneurs, chevaliers, dames and damoiselles, and by all the people in England as well as in France," was arrested and beheaded.¹ The Crown never provided clear reasons for the sudden execution of this highly regarded and well-placed nobleman, although rumors circulated of an amorous affair with the queen, of his intention to surrender Guines to the English, and of the inability of the count or the king to pay the required ransom. In *Les Grandes Chroniques*, the official chronicle of the Crown, the execution was vaguely attributed to the "very great and evil treasons, which [Raoul] had done and committed against King John."² Politically, this summary execution established an atmosphere of distrust, caution, and

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uneasiness especially among the nobility of Normandy, who had highly regarded the late peer.

Following his coronation, King John recognized the necessity of improving his relationship with the members of the French nobility. About a year after he ascended the throne, John announced the creation of a new chivalric order the Order of the Star, which was to be housed in the Valois village of St.-Ouen, near St.-Denis. The brief history of this short-lived Order presents a glimpse of the French monarch's political needs, as well as of the aristocracy's consciousness of its role in French political society. King John created the Order in an attempt to win the allegiance of his leading aristocrats, many of whom had been estranged from the king since the execution of Raoul. John's ploy met with little success since the Order did not elicit the intended response from the leading nobility of the kingdom. After the one, and only, sparsely attended meeting of the Order in January 1352, John redefined this institution at St.-Ouen as a religious retreat for the Order's members, thereby virtually eliminating any political purpose it had been designed to serve. While the French monarch continued to seek and to secure aristocratic loyalties throughout the 1350s, he attracted this political support by more practical, and less romantic, means.

The idea of creating a special French chivalric order had first occurred to John in 1344, when he was duke of Normandy. In that year, the duke wrote to Pope Clement VI to request certain privileges for 200 knights who were to form a lay religious confraternity. The pope, supporting John's religiosity, issued several bulls sanctioning the creation of both an order and a foundation which would provide for a college of 12 canons who would lead the knights in common prayer.³ Despite the papal

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support of the order, John never seems to have assembled any members of the Norman nobility for worship. Although there are numerous reasons for the failure of the duke's early efforts to create a lay religious order, the renewal of the English war in Normandy, followed by the onslaught of the plague in 1348, was the chief factor which prevented the realization of his dreams.

After becoming king of France in 1350, John revived his youthful aspiration to create a new knightly order. Partly out of a general dissatisfaction with religious chivalric orders dating from the dissolution of the Knights Templar in 1311, partly out of a wish to emulate the fictive orders of the twelfth century,⁴ and partly out of the hope of gaining political support, King John established the Order of the Star. This new institution was not primarily for common worship by noblemen, but for honor, camaraderie, and the glorification of French knighthood.⁵ John firmly believed that a monarch who showered luxuries and festivities on the elite of a realm would win its loyalty and affection. The

idea of a paternalistic and beneficent monarch was certainly familiar to John. In 1347, a treatise, probably written for the future king, on the techniques of good and proper governance of a kingdom had circulated through his father's court.⁶ The work advised that a monarch should take care to avoid overworking himself and should engage in suitable recreation with his good subjects.

And for so much [as] no wise man ought to continually labor in great business and always be studious, it is necessary, right, good and fitting that at times Princes and lords have suitable disports and recreations, following the words of the sage Cato.

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Therefore, it is necessary that a king or Prince, after he has had great thought and attendance of the charges and business of his governance, also have play, disport and recreation, accompanied with goodly, fair and honest people....⁷

Elsewhere, the treatise warns that a ruler must surround himself with good and wise councilors and that he must provide for the enjoyment and profit of his subjects if he is to avoid the ruin that befell the ancient Roman emperors.⁸

With the desire to increase the support and loyalty of his leading subjects, especially after their post-coronation estrangement, King John issued, on 6 November 1351, an ordonnance and a circular letter inviting noblemen to be initiated into the Order of the Star.⁹ John attempted to provide his powerful subjects with new marks of prestige and greater access to, but not necessarily influence over, the king himself. The king wrote in his letter that the members of this new "Compaignie de Chevaliers", after receiving the dazzling livery of the Order, were to swear to "give loyal counsel to the Prince, when he requested it of them, either in arms or other things." Furthermore, any knight who fled from battle was to be suspended from the Order until his reinstatement by the Prince and the royal council, and every knight was forbidden to travel far from home without the Prince's consent.¹⁰ The language and imagery of this new chivalric order clearly hearkened back to a "Golden Age" when the king could depend upon the loyalty of his subjects and vassals swore to provide their lord with, at the very least, symbolic counsel (*consilium*) and assistance (*auxilium*). The regulations of the Order emphasized courage, unwavering obedience, and royal sovereignty. In the eyes of the

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chronicler Jean le Bel

King John of France [had] established a majestic company, grand and noble, along the lines of the Round Table which dated from the time of King Arthur.¹¹

Froissart had a less stately perception of the activities of the Order. He described the intended annual meetings of the company as events where the honorable, as well as the shameful, deeds of the knights were to be reported and recorded in a book, so that all might know the proud and glorious life of a French nobleman.¹²

In creating the Order, King John did not attempt to replace his own royal council of administrators, family members, and advisors with noblemen who would provide counsel and aid. Instead, he played upon the nobles' romantic notions of an earlier, feudal age the age of St. Louis when aristocrats were trusted servants of the Crown, not victims of royal wrath. John sought to provide these nobles, who had been emasculated by the defeat at Crécy in 1346, displaced by a growing class of bureaucrats, and financially impoverished by the disruptions of the plague and the reduction in the real value of royal pensions, with the glorious trappings of bygone days.¹³

The attendance at the first and only meeting of the Order of the Star on 5-6 January 1352 can be used as a crude measure of the aristocratic response to, or support for, this attempt to recreate the political society of the Round Table or the Golden Age of St. Louis. The circular letter of 6 November 1351 had noted that the Order was to comprise a company of 500 knights.¹⁴ Vague reports of the meeting indicate that fewer than 100, or 20%, of these

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500 knights attended the only meeting of the Order. From chronicle sources, from the fragmentary royal accounts which record some of the expenses of the Order, and from some letters issued by the Crown in January 1352, only 23 of these individuals can be identified as present at St.-Ouen on January 5-6.¹⁵ Of these 23, 17 were members of the immediate

royal family or officers of the Crown itself, and at least two were currently wards of the Crown living at the court.¹⁶ The attendance at this initial meeting was so limited that the first historian of the Order, Leopold Pannier, cynically suggested that the gathering was "truly a family celebration."¹⁷

To what can we attribute the embarrassingly low attendance and the overwhelmingly familial or official status of the knights of the Star present at the premier meeting of the Order? Conceivably, those who received the circular letter of 6 November 1351 may not have been able to afford the cost of coming to St.-Ouen, despite the fact that the Crown had assumed the great expense of providing the Order's splendid ceremonial garb to the initiates. Yet, it would be expected that even an impoverished nobleman would agree to attend the meeting in order to curry favor at court and, perhaps, benefit financially from a closer affiliation with the Crown.

A more plausible explanation is the political one. It is likely that many of those whom John had invited to join the Order simply declined or refused to participate and abstained from attending the January meeting. While no statement of protest or actual objection to the foundation of the Order has come to light, many French aristocrats may still have harbored resentment towards the king over the summary execution of their distinguished colleague, the count of Eu and Guines. Others may have

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objected to the creation of the Order, with its luxurious garb and redecorated building at St.-Ouen, because these excessive expenditures were made by the Crown at a time when the government could ill afford such outlays. Still others may have resented the very creation of the Order by the king as a crude and offensive political ploy to re-establish lost loyalties and to assuage aristocratic uneasiness. In any case, the attempt to create a new chivalric order in 1352 failed.

Ironically, on the days when the handful of noblemen were meeting at St.-Ouen to revel in the glory of French knighthood and to recount stories of their courageous acts, their pride was being tarnished by a small English force which seized the castle at Guines.¹⁸ The captain of the fortress, the Sire of Bavelinghem, instead of seeing to the defense of the stronghold, was at St.-Ouen, being initiated into the new Order.

This interpretation of the creation of the Order of the Star as a failed attempt by the Crown to foster aristocratic loyalties is strengthened by the fact that King John, stymied by his failure of January 1352, gave a new purpose or definition to the chivalric order the following autumn. Instead of preserving the Order of the Star as a political institution, John redesigned it as a confraternity for common worship. In October 1352, the king published an ordonnance establishing a chapter of canons, chaplains and clerics to celebrate the Divine office in the Chapel of the Noble House at St.-Ouen. The chapter and clerics were to be funded by the proceeds of "all forfeitures and confiscations for crimes of *lèse-majesté*" committed in France.¹⁹ John's desire to create a chivalric order with the primary purpose of serving the religious needs of an elite group of noblemen is reminiscent of the chivalric

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intentions he harbored as a young duke of Normandy.

The monarch's selection of forfeitures and confiscations as a source of funding for this redefined Order had a special political significance. Throughout the fourteenth century the French nobility had vigorously protested the confiscation of lands by the Crown, because the Crown tended either to subsume the lands into the royal domain or to delay their regranting in order to acquire extra income. The Reform Ordonnance of 1303, which was reconfirmed every few years during the fourteenth century at the insistence of the nobility, specified that the Crown should not hold confiscated lands for more than one year.²⁰ The concern of the aristocracy in the Reform Ordonnance was not to prevent the king from confiscating the lands of traitors but to ensure that confiscated lands were returned to "circulation" in order to provide income to members of the nobility. Thus, while the French nobility was not opposed to the king's endowment of pious foundations, the funding of the chivalric order with lands denied to potential noble landholders was not politically welcomed.

Despite the decision taken in October 1352 to endow the new religious-chivalric order, the proceeds of very few confiscations actually found their way to the clerics at St.-Ouen. One month after the creation of this endowment, the Crown seized a house and some fiefs worth 284 *livres tournois* from Gilles d'Acly as punishment for certain

wrongdoings. Instead of donating these properties to the Order, John found it politically more expedient to regrant the lands to Robert of Lorris, one of his trusted councilors. Seven months later, Robert himself gave the lands to the Order. John's failure to transfer these lands to the Order may indeed have resulted from the resentment of the aristocracy and led to the laundering of the

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lands through Robert. In the following years, judging from the existing archival materials, it appears that the king refrained from giving confiscated or forfeited lands to the chapter. Instead, he found other sources of funds for the clerics, such as the gift of 800 *livres parisis* made on 17 February 1354 and the promise to provide an income in land or funds equivalent to 800 *livres parisis* in future years.²¹

Ironically, the Order of the Star would have become an extremely well-endowed Order if the Crown had pursued its intentions as set forth in the October 1352 ordonnance. Instead, between 1354 and 1359, only a few lands belonging to John Malet, sire of Graille, who was executed on 16 April 1356 at Rouen ostensibly for committing *lèse-majesté*, seem to have been granted to support the clerics.

The Crown's abandonment of the policy of donating confiscated lands to the Order throughout the 1350s a period in which a minimum of 92 confiscation orders were issued can be attributed to the need to use confiscated properties as direct grants for the securing of loyalties. Beginning in July 1358, following the murder of Etienne Marcel and the collapse of the Paris Revolt, the Crown used confiscations and threats of confiscations to coerce noblemen who supported the rebellion of Charles II of Navarre, "the Bad", into returning to royal obedience.²² Thus, rather than using these lands to fund a confraternity for the exclusive use of leading aristocrats, the Crown, under the Regent Charles and the councilors of the captive King John, used land grants as rewards for renewed promises of loyalty.

King John was not the first ruler in medieval Europe to adopt the device of a chivalric order for creating a more coherent political society under his rule: Alphonse XI of

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Castile and Louis of Bavaria both had created orders around 1330, and Edward III had formed the Order of the Garter in 1348.²³ However, these orders succeeded, earning aristocratic support and persisting throughout the fourteenth century, while the Order of the Star failed. The floundering of the French chivalric order as a mechanism for attracting the support of leading noblemen can be attributed to King John's underestimation of the political sophistication and independence of his subjects. As they demonstrated very clearly in January 1352, their unwavering loyalty could not be won with invitations to join an elite group of well-dressed and privileged men, sentimentally recreating a world from the previous century. Many members of the French nobility in 1352 had concerns about their own financial state, the safety of the kingdom, their monarch's sincerity, and possibly even his claim to the throne. Instead, as the rebellions led by Charles II of Navarre between 1354 and 1360 reveal, several powerful aristocrats yearned to reform the government of France, not to be patronized with political palliatives.

King John, for his part, realized very quickly that his attempt to secure the high regard and loyalty of his leading noblemen had failed. The recasting of the Order of the Star in the autumn of 1352 clearly shows that John had accepted the Order's fate. No longer was the Order to be a costly institution for the glorification of nobility or the building of stronger bonds between king and nobleman. As the confiscations and regrating of lands show, winning the loyalties of powerful subjects required practical and material rewards, not just dreams of yesteryear.

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Notes

1. *Chronique de Jean le Bel*. Société de l'histoire de France, ed. J. Viard and E. Déprez (Paris: 1904-1905), ii, p. 198.
2. *Chronique normande du XIVe siècle*. Société de l'histoire de France, ed. A. and E. Molinier (Paris: 1882), pp. 96-7; S. H. Cuttler, *The Law of Treason and Treason Trials in Later Medieval France* (Cambridge: 1981), p. 154; and G. Bordonove, *Jean le Bon et son temps*, (Paris: 1981), pp. 107-8; *Les Grandes Chroniques de France*, ed. P. Paris, (Paris: 1838), vi, p. 3.
3. Clement VI, *Lettres closes, patentes, et curiales se rapportent à la France*, ed. E. Déprez, J. Glenisson and G. Mollat, (Paris: 1910-1962), ii, nos. 883-8; and Y. Renouard, "L'Ordre de la Jarretière et l'Ordre de l'Etoile," *Le Moyen Age*, 55 (1949), p. 284.
4. Renouard, pp. 281-82.
5. The Order was created "à l'honneur de Dieu, de Notre-Dame et en exhaussement de chevalerie et accroissement d'honneur." Alfred Coville, *Les Premiers Valois et les débuts de la guerre de Cent Ans* (Paris: 1910), p. 108.
6. This treatise was written expressly for either John, then duke of Normandy, or Charles of Navarre, who was a ward of King Philip VI at the time. The work itself received wide distribution, especially in the fifteenth century, when it was translated into English. See "The III Consideracions Right and Necesserye to the Good Governauce of a Prince," in *Four English Political Tracts of the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jean-Philippe Genet, *Camden Society*, 4th ser., 18 (1977), pp. 177-79.
7. From a fifteenth century translation of the 1347 French treatise. The spelling and grammar have been modernized here. "The III Consideracions,"

p. 193.

8. "The III Consideracions," pp. 192, 197.

9. *Ordonnances des rois de France de la troisième race*, ed. E.-J. de Laurière et al. (Paris: 1723-1849), ii, pp. 465-6; Leopold Pannier, *La Noble Maison de St.-Ouen* (Paris: 1872), pp. 88-90.

10. *Ordonnances des rois*, ii, pp. 465-66.

11. Jean le Bel, ii, p. 204.

12. Pannier, p. 93, n. 1.

13. Pannier, pp. 86-7. Of John's political need to re-attach himself to the nobles, Pannier noted: "Ruinés par les dernières guerres, les seigneurs ne demandaient par mieux. Ils quittaient en foule leurs châteaux à moitié détruits, où ils ne pouvaient plus vivre en maîtres au dépens de leurs serfs, pour venir à la cour se faire valets à la charge du roi. Alors commençait cette courtisanerie qui arriva à son apogée sous Louis XIV. Le roi ne pourra plus marcher qu'accompagné de sa suite de nobles, à qui il devra donner sans cesse de l'argent, des fêtes, des honneurs, mais chez, qui quelquefois au moins, il trouvera des partisans." See also David Bessen, "Charles of Navarre and John II: Disloyalty in Northern France, 1350-1360" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Toronto, 1983), pp. 54-90.

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14. *Ordonnances des rois*, ii, pp. 465-66.

15. Pannier, pp. 94-6, refers to Dacier's researches on the accounts of the *argentier du roi*, in which are recorded the expenses for some of the modifications made to the building at St.-Ouen to prepare for the Order and for the purchase of the ceremonial garb worn by the Knights of the Order. From these figures, Dacier calculated that at most 100 knights were present at the January 1352 meeting of the Order of the Star. The 23 individuals were King John; Dauphin Charles; Louis, duke of Anjou; John, Sire of Berry; Philip the Hardy, duke of Burgundy; Philip, duke of Orléans (brother of the king); Louis of Bourbon; Charles, count of Artois; Philip of Navarre; Louis of Navarre; Humbert II, former Dauphin of Vienne; John of Chatillon, grand-master of the hotel of the king; Sire of Andresil, chamberlain of the king; John of Clermont, chamberlain of the king and Maréchal of France; four chamberlains of the Dauphin; Charles of Spain, Constable of France; John II, viscount of Melun, count of Tancarville; Jacques Bozzuto, of the house of Anjou-Sicily; Sire of Bavelinghem, captain of the chateau of Guines; and Geoffrey of Charny, governor of Saint-Ouen.

16. The two wards were the minor children, Louis and Philip, of the late Queen Jeanne of Navarre. Their older brother, Charles, was not present at the meeting of the Order probably because he was still serving as lieutenant of the king in Languedoc. He did, however, return to Paris in February to marry the daughter of the king.

17. Pannier, p. 95.

18. *Les Grandes Chroniques*, vi, p. 5.

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19. Pannier, pp. 118-20; *Ordonnances des rois*, iv, pp. 116-17.

20. Raymond Cazelles, "Une exigence de l'opinion depuis Saint Louis: la réformation du royaume," *Annuaire-Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de France*, (1962-1963), pp. 91-99.

21. Pannier, pp. 120-23.

22. AN JJ 86-90; Bessen, pp. 315-18.

23. Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: 1984), pp. 179-99.; Renouard, pp. 281, 285.