



John Hawkwood: An English Mercenary in Fourteenth-Century Italy

William Caferro

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John Hawkwood was fourteenth-century Italy's most notorious and successful soldier. A man known for cleverness and daring, he was the most feared mercenary in Renaissance Italy. Born in England, Hawkwood began his career in France during the Hundred Years' War and crossed into Italy with the famed White Company in 1361. From that time until his death in 1394, Hawkwood fought throughout the peninsula as a captain of armies in times of war and as a commander of marauding bands during times of peace. He achieved international fame, and his acquaintances included such prominent people as Geoffrey Chaucer, Catherine of Siena, Jean Froissart, and Francis Petrarch. City-states constantly tried to outbid each other for his services, for which he received money, land, and in the case of Florence, citizenship—a most unusual honor for an Englishman. When Hawkwood died, the Florentines buried him with great ceremony in their cathedral, an honor denied their greatest poet, Dante. His final resting place, however, is disputed.

Historian William Caferro's ambitious account of Hawkwood is both a biography and a study of warfare and statecraft. Caferro has mined more than twenty archives in England and Italy, creating an authoritative portrait of Hawkwood as an extraordinary military leader, if not always an admirable human being. Caferro's Hawkwood possessed a talent for dissimulation and craft both on the battlefield and at the negotiating table, and, ironically, managed to gain a reputation for "honesty" while beating his Italian hosts at their own game of duplicity and manipulation.

In addition to a thorough account of Hawkwood's life and career, Caferro's study offers a fundamental reassessment of the Italian military situation and of the mercenary system. Hawkwood's career is treated not in isolation but firmly within the context of Italian society, against the backdrop of unfolding crises: famine, plague, popular unrest, and religious schism. Indeed, Hawkwood's life and career offer a unique vantage point from which we can study the economic, social, and political impacts of war.

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