

## *MARS* – Medieval Aristocracy Relational System.

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One outgrowth of the University of Hull's active interest in historical computation, both in teaching and research, has been the *MARS* project, the ultimate aim of which is to assemble a large electronic archive of data concerning the fourteenth-century English gentry.

The relative recent concept of *MARS* has a considerable pedigree. The initial datasets, based on a variety of fourteenth-century military records, were compiled by Dr Andrew Ayton and have provided a wealth of material for a number of articles and his recently-published monograph *Knights and Warhorses: Military Service and the English Aristocracy under Edward III*. The second dimension of *MARS* has been the by-product of an ongoing doctoral research programme (funded by the British Academy) into the sheriffs of fourteenth-century England. The fusion of these two interests and their respective datasets will hopefully provide the foundation for a comprehensive study of what was in effect the 'political community' in the period.

But what of the data itself? At present the system is composed of several relational databases, each of which pertains to a specific gentry interest or activity. The importance of Dr Ayton's data is self-evident: military affairs must inevitably play a large part in any attempt to complete the gentry jigsaw. In contrast, the databases produced as a result of my own research into the sheriff focus on the gentry in their role as shire officials. A wide range of printed and manuscript sources have been exploited to reconstruct patterns of administrative appointment, landholding and retaining.

But despite the existence of many thousands of records illustrating the concerns of the fourteenth-century gentry, *MARS* is still in an embryonic form. Much remains to be done. The real potential of *MARS* lies in its future development as a collaborative and wide-ranging treatment of the later mediaeval gentry, a complex and time-consuming process. Nevertheless, the gradual accretion and analysis of data at Hull, even in its rudimentary stages, has suggested several lines of inquiry which will emphasize the 'national' view of mediaeval history, and which may serve to highlight the real potential of prosopography as a mainstream research tool.