

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and
the Footprints of Philosophers
Edited by Cary J. Nederman
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

JOHN OF SALISBURY
Policraticus

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

Series editors

RAYMOND GEUSS

Reader in Philosophy, University of Cambridge

QUENTIN SKINNER

Regius Professor of Modern History, University of Cambridge

Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought is now firmly established as the major student textbook series in political theory. It aims to make available to students all the most important texts in the history of Western political thought, from ancient Greece to the early twentieth century. All the familiar classic texts will be included, but the series seeks at the same time to enlarge the conventional canon by incorporating an extensive range of less well-known works, many of them never before available in a modern English edition. Wherever possible, texts are published in complete and unabridged form, and translations are specially commissioned for the series. Each volume contains a critical introduction together with chronologies, biographical sketches, a guide to further reading and any necessary glossaries and textual apparatus. When completed, the series will aim to offer an outline of the entire evolution of Western political thought.

For a list of titles published in the series, please see end of book

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and
the Footprints of Philosophers
Edited by Cary J. Nederman
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

JOHN OF SALISBURY

Policraticus

*Of the Frivolities of Courtiers
and the Footprints
of Philosophers*

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY
CARY J. NEDERMAN

*Department of Political Science
University of Arizona*



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521363990

© Cambridge University Press 1990

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1990

Seventh printing 2007

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

John, of Salisbury, Bishop of Chartres. d. 1180.

[*Policraticus*. English]

Policraticus: of the frivolities of courtiers and the footprints of philosophers
edited and translated by Cary J. Nederman.

p. cm. – (Cambridge texts in the history of political thought)
Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-521-36399-3. – ISBN 0-521-36701-8 (pbk.)

1. Political science – Early works to 1800. 2. Education of
princes. 1. Nederman, Cary J. II. Title. III. Series.

JC121.J5813 1990

320'.01–dc20 89-22327 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-36399-0 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-36701-1 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2009

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate. Information regarding prices, travel timetables and other factual information given in this work are correct at the time of first printing but Cambridge University Press does not guarantee the accuracy of such information thereafter.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers
 Edited by Cary J. Nederman
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

Acknowledgements	<i>page</i>	xiii
Editor's introduction		xv
Bibliographical note		xxvii
Principal events in the life of John of Salisbury		xxix
<i>Prologue</i>		3

BOOK I

<i>Chapter 1</i> What most harms the fortunate	9
<i>Chapter 2</i> In what consists devotion to unsuitable goals	10
<i>Chapter 3</i> The distribution of duties according to the political constitution of the ancients	10

BOOK III

<i>Prologue</i>	13
<i>Chapter 1</i> Of the universal and public welfare	14
<i>Chapter 3</i> That pride is the root of all evil and passionate desire a general leprosy which infects all	17
<i>Chapter 4</i> The flatterer, the toady and the cajoler, than whom none is more pernicious	18
<i>Chapter 6</i> The multiplication of flatterers is beyond number and pushes out of distinguished houses those who are honourable	19

Contents

<i>Chapter 10</i>	That the Romans are dedicated to vanity and what the ends of flatterers are	22
<i>Chapter 15</i>	That it is only permitted to flatter him who it is permitted to slay; and that the tyrant is a public enemy	25

BOOK IV

<i>Prologue</i>		27
<i>Chapter 1</i>	On the difference between the prince and the tyrant, and what the prince is	28
<i>Chapter 2</i>	What law is; and that the prince, although he is an absolutely binding law unto him- self, still is the servant of law and equity, the bearer of the public persona, and sheds blood blamelessly	30
<i>Chapter 3</i>	That the prince is a minister of priests and their inferior; and what it is for rulers to perform their ministry faithfully	32
<i>Chapter 4</i>	That the authority of divine law consists in the prince being subject to the justice of law	35
<i>Chapter 5</i>	That the prince must be chaste and shun avarice	38
<i>Chapter 6</i>	That the ruler must have the law of God always before his mind and eyes, and he is to be proficient in letters, and he is to receive counsel from men of letters	41
<i>Chapter 7</i>	That the fear of God should be taught, and humility should exist, and this humility should be protected so that the authority of the prince is not diminished; and that some precepts are flexible, others inflexible	46
<i>Chapter 8</i>	Of the moderation of the prince's justice and mercy, which should be temperately mixed for the utility of the republic	49
<i>Chapter 9</i>	What it is to stray to the right or to the left, which is forbidden to the prince	53
<i>Chapter 10</i>	What utility princes may acquire from the cultivation of justice	54

Contents

<i>Chapter 11</i> What are the other rewards of princes	56
<i>Chapter 12</i> By what cause rulership and kingdoms are transferred	61

BOOK V

<i>Prologue</i>	65
<i>Chapter 1</i> Plutarch's letter instructing Trajan	65
<i>Chapter 2</i> According to Plutarch, what a republic is and what place is held in it by the soul of the members	66
<i>Chapter 3</i> What is principally directed by Plutarch's plan . . .	68
<i>Chapter 6</i> Of the prince, who is the head of the republic, and his election, and privileges, and the rewards of virtue and sin; and that blessed Job should be imitated; and of the virtues of blessed Job	69
<i>Chapter 7</i> What bad and good happen to subjects on account of the morals of princes; and that the examples of some stratagems streng- then this	75
<i>Chapter 8</i> Why Trajan seems to be preferable to all others	79
<i>Chapter 9</i> Of those who hold the place of the heart, and that the iniquitous are prevented from counselling the powerful, and of the fear of God, and wisdom, and philosophy	81
<i>Chapter 10</i> Of the flanks of the powerful, whose needs are to be satisfied and whose malice is to be restrained	85
<i>Chapter 11</i> Of the eyes, ears and tongue of the powerful, and of the duties of governing, and that judges ought to have a know- ledge of right and equity, a good will and the power of execution, and that they should be bound by oath to the laws and should be distanced from the taint of presents	91

Contents

<i>Chapter 15</i> What pertains to the sacred calling of proconsuls, governors and ordinary justices, and to what extent it is permitted to reach out for gifts; and of Cicero, Bernard, Martin and Geoffrey of Chartres	95
<i>Chapter 17</i> Money is condemned in favour of wisdom; this is also approved by the examples of the ancient philosophers	99

BOOK VI

<i>Prologue</i>	103
<i>Chapter 1</i> That the hand of the republic is either armed or unarmed; and which one is unarmed, and regarding its duties	104
<i>Chapter 2</i> That military service requires selection, knowledge and practice	109
<i>Chapter 6</i> What ills arise from disregard by our countrymen for the selection of soldiers, and how Harold tamed the Welsh	112
<i>Chapter 7</i> What is the formula of the oath of the soldier, and that no one is permitted to serve in the army without it	114
<i>Chapter 8</i> The armed soldier is by necessity bound to religion, in just the way that the clergy is consecrated in obedience to God; and that just as the title of soldier is one of labour, so it is one of honour	115
<i>Chapter 9</i> That faith is owed to God in preference to any man whomsoever, and man is not served unless God is served	117
<i>Chapter 18</i> The examples of recent history, and how King Henry the Second quelled the disturbances and violence under King Stephen and pacified the island	118
<i>Chapter 19</i> Of the honour to be exhibited by soldiers, and of the modesty to be shown; and who are the transmitters of the military arts, and of certain of their general precepts	122

Contents

<i>Chapter 20</i>	Who are the feet of the republic and regarding the care devoted to them	125
<i>Chapter 21</i>	The republic is arranged according to its resemblance to nature, and its arrange- ment is derived from the bees	127
<i>Chapter 22</i>	That without prudence and forethought no magistracy remains intact, nor does that republic flourish the head of which is impaired	129
<i>Chapter 24</i>	The vices of the powerful are to be tolerated because with them rests the prospect of public safety, and because they are the dispensers of safety just as the stomach in the body of animals dis- penses nourishment, and this is by the judgment of the Lord Adrian	131
<i>Chapter 25</i>	Of the coherence of the head and the members of the republic; and that the prince is a sort of image of the deity, and of the crime of high treason and of that which is to be kept in fidelity	137
<i>Chapter 26</i>	That vices are to be endured or removed and are distinguished from flagrant crimes; and certain general matters about the office of the prince; and a brief epi- logue on how much reverence is to be displayed towards him	139
<i>Chapter 29</i>	That the people are moulded by the merits of the prince and the government is moulded by the merits of the people, and every creature is subdued and serves man at God's pleasure	142

BOOK VII

<i>Prologue</i>		145
<i>Chapter 1</i>	That the Academics are more modest than other philosophers whose rashness blinds them so that they are given to false beliefs	148

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers
 Edited by Cary J. Nederman
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Chapter 2</i> Of the errors of the Academics; and who among them it is permitted to imitate; and those matters which are doubtful to the wise man	150
<i>Chapter 7</i> That some things are demonstrated by the authority of the senses, others by reason, others by religion; and that faith in any doctrine is justified by some stable basis that need not be demonstrated; and that some things are known by the learned themselves, others by the uncultivated; and to what extent there is to be doubt; and that stubbornness most often impedes the examination of truth	153
<i>Chapter 8</i> That virtue is the unique path to being a philosopher and to advancing towards happiness; and of the three degrees of aspirants and of the three schools of philosophers	156
<i>Chapter 11</i> What it is to be a true philosopher; and the end towards which all writings are directed in their aim	160
<i>Chapter 17</i> Of ambition, and that passion accompanies foolishness; and what is the origin of tyranny; and of the diverse paths of the ambitious	162
<i>Chapter 21</i> Of hypocrites who endeavour to conceal the disgrace of ambition under the false pretext of religion	167
<i>Chapter 25</i> Of the love and acclaim of liberty; and of those ancestors who endured patiently free speaking of the mind; and of the difference between an offence and a taunt	175

BOOK VIII

<i>Prologue</i>	181
<i>Chapter 12</i> That some long to be modelled after beasts and insensate creatures; and how	

Contents

much humanity is to be afforded to slaves; and of the pleasures of three senses	182
<i>Chapter 16</i> Of the four rivers which spring for Epicureans from the fount of lustfulness and which create a deluge by which the world is nearly submerged; and of the opposite waters and the garments of Esau	188
<i>Chapter 17</i> In what way the tyrant differs from the prince; and of the tyranny of priests; and in what way a shepherd, a thief and an employee differ from one another	190
<i>Chapter 18</i> Tyrants are the ministers of God; and what a tyrant is; and of the moral characters of Gaius Caligula and his nephew Nero and each of their ends	201
<i>Chapter 20</i> That by the authority of the divine book it is lawful and glorious to kill public tyrants, so long as the murderer is not obligated to the tyrant by fealty nor otherwise lets justice or honour slip	206
<i>Chapter 21</i> All tyrants reach a miserable end; and that God exercises punishment against them if the human hand refrains, and this is evident from Julian the Apostate and many examples in sacred scripture	210
<i>Chapter 22</i> Of Gideon, the model for rulers, and Antiochus	213
<i>Chapter 23</i> The counsel of Brutus is to be used against those who not only fight but battle schismatically for the supreme pontificate; and that nothing is calm for tyrants	216
<i>Chapter 25</i> What is the most faithful path to be followed towards what the Epicureans desire and promise	225
Index	233

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and
the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgements

Many people have given generously of their time and knowledge to improve and refine this translation. My greatest debt is to my research assistant, Ms Sarah Crichton, who read every word of the English text and suggested significant changes to and reformulations of my renderings of John's words; the value of her intelligence and good humour can never be adequately calculated or repaid. Friends and colleagues throughout the world lent practical aid and moral support at crucial moments, including Professor Kate Forhan, Ms Allison Holcroft, Dr Katherine Keats-Rohan (whose forthcoming critical edition of the *Policraticus* is eagerly awaited), Dr David Denemark, and Professor Quentin Skinner. While all of these people have in some way made this a better translation, none are to be held responsible for any of its flaws. Thanks are also due to Ms Susan van de Ven, who copy-edited the text, and Miss Catherine E.J. Campbell, who prepared the index. Finally, I owe a considerable debt to my colleagues in the Political Science Department at the University of Canterbury for their exemplary patience and support and to the University itself, which defrayed expenses associated with this work out of its Minor Research Grant programme.

This book is dedicated to two teachers, friends and, for a brief time, colleagues who in all these capacities fuelled my interest in medieval political thought: Neal Wood and the late John Brückmann. The present volume is but small thanks for their efforts to challenge and extend the horizons of my learning.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and
the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the *Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers*

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Editor's introduction

John of Salisbury's *Policraticus: Of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers* is commonly acclaimed as the first extended work of political theory written during the Latin Middle Ages. At approximately 250,000 words in length, the *Policraticus* is however far more than a theoretical treatise on politics. It is equally a work of moral theology, satire, speculative philosophy, legal procedure, self-consolation, biblical commentary and deeply personal meditation. In sum, the *Policraticus* is the philosophical memoir of one of the most learned courtier-bureaucrats of twelfth-century Europe. The title *Policraticus*, a pseudo-Greek neologism, itself seems to have been invented by John in order to convey the implication of classical learning and erudition as well as to capture the political content of the work.

Because of the diversity of John's interests, the reader must take care to approach the *Policraticus* without reference to current disciplinary boundaries. It is anachronistic to ignore or exclude from consideration those sections of the *Policraticus* which do not meet strict contemporary criteria for political theory. Indeed, even John's conception of what constitutes the realm of the political was different from a modern one, a fact which is reflected in the substance of his writing. Yet if we acknowledge the distance of his fundamental assumptions from our own, we can learn much about the political attitudes and beliefs of medieval Europe as well as about the origins of many of our own cherished political and social values.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Editor's Introduction

Biography

John was born at Old Sarum (the former site of Salisbury) in England between 1115 and 1120. Specific knowledge of his family background and early life is scant; we know in detail only about a brother, Richard, and a half-brother, Robert, both of whom held offices within the English church. The first date we can safely associate with John is 1136, when he travelled to Paris to study at Mont-Saint-Geneviève. The list of his teachers during the ensuing dozen years includes many of the great minds of the mid-twelfth century. He received instruction at one time or another from Peter Abelard, Robert of Melun, William of Conches, Thierry of Chartres, Adam de Petit Pont, Gilbert of Poitiers, Robert Pullan and others; his studies encompassed speculative philosophy, rhetoric, linguistic theory, literature and theology.

Like so many other educated churchmen of his era, John chose an active career in the corridors of power rather than life in the cloister or the school. He joined the household of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury, a vocal and energetic advocate of the rights of the English church, in 1147. In his capacity as secretary to Theobald, John was an omnicompetent bureaucrat: he composed the Archbishop's letters, advised him on legal and political affairs, travelled to the Continent as an archiepiscopal envoy, and altogether lived in the manner of a trusted intimate.

Because Theobald's court attracted many clerics with training and experience similar to John's own, he could continue to indulge his intellectual pursuits in a sympathetic environment at Canterbury during the 1140s and 1150s. John seems to have been a member of a small circle of learned bureaucrats whose members included Thomas Becket, the future martyr, a trusted servant of Theobald's before he was appointed as King Henry II's Chancellor in 1155. It was this circle of like-minded men that constituted the immediate audience for much of John's writing. The *Policraticus*, for instance, is not only dedicated to Becket but often addresses him personally about current events or personalities.

John's activities on behalf of the Archbishop brought him into contact with some of the most powerful and prominent men of twelfth-century Europe. He was present at the Roman curia for many crucial occurrences during the pontificate of Eugenius III (1145–

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Editor's Introduction

1153), four years of which he would later chronicle in his *Historia Pontificalis*. He enjoyed a warm friendship with his fellow countryman Nicholas Breakspear, who ascended the papal throne as Adrian IV in 1154. The *Policraticus* often relates stories and sayings derived from its author's interviews with Adrian, with whom John was sufficiently intimate to raise criticisms of the conduct of the papal curia.

John was also well acquainted with important figures in twelfth-century secular life, especially the young Henry II (1153–1189). He had supported Henry's side in the struggle against the partisans of King Stephen (1135–1153) during the period of English history known as the Anarchy. His later writings reveal a consistent horror of civil war of the sort engendered by Stephen's usurpation of the throne. John was, however, sufficiently vocal in his opposition to Henry's policies towards the English church to be banished from court during 1156 and 1157. Although he was to recover favour with his monarch, he acquired a lingering scepticism about Henry's motives which was to be confirmed by later events.

Thus, it is hardly surprising that when Becket became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162, John backed his friend's cause against the English crown. He consequently spent much of the 1160s in exile, either in France or at the papal court, lobbying on behalf of Becket and against Henry and the English bishops who backed the King. Yet as the large body of his correspondence dating from this period testifies, John felt no more comfortable with Becket's zealotry than with Henry's repressiveness. His letters often adopt an independent line and express a willingness to compromise with Henry which is in marked contrast with Becket's intransigence.

The murder of Becket did not deprive John of his career at Canterbury. Yet while he served the English church in numerous capacities during the early 1170s, and was consecrated Bishop of Chartres in 1176 (a post in which he seems to have achieved little), his waning years were peaceful and restrained after his intrigues during the era of Theobald and Becket. He died at Chartres in 1180 and is buried in the abbey church of Notre-Dame-de-Josaphat.

John of Salisbury's literary output falls broadly into two categories. On the one hand, he composed several treatises of considerable philosophical interest, most notably the *Policraticus*, but also the *Entheticus de Dogmate Philosophorum* (or *Entheticus Major*), a satirical poem about philosophers and courtiers, and the *Metalogicon*, an

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Editor's Introduction

important discussion of pedagogy and speculative philosophy. These works all date from about the period between 1154 and 1159. By contrast, John's writings of an historical nature – the *Historia Pontificalis* and most of his letters, as well as his lives of St Anselm and Becket – were composed later in his career, during or after his association with Becket. This should not be taken as evidence that he lost interest in scholastic or theoretical disputes. On the contrary, his historical writings (and indeed many of the crucial decisions of his administrative career) often represented practical applications of the principles he had already articulated in a philosophical form. Above all, it was a constant concern to unify theory and practice that constituted the hallmark of John's political and intellectual life.

The *Policraticus*: textual history

The arrangement of the text of the *Policraticus* as we know it today does not seem to reflect either the order of its composition or the development of John's interests. John's earliest effort to treat many of the themes ultimately addressed in the *Policraticus* may be found in the *Enthetitus Major*, so-called because John prefaced the *Policraticus* with another shorter and quite different poem also called *Enthetitus*. Probably composed between 1154 and 1156, the *Enthetitus Major* satirises many of the foibles of princes and courtiers, compares them to the standards set by the ancient philosophers, and lays down a new code of conduct for the intellectual Christian man of affairs.

What the *Enthetitus Major* lacked, of course, was sustained philosophical argument of the sort found in the *Policraticus*. Thus in 1156 or 1157, during his period of self-proclaimed 'disgrace' when he was exiled from Canterbury due to Henry II's anger, John began to write a prose work which attempted to demonstrate the foundations of the good life for man and to demystify the false images of happiness propounded by those of his contemporaries who unwittingly advocated the hedonistic doctrines of Epicureanism. This treatise, which represented a sort of self-consolation (perhaps modelled on Boethius's 'Consolation of Philosophy') in a time of political disfavour, came to form the bulk of the chapters in books VII and VIII of the *Policraticus*.

After his recall to Theobald's household, John seems to have undertaken to transform his self-consolatory meditation into a full-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Editor's Introduction

fledged volume of advice to his fellow clerical bureaucrats about how to avoid potential misfortunes of life at secular and ecclesiastical courts. In particular, such concerns apparently stimulated John to compose the more overtly political sections of the *Policraticus* (books IV, V and VI) in which he articulates a theory of government and society which, if realised, would better preserve the physical and spiritual safety of civil servants like himself as well as their princes and subjects. John thereby broadened his concern from the good life for the individual man to the good life for the entire political body. The completion of the *Policraticus* in its final form is dated, on both internal and external evidence, to the middle of 1159.

Sources

Like most works of medieval philosophy, the *Policraticus* depends heavily upon authoritative sources as a means for extending and enhancing its arguments. Thinkers like John believed that the case for a specific claim was strengthened not only by rational demonstration but also by the antiquity and the eminence of the authorities one could adduce in support of it. Thus we encounter throughout the *Policraticus* extensive quotations from and citations of both pagan and Christian sources.

John's most important authority, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, is Holy Scripture. While his careful and often subtle use of biblical imagery and texts reveals a thorough knowledge of both Testaments, he manifests a clear preference throughout the *Policraticus* for the Old Testament, especially the books of the prophets and of wisdom. At times, the *Policraticus* even engages in extended biblical commentary. Much of book V, for instance, is taken up with exegesis of a passage from Job, by means of which John demonstrates the salient features of the good ruler.

John is also conversant with the Fathers of the Latin Church and other early Christian authors. The *Policraticus* displays a particular fondness for St Augustine and St Jerome, and for the historical writings of Orosius, but there are few available writers of the patristic age whom John fails to cite. By contrast, he is more hesitant in referring to the writings of his contemporaries; Bernard of Clairvaux is the only recent figure upon whose work the *Policraticus* explicitly draws with regularity. More commonly, John mentions the doctrines

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Editor's Introduction

of contemporary thinkers by means of pseudonymous references, a technique which he employs throughout his corpus when he wishes to cloak the actual identity of his opponents.

The *Policraticus* is perhaps best known, however, for the number and range of its references to the texts and doctrines of pagan antiquity. Indeed, the scope of John's learning has often earned him the designation of the best read man of the twelfth century. John's classical education was particularly thorough in the areas of rhetoric, philosophy and poetry. He seems to have been familiar with all the available works of Cicero – although not, of course, with Cicero's two major works of political theory, *De re publica* and *De legibus*, whose ideas he knew only through Christian intermediaries like St Augustine. Likewise, John integrated into the *Policraticus* many citations from the major and minor Latin poets; among his favourites were Virgil, Horace, Juvenal, Lucan and Ovid.

Yet there are good reasons for doubting whether the breadth of John's classical quotations and allusions in the *Policraticus* was matched by a thorough acquaintance with the texts to which he refers. It has been demonstrated, for instance, that his use of passages from the pagan historians Gellius, Suetonius and Frontinus does not reflect direct exposure to their writings. Rather, John relied on *florilegia* (or books of extracts) compiled by later editors which were readily available to him at the Canterbury Cathedral library. Hence, John's classical learning was not as extensive as a cursory reading of the *Policraticus* might suggest.

Of the philosophical and literary works of the Greeks, John knew little in comparison with later centuries; like virtually all Western men of his time, he read no Greek. He could acknowledge the bare existence of Homer, Herodotus, Pythagoras and Socrates, and he was occasionally able to ascribe specific doctrines to them. He knew some of Plato's thought by means of an available Latin translation of and commentary on the *Timaeus*. Perhaps most importantly, John was closely attuned to the reintroduction of Aristotle's writings into the Latin West, a process which is commonly said to have revolutionised medieval learning. He may have been one of the first in the Middle Ages to be familiar with the entirety of Aristotle's *Organon* (the six Aristotelian treatises on logic). Even though Aristotle's moral and political writings would not be circulated in Western Christendom until the thirteenth century, John was able to glean from the *Organon*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Editor's Introduction

many important Aristotelian ideas (such as the doctrine of the golden mean and the psychology of moral character) which he incorporated into the social philosophy of the *Policraticus*.

Yet the general absence of classical models of politics created for John something of a dilemma, since his intellectual instincts resisted the postulation of innovative concepts unsupported by long-standing tradition. His solution is one that was not uncommon in the Middle Ages: he created a bogus authority – in essence, he perpetrated a forgery – in order to legitimise ideas which were otherwise original to him. The archetypical instance of this in the *Policraticus* is his reference to a work called the ‘Instruction of Trajan’, purportedly composed by the Roman imperial writer Plutarch. John attributes to this treatise many of the most significant and insightful features of his political theory, especially the claim that the political system can be analysed in detail as an organism or living body whose parts are mutually devoted to and dependent upon one another. In fact, the framework for the whole of books V and VI is allegedly borrowed from the ‘Instruction of Trajan’. Yet there is no independent evidence for the existence of a work by Plutarch (or some later Plutarchian imitator) as described by John, and when the ‘Instruction of Trajan’ is cited by authors subsequent to him, it is always on the basis of the report of the *Policraticus*. Hence, scholars now usually conclude that the ‘Instruction of Trajan’ was actually a convenient fiction fashioned by John as a cloak for that intellectual novelty so despised by the medieval cast of mind. Moreover, this gives us good reason to believe that when John refers to other unknown sources, he may be performing a similar sleight of hand upon his audience.

John’s method: *exempla*

To the modern reader, one of the most peculiar features of the *Policraticus* is John’s regular and prolonged use of *exempla*, that is, stories told to illustrate or exemplify a lesson or doctrine. Many chapters of the text are little more than a collection of such tales strung together with no apparent organisation or interconnection. The sources for these *exempla* vary widely: many are biblical, some derive from classical or patristic historians, and a few are even the products of John’s own experiences at papal and royal courts. The complaint is sometimes heard that he is wholly unconcerned about

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Editor's Introduction

the actual historical significance – let alone the accuracy – of the stories and events he recounts. John's reliance upon *exempla* does not meet standards set by modern historical scholarship.

Yet the use of *exempla* must nevertheless be taken very seriously. The *Policraticus* is as much a work of moral edification as of philosophical speculation. It is intended to have practical relevance and value by imparting to John's contemporaries a code of conduct applicable to the unsettled circumstances of the clerical administrator. Thus, John's examples are oriented to the demonstration of how abstract principles of moral and political behaviour may be employed in everyday life. Like the parables of Jesus in the New Testament, the *exempla* of the *Policraticus* teach general lessons through concrete stories. Sometimes these lessons pertain to the translation of vicious or sinful beliefs into action, while at other times they illustrate the ways in which goodness and faith manifest themselves. But in all cases, John's *exempla* are meant to help the reader to bridge the gap between abstract moral discourse, on the one hand, and the actual conditions in which human beings find themselves, on the other.

*Thematic unity of the *Policraticus**

Because it was composed over the course of many years and touches upon a bewildering array of topics and issues, the *Policraticus* might appear to be more a rambling and disjointed collection of stories and observations than a focussed and coherent piece of philosophical argument. But while on initial inspection this claim seems plausible, the careful reader will discern in the *Policraticus* a number of unifying elements which lend intellectual coherence to the treatise. In surveying these themes, we may begin to grasp the nature of John's contribution to Western modes of political discussion and debate.

Perhaps the most surprising theoretical feature of the *Policraticus*, at least when judged on the basis of current attitudes towards the Middle Ages, is John's treatment of the relationship between secular and spiritual spheres and powers. John is not strictly a 'hierocratic' thinker, if that term denotes the claim that all political authority flows from God through the Church to earthly rulers, so that the use of power is always to be regulated and limited by ecclesiastical officials. Instead, he permits secular government to be conducted without direct interference by the Church. Like the soul in the body, he

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Editor's Introduction

asserts, the priesthood fixes the general aims of the healthy political organism (namely, the conditions necessary for salvation). But the head of the body is responsible for ensuring and supervising the actual physical welfare of the organism as it pursues its path through life. Thus, there exists a common good within the community unique and distinct from, although conducive to, the ultimate spiritual end of salvation. It is the promotion of this common good – the realization of a just society on earth – that forms the primary temporal duty of princes and of all their subjects.

John's doctrine of the different but interrelated aims within the community parallels his teachings about moral goodness and personal happiness. As a Christian, he accepts that the ultimate goal of human existence is eternal life in the presence of God. But for him this does not diminish the importance of achieving goodness and happiness on earth. Rather, the *Policraticus* declares that men are morally bound to seek their own temporal fulfilment through the acquisition of knowledge and the practice of virtue; such a way of life, while it can never earn the gift of God's grace from which arises salvation, only confirms the completeness and joyfulness which is the special attribute of the faithful Christian. John consequently attempts to fuse classical and Christian values and to demonstrate a fundamental consistency between ancient moral philosophy and medieval Christian moral theology.

John believes that, at least so far as life on earth is concerned, men play an active role in creating their own happiness both as individuals and as political creatures. He claims that the political system must be guided by the principles of nature, which he regards as 'the best guide to living'. Yet nature does not strictly determine human behaviour. Rather, men must actively cooperate with nature by means of experience and practice. Human beings conform to the course suggested by nature, a feat which is accomplished by developing and perfecting their knowledge and virtue. This is true at the personal as well as the social level: just as humans cultivate their own individual qualities by improving upon their natural attributes through effort and education, so they achieve a well-ordered political community by acknowledging and performing the natural duties demanded by justice towards their fellow creatures. Nature may fix the path of the good life, but men must exercise their minds and wills so as to discover and follow this route.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Editor's Introduction

It is obvious, then, that John's political and moral philosophies are inextricably interwoven. Nowhere is this more evident than in his notion of moderation. John contends in Aristotelian fashion that the golden mean is a structural feature of all the virtues which individual persons may acquire; justice, courage and the like are middle points between dual vices of excess and deficiency. For this reason, John insists throughout the *Policraticus* that while many sorts of conduct (such as hunting, banqueting, drinking, gaming and so on) are vicious if performed often or regularly, they may be condoned if done in moderation for the purpose of recreation. In sum, moderation is the touchstone of an ethically correct (and ultimately, happy) life. But moderation simultaneously constitutes the salient characteristic of the good ruler in the *Policraticus*. John's king exercises power in a moderate fashion, neither releasing his subjects wholly to the caprice of their own volition nor controlling their behaviour so strenuously that they become incapable of using their legitimate free will. Royal moderation is equivalent to respect for the proper sphere of liberty which belongs to each and every member of the political community. John stresses that even a zealous insistence upon the virtue of subjects is a violation of the terms of moderate government: the king accords his people a sufficient measure of personal liberty that they may commit errors, at least so long as their sins endanger neither the safety of orthodox faith nor the security of the temporal polity. For the ability of an individual to acquire his own virtue requires him to train and exercise his will, which means that he will make mistakes on occasion.

By contrast, immoderate conduct (especially that in excess of the mean) is regarded by John as the defining mark of tyranny. The discussion of tyranny is one of the best known and most influential features of the *Policraticus*. Unlike preceding classical and medieval authors, who conceived of tyranny purely in terms of the evil or destructive use of public authority, John identifies the tyrant as any person who weds the ambitious desire to curtail the liberty of others with the power to accomplish this goal. As a result, his theory of tyranny is generic in the sense that it permits the tyrant to emerge in any walk of life. Specifically, he catalogues three classes of tyrants: the private tyrant, the public tyrant and the ecclesiastical tyrant. Private tyranny occurs when any private person employs the authority allotted to him so as to dominate or limit the legitimate freedom of someone

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Editor's Introduction

else. The private variety of tyrant may appear in the household, the manor, the shire or anywhere that power is wielded. The suppression of private tyranny John assigns to royal government, since the king is charged with primary responsibility for the enforcement of law and the protection of all sections of the community.

When monarchic authority passes into the hands of an ambitious man, however, the form of tyranny becomes specifically public, in so far as the office of the prince differs from other forms of power in secular society. For the prince, as the pinnacle of temporal political organisation, represents both the ordinary assurance of the security and liberty of his subjects and the authoritative source of earthly law and jurisdiction within his realm. Thus, a public tyrant is inevitably accompanied by the destruction of the other parts of the community as well. In order to combat the threat of a public tyrant, John believes that the other members of the polity are charged with a duty – stemming from the principle of justice itself – to criticise, correct and, if necessary, even to kill a tyrannical ruler. Moreover, he takes this duty to be a generalised one: it pertains not merely to royal magistrates but to all segments of the body politic, since all are equally obligated (by their membership in society) to enforce the terms of justice.

The final category of tyranny – the ecclesiastical tyrant – is perhaps the most striking one to the modern reader. John devotes nearly as much attention in the *Policraticus* to the criticism of the behaviour of clerics and priests as of temporal political officials. In particular, he realises that there is great scope for churchmen to abuse their powers and hence to become ecclesiastical tyrants whose ambition for the offices and wealth of the church requires them to disregard the spiritual nourishment of the body of Christian believers. He is less forthcoming, however, about the appropriate method for the punishment of ecclesiastical tyrants. In general he prefers to leave such correction to the determination of the Roman pontiff, although he does acknowledge that once a cleric or priest has been stripped of ecclesiastical immunity he may be prosecuted for his crimes by earthly authorities. But of more significance, John's analysis draws theoretical force from its refusal to excuse any sphere in which power is exercised from the possibility of tyrannical conduct.

The key themes of the *Policraticus* in many ways reflect the concerns of twelfth-century political, intellectual and ecclesiastical

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Editor's Introduction

life. Indeed, John's very conception of philosophy compels us to examine his thought in relation to its historical circumstances. Throughout his writings, he stresses that philosophical inquiry ought not to be a specialised, dry and obscure pursuit, but rather an integral feature of an active and dutiful life within the political arena, a life devoted to the service of God and His children. In the conduct of his career, as well as in the political theory of the *Policraticus*, John sought above all to illustrate the principle that philosophy is an aid to achieving the good life of both the individual and the whole community. The vitality of John's political thought consists primarily of its confrontation with the practical demands of politics in relation to the requirements of living well in a moral and religious sense.

At the same time, John's work succeeds in making the philosophical analysis of politics more intellectually respectable to a medieval audience. The *Policraticus* aims to demonstrate that public affairs are not necessarily corrupt, but can instead be conducted in a philosophically satisfactory manner according to which human goodness and happiness are promoted and enhanced. Such a claim represents an important step towards the incorporation of political thought into the domain of speculative inquiry from which medieval writers had largely excluded it up to John's own day. The thirteenth century, with its full recovery of Aristotle's social and political philosophy, would complete this process. But one need not await the infusion of Aristotelian doctrines to discover an author for whom political philosophy is a worthwhile and coherent field of learning. John of Salisbury richly deserves a reputation for having restored the theoretical study of politics to a place of prominence in the intellectual system of the medieval West.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Bibliographical note

A virtually complete English translation of the *Policraticus* may be pieced together from two volumes: John Dickinson's rendering of the so-called 'political' sections of the text (books iv, v and vi, and portions of vii and viii under the title *The Statesman's Book* (New York: Knopf, 1927)) and J.B. Pike's translation of the remainder of the work, published as *The Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1938). The *Entheticus Major* and *Minor* have lately been translated into English by Jan van Laarhoven (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987). Until recently the standard translation of the *Metalogicon* was by D.D. McGarry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955); it has been supplanted, however, by the new edition by J.B. Hall and K.S.B. Keats-Rohan (Brepols: Corpus Christianorum, 1991). There exist good editions of the *Historia Pontificalis*, ed. Marjorie Chibnall (London: Thomas Nelson, 1956), and of *The Letters of John of Salisbury*, in two volumes: *Volume I, The Early Letters (1153–1161)*, ed. W.J. Millor, H.E. Butler and C.N.L. Brooke (London: Thomas Nelson, 1955), and *Volume II, The Later Letters (1163–1180)*, ed. W.J. Millor and C.N.L. Brooke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

Readers interested specifically in John's political thought are advised to consult the following secondary materials. An asterisk [*] indicates an introductory work:

- *Kate L. Forhan, 'A Twelfth-Century "Bureaucrat" and the Life of the Mind: The Political Thought of John of Salisbury', *Proceedings of the PMR Conference* (Villanova, Pennsylvania) 10 (1985), 65–74.
- *Hans Leibeslütz, *Mediaeval Humanism in the Life and Writings of John of Salisbury* (1950); reprinted with new afterword (Nendeln, Lichtenstein: Kraus, 1968).
- Janet Martin, 'John of Salisbury's Manuscripts of Frontinus and of Gellius', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 40 (1977), 1–26.
- 'Uses of Tradition: Gellius, Petronius and John of Salisbury', *Viator* 10 (1979), 57–76.
- Cary J. Nederman, 'The Aristotelian Doctrine of the Mean and John of Salisbury's Concept of Liberty', *Vivarium* 24 (1986), 128–142.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Bibliographical note

- *‘A Duty to Kill: John of Salisbury’s Theory of Tyrannicide’, *Review of Politics* 50 (Summer 1988), 365–389.
- Cary J. Nederman and J. Brückmann, ‘Aristotelianism in John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus*’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 21 (April 1983), 203–229.
- Cary J. Nederman and N.E. Lawson, ‘The Frivolities of Courtiers Follow the Footprints of Women: Historical Women and the Crisis of Virility in John of Salisbury’, *Ambiguous Realities: Medieval and Renaissance Women*, ed. J. Watson and C. Levin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 82–96.
- *Richard H. Rouse and Mary A. Rouse, ‘John of Salisbury and the Doctrine of Tyrannicide’, *Speculum* 42 (October 1967), 693–709.
- *Clement C.J. Webb, *John of Salisbury* (London: Methuen, 1932).
- Michael Wilks, ed., *The World of John of Salisbury* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

For background reading about John’s political, social and cultural world and times, the following studies are recommended. An asterisk [*] denotes an introductory work:

- R.L. Benson and Giles Constable, eds., *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- *C.N.L. Brooke, *The Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (New York: Norton, 1970).
- *David C. Douglas, *The Norman Fate, 1100–1154* (London: Methuen, 1973).
- *Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
- Avrom Saltman, *Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1956).
- Beryl Smalley, *The Becket Conflict and the Schools* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973).
- *Richard W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).
- Medieval Humanism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970).
- *W.L. Warren, *Henry II* (London: Methuen, 1973).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Principal events in the life of John of Salisbury

- 1115–1120 Born at Old Sarum
- 1136 Commences studies in Paris
- 1147 Joins the court of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury
- 1148 Attends the Council of Rheims
- 1155 Becket appointed Chancellor under Henry II
- 1156–1157 Exiled from Theobald's court at the command of Henry II
- 1159 Completes *Policraticus* and *Metalogicon*
- 1162 Becket becomes Archbishop of Canterbury
- 1163–1170 Exiled from England as a supporter of Becket's cause against Henry II
- 1171 Returns to England following Becket's assassination
- 1176 Appointed Bishop of Chartres
- 25 October 1180 Dies at Chartres

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36701-1 - John of Salisbury: *Policraticus* of the Frivolities of Courtiers and
the Footprints of Philosophers

Edited by Cary J. Nederman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)
