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Introduction to Volume II

MATTHEW S. GORDON, RICHARD W. KAEUPER AND HARRIET ZURNDORFER

Locating Violence in Context

Violence permeated much of social life across the vast geographical space of the European, American, Asian and Islamic worlds and through the broad sweep of what is often termed the Middle Millennium (roughly 500 to 1500).¹ In the chapters that follow, violence is analysed from Japan and China in the east, across Central Asia and North Africa, to western Europe, with chapters on ritualised violence in the Americas before the European conquest. We follow four broad lines of inquiry: the formation of centralised polities through war and conquest; institution building and ideological expression by these same polities; control of extensive trade networks; and the emergence and dominance of religious ecumenes.² These contexts, of course, are by no means inclusive of all the violence produced by and within the societies under consideration in this volume.

Violence was a given – an inevitable ingredient, it would seem – of everyday conduct at the individual and domestic levels across cultures. In many socio-cultural settings such violence involved gendered and legal relations. The pater familias imposed authority over the household just as the owner exercised authority over the enslaved, a physical discipline normalised by custom and law. Equally, parents used physical discipline on their offspring (legitimate or otherwise), again in ‘normal’ and legally sanctioned patterns. We might always assume the pursuance of such violent practices even if they transpired in the shadows nearly always beyond our analytic reach.

² Kedar and Wiesner-Hanks, ‘Introduction’.
It needs be said, too, that taking the precise measure of the incidence and severity of patterns of violence (of any sort) remains an elusive goal. Thus, for example, early enthusiastic efforts in the late twentieth century to utilise computers in producing generalisations about crime and conviction rates, such as in the case of premodern England with its precocious and surviving corpus of royal governmental records, failed to meet expectations. There was not only the difficulty of obtaining (even from massive English archival deposits) sufficient and comparable runs of documentation but also the uncertainty over the correlation of crown prosecution with the incidence of quotidian social violence. Governing agencies, moreover, had not yet criminalised many forms of violence, and some even received voluble praise from poets or priests, and validation in art, especially when carried out by those whose elevated social status guaranteed a right to defend sacred honour through physical action.

One faces a similar dilemma in attempting to account for frequency and levels of violence in Near Eastern society in the first centuries of the Islamic period. References in the Qur’ān, Hadith (the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad) and early Islamic juridical writings would seem to suggest regular, quotidian patterns of domestic and other forms of ‘low-level’ violence but certainly do not offer quantifiable information of any sort. Much the same can be said of the countless references to a variety of types of violence that occur in the voluminous works of adab (‘belles-lettres’) and poetry produced over centuries, in a variety of languages, including Arabic, Persian and Turkish, by Near Eastern writers. For the most part, these are works of and about urban society and evince patterns both of criminality and of stern governance (so torture, executions and the like). Political unrest – driven, in cases, by sectarian divisions between Sunnis and Shi’a, or of an internecine sort within each of these two broad communities – is also a constant in narrative and literary accounts, though again one is at a loss to take a detailed measure of such activity.

Similarly, no unidirectional trend towards greater control over violence can confidently be traced in our sources. Rather, the tension created by the simultaneous need for violence (and praise for its dramatic exercise) existed, across culture and region, side by side with concerns for the realisation of a more peaceful social order. In early medieval Europe, monarchs at the level of kingdoms, great lords, and urban ruling bodies at a more provincial or even local level, sought to classify some violence as illicit and worked to establish social order within which disputes might be settled through judicial decisions in court or arranged compromises between contending parties.
Given such conditions, agriculture, trade, pilgrimage and other activities could be conducted with some hope of security. Yet these same waxing powers often cherished territorial goals of their own. Such ambitions could only be achieved by the use of armed might which was becoming increasingly available through rising capacities of revenue extraction that provided the means for territorial expansion.

Confronting violence was, likewise, an abiding question for all Eurasian religious traditions. The manner in which religious establishments addressed violence and its impact on the socio-moral order varied widely. In Latin Christendom, a predominant view was that one carried out the will of God for social advancement: the spiritual mission had more chance of success in a less violent world. But here, too, violence had to be accommodated. If, at one level, Christian religious elites wearied of losses of landed property and goods to assault and thievery by the rapacious, great or small, at the same time, in a broader sense, they were profoundly caught up in a proud world of power and property. The typical reaction, then, was to support violence by lay patrons or turn themselves to warfare through the articulation of spiritual goals and blessings promised to participating warriors and lay notables. The elite in lay society, for their part, may increasingly have become culturally refined, as their literature, art and architecture demonstrates; yet they long showed how much they felt their origins as a warrior elite that settled issues with edged weaponry, their vigorous actions paralleling those in the heroic code they cherished and patronised. They could be confident that such bold and vigorous action would be highly praised and long remembered through song, verse and artistic creations.

The Four Contexts

The four contexts in which to read the contributions to the volume, again, cover most of the most common manifestations of collective violence across the specified regions and cultures of the global stage.

War, raiding and conquest typically informed relations between nomadic and agro-urban peoples. Patterns of assault, plunder and enslavement acted frequently as a prelude to episodes of more systematic violence. Chinese–Inner Asian relations over centuries were subject to ever-mounting pressures exerted in both directions by Chinese imperial forces on the one hand and Turkic and other nomadic/frontier forces on the other.\(^3\) If confrontation was

mitigated by commercial ties, diplomacy and cultural exchange – patterns better understood today by historians – the fact of organised violence persisted. Similarly, in the late antique Near East, ‘Saracens’, a term used by Byzantine writers for southern peripheral Near Eastern peoples, preyed on the Byzantine and Sasanid realms over generations, often with slave trafficking as a central motivation. In time, in the sixth and seventh centuries, in an effort to mitigate the violence and elicit the support of local intermediaries, Rome and Byzantium recruited Arabian and Syrian frontier tribes as clients. The experience – a sustained exposure to the ‘lessons’ of imperial state conduct – probably played a part in setting the stage for the Arab/Islamic invasions that followed upon the initial expansion of the ‘Medinan state’ under the Prophet Muhammad (570–632) and his immediate successors, notably Umar I, later known as the ‘rightly guided’ caliphs (632–61).

Peoples of peripheries – steppe, deserts and seas – attacked China, Iran, Byzantium and other complex agrarian regions. In nearly all cases, on land, military forces were mounted, highly mobile and lightly armoured, relying on the horse and/or camel and the deployment of the bow and lance, pitted against often more encumbered and less flexible central armies. The more immediate consequences included imperial state-formation and/or territorial expansion on the part of the once-peripheral forces, as in the case of the Arab/Muslim conquerors or, centuries later, the Mongols following their sweep into Song China in the thirteenth century. Longer-range consequences ensued as well. The defeat of Tang Chinese forces in 751 at the Battle of Talas by an Abbasid army, allied with Turkish Karluks, resulted in the end of Chinese imperial expansion westward into Central Asia. Muslim control of Transoxiana for the next 400 years, and important transformations in religious and material culture, including technologies of silk-weaving and paper-making, followed.

War and conquest were also instruments of the legitimate state. The point at which warfare, especially in Europe, no longer was the privilege of aristocrats bent on proving their honour and turned into the duty of peasants pressed into service by the state is a marker of how violence became integral to socio-political aims. The Hundred Years War in fourteenth-century England was a case of war waged to preserve the realm rather than the king’s personal honour, and thus indicative of how the obligations that subjects owed their monarch became a matter of public scrutiny. State-sanctioned violence

justified war and conquest while unsanctioned violence often transpired in the aftermath of victory, with the winner eliminating his potential rivals.

A significant historiographical challenge arises here. Few nomadic societies left written records, and with the relative scarcity of archaeological evidence, historians rely, in accounting for the upheaval and ruin these peoples engendered, on records produced either by the vanquished or, at subsequent stages of socio-political development, by the victors themselves in the context of imperial state governance. In the Americas, pre-Columbian writings survived only for the Mesoamerican culture area. To make sense of the seventh-century Arab/Islamic invasions of the Near East, Egypt and North Africa, historians have on hand a number of contemporary accounts produced by Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian and pagan writers on the one hand, and the much later accounts of Muslim Arabic writers, on the other. In the latter case, hindsight left a deep imprint on the memory and attitudes of the writers: as recipients of state support by the early Abbasid court (eighth to tenth centuries), scholars and bureaucrats framed accounts of the Arab conquests in terms of contemporary fiscal and political anxieties that postdated the conquests by long decades. Similarly, Chinese local gazetteers contain precise accounts of what happened to thirteenth-century Eurasian cities that resisted the Mongols as their armies swept westward. Narratives, in this case, only encouraged further distinctions between native and foreign peoples. All such accounts are also heavily coloured by views of what the conquests ‘meant’ – success as a token of divine favour, say, or, alternatively, subjugation as a sign of divine displeasure – and each is thus to be negotiated with great care.

At issue in part is our ability to reconstruct the many elements that informed state-sponsored violence and the effort to impose central monopoly over the use of force: patterns of recruitment and training; the shaping of command structures; and the ‘mundane’ activities of feeding, housing and compensating troops. Scholarship on the long history of relations between Byzantium and the Sasanid empire – the third to the sixth centuries – argues over the extent to which they were informed by military confrontation. Questions also surround, for example, the turn in the early Abbasid period to a so-called ‘slave military’ option. The phenomenon can be traced to Abbasid Ifriqiya (modern-day Tunisia), governed at that point by the Aghlabids (800–909), whose armies

7 See Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbors and Rivals (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 70.
contained black ‘slave’ units, and, almost simultaneously, Khurasan, governed at that point by the future caliph, al-Ma’mun (r. 813–33). His brother, Abu Ishaq al-Mu’tasim (r. 833–42), took up the effort of recruiting Turkic and other Inner Asian fighters, forming in the process a substantial new armed force in Abbasid Iraq. The option of the ‘slave military’ remained to later Islamic-era dynasties, though modern scholars have been careful to note that most such polities, among them the Ghaznavids (977–1186), Seljuqs (1040–1194) and Ayyubids (1169–c. 1260), relied typically on hybrid forces, both on the campaign trail and in sustaining law and order within their respective realms. Scholars of Mongol military history are often better served in regard to military organisation, campaign movement, and so on: contemporary and later accounts, in Latin, Chinese and Persian, among other koines, offer detailed assessment of the structures, tactics and materiel of Mongol armies.

The Mamluk sultanate, as a ‘slave military’ state, poses a problem of explanation: is it right to consider the arming of slaves as a ‘thousand-year’ episode, spanning, in other words, the length of Near Eastern/Islamic history? A remarkably durable state (1250–1517), the sultanate confronted early in its history the Mongols in Syria and crusader forces along the Palestinian coast, and, over its history, sustained a formidable military state that drew significantly on a trafficking in Turkic and then at a later stage Circassian recruits. In much the same fashion as the Abbasid, Fatimid and Seljuq states, to name but a few other dynastic powers of Islamic history, the Mamluk administration relied on extensive local security and intelligence networks in assuring law and order. The effort, which included sustained use of social monitoring, surveillance and public killings, relied throughout as much on the constant ‘promise’ of violence by the state as on its execution.

Western European states built on Carolingian foundations and linked central governments with local administration in various ways. In England each county sheriff was a royal official and law and administration was supervised by itinerant justices (the eyre) and regular audits of sheriffs’ accounts by the Exchequer. French governments placed royal officials (baillis and sénéchaux) over local prévôts, and relied on a system of appeals to central royal courts by those dissatisfied with local justice. Public punishment of those found guilty of crimes was dramatic, even though chopping off limbs gave way by the early thirteenth century to hanging. Royal and civic governments tried to restrain tournaments; originally seen as a danger to public order, this extreme sport did

gradually take on ritualised form and a diminished field of action from a wide swath of countryside to particular locations. Kings in western Europe gradually learned that leading in chivalric enterprises and tournaments produced better results than any attempts at prohibition.

This is to see dynasties and states as typical agents of violence. In 581, when the Sui dynasty (581–618) took political power over all of China, the regime burned and razed to the ground the thriving city of Jiankang (the future site of Nanjing), a city with nearly a million residents and a booming entrepôt for domestic and imported goods, as well as a centre for Buddhists (both Chinese and foreign), for fear of its reclaiming adherents to former local regimes. This is to see dynasties and states as victims of violence. Regicide – the killings of the early caliphs (Umar I, Uthman and Ali ibn Abi Talib) and the later beheading of the Abbasid caliph al-Amin (813) are among many examples – and assassination, that of the Seljuq vizier and regent Nizam al-Mulk (1092) the subject of much fascination, coloured Near Eastern political history. European warriors, encouraged by papal theological innovations, launched crusades first against the Islamic world in the eleventh century. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, kings levied taxes to support crusades and led their warriors not only against the Islamic world, but also against Germanic pagans and even fellow Christians.

And violence, in the early and medieval Islamic period, as across European and Asian history, surged from ‘below’ as well. The Jacquerie of fourteenth-century France, as well as the the Irmandiños rising in fifteenth-century Galicia and the rebellion of the Remences in fifteenth-century Catalonia, saw commoners brutally attack knights and nobles in a response against chivalric social violence. In England, the Great Rising of 1381 saw peasants together with a segment of the middle class violently rise up to demand that royal government better serve their needs. All of these European rebellions were crushed by the power of the state or the chivalric elite. Artisans and craftsmen rebelled against the Florentine government, demanding economic privileges and access to government in the late fourteenth-century Ciompi Revolt. Here there was some success, with the Ciompi coming to control the Florentine government for several years. Similarly, civil war, sparked by fiscal, religious and social divisions, wracked early Islamic society in recurring fashion. Rounds of civil conflict (Ar. fitna, pl. fitan) furthered sectarian

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formation and, in several cases, led to changes of regimes, as in the Marwanid–Zubayrid clash of the seventh century and the Abbasid coup against the Umayyad state in the mid eighth century. Rebellion was no less frequent a pattern; one thinks of the many challenges to the early ‘proto-Sunni’ authority of the Abbasid state by Shi’i movements, notably that of the Isma’ilis in the tenth century, whose success led to the flourishing of the Fatimid caliphate (909–1171) in Egypt, or the extended Zanj revolt of the later ninth century, an uprising the suppression of which cost the Abbasid state enormous human and fiscal wealth.

Rebels, as in the case of the Zanj, could and did frequently conquer territory outright. Turning from the Islamic realm to imperial China, in the ninth century a former salt-smuggler, Huang Chao, led an insurgency (875) against the mighty Tang dynasty and captured vast portions of the empire, including the world-famous city of Chang’an. It would take almost ten years before the Tang state eliminated Huang and his followers. Despite its wealth, religious tolerance and political efficiency, the Song state (960–1279) saw numerous rural rebellions, including those tinged by utopian goals such as that led by Fang La (d. 1121), who was fictionalised in the well-known Chinese novel Water Margin. While China long possessed a literary heritage of heroism focused on high-born men, by the twelfth century oral tales of men like Fang La were reaching a broader public that idealised the man of action, the haohan, usually from a low societal status, and in possession of such qualities as courage, fortitude, endurance and stoicism, and who embodied an alternative kind of masculinity that was emotional in contrast to the kind of manhood in traditional Chinese ethics that stressed self-control.10

Trade, our third context, is not often approached from the vantage point of violence, whether in organised or more ‘mundane’ forms. Huang Chao’s uprising stands as a reminder, however, of the linkage of violence and trade. Huang not only disrupted trade at home but also threatened China’s far-reaching international trade networks. Early, in a reign of terror, he massacred the large community of foreigners, mainly Arab and Persian sea-faring traders, temporarily resident in Guangzhou, which, in the long term, detracted international commerce from the port for nearly a hundred years. Huang Chao, like many ambitious tyrants, saw foreigners as a threat to his regime. As for the early Islamic period, historians have considered the role played by trade, whether in relation to commercial expansion, or, for example, the efforts of

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the Sasanid and Byzantine states, followed thereafter by the early Islamic caliphate, to wrest control over lucrative commercial routes, this in the context of the political upheaval of the sixth- and seventh-century Near East. A key outcome of the Arab/Islamic conquests was not only the destruction of the Sasanid state and the ouster of the Byzantine presence from North Africa, Egypt and the Levant, but the greater integration of the two former economies into a single, transregional agrarian and commercial market sustained, through the early and medieval Islamic period, by urban investment and consumption.

It would seem, in sum, that however peaceful and profitable trade and trading diasporas could be, they were seldom strangers to violence. The Middle Millennium saw an unprecedented expansion in both long-distance and regional trade as well as in the variety and quantity of the goods exchanged; the sheer value of the goods, however, attracted the covetous. While Adam Smith proclaimed the human propensity to truck, barter and exchange, one may also add the human proclivity to rob, pilfer and extort. With regard to violence and trade in the Middle Millennium, one can think of robber-bandits along the intercontinental highways such as the trade routes composing the ‘Silk Road’ or sea brigands operating in the Mediterranean across the ancient and medieval periods. The violence of pirates operating in the western Indian Ocean was well known: travellers, including Marco Polo (d. 1324) and Ibn Battuta (d. 1377), documented the well-armed and organised efforts of pirates operating along the Indian Malabar coast.\(^{11}\)

The increasing regularity of trade within Europe, across its adjoining seas and into Africa and especially Asia created new opportunities for cultural exchange but was also paired with violent behaviour. The appearance of the Vikings in northern Europe around the turn of the ninth century represented the bountiful marriage of trading and raiding. The opening act of the Viking Age, a raid in 789 near Portland in southern England, may have begun as a mercantile mission but it ended with the slaughter of the Anglo-Saxon reeve. The Viking expansion across the north Atlantic was probably driven at least in part by the desire for fruitful new lands and economic opportunities, which could be seized violently when they could not be secured commercially. The commercial nature of Scandinavian society in early medieval Europe facilitated violent behaviour that was recorded as some of the most horrific of the age.

Commercial activity similarly encouraged violent activity in southern Europe and the Mediterranean basin in the later medieval period. Italian merchant republics, chief among them Venice and Genoa, sent commercial expeditions across the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts, sometimes establishing a presence diplomatically, as the Republic of Genoa did with the purchase of the city of Kaffa from the Golden Horde in the thirteenth century. The European commercial presence was always tense in such locations, leading to war between the Genoese and the Mongols in the 1290s, the 1300s and the 1340s; this last war helped to create a disease vector for the Black Death into the Mediterranean basin. Often enough, though, the merchant republics used violence to establish or extend their commercial prowess. The Fourth Crusade, launched in 1202 to claim Jerusalem for Christendom, was manipulated and directed by the Venetian doge, Enrico Dandolo, first to attack the Christian city of Zara, which had resisted Venetian dominance. The doge then helped convince the crusading army to attack his commercial rivals, the Byzantines, leading to the sack of the city of Byzantium, and the establishment of the short-lived Latin Empire of Constantinople. Commercial interests provided ample incentive throughout the European Middle Ages for violent behaviour and warfare.

Unlike the view of neoclassical economics where trade is mutually beneficial and exchange is voluntary, the real world is and was a messy place where involuntary trade occurred as well. The intersection of trade, raiding and enslavement deserves especial mention, given the ubiquity of the latter institution across this long era. The activity of ‘Saracens’ of late antique Syria, Viking invasions, and the marauding of Mongol bands in the later medieval period are but three examples. The active commerce in human beings conducted by Japanese Kyushu-based merchants beginning in the last quarter of the thirteenth century brought them profit from the thousands of Chinese and Korean captives forcibly sold into indentured slavery. Slavery, high-level trade and violent state-level confrontation merged, as well, in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century eastern Mediterranean. Commercial concerns, and, especially, access to the Black Sea region – the source of slave military recruits – informed diplomatic, political and military initiatives by the Bahri Mamluk sultanate in Egypt, confronted as it was by the ambitions of Genoa, Venice, Byzantium and the Ilkhanid state (1256–1353), the Mongol polity then in control of Anatolia, Iraq and Iran. The Mamluk state, in the

Bahri and Burji (or Circassian) phases alike, took no less an interest in the commerce of the Red Sea basin and the Indian Ocean, and devoted considerable military and political resources to assuring access of this kind.

Finally, to our fourth context, the ascendancy in the Middle Millennium of the three major religions, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, launched a new kind of integrative force in world history. The Islamic realm would, in time, extend from the Arabian peninsula to Spain to West Africa, and to Central, East and Southeast Asia; Buddhism into not only East, Southeast and Central Asia but also Iran; and Christianity into Iran and Central Asia. The historical record is clear on the linkages of violence, the shaping of religious identity, and the propagation of faith. Our volume contains chapters discussing Christian crusades, Islamic jihad, Buddhist monastic armies, and Aztec campaigns to obtain captives for sacrifice in Mesoamerican religious cults.

But these are only windows onto extended and intricate discussions. All three of the major religious traditions are replete with consideration over the proper approach to, and expressions of, war and violence. Just as it is vital to avoid reducing analysis to well-worn symbols – the ‘sword of Islam’, say, or the red crusader cross – it is no less vital to shed sharp light on the persistence of sanctioned violence in the name of faith and religious commitment. Violence ensued as Buddhism lost its influence in Central Asia (e.g., Afghanistan) to Islam, and Islam in Spain to Christendom. The Augustinian concept of ‘just war’ was not confined to Christian advocates; it penetrated the mind-sets of other religious thinkers preoccupied with the moral criteria that made war permissible. When Han Shantong (d. 1351), the grand patriarch of White Lotus Buddhism, led his adherents into rebellion against the Yuan state, he transformed the religion from one of acceptance and religious orthodoxy into a heterodox millenarian movement that the authorities felt justified to challenge militarily.

Jihad, the topic of a chapter in this volume, has been subject to intense modern debate, especially in the period after the attacks of September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington, followed by similar atrocities in Madrid in November 2003 and London in July 2005. The fury of the debate, much of which was conducted online, has too frequently obscured the history and subtlety of the term as it evolved in Islamic conception and practice. To fault the Qur’an on this score, a typical turn in much anti-Islamic discourse, was to miss the mark. The Qur’anic usage is normally viewed as more pacifist than the understanding of the term that ensued in Hadith and the copious juristic

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and religious literature that followed the Arab/Islamic conquests and the gradual rise of Islamic society. Thus the Qur’an speaks to a ‘striving’ that encompassed moral, inner discipline, that is, moral rectitude as much if not more than outward behaviour including the taking up of weapons. The shaping of a systematic discourse on the appropriate use of armed force in the service of religion (read: Islam) came only later, in the context of the shaping of Islamic law and Near Eastern political history. Central to the formulation of jihad by jurists, propagandists and political theorists was the distinction of two realms, the Islamic and the non-Islamic, the latter one in which Islamic law was necessarily absent.

Towards a Theory of Violence

The themes outlined here, in their specificity, stand in contrast to the vagaries that historians have held about theorising violence. As the general editors of the Cambridge World History of Violence suggest, historians often have a ‘Manichaean view’ of violence: on the one hand, to condemn violence, especially extreme atrocities such as genocide, and on the other hand, to justify violence in a broader context and thereby to a certain extent excuse it.¹⁵

The conventional understanding of the English noun ‘violence’ takes in three elements: harm (especially physical), transgression and intention. Despite its universal occurrence, conceptualising violence along the historical record is a relatively new facet within the discipline of history. It may be traced to the 1970s and new interest by historians to find social and cultural meaning in specific instances of violence.¹⁶ Although social scientists, philosophers and political scientists have written about violence – and the anthropology of violence has become a burgeoning sub-field of the discipline – the historical approach only really took hold in the late twentieth century. Following the lead of Nathalie Zemon Davis, Lawrence Stone, Richard Evans and Jean-Claude Chesnais, scholars began researching and publishing on violence in relation to its occurrence in both European and North American historical development. But, as Philip Dwyer observes, the history of violence in general lacks a methodology.¹⁷ It is also culturally contingent,

¹⁶ See Philip Dwyer’s study ‘Violence and its Histories: Meanings, Methods, and Problems’, History and Theory 55.4 (2017), 7–22, for discussion and bibliography on the development of violence study in the Western academy.
¹⁷ Ibid., 8–9.
which means that regarding violence from the perspective of world history one may encounter forms and ways of violence that are not common everywhere. For example, transcultural or transhistorical study of hostility and aggression shows that violence need not be centred on the intentional infliction of bodily harm. Coercion through confiscation of land or livelihood, imprisonment, hostage-taking, excommunication, stripping of honours and public humiliation are also forms of violence, albeit non-physical.\textsuperscript{18}

How the historian employs words and concepts to analyse potential or real conflicts ending in violence, or not, is also relevant for theorising. As mentioned above, clashes between nomadic and agro-urban peoples were common in the Middle Millennium, but how historians in the past wrote about these two groups may not conform to our own expectations. Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), for example, saw the interaction between nomads and city-based peoples as dialectic. He considered the city to be the site where the inhabitants could access the arts, sciences and crafts, but also a place that softened and corrupted its residents, robbing them of physical vigour and martial potency. In his reckoning, nomads of the desert, on the other hand, were morally pure, vigorous, but also, and not least, desirous of the wealth of cities. In Ibn Khaldun’s historical vision, the wild violence of the desert and the decaying vitality of the city reflected two extremes; the violent confrontation between them might re-energise each in turn. And there is the case of Chinese historians who took pride in that imperial-era China condemned violence, played down the glory of military exploits in the historical record, and awarded its highest prestige to literary persons, rather than martial heroes. These historians shun the facts behind China’s historical longevity – the Chinese empire maintained the most successful, sustained and continuous military tradition on the planet. War united China, war reunited China and war expanded China. The ‘sanitising’ of the role of military violence in Chinese history originated with Chinese literati, and was accepted and perpetuated by their Jesuit interpreters, and later reinforced by Western sinologists, who in their concern with politics and ideology disregarded the centrality of warfare to China’s development.\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{19} Harriet Zurndorfer, ‘What Is the Meaning of “War” in an Age of Cultural Efflorescence? Another Look at the Role of War in Song Dynasty China (960–1279)’, in Marco Formisano and Hartmut Böhme (eds.), \textit{War in Words: Transformations of War from Antiquity to Clausewitz} (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), pp. 89–110. See also Nicola Di
Looking at the long Middle Millennium one may be struck by how similar the strategies of war and violence may seem across the global spectrum. Societies that were never in contact with each other turned to similar forms of military tactics. *Chevauchée*, the medieval war practice of burning and pillaging enemy territory in order to reduce the productivity of a region which often set in motion a huge flight of refugees to fortified locations (castles and walled towns), originated with William the Conqueror and continued well into the time of the Hundred Years War. This practice seems comparable, if on a different scale, to the *ghazwa* of medieval Near Eastern nomadic culture, a kind of raiding technique to avoid head-on confrontation. By taking the opponents’ cattle, the victors left the defeated without economic means. In both instances of the practice, the motive was often the same: to disable the enemy, not necessarily to kill him. Another form of violence, albeit more psychological than bodily, was the forced relocation of civilians caught up in war-generated conflicts. In the period when the Liao (916–1125), Song, Jin (1115–1234) and Yuan (Mongol) (1279–1368) regimes successively fought and ruled over parts of China, entire populations were compelled to move from their native regions elsewhere, sometimes as a demonstration of state power but also as an extreme manifestation of the command mobilisation of economic resources. The early years of Chinese dynasties are another time of mass relocations as a form of punitive retaliation or even fear of people’s power; the first Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang (d. 1398), viewed the elite of Suzhou, one of China’s richest and most cosmopolitan cities, as potential trouble-makers, and uprooted the most wealthy and educated (about 92,000 households) of this group to faraway rural locations, or to the capital Nanjing to work as corvée labourers.

Concluding Remarks

In the final scene of *Henry V*, which dramatises the Battle of Agincourt (25 October 1415), a key turning point of the Hundred Years War, Shakespeare has the duke of Burgundy speak of the havoc wreaked upon France. Bemoaning the cruelty and destruction inflicted on civilians and ordinary soldiers alike, he says,

And as our vineyards, fallows, meadows, meads, and hedges,
Defective in their natures, grow to wilderness,
Even so our houses, and ourselves, and children
Have lost, or do not learn for want of time
The sciences that should become our country
But grow like savages – as soldiers will
That nothing do but mediate in blood.²¹

These words recall how violence in the Middle Millennium took on new degrees of intensity – warfare inflicted death on ever greater numbers of common people, caused enormous destruction of vital resources, and left territories bereft of any kind of governance. The play has Henry, following the battle, in which 40 per cent of the French nobility were killed, order the slaughter of the remaining captive French soldiers, the number of whom was greater than his entire army. More even than battle, the tactic of ravaging an enemy territory brought widespread violence to those whom we would today call non-combatants through arson, pillage and rape.

Shakespeare, writing well over two centuries after the clash at Agincourt, offers a reminder that depictions of violence, which form the fifth and last part of our volume, are integral to understanding the significance of individual and group acts of violence: how societies experience violence in the record of their development is reflected in the visual and literary works they produce. Miniatures produced by the Master of the Prayer Books (c. 1500) depict this particular battle in Enguerrand de Monstrelet’s fifteenth-century *Chronique de France*. Such figural portrayals of violence may be found in other areas examined in this volume. If absent from mosques and other Muslim public buildings, images of weapons, fighters and battle scenes appear consistently in ceramic- and metalware as well as murals, tiles and manuscripts depicting spectacle, including hunting expeditions, battles, sieges and even torture, produced by Near Eastern artists and artisans across the Islamic period. These images celebrated prowess and heroism, but also conquest over the forces of nature. In Arabic literature, similarly, warrior poetry ensured remembrance and commemoration of martial victory and defeat alike.

How should the twenty-first-century observer reckon with the intellectual or material attraction to violence as recorded in literature and visual representation: the sculptural and ceramic magnificence of Mayan artefacts

commemorating grand spectacles of bloodletting and human sacrifice; the portrayal of ghost armies and violent eschatology in Daoist literature; and Buddhist tales of self-sacrifice, parricide and, not least, fighting monks who fostered the much-valued martial arts of East Asia? Why would one create beauty out of violence? The question – why generate depictions of violence, either visual or literary? – treats a major consequence of violence, the terrible and frightening expression of dehumanisation. While one may be horrified by violence in whatever form – warfare, massacre, torture, cataclysm – one may also see the need to resurrect or mediate what lies beneath its ugly smear on life, or after-life, and thereby humanise such ‘bold and vigorous action’ into something memorable, but not necessarily desirable.

Attempts to control or reduce violence during the Middle Millennium likewise call for attention. Motive and agency emerged as urbanisation and trade increased, as urban, provincial, royal and imperial governance developed strength, and as religious ideas gained form and audience. Yet tensions obviously remained in a world suffused with the ethos of various warrior elites. Although governing agencies sought a reduction in violence that complicated their duties within their jurisdictions, they vigorously practised the violence of war beyond their borders and sought economic dominance. Even at home they utilised brutal public punishments to enforce the legal systems they created.
PART I

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BEYOND WARFARE: ARMIES, TRIBES AND LORDS
Violence in Inner Asian History

NICOLA DI COSMO

In the history of Inner Asia, by which I mean the history of steppe empires from the Xiongnu (established in 209 BCE) to the Manchu conquest of China (1644 CE), the notion of ‘violence’ is taken for granted as the normal modus operandi, in politics and warfare, by steppe nomads and their hordes of warriors. The period between 500 and 1500 witnessed the expansion of Inner Asian nomads across Eurasia due to the establishment of two empires that emerged from the depths of Mongolia, the Turk (551–744) and the Mongol (c. 1206–1368). Both empires splintered, created various successor states, and eventually collapsed, but they also succeeded in unifying diverse lands and peoples to an extent never achieved before or after by other polities, nomadic or sedentary, before the early modern period. Moreover, various other empires, also originating in northern and north-east Asia, created sophisticated states able to rule over sedentary peoples, such as the Kitan Liao and the Jurchen Jin, who are known in Chinese history as the first ‘conquest dynasties’.

War being what their sedentary neighbours regarded as their main occupation, the steppe peoples are often taken as a paragon of unbridled savagery. War, naturally, cannot be regarded as a prerogative of nomads, but what makes them somewhat distinct in world history is a perceived excess of violence not just in their conduct of war, but also in their internal politics. Such excessive violence can run the gamut from wanton slaughter to calculated massacre, as reported in the sources of the victims of such events. The Carmen Miserabile, a chronicle of the Mongol invasion of Hungary by a cleric, Rogerius, who lived through it, is a good example of the type of violence

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1 The ancient Turks, a people of nomadic pastoralists living in Mongolia, emerged onto the stage of world history in the sixth century CE. They were a major political force for about two centuries, and played a pivotal role in East–West relations. See Sören Stark, ‘Türk Khaganate’, in The Encyclopedia of Empire (2016), DOI: 10.1002/9781118455074.wbeoe430.
inflicted upon the civilian population.\textsuperscript{2} His witness account records the heinous behaviour of the Mongol troops, characterised by all kinds of merciless acts of violence, which today would be regarded as ‘war crimes’. Similar reports dot the progress of the Mongol conquest from China to Russia, Central Asia, Armenia and the Middle East. Whether in Kiev or Baghdad, the Mongols gained a reputation as the epitome of unrestrained violence. In the darkest moments of twentieth-century history, their feats were hailed as examples that could be emulated. Chinggis Khan featured in Nazi propaganda, and even in Hitler’s speeches, in positive terms, as a paragon of brutality who ended up being celebrated as a state builder.\textsuperscript{3} In Western Cold War propaganda, the Russian Bolsheviks were at times featured as bloodthirsty Asians, resembling Mongol hordes.

In recent decades, a new historiography has emerged attempting to alter such views, in particular by questioning the actual impact of the Mongol conquest and its long-term effects. It is well known that cities that resisted the Mongols met with merciless punishment, and a large proportion of the population was slain. However, many survived, in particular those people who could be useful to the Mongols as craftsmen and artisans, as well as women and children. They were also deported, and indeed deportations and ‘relocation programmes’ played an important role in the cultural and genetic make-over of several Eurasian regions conquered by nomads.\textsuperscript{4}

Moreover, recent historiography has focused on the positive aspects of the conquest, in particular with the opening of trade routes, communication and exchanges among Eurasian civilisations which the Mongols not only allowed, but actively promoted.\textsuperscript{5} At the same time the negative aspects of the conquest, and especially the violence associated with it, have been, if not sidelined, surely minimised. There are good reasons for moving away from the immediate impact of the conquests, which were certainly bloody, and for focusing on the long-term changes that the nomadic empires produced both within and outside the states they ruled. At the same time, we cannot ignore altogether the fact that many of these empires were built on war and

\textsuperscript{2} Anonymous, Magistri Rogerii Epistula miserabile carmen super destructione regni Hungariae par Tartaror facta, ed. and trans. J. M. Bak, M. Rady and L. Veszprémy (Budapest: Central European University, 2010).


\textsuperscript{5} Thomas T. Allsen, Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
violence, and that violence was an integral and pervasive aspect of their political and social life.

Violence of course is implicit every time we speak of war, rebellion, armed conflict, conquests and other phenomena that include an aspect of force, whether this is organised or spontaneous, systemic or sporadic. In a premodern nomadic context, we ought to distinguish several areas of violence.

First of all, there is a degree of endemic violence in everyday life, usually involving feuds between clans and families that can carry on for generations. At a higher level of social organisation, conflicts between ‘tribes’ or ‘nations’ – understood as distinct ethno-political units with a common name, territorial claims, leadership and assumed shared ancestry – could escalate into large multi-tribal conflicts. Such conflicts usually occurred in the periods that immediately preceded either the rise or the disintegration of a nomadic empire, understood as a larger, centralised, multi-ethnic and politically complex entity. While the empire remained solid and prosperous, it may have expanded, by military means, at the expense of other regions, or may have engaged in long-range raids beyond its frontiers. Grievous cases of violence involved the sacking of conquered cities, especially if they opposed resistance. It must be said that even cities that did not oppose resistance at times bore the brunt of massive violence.

Violence visited against sedentary and urban populations appears especially punishing and cruel because of the number of records that document it, which is disproportionately higher than any record of violence within a nomadic context because of the records left behind by literate civilisations. However, war was no less violent, brutal and ruthless when nomads fought each other. The conflict between the descendants of Chinggis Khan, which ended with the victory of the House of Tolui and the virtual annihilation of competing lineages and factions, is an example of merciless politics at the highest level of nomadic politics.

Every Inner Asian empire rose within a social and political context of intranomadic (or inter-tribal) warfare, whereby widespread violence led to a remaking of the social and political order and eventually to a political consolidation often followed by a phase of expansion and conquest. Once established, the nomadic polity remained vulnerable to internal crises, due to succession conflicts and internal challenges, as well as to the rise of rival polities. If we take this as a bare-bones simplification of the dynamics of nomadic politics, three areas can be singled out, each of which presents different characteristics: ethnic violence within a nomadic society, political
violence within the nomadic ruling elite, and violence against conquered populations.

**Violence within Inner Asian Societies**

All successful empire-building enterprises by nomadic leaders are preceded by an escalation of violence and militarisation within the steppe society. The reasons for the escalation from what we might regard as low-level family feuds to much larger tribal conflicts are not clear, but it is possible that scarcity of resources caused by periodic climatic events may have acted as accelerators of political crises, leading to a higher frequency of conflicts in society. The feud, then, becomes the pretext for an all-out war whose deeper causes lie in societal survival, which depended on access to land and animals. While this is hypothetical, there are indications that the deepening of conflicts and expansion of violence within Mongolia at the end of the twelfth century were caused by a climatic crisis that eroded the economic and productive means of the Mongols for several decades.\(^6\)

The reasons for specific confrontations within a nomadic setting are typically difficult to identify, and the sources in our possession can hardly be regarded as objective witness to history. In the *Secret History of the Mongols* – doubtless the most important single document that provides an in-depth view of steppe politics – we find several examples of violence in contexts that explain the rationale behind it. While the narrative is couched in a literary style narrating epic feats that cannot be regarded as faithful historical record, several episodes are indicative of the cultural significance of violence within medieval Mongol society. For instance, two foundational episodes of violence in the life of the young Chinggis Khan, then Temüjin, illuminate a kind of violence that must have been common in the steppe. The assassination of Temüjin’s father Yesügei, by another tribe’s members, and Temüjin slaying of his own half-brother Bekhter are indicative of the existence of a pervasive, endemic level of violence.\(^7\)

The first episode refers to a feud between Yesügei’s clan and the Tatars. Such feuds were carried from generation to generation, and were extremely difficult to extinguish. The political and economic landscape of nomads was

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dotted with relationships between one’s own and other clans, which could be friendly or hostile. Help could be sought from friendly clans, with which marriage ties and alliances were often forged, but at the same time they had to protect themselves against hostile clans, who might raid, steal and kill.

The second episode refers to competition between siblings to assert claims of seniority, which could arise very early in their life. Temüjin’s cold-blooded assassination of his older half-brother following a minor dispute was meant to show that violence was a means to asserting one’s own primacy within the family, and thus establish a sort of political hierarchy. The reaction of Temüjin’s mother, which condemned the assassination and pleaded for the unity of her children, was meant to provide a political lesson, more than a moral one. That type of pragmatism appears to be constantly present in steppe politics, and violence should be proportionate to the ends that one aims to achieve.

The kidnapping of Börte, Temüjin’s wife, at the hands of the Merkits exemplifies another type of violence, exacted in retribution for a previous kidnapping by Temüjin’s father. Taken as brides in an act of revenge, or as booty in war, women were the frequent victims of the culture of vendettas that pervaded Inner Asian nomadic societies. Violence was widespread because it was also regarded as legitimate, and, in fact, required by a sense of honour and self-respect that could not allow a slight to remain unpunished. Retribution had to be exacted according to an ‘eye-for-an-eye’ sense of justice that in reality prolonged and extended violence across generations.

Two considerations emerge from these examples. The first is that feuds and vendettas constituted a low-level endemic violence. Avenging a wrong was probably the single most important cause of conflict, and, to the extent that revenge was understood to be a sacred duty of the political community, it was accepted as a legitimate casus belli. The second is that there was no real social mechanism to prevent that violence, under certain political and economic circumstances, escalating and engulfing larger and larger segments of the population. In such cases, a highly destructive period of inter-tribal warfare could erupt, sometimes lasting for decades, at the end of which the political order would be transformed. Often the new political order resulted in the formation of a centralised state, dominated by a higher authority able to impose laws and norms that restored social order by regulating legal disputes. It may not be much of a stretch of the imagination to see all the Inner Asian empires, that is, polities that achieved a high level of political centralisation and territorial control, as a political remedy for excessive widespread violence, once it had reached intolerable levels that threatened
the very existence of the society. These processes are still not very well understood, because they are obscured by the absence of sufficient internal evidence. Nonetheless, the extant documents offer tantalising glimpses.

The Liaoshi presents Abaoji, founder of the Kitan empire, as a fair ruler who ‘made the rewards and punishments equitable and abstained from wanton military campaigns’.

Before him, the Orkhon inscriptions, monuments to the resurgence of the Turk nation’s imperial ambitions, referred to the royal ancestors and founders of the early Turk empire (sixth century CE) as rulers who ‘kept in order the Turkish peoples’ kingdoms and polity’. The legal provisions passed by Chinggis Khan, and often known as the Great Yasa, were meant to impose empire-wide laws and regulations. Theft, murder and other crimes were to be adjudicated according to the law, and justice was administered by authorities established by the state. Several authors have indeed noted, based on medieval sources, that ‘the way of life of Eurasian nomads created a need for social institutions that would reduce violence’. These few examples suffice to show a close association between imperial unity and the transition to an equitable government meant to keep social order by the administration of laws. While this may be understood as a common aspiration of every society, and therefore not unique to the pre-modern steppes, that ‘order’ was required as a way to quell escalating, runaway social conflicts and violence.

This is not to say that the imperial ‘unifier’ of various steppe empires was elected simply by a vote of confidence of the various tribal chiefs who were trying to prevent the total collapse and annihilation of their people. Abaoji, in order to secure his power, ambushed and killed rival chiefs. The early founders of the Turk empire emerged in the sixth century from a series of wars intended to ‘pacify’ the Mongolian steppes, and subsequently rebelled against their Rouran overlords. It is again the Secret History of the Mongols

that provides the best examples of a use of violence that could only be justified teleologically, as one of many episodes leading to the ending of internecine violence. For instance, the rivalry that developed between Temüjin and his erstwhile blood brother (*anda*) Jamuqa, and the final execution of the latter, can be read as an allegory of the brutal truth that sharing of power could not be tolerated lest more violence ensued.

A different type of inter-nomadic warfare followed the dissolution of a nomadic empire, and the collapse of a central authority. This process has been read by historians as the return to a pre-imperial or pre-unification status quo, but this interpretation is difficult to maintain. Surely the social order that existed before the Turk, Uighur, Kitan or Mongol empires could not be recreated after a period in which the previous ethno-political units had been thoroughly altered through processes of assimilation, relocation, disbandment or, sometimes, extinction of a given nation. The disappearance of ethnic appellations among the steppes does not have to be necessarily the result of some form of ‘ethnic cleansing’ but surely violence is one of the causes that can explain why certain names, and presumably a good portion of the peoples carrying them, vanished.13 One example of ‘dissolution’ is the end of the Uighur empire, brought about in 840 by a combination of factors among which the invasion of the Kirgiz was the final and decisive *coup de grâce*. The Kirgiz were merciless. They attacked and sacked the Uighur capital Kara Balghasun and killed the khagan. The remaining Uighurs fled towards China seeking assistance and asylum, but the military and ‘humanitarian’ crises were compounded by a political one, since two claimants emerged as competing khagans. The situation of the Uighurs became quite desperate, and eventually various military-political unions that had emerged in the wake of their disastrous defeat were severely depleted by war and famine.14

Intra-nomadic conflicts erupted also in the Mongol empire after the conquest had been under way for several decades. The conflict between the Chagadaid Baraq and the Ilkhanid Abaqa that culminated in the Battle of Herat of 1270 was a clash between rival commanders, but also, in a more essential sense, between two people who saw themselves as legitimate rulers of a Chinggisid state.15 Both had their power base in conquered territories and

the crux of the matter was territorial domination. A few years earlier another critical struggle emerged between the founder of the Ilkhanate Hülegü and the khan of the Golden Horde Berke. Religious as well as territorial disputes foregrounded the clash, but one episode in particular speaks to a violence that we do not often find elsewhere. According to Arabic sources, when the war broke out Hülegü killed the merchants from the Golden Horde residing in Tabriz, confiscating their property, and in retaliation Berke killed the merchants coming from the Golden Horde. Economic damage to the enemy was inflicted by massacring the very agents of trade.\(^\text{16}\)

Another example of intra-nomadic warfare worth mentioning derives from the violation of political rules meant to limit the power of the supratribal leader. A case in point is that of the founder of the Kitan state, Abaoji. By Kitan rules, the election of an emperor was supposed to be limited to three years, and when Abaoji refused to relinquish power opposition by various tribal leaders led to violent uprisings and assassination plots in 911, 912 and especially 913, when a rebellion was violently repressed. Following hundreds of executions of political rivals, Abaoji had to continue to rely on family members, thus establishing new positions filled with trusted allies. However, politically, the electoral and term-limited system of the Kitan had to be overcome in favour of a system of absolute authority residing in the emperor alone. To this end, Abaoji’s formal accession to the throne and establishment of a personal dynasty in 916 displayed the trappings of a Chinese ceremony, accompanied by the naming of an heir apparent, thus curtailing the electoral powers of the tribal aristocracy.\(^\text{17}\)

In general, intra-nomadic warfare, whether it preceded or followed the formation of empires or large multi-ethnic polities, appears to have been often just as brutal as violence against sedentary peoples, insofar as the civilian population did not enjoy any special protection, and war under such circumstances could lead to the total annihilation of the losing side. Dearth of sources makes it all but impossible to ascertain the degree to which a war among nomads would lead to widespread killing, or even to some form of ‘ethnic cleansing’. Assimilation to other polities, dissipation by migration or social dissolution, and reconstitution under a different ethnonym are possible ways to explain the disappearance of a polity.

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The end of the Uighur empire in 840 is indicative, on a larger scale, of a political dynamic that radically transformed the Uighurs as a people from nomads to city dwellers and farmers as some moved to agricultural areas and became sedentary, establishing their sovereignty in smaller city-based kingdoms such as Qočo and other areas in what are today the Chinese provinces of Gansu and Xinjiang.¹⁸

To conclude, intra-nomadic violence persisted at an endemic level among clans as a consequence of conflicts that emerged naturally due to human rivalries and criminal behaviour. Such violence could, however, escalate with the proliferation of tribal armies, extensive and prolonged conflicts, and widespread militarisation, thus posing an existential threat to the entire social body. Violence spiralled out of control until a higher authority emerged, and a different socio-political structure (call it state or empire) managed to put an end to the violence by creating a new centralised political order.

Violence in Inner Asian Politics

Nomads in an ‘imperial condition’ were, in theory, less exposed to random or organised violence than ‘stateless’ nomads. Internal discipline, unified leadership under a single family or clan endowed with a monopolistic power over the government and army, and the development of new institutions and legal regimes contributed to a large reduction of violence within the social body, and to the suppression of self-reproducing violence. However, leadership was not immune from violent contestations. The theory of violent succession in Inner Asian political history is well known. Joseph Fletcher found in steppe politics an analogy with Celtic forms of inheritance of political power, known as ‘bloody tanistry’, whereby the leader was chosen through a process of violent elimination of all rivals.¹⁹ In Fletcher’s interpretation, in the Turko-Mongolian political tradition violence acquires a systemic valence in order to determine the fittest for succession efficiently.

It is undoubtedly true that succession was one of the most delicate moments in the political existence of nomadic empires, although recent studies have shown that succession was similarly bloody and contested in


other East Asian contexts, not affected by nomadic practices. What may be more relevant here is the weakness of emperorship as an institution, which made a model of rulership based on absolute sovereignty easier to challenge. The absence of firm rules made successions open to fissures in the political system that could lead to a coup d’état and other forms of violent usurpation even in cases in which the heir apparent had been chosen. The discrepancy between actual authority and institutional legitimacy derived from the very rise of the charismatic power of the founding ruler, who was regarded as endowed with demigod qualities, and indeed ‘chosen by heaven’. The personal, rather than institutional, elevation of the ‘khan’, based not just on sheer force but on political consensus, effectively prevented whoever succeeded him from commanding the same authority. Hence, after the death of the charismatic king, challenges for succession could come from different quarters, even though generally a blood connection with the imperial lineage was required to advance a legitimate claim. Hence, most violence occurred in wars among brothers, sons and nephews.

The rise of charismatic leaders itself is often associated with parricide and fratricide, but it was the problem of succession that created vicious political crises, whereby not just the destiny of an individual but the integrity of the newly created state was at stake. In medieval China, the Tuoba Xianbei, a northern people hailing from Manchuria that conquered northern China as the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534) introduced a peculiar system that involved the matricide of imperial consorts who had given birth to an imperial heir. Once the mother had been killed, no other potential heirs would be born, thus excluding challenges to the succession process. That particular type of violence did not take root in either the Inner Asian or the Chinese traditions, but it shows in stark terms the degree to which succession issues were critical to a raison d’état that did not hesitate to resort to human (female) sacrifices.

Aristocratic women participated in politics as wives and mothers of rulers, and in several cases queens took the reins of the succession process, often avoiding political crises at the cost of personal sacrifice. In the Mongol empire, the roles of Töregene Qatun and Sorqaqtani Beki cannot be

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overestimated. The first, mother of Güyük Khan and temporary regent after the khan’s death, and the second, widow of Tolui and mastermind of the Toluid takeover of the empire from the Ögödei line, resulted in the rise of her sons Möngke, Khubilai, Hülegü and Arig Böke as future leaders of the empire, except for the Golden Horde and the Chagadai ulus. The process was, however, extremely violent. The years immediately after the election of Möngke in 1251 as the new Great Khan witnessed a most violent political struggle. Following an apparent plot to assassinate Möngke, Oghul Qaimish, the widow of Güyük and temporary regent, was arrested and executed by drowning. At the same time, people suspected of anti-Toluid sentiments were hunted down, tried, and executed in large numbers. Though the Mongols, dangerous succession crises were not uncommon among Inner Asian regimes. In the Uighur empire, which took over in 744 the mantle of imperial dignity after the collapse of the second Turk empire, a coup d’état was perpetrated by the chief minister Tun Bagha in 779, who assassinated the khagan Mouyu. The struggle in this case cannot be regarded as one of succession but was a violent takeover of the leadership because of political dissent regarding the khagan’s policy towards China and the excessive influence of Sogdians in government. In 795 another minister ascended to the throne, because of the lack of an imperial heir.

This is not to say that every succession had to be soaked in blood and fratricidal struggles, but that, given the weakness of the succession process, political contestations could easily devolve into violence. However, it would be mistaken to believe that violence, or ‘bloody tanistry’, was the default method of resolving political disputes. One case in which negotiation successfully avoided conflict was when the Jurchen Jin emperor Wuqimai, who had succeeded the state’s founder Aguda, had to appoint the heir apparent. The system favoured a lateral succession (brother to brother) but the complex family landscape pitted various potential candidates one against the other. Eventually, it was determined that a very young grandson of Aguda be appointed as the new emperor, bypassing various uncles and cousins who had theoretical priority.

Political dexterity also managed to prevent a major state crisis in the case of the Liao succession to Abaoji. Once the charismatic emperor died, the heir apparent he had nominated was contested, opening the door to a potential conflict. The kingmaker in this case was Abaoji’s primary consort Chunqi, who had been a political operative for some time in the early rise of her husband, and the mind behind various events leading to the consolidation of his power at the expense of tribal leaders. She refused to be buried with Abaoji (cutting off her own hand and throwing it in the emperor’s grave in place of herself, as tradition dictated). She reshuffled the inheritance cards, and made her younger son Deguang (Taizong) the emperor instead of Bei.

While political skills could avoid a bloodbath, the possibility of internecine factional wars flared often in the history of Inner Asian regimes. Yet violent competition was not inevitable. It was, rather, a last resort within a political system that was relatively fragile, given the ample space for political manoeuvre afforded to clan members and military leaders. In theory, a weak imperial institution was meant to prevent the excessive concentration of power in the hands of the ruler, but in practice it allowed succession to be subject to complex negotiations, which could degenerate into violence. Political solutions were often sought to overcome the dangers presented by the clashes among various factions both within the imperial clan and outside, such as military commanders and aristocratic leaders.

Several Inner Asian states made concerted efforts to curb the violence inherent in court politics and the centrifugal tendencies generated by political factionalism. Such efforts were directed as an often radical remaking of the elites. Thus, in several regimes we see an internal transformation of the top political echelons aimed at employing a Chinese-like bureaucracy to compensate for the power of the tribal aristocracy. This balancing act was exceedingly complex, since it was easy to err on either side: an excess of reliance on foreign traditions and institutions could easily trigger nativistic responses – as we see often both in the Liao and in the Jin dynasty – and could also reduce the army’s efficacy. On the other hand, retaining a nomadic tradition of rulership, based on the primacy of the hereditary aristocracy, could make leadership vulnerable to civil wars and rebellions. Only after 1500, and most significantly with the rise of the Manchus and the establishment of the Qing dynasty, was a traditional Inner Asian regime able to transform itself into a system of government that successfully resolved the contradictions that underlay so much of the political violence experienced in earlier periods.
Violence against Civilians in Conquest Wars

A third type of violence, and by far the best documented, concerns the military campaigns in sedentary regions and cities during conquests and raids. The victims of the violence itself, often literate and eyewitnesses to the events, left behind copious records and chronicles. Soldiers sacking cities and behaving with extreme violence against the unarmed population are phenomena that are no more ‘nomadic’ than they are ‘medieval’. Indeed, such violence has been documented across the ages and the continents, including many examples in the twentieth century, from Warsaw to Marzabotto and from Nanjing to Srebrenica. What is more relevant to a discussion of violence is to understand what was aberrant behaviour and what was, instead, a behaviour that conformed to practices that were, if not ideal, common and shared. For instance, the violence of Inner Asian nomads in the Sinitic zone in the Middle Ages does not seem to stray much from the general behaviour of any army of that period in China as well as in Inner Asia. ‘Letting troops loose’ as a tactic of war in medieval China resembles to a large extent (pillage, massacres, abductions) the behaviour attributed to nomads. 25

From Yang’s recent study of Tang generals’ attitude towards military violence, we can deduct that the behaviour of generals in allowing their troops to engage in widespread pillaging, raping and killing was surely not unusual in the case of military actions against Turks or other foreign peoples. It is quite clear that the restraint sometimes displayed in the repression of internal rebellions and against Chinese enemies was not observed with foreign enemies. The reason for this could be either a sense that foreigners were not entitled to particularly humane treatment or that the strategy followed by the Tang generals responded to a tit-for-tat that retaliated against northern nomads with the same methods used by the nomads themselves, which explained killing the males, enslaving women and children, and looting property. Whenever the question arose about punishing in a similarly harsh manner Chinese enemies, for instance in the Sui–Tang transition, Chinese generals seem to have enjoyed a considerable latitude and to have rarely been punished for excessive violence. However, political advisers more often made the case that defeated enemies ought to be treated leniently in order to decrease resistance and restore order in the case of intra-Chinese wars than in the case of wars against foreign foes, such as the campaign against the Turk empire in 629–30.

One notable case of violence against the local population was actually committed by the nomadic allies of China, the aforementioned Uighurs. During the turbulent times of the An Lushan Rebellion (755–63), when the then ruling Tang dynasty was on the verge of collapse, the Uighurs lent their military might to protect the Tang royal house against internal and foreign enemies. However, on two occasions they took advantage of ‘liberating’ prosperous Chinese cities only to inflict massive violence on the local population. In 762 they pillaged Luoyang (the Eastern Capital) and treated the local population with exceeding brutality for several days, knowing that the Tang had no means to prevent it.  

Episodes of opportunistic violence seem to point to a fundamental pragmatism in carrying out wars of conquest, or at any rate in territories outside the steppes. The general wisdom on this matter is overwhelmingly based on the well-documented Mongol conquest. The Mongol army, especially at the time of the early campaigns by Chinggis Khan, was a classic steppe cavalry army, extremely mobile and well disciplined, but with scant if any experience in siege warfare. Since the early days of the war in Central Asia against the Khwarazm-Shah it was therefore impellent that cities surrender rather than engage the Mongols in protracted and difficult sieges. Massacres of the population once the cities had been taken served therefore as a cautionary tale for other cities. In the campaign in Central Asia the fate of the city of Nishapur was sealed when the population decided to resist and a son-in-law of Chinggis Khan was killed in battle. Chinggis’s daughter, the widow of Toghachar, once the city was taken, ordered the massacre of all the city residents, except for 400 artisans.

This account raises an important point, namely, whether the Mongols practised a selective violence against the civilian population. We have already seen that the practice of raiding and pillaging spared women and children, who were instead enslaved and treated as chattels. The Mongols added more categories of people who were more useful alive than dead. Chief among these was the class of artisans and people who, generally speaking, had practical knowledge in special crafts or were well versed in arts and sciences. Merchants and people adept with administrative matters from the ranks of the defeated can also be found in the employment of Mongols. The notion that the Mongols destroyed everything in their path has therefore been partly

corrected in favour of a consideration of both the strategic use of massacres to weaken the resistance of cities and the selective use of violence to spare certain categories of useful people.

In some cases, however, the massacre of civilians seems to defy any particular logic other than sheer bloodlust. One of most famous cases is the sack of Baghdad in 1258. The complex political circumstances surrounding Hülegü’s campaign in the Middle East may have contributed to the extraordinary ferocity with which the fall of Baghdad was treated, given the resistance already met by the Mongols in Iran. Baghdad had repulsed the Mongols twice before Hülegü’s campaign, in 1230 and 1242, and, perhaps trusting in those precedents, the city preferred to resist rather than surrender. The siege lasted from 29 January to 7 February 1258, and was followed by forty days of unrestrained extreme violence, which is said to have entirely depopulated the city and amounted to a loss of hundreds of thousands of people, a figure made credible by the fact that its population had swollen because of country people who had moved there seeking refuge behind its walls. Hülegü’s army was by then already multi-ethnic, with soldiers from China, Central Asia and the Caucasus. When the order was given to stop the looting and killing, only a few people who had managed to hide survived.

The notion that the Mongols were animated by special ferocity surely favoured their progress in several campaigns, with enemies fleeing, leaving their cities unprotected, and cities surrendering without fighting. Other Inner Asian nomads, especially the dynasties that flourished on the northern frontier of China, and conquered parts of China, did not rise to the same reputation, probably because warfare between them and Song China had become by then not very different in tactics, the military situation was more balanced, and the degree of violence as a result of border wars and punitive campaigns was accepted by both sides.

Conclusion

 Violence was certainly pervasive in the life of steppe nomads, in the sense that the whole society, rather than just a class of warriors, was exposed to violence to defend oneself or protect one’s community. This was typically

limited in scope and contained within the bounds of personal or clan disputes. However, beyond the level of endemic, low-level violence deriving from personal rivalries, crimes against people and property, or competition over scarce resources, violence could also rise to a higher level of intensity, in which tribal armies proliferated, and war became the defining characteristic of a historical moment. The increased militarisation of the society naturally produced a set of leaders vying for power.

It is exceedingly difficult to find unequivocal evidence of the reasons for a transition from low to high levels of violence, and to determine whether a political, economic, climatic or other cause may be behind the social and political crisis that ignited an acceleration and expansion of militarisation and warfare. There is certainly not one single cause, but equally certainly the starting point of the crisis has to be found within the nomadic world.

The basic argument to explain the transition from a multi-polar system of aristocratic domains – within which a further system of class divisions and clan orders operated – to a centralised system of power based on a single monarch, a ruling clan, and rigid political and military hierarchies, is to resolve the social crisis and put an end to exhausting cycles of violence. This ‘supra-tribal’ condition (as it has been defined) shows considerable differences from case to case, according to internal customs and traditions of the people themselves, and in some cases the ‘supra-tribal’ chieftain, as noted above in the case of the Kitan, was elected for a limited term only, indicating the reluctance of the tribal aristocracy to relinquish their autonomy and privileges indefinitely to any single person. History shows that a superior authority, once installed, often managed to trump aristocratic resistance, even though violence was often applied to that end. In other words, it is clear from the history of steppe nomads that a mechanism by which a supra-tribal state emerged was due to a political culture that in the last instance placed the survival of the community at large above the single interests of clan aristocracies. This was accomplished by the election of a ruler (khan or khagan) to whom the rest of the aristocrats yielded essentially dictatorial powers.

One may ask why, once a new political order had been created, war continued, often beyond the ecological and territorial boundaries of the steppe state itself. These campaigns are what the reputation of the nomads for savagery is pinned on. The answer may well reside in the excessive financial requirements of the new state, which the local economy of the steppe, based on very limited if any surplus production, could hardly satisfy.30

Lavishly wealthy aristocracies, large standing armies and a plethora of service agencies that furnished court and emperor with all that they required contributed to a large increase in the state budget, which tended to balloon generation by generation as the imperial clan grew and its requisitions became more burdensome. In order to sustain this political machine, the state had to increase its revenues, and one way of understanding the political changes occurring within Inner Asian empires is to focus on their ability to extract revenues from their neighbours. Violence or the threat of it was one (but not the only) resource that nomads had at their disposal to obtain additional revenues. Violence was, however, often resorted to in order to exact tribute, impose advantageous trade conditions and conquer sedentary populations that could be taxed.

The violence applied to all these processes varied from time to time and from situation to situation but it cannot be regarded as indiscriminate. The economic function of violence, whether purely predatory or meant to impose one’s control over resource-producing communities, is reminiscent of Mancur Olson’s theory of the ‘roving’ vs. the ‘stationary’ bandit. An application of this theory to the economic system of Inner Asian nomads is beyond the scope of this chapter, but a few remarks may still apply.

The standard definition of the roving and stationary bandit theory is that ‘uncoordinated competitive theft by “roving bandits” destroys the incentive to invest and produce, leaving little for either the population or the bandits. Both can be better off if a bandit sets himself up as a dictator – a “stationary bandit” who monopolizes and rationalizes theft in the form of taxes’. Based on this definition, one may question whether the supra-tribal chief is a variant of the ‘stationary bandit’ who imposes his dictatorial rule over the nomadic population. As we have seen, the existence of a supra-tribal leader requires a measure of consent from the rest of the tribal aristocracy. However, there is no question that the supra-tribal chieftain has the right to tax the nomadic population in the form of requisition of people and animals for corvée labour and army service. But the surplus that could be extracted was minimal, given the low productivity of the grassland. What, then, happens when the amount of taxes that can be extracted from the population falls far below the state’s requirements?

This is where Olson’s theory becomes interesting to the extent that it may stimulate a further reflection about the projection of Inner Asian military

power outside the nomads’ own economic zone, and they become either roving bandits, engaging in raids against the sedentary population to loot and extract ‘protection’ payments, or stationary bandits, engaging the fiscal exploitation of conquered areas. Violence was required in both cases, but the latter also required a transformation of the state itself through the adoption of institutions that allowed for a rational and systematic fiscal system.32 Such transformations are the building blocks of the history of steppe nomads, and the use of violence, as well as attempts to limit it, are an integral part of that evolutionary process.

Bibliographical Essay

The topic of violence in Inner Asian history has long been neglected, partly because of a general absence of detailed studies in this field, and partly because of the much greater attention paid to the Mongol conquest, whose brutality and savagery have been documented in numerous medieval chronicles from Russia to Armenia, Hungary and the Middle East. A contribution that includes the arc of Inner Asian history in the period in question, but with a focus on war rather than violence, is Nicola Di Cosmo (ed.), Warfare in Inner Asian History (500–1800) (Leiden: Brill, 2002). The classic book by René Grousset, The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970), includes various episodes of war and violence. Much has been written about the military aspects of the nomadic invasions by popular writers, such as Erik Hildinger, Warriors of the Steppe: A Military History of Central Asia, 500 B.C. to 1700 A.D. (New York: Sarpedon, 1997). Also typical of this literature is James Chambers, The Devil’s Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe (New York: Atheneum, 1985), which includes a chapter entitled ‘The Fury of the Tartars’. More scholarly is the study of the Mongol conquest of China by H. Desmond Martin, The Rise of Chingis Khan and His Conquest of China (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1950) which includes detailed information on military matters. More recently, of note is the book by Timothy May on Mongol military history, The Mongol Art of War: Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Military System. (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2007).

A seminal essay on steppe violence is Joseph Fletcher, Jr, ‘Turco-Mongolian Monarchic Tradition in the Ottoman Empire’, Harvard Ukrainian Studies 3 (1979), 236–51. Here Fletcher theorised the similarity between the nomadic system of violent succession and the system known as ‘bloody tanistry’ in the Celtic world. Timothy May is also the author of an essay on military training of steppe nomads, reaching beyond the Mongol period,

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An excellent guide to primary sources for the Mongol impact on Europe is Felicitas Schmieder, *Europa und die Fremden: Die Mongolen im Urteil des Abendlandes vom 13. Bis in das 15. Jahrhundert* (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1994), in particular chapter III. Several primary sources mention the violence inflicted by the Mongols on their European victims, such as those contained in Archdeacon Thomas of Split, *History of the Bishops of Salona and Split*, ed. Olga Perić et al. (Budapest: Central European University, 2006), and Anonymous, *Magistri Rogerii Epistola in miserabile carmen super destructione regni Hungariae per Tartaros facta*, ed. J. M. Bak, M. Rady and L. Veszprémy (Budapest: Central European University, 2010).
Conspirators in Violence

Disorder, the Imperial State and its Armies in Medieval China

Don J. Wyatt

With neither its power, its wealth nor its population having been equalled by any predecessor, the dynasty known in history as Tang (618–907) enjoys a legacy much admired amidst all of those collectively constituting the imperial Chinese cultural heritage. Therefore, the destruction – largely through the actions of a single individual – of the intricate and expansive empire that was the splendorous Tang stands as one the great ironies of world history. Contrary to what we might expect, this decisive vanquisher of the Tang was neither an inept emperor, a malfeasant courtier nor a seditious general. The undermining of the dynasty resulted neither through imperial overreach, court mismanagement nor a traitorous coup. Instead, the glorious Tang was felled by an uprising sparked and led by a disgruntled commoner, a well-off but – owing to his repeated failures to advance at all in the state-sponsored civil service examinations – disaffected illegal trader in salt named Huang Chao (d. 884).

In addition to feeling compelled to act by his outsized hostility over the perceived injustice against him in the examinations, Huang Chao very likely also launched his rebellious assault upon the state out of sheer competitiveness, entrepreneurial and otherwise. Being a native of what is today Shandong province, in China’s coastal north-east, Huang Chao raised forces and first commenced his revolt locally in the spring of 875, largely in response to an insurgency that was already in progress (since the previous year) led by

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1 The most complete traditional biography of Huang Chao in Chinese is contained in Ouyang Xiu, Song Qi et al., Xin Tangshu (New Tang History) (Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1976), 225B.6451–6464. For a comprehensively annotated English-language translation, see Howard S. Levy, Biography of Huang Ch’ao, 2nd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), pp. 8–101. Although only his death year is certain, Huang Chao is thought to have been born between 820 and 835.
another illegal dealer in salt and rival, Wang Xianzhi (d. 878). Wang Xianzhi quickly incurred the conventional misfortune of being captured and executed and thereupon Huang Chao opportunistically incorporated Wang’s suddenly leaderless troops into his own peasant forces.²

Thereafter, the insurgency of Huang Chao became transformed into an insurrection. Nonetheless, finding the imperial capital of Chang’an too well defended against encroachment, the rebel leader appropriated the newly contrived and presumptuous title of ‘Heaven-Storming Generalissimo’ (Chong Tian dajiangjun)³ and drove his forces – already numbering perhaps in the tens of thousands – south. The generalissimo and his troops swept across the Yangzi river and into large parts of what are the modern provinces of Zhejiang, Jiangxi and Fujian. Relying on the age-old populist platform of claiming to deliver much-sought egalitarianism to all followers, in these southern locations he massacred with impunity all of the fleeing Tang officials and loyalists he could capture but unwisely failed to substitute either personnel or stabilising structures of governance of any kind in their place.

The drive south climaxed in 879, with the sacking of the city of Guangzhou (later Canton), which at that time was pre-eminent among East Asian ports of international trade. Here also another feature of Huang Chao’s rebellion, one that was doubtless an integral component and extension of his own personality, was fully unleashed – namely, deadly xenophobia. Chinese sources are silent on this matter but Arab sources record that Huang Chao’s forces exterminated the entirety of the non-Chinese population of Guangzhou, which consisted mainly of Muslims but also Christians and Jews, along with most of the Chinese inhabitants of the great entrepôt. Overall estimates of those slain range between 120,000 and 200,000. The indeterminate but sizeable number of foreign dead attests to the scope and scale of trade between China and West Asian lands at the end of the ninth century. The deaths of nearly all of the China-based foreign merchants engaged in the trade led to its collapse, from which it would not recover until well into the tenth century.⁴

Midway through 880, Huang Chao and his troops returned north, crossing the Yangzi and capturing the secondary Tang capital of Luoyang by the end of the year. At the beginning of 881, Huang and his forces took and at last occupied the principal Tang capital of Chang’an, forcing the reigning Tang

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³ Ouyang Xiu et al., *Xin Tangshu*, 225B.6453.
emperor to flee westward into exile. Huang then announced the establishment of his own Qi dynasty.5

Such success would mark the pinnacle of everything Chao ever achieved as a rebel. As a usurper, his indiscriminate purging of all or nearly all eminences of the old regime alienated the many younger low-level officials who might otherwise have potentially been allies. The mass executions of the trapped and defenceless members of the old Tang imperial clan were also repellant. Similarly, the unbridled and undisciplined plundering of private as well as royal properties that Huang’s rebel troops committed provoked bitter outrage.

Within two years, as restoration armies mobilised against him, Huang Chao was forced to flee Chang’an in early 883. Tracked down and cornered near his birthplace by 884, he was killed resisting capture on 13 July. Despite all of its fury and destruction, the Huang Chao Rebellion was more of a death-knell than an overthrowing of the established order. Whereas it succeeded in fatally crippling the once-mighty Tang, the true denouement was more than two decades later in coming, when in 907 the dynasty was at last extinguished by Zhu Wen (852–912; r. 907–12), the future emperor of the Later Liang dynasty (907–23), who had the ironic distinction of having previously served and risen through the ranks under Huang Chao.6

Abhorred by the State

Significantly, over time, even the death of the notorious rebel Huang Chao became the subject of various afterlives. One of the most colourful and revealing of these many preserved anecdotes concerning Huang Chao’s death – or, in this particular case, non-death – is recounted by Shao Bo (d. 1158), the grandson of the famous philosopher Shao Yong (1011–77). The younger Shao reports to us that:

As for what is recorded in the histories of the Tang dynasty for the sixth [seventh, in Western calibration] month of 884, [rumour had it that] what at that time was widely taken to be the head of Huang Chao staked atop the imperial encampment was not his. To the east or west, as far as either of the two capitals, elders with wide knowledge of affairs circulated [their belief] that Huang Chao was actually not dead. Thus, there was anxiousness afoot about his still being at large. [He was said to have] slipped away into Wolf-Tiger

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5 Ibid., p. 97.
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Valley in Taishan [in western Jiangsu] and, thereupon, succeeded in escaping by shaving his head to pass as a Buddhist monk.7

Shao Bo furthermore informs us that in perfecting his disguise as a masquerading monk in order to avoid detection, Huang Chao ‘did not diverge in appearance from the [real] initiates. It was only his unmistakably serpentine eyes that made him appear different, and nothing more.’8

We may note that the death of the infamous Huang Chao was never subject to dispute and that it was in the interest of the restored Tang state to make his demise as broadly known throughout the empire as possible. Yet the foregoing anecdotal passages are noteworthy for what they overtly convey across time to us about the power of rumour in medieval China. For the public as well as for the state, the very ideas of the evasion of justice by a consummate outlaw and the flight of a mass-murderer who was so enabled by the deft use of subterfuge and deception were in themselves clear causes for shuddering.

Yet, inasmuch as we are today capable of adopting the standpoint of observers less than three centuries after the fact like our informant Shao Bo, we will find a good deal more revealed by this tale. We may foremost observe that, no matter how culturally loathsome he himself may have been, Huang Chao as a man in no way surpassed the nefarious concept that he represented in contemptuousness. Indeed, such accounts as the one above have the effect of making historical actors like Huang Chao into embodiments of the concept that the Chinese in every historical age have referred to consistently across time as luan, a term meaning – at its most basic level – disorder. With respect to all questions of violence perpetuated in the name of either the past or the present Chinese state, we profit tremendously from considering this concept of luan very closely as an ever-present and integral component.

As is the case with every cardinal cultural precept in the Chinese intellectual tradition, all thinking about what luan is begins inescapably with its etymology. The Chinese graph or character luan is originally a pictograph of two hands in the act of detangling or unravelling a skein or section of coiled

7 Shao Bo, Henan Shaoshi wenjian houlu (Later Record of Things Heard and Seen by Mister Shao of Henan) (Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1970), 17.6b.
8 Ibid., 17.7. The audacious rumour that Huang Chao would have entirely escaped justice by disguising himself as a Buddhist derives its cultural potency from at least one historically documented instance of the monks of the religion abetting his rebellion. See Glen Dudbridge, A Portrait of Five Dynasties China: From the Memoirs of Wang Renyu (880–956) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 44–5.
or knotted thread.\textsuperscript{9} As such, this image has come ideographically to denote the human confrontation with anything confused, chaotic or disorderly. From the customary perspective of Chinese social interaction, the characterisation of something as luan is always undesirable because it signifies a departure from the normatively operative assumption of orderliness, which is the standard to which the individual and society should be held and the objective towards which both should always aspire.

Therefore, we should understand the ascription luan as being essentially applicable to any disturbance or disruption in the expected social order – any tear in its fabric, no matter how small. Indeed, quite fittingly, luan has most frequently described and defined those most quotidian acts of social disharmony – transgressions that in terms of the modern Western legal code we would consign to the rubrics of public nuisance, or disorderly conduct, or disturbance of the peace. Yet, in its most extreme manifestations, luan surpasses by far the level of mere disruption and disorderliness and, as in the salient case of Huang Chao, attains that of open revolt or rebellion.

Consequently, in every age, the Chinese state has looked on luan with a disfavour ranging between distaste and alarm and responded to it as a threat to be guarded against and quashed at all costs. Every recognised instance of luan has elicited some level of violent response against it. Yet, to be fair, at least from its own perspective on the standards for its time, if only for the sake of efficiency, the state has historically tended to respond with some sense of proportionality. As we might expect, for lesser infractions and particularly those pedestrian ones that civilians might ordinarily perpetrate, the initial response by the state was in the form of the police, which was an institution that only became well established in China by late Tang times.\textsuperscript{10} Given the impressive length of Chinese history overall, this relatively late appearance of official policemen was no doubt partially attributable to the large-scale urbanisation that began to occur with the advent of the Tang, for these civil agents of the law only reliably functioned in the vicinities of the capitals.\textsuperscript{11} However, whenever confronting the challenge of luan at its most extreme, the instrument wielded in response by the Chinese state as its first as well as its last resort has never been anything other than the military.

\textsuperscript{11} Benn, China’s Golden Age, p. 48.
In a society in which the emergence of independent civilian police authority was a late-emerging development, reliance on the military to suppress large as well as many small instances of luan is perhaps entirely understandable. Still another more culturally deep-seated reason why the medieval Chinese state should have relied on its military in combating all levels of luan is that armies were by custom universally construed as bastions of order unto themselves. Yet, despite being by custom the chief weapon employed by the Chinese state in suppressing instances of major disorder, the military itself was neither immune to direct infection by luan nor impervious to contagion by its proximate propagation. In fact, as is shown below, an increasing propensity almost assuredly arose over the course of the imperial period for the military to be greatly touched if not altogether pervaded by luan. Much of the reason for this increasing susceptibility within the armed ranks to luan stemmed from changes that occurred in the class composition of the medieval military – changes that also mirrored and exemplified those occurring in Chinese society at large in the momentous transition from the Tang dynasty to that of the Song (960–1279).

The preserved historical record of violence in medieval China tacitly acknowledges this transition by exposing us to how the responses by the military especially to disorder of the highest magnitude increasingly result in mixed outcomes. Nevertheless, at least up until the invasions of the Jurchen tribes of the early twelfth century that precipitated the fall and occupation of north China in 1127 and the involuntary geographical creation of the Southern Song, reliance on the military as the solution to extreme luan did largely serve to facilitate order and extend a continuum of victory in the preservation of the medieval Chinese state against its adversaries, whether domestic or foreign. However, we will discover that this victorious continuum was progressively achieved only through the often unchecked collateral exploitation, brutalisation and elimination of untold numbers of innocent Chinese lives in the process.

Perverse Armies of Luan

Given its sheer scale and the magnitude of violence it exacted, the luan committed specifically by Huang Chao wreaked cataclysmic socio-political havoc upon Tang China. To be sure, as it ran its devastating course, Huang’s rebellion ignited seemingly numberless smaller and more localised uprisings that conterminously plagued the Tang dynastic state. Yet, there can be no disputing at all which of these outbreaks posed the existential threat. Except
for portions of the extreme provincial west, such as distant Sichuan, where the reigning Tang monarch himself had fled into refuge, the chaos fomented and carnage dispensed by the massive uprising of Huang Chao tragically touched all corners of and nearly all within the empire.

Yet, even in light of the quasi-ubiquity of the terror that victimised almost everyone, no group was more adversely affected by the Huang Chao Rebellion than the Tang ruling aristocracy. Indeed, the welter of foreign religious minorities massacred by the thousands in the south at Guangzhou notwithstanding, Huang Chao collectively targeted the office-holding elites who actually controlled the empire – situated almost exclusively in the north at Chang’an and Luoyang as well as along the east–west corridor stretching between the two great capitals – as his chief enemy, and history shows us that he could hardly have been more committed than he was to their removal from power or totalistic in their liquidation. Thus, as Nicolas Tackett has convincingly concluded, principally through systematic analysis of the funerary epitaphs and funerary biographies of this class, no single event was more responsible for the wholesale destruction of the medieval Chinese aristocracy than was the ruinous rebellion incited, led and visited upon it by Huang Chao.¹²

The decline by depletion and eventual disappearance of the Tang aristocracy as a viable governing entity necessarily affected adversely all of the institutions that had heretofore served its interests as a class. As we might expect, one institution that was collaterally undermined with considerable severity was the military. Given the customary positions of leadership its members enjoyed, this decimation of the Tang ruling elite not only as rulers but as a military vanguard necessarily had dooming consequences for the imperial armies of the expiring Tang regime.

In truth, the earlier history of the Tang yields stark evidence of the dysfunction likely to transpire in the military sphere whenever there was a leadership dearth stemming either from the absence or from the absconding of the traditional nobility. We need only briefly consider the example of the convention of foreign origin that was eventually adopted by the emperors of the Sui dynasty (581–617) as well as those of the early Tang as the militia troops (fubing) system.¹³

First established by the Tuoba clan as rulers of the Northern (386–534) and subsequently Western (535–77) dynasties, the forces that composed the fubing

system were not militia in the conventional sense but, in the words of the late eminent scholar Arthur F. Wright, ‘territorially administered soldiery’, garrisoned by the semi-nomads along the northern frontier for defence against their more nomadic and northerly enemies.14 These troops, collected together in discrete units of approximately a thousand men each and thereby representing several hundred fu or ‘garrisons’, were essentially soldier-farmers, and thus intended to be self-sustaining over their long stints of deployment. Crucial in its inception, however, is that the system was one wherein its high as well as middle command staffing often consisted of ethnic Xianbei nobility and that these two levels of generals and officers were frequently affined ‘by tribal or pseudo-tribal bonds’. All changed after the Tang founding and the appropriation of the system by the Chinese, as ‘once proud units became … the dumping grounds for criminals, fertile fields for exploiting functionaries, and social classes at once déclassé and rebellious’.15

To be sure, the transition that the fubing system underwent was deleterious, so much so that it functioned under the Tang for only another century and a half. Fubing as a system was disbanded entirely by the mid eighth century (officially in 737), just before the catastrophically ruinous rebellion initiated by the military governor An Lushan (c. 703–57), which its elimination is thought to have at least indirectly caused.16 Yet, most important for our understanding is that this demise of the fubing system presaged later change. Hence, we can take its example as at least a partial reflection of a distinct divide between how the military had been conceived and constituted during the first century-plus of the Tang versus its waning decades. This sense of disjuncture that arose perceptively during the Tang would substantially influence the fledgling Song dynasty that would soon arise in its wake.

For a complex of socio-political, economic and also intellectual reasons, in the long run the transition from the Tang to the Song dynasty tended only to accelerate the dysfunction evinced within the Chinese armed forces. Such was the case no doubt in part because the aristocracy that had dominated the prior medieval age was never again to be reconstituted. Thus the most

consequential difference between the imperial military of Tang times and the subsequent Song era was clearly the extent to which non-aristocratic class elements became infused into and thus may be said to have become representative of it.

The ‘levelling’ of the classes within the institution of the military adumbrated the same phenomenon that was ensuing within Song society on the whole and, more than any others, two long-standing but steadily intensifying processes – one eminently inducible and the other highly coercive – greatly facilitated this transformation. The first of these processes was the professionalisation of the military as a paid as opposed to volunteer (as distinct from enlisted strictly by corvée) force, and the second was the augmentation of the military by means of practices of conscription that increasingly preyed upon and thus drew into the ranks predominantly men from the poorest and least empowered ranks of society. As facilitating factors, professionalisation and conscription are obviously at completely opposite ends of the motivational spectrum. However, within the context of the state–military complex of imperial China, these processes tended to be mutually reinforcing – that is, they functioned as companion techniques of reward and punishment employed together towards the achievement of the pre-emptive but ultimately misguided goal of absorbing into the army those most predisposed to commit luan in order to preclude their committing luan beyond its bounds in the civilian setting. As much as any other, this grand strategy in cooptation contributed to what the late military historian Edward L. Dreyer referred to as ‘the denigration of soldiers (including officers), noticeable from Song times onward and expressed in the often-quoted saying, “Good iron isn’t used for nails; good men aren’t used as soldiers”’ (Figure 2.1).17

Ravages Committed by Soldiers and Brigands Alike

Well known is the fact that, as gifts to the fund of human wisdom, Chinese proverbs are practically uncountable. We therefore should not be surprised to find any one of them reinforced by numerous like-minded sayings and idioms. Rare it is, however, to encounter one of these maxims that is directly traceable to a single set of concrete historical events – indeed, a specific series of unified instances of luan – but such is the case for the ‘ravages committed by soldiers and brigands alike’ (bingxian feihuan).

The official History of the Song (Songshi) informs us of how the regime in the late eleventh century, at a time still fairly early in its tenure, had to grapple with the predations of a particular renegade borderland official – most likely a semi-sinicised border tribesman in the service of the Song in the far northwest, in what is now the Turpan (also Turfan; Chinese: Tulufan) area of modern Xinjiang province, and thus at a considerable remove from the then primary capital of the dynasty at Kaifeng. In the Chinese, this ingrate non-Chinese official was very aptly named Guizhang (Devil’s Badge) and he is remembered in history only for his singularly conspicuous act of luan. We are first informed that: ‘On 10 March 1076, when Zongge Staff Supervisor (shoul- ing) Guizhang invaded Five Bellows Valley (Wumougu) [for the purpose of pillaging and plundering], Submitted Tribes Officer (fanguan) Linzhan Nezhi and others engaged him in battle and dealt him a great defeat.’\(^{18}\) We

\(^{18}\) Tuotuo et al., Songshi (History of the Song) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 15.290.
subsequently, however, learn of Guizhang’s persistence when we are apprised via the same source that: ‘On 28 December 1076, when Guizhang attacked Minzhou, Prefect (zhizhou) Chong E and others defeated him at Iron Wall (Tiecheng).’9 Yet, with this final suppression of the nearly year-long mayhem inflicted by a rogue functionary of the Song state, we finally learn of a most unexpected result for his followers: ‘On 12 January 1077, it was imperially decreed that: “[Upon condition of their disbandment,] the soldiers and brigands of Guizhang who had crossed over into Minzhou would be given cash and that, upon their return, those commoners who had been forced to follow along in the service of these armies would be pardoned as blameless for their transgressions.”’20 Thus, with the turn of the year, whereas the defeated bandit leader Guizhang was fittingly beheaded, his disbanded bandit supporters – not unlike the loyal prefect Chong E who is credited with delivering the culprit’s head to court – were contrastingly rewarded, if with nothing more than clemency for their misdeeds. To the extent that we are able to view these wholly dissimilar outcomes from the standpoint of the untold numbers of victims of Guizhang’s borderland assaults, we should find it hardly surprising that such a cynical expression as the ‘ravages committed by soldiers and brigands alike’ would have emerged expressly in connection with this unseemly historical event.

We can glean much from the story of Guizhang and one of the more prominent themes on which it sheds light is the heightened wariness and trepidation – when compared to Tang precedents – pervading dealings between the Song dynastic state and foreigners. However, for our present purposes, unavoidable for us is how effectively the example of Guizhang illustrates and underscores the implicit perils of the newly emergent medieval Chinese armies, staffed principally through a service model consisting of a combination of payment to recruit and retain professionals and conscription for the purpose of incorporating everyone else. Grant we must that the forces of Guizhang had been illegitimate, not even constituting a cohesive but treacherous splinter regiment of the imperial armies that had opposed and defeated them; they instead represented, at best, a mixture of disloyal government troops and opportunist local marauders. However, on the basis of the shocking imperial decree just cited, we can hardly doubt that the destitute and dispossessed victims of Guizhang’s rampage would have seen the recruitment principles – namely, spoils at their expense for the few

19 Ibid., 15.292.
20 Ibid., 15.292.
and forcible conscription of those like themselves imposed upon the many – as shared in common by his army and that of the imperial state. For this reason, over time, civilian cynicism towards and disapprobation of the legitimate army became rife, such that it often became regarded as hardly different or distinguishable from the bandit brigades of yet another opportunist warlord. 

Unsurprisingly, from the perspective of the poorest and therefore most vulnerable of the expanded class of commoners during the Song period, because the onus of its fulfilment fell heaviest upon them as a group, conscription rather than payment was the more virulently savaging of what in the course of time became viewed as two complicit evils. Whereas it did tend to induce corruption, paying soldiers was a requirement of professionalisation, which had been ongoing since the mid eighth century, at any rate. Moreover, at least theoretically, conscripts were paid too. However, the remuneration for conscripts was often notoriously irregular and it could suddenly, depending on the whims of their commanders, become non-existent. More tragic by far in the popular mind was the brutal reality of conscription as a captive condition. 

Compounding this condition of captivity for those conscripted members of the Song army was a host of attendant brutalities. Not the least among them consisted of the fact that the abuse that was routinely meted out to them by their superiors could often rival that risked in combat with or capture by the enemy. This violence that conscripts suffered daily at the hands of those ostensibly charged with ensuring their well-being drove many of them to contemplate as well as attempt either defection to less punitive posts or outright desertion. These defections and desertions were guarded against by additional tactics in coercion that guaranteed conformity and compliance, and one of the more novel but widespread of the devices employed – applied collectively for the purpose of identification and quite understandable in an age prior to universally standardised uniforms and identification tags – was tattooing. Extant anecdotes contemporary with the time, such as the following one recorded by the raconteur Zhuang Chuo (fl. 1078–1143), expose us to the kind of victimisation that could be associated with this demarcating practice during Song times, which anciently – in the form of the branding of the forehead and face – had been a codified punishment exclusively reserved for criminals and those who might have offended a given ruler:

When [the emperor] Gaozong [r. 1127–62] crossed the [Yangzi] River heading south, [the generals] Han [Shizhong] [1089–1151] and Liu [Guangshi] [d. 1142]
were both waging frontier campaigns. Only the army of Zhang Jun [1086–1154] regularly accompanied the court. From among the young, stout, and big and tall among his soldiers, [Zhang] selected troops and, upon having them tattooed from buttocks to feet, called them [his] ‘decorated legs’. In former times, [only] drifters at the capital used to sport tattoos like these. However, nowadays military commanders follow this practice, which also prevents their troops from fleeing to [seek refuge in] other armies. These tattoos are employed as a means of verification, but they cause much suffering and are also expensive and thus the people all resent them.21

To be sure, in the telling, Zhuang Chuo’s account verges on the tragicomic. Nevertheless, we also keenly sense that there was little that was funny about the experience for those who were forced to undergo the indignity of this stigmatising process and live out the rest of their lives marked by its humiliation. Moreover, with its allusion to the expense involved, surely one of the more intriguing aspects of this report is the high probability that those who were forced to endure the tattooing were at least sometimes made responsible for bearing the cost of inflicting this painful permanent form of branding upon themselves. To this fact may be added that the bearer of these identifying tattoos immediately decremented himself economically. We know this to have been the case because, via yet another in the litany of imperial regulations imposed during the crisis year of 1127, differentials in pay among regular troops became in part officially based on clarity of skin, with those enlisting with clear complexions (baishen) receiving full pay and those who had modified their tattoos to conform with transferral to a different army unit – with the alteration method of choice being mutilation by slicing (gaila) – receiving only half-pay, along with re-enlisting defeated soldiers and surrendered bandits.22

Yet we should not think of the relationship between the imperial armies of Song times and the citizenry they were sworn to protect as entirely being reduced to non-existent expectations. In times of grave exigency, the military more than occasionally functioned as the lifeline of the people. Our initial


22 Li Xinchuan, Jianyan yi lai xinian yaolu (Record of Important Events in Chronological Order since the Jianyan Era) (Taipei: Taiwan yinshuguan, 1983), 6.42b. The Jianyan reign period is from 1127 to 1130.
informant Shao Bo provides us with the account of a massive flood that struck the capital and its environs, stating in part:

In the sixth month of the summer of 1118, a torrential flood ensued as the capital endured great rains for ten [straight] days. As the Bian and Zhang tributaries [of the Yellow River] overflowed, all walls and gateways became blocked with mud ... The [capital] outskirts themselves in all four directions became like rivers, such that it was not known which [routes] to follow in escaping; those that were recognisable were known to be so by being marked with the emblem of the army.23

However, for every account in the historical records of the Song period of its beneficence displayed towards the populace, there seem to be several countervailing documents attesting to the unbridled callousness of the military. As we should expect, as in the foregoing cases of those recorded by Shao Bo and Zhuang Chuo, most of the impugning testimonials are non-official in nature, for they are included within the anecdotal corpuses of private authors. Yet we may elect to regard the freedom of these particular writers from having to protect the image of the military as actually giving credence to their claims. Without the burden of having to cooperate in projecting any sanitised version of its functioning, eyewitness doxographers like Shao and Zhuang, writing privately and without commission instead of at the behest of the court, were thus enabled to portray the military as the externally and internally punitive arm of the Song state that it so invariantly really was.

New Shape to the Old Demon

With this understanding, let us now turn to consider the paramount Song instance of luan, occurring prior to the terminus of the original Song state, which arose in the form of the hugely destructive rebellion led by the rebel Fang La (d. 1121).24 As a believer in the Persian religion of Manichaeism, Fang La fervently subscribed to one of the numerous transplanted alien cults in China that two and a half centuries earlier through the mass slaughter at Guangzhou the insurrectionist Huang Chao had attempted to annihilate. Since the time of its appearance in perhaps the late sixth century CE, Manichaeism had, at best, been one of the faiths merely tolerated in China. However, by Song times, its already marginalised standing had declined even

24 The most complete traditional Chinese biography of Fang La is an adjunct section to the one devoted to his vanquisher, the eunuch commander Tong Guan (1054–1126). See Tuotuo et al., *Songshi*, 468.13659–62.
more precipitously and its adherents had become persecuted. The opponents of Manichaeism in the Confucian cultural mainstream despised the followers of the religion, to whom they ascribed the malevolent Chinese term *mo* (demon) because of its phonetic approximation of Mani, the name of the prophet founder of the creed. Although the regimen was shared in common with their Buddhist competitors, even the strict vegetarianism of the Manichaeans was denigrated.  

Yet an exploitative policy of the Song state is perhaps just as important as the persecution of their proscribed religion in explaining what incited this harshly relegated group to rebel. To satisfy his penchant for stocking his opulent gardens and villas with exotic flora and stones, the emperor Huizong (1082–1135; r. 1100–25) exacted a heavy tax-in-kind for the continual furnishing of these items at court. This tribute tax was known as the ‘flower and stone requisition’ (*huashi gang*), and whereas it reputedly applied empire-wide, it was levied disproportionately on the southern regions where such exotica were native and plentiful. Rare plants in particular were extracted from prime areas along the subtropical south-east coastline and transported north. This same region of Jiangnan (‘south of the [Yangzi] River’) was coincidentally the heartland of Manichaean worship and thus home to its underground sects of ghettoised congregants.  

Given its disparagement as onerous by nearly all subjected to it, the ‘flower and stone requisition’ provided something of a perfect pretext and Fang La began to rail against the tax, deftly linking it to proto-nationalist themes with his claims that its collection really only accrued to the benefit of the foreign borderland regimes of Kitan (also Khitan) and Tangut peoples, to whom – in order to maintain a fragile peace – the Song itself paid tribute. Gradually, Fang La’s message of unjust exploitation became transformed into a passionate call for arms and, in the winter of 1120, the variously dispersed Manichaean sects as well as other malcontents arose with a unified purpose from their marginalisation in open rebellion against the Song.  

Despite being militarily unseasoned, the predominantly peasant rebel forces led by Fang La at first enjoyed stunning successes against the locally stationed and even some of the first imperial troops of the Song mobilised

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against them. Many of the latter in fact had had to be diverted in order to join the fight from the distant uneasy northern border with the Kitan Liao dynasty (907–1125). The fact that Fang La’s uprising, just as had Huang Chao’s during the Tang, spawned numerous copycat insurgencies across the Jiangnan region also contributed to success by distraction. Tax revenue from that area earmarked for the court was disrupted. The detested ‘flower and stone requisition’ – now fully recognised by the state as the lightning rod of resistance that it had become – was suspended both there and elsewhere.²⁹

Owing most probably to its staunchly Manichaean core, which was regarded societally as heterodox, the Fang La Rebellion is attributed a particular perniciousness in the official sources. The histories, whether officially commissioned or private, describe with disdain the attacks by the rebels on their religious-intellectual rivals. Having now seized the opportunity for full-scale retribution against their long-standing cultural enemies, the Fang La insurrectionists are said to have been vengeful, unsparing and unstinting in their assaults against them. Being monotheists and anti-idolaters, they razed the monasteries of the Buddhists to the ground and defaced their icons. Being rebels intent on establishing a new non-hierarchical egalitarian order, they torched the schools of the Confucians and murdered countless numbers of their preceptors, mentors and patrons.³⁰

We doubtless err if we dismiss these official assertions of such utterly alienating acts as totally untrue. Unquestionably, the wanton destruction wreaked by the long-oppressed but suddenly ‘liberated’ rebels was hugely far-reaching.³¹ Yet neither can we wholly discount that many of these claims might well represent Orwellian cases of the winners in any conflict writing their own self-serving and self-aggrandising accounts of the truth. Our subsequent informant Zhuang Chuo supplies us with a viable case in point via his succinctly revealing description of the aftermath of Fang La activity in the future Southern Song capital of Hangzhou, which had been captured by the rebels on 19 January 1121 and fully retaken by the state by May of the same year.³² Zhuang Chuo, who was neither a Manichaean nor a sympathiser, reports that: ‘When Hangzhou suffered the disorder (luan) of Fang La, the [city wall] watchtowers and gates as well as the dwellings throughout the district were all put to the torch. In order to reconstruct these [structures], Weng Yanguo [j.s. 1097] had the Buddhist temples destroyed [for use as rebuilding material].³³ In his language, Zhuang Chuo is actually elliptical in

³³ Zhuang Chuo, Jile bian, 3.3.
implicating whoever may have been culpable in the first place for the arson, though we must assume he means the rebels. However, Zhuang Chuo, who was potentially an eyewitness to all about which he here writes, could hardly be more direct in naming the person representing the entity that he believed to be responsible for the destruction of Hangzhou’s exquisite Buddhist temples. He proffers that their destroyer was no rebel at all but instead an authorised agent of the imperial state, functioning in the jointly civil–militaristic capacity of Song times that had by then become sanctioned and commonplace. Reinforcing Zhuang Chuo’s intimation is the fact that public works during the Song were largely achieved through military labour, with the typically local as opposed to imperial troops deployed for these tasks sometimes even called ‘corvée soldiers’ (yibing). Thus it is hardly unreasonable to posit that the very same armed forces that were responsible for rebuilding Hangzhou’s defence stations were the same ones responsible for levelling its Buddhist temples in order to generate reconstruction supplies.

At any rate, the fleeting victory at Hangzhou would represent the pinnacle of the success that Fang La and his rebel legions achieved. By the spring of 1121, the imperial forces dispatched from the Kaifeng in the north against the insurgent Manichaean regime had commenced a pincer offensive designed to hem in, constrict and thus seal off any means of escape for either it or its supporters. Fang La himself retreated to a secret hideaway in the mountain fastnesses of his home region, only to have his whereabouts exposed by the aggrieved son of a gentry landlord whom he had slain. After massacring the estimated 70,000 hardcore participants in the uprising who elected to fight out of desperation to the death, imperial troops succeeded in capturing Fang La alive and, together with his family and inner circle of advisers, he was shipped north to the capital for execution. These leaders of the Manichaean insurrection were publicly executed on 7 October 1121. One non-official source contemporary with the time fixes the overall number of just civilian (pingmin) fatalities in the pacification campaign to quell this most destructive

34 See Don J. Wyatt, ‘Unsung Men of War: Acculturated Embodiments of the Martial Ethos in the Song Dynasty’, in Nicola Di Cosmo (ed.), Military Culture in Imperial China (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 192–218. The scholar Lu Xinyuan (1834–94), in his Songshi yi (Companion to the History of the Song) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju; Xinhua shudian Beijing faxingsuo faxing, 1991), 7.2b, informs us that: ‘In 1121, [Weng Yanguo] was dispatched to serve jointly as magistrate of Jianzhou as well as fiscal commissioner (zhuanyun) and military administrative assistant (panguan) for Fujian [province].’

of the peasant uprisings ever to occur during the Song at being ‘not below 2,000,000 persons’.  

The Plebianisation of Luan

As we have witnessed, over the course of its middle imperial centuries, no term can be said to bear a closer association with the cyclical pattern of violence begetting violence in China than that of luan. Yet, a fundamentally indispensable aspect of that association still demands and deserves an accounting in closing. From our consideration of the structural and dispositional changes undergone by the armies of the state in transition from Tang to Song times, we have discovered that the perpetration of luan was by no means limited to the civilian domain. Armies themselves, when lacking the requisite quality of leadership that upheld order, could of course readily become seedbeds of luan, and the Chinese past is superabundant with cases of the institution most entrusted with maintaining order instead acting contrarily and directly counter to that aim.

Nonetheless, we have seen that – in the critical transition from Tang to Song times – those governing China and, by extension, the people whom they governed, evinced the proclivity to conceive of luan as progressively and preponderantly a plebeian offence. Why would this be so? As I have endeavoured to demonstrate implicitly, much of the reason for construing luan as either a small infringement or a grave crime committed against the state primarily by commoners generates from the downward social trending of the history of large-scale disorder itself in China. After the An Lushan Rebellion (755–63), the instigators of major upheavals of this kind successively tended to be disaffected and disenfranchised civilians – and typically unprivileged peasants or even outcasts – rather than wayward and insubordinate but nonetheless pedigreed military men. As inciters of luan on the grandest stage, these civilians of course had no choice except to function as militarists – adopting the same mindset, donning the same trappings and pursuing the same tactics. Yet, whether emerging from within the ranks of the army or from outside them, such insurgents of the Song ultimately became progressively dissociated as a breed and removed as a class from the typically wellborn but unexpectedly perverse generals of early Tang times.

36 Fang Shao, Qingxi kougui (Traces of the Bandits of Qingxi) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995–9), 1.2b. Fang Shao, the author of this non-commissioned history of the Fang La Rebellion, was born in 1066 and died sometime after 1141.
We may note finally that the Song dynasty, exactly like its predecessor the Tang, was founded by a military coup – that is, established by the deposing of the ruling house through the armed usurpation of a general serving in the army of a pre-existing dynasty.\textsuperscript{37} However, we should also observe that it was the last of the imperial dynasties of China to be so founded. Thereafter, the face of luan became conspicuously and inexorably plebianised, with this consequential transition towards an identification of civil disorder as a phenomenon with the common people both leading to and facilitating the corresponding one that was taking place in the composition of the armies. Once the military had transitioned from being one comprised largely of nobles in the Tang to one composed exclusively of commoners in the Song, we find increasingly that the impetus for perpetrating luan as well as the burden of suppressing it could only rest fatefully on the humble shoulders of those of plebeian background and no one else.

Bibliographical Essay

The secondary source scholarship devoted at least in part to the dynamism in relations between Chinese rebel insurgencies of the ‘medieval’ or ‘middle imperial’ centuries (roughly the ninth to fourteenth centuries) and the armies of the imperial state as instruments in quashing them has surged markedly of late, with this chapter profiting appreciably from this. With respect to the ninth-century situation, by far the most illuminating of these emergent works here drawn upon is Nicolas Tackett’s The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), which will assuredly serve as an inspirational beacon for all future studies on its namesake subject generally and on the disruptive influence of the rebel\textit{qua} ruler Huang Chao (d. 884) in particular. An additional recent work of importance is A Portrait of Five Dynasties China: From the Memoirs of Wang Renyu (880–96) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) by Glen Dudbridge. Despite focusing more fully on the ensuing, intensely divisive period of Five Dynasties (907–60) that succeeded the Tang dynasty (618–907), through the compelling retrospective insights afforded by his diaries, the roving scholar-official Wang Renyu, via Dudbridge’s lucid translation and interpretation, conveys across time to us the devastating impact of Huang Chao, whose tenure as a fleetingly victorious usurper intersected with Wang’s own birth and earliest formative years.

For the purpose of enhancing our knowledge on the subsequent rebellion led by Fang La (d. 1121) at the close of the initial or Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), we have long had to depend principally on two seminal articles published in the Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies by the scholar Kao Yu-kung [Gao Yougong] in the 1960s – namely, his ‘A Study of the Fang La Rebellion’, HJAS 24 (1962–3), 17–63 and ‘Source Materials on the Fang La Rebellion’, HJAS 26 (1966), 211–41. However, to this monographic and still essential

Conspirators in Violence

scholarship in English on Fang La may now be added several studies that are more broadly focused on the history of Chinese sectarian violence as a whole. These works advance our understanding not merely of Fang La but also of traditional Chinese religious heresy, violence – whether perpetrated by the populace or exacted against it in reaction by the state – and the inextricable and frequently combustible relationship between the two. Notable among these later studies are Violence in China: Essays in Culture and Counterculture edited by Jonathan N. Lipman and Stevan Harrell (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990); Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History by Hubert Seiwert, with Ma Xisha (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Heterodoxy in Late Imperial China edited by Kwang-Ching Liu and Richard Shek (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004); and The Sinister Way: The Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture by Richard Von Glahn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). However, newer still are those works that specifically facilitate our appreciation of the historical context that spawned the insurrection of Fang La as well as the numerous would-be similar uprisings that arose to shape and, from the standpoint of the state, plague China’s late medieval age. Two prime examples of this growing fund of illuminating secondary literature are Emperor Huizong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) by Patricia Buckley Ebrey and The Reunification of China: Peace through War under the Song Dynasty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) by Peter Lorge.
Violent behaviour is a major topic in Arabic and Persian sources: battles, fighting, killing, beating, injuring, plundering, robbing, raping are very common indeed. The study of violence used by armies and lords in the medieval Islamic period, however, is hampered by two serious problems.

First, all of the evidence is anecdotal. This is particularly true for violence off the battlefield, that is, in pressing men to service in the army, in collecting taxes and provisions for the army, and in the cohabitation of ‘civilian’ and ‘military’ persons. All accounts beg the question of whether they report typical situations or rather exceptions. Therefore it is hazardous to make an assessment of how the level of violence evolved over the centuries. Second, the sources typically have a normative aim. How do we evaluate a complaint about violent behaviour of an army or group of people? Many of the relevant passages are polemical, that is, directed against a person whom the author had elected as a personal enemy. Here, plausibility will often be all that can be achieved.

The present study concentrates on the Turko-Mongol periods and focuses on everyday forms of violence more than incidents of large-scale upheaval. Everyday violence has not been a subject of research in itself whereas episodes of large-scale destruction, for example the Mongol invasion and the campaigns of Timur (1370–1405) across Iran, Central Asia, the Near East and India, have been frequently described. There is no need to repeat these descriptions here. I will treat such topics as military recruitment, the provisioning of armies and taxation problems. One of the most evident forms of everyday violence was related to the billeting of troops and other military personnel in private homes, and therefore a substantial section of this chapter is devoted to that topic.
Recruitment

Armies in medieval Iran and Central Asia were not always professional forces. Levies from the population played an important role at all times. Whereas a part of these levies may have been volunteers, others probably were pressed into service, but the evidence for this is meagre. In some areas, livestock breeders were a significant part of the available military manpower: Arabs or Kurds in the west; people we today would call Afghans and Baluch in the east; and most prominently, Turks, in Transoxiana and parts of eastern Iran from pre-Islamic times, in central and western Iran beginning with the early eleventh century. They served under their own chiefs who also led them in war and, in many cases, probably followed their own agendas. Local lords must have been responsible for recruiting non-professional warriors all along, sometimes at the request of their overlords, sometimes in pursuit of their own interests. Rarely, if ever, was the central (imperial) administration able to do without them.

Some regions, in particular in the east, were known to be home to warlike populations. Tenth-century ‘Arab geographers’ describe villages and rural regions in Khurasan and Transoxiana yielding thousands of warriors, in most cases probably peasants. But we do not know how the actual recruitment of peasants into the army was organised, and thus the extent of intimidation and coercion cannot be assessed. However, the civilian settled population was trained in the use of arms to a certain degree, and, in general, troops recruited from the general populace seem to have obeyed their commanders.

The general populace was also mobilised to fight internal enemies. This is mentioned in the reports about the wars against the Prophet Muqanna’ in the oasis of Bukhara (778). Not only warriors but also men operating siege machinery or digging moats were recruited. It is in such a context that violence in recruiting is mentioned. In one incident from 821–2, a governor, Tahir b. Husayn, learnt that some people had stayed in their village instead of joining a local campaign. He ordered the individuals executed and their belongings confiscated.¹

General mobilisation was necessary when such enemies as the steppe Turks came close to the Samanid domains. Inversely, when the Samanids (a dynasty ruling over eastern Iran and Transoxiana in the ninth and tenth

centuries) were about to conquer Sistan in south-eastern Iran, the regional rulers mobilised everybody, including the rural levies. The Ghaznavids (who ruled in Khurasan c. 990–1040) used general mobilisation as well; they called on the local lords to join them in their campaigns together with their troops. The same terms are used for the general mobilisation of nomad warriors, which was the rule after the coming of the Qarakhanids (a Turkish dynasty who ruled in Transoxiana from around 1000 to the early thirteenth century) and the Seljuqs (1030s, to rule over much of Iran and other regions until the mid or late twelfth century) to the Iranian world. That military service was a duty for every able-bodied Turk is formulated explicitly by Yusuf Khass Hajib in his Wisdom of Royal Glory. The Seljuqs do not seem to have made a difference between their followers and their warriors.

The Mongols, for their part, not only mobilised their own people and all other steppe dwellers, but recruited Iranians as soldiers and workers early on. In many cases, locals were used as ‘cannon fodder’ to fill moats with their bodies, as, for example, at the citadels in Bukhara and Samarkand. Later, Iranians were employed as warriors, and service in the Mongol army appears as one of the basic duties of the conquered population, on the same basis as paying taxes. The terms hashar and bigar occur, both of which refer to forms of corvée. A term specifically used for conscripts is charik. Again, it is not stated that rural and urban people were swayed by the threat of violence, but this is probable. In one case, there is a statement that Mongol scribes sent to recruit people had taken bribes from the population. This was no isolated case; there is another report concerning Timurid Yazd about an official in charge of recruiting Iranians who took bribes.

Another term for the recruitment of people into the Mongol and later Timurid armies is nambardar, and there was a troop called the nambardar levy (charik-i nambardar). This concerned mostly Iranians, and sometimes scholars and fiscal administrators were also recruited. Nambardar was used to

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5 For charik in Timurid armies, see Beatrice Manz, Power, Politics and Religion in Timurid Iran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), index s.v. cherik.
increase the numbers of warriors for large campaigns; the troops were recruited regionally, and they had to bring their own equipment. Timur used Khurasanian nambardar troops to hold the city of Tiflis, which he had conquered.\(^6\) The right to recruit people was based on the claim that the (Mongol) ruler had the right to decide where people would be living; a large-scale relocation of persons also appears as nambardar. In the later Timurid period, nambardar appears as a fiscal duty, which was apparently collected from the population in exceptional situations.

Recruitment of the general populace thus went from volunteers to forced conscripts. Service in the army was seen by the Mongols as one form of the general obligation of conquered peoples to serve, and military service comes close to corvée. But all the same, the level of violence used in recruiting warriors, auxiliaries or workers for the armies is nowhere stated. It can be inferred, however, from the fact that some people tried to bribe recruiters in order not to serve.

**Corvée**

Armies must have used forced labour at all times. Details are available for the Ghaznavid armies (early eleventh century) due to the very circumstantial reports in Bu ’l-Fadl Bayhaqi’s history. Corvée was used for a number of purposes. Among these, the source names the battue hunt, the building of palaces and the clearing of roads from snow for the army when on its march home from India. Other sources add the digging of irrigation canals and the building of fortresses – in one case, prisoners of war were used as labourers; in another one, evidently the peasants of the surrounding villages had to serve.\(^7\) Building fortresses must have been one of the most important fields where forced labour was used for military purposes.


Sometimes, in official documents, persons (or institutions such as pious foundations) were exempted from labour service. In such cases, labour service is mentioned in a row with other forms of extraordinary levies. Legal experts forbade the employment of forced labour; and at any rate, workers had to get fair pay. This rule was probably hardly ever honoured: many large construction projects simply were not possible without corvée.

The preceding examples all come from the pre-Mongol period. The Mongols did not invent forced labour, but certainly they used it to an unprecedented extent. The hunt is again a favoured occasion, and it is cited also as a typical form of oppressive behaviour by Mongol rulers. In some cases, service in the hunt could be extended to one month. But the building, upkeep and repair of fortresses is also an important point. As with service for and in the army, all kinds of labour service were seen as a regular obligation of the conquered population. The Mongol army used captives and levies from conquered towns in siege warfare to an unprecedented degree; drafted labourers were also used to demolish the city walls in conquered areas.

Provisioning the Army

Feeding the army on campaign is always a challenge. In legal theory and according to the rules of statecraft, the army was not supposed to take what it needed from the inhabitants, or, more precisely, the army was to pay for what it needed. Nizam al-Mulk’s (d. 1092) idea to keep fodder and stores of grain along the usual routes and to acquire land from which to build up these stocks may have been put into practice to some degree under the Seljuq sultan Malikshah (1072–92) but certainly did not survive the wars after his death.

In some cases (in particular, it seems, in pre-Mongol times) army commanders tried to apply this principle. In the late 1030s, when the Ghaznavids were trying to hold Khurasan against the Seljuq Turks, the army changed its position more than once because it caused too much of a strain on local resources and prices were going up too much. But there were situations when a commander could not help taking what was needed by violent

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means. This was the case when he no longer had the means to pay for food and fodder, for example because he had been beaten and was destitute or did not have any notable fiscal organisation for other reasons.

The last Samanid ruler, al-Muntasir (1000–5), tried very hard to get into some kind of royal position, but never got very far in this endeavour. He therefore relied on violent means (including torture) to provision his retinue. In the intra-Seljuq contest for the throne after the death of Malikshah (1092), his son Barkyaruq (1094–1105) was not above requisitioning foodstuffs (in Nishapur, year 493/1099–1100, in the region of Baghdad the following year, and in Wasit in southern Iraq the next year). He also once saw his army disperse because there was not enough to feed the horses, and evidently he could do nothing about it, losing the fruits of an otherwise brilliant victory.

A ruler who had no money had no other way of feeding his retainers than to have food and other things collected from the people. The otherwise well-regarded Ghurid sultan Shihab al-Din (d. 1206), during his struggle for control of Khurasan against the Khwarazmshah Muhammad b. Tekesh (1200–20), turned to violent requisitioning of foodstuffs because his army had used up its provisions. When this did not suffice, he did something which was considered so unusual that it made people yearn for the victory of the Khwarazmians: he confiscated grain and other foodstuffs which the population had transported to the shrine of ʿAli al-Rida, a Twelver Shiʿite imam, at Mashhad, where the goods were under protection (at least that was the conventional view which the Ghurid sultan did not respect).11

There is no doubt that Mongol armies ravaged the countryside even after establishing their rule in Transoxiana (soon after the first invasion in the 1220s) and the Ilkhanate in Iran (in 1265). The most vivid descriptions of Mongol practices of raising revenue come from Rashid al-Din; the bleak picture he draws of the Iranian countryside before Ghazan’s reforms (which he himself had devised; Ghazan r. 1295–1305) is in part meant to give more lustre to this achievement, but it is plausible enough that there was more than some truth to these descriptions.12

The oppressive and violent behaviour of Mongol warriors and officials did not go without resistance. It is mostly in hagiographic sources that we learn about such events. Thus, in a story set in fourteenth-century Fars, a group of mounted foragers was attacked by the villagers, who killed one of them. The

troop sent to carry out reprisals found only four people in the village, the others having fled. In another story, likewise coming from a hagiographic source and likewise set in the fourteenth century, but in the region of Bukhara, a Mongol who tried to cash a tax cheque was also doing harm to some women, and the villagers killed him. The source comments: ‘The death of this oppressor was the reason why many people stayed alive.’ The stories of how the Sarbadar movement in Khurasan started (in around 1360) show a similar structure: Mongol officials had asked village notables to provide them with female company and wine, but in the end they were killed; according to another report, it was a Mongol tax collector who was slain.

In the Timurid period, letting the horses graze in the sown fields was very frequent; apparently, not much of a difference was made whether the army was on enemy territory or ‘at home’. In the Mongol and Timurid periods, it is clear that the armies lived off the land. Nomads as much as the agricultural population suffered since much of the needed foodstuffs was from animals.

Barat tax cheques

From the late Ghaznavid period on (early eleventh century), the tax cheque (barat) became a much-feared instrument of reprisals. The barat put the taxpayers and the ultimate recipient (often a military man) into direct contact, with violence often the result. The military man had recourse to violence in order to get what was written in the document (or what he wanted otherwise). Tax cheques were also used for the requisitioning of foodstuffs. In a critical moment during his campaigns in Khurasan against the Seljuq Turks, the Ghaznavid sultan Mas’ud (1030–41) had cheques written on an enormous scale and handed them out to the army; recipients of such documents then had the right to take what was written from the place mentioned in the document. This was a barely disguised licence to plunder. In many cases, it is not clear whether this was a procedure to raise revenue or an extortionist practice used to make subdued places pay in order to avoid unrestricted looting. Later, in the times of Sanjar, the barat had become a

15 Tihrani, Diyarbakriyya for Mardin in Anatolia, 55, 91, 255, 353.
normal procedure, and in an appointment deed for a representative of the royal administration in the Marv oasis the appointee is told to write the barat documents in such a way that the subjects do not complain (which must have been next to impossible).¹⁶

In the Mongol period, the barat again can be equivalent to plunder. Hagiographic texts report marauding on the basis of barat documents so that we get the impression that this was current practice. Very small amounts of money or objects of little value could be at stake, such as a sheepskin. However, the barat was also used as a normal instrument of taxation.¹⁷

In the late thirteenth century, Rashid al-Din writes, the tax system had broken down completely, and even through extremely violent means the holders of barat assignments had not been able to take in even a small fraction of the sum to which they were entitled. Ghazan Khan then is said to have abolished it in his famous reforms (in 1304), but, like such reforms in general, it is doubtful whether this particular policy was implemented.¹⁸ At any rate, the barat as a fiscal instrument soon resurfaced after Ghazan. Again, barat assignments apparently were quite normal and served, for example, to equip warriors. Barat thus was a current instrument for paying the troops before and after Ghazan Khan’s reforms. Tax exemptions also mentioned that no barat should be given out on the exempted lands.

This understanding of the barat continued into Timurid times: in an appointment for one of Shahrukh’s important amirs over a province, it is stated that the warriors who are living in the region are to turn to him to get their payment – in barat.¹⁹ In such cases, we do not learn how the holders of barat assignments behaved on the spot when they tried to ‘cash’ them, but the same term meant a share in the plunder to which a conquered town was subjected. Thus, Timur’s troops, when they plundered Delhi, had barat assignments which they then took into the city. Most of them, the source adds, were for sugar and grain.²⁰

Timurid hagiographic sources also show the process of ‘cashing’ barat assignments. A military man once came to the house of Khwaja Ahrar (d. 1490) in Tashkent with a barat for barley to be used as fodder for horses. When the khwaja’s servant told the man that the khwaja was in his private quarters and not to be disturbed, the warrior whipped him so that his screams made the khwaja come forth. The barley was duly delivered, but when the soldier came to the army camp, he suddenly dropped dead, and his master’s days were also counted.\(^{21}\)

On the administrative level, thus, barat was a regular instrument for paying the troops. What happened on the ground is not clear; the hagiographic accounts, however, indicate that the process often was chaotic and included violence. And thus, the instrument could also be used as a kind of makeshift regulation, a semblance of control in an otherwise uncontrolled situation such as the plundering of a conquered city.

*Na’l-baha,* ‘price of the horseshoe’

The same ambiguity is evident in another term used for the provisioning of the army, *na’l-baha,* literally, ‘the price of the horseshoe’. The term is used for two groups of cases: for the payment a city makes to a conqueror in order to avoid (unrestrained) sacking; and for a payment a city or a region makes to an army on the march.

The first instance comes from Sanjar’s chancery. In a letter, a representative of a region in northern Khurasan petitions the sultan to let an army go to other places so that they can collect their *na’l-baha* and other dues there.\(^{22}\) The levy is not regarded as an abuse here, rather part of the normal dues an army can ask the inhabitants of a region to deliver. In Kirman in the 1170s, the pretender Bahramshah asked for a considerable *na’l-baha*, which city notables divided up and delivered to a shihna (a kind of military governor). *Na’l-baha* as a term for a payment made to avoid the sacking of a town is attested from the Timurid period.\(^{23}\)

\(^{21}\) Mawlana Shaykh, *Maqamat-i Khwaja Ahrar*, ed. Masatomo Kawamoto (Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 2004), p. 43. Miracles of revenge and punishment in hagiographic accounts can be used to identify those whom the general populace feared and what they took to be unbearably unjust.


Terms such as barat and na’l-baha thus have two aspects. In some cases, they seem to be accepted as regular forms of taking in goods and monies the army needs; in other cases, they clearly mean plunder and extortion. It is not always possible to make a clear distinction between ‘non-violent’ and ‘violent’ forms of using such instruments of taxation. Armies until the coming of the Seljuqs tried to avoid living off the land (but did so nevertheless in a number of cases). Later, this became common practice, and objections, if ever raised, seem to have been on a quite theoretical level.

Billeting, Cohabitation

Billeting soldiers or other men on official mission in private homes (*nuzul, nuzula*) was only one of the many extraordinary levies which the army (and other official persons) demanded as the need arose or was perceived to arise. Such levies were known under general terms such as ‘*awaridat* or *takalif-i diwani* or *qismat*, the last term literally referring to levies which were divided up among a group of people. All these extra levies were seen with a critical eye; they were sometimes seen as ‘newly introduced’ taxes. Too heavy taxation could lead to serious trouble, in particular if the villagers in the respective region decided to leave their homes. In polemics between bureaucrats, reference to peasants leaving their homes may have been a standard figure, as is shown by the following passage from a polemical text which ‘Utbi, the Ghaznavid historian, appended to his history of Mahmud (998–1030): ‘The peasants and cultivators, pressed by the extraordinary levies, the billeting and different monies divided up amongst them, left their homes and stopped cultivating the soil’; one consequence was that the army did not get what it needed, which the text explains as maladministration by a certain vizier.\(^\text{24}\)

In the following, the focus will be on billeting. Billeting was not approved of. Not only was it a burden on the inhabitants, but it forced them to change their everyday routines radically. There was always the danger that the soldiers would misbehave, steal foodstuffs or other things and, above all, molest or even rape the women in the house; this implied that male honour was impugned and therefore was a particularly sore point. It was therefore a rule of good government to avoid billeting whenever possible, and the intrusion of soldiers or other officials into private homes without order was a crime that a just sultan had to punish severely and immediately.

One story is about the foundation of the garrison city Shadyakh close to Nishapur in Khurasan. When the governor of Khurasan, ‘Abdallah b. Tahir (828–45), who was typically held up as a model of good rule, once rode through the city, he noticed a woman leading a horse to a watering place. This was out of the ordinary: working with horses was a male occupation. He had the husband of that woman brought to his presence. Interrogated, the man said that it was all the governor’s fault: he had billeted soldiers in private homes. Consequently, if both wife and husband leave the home, the soldier can be expected to steal everything. If the man goes out alone, he cannot be sure about what will happen to his wife. Thus, the only solution is that the wife go out alone. And in order to remedy this, ‘Abdallah had the garrison city built.

A second story also concerns an exemplar of just rule, Mahmud the Ghaznavid, and it is equally legendary, being transmitted as an *exemplum* in a fourteenth-century decree forbidding billeting of soldiers and messengers in private homes. One night, Mahmud could not find sleep, and he wondered whether there might be an oppressed person whose complaint had not reached him. He decided to go out (in Harun al-Rashid fashion, alone and in modest apparel), and indeed he found a man in a mosque praying. The sultan overheard the prayer; it concerned a complaint that the man had been unable to bring to the sultan’s ears. Interrogated, he said that one of Mahmud’s followers used to come to his home at night drunk and molest his wife. The sultan disclosed his identity at this point and asked to be taken to the man’s home. At the end, the sultan himself cut off the head of the wrongdoer as was his duty.  

Baghdad is well covered in the sources, and therefore we get a number of reports from that city. In the very last period of the independent caliphate, billeting soldiers in private homes became the rule; it was introduced in 941. The Baghdadis protested violently against that order, smashing the pulpit of the Friday mosque so that the Friday sermon could not be held; in the ensuing clashes, some warriors and some citizens were killed. No wonder that the Baghdadis later participated in the killing of Abbasid troops when the Buyids took over in 945. But if they had hoped that the new power would not have recourse to billeting, they were mistaken. It was only the (Shi’ite) quarter of Karkh and the neighbouring (Sunni-Hanbali) quarter of Bab al-

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Basra, two of the most riotous parts of the city, which were exempted for the time being; warriors were billeted there only in 1018/19, and the source states that the soldiers ‘did evil things which had not been seen before’. The vizier who had given that order was deposed soon afterwards.26

When the Seljuq Turks came to Baghdad under Toghril Beg (1055), again, billeting is mentioned in the sources. When the Turks had stayed in the city for more than a year the situation became unbearable. ‘The people suffered greatly from the army, and their houses had become crowded, because the warriors had taken up residence with them, and had robbed their provisions, and committed all kinds of forbidden things.’ Toghril Beg and the army then left for a campaign in northern Iraq. When they came back to Baghdad the following year (1057–8), ‘Toghril did not allow anybody to take up residence with the people.’27 In the reign of Malikshah (1072–92), one source says, the authority of the sultan was so great that no one dared occupy or enter the house of another man: we have to conclude that such orderly behaviour was the exception rather than the rule, and that in other times, when the sultan was not so strong, such behaviour was common enough. And of course, it is military men entering the houses of ‘civilians’. That the practice must have continued later is evident from the fact that the Seljuq sultan Mas‘ud (1134–52) abolished it again in 1138–9. At the same time, he alleviated the tax burden; both measures earned him the sympathies of the people.28

Billeting could trigger large-scale uprisings. When the Samanids conquered Sistan (in 911), they had to raise the taxes and have the army take up residence in private homes. One of the local leaders went to complain. He stated: ‘It is not customary in Sistan to increase taxes. Moreover, the army should be confined to its camp because the people have wives and daughters to protect. Finally, people of honour should not be required to quarter strangers in their homes and villas.’29 This was the prelude to a general uprising of the Sistanis against Samanid rule.

In stories told in hagiographic style, it is not the people themselves but supernatural forces that fight the oppressors. Thus, in a story relating things

29 Tarikh-i Sistan, p. 297.
from the early ninth century, the Khurasanian ruler Talha b. Tahir (822–8), on his return from a campaign in the region of Kabul, came to Balkh. He had his army take up residence in the homes of the people, and the owners of the houses were evacuated. The people appealed to an ascetic scholar who told Talha to stop this, and Talha promised to liberate the houses. But he did not keep his promise, and the scholar turned to his *ultima ratio*: fervent prayer. Talha died suddenly, within the day.30

Excepting Baghdad, we do not hear much about billeting in the period between the coming of the Seljuq Turks and the Mongol invasion. That there must have been more than isolated cases is nevertheless clear enough, even if it perhaps was no longer military contingents but rather messengers and other officials who were thus accommodated. For instance, billeting continued as part of the ‘extraordinary’ taxes known under the catch-all term of *‘awaridat*. Sometimes, billeting is mentioned separately. The sources for this are tax exemptions transmitted in samples for official documents, and the texts mention, among other duties, the housing of messengers from which the persons or institutions are now exempt. References to large bodies of military men lodged with local residents occur much less frequently, perhaps because the armies of the Seljuqs and the post-Seljuq states were based on nomadic manpower to a much higher degree, and the armies stayed outside the cities in their camps. The Seljuqs therefore conformed to the maxim – ‘the army should stay in its camp’ (see the Sistani ‘rebel’ quoted above) – more than earlier armies and could do so because their armies had a different social profile. Baghdad and the Iraqi lowlands may have been an exception: the region could not support Turkmen troops for lack of pasture, and therefore the devastation caused by Turkmen presence was extreme there. There seems to have been a tendency to minimise direct contact between the army and the civilian population, not only in Baghdad, but everywhere. This tendency, visible in the story about the building of Shadyakh, now possibly becomes more prevalent.

A Kirmani source speaks to this shift in a story dating from 1085–6. The local ruler, a Seljuq, Turanshah b. Qavurt (1085–97) was a great patron of architecture. On one occasion, he noticed a carpenter’s son who looked like a Turk and asked the father about him. ‘His mother claims that I sired him, the carpenter replied, but we had a Turkish soldier in the house at that time.’ And the source adds (in summary): Back then, the army still lived in the city, and

the suburb (rabad, here probably: military and government suburb) had not yet been built. When he heard the story of the carpenter, however, Turanshah gave orders to have a separate place built for the army (and the government officials in general).  

Things did not get better in the Mongol period. Billeting of soldiers and officials in private homes was the rule rather than the exception. The sometimes substantial retinues of ‘messengers’, up to 500 or 1,000 persons, were a particular nuisance. Rashid al-Din claims to have put an end to that, but in another decree from a somewhat later period, the prohibition is reiterated, so that the practice may have gone on. The levying of extraordinary taxes as well as billeting continued into the Timurid period. To give just one example: arriving in Tabriz in December 1405, the Timurid prince Aba Bakr decided to have his troops spend the winter in the homes of the townspeople, and ‘complete ruin befell the subjects’.

Large-Scale Devastation

Continued warfare, together with other reasons, could result in large-scale devastation of certain regions. One example of such destruction is the migration of large groups of Turkmen nomads into Khurasan and northwestern Iran, the Caucasus and Anatolia in the eleventh century. It took several generations before a new balance was achieved between the incoming nomads, new power holders, and the Iranians (settled agriculturalists, urbanites and transhumant stockbreeders). The conquest of Khurasan by Turkmen under the leadership of the Seljuq princes Toghril and Chaghri began in the 1030s and was completed after the Turkmen had defeated the Ghaznavid army in 1040. In its campaigns, the Ghaznavid army was hampered by severe shortages of food: the provisions of the entire province had been used up during the preceding years, and in some regions the fields had not been tilled.

Contemporary sources note widespread looting after the Seljuq victory in which local populations also took part. More importantly, the incoming Turkmen, even if their numbers were not particularly high, had their

31 Kirmani, Saljuqiyan wa-Ghzuzz dar Kirman, p. 429.
33 Samarqandi, Matla’, part 2, p. 43.
herds with them; ‘a migration of a mere 4,000 households would have been accompanied by 400,000 sheep, quite apart from the larger livestock such as camels of whom smaller – although still significant – numbers were required’. And thus, ‘a smaller migration would have a huge impact and would inevitably be drawn into conflict over the limited pasturage available in Khurāsān’. A detailed analysis of the Turkmen campaigns has led to the conclusion that their main objective was pasture and plunder; pasture had to be secured by destroying fortresses and also towns which could have served as strongholds from where to control access to pastures, and plunder was an easy method to pay the warriors who otherwise did not receive a salary.

Where the incoming Turkmens clashed with pastoralists and transhumant stockbreeders already in place, a fierce competition over pasture was the result. This concerned mostly the Kurds and Lurs in western Iran, some of whom were dislodged; some Kurds also ‘became Turks’ (meaning that they started nomadising in the Turkish fashion).

The destruction caused by the Turkmen migrations in the first half of the eleventh century is therefore more or less immediately linked to their nomadic lifestyle: they had to secure pastures for their flocks. Another point is the different form of warfare in which plunder was the essential form of rewarding the efforts of warriors. And sometimes tactics were employed which sought to destroy the food basis of the adversary, without heeding long-term consequences. This could sometimes result in wholesale destruction on a local level. Thus, in 1100–1, in the dynastic war between Barkyarq and his brothers Muhammad and Sanjar, the latter party destroyed the region around Damghan, including the felling of trees, so that famine spread and people were forced to eat carrion. This was no unique case, as an example for the early thirteenth century, the siege of Nishapur, can be mentioned. The Khwarazmian prince ‘Alishah tried to hold out against the Ghurid sultan, and in the process he had the environs of the city destroyed, again including the felling of trees. This continued into the Timurid period: Shahrukh is notorious for having destroyed the complex irrigation system of Sistan in 1408 (after the city and the province had been devastated by Timur in 1383).

35 Peacock, Early Seljūq History, p. 88.
Turkmens kept migrating into Iran during the twelfth century. One of the most spectacular and also most destructive episodes in these migrations was the Ghuzz ‘rebellion’ against Sanjar in the 1150s. After they had clashed with the Seljuq provincial ruler at Balkh and killed him and his son, the sultan went to war against them. In the ensuing battle, the Ghuzz took Sanjar captive (1153) and dragged him around Khurasan where they left a swath of destruction; Marw alone was pillaged three times. The Ghuzz had obtained pasture in the region of Balkh and farther south – the oases and towns of Khurasan which they ravaged during these years were not really valuable as pasture. But again, the need to secure their pasture against a governor whom they found oppressive, and also the opportunity to get plunder, can be discerned as factors behind their action.

Another example of large-scale destruction comes from the period immediately preceding the Mongol invasion, and it concerns Transoxiana and the region along the Syr Darya, both part of the empire of the Khwarazmshah Muhammad b. Tekesh (1200–20). The contemporary geographer Yaqut writes that the region had been flourishing, but that the Khwarazmshah destroyed it.\(^{38}\) The author adds that this was only a prelude to the enormous destruction and general massacre caused by the Mongols, but his remarks on the earlier scorched earth politics of the Khwarazmshah are still worth keeping in mind. In this case, it was the ruler himself who ordered one of his provinces to be destroyed for fear of its being overrun by invaders.

Local Power Holders

It was not only imperial armies who were responsible of large-scale destruction and day-to-day harassment. Local lords contributed in no small measure to the picture. Local power holders could be of two types: some of them had appointment deeds from a sultan or another overlord, some of them did not. The difference for the local population sometimes was not decisive. Some local lords were oppressive, irrespective of whether they represented the sultan or not.

The term for these local representatives of the sultan was shihna (military governor) or, in certain regions, muqta‘ (holder of an iqta‘, that is, for the purposes of the present chapter, an allotment of the taxes of a given region). In the following passage, I draw mainly from hagiographic sources. In these sources, both shihna and muqta‘ appear as the most hated persons. Thus, for

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\(^{38}\) Yaqut, Mu‘jam al-buldan, vols. 1, p. 179 (s.v. Isfijab) and 111, p. 309 (s.v. Shash).
example, in Daylami’s account of the life of Ibn Khaṣṣif (d. 981/2), a local governor is shown adjudicating a theft case and giving an obviously unjust sentence against the shaykh which, had it been implemented, would have meant that Ibn Khaṣṣif would have had his right hand cut off. In another story, the shihna is an executioner, ready to give a man a disproportionate flogging of 1,000 lashes.39

In hagiographic writings on shaykhs from Khurasan, the picture is very much the same: the local shihna violently takes money from people; he steals a sheep from a butcher; it is clear to everyone that whatever a shihna owns has been acquired by illegal means. A muqta’ is mentioned only once in the hagiographic literature. He also was a local representative of the sultan’s power. Very much like the men presented as shihna, he oppressed the people: in this case, we have a story about timber needed for some building which the muqta’ wanted to have and which his henchmen took from the mosque which the hero of the hagiography was preparing to have erected. All these people without doubt were representatives of sultanic power – and therefore it was possible, at least in principle, to seek redress against their misbehaviour. This was evidently not the case with local lords who were lords in their own right. Such men come to the fore in the sources in many cases when the imperial order collapses, but they must have been there all along.

Among the lords who ruled in their own right, some were seen as usurpers if not adventurers. One early example is a lord in Qumis (west of Khurasan), around the year 1000. He came from an old family and thus was not an upstart, but he was an oppressor all the same. He attacked caravans, in particular the Hajj caravans which had to pass through his domain. It is difficult to decide whether this man should be seen as a robber who has taken control of a castle, or a castle lord who has chosen robbery as a way of making a living and feeding his retainers. Another such man had a castle in the region of Balkh, and from that stronghold he attacked caravans and plundered villages. The sultan – Mas‘ud the Ghaznavid (1030–40) – acted according to his duties as sultan and eliminated this figure.40

On the other hand, there is the example of the Kurdish lord Hasanwayh (961–79). His rule was based on a number of fortresses in the southern Zagros mountains. His people are reported to have robbed caravans, stolen cattle


and seized crops in the surrounding villages. Hasanwayh himself plundered the regions around him, extorted protection money and imposed all kinds of dues, which he had invented. His nominal overlord, Rukn al-Dawla, the Buyid ruler (947–77), tolerated this conduct, apparently anxious not to lose Hasanwayh’s support. When told of the mischief Hasanwayh and his men had done, he used to say: ‘The Kurds also need to eat.’

It was the breakdown of sultanic regimes, however, that caused regional lords to fight for precedence and, in some cases, vie for succession. Such situations occurred regularly, not only towards the end of a dynasty, but also during disputed successions. The fifteenth century, the period of Timurid rule in Khurasan, when the province was remarkably stable and prosperous, offers some good examples for the periods between the established rules of two consecutive dynasts. Thus, when Shahrukh b. Timur had died in 1447, stability was not reached again until several years later, in 1450–1. During these years, nearly a dozen princes vied for the throne at Herat. Some years later, in 1457, a contemporary author described the situation after the death of Abu ’l-Qasim Babur: three tax administrations and three armies all took in the annual taxes, which led to utter destruction.

A graphic description of what might happen if sultanic order broke down altogether, as happened in the last years of Seljuqid rule in western Iran, can be found in Jurfadhaqani. This author describes how the continuous demands of various armies ruined the old families and the rich landowners, so that estates that had been worth 10,000 gold dinars or more were given away and no one dared take them. His home town, Jurbadaqan, was hit by two extra evils: it was situated between two capitals – the town is on the road linking Isfahan to Hamadan – and close to a number of fortresses. From each of these and from the regional capitals, taxes were levied. Local lordship, therefore, could be violent lordship, arbitrary and mindless, irrespective of whether the lords were representatives of sultanic power or not.

Conclusion

In all, it seems that violence by lords and armies (off the battlefield) can be linked tentatively to some typical settings. First, it was shared space that was often the theatre of violent clashes. The billeting of soldiers in cities, and later

43 Samarqandi, Matla’, p. 1,144.
also of official messengers in the countryside, in private homes was particularly onerous because it involved women and their behaviour and therefore male honour. In the Turkish period, violent clashes based on the spatial proximity of the military and the general populace seem to have been less frequent and less dramatic because the Seljuqs and their successors ran armies which were no longer based in towns as far as the Iranian plateau is concerned; the Iraqi lowlands and Baghdad stand out as some kind of exception. Such violence re-emerged, however, in the Mongol period due to the frequent sending of ‘messengers’ who were also accommodated in private homes.

Second, on a number of occasions, the taxpayers came into direct contact with the ultimate recipients of the tax payments, the military. That means that on such occasions payments for the army or any given group of warriors had to be collected by these warriors themselves. This could take the form of tax cheques (barat); the ‘cashing’ of such cheques often involved violence and could be an altogether chaotic process. The provisioning of the army on the march is another occasion; armies lived off the land regularly and did not even try to avoid that. Extra levies meant for the army on the march, and in particular the na’il-baha, but also other forms of ‘awaridat, appear in the Seljuq period; they became very common indeed in the Mongol and post-Mongol periods. Both the tax cheque and the extra levy for the provisioning of the army therefore have two sides: they can be seen as a regular instrument of state finance, and they can appear as a form of looting and marauding. Even if they work without open violence, they cannot function without threat; immediate coercion is behind both these forms.

Third, beginning in the second quarter of the eleventh century, Turkmens and later other Turkish nomads migrated into Iran and other parts of the Middle East. Numbers are hard to come by and are open to discussion, but it is clear that this was a major migration. Conflicts arose from their need for pasture and their way of paying the army through shares in plunder. Some of the most violent clashes occurred where the Turkmens competed with other pastoralists and transhumant stockbreeders over pasture. Central Asian nomads continued to migrate into Iran during the Mongol period. The particular forms of violence linked to nomad migrations into Iran are one of the most salient features in the history of Iran in the period under study.

Fourth, local lords could turn into violent lords particularly in situations when sultanic power had broken down. This happened repeatedly during the period under study. Successions tended to be contested, and thus sultanic power could vanish even if the dynasty itself was well established. Dynastic
change was also not infrequent; most dynasties did not outlive a century. However, there are also instances of local lords acting violently in regions and times where sultanic power was strong; in such cases, the sultan apparently had an interest in keeping them as allies (or vassals).

Beyond these settings, a constant level of violence was implied in processes of recruitment and of making people work for the army: forced service in the army and forced labour were features of everyday life.

Bibliographical Essay

Violence by armies or soldiers off the battlefield has not been a field of research in its own right for the region and periods under study so far, and there is no source genre dealing directly with violence. This violence has, however, been treated in general histories such as the Cambridge History of Iran (in particular, vols. IV–VI) and also in many histories treating individual dynasties; see Peacock’s studies of the Seljuq empire quoted in Deborah G. Tor, Violent Order: Religious Warfare, Chivalry, and the ‘Ayyār Phenomenon in the Medieval Islamic World (Würzburg: Ergon, 2007). Beatrice Manz, The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Manz, Power, Politics and Religion in Timurid Iran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), for the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries. For the Mongol period, see David Morgan, The Mongols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). The standard reference for the Mongols in the Muslim world is Peter Jackson, The Mongols and the Islamic World: From Conquest to Conversion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). A case study of siege warfare and massive destruction during Timur’s campaigns is Jean Aubin, ‘Comment Tamerlan prenait les villes’, Studia Islamica 19 (1963), 83–122.

Another approach to the problem has been through regional history. Several studies of individual regions of Iran are relevant, among them David Durand-Guédy, Iranian Elites and Turkish Rulers: A History of Isfahan in the Saljuq Period (London: Routledge, 2010), and Denise Aigle, Le Pārās sous la domination mongole (Paris: Association pour l’Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 2005). Local lordship, including violent lordship, is treated in Jürgen Paul, Lokale und imperiale Herrschaft im Iran des 12. Jahrhunderts: Herrschaftspraxis und Konzepte (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2016).

Sources used in this chapter, in Arabic and Persian, come from diverse genres: narrative sources, that is, universal chronicles, regional and dynastic histories and individual biographies (in both Arabic and Persian) as well as hagiography (in Persian). Hagiography is particularly rewarding because it offers insight into the ways ‘ordinary’ people felt about lords and armies. I have discussed the methodology of using hagiography in ‘Hagiographische Texte als historische Quelle’, Sacuum 41.1 (1990), 17–43 and in ‘Histoires de Turcs dans l’hagiographie persane pré-mongole’, in Véronique Schiltz (ed.), De Samarcande à Istanbul: étapes orientales. Hommages à Pierre Chuvin II (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2015), pp. 193–204. Drafts and copies of official letters (most of them in Persian) are important because they give the official point of view: telling people not to do something may mean that this was current practice. Geography (in Arabic) has given some elements. Some types of sources are absent because they do not exist or at least are no
longer extant: documents from legal practice, court records and so forth. Fiction and poetry have not been used but could possibly yield interesting results; the laments about large-scale destruction wrought by the Ghuzz in Khurasan were the subject of an elegy by Anwari, a twelfth-century panegyrist; the poem was translated into English by William Kirkpatrick as early as 1785 and has since then been known as 'The Tears of Khorassan' (for references, see J. T. P. de Bruijn, 'Anwari', in Encyclopaedia Iranica, vol. 11 (1986), pp. 141–3).
Europe, after the collapse of Roman government in the West in the fifth century, became a mosaic of comparatively small kingdoms. The invaders came to enjoy the benefits of the Roman world: Theodoric tried to strengthen Roman government in his Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy, even employing the distinguished Roman, Boethius (480–524). But the attempted Byzantine reconquest of Italy produced the long Gothic Wars (535–54) followed by the Lombard invasion. Civic life in Italy was blighted. In Britain the Anglo-Saxon conquest dismantled Roman government, while the Franks were divided by succession disputes and constantly squabbling with their neighbours.

In consequence the elaborate machinery of the tax-collecting and revenue-distributing state that had sustained Roman armies collapsed: it was simpler to establish the newcomers on the land from which they derived their income. All their freemen had some obligation to serve their ruler, but as they settled the most prominent took the military role, supported by their armed retinues of dedicated soldiers. They also incorporated the soldiers of Roman military settlements into their armies. The military obligation of free men remained in force, but as immigrants and natives mingled it may have become residual. It is therefore very difficult to gain any clear picture of early medieval armies.

The barbarians copied Roman arms and armour but without Roman arms factories they lacked uniformity. King Clovis of the Franks (481–511) apparently used leather armour in battle. Tactical reality is obscure. A Byzantine observer remarked that they had few horsemen, but perhaps this reflected comparison with Byzantium, whose army had a large cavalry component. It is certain that many of the elite rode to war and perhaps fought on horseback. The Lombards of north Italy were famous horsemen. The Frankish elite had horses, but at the Battle of Autun in 641/2 Berthar observed his friend Manaulf in the opposing ranks and took him under his shield for shelter
only to be stabbed by him); this clearly suggests fighting on foot, though perhaps the elite rode to battle. The stirrup, which gives the rider stability, only seems to have become widespread in the ninth century. Nevertheless, these barbarian peoples had the capacity to raise large armies. In 539, a Burgundian army intervened in the war between the Goths and the Byzantines in Italy, and shortly after a Frankish force followed suit with much success. In 507, Clovis defeated the Visigoths at the Battle of Vouillé and occupied much of Aquitaine. But what we know of the battle is very limited:

King Clovis met Alaric II, King of the Goths, on the battlefield of Vouillé … Some of the soldiers engaged hurled their javelins from a distance, others fought hand to hand. The Goths fled, as they were prone to do, and Clovis was the victor, for God was on his side … Clovis killed Alaric, but as the Goths fled, two of them suddenly rushed up in a scrum, one on this side and one on that, and struck at the Frankish King with their spears. It was his leather corselet which saved him and the sheer speed of his horse, but he was very near to death.¹

This hints at a clash between cavalry elements. The Visigoths took refuge in their Spanish kingdom, and the Franks under their Merovingian kings became the dominant people in Gaul and the single biggest group within the old empire. Italy was fragmented and impoverished by the long wars.

The Merovingians were often divided by family conflicts, but out of these conflicts the Arnulfing clan emerged as a powerful factor in Frankish politics. After 718 their leading figure, Charles Martel, became dominant in the affairs of the Franks, acting as Mayor of the Palace down to his death in 741. His success opened the way for his son, Pepin, to depose the last Merovingian and be crowned king in 751; he in turn was followed by Charlemagne, one of the greatest figures in European history. Charles Martel is seen as having a special position in European military history. In 732 he defeated a Spanish Muslim army at the Battle of Poitiers. Some, therefore, regarded Charles as the saviour of Christendom while others have pointed out that this was a mere raid. It is a fine distinction because Charles’s position amongst the Franks was contested, and, had he lost, the Muslims would have been in a very strong position to dominate Gaul. Until recently it was widely supposed that the Muslims were horsemen and that Charles invented heavy cavalry, which depended on the mass charge for ‘shock’ effect, to counter them. These new

soldiers – the knights – were financed by grants of land, later called fiefs. This explained the military supremacy of his immediate descendants, and offered an explanation of the origins of ‘feudalism’ regarded as the dominant form of political organisation in European history.² In fact we know very little about the battle. The best account suggests that Franks and Arabs alike were on foot: ‘The northern peoples remained as immobile as a wall, holding together like a glacier in the cold regions. In the blink of an eye, they annihilated the Arabs with the sword.’³

The important triumphs of Charles Martel and Pepin were followed by the immense successes of Charlemagne (768–814). Under him the Franks conquered all of western Germany and Saxony in a series of campaigns lasting over twenty years, subjugated Bavaria, destroyed the Avars of what is now Hungary, seized the Lombard Kingdom of North Italy, advancing their rule down to the Byzantine south, and created a March in northern Spain around Barcelona. On Christmas Day 800 Charlemagne became Emperor of the West. These military successes demand explanation.

Charlemagne prohibited the export of armour and weapons to preserve the technological superiority of his armies. This may have limited his enemy’s access to metal, but probably only to a limited degree. There is no doubt that cavalry were becoming more important. In 782 a Frankish cavalry force was defeated in the Battle of the Süntel mountain, while in 784/5 Charlemagne’s son defeated the Westphalians in an equestri proelio. Throughout the reign there were occasions when Charlemagne sent scara against the enemy. The term literally only means ‘unit’ but such forces seem to have been fast-moving mounted elite troops. However, there is no indication that they were ‘shock’ cavalry and indeed illustrations of the ninth century reveal armoured men on horseback, some without stirrups and all without the heavy saddle of the later knight. In any case it seems unlikely that Charlemagne could have conquered all that he did relying solely or mainly on such men.

Battles were rare, but sieges were frequent and these are notoriously labour-intensive. Moreover Charlemagne sometimes raised more than one army at a time, notably in 773, 775, 778, 787 and 791, sometimes using allies like the Lombards. This raises the question of the size of Charlemagne’s forces. It

² For a survey of the complex historiography of this subject see J. France, ‘Recent Writing on Medieval Warfare: From the Fall of Rome to c.1300’, Journal of Military History 65 (2001), 441–73.
is possible that his empire could have mobilised as many as 35,000 heavily equipped soldiers as part of a total of 100,000. These are only estimates of potential numbers, but the deployment of apparently overwhelming strength on occasion suggests that Charlemagne raised his armies from the mass of freemen rather than just the elite. *Capitularies*, though only from after 800, assert the king’s right to call all men to the host, though Charlemagne preferred the less well off to club together to provide one properly equipped soldier.

Obviously the king could insist on such service, but how could it have been implemented? Charlemagne had limited administrative organs, at most no more than 2,000 administrators. This means he depended on the goodwill of his great men, and as this was a fluctuating quality it explains why there were times when Charlemagne was desperately short of troops. Charlemagne was a skilled politician, able to manipulate the great. In 806, he wrote to Abbot Fulrad of Saint-Quentin, ordering him to prepare his troops to join the army:

You are to come with your men to the aforesaid place equipped in such a way that you can go from there with the army to whatever place we shall command – that is with arms, implements and other military material, provisions and clothing. Each horseman is to carry shield and spear, long-sword and short-sword, bow, quivers and arrows, and your carts are to contain implements of various kinds – axes and stone-cutting tools, augers, adzes, trenching tools, iron spades and the rest of the implements which an army needs. And provisions in the carts for three months following the assembly, weapons and clothing for half a year. And this we command in absolute terms, that you see to it that whichever part of our realm the direction of your march may cause you to pass through you proceed to the aforesaid place in good order and without unruliness, that is you presume to take nothing other than grass, firewood and water.

This is the emperor at his most imperious, but he was not always in that kind of position. Charlemagne evidently paid careful attention to logistics. In 793, in preparation for the campaign against the Avars of what is now Hungary, he ordered the construction of a Rhine–Danube canal, though this proved impossible. But the letter above all shows his dependence upon great men and this explains why he could at some times enlist them, at other times not.

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Charlemagne had a composite army: he could count on the people of his own lands, but they were not a standing army. Like almost all other medieval rulers he could occasionally make great efforts, but could not sustain such forces on a regular basis. Even the right to call all freemen to arms would have been subject to the consent of his great men. Carolingian success was based on Charlemagne’s careful exertion of authority over them, combined with his tactical sense. The men of his immediate entourage must have had the organising ability to use resources well when they were available. But maintaining the empire was enormously expensive and the problems it engendered emphasise how weak imperial control at the local level was:

Poor men complain … that if a man refuses to give his land to a bishop, abbot or count or any of their servants, these seek opportunities whereby they can harm that poor man and make him go on every occasion to fight in the army until he is impoverished and hands over or sells his land, like it or not. They say that others, who have handed their land over, are allowed to stay at home without any trouble.6

Charlemagne’s immediate successors lacked his skill in manipulating their magnates, and quarrelled amongst themselves. The new kingdom of Germany emerged as a substantial unit held together because of the threat of attack from pagan eastern Europe, and was cemented by a series of able rulers, the Ottonians (919–1024). They usually dominated the great lords, and they seem to have kept the right to call up humbler people. However, in a land dominated by great duchies their local power was limited. Further west the Carolingians were threatened by the Capetian house, creating great uncertainty about legitimacy. At the same time the area was subjected to raiding by the Vikings and the Muslims who ruled Spain and the Mediterranean islands. In these circumstances defence became the task of local lords. In 859, at a time of great Viking threat, ordinary people attempted to defend themselves:

The Danes ravaged the places beyond the Scheldt. Some of the common people living between the Seine and the Loire formed a sworn association amongst themselves and fought bravely against the Danes on the Seine. But because their association had been made without due consideration, they were easily slain by our more powerful people.7

6 Capitulary of Aachen of 811 in King (ed.), Charlemagne, p. 264.
This was an assertion by the elite of their monopoly of the control of violence. As monarchy failed, local powers emerged so that by 1000 France was a mosaic of small states. The Capetian monarch held the Île de France, but had little authority over the rest. Military forces were, therefore, whatever such men raised. Since great lords had lands that were scattered and intermixed with those of others, they fortified the houses, which were centres of exploitation, and staffed them with knights, the military elite of the day, though most of the time they were also petty administrators and landowners. They and the men they served emerged from a long and bitterly competitive process of small-scale war. They were at their most effective as cavalry, for by now the stirrup and the high saddle, which together gave the mounted man a secure seat, were diffused throughout Europe. However, they were perfectly prepared to fight on foot. These people inherited a warrior ethic emphasising bravery and loyalty, and treated others with at best condescension and at worst brutality: the first act of Ralph of Cravent on becoming a knight was to rob a monk.

The rivalries between these mouvances caused grave disorder in the French countryside. The overarching judicial authority of the kings had fallen into the hands of the very people who most frequently disturbed the peace. The church, often the victim of this violence, attempted to persuade the elite to swear to maintain the peace, using its moral authority to substitute for the legal power of kings in the movement known as the ‘Peace of God’. Ultimately it had very limited and short-lived success, though it inspired German and French rulers to attempt peace legislation. In Germany, church and monarchy worked together to safeguard the social order. The biographer of Bruno of Cologne, brother of the emperor Otto I (936–73) and also duke of Lorraine, defended his role in war and politics:

If anyone who is ignorant of the divine dispensation objects to a bishop ruling the people and facing dangers of war and argues that he is responsible only for their souls, the answer is obvious: it is only by doing these things that the guardian and teacher of the Faithful brings to them the rare gift of peace and saves them from the darkness in which there is no light.8

The German monarchy long retained its right to call up ordinary citizens for war and it mounted great expeditions to quell revolts in its Italian lands. But the ideological conflict between Henry IV (1056–1106) and the papacy from

1073 to about 1122 undermined the king’s command of the militias. In Italy, which had long been annexed to the German crown, the emergence of cities during these wars broke royal power. By 1122, the king’s ability to raise armies was limited to his own lands and occasions when he could persuade at least some of the greater lords to assist him.

Europe towards 1100 was dominated by great lords, ‘princes’ – whose allegiance to kings was limited. Even the cities of Italy attempted to rule the land around them, the contado, in much the same way as the princes against whom they struggled. The armed men whom the great and lesser lords enlisted fought on foot or, for preference, horseback. They were socially very mixed, for though some were landed, and perhaps relatives of the lord they followed, others were paid men, though from families with the means to equip them with the expensive horse, armour and weapons which were the hallmark of such men. And they had the leisure to give themselves the athletic rather than merely muscular physiques vital in managing a horse and close-quarter fighting. But these knights were never the only men of war. Contemporaries conventionally divided armies into milites et pedites, knights and foot. From the late tenth century we hear of mercenary foot and by the late eleventh they were an important part of all major armies. The rise of the mercenary seems to reflect the decline in the power of monarchies to enlist their own humbler subjects, perhaps arising from the unwillingness of land-owning elites to allow the king to utilise the military potential of the peasants from whom they drew their incomes.

The social origins of soldiers had a major impact on war. An important leader could recruit the core of an army from his own lands and those of the men closely associated with him, and to these he could attach mercenaries. Beyond that he had to rely on others whose allegiance was more conditional. A large army was a composite of retinues, but each of these was made up of men only used to working with people from their own locality. Thus a retinue was a collection of small groups who were strangers to one another and a large army was a collection of retinues. Other foot were poorly armed, drawn from the more adventurous peasants. So armies were uneasy composites. William of Normandy raised an army of 7,000 for the conquest of England. Some of these were his own, many provided by his important followers, and yet others were mercenaries or people from lands outside the duchy like Brittany or Flanders tempted by the prospects of gain. This army was stuck at Dives for a month and this gave it time to manoeuvre together. The cohesion gained by this may well have contributed to its victory. More typically, armies came together for short periods of time and
therefore lacked cohesion. Because of this, even major sieges were a challenge and campaigns were short and consisted largely of ravaging.

In late 1184, the count of Flanders, the archbishop of Cologne and Duke Godfrey of Brabant invaded Hainaut. Baldwin count of Hainaut scorched the countryside and retreated to his castles. After about six weeks the allies, now starving, withdrew and in revenge Baldwin unleashed his troops upon their lands. In this campaign the allies mustered about 3,200 knights and a substantial number of mounted sergeants while Count Baldwin hired 300 mercenary knights and 3,000 mercenary sergeants, and about 300 foreign knights came to him unpaid, in the hope of loot. In addition he had native forces and those of his chief vassals. These were substantial armies, and though the numbers of foot are harder to estimate it is unlikely that there were less than three to every mounted man. Henry II of England (1154–89) usually campaigned with about 5,000 men. In 1214, Philip of France defeated the allied Germans, Flemings and English at Bouvines, where the armies on both sides totalled about 14,000. Battles were relatively rare and when they did occur infantry acquitted themselves well. At Hastings a wholly infantry army held the Normans at bay all day. Henry I (1100–35) won victories at Tinchebrai (1106) and Brémule (1119) with forces on foot against knightly charges, while in 1124 his men crushed a cavalry charge, also on foot, at Bourgthéroulde. At Bouvines the decisive event of the battle was a mixed cavalry and infantry charge by the allies, which the French repulsed.

Battles are spectacular, but warfare was governed by the existence of castles and fortified cities. Much warfare was petty, the squabbles of aristocratic neighbours. For relatively limited ends few were prepared to take the all or nothing risk of battle, particularly if a defeated enemy could fall back on his castles for refuge. And a strong castle was difficult to take. Motte and bailey castles, constructions of earthworks and timber, could be formidable, and besieging anything stronger demanded organisation and quite long-term determination. As armies turned to ravaging as the way of damaging the enemy, skirmishes were common. William of Poitiers was praising Duke William of Normandy when he wrote: ‘He sowed terror in the land by his frequent and lengthy invasions; he devastated vineyards, fields and estates; he seized neighbouring strongpoints and where advisable put garrisons in them; in short he incessantly inflicted innumerable calamities upon the land.’

By such methods the Normans conquered south Italy, and they were not shy about the fact. Roger Count of Sicily told his chronicler, Malaterra, to report his early life as a brigand. A reputation of that kind is always useful! But in major confrontations strong castles were formidable obstacles and as
a result siege machinery developed. Ladders were an obvious but dangerous method. But they could be covered by archers in strong wooden structures rolled close to the walls – sows is one name for them. Towers could be built to enable the attackers to sweep the walls, and some were moved up to the walls on wheels. Battering rams, so popular in the ancient world, seem to have largely fallen out of favour, perhaps because their crews were so vulnerable, but mining was always popular. Lever-action artillery was adopted, though for long it was an anti-personnel weapon incapable of smashing walls. During the twelfth century these perriers (stone throwers) became more sophisticated and they were capable of knocking over the merlons covering the walkways on castle walls. By about 1200 the trebuchet had arrived, a counterweight lever-action weapon which could fire heavy balls and damage even the strongest towers. Even so, the advantages of the defender were so great that major armies tried everything. In one of the greatest engagements of the age, Philip Augustus of France successfully besieged Château Gaillard from September 1203 to March 1204, using all these methods. Of course any fortress ultimately relied on a relieving army and Philip was fortunate that King John’s attempt miscarried badly.

The knights were the best-trained, best-equipped and most adaptable soldiers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. They were socially a very mixed group, ranging from great lords like William of Normandy down to relatively humble men. Many of them were not landowners, but paid table-knights. The prejudicial term mercenary was rarely applied to such people, probably because to equip themselves for war they must have come from families above the level of peasants and their services were valued. Such paid men first appear in the sources in the tenth century, and by the eleventh they were commonplace. The Anglo-Norman chroniclers complained that the weak rule in Normandy of Robert Curthose in the 1090s attracted footloose knights. These swords for hire were normal in medieval armies of the twelfth century. They lived with and shared in the lifestyle of the great men they served, but the distinction between these professionals of war and landed men had grown by 1200. By then, certainly in England and France, knights had become assimilated into the aristocracy and were quite distinct from poorer men. Aristocrats were not primarily soldiers, but they cultivated a military patina for this guaranteed their social and political ascendancy. Increasingly they drew their soldiers from the professionals of war. At Bouvines in 1214 disciplined mercenary infantry fought to the death for Renaud of Boulogne. Leaders like Mercadier under Richard and John of

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England and Cadoc for Philip Augustus did well. War in Europe, except at the level of command, was becoming professionalised.

Contemporaries blamed the ravages of war on mercenaries, although they were usually acting on the orders of aristocrats and kings – whom it would be dangerous to criticise. The Third Lateran Council in 1179 condemned mercenaries and heretics in a single decree. The church laboured hard to moderate the behaviour of soldiers. The Peace of God had failed, but was transmuted into the Truce of God, which attempted to outlaw fighting on holy days. Its success was limited but it was establishing standards of behaviour. And convergent forces humanised warfare. By about 1000, slavery, although important on its peripheries, was dying in western Europe because lords preferred serfs tied to the land. Land ownership was vital to western aristocrats because their rulers lacked tax revenues to fund generous patronage. Given the scale of warfare between lords and the limited objectives, wiping out serfs would have impoverished the land. Well-to-do captives were not killed but ransomed, because, given the frequency of war, there was a sense that it might be ‘my turn’ next. So although ravaging was cruel and destructive, it rarely reached the heights of wholesale massacre, and at least amongst the elite the notion of honourable surrender was grafted on to the warrior ethic. In fact Christianity was deeply embedded in the western elite, and with it therefore a concern with the ethics of warfare.

The ethical basis of the aristocratic claim to power was that they were the defenders of society who bore arms to maintain the social order – an order, of course, from which they profited. Clergy defined a threefold society, those who prayed, those who fought and those who laboured, and claimed that the built-in reciprocity was part of the divine economy. But killing was inevitable in war, and yet the church taught that killing was murder, a sin that attracted a heavy penance. Beyond the frontiers of Latin Western Christendom were pagans and infidels, and the idea took root that killing them was acceptable, though it was not to kill fellow Christians. Men looked back to the example of Charlemagne, who had crushed the pagans. There was a strong feeling that killing outsiders was acceptable – in Spain, for example, the Muslims were a real menace. And yet there was doubt and a lack of authoritative statements. And the doctrine and mechanisms of penance were still being debated amongst theologians. This uncertainty seems to have worried people. Even as tough a soldier as Fulk the Black of Anjou went three times to Jerusalem, and founded a great abbey for the good of his soul. It is in this religious concern for the good of their souls that we find the root of support for the crusades.
In 1095 Pope Urban II (1088–99) called for an expedition to aid the Christians of the East and to liberate Jerusalem from Islamic rule: ‘Whoever for devotion alone, not to gain honour or money, goes to Jerusalem to liberate the Church of God can substitute this journey for all penance.’ This created a new warfare, ideological in motivation and unprecedented in scale. Hitherto conquest and expansion had been essentially local and small scale. Lords nibbled at their neighbours and inched forward: the Normans in Wales, the Germans in central Europe and the Spanish Christians in Spain. The conquest of England in 1066 was accounted remarkable. But no one bordered Jerusalem or thought to seek land there before Urban launched the First Crusade. The response dwarfed anything that had gone before. About 100,000 people left their homes in Europe, and about 60,000 gathered in May 1097 before Nicaea. No doubt they had very mixed motives. Urban II, after all, had prohibited neither fighting for money nor fighting for reputation; he offered spiritual reward to those who went for spiritual reasons. The supposed riches of the East were a powerful lure, especially for young warriors. But without Urban’s lead there would have been no crusade. This was a powerful tribute to the grip of religion upon Europeans.

Astonishingly, the First Crusade fought its way across Anatolia and Syria, liberated Jerusalem and established the crusader states of Edessa, Antioch, Jerusalem and Tripoli. It was greatly assisted by the succession struggles in the Turkish Seljuq empire of Baghdad, and the tacit support of their rival, the Shi’ite caliphate of the Egyptian Fatimids. And certainly the crusaders enjoyed good fortune. When they were at their least coherent, sheer weight of numbers enabled them to defeat the Turks of Anatolia. Thereafter they were heavily outnumbered, but adjusted to a radically different style of warfare. The Turks were a steppe people mounted on swift, light animals, whose fighting depended on manoeuvre sustained by strings of horses. They surrounded and harassed their enemies with their composite bows to the point where formations broke up and could be destroyed in close-quarter fighting. The crusaders learned to stay rigidly in their ranks, and to throw their infantry forward to protect their horses from the arrows of the Turks. These were contrasting styles of war and the rapid crusader adjustment speaks well for their leaders. But the whole agonising business of reaching Jerusalem highlights their fanatical determination in battle and siege. The settler states were never strong enough to seize Aleppo or Damascus, or

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Cairo, but equally they fought off all early attempts to destroy them. But they were never able to live in peace with their Islamic neighbours, amongst whom the spirit of jihad was rapidly rekindled by their very presence. This was ideological war, as William of Tyre, himself a citizen of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, remarked:

> War is waged differently and less vigorously between men who hold the same law and faith. For even if no other cause for hatred exists, the fact that the combatants do not share the same articles of faith is sufficient reason for constant quarrelling and enmity.\(^\text{10}\)

The newcomers modified their fighting methods to suit their new situation. Like their enemies, they had to rely on cavalry, but although they made use of Turcopoles as light cavalry, they were not numerous enough to switch to light cavalry and did not control a sufficiently large friendly native population to develop in that direction. Instead they relied on a compact though relatively small mass of heavily armoured knights. In battle the key tactic was the mass charge, unknown in Europe but made possible because continuous warfare meant that lords and knights were used to working together. But heavily laden horses were quickly blown, so that the timing and direction, to hit the critical point of the enemy, was crucial. To make this possible they developed the fighting march. In the presence of the enemy, always more numerous than they were, the knights formed into tight squadrons surrounded at a distance by footmen and archers to fend off the horse-archers. As they moved into the enemy mass the commander could then decide the moment to launch a charge. But the greatest innovation was the military monastic orders of the Temple and the Hospital, each of which could field 300 highly disciplined knight-brothers supported by Turcopoles and foot. Effectively these were standing armies, but they were small, and divided, and often aloof from the army of the nobles.

At a time when the close-quarter battle was crucial, these heavily armoured men were very effective, and while horse-archers were good soldiers the Muslims needed to develop a more numerous corps of ghulâms, heavy cavalry. By uniting Syria and Egypt and extending his authority into Iraq Saladin was able to create such a body of warriors. He posed as the champion of Islam but to strike down the settlers he needed to seize their cities. This was impossible as long as their field army was intact. At Hattin in

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1187 he lured the army of Jerusalem into a waterless area and destroyed it with his huge army. Subsequently the cities and castles, stripped of their garrisons, surrendered. However, Hattin was an inconclusive victory. Saladin’s army was drawn from the lands of many magnates and it tended to melt away, so that he was unable to seize all the cities, and the Third Crusade (1187–92) was able to re-establish a substantial part of the old Kingdom of Jerusalem.

The Third Crusade was the last traditional ‘dash for Jerusalem’ crusade. Its major leader, Richard of England, recognised that Egypt was the basis of Saladin’s power and urged an attack upon it, but others were focused on Jerusalem. However, the failure to reconquer Jerusalem and the divisions amongst Saladin’s descendants, the Ayyubids, which invariably divided Syria from Egypt, made the idea of an assault on Egypt attractive, especially as it capitalised on western naval superiority in the eastern Mediterranean established by the First Crusade. The Fourth Crusade was intended to attack Egypt but was diverted to Constantinople; the Fifth Crusade (1213–21) threatened Cairo but fell victim to Nile hydrology. Emperor Frederick II (1214–50) played off the rulers of Syria and Egypt to gain Jerusalem by a ten-year truce in 1229, and the trick was repeated by the Barons’ Crusade, extending Christian control of Jerusalem to 1244. St Louis of France (1226–70) attacked Egypt in 1248–54, but he was defeated, like the Fifth Crusade, in the Nile delta. An important factor in his defeat was the Mamluks, the military slaves of the Ayyubids. These Turks recruited from the steppe were natural warriors, but by the 1240s were heavily equipped and carefully trained to form a standing army. In the wake of St Louis’s crusade they overthrew the Ayyubids and established a military republic, choosing a sultan from their own leaders. They exploited Egypt to finance a standing force of 20,000 and imposed a ruthless Sunni intolerance on their people. This militarised state reconquered Syria from the Mongol invasion in 1260, kept Mongol Persia at bay for the rest of the thirteenth century and destroyed the Latin settlements, culminating in the destruction of Acre in 1291.

The thirteenth century established clearly the world supremacy of the steppe people. The Turks drove the western crusaders out of the Middle East. In 1241 the Mongols defeated the armies of Europe first at Leignitz and then at Mohi. In a world where armies could rarely train and commanders depended on the native skills of the people who gathered to fight, those of the steppe people, brilliant horsemanship allied to discipline and the ability to manœuvre and strike at a distance with the composite bow, made them supreme warriors. And they were adaptable, varying tactics according to those of the
enemy and using skills like siege-craft among conquered peoples. They conquered China, failing only in India and the Middle East, where they encountered Turks who were really their own kind. And these Turks in Egypt developed standing forces far ahead of their European counterparts.

No European monarch had the machinery and the resources sufficient to maintain a permanent army comparable to that of the Mamluks. But warfare was becoming more professional. The driving force was the frequency of conflict, especially in Italy where conflict between empire and papacy exacerbated fighting between the cities, and ultimately precipitated the long and bitter struggle for control of Sicily between the Angevins of Naples and the house of Aragon in which Byzantium and the papacy were deeply enmeshed. At first armies continued to be transient bodies, but rather notably the cavalry element was becoming more disciplined and effective in such fierce fighting as that at Benevento in 1266 and Tagliacozzo in 1268. Paid men had to be more obedient and they were becoming more numerous and important. But steady foot had always been a menace to cavalry and in 1302 the militia of Bruges, Ghent and Ypres crushed the flower of French chivalry at Courtrai. The Flemish foot, with their backs to a river, formed a line bristling with long pikes. The marshy ground in front of them hindered the French knights who could not create enough momentum to break the enemy line so a scrum ensued. Men with clubs then sallied out of the Flemish line picking off the knights, and when they tried to regroup they were pushed into the streams and wetlands and massacred. In many ways this was a very traditional victory in that the infantry were fighting behind obstacles. In August 1304, the French defeated the Flemings when they tried to manoeuvre in the open at Mons-en-Pévèle.

In Italy the continuous fighting of the second half of the thirteenth century forced the cities to pass laws ensuring that their citizens served as horse or foot according to their means, but by about 1300 the burden on such militia forces was becoming intolerable. All the parties to these conflicts employed mercenaries so continuously that they coalesced into companies under famous captains. German troops became regular employees, while an Englishman, Sir John Hawkwood, was among the famous leaders. These semi-regular bands were highly effective. When the Italian wars paused in 1302, the Grand Catalan Company of 1,500 cavalry and 4,000 foot sought employment with the Byzantine empire and was highly effective against the Turks. When the Byzantines turned against it the company defeated them at the Battle of Apros in 1305 and devastated much of Greece. They then took service with the Frankish duke of Athens, and when he could not pay them,
crushed his army at Halmyros in 1311, and took control of Athens until 1388. The Companies were characterised by close cooperation between cavalry and foot. The combatants were often raised as ‘lances’, a small group of varying size focused on heavily equipped men-at-arms supported by two or three servants, archers and footmen.

Elsewhere in Europe continuous warfare was teaching the same lesson. The Welsh and Scottish campaigns of Edward I (1272–1307) witnessed the raising of huge infantry forces vital in difficult countrysides. After the English disaster at Bannockburn in 1214, northern England was harassed continually by Scottish raids, punctuated by major expeditions. It was by reflecting on a series of battles fought in the north of England, Boroughbridge in 1322, Duplin Moor in 1332 and Halidon Hill in 1333, that Edward III worked out a new tactical system. He strengthened the strategic offensive and the tactical defensive, forcing his enemy to battle by occupying or threatening vital targets. He deployed his men-at-arms on foot to receive the enemy, but on their wings massed bowmen eroded the enemy attack. The bow is one of mankind’s oldest weapons and it is hard to imagine that men had not long understood that cutting a stave from that part of the tree where the sapwood and outer wood meet produces a superb weapon. But the longbow was very specialised, being too long and too stiff for hunting. The conditions of frequent war revealed it as a real mankiller, and at the same time provided an incentive for men to train to use it. For such a bow, with a draw of over 150 pounds, could only be successfully used by somebody long trained to it:

[My yeoman father] taught me how to draw, how to lay my body in my bow … not to draw with strength of arms as divers other nations do … I had my bows bought me according to my age and strength, as I increased in them, so my bows were made bigger and bigger. For men shall never shoot well unless they be brought up to it. 11

And Edward made contracts with captains who used the efficient English administrative system to pick and recruit men to serve in their companies. This close association of men-at-arms, bowmen and foot produced an effective simulacrum of a standing army. Moreover, once the ‘Hundred Years War’ began in France these men could be turned loose to pillage the countryside. This new system triumphed over the French at Crécy in 1346 and Poitiers in 1356. By mounting the archers, the English companies gained great speed and range for their devastating chevauchées across the French

countryside. Once the French ceased to seek battle, their numbers, the sheer volume of fortified places and the wealth of their realm told. Essentially the English won enough victories to encourage the continuation of the war, but never achieved a decisive breakthrough. Even Agincourt in 1415, the supreme victory of the Edwardian system, was not in the end decisive. In medieval circumstances conquest demanded a degree of consent that the English crown never commanded.

But the sheer length and intensity of these wars promoted not merely professionalisation but the raising of standing forces. Monarchs took to retaining personal guards. The English crown kept permanent garrisons totalling several thousand men, notably at Calais. After the mid fifteenth century the English threat to France receded, but the ambitions of the dukes of Burgundy threatened the integrity of France. The result was the creation by the French monarchy of the Compagnies d’Ordonnance, a standing force of all arms, though with cavalry as an elite, which in the last quarter of the fifteenth century numbered 20,000. In Spain the long wars against Islam left the monarchy with a substantial standing force. Such units now replaced the king’s personal retinue as the core of major armies. Kings did not yet have a monopoly of war, but they were achieving a major dominance which pointed in that direction. Such bodies were enormously expensive and as its efforts in France failed the English monarchy cut back on troops. As a result, in the second half of the fifteenth century aristocratic faction could muster sufficient forces to precipitate civil war.

The novelty of the warfare in the Hundred Years War commands attention, but though it had much in common with fighting elsewhere, notably crude devastation of the civilian population, it was not typical. In the Baltic, the Teutonic Order pushed the frontier of Catholic Christendom forward against the pagans. This was ideological war reinforced by the determination of the papacy to hold the orthodoxy of Russia at bay and the greed of the Hanseatic merchants to monopolise the northern trade. The great Cogs brought in supplies to Livonia and shipped in crusaders from the German heartlands to fight a war of sieges and devastation so brutal that outsiders were shocked by the slaughter. Here technological advantages were important. The Germans had plenty of iron weapons, their shipping dominated the rivers, and their siege weapons and crossbows at least at first were a great advantage. In Poland, the Teutonic Order established itself in an effort to conquer Lithuania where a well-organised pagan enemy held out. It was a bitter, gruesome, grinding process of killing and devastation, given an air of glamour by the Reisen, the annual expeditions joined by wealthy lords,
knights and even kings from all over Europe which earned for their participants the spiritual benefits of crusading. In Poland, with its eastern borders open to the steppe, light cavalry predominated. All over Europe aristocrats attached enormous importance to control over armed force. In Hungary, the high aristocracy was inspired by suicidal self-interest inimical to the new professionalism. This was peculiarly unfortunate because they were soon confronted with the greatest military power in the Mediterranean world.

The Ottomans had begun as one of the many minor principalities or *Beyliks* into which Anatolia was divided. Pressed up hard against the Byzantine frontier, the Ottomans attracted steppe Turks to war against Christians, and conciliated conquered peoples by toleration and light taxation. The neighbouring Beyliks were not strong, while Byzantium in the early fourteenth century feared attacks from the West and later was divided by factional conflicts. The Mamluks of Egypt were fighting Persia. Neither Christian Cyprus nor Hospitaller Rhodes could do much, while Frankish Greece was enfeebled and Venice and Genoa fought one another. The Aegean was the centre of a fragmented world, but success enabled the Ottomans to expand their armies from the steppe. These were mainly light horse-archers of a kind long familiar. They lacked infantry or experience of siege techniques. Bursa and Nicaea fell to the Ottomans only because they were isolated, without hope of relief. The Turks established themselves in Europe in 1345, seizing Adrianople in 1362. A short expedition by Amadeo VI of Savoy in 1363 with a force of some 3,000 defeated Sultan Murad I (1362–89), but this was not sustained and Philippopolis fell to the Ottomans in that year. At Kosovo in 1389 a Serb army was crushed and soon after Bulgaria capitulated. The Ottomans distrusted their tribal leaders, so, as their lands grew, they established provinces, *sancaks*, which were run by bureaucrats and the *sipahis*, heavy cavalrymen, who formed an elite in the army. But even more radical was recruitment of young Christians as slave-soldiers into the infantry core of the *yeni ceri* (janissaries). Thus the army gradually became a standing force, and developed infantry necessary for fighting in the seamed and fortified countryside of Europe.

The Hungarians were at first content to see their Balkan rivals destroyed, but finding themselves in the frontline they became alarmed. In 1396, with Sultan Bayezid besieging Constantinople itself, Sigismund king of Hungary advanced in conjunction with a crusader force. They besieged Nicopolis, drawing Bayezid away from Constantinople. The heavily armoured western knights were contemptuous of Sigismund and his Hungarians, but they had no real commander. The knights charged into the Ottoman army, but,
weakened by the effort, were isolated from their allies and annihilated by the sipahis. In 1402 Bayezid was defeated, captured and later killed by the Mongols under Timur at Ankara, but the Ottoman bureaucracy and army kept the state viable, until under Mehmed II (1451–81) the Ottomans laid siege to Constantinople, isolated but protected by its famous mighty walls – which, however, proved vulnerable to a new technology.

Technological change played little role in the history of European warfare. The diffusion of the stirrup and the high saddle gave the mounted warrior a more secure seat by the tenth century. A strong metallurgical industry provided Europeans with plenty of good weapons whose export to the Middle East was prohibited by the papacy during the crusades. The crossbow was a complex weapon that demanded little skill of its bearer, but was slow to load. It was very useful in sieges and in the thirteenth century notably helped the conquest of the peoples of northern Europe. But none of this conferred any very great advantage. The development of plate armour, strong enough to deflect blows but light enough to wear, was a remarkable tribute to western smiths. But it was so expensive that only relatively few could ever afford it. Siege-artillery was not an overwhelming threat to fortifications and never replaced older methods of mining and escalade. Gunpowder was invented in China and its first recorded military use in Europe was by the Mongols at the Battle of Liegnitz in 1241. By 1267 the friar Roger Bacon knew the approximate content of this substance. In a treatise of 1326 by Walter Milemete there is an illustration of a cannon. All previous killing methods had relied on the musclepower of men and animals, so that in principle gunpowder introduced something quite new: chemical combustion.

But using gunpowder was problematic. Saltpeter was difficult to produce and this meant that blackpowder was expensive and inconsistent. It was susceptible to damp, raising difficulties of transport, and it aged quickly. It was not until the late fourteenth century that saltpeter production expanded and ‘corned’, wet-grinding the powder, ameliorated these problems. The explosive power of gunpowder challenged contemporary metallurgy. Early guns were very heavy and when it was realised that corned powder actually increased explosive power they became even heavier. Guns, with their slow rate of fire, were chiefly valued for siege, to demolish the tall thin walls of medieval fortifications. Towards the end of the fourteenth century huge bombards, like ‘Mons Meg’, cast in Flanders in 1449 with its 56 cm calibre, were produced. A gigantic version was ‘Basilica’, said to have been 8.2 m long, deployed by Mehmed II against Constantinople in his victorious siege of 1453. It may be significant that this monster is said to have been cast by a
European, Hungarian or German, in the sultan’s pay. Certainly firearms fitted well into the slow-moving pattern of Western warfare. Cannon of some kind were used at Crécy in 1346, and in the fifteenth century smaller lighter weapons appeared on the battlefield. It came to be recognised that long narrow-bore cannon were just as effective as bombards against fortifications and could be used in the field. The replacement of stone balls by iron enhanced their effect and enabled calibres to become more standardised. By the time the French invaded Italy in 1494 they had relatively mobile cannon suitable for battering walls and deployment in the field. To defend against such weapons, cities and castles under threat built boulevards, bastions, outside the walls.

The earliest handguns were miniature cannon mounted on poles – staff-guns – but in the fifteenth century the arquebus emerged, with its barrel length of about 1 metre being 40 times its bore. It was slow to load and inaccurate beyond 50 metres, but its great value was that it needed little skill to operate – it was a simple point and shoot weapon. But its limitations, and those of cannon, posed problems about tactical integration. One method was the Wagenburg: placing men and guns in carts that were chained together with cannon between them. These were very effective if the enemy obliquely attacked them, and enjoyed a considerable vogue in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. In fact, although they were fearsome and much remarked upon by contemporaries for their novelty, the slow rate of fire, limited range and inaccuracy of gunpowder weapons meant they made only a limited impact upon warfare before 1500. Tactical integration was the work of the sixteenth century. In 1453 the cannons of Mehmed II did much to prepare the way for his successful assault on Constantinople. But ultimately it was the sultan’s readiness to sacrifice his ancillary troops and the sheer discipline of the janissaries which carried the day.

Conclusion

Medieval Europe was essentially a poor society in which armies could only be sustained on a temporary basis. This resulted in relatively small forces centred on tiny well-equipped and well-trained elites. As wealth increased, military investment spread further, but until the fourteenth century commanders depended entirely on the native skills of their men. Europeans could not really match the hardiness, adaptability and fighting power of steppe peoples, Mongols and Turks, who were the dominant military powers of the medieval period. However Western armies became more professional and by
the fourteenth century in some places there were what amounted to standing forces, though they were small. But agriculture was the most important source of wealth in the medieval world, and its productivity was always limited by the need to preserve fertility. Wealth intensification was not really possible, so extensification was the real option. The ruler of vast lands had more disposable wealth, which could be translated into military power. Europe was a mosaic of small states, which could not rival the Mamluks and the Ottomans. It is significant that it was the French monarchy that made the greatest steps towards regular forces – it was the richest and biggest power in Europe. But there was no simple pattern in Europe, where diversity remained the rule.

Bibliographical Essay

Armies and Bands in Medieval Europe

Archeologists excavating the city of Zutphen in the Netherlands encountered a victim of Viking violence who was killed in 882. Her well-preserved skeleton tells the story of her fate, which she shared with untold Europeans of the Viking Age. We do not know her name, but we know that she was a woman of around 40 years of age. Her powerfully developed muscle attachments and worn vertebrae suggest that she was used to heavy work; perhaps she was a slave. The Viking who attacked aimed to immobilise her and thus targeted her legs. He forcefully hit her right knee with a sharp axe or a sword, leaving a 5 millimeter deep gash in the bone. That injury would have made her fall to the ground; she was soon dead. When Zutphen, which the Vikings had completely destroyed, was later reconstructed, the remains of this and other victims of a Viking raid were unceremoniously covered with soil and sand.

The early medieval northern seafarers and raiders known as Vikings endure a pervasive reputation of extreme and cruel violence. That reputation began during the Viking Age itself, when their victims produced most of the preserved stories about Viking activity. Later, such basically truthful but biased accounts provided an attractive foundation for narrative elaboration and exaggeration, contributing to the modern image, fomented in popular culture, of the Vikings as uniquely violent. Over the last half century, scholarship has contextualised the Vikings and their violence in what after all was a violent period, the early Middle Ages in Europe.

Despite its widespread modern use, the term ‘viking’ appears only occasionally in contemporary sources, and its etymology is debated. The word is not an ethnic label, but rather a designation for seaborne raiders of any origin. When discussing the Vikings, contemporaries mostly talked, in Latin, Arabic, Old Irish and Old English, about being attacked by ‘Danes’, ‘Northmen’, ‘foreigners’, ‘heathens’ or simply ‘pirates’. In this chapter, I shall reserve the term ‘viking’ for those Scandinavians who raided and battled in western Europe, in accordance with contemporary usage.
An example of a contemporary text that sets the tone for later understandings of the violence exerted by the Vikings is what a monk in the monastery of Saint-Vaast in Arras, northern France, wrote about events in the year 884:

The Northmen did not stop from capturing and killing Christians or from destroying churches, pulling down fortifications, or putting villas to fire. The corpses of clerics, noble laymen and others, women, youth, and babies were lying in every street. There was no street or place in which the dead did not lie and lamentation and sadness filled everyone, seeing that the Christian people were massacred ... But the Northmen, raiding as usual beyond the [river] Scheldt, devastated with fire and sword churches, monasteries, cities and villages, and slaughtered people.¹

This chapter traces the history of Viking violence in Europe during the Viking Age, conventionally dated to 793–1066. The history of Viking raiding falls into three periods: beginning on a small scale, the raiding parties became substantial around the middle of the ninth century. Towards the end of the tenth century the Vikings put together even larger contingents of warriors which brought England to its knees. After outlining that history, we will analyse the function of violence in Scandinavian society and how the story of Viking violence had already become exaggerated in the Middle Ages.

**Viking Raiding in Outline**

*Small Beginnings*

Viking raids on Europe began on a small scale. Three ships attacked the Isle of Portland in Dorset, southern England, at the end of the eighth century, thirteen came to Flanders in 820, and thirty-five appeared in Somerset, western England, in 836. Even if we may not trust medieval chroniclers to provide exact and accurate numbers, what they tell us about the activities of the Vikings leaves a strong impression of small, opportunistic bands. They moved from place to place and plundered wherever they were able. The thirteen ships coming to Flanders in 820 were fought off by the garrison of an unnamed fort, but not before they had burned a few ‘wretched huts’ and taken away ‘a small number’ of cattle. When they later tried to enter the River Seine, they were again repelled, suffering five dead. They were finally successful in attacking the village of Bouin, situated on an island off the coast

south-west of Nantes, France, where they plundered thoroughly and gained ‘immense booty’, which they brought with them ‘home’.  

The 820 raids bring out some of the themes of Viking violence. Burning of buildings is legion, not surprisingly at a time when most buildings were made of readily flammable materials; this was an easy way to terrorise the population, widely employed in warfare far beyond Viking raids. When the early Vikings encountered regular military units or otherwise organised resistance, they typically either fled or were defeated (as during the 820 attacks on Flanders and the Seine). This may be why the early Vikings are often reported to have attacked islands. They could easily and quickly reach islands thanks to their ships, while the armed forces of Europe’s kingdoms (in the ninth century typically lacking navies) were slow to cross the water. It was also on islands, such as Noirmoutier close to Bouin, and Thanet in Kent, England, that Vikings first organised more lasting encampments. It is also typical that the Vikings stole cattle, as they did in Flanders in 820, some of which they surely consumed. They were able to bring only so much food on their ships, so they would, like most armies until quite recent times, be dependent on getting food from the areas they raided.

_Larger Bands and the ‘Great Army’_

The size of Viking bands increased decidedly around the middle of the ninth century. The chronicler Prudentius noted increased Viking activity in 845, when 600 ships (led by King Horik of Denmark) entered the Elbe and 120 the Seine, or so he claimed. English chroniclers noted the arrival of 350 ships in the Thames in 851, bringing a force of Vikings who stormed both London and Canterbury and also put the army of the Mercian king Berhtwulf to flight. That force then attacked the West Saxons, who were well organised and ‘made the greatest slaughter of a heathen raiding-army that we heard tell of up to this present day’, as a chronicler put it. In 850, we hear for the first time about Vikings wintering in Europe, on Thanet near the mouth of the Thames.

An even greater conglomeration of Viking bands showed up in 865, when we first hear about the ‘great (heathen) army’, which was to become a constant feature of English and also continental history for the next thirty years until it broke up in 896. This was an army that behaved much like other early medieval armies. The great heathen army marched purposefully, laid

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cities under siege, sometimes taking and holding them, and fought in pitched battles, for example winning most of the nine battles it fought in 871, except at Ashdown, where ‘many thousands [of the Vikings] were killed’.\(^4\) When the great army arrived, England was divided into four kingdoms; the Vikings would conquer three of them (Northumbria in 867, East Anglia in 869 and Mercia in 874) and only Wessex under Alfred the Great (871–99) held out. In the mid 870s, the Viking army broke into two, based in Northumbria and East Anglia, respectively. Their chieftains Halvdan and Guthrum took the thrones of the kings they had killed. In 875, Halvdan ‘shared out the land of the Northumbrians’ among his men, ‘and they proceeded to plough and to support themselves’.\(^5\) It remains unclear exactly how to understand this statement, but it must imply that at least some land around York had become vacant since its occupants had been either driven away or killed by Viking violence. Guthrum continued to fight Alfred in Wessex; he concluded peace treaties with him and accepted both baptism, with Alfred as his godfather, and, as a consequence, a new Anglo-Saxon name, Ethelstan. Both leaders and followers clearly desired to settle in England, as kings or farmers according to the station of each, and many achieved those goals, mainly through violence. Halvdan, Guthrum and their successors became kings who operated in ways similar to those of their Anglo-Saxon predecessors, defending as far as they were able their kingdoms and attempting to expand them with armies which according to the standards of the time must be considered regular armies. The areas they had conquered, soon labelled the ‘Danelaw’, remained in Scandinavian hands for much of the next century and a half or so. Enough Scandinavians moved into Britain to deeply influence both language and customs. Their political domination of eastern and northern England did not, however, last. The West Saxons, in particular, pushed back and conquered over time all of the Danelaw.

Constellations of Viking troops similar or even partially identical to the great army operated in similar ways on the continent, for example when a large contingent in 888 tried to storm the city walls of Meaux in northern France. When the attempt failed, the Vikings settled in for a long siege, much as any other western European army would at the time. When the defenders were unable to last much longer, they took up negotiations with the besiegers. They agreed that the inhabitants of Meaux would give up the city with all its valuables to the Vikings. The people would be allowed to escape. As

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 71.
\(^5\) Ibid., pp. 74–5.
soon as the Vikings were in possession of the city and the valuables there, they treacherously broke their sworn promises, stormed forth and captured the entire population, including Bishop Sigemund, clearly to sell as slaves.

A new era in the history of Viking raids had clearly begun in the mid ninth century, with sustained and forceful assaults. The increase in size of the bands suggests new organisation, new methods and new needs. Contemporaries noticed the increase. In 863, a first-hand observer, Abbot Ermentarius, depicted the situation as he experienced it, after his monastery had been attacked repeatedly and the monks had already been forced to move further inland twice (the monks would move three more times before the century was over):

The number of ships increases, the endless flood of Northmen grows. Everywhere Christians are the victims of massacre, plunder, devastation, burnings ... They arrive at and capture cities without anyone resisting: Bordeaux, Périgueux ... Limoges, Angoulême, Toulouse; Angers, Tours, and Orleans are destroyed ... It is as the Lord threatened through his prophet: 'From the north evil shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land' (Jer. 1:14) ... Ships past counting voyage up the Seine and throughout the region evil grows no less weak. They seize Rouen and plunder and burn it, likewise Paris. They capture Beauvais and Meaux; they devastate the stronghold at Meldun; Chartres is taken; they loot Évreux and they seize Bayeux and cities everywhere. No place, no monastery remains intact. Everyone flees and only rarely does anyone say 'Stay, stay and resist! Fight for your country, your children, and the people!' Thus those who ought to defend us with arms are lazy and fight among themselves, and they redeem us with tributes, devastating the Christian kingdom.6

Ermentarius was well versed in rhetoric and his panorama of Viking devastation in France is a tour-de-force displaying his rich literary skills. As historians, we should be careful not to take him as conveying the literal truth in every detail. The Vikings had begun to behave in much the same way as any other contemporary army.

**Taxing and Conquering England**

While ninth-century observers may have thought there were too many Vikings and were disappointed at secular government, which often preferred to pay them off with a tribute, even larger contingents began to show up towards the end of the tenth century. In response, the English in particular

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paid ever larger tributes to the threatening Vikings. A new chapter in the history of Viking endeavour began in 991 when the Norwegian Olav Tryggvason arrived with ninety-three ships, ravaged south-eastern England, and defeated ealdorman Byrhtnoth in a staged battle in Maldon, which has become famous thanks to a partially preserved Old English poem celebrating the stiff upper lip of the English in the face of defeat. After their defences had been thwarted and at the advice of the archbishop of Canterbury, the English for the first time paid the Danegeld; Olav received 10,000 pounds of silver. When he came back three years later, in 994, and now accompanied by King Sveyn of Denmark, the tribute increased to 16,000 pounds. Huge troop contingents arrived for new payments in 1002, 1006 and 1012, the sum increasing each time. In 1013, Sveyn and his army ravaged so widely that the English King Ethelred fled first to the Isle of Wight, and then to his wife’s brother, Duke Richard of Normandy. On Christmas Day, Sveyn was accepted as king of England, but he was unable to enjoy his position for long, since he died suddenly in early February 1014. His son Cnut arrived with a large army in 1016, and when two English kings, Ethelred and Edmund, died in close succession apparently from natural causes, Cnut became king of England and imposed a final, enormous Danegeld of 82,500 pounds. Cnut was succeeded on the English throne in turn by his two sons, ruling until 1042. Troops that were capable of conquering England outright must obviously have been comparable to the English army in terms of size, weapons and tactics. This conclusion is also carried out by the poem The Battle of Maldon, which portrays the English and the Viking troops as fighting in similar ways.

The last major Viking attack on England occurred in 1066, when King Harald Hardrada came from Norway with ships, variously given as 300 and 500 in number. He was defeated by the English under King Harold Godwinson, who however lost the next battle three weeks later at Hastings against William the Conqueror, a French-speaking descendant of Vikings who had colonised Normandy.

Eastern Europe

While the drama of the Viking raids played out in western Europe, other Scandinavians penetrated the plains of eastern Europe, which at this date were not densely populated. Their original goal clearly appears to have been to acquire trade goods, particularly fur (in which northern Russia was particularly rich), and perhaps slaves. Scandinavians together with other ethnic groups were firmly entrenched in the town of Staraya Ladoga (east of
St Petersburg) by 800, at the latest, which they used as a basis for acquiring goods from its large hinterland. Over the following century, they similarly settled in other towns, such as Gorodishche (a predecessor of Novgorod) and, eventually, Kiev. Scandinavians were included in, and may at times have dominated, the grouping known as Rus, which took political leadership in the towns mentioned. By the late tenth century, Grand Prince Vladimir, apparently of Scandinavian descent, created a strong state centred on Kiev.

Unlike for western Europe, no written sources provide any details about how these Scandinavians got what they sought, but it is reasonable to assume that as in western Europe here they also used a combination of peaceful and violent means to acquire what they desired. Arab geographers bear witness to trading procedures known as ‘silent trade’, in which buyer and seller never actually meet, clearly in order to avoid violence. This suggests that violence was very much a possibility while trading.

If the Scandinavians appear to have first gone to northern Russia to acquire trade goods, they soon enough discovered that the large networks of rivers there allowed them to reach new markets. The twelfth-century Russian Primary Chronicle describes Viking Age trade routes between the Baltic and the Black Sea, and also from that route to the Volga via portages over the watersheds. Those routes allowed traders, some of whom must have been Scandinavian, to reach the markets of the Byzantine empire as well as the great market town of Bulghar on the Volga, which was also visited by Arab merchants. An Arab diplomat testifies to Rus traders in Bulghar in 921, selling slaves and furs. The large number of Viking Age Arab silver coins found in Scandinavia testifies not only to profits from trade, but surely also to booty from violence.

Weapons and Tactics

Weapons of the Vikings

The Vikings used weapons in much the same way as other contemporary armies, and their use grew more sophisticated as the Viking Age progressed. When a group of Vikings in 845 faced the regular Frankish army, they appeared to an observer ‘unequipped and almost unarmed, and very few’. The monk who reported this wrote with the polemical purpose of criticising what he saw as the cowardice of the regular army (a common theme in contemporary Frankish writings), but it is hard to
escape the point that the Vikings, comparatively, were poorly provided with arms and armour, while the Franks in contrast, helmeted and protected by chain mail, carried shields and spears. Among the weapons that the Vikings used were axes, swords, spears and arrows. They also had shields and armour.

Viking Tactics

The Vikings were often, although far from always, successful in their violent enterprises. Much of their success depended on their ability to surprise their victims, as the chronicler Prudentius expressed it in 837: ‘The Northmen … fell on Frisia with their usual surprise attack.’ The Vikings typically arrived by sea in their fast ships, allowing them to attack with very little advance warning, as distinct from the slow-moving land-based armies of the early medieval European kingdoms. The Viking ship is thus to be considered one of their most important military technologies. The Viking Age could not have started before some Scandinavian shipwright, probably in the late eighth century, worked out how to attach a mast and a sail securely to the sturdy clinker-built war canoes that had long been in use. He created the Viking longship: narrow, sturdy, fast and ocean going. Modern reconstructions of excavated ships have proven eminently seaworthy. The Vikings were aware of how much they had to thank their ships for, so the ship played an important role in their imagination and mythology.

Another feature of Viking tactics was to attack soft, undefended targets. Early on, the Vikings favoured monasteries and churches with their poorly defended treasures, but they also took advantage of whatever they were able to find out about the troop movements of their opponents. A band of Vikings, for example, attacked the city of Nantes in 845, which was undefended because only a month earlier the Bretons had soundly defeated the local Frankish army. They also attacked on an important religious festival, St John’s Day (24 June), when many people had gathered in the city wearing their Sunday best.

7 [C. Smedt], ‘Translatio S. Germani Parisiensis anno 846 secundum primævam narrationem e codice Namurcensi’, *Analecta Bollandiana* 2 (1883), 79.
11 Ibid., pp. 15–19.
The Function and Purpose of Viking Violence

A careful reading of the sources makes it abundantly clear that the immediate purpose of Viking violence was to acquire wealth, either directly in the form of gems, precious metals and other valuable materials, or in the form of plunder that could easily be sold, notably slaves. In addition, they strove to feed and maintain themselves, by stealing cattle, wine and other foodstuffs. In contrast to how contemporaries and later writers into our own days describe the Vikings, violence was simply a means to this end, the acquisition of wealth. For example, when the German king Louis III died in 882 leaving his lands defenceless, the Vikings ‘no longer thought of fighting but instead of booty’, the chronicler Regino of Prüm narrates: ‘the minds of that greedy people caught fire at the prospect of getting money’. It was the prospect of wealth and the need for provisions that drove the Viking raids, not violence.

The Need for Provisions

European narrative sources often tell of Vikings plundering for food and provisions. While vainly besieging the Anglo-Saxon stronghold of ‘Wikingamere’ in 920 they ‘seized the cattle round about’. When the Vikings negotiated for tribute, they demanded not only ‘a great sum of silver’, but also ‘quantities of corn, wine, and livestock’ (the example is from France in 869).

What happened to any cattle the Vikings got their hands on is vividly illustrated by archaeological testimony about the 882 raids in Frisia. The chronicle kept up at the German monastery of Fulda records in a single, brief sentence an 882 Viking raid on Deventer in the Netherlands: ‘The Northmen killed very many and burnt the port town which in the Frisian tongue is called Taventeri, where St. Liafwan rests.’ Archaeological excavations in Deventer have shown unmistakable traces of the Vikings in the form of a layer 10–25 centimetres thick of charcoal, debris and burnt building structures. The town of Zutphen lies a little upstream on the same river as Deventer, the IJssel, and the usually selective chroniclers do not mention it as a victim of the Vikings. Archaeological excavations there have, however, revealed evidence of Vikings raiding.


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Zutphen was clearly an administrative centre within the Carolingian empire, centred on a large single-aisled hall of $24 \times 8$ m, constructed of posts and planks (rather than the cheaper wattle-and-daub). The archaeological remains do not allow us to date exactly the destruction of Zutphen, but it is reasonable to assume the town, like its neighbour Deventer, was devastated in 882. The Vikings put the entire town, including the great hall, to the torch, and everything seems to have burned down. Archaeologists have found a thin layer of charcoal, including remnants of wattle-and-daub walls, lost metal household implements, broken ceramics and animal bones, but also a few human skeletons (including the woman whose fate was recounted at the beginning of this chapter).

The Vikings killed at least ten head of cattle in Zutphen. When they departed, they left behind the heads and the lower limbs of these animals, which must mean that they hauled off the bodies with most of the edible meat. As a centre in the royal administration, the town would have housed much livestock, and perhaps this is why the Vikings, always in need of provisions, targeted it.

At some point after the Vikings had left, but not necessarily very soon, Zutphen was cleaned up. The debris, including the remains of people and animals, was put into the pits of the sunken huts and covered up. The woman victim, who may have fallen inside the hut, was never given a proper burial. Afterwards, the town was rebuilt with an even larger hall building, and now with ramparts, ditches and other defensive measures. As everywhere in Europe, rulers built fortifications to meet the Viking threat. The coastline of the Low Countries, for example, is full of fortresses with circular surrounding walls similar to the one built in Zutphen.

The Viking Desire for Wealth

The immediate purpose of the Viking raids was to acquire money and other forms of wealth. This is why the Vikings were always willing to negotiate for

References:
tribute in return for peace, as is reported in *The Battle of Maldon*, when a messenger from the Vikings before the battle announces to the English:

> [the Vikings] will be so good as to let you give gold rings
> In return for peace. It is better for you
> To buy off our raid with gold
> Than that we, renowned for cruelty, should cut you down in battle.\(^\text{17}\)

The annals and chronicles of the Viking Age are full of fearful Europeans paying off Vikings with wealth, which the latter gratefully received, rather than fighting. For Viking chieftains, tribute payments had the advantage that the payment went directly to them, who could then redistribute the spoils among their followers, making the latter obliged to their generous leaders. A Swedish participant in three ventures (in 1006, 1012 and 1018) to pressure England’s King Ethelred to pay Danegeld thought of the resulting bonanza as generated by the generosity of his chieftains when he boasted about his gains in a runic inscription: ‘Ulfn has taken three Danegelds in England. That was the first that Tosti paid. Then Thorketill paid. Then Cnut paid.’\(^\text{18}\)

Ethelred and his subjects, who had in fact ‘paid’ the money, are nowhere mentioned in the inscription, which bears witness to Ulf’s wish (as local minor chieftain) to associate himself with the great, famous chieftains whom he mentions.

If no tribute or Danegeld materialised, the Vikings instead got as much wealth as possible through raiding and plunder. Both European sources and those from Scandinavia contain plenty of examples of Vikings simply grabbing the valuables they desired. When in 865 they managed to gain entry into the rich monastery of Saint-Denis close to Paris, they carried out booty to their ships for twenty days, according to a contemporary witness.\(^\text{19}\)

A silver necklace found in northern Norway contains a runic inscription that reveals the Viking point of view: ‘We travelled to meet the men of Frisia; we divided the spoils of the fight.’\(^\text{20}\) It is tempting to assume that the silver of the necklace as well as the other silver artefacts found together with it made up some of that booty. The Vikings were in the business of accumulating wealth, and we occasionally hear of the hoards they brought together, as when a group of Frisians in 885 defeated a group of Vikings and in their encampment found a great mass of ‘treasure in gold and silver and other movables’.\(^\text{21}\)

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17 ‘Old English Literature: A Hypertext Course Pack’, [www.english.ox.ac.uk/oecourse pack/maldon](http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/oecourse pack/maldon).
18 ‘Samnordisk runtextdatabas’ (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2009), U 344.
Slaving and the Slave Trade

To gain wealth, the Vikings often engaged in trade. They traded products of their Scandinavian homelands, such as furs, reindeer antlers and soapstone, but also objects that they had taken on their raids. For example, a group of Vikings stole an outstandingly decorated Gospel Book (Codex aureus, ‘The Golden Book’) from an ecclesiastical library in England. According to a note in Old English in the book, they then sold it for ‘pure gold’ to ealderman Alfred of Surrey, who gave it back to Christ Church, Canterbury. Chronicles and other contemporary sources occasionally mention Vikings trading or even setting up markets, as when King Charles the Bald in 873 gave permission to a band of Vikings ‘to stay until February on an island in the Loire, and to hold a market there’.  

In addition to stolen objects and perhaps trade goods legitimately acquired in Scandinavia and elsewhere, such markets would surely have traded in slaves. Written sources often mention that the Vikings captured people on their raids, as when in 888 they betrayed their promise to allow the citizens of the city of Meaux safely to evacuate their besieged city. They captured the entire population, including the bishop, and nothing more is ever heard of them in the sources. We may assume that they were sold into slavery. European cities and towns from Venice to Hedeby and from Marseilles to Bulghar are known to have traded in slaves in the early Middle Ages, and the Vikings engaged in such trade there, although they were far from the only suppliers.  

A visitor to the trading town of Bulghar witnessed a remarkable display of violence against women when he observed the cremation funeral of a Rus chieftain placed in his wooden ship, which had been pulled ashore. A large array of grave goods was placed in a pavilion on the ship, and then animals were killed and also placed there: two horses, two cows, a cock and a hen, and a dog. One of the chieftain’s slave-girls volunteered, Ibn Fadlan claims, to accompany her dead master in death. First, she had intercourse with the most important men who had come for the funeral, before she was drugged and brought into the pavilion where her master lay. ‘Six men entered the pavilion and all had intercourse with the slave-girl.’ Afterward, she lay down next to the dead chieftain. The men held her arms and legs and an old ‘crone’ called

‘The Angel of Death’ put a rope against the slave’s neck, giving the ends to two of the men. She then repeatedly stabbed the slave ‘between her ribs, now here, now there, while the two men throttled her with the rope until she died’. Later, the ship was set ablaze, and the ashes were buried under a mound.24

Whether the burial Ibn Fadlan observed exemplifies Scandinavian customs is much debated, since one cannot automatically equal the label Rus with Scandinavians, or Vikings, as is often done. Viking chieftains were certainly often buried or cremated in ships that were later covered by mounds. They may be accompanied by the same kinds of animals as Ibn Fadlan saw, and very occasionally more than one person is buried in the same burial and it is clear that one of them has been killed, for example through decapitation. These circumstances may suggest that, whether or not Ibn Fadlan observed a ‘Viking burial’, what he observed may very well have been influenced by Scandinavian approaches to violence against slaves and animals.

Gift-Giving and the Use of Wealth

The wealth that Vikings in one way or another acquired was fed into the political economy of the time, which may be analysed as a gift-exchange system. Chieftains distributed their wealth as gifts among their followers, who in return owed their loyalty or at the very least realised the material advantages of staying with a successful chieftain. Scandinavian chieftains competed with each other in constantly fluid constellations of power. They competed over resources and people, notably warriors, rather than territory. In a time before states existed in the north, they could not simply command people to follow them; they had to persuade them to become loyal followers. In addition to violence, their methods of persuasion included giving gifts and appearing as wealthy and successful.

Such chieftains are described, or alluded to, in northern poetry of the Viking Age, particularly in the Norse court verse known as skaldic poetry, but also for example in the Old English poem Beowulf. The poetry conjures the image of the chieftain hosting great parties in his hall, where he surrounded himself with warriors, who came to partake of his generosity and hospitality. In the eleventh century, the skald Arnorr extolled his patron, Earl Thorfinn of

the Orkney Islands, with characteristic skaldic circumlocutions and opaque language: ‘Through all the serpent’s slayer [= winter] he, surpassing [all other chieftains], drank the swamp of malt [= beer] – the ruler practiced splendid hospitality then.’

Thorfinn was so generous that he let his warriors party throughout the winter, and not just at Yule, as contented more parsimonious leaders. Being a court poet, Arnor advertised his chieftain’s generosity with aplomb and exaggeration, while the Swedish chieftain Holmbjörn at about the same time was not averse to boasting about himself. He put up a runestone through which he let any rune-literate warrior looking for a patron know that he, Holmbjörn, ‘was generous with food’.

The halls were also the sites of gift distribution. In early northern literature, chieftains and kings are usually known by some variant of the designation ‘ring giver’ or ‘ring breaker’. In still unmonetised Scandinavia, wealth was stored in the form of rings, particularly arm-rings, made of precious metals, and chieftains gave rings to their warriors, sometimes breaking them up to share them. The receivers were suitably grateful, as we can see in another poem by the same Arnor. This time, he praises another ruler, perhaps King Cnut the Great of England and Denmark, about his gifts of arm-rings and how the recipients were grateful (the ‘men of Scania’ are probably the same as the ‘Danes’ on the previous line):

Fire of the stream [= gold] was set between the wrist and shoulders of the Danes
I saw the men of Scania thank him for an arm-ring.

The men who benefited from the ruler’s generosity were suitably grateful. Their thanks should extend beyond words to action, as Wiglaf reminded Beowulf’s other warriors, when their chieftain single-handedly was fighting a fire-spewing dragon:

I remember the time that we took mead together,
when we made promises to our prince in the beer-hall – he gave us these rings – that we would pay him back for this battle-gear, these helmets and hard swords, if such a need as this ever befell him.

26 ‘Samnordisk runtextdatabas’, U 739.
Vikings seldom encountered such fearsome enemies, but Wiglaf’s argument still holds; when the chieftain called for the armed action of his warriors, those who had received his gifts owed him nothing less than their fighting prowess. Otherwise, they lost their honour as men and warriors. In this way a chieftain was able to maintain the loyalty and obedience of people whom he scarcely could have forced to follow him (in the manner one encounters in the developed state).

In competing over warriors – a finite resource – Scandinavian chieftains needed to acquire things that were suitable as gifts, and they needed as much as they possibly could get. This explains many of the developments in Viking Age Scandinavia as well as the Viking raids themselves. By engaging in trade, chieftains not only won the profits of that trade, readily made into precious metals, they also gained access to particularly attractive gifts in the form of exotic, foreign and rare objects. By supporting artisans (some of whom had surely been enslaved in Viking raids) who manufactured beautiful and attractive things, they were able to increase the perceived value of their gifts beyond the intrinsic worth of the raw materials. By importing prestigious ideology, such as Christianity, making it accessible to their warriors, chieftains provided yet another gift. In all these respects, Viking Age chieftains strove to get more value for the wealth they already possessed, but they also strove to increase their wealth, simply by plundering more or being paid more in tribute. This explains the Viking raids on Europe. They were fundraising events pursued by chieftains starved of wealth.

The Ideology of Violence

Similarly to other groups that exert violence, the Vikings embraced a complex ideology, including a kind of heroic honour code, that governed their behaviour in their violent pursuits. Their ideal was to be a drengr, a label that is difficult to translate (the word basically refers to a young man) but which clearly had ‘connotations of bravery, toughness and loyalty’. A drengr does not flinch or flee when encountering the enemy, he fights bravely, strongly and successfully with little regard for his own safety, and he is, above all, loyal both to his chieftain and to his comrades. It was high praise indeed when the warrior Erik, who had fallen when besieging the trading town of Hedeby in southern Denmark (now in Germany), was called on his memorial runestone ‘a very good drengr’.

The word, and derivations from it, often show up in Viking Age runic inscriptions and poetry in praise of individual Vikings. A runestone raised in central Sweden early in the eleventh century encapsulates the ideals of the Vikings. In the inscription, a woman called Tula remembered her son Harald with a short verse:

They travelled ‘drengila’ (in the manner of a drengr; valiantly) far for gold, gave (food) to the eagle. (They) died in the south, in Serkland (the land of the Saracens, i.e. the Arabs).

Harald had undertaken his travels (apparently to the shores of the Caspian Sea) together with several others under the leadership of the famous Ingvar (himself the subject of a fantastical Icelandic saga), whom the runestone claims was ‘his brother’. Fellow fighters in Viking bands seem often to have referred to each other as brothers, so Ingvar and Harald may not actually have been related. The inscription uses a common poetic circumlocution in describing Harald’s and Ingvar’s martial prowess (appropriate for a drengr): they gave food to the eagle, or in other words, they killed enemies whose dead bodies were left on the battlefield for eagles and other carrion eaters to devour. The simile recurs frequently in Viking Age poetry, sometimes featuring ravens or wolves instead of eagles.

A Viking who had fought loyally and valiantly in accordance with their code of honour expected after death to go to Valhöll, the great hall of the god Odin. Female valkyries select among those fallen in battle those who will go there. This gathering place of fallen chieftains and their warriors is well attested both in poetry and in pictorial sources. Among the latter are the many Viking Age picture stones from the island of Gotland, Sweden, that depict a horseman arriving at a great hall; he is typically greeted by a woman offering a drink. According to the probably old, perhaps even Viking Age eddic poem Grímnismál, the roof of Valhöll is supported by spears and covered with shields. The hall has 540 entrances, each spacious enough for 800 warriors to go through at the same time. The warriors who dwell there eat pork from the constantly reborn boar Sæhrímnir, and they drink mead running from the teats of the goat Heiðrún, who stands on the roof of the hall, as well as beer offered by valkyries.

The image of Valhöll that appears in the earliest sources conveys an ideal image of the feasting halls of quite earthly chieftains, at the same time clearly being inspired by Christian ideas of the afterlife and of Paradise. Later medieval writers, not to mention latterday popular culture, further developed the themes of Valhöll and of being a good drengr. A particular theme,
becoming a widespread literary topos, emphasises the stoicism and heroic resignation of Vikings in death. The high medieval (twelfth-century?) moving and forceful poem conventionally known as the *Lay of Kráka* is a famous example. As the great hero Ragnar Loðbrók was dying, tortured by King Ella in a pit of vipers (itself an old literary topos), he supposedly composed that poem celebrating his heroic career as a warrior, remembering deeds all around northern Europe. He is confident ‘that the benches of Balder’s father (Odin’s benches in Valhöll) … are prepared for feasting’ and ‘the gods will invite me in’. Since Ragnar knows that his sons will take vengeance on his killer, he is able to laugh and thus ends the poem: ‘The hours of life have passed, laughing shall I die.’ Ragnar’s attitude, however legendary and literarily developed, is thought to reflect something of the real mindset of Viking fighters, of being a good drengr.30

The End of the Viking Age

Viking raids were, as we have seen, often but far from always successful; the Scandinavians were often able to outflank the armies of Europe by being faster than they. As European armies became better at meeting the threat, the Vikings attacked with ever greater groups of warriors made possible by several chieftains banding together for a campaign. This tendency towards ever larger Viking troop contingents reached its apogee with the formidable armies that conquered England in 1013 and 1016 and the one that failed in the same purpose in 1066.

The raids, however, recede in the eleventh century, for two reasons in particular. On the one hand, European rulers had learned how to meet the threat from the seas, with fortifications, their own navies, and army contingents strategically stationed. It simply became harder and more risky to raid. On the other hand, the political situation had developed in Scandinavia. The always competing chieftains knocked each other out of the political game with the result that around the year 1000 only the three kings of Denmark, Norway and Sweden remained. These rulers worked on controlling violence within their kingdoms, and they were not keen on bands of armed warriors that they did not control and who might question their authority. They suppressed any such tendencies, often redirecting them in other directions, such as towards the pagan peoples of the eastern Baltic Sea.

The Reputation of the Vikings

The Vikings had already earned a reputation for violence in the contemporary sources, the most accessible of which were produced by their European victims. They were surely happy to acquire such a reputation, since it made their job of either raiding or negotiating for tribute easier. Some sources, such as those mentioned above penned with rhetorical bravura by Ermentarius and the anonymous monk of Saint-Vaast, depict scenes of absolute destruction and devastation. It is inadvisable to take such accounts at face value, as is often done, particularly considering that by all accounts the Vikings were poorly armed and not necessarily very well organised. The sources should rather be read as symptomatic of the shock engendered by the quick and often unexpected attacks by an at least initially poorly known barbarian people.

Exaggeration in the sources is occasionally obvious as when the chronicler Prudentius noted in 834 that the Vikings ‘destroyed everything’ in the Carolingian trading town Dorestad in Frisia. Yet the town was still there in 835 for the Vikings to attack and ‘lay waste’, as the same chronicler notes. In 836 he says that the Vikings ‘devastated’ Dorestad, and they returned in 837. Clearly, the devastation was not so bad that the town could not quickly be reconstructed or that merchants chose not to return, despite what Prudentius’ words might make us think.

Scholars and others who later in the Middle Ages read the chronicles of the Viking Age were impressed by the devastation brought by the Vikings, and they typically exaggerated the violence further. For example, in the 1150s the Englishman Henry of Huntingdon wrote a history of his country. Here the Vikings come out even more violent and terrible than in the most rhetorical of contemporary accounts. The invasions of Cnut and other Vikings were ‘much more monstrous and much more cruel’ than any other invasions that England had suffered. Vikings wanted only ‘to plunder, not to own, to destroy everything, not to rule’. He makes these statements even though he was certainly aware that Cnut desired to rule, as he did in England for almost twenty years, and that Halfdan’s warriors were interested in owning and cultivating land. Henry presented the Vikings as a people interested in violence and destruction for their own sake, and later writers have often followed his lead.  

Scandinavian writers also took the theme of Viking violence and ran with it, notably in the rich storytelling tradition of medieval Icelandic sagas, where increasingly fantastic and exaggerated accounts entertained. The tendency is always to portray Vikings as uniquely cruel and violent, and their fearless penchant for violence as an expression of their religious beliefs in a good afterlife for strong warriors.

**Berserks and the Blood-Eagle**

A brief poetic stanza from the early eleventh century celebrated the victory of the Viking chieftain Ivar over the Northumbrian king Ella using a stark circumlocution common in Scandinavian court poetry of the time: ‘Ivar caused the eagle to cut the back of Ella.’ The image is of the king’s dead body left behind on the battlefield to be desecrated by carrion eaters like the eagle. This kind of imagery is commonplace in the court poetry of the time, but as the centuries passed, new narrators looking to fascinate and horrify their audiences came up with increasingly strained interpretations of this verse. The culmination was reached in the late medieval Tale of Ragnar’s Sons, which describes how Ivar and his brothers, in revenge for the torture death of their father Ragnar Loðbrók, ‘had the eagle cut in [the still living] Ella’s back, then all his ribs severed from the backbone with a sword, in such a way that his lungs were pulled out there’. This horrific torture, known as the ‘blood-eagle’, continues to fascinate modern audiences, for whom it often serves as the ultimate example of how Vikings hungered for cruel violence, even though scholarship has long since shown that the story is an invention of the fourteenth century.  

The ‘berserk’ (often spelled ‘berserker’) occupies a similarly strong and apparently permanent position in the modern fascination with Viking violence. A ninth-century Scandinavian poem describes warriors ready to fight in a sea battle, again using poetic circumlocutions: the ships are loaded with men, white shields, western spears and foreign swords; the ‘bear-shirts (berserkir) bellow’ and the ‘wolf-skins howl’. The poet thus aptly described the sound of chain mail worn by warriors eager for battle using circumlocutions that make the hearer imagine those warriors as suitably ferocious and wild, in accordance with Viking Age warrior ethos. Yet medieval narrators took the idea and ran with it, creating a special kind of warrior called ‘berserk’ (‘bear-shirt’ in Old Norse), who ‘chewed on their shields in frenzy, fought

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wildly like wolves or dogs, and could not be injured by steel or fire’. Eventually, the berserk became in the Icelandic sagas a stock comic character with great strength but little intelligence whom clever farmers could manipulate for their purposes.\textsuperscript{33}

**Vikings and Violence**

The Vikings have a singular reputation for cruel and extreme violence, which is one reason why it is difficult to imagine a History of Violence without a chapter on Vikings. As we have seen, however, most of what appears to make Viking violence unique does not quite hold up to critical scrutiny. They caused devastation across Europe, and they were for a time a military force to be reckoned with. The shock of their earliest, entirely unexpected attacks continued to colour how they were understood. Berserks, blood-eagle rituals and utterly devastated European landscapes belong to the medieval and modern imagination, not to history.

There is no doubt that the Vikings were violent, and that they relished and celebrated their violence. In this, they were little different from other warrior groups. They clearly embraced an ideology that promised just rewards for forceful and courageous fighters, although this belief surely drove their endeavours less than their thirst for wealth.

**Bibliographical Essay**

Most sources central for studying Viking history are translated and collected in Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew MacDonald (eds.), *The Viking Age: A Reader*, 2nd edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), which however does not distinguish clearly between contemporary texts and those produced much later in the Middle Ages, notably the Icelandic sagas composed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The modern study of Viking history began with P. H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (London: Arnold, 1962; 2nd edn, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1972), which set the Vikings and their violence in their proper historical context, bringing a sense of proportion to the subject. Sawyer was also innovative in his use of numismatic evidence to expand our understanding of the Vikings.

Although many written sources have become better understood in recent decades, real advances of knowledge have mainly come through archaeological investigations. Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 1998) summarised many of these advances. Stefan Brink with the collaboration of Neil Price (eds.), *The Viking World* (London: Routledge, 2008) is a valuable collection of brief and up-to-date thematic

essays on all aspects of Viking history and culture, written by experts. Many essays focus on archaeological materials, while others deal with written sources.

PART II

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THE VIOLENCE OF GOVERNMENTS AND RULERS
Violence was an intrinsic element of government and political culture in early medieval China from the fourth to the tenth century. As is typical of other periods in Chinese history, individual monarchs and dynasties came to power through force of arms, and kept order by implementing Chinese legal-bureaucratic systems that legitimised violent punishments for many crimes. Chairman Mao’s famous dictum that power grows from the barrel of a gun held true in the early medieval period when the weapons of choice were the bow, sabre and lance. Less frequently noted, the formal bureaucratic and military systems were riven with informal, patrimonial political ties that engendered violence at court and in the provinces. Male and female relatives by blood and marriage, and sometimes eunuchs, were involved in the struggle to sit on the throne or rule from behind the scenes. A monarch – or courtiers wielding power for a puppet ruler – required the protection of a loyal bodyguard and army that could violently dispose of real or perceived enemies.

The violence employed in these political struggles can be defined as ‘physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone’, according to the New Oxford American Dictionary. For the most part, killing was the most crucial type of violence in politics because it was a zero-sum game. The winner typically eliminated real and perceived rivals and their adherents. This turbulent political and military climate created a murky distinction between morally justified state-sanctioned violence and unsanctioned forms. To win in the zero-sum game of power, qualities such as intelligence, unscrupulousness, ruthlessness and deviousness were required. Nonetheless, monarchs or courtiers who attempted to instil order purely by terrorising subordinates into compliance never succeeded in forming stable dynasties. Effective rulers bolstered their legitimacy by cultivating reputations for benevolence, carrying out traditional sacral rituals to heaven, and meting
out punishments according to the legal code. Rulership was given moral justification by the Chinese mandate of heaven ideology, which held that heaven chose the most virtuous dynastic line of ‘sons of heaven’, to pass down the reign as ‘August Emperor’. The Chinese legal code was the ruler’s vehicle for sanctioning violent punishments, but justice could be manipulated to bring false charges against political enemies.

The divided and unstable political situation of early medieval China increased the prevalence of conflicts and violence. The various dynasties that ruled during the early medieval period are listed in Table 6.1. Though impossible to measure precisely, state violence was probably more intense during the periods of political division from 220 to 589 and 907 to 960 when ‘China’ was separated into two or more states with relatively frequent internecine conflicts at court, interstate wars and dynastic transitions. The geographic divisions were particularly intense in the north in the fourth century and the south in the tenth century. During the periods of disunity, states were relatively weak because provincial strongmen tended to usurp the powers of the central legal-bureaucratic government. To complicate matters further, there was an ethnic division between the rulers of north

Table 6.1 Dynasties of early medieval China (fourth to tenth centuries).

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<tr>
<th>Northern Dynasties</th>
<th>Southern Dynasties</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sixteen Kingdoms (317–86)</td>
<td>Eastern Jin (317–420)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Wei (386–534)</td>
<td>Former (or Liu) Song (420–79)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western Wei (535–56)</td>
<td>Eastern Wei (534–50)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Zhou (557–81)</td>
<td>Northern Qi (550–77)</td>
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<td>Northern Zhou (577–81) / Sui (581–9)</td>
<td>Southern Liang (502–57)</td>
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<td>Southern Chen (557–89)</td>
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<td>Sui (589–618)</td>
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<td>Tang (618–690)</td>
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<td>Zhou (690–705)</td>
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<td>Tang (705–907)</td>
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<td>Later Liang (907–23)</td>
<td>Ten Kingdoms (902–79)</td>
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<td>Later Tang (923–36)</td>
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<td>Later Ji (936–47)</td>
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<td>Later Han (947–50)</td>
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<td>Later Zhou (951–60)</td>
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and south China. In the fourth to sixth centuries, dynasties of Inner Asian ancestry ruled over the north, most prominently the Särbi (Xianbei) of the Northern Wei, Northern Zhou and Northern Qi dynasties. A succession of ethnically Chinese dynasties controlled the south. In the tenth century, three of the five successive dynasties in the north had rulers of Shatuo Turk ancestry, while the Kitan Liao dynasty of Manchuria controlled part of Hebei. Even though the northerners have tended to be stereotyped as more martial than southerners, this chapter demonstrates that southern provincial elites also cultivated martial talents and became involved in the violent struggles for power. Though somewhat more stable, the geographically unified Sui and Tang realms were also punctuated episodically by bloody conflicts at court and rebellions in the provinces.

**Violence in the Rise to Power**

Anyone who wished to sit on the throne or wield power from behind it normally had to kill political rivals and their adherents. This was a truism whether the context was succession struggles within the palace or fighting on the battlefield to found a new dynasty. The outbursts of brutality that were by-products of political competition, though seemingly violating the legal code and official Confucian morality, were endemic to the political culture and sanctioned by custom.

**Violence Endemic to the Political Culture**

Even though in principle the Chinese legal-bureaucratic system resembled modern ones in having an established hierarchy of offices and administrative regulations, some scholars have argued that a Weberian patrimonial model in which emperors treated retainers as members of the household can further understanding of early medieval Chinese politics. Under these circumstances, newly enthroned monarchs needed to consolidate power by killing rivals, purging adherents of predecessors and placing allies in office. The monarch’s reliance on personally loyal retainers was stronger during the periods of political division, but remained a component of rulership during the unity of the Sui and Tang. Courtiers who showed disloyalty were risking their lives. As Max Weber has observed, patrimonialism gave rise to ‘favoritism – of men close to the ruler who had tremendous power, but always were in danger of

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sudden, dramatic downfall for purely personal reasons’.\(^2\) The violence targeted at political enemies and officials who fell from favour served a broader purpose of enhancing the authority of the ruler by intimidating other subordinates.

Ideally, the monarch should be the only object of loyalty in a patrimonial realm. However, as post-Weberian social scientists have pointed out, another typical aspect of patrimonial-bureaucratic rule is the prevalence of personalistic patron–client relationships that permeate the palace, the court and the governmental administrative hierarchy.\(^3\) Powerful members of the court, the bureaucracy, the military and local society used resources at their disposal to attract clients. The personal relationships and conflicts worked against the interests of emperors. As a result, child emperors, and even some adults, became puppets of courtiers, palace women and eunuchs. Brittle personalistic political ties and feuds encouraged conflicts, including coups and succession struggles at court.

Militarisation of local society also reinforced the propensity to resort to violence in the palace. In contrast to the stereotype of the Chinese farmer or civil official who disdained warfare, local society included martial elites (haojie 豪傑 or haoxia 豪俠) who were drawn into armies and bureaucracies of states. During the southern dynasties, their cultivation of military skills and concern for ‘personal honour, vengeance, and the willingness to be personally involved in combat and killing’ made them attractive soldiers and bodyguards.\(^4\) Under the northern dynasties and the Sui and Tang, armies were composed of a multi-ethnic array of men, including local martial elites and cavalrymen of Inner Asian origin. The high elite of north China esteemed martial values and pursuits as highly as scholarly and literary ones.\(^5\) This militarisation of society and inclusion of military men in government increased the likelihood of bloody coups d’état and succession struggles at court.

**Succession Struggles**

The stereotype of Chinese dynastic succession involves an emperor who designates an heir, usually the eldest legitimate son, to accede to the throne in an orderly manner after the father’s death. The reality is that primogeniture was manipulated or ignored. As a result, succession was ‘volatile and potentially very violent’, and sometimes entire lines of kin were killed to preserve

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the power of a reigning monarch. Even before the demise of a monarch, bloody power struggles often occurred among relatives and courtiers. Coup attempts were common. The ideology of succession by the eldest legitimate son did not hold much sway in this period.

Some scholars have argued that violent struggles over the throne resulted from the cultural influence of the rulers of north China of Inner Asian ancestry. However, more than foreign cultural influences must have been at play, because analogous succession struggles also regularly occurred in the southern dynasties with ethnically Chinese emperors. In fact the extreme disunity of the fourth century was triggered by succession disputes among the ruling Chinese Sima family of the Western Jin Dynasty (265–317). The origin of the conflict was a struggle between the wife and mother of a weak emperor and their extended families. This triggered various military interventions by Sima kinsmen who held regional military commands. Known as the War of the Eight Princes, the internecine violence led to the demise of the Western Jin.

Among the southern dynasties from 420 to 550 only one designated heir managed to succeed his father, the Southern Qi Emperor Wu (r. 483–94). During the fifty-nine years of the Former Song, twenty-seven members of the imperial descent group were involved in attempted coups, about half of whom were brothers and uncles of reigning emperors. An example of a bloody succession during the Former Song occurred in 453. The eldest son of Emperor Wen (r. 424–53) assassinated his father and usurped the throne. Thereupon a brief war ensued between the usurper and the emperor’s third son, who was a provincial general. The latter defeated his older brother on the battlefield and reigned as Emperor Xiaowu (r. 453–64). His victory depended on a group of battle-hardened retainers. After an uncle raised an army in rebellion, fear of potential usurpers led Xiaowu to carry out bloody purges over the next decade. The Emperor Xiaowu’s reign was established in battle and preserved with the aid of military retainers who could protect the emperor and eliminate actual or potential rivals.

6 Eisenberg, Kingship in Early Medieval China, pp. 20–1.
9 Chittick, Patronage and Community, pp. 11, 31–5; Eisenberg, Kingship in Early Medieval China, pp. 48–9, 55–7.
To the north, under the Särbi-ruled Northern Wei, the politics of succession likewise were violent, but most blood was spilled within the confines of the palace. The main threats to reigning emperors came from members of his paternal line and palace women plotting to usurp power. For the first seven decades of Northern Wei rule, the infighting and purges were bloody – with many brothers, uncles and other male kin being killed. For example, the dynastic founder, Emperor Daowu (r. 386–409), was responsible for the deaths of two half-brothers, but ultimately was assassinated by one of his sons, Shao. This son ruled briefly before being killed by his brother, who ruled as Emperor Mingyuan (r. 409–24). Presumably to control female power at court, a violent tradition was instituted by the mid fifth century of forcing the birth mother of the heir apparent to commit suicide. Instead of the intended effect, the practice provided opportunities for nursemaids, barren wives and stepmothers of emperors to dominate the palace. For example, Dowager Empress Wenming became embroiled in a power struggle with her stepson, Emperor Xianzu (r. 465–71, d. 476) after he retired in favour of his young heir, Xiaowen. Allegedly, after the Xianzu had put Wenming’s lover to death, she arranged for Xianzu’s assassination. She served as regent for her step-grandson, Emperor Xiaowen (r. 471–99), until her death in 490. Political power depended on the ability to shed the blood of males and females who inhabited the palace. Perhaps because the internecine killing was confined to the court, the Northern Wei lasted almost 150 years, a longer span than any of the five southern dynasties whose struggles were more likely to be settled on the battlefield.

The long-lasting Tang dynasty, whose rulers rose to high elite status under the Western Wei and Northern Zhou, followed a pattern of bloody succession that resembled the northern dynasties more than the southern ones. From 618 to 756 the only succession of a designated heir was Gaozong (r. 649–83). Even in Gaozong’s case, the preceding decade was characterised by typical factional disputes over who should be the crown prince. The most famous incident involved Emperor Taizong (r. 626–49). Prior to ascending the throne, he was aided by twelve ‘trusted subordinates’ who ambushed his brother, the heir apparent Jiancheng, in 626. Soon thereafter, Emperor Gaozu (r. 618–26) relinquished the throne to Taizong. To consolidate his authority, Taizong replaced

Gaozu’s loyalists in the military and bureaucracy with his own adherents, and the sons of Jiancheng were put to death. In another example, after cultivating a band of trusted martial clients, Xuanzong (r. 712–56) spent several years eliminating rivals in the palace, including the murder of a female cousin and forced suicide of an aunt. He placed his father on the throne in 710 and himself in 712. These contests for power resemble the Northern Wei pattern because they remained within the confines of the palace, preserving dynastic continuity.

In the second half of the Tang, a new historical pattern emerged as eunuchs were institutionalised as kingmakers. Previously, eunuch involvement in palace faction struggles had been episodic. For example, Zong Ai, a powerful eunuch of the Northern Wei arranged the killings of several of the crown prince’s supporters and perhaps the crown prince himself in 451 and 452, but Zong fell victim soon thereafter. By the late Tang, eunuch power was institutionalised due to their control over the capital armies and monopolisation of communications with the inner palace, particularly in the 820s and 830s. They installed the 15-year-old Emperor Jingzong after the death of his father in 824. When he proved to be too immature and irresponsible to be controlled, they had him murdered in 827. His younger half-brother Wenzong (r. 827–40) was next chosen to rule at 17 years of age, but he chafed at eunuch control as he matured. Wenzong’s gambit to throw off eunuch domination failed in the so-called ‘Sweet Dew Incident’ in late 835, when an attempted ambush of eunuchs went awry. In response, the eunuchs called in the army to carry out a bloody purge in which more than a thousand government officials were killed. Three chief ministers and their families were publicly executed on trumped-up charges of plotting rebellion. Factional conflicts within the ranks of the eunuchs also instigated violence. After eunuchs executed Wenzong’s only son in 838, three eunuch factions emerged, each supporting a new candidate to become heir apparent. The victorious eunuch faction, who promoted the candidacy of the future Emperor Wuzong (r. 840–6), had the support of the capital army. Another bloody purge ensued, leading to the deaths of the two failed candidates and their supporters.

After civil wars led to the fall of the Tang in 907, the succeeding Five Dynasties in the north exhibited short-lived dynastic successions, even more unstable than the southern dynasties in the fourth to sixth centuries. The Later Tang dynasty exemplifies a paradigm of highly militarised succession. The original power group was composed of the sons and adopted sons of Li Keyong, who was a prominent general of Shatuo Turk descent at the end of the Tang dynasty. His father had been bestowed the Li surname of the Tang dynastic line as an honour. The Later Tang dynastic founder Li Cunxiu was the birth son of Li Keyong. His reign only lasted from 923 to 926 before mutinous troops, who were poorly paid, killed him and enthroned his brother by adoption, Li Siyuan (r. 926–33). The latter became the only Later Tang emperor to die a natural death. Two of his blood sons were killed in the succession struggles in 933. Here we see a pattern of the armies, rather than eunuchs, as kingmakers in bloody successions. These martial emperors failed to establish legitimacy because they could not organise a stable civil administration to pay the troops.

The Former Shu Kingdom (903–26) of the south-west, one of the Ten Kingdoms, provides an example of a violent succession struggle involving mutually suspicious sons and females of the harem. Wang Jian, an ethnically Chinese Tang military governor, officially declared himself king and then emperor as he solidified control over the region as the Tang empire dissolved in civil war. Like the Shatuo-founded Later Tang dynasty to the north, Wang relied on a military in which most commanders were his adopted sons. After declaring the dynasty, Wang was vexed with the problem of designating a successor. He chose his second birth son over his most able adopted son in 908. The bypassed adopted son was executed for insubordination soon thereafter. Two years later, the heir apparent was killed while leading his armed adherents in a failed coup attempt. Faced with the need to designate a new heir, Wang fell under the influence of his favourite concubine and chose her child, Zongyan. At 14 years old, he was the youngest son. Though this put an end to internecine conflict, Zongyan proved to be a disastrous choice. After succeeding his father in 918, his negligent administration alienated the army and populace. When Later Tang forces invaded in 925, the Former Shu armies surrendered without a fight.

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Succession was frequently a violent political struggle involving many different actors at court. In the case of strong princes contending for the throne, violent successions arose from the need to eliminate rivals with real or potential claims to the throne. They generally relied on their military clients to kill and cow kin who were potential adversaries. Successions remained bloody even when harem women, eunuchs or armies influenced or controlled the monarch because of the need to prevent rival factions from promoting other claimants to the throne.

**Dynastic Changes**

Succession disputes spilling out of the palace, conflicts among the elite, poor administration of the empire and natural disasters were factors that could provoke a dynasty’s army and/or subject population to revolt. Rebellious commoners never founded new dynasties in the early medieval period. Instead, military officers, leading personal armies that succeeded in gaining control of the court, in most cases established the new imperial lines. Since the dynastic founder and successors were expected to be males, eunuchs and women who were powers behind the throne were not candidates for establishing dynasties. Empress Wu’s Zhou dynasty, to be discussed below, was the sole exception.

The fall of the Northern Wei dynasty provides an example of dynastic change resulting from civil war. The troubles began when the garrisons guarding the northern frontier revolted in the 523. The catalyst was a local commander who refused to distribute grain to soldiers and their families during a period of drought and famine. A military officer of agro-pastoral Jie descent, Erzhu Rong, succeeded in gaining the loyalty of rebel troops in 528. He carried out a massacre of the Northern Wei child emperor, his mother and 2,000 officials and courtiers who had surrendered. Erzhu enthroned a puppet Wei emperor, but two years later Erzhu was assassinated while visiting the puppet court.\(^\text{18}\) By 534 rebellious troops had coalesced into two rival factions under Yuwen Tai, a Särbi strongman, and Gao Huan (496–547), a Chinese officer who had assimilated into the frontier Särbi culture. The rival factions established competing states with puppet rulers, the Western

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Wei (535–56) and Eastern Wei (534–50) respectively. Later, their heirs founded the Northern Zhou (557–81) and Northern Qi (550–77) dynasties. Both military strongmen had risen from relatively low positions in the officer corps through their intelligence, cunning and ability to gain the respect and personal loyalty of subordinate generals, including former rivals. In addition, the calculated use of violence was an aspect of their success. For example, when Western Wei Emperor Fei (r. 551–54) chafed at Yuwen Tai’s control, the emperor was deposed, replaced by his brother, and poisoned two months later.19

Yuwen considered carrying out a coup to establish his own dynasty, but decided to wait until he had reunified all of China. Before this could happen, he died of natural causes in 557 at age 50, but soon afterward his 15-year-old son was installed as the first Northern Zhou emperor. Most members of the former Wei imperial house were spared, perhaps because they had lacked real power for two decades. The exception was the abdicated Wei emperor, who was killed in less than a month. Two of Yuwen Tai’s close associates also were killed because they were suspected of disloyalty to his heir.20 The Northern Zhou succeeded in conquering the Northern Qi, but lasted only two decades because it would succumb to the Sui Dynasty (581–618) in a much bloodier coup.

Coupes were especially prevalent during the periods of division between north and south. The typical case involved a powerful military officer of elite social status who had gained regency over a child emperor. The usurping dynastic founder was given a patina of legitimacy when the child ruler was forced to abdicate ‘voluntarily’ to his ‘virtuous’ successor. The claim to morality was particularly sanctimonious in coupes d’état because the dynastic founder typically sought to exterminate the abdicated emperor, his kinsmen and their loyal adherents in order to consolidate power.

The Sui founder, Yang Jian (541–604), followed the blueprint of coupes d’état that had been established in the preceding centuries. Yang was from a well-connected family that had risen to power under the Western Wei and Northern Zhou dynasties. He became a close associate of Northern Zhou emperor Wudi (r. 561–78), who was responsible for the conquest of the Northern Qi. A key to Yang Jian’s future occurred in 561 when his oldest daughter was betrothed to Wudi’s designated heir, and Yang Jian gained access to the palace as father-in-law of the emperor. When the heir died only


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a few years after Wudi, Yang Jian instigated a coup with forged edicts appointing him as supreme military commander and regent to the new child emperor. When he invited some Northern Zhou princes to the capital, they revolted because they suspected an ambush. In the ensuing war, Yang Jian used his control of the capital armies to defeat opposing troops and kill fifty-eight members of the Yuwen imperial lineage.

Yang Jian’s desire to carry out the coup and found his own dynasty may have been because the child emperor was born of a concubine rather than Yang Jian’s daughter. In accordance with custom, Yang Jian moved gradually to found the dynasty. Over the course of several months, edicts were issued in the name of the child emperor praising Yang Jian. Finally, in early 581 an edict was promulgated in the name of the child emperor offering his abdication. Making a customary display of reluctance, Yang declined three times, but was finally ‘persuaded’ to become the son of heaven. The abdicated child emperor was eventually killed. The brutal extermination of all male kin of the Yuwen line, whom Yang Jian and his father had served loyally, forestalled any attempt to restore the Northern Zhou dynasty. 21

However, the Sui proved to be another short-lived dynasty because Yang Jian’s heir overtaxed the population with repeated unsuccessful attempts to conquer Korea. Massive rebellions broke out starting in 613. As China dissolved into civil war, the eventual Tang dynastic founder, Li Yuan, became one of the major combatants seeking to reunify the empire. He used a mixture of martial violence and diplomacy to consolidate power. Li Yuan was initially a Sui loyalist military officer involved in suppressing peasant rebels, but by 617 had decided to revolt. He became one of nine major rebel warlords, more than half of whom were former Sui military officers. All of the major contenders, including Li Yuan, claimed to have received the mandate of heaven and proclaimed the founding of their own dynasties while fighting was under way. 22 Li Yuan emerged victorious in part because of his willingness to coopt rivals. Regional warlords or their followers who voluntarily surrendered were appointed to positions in the Tang military or civil administration. In contrast, rival warlords who refused to surrender were attacked. For example, in a key battle in 621 Tang forces under Li Shimin, the future emperor, defeated the Tang’s two strongest opponents, Dou Jiande and Wang Shichong. Some 3,000 men fell in battle and 50,000

were captured. Dou and Wang were captured and convicted of treason. Dou was executed in the marketplace of Chang’an, and Wang was killed surreptitiously on the way to exile. In other cases, warlords who insisted on defying the Tang to the end faced the wrath of their own adherents. For example, Gao Kaidao had originally received investiture from the Tang, but later revolted. Knowing that the Tang would execute him for treason, he refused to surrender, but committed suicide when most of his own forces rebelled against him. As China dissolved into civil war, military leaders often personally shed blood. The future Tang emperor, Li Shimin, and other warlords, such as Dou Jiande, were involved in combat, often leading their troops in cavalry charges. Li Shimin claimed to have killed more than a thousand men.

An example of failed dynastic change in an earlier civil war demonstrates that founding a successful dynasty required more than military prowess. When a military governor of the Northern Qi dynasty, Hou Jing, fled southward with his army, the Southern Liang dynasty was unable to put up effective resistance. Hou Jing took the capital, Jiankang, in 549 after a six-month siege that brought misery to the populace. Marrying a Liang princess, he ruled through puppet emperors for two years until founding his own Han dynasty. However, due to poor governance and lack of attention to consolidating control over the countryside, Hou Jing was soon forced to flee Jiankang. After his erstwhile adherents killed him while on the run, his body met a grisly fate. His head was delivered to the new Liang emperor, his hands were sent to the Northern Qi as a peace offering, and the remainder of his body was returned to Jiankang where the flesh was devoured by a mob that included his widow, the Liang princess, and the bones were burned and ‘mixed with wine and drunk by those who suffered because of him’. Hou Jing’s example demonstrates that a military leader with poor political and administrative skills not only could lose political support and legitimacy but also could become the object of contemptuous collective violence.

Perhaps the most violent attack on the political elite of the entire period originated in the harem when Empress Wu carried out a coup to abolish the

26 Scott Pearce, ‘Who, and What, Was Hou Jing?’, Early Medieval China 6 (2000), 49–73, at 64.
Tang and found her own Zhou dynasty (690–705). She ascended from being Gaozong’s (649–83) concubine to empress, and finally ruled outright as emperor in part because of her mastery of the politics of the harem and bureaucratic administration. Perhaps due to the anti-female bias of the traditional historians, contemporary sources depict her as particularly cruel and vindictive. Regardless of the truth of these accusations, she irrefutably resorted to violence more frequently than male contenders for power in order to overcome social resistance to female rule. We also should not overlook her deft political skills and ideological innovations, which, like the violence involved in her consolidation of power, were perhaps the most intense in imperial Chinese history.  

While still a concubine, she assembled a network of spies in the inner palace to outmanoeuvre her rivals, including Empress Wang, who was deposed on the orders of the emperor and later killed. Officials who had opposed her elevation to empress were banished, killed or forced to commit suicide over the next several years. When Gaozong suffered a debilitating stroke in 675, the empress took control over government. After his death she usurped authority from her own sons – Zhongzong (r. 684, 705–10) and Ruizong (r. 684–90, 710–12) – who served successively as figureheads. The empress had always been a brilliant political strategist, but as she increasingly consolidated her power from 683 to 697, she took ideological innovations and violence against elites to the highest levels of the early medieval period. After she forced Zhongzong to abdicate in 684, a rebellion occurred in south China. In reaction, she carried out what has been described as a ‘reign of terror’ to protect her informal control of the court. She claimed ‘thousands of victims over the next six years’. By 685 her loyal ‘cruel’ officials staffed judicial offices and lodged charges of treason, which were frequently false, against high-ranking officials and military officers. Confessions were obtained through torture. Punishments extended to family members who were executed or exiled in accordance with Tang law against sedition. In the following year, she installed a giant bronze urn where suggestions and complaints could be filed anonymously. The urn became the means for malcontents and opportunists to file false charges against their rivals. The culmination of the violence came in 688, two years before she founded her Zhou dynasty. Laying a trap similar to Yang Jian’s in 580, she invited the collateral kin of the Tang house to a grand ceremony in the capital. Suspecting an ambush,

one of her deceased husband’s uncles attempted a poorly organised revolt that ultimately failed. In retaliation, almost every member of the Tang’s Li lineage was accused of sedition and executed. The few exceptions included her sons Zhongzong and Ruizong and their children, who remained under house arrest.28

The use of violence ultimately paved the way for her usurpation of power in 690. In contrast to other coups, after Ruizong’s forced abdication he was named heir apparent and the Li surname of Ruizong and her other surviving children and their offspring was changed to her surname of Wu. Her use of violence against real, potential and imagined political enemies was qualitatively similar to contemporary standards, but quantitatively unique in its large scale. Although unique to early China, her purge perhaps resembles similar efforts under the first emperor of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and Chairman Mao during the Cultural Revolution.29 As an unconventional female emperor, she seems to have needed to resort to violence more frequently than her male contemporaries to assure that the military and bureaucracy were filled with supporters, and that potential opponents were cowed or dead, including almost the entire Li lineage. Nonetheless, her female dynasty relied too much on her personal political talents to endure. As she became too feeble in the final year of her life, she fell victim to a countercoup and Tang restoration in 705 with her son Zhongzong on the throne. Perhaps too old and sick to be considered a threat, she was allowed to retire and apparently died a natural death months later at the age of 80.30

Sanctioned Violence in the Exercise of Power

Given the violence that was intrinsic to power, it is not surprising that emperors, or holders of power from behind the throne, did not hesitate to inflict bloody punishments upon courtiers, military officers and other subjects for real crimes, perceived slights or disloyalty, or to appease political constituencies. The Chinese legal tradition sanctioned violence on behalf of the state to maintain order. Only the emperor was above the law, so he or she could modify punishments for political purposes. Displays of leniency

solidified an emperor’s reputation for benevolence, while harsh punishments could strike fear into potential political opponents. When the circumstances demanded, monarchs were just as willing to execute former trusted subordinates as they were to eliminate relatives who stood in their way to power. Factional competition could lead to false charges against political enemies. In this case, the emperor became a weapon used to bludgeon foes in an opposing faction.

_The Legal Code_

Although only the Tang dynasty legal code is fully extant, we can assume that its legal principles applied for most of the early medieval period because it is similar to surviving portions of earlier Qin, Han and Sui dynasty law, and later the Song dynasty (960–1270) accepted the Tang Code with only a few revisions.\(^31\) The code envisioned that justice would be meted out fairly because government officials did not have any discretion in sentencing. Punishments varied according to status ranking that divided society into three strata – privileged (imperial relatives and officials), commoners (free individuals) and inferior (slaves, bound retainers and bondsmen). For identical crimes, miscreants of the privileged class received the lightest sentences and members of the inferior class the harshest.\(^32\) The social disparities in sanctions carried the assumption that commoners and slaves were more deserving of violent treatment than government officials and aristocrats, who could escape most crimes with a fine.

Some of the penalties were physically violent, while others took a psychological and economic toll. The punishments grew progressively heavier, starting with corporal penalties of beatings with a light or heavy stick. Interestingly, the next two types of penalties, penal servitude or lifetime exile, were not physically violent, but took an emotional and financial toll. Finally, the most severe sentences were the death penalties of strangulation and decapitation. The latter was considered harsher because the body was mutilated. Only the emperor could approve a capital sentence, and penal servitude and exile had to be reviewed by higher authorities. From the perspective of the ruler and state, these punishments were ‘intended to inspire awe and to be dreaded … to fill the prospective law-breaker with

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The violent corporal and capital punishments were most explicit in this regard because they were carried out publicly. Despite the brutality of some of the corporal and capital punishments, they are somewhat moderated in comparison with Qin and Han dynasty law. The earlier legal codes prescribed various forms of mutilation – including severing of the nose, feet and testicles – and two other grisly types of death penalties that involved being carved into pieces or cut in half at the waist.

The ultimate purpose of the law was to protect the emperor and the dynasty. To this end, the most severe penalties were meted out for the crimes of rebellion, sedition and treason. All three offences carried penalties of decapitation for the criminal and collective punishment of their extended families. For example, when the crime was rebellion or sedition, the offender’s father and sons were strangled and his extended family was enslaved by the state. For these offences, the privileged classes were punished as harshly as commoners. The function of these laws was to use state-sanctioned violence to strike fear into the hearts of any potential rebels in the provinces or usurpers at court, who, as we have seen above, were usually members of the elite.

Punishment of Civil Officials and Military Officers

Strong rulers varied in their application of violence towards officialdom and members of the court. Even though open discussion of policy was customarily encouraged, opposing an emperor’s favoured policies posed dangers because criticism of the monarch carried the death penalty. Sui Emperor Yangdi (r. 605–17) reacted harshly towards critics. Zhang Heng – whose privately critical remarks about Yangdi’s construction projects and imperial tours were reported to the emperor – was forced to commit suicide in 612.

The atmosphere of fear at the court contributed to the quick fall of the Sui dynasty because officials became unwilling to report bad news. Some emperors consciously cultivated an image of tolerance towards remonstrations, most notably Taizong early in his reign. Taizong later applied violence strategically when he carried out a purge of corrupt local officials. Thousands were punished, including seven egregious offenders who were executed,

37 Xiong, Emperor Yang, pp. 42–5.
which far exceeded the legal code’s sanctions for corruption.\textsuperscript{38} Likewise, Empress Wu exercised violence strategically after founding her Zhou dynasty. Toning down her campaign to sow fear among officialdom, she gradually eliminated the ‘cruel officials’ who had supported her rise to power with trumped up charges of sedition. However, she had a final outburst in 697 when thirty-six prominent officials and over a thousand of their relatives and adherents were executed or exiled for being suspected of disloyalty.\textsuperscript{39} In all of these cases, rulers reacted to real or perceived fears of corruption and disloyalty with capital sentences. The violence inherent to the rise to power obviously made emperors suspicious and created opportunities for informants to slander innocent enemies at court.

In the military, generals potentially could receive violent punishments that varied according to circumstances. Penalties for military defeats might include execution, banishment, demotion or loss of official status. For example, on a frontier campaign Cheng Zhijie, who was closely connected to the imperial family, failed to pursue the Western Turk forces in 656. Emperor Gaozong ordered a death sentence that was reduced to loss of official status. Perhaps due to his connections, Cheng was reinstated as a high-ranked provincial administrator a few years later.\textsuperscript{40} In contrast, Emperor Xuanzong was not forgiving when the generals Gao Xianzhi and Feng Changqing, leading an army of raw recruits, failed to defeat An Lushan’s army of rebellious professional troops. Gao and Feng were summarily executed, probably because of Emperor Xuanzong’s urgent need to protect his failing rule.\textsuperscript{41} In another type of case, a general heading a garrison on the Tang’s north-western frontier, Liu Huan, poorly managed relations with neighbouring tribes, including instigating a skirmish that resulted in the death of a Turkish envoy in 734. Xuanzong ordered the execution of Liu Huan and his family for ‘plotting rebellion’ and sent their heads to the Turkish khan. The charge of rebellion seems to have been fabricated to justify the penalty of decapitation and maintain peaceful relations along the borderlands.\textsuperscript{42} In these cases, the reigning emperor reacted to military failures or mismanaged

\textsuperscript{38} Wechsler, ‘T’ai-tsung (Reign 626–49) the Consolidator’, pp. 190–3, 206. Various forms of official malfeasance were punished with beatings, see Johnson, \textit{T’ang Code}, vol. 11, pp. 93–119.


frontier relations with benevolence or harshness that seemingly reflect political exigencies.

**Suppression of Rebellion**

In periods of rebellion and civil war, the rebel army and the populace under its control could become the target of state-sanctioned violence in the forms of plunder, enslavement, forced migration and killing. Even though the Confucian value system discouraged pillage, Chinese emperors took a pragmatic attitude towards paying troops with the spoils of war when their states were weak and short on funds. In the sixth century, Yuwen Tai’s Western Wei forces plundered and enslaved the populaces of rival rulers.\(^\text{43}\) Two centuries later, during the An Lushan rebellion, Tang forces looted two southern cities retaken after local uprisings in 761.\(^\text{44}\) Though we have no evidence that the Tang generals or government condoned this instance of plunder, Emperor Suzong (r. 756–62) was directly involved in another case that secured the participation of Uighur forces against rebel-held Chang’an and Luoyang in exchange for the right to loot the inhabitants and enslave the children.\(^\text{45}\) In these cases, the populations were being treated violently whether or not they had supported the rebels.

Ringleaders of rebellions typically were executed, but their followers might be pardoned or subject to forced migration or mass killing. An instructive case involves the Lanchi Hu, a non-Chinese people living in the northern Tang Empire. After a revolt in 721, Tang troops slaughtered 15,000 of the Lanchi Hu and captured their leader, Kang Daibin. Delivered to Chang’an, Kang was publically cut in half at the waist in the Western Market. His death penalty exceeded the decapitation stipulated in the Tang legal code, possibly inspired by the above-mentioned Qin and Han codes. Evidently as a warning, Emperor Xuanzong ordered the ‘chiefs of the four barbarians’ to watch the gruesome spectacle, but pardoned the remainder of the Lanchi Hu whom he called ‘honest and obedient commoners, the same as Han’ Chinese. Despite the pardon, the Lanchi Hu erupted in a revolt again in 722 after a misguided attack by Tang troops. After another military suppression, the emperor ordered the forced relocation of 50,000 people to the south to prevent further uprisings.\(^\text{46}\)

\(^{46}\) Ibid., pp. 64–5, 283.
Conclusion

State-sanctioned violence was the foundation of political legitimacy in early China, but was not sufficient to ensure stable rule. A dynastic ruler not only had to be powerful, but also had to demonstrate that he or she was benevolent and had heaven’s blessings. All political actors, whether emperors, officials, eunuchs or palace women, assumed that violent purges of real or potential political enemies were needed to consolidate power. Once on the throne or ruling from behind it, coercive force created emotions of fear and awe that were necessary to gain the acquiescence of the military, officialdom and general populace. However, to demonstrate the dynasty’s sacred mandate to rule, the army and the legal system had to become instruments to maintain domestic peace. In addition, collection of taxes and delivery of salaries and rewards to retainers, bureaucrats and soldiers created respect for the leader’s benevolence and generosity and forestalled palace coups and military rebellions. China shared these characteristics of legitimacy with most premodern states. If state violence in the early medieval period has a distinguishing characteristic in Chinese history, it may be the bloody patrimonial politics of the palace that contributed to the relatively frequent usurpations of power, and high degree of political division and rebellion.

Bibliographical Essay


The two authors who have made the greatest contributions to explaining early medieval violence primarily analyse the causes of political instability, and secondarily describe the concomitant bloodshed. Andrew Chittick, Patronage and Community in Medieval China: The Xiangyang Garrison, 400–600 C.E (Albany: State University of New

York Press, 2010) studies a local garrison’s relationship with the courts of the Southern Dynasties and argues that when a patron’s ties with military clients dissolved, the dispersed warriors instigated civil wars and dynastic changes. Andrew Eisenberg, *Kingship in Early Medieval China* (Leiden: Brill, 2008) describes elite politics as a manifestation of classic Weberian patrimonialism and argues that rulers consciously manipulated factional rivalries with violent results.

Most of the evidence to write this chapter was gathered from narratives of political and institutional history, particularly The *Cambridge History of China* (CHC), which at the time of writing still did not have a volume published on the Six Dynasties (220–581). To fill this lacuna, I relied mainly on Eisenberg’s and Chittick’s above-mentioned books, and works of Scott Pearce including his monumental dissertation, ‘The Yü-wen Regime in Sixth Century China’, unpublished PhD thesis, Princeton University, 1987.


To ask what state-sanctioned violence meant in medieval Japan (1185–1615) is to be confronted with two attendant questions: what counted as violence; and what counted as state-sanctioned?

There is no single, overarching word for violence in Japanese during this period. Violence was instantiated in specific actions: disorders; outrages; cutting down and wounding; offensive or defensive warfare; quarrels and disputes; battles. Warrior regimes made it their business to restrain armed conflict (variously occasioned and understood) among their followers, not the populace at large. Yet however multifarious in its manifestations and designations, an overarching idea of violence as a threat to peace and the social order inhabits our sources and shapes the authorities’ definition of their mandate to rule. In the various regimes’ rhetoric and legal output the restraining of violence was an essential dimension of governance, and the ability to use violence against those who violated the peace a jealously guarded prerogative. Yet the coercive (and thus violent) character of the state’s exercise of power remained largely unspoken. When the authorities used force, they claimed to be quelling a disturbance or restoring the peace. Violence, when labelled in one of its concrete manifestations, was the violence of the law breakers, be it brawling or running rampage in someone else’s property or feuding. From the point of view of the authorities – self-styled or otherwise – all unauthorised uses of force were criminal and political at once.

Answers to what constituted state sanction are, in some ways, even more elusive. Contemporaries tended to identify state-sanctioned and thus legitimate conduct as ‘public’. It was, most explicitly and simply, the legitimation conferred by office and, by extension, by membership in the ruling regime. All actions performed by an office holder were public acts, but ‘the public’
was seldom invoked explicitly; more often legitimacy was claimed by profes-
sing not to have ‘private’ (as in selfish, narrowly partisan or factional) motives. The juxtaposition of public and private carried overt moral undertones and rhetorically claimed to be uncomplicated.

Yet most of the regimes that governed Japan between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries found themselves relying, whether they recognised it or not, on the private and familial as much as on the public and official. Office holders, in other words, realized their public claims to authority through personal and intensely factional networks of lordly patronage and loyalty. For roughly 300 years, two warrior regimes (known as bakufu, or shogunates) functioned or claimed to function within the framework of the pre-existing imperial state, even as they developed increasingly adversarial relations with the very authorities that granted them the public status needed to govern. The foundering of central authority, at the end of the fifteenth century, brought about a new class of regional warlords who, in dispensing with the sanction of office, needed to forge new ideas about what might constitute the public, that is to say, the unselfish and legitimate.

Previous scholarship has explored the ritualised violence that typified intra-elite conflict within the imperial state between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, and the judicial violence exercised by the third and last shogunate in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. This chapter focuses on the regimes that dominated the country between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, and on the way in which the suppression of violence – from petty crime to unauthorised military action – was central to the creation of a mandate to rule. In particular, it analyses legislative output as symptomatic of shifting ideas about the bounds of acceptable – and indeed, necessary – judicial and military violence, and explores the ways in which the wartime escalation of violence revealed by successive laws is also a marker of changing claims to public and state authority.

The warrior class emerged historically as part of a broader phenomenon of privatisation and personalisation of rule, which came to a head in the twelfth century, when the imperial court’s reliance on the military services of warriors led to the transformation of ‘hired swords’ (historians’ characterisation of warriors under imperial rule) into political actors in their own right.

During the first 400 years of warrior ascendancy, lawful violence went from being that which was deployed by the state, to that which was deployed on behalf of the state by private actors, to that which was deployed in the service of one’s immediate overlord by his followers (as least as long as that overlord was successful and able to retain the mantle of legitimacy for himself).

Each of the first two shogunates (a third would emerge from the civil war and rule Japan from roughly 1600 to 1867) issued a legal ‘formulary’ (shikimoku) outlining the guiding legal principles that informed its governance: the Kamakura regime (1185–1333) issued the Jōei shikimoku (officially entitled Goseibai shikimoku, or Formulary on Judicature) in 1332; its successor, the Muromachi regime (c. 1336–1573), produced the Kenmu shikimoku (Kenmu Formulary) in 1336, explicitly invoking the earlier code as a model. Each of the formularies was then followed over the years by a steady stream of ‘additional articles’ (tsuikahō) that addressed new circumstances as they arose and demanded political and legal attention.

When warlords (daimyō) emerged in the sixteenth century who made no pretence of relying on any source of external validation, the personalistic nature of rule only heightened the value of military success in determining the right to govern. In responding to breaches of the peace, warlords increasingly ignored the distinction between political disagreement and criminal behaviour. Having risen to prominence by ignoring once-revered chains of command and venues of adjudication, these new lords found their still precarious positions threatened by the ubiquity of self-redress. As a solution, they attempted to monopolise the exercise of violence and, at the same time, to escalate its brutality in an effort to dissuade actors other than themselves from challenging their monopoly. To distinguish themselves from their subjects, warlords promoted a new conception of ‘public authority’ – one based not on investiture from above but on the seemingly undeniable merit of survival and success; they negated the personal, private character of violence and subjected it once again to the sanction of a ‘state’ (kokka, that is, the warlord’s domain) conceived as above the fray. However novel their conception of authority, warlords too turned to the promulgation of laws – both as instruments of governance and as legitimising tools.3 Several

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daimyō houses went so far as to issue comprehensive codes: the Imagawa (in 1526 and 1553), the Date (in 1536), the Takeda (in 1547 and 1574), the Yūki (in 1556), the Chōsogabe (in 1596), to name but a few.

Kamakura and the Jōei Formulary

From its very establishment, the first warrior regime took as its central mandate the regulation of lawlessness and violence. Created in the wake of the Genpei War (1180–5) by the victorious Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147–99), the first shogunate developed piecemeal as a series of offices and courts designed to curb the widespread post-war unrest. Members of the winning coalition intent on settling scores with rivals or expanding their local influence by encroaching on the lands of absentee proprietors caused much of the unrest. The fledgling regime soon established that it would adjudicate disputes over tenurial rights that involved its followers. It would also appoint trustworthy followers to serve as land stewards (jitō) in manorial estates where conflict had disrupted management or the forwarding of rents.

Yet the prerogatives claimed by the rulers in Kamakura foregrounded both their own private character and the limitations of their scope. Subject to Kamakura’s directives and eligible to seek its arbitration were two groups only: members of the Minamoto warrior band – its honourable housemen (gokenin) – and the newly appointed land stewards. Honourable housemen followed Yoritomo in his capacity as head of the Minamoto family; land stewards answered to the new regime as recipients of a title (and an income) that it had the exclusive right to grant. Nominally distinct, the two groups in fact overlapped to a considerable degree, as meritorious housemen were often rewarded with appointments as land stewards. The rulers in Kamakura, then, used their imperial (and thus unquestionably ‘public’) investiture to bolster their management of followers as an extended network of patronage, blurring from the outset the distinction between public and private, official and lordly.

In the aftermath of the Jōkyū Disturbance of 1221, in which retired Emperor Go-Toba led disgruntled warriors and noblemen in an abortive attempt to overthrow the shogunate, the Kamakura regime expanded its reach considerably: politically, by rewarding its supporters and punishing the

insurgents (including Go-Toba); geographically, by appointing loyalists to new jito posts in western Japan, where its followers were fewer. It also began the tentative exercise of legislative authority, with the fifty-one articles of the Jōei Formulary of 1232 (Jōei shikimoku), which for the first time sought to articulate the scope, priorities and procedures of its courts. The promulgation was hardly meant to serve as a new law of the land; civil courts in Kyoto continued to function as they had before the war. Still, along with restating the regime’s commitment to restraining its own men (in nine articles), the Jōei Formulary also codified (in four articles) Kamakura’s nationwide right to investigate and punish sedition against the state – with which the new regime identified itself, even against a retired emperor.

Much of Kamakura’s legislative output after the Jōei Formulary was concerned with tenurial rights and probate. Only about 10 per cent of the more than 600 laws issued in the century between the Formulary and the fall of the regime are concerned with the definition and punishment of violent acts. About a third of these are concentrated in the decade surrounding the Mongol attacks.

The attempted Mongol invasions of 1274 and 1281, which led Kamakura to assume responsibility for Japan’s defence, clearly exposed the contradictions inherent in the regime’s conflation of a public mandate with a private exercise of authority. As the only countrywide institution capable of mustering forces for the protection of Japan’s coasts, the warrior regime unquestionably exercised the shogun’s full formal mandate as a ‘great barbarian-subduing general’ (sei’i taishōgun). Yet mobilisation occurred locally in western Japan, drawing on networks of honourable housemen rather than the warrior population at large. ‘Enlisted’ troops were expected to provide their own equipment (from arms and armour, to horses and even attendants) and cover their own travel and living expenses for the duration of the campaign. Each warrior was also required to bring along a complement of fighting men – typically relatives and retainers – commensurate with his resources. Only lightly directed by the regime’s provincial constables (shugo), such small warrior bands became the core of the Kamakura’s fighting force, which therefore retained a strongly particularistic and familial character.

Indeed, even the incentives the shogunate was able to provide to its army remained predicated on long-standing expectations of private service and

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lordly reward. One particularly industrious warrior, Takezaki Suenaga, participated in both campaigns, but could neither prove to have killed any enemies, nor claim to have been wounded himself or to have suffered casualties among his followers. Those being the established yardsticks of merit, Takezaki was denied a request for reward on the grounds that his appeal was without precedent. If the regime used defence against the foreign threat as a way to expand its martial and peacekeeping prerogatives, Takezaki’s case suggests, it did so only gradually, and less than programmatically. (Tellingly, contact with the great power of the age did not bring about a reconsideration of ideas of legitimate violence: in a series of laws relating to the defence of Japan’s south-western coast, Mongols are referred to as pirates and bandits, relying on the long-established equation between threats to the established order and crime.)

The problem ran deeper than reliance on precedent. Despite Kamakura’s success in repulsing the invader, the attempted Mongol invasions represented a mixed blessing for shogunal authority. Its lordly (private) approach to controlling followers required not only honours but also tangible rewards to offset the crippling costs of long-term mobilisation, yet no such rewards could be forthcoming, as victory had yielded few spoils and no conquered territories to divide among the meritorious.

Ashikaga Ascendancy and the Kenmu Formulary

The first shogunate was brought down in 1333 by an emperor, Go-Daigo (1288–1339), who was unhappy with what he perceived to be the warrior regime’s usurpation of imperial authority. As it had a century before, the Kamakura regime met the challenge with military force. At first (in 1331), the emperor was deposed and exiled, but soon he escaped and renewed his efforts to overthrow the shogunate. Among the last laws issued by the Kamakura shogunate are several concerning battles and military leagues (suppl. art. 58); local disturbances and disorders (suppl. art. 60); as well as the rewards for executing one of Go-Daigo’s sons and generals and one of his

7 Conlan, Divine Intervention, pp. 87–90, 106–7.
10 Ibid., p. 57.
staunchest warrior supporters (suppl. articles 61 and 62). The simultaneous promulgation of provisions on the punishment of lawlessness and promises of reward for those who were to carry out executions of two of Go-Daigo’s standard bearers leaves little doubt about the regime’s attempt to characterise the emperor’s insurrection as illegal conduct. Which side could rightfully claim to use legitimate, state-sanctioned violence was left to polemicians to debate at the time and in the centuries to come. In actual practice, participants seem to have chosen camps on the basis of their estimation of success and reward, trusting that legitimacy would follow victory.

On his second attempt Go-Daigo triumphed, drawing support from disgruntled warriors, resentful of the Kamakura elite’s autocratic ways and deafness to its followers’ economic straits. The fall of the shogunate led to a brief restoration of direct imperial rule, which quickly revealed the winning coalition’s diverse (and incompatible) aims: the emperor wished to negate warriors’ autonomous political role as keepers of the peace, subordinating them once again to the directives of the court; the warrior leaders had participated in the uprising in hopes of replacing the regime in Kamakura with another one – also led by warriors – that would be more responsive to their interests. The most powerful among them, Ashikaga Takauji (1305–58), eventually rebelled and drove Go-Daigo from the capital. The dethroned emperor fled to the mountains south of Nara, where he established a court in exile and rallied his remaining supporters, beginning a war of attrition that his descendants would continue until 1392.

The fraught circumstances of the second shogunate’s birth – its labile claims to a legitimate mandate – had a marked influence on the shape taken by the new regime’s institutions and on the laws through which it defined itself. Ashikaga Takauji, who would eventually be named shogun, issued the Kenmu Formulary in 1336, modelling it on the code enacted by the Kamakura regime a century before. The promulgation date is telling, for this ‘shogunal’ code was produced at the time of Takauji’s military occupation of

11 Ibid.
12 For contemporary critiques, see Taiheiki (The Chronicle of the Great Peace), Jinnō Shōtōki (Chronicle of the Legitimate Succession of Divine Emperors) and Nan Taiheiki (Criticisms of Taiheiki).
Kyoto, two years before being granted the office of shogun by a puppet emperor he himself would place on the throne.

The Kenmu Formulary explicitly invokes the Jōei Formulary in its pre-amble – a nod that serves to establish the issuing authority’s continuity with its predecessor despite its lack of legal sanction. Based in Kyoto instead of Kamakura, the new Ashikaga regime would go on to assert far broader governing prerogatives than its model; over the course of the fourteenth century its legal pronouncements would diverge substantially from their thirteenth-century precedent. Yet the Kenmu Formulary was meant to be a political manifesto as much as a law code. Signalling Ashikaga Takauji’s first attempt to position himself as the heir to a century of warrior public authority, the articles are light on substance, more attentive to the weight of past ideals than intent on putting Takauji’s imprint on governance. Conspicuous is the code’s emphasis on morality (practising frugality, abstaining from drinking and carousing, returning improper gifts, emphasising decorum, rewarding uprightness and loyalty). With no hint of irony, the usurper’s first legal document calls for an end to lawlessness – an appeal that, combined with articles prescribing the return of vacant lots to former owners and forbidding the commandeering of private residences, strongly hints at the regime’s attempt to continue another of Kamakura’s legitimising strategies: the suppression of its own supporters’ private recourse to force.

Yet the provisions, as stated in the Kenmu Formulary at least, had no teeth. Article 3, on ‘The Need for Suppressing Violence’, proclaims: ‘Breaking into buildings in broad daylight, burglary at night, murder, and highway robbery cause the cry for help to be heard incessantly. The Shogun must take strenuous measures against these crimes.’\(^\text{16}\) This is more of a lament than a legal provision; it establishes moral credentials rather than prescribing specific action. The violence, unleashed by Takauji’s very conduct, may still have been too widespread for the fledgling regime to commit to eradicating it in short order. Indeed, in the formulary’s concluding clause, the legal expert charged with drafting the document warns: ‘At the present time hostilities have not yet ceased, and caution is of paramount importance.’\(^\text{17}\)

Throughout its two-and-a-half-century existence, the regime remained more concerned with negatively outlining the violence it deemed unacceptable than with positively establishing the scope or specifics of sanctioned

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\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 22.
recourse to force. To be sure, among the more than 500 supplementary articles that followed the Kenmu Formulary, there are some that specify which officials were charged with arresting felons (suppl. art. 473), guarding prisoners’ cages (suppl. art. 476) and torturing prisoners (suppl. art. 477). But these articles were issued in 1523, during the regime’s long decline and after nearly two centuries of complete silence on the issue. No doubt the matters regulated in these provisions were not, in practice, left unattended for nearly 200 years, but the regime’s failure to codify its procedures in writing is a reminder that there were vast and important blank areas in the shogunate’s legal output, and that indeed regulations alone cannot serve as the measure of its attitude towards violence. In this sense, laws were primarily revelatory of the regime’s understanding of law itself – of how legislation served to make visible the authorities’ credentials as much as to regulate fully their daily exercise of power.

Equally inescapable is the degree to which the regime was inclined to define its role through piecemeal prohibition rather than policy; the degree to which, much like its predecessor, it remained more reactive than active in its approach to governance. Its articulations of the limits to be imposed on the use of force remained consonant with the spirit, if not the scope, of the ones first offered by the Kamakura regime.

Hostilities between the northern-court-backed Ashikaga and the southern-court loyalists continued to flare up throughout the country for about half a century. As a response to repeated and diffuse military challenges, the shogunate was forced to devise a way to give its provincial governors (shugo) the military and financial resources to respond (as well as incentives to stay loyal). The solution adopted (in 1352) was to allow governors to carry out requisitions of taxes paid by all estates in the province where a disturbance occurred (with exceptions for the holdings of certain proprietors). In 1355, the collection was extended to all provinces in times of crisis. By 1357, governors were allowed to requisition not half the payments but half the lands.\footnote{Ihara Kesao, ‘Muromachi-ki tōgoku honjoryō shōen no seiritsu katei’, \textit{Kokuritsu Rekishi Minzoku Hakubutsukan Kenkyū Hōkoku} 104 (2003), 18–19, 31–4; Imatani Akira, ‘Muromachi Local Government: Shugo and Kokujin’, in Yamamura (ed.), \textit{Cambridge History of Japan}, vol. 3, pp. 237–40; and Conlan, \textit{State of War}, pp. 85, 98, 224–5.}

\footnote{The officials in question were called \textit{kotoneri} and \textit{zōshiki}. Only the article headings survive, so we have no explanation of their duties or of the differences between the two.
The cumulative effect of these laws, known as *hanzei* (half-tax) decrees, was momentous. They were, characteristically, incremental responses to a political and military problem, yet the solution they offered also represented an important departure, for the right to confiscate the income of aristocratic proprietors for the needs of the warrior regime was, in effect, a suspension of the regime’s primary raison d’être – the safeguard of the lawful order and the suppression of violence – for the sake of the regime’s survival. This position could be rationalised as necessary for the suppression of greater political unrest, but its implications were nonetheless profound.

This rapid cession of authority helped transform provincial governors into more than mere representatives of the regime, for it enabled them to forge ties with local warriors by doling out the fruits of requisitions to those loyal to them. The successive hanzei decrees, in effect, represented a devolution of the means to wage war; provincial governors were now invested with the authority to exercise state-sanctioned violence on a far larger scale than before.

It should not surprise that, at the same time as it granted its governors greater latitude fiscally and militarily, the shogunate felt compelled to issue a law (in 1352; suppl. art. 60) ‘concerning punishment for waging war. An individual who has a shogunal order to enforce must wait for the Bakufu envoy’s transmission of that order to put it into effect … Hereafter, anyone engaging in offensive warfare, no matter the reason, will have all of his property confiscated. On the other hand, any who act in self-defense will have one-half of their lands seized.’

Conflicts between, on the one hand, Ashikaga partisans and officials in the new regime and, on the other, aristocratic proprietors and other warriors both threatened the shogunate directly and undermined its mandate to keep the peace. To accommodate warriors’ penchant for settling scores privately, the regime upheld a distinction between ‘offensive’ and ‘defensive’ warfare.

The first time Ashikaga law had addressed the matter (in suppl. art. 26), referring back to an article in the 1232 code as precedent, had been in a series of pronouncements handed down early in 1347. Here the issue had been more explicitly presented as a matter of private enmities, rather than of the irregular execution of shogunal directives: ‘Even if a man bears a clear grudge, he must make an appeal to the Shogun and respect his judgment. To willfully commit murder will be punished. In the case of offensive

warfare, although one’s original petition may be justified, not to wait for the Bakufu’s decision will be punished as a crime. Still more so, those who do not have justification [for offensive warfare] …\(^{22}\) Breaking the peace was tantamount to encroaching on shogunal prerogatives, and the punishment was accordingly severe. Significant is the acknowledgment here that those guilty of offensive warfare were being punished despite the merits of the original dispute. In this regard, the law served to check over-eager Ashikaga partisans – who broke the peace, confident in the support of their lords – as much as neutral plaintiffs.

Indeed, here and in other similar articles, the shogunate acknowledged what dangerous precedents the hanzei decrees could become, allowing as they did the regime’s representatives to move aggressively with little supervision. Yet we see the authorities move tentatively, displaying great consistency in the enunciation of general principles (private violence is unacceptable), but going back and forth on the consequences of violations. The criminalisation of offensive and defensive warfare was again the object of a law (suppl. art, 58) signed by Takauji himself some time before 1352: ‘Although both are crimes, it is particularly hard to evade punishment for the crime of offensive warfare. In that case, punishment will depend on how severe the offense has been. As for punishing defensive warfare, that will be decided upon investigating the details and weighing the situation.’\(^{23}\) Compared with the authorities’ stance in both the earlier law (art. 26) and the later one (art. 60), here the exclusive right to the exercise of legitimate violence is restated in principle, even as violators are assured that their actions will be judged case-by-case.

Yet the recurring attention to offensive and defensive warfare and to the abuses of power by shogunal representatives remained a response to the violence of the fourteenth century rather than a voluntary pursuit of new justifications for the exercise of the regime’s military capabilities. That these laws were a testimony to the Ashikaga’s embattled beginnings is confirmed, indirectly, by the lack of new pronouncements on offensive and defensive warfare during the shogunate’s heyday, roughly 1369–1467. They reappeared early in the sixteenth century, a time of particular instability within the regime, when multiple contenders vied for the offices of shogun and head of the shogunal administration. Supplementary article 390 (1514) opens by invoking and restating the 1347 precedent. It goes on to add: ‘However, in the


\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 50.
present decree, offensive warfare is even more strictly prohibited. Anyone who disobeys will be executed. If he flees, his fellow conspirators will be sought out and punished.\textsuperscript{24} Two years later (1516), supplementary article 396 returns to the matter, emphasising the economic punishment: ‘Those who carry out offensive warfare, and thereby commit bloodshed and murder, shall have their property confiscated.'\textsuperscript{25}

Murder and bloodshed appear, as they did in the earlier laws, but what remains central to these provisions is the association between breaking the peace and disobedience. Article 60, cited above, was issued together with another provision (article 61), ‘Concerning those who disobey shogunal orders.'\textsuperscript{26} And, beginning in the late fifteenth century, the ever-deepening crisis of shogunal authority gave rise to a number of statutes addressing its followers’ unruliness: ‘Concerning the obligation to report to the Bakufu if members of the shogunal guard commit offenses\textsuperscript{27} (art. 266; 1463); and ‘Prohibition against forming leagues and engaging in uprisings\textsuperscript{28} (art. 304; 1490). Gradually emerging, in these later laws, is the sense that subordinates’ abusive uses of authority and military force were a threat not only to the shogunate’s legitimacy but to its very pre-eminence.

\section*{Violence in Warring States’ Laws}

The violence attendant upon the demise of the Ashikaga shogunate found its way into the codes of law compiled with growing frequency by regional warlords during the course of the long civil war known as the Age of Warring States (\textit{Sengoku jidai}; roughly, 1467–1615).

The regime was first crippled by the internecine strife of its members – the military governors, who had long provided military support to the Ashikaga and had been entrusted with governing the provinces. A protracted and inconclusive war (1467–77) between two coalitions of governors, nominally headed by two aspiring shoguns, left much of the city of Kyoto in ruins, and the governors themselves exhausted militarily, financially and politically. By exposing the hollowness of the regime from which they drew legitimacy, the governors soon found themselves unable to enforce the loyalty of local warriors in the provinces they governed as shogunal officials.

By the middle of the sixteenth century the vast majority of the houses that had once served as military governors had been destroyed or replaced in the provinces. Their place was taken either by their former military deputies

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 142. \hspace{1em} \textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 144. \hspace{1em} \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 51. \hspace{1em} \textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p. 112. \hspace{1em} \textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 120.
\end{flushright}
(shugodai), who had long carried out most of the day-to-day provincial administration and developed ties with locals, or by locals themselves. These ‘men of the provinces’ (kokujin) began from the small power bases provided by ancestral holdings and fought their way to the conquest of entire districts, provinces and even regions.29

Daimyō, as the emergent warlords were known, frequently relied on the administrative and legal frameworks established by the governors they had displaced. Still, by the second quarter of the sixteenth century, they began issuing not only individual decrees of their own but whole law codes. The first to do so were the Imagawa of Suruga province, who issued their code, known as Imagawa kana mokuroku, in 1526. In the code’s final clause, they boldly state: ‘As for the above articles, they are the product of following our repeated realizations and privately recording them for the sake of the domain … [W]e have established this code and it is [composed of] things ruled upon previously … As for the other laws of the realm, even that we privately stopped [drawing] from their precedents is not something [that needs] discussing.’30 A few years later the Imagawa expanded their code, including an even more forceful statement (suppl. art. 20): ‘It was through our efforts that we issued laws for the province and brought peace; not through the shugo’s intervention.’31 While shogunal lawmakers too, in the thirteenth century, had founded the Jōei Formulary on Kamakura’s own accumulated legal wisdom, they had implicitly relied on the court’s mandate to validate their pronouncements. The Imagawa and other daimyō, instead, used legislation to claim not only legitimacy but also independence.

Quite apart from the military force that propelled the daimyō to prominence, the violence of the age is conspicuous, as a range of behaviours in need of regulation, in the greater space devoted to penal law. Fully one-third of the 171 articles of the Date code (Jinkaishū, Collected dust and dirt), for instance, are devoted to violent crimes such as, for example, killing a guest (art. 28), killing a merchant or a travelling ascetic (shugyōsha) (art. 33), killing the wrong person (art. 35), poisoning someone (art. 36), wounding someone as a result of an argument (art. 38).32 Some laws evince concern about the pervasiveness of violence in daily life. The Imagawa code addresses night-time home invasions

(art. 7; a recurrent crime in the laws of the time), as well as the penalty for children involved in fights (art. 11; a less common issue), and how to treat a child who has unintentionally killed a playmate (art. 12).\footnote{Ibid., pp. 116, 118.}

More so even than in shogunal laws, penalties for infractions tended to remain vaguely stated in daimyō codes. The new rulers’ intransigence was denoted obliquely by the novel breadth and variety of definitions of criminal conduct. That penalties for infractions were in general notably harsher than in earlier codes is suggested by those instances in which they were spelled out. The code issued by the Yūki house (Yūki-shi shinhatto) minces no words: ‘Hereafter, if one is disloyal, all his kin must be executed, his family name cancelled, his lands [granted to] someone else’ (art. 22).\footnote{Ishii et al. (eds.), Chūsei Shisō, pp. 252–3.} More run-of-the-mill offenders were subject to harsh punishment as well. Article 26 of the Chōsogabe house’s code (Chōsogabe-shi okitegaki) stipulates: ‘With regard to thieves: they should be captured immediately and the magistrate informed. If there is no question about guilt, they will of course be beheaded.’\footnote{Marius B. Jansen, ‘Tosa in the Sixteenth Century: The 100 Article Code of Chōsokabe Motochika’, Oriens Extremus 10.1 (1963), 83–108; Satō et al. (eds.), Chūsei Hōsei, vol. III, p. 289.} Here, the casual certainty of the penalty is somehow more arresting than the penalty itself. Punishments are made more ominous by appearing as passing mentions, as in the Chōsogabe code (art. 28): ‘With regard to someone who injures another without reason: the nature of the death penalty which is to be imposed will be determined after careful examination. Further, if punishment is extended to the offender’s relatives, the details of the investigation should be made clear.’\footnote{Jansen, ‘Tosa’; Satō et al. (eds.), Chūsei Hōsei, vol. III, pp. 289–90.} The Yūki code contains a similar provision about quarrels conducted without good reason, and here too punishment (confiscation of all lands) may be extended to the culprit’s kin (art. 5).\footnote{Ishii et al. (eds.), Chūsei Shisō, p. 248.} Indeed, such reference to the punishment of kin (however more careful the pronouncement) is unmistakable evidence of the draconian nature of the codes.

The new codes are also characterised by more frequent and specific articulations of daimyō’s monopolistic rights to judicial violence and by careful stipulations concerning delegation of those rights. In his analysis of the Date house’s law code, Kobayashi Hiroshi has argued that despite Date efforts to establish their courts as the sole venues for the adjudication and settlement of disputes, the daimyō had to make numerous concessions to the customary rights enjoyed by land stewards in estates throughout the domain.
Thus the code guaranteed a steward’s right to kill resisting peasants and requisition their lands, as well as his right to discipline his retainers and serfs. Kobayashi concedes that these prerogatives were essentially limited to the sphere of the local estate and to the exercise of the intrinsic prerogatives of land stewardship – to cases in which the retainer or servant breached the main compact with his master. If instead that master protected or hid a follower guilty of a crime – a crime against the law of the domain – then the violation fell within the jurisdiction of the Date.\textsuperscript{38} Yet crucial here is not (or not mainly) daimyō law’s actual reach, but rather its function in delimiting lawful recourse to force. Provisions such as those found in the Date code do not so much protect stewards’ authority as declare the warlord’s right to articulate the limits of his and his steward followers’ respective jurisdictions, by arrogating the right to establish, as domainal law, the contours of customarily held prerogatives.

The peculiar intersection of criminal conduct and (dis)loyalty returns again and again in sixteenth-century codes. Article 22 of the Yūki code is only one example, if a particularly vivid one. The same code returns to the issue in article 28: ‘However much loyalty his family may have displayed in past generations, if one is indiscreet, or lacking in preparedness, or does not serve [the Yūki], he [and his family] must be eliminated.’\textsuperscript{39} In a similar vein, the Chōsogabe code states (art. 84): ‘As regards family name and succession designation for loyal retainers: If a vassal commits a crime and has to be punished, his family name will not be affected if the offence was a minor one. But if he commits a major crime, his punishment should include the loss of his family name.’\textsuperscript{40} Like the Yūki law, this one is primarily concerned with weighing a vassal’s past loyalty against his present disloyalty. Yet a provision in the Date code (art. 61) is suggestive of the degree to which crime and disloyalty were commensurable categories in the eyes of the law-making daimyō: ‘After being judged a bandit, said thief, even if he serves loyally, must not be pardoned glowingly. Furthermore, that thief’s sons and grandsons must not be employed indiscriminately, nor must there be any vassalage.’\textsuperscript{41} In prohibiting the exchange of loyalty for lawfulness the provision implicitly concedes not only the perceived fungibility of the two, but also lords’ frequent willingness to condone breaches of the peace by those who

\textsuperscript{39} Ishii et al. (eds.), Chūsei Shisō, p. 254.
\textsuperscript{40} Jansen, ‘Tosa’, 107; Satō et al. (eds.), Chūsei Hōsei, vol. 111, p. 299.
\textsuperscript{41} Satō et al. (eds.), Chūsei Hōsei, vol. 111, p. 151.
otherwise provided loyal support. This is the same dilemma confronted in their respective codes by the Yüki and Chōsogabe, both of whom, in deciding whether or not to show clemency to those with a history of loyalty (and if so, when, and how much), were forced to return to the centuries-old equation of antisocial conduct and disloyalty.

Despite building their rule on local power relations rather than official appointments, then, sixteenth-century warlords were forced to reckon with the problem that had vexed the two shogunates: any effort to shore up legitimate authority through legislation and adjudication was undermined by the ruler’s imperfect ability to keep the peace – or, at least, to arbitrate the cases in which the peace could not be kept. Had daimyō come full circle?

Despite daimyō’s reputation as iconoclasts, most sixteenth-century warlords were eager to borrow the trappings of imperial and shogunal authority and to prove their ruling bona fides through cultural patronage and inter-marriage with aristocrats. Indeed, it is easy to overstate the novelties introduced by sixteenth-century warlords in fields of military recruitment, vassal organisation, taxation and, of course, law, and scholars recently have pointed out how much warlords looked back to hallowed precedents. Yet the precarious localism of these men’s political beginnings also encouraged them not only to be experimental about the policies they created and to be selective about the ones they borrowed; they also encouraged them to be aggressive, rather than simply reactive, in implementing their policies. Warfare being their primary occupation, they worked hard to improve their ability to muster troops, restructuring their warrior bands and spelling out more clearly the parameters of service.

They did much the same in rationalising their exclusive recourse to violence by crafting new and more intrusive approaches to the adjudication of disputes and conflicts. In code after code, self-redress, long the bane of shogunral authority, became more clearly and fully encompassed among acts of disloyalty; the distinction between offensive and defensive violence faded and disappeared. In a landmark essay, Katsumata Shizuo showed how the redefinition of self-redress as a criminal offence – regardless of merits – was


part of broader assertions of daimyō jurisdiction. Daimyō encouraged local communities to resist the lordly authority of the daimyō’s own followers and to seek redress to their grievances in the daimyō’s courts, thus simultaneously undercutting powerful followers’ autonomous lordship and forging deeper ties with village leaders, who could then be integrated into the warlords’ war machine. Crucial to these manoeuvres was the promulgation of laws that discouraged internecine conflict by punishing all parties to a violent dispute indiscriminately (known in Japanese as kenka ryōseibai hō, or ‘laws punishing both sides in disputes’).\footnote{Katsumata Shizuo, ‘Sengoku-hō’, in Iwanami Köza Nihon Rekishi, vol. VIII (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1976), pp. 175–210.}

Both codes issued by the Takeda house of Kai and Shinano, in 1547 and 1574 (both known as Kōshū hatto no shidai), include such provisions: in case of disputes, principals and accessories alike were to be punished, equally and regardless of merits (1547 code; art. 12); in quarrels, punishment should be meted out to all regardless of merit (1574 code; art. 17). The Imagawa code (art. 8) declares anyone party to a quarrel guilty, regardless of merits.\footnote{Ibid., p. 140.} The Date code (art. 20) declares that fault will be found ‘regardless of reports of right or wrong’ (rihi hirō ni atawazu) and ‘even in cases of absolute righteousness’ (shigoku no dōri).\footnote{Ishii et al. (eds.), Chūsei Shisō, pp. 265–6.} Most extreme in its monopoly of legitimate violence is the Yūki code in which the daimyō extends his arrogation of initiative to all uses of force. Three successive articles adopt the principles at work in the proscription of feuding – of lawless military action – to encompass what may have been less self-consciously private mobilisation: warriors must not head out against the enemy when hearing the battle-conch, but rather request instructions from above (art. 67); warriors must not head to the battlefield alone and without armour, no matter the emergency, but form a unit (art. 68); warriors must not undertake surveillance missions on their own, without prior orders (art. 69).\footnote{Ibid., p. 140.}

Conclusion

In contrast with the modern pop-cultural image of samurai as almost preternaturally self-disciplined and reliably – even blindly – obedient to authority, for much of its history Japan’s warrior class was neither particularly restrained in its recourse to violence nor especially unquestioning of authority. Indeed, each of the warrior regimes that alternated in power rose to
prominence by winning victories on the field of battle against the country’s previous lawful authority. Each of the new regimes then proceeded to obtain the imprimatur of the imperial court, which came to be seen as dispenser of the mandate to rule rather than as a ruling institution in its own right. Sanction from the imperial court served retrospectively to invert the competing parties’ respective characterisations as legitimate government and disloyal subject/bandit. Each of the new regimes, finally, embraced public authority’s prerogative to legislate. The very claims to continuities with previous regimes’ laws served to underscore each new shogunate’s institutional character, drawing attention away from the personal (that is, private and therefore antisocial) character of the crisis that led to its founding. The pattern, which we have seen for the first and second shogunates, was repeated at the turn of the seventeenth century, when a third shogunate was founded by Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616). In the opening clause of an oath Ieyasu extracted from all daimyō in 1611 as part of his efforts to consolidate his house’s hold on the country, he had the great warlords swear: ‘We will respect the laws and formularies established by the bakufu for generations since the time of the General of the Right (Yoritomo); out of concern for our own interest, we will strictly obey any regulation which may be issued by Edo hereafter.’ Ieyasu’s reference to Yoritomo’s legal precedents echoes the one found in Ashikaga Takauji’s Kenmu Formulary, forcing the daimyō to participate in the inscription of the newly established Tokugawa regime in an unbroken tradition of shogunal legislation. In this sense, the oath displaces Tokugawa Ieyasu as the focus of obedience; the daimyō were submitting not to him but to an institution, the shogunate, which had existed almost without interruption for over 400 years. Indeed in the oath, as in subsequent legal codes, the Tokugawa concentrated on keeping the peace with a determination that far outstripped any precedent.

Yet the second part of the clause – to obey by the dictates of Ieyasu’s government (located in Edo) ‘out of concern for our own interest’ – cannot fail to evoke a less remote model as well: the codes of sixteenth-century warlords, with their threatening demands of compliance. And in evoking the sternness and expansiveness of daimyō houses’ codes, Ieyasu’s oath also draws attention to differences that separated it from its models. Most important here are the differing understandings of what constituted public authority. Following in the footsteps of the earlier shogunates, Ieyasu was content

to demonstrate his legitimacy through legislation. The seal of the public is provided by his, and his descendants’, appointment as shogun. This was a conception of legitimation that construed the public and the private as not only antithetical but easily distinguished. It ignored the obvious reality that the shogun, the daimyō, and every official in his as in previous regimes, held office as a member of a warrior house: the public was constituted through the investiture of that most private (as in familiar, partisan and particularistic) of institutions.

Sixteenth-century warlords, by contrast, had been forced by their rejection of central authority to contend more actively with the problem of the public-as-legitimate. Having gained power as members of warrior houses, and having maintained it at least as much through the cultivation of personal ties of loyalty and service as they had through the trappings of public authority, the daimyō were unable to create a wholly new conception of rule. Yet in dismissing the precedents set by shogunal law, codes like the Imagawa kana mokuroku laid claim to an authority that was not only demonstrated, but also created, through legislation.

In this light it is possible to see how laws of the Warring States period were more aggressive in both their containment and their exercise of violence. Laws punishing with equal severity both parties to a dispute were not only expressing the violence of the society that produced them; they were discarding legal approaches to the unauthorised use of force – such as the distinction between offensive and defensive warfare – that had long been associated with centrally legitimised regimes and that no doubt were widely associated with those regimes’ inability to contain violence.

Bibliographical Essay

Few works have focused primarily on violence in premodern Japan, although frequent low-level conflict and increasingly protracted, full-scale warfare feature prominently in any account of the twelfth to sixteenth centuries. The often-elusive boundaries between state-sanctioned and private violence have meant that different uses of force have been tackled as much in terms of the positions of those performing violent acts as in terms of the institutional frameworks that regulated and sanctioned those practices. The violence of members of the state or of governing regimes has been addressed in terms of three distinct if frequently overlapping dimensions: war waged by members of the state; violence carried out for political ends; and judicial violence.

East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1993) represented the beginning of study of the origins of the warrior class, analysed for the first time in their military rather than lordly or institutional capacity. Both studies considered the development of warriors as a class of loosely organised provincial landholders out of the original eighth-century structure of a centralised conscript army, and this class’s slow emergence as a political force. Friday followed with a study of cultural, political and military characteristics of samurai warfare between roughly the tenth and the thirteenth centuries: Samurai, Warfare and the State in Early Medieval Japan (New York: Routledge, 2004). A similar holistic approach to warfare characterises Thomas D. Conlan’s State of War: The Violent Order of Fourteenth-Century Japan (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2003), which endeavors to show the ways in which the pressure to succeed and survive, and the demands of mobilisation, generated social and political change during the conflict between imperial loyalists and the Ashikaga shoguns. In more narrowly military-historical terms, the long sixteenth-century civil war has recently received scholarly attention as well, by both Conlan, in ‘Instruments of Change: Organizational Technology and the Consolidation of Regional Power in Japan, 1333–1600’, in John A. Ferejohn and Frances McCall Rosenbluth (eds.), War and State Building in Medieval Japan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), and Matthew Stavros, in ‘Military Revolution in Early Modern Japan’, Japanese Studies 33.3 (2013), 243–61.

The body of works exploring the political uses of violence has not been united by an equally exclusive concern with the warrior class. Rather, running through these works is an interest in the ways in which more or less ritualised outbreaks of violence, as well as the threat of violence, were used by a variety of state or elite groups to further political agendas. In The Culture of Civil War in Kyoto (Berkeley: University of California, 1994), Mary Elizabeth Berry explores a fifteenth- and sixteenth-century phenomenon she calls the ‘politics of witness and demonstration’ – the unsanctioned and occasionally lawless and violent mobilisations of both elite warriors and urban commoners to seek redress for their grievances and proclaim the legitimacy of their demands. In a similar vein, Michael S. Adolphson, in The Gates of Power: Monks, Courtiers, and Warriors in Premodern Japan (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2000), analyses the so-called ‘forceful demonstrations’ (gōso) carried out by elite monastic establishments in the late classical and early medieval periods, arguing that these much-feared displays of divine displeasure (which took the form of threatening processions of monks and monastic warriors though the streets of the capital) were not disruptions of the lawful order but rather recognised avenues for promoting and defending the Buddhist establishment’s political and economic agenda. Returning to the topic of monastically sponsored violence, in The Teeth and Claws of the Buddha: Monastic Warriors and Sōhei in Japanese History (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), Adolphson demonstrates that just as ‘forceful demonstrations’ were far from aberrations, so too the great monasteries’ employment of armed men was not a sign of the degeneration of the Buddhist establishment. Adolphson takes apart the myth of ‘warrior monks’ (sōhei), showing that the main difference between ‘secular’ and ‘monastic’ warriors was their employer. Moving away from the capital, and indeed from land-based polities, in Lords of the Sea: Pirates, Violence, and Commerce in Late Medieval Japan (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 2014), Peter D. Shapinsky foregrounds the purveyance ‘of services violent and not-violent’ as a crucial means
towards the establishment of autonomous sea-based domains that at once rejected, employed, and complemented established forms of political legitimation.

Oldest but least numerous (especially in English-language scholarship) are studies centred on judicial violence – understood both as the violence inherent in the judicial system and as the ways in which the judicial system sought to curb violence. Much work has been conducted on the subject by Japanese scholars specialising in the sixteenth century and the legal output of the vying warlords of the age. In English, the landmark study remains an essay by Katsumata Shizuo, 'The Development of Sengoku Law', in John Whitney Hall, Nagahara Keiji, and Kozo Yamamura (eds.), \textit{Japan before Tokugawa: Political Consolidation and Economic Growth, 1500 to 1650} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), itself a condensation of an earlier essay in Japanese, which places warlords' self-definition as arbitrators and judges of violent disputes at the centre of our understanding of their rise to power. Thomas Conlan has devoted a chapter to judicial violence in his \textit{State of War}, focusing on the less-studied fourteenth century, but the most in-depth contribution to this line of inquiry, and perhaps the most systematic reappraisal of judicial violence, remains David Anthony Eason's unpublished dissertation 'The Culture of Disputes in Early Modern Japan, 1550–1700' (UCLA, 2009), which seeks to move beyond formal analysis of the judicial process to focus instead on the often violent culture of grievances and disputes that was central to conflict resolution.
The notion that Islam is a religion that thrives on violence was part and parcel of European medieval polemics. ‘The use of force’, writes Norman Daniel, ‘was almost universally considered to be a major and characteristic constituent of the Islamic religion, and an evident sign of its error.’ In the Western imagination, Muslim warfare, or jihad, has been just one aspect of the Islamic penchant towards violence; another is the perceived cruelty and arbitrariness of the Islamic penal system. Traces of this preconception can be found also in modern times. As an example, one might mention that violent executions at the hands of fearsome, massively muscular Arab henchmen were a popular trope of nineteenth-century Orientalist painters, as seen, for example, in the two paintings, ‘Execution of a Moroccan Jewess’ (1860) by Alfred Dehodencq (1822–82) and ‘Execution without Trial under the Moorish Kings of Granada’ (1870) by Henri Regnault (1849–71).

While it has become a common scholarly tactic in recent decades to question approaches that otherise the European Middle Ages from the perspective of the modern, rational nation-state, declaring them uniquely irrational and violent, careful scholarly investigations into the complex mechanisms of penal justice and crime control under premodern Islamic regimes remain a desideratum. This is not to say that the Islamic prosecution of crime, in the period under consideration here (c. eleventh to fifteenth centuries), was not arbitrary and violent, even if it bears mentioning that Western travellers to the Near East sometimes praised the efficiency, and also the fairness, of the penal system in place under the Ottoman sultans (r. c. 679–

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Torture and Executions in the Islamic Middle Period

1342 (c. 1280–1924). But it should not be overlooked that scholars can still see significant progress in their understanding of the history of state punishment in Islamic societies, whether in terms of longue durée continuities or of spatio-temporal variations. Synchronically speaking, the social matrix in which state punishment was embedded in the various premodern Muslim polities deserves closer inspection, such that the story that is told is not simply one of Oriental despotism, of brute violence perpetrated from the top down upon passive victims, but one that paints a fuller picture of the networks of relations that obtained between the social actors that were involved in the penal process, namely, those who implemented, those who theorised about, and those who suffered punishment by the state.

This chapter first reviews the normative bases for penal state violence, in particular for capital punishment and torture, in Islamic law and Islamic political theory. It then moves on to discuss a number of examples from Islamic historiography, first from the reign of the Seljuq sultans of Persia, Iraq and Syria (r. 1040–1194) and then, second, from that of the Mamluk sultans of Egypt and Syria (r. 1250–1517). The Seljuqs and Mamluks exemplify the ‘new Sunni internationalism’ of the so-called Islamic Middle Period, a socio-political order based on a delicate balance of the military, religious and mercantile strata of society. Moreover, the few available, book-length studies of crime and punishment in premodern Islam are focused on the Seljuq and the Mamluk periods. In the following text, these studies serve as convenient points of departure.

Normative Bases of Torture and Capital Punishment in Islamic Law and Political Theory

One may legitimately question the practical relevance of Islamic criminal law (fiqh al-‘uqubat) in the medieval Islamic polity. In fact, historians of crime and punishment in medieval Islam often opt to more or less ignore legal doctrines, considering them largely irrelevant to historical practice. Here, however, a short summary of the basic norms of Islamic criminal law, concerning capital punishment and torture, is given. This is useful on two accounts. First, if we want to assay the claim that criminal justice in medieval Islam was in fact largely un-Islamic, that is, disconnected from the Islamic judiciary and the norms provided by the Sharia, we need to know what these norms were. Second, even if Sharia criminal law was in many instances divorced from practice, it still claimed a certain discursive authority, and is therefore a useful thing to know about.
According to Islamic criminal law, five offences are punishable by death: apostasy, blasphemy (whose definition includes the act of insulting the Prophet Muhammad), illegal sexual intercourse, brigandage and intentional homicide. The classical jurists count the penalties for the first four of these offences among the so-called hadd (pl. hudud) punishments (henceforth ‘statutory punishments’), which they characterise as ‘divinely ordained’, because they are specifically mentioned in the Qur’an or the traditions reported from the Prophet (hadith). This sacrosanct character of the statutory punishments makes them largely inaccessible to juridical reasoning and extrapolations. As a corollary of this, statutory crimes were defined narrowly, and the acceptance of repentance, strict rules of evidence (such as the requirement of four eyewitnesses in cases of illegal sexual intercourse), the principle that the statutory punishments are inapplicable in the presence of legal doubt, and perhaps most importantly, the fact that the Islamic judge (qadi) does not act as public prosecutor, made condemnation by the judge unlikely or even impossible in most cases.

Thus, what emerges from the premodern Muslim legal literature is a ‘paradoxical reluctance of the jurists to implement the serious hadd [statutory] penalties’. There are several ways to interpret this phenomenon. One aspect that deserves to be highlighted is that the jurists opposed the staging of public spectacles of state violence, such as the statutory punishments (in particular crucifixion, the punishment for brigandage) usually implied. Violent punishment had been from early Islamic times the province of the government and its agents of public order, less so of the developing class of legal scholars and judges. The chronicles from early Islam up to Ottoman times provide many cases in which the authorities made an example of offenders against the public order by publicly shaming, torturing and executing them. Thus the fact that the jurists developed doctrines that painstakingly circumscribed statutory crimes and punishments can be interpreted as an attempt to rein in state violence. At any rate, reports about the implementation of statutory punishments under the supervision of judges are exceedingly rare in the historiography of Islam.

Intentional homicide in Islamic law is regulated by the law of talio (qisas, cf. Q 2:178), whereby the blood avengers of the victim can demand execution of the murderer from the judge, claim blood money, or pardon him. The chronicles of medieval Islam say almost nothing about talionic capital punishments; it is impossible to decide whether this is because they did not occur or

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because they were so frequent that the chroniclers ignored them. In addition to statutory and talionic offences, crimes that cannot be judged on the basis of the revealed law alone (including cases where the evidence to support statutory or talionic punishment is convincing but not conclusive) are punishable by ta’zir (‘discretionary punishment’), which is meted out at the discretion of the judge. According to most Muslim jurists of the classical period, discretionary punishment must be less than the mildest statutory punishment, that is, less than forty lashes with the whip. However, in late classical Islamic jurisprudence, that is, from the twelfth century onwards, utilitarian considerations came to overrule the restrictions that had formerly been imposed on discretionary punishment. To cite an example, according to the Syrian jurist Ibn ‘Abidin (Damascus, d. 1836 CE), ‘innovators in religion’ (mubtadi’un) whose ‘innovation’ (bid’a) has not yet reached the full level of apostasy can be executed as their discretionary punishment. One should also note that jurisdiction in matters of discretionary punishment drifted away from the Islamic judges to military-executive courts, a development that is traceable to the Seljuq period and fully manifest in Mamluk times.

The classical jurists widely condemn the infliction of excessive pain, that is, torture, which they consistently associate with mutilation. According to various narrations, the Prophet repeatedly prohibited mutilation, whether of human beings or of animals. Later Mamluk jurists, however, came to define mutilation rather narrowly. ‘Mutilation’, wrote the Egyptian Ibn al-Humam (d. 1457), ‘is realised only in cutting off limbs and similar things that are done to the body and which persist [in their effect].’ It is also in the works of Mamluk jurists that one detects a tendency to allow for judicial torture. Previously, and in stark contrast to Roman law, torture of witnesses was unknown in Muslim jurisprudence. However, from the late thirteenth century onwards, and roughly parallel to the rise of judicial torture in Europe, Muslim jurists such as Ibn Taymiyya (Damascus/Cairo, d. 1328), Ibn Qayyim

5 Arent Jan Wensinck, Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane, 2nd edn (Leiden: Brill, 1992), vol. VI, pp. 171b–172a (s.v. m-th-l).
al-Jawziyya (Damascus, d. 1350) and Ibn Farhun (Medina, d. 1397) legitimated judicial torture, thereby producing a profound shift in the Muslim doctrine of evidence.

Against this backdrop of the jurists’ view of legal punishment, a second discursive tradition should be examined, that of Islamic political theory, which in the Islamic Middle Period was usually articulated in the form of courtly advice literature to rulers, the so-called Mirrors for Princes. The ideology expounded in this tradition served rulers of the Islamic Middle Period to explain and justify capital punishment and other forms of state violence, in addition and sometimes also against what the sacred law stipulated. The Muslim Mirrors for Princes usually exhort the ruler to piety and remind him of the judgment to come . . . but insofar as they touch on government, they see it as a fundamentally secular domain . . . their sense of justice is usually expedient rather than shari’ah. This tradition was arguably more important in practice than the legal doctrine developed by the jurists.

Next to the emphasis on justice, the term siyasa (Pers. siyāsat) is central to this tradition. Siyasa was used in the first centuries of Islam in the sense of ‘governance’, but from the tenth century, another, more narrow meaning of siyasa as ‘(capital) punishment’ emerged and was in full swing by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As political theorists of the period argued, justice, the ruler’s key virtue, requires the use of capital punishment almost as a conditio sine qua non. This development occurred more or less in parallel with the rise to power of Turkish and Central Asian military governments in the Nile-to-Oxus region, a transformation of the political landscape that produced both dynasties of the Seljuqs and Mamluks.

An eleventh-century Iranian Mirror for Princes, the Qabusnameh, states bluntly that the ruler must not neglect ‘rightful bloodshed, because the common good depends on it’. In the absence of punishment, claims another Mirror for Princes, written some hundred years later in Aleppo, ‘men would devour one another’. In late twelfth-century advice literature one reads that ‘people are wicked’ and that ‘with wicked people, things cannot be put right through tolerance and indulgence . . . [therefore] the sultans of today must rely on punishment (siyāsat) and awe’. Under the Mamluks, the courtier Ibn

al-Nafis (Cairo, d. 1288) wrote that sultans ought to be cruel and merciless; this would enable them to order ‘many punishments, such as cutting off limbs, gibbetting (salb), and crucifixion by nailing on a cross (tasmir)’.\(^\text{11}\)

Military regimes like that of the Seljuqs and Mamluks governed in an atmosphere of political instability in which the legitimacy of government had to be constantly reaffirmed by violent manifestations of state power. The Persian tradition of absolutism offered these regimes an ‘independent ethical standard based on force and opportunism’.\(^\text{12}\) Overall, the siyasa-based authoritarianism of Middle Period Islamic governments led to a situation in which ‘even great sultans tended to be drastically arbitrary, splendid in their moments of generosity, inhuman in their anger or their fears’.\(^\text{13}\) In the popular imagination of the Islamic Middle Period, the figure of the executioner (jallad) became so intimately linked to that of the ruler that in the Arabian Nights the caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809) is regularly represented as the head of a triad comprising his vizier, Ja’far, and his no less famous executioner, Masrur.

In an attempt to harmonise siyasa and Sharia, and probably also to curtail the former, the jurists began to develop the doctrine of al-siyasa al-shariyya, ‘governance in accordance with Sharia’. In Ibn Taymiyya’s classic exposition, excesses of siyasa (which he terms ‘oppressive siyasa’, siyasa zalima) are condemned, but nonetheless utilitarian ideas about the commonweal are increasingly incorporated into juridical reasoning. Premodern Muslim thinking about siyasa shariyya is rich and variegated. However, in the long run the concept arguably did more to undermine Muslim jurisprudence than to rein in the arbitrariness of autocratic rule. This is illustrated by the above-quoted example of Ibn ‘Abidin, in whose account the death penalty qua discretionary punishment and the concept of siyasa are closely intertwined. In Ottoman times, there emerged a tendency to lay down siyasa punishments in the so-called Qanunnamehs, for example the celebrated Qanun-i ‘Osmani of Süleyman the Magnificent (r. 1520–66), a codification of siyasa that arguably helped to stabilise affairs.


\(^\text{12}\) H. A. R. Gibb, ‘An Interpretation of Islamic History (Part Two)’, \emph{Muslim World} 65.2 (1955), 126.

Torture and State Violence under the Seljuqs
(Eleventh–Thirteenth Centuries)

The Seljuqs ruled over the lands of Persia and large swaths of the Islamic world in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. They were the leading family of a confederation of Turkish tribal nomads who had moved into the central Islamic lands from the early eleventh century onwards, conquering the Abbasid capital, Baghdad, in 1055. Given their Central Asian pedigree, the Seljuqs initially enjoyed little prestige in terms of their Islamic credentials. However, they soon rose to become patrons of Sunni orthodoxy, facilitating what historians, though not unanimously, refer to as a ‘Sunni revival’ in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The Seljuqs’ use of state violence, particularly when orchestrated in punitive rituals of power, often reveals traces of this situation.

One hears relatively little in the chronicles of the Seljuq period about the kind of violence deployed inside the dungeons of the sultan and his governors in the provinces, but there is little reason to doubt that the torturing habits of the Abbasid and Buyid rulers were continued. Certain Abbasid caliphs, such as al-Mu’ta’id (r. 892–902) and al-Qahir (r. 933–4) were notorious for the torture chambers they entertained. The extortion technique known as musadara, ‘the mulcting of an official of his (usually) ill-gotten gains or spoils of office’, 14 appears to have been established at the Abbasid court in Baghdad from the ninth century onwards, and there are many examples of dismissed officials pressed to divulge the whereabouts of riches from Buyid, Ghaznavid and Seljuq times too. Instruments of torture that were used included a wooden box with iron nails pointing inwards, devised by the Abbasid vizier Ibn al-Zayyat (d. 847), a kind of iron maiden that, in a sad twist of irony, was applied to its inventor when he fell from grace. In the tenth century, torturers in Baghdad used iron tongs to tear the flesh from people’s upper legs, and pulled out fingernails. 15

Occasionally, torture became public. A chronicle devoted to the Rum Seljuqs of Anatolia, a subsidiary branch of the Seljuq family that ruled until 1307, provides an example. In 1214, the Rum Seljuq sultan ‘Izz al-Din Kay Kawus I (r. 1211–20) besieged the Christian city of Sinope on the Black Sea. When the

defenders of the city refused to surrender, Izz al-Din ordered that his royal prisoner and lord of Sinope, King Alexios I Megas Komnenos (r. 1204–22), be tortured in front of the city walls. This promptly caused Alexios to complain loudly to the onlookers on the ramparts:

Alexios began to wail and cry out: ‘O you godless people! Don’t you see that they will kill me and, with cruelty and brutality, will make you prisoners of war? In whose interest do you continue to defend the city?’ However, this had the same effect on them as the whistling of the wind on deaf rocks . . .

The next day, the sultan ordered Alexios strung up head down and tortured until he lost his senses like an epileptic. When the inhabitants of the city saw that the predicament of [their] ruler had gone beyond all tolerable limit, they called out: ‘Let the messenger [of the sultan] come into the city! We want to talk to him.’

As noted above, in the pre-Mongol period, torture was universally rejected by the Muslim jurists, and acts of torture like the one inflicted on Alexios enjoyed no backing by the religious law. As for capital punishment, very few cases of statutory punishments are mentioned in the sources of the Seljuq period. A single case of stoning on account of illegal sexual intercourse seems to have come to the attention of scholars so far. This concerns a certain high-ranking amir of the Rum Seljuq sultan Kaykhusraw II (r. 1237–46), a man named Taj al-Din. Having previously schemed with the sultan’s vizier, Sa’d al-Din Köpek, to purge the court of a number of their political enemies, Taj al-Din himself became the target of Köpek’s intrigues. Taj al-Din had raped one of the slave-girls of one of the local rulers of the sultan’s domain, and Köpek quickly obtained a legal opinion (fatwa) from the ‘leading jurists and judges’ that a man who acted like Taj al-Din had was to be stoned. This, however, could only be done with the consent of the sultan who, having been talked into it by Köpek, agreed to the punishment and issued an official order to carry it out. Köpek set out to apprehend Taj al-Din at Ankara.

He ordered Taj al-Din to be put in chains and occupied himself several days with claiming and cataloguing his property. Having done so, he had him brought to the [main] square of Ankara. That amir, so loveable that the bright sun, envious of his shining face, veiled itself behind a cloud, and the planet Mercury, jealous of his ability to write and speak beautifully, bit into his own envious fingers, and no man with a soul would have been capable of hitting his jasmine-like chest with [as much as] a rose-petal, – that amir he

ordered to be buried in the ground up to his navel, and he ordered the common people, coercing them, to stone him and thus make his sweet soul reach paradise. Then he had all the money and jewellery he possessed brought into the treasury.¹⁷

Despite the involvement of legal experts, and the ostensibly Sharia-based protocol followed in implementing the punishment, the case of Taj al-Din clearly does not satisfy the strict rules of evidence laid out in the normative literature. As others have noted, the fatwā sought by Köpek functioned as a ‘legal fig leaf’, while ‘the initiative comes from a misled or ill-intentioned third party and the authority comes from the sultan’.¹⁸ As it appears, the conspicuous unholiness of the affair did not escape the chronicler, who voices an uncharacteristic amount of empathy for the victim.

Other cases of stoning under the Seljuqs concern heretics, and may best be understood in light of the Seljuqs’ declared aim to promote the cause of Sunni Islam. As an example, one might cite the case of a certain Mahmud al-Ilaqi, from the Kurdish town of Îlaq, who was active in Khurasan in the 1070s, spreading what amounted to heretical views in the eyes of the Seljuq authorities and Sunni leaders. Ilaq had been a hub of nativist Iranian prophecy in the eighth century, and Mahmud is accused, in the text that chronicles his demise, of perpetuating the teachings of two movements that were active there in the time of the Abbasid caliphate:

He claimed substantial union [with God]. He possessed fragments from the treatises of the Mubayyida and Khurramiyya . . . He sold such and such places in paradise, and so on. Having realised his [heretical] condition, men bore witness against him that necessitated his execution. This matter was discussed, then he was crucified and stoned to death. The first to throw stones at him while crucified were Judge Abu Muhammad, who was the city’s judge, and the imam ‘Abdallah al-Saffar, the city’s legal adviser. They were followed by others, who smashed him to pieces. This occurred at Merv, when Sultan Malikshah, may God have mercy on him, was there in the year 472/[1079–80].¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 204–5.
It seems no coincidence that al-Ilaqi met his violent end when the city in which he spread his teachings was visited by the sultan. Most likely, Malikshah used the occasion to show his commitment to the eradication of religious deviancy. He did so in consultation, or so it seems, with the local (Sunni) religious establishment. That the chief’s judge threw the first stone tallies with the normative legal literature, which stipulates that the head of the state or his representative, the judge, must throw the first stone if the conviction is based on a confession (which one assumes had been extracted from al-Ilaqi).

Public punishment meted out by the Seljuqs was particularly violent when it was directed against heretics. The Isma’ilis, who for large parts of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were the Seljuqs’ most worrisome domestic enemies, suffered from this perhaps more than any other group. Dozens of their supporters were immolated at Isfahan in 1101, when Sunni militias, at the encouragement of the leading local Shafi’i jurist, threw them into ditches burning with naphtha.20 There are also cases of post-mortem public burning of the corpses of executed Isma’ilis.21 Certain late medieval sources state that the body of the mystic ‘Ayn al-Qudat (d. 1131), after his execution in Hamadhan, was wrapped in a naphtha-soaked cloak and set on fire. ‘Ayn al-Qudat’s end echoes what is perhaps the single most famous execution in the history of Islam, that of his fellow-mystic, Mansur al-Hallaj, in 922. The reasons for al-Hallaj’s trial and execution are exceedingly complex, and the sources are difficult to interpret. Most seem to agree, however, that al-Hallaj, under drummed-up charges of being a Qarmatian agitator,22 was crucified alive in Baghdad and decapitated the next morning, his corpse burnt and his ashes thrown into the Tigris. On such evidence, one may be justified in speculating about a background of religious deviancy in the case of a woman condemned to immolation in Baghdad in 1136. As is reported by the chronicler Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1201), on the night of 21/22 July, in the courtyard of the Baghdad congregational mosque,

a Muslim woman was arrested because she was suspected [of religious deviancy?], although she was deemed good. A reed basket was brought and she was made to stand in it. The naphtha-thrower struck fire at it, and so the basket burned. The woman, however, managed to escape, stripped of her clothes. She was pardoned. The fire had only touched her superficially.23

According to a Prophetic hadith,24 only God punishes with fire (that is, in the hereafter), and this reflects a certain predilection against punitive immolation. However, examples of public burnings, particularly of heretics, are known from the early centuries of Islam. The fourth caliph, ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (r. 656–61), was credited with having ordered the immolation of apostates and idol-worshippers, and there are further examples from Umayyad and Abbasid times. The post-mortem immolation of executed corpses was rarely challenged by the jurists. As the jurist Ibn Hajar writes in the eighth/fourteenth century, ‘the [corpses of the] dead are burned to denigrate them, and to frighten [others] so as to not emulate them’.25

When the chronicles report that offenders were put on the cross (Ar. salb), involvement of judges is, as a rule, not specified. Putting someone on the cross suggested an association with Qur’an 5:33 and the crime of ‘making war on God and His messenger’, and the authorities certainly benefited from the legitimacy that came with the act of salb, even if the Islamic judiciary did not actively sanction it. In fact, crucifixion is probably the most commonly mentioned form of execution in Seljuq chronicles. Often, as in the case of al-Hallaj, salb comes closer to the tying to a wooden post or to gibbeting (cf. the Persian synonym of salb, viz. bar dar kardan, ‘to put on a wooden stand’) than to Roman-style nailing on a cross. When the Seljuq vizier Dargazini was ‘crucified’ (suliba) in 1133, ‘the rope around his neck snapped’, and he fell to the ground.26

Chronicles from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries occasionally also mention other forms of capital punishment, such as trampling by elephants (especially in the East). For example, the Ghaznavid sultan Ibrahim b. Mas‘ud (r. 1059–99) had his own palace baker trampled to death for hoarding wheat and flour and thereby jeopardising the bread supply of the local populace.27

Offenders were sometimes executed by being thrown down from heights, a discretionary or siyasa punishment meted out particularly to sodomites.\(^{28}\) Finally, decapitation by the sword was probably a common, perhaps even the commonest, form of capital punishment (in the sense of talionic executions), as has been claimed,\(^{29}\) but it receives relatively little attention in the chronicles.

**Torture and State Violence under the Mamluks (Thirteenth–Sixteenth Centuries)**

The Mamluks were military slaves (Ar. *mamluk*, ‘owned [individual]’, ‘slave’), mostly of Circassian and Kipchak origin, who wrested power from their lords, the Ayyubid sultans of Egypt (r. 1174–1250). The long-lasting slave dynasty the Mamluks established thrived on the prowess of their army (which in the thirteenth century carried them to victories over the Crusaders and the Mongols), the non-hereditary principles of succession that characterised their rule, and the sheer physical coercion that they deployed to bring society under their control. From the inception of the Mamluk sultanate, the Mamluks had a reputation for the ruthless use of force. It was the Mamluks, after all, who, under the leadership of the famous general Baybars, had repelled the Mongols at the Battle of 'Ayn Jalut (1260) and thereby saved Syria and North Africa from devastation.

Baybars, who went on to rule as the Mamluk sultan from 1260 to 1277, was famous for his stern sense of justice. While his contemporary, the courtier Ibn al-Nafis, is unreservedly positive about the fact that Baybars was ‘stout-hearted, cruel, and merciless’,\(^{30}\) the nineteenth-century Egyptian scholar al-Bajuri criticises Baybars for being the first to introduce torture in Egypt, among which al-Bajuri counts burning, drowning, strangling and impaling.\(^{31}\) While instances of these practices are indeed attested in the sources, more commonly implemented capital punishments were hanging, crucifixion, and execution by the sword. The chroniclers often refer to, or rather pass over, these punishments in a matter-of-fact way. This makes it difficult to say with any degree of precision how regularly they were implemented, because the

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casualness with which the matter is dealt suggests that a lot of public executions find no trace in the sources. It was only when executions were particularly shocking, for whatever reason, that they were described in some detail.

Such is the case with the hanging of a judge’s wife and that of her lover, himself a judge, in Cairo in 1513. The two were apprehended in flagrante by the husband, who then insisted on bringing charges against them. They were initially sentenced, by a military judge, to flogging and a fine, and suffered the ignominious spectacle of being paraded, sitting backwards on donkeys, through the city. However, when news of the story reached the ears of the sultan, Qansuh al-Ghawri (r. 1501–16), he demanded that the adulterers be stoned. When the four chief judges of Cairo refused to ratify his order, citing the lack of proper evidence and the repentance of the male lover, the sultan flew into a rage. He dismissed all chief judges and shouted at the legal scholar who had drawn up the lovers’ defence: ‘By God, I hope you go home and find someone doing to your wife what al-Mashali [the wife’s lover] did to the wife of Khalil [the cuckolded judge]!’ The two lovers were then hanged (rather than stoned), tied to the same rope and facing each other, near the door of the house of one of the jurists who had objected to the death sentence.32

It is clear why chroniclers showed interest in this event. Not only was the manner of execution highly unusual, and were the two victims members of the learned high society of Mamluk Cairo, but, more significantly, their trial had triggered a constitutional crisis, in which the sultan struggled to assert his power over the religious judiciary. He was not entirely successful, one might add, for one reading of the incident is that, in late Mamluk Cairo, Islamic judges had in fact enough clout seriously to challenge, and rein in, the sultan’s autocratic exercise of penal power. Although the two lovers met a violent death, it is significant that they did not suffer stoning, the Sharia punishment for adultery. The veto of the chief judges appears to have impeded this. Instead, as one surmises, the sultan had to resort to capital punishment on the basis of considerations of siyasa.

As adumbrated above, the chroniclers did not pay much attention, except in particularly spectacular circumstances, to executions that derived their legitimacy from the above-mentioned five Sharia types of capital punishment. This may explain why one reads almost nothing in the chronicles about talionic executions, and why crucifixion, the Sharia punishment for

brigandage, is often dealt with in off-hand fashion by the chroniclers. But when an execution took place that squarely contradicted Sharia provisions, it roused interest. This seems to apply to the crucifixion of a young boy-servant in Damascus in 1248, an event described at length by the historian Abu Shama al-Maqdisi (d. 1268). This young Turkish slave of an amir, writes Abu Shama, had been found guilty of murdering his master, but instead of being punished talionically, he was crucified:

His face was turned towards the east, and his hands, upper arms, and feet were fixed with nails, and he stayed alive from the noon of Friday till the noon of Sunday, then he died. He was said to have been courageous, brave, and pious, and he had taken part in a campaign at Ascalon and killed a number of Franks and also killed a lion notwithstanding his youth. There were some memorable things in connection with his crucifixion. He abandoned himself without resistance and fear but rather stretched his hands so that they could be nailed [to the beams]. Then his feet were nailed, and he looked on this without groaning or grimacing with pain or moving any of his limbs. This I was told by several people who were witness to this. He remained patient and quiet without groaning but just looked at his feet and his sides, to the right and to the left again, and sometimes he looked at the people. It was said that he asked for water but was not given any. People’s hearts flowed over with pity and compassion for [this] creature of God, so young a boy who had to suffer such a trial.

Although medieval Muslim chroniclers mention cases of crucifixion on ‘countless’ occasions, the level of empathy shown by Abu Shama is unusual. From a comment by Abu Shama, one suspects that his master had sexually harassed the crucified young boy. Another aspect that deserves highlighting is the considerable effort Abu Shama spends on detailing how nails were driven through the boy’s hands and feet. Crucifixion by nailing to a wooden contraption is in fact one way in which the Mamluks seem to have exacerbated the brutality of the punishment. In previous centuries, crucifixion often involved no more than the tying of a body to a wooden contraption. Also, the legal literature never mentions nailing. In the Mamluk chronicles, however, crucifixion by nailing (tasmir) is relatively common. In fact, it may be

conjectured that while some forms of the death penalty, such as burning, recede into the background in Mamluk times, others, such as nailing to the cross, bisection and impaling, become more visible. A combination of Mamluk-style capital punishments is reported by Ibn Hajar for the year 1391, when the governor of Damascus first nailed to the cross, and then bisected, a group of amirs. Execution by bisection (tawsit), a punishment that appears to have a Central Asian pedigree, predates the Mamluks. The practice of cutting offenders into half, or splitting them lengthwise, was described by the traveller Ibn Fadlan (d. 922) as a mode of execution, applied to adulterers and thieves, customary among the Oghuz and Bulgars of the Volga. There are also a couple of reports about the practice in Seljuq chronicles. However, it appears that it was only under the Mamluks that tawsit became a commonplace capital punishment, or even ‘the usual method of execution’. Unruly militaries were thus executed, for example after Sultan al-Salih Salah al-Din’s (r. 1351–4) troops reconquered Damascus from a band of looting amirs.

On Monday, 12 November 1352, the sultan rode out from the castle, in midst his army, to the dais . . . The sultan sat down on the dais, and the army stood in front of him, at the foot of the citadel. The amirs whom they had brought with them from the area of Aleppo were brought forth, and they began to make each amir stand [in front of the sultan]. Then they consulted about him. Some were pardoned, others condemned to bisection. Seven [amirs] were bisected: five amirs of forty and two amirs commanding over a thousand [footsoldiers] . . . The rest were pardoned and thrown back into prison.

The premeditated and ordered, public performance of violent punishment served the Mamluks to disguise the fact that Mamluk society was often not orderly and well protected from unrest, but rather plagued by violence that was difficult to contain, even if it should be noted that the Mamluk empire enjoyed remarkable longevity. Public punishments were spectacles,

Fawwaz and Hikmat Kishli Fawwaz (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1424/2004), vol. xxx, p. 95 (s.a. 665/[1266–7]). See also the comment on tasmir made by Ibn al-Nafis, as quoted above (n. 11).
39 Schacht and Meyerhof, The Theologus Autodidactus, p. 81 (Excursus F).
celebrations of the lack of power of the punished offenders, and thus manifestations of the power of the ruling elite. As one historian of the Mamluks has remarked, they were ‘a form of street theatre’ too, such that ‘[w]hen the Emir Qusun was condemned [in the year 1342] to be crucified, street vendors cashed in by selling lollipops in the shape of the crucified victim’.  

A common pattern in Seljuq and Mamluk times was that the members of groups of criminals were simultaneously executed in different spots in the city. Symbolically enveloping the city with his violence, the ruler thus claimed absolute control over the polity he governed. Following a similar logic of staking out territorial claims, the fragmented bodies of amputated, beheaded or bisected enemies of the state were carried, often over long distances, and paraded through the cities in the Seljuq and Mamluk domains. Towards the end of the Mamluk period, in 1501, even the sultan himself was thus treated; following a coup, Sultan al-ʿAdil Tumambay (r. 1500–1) was decapitated and his head carried around on a leather tray through all of Cairo. Urban ignominious parades, in general, were a common sight in Seljuq and Mamluk times. It is worthwhile noting that ignominious parading is one of the most often mentioned punishments in the Arabian Nights.

Perhaps the most gruesome type of public parading, in fact of any public spectacle of violence, was the flaying alive of victims and parading of their stuffed skins. Leo Africanus (d. after 1550), who passed through Cairo in the dying years of the Mamluk sultanate, relates information about this practice, borrowing his description from the chronicle of Ibn Iyās:

rebels or seditious persons they flay alive, stuffing their skins with bran until they resemble the shape of a man, which being done, they carry the said stuffed skins upon camelbacks through every street of the city, and there publish the crime of the executed. I never saw a more dreadful punishment, for the reason that the condemned lies so long in torment. Only when the torturer touches the navel with the knife does he yield up his soul; but this he may not do until the magistrate standing by commands it.  

Death by flaying is also known to have been meted out under the Seljuqs and the North African Fatimids (r. 909–1171), who applied the punishment to rebels.45 In comparison, the Mamluk chronicles relate more instances of flaying, not only of rebels but also of Bedouin brigands, murderers, grave robbers and thieves. In the final decades of the Mamluk sultanate, according to Bernadette Martel-Thoumian, the inhabitants of Cairo and other Mamluk cities witnessed a ‘superabundance of horror’ (surenchère de l’horreur).46 According to Ibn Iyas, even the Mamluk sultans started to have second thoughts about whether their violence was justified. When in August 1513 Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri, known for his severity in punishment, was presented with the stuffed skin of a young Bedouin, dressed up like a mannequin in a silk garment and a hat, he was reportedly outraged. Ibn Iyas adds that the sultan had in fact never ordered such a macabre spectacle.47 In the end, the violence meted out by the Mamluk rulers to the populace caught up with them. On 14 April 1517, the last Mamluk sultan, Tuman Bay II, was ignominiously hanged at the Zuwayla Gate in Cairo, an execution that was instantly ‘re-created by the masters of the shadow-theatres, much to the delight of Egypt’s new master, the Ottoman Sultan Selim the Grim [r. 1512–20]’.48

Conclusion

When examining the cases of violent state punishment in the Seljuq and Mamluk chronicles, it is often difficult or even impossible to establish a correlation between offences and punishments. The statutory punishments, an area in which such predictability presumably would have obtained, were only seldom implemented. By contrast, the legal framework of discretionary punishment and siyasa justice was notoriously flexible. There seems to be a certain calculated arbitrariness in how the sultans of the Islamic Middle Period made their penal authority public. Spectacles of punishment in medieval Islam, in the words of Aziz al-Azmeh, were ‘negative ornaments of power, a display of arbitrariness, not necessarily in the choice of the person to be eliminated or disgraced, but in the discretion used in artfully carrying out an execution or making a foe destitute. Here, arbitrariness and uncommon

48 Irwin, Arabian Nights, p. 158.
harshness or brutality in the infliction of punishment manifests unaccountability and unapproachability."\textsuperscript{49}

As regards the early caliphal period (seventh to tenth centuries), there is certainly no shortage of examples of violent public punishments reported in the chronicles dealing with the Umayyad and Abbasid regimes. Is one really entitled, then, to speculate about an increase in punitive state violence following the 'Barbarian incursions' of the Turks into the heartlands of Islam starting in the early eleventh century?\textsuperscript{50} The cruelty of the Turks is a trope in late medieval (as well as early modern and modern) Islamic literature, and one should guard oneself against reproducing the anti-Turkish clichés of Arab and Persian historiography. Let us not forget also that the Ottomans, the direct heirs of both the Seljuqs and the Mamluks were, as noted above, sometimes lauded for their equity in imposing punishment on their subjects. In the absence of book-length studies that are explicitly dedicated to the history of crime and penal justice in the centuries before the Seljuqs, diachronic comparisons would seem premature.

Still, the frequency with which public executions and other kinds of violent state punishment are mentioned in the Muslim chronicles of the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries is striking. Furthermore, it is not far-fetched to think that public spectacles of pain, as rituals of power aiming to create a sense of legitimacy, became particularly important in the highly militarised, post-caliphal periods of Islamic premodern history. In his panoramic study of Iraq and Egypt in the tenth century, Adam Mez commented that, in terms of the state's suppression of crime, 'the Baghdad and Cairene governments show[ed] a refreshing restraint and moderation'.\textsuperscript{51} It would appear to be difficult to make similar assertions about the Seljuqs and Mamluks.

That said, certain shifts from Seljuq to Mamluk times can be detected. This concerns, in the first instance, changes in the legal doctrine of torture and punishment based on utilitarian considerations of the public interest. Judicial torture was legalised under the Mamluks; the definition of mutilation, forbidden categorically by tradition, became narrower; the justification of punishment on the basis of siyasa made increasing inroads into Muslim jurisprudence, as in general siyasa and Sharia entered into a new synthesis.

As for punitive practices, some punishments, such as immolation, were less common in the Mamluk period, but at the same time an array of formerly unknown, or hardly known, violent punishments appear to have been introduced. Among the non-lethal penalties, shaming punishments appear to have become more widespread and invasive, and amputation to have increased in frequency. As for capital punishments, crucifixion by nailing, bisection, impaling and skinning alive appear to feature in Mamluk chronicles more regularly than in the chronicles of previous centuries. In sum, Mamluk society witnessed a certain proliferation, perhaps also a 'banalisation', of torture and violent punishment.

The standard scholarly narrative regarding Islamic law under the Mamluks has been that it was severely compromised by the siya¯sa-based, and therefore largely arbitrary, justice of the sultan, as well as by the failure of the Muslim jurists adequately to protect legal doctrine from becoming divorced from practice. The jurists, instead, would have contented themselves with emphasising the theoretical, or symbolic, primacy of Sharia. More recent scholarship, by contrast, has emphasised the symbiotic nature of Sharia and siyasa, the fact that siyasa was commonly held, by both jurists and rulers, to encompass, not to replace, Sharia. This may be the case. However, it so happens that in the particular area of crime and punishment, and especially on account of the doctrine of discretionary punishment, the law was so underdetermined and so riddled with loopholes that only little opposition could be mounted to check the rising tide of penal violence by the state.

Bibliographical Essay


52 Martel-Thoumian, Délinquance, p. 243.


As regards studies of crime and punishment in the formative and later periods, studies of punishment under the Umayyad caliphs (seventh–eighth centuries) have often focused
If definitions of ‘violence’ are slippery, the concepts of crime and law offer some purchase. Law is not just about controlling or repressing violence (indeed, sometimes quite the opposite), but about circumscribing and defining it. The term ‘crime’ entered Middle English, via Old French, from the Latin ‘cernere’, meaning to discern or to determine.¹ In itself, it presents many problems, but its chief conceptual purchase lies in the sense that this is an offence to be dealt with through public law. With regard to violence, law itself serves many purposes: it is sometimes presented as the embodiment of abstract justice; sometimes its role is to stop a fight; sometimes the legal process is itself a part of the conflict. It can work both hegemonically in the service of power and horizontally across communities.

A fairly standard narrative argues that as polities coalesced and became more powerful over the course of the Middle Ages, so the law and legal mechanisms which underpinned political structures of power became more efficient and effective. This is a story both of legislation and of jurisdiction. Growing states shored up their power through expanded legislative effort and, so it is often assumed, the distribution of jurisdiction reflected these shifts towards central power. However, recent historiography has tended fruitfully to complicate such narratives. The idea that law is straightforwardly intertwined with the growth of states has been disrupted, both by showing political developments to have been complex and multidirectional, and by demonstrating that law can work for many different parties – it is not always the tool of those in power, and nor was it always perceived as such.

It is nevertheless striking that there is a dramatic shift in tone between the historiography of the early Middle Ages and that of the later Middle Ages. Work on crime and law for the early medieval period has often been

particularly receptive to anthropological perspectives, and taken a processual approach to dispute resolution. Work on crime and law for the later medieval period, by contrast, continues to ask questions about institutional developments, and to focus more explicitly on the formal legalism of cases of crime and violence.

An account now of the relationship between law and violence must do both these things: it should be processual, acknowledging the negotiating function of law and conflict resolution as socially embedded; and it should acknowledge its relationship with power and the coercive function of law. Put differently, we need to think about law both as a social mechanism, engaging with real-life problems, and as a normative one, expressing a vision of how life should be categorised and managed.

This chapter is about the ways in which law, violence and power were intertwined. It examines the ways in which those relationships became, if anything, more complex over the course of the Middle Ages. Although it rejects straightforward chronologies, it is nevertheless organised around the rediscovery of Justinian’s Digest of Roman law in late eleventh-century Italy and the subsequent emphasis on Roman law in medieval Europe: by any measure, this was a pivotal moment.

**Early Medieval Law and the Reinvigoration of Roman Law**

Perhaps the most influential vision of early medieval law is that of Patrick Wormald. He showed how law was effectively aspirational for rulers: law codes and edicts were ways to represent a particular form of power. His work on Alfred shows how law was a means to express the king’s interest in reform and regulation as a fundamental constituent of his sense of kingship. The effect of this argument is to thrust the development of English common law forward by three centuries. Law was considerably more sophisticated before 1066 than classic pictures of post-twelfth-century developments of statecraft would have us assume. In this respect, the contrasts between northern and southern Europe are very significant: laws in the north were being developed

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from earlier Germanic codes, whereas in the south the remnants of Roman law were integrated and taken up in miscellaneous ways. This being said, the differences between written law codes and what we know of actual cases are striking. In a highly fragmented Europe, disputes were part of social and political processes, and the main purpose of law had to be to satisfy all parties in a conflict. From the written evidence of such cases, it is often hard to identify the underlying principles. Law could indeed represent abstract justice, but its main day-to-day function had to be part of a process of negotiation and pacification. Moreover, law was only one among many ways of dealing with outbreaks of violence: informal negotiations and practices of feuding were also part of an array of possible strategies. The coercive force of law was also highly dubious, and relied upon its symbolic value and the good faith of the parties involved.

If the Anglo-Saxon state was particularly precocious in its ability to prosecute and control the use of legitimate violence, it nevertheless remains a conundrum for historians that theft was punished far more severely than physical violence. The penalties imposed by law for physical violence were, in fact, rarely those of execution. Homicide could usually be compensated with money. Indeed, the tariffing of penalties for different kinds of crime are extremely instructive with regard to definitions of crime. If homicide could be compensated with money, theft was almost invariably a crime punished by execution. While it is tempting therefore to conclude that these were societies inured to violence, which cared more about material things than about human life, this would be wrong. Rather it is an indication of the complex embeddedness of law in social relations. Law was not just a top-down tool to control and diminish acts of interpersonal violence, but often an element of peacemaking strategies. Feuds and interpersonal violence, while certainly engendering horror and fear, were part of the social fabric, and the role of law was to enable a settlement. Homicide was at least open and deemed therefore to be more honourable and honest, and certainly less threatening than the devious secrecy of theft.

For example, in Anglo-Saxon England, the victim’s family would be paid a wergild, and their is lord would be paid a manbot – these sums represented a

form of compensation. The figure with jurisdictional rights over the killer (perhaps the king) would be paid a fihtwite. Superficially, this presents a contrast with Frankish sources, which seem either to limit royal involvement in the punishment of either theft or homicide, or to punish both by death. Closer inspection reveals, however, a similar logic, as Carolingian texts indicate that a killer was to be summoned into the royal presence for punishment only if he refused to pay, or the victim’s family refused compensation. There was a further rationale to royal involvement in Anglo-Saxon law. Tom Lambert has shown that the principle underlying much of the legislation against violence was one of hospitality: rulers were analogous with hosts, who had a duty to protect their guests, and were entitled to compensation if any of those guests were harmed. The laws of Ine of Wessex, for example, make this point, describing penalties for fighting in different kinds of houses. The late Anglo-Saxon period saw a great expansion of the king’s protection to include houses, roads and churches, and the reach of the king’s intervention after acts of physical violence consequently stretched substantially.

These points might be nicely encapsulated by looking at the special case of church sanctuary. This probably derived in the early medieval period in England both from episcopal intercession on behalf of supplicants (an idea derived from Roman culture and Christian teaching about the importance of mercy and penance), and from the ideas of hospitality and shelter underpinning legal developments. Church sanctuary then was a practice which engaged with the socially embedded nature of interpersonal violence and which acknowledged that the role of law was not straightforwardly coercive, but debateable and flexible: sanctuary was intertwined with the multiple discourses – religious, interpersonal and legal – surrounding violence. While recent historians have tended to emphasise the continued uptake of Roman law, particularly in southern Europe, even in the early Middle Ages, the rediscovery of the Digest in the late eleventh century was clearly a crucial moment. The impetus given by this text was multi-faceted. On the one hand, it stimulated the intellectual study of law, with the University of Bologna being founded around the same time: law could become a specialist subject, with a distinctive jurisprudence emerging. On the other hand, it

provided a model of law whereby its function was emphatically more than an agent in interpersonal negotiations: Roman law lay at the heart of the development of the *ius commune*.\textsuperscript{12} In Roman law paradigms, crime is seen as a public misdemeanour. Its implications reach beyond those involved in the conflict, to affect the community as a whole. If early medieval law was triangulated to consider the interests of the perpetrator, and the dual victim-hood of the wounded person and the analogous host, Roman law articulated more explicitly the public effects of the crime. Punishment was calibrated accordingly.

The distinction in perspective is nicely underlined in the idea of a shift from an accusatorial to an inquisitorial system in the fourteenth century. In an accusatorial system, the prosecution of crime depends on an accusation by a private individual, prepared to take upon himself or herself the burden of proof. In an inquisitorial system, prosecution is *ex officio* – it does not rely upon the actions of an individual, because the implications of the crime are deemed to affect the community as a whole. The burden of proof lies upon the legal mechanisms that are responsible for constructing a case against the defendant. Needless to say, the shift from one system to another was by no means uni-directional or definitive.

Changes in procedure and the growth of an idea of ‘public crime’ would seem to sustain the argument that developing mechanisms of legal prosecution went hand-in-hand with the development of states. What is often labelled a Weberian narrative of a growing state monopoly of violence seems incipient at this point. However, there are various problems with such a straightforward schema. First, the mapping of law and polity can be tricky. European polities did not often develop distinctively ‘national’ sets of laws, but law overlapped political boundaries in complex ways. Roman law is, by its very nature, international, and in many ways the localism of earlier medieval laws had to give way to a more cosmopolitan notion of law which could sit uneasily with the development of statecraft: equally, though, Roman law in many ways acted as a supplement to local laws and customs.\textsuperscript{13} John Watts has pointed out the internationalism of the practice of writing up law: at a learned level at least, it was a cosmopolitan endeavour.\textsuperscript{14} Even


\textsuperscript{13} Peter Stein, *Roman Law in European History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 50.

\textsuperscript{14} Watts, *Making of Polities*, p. 148.
where we can identify explicit attempts to integrate law and jurisdiction into growing practices of statecraft, the success of those attempts is highly dubious, as is the idea that the goal itself was to create a homogeneous and hegemonic body of law. There are, of course, significant regional differences, and England must be acknowledged to be unusually centralised in its legal administration.

A growing sense of ‘public crime’ must have affected the processes of legal categorisation and definition. Homicide would be re-read as a matter of utmost gravity, affecting the community as a whole, rather than just the victim and the king whose protection had been violated. However, this process of reinterpreting homicide was protracted and complex. Even by the fifteenth century, many were unwilling to recognise the implications of homicide as stretching beyond the parties involved. The prosecution of rape continued to be highly contingent upon deeply misogynist notions of women as property of their male guardians. The prosecution of domestic violence is particularly telling. Although its implications could become explicitly disruptive to the community when domestic quarrels and beatings emerged onto the street, there was a real unwillingness to accept the need for public law to interfere in abuse that remained within the boundaries of the home. Moreover, ambivalence about the extent to which husbands should actually be encouraged to ‘discipline’ their wives continued, while concern grew about the public implications of excessive beating. Where to draw the line between acceptable and excessive beating continued to be defined by legalists, as well as by moralists, as essentially a matter of ‘moderation’, a highly subjective measure. The narrative of the increasingly ‘public’ legal reading of violence and the appropriation of its use by the state can be examined by thinking about six strikingly problematic strands of this argument.

Public and Private Implications of Violence

The process of law was spectacularly public by the later Middle Ages. This is the first strand of developmental arguments regarding the public and state-centric implications of law. Courtrooms were highly ritualistic, and historians have drawn attention to the spectacular nature of public punishment. The

purpose of corporal punishment, it seems, was not simply retaliatory, but highly public in its deterrent effect: this was a dramatic spectacle, designed to reinforce structures of power. Crime was often characterised as an offence against the state, and its repression was more explicitly a function of the state and an aspect of sovereignty. Roman law provided a model whereby sovereignty was bound up with the enforcement of justice – models of kingship developed, particularly by the fifteenth century, to put justice at their ideological centre. One way in which this could be manifested, bridging the conceptual gap between legislation and jurisdiction, was in the famous thirteenth-century attempts of the French crown, under the later canonised Louis IX, to deal with corruption among legal officers throughout his realm.\footnote{William Chester Jordan, ‘Anti-Corruption Campaigns in Thirteenth-Century Europe’, \textit{Journal of Medieval History} 35.2 (2009), 204–19.}

It was a powerful exercise in statecraft, attempting to streamline an often dysfunctional system; it was a statement of royal concern for true justice and morality; it was explicitly anti-local, as it enforced frequent moves upon legal officials; and it denied the integration of legal mechanisms into local concerns, arguing that they should stand above these concerns on behalf of the community of the realm as a whole. One effect of such moves was to create powerful processes of marginalisation, creating large groups of excluded and criminalised people. The seemingly exponential growth of marginal groups in fourteenth-century Paris is visible in the records because of, and may have been stimulated by, the growth of top-down legal mechanisms defining acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in increasingly strident and explicit terms.\footnote{Bronislav Geremek, \textit{The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris}, trans. J. Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).} Likewise, civic attempts in London to impose a sense of community through legal authority functioned in part by excluding groups like prostitutes, beggars and the extremely poor.\footnote{Frank Rexroth, \textit{Das Milieu der Nacht: Obrigkeit und Randgruppen im Spätmittelalterlichen London} (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1999).} Defining acceptable behaviour from the centre can be an exercise in sustaining a political community by defining its boundaries.

However, law intertwined with power in significantly varied ways. For example, the governmental role in the prosecution of crime in Perugia and Bologna grew dramatically in both cities in the late thirteenth century: the implications of crime were deemed to be more public, and the punishment of crime became accordingly harsher.\footnote{Sarah Blanshei, ‘Criminal Justice in Medieval Perugia and Bologna’, \textit{Law and History Review} 1.2 (1983), 251–75.} Punishments were explicitly calibrated...
to make points about political communities – magnates, or urban nobles, who killed non-magnates were liable to a fine four times as great as that to be paid by non-magnates who killed magnates; a foreigner who killed a Perugian was to be executed, a Perugian who killed a foreigner was to be fined 100 pounds. This calibration of penalty by person, place and time was a way to circumscribe a particular kind of political community, characterised by strong popolo reforms and an ideology of peace and justice.

Likewise, in Bologna, whereas thirteenth-century crimes had been prosecuted based largely upon private accusation, by the late fourteenth century ‘a deterrent and public or community-oriented conception of crime and punishment’ had expanded the role of government in the prosecution of crime, and punishments were more often corporal than compositions between individuals. But if this was increasingly the ideological position, the reality was more complex. Law enforcement continued to be dependent on the involvement of members of the community, and assaults continued most often to be prosecuted via a procedure initiated by a private accusation. Interestingly, members of the community seem to have distinguished between murders committed ‘furioso’ or in hot blood, and other types of homicide with more obviously public implications for the community as a whole. Despite a lack of formal distinction in law, members of the community seem fairly readily to have sheltered those involved in crimes of passion or vendetta, thus challenging the reach of law and the public implications of these acts of violence. Blanshei concludes: ‘The distinctions between “public” and “private” spheres of criminal prosecution, between the procedures of accusation and inquisition, between vendetta control and deterrence of marginal criminality, thus reveal a basic ambivalence in the community’s view of crime and criminality, between those crimes and criminals to be tolerated and those to be feared.’

Regarding punishment and pardon, the matter is further complicated by a growing flexibility of approach. The number of royal pardons grew exponentially over the course of the fourteenth century, with France providing an important case study. The growing use of remission, largely from the 1330s, was an effective way of reinforcing the role of royal power by underlining its unique ability to override judgements by inferior courts. Remission, then, was an expression of public power. But it also arose from what might look like a contradictory tendency to pay closer attention to the individual

conscience of the wrongdoer. Indeed, both these tendencies are apparent in Roman law itself, which stresses both the public implications of crime and the importance of individual intention. A Christianised approach, and the prerogatives of canon law, reiterated this. Courts were therefore keen to examine fact, and not just law. In other words, they looked at the precise unfolding of events, rather than simply pigeon-holing crimes into pre-circumscribed categories. By the fourteenth century, the concept of equity had become increasingly prominent, underpinned and stimulated by theologians such as Thomas Aquinas. In continental Europe, notions of equity increasingly inflected the judgement of cases, and England saw the creation of a court of equity, the Chancery.

It is perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of medieval law that insoluble conceptual contradictions could coexist. At the same time as courts were increasingly attentive to individual consciences and motivation, animal trials continued to provide strange spectacles. Even if these trials purported to represent communities, the hanging of pigs adhered to a notion of crime wherein intention played little role.

The Limited Impact of Roman Law

A second strand, then, of the argument about the ascendancy of Roman law needs nuancing. The impact of Roman law itself was in fact extremely limited. Most areas in Europe continued to run with a wide array of customary, local and more centralised formulations. Although Joseph Strayer’s representation of late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century French statecraft has proved extremely enduring, and gave centre stage to the role of law in the development of the French state, more recent research has juxtaposed these genuinely impressive developments with the continued importance of customary law and powerful local or seigneurial jurisdictions. Germany was a case in point of multiple, often competing, legal frameworks: the law of the Landfrieden, the laws of towns, the normative structures of feuding, and the customs of fiefs and Länder.

29 Watts, Making of Politics, p. 127.
Custom itself deserves fuller consideration. Ibbetson identifies three senses of custom or *consuetudo* in medieval law, all of which point to ways in which the narrative of the growing hegemony of law can be problematised. He describes ‘custom as normative practice, custom as unwritten law, and custom in opposition to law’.30 While state-builders may have quite logically felt customary law to be an undesirable impediment to legal developments, it was remarkably enduring.31 Many of these laws were oral: the German *Weistümer* and their Swiss and Netherlandish cousins were ‘locked in place by frequent repetition’.32 Over the course of the thirteenth century, we see an increasing drive to write down customary law. Philippe de Beaumanoir, the late thirteenth-century French jurist, is a remarkably articulate example. He was a legal official (a *bailli*), and his declared purpose was to ‘write down customs so that they can be preserved for the future’.33 Here is an acknowledgment that customary law was an integral element of French law, coupled with the impetus to regularise and take control of it to some extent. In fact, a kind of jurisprudence of custom emerged, articulated most clearly by the great jurist Bartolus of Sassoferrato – a custom had to be proved by writing or by witnesses, it had to be rational, and it could only be proved through law, as implicit acknowledgment of the continuing importance of custom.34 In France, Louis IX formalised the practice of *enquête par turbé*, a procedure to ensure that a given custom had the necessary authority of age. The Castilian *Siete Partidas* explains that a customary rule gains force through antiquity, but that it can only be valid through two judgements by judges.35 Customary law was then both something that could be formalised through traditional channels of power, and something more subversive in the face of developing hegemonies.

**The Monopolisation of Violence?**

A third strand of teleological models of monopolisation of violence stresses the role of states: this is highly problematic because of the diffuse nature of many late medieval polities. Germany, with its patchwork of principalities, is paradigmatic in this respect. Italy and the Iberian peninsula could be

32 Ibbetson, ‘Custom in Medieval Law’, p. 158.
34 Ibbetson, ‘Custom in Medieval Law’, p. 158.
described in similar terms. As Watts puts it, ‘Kleinstaaten in fact resembled the
commonest pattern of territorial power in Europe: the patchwork of jurisdic-
tions, operating under a (sometimes very light) co-ordinating authority.’
Watts describes a spectrum of jurisdictional coordination, with the kingdom
of Castile at one end, run with a clear distinction between the role of royal
officers in reserved cases and that of municipal authorities who applied local
laws. In the middle, one might situate France, where despite a crown
claiming ultimate jurisdictional powers, a neat jurisdictional pyramid of
appeals from lower jurisdictions to higher ones rarely operated in anything
but theory. Jurisdictional rights were distributed territorially and geogra-
phically (between powerful lords, royal officials and the church), as well as
qualitatively by type of case. And finally, at the other extreme, lies Germany,
where, despite the theoretically overarching feudal rights of the king or
emperor, towns and princes vied with one another for the exercise of
jurisdictional rights. Fourteenth-century Westphalia saw the development
of the so-called Vehmic courts, which represented private jurisdictional
franchises, and can be taken to indicate the rise of a new country gentry in
the fourteenth century. Over the course of the fifteenth century, imperial
efforts to master these private franchises had only limited success. The
further east one travels, the greater becomes the jurisdictional autonomy of
magnates, despite attempts, theoretical at least, to impose royal judicial
authority. One might cite the Majestas Carolina in Bohemia (1355) and the
Privilegium Maius in Austria (1358) as examples of law codes emanating from
the royal power, which in practice were far more limited. Sometimes these
impressive statements were in fact codifications of custom, witness the
Swedish Eriksgata of 1335 or the law of the Bavarian Land of 1346.
Ecclesiastical powers tended to benefit from substantial immunities, and
regional land-courts usually represented local powers and ruled through
custom.

One of the striking results of this diffusion of justice in the later Middle
Ages is the rich archival trail of conflicts of jurisdiction which it generated.
These generate a powerful set of statements about power rivalries (some-
times caught up in armed hostilities, most famously in spiralling unrest
leading up to the Hundred Years War, as some of Edward I’s Gascon subjects

exploited jurisdictional tensions by appealing against judgements of their immediate overlord, Edward, to his technical overlord, a receptive Philip IV of France), but they also provide unusually detailed accounts of events, and often give a sense of the ways in which violent incidents are remembered collectively and individually. Typically, small-scale conflicts of jurisdiction would necessitate the gathering together of the oldest inhabitants of the locale to describe all cases they had seen prosecuted, and to provide evidence of precedent: events can be remembered over a period of over half a century, and the historian can gain unique insights into the ways in which dramatic violence impacted upon members of a community.

The Idea of Vengeance

Jurisdiction was something worth quarrelling over, not only because it was financially profitable but also because it was symbolically loaded. A fourth strand of complexity in accounts of the growing sense of the public implications of violence concerns the idea of vengeance. Roman law condemns physical violence because it threatens the community as a whole: punishment apparently replaces the disorder of private vengeance. Nevertheless, the motivation of vengeance continued to underpin many legal responses to violence, and public punishment was still caught up in this logic. This ran alongside the on-going practice of private vengeance. Despite the rhetoric, in the later Middle Ages legal prosecution never entirely replaced the recourse to private violence and vengeance. And as the logic of private vengeance continued, it proved virtually impossible to dissociate public punishment from its grasp. Indeed, one explanation for the relatively few cases of capital punishment for violent crime lies with the fear of violent retribution by the accused’s family.

In Philippe de Beaumanoir’s late thirteenth-century northern French custumal, he famously describes the role of law and punishment as ‘vengeance for misdeeds’. Corporal and capital punishment were certainly spectacular and served an exemplary purpose: they were designed to reinforce the public demonstration of the power behind the law, to deter

45 Beaumanoir, Coutumes, p. 1.
potential offenders, and to purify the community as a whole. But they were also explicitly a form of vengeance, and caught up in the same webs and cycles of retribution that one might assume they were designed to replace. In 1304 in Lens, one Jakemon Platel vengefully murdered the hangman.\textsuperscript{46} The guilty party was still expected publicly to forgive his (and more rarely her) executioner into the sixteenth century, in Nuremberg for example: this was a necessary formula to release the accused’s family from the obligation to avenge their executed relative.\textsuperscript{47} In other words, vengeance was in many ways still the operative logic. If the application of law was about justice, this was justice conceived of distributively: the punishment should in some way match the crime and thus purify the community; it was to be decided upon via a logic of the latter-day law of retaliation (\textit{lex talionis}).

And the application of law itself was, of course, by our standards often extremely violent. Any narrative of growing centralisation quelling and controlling levels of physical violence must reckon with the sheer brutality of medieval law (and not just punishment). Modes of proof provide a case in point. Although judicial duels tend to be associated with the Germanic law of the early medieval period,\textsuperscript{48} much of the law of later medieval Europe showed a good deal of ambivalence regarding the practice, with many compilations of customary law regulating it: the \textit{Livre de justice et de plet} sets out the precise circumstances in which a judicial duel represents the appropriate mode of action, and indicates what might invalidate it.\textsuperscript{49} Philip IV of France attempted to forbid duels and private wars in the 1290s and 1300s, but he was eventually obliged to bow to pressure to allow duels in criminal and capital matters from 1306 onwards because ‘several malefactors get away with murder and other serious offences and excesses, because they have undertaken them secretly and so cannot be indicted by witnesses: therefore, if no other proof is available, we wish that they should be able to be called to a judicial duel’.\textsuperscript{50}

If anything, the increasing recourse to Roman law intensified the physical pain associated with law. Not least, Roman law with its emphasis on inquisitorial procedure, reintroduced torture as a technique for gathering evidence. However, torture was almost always deemed highly problematic, with Louis

IX of France (whose apparent interest in true justice surely played a role in his saintly reputation and subsequent canonisation in 1299) forbidding its use unless multiple witness statements were able to suggest its utility. 51 Ritual humiliations were associated with the punishment of violent crime. It is of course telling that the most gruesome and meaning-laden punishments were reserved for crimes of lèse-majesté, or crimes against the state. But very often, corporal punishment was commuted into some kind of monetary payment. In many ways, this is surprising given prevalent modern stereotypes of the brutality of the Middle Ages. Of course, the reason does not lie convincingly with any squeamishness regarding bloodshed. Rather it lies in the continued reluctance to categorise or even the straightforward impossibility of categorising violent offences as offences against the community as a whole, rather than as essentially interpersonal conflicts. The commutation to monetary payments effectively repositioned the original acts of violence within a framework of interpersonal relations which could be negotiated and pacified by a monetary payment – most often involving both a fine to the legal authority and a payment to the victim or (in the event of murder) to the victim’s family. One pleasingly eccentric medieval practice was known as the ‘grâce par mariage subséquent’. If any bystander at an execution offered to marry the guilty party, the execution was abandoned, and the guilty would effectively have another chance at social life. 52 How widespread this practice indeed was is a moot point, but its continued existence once again points to an ambivalence regarding the role of capital punishment: it provided yet another opportunity to resituate the guilty party within a community, and to reintegrate and pacify. And indeed this continued to be in many ways the main role of the law. Maiming or killing the individual through corporal punishment could resolve the disruption caused by an act of violence, but more often legal mechanisms seemed to aim to restore communal harmony through reintegration, pacification or negotiation.

Legal Process as an Instrument of Revenge

Law was messy, jurisdictions overlapped and conflicted, and ideas about vengeance and an insistence on the importance of interpersonal relationships continued to shape the logic underpinning law. Despite popular narratives of the growing hegemony of the law, then, legal mechanisms did not replace interpersonal violence in the later Middle Ages. More than this, law was itself

51 Ducoudray, Origines, p. 510.
a strategy, and here lies the fifth strand of complexity. Even in relatively centralised areas like England, law and its courts provided opportunities not only for the quelling of interpersonal violence but for the pursuance of hostilities and quarrels. In the words of Hanawalt and Wallace: 'The law was viewed as a tool of vendetta and revenge, not necessarily as a final arbitrator.'53 While such a perspective has more analytical purchase when thinking about civil cases, it is nevertheless very striking that litigation was becoming an increasingly effective way to drag one’s antagonist thoroughly through the dirt. It was becoming a form of interpersonal violence in itself. This highly antagonistic dimension of the legal process begins with the process of *fama*, on which Roman law was increasingly dependent. In line with the inquisitorial process, a case was to come to justice in the first place because of a common rumour or *fama*. What this indicates about the antagonistic and subversive potential of what one might call gossip is intriguing,54 although the growth of Roman law meant the intensification of attempts by theorists to distinguish between mere rumour and gossip on the one hand and more evidence-based communal reports on the other.55 It foregrounds the role of community hostilities even at the inception of legal cases. As cases developed, the public and formalised nature of courts provided parties with an opportunity to air grievances and often to exacerbate antagonisms.56 This is not to say that law was never imposed from above – it could be both a top-down process and a tool sought out by conflicting parties.

**Channelling and Controlling Violence**

In this sense, the sixth point, law was to some extent about channelling, containing and controlling violence, rather than replacing or usurping it. This was no monopolisation of violence, nascent or otherwise. Looking backwards to the Peace and Truce of God movements instituted in the eleventh century, these pivotal moments in responses to violence were never about preventing or outlawing all violence.57 Rather, their role was to control

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when, where and against whom violence was permitted. Later medieval law regarding violence often continued in this spirit, albeit with the spiritual prerogatives underpinning the Peace and Truce of God movements largely replaced by the prerogatives of political theory and attention to the common good. In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florence, vendetta continued to be seen as legitimate in both cultural and judicial terms. What the law did, however, was to regulate feuds by stipulating which types of people were allowed to participate in feuding, and the open and public manner in which it was to be conducted. For example, a statute of 1325 was entitled ‘De puniendo qui fecerit vindictam nisi in principalem personam’ Some feuding was deemed to be extremely dangerous and pernicious to the good of the community as a whole, witness the anti-magnate legislation which was underpinned by a sense that magnate violence was threatening the well-being of the commune. However, the role of law was never to ban it altogether, but to control it and to ensure that its effects shored up, rather than undermined, the structures of the community. In Germany, feuding continued to be tolerated in a rather different way, as one of a set of alternatives to law courts for settling disputes. Private war or Fehde was to a great extent normalised, and often spectacular, witness the Westphalian feud lasting from 1442 to 1447 fought between Dietrich von Mörs, archbishop of Cologne, and the town of Soest. Alongside this ran institutionalised forms of Schiedspruch or arbitration, often rooted in societies of nobles and knights such as that of St George in Swabia, with the ultimate sanction being, somewhat ironically, war against the offender who had failed to keep the terms of the arbitration. Landfriede or Public Peaces were ad hoc agreements to resolve disputes, again sustained through institutionalised and ad hoc legal machinery which did not deny the logic of the feud but tried to provide a way to minimise its perpetuation. In France, the private wars and feuds of powerful nobles were ostensibly limited by the growing pretensions of centralised power, but the extent to which these prohibitions worked in practice were limited, and even theoretically the prohibitions acknowledged the logic and necessity of many of these wars. A case in point is the Foix–Armagnac feud lasting from the 1290s to the 1340s.

Methodological Challenges

A far more complex picture emerges, then, than teleological narratives of the monopolisation of violence by the state and the public apprehension of interpersonal violence might suggest. Legal responses to violence were increasingly spectacular and ritualistic, sustaining and intensifying developing political structures, but interpersonal violence still was often read as being of more private than public import. Equally, legal responses were often still framed within a logic of interpersonal vengeance, and often acknowledged the legitimacy of feuds and private war. Most straightforwardly, a narrative of progression does not work because of the rich geographical variety of legal attitudes and frameworks over the course of the Middle Ages. One can even cite areas where any ‘progress’ seems rather to be have been operating in reverse. Later medieval Ghent is a fascinating case in point, where by the fourteenth century ‘the “state” was retreating before the Germanic bloodfeud.62 Violent offences were rarely brought to court, hindered by the persistence of self-help, the reluctance of plaintiffs to press charges, and the absence of a conception of violence as per se an offence against public order. Comital power had peaked in the city in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, but the count of Flanders was eventually obliged to acknowledge feud as a legitimate dispute mechanism, only attempting through law to regulate its perpetration. As comital power was forced to recede, feuding became subject to atonement payments which were sufficiently standardised and manageable as to amount to a form of taxation as much as a punishment. Towards the end of the fourteenth century, punishment was imposed on a man even if he had been reconciled with his victims, but the century as a whole represents a high point of the feud.

The more complex picture emerging leaves us with considerable challenges regarding the source material. These are challenges with which modern scholars, armed with the insights of the linguistic turn and thorough understandings of the mechanisms framing the construction of legal narratives, should be particularly well equipped to deal. Legal sources provide opportunities to discover details of social life which go beyond the specific crimes for which the subjects are indicted. However, they are often formulaic, and it is in the nature of law to categorise with pre-existing labels actions which may in practice have been more varied. And of course, the range of violence which appears in legal records rarely reflects the range of violence in

practice. There are numerous reasons why court records would not faithfully mimic social practice. As Watts points out, ‘if an accusation that one had been wronged “with force and arms” enabled one to get justice in a higher and more powerful court, there were good reasons to make that accusation, whatever the realities of the situation’. 63 The labels and the presentations of ‘facts’ were constrained by the strictures and expectations of law, and manipulated by canny litigants. Some of the most illuminating legal sources available are the appeals reproduced in letters of pardon and remission, and petitions of the later Middle Ages. While these documents tend to provide a rich body of detail concerning a particular case, they are naturally shaped by the desire to achieve a particular result. A murderer applying for a pardon would need to present the case in a particular way in order to elicit the sympathy of his audience, and these narratives were necessarily shaped by legal norms. 64 For example, if ‘hot anger’ was legally deemed to be a mitigating factor, then such a narrative would be likely to portray the act of violence as one undertaken in fury. If legal frameworks suggested that self-defence was a mitigating factor, then such narratives would try to show that any violence was provoked and defensive. If legal frameworks provided ways of demonising the victim and suggesting that he or she deserved the abuse (in the case of domestic violence, for example), then such a narrative would be likely to try to show the victim to have provoked the perpetrator unreasonably. These narratives were constructs: they referred to real events, but were shaped and constrained by structural imperatives in ways that literary scholars have shown to shape fiction.

Conclusion

The study of violent crime often tempts statistical analyses, and here again the source material is fraught with challenges. 65 A period can look particularly violent from the records simply because legal mechanisms were more highly developed.

63 Watts, Making of Polities, p. 23.
or because political imperatives were stimulating a crackdown on crime as a demonstration of power.\textsuperscript{66} An instructive debate arose between Esther Cohen and Claude Gauvard in this respect. Cohen used the Parisian Châtelet records of 1389–92 to argue that the disruption of the Hundred Years War led to a surge in crimes against property, with a comparative diminution of crimes of violence against persons.\textsuperscript{67} Gauvard critiqued the conclusions by pointing out the problems inherent when only a single register survives. Furthermore, the registers were compiled by a judicial system in the midst of reforming itself and keen to demonstrate that it could be tough on crime particularly against property, a subject about which people were particularly fearful in the context of the Hundred Years War.\textsuperscript{68} The registers were to be examples of the types of punishment meted out, rather than systematically to transcribe prosecutions. They tell us more about the judicial system and the shifts within it.

If one turns to what one might broadly term ‘legislative’ evidence, or the normative evidence of law-making rather than the application of law, any conclusions must be tempered by the aspirational nature of these sources. They represent ideals and hopes, rather more than practice. Likewise, they often present a falsely static picture in a world in which legal mechanisms and frameworks were in fact changing far more rapidly than the surviving documentation indicates.\textsuperscript{69}

Understanding law is integral to understanding violence. It accounts for the bulk of our sources (at least for the late medieval period); and it provides a critical way of thinking about violence, both for medieval contemporaries, and for historians. Law was not simply a hegemonic process, attempting to limit and replace violence with something more formalised and state-centric. Rather, it was a process of negotiation, mediation and compromise. And in this sense, it was much like interpersonal violence itself. As so often, the boundaries are blurred.

Bibliographical Essay

I concentrate here on key works from the 1980s onwards, simply because of the overwhelming quantity of material. These more recent works provide seminal insights,


\textsuperscript{69} Wormald, \textit{Legal Culture}, p. 9.

On canon law, which often relates at least tangentially to violence, the best overviews are those of James Brundage, Medieval Canon Law (London: Longman, 1995) and Richard Helmholz, Canon Law and English Common Law (London: Selden Society, 1983), the latter examining ways in which canon law interacted with secular law.

Finally, readers should also turn to several important collections of essays which range widely across medieval law and violence and provide important insights regarding the nature of law and its relationship to other normative frameworks: John Bossy (ed.), The Moral World of the Law (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); R. Mazo Karras, J. Kaye and E. Ann Matter (eds.), Law and the Illicit in Medieval Europe (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
PART III

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SOCIAL, INTERPERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE
On an early spring day in 1295 in the eastern parts of the Harima province in Japan, the Ōbe Estate was invaded by a large group of bandits. They pillaged and stole everything they could get their hands on, including farming tools, horses, cows, crops and money, and even added humiliation to injury by tearing the clothes off the back of several of the residents. Apparently not satisfied with their gains, the invaders then kidnapped wives and children and pretended to torture and kill them in order to blackmail the residents into raising an unknown sum of money.¹ The managers appointed to the estate by the absentee owner were quick to flee, leaving the residents to face the invaders by themselves.

The leader of the gang was Tarumi Shigemasa, who had recently been removed from his position as manager of the same estate he was now pillaging. When reinforcements from the owners – the powerful temple Tōdaiji – finally reached the estate some time after Shigemasa had already left the area, the temple deputies demanded so much fodder and provisions from the unlucky villagers that it placed an additional burden on the already devastated community.² In this case the invading force of Shigemasa was too large and brutal to be countered by military means and the residents had to buy their way out of further troubles. However, villagers in medieval Japan were far from always as docile or victimised as this incident might indicate.

Many if not most medieval societies were characterised by the reluctance or incapacity of central powers to intervene actively in local disputes and conflicts, and the power and initiative of negotiation were often left to the contesting parties themselves. The lack of trust in the willingness or

¹ Tōdaiji sangōra mōshijō an Einin 3 (1295).02 (KI 24:18748, p. 231); Harima Ōbenoshō hyakushōra mōshibumi an Einin 3 (1295).21 (KI 24:18762, p. 236).
capabilities of the central powers or estate proprietors to protect individuals and groups in the provinces forced the latter to organise and use violence as a conscious conflict strategy. Yet, studies of these societies, and in particular of medieval Japan, are still to a large degree focused on the study of central institutions and thereby neglect to discuss peripheral conflict mechanisms and local violence as something more than subversive or anti-social acts.

People disturbing the peace or violating managerial rights have often been discussed as predatory groups, whether they were government-licensed warriors (commonly known later as ‘samurai’) or estate residents. Violent reactions and encounters have been seen as disrupting and anomalous elements in the attempts of the military government (shogunate) in Kamakura to secure peace in the realm. Violence in the countryside has therefore often been associated with the later breakdown of the central powers and of the Kamakura shogunate, and local violent conflicts have been used as indicators of a failing government.

However, local violence and the functioning of a medieval government are not as mutually exclusive as they may be in modern nation-states, where the state’s monopoly on institutions of arbitration of violent conflicts is of paramount importance to the stability of society and to the legitimacy of the power of the state over its citizens. A study of local conflicts in the Kamakura period (1186–1333) therefore does not show a state under attack from unruly and socially ill-adapted denizens but a more complex picture of conflicting parties acting in accordance with local standards and motives.

Background

In the transition from the classical imperial order to what we can call the early medieval period in the tenth to twelfth centuries, the centralised imperial bureaucracy gradually gave way to new ways of organising society and government. From the late ninth century, the central government was increasingly dominated by a few powerful families, who established complex vertical alliances with low- and middle-ranking nobles both at court and in the provincial administrations. Personal ties of clientele gradually gained importance at the expense of the functions of government, even though the same families were often in control of both avenues of power. In this process,

the central government as a bureaucratic organ lost much of its influence over military resources and its control over the agricultural labour in the provinces.\textsuperscript{4} By the mid-Heian period (795–1185), three groups found themselves in constant and intense competition over agricultural resources: the capital elites of nobles and temples; provincial government officers; and resident provincial elites.\textsuperscript{5} Although the middle tier of provincial officers was gradually replaced by local warrior families during the Kamakura period, the picture of lord–client relations and incessant competition over land rights and access to resources among both central and local elites continued well into the medieval period of the fifteenth century.

The political and managerial segmentation resulted in a much weakened state structure, where the government possessed very few economic resources or means of coercion.\textsuperscript{6} This system of decentralised administration also led to severe competition for resources, not least among peers at the same tier in the hierarchy. Landed wealth became one of the most important means of political influence, as private estates provided not only resources for the individual family but also the means for engaging with people from the other tiers and establishing a relationship of clientele. The nobility came to assume a dual role as they scrambled to amass huge landed estates in the provinces. Not only were they the key members of the central administration at the imperial court, they were also private landholders in direct competition with the provincial officers of the same state that they represented.

The competitive nature of the state was given added impetus as scores of professional warriors began to make their presence felt in both provincial and capital affairs by the second half of the Heian period. I will not go into a more detailed discussion of the rise of warriors to national power here, but only note that the appearance of new, military families of great coercive power only added to the competition amongst the elites in all tiers. It did not significantly alter the state. By the middle of the thirteenth century, the warrior government in Kamakura had assumed many of the judiciary and administrative functions of the state, besides of course the responsibility of all military and police matters. Still, the Kamakura regime never tried to replace the imperial court and chose instead to utilise the prestige of the court to


\textsuperscript{5} Friday, \textit{Samurai, Warfare and the State}, p. 8

\textsuperscript{6} Kiley, ‘Estate and Property’, p. 114.
bolster its own authority, thus embedding itself in the court-centred national state system as one among other oligarchic groups.  

Although the Kamakura regime on the surface looked all-powerful, it was not the sole judiciary agent in the realm, nor did it enforce or even claim a monopoly on violence. The imperial court continued as the most important arbiter of conflicts, and only in cases where retainers of Kamakura were involved would Kamakura take over the mediation of conflict. Both capital centres thus developed effective systems of justice, each with its own courtrooms and jurisdictions. The landholding elites in the capital, consisting of the imperial family, court nobles, temples and shrines, maintained control over extensive estates and their resources and the power naturally derived from these. In large part due to their ‘monopoly on prestige distribution’, as one historian has labelled it, the capital elites succeeded in maintaining some degree of control over their landed assets, even if most of these elites were more interested in a steady stream of revenue than in actual managerial control. Although it can be said that violence suffered ‘almost universal condemnation’ in the Kamakura period, this was only true in the official version of society. The reach of the state – that is, the imperial court and the Kamakura regime combined – was very limited and never extended much further than to those in direct personal relation with the judicial centres. Local agents of Kamakura were slow at best and often actually insubordinate when it came to apprehending criminals at large. In most cases, they were not even allowed to enter privately held estates belonging to the capital elites – a privilege of non-interference in private estates that the landholders defended with passion. This meant among other things that provincial policing authorities could not normally apprehend any estate residents who had committed illegalities inside or outside the estate. Since the system involved

11 Conlan, State of War, p. 219. 
a retraction from the judiciary system of the state, it implied that estate administrations had to deal with criminals and other unruly residents on their own.

Judiciary Violence

When discussing the judiciary meanings of violence in medieval Japan, we run into several problems. The structure of the fragmented state created multiple centres of authority, as seen above, and it is therefore very hard to establish a core set of rules for appropriate violent behaviour. It is, after all, one thing to talk about how violence was viewed through the lens of the state and its laws and courtroom verdicts, but it is much harder to get a clear image of how such rules were accepted or adapted by local society.

Law codes do not necessarily equal justice. As the Kamakura shogunate began to enforce its laws with more fervour in the second half of the thirteenth century in the very real fear of a Mongol invasion, many people resisted the overtures of the state and its policies that were seen as being unjust. Laws were increasingly enforced through violence, or threat of violence, and they were resisted by many through violence. Concepts of legitimacy and illegitimacy were rather diffuse, especially when it came to using extra-legal means of violence, and the difference between vigilantism and banditry was in many cases blurred and merely depended on the degree of official recognition. This mistrust made it necessary for individuals and groups to organise and use violence, regardless of whether such violence was considered bad and ‘illegal’ from the viewpoint of the central power holders.

Violence in medieval Japan was not unrestrained or meaningless and often developed according to local expectations of propriety and legitimacy. To the central powers and their elite members, however, local power seekers or power holders were essentially regarded as a potential threat, not only to their political power, but also to their values and norms. This especially surfaced when peripheral powers overstepped their invisible boundaries and became a nuisance for central elites.

In documents produced by members of the religious, military or political elites, rural violence was to a high degree condemned as illegal and deviant

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14 Conlan, *State of War*, p. 196
15 Similar attitudes to violence and militias/vigilantes can of course be found in many other settings. See for example Richard White, ‘Outlaw Gangs of the Middle Border: American Social Bandits’, *Western Historical Quarterly* 12.4 (1981), 387–210, at 389.
behaviour. Documents produced by local political actors, on the other hand, often show a more pragmatic view on the use of private violence and on extra-judicial conflict mediation. In these different discourses we can thus get information on how norms and the legitimation of violence were negotiated between asymmetrical powers with vastly different political capital at the centre and periphery in the medieval period.

Villages in medieval Japan employed a number of strategies in their negotiations with the absentee proprietors who for the most part consisted of aristocratic families or large monastic institutions in the capital area of Kyoto. Mirroring what Charles Tilly has called *dissimulation* in late medieval Europe, estate residents often used the strategy of conceding just enough of one’s autonomy and/or proprietary rights to meet the demands of the rulers and thereby evade close control or expropriation. This was done through cooperation with the local administrative institutions of the proprietors in the estates, which would leave them just enough room for manoeuvring in daily affairs without severe restrictions from the centre. As James C. Scott has also shown in his study of Malay villages for a later period, rights could be achieved through time, not by open defiance or rebellion, but through effective erosion in a multitude of ways. This is very close to what happened from the early stages of the estate system and it was not ‘necessary’ for the peasants openly to defy the proprietors. Only later in the thirteenth century does the strengthening of temple power over their properties become so oppressive that peasants were unable to avoid direct confrontations for which they would often be vilified as bandits. Such network strategies illustrate perfectly the system of mutual dependency, yet inherent antagonism, between the estate communities and the proprietors.

**Enemies of the Estate**

A cursory survey of thirteenth-century estate documentation quickly shows a diverse picture of enemies to the proprietor and to the local communities, both exterior and interior. Lumping the exterior enemies together into crude categories produces the following main types of enemies to the estates, which I have here ranked according to their proximity to the political centre

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16 For discussions of private versus public wars in premodern Japan, see Friday, *Samurai, Warfare and the State*, pp. 23–9; and Conlan, *State of War*, pp. 194–221.
and elites: (a) warriors acting with some kind of centrally defined and protected authority and legitimacy; (b) bandits, thieves and other violent predators without official sanction; and (c) residents from neighbouring estates/communities.

These groups should not be seen as fixed categories, and individuals could move from one category to the next at different stages of a conflict, or between one dispute and the next. Less aggressive elements in the provinces also seem to have posed a threat to the social fabric of the estate communities. Peasant groups on the run from oppressive proprietors or gluttonous warriors would sometimes be able to find shelter with relatives or associates in other estates for a while, but in cases where the network ties were not so strong they would be kept at a distance as a threat to the limited resources of the community.\textsuperscript{19} Outcast groups and other itinerant groups would also be a constant liability, and could disrupt order in the estates and local communities.\textsuperscript{20} However, they only figure sporadically in the sources, as when social unrest in Yamato province made the Tôdaiji clergy send a letter to managers and residents in their estates in which they warned against roaming and bellicose outcasts, furthermore ordering that begging sites should be abolished forever.\textsuperscript{21} Such cases show that itinerant elements in many instances were regarded with hostility by proprietors and residents alike and that the latter were prepared to defend their territories and resources through various displays of violence.

Professional warriors, and especially those sanctioned by the shogunate, were beyond doubt the most formidable foes of a peasant community, which would usually simply refrain from resisting an invading forces, often by absconding and hiding in the mountains until danger had passed. The relative strength of this type of threat to peasant communities also helps explain why warriors are so conspicuously present both in contemporary sources and consequently also in research today. Even rural communities with a notorious tendency to resist outside interference were usually without the means to stand up to a posse of official deputies. In a prolonged conflict in the Kuroda Estate, for example, central authorities repeatedly dispatched expeditionary forces in order to apprehend a number of named suspects of violent

\textsuperscript{21} Tôdaiji nen’yo dokoro gechijô dodai Genkô 4 (1324).08 (Tôdaiji monjo (hereafter TM), doc. 10:90, pp. 215–16).
crimes, in the process burning down several homesteads. At one point, the residents in the estate were so worried over the prospects of yet another expedition by groups of law enforcement officers into the estate that they wrote a plea to the proprietor, the temple of Tōdaiji, in fear that the troops again would put their homesteads to the torch as well as destroy the early sprouts of wheat and the fodder for their horses. Although the residents on other occasions before and after this event had openly defied troops dispatched by Tōdaiji as well as by external enemies, there is no indication that they tried to put up armed resistance against the deputies.

Officially recognised warriors were not alone in using violence against estate communities, however, and all sorts of predators and/or bandits posed a constant threat in the absence of an effective organisation of law enforcement in the provinces, as we also saw in the case of Tarumi’s raid on the Ōbe Estate in the beginning of this chapter. In several cases, we find neighbouring communities at each other’s throats for several years, leading to several violent encounters. In Iga province, for example, accusations of violent raids flew back and forth between residents of Kuroda Estate and Fukano-myō, which belonged to the temples Tōdaiji and Kōfukuji respectively. For more than a decade, Kuroda residents had made forays into adjoining Kōfukuji estates without Tōdaiji being able, or willing, to halt them. During the early 1310s, armed groups from Kuroda had again defied the orders of their proprietor and assaulted Fukano-myō and chased away Kōfukuji representatives in the area. When Tōdaiji did not intervene in the conflict or in other ways deter its estate residents from attacking the Fukano residents, the latter seized a convoy on route from Kuroda to Tōdaiji loaded with revenues from the estate. While proprietors may have protested over such incursions and assaults, they generally did so more out of concern for their own revenues than the well-being of the people on their estates. In the sources available to us today, such acts were typically framed as banditry in the expectancy that military authorities

22 Iga Kurodanoshō hyakushō shūjō, Karyaku 2 (1327).04.10 (Kamakura ibun (hereafter KI), doc. 38:29806, p. 241).
23 Oxenboell, ‘Images of Akuto’.
24 Tōdaiji nen’yo dokoro gechijō an, Einin 7 (1299).05.01 (TM, doc. 10:70, pp. 188–9).
would be more inclined to intervene in the conflict on behalf of the absentee estate owner.  

That proprietors and residents often had very different priorities in such border conflicts is perhaps even more apparent in the case of the Hiranodono Estate in Yamato province. The province was at several levels controlled by Kōfukuji, who controlled a large number of estates but furthermore had been appointed governor for the province. This double role as landlord and law enforcement agency led to several violations against estates belonging to other temples or individuals, as residents in Kōfukuji estates took advantage of the situation and made forays into areas outside their control. In 1293, residents from two such estates, Annyōji and Yoshida, attacked the Hiranodono Estate, which belonged to the temple Tōji. In a plea from the Hiranodono residents to the estate owner they complained that the attackers had cut trees and thatching straws inside Hiranodono, and it had come to a violent confrontation in which several Hiranodono residents had been injured. While the defenders saw the attack as a predatory act, the attackers argued that Hiranodono rightfully belonged to the Kōfukuji temple complex, and that the Hiranodono residents could make legitimate claims to the resources in neither the mountains nor the fields of the estate. The following year, armed men from Annyōji and Yoshida again attacked the estate and made claims to a mountain area deep inside the estate. This seems to indicate that the attacks were not so much aimed at collecting resources as they were symbolic challenges of Tōji’s proprietary claims to the area. Even so, the threat to the security and well-being of the Hiranodono residents was anything but symbolic, and when their pleas were brushed aside by Tōji, they decided to stop paying the revenues to the temple until the situation was solved, an act for which they were subsequently denounced as enemies of the temple.

The question of legitimacy is central to our understanding of how the groups of alleged bandits worked and survived, although the notion of legitimacy should not be seen solely from the perspective of the law, since

29 Ibid.
both violence and land possession could be legitimated through many other channels. An illustrative example can be found in the border conflict between residents in the Nade Estate and the Mionoya Estate. The warrior’s argument for raiding the contested area was that he had undertaken agricultural activities in the area prior to the conflict and that he therefore had the right to do it again, no matter if right of usage was protected by a deed or not.\(^\text{33}\) Not only were his actions aimed at acquiring more wealth and resources as a one-off occurrence, they were also orchestrated with enough visibility to pose a direct threat to the villagers, thereby sending a powerful signal of his actual power in the region. Finally, from his argument that his previous practice of harvesting on the land legitimated future usage, we can see that his raid was also meant as a violation of a disputed space through which he created precedence for his managerial claim to the area. In this way it is not the singular raid that was important, but its latent threat of future raids and his demonstration of effective lordship over the area.

When Mionoya residents had again harvested in a disputed area between the two estates, the Nade residents immediately did the same in order to emphasise their claim to the area.\(^\text{34}\) Contrary to the image of outlawry and predation subsequently painted by the Mionoya in their complaints to the court, the object of the raid was not to collect crops or other agricultural products, but to uphold a claim to the land itself. Although the Nade group was labelled as bandits for this and similar raids on Mionoya, it should be clear that their actions were not random onslaughts on other people’s property but part of an ongoing territorial struggle. This naturally leads us to a discussion of how and by whom the defence of an estate against marauders was organised.

**Mobilisation Schemes in the Estate System**

The security of estates often depended heavily on local families, and absentee proprietors were often quite reluctant to evict aggressive residents if they were deemed useful for the overall control of an estate. For half a decade, the Tōdaiji clergy experienced severe problems with the their control over their Kuroda Estate in Iga province, where residents in general and local estate officials in particular were accused of causing serious deficiencies in the

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transport of dues from the estate to the temple. In a great number of petitions to the imperial court and to provincial representatives of the shogunate, the Tōdaiji monks accused the recalcitrant residents of a huge range of evil deeds and of being liable to severe punishment. After many years, some of the local leaders were finally exiled, but members of the same family were soon appointed to the vacant positions in the estate administration. It did not take long before the new leaders were accused of various infractions against the cultivators, but it was only when they started causing trouble for the temple that the latter condemned their actions and tried to remove them. 35 In Arakawa in Kii province, a local warrior by the name of Tametoki was arrested and convicted of murder by the provincial authorities. 36 Since he belonged to the local gentry class, he was exiled as punishment for his crime instead of being executed, which seems to have been the most common punishment for commoners. 37 When some years later he returned to the estate, however, the proprietor of the estate shielded him from further punishment in return for a pledge in which Tametoki promised to behave. 38 A few years later, Tametoki again caused trouble, but this time his actions were directed against the proprietor’s direct interests and the latter immediately demanded his arrest and swift punishment. 39

That absentee proprietors often relied heavily on local strongmen in the management of their estates does not mean, however, that local conflicts necessarily revolved around such warriors or warrior-like characters. When threatened by external forces such as bandits, rival village communities or groups of landless peasants, estate residents were often quick to unite and organise through well-established practices. Their responses to such attacks were therefore not disorganised counter-strikes by confused individuals. On the contrary, estate defence was a highly coordinated affair, which involved multiple, if not all, layers of rural hierarchies and often transgressed individual estate borders. In this process it was only natural to find local strongmen, estate managers or other more or less professional warriors at the centre of the mobilisation schemes. However, when their own community was under attack, all men would typically be mobilised for fighting duty in a system that to a surprising degree resembles the national mobilisation of professional warriors.

35 For a more detailed discussion of this conflict, see Oxenboell, ‘Images of Akuto’.
36 KI, doc. 16:12183; Kōyadsan monjo (hereafter KM), doc. 2:112.
38 KM, docs. 4:384 and 7:1577; KI, doc. 21:15998; KM, docs. 7:1546 and 7:1578.
39 KM, docs. 7:1542 and 7:1578.
It is well known that the military leaders mobilised warriors primarily through promises of rewards, and only secondarily through threats of repercussions for failing to report for duty.\textsuperscript{40} The prospects of reward were so integral to the motivation of warriors that one warrior apparently had no scruples in admitting that ‘the way of the bow and arrow is to do what is worthy of reward’.\textsuperscript{41} Fame seems also to have been a common motivation, but physical rewards stand out as the most pertinent reason for warrior mobilisation in times of war throughout the medieval period. However, the reward-for-military-service system was far from limited to the vertical relationship between the shogunate and the warriors. The reward system seems also to have been deeply integrated into the estate system, even where no shogunate warriors were present. Let us therefore look more closely at a few examples of how estate defence was organised and mobilised and how rewards were meted out.

From an official in the Tōji Estate Yugeshima in Iyo province in 1340, we have an interesting account of how the defence was organised in practice. The daily guard duty of the estate was the responsibility of the estate manager, who had been appointed and dispatched to the estate by the temple. In times of invasions by larger bands of assailants, the manager and his henchmen were not sufficient in number or equipment to take up the fight and it would be necessary to draw on the cooperation of external aid in the shape of ‘dozens of fighting men’.\textsuperscript{42} Such a move required large quantities of food and other provisions, in which case the temple would be informed within a few days.\textsuperscript{43}

We have no way of knowing for certain who these ‘dozens of fighting men’ were, but they should probably be seen as the upper levels of the village communities in the area, and they included able men of some social standing and martial training. Some of them were probably outsiders from other estates in the area and it shows that estate defences did not rely solely on their own fighting forces but could also in some cases call on assistance from a


\textsuperscript{41} Thomas D. Conlan, \textit{In Little Need of Divine Intervention} (Ithaca: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2001).

\textsuperscript{42} Unfortunately we do not know who such assailants were, but they would most probably be pirates or other sea-based warrior groups. For a discussion of piracy and sea lords, see Peter Shapinsky, \textit{Lords of the Sea: Pirates, Violence, and Commerce in Late Medieval Japan} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

\textsuperscript{43} Hokkō Yūshin Yugeshimanshō Kajirakata shōmu shiki uketumi, Ryakuō 3 (1340).01.23 (Tōji hyakugō monjo, to, doc. 125, p. 687).
much wider network. As a mediator and coordinator, the proprietor played a key role in local conflicts over water rights and other managerial issues, but was also a unifying power in the defence of a group of estates.

The Yugeshima document furthermore mentions that, after the attack, testimonies would be taken from the residents and submitted to the temple investigators in expectation of rewards or other compensation.

Accordingly, the residents did not engage in battle only to protect their families and belongings during the attack; they were also acting as the first line of defence on behalf of the proprietor, who would reward them for their services. If estate residents did not respond to a mobilisation order from the manager of the estate, on the other hand, they would in some cases be punished for their negligence.

As we saw above, the rules of how to engage invading forces were clearly spelled out to the estate manager in Yugeshima, but a case sixteen years earlier in the estate provides us with a very concrete example of how private initiative could work in the protection scheme of the estate: ‘When several hundred mounted warriors, led by bandits from the Sanuki province ... invaded Yugeshima in the Shōwa era (1312–17) and committed evil raids, Shōyo collected military provisions. With several hundred men he bravely risked his own life in battle and chased away these bandits and proved his extreme loyalty.’ While the document was written by Shōyo himself in expectation of bigger rewards from the proprietor and therefore should not be taken at face value, it does show how Shōya used estate resources in order to gather a band of people willing to fight off the invading forces. Even if Shōyo were embellishing somewhat on the magnitude of his network of allies and supporters, it still indicates that local warriors within the estate system were able to muster substantial support.

The military provisions collected by Shōyo should probably not be taken simply to refer to the part of the crops and other revenues from the estate used to feed his army, but also a part of the revenue used as payment and reward for the aiding force. If we compare with the regulations mentioned earlier from the estate, we can put together the following chain of events. The estate was attacked by a large force of armed men. Apparently the managers in the estate were not successful in organising the defence and in

44 Kobayashi, Nihon chūsei no ikki to sensō, p. 96.
45 Hokkyō Yūshun Yugeshimanoshō Kujirakata shomu shiki ukebumi; Kobayashi, Nihon chūsei no ikki to sensō, pp. 29–30.
46 Kobayashi, Nihon chūsei no ikki to sensō, pp. 30–1.
beating back the enemy, since Shōyo took the initiative although he was not an appointed official in the estate but probably a local strongman with considerable local status and legitimacy. Using revenues which had been collected and stored to be shipped to the proprietor at a later date to feed and compensate a fighting unit, he managed to collect enough men to defeat the invaders and chase them away. Immediately after the fight, a report on the events was written and sent to the proprietor in the capital, who dispatched a delegate to verify the story on location. The amount of provisions collected by Shōyo would be calculated and included in the budgets of the temple. Finally, rewards would be meted out for outstanding military service.

His military exploits were not ignored by Tōji, who subsequently rewarded him handsomely by appointing him to a lucrative administrative position in the estate. Shōyo took the initiative and mobilised the residents in the estate and was rewarded for his efforts. Yet the absentee proprietors were not always pleased with officials who were too active, as the following example of a violent conflict in Ōyama-no-shō in Tamba province will show.

Around 1312, a leading Tōji administrator by the name of Gensō was relieved of his position in the temple, but as we also saw previously with Tarumi Shigemasa, his degradation did not go down well. Going rogue and becoming a bandit, he gathered a gang of armed followers, and he started collecting revenues from a number of the temple’s estates. Some time in the winter of 1315/16, Gensō and his men also attacked the estate of Ōyama-no-shō, where it came to a violent confrontation with armed residents. One of the residents in the estate, Fujiwara Ieyasu, called for reinforcements from outside the estate in order to fight off Gensō’s forces. Ieyasu seems to have been successful in chasing away Gensō’s forces, and the battle in Ōyama-no-shō is the last we hear of Gensō. Based on his resolute actions and initiative in the fight against Gensō, Fujiwara Ieyasu asked for a reward for his loyal services to the proprietor. However, against all expectations, his request was flatly refused. On the contrary, he had his title of ‘local leader’ revoked. That Ieyasu was denied the anticipated reward for his loyalty and on the contrary was punished for his actions may at first glance seem odd. After all, he had fought off a group of

48 Fushimi jōkō inzen an, Ōchō 2 (1312).01.06 (KI, doc. 32:24513), p. 113; Rokuhara mikyōjo, Shōwa 3 (1314).09.09 (KI, doc. 25219, p. 46).
49 Kobayashi, Nihon chūsei no ikki to sensō, pp. 100–1.
51 Ibid.
invaders and prevented the estate from being laid waste without wasting time on waiting for directions from the temple.

Some clues to the motivation of the temple in denying the claim of Ieyasu can be found in the text from the Yugeshima Estate discussed above. After listing the responsibilities of the residents in the defence of the estate, the estate manager also had to swear that ‘if small matters turn out to have been blown out of proportions and the peace has been disturbed because of selfish desires, punishments should be swift’.\(^{52}\) In other words, if the temple deputies discovered after an alleged attack on the estate that the attack had not been as severe as claimed by the residents and that their claims for compensation therefore were unfounded, the temple would take punitive action against the residents. Violent entrepreneurs were vital for the defence of the estates, but remained, after all, a constant liability to the managerial control of the absentee proprietors in the capital.

As we can see from these examples, residents in private estates were far from meek and powerless victims of violent predators from the outside, and recourse to violence does seem to have been an integral part of daily life in many estates. The mobilisation of estate residents in the case of attacks from armed groups should therefore not be seen as oppressive policies of either absentee proprietors or their local representatives. Villagers were the first and primary targets in the case of such attacks and they had a deep interest in maintaining and supporting this mobilisation structure. Not only could they hope for financial stress-relief and/or military aid from the proprietor, but a powerful lord could also embody a legitimacy to use armed force in disputes over fields and wastelands.\(^{53}\) The symbolic value of a nominal or real proprietorship by one of the great temples or aristocratic families played a decisive role in this process, where villagers engaged in violent negations with neighbours over rights to resources.

The proprietor and his deputies furthermore acted as a unifying element around which the community could rally in times of crises or for the organisation of large collective projects. If the balance for some reason or other was disrupted, or if the mutual trust started to wear off, the whole system of mutual dependency threatened to collapse.\(^{54}\) This is well illustrated by the conflict in the Hiranodono Estate discussed above, where the residents

\(^{52}\) Hokkyō Ōshun Yugeshimanoshō Kujirakata shomu shiki ukebumi, Ryakuō 3 (1340).01.23 (Tōji hyakugō monjo, 10, doc. 125, p. 687).
\(^{53}\) Kobayashi, Nihon chūsei no ikki to sensō, pp. 31–3, and 97–8.
of the estate claimed on multiple occasions to be targets of violent raids from neighbouring estates. While this in many cases would have made the proprietor, in this case Tōji, initiate the formation of a militia or other defensive units in cooperation with deputies or other local leaders, this did not happen in Hiranodono. On the contrary, soon after the initial attacks we find Tōji and the residents in a bitter exchange of accusations and threats. While the residents on the one hand claimed that they would be unable to secure the deliverance of dues to the temple if the attacks were not stopped, Tōji’s estate manager accused the residents of rebellious acts and using the attacks as an excuse to enrich themselves at the cost of the temple.55

Social Changes of the Late Thirteenth Century: Pressure from the Centre

During the second half of the thirteenth century, several profound changes at all levels of society contributed to the strengthening of a more authoritarian state structure that eventually would lead to increased levels of violence and social destabilisation. This may of course seem contradictory, since many people are used to thinking of the state as the guardian of order and peace with its monopoly (or near-monopoly) on violence. However, as central powers expanded their influence into rural areas, privileges held by both elites and commoners in those areas came under renewed pressure as they did not always fit snuggly into the plans of government. Previously held rights to commons became restricted and/or subject to taxation, and local conflict patterns and extra-judicial mediation were increasingly seen as violent acts of subversion and banditry.

The most obvious and dramatic changes in the second half of the thirteenth century resulted from the attempted Mongol invasions in 1274 and 1281, which had severe repercussions for the relationship between the shōgunate in Kamakura and its provincial retainers. The wars left no spoils to be divided among the warriors fighting the invaders, which resulted in a sweep of complaints and a general dissatisfaction with the regime by many warriors.56 The heightened level of alarm during the wars and preparations to ward off another invasion throughout the 1280s furthermore forced the regime to be ever more vigilant in suppressing local insubordination and overriding local hierarchies and social structures. Infringements of laws were

punished with increasing severity, and the laws were being enforced with much greater enthusiasm by the regime than before, leading to frustration and anger at all levels.\textsuperscript{57}

However, other changes in this period were just as influential, except they took place much more gradually over time. While population growth had remained largely static since the early eighth century, from around the mid thirteenth century Japan experienced a slow but steady increase in population. Massive famines still hit the population of the archipelago hard in 1229–32 and 1257–60, but the population seems to have recovered faster from the devastations than had been the case in earlier periods. This was no doubt due to the adoption of technological improvements, especially in the central provinces near Kyoto. The proliferation of coins in this period, for example, resulted in an increase in trade at all levels of society, and both people and commodities became much more mobile.\textsuperscript{58} The increased mobility then paved the way for the spread of new ideas and technologies that had been available for generations but had never before had the necessary social composition to take root.

Iron tools became more accessible for cultivators, and new crops facilitated the implementation of double cropping, while improved techniques for using draft animals like cattle and horses made it more feasible to till larger areas, with a larger output.\textsuperscript{59} These technological advances helped sustain a growing population, and the increasing number of people put pressure on the cultivators to become even more productive and efficient. For centuries, land had been abundant, but now it was necessary to make more out of the land available. The intensification of agricultural production necessitated a higher degree of attachment to the land, which meant that peasants were less prone to using avoidance techniques in their negotiations with estate proprietors. This in turn led to more direct confrontations between village networks and absentee proprietors and their local agents.\textsuperscript{60} New organisational techniques had to be developed by rural societies in this new environment. While large nucleated villages surrounded by moats did not become common until the wars of the fourteenth century, more compact villages were gradually

\textsuperscript{57} Hirochika Watanabe, ‘Kamakura chūki made no “akutō”’, Shiiso 38 (1987), 40–1.
\textsuperscript{58} Ethan Segal, Coins, Trade, and the State: Economic Growth in Early Medieval Japan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
\textsuperscript{60} Troost, ‘Peasants, Elites, and Villages’, p. 96.
replacing the estate geography of dispersed hamlets by the second half of the Kamakura period.\textsuperscript{61}

Simultaneously, the powerful, landholding elites set out to strengthen their control over those estates that had not already been lost to various local power holders. In particular, estates far from the central provinces became increasingly harder to control for the capital-based landholding elites. Although some of these remote estates did continue to exist well into the fourteenth century and beyond, they became less economically important for the landholders who would only get very little revenue, if any, from them from the thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{62} Instead the capital proprietors set out to strengthen their direct control and management over estates closer to the centre. They sent out on-the-ground custodians to oversee the performance of detailed land surveys and the assessment and payment of taxes.

In this process, militias and vigilantism were still necessary means for the safekeeping of the estate and its community, but it needed to be contained more actively by the absentee estate owner. When residents overstepped their role and engaged in violence not sanctioned by the estate owner, they were vilified and accused of being bandits. This naturally poses a problem for the historian today, who is left with an abundance of narratives on banditry and rampant predation that may create a false image of chaos and uncontrolled violence.

Conclusions

Villagers in medieval Japan were quite capable of taking up the fight if they felt threatened, and when facing a superior force they could mobilise their extensive networks, which often reached well beyond the narrow confines of the individual estate. In border conflicts and raids against the estate, most if not all segments of village society took part in the defence organisation, and they were therefore far from passive victims of oppressive landlords, vicious bandits or other predatory elements in the provinces.

The proprietor and his deputies in the estate were often central to the organisation and mobilisation of the villagers in defence of the estate. Loyal fighting was rewarded by the proprietor in a way more commonly associated with ‘warrior society’, creating a strong bond of clientele between the

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., pp. 98–9; Farris, \textit{Japan’s Medieval Population}, p. 78.
absentee proprietor and the estate residents. However, when a private initiative by a villager was perceived to constitute a threat to the central control of the estate it was punished by the proprietor. It is probably no exaggeration to say that for the proprietor, estate control and the safe shipment of revenue from the estate had a higher priority than the safety of the estate population. When, on the other hand, the proprietor did not carry the responsibility of guaranteeing the safety of the estate or the economic interests of the residents, we sometimes find the latter in direct confrontation with the proprietor and his local estate administrators. The proprietor had lost his legitimacy to control the estate and extract revenues, but the confrontation should not be seen as a rebellion as much as a means of negotiating with the proprietor.

Conflicts concerning one or more parties seizing lands either from absentee proprietors or from local residents form the undercurrent in thousands of documents from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The guilty parties could be shogunate representatives, estate proprietors, estate officials, peasants, and even merchants or monks. To the victims of these acts of expropriation and force it would always constitute a violation of their rights, whether these rights were based on legal documents, social norms and customs, or physical occupation of the land. However, forceful appropriations without government recognition were far from always random onslaughts on innocent people’s proprietary rights. Usurping lands and raiding properties could just as easily be explained as a violent emphasis on normative rights. The same can be said about the act of stealing crops, which was often used as a physical and symbolic representation of ownership of the land in question. The act of chasing people from their homes could be seen in the same context. By demonstrating the ability actually to chase away troublesome competitors, the perpetrators of such acts would effectively emphasise that they were the actual masters of the land, with no regard to what legal documents would say on the matter.63

Local security strategies have often been discussed in the context of the government and its corps of local, professional warriors. This has in part resulted in an artificial distinction between ‘warriors’ on one side, and cultivators, artisans, monks and merchants on the other. This is problematic since after all it was it was not at all uncommon for peasants to work in the fields one day and to fight against neighbouring villages or forces from the

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outside the next day, and it is not an easy task to establish how belligerent a peasant has to be in order to be ‘raised’ to the level of warrior in any historical analysis. Fighting in low-capacity states does not necessarily require official recognition from central authorities or a particular moral high ground to be legitimate in the eyes of the general population. When a cultivator took up arms and engaged in violent encounters, either as aggressor or as defender, this may not have made him a warrior in the eyes of the martial or cultural elites in the capitals – and it may in fact often have earned him the label of bandit – but his actions were no less significant for the local negotiation of power. In order to understand these local power negotiations and displays of collective violence we therefore need also to consider organisational structures at a lower level of local power hierarchies, such as cultivators, merchants and foresters to name but a few, and not necessarily to see these conflicts as residues of central conflicts between estate proprietors or between central elites and power seeking warriors.

Bibliographical Essay

Very little has been written in English on medieval Japanese banditry, or akutō. In fact, there are only a handful of articles on this topic. The first one to be published was Lorraine F. Harrington, ‘Social Control and the Significance of Akutō’, in Jeffrey P. Mass (ed.), Court and Bakufu in Japan: Essays in Kamakura History (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), pp. 221–50. She rightly argues that bandit narratives in the Kamakura period were not necessarily indicative of predatory groups in the provinces but rather reflected legal discourses. This point was later taken up and elaborated upon by Morten Oxenboell in two articles, ‘Images of Akutō’, Monumenta Nipponica 60.2 (2005), 235–62, and ‘The Vicissitudes of a Medieval Japanese Warrior’, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Third Series 17.1 (2007), 43–54. In a third article, ‘Mineaiki and Discourses on Social Unrest in Medieval Japan’, Japan Forum 18.1 (2006), 1–21, he made a critical analysis of one of the most vivid accounts of banditry in the period, the chronicle Mineaiki. Recently, Philip Garrett has made a detailed study of how the large temple complex on Kōyasan wielded judicial authority as estate proprietor and dealt with crime in the territory under its control, in his article ‘Crime on the Estates: Justice and Politics in the Kōyasan Domain’, Journal of Japanese Studies 41.1 (2015), 79–112.

Although there is no monograph-length discussion of banditry, there are excellent works on rural conflicts and violence, although most of them focus on the period following the Kamakura period as the country descended into the civil wars of the fourteenth century. Foremost among these is Thomas Keirstead, The Geography of Power in Medieval Japan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), a detailed investigation of the conflict opportunities available to peasant communities in the late fourteenth century. Peter Shapinsky’s Lords of the Sea: Pirates, Violence, and Commerce in Late Medieval Japan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014) provides a fascinating account of the
tactics and political role of rural, sea-going warriors in the Japanese Inland Sea in the sixteenth century.

A much larger body of scholarship exists on the violence of elite groups of warriors and the history of warfare in the medieval period. Although the following works deal only in passing with rural communities and peasant conflicts and violence, they are crucial for an understanding of warfare and violence in the period under consideration here. William Wayne Farris, *Heavenly Warriors: The Evolution of Japan’s Military, 500–1300* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) outlines the development of Japanese warfare from the imperial conscript system of the prehistoric and classical period to the development of a warrior class by the early medieval period. Karl Friday’s two books, *Hired Swords: The Rise of Private Warrior Power in Early Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992) and *Samurai, Warfare and the State in Early Medieval Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2004), both focus on the rise of the samurai class and how their expertise as violent specialists propelled them from rural landholders and managers into de facto rulers of the realm during the early medieval period (c. eleventh to thirteenth centuries). Chronologically following on from the works of Farris and Friday, Thomas Conlan has given a detailed picture of the organisation of warfare and the mobilisation of fighting men during the wars of the fourteenth century in his monograph *State of War: The Violent Order of Fourteenth-Century Japan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003). Finally, through two monographs, *The Gates of Power: Monks, Courtiers, and Warriors in Premodern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2000) and *The Teeth and Claws of the Buddha: Monastic Warriors and Sōhei in Japanese History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), Mikael Adolphson has traced the military role of monastic institutions in the early medieval period.
Writing in 1085, Censor Wang Yansou urged the rapid end of the militia policies instituted under the previous emperor. Not only were the policies disruptive of rural life, but the training was brutal, bred resentment, and created the potential for trained bandits. While there were significant political reasons behind his concerns, the very fact that he would argue that training farmers to function as soldiers undermined society demonstrated a sea change in attitudes about military skills and Chinese farmers, a change Wang acknowledged.¹ Formally trained skills in the use of violence lie at the centre of the cultural, political and social relationship between imperial governments and their subjects. A group skilled in violence was a threat to a government if it was disloyal, and a source of strength if it was loyal. It was therefore important for a government to determine who should have access to the skills of violence, defining what was acceptable through culture, politics and material support.

Chinese governments often struggled to balance their own need for trained soldiers with their desire to limit the means for effective violence within their societies. Ideally, a dynasty’s farmers served as soldiers and its officials as officers when needed for war, with everyone returning to their peacetime occupations afterward. This was both cheaper and more politically safe for the government, since it allowed it to keep a minimal military establishment that would not threaten the government. Over the course of the Tang (618–907) and the Song (960–1279) dynasties this ideal setup collapsed and was replaced by a very different structure. The Mongol Yuan (1279–1368) prohibited weapon ownership for its Chinese subjects, and the Ming (1368–1644) limited training to a hereditary military class.²

¹ Li Tao, Xu Zizhi Tongjian Changbian (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2004), 361.8641–4.
The Tang dynasty initially maintained a military based upon farmer-soldiers, the *fubing* system.\(^3\) Over the course of the dynasty the system was displaced by professional standing armies, often built on non-Han steppe cavalry, guarding the border, as well as some other formations. Even after one of the border commanders, An Lushan, nearly destroyed the dynasty, professional soldiers remained the norm. While this would prove to be a turning point in Chinese military history, it was also a turning point in the relationship between commoners, violence and the state. Where before Tang commoners might be expected to train in martial arts and military skills, by the middle of the period martial arts and military skills were the realm of professional soldiers. The state removed the means of violence from the commoners, but was then nearly destroyed by the military threat to the state this result created.

The Song dynasty was founded by and maintained a professional army for its entire history. While the dynasty did an effective job of keeping the military from threatening the regime, statesmen lamented the expense and moral decline of a professional military. Attempts to return to the days of farmer-soldiers failed to produce effective armies. Farmers were not interested in learning martial arts, nor very good at being soldiers. State violence was the responsibility of the army, not the people. The only individuals who took up violence did so to become bandits or otherwise oppose state authority.

The rise of the Mongols, following in the footsteps of the Kitan and Jurchen peoples, provided another model for state-directed violence. These steppe groups drew their soldiers from the ranks of commoners, but they were primarily itinerant herdsmen who were all skilled in mounted archery.\(^4\) When these steppe peoples took control over parts of China, or in the case of the Mongols all of it, they ruled as an occupying force. The Mongols prohibited Chinese people from owning weapons for the safety of the state. Chinese people in this system were not supposed to practise violence.

The Ming dynasty shifted course, establishing hereditary military households who were liable to provide soldiers to the army while farming land given to them by the state. This had the attraction of restricting the means of state violence to a limited and presumably loyal group, but keeping costs down by providing that group with a peacetime livelihood. Unfortunately, it

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failed to provide effective soldiers, forcing the state to recruit and pay for replacements. Some hereditary officers continued to serve, but much of the Ming military became once again a professional force.

Violence and Dynastic Loyalty

There are three main means to enhance the effects of violence: weapons, training and numbers. In China from the beginning of the Tang dynasty in 618 until the mid Ming dynasty in 1500 control of these three factors was the state’s basic way to maintain itself. It was clearly understood that the internal and external security of a dynasty was based upon ensuring that only loyal people were trained in martial arts, had access to weapons, and were organised into large units of men. Deficiencies in any of these three areas made a group of men less effective. This was good if bandits were unable to get well trained, armed and organised, and bad if the government’s armies failed in these areas. Of course, often the only difference between a bandit and a soldier was loyalty to the state.

Effective soldiers highlighted the social and political problem of loyalty. Once a soldier was trained, armed and incorporated into a fighting unit he could become an asset to state power. But state power, the state or even the dynasty was often far too abstract a concept to be the locus of loyalty: individuals connected to individuals, not offices or ideas. Soldiers were often loyal to their commanders rather than to the political authorities or the emperor. Dynasties rose and fell on their ability to maintain the loyalty of the generals, as was true everywhere in the world. Those who controlled the means of violence had political power, and those with political power strove to control the men and the means of violence.

The problem of loyalty extended beyond the merely political, however, since control over the means of violence had important cultural and social meaning as well. For the government, a soldier simply had to be obedient. The place of violence in the broader society was far more complicated. Chinese culture was not monolithic across time, place and class, let alone when the added issues of explicitly non-Chinese culture are included in this mix. Although the educated Chinese upon whose accounts of the past we primarily rely distinguished between Chinese and non-Chinese, the reality was much less clear. Chinese culture was a moving target but it did have some consistent ideals and attitudes.

There were four classes in this ideal Chinese system: the gentlemen/knightly class shi, the farmers nong, the artisans gong and the merchants shang. The
gentlemen evolved from a hereditary lower elite into the literati and gentry class of later imperial Chinese history. In theory, the gentlemen governed in peacetime and led the army in wartime. Farmers became soldiers in wartime and then returned to their fields afterwards. Under this system, both the gentlemen and the farmers were trained, if sometimes minimally, in fighting. Most adult males therefore were expected to participate in organised violence, and were restrained in any less politically sanctioned use of violence by the cultural and social norms of the practice of arms. This normative ideal persisted throughout imperial Chinese history. The peacetime social relationship between leaders and followers was reinforced and maintained in wartime.

Chinese writers described non-Chinese groups along the borders of the Chinese ecumene as fundamentally more warlike and less civilised than the Chinese. Particularly with the rise of cavalry forces and the disappearance of chariots from the battlefield, steppe peoples living in areas better suited to horse raising and nomadic lifestyles were better horse archers than soldiers raised in sedentary parts of China. All non-Chinese men were therefore adept at violence and, from the Chinese perspective, inclined towards it. This elides the case of the transfrontiersmen who straddled both worlds, or the continual influence of that steppe culture into China because of the value of non-Chinese cavalrymen. Along with horse archery, steppe people were (and continue to be) renowned for their skill at wrestling. At the same time, wrestling and archery were established practices in the Confucian Classics.5

This period in Chinese history marked the end of the functional gentleman/officer and farmer/soldier practice, and the shift to a variety of other systems. The ideal continued, nevertheless, even while any forces produced under the vestiges of that ideal became less and less effective on the battlefield. As that system broke down in practice, fewer farmers or gentlemen/literati learned martial arts. Owning and carrying weapons was less general. Actual military experience among the literati or farming population was even more rare. Unsurprisingly then, the meaning of violence and its place in society also changed, with concomitant political ramifications. Changes in battlefield practice ramified throughout Middle Period culture.

The Tang Dynasty (618–907)

A fully operational system of gentlemen/officers and farmers/soldiers was still in place at the beginning of the Tang dynasty (618–907). The Tang ruling

5 Lorge, Chinese Martial Arts, pp. 39–43.
family along with many of the elites were themselves cultural hybrids of Chinese and steppe backgrounds. Most of the sedentary farming population was Chinese, however, and were required to perform military service as a duty to the state. This system grew out of pre-Tang military practice, where northern regimes dominated or run by Eurasian steppe groups bolstered their limited cavalry forces with Chinese infantrymen.

The fubing system rotated farmer-soldiers for one-month tours at the capital or longer tours at the border. Ideally, this service was spread fairly over a large farming population without overburdening any area. Fubing troops were supposed to maintain their military training year-round, thus making martial arts training a regular part of the life of the male agricultural population. At least on paper, farmers practised archery daily, and would expect in wartime to fight with swords and spears while wearing armour. Battlefield tactics were drilled during the wintertime. Most fubing troops were infantry, though there was a smaller contingent of fubing cavalry. Tang dynasty cavalry, however, were predominantly steppe tribesmen serving under their own leaders.

On the surface of it, the fubing system decreed a uniform familiarity with the means of violence across the Chinese farming population. In practice, fubing units were not evenly distributed within the empire. The north-west near the border was heavily militarised, as were some localities with histories of strong military participation. There were also areas without fubing units. A given farmer’s practice of martial arts and even violent military or security duties was highly contingent upon place and history. Steppe people, at least those living under the authority of the Tang government, would have been universally acquainted with the means of warfare.6

Chinese sources assumed that steppe cavalrymen were highly adept at warfare, having grown up riding horses and shooting bows from horseback. Chinese farmers had to be trained to use violence as an added set of skills independent of their usual lifestyle. This was a highly effective military system at the beginning of the dynasty, demonstrating that the fubing units were fully functional as both offensive and defensive forces within China. Drawing troops from the same local area would have enhanced unit cohesion. Presumably continual service in fubing units also promoted social cohesion during peacetime. All adult men were required for service between the ages of 21 and 60, making for a long-term shared experience. This service would have mirrored that of the steppe cavalrymen, while also distinguishing

the two groups sharply. Their practices of violence were conducted separately for the most part, and explicitly in culturally distinct ways. The specific martial arts each group practised reinforced their cultural separateness, while at the same time distinguishing the nature of their service and loyalty to the Tang state.

Soon after the Tang was established, however, border problems requiring primarily cavalry forces became more critical. Steppe cavalrmen posted on the border became more important for imperial security, and the military value of the fubing declined. Steppe generals on the border were loyal to the court until 755, when An Lushan rebelled and nearly destroyed the dynasty. Professional soldiers held the balance of power, as Han Yu (768–824) noted when he pointed out that in addition to the four original classes of people were now added soldiers and monks. Martial arts were increasingly professional skills and the military was a full-time occupation.

The response to the An Lushan Rebellion (755–63) and the subsequent Huang Chao Rebellion (874–84) increased the overall militarisation of China as the central government lost its monopoly on violence. When the Tang finally fell in 907, war became endemic in north China and the south broke up into individual kingdoms. What would later be called the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period (907–60) cemented the place of professional soldiers in the political and social order. Local militias still existed, and some farmers still practised martial arts for protection, but only professional military forces were useful on the battlefield.

Since professional soldiers now controlled the means of state violence, establishing and maintaining the loyalty of those professionals continued to be a critical problem. The Tang system had clearly failed. Ironically, the ethnic separation of fighting techniques and loyalties had also broken down in the late Tang. Soldiers dominated the unstable politics of the first half of the tenth century. Ultimately power was recentralised and a new dynasty, the Song, was established after decades of warfare and bloodshed. Unlike the Tang founding, which made significant use of farmer-soldiers, the Song founding was a wholly professional affair. The new dynasty had no interest

in loosening its grip on the means of violence or empowering the farmers to threaten the state.

The Song Dynasty (960–1279)

Peace allowed the Song state to diminish the political power of the military. Civil institutions were reinvigorated, and civil culture and economic development flourished. From the perspective of the civil elites, the literati, the Song was a time of civil dominance that had replaced the violence and chaos of a military dominated period. This was a ‘return’ to the ‘correct’ order of the Chinese world wherein the military and martial culture was subordinate to the civil side of culture and politics. Outside of the literati perspective, however, it is just as clear that martial culture was undergoing its own period of flourishing and maturation. Where the Tang government had a tiny military bureaucracy distinct from the major bureaucratic institutions, in the Song the military bureaucracy was virtually equal in size to the civil bureaucracy, and that was without including the actual army bureaucracy itself. This was both a product of centralisation and the development of military affairs as a distinct area of competency.

The strategies for the political use of violence in creating the dynasty and the physical and institutional structure of the Song empire were never obvious. Every military campaign was preceded by a contentious debate over strategy, and almost every expedition was opposed as too risky or unnecessary. Also contrary to later historiographical traditions and simplifications, the states and kingdoms that the Song attacked did not recognise that the Song emperor possessed heaven’s mandate and so should surrender without fighting. All sides of every debate along with the courts of the rival states shared the same ideology. And all the statesmen and rulers involved knew that despite their diplomatic language, the fate of their states would be determined on the battlefield by violence.

The establishment phase of the Song dynasty ended in 1005 with the Chanyuan Covenant that concluded the war with the Kitan Liao empire. The Covenant would keep the peace for 120 years, making it one of the most successful peace treaties in world history. Yet despite that peace and

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the anti-military and anti-violence rhetoric of Song statesmen, most reviled the agreement. The Covenant was seen as humiliating proof of the military failings of the dynasty. Civil culture, by contrast, flourished, leading some to perceive a connection between military weakness and civil strength. This was one perspective of the literati class, albeit the one that would dominate later perceptions of the dynasty, but it ignored most of Song society, and some significant developments in non-civil activities within Song culture.

The public performance of violence also came into its own during the Song. It was during the Song that the ‘entertainment quarters’ grew out of the wealthy merchant culture of the capital city, Kaifeng. Martial arts performances of a kind that had hitherto been confined to imperial banquets and celebrations, or intermittently performed by some travelling troupes, became regular entertainments for the common people.\(^{11}\) During the Song the increase in economic activity and concomitant wealth of the society, combined with the breakdown of the previously restricted market system within the Kaifeng, allowed martial arts performances to break into the public sphere. The regular performance in fixed public locations led to an elaboration of martial arts practice beyond what was strictly necessary for combat effectiveness. It also included female martial arts performers. Violence was now a consumer good, along with restaurants and brothels.\(^{12}\)

Official martial arts performances within the palace continued as before. Demonstrations of fighting were a standard component of official banquets, as well as diplomatic missions. Wrestling competitions remained the mainstay of these events, despite being acknowledged as having little direct value on the battlefield. Other kinds of martial arts performances used essentially obsolete weapons, or weapons outside of the regular armament for soldiers. Combat with wooden weapons was also performed. Song entertainment within the palace and in the capital was just as violent as popular modern cinema. Violence was considered an acceptable entertainment, at least in a staged form.

Some Song statesmen were troubled by the shift to professional soldiers, and attempted to replace the standing army with farmer-soldiers. This was one of the main policies of Emperor Shenzong (1048–85). The baojia system tried to spread a local militia scheme that existed in some northern border areas to the empire as a whole. Every household would contribute men to military service, once again requiring martial arts training in the general population. It was this


\(^{12}\) Lorge, Chinese Martial Arts, pp. 131–3.
provision that Wang Yansou feared would produce bandits in addition to alienating the farmers. Trained soldiers were more violent than untrained farmers. Even worse, training farmers made them more violent without producing good soldiers. Ultimately the baojia system was only partly implemented and it failed to replace the professional standing army.

Song society had been relatively peaceful from 1005 to 1125, with most military activity confined to the border areas. Farmers were farming, and soldiers, while mistreated and denigrated by literati officials, took care of their military duties. This separation of responsibilities was also a contributing factor to Song economic development. The rising power of the Jurchen Jin dynasty in the early twelfth century broke down that peaceful arrangement. The Jurchen overthrew the Liao empire, which had maintained peace with the Song since 1005, and then captured north China from the Song, along with the emperor and the retired emperor. The Song court re-established itself in the southern part of its territory.

The Southern Song empire was under chronic military threat. Martial arts, which had been professionalised in the first half of the dynasty, once again flourished outside of the standing army. Local forces grew up to provide security against bandits. Banditry itself exploded after the fall of north China as fleeing soldiers escaped the battlefields and refugees sought safety in the south. The sort of militarisation of local society that had been confined to the northern border in the Northern Song period now spread to the south. Northern China was highly unstable, and consequently highly militarised, for some time as the new Jurchen Jin dynasty struggled to gain control of its new territory. It was difficult to distinguish local bandits from Song loyalists, and Jurchen armies took time to transition from conquest to stabilisation duties.

Song society remained vibrant and wealthy, but the earlier balance of forces between the court and the army was permanently changed. Massive armies and navies were concentrated on the border, and broad powers over local government assigned to the commanding generals. The court wrestled with the problem of providing effective generals with the resources they needed to defend the dynasty while also maintaining control of them. With the main armies under immense pressure to defend the border, very few men were left to provide local security. Local communities learned to defend themselves, including creating mountain fortresses for refuge in case of invading armies, and merchants developed large numbers of armed men to protect their goods.¹³

Soldiers were so much more important during the Southern Song that they were able to raise their status. Their previous poor treatment in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries was done away with.\textsuperscript{14} Military and martial skills could not be denigrated to the same extent in a time of military crisis. Yet it was also true that the greater Southern Song valorisation of martial arts built upon real cultural developments in the Northern Song period that were explicitly downplayed by literati writers. Southern Song circumstances had altered, and caused changes in the valorisation or at least legitimacy of martial arts skills, but some of the shift is also historiographical. The elites of the earlier period who had invested considerable effort in suppressing the importance of martial culture did so less strongly in the Southern Song period.

Archery societies developed in the Southern Song, often meeting in temples where there was sufficient space to practice. Martial arts performances continued in the cities, which remained wealthy and culturally sophisticated. As the status of soldiers rose, joining the army became a more respectable thing to do. The Song government still struggled to recruit enough soldiers, resorting, as had always been done in China, to drafting captured bandits into the army. The court also on several occasions drafted successful local defence forces into the army.\textsuperscript{15} This last expedient unfortunately failed to produce effective frontline units and undermined local security.

The intense violence of the Song–Jin conflict escalated in the thirteenth century with the rise of the Mongols to the north of the Jin empire. North China endured for a time a three-way conflict between the Jin, the Mongols and the Song for control of the area. Below that larger geo-political conflict, bandits and local warlords tried to carve out autonomous power bases, and local communities tried to defend themselves against marauding armies. North China, which had fallen behind southern China’s economic development centuries before, became a battleground. The Song government supported various bandits or warlords in the hope that the Mongols would destroy the Jin and leave northern China open for the Song. Many bandits were canny enough to exploit the Song court’s illusions in order to obtain supplies. The Shandong peninsula was for a time the cockpit of three empires, an intensely violent place of armed local bands fighting each other, Jin attempts to re-establish control,


\textsuperscript{15} Huang Kuan-chung, \textit{Nansong Difang Wuli} (Taipei: Dongda Tushu Gongsii, 2002).
and Mongol incursions trying to shatter Jin government. Meanwhile, the Song waged a war of proxies.

The Mongols crushed the Jin dynasty in 1234 and briefly entertained the possibility of allowing the Southern Song to remain in place as a vassal state. From the Mongol perspective, one of the main functions of a vassal state was to contribute military forces for further conquests. Had the Song been willing to accept vassal status and make its martial resources available, it could have avoided conflict with the Mongols. The Song court chose instead to try to retake northern China while the Mongols were still consolidating their hold over the area. This triggered a fifty-year war that ended with the destruction of the Song in 1279.\(^{16}\)

In order to defeat the Song the Mongols had to build their own navy. This was an entirely new kind of military force for the Mongols, but there was no other way to breach the Song’s Huai River defence line. As important as the new navy was, so too were Mongol efforts to suborn the loyalties of Song border commanders. Within the complicated politics of the Song court, the strongest control mechanisms for maintaining the loyalty of important generals were personal ties. The Song court never developed a systematic way to insure that its military was unconditionally obedient to the emperor. Literati officials sometimes seemed unable to understand that their civil values alienated them from the martial values of the generals. Their civil ideology blinded them to the fact that the military did not see literati officials as inherently superior to men who fought on the battlefield. Literati officials generally looked down upon the men of violence who were crucial to the survival of the dynasty, even when the dynasty was facing extinction.

The Mongols and the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368)

When the Mongols conquered the last remnants of the Song in 1279, they established a very different relationship with their subjects. Southern Chinese subjects were prohibited from owning bows and weapons, and the private manufacturing of weapons in general was also forbidden. The Mongols understood that they were conquerors of a possibly restive population who must be prevented from obtaining the means to threaten their rule. At the same time, however, Chinese forces were used in other military activities. The navy the Mongols had constructed for fighting on the Huai River was dispatched with Chinese troops (alongside a Korean flotilla with some

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Korean and Jurchen troops) to attack Japan. This naval campaign was a good example of the Mongol exploitation of the specific military skills of their subject populations. Very few Mongols in fact took part in the two failed invasions of Japan.

The Mongols themselves, as David Wright has shown, were familiar with Chinese military thought, and considered Sunzi’s warnings about attacking cities when they invaded the Song. As pastoral steppe nomads, the Mongols were acutely aware of their own military limitations as they moved from the plains of northern China into the hot, humid terrain of the south, where rivers, streams and mountains limited the scope of cavalry. The Mongol commander of the main Mongol thrust towards the Song capital at Hangzhou, Bayan, was a sophisticated strategist, and the military councils he presided over during the southern campaigns demonstrated the high level of skills possessed by his subordinate commanders as well. Bayan’s decision-making process is an important indicator of the strategic capabilities of the Mongol leadership. Most accounts of the Mongol conquest emphasise the tactical advantages of their cavalry over sedentary populations. Yet the greatest land empire in human history was created by great leadership, not just effective battlefield armies.

The Jin and then the Song lost because the Mongol leadership was better politically and militarily. It may well be true that a steppe society like that of the Mongols was fundamentally more oriented towards violence than agricultural or urban Chinese society. This probably underestimates the regular violence of Chinese society, though this is hard to measure. Nevertheless, dynasties rose and fell because of good or bad leadership. Bad strategy and poor political skills were far more critical than the style of warfare of a given group. Chinese armies beat steppe armies when well led, and lost when poorly led. Similarly, Mongol armies conquered much of Asia when their leadership was good, and then collapsed when that leadership failed. The particular facility with violence of the average Mongol, Jurchen or Chinese was a secondary consideration in the rise and fall of empires.

The Mongol court maintained its cultural separateness from Chinese culture for most of its rule over China. Chinese officials and systems of rule were used as the easiest way to manage the Chinese population with the least friction or need to resort to violence. Mongol rule penetrated less deeply into

Chinese society, leaving local power holders to dominate ordinary people. Mongol garrisons were scattered across the empire in strategic spots to prevent uprisings. As long as the government received the resources it demanded, it was not concerned to intervene in local affairs. This allowed a limited amount of violence at the local level by the powerful to go unchecked as long as it did not threaten the government.

Much of this local violence had existed during the Song as well, but in theory it had represented a threat to proper state order. Song officials colluded with powerful local groups or were bullied into doing so to maintain order. Good examples of that were large Buddhist monasteries that dominated their localities. Part of the test of an official’s capabilities was maintaining order. A monastery or powerful family could complain to the central government or stir up locals to cause problems, ruining an official’s career. Under the Song, local rule was ceded to the existing power holders.

While the locally powerful were allowed to dominate their areas, this system did not tie them to the central government. There is no way of knowing if there was more or less violence at the local level under Mongol rule, but specific skills like archery were obviously seen as a threat to the state. If people were prohibited from owning bows, arrows and weapons outside of state control, then it would have been very difficult to learn how to use those weapons. The looseness of Mongol rule, however, meant that many imperial laws were not strictly enforced. Local power holders developed security forces to ensure their own authority, meaning that weapons and martial arts training were still available throughout China.

The Mongols also treated north and south China differently. North China had been conquered as the result of defeating the Jurchen Jin. By the time the final remnants of the Southern Song were conquered north China had been under Mongol rule for half a century. Indeed, considering the period of Jin rule, north China had been under a steppe regime for a century and a half. The Mongols had initially allowed local warlords in north China to control their territories as feudatories. These fiefs could be passed on hereditarily as long as they contributed to the Mongol war effort. Violence in the service of the khan was all that was required to stay in the Mongol court’s good graces. The khan was willing to cede local authority to a strongman who followed him.

Michael J. Walsh, Sacred Economies: Buddhist Monasticism and Territoriality in Medieval China (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
A good example of this was the bandit, warlord and sometime Song loyalist Li Quan. Li married into a bandit band in Shandong and drew upon Song support to fight the Jin. When it became expedient to switch sides, he joined the Mongols. He fought loyally for them until he was killed in battle.20 His wife temporarily controlled his forces until their son took over. The Mongols confirmed the son, Li Tan, in possession of the Shandong territory. Li Tan later rebelled against the Mongols along with other northern Chinese hereditary fief holders and was then crushed. Interestingly, Li Tan was executed in the peculiar way that a Mongol aristocrat would have been, wrapped in a carpet and trampled by horses, so as not to let his blood hit the ground. Of course, the Mongols were used to a certain amount of internal fighting among their leadership.21

Northern Chinese ranked above southern Chinese in the Mongol hierarchy of subjects. Since for most of the Yuan dynasty, the Mongols’ Chinese-style government, civil bureaucrats were not very highly esteemed, the educational link between imperial court and literati class was severely attenuated. The Yuan dynasty administration required certain material resources from the subject Chinese population, and some limited military services, but spent little effort in binding local elites to the government until late in the fourteenth century.

While the subject Chinese population was legally limited in its martial arts practice, Mongols and other steppe groups that were part of the Mongol ülüş were expected to practise riding and shooting. These martial practices were not just necessary for the government, but also fundamental markers of identity. Horse archery functionally defined steppe warriors and their ethnic groups as distinct from the sedentary populations. At a finer level of distinction, the variations in the bow architecture of various groups concretely manifested significant differences in arrow ballistics and combat performance. Different bows performed differently and required different tactics in battle. Jurchen bows, for example, if later Manchu bows are a good representation, were the heaviest and strongest, firing the heaviest arrows. They were good for hunting large game as well as extremely lethal in combat, but an archer carried far fewer arrows. On the other side of Eurasia, the Ottoman bow was far lighter and fired lighter arrows, but an archer could carry far more arrows. Each group

20 See Li Quan’s biography in Togto’a, Songshi (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1990), 476.13817–477.13851.
21 See for example the contest under the Mongol ülüş for control over Korea in David Robinson, Empire’s Twilight (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
effectively distinguished itself not only by its language, but also by the subtle differences in its martial arts.

Wrestling remained an important martial art amongst the steppe people. As a performance it united high and low, and offered a talented practitioner a route to fame and fortune. Like horse archery, it was seen as a particularly steppe art.\(^{22}\) Few if any Chinese participated in wrestling matches with Mongols, though it seems likely that wrestling continued among the Chinese population. It was not just which martial arts people practised, but with whom they practised it.

The Mongols never fully worked out their relationship with the Yuan dynasty administration, leading to uncontrollable internal conflict. Disunity diminished their response to uprisings among the Chinese population. As the rebellions grew, some Mongol leaders withdrew back to the steppe. Vast armies of Chinese rebels, often as much at odds with each other as with the Yuan government, emerged all over China. Whatever general lack of martial arts skills or military skills characterised these rebel forces at the beginning of their uprisings, over time with continuous fighting they became efficient and effective. Some Mongol forces remained in the north while the main struggle took place in the south.

The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644

The Ming dynasty was unique among the major dynasties in Chinese history, and even the minor ones, in that it began in the south. More peculiarly, a significant aspect of the rise of Zhu Yuanzhang, the Ming founder, was extensive riverine warfare on the Yangzi River.\(^{23}\) Zhu Yuanzhang’s rebel group began as part of a religious movement before converting to being simply one of the contenders for power in the ruins of the Yuan dynasty.\(^{24}\) The Ming founder combined a hatred for the Mongols with his own particular utopian ideas of society. While some of his institutional arrangements

\(^{22}\) Even today the best wrestlers in East Asia are often Mongolian or from other Turkic groups. The top Sumo wrestlers in Japan are currently Mongolian, much to the dismay of Japanese people who believe the art to be a quintessential example of Japanese culture.


collapsed soon after his death, most obviously locating the capital at Nanjing and leaving the throne to his grandson, others persisted for much longer.

The Ming founder was himself one of the most violent men ever to have ruled China. Some of his violent court practice was a holdover from Mongol court practice, but it was his personal decision, for example, to have a court official beaten to death in front of him by military officials. Such an act would have been inconceivable during the Song dynasty. Tens of thousands of people distantly related to conspirators, or perceived conspirators, were executed to satisfy his growing paranoia. This would also carry over into the reign of his son, the Yongle Emperor, who usurped the throne from his nephew after a bloody civil war. Court culture during the Ming dynasty was far more violent than under previous Chinese dynasties.

Martial arts skills were widespread after the Ming conquest, and armies and soldiers roamed the new empire. The Mongols had been driven back to the steppe, for the most part, but their cultural influence remained. Chinese society in the wake of a century of Mongol rule and decades of warfare was brutalised. The region around what is modern Beijing had been ruled by the Kitan Liao, Jurchen Jin and Mongol Yuan dynasties for over three and half centuries, and most of northern China for over two centuries. War had been widespread in the fourteenth century, and that was reflected under the early Ming rulers.

Surprisingly, given the intense fighting in northern China and the fluid circumstances directly after the Ming conquest, the early Ming was far more peaceful than the later Ming, with most collective violence taking place in the south. Three quarters of the outbreaks of collective violence took place in the south, and four-fifths in the second half of the dynasty. Why this was the case is unclear, though the vastly lower population in north China and the general economic depression of the early Ming may have played a role. Nevertheless, early Ming state policies certainly did not create a violent society, and the breakdown of those policies coincided with an increase in collective violence in the latter half of the dynasty. The rise in collective violence also coincided with the collapse of the hereditary military class as the state’s primary source for men trained in martial arts.

Zhu Yuanzhang’s solution to the relationship of martial arts to the state was to create a hereditary military class. Army veterans were given land to farm and registered as military men in perpetuity. In theory, the land would

provide a living to support soldiers and officers in return for producing men for the army. The state would be relieved of the burden of supporting soldiers or recruiting them. How much military training these men would receive at home or in their military communities is less clear. Certainly, some kinds of martial arts training, for example with firearms, were conducted by the state after induction into the army. This system worked for some time when the empire was at peace.

Army effectiveness decreased over time, however, and the military families lost most of their traditions of war. By the fifteenth century the army and its system of military registration was unable to deal effectively with resurgent Mongol raiding. Partly, of course, this was a political and diplomatic failure to engage with the Mongols on trade, but that ineffectiveness was due to the Ming dynasty’s deep-seated hostility to the Mongols. The Great Wall grew out of that inability to resolve conflicts with the Mongols. 27

In the sixteenth century, the dynasty would struggle to meet the threat of pirates on the south-eastern coast, 28 forcing Qi Jiguang, a general from a military family, to build new army units from the farming population. General Qi found the martial arts training of the army ineffective and created a new system from the available skills circulating in the commoner population. 29

By 1500, the Ming military system established by the dynasty’s founder was no longer capable of meeting external military emergencies. Even though the Tumu Incident of 1449, during which a Mongol raid captured a sitting emperor travelling within the Ming empire, demonstrated the unequivocal decline of the army, it proved politically impossible to reform the military system. Any change in that system had broad implications for the state and society, the costs and ramifications of which the government was unwilling to accept. The government was more concerned with internal stability than with defending against external threats. The military families from which the soldiers of the army were to be drawn did not provide enough or even any training in fighting skills, and the central government, in turn, failed fully to make up this deficit. Rather than enhance military training to deal with the Mongol threat, the court had instead continued what was originally a stopgap

29 For Qi Jiguang more broadly, see Yong Huei Sim, The Maritime Defense of China: Ming General Qi Jiguang and Beyond (New York: Springer, 2017).
policy of constructing what would become the Great Wall. Building walls did not require social, political or cultural change, and did not generate a population of men skilled at arms who might not be loyal to the state.

There are a number of reasons why the Manchus defeated the Ming dynasty in 1644, but its fate was not set by 1500. At the mid-point of the Ming, the state’s management of the tools of violence had begun to fail the empire. Society had changed, but a succession of Ming emperors and their courts were unable to adapt to that change. The skills of trained violence were not fully controlled by the state, though the more significant problem was that the state no longer maintained a sufficiently capable group of men trained in violence. When the original system set up to provide the state with trained fighters failed, it could not find an effective replacement.

Conclusion

From the Tang dynasty through the Ming dynasty the relationship between the state and society continually changed. During the Tang dynasty the farmer-soldier and official-officer system of converting peacetime roles temporarily into wartime roles and back again collapsed. Soldier and officer became permanent occupations for men who had no other life to return to. Their skills were as specialised as their martial culture. Military men were part of society, but their relationship to society and the state was very different from that of their farmer-soldier predecessors. The ideal Confucian relationship between male farmers, the army and the state was broken, and the place of trained violence within Chinese society irrevocably changed.

The transformation of the connection between soldiers and farmers changed the meaning of martial arts skills. When all adult men in the agricultural sector at least theoretically owed the state military service, martial arts skills were part of the lives of ordinary, law-abiding imperial subjects. Military service, and the martial arts skills that accompanied that, was a sign of submission and loyalty to the government. Once that connection between farmer and soldier, and between official and officer, was broken, practising martial arts outside of the military was politically suspect. It became an act of defiance, and a repudiation of the government’s ability to maintain an orderly society. The tacit acknowledgment by Song dynasty officials that training

farmers to fight had become a threat to social stability and promoted criminal behaviour marked a seismic shift away from classical norms.

Ironically, the same Confucianised elites arguing against Confucian normative ideals of martial arts in the eleventh century were also trying more broadly to return to those ideals as a way of reinvigorating society and government. Their efforts laid the intellectual and literary foundations of what in the West is usually called ‘Neo-Confucianism’ in the twelfth century. But just as the Neo-Confucians asserted the moral superiority of the literati over the emperor, the separation of martial arts from the state created martial artists who were independent of state authority.

The Mongol Yuan dynasty continued the separation of Chinese society into those who could be trusted to be trained in martial arts and those who could not, with the distinction often, but not always, based upon ethnic lines. It was not just martial arts in general, but specific arts, archery in particular, that concerned the authorities. Who practised particular martial arts was critically important to the state.

Finally, the Ming dynasty inherited the separation begun in the Tang, and tried to increase the separation by making the military a hereditary class. The martial arts genie was already out of the bottle, however, and independent martial arts flourished during the Ming. Martial arts performances grew and spread, and the independence of the martial artist in opposition to the state developed both as a concept and in reality. By the Ming, the state neither produced nor fully controlled the means of trained violence, and that changed the relationship of the subject to the government and the state.

**Bibliographical Essay**

Violence as a separate topic has been carefully excluded from discussions of state power and society in Middle Period Chinese history (750–1550). This is due to two intersecting and reinforcing interests within historical studies, the desire to take as a given the ‘natural’ cohesion of the Chinese state and Chinese society, and the sometimes active hostility of researchers to confront directly the uses of violence in Chinese culture. Chinese scholars are more prone to the former bias and Western scholars to the latter. Most Chinese scholars assume the continuity and coincidence of the Chinese state with Chinese culture and the Chinese people, which obviates the need for violence to maintain that coherence. Western scholars until recently have posed the unified Chinese state and its ‘natural’ and eternal existence against the contentious and violent Western geo-political environment. Most discussions of state violence are confined to military history, which has only recently received much attention.

Chinese history is usually broken up by dynasty, stressing the centrality of the political unit. The early part of China’s Middle Period begins in the middle of the

For the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period (907–60), Richard Davis has written two biographies, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares: The Later Tang Reign of Emperor Mingzong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015) and *Fire and Ice: Li Cunxu and the Founding of the Later Tang* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), that emphasise the ethnic distinctions in the place and uses of violence in northern China. His student Hongjie Wang’s *Power and Politics in Tenth-Century China* (Amherst: Cambria, 2011) is also useful as a local study of the Shu regime in Sichuan.


For the Ming dynasty there are two relevant books by David Robinson, *Bandits, Eunuchs and the Song of Heaven* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001) and *Martial Spectacles of the Ming Court* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). Kenneth Swope’s *A Dragon’s Head and a Serpent’s Tail* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010) shows not only the clash of different military approaches between states, those of China, Korea and Japan, but also the differences between northern and southern Chinese troops.
Aristocratic violence – be it on crusade, in the tournament lists or on a cavalry charge in shining armour – is iconic of the Middle Ages for most people. In this chapter, I will mainly focus on the violence of one particular sort of aristocrat, that is, lords (seigneurs in French). Lords were those aristocrats who exercised power, usually including both fiscal and judicial rights, over a particular lordship (dominium in Latin). This chapter thus treats the particular violence associated with the exercise of lordship, but the political culture of lordship was inextricably bound up with the mores, practices and aesthetics of nobility. A warrior aristocracy, medieval nobles were a self-consciously violent class, and that violence had a reiterative relationship with the violence exercised by those among them who were lords. Aristocrats’ culture of violence was particularly important to a lordship’s economic aspects as a justification for the forcible extraction of peasant surplus through taxation, a dynamic integral to a specifically medieval mode of production. The particularly (but not exclusively) aristocratic practice of violently redressing wrongs, which is sometimes called feud, also contributed a great deal to shaping how lords pursued their political claims and conflicts in war.

In dialogue with its relationship to the culture of aristocratic violence is seigneurial violence’s relationship to the authority of kings, princes and emperors, primarily as mediated by law and legal institutions. For most of the twentieth century historians often argued – and more often assumed – that lordly violence rose and fell in inverse proportion to the power of such ‘sovereign’ rulers. When they were strong – at the height of the Carolingian empire in the later eighth and early ninth centuries, say, or under the increasingly bureaucratic governments of the later Middle Ages – such rulers preserved peace through the promulgation of laws and the enforcement of justice against unruly nobles. When they were weak – around the
millennium in France, for example, or in fifteenth-century England – lords violently usurped their power, going to war against each other or even their rulers for their own political and economic profit and oppressing the peasantry. In short, Hobbes’s Leviathan had to be strong to contain lordly violence.

Since the 1980s, medieval historians have progressively challenged many aspects of this zero-sum model across the subject’s geographic and chronological range. Ideas about sovereign power and ‘the state’ have become more nuanced and more historically sensitive. The Weberian ideal type of a state as having a monopoly over the legitimate exercise of violence is increasingly understood as inapplicable to the medieval polities, even in the period’s final centuries. Investigating aristocratic practices of ‘feud’, ‘vengeance’ or ‘private war’, historians found that they could not be accommodated within the paradigm of a public state opposed to the exercise of private power. It is now recognised that aristocrats in general and lords in particular played roles in medieval societies and polities that made their use of violence not just tolerable but also necessary. When they wielded public powers of taxation and justice, as many of them did, these functions could not be carried out without at least the implicit threat of force, if not actual violence. In many times and places, lords’ and nobles’ right to wage war against each other or even against their superiors was an established principle of practice and sometimes of law. The practice of ‘feud’ has also come in for reassessment, increasingly not understood as anarchic or usurpatory but re-envisioned as rule-based and self-limiting. This has encouraged emphasis on the rules that (ostensibly) structured seigneurial violence rather than the institutions that (ostensibly) limited it.

Seigneurial violence now appears much more socially productive and politically intelligible to historians than it did until relatively recently. Yet it is important to realise that the exercise and experience of seigneurial violence varied a great deal according to social position and context. Aristocratic women sometimes pursued violent strategies on their own account as lords or participants in feuds, but the overwhelmingly masculine nature of medieval warfare sidelined them from many (but not all) conflicts. Aristocratic violence also weighed heavily on non-aristocrats, especially peasants. They were often its main victims, even in conflicts between aristocrats, and the lords’ dominance rested upon their ability to coerce their subjects physically, especially when it was a question of taxation and labour services. Even chivalry – if it made a contribution to Norbert Elias’s ‘civilizing process’, and the balance sheet here is very mixed – was nevertheless a culture and a practice that confirmed
commoners’ social inferiority and exclusion and which served to reinforce the mostly non-military role of aristocratic women.¹

The Early Middle Ages (c. 500–900): Feuding and Peacemaking

In most early medieval societies, the political elite incorporated both the old Roman aristocracy and the elites of the new ‘barbarian’ peoples. Families continued to be a central aspect of elite status, but their prominence rested on a combination of their wealth, especially in land, and their personal relationship with the leader of one of the new kingdoms that were being established throughout Western and Central Europe. These elites were not lords, in the sense that they did not usually exercise judicial or fiscal power in their own right, though they might exercise it on their own behalf or by delegation from the ruler. The most important social distinction in the early medieval world was not between the nobles and the commoners, but between the free and the unfree. Military violence was not the exclusive preserve of aristocrats from the fifth to the seventh centuries, but elite status does seem to have affected how and why violence was used for political and social ends.

Elites were habitually violent towards one another for their own purposes. Often considered emblematic of early medieval aristocratic violence is the so-called feud between Sichar and Austregesil in sixth-century Merovingian France. Actually termed *bella civilia* (civil or civic wars) in the source that relates the story, the conflict began at a Christmas party, involved multiple murders, and was reignited after lying dormant for several years when Sichar insulted another man named Chramnesind at dinner.² Conflicts like this were primarily a masculine enterprise – Chramnesind reportedly thought to himself that if he did not violently respond to Sichar’s insult then he ‘ought not be called a man, but rather a weak woman’ – but there are cases in which elite women too had recourse to killing. At least this was true of some of the women who shared the king’s bed, as the sanguinary enmity between Queen Brunhild and Queen Fredegund and other examples show.³ (A slave who raised his hand to Sichar, on the other hand, was flogged and had his

¹ See Chapter 21 in this volume.
extremities amputated before being hanged.) Personal and emotional – or at least presented that way in the sources – such conflicts have been seen as part of an aristocratic culture of feud in which kin-groups collectively addressed injuries to their members outside of the restraints of law or government. While not chaotic because there were incentives to settle disputes and rules for pursuing enmity, the collective responsibility of kinship and the tit-for-tat rhythms of vengeance and counter-vengeance created a potentially limitless cycle of violence.

The characterization of early medieval elite violence as ‘feud’ has, however, been increasingly called into question. We actually have little evidence for this sort of ‘classical’ feuding: the incidents that have been grouped under the rubric are heterogeneous, and closer inspection shows that the extended kin-group so essential to anthropological models of feud seems to play little role in violent early medieval conflicts. Even in the classic, almost universally cited example of Sichar’s feud(s) with Austregesil/Chramnesind, his two opponents do not seem to have been related. Rather than ‘feud’ in the anthropological sense, elite violence was generally in the service of wars over ‘higher-order’ political objectives like territorial expansion or it was an act of specific vengeance for a particular injury. (It is true that those distinctions could be blurred, the ‘feud’ between Brunhild and Fredegund being an iconic – if atypical – example.) The law codes promulgated by early medieval kings usually gave some scope for such ‘private vengeance’ as long as it was publicly advertised, though whether such laws could be enforced – or were ever even intended for such a purpose – is an open question. Perhaps more importantly, such violence was fully congruent with social norms common to others at the top of the social hierarchy.

Legal and governmental questions regarding aristocratic violence come into sharper focus in the eighth and ninth centuries. Aristocrats were central to the successes of the Carolingian kings and emperors. Their massive campaigns against their neighbours mobilised substantial armies, constituted primarily of magnates and their followers whose specialised horses and equipment were paid for by taxing peasants. Aristocratic prominence also grew through Carolingian practices of administration. Provincial governors (called counts) were chosen from the men of the highest elite families. Not free to act at will, their power – locally rooted, often effectively hereditary – was nonetheless difficult to curb. When civil war divided the Carolingian

empire after 840, it appears that these elites became increasingly given to local wars among themselves, which were now called *werrae* (the root of the modern romance *guerra*, *guerre*, etc.) as distinct from the public wars of the state, labelled with the classical word *bellum*.⁶ In the Carolingian heyday in the early ninth century, proclamations against vindicatory violence had been made, with threats of dispossession or amputation for offenders who refused settlement.⁷ Anglo-Saxon England saw similar developments about a century later, where kings sometimes issued legislation that strictly limited the legality of bloodfeud, discouraged the involvement of kin, and increased royal interest in dispute-resolution.

Again, in both the Carolingian and the Anglo-Saxon historiography, there is much controversy about the meaning and effect of this legislation, particularly given the state of the sources. Frankish and Anglo-Saxon laws admit the existence of feud, despite limitations, and while tenth-century administrative innovations may have given rulers greater abilities to shape their subjects’ behaviour, the sources give us almost no indication as to how much they exercised these abilities or how far up the social ladder that might have extended. What we can observe of Anglo-Saxon elites’ behaviour suggests that for the powerful, for whom politics and personal grievance cannot be neatly distinguished, violence was always an option. On the continent, we again primarily have prescriptive sources for the period before 840, but some scraps of descriptive evidence suggest that Frankish magnates may well have been engaging in *werrae* even under Charlemagne.⁸ What does seem clear is that elite violence in the early Middle Ages partook of a wider culture in which victims and their supporters were at least partially responsible for redressing wrongs at the perpetrator’s expense (and that of his or her supporters). These wrongs ranged from the theft of cattle to the murder of kin to the usurpation of a kingdom. Legally constituted authority, in so much as a king or great prince might be said to be such, often had a role to play in settling or limiting these conflicts, and their claims to fines payable to themselves on top of retributive damages to the victim are suggestive of royal interest and injury in these purportedly ‘private’ affairs.

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⁷ Monumenta Germaniae Historica, capit. i: 33.xxxii, p. 97 and 44.v, p. 123.

The Central Middle Ages (c. 900–1200):

Castles and Fiefs

Lords with their own power – as opposed to aristocrats exercising (or usurping) someone else’s power – came to prominence in the wake of the Carolingian empire’s collapse at the end of the ninth century. The role of violence in this development is extremely controversial. The disintegration of centralised Carolingian power made the counts independent, and their positions, once official, became hereditary. Nominally subordinate magnates underwent a similar transformation. Wholly new, more localised, powers sprang up. Castles began appearing, whose occupiers dominated the countryside through the violence they visited upon non-combatants, like peasants and monks. At least, that was how clerical writers told the story, especially when they were in conflict with a neighbouring castellan. The multiplication of castle-based lordships and the weakening of regnal and even comital power meant that local lordship became the dominant form of authority and expression of power in many parts of Europe. Not every area of Europe experienced this transformation equally or simultaneously. Lordship in this sense had long been a fact in Germany’s politically fragmented lands, whereas in northern and central France many contemporary observers found castle-based lordship a surprising, even shocking, novelty. The relationship between violence and lordship depended a great deal on local norms and contexts.

This landscape of multiple, small powers that comes into sharper focus around 1000 was organised around bonds of loyalty and submission, often called faith or fidelity, which was sometimes signified by an act of homage and sometimes linked to grants of land or castles, which were sometimes called fiefs. In some cases, holding the fief entailed promising to carry out armed service for its grantor. This neat picture of ‘feudalism’, however, betrays a much messier reality, in which relationships were rarely so codified and violence was an important means of adjudicating and distributing power. An account composed in the 1020s and known as the conventum (or ‘agreement’) illustrates how such configurations of power could be productive of violence. In the story, which may be fictionalised but involves historical people, Count William of Poitou, duke of Aquitaine, apparently mistreats one of his men, Hugh the castellan of Lusignan. William grants lands and castles to other followers and fails to aid Hugh against his enemies, who besiege his castles, burn his town, and threaten his wife. Hugh never directly attacks William in the story, but he repeatedly gathers his forces and marches...
on his own enemies, burning castles, capturing people, and even amputating knights’ hands (a judicial punishment for perjury).

In this world bristling with arms and dominated by castles, women, even aristocratic ones, appear only as avenues to power through marriage or as proxies for threats to their husbands, and peasants exist only in the guise of targets or as foils for aristocratic models. It is the bonds between elite men that shape the story. Hugh’s violence is necessitated by his long-suffering faithfulness in the face of his lord’s arbitrary inconstancy. In one memorable exchange, William shrugs off Hugh’s reproaches, saying, ‘You are mine, to do my will.’ But between the lines, Hugh’s ostensible fidelity to William is compromised by alliances with other nobles, including the neighbouring count of Anjou, and one suspects William may have been wise to limit the number of castles under Hugh’s control. The reciprocal faith and service between a lord and his man thus covers a series of opportunistic moves and strategies based on force, not loyalty. The ways in which both William and Hugh fail in their responsibilities to one another is suggestive of what some historians have called ‘feudal anarchy’, illustrating the violent potential of lordship and the inability of institutions to contain conflict.

Yet if institutions appear light on the ground – though not wholly absent – rules are more evident. None of the characters feels that William possesses his power illegitimately, only that he exercises it that way. While such abuse (often considered in and of itself violentia by medieval writers) engenders a violent response, the narrator, possibly a cleric writing on Hugh’s behalf, does not characterise Hugh’s actions as evil or usurpatory. The violence itself is not anarchic or uncontrolled. Carefully limited and targeted, its purpose was neither to annihilate the opponent nor to prolong the enmity indefinitely, but rather to force them to the bargaining table (albeit in a flexible state of mind). As the title conventum itself indicates, William and Hugh ultimately did come to an agreement that re-established peace between them. Indeed, throughout the story, numerous such agreements (conventi, or alternately fines, literally meaning ‘ends’) are proposed or made between other players, often in formal, court assemblies (placita) that seem routine. There is ample evidence here not just of unwritten rules and cultural norms, but also of an approach to conflict resolution that has been characterised as ‘substantive legalism’.

peacemaking’ is reflected in the language that sources used to describe them: words like ‘anger’ (ira) and ‘love’ (amor) were terms that expressed not only (and perhaps not even) internal experiences, but also quasi-legal states.

Not everyone was as impressed by the regulation and termination of aristocratic disputes as medieval historians sometimes are. Some representatives of the church were especially critical. Physical violence was not usually considered evil in and of itself, but its tendency to harm non-aristocrats, including clerics and peasants (who were, not incidentally, often rent- or service-paying labourers on ecclesiastical properties), was a problem. In the decades around the year 1000, some Church councils and synods – sometimes accompanied by large crowds of common people – in what is now France and Spain began issuing promulgations limiting violence on pain of excommunication. In 989, the bishops, monks and nuns assembled at the Council of Charroux forbade anyone from breaking into churches, stealing farmers’ livestock and attacking unarmed priests.11 These protections for ‘non-combatants’ were expanded in later councils, and truces were proclaimed that forbade violence at particular times. The Peace of God, as these councils are collectively called, is often portrayed as a popular initiative that addressed problems of public order created by social elites in the abeyance of central authority. But the great clerics who were its driving force were as aristocratic in background as those whose violence they sought to calm, and many peace efforts were as much individual responses to particular constellations of local power relationships as they were part of an effort to limit violence in a universal or even ideological way.12

Nor were kings and great princes absent from peace efforts, any more than they had really abandoned the business of public justice.13 Ceremonially and ideologically, central medieval kingship remained a sacred office and a touchstone of political philosophy. The rise of lordship and its attendant violence nevertheless thoroughly reshaped regalian power. If lords sought to become like kings (or at least more like counts, or so the monks claimed), kings themselves became more like lords. A shared culture of nobility drew kings as deeply into the world of knighthood and epic as their vassals and their vassals’ vassals. Seeking to dominate their inferiors and rivals, kings built

great castles and warred against enemies near and far. Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis wrote accounts of King Louis VI’s expeditions against the recalcitrant nobles of northern France that echo with the clash of swords and the crackle of burning buildings. Recounting Louis’s campaign against Leo, castellan of Meung, Suger observed 'The lord Louis curbed him with his mighty hand . . . as the strong is always subdued by the stronger, [Leo] could not withstand the pressure of arms and fire directed against him.'\textsuperscript{14} Louis was an anointed king by hereditary right (and in Suger’s view, by divine right as well), but ruling his kingdom required physical power against his magnates as well as legal authority over them.

The Late Middle Ages: States and Laws
(c. 1200–1450)

Legal authority becomes a more pressing issue in the sources for the last few centuries of the Middle Ages, as they evince the elaboration of some political forms that would endure into the modern era.\textsuperscript{15} Royal governments became much stronger in some areas of Europe, particularly France, England and Spain. In the Low Countries and northern Italy, cities developed governmental powers to match their industrial and commercial wealth. While imperial German lands remained politically fragmented, cities, bishops and princes wielded increasingly complex powers. Central administrations grew in size and complexity, and bureaucratic systems of accountability were instituted. Record keeping increased exponentially. The rediscovery of Roman law and its subsequent, explosive growth offered new arguments for the supremacy of princely power and underpinned major expansions of justice. Administrative and ideological growth were matched by the elaboration of courtly ceremony and display. At the other end of the social ladder, non-elite or less elite groups began clamouring for access to power or, perhaps, reacting against new barriers to it erected by the growth of officialdom.

The genesis of the modern state (as these developments have been called in the aggregate) is often thought to have eclipsed lordship, particularly in terms of violence and law.\textsuperscript{16} Late medieval governments and lords are often


\textsuperscript{15} See Chapter 16 in this volume.

\textsuperscript{16} For example, André Gouron and Albert Rigaudière (eds.), Renaissance du pouvoir législatif et genèse de l’état (Montpellier: Socapress, 1988).
viewed both as opposites and in opposition to one another. Even when it is not a question of looking for a nascent state monopoly on violence, governments are understood as the champions of a new order underpinned by law, with lords as the avatars of an outmoded ('feudal' or even 'medieval') violence. While governments were legitimised by law, lordship was asserted and maintained by violence. While governments sought to substitute institutional justice for arbitrary force, lords pursued their claims through wars, vendettas or feuds. Governments were, at least ideally, constituted for the public interest or common good (*res publica*, *bonum commune*, etc.). Lordships, on the other hand, were private possessions exploited for their owners’ satisfaction, by force if necessary.

In fact, lordship remained a key component of political life in most European regions through the eighteenth century and, in some places, well beyond. Over recent decades, historians have increasingly pointed out that lords did not stand outside of the variety of institutions that constituted government in late medieval polities. They numbered among them. Lordships were governmental entities in their own right. The fiscal and judicial powers that lords wielded were 'public' in the same sense as those exercised by royal or communal governments. If law legitimised – but also limited – the reach of kings and cities, seigneurial prerogatives and duties were also increasingly elaborated in law. All was not peaceable in medieval kingdoms (or city-states or prince-bishoprics). Lords chafed at the jurisdictional and administrative ambitions of other powers, including those of kings and communes, sometimes engendering violent opposition. Still, lords had the same responsibilities for maintaining order and dispensing justice that confronted other, more modern-seeming holders of power. The vast majority of their interactions were characterised by cooperation, not conflict.

This overall scholarly consensus nevertheless belies important regional differences. These differences not only arise from the accidental vagaries of regional historiography, but also reflect the very real differences in national trajectories whose roots are found in the late Middle Ages. Looking at the way that seigneurial violence fitted into – or has been seen to fit into – the development of state and society in Germany, France and England shows a general congruence in the relationship between late medieval lordship and violence, and there were similar developments in northern Italy.

Seigneurial violence was not simply tolerated for want of the means to do anything about it, but regarded as normal and even justified in some contexts, including as part of a wider vindicatory culture and/or as the consequence of exercising political power. The comparison nonetheless also brings out how the specific contingencies of regional political development impinged upon the expression of seigneurial violence and its relationship to institutional and social structures.

**German Lands**

In scholarship on German lands, seigneurial feuds (*Fehden*) have long been part of the conversation, owing to Germany’s particular political circumstances, both medieval and modern. A federal state in which much power is devolved regionally and locally, modern Germany is not wholly dissimilar to medieval Germany’s patchwork landscape of competing authorities made up of territorial lords and princes, independent cities, and prince-bishoprics, over which the king had quite limited authority relative to his royal peers in France or England. The ‘big question’ about the late medieval German polity is thus not how it developed into a modern state, but why it developed differently from western European polities whose trajectories were much more ‘statist’.¹⁹ Seigneurial feud plays a key explanatory role in efforts to answer this question. Its widespread existence in late medieval Germany speaks to the non-centralisation of the polity, but the process of feuding underpinned, as well as reflected, a socio-political order in which power was determined by social status and honour rather than institutional law and official judgement.

As was seminally argued by Otto Brunner in a book first published in 1939 and translated into English (from a later edition) in 1984, the practice of feud was integral to the practice of lordship because lords had a right and a duty to act with violence in the protection of their lands, subjects and possessions.²⁰ These rights and obligations were understood in terms of honour, a personal quality as

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much as a legal status. The conservation of honour was an existential imperative for lordship. Feud might therefore be expressed as vengeance, but it was political in its implications, and its practice was highly orchestrated: it began with a formal challenge (Absage or diffi datio) issued to the opponent and entailed particular forms of violence, particularly plunder and arson (Raub und Brand), which was however at least theoretically restricted to particular times, spaces and targets. Kings primarily intervened in seigneurial feuds as mediators, not justiciars. They rarely tried to outlaw feud altogether, and most of the imperial Landfrieden (territorial peace proclamations) were intended to regulate feuds rather than suppress them. What determined the legitimacy of the violence was not sovereignty, but the rightness of the cause. This was not contrary to social order; it was social order.

Brunner’s rehabilitation of seigneurial feuds re-envisioned ‘peace’ as the maintenance of right, potentially through violent means, rather than simply the absence of (non-state) violence. At first blush, he thus privileged ‘rules’ over ‘institutions’, but in fact, his argument does rest on the possession of legitimate authority, just by lords rather than kings or great princes. He simply moved the necessary status for violence to be ‘political’ (rather than criminal) down a notch or two on the socio-political ladder. This is not a minor achievement. Recognising seigneurial feuds as political action elucidates broad swathes of historical behaviour. For example, Hillay Zmora has shown that in fifteenth-century Franconia seigneurial feuds were not the criminal acts of greedy knights (Raubritter), nor were they waged in opposition to or in spite of superior powers attempting to build a centralised state. Rather, they were closely linked to the princely rivalries engendered by competing efforts at consolidation and often waged on behalf of those princes. Seigneurial feud and princely war (Zmora’s distinction) often became hopelessly entangled. The explanatory force of Brunner’s argument runs into some trouble when we look further down the social scale. It was axiomatic for Brunner that peasants, like women, did not possess the right to feud. Peasants’ role in feud was therefore confined to that of victims. Their bodies and goods were targeted as a means of waging economic warfare, violence that effectively reproduced lords’ socio-political domination of peasants. Nevertheless, as

22 Brunner, Land and Lordship, pp. 15, 44, 53, 55–63, 88–9, 221, etc.
Brunner did recognise, peasants themselves frequently engaged in feuds; Christine Reinle has counted nearly 260 peasant challenges to feud over six decades in late medieval Bavaria. The vast majority of these challenges did not lead to actual violence, but when they did, it was nearly identical to that of aristocratic feuds, including theft, kidnapping and arson. Brunner thought that peasant feuds were exclusively motivated by ‘blood vengeance’, retribution for a killing, rather than the primarily political concerns that drove what he called the ‘knightly feud’. Reinle’s research suggests otherwise. As in aristocratic feuding, peasant feud served as a means of forcing the opponent to negotiate claims contrary to the feuder’s perceived rights, usually in property. Some of these feuds were directed against other peasants, but many targeted lay or ecclesiastical lords. The salient difference from aristocratic feud was simply that peasant feuds were criminalised earlier. For peasant as for their lords, the possession of just cause was more important than that of legally constituted authority in legitimating violence.

France

In France, seigneurial violence has also been understood as a major detriment to peasants’ lives and livelihoods. Particularly in the decades after the Black Death, when depopulation shrunk the tax base, lords might make recourse to outright banditry in order to extract the kind of surplus required by seigneurial lifestyles. Far more than a danger to people below, though, seigneurial violence in France has mainly featured in scholarship as an impediment to the power above. ‘Feud’ or guerre privée (private war) has been primarily viewed as a stumbling block to the development of a monarchy eventually destined for absolute power, foreshadowing the powerful role of the état in modern France.

The main reference sources have been a series of promulgations issued by the kings of France, beginning with Saint Louis IX (r. 1226–70) up to at least Jean II (r. 1350–64), that limited or prohibited wars (guerres) between their subjects, including those of the lords. Some of these promulgations explicitly included people ‘of whatever status or condition’, meaning lords and nobles, and drew a stark contrast between pursuing one’s conflicts illicitly.

through war and pursuing them legitimately through institutional justice. In 1304, King Philip IV, for instance, declared that kings were ‘divinely deputised’ for the administration of justice and consequently prohibited his subjects from undertaking wars or vengeance on their own account.\(^{27}\) That lords nevertheless continued to go to war against one another – in southern France alone over sixty such wars took place between 1250 and 1400 – has been considered evidence of seigneurial recalcitrance to growing royal power, an unwillingness to give up ‘medieval’ prerogatives, and even a usurpation of royal rights.

Certainly, such wars disturbed peace and quiet. A preferred method of waging them was to engage in *chevauchées* (literally, ‘rides’) through the adversary’s territory, kidnapping (and sometimes raping) their dependent subjects, pillaging their goods, destroying their crops, burning their houses, and so forth.\(^{28}\) (In this their behaviour differed not at all from that of royal troops at that time.)\(^{29}\) Like the *Fehden* of the empire, these wars were usually about power. The language of hatred and vengeance might be employed to describe the conflict, but invariably the underlying *casus belli* were issues of property and power, like taxation, jurisdiction, inheritance or marriage, and territorial/castle possession. This political – one might even say legal – basis of conflict meant that women might have a principal role to play in the decision to wage war as the hereditary holder of (or claimant to) a lordship. We see this in the famous case of the two Jeannes who fought for the Duchy of Brittany in the mid fourteenth century, but there were many other examples, from Countess Marguerite de Comminges and Lady Eleanor of Vendôme down to a humble castellan’s daughter who hired mercenaries to occupy a few châteaux near Montpellier in the 1360s.\(^{30}\)

Royal courts did criminally prosecute some seigneurial warmakers, sometimes punishing them with fines, sometimes even quoting from royal proclamations against warfare, but most of the interactions between royal justice and provincial lords allowed a great deal of scope for seigneurial violence, even under the law. The vast majority of royal acts on warfare


\(^{29}\) Similar to the discussion in Chapter 13 in this volume.

were not outright prohibitions, rather most of them actually allowed lords or nobles to go to war in explicit terms, only prohibiting it when the king himself was at war, or limiting the timing or the extent of the violence. In 1339, for example, King Philip VI recognised the right of Gascon nobles to wage war, provided that a formal challenge (difidatio) had been made and that such wars cease when the king himself went to war. Moreover, judicial prosecutions of French warmakers rarely made use of royal promulgations against war, but rather rested on far more diffuse grounds such as the carriage of illicit arms or the infringement of a special royal privilege called the safeguard. In some cases, the violence was actually ruled licit because it had been employed in enforcing seigneurial rights, like justice or taxation, or in the correction of a vassal’s disobedience. In these cases, a seigneurial right to violence – even on a large scale – might be judicially endorsed. Even when a war was found illicit, the judgement was often treated as a starting point for further negotiations, with the guilty party soliciting a letter of pardon (lettres de rémission) from the crown and coming to an extra-judicial settlement with his (occasionally her) adversary. Such practices should be understood as mutually beneficial, rather than as reflecting ‘incomplete’ royal development. They represented significant new royal involvement in violent seigneurial disputes, but in ways that were often useful to lords and in which they were often fully complicit.

England

The place of seigneurial violence within English political and legal frameworks seems likely to have been very different. A small kingdom with an elaborate legal tradition and a hierarchical court system, there would apparently be fewer opportunities for seigneurial violence than in the large, politically and judicially fragmented polities of France and the empire. The socio-political constitution of aristocratic England, divided into a small group of great nobles and a much larger mass of lesser elites (knights, eventually gentry), may also have discouraged large-scale violence, so long as there was stability at the top. To some extent these assumptions are true. Certainly, before the mid fourteenth century, there is relatively little evidence of large-scale violence by magnates great or small against one another, and by and large this was a royal governmental achievement. The English king and his agents possessed an administrative framework of a uniformity and

32 John G. H. Hudson, ‘Feud, Vengeance, and Violence in England from the Tenth to the Twelfth Centuries’, in Belle S. Tuten and Tracey L. Billado (eds.), Feud, Violence and
comprehensiveness unparalleled elsewhere in Europe, and royal control of
the realm’s castles was extensive. But surveillance and suppression were only
part of the equation. The creation of simple legal procedures like novel
disseisin and mort d’ancestor for dealing with land disputes enabled speedy
and decisive conclusions to one of the most common sources of violent
conflict between the powerful. Such opportunities for dispute, so plentiful on
the continent, were also limited by England’s relatively strict rules of inheri-
tance and systematic royal control of marriages and wardships.

There is, however, a major exception to this pacific picture: baronial rebellions
against the king. Major rebellions took place in 1088, 1173–4, 1215–17 and 1258–65.
To this list, we might also add the years of ‘anarchy’ during the dynastic war
between Stephen and Matilda (1135–4) in which magnates played a major role and
also pursued their own conflicts. Baronial violence on a large scale in England thus
had a very close relationship with royal politics and the government of the realm.
The kingdom’s great lords expected to be involved in running the kingdom, and
they had the castles, wealth and men to assert their demands. In the twelfth
century, these were primarily dynastic: who ruled the realm. But from the
thirteenth century they were primarily legal and administrative: how it was
ruled. The 1215–17 rebellion produced and defended Magna Carta, while the
Provisions of Oxford were central to that of 1258–65. There were many factors
that motivated baronial rebellion, including some no doubt venal or vicious, but a
major impetus was the reformation of government and the restraint of arbitrary
power.

The developments of the fourteenth and fifteenth century encouraged
greater scope for seigneurial violence, especially at the local level where
conflicts between lords great and small seem to have become more frequent.
As in France, the Hundred Years War militarised the population and put the
crown under intense financial and political pressures. The structure of
English lordship itself changed in the later Middle Ages. Rather than promis-
ing fidelity in exchange for land, men increasingly promised their service in
exchange for payment (maintenance). They wore their lord’s clothes and
colours (liveries) and did his bidding, including breaking into houses, setting
fires and seizing the property of his enemies. Local justice fell increasingly
into the hands of the local gentry, whose own behaviour was thus less closely
subject to royal control. But if this picture of ‘bastard feudalism’ looks like
disorder and corruption to modern sensibilities, again we must think about

*Practice: Essays in Medieval Studies in Honor of Stephen D. White* (Farnham: Ashgate,
2010), pp. 41–53.
how these lords and gentlemen (and some gentlewomen) fit into the political community of the realm. They constituted a political elite with a responsibility as well as a right to engage in the power brokerage that lay behind government. Their interests might be personally held, but they were enmeshed with their public roles. Keeping peace and doing violence were often two sides of the same coin. What violence they committed on their own behalf – usually in connection with a lawsuit over land – was carefully targeted and usually very limited, intended to move the dispute towards settlement without offending the sensibilities of the other elites whose involvement was key to a favourable conclusion.34

Conclusion

Historicising violence means understanding its contingent function within the social contexts specific to the period. Throughout the medieval millennium, political and social elites killed, ravaged and waged war. In our own society, these are acts that only agents of state may legitimately undertake; in anyone else’s hands, they now constitute crime or (perhaps another category altogether) terror. In medieval Europe, it was different. Seigneurial violence had its critics, but it persisted as a social fact throughout the period and beyond. It did so partly because personal redress of wrong with violence was not only widely practised but also widely accepted. This was true in great part because medieval power was personally held and relatively widely dispersed; many individuals within the political community possessed not only a right to act violently but also a social duty to do so. For lords in particular, especially in the period’s later centuries, vindicatory right and legal prerogative frequently overlapped; their ‘private’ and ‘public’ interests and duties were not fully distinguishable. The social corollary to this was an aristocratic licence to violence, sometimes shared by noblewomen and usually suffered by non-nobles, especially peasants, though there were legal and cultural constraints on how lords and their men used violence. Seigneurial violence expressed and maintained the political dominance of lordship, simultaneously reiterating the socio-cultural

norms of aristocracy. It was a demonstration and an actualisation of medieval order.

Bibliographical Essay

Relevant source material can be found in almost every European documentary collection and archival repository. For the early Middle Ages, the various ‘barbarian’ law codes have often been used to discern cultural norms and set beside documents like chronicles, letter collections and saints’ lives that may reflect social practice. For the Carolingian period, surviving administrative documentation is much more copious, and, like that of their Merovingian and Visigothic predecessors, has been mostly edited by the Monumenta Germaniae Historica (MGH). For the central Middle Ages, more literary evidence enriches the source base, and we begin to have more judicial sources. For the last medieval centuries, evidence for seigneurial violence can be found in documents ranging from civil lawsuits to personal letters to poetry to the minutes of municipal assemblies.


For violence and lordship after the millennium, the ‘feudal revolution’ debate remains unresolved: Thomas N. Bisson, ‘The “feudal revolution”’, Past & Present 142 (1994), 6–42 and the ensuing debate, with contributions by Dominique Barthélemy, Stephen White, Timothy Reuter and Chris Wickham and a reply by Bisson in Past & Present 152 (1996),


The violence of warfare is a difficult problem to analyse given the disparities that often occur in the sources between personal narratives and the dry statistics of army organisation. In addition there is the problem, often discussed by modern historians, of whether the history of battles is possible at all given the narrative conventions employed to describe it. Are we simply using traditional descriptive formulae? Warfare during the period from the mid fifteenth to the mid sixteenth century – the age dominated in Europe by the growth of vast dynastic states and world-wide empires – characterised by wars for the control of Italy and then widening into the Europe-wide Habsburg–Valois wars, displayed a number of dynamic and static characteristics. First, the numbers of troops employed by states steadily increased as their taxation base became more stabilised.

Second, the scope and type of armaments became more varied. An arms race between the offensive and defensive modes of warfare accelerated, so that for example cannon developed both in terms of reliability and manoeuvrability. The ‘invention’ of artillery in the Middle Ages later became an all-purpose explanation for historical change (along with printing) and its importance in specific events was sometimes exaggerated. All the same, its significance can scarcely be denied – both the rapidity of development from 1460 to 1480 and the standardisation of the 1550s. The employment of iron shot became general and then the calibres of artillery pieces became standardised by the middle of the sixteenth century, so that the cannon of Henri II of France and Emperor Charles V became recognised forms. It also became cheaper for mounting on ships when, as in the England of the 1540s, cast iron became available for manufacture. So Charles V prepared an artillery train of seventy-two pieces for his Algiers campaign of 1541 and had eighty-eight...
pieces for his army on the Picard frontier in 1553, Henri II thirty-four pieces for his Metz campaign of 1552.

At the same time, the engineering techniques for constructing fortresses capable of resisting artillery bombardment developed first in Italy and then in the Low Countries, northern France and England. We should not underestimate the terror effects of artillery sieges on the populations subjected to them in this period simply in terms of noise as well as destructiveness. Every depiction of a siege reveals serried ranks of bombards drawn up against city walls, very close when the defenders had no artillery of their own to cover the approaches. To this, of course, was coupled the terror and fear of assault and sack. This was nothing new in itself. Towns and cities tended to surrender when their hope of defence or relief was exhausted, though there were some notable exceptions on the grand scale, such as Rome in 1527, and some other assaults, as at Thérouanne (1553) and Saint-Quentin (1557), which were followed by brutal sacks. Until the mid-fifteenth century largely an arm for siege warfare (the artillery train taken to Italy by Charles VIII being a case in point), artillery also became a major battlefield resource with the result that battles such as Ravenna (1512) and Marignano (1515) came to turn on the use of artillery.

Handguns were developing as serious adjuncts to infantry and cavalry formations. It became normal for private soldiers to own their own handguns, even though cannon were largely a monopoly of the state. Of course, the dominant form of infantry warfare was still the pike square developed first by the Swiss and then generalised throughout western Europe. But infantry armed with arquebuses (first among the Spanish, later the French) were already common on the battlefield by 1560.

The static aspect of warfare is to be seen in explanations and justifications. The distinction commonly made between types of war, between ‘wars of magnificence’ waged to defend the faith or to defend dynastic right, and ‘common war’, waged for the crude acquisition of territory, remained. The latter embraces what earlier theorists had sometimes called ‘guerre mortelle’ (‘war to the death’ waged by non-nobles) in which no ransoms were taken, and ‘guerre à feu et à sang’ (‘war in fire and blood’), usually envisaged as a non-chivalric form of warfare. The conventions of chivalric war – personal bravery, consideration for enemies under a code of rules, loyalty, generosity, gratitude for favours done, courtesy to women, above all the pursuit of honour through the path of ‘virtue’ – had always applied mainly to noblemen. They had to be stretched in order to accommodate many of these conflicts which, after all, often embodied vast geo-political and strategic
objectives as well as dynastic interests. Huizinga, though he sought to emphasise the importance of chivalric ideals in the late Middle Ages, characterised such ideals as increasingly at odds with reason of state and concerns for wealth and power. As in earlier periods, the line between ‘war in fire and blood’ and chivalric war was repeatedly blurred.

At Mézières in October 1521, jousts were held between ‘champions’ on horseback and on foot between the French garrison and the besieging force under Nassau. Yet within weeks, both sides were carrying out ‘war in fire and blood’ along the borders of the Ardennes, which the memoirist and military commander Guillaume du Bellay thought were the origin of ‘the great cruelties wrought in war during the thirty years afterwards’.

Traditional attitudes saw the transmutation of nobilities, with their inherited conceptions of personal honour, from the main body of armies into the officer corps. Many writers in the sixteenth century still assumed that the nobility’s calling was war; for Guillaume du Bellay, war was ‘the custom and usual calling of the nobility of France’. The military commander Blaise de Monluc (c. 1502–77) in his Commentaires was categorical: ‘Remember, you who have been born gentlemen, that you were given life by God to bear arms and to serve your prince, not just to go hunting or make love.’ Montaigne was more measured but made the same point: ‘The true and only form of nobility in France is the military calling.’

This meant that warfare, however bloody, continued to be waged under a patina of aristocratic assumptions about proper behaviour. The taking of noblemen for ransom in battle continued throughout this period alongside notable examples of indiscriminate slaughter. At Dreux in 1562, the prince of Condé was chivalrously treated by the duke of Guise while the marshal Saint-André was put to death when captured by a noble enemy he had offended. Both actions fell within the noble code of honour. This raises the question of professionalisation. It is commonly assumed that armies became more professional in the sixteenth century in that the military became a distinct calling, yet there was nothing new in this and knights had always been required to train seriously for war.

All this took place against a background of serious, in some ways worldwide, struggles for dominance between the dynastic states, which dominated the core areas of western Europe. At their centre stood France, a kingdom of

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over 18 million people with a growing taxation base, faced from 1519 by a rival complex of power, the Habsburg dynasty, which by the 1520s dominated the western Mediterranean, the Low Countries and part of Germany, as well as starting to acquire an American empire. The long struggle between these powers, which grew out of the pivotal struggle for the control of Italy from the late fifteenth century onwards, saw the employment of armies on multiple fronts and the virtual impossibility of stable peace until the two dynastic states had exhausted themselves and had entered into an era of religious warfare in 1559.

Emperor Charles V had at his disposal a formidable infantry formation in the form of the Castilian tercios, bodies of 3,000 infantrymen who dominated the European battlefields during the sixteenth century but the emperor also struggled with complex and far-flung problems of finance and organisation. The kings of France had one of the earliest ‘standing armies’ at their disposal which ultimately generated a direct taxation system, but there were also always problems of finance. How many men did this entail? In the late fifteenth century, it was essentially still a cavalry army, notionally composed of noblemen, that was supplemented on active campaign by new levies of foot and mercenaries. This was because, despite the oft-repeated criticism of mercenaries by Machiavelli, it proved impossible for governments in this period to undertake training and permanent housing for large bodies of foot soldiers. Thus, mercenaries for all monarchies were an essential ‘professional’ formation, even though, in the case of Spain, the core of the royal army was made up of native Castilian recruits. Attempts were made in France to do the same, though with less success. Military men such as Fourquevaux, author of a notable treatise on infantry organisation (1549), shared Machiavelli’s suspicion of mercenaries and sought to train a native infantry.

As far as the impact of war is concerned, the core dynamic is that of numbers. Typical armies of the late fifteenth century seldom attained more than 20,000 men, often half that. By the mid sixteenth century, it was possible to field armies of 50,000, with Charles V at the time of the Metz campaign having perhaps 150,000 men under his control in all. As for the numbers deployed, contemporaries were famously reluctant to count in detail. At the start of his chronicle of Louis XII’s wars, Jean d’Auton diffidently waived aside the problem: he sought to enumerate the army ‘but I won’t do it in fear of exaggeration and provoking annoyance’. Administration itself was inexact.

Fraud, in the form of taking money for non-existent soldiers, in both cavalry and infantry formations was endemic, despite the repetition of detailed regulations on the musters, with the result that the crown could often have no clear idea of how many men there were in an army, even though it might know the number of companies.

The tendency was for the size of armies to rise inexorably. Louis XI at the height of his military operations in 1481–3 against the Burgundian Netherlands had 45,000 men at his disposal in different theatres. With support forces, supply staff and hangers-on, this amounted to feeding more like 80,000 people. Charles VIII, despite contemporary exaggerations, probably took no more than 20,000 men (half of it cavalry) and left half of that behind him in various garrisons. Louis XII’s army for the conquest of Milan in July 1499 probably stood no higher than 6,000–9,000 cavalry and 17,000–20,000 infantry, not all of which could be concentrated in the same place. The army dispatched to Naples in 1503 was officially listed as 1,200 lances and 10,000 foot (French and Italian), though Venetian observers reported only 4,000 foot. The estimates for Francis I’s army in Italy in 1515 can be put at 2,500 lances (7,500 combatants), 23,000 lansquenets (German foot soldiers) and 8,000 Gascons. French armies were always heavily dependent in this period on German and Swiss infantry. In 1542, Francis I probably had a total of 70,000 non-garrison troops on all fronts; he is unlikely to have had more than an army of 30,000 foot and 3,000 horse for the Landrecies campaign of the summer of 1543. In addition, the king had decided to raise 12,000 Swiss, 6,000 Italians and another 2,000 lansquenets. Given the 33,000 frontier troops in pay, this gives us a full total of 85,000 under arms. At moments of military crisis, like the camp assembled at Jalons in 1544 to face the emperor, it was claimed by a contemporary that France had assembled a force of 45,000 men.

The military establishment of 1552 needed to be ratcheted up by the demands of repeated campaigns. The army was then listed as: first, the military household, then 1,600 lances (notionally 4,000 horse), 2,940 light horse in thirty-six companies, forty-one companies (18,600) of French infantry, 7,000 Swiss and four regiments of lansquenets, six companies of Scots and one of English. The likely maximum for the infantry is 30,000. The garrisons of the kingdom itself included a further 1,500 horse and 12,000 infantry plus 12,000 in Piedmont. The campaign lists for the army after the capture of Metz show around 36,000 men, to which the garrison resources of the kingdom should be added at 11,450 men. This seems to have been the maximum the crown could put together. A figure between 50,000 and 60,000 would therefore seem to be a good rough estimate for the entire military resources of the
kingdom in 1552. By the end of the 1550s, the French state could not have been paying fewer than 70,000–80,000 men by the end of the Habsburg–Valois wars in periods of active campaigns.

Increased numbers had serious implications for breakdowns in pay systems, especially by the 1550s when all monarchies were going through severe financial crises. One of the consequences of relatively undeveloped supply systems was the continuation of the custom of ‘living off the land’ by soldiers. War was destructive, of course, both for combatants and for civilians. For the ordinary soldier, the ‘pains’ of war were commonplace. Jean Molinet expressed this when speaking of the rigours of the military life: ‘You rich bourgeois, you wouldn’t put up with six leagues of such marching for all the gold in your coffers.’ In the late fifteenth century Robert de Balsac insisted on the king’s need to pay his gens d’armes (the heavy cavalry of the French monarchy paid from the new direct tax, the taille) regularly, ‘for they earn their pay with great pain and travail ... and are as poor as Joab’. In the early sixteenth century, Pierre Gringore could write of the ‘pains and anguish’ endured by soldiers, including hunger, thirst, heat, cold, dust, rain and snow, and harsh discipline.

Such ‘pains’ were, of course, primarily endured on the field of battle. Anyone who has tried to reconstruct the events of a battle will be aware of the problems of doing so, though this has not impeded generations of writers who have attempted it. It is obvious that historians usually know the outcome of battle; they can even in some cases estimate the reasons for victory (though this is much more problematic). What actually happened on the field in fact puts an impossible strain on the contradictory sources. Even the topography of the battlefield is often difficult to reconcile with contemporary narratives. This applies as much to the widespread attempts to depict battle in prints and painting during this period, as encapsulated in the military historian John Hale’s remark that ‘battles sprawled, art condensed’. Moreover, victors commemorated, losers avoided; thus all known depictions of Francis I’s surrender at Pavia are made by artists employed by the Habsburgs or their subjects. Peter Burke has pointed out that increased legibility in Renaissance

battle painting does not imply increased realism. There is a fundamental gap between ‘what actually happens’ in a battle and the processes available for narrating and depicting it and, naturally, the further back we go those processes are so much the more formalised if not stereotyped. In an age when a community of 10,000 was a substantial town and few cities topped 30,000, armies of between 10,000 and 50,000 were the largest gatherings of human beings most people would ever encounter in any one place before the nineteenth century.

To take just one example of many, Martin du Bellay’s account of the Battle of Ceresole (April 1544) is measured and, as far as can be checked, accurate in detail. Ceresole represented an attempt by France to return to intervention in northern Italy. It was a rare French victory but one without consequences because of the Anglo-Imperial invasion of France during the following summer. Du Bellay’s account places little emphasis on his own achievements (even though these were clearly important). His is the account of one of the commanders responsible for the overall tactics of the battle. Blaise de Monluc’s account, on the other hand, is much fuller, dominated by incidental detail with himself at the centre of the narrative and deriving any overall view of the field from his reading of du Bellay. Monluc is a writer for the press of battle, described very much in terms of a rugby scrum (‘shove soldiers, shove’). His account concentrates on his own part in the battle and his opinions are trenchant. The duc d’Enghien’s (the French commander) charge he describes as ‘ill-advised’, ‘furious but ill-considered’; the Swiss troops in French service (Gruyeriens) were cowards and ‘unworthy to bear arms’. What these two accounts display is that, though both soldier-writers were anxious to explain and understand the causes of success and failure in battle, their understanding was very different.6

The internal dynamics are therefore subject to all the usual vagaries of historical contradictions. Modern historians have approached the subject from two angles. First, there is the broadening out of the reconstructed narrative of battle to take account of the experiences of the rank-and-file. Then, we can now understand more clearly that the narrative framework for classifying and describing battles already existed before the event and such encounters were narrated within that framework, which was not fixed but evolved. Hence the concept of a move from the ‘feat of arms’ to ideological conflict, though even in the early Middle Ages there was always an element

of the ideological, if we can give that name to the concept of victory as validating right or the will of God.

The effects of battle in an era of artillery and firearms warfare need to be considered. At Pavia in 1525 a French army superior in numbers (24,000–26,000 French against 20,000 Imperials) and artillery (sixty cannons against twenty) was annihilated by a force heavily armed with handguns, though the extent of the disaster is uncertain. Contemporary accounts tended to exaggerate the disparity in numbers in order to emphasise the extent of divine sanction. Pavia was undoubtedly one of the most murderous battles of the sixteenth century. Pescara the Imperial commander gave the order to take no prisoners, though this was not unusual, Louis XII having done the same at Agnadello in 1509. Imperial propaganda spread around such figures as 12,000 French dead against around 500 of the emperor’s army. The most recent estimates suggest that, out of 60,000 men on both sides on the field, 18–23 per cent were killed, clearly the majority French and Swiss, though some of these were drowned or killed in the flight by peasants. The aftermath of such battles was gruesome. Alessandro Benedetti witnessed the corpses strewn across the battlefield of Fornovo (1495), more of a drawn battle, half-naked, stripped by peasants who had watched the battle from the neighbouring hills. The wounded lay naked in the sun begging for water, and in the Venetian camp there were amputations and the guts of the dying strewn around.7 Jean d’Auton vividly described the gentlemen coming into Chaumont’s headquarters after the attack on the the modern artillery bastion at Genoa in 1507:

The whole building, above and below, was full of the dying. I saw there several gentlemen arrive who had been in the battle, of whom some had not yet had their armour removed, all exhausted, their faces spattered with powder and sweat . . . at supper-time a great crowd of Swiss arrived, some carrying others on their pikes, all wounded and bleeding.8

The picture is much the same when the surgeon Ambroise Paré reported his commission to search for bodies after the Battle of Saint-Quentin in 1557. At the camp he found bodies, ‘decomposed and unrecognisable. We saw the land for a half league around covered with dead bodies and could not stay because of the terrible smell that rose from the bodies of men and horses and we caused a great cloud of flies to rise as we went; they almost blocked out

the sun and their buzzing was amazing.\textsuperscript{9} The period was one in which not only the rank-and-file but also the commanders suffered high casualty rates, especially for those who lost the battle. Rout had always been the moment of maximum slaughter. Francis I was captured at Pavia and many of his closest commanders were killed. Even after a victory, losses among the commanders were sometimes high and disease could set in to an army, as after Marignano. Far-flung expeditions to Naples, as under Lautrec in 1528 and Guise in 1557 led to the disintegration of armies through epidemics. Artillery and its destructiveness was a normal feature of pitched battles by the start of the sixteenth century. In the first stage of the battles for the crossing of the Garigliano in October 1503, we are told that twenty French cannons were firing at once against Gonzalo de Cordoba’s forces, ‘which carried away often, twenty, thirty and forty at a time, so that where the shot struck there was nothing but dismembered heads, arms and bodies’.\textsuperscript{10} At Ravenna, one of the hardest-fought battles of the age, Bayard’s biographer gave French losses as 3,000 foot and eighty men-at-arms while the Spanish lost 10,000 infantry and twenty captains.\textsuperscript{11} At Marignano, according to Bouchet, ‘The fight was cruel and long . . . and the French and Swiss were so determined to slaughter each other that only nightfall separated them.’ Estimates of Swiss casualties are around 15,000 out of 35,000.\textsuperscript{12} At Ceresole in 1544 a contemporary observer noted that for a quarter league around the town ‘our horses were up to the knees in blood and couldn’t walk for dead bodies’. Estimates of Imperial casualties were 12,000–15,000 ‘of all nations’.\textsuperscript{13}

Monluc recalled at the end of his life that he had been shot seven times while serving the king and that not one of his limbs was without a wound.\textsuperscript{14} Assaults during sieges were among the most deadly events, and surveys which started to be taken of wounded from the mid sixteenth century reveal that in such events most injuries were from arquebus shots but also from rocks thrown down on attackers. In hand-to-hand fighting the sword was the most likely source of wounds. It is usually thought that before the late seventeenth century there was little organised system for caring for battle wounded. This is not the case,

\textsuperscript{14} Monluc, \textit{Commentaires}, ed. Courteault, p. 821.
though measures were rough and ready. Letters of the Regent Louise of Savoy offer vivid testimony to the ‘poor soldiers, horse and foot, who came from the camp nearly all in their shirt-sleeves’ after Pavia.\textsuperscript{15} The issue was a crucial one, for it affected the morale of the troops. It seems that in this period the only possible course of action for the severely wounded was to place them in monasteries as lay brothers\textsuperscript{16} though La Noue later in the century thought the system ridiculous and very ineffective.\textsuperscript{17} There was an ambitious attempt by Marshal Charles de Cossé-Brissac (c. 1503–63) to deal with this in his 1551 ordinance by making a levy of 5 per cent on the pay at musters to be used to create military hospitals. Among the infantry companies at Casale in 1558 an average of just over 10 per cent of the men were sick. Among the legionaries at Calais at the same date, just over 11 per cent were out of action through illness or wounds.\textsuperscript{18}

Royal letters of 1537 observed that in the lansquenet regiments of Wilhelm von Fürstenberg (the main provider of German mercenaries for France in those years), there were a large number ‘sick, who for the extremity of their illness, cannot march with the colours’. The king had therefore, ‘to heal and restore them’, and decided to move them ‘gently’ to Auxerre. They were to be lodged in ‘some suitable place’.\textsuperscript{19} Some of the commanders of the Grisons troops who had been killed in the disastrous Parma campaign in 1554 were recommended for royal alms, as were captains who left children to be looked after, and a dozen common soldiers who returned minus limbs. Henri II sent a gold chain for a German page who had his leg blown off at the siege of Thionville in 1558. Monluc’s infantry had large numbers of wounded after the capture of the town but they were taken to Metz ‘and I had hospital money distributed to them, that the Admiral [Coligny] had allocated, which was the reason for saving a whole world of wounded soldiers and prompt the men to risk themselves more boldly in battle’.\textsuperscript{20} Individuals who could obtain favours might be treated generously by the crown, as was Pierre de Rieux, a ‘poor gentleman’ who had lost an arm by a cannon shot in Scotland and in 1549 was granted 300écus out of the sale of fallen trees in the royal forests, through the intervention of the Cardinal de Guise.\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[19] BnF Dupuy 273, fo. 31.
\item[21] BnF fr.5127 fo. 72v.
\end{footnotes}
The Habsburg–Valois wars gave rise to very significant developments in the treating of battle injuries and here the role of Ambroise Paré is pivotal. Born in Maine in c. 1510, he was apprenticed as a barber-surgeon to the count of Laval and worked in Paris at the Hôtel-Dieu. But it was his attachment to the army of Montmorency on the Pas de Suse campaign of 1537 that initiated him into royal service in the armies. Describing a wound, he used the phrase ‘I treated him, God healed him.’ Thereafter, he served as surgeon in nearly all the campaigns of the Habsburg–Valois wars and developed his famously pragmatic approach to the treating of wounds. Paré tells us that he had never dealt with firearms wounds before 1537 and had to learn as he went along to adapt the textbook remedies. In his publication of 1545 he recalls treating Marshal Brissac for gunshot wounds at the siege of Perpignan in 1542. It was then that he discovered that the traditional method of cauterising with boiling oil was only appropriate when there had been huge blood loss and that otherwise semi-warm poultices were the best way to heal wounds, while provoking suppuration was the best way to treat arrow wounds. Similarly, after the Battle of Saint-Quentin, he described using ‘Egyptiac’ (possibly a honey-based ointment) dissolved in wine and eau de vie to combat the infection of wounds full of pus and maggots. Paré wrote his own account of his journeys and campaigns called his \textit{Apologie}, one of the most vivid sources for the nature of wounds and the effects of weaponry, especially in the era of battlefield artillery. At Suse in 1537, he described the dead and dying and ‘hearing them cry under the feet of our horses, which made me feel great compassion in my heart’. In a stable, he found four dead soldiers and three wounded propped against a wall, their faces disfigured, hearing, seeing and saying nothing, their clothes still smoking from the cannon shot that had burned them. An old soldier came and asked if there was any hope for them. Paré said no, so he quickly cut their throats ‘gently and without anger’. When Paré reproached him, he said he hoped that in a similar case he would find someone to do the same for him. In 1545, he recalled service against the English at Boulogne, where a cannon shot (which killed four men) passed so near a French soldier’s breast-plate skirt that the skin of his thigh was painfully scorched. Paré treated the livid skin, while being mocked by the old soldiers for ducking when the cannon shot passed. Paré recounts all the normal events of war: execution of a defeated garrison if they did not surrender in time or, as in the case of the Hesdin campaign (1552), of all

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Paré, Œuvres}, vol. III, p. 689.
  \item Ibid., p. 691.
  \item Paré, \textit{Œuvres}, vol. III, pp. 721, 690.
  \item Ibid., p. 696.
\end{itemize}
Spanish soldiers captured after they had set fire to their powder magazines. Also at Hesdin in 1553, he observed the psychological effect of constant artillery bombardment on seriously injured soldiers. He reported the emperor’s siege army at Metz, devastated by famine and hunger during the winter of 1552–3: ‘each soldier had his camp bed and a coverlet of shining and brilliant stars clearer than fine gold; each day they had fine white sheets and lodged at the sign of the moon, making good cheer when they had the means and paying their host so well that they went off scot free’. Most were shoeless and most were soon dead.27

Of course, war wrought much wider devastation on civilians and here many of the conventions and modes of conduct were inherited from the past. Noblemen who wrote about war tended to treat the resistance of peasants to being pillaged with contempt. Rabutin, who was not totally unsympathetic to suffering, observed that the peasants were unwilling to help their own soldiers and were more intent on pillaging the dead than helping them. The regular soldiers during the Metz campaign, as soon as they left their camps in small numbers, had their throats cut by the ‘villainous peasants’.28 When villagers fought back, they could do so effectively. In September 1523, a band of 100 adventurers (foot soldiers) came to a village in the Oise and proceeded to ransack it, arguing that letters of safeguard were of no account. The peasants were driven into the cemetery, but then, finding they were greater in number, fought back and drove the soldiers off. The captain then threatened to return and punish them.29 All this was largely the result of two causes: first, it is not clear that peasants made any great distinction between ‘friendly’ and ‘enemy’ soldiers; second, the very rudimentary supply systems of armies almost demanded pillage by royal soldiers in order to stay alive, this despite quite rigorous military discipline systems that were being put in place. The disciplining of these bodies of horsemen became a notorious problem.

Philippe de Commynes, the Burgundian counsellor who was won over to his side by Louis XI, commented that they were:

constantly quartered throughout the country, without paying for anything, and doing other evils and excesses which everyone of us knows about: for they are not content with their rations, and so they beat and abuse the poor people and force them to go and find bread, wine and other food for them;

27 Ibid., pp. 708–9.
29 Archives Nationales, Paris, Archives de la famille de La Trémoille (1AP), vol. 221, fo. 23.
and if the goodman has a wife or daughter who is beautiful, he would be wise to keep her out of sight.\textsuperscript{30}

In Lombardy in 1500, Marshal Trivulzio reported that Cardinal d’Amboise was ‘tremendously angry about the pillage by the men-at-arms this side of the Ticino and the ransoms we hear they have extorted’. Scarcely a town or village had escaped ransom and the captains were to be ordered to account for their men.\textsuperscript{31} Vile behaviour was double-edged, of course. In Puglia in 1502 we hear of a ‘lackey’, a ‘murderer and mauvais garçon’, who, due to be hanged, redeemed himself by slaughtering twenty Spaniards.\textsuperscript{32}

It is now being realised that the violent response of village communities to military rampage was more than just a reaction of revenge or even of social conflict. In a sense, though this was a period in which intensively trained professionals dominated the battlefield, the traditional dichotomy between ‘soldier’ and ‘civilian’ is illusory; arms were universal. Village communes had well-established structures of organising military responses to outsiders, either over taxes or over military occupation. This was why the French crown could hope to employ the age-old resources of the francs-archers (peasants who were released from taxes in order to be available for military service) or their successors, the légionnaires. The notion that the French state was reluctant to employ French peasantry as infantry because the nobles feared the arming of the peasants is largely a myth. In addition the great cities were used to organising their own militias. The state was keen for such formations to train with both the bow and the arquebus in the sixteenth century, though careful about the effects on the spread of crime and routine violence as a result (with ordinances in 1546, 1548 and 1558).

It is the case that gross disorder was never far away from military operations. The early 1520s was the era of the mauvais garçons, largely out-of-control soldiery par excellence, and stories involving them were common. Francis I in September 1523 denounced:

Some adventurers, vagabond men, idle, lost, wicked, criminal, abandoned to all vices, thieves, murderers, ravishers, violators of women and girls, blasphemers and deniers of God, cruel, inhuman, unmerciful, who make a virtue of vice and have cast themselves into the pit of all evils, ravishing wolves made to destroy everyone and who will and can do no good service; whose custom is to devour the people.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31} D’Auton, Chroniques, vol. 1, p. 380. \textsuperscript{32} Ibid., vol. 11, p. 268.
Fifteen hundred mauvais garçons roamed through Poitou and were only put down with great losses by a commune force led by the local nobility. Eventually there were 6,000–7,000, who began their devastation in Berry and then moved on to Poitou. ‘They were men abandoned to all vice and wickedness and attacked, among others, priests and judges and all the gallows they found along their way they cast down.’ In 1543, Francis I wrote to the captain-general of the Norman legion that ‘this canaille’ of the legion, when its pay had not arrived, ‘had cried: money, money!’ and had deserted their colours. He therefore issued orders for them to be ‘cut to pieces’ and a goodly number of them hanged ‘to inspire horror and fear’ in the rest.

The campaigns between France and the rulers of the Low Countries between the mid-fifteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries generated what we may call a crisis of ‘habitability’ which afflicted the region intermittently over that century, generated very largely by the inability until 1559 of the French and Habsburg rulers to agree on the frontier between them. As it happens, the sources for this region are particularly rich over a century and illustrate the recurrence and accumulation of traditional patterns of military violence. The abbé of Saint-Riquier relates much about the destructive nature of Charles the Bold’s campaigns in Picardy in 1472. At Nesle, he stormed the town and ‘all within were killed except certain churchmen, women and children. The town was also totally burned and destroyed.’ Later in the campaign the duke came before Poix, ‘where he burned town and castle. From there, he came to Oisemont, which he also burned with several villages.’ After the Burgundian army took and burned Gamaches, they marched across Vimeu, ‘which was totally pillaged and looted’. As a result of these ruthless actions, the castles of Rambures and Eu were surrendered, even though they could have been defended. In August, the French king’s troops came back and tried to take Auxy, which had a stout castle. The town and lower court were overrun but fighting developed on the drawbridge and the French were repulsed by the Burgundian garrison, losing only one soldier ‘killed by a culverin on the galleries of the castle’. However, while the fighting was going on, ‘the French lords lodged in the good mansions and

others pillaged and looted everything they could find’. The town, which had been burned a few years before, was torched along with the mills along the river and the countryside around scoured for prisoners. Late in August, the French attacked Hesdin, destroying the suburbs and then most of the villages above the town along the River Canche. In the aftermath of the campaign, famine and plague spread and ‘the sick were brought back in carts to Abbeville and Hesdin and elsewhere, some dying on the way, others on arrival. On this campaign the duke burned more than 300 villages in the country of Caux, a great pity and loss for the poor people.’ Plague broke out among the soldiers garrisoned in the abbey of Saint-Riquier, while some of the garrison went out into the fields to remove the stacks of grain and beat the peasants who tried to resist them. The towns of Ribemont and Chauny were burned in October by the duke after they surrendered. One incident which concerned the abbot of Saint-Riquier provides a telling illustration. With his abbey full of soldiers, the abbé decided to seek refuge elsewhere and had himself taken in a spring carriage through the forest of Crecy: when he came to Domvast, he found villagers fleeing in panic and crying: ‘To the woods! To the woods!’ So he had his men set him on a mule and fled. The renewal of war in 1475 brought the destruction of the abbey of Saint-Riquier and much other pillage.

The bad times returned, this time with little respite, with the beginning of the Habsburg–Valois wars in 1521. The impact of fighting on France itself became much more immediate and was symbolised by the march of Nassau along the frontier from Mézières to Guise. Du Bellay memorably summed up this campaign and its effects: ‘After sacking the little town of Aubenton, they put everyone to the sword, without distinction, of all sexes and ages, with a remarkable cruelty; from that stemmed the terrible cruelties of the wars for thirty years after.’

38 War began again in 1536, with sieges of Péronne, Saint-Pol and Montreuil. A statistical measure for the impact of war between 1537 and 1545 is available from the enquiries made about war losses for the villages belonging to Emperor Charles V in Artois during these campaigns. There is much detail available from these on the strategies used by peasants to avoid plunder – fleeing to the forests, holding out in quarries or church towers – and also on the gross cruelties of occupying soldiers, but we can also use the source to measure the losses involved. For instance, for a sample of forty villages surveyed, 86 per cent of livestock was lost between 1536 and 1538. In the same period, the grain harvest was reduced to 18.64 per cent of what it

38 Du Bellay, Mémoires, vol. 1, p. 152.
had been before the fighting. Again, in 1542–5, 374 villages were surveyed for war losses with similar effects, though there is less precision over the proportion of losses. Some villages claimed to have been burned several times, including newly harvested grain. Those enclaved in enemy territory were treated worst, especially around Bapaume. Typically, in 1542 when crops were destroyed, the men left for refuge in Arras, leaving just a few women behind; occasionally it was possible to hold out in a church tower, though these were only of use against casual marauders.\(^{39}\)

The very same regions were to be fought over again in the 1550s, their travails this time documented by Jean Thieulaine, lawyer and bourgeois of Arras.\(^ {40}\) War began again in 1551 with manoeuvres on both sides, but serious operations really started in October 1552 when the Habsburg armies under the comte du Rœulx burned towns all along the frontier and took the town and castle of Hesdin. The French re-occupied it in December. Early in the next year, the French pillaged the town and castle of Saint-Pol, as they had in 1536, ‘killing the people and burning the castle and other buildings as well as demolishing the gates and part of the walls’. Thieulaine was writing from the point of view of a subject of Emperor Charles V, who had been unable to pay his troops and noted that ‘the good towns and the countryside suffered greatly, especially the people of Cambrai, where the Spaniards in garrison made themselves masters of the town, forcing the people to feed and give them money, breaking into private houses and publicly forcing the granaries’. German troops in the garrisons of the region operated a racket by forcing the locals to ‘lend’ them their money.

Operations became much more devastating from 1553. The city of Thérouanne with its cathedral was completely erased from the map when the emperor’s troops took it. August saw a soaring price of grain and the outbreak of dysentery in the region. Spanish soldiers in the emperor’s service were no great boon to their master’s subjects:

The Spaniards, instead of helping us, pillaged . . . carrying off animals and people, both men and girls and women, some of whom were raped at the camp, though this was concealed to save their honour, and as for the men,

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many were ill-treated and ransomed. After that, the Spaniards forced the cutting of the grain and took it off to their camp.

Pillaging continued on both sides with ‘great damage, both to the stock-piles and to the newly gathered and stored harvest, which was all lost without any chance for the poor people to save anything for their support or for future sowing’. Raiding on the borders of Picardy and Artois drove peasants to desperation, forcing them into the town of Arras, sleeping in the streets and on the verge of starvation. French soldiers descended on the same area in October, ‘burning and committing such execrable deeds as killing old women, raping girls and nuns, killing or carrying off children’. The chronicler Louis Brésin described the revenge raids of the emperor’s troops in December as ‘similar cruelties and burnings in the King’s lands . . . sacking the town of Ancre and burning it’. What strikes forcefully about the narrative of these events is that warfare, normally much quieter during the winter months, seems to have continued unabated in the winter of 1553–4.

Endemic war in a region also engendered endemic low-level violence. In 1523 and 1524, out of 185 pardons for homicide issued by the French crown in Picardy, thirty-three were for soldiers (17.8 per cent) and, of these, ten were archers of the gendarmerie, the rest defined as ‘hommes/compagnons de guerre’ or ‘aventuriers’ in the infantry. In the period from 1490 to 1560, an average of roughly 13 per cent of pardons were issued for military men, with the years of greatest numbers corresponding rather closely with those in which active campaigning required the presence of infantry formations as well as the permanent gendarmerie. These figures do not include the many other cases in which soldiers played some active or passive role in the causes of a murder.

During periods in which there was a large garrison in the province, the early 1520s, late 1530s and mid 1540s, the frequency of such events would increase. In the first half of 1544, we find a murder at Origny on the Hainaut border resulting from a quarrel over who had the best fighters in neighbouring village forts; a murder in a tavern at Boulogne by a gentleman of the gendarmerie over dinner with a man who tipped beer over his fish; a murder by a piper in Villequin’s company of 500 foot at Saint-Quentin; another by a 23-year-old infantryman at Vervins; by a member of the Picard legion in the.

42 The following examples and statistics are drawn from David Potter, “‘Rigueur de justice’: Crime, Murder and the Law in Picardy, Fifteenth–Sixteenth Centuries’, French History 11.3 (1997), 265–309.
hostelry at Grandvilliers; retrospectively for an archer of Jametz’s company
for a murder in 1538 over a quarrel in an inn at Dammartin over filles de joie.
The majority of cases in which the soldiers were petitioners involved vio-
ence between soldiers and indicates the fairly obvious point that the military
lived in their own world and were most likely to quarrel among themselves.

This is not to minimise the obvious problems of insecurity caused more
generally by war and the presence of armies. One accused murderer claimed
that even in September 1529, after the Peace of Cambrai, he and his friends
had carried staves ‘because the country is full of soldiers who daily pillage
those they meet on the roads’. Petitioners who lived in the Thiérache region
and Ardennes customarily appealed to the fact that their territory was border
country and therefore in danger of enemy raiding, presumably to explain
their armed reactions, while the presence of uncontrolled soldiers was always
given as a reason for possession of weapons. The inhabitants of Montcornet,
during 1536, justified violent actions by the fact that they were ‘routinely told
to have weapons of war ready for defence’. This was the case all over the
border country from Calais to the Ardennes. In the home, there were threats
from random and quasi-military violence, especially in that area subjected to
much raiding by both sides, as for instance in 1543–4.43 In March 1544, in
Ponthieu, a farm was invaded by two ‘vagabond adventurers’, one of whom
had killed a man three weeks before. The two were notorious murderers and
thieves, probably out to ‘ransom’ the farmers, as was often the custom during
border warfare. They laid hands on the 56-year-old servant, threatened to
rape the farmer’s wife, and attacked a priest. The wife screamed and her
husband came with a pitchfork he had to hand and the result was a scuffle in
which the farmer and his uncle managed to fight off one of the soldiers and
in the course of which the ruffian was stabbed. During the Anglo-French war
in 1545, two ‘English savages’ had raided a village near Montreuil even after
the peace; these two Englishmen ‘took to lurking in the woods and fields’ to
waylay the villagers. Again, the result was a fight and the killing of the
intruders.

These examples, taken from one well-documented region, simply illus-
strate the endemic nature of violence which accompanied any war. The
features specific to this period combine a more intensive kind of violence
brought about by changes in military technology and the scale of war with a
broadly dysfunctional control system. This meant that the larger armies and
more destructive campaign had an impact of casualties and losses among the

soldiery as well as a chaotic impact on the ‘civilian’ population, though the patterns of ‘collateral’ violence remained much the same as they had been for centuries.

**Bibliographical Essay**


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The year 1182 was marked by one of the most notorious episodes of the high Middle Ages: the extermination or enslavement of almost all westerners in Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium or, to use contemporary parlance, the ‘Empire of the Romans’. News of the calamity travelled far. According to William, archbishop of Tyre, who spoke with eyewitnesses, the quarter of the capital in which the Latins resided was torched and its inhabitants put to the sword. Temples and shrines suffered ferocious acts of cruelty directed against clergy and monks. The papal legate was seized and decapitated, his head fastened ‘to the tail of a filthy dog as an insult to the church’. Respect was shown to no one, William reported: the ill were dispatched in the sickbeds where they lay; the able-bodied were pulled out of hiding and either killed or ‘sold into perpetual slavery among the Turks and other infidels’; even corpses were ‘torn from the tombs’ and ‘dragged through the streets and squares as if the insensate bodies were capable of feeling the indignities offered them’. None of the victims, the archbishop’s account concluded, had ‘anticipat[ed] anything of the kind’. Bloodshed seemed to have erupted suddenly and without cause between two populations previously living in harmony.¹

In fact, the massacre represented the boiling over of long-standing tensions arising from the empire’s struggle to dominate the Italian peninsula and the Mediterranean. In the eleventh century, this effort had included armed conflict in the Adriatic against Normans who had acquired a foothold in Apulia and Calabria, and subsequently expanded into Sicily and the

Balkans.\textsuperscript{2} Largely as a consequence of alliances formed to contain this threat, Venice, and later other Italian cities, had been accorded mercantile privileges that facilitated the spread of their citizens throughout the empire. It was said that, towards the end of the twelfth century, 60,000 westerners were to be found in the capital alone, and many more in the provinces.\textsuperscript{3} The bandying about of such figures suggests a society that was worried about the porousness and vulnerability of its territory to migration. It is therefore tempting to view the slaughter of westerners in 1182 as a pogrom: a spontaneous aggression by the majority population against a minority it viewed as compromising its way of life and undermining its interests. Yet the population’s actions can be shown to have merely supplemented an institutional endeavour carried out by professional imperial troops taking the field at the behest of the man who would soon become emperor, Andronikos I Komnenos (1183–5).\textsuperscript{4}

This chapter evaluates the role of the imperial regime in generating and directing the use of force not through the pursuit of warfare outside the empire’s borders, but rather through the selective policing and intimidation of populations residing within them. Beginning with a discussion of the role played by ethnicity – and its relationship to religious controversy – in defining people’s identity, we shall sketch out the transformations state violence underwent within the ‘Empire of the Romans’. A brief consideration of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages will be followed by a more detailed examination of the historical period around which many of the extant sources cluster: that of the high Middle Ages, and in particular of one of the most notable imperial dynasties, the Komnenoi, who reigned from the late eleventh to the late twelfth centuries. As we shall see, the dynastic founder, Alexios I Komnenos, promoted a particular judicial model, whereby an individual would be put on trial for heresy, often together with a group of


followers, and threatened with the ultimate penalty of burning at the stake. The ascription of heretical beliefs and practices constituted less a reflection of observable realities than an attempt by the regime to secure political dominance by casting religious diversity as deviance. The construction of ethnic communities, and the corresponding patrolling of their boundaries, served similar ends.

The emperors who succeeded Alexios initially continued to associate themselves closely with carefully managed, highly dramatic proceedings against those they identified as heretics. Across their reigns, officially sanctioned persecution gradually shifted from attacks against a few representative targets to more blanket arrests and incarcerations – and ultimately killings – directed against the masses. But mass murder requires the arming of the masses, or at the very least the creation of a mob. As policy, violence is insidious: if its goals are not achieved rapidly and conclusively – and they rarely are – it seeps into the whole of the body politic, producing a more aggressive society.5 This process, as will become apparent, can – and did – spin badly out of control.

A Dynasty of Righteous Persecutors

In order to understand the calamity that befell foreigners in Constantinople in 1182, it is useful to review the earlier commingling of political, juridical and religious forms of power under the empire’s rulers. During antiquity, the Roman empire had employed the promise of citizenship as a means by which to establish territorial control and achieve the cultural and political incorporation of the subjugated, granting full citizenship in 212 to all free men within the empire. After the conversion of Constantine I and the adoption of Christianity as the state’s official religion by Theodosius I in the fourth century, Romanisation became interdependent with Christianisation. Imperial rule was interpreted as a benevolent mission extending to the ends of the earth and lasting for all human time: first, to civilise and enlighten the nations; and second, to protect the growing community of the faithful.6

The problem was a lack of consensus over what precisely the Christian faithful believed. In the imperial capital, one observer commented, ‘everything’ was ‘taken up’ by ‘discussions: the alleyways, the marketplaces, the broad avenues and the city streets’. Ordinary people did not hesitate to pronounce on doctrine:

If you try and change money, someone will philosophise to you about the Begotten and Unbegotten. If you inquire about the price of bread, the reply comes: ‘The Father is greater and the Son is a dependent.’ If you should ask: ‘Is the bath prepared?’, someone will reply, ‘The Son was created from non-being.’

Over time, as state authority gathered momentum, freewheeling curiosity regarding doctrinal matters was increasingly identified as disruptive, and theological discussion became limited to certain classes of believers. Despite resistance from congregations – expressed in cries to ‘Cast out the edict! Nobody believes by an edict!’ – the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy were incorporated in imperial legislation, and enforced via prosecution and sentencing in the courts. The authority of the state in religious affairs, and the role of the emperor himself as supreme arbiter and guardian of orthodoxy, became established as axiomatic.

It is possible to identify periods during which imperial intervention intensified. In the fourth century, Constantine I convened councils that defined the emerging religion of the state. In the sixth, Justinian I instituted legislation by which believers who did not adhere to the faith as recognised by the emperor could be marginalised. In the ninth, Theodora and her son Michael III oversaw the creation of an official register of heresies and heretics, in what was subsequently referred to as the ‘Triumph of Orthodoxy’: the condemnation of earlier iconoclastic policies and the reinstatement of the veneration of icons.

Modelling himself upon these predecessors, Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118) promoted himself as the primary overseer and arbiter of doctrine, commissioning the compilation of a substantial treatise from a trusted monk, Eugenios Zigabenos, under the title *Dogmatic Panoply (Panoplia dogmaticike)*. The work contained a sequence of three of illustrations emphasising Alexios’ decisive role in the process of textual production. The emperor was depicted receiving the writings of the Church Fathers directly from them, then in turn offering the book that resulted from the study of these texts to Christ, who responded by praising him for making the fruits of his learning concrete through government, and by instructing him to continue to reign in the same manner (Figures 14.1–14.3).

The treatise dealt primarily with actions it portrayed the emperor as having taken to expurgate certain errors that had appeared during his reign. Its claims are borne out by surviving court records, which indicate that the emperor initiated extensive legal proceedings against heretics – proceedings in which he ordered interrogations, oversaw the formulation of charges, selected the tribunals to hear cases at the palace, and even controlled the pronouncement of judgement and subsequent sentencing. The existence of a policy of heresy trials is also confirmed by bulletins, pamphlets and other ephemera, intended for circulation throughout the empire, that publicised and interpreted the outcome of individual cases. These materials promoted the notion of an ongoing struggle, of critical importance to the survival of the faith, in which cruelty and bloodshed were not merely permissible, but righteous. Announcing that the emperor had ‘recently’ overseen the conviction and punishment of a ‘heresiarch’, one typical religious tract sponsored by the regime celebrated the news that the ‘head of the serpent’ had been destroyed, declaring that the ‘other parts’ awaited ‘day by day’ a similar fate. It concluded by assuring imperial citizens that ‘not even the tail’ would ‘escape the due search of the most God-loving emperor’, who could be counted upon to catch all the heretics ‘in his hunting nets’.

12 PG 120, cols. 1,289–92; G. Ficker, *Die Phundagiagiten: Ein Beitrag zur Ketzergeschichte des byzantinischen Mittelalters* (Leipzig: J. A. Barth, 1908), pp. 110–11; M. Angold, *Church and...*
The Definition of Heresy

Alexios appears to have been concerned that trials for heresy held under his auspices should follow the foundational principles and due process of

late Roman law as enshrined in the Latin legislation of Justinian’s *Body of Civil Law* (*Corpus iuris civilis*) and the Greek legislation of Basil I’s and Leo VI’s *Imperial Laws* (*Basilika*). An important feature of these law codes was their conflation of sacrilege (*hierosylia*) with high treason.
According to this perspective, since the empire had been founded and the emperors appointed by God, attacks on the sacred also compromised the state, and risked provoking divine wrath. This

(kathosiosis).\(^{13}\) According to this perspective, since the empire had been founded and the emperors appointed by God, attacks on the sacred also compromised the state, and risked provoking divine wrath. This

semantic association is illustrated in one contemporary lexicon, which defined ‘treason’ as behaviour directed ‘against the holy, namely the emperor’. Beyond its most obvious manifestation – an assassination attempt against the emperor – treason was identified with any action that threatened the security of the state and its government, such as admitting enemy troops into a city or fortress of the empire; abetting the enemy by assisting in the escape of prisoners or the provision of arms, horses or money; deserting an assigned military post; seizing a fortress or other strategic location; forging or misrepresenting imperial instructions or other state correspondence; and finally, counterfeiting imperial coinage. Because the charge of treason applied even to actions not yet implemented, but merely planned or intended, the crime could be discerned in any ‘cunning or foolhardy opinion intended against . . . the emperor’. Heresy was counted among such errant opinions. If the emperor’s pursuit of the divinely sanctioned imperial project aimed to secure both the earthly future of the body politic and the salvation of the community of the faithful, the heretic’s radicalism threw this work into jeopardy. A lavishly illuminated manuscript commissioned in the mid ninth century represented those accused of the iconoclast heresy as having carried out, through their attack on images, a second crucifixion of Christ – a sin equivalent to proselytising for paganism, and requiring its perpetrators to be trampled into the dust (Figures 14.4 and 14.5).

Legislative tradition thus defined heresy as a crime against the state. Heretics were divided into three categories: those who taught doctrines alien to the church; those who through simplicity and guilelessness were led astray by such teachers; and even those who merely happened to find themselves in the company of such men, and remained for some time in order to hear what they had to say. The range of recommended punishments for the crime included the severest sentences at the government’s disposal. At the very least, heretics should lose the right to vote, and be barred from the political processes of decision-making open to citizens of good standing. But they might face the penalty reserved for high treason: hanging or, still worse, burning at the stake. Yet even though the ‘old law’ prescribed death, under

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the tenth- and eleventh-century Macedonian dynasty authorities had not upheld that law’s letter, finding it ‘neither right nor fitting’ for the reputation of Christianity. Their reluctance reflected the abiding hope that all deviants...
Figure 14.5 Moscow, Historical Museum, MS. D.129, ninth century, fo. 51v. Illustration depicting the actions of iconodules. The iconodule Patriarch Nikephoros I holds an icon of Christ triumphantly and tramples underfoot an iconoclast, John Grammatikos, who has dropped the coins he received for a betrayal of Christ that is presented as similar to that by Judas (below). The iconoclast’s punishment is equated with that appropriate to pagans (above).
could be led back to the righteous path, and either be readmitted into the congregation after a brief spell as excommunicates or, if their error was greater, be reconfirmed or rebaptised.\textsuperscript{16}

As late as the third quarter of the eleventh century, emperors had sought to patrol people’s thoughts and speech without resorting to corporeal chastisement. Investigations in Constantinople into heresy had resulted in the condemnation of nine doctrinal positions as theologically unsound, and in the anathematisation of their proponents, but not in the imposition of physical punishment. Attempts to bring the inhabitants of the towns of Antioch and Melitene to heel had included burning heretical religious texts, but not heretical human flesh.\textsuperscript{17} Under Alexios, however, the threat of the stake – what one imperial decree described as ‘red-hot, fiery’ chastisement – began to loom larger in judicial proceedings.\textsuperscript{18}

The Identification of Heretics

The two most important clusters of heresy trials under Alexios were those of John ‘the Italian’ (Italos) and Basil ‘the Bogomil’ (Bogomilos), along with their respective adherents. Beginning in 1082 and concluding in 1118, these trials were high-profile events, held for maximum impact in the capital, Constantinople. As one commentator later observed, whether ‘whole towns and villages’ should actually ‘go astray and die in their heresy’ was of little concern; rather, the entire focus was on trying and convicting the heretic ‘in the Queen of Cities’, where he could receive exemplary, widely publicised punishment.\textsuperscript{19} The two sets of trials shared a common overall


\textsuperscript{19} Σύνταγμα, p. 246.
organisation, with the same imperial prosecutor assigned to both, and similar indictments of impious dogma and atheism. But they diverged in the details of the hearings, with the proceedings framed in such a way as to ensure that, following conviction, sentences of unequal severity ensued. In John’s trial, the accused, after having correct dogma demonstrated to him, was said not to have sought to advance counter-arguments, but rather to have ‘eagerly’ condemned the beliefs attributed to him, so that he arrived at acknowledgment of their error without requiring prompting. Having been presented as penitent, he was granted a relatively mild sentence, which required him to denounce his purported teachings before a congregation that echoed the anathemas after him, then to retire from his university chair to a contemplative monastic life. By contrast, in Basil’s trial, the accused was portrayed as an inveterate sinner glorying in offences so grave as to be erasable only through the dissolution of his body. Allegedly having declared himself ‘ready to step into fire and die a thousand times over, and not renounce his faith’, Basil was considered to have condemned himself out of his own mouth to the very punishment that was meted upon him. He was duly burned alive in the hippodrome, the public space near the palace used for sporting events, assemblies and executions.

Perceptions regarding the differing identity of those prosecuted appear to have decisively affected these two trials. The narrative subsequently composed by Alexios’ daughter, Anna Komnene, identified in John’s alien origin a reason for exercising greater tolerance. According to Komnene, John had hailed ‘from Italy’ and grown up in areas that opposed Byzantine rule, then been taken to the imperial capital to be indoctrinated. This effort had not immediately been successful, since dispatch back to his homeland on a diplomatic mission had led him to seek to betray his adoptive country, but patient handling in the form of repeated correction eventually achieved the desired result, and he became a model imperial subject and believer. According to Komnene, Basil posed a far more pernicious danger. She identified him as the enemy within – a member of a shadowy sect that had spread throughout the empire, corrupting the citizenry and contaminating even the ‘greatest houses’ before finally being brought to light ‘as one charms

a snake out of a hole’. A particularly strong connection was intimated between Basil and seditious activity in the cities of Mosynopolis and Philippopolis (Plovdiv), located in the south-eastern Balkan hinterland of the imperial capital.  

The association of the accused respectively with southern Italy and the Balkans reveals the trials to have been reflections of larger geo-political developments. They spanned four decades that saw the establishment in southern Italy of the Norman adventurer Robert Guiscard and the dispatch of his son, Bohemond of Taranto, to begin expansion across the Adriatic in 1081, as well as Bohemond’s second invasion of the Balkans in 1107. They also fell on either side of the launch in 1095 of the First Crusade. The mass armed pilgrimage drummed up by Pope Urban II had been intended to provide aid to Byzantium, but soon turned against it, largely under the influence of Bohemond. In 1098, when Bohemond and his forces took Antioch, the former centre of Byzantine military operations in the Levant, he refused to surrender it to Alexios, instead complaining of the presence in the city of ‘heretics’ – the most prominent of them ‘Greeks’ – and urging Urban to come east so that ‘with your authority and our strength you may eradicate . . . all heresies’. During the Norman–Byzantine war that followed, Bohemond sought to have his campaigns recognised by Urban’s successor, Paschal II, as a continuation of the crusading enterprise, branding the Byzantine emperor an ‘infidel and enemy of Christians’ and arguing that war was the only way the false teachings ‘of the Greeks’ could be ‘purged’. Propaganda asserted that the army of the First Crusade, as it had crossed Byzantine territory in the Balkans, had encountered ‘heretics’ and responded by sacking ‘a certain castle’ of theirs and consigning its inhabitants to the flames. Such stories justified continued military aggression by the Normans across the


24 The emphasis on the cleansing properties of fire probably reflected the importance in Norman southern Italy of memories of the fleeting appearance in France and Italy of burnings of those accused of heresy during the 1020s and 1030s. Accounts of the killing of some dozen individuals at Orléans in 1022 became particularly influential from the 1180s onwards, when they were rewritten so as to draw attention to the role Normans had played in identifying heretics and securing their punishment. See Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France, ed. M. Bouquet et al., 24 vols. (Paris, 1737–1904),
Adriatic by depicting the empire as a breeding ground for religious dissent. Moreover, campaigning against the Byzantine emperor came to be presented not merely as the eradication of heresy, but also as vengeance for the martyrdom and persecution by heretics of true believers. Illustrations contained in the Italian version of a Greek chronicle depict a figure wearing imperial garb, and ordering the arrest, torture and execution of Christians. The apparent function of depictions of such scenes was to provoke outrage such as evinced by the reader who scratched out the emperor’s features (Figure 14.6).

As a response on the part of Byzantium, the trial of Italos served to warn that Constantinople was still powerful – and to reassure those on the western frontier that they would be treated leniently if they submitted themselves to imperial authority. By the time of Basil’s trial, however, it was important in addition to dissuade the papacy from promulgating a crusade against imperial territory. One way for Alexios to do so was to cast himself as a defender of the faith and launch a vehement attack in the judicial courts against a religious group, associated with the contested zone of the Balkans, whose reluctance to follow the organised church could be cast as deviance so pernicious that it threatened to destroy Christianity. The theological texts produced at the imperial court confirm that underlying the persecution of ‘Bogomolism’ was the aim of rapprochement with the papacy. Expounding at length on the fact that the leader of the ‘Bogomils’, who had led many people to perdition, had been outwitted, out-argued and exposed by the wise emperor, these texts downplayed disagreements on matters of rite and doctrine – such as the *filioque*, the dogma that the Holy Spirit processes from the Father ‘and the Son’ – between the eastern and western churches, relegating such disagreements to the distant past and denying the existence of ongoing schism.
The Spread of Persecutory Practices

After Alexios’ death, his descendants John II (1118–43) and Manuel I (1143–80) continued to encourage the exchange of delegations between Constantinople and Rome in the name of ecclesiastical union.²⁸ It became convenient in this

context to imagine the existence of a heresy originating with the Manichaean dualism condemned by the ecumenical councils of the early church, and surviving among the Paulicians of the upper Euphrates before being transferred to the Balkans. A recrudescence of this heresy was ostensibly spreading across Europe, borne hither and thither by the ‘Bogomils’ and others related to them, such as the ‘Cathars’ and ‘Patarenes’. If it was to be suppressed, the two churches needed to reconcile their differences and mount a concerted effort.29 The treatise Against the Patarenes (Contra Patarenos) by Hugh Eteriano bears out the attraction of such joint action against heretics during the third quarter of the twelfth century. In his work, Eteriano – an Italian who resided in Constantinople and was well connected to the imperial court, but who later returned to take up an ecclesiastical office in Rome – fulminated against a ‘wicked sect’ that had established itself ‘around the Hellespont’ and elsewhere in the ‘world’. He argued that the sect’s members deserved death because they were guilty of nefarious actions and opinions incompatible with ‘the holy church of God of the Latins and Greeks’.30

Certainly, the papacy lent ever greater support to the use of the pyre as punishment for heretics. The first example of the implementation of this sentence was the hanging and posthumous burning in 1155 of Arnold of Brescia, after a trial in which charges of heresy and treason were combined. By the time groups of heretics were burned in 1163 at Cologne and 1167 at Vézelay, the practice, if not quite yet routine, was sufficiently uncontroversial that prominent churchmen felt comfortable recommending it.31 This development cannot be attributed solely to eastern influence, since a handful of cases had already made a brief appearance in western contexts a century earlier. Yet recourse to the pyre as an established means of execution, together with the development of highly legalistic justifications, did coincide


with extensive diplomatic contact, initially spearheaded by Manuel and Pope Hadrian IV, between the imperial court and the papal curia. There was a strong resemblance, furthermore, between the language of late Roman law regarding treasonable and sacrilegious conduct found in Komnenian pronouncements and the formulations that the papacy would adopt by 1199 in presenting extreme forms of religious persecution as a legitimate response for the church.

To view the popes as potential partners in the rooting-out of heresy represented a risky strategy for the emperor, since it exposed him to criticism and rival claims from within the eastern church. Already under Alexios, prelates in Constantinople had been ‘whispering that they were doubtful’ about the trials, suspicious that ‘matters had not been investigated properly or accurately’. In 1143, opposition coalesced around Patriarch Michael II, who convened a synod without imperial prompting that condemned two bishops, Leontios of Balbissa and Clement of Sasima, as ‘Bogomils’, and deposed and anathematised them. Within a few years, Michael went further, overseeing not merely his synod’s conviction of a group of laypeople for ‘Bogomolism’, but also their sentencing to the stake. After Michael’s death, the emperor sought to recover lost political ground by organising a tribunal that turned the tables on the ecclesiastical establishment, condemning the successor to the patriarchate, Kosmas II, as himself a ‘Bogomil’. This intervention proved inconclusive, and trials and counter-trials proliferated of supporters respectively of the emperor and the patriarch.34


The problem the Komnenoi faced was that, while emperors had long sought to define the relationship between canon and civil law through codification that placed both under imperial control, such a framework did not remain stable. Over the second half of the twelfth century, the ecclesiastical branch of the judiciary extended its purview, gaining greater autonomy. Although hardliners such as Eteriano continued to identify the ‘most Christian’ emperor as duty-bound to ‘intervene devoutly’ and persecute ‘false apostles, heretics, antichrists’ who were ‘divided and separated from the holy church’ by ordering them ‘to be sent to the fiery furnace’ so that they might ‘begin to burn here who will be burned in the everlasting fires of hell’, opinion was shifting. Advisers close to the emperor had begun to question the wisdom of holding religious trials that dispatched people by ‘hanging and fire’, asking whether they ought to allow the ‘imperial enactment’ that punished heretics to ‘become ineffective’. Eventually, the emperor himself displayed reluctance to order the black symbol of death to be inscribed on the foreheads of men of even a ‘most damnable sect’.35

In any case, by this point trials for heresy were losing their usefulness as a means by which to contain western expansionism across the Adriatic, not least because that expansionism itself was changing. One of the measures the Komnenoi had taken to counter the Normans had had unintended consequences. The dynasty had approached the maritime city of Venice, offering trading privileges in return for naval support in the struggle against marauding fleets from southern Italy and Sicily.36 The agreement had spurred an influx of Venetians into imperial territory, in time altering the demographic composition of the empire. Spreading outside ‘the residential area granted them by the emperor’, the incomers dispersed ‘throughout the Roman empire’, taking ‘for themselves Roman wives’ and dwelling ‘in homes like those of the Romans’, so that they came to be ‘looked upon’ practically as ‘natives and genuine Romans’.37


37 Niketas Choniates, Historia, p. 171.
Imperial government reacted by attempting to define more precisely the juridical status of the incomers, carefully distinguishing between those who ‘came by way of trade’ to the empire and were there temporarily on business, and those who, settling down, lived in the empire more permanently and ought consequently to perform to the state the duties of residents. Of the latter group, an oath of allegiance was demanded, requiring them to ‘maintain loyalty to the Romans so long as they lived’. Those who pledged themselves were designated as *bourgesioi*, a hybrid term conveying not only the notion of foreign origin but also that of local citizenship.38

From Heresy Trials to Mass Violence

Such pledges of loyalty notwithstanding, fears that the settlers might constitute a fifth column in the empire grew during the war against the Normans – a war which, between 1155 and 1175, Manuel tried repeatedly to take to Italian soil. During that effort, the settlers’ homeland, Venice, played an equivocal role, sometimes abiding by its alliance with the Komnenoi while at other times providing their enemies with material support. In an astonishing logistical feat, on 12 March 1171 and following imperial orders, all those of Venetian origin throughout the empire – estimated to be around 10,000 individuals – were arrested and confined to ‘public prisons’ and ‘monasteries’, and their property confiscated. Those who tried to elude captivity, or to escape after being imprisoned, were hunted down by special patrols. A few ships managed to make it out of port and take the news to Venice, but the fleet dispatched to the Aegean in order to pressure the emperor into releasing his prisoners met with a resounding defeat. Manuel sent a sharply worded letter to the Venetians regarding their debt to Byzantium and their dependence on its goodwill. They were, he reminded them, ‘a nation formerly not even worthy of the name’, which had ‘come into the Empire of the Romans as indigent migrants’ and owed their success to support received ‘from the Romans’. Admonishing them for their ‘ambition to betray’ the state to its ‘enemies’, he warned them that no one ‘makes war on the Romans with impunity’.39

Manuel’s mass arrests and incarcerations were of a completely different order of magnitude from that of the earlier trials. The attack targeted the entirety of a sizeable community whose members, rather than being treated as assimilated, continued to be associated with two conflicting sets of

obligations and rights, and therefore were caught between polities, unable to benefit fully from the protection extended upon citizens either by their land of origin, Venice, or by their adoptive land, Byzantium.

Byzantine apologists framed the action as a just punishment visited upon those who had sought to betray the country that had welcomed them. The settlers were accused of behaving ‘belligerently’ towards their hosts – ‘insulting savagely’ and inflicting ‘blows’ on not merely the ‘general commonality’ of ‘the Romans’ but ‘many of the wellborn who were related to the emperor by blood’. They were also blamed for undermining order by inciting riot among other westerners, especially Italians, who were more recent arrivals in the empire. These allegations allowed the imperial government to revoke the settlers’ naturalisation, cast them as representatives of the enemy, and hold them as hostages.

The Venetian fleet saw itself as having come to the defence of its people, who had been attacked in contravention of the trade agreements in place. That the doge and his council were reluctant to surrender this perspective on events, even following military defeat, is apparent from their continued lobbying for the release of the incarcerated settlers and the payment of reparations estimated at 108,000 coins or 1,500 lb of gold. To gain leverage in negotiations with the emperor, Venice threatened to broker a more substantial Norman–Venetian alliance against Byzantium than had hitherto existed.

By 1179, Manuel had backed down, releasing prisoners and returning the ‘possessions stored in the imperial treasury’, as well as agreeing to send ‘several instalments’ to make good ‘losses’. The episode, however, paved the way for large-scale attacks against ethno-religious communities, which the state incited but for which, so as not to be obliged to pay compensation, it disavowed responsibility, instead presenting the attacks as pogroms committed by the unruly masses. It thus looms as an ominous precursor to the far more radical and violent massacre of westerners in 1182 in Constantinople – instigated by Manuel’s cousin, the usurper Andronikos II – with all its bloodshed and indignities.

Conclusion

When compared to the medieval West, Byzantium can appear as an enlightened, inclusive, even cosmopolitan, society that extended freedom of

worship to other faiths and denominations. It is true that during certain periods Muslims had their mosques, Jews their synagogues and Catholics their denominational churches within imperial territory. Armenians, Georgians, Italians, Germans, Bulgars, Rus and others, including even Pechenegs and Turks, could aspire to prominent marriages, administrative positions and military commands despite their ethnic background. Yet the Komnenian dynasty, starting with Alexios I, went to extraordinary lengths to base its legitimacy on the commitment to eradicate heterodoxy. During their rule, the incidence of trials commented upon in the sources increased dramatically: some thirty cases are attested from the late eleventh to the late twelfth century, in contrast to almost no known cases from the late ninth to the late eleventh century. The sheer number of trials suggests that the Komnenian dynasty was more preoccupied with persecution and repression than previous dynasties.

Mere quantification obscures the changing agency behind the orchestration, staging and interpretation of proceedings. Looking back at Alexios’ reign, a member of the Komnenoi writing in the mid twelfth century continued to define the burning of heretics as the greatest ‘triumph’ of an imperial career full of ‘struggles and exploits’. By that time, however, although the discourses of an earlier era remained useful in reminding people of the dynasty’s origins, and thus bolstering the foundational story and authority of the imperial regime, it was no longer effective for emperors to employ persecutory institutions to achieve specific political goals relating either to continued control of the imperial heartland or to expansionist claims over new territory, especially in Italy. Emperor Manuel found it increasingly expedient to avoid such


punishments. Meanwhile, other political players – the pope and the patriarch – co-opted the format and framing of the heresy trials and burnings, using them to expand their own jurisdiction and to pursue agendas at odds with those of the emperors. In this way, a persecutory programme originating as a response to specific challenges faced by the Komnenoi helped lay the groundwork for the independence of the patriarchal court, as well as for the creation of the papacy’s bloodiest institution – the Inquisition.

Recourse to mass persecution served further to undermine state monopoly of physical force. Assaults on large population groups required not merely the employment of a few interrogators and executioners, but mass mobilisation of the citizenry, and such actions could easily backfire. By granting the people the right to use violence licitly, the Komnenoi opened the door to the possibility that the full weight of judicial proceedings would one day be brought to bear against the ruler himself. In a last-ditch effort to maintain his dynasty’s grip on the empire, Manuel’s successor, Andronikos, sought soon after his enthronement in 1183 to reintroduce burning at the stake. But when he condemned not only the books of a certain Mamalos to destruction, but the man himself – ordering a huge pyre to be built and stationing men with long pikes around it who prodded the unfortunate victim, repeatedly attempting to escape, back into the flames – onlookers did not react in the intended fashion, as enthusiastic or even quiescent observers, but instead were moved to tears by the spectacle. Popular sentiment had turned against the ‘Emperors of the Romans’, who, it was said, were not satisfied ‘only to reign and wear gold and consider public resources their own private property’ while ‘treating free men as slaves’, but had the temerity to pronounce even on things ‘pertaining to God’. These emperors introduced ‘dogmas’ and provided ‘doctrinal definitions’, meting out ‘punishment on those who do not agree with them’ as if they themselves were ‘infallible’ and ‘divine’.

Shortly after the spread of these accusations, Andronikos was toppled from power and killed in what amounted to a parody of the trials and executions his grandfather had once successfully staged. Seized and imprisoned, Andronikos was given a summary hearing in which he was denied the right to defend himself, then paraded through the streets of the city, where he was abused verbally and physically. Finally, taken to the hippodrome where he had previously sought to hold burnings, he was hung up by the feet between two columns, and stabbed and hacked to death.

46 Ibid., pp. 349–5.
In these proceedings, ordinary imperial citizens – the ‘common inhabitants’ and ‘masses’ of Constantinople – played a central role. It was they who beat and denigrated Andronikos; they, too, who eventually slew him. The legitimisation of an emperor had always been viewed as resting on the assent of the people who, it was argued, had entrusted their power to the ruler. They now claimed that power back. The lynching they orchestrated was a direct response to the arrival of reports in Constantinople that an Italian fleet had finally made it all the way up the Aegean and sacked the second city of the empire, Thessalonike – a feat that prefigured another Italian fleet’s conquest of the imperial capital itself within two decades.\textsuperscript{47} Citizens appear to have come to the conclusion that the dynasty ruling over them, while unable to offer effective security against the external threat posed by the Normans and Venetians, was using fear of that threat to oppress those it was supposed to protect.

The Komnenian dynasty thus came to be viewed as having created a closed circuit of violence. In seeking to destroy the people, it ended up, through its tyranny, bringing about its own downfall. Recounting Andronikos’ death, the contemporary historian Niketas Choniates expressed this view through a striking if terrible image. It seemed to many, Choniates noted, that the last of the Komnenoi, after the amputation of his right arm, ‘extended the stump’ and brought it ‘round to his mouth’, dying in the act of sucking out his own ‘dripping, still warm’ life-blood.\textsuperscript{48}

Bibliographical Essay


\textsuperscript{48} Niketas Choniates, \textit{Historia}, p. 351.


Violence against Women in the Early Islamic Period

NADIA MARIA EL CHEIKH

Writing about wife beating in eighteenth-century London, Margaret Hunt pondered about ‘the language of historical discourse and its ability to represent violence and pain’ in relation not only to the vocabulary available to histories, but also to the construction of the discourse: ‘How do we structure or frame the histories that we write in order to allow some place for the bodies that carry the marks of these everyday occurrences, and thereby often constitute the “larger” events and processes of history?’ As Gyanendra Pandey confirms, the historian who wishes to represent violence in history faces problems of language, of analytical stance and of evidence. Moreover, one has to grapple with the complexities inherent in the definition of violence, whether it is private or public, physical or verbal or emotional.

These inherent complexities are compounded by the historiographical difficulties that render tackling the subject of violence against women in early Islamic societies challenging. The lack of archival evidence for the early Islamic centuries drives scholars to produce historical analyses based on literary works, chronicles, biographical dictionaries and juridical writings. Since access to the history of the medieval Islamic past is dependent upon its texts, it is imperative not to read literary texts as if they were windows to the past, but rather to realise that they require a methodological ‘turn’ to the textual mechanisms of ideology construction and representation.

In this chapter, I will limit my evidence to references to physical violence and abuse in both the private and public spheres. The first section begins with the salient reference in the Islamic text that is both first in chronology and axial in significance, namely, the Qur’an. The Qur’an, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the first/seventh century, is not only Islam’s primary

source with regard to theological and legal questions, it is also a daily presence in the life of the community of believers. In order to understand the Qur’anic interpretation, it is imperative to refer to early historical and biographical texts, material that was relevant to the exegetical analysis.

The second section refers to anecdotes that reveal the conflicts and tensions in private relations, the harmfulness of domestic intimacy, and the dynamics of household violence. The final section discusses episodes describing public violence against women in a variety of set-ups, but especially in the streets of Baghdad, the Abbasid capital. The information depends on literary texts of the fourth/tenth century, specifically adab, a genre of literature that includes a body of ethical and religious precepts and practical tips for getting on in the world, as well as descriptions of contemporary institutions and conditions and the narration of historical events. In the words of Julia Bray, adab represents ‘the link between literature and living’, praising man’s rational capacity and making human experience the framework of its discourse. Even if one is not to accept anecdotes in the adab genre literally, they can nevertheless introduce us to contemporary concerns and underlying attitudes, conveying social values and patterns of social conduct. The challenge lies in how to read these texts in order to tease out historical meaning.

It is important to stress that the following analysis opens windows of understanding as to the ideological context in which physical violence against women was framed. Rather than providing information on the lived reality, the analysis provides an indication as to the latitude men had for deciding when violence was to be used, how severe it should be, and the very pretexts that could lead them on this course.

Institutionalised Violence: Qur’an 4:34 and the Islamic Exegetical Tradition

Violence against women, in its domestic dimension, was a matter profusely discussed in early Islamic times in connection to a Qur’anic verse in Surat al-


Nisa’ (4:34) which gives the husband the right to correct a disobedient or recalcitrant wife: ‘As for those from whom ye fear rebellion (nushuz), admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then, if they obey you, seek not a way against them.’ This verse has generated a massive exegetical literature. A chronological study of Qur’anic exegetical material pertaining to this verse indicates that prominent Muslim scholars from the second/eighth to the tenth/sixteenth century shared a common view of the social gender hierarchy, one that implied that men as guardians of women have the right to correct their wives in the case of nushuz (insubordination). Any challenge to the hierarchy defined by male superiority and the domination of women could be taken as a sign of nushuz, and the verse has largely been understood to give husbands the authority to beat their disobedient wives. Classical exegesis has no problem with the patriarchal nature of the Qur’anic discourse; the issue that bothered the Islamic exegetical tradition was that of ‘beating’ as the ultimate resort for bringing a rebellious wife back to obedience. According to the occasion of revelation, the verse was meant to ease the consequences of the Prophet’s retort to a woman who complained that her husband had slapped her on the face that ‘she must retaliate by slapping the husband back.’

The Jami‘ al-bayan ‘an ta’wil al-qur’an, a key early work of Islamic exegesis produced by Abu Ja‘far al-Tabari (d. 310/923), a major Abbasid scholar, was ‘the first major work in the development of traditional Qur’anic sciences’. It quickly became a standard text upon which later commentators drew. As the earliest complete Qur’an commentary, it contained ‘the compilation and material arrangement of the first two centuries and a half of Muslim exegesis’. According to al-Tabari: a man slapped his wife. The Prophet wanted to apply retaliation. As they were in this situation, the verse was revealed. The Qur’an commentaries do not

dwell on the act of ‘correction’ but focus instead on nushuz or the definition of rebellious wives. Al-Tabari states:

\[ \text{Al-nushuz} \text{ means that the wife treats her husband with arrogance, refuses to join him in the marital bed; it is an expression of disobedience and an obvious unwillingness to any longer carry out what obedience to the husband requires. It is a way of showing hatred and opposition to the husband.}^10 \]

Women are either righteous (salihat) or rebellious (nashizat). While obedience was an essential characteristic of a righteous wife, nushuz has been interpreted to mean disobedience, sexual refusal, rising out of one’s place, and hatred for one’s husband.

The question of wife beating is closely associated with the notion of male supremacy, qiwama.\(^11\) In this connection al-Tabari confirmed: “The verse saying that ‘men are in charge of women’ means that they can discipline them, put them in their place when it comes to matters pertaining to their duties toward God and toward their husband, and this is because Allah has given authority to some of you over others.”\(^12\)

The earliest extant Arabic/Islamic biographical dictionary, the \textit{Tabaqat} of Muhammad ibn Sa’d (d. 230/845), an Abbasid era scholar, includes a brief section entitled ‘On Beating Women’. This material is crucial given that the Prophet’s actions and utterances provided criteria for what was lawful or forbidden for Muslims. There, the traditions emphasise that the Prophet himself never beat a woman and that he forbade men to beat their wives. This prohibition was, however, mitigated when men told him that the women ‘have become wicked’. In a second type of tradition, the Prophet allows beating but points out that only the worst men in the community would mistreat their wives.\(^13\) That the Prophet’s personal position with respect to this matter wavered, allowed the Qur’an exegetes a range of options in their interpretation of the verse.

The Qur’anic verse presents three consecutive or gradual steps to the men who felt defied by their wives: first, admonition; second, refusing to share the wife’s bed; and third, beating. The exegetes did not question the right of

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11 According to Hadia Mubarak, the exegete brings pre-understandings and pre-suppositions to the text and it is hence the interpretive process, not the Revelation itself, that is open to critique and historicisation. ‘The Interpretive Monopoly: A Re-Examination of Verse 4:34’, \textit{Hawwa} 2 (2004), 261–89.


husbands to discipline their wives physically but disagreed on how this right was to be exercised and the extent to which physical violence could be used. The religious discourse thus tried to come to terms with the phenomenon of violence within the conjugal relationship, introducing rules that, while maintaining the husband’s domination over his wife, strove to control the most excessive manifestations of his rights. The common agreement was that the hitting ought to be ghayr mubarrih (not extreme). Disciplinary punishment was legally acceptable as long as no limbs were broken and no permanent damage was done. The harm caused to a woman’s pride or her fear of further beatings was not taken into consideration by the law.

It is certainly noteworthy that husbands were not legally accountable for hitting their wives unless a beating resulted in broken bones, wounds or death.

The rules were elastic and evasive, and this is reflected in the divergences among the various legal schools as well as between the textual interpretations among theologians and jurists. The jurists used Q 4:34 to support the husband’s right to hit his wife, devoting considerable energy to outlining the permissible extent of hitting, alongside the conditions under which a husband might be liable for excessive violence. Legal scholars used Q 4:34 as a proof text for supporting the right of a husband to hit his wife but emphasised its procedural aspect, taking into account the husband’s liability in the case of severe hitting. However, even here, divergences are noticeable. The jurists of the Hanafi legal school safeguarded the authority of husbands in marriage by protecting them from legal accountability in cases of excessive violence. Jurists of the Maliki legal school tried to protect wives from physical abuse by instituting social and judicial supervision over husbands, while Hanbali jurists denied wives clear legal recourse.

In her analysis of the legal tradition, Chaudhry concludes, however, that ‘despite the disparate motivations and concerns of [the four schools of jurisprudence] . . . in the end their stances on the right of husbands to physically discipline wives shared essential similarities’.

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14 Marin, ‘Disciplining Wives’.
18 Chaudhry, Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition, pp. 97–8. 19 Ibid. p. 131
Narratives relating to prominent early companions of the Prophet Muhammad could serve to bolster the uses of this verse since they enjoy the position of *al-salaf al-salih* (the pious predecessors). Most notable is the behaviour of the companion of the Prophet, al-Zubayr, particularly his mistreatment of Asma’, the daughter of the Prophet’s companion and later first caliph, Abu Bakr. Ibn Sa’d states that al-Zubayr was hard on her. When Asma’ complained, her father Abu Bakr told her: ‘Be patient, child. When a woman is married to a good (*salih*) man, when he dies and she does not marry again, God will reunite them in Paradise.’

One anecdote illustrates an instance of al-Zubayr’s harsh treatment: he arrived at his house and he ordered his wife Asma’ and another of his wives to sweep the floor under his bed. Finding out that his orders had not been carried out, ‘he took both of us by our heads and beat us with his whip, hurting us’.

Another anecdote implicates ‘Abdallah, the son of the Prophet’s notable companion and second caliph, ‘Umar b. al-Khattab. ‘Abdallah used to beat his wife, Safiyya bt. Abi ‘Ubayd, ‘to the point of causing her pain’. The implication is that this is why ‘the revelation was made in the Qur’an on beating women’. As for her father-in-law, the second caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khattab, he is frequently described as a man of harsh character, not only in his private domestic space but also in the wider public one. Such an incident occurred when the Prophet’s daughter Ruqayya died. When women wept for her, ‘Umar began to whip them. The Prophet had to intercede to restrain his anger and allow the women to express their grief freely. Another tradition has the companion ‘Umar b. al-Khattab rebuking women of the Ansar for crying over a dead man. The Prophet is said to have intervened: ‘Leave them, O ‘Umar, the soul is stricken and the eye is tearful.’

The exegesis of the Qur’anic verse as well as stories about the Prophet and his companions provide a general ideological framework for understanding violence against women in the early Islamic context. Getting a sense of family history and the practices of violence in early Islamic societies is an especially difficult task due to the nature of the sources, which are literary and, as mentioned earlier, require a complex analytical reading. It is also important to note that marriage was polygamous and was not viewed as a permanent

22 Ibid., no. 180.
23 Ibn Sa’d, *al-Tabaqat al-kubra*, vol. VIII, p. 36.
relationship; indeed, easy divorce could end it at any time. Moreover, unlike Christianity, Islam did not confine sex to marriage: legitimate sexual intercourse extended also to the institution of concubinage. This constitutes a fundamental distinction that affected the social fabric of society. The material in the next two sections includes anecdotes about women (as targets of violence) in different legal and social situations.

Domestic Violence in Abbasid Adab Anthologies

In order to get more intimate glimpses into the relationships, the possibilities, and the actions of violence within the domestic household and the family, one needs to look into anthologies of adab. The two anthologies of the fourth/tenth-century Iraqi writer al-Muhassin ibn ‘Ali al-Tanukhi (d. 384/994), al-Faraj ba’da al-shidda (Ease after Diversity) and Nishwar al-muhadara (The Elegant Talks of the Assembly), are particularly valuable as they contain material pertaining to the social history of the fourth/tenth century. Al-Tanukhi presents in both works references to historical personalities, events and places, encompassing a wide spectrum of society. The relevant anecdotes are rich in details on various aspects of Abbasid society. The adab works of al-Tanukhi have been praised by modern Western scholars as ‘the most significant mine of historical anecdotes’ concentrating on specific episodes reconstituting private and economic life, institutions and costume. The material, when analysed, prods us to ask whether a man could beat his wife over the provision of sexual and emotional services, because of disagreements with her about her relatives, because she defied him verbally, or out of jealousy?

One anecdote in al-Faraj relates that a young man, Bishr b. ‘Abdallah, was enamored with Jayda’, a married woman. As she was jealously guarded by her husband, a ploy was devised to allow Jayda’ to spend a night out with Bishr. Bishr secured the help of a male friend who masqueraded as the woman by wearing her clothes and returning to her house. Unfortunately,

25 D. S. Margoliouth, who made a partial translation of the Nishwar, states: ‘In no case could the diwans, even if we had them complete, give us so clear a picture of contemporary life as can be gleaned from Tanukhi’s pages.’ In The Table-Talk of a Mesopotamian Judge (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1922), p. vi.
27 This is the line of questioning that Margaret Hunt pondered with respect to a different historical context and period, in ‘Wife Beating, Domesticity and Women’s Independence’.
the fake wife broke a household utensil and her husband took a whip and lashed her back. She was saved by the intervention of the husband’s mother and sister. 28

The anecdote describes conflicts and tensions in private relations, the harmfulness of domestic intimacy, and some of the dynamics of household violence. A man could resort to violence, striking his wife for a most trivial infraction. Jaydà’s mother’s only counsel was for her daughter to be obedient to her husband. 29 The threshold of permission for beating one’s wife was thin indeed. Did such actions signify a certain normative behaviour and disciplinary practices deemed to be appropriate in connection to domestic governance? It is not easy to discern what combination of individual psycho-sexual patterning, sense of male entitlement and location in historic time and space could permit any man to whip his wife for the most trivial of reasons.

The anecdote also provides a scenario of external involvement in such quarrels, with female relatives intervening on the wife’s behalf. Family violence was a dramatic spectacle, played out in the presence of the husband’s female relatives. For women, embeddedness in their spouse’s family was the most effective means to counterbalance the overwhelming power of their husbands. Early Islamic societies, like most pre-industrial communities, tolerated the male privilege to hit (‘punish’) wives as a way to express male authority. 30 Communities, however, had standards as to what constituted excessive violence and women often had allies within the community, most prominently the senior women. Such was the case in the previous anecdote. Assault cases were mediated informally by family members, notably the husband’s mother. This was so because of the special ties that bonded sons to their mothers. 31

Expectations about domestic chores and a generally submissive and obedient demeanour on the part of the wife were major sources of conflict leading to violent episodes. Husbands expected their wives to meet their immediate needs. In his comprehensive adab work al-’Iqd al-fārid, the fourth-/tenth-century Andalusian scholar Ibn Abd Rabbih (d. 328/940)

29 Ibid., p. 356.
includes a passage that captures the traits of the ideal wife. There, Umm Iyas advises her daughter, on the eve of her marriage, about the ten characteristics that she needs to keep if she is to be happy in her married life. Be submissive and obedient to him; always mind how you are going to look and smell so that he will see nothing ugly of you and smell only sweet smells; pay attention to his sleep and food, for hunger will provoke his hostility and disturbed sleep is a cause for anger; care for his money and guard his honour and family (the secret of managing money is to have good judgement while caring for the family and requires fine management); do not disobey him and do not betray his secrets (if you disobey him he will hold a grudge, and if you betray his secrets you will not be safe from his treachery); do not be happy if he is sad and do not show sadness if he is happy.\textsuperscript{32} The woman has to be attractive physically and in all that pertains to the senses. She has to monitor her husband’s daily well-being with respect to food and sleep lest his anger and hostility be provoked. Obedience and absolute discretion and loyalty are emphasised. These characteristics place a heavy burden on the wife and reflect the demanding role that wives were ideally expected to play. A wife’s faithfulness and obedience are emphasised elsewhere in the text as summarised by a mother’s counsel to her daughter: ‘Be to him a servant, he will be to you a slave.’\textsuperscript{33} Such passages provide guidelines for the duties and responsibilities of women towards their husbands. Such was the model to which a woman living in the Abbasid era urban Near East was to aspire, and acting in contrary ways could exact a heavy price.

Although women were legally subject to their husband’s discipline, the parameters of that discipline and the catalysts triggering wife beating continued to be questioned. A characterisation that could constitute a catalyst for conjugal discipline occurs once again in al-‘Iqd al-farid. A section entitled ‘the characteristics of the wicked woman’ (\textit{Sifat al-mar’a al-su’}) includes a description of the archetypal wicked woman: she has a vicious tongue; she is prone to excesses, laughing with no restraint, and lying. The wicked woman is someone ‘who hides the commendable actions or characteristics of her husband and exposes his ills. She is one who helps fate against her husband and does not help her husband against fate. She feels no mercy in her heart and has no fear of him. If he comes home she leaves and when he leaves she


\textsuperscript{33} Ibn Abd Rabbih, \textit{al-‘Iqd}, vol. vi, p. 85.
comes back. If he laughs she cries and if he cries, she laughs. Moreover, she is foul and base, difficult to appease, and sheds tears, while she is tyrannical, talks, gesticulates, curses and lies. In expanding on the characteristics that make a woman unfavourable, emphasis is placed on her bad temper, her lack of support and sympathy for her husband, her lack of interest in him and her unwillingness to attend to his every need. The topos of the garrulous female is also a persistent feature of these descriptions. Women’s inappropriate speech or verbal challenges were classified as provocations and could also lead to physical violence. But generally, a woman behaving or feeling in any of the ways described above could potentially justify conjugal discipline.

Some anecdotes carry violence to its extreme limit. Such is the story about a beautiful and chaste woman from Baghdad. She had a cousin who was enamoured with her but her father married her to another. Her cousin continued to court her. Her husband left one day for some business and, wanting to cool down, she removed her clothes and sat by the well to wash. She left her golden rings by her clothes. A magpie stole her rings at the same time as her cousin was passing by. He retrieved the rings, put them on and sat by the pool so that the husband might see him and think that he was with his wife and hence divorce her. Such an eventuality would enable the cousin to marry her. When the husband came, the cousin stood up to salute him and made sure that the husband would see the rings in his hands. The husband recognised the rings, came in and saw his wife bathing. There was no doubt in his mind that this was the washing of janaba (ritual impurity) and that the cousin had had sexual intercourse with her. Later that day, the husband had intercourse with her, did not ask her about anything and killed her. In this case jealousy led to the murder of the wife. The level of violence was most acute because of his suspicion of her betrayal. His honour was at stake. Sexual jealousy constitutes a major cause for violence in the extreme.

Women in the adab texts of the late third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries were confined by a stringently controlled normative conduct. The processes of moral control and discipline put the social role of women at the centre of the moral discourse, causing any deviation or transgression by women to be seen as a moral danger to society. One anecdote reflects the deep fears that men felt at any possible humiliation brought to bear on them

34 Ibid., p. 112.
36 Largueche, ‘Confined, Battered and Repudiated’.
as a consequence of the behaviour of their female relatives, in this case their daughters.

One of my neighbors was Abu ‘Ubayda . . . He used to be a companion (nadim) of Ishaq b. Ibrahim al-Mas’abi. He told me that one day Ishaq summoned him in the middle of the night . . . He [Ishaq] threw at me [Abu ‘Ubayda] papers that he was holding in his hands and said: read these. I read them all. They were the reports of the police chiefs . . . each one relating the day’s events. All the reports mentioned raids undertaken against women who were found fornicating. They were the daughters of vizirs, umara’ and notables who had died or who had lost their positions . . . [Ishaq said] I am afraid lest a similar fate befalls my five daughters and I have gathered them in this room to kill them immediately and find rest.37

In this anecdote it is the father who is about to inflict the ultimate punishment on his daughters, and that for no reason, the daughters having committed no breach whatsoever.

What this story from this fourth-/tenth-century compilation clearly implies is that, in the absence of constant vigilance, the natural depravity of women would necessarily lead to their downfall. Indeed, this anecdote presents in an almost obsessive way a testimony to the precariousness of the lives of even elite women and the profound fears of humiliation that their male relatives permanently had.

If free women lived amidst vulnerable conditions, one can only imagine the physical abuse that slave women could be subjected to by their owners. Slavery shaped the mores of Abbasid society and reshaped the Abbasid family. The presence of slave women led to a role reversal affecting the position of the free women, on the actual and affective levels. It was under these ever evolving conditions that the jurists worked out a legal system to regulate both family and property relations.38

The violence and abuse that were suffered by slave women are brought up in the texts in connection to ‘Inan, a slave woman who became a leading courtesan and elite singer in the Abbasid urban world. She achieved notoriety

37 Al-Tanukhi, al-Faraj, vol. 1v, pp. 5–6.
for her literary skills, hence her presence in the adab anthologies. In spite of her poetic skills, her education and her culture which brought social prestige to her master, when she refused to keep company with the poet Bakr she was lashed. The anecdote reflects the ease with which 'Inan could be severely beaten for a negligible infraction. And indeed, when on one occasion 'Inan fell ill and asked her master, al-Natifi, to postpone the visit of the poet al-Ahnaf, al-Natifi showed no signs of compassion. He beat 'Inan a number of times and forced her to receive her undesired visitor. 'Inan cried and 'her tears rolled down like pearls streaming out of a thread'. She responded by saying: 'May he who beats her unjustly have his right hand harden upon his lash.' Another slave woman, 'Arib al-Ma‘muniyya, was also subjected to beating by her owner. She fell in love with Hatim b. ‘Adi, a friend of her owner al-Marakibi. 'Arib fled with her lover, stayed with him for a while and then left him. Her owner searched for her, and when he found her he hit her and dragged her to his house while she was shouting: ‘Oh you, why are you hitting me? I will not be patient with you. If I am a slave, sell me.’ 'Inan’s and 'Arib’s biographies highlight the difficulties and impediments that the skilled slave poetesses had to endure as well as the physical abuse that they were subjected to.

Public Violence against Women

The anecdotes that expose violence exercised upon women are not restricted to the domestic sphere of the private household but also involve violence perpetrated in the public spaces against individual women and groups. The material which I have sampled from the large canon of Arabic-Islamic texts deals with two main forms of violence against women. One is an ideological type of violence, perpetrated by fringe groups in forms that seem to define and exclude such groups. The other is of a more random nature, more of the criminal type.

Criticism against two religious fringe groups, the Khawarij and the Qaramita, focused on their excessive violence against women. The material presents a blend of information about events and reconstruction of the

motivation and ethos of these groups. Early texts mention horrific episodes of violence against women in connection with the Khawarij, a rigorous group with intense devotion but also with a strong penchant for violence. The historian al-Tabari mentions that the Khawarij ripped open the bellies of their enemies’ pregnant women. This horrible and repugnant act is associated with a topos whereby women, moments prior to their deaths, speak boldly to their attackers and condemn their horrible deeds.\footnote{Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), pp. 215–18.} One of their victims, Bunana bt. Abu Yazid, ‘who had read the Qur’an’, shouted at her killers: ‘Woe to you! Have you ever heard of men killing women?’\footnote{Al-Tabari, *Tarikh al rasul wa al muluk*, ed. M. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1879–1901), vol. II, p. 756; trans. Michel Fishbein, *The History of al-Tabari: The Victory of the Marwanids* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 125.} The way the Khawarij were imagined and interpreted by the other Muslims, with a mixture of fascination and loathing, was expressed most vividly in anecdotes that centred on this violence against women.

Another fringe extremist group, the Qaramita, a Shi‘i sect that emerged in the third/ninth century, were viewed as heretical extremists and were accused of excessive violence, sometimes against the women closest to them. One episode in al-Tanukhi’s *Nishwar* depicts an act of violence perpetrated by a son against his mother. The tale is related by the mother who searched the desert camps to reclaim her son who had joined the rebels: ‘I found him in a Qarmati army . . . he asked me: what is your religion? I said, it is Islam, my son, as you know. He answered: mother, leave this religion and join me.’ As she tried to run away from her son, he followed her and, striking his mother with his sword, wounded her shoulder.\footnote{Thabit b. Sinan al-Sabi’, *Tarikh akhbar al-qaramita*, ed. Suhayl Zakkar (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risala, 1971), pp. 21–2.} The mother told the story, horrified at the defiant atmosphere of the camps, whose converts rejected the ethics, moralities and laws of established society. Her zealous and emancipated son was tough and cruel, showing no acknowledgment of a mother’s dues. These reports on public violence were ideologically motivated, reflecting the mainstream’s perspective that saw these fringe groups as Muslims of lesser quality, and perhaps at times as unbelievers. It is this evaluation that makes the anecdote just related understandable. The son’s violent behaviour towards his mother confirmed the Qaramita’s rejection of the most essential of social bonds, and the most instinctive loyalties.\footnote{Nadia Maria El Cheikh, *Women Islam and Abbasid Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 74–5.}
While such anecdotes were meant to reinforce entrenched preconceptions, al-Tanukhi includes anecdotes pertaining to random common criminal acts of violence against women on the streets of Baghdad. A sailor who was being interrogated by the chief of police in Baghdad told the following tale of sex, violence and death. As he was strolling at night in the dark, a servant whom he did not know handed him a woman and her two daughters, gave him some money and asked him to take them to the neighbourhood of Bab al-Shammasiyya. The events took a whole new turn as the woman uncovered her face: ‘She was beautiful, like the moon and I desired her ... I moved out my boat to the middle of the Tigris and I stepped up towards her and I tried to seduce her. She started to scream. I told her: By God, if you scream, I will drown you.’ She became silent but continued to resist him until he threatened her with the drowning of her daughters. He drowned one, then the other and she continued to refuse him. He then told her: ‘There is nothing left for me to do except to kill you: let me lest I kill you.’ The woman finally gave in and he had intercourse with her. He then decided that she would give him up to the authorities. He decided to drown her. The man was eventually caught and he confessed to his horrible crimes on the basis of an aman (safe-conduct) that the head of the police had extended to him. In his own self-defence he stated that he was overtaken by sudden and uncontrollable sexual urges and that he was almost in a state of ‘madness’ while committing his actions. The head of police nevertheless told him: ‘there is no aman for a dog like you. You have killed three people and committed adultery.’ His head was severed, then his legs and neck, then his body was set on fire.46

What this story suggests is that the streets of Baghdad were dangerous for women. Unaccompanied, women could suffer a terrible fate. That is why these three women were initially entrusted to the sailor, who betrayed their expectations and trust and committed serial murder. This potential violence restricted women’s movements in the city. Women could pay with their lives for daring to circulate unattended, without the protection of a male guardian. Violence, notably rape, and even death, was a form of social control and, as feminist critics postulate, it is fundamental to the functioning of patriarchy.47

46 Al-Tanukhi, Nishwar, vol. 111, pp. 217–20. In Orhan Pamuk’s Istanbul: Memories of a City, trans. by Maureen Freely (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p. 4, there is a reference to the legendary Salacak Murder which happened in 1958. Having agreed to take a woman and her children out on the Bosphorus in his rowing boat, the fisherman, dubbed as the ‘Salacak monster’, decided to rape her and threw the children into the sea.

47 Susan Brownmiller states that ‘the male ideology of rape is a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear ... Rape is an abiding
Al-Tanukhi’s compilation, al-Faraj, includes the story of a Turkish soldier who kidnapped a woman on the road and brought her to his house. It is noteworthy that the neighbours tried to stop him unsuccessfully. Once inside, the Turkish soldier closed the door and attempted to seduce her, to no avail. As he was forcing himself on her, she told him, ‘Wait until you close the remaining door.’ ‘Which door?’, he asked. ‘The door between you and God’, she answered. He stood up, saying, ‘Leave, God has given you relief.’ She departed, unmolested. While this anecdote’s punchline fits its incorporation into the relief after adversity genre, which highlights stories whereby a protagonist says the right thing to escape danger, it also reveals that soldiers could – and perhaps did – behave with depravity. This is confirmed in another anecdote by al-Tanukhi that mentions that the leader of the Khurasanian army came to Sijistan with a large number of troops who behaved with wickedness as their hands stretched out to the women on the streets.

Conclusion

This chapter indicates the type of information available in sample texts from the Arab/Islamic canon on the subject of violence against women in the early Islamic period. Violence in the form of corporal punishment was inherent in the value systems designed to protect individuals and communities. Disciplinary practices were prescribed by the exegetical religious tradition and endorsed by prevailing notions of appropriate domestic governance.

The exegetical tradition on the Qur’anic verse 4:34 is copious. The commentaries on the verse distinguish between necessary retribution and unwarranted beatings in order to define acceptable and unacceptable levels of violence within the household. Beyond the rich exegetical tradition, the information tends to be otherwise scarce and fragmentary. One has to read through multivolume biographical dictionaries and adab anthologies in order to capture a handful of anecdotes that depict instances of violence against women. While we recognise the limitations of using literary sources as historical documents, literature can be used to show the possible dangers

49 Al-Tanukhi, Nishwar, vol. iii, p. 33.
that women faced, as well as implying perhaps the pervasiveness of violence against women in the culture at large. The anecdotes in the adab texts reported on violence that occurs in the household, in the private zone between spouses, as well as on violence against women in the public space. The anecdotes assume the necessity of ‘moderate’ and ‘controlled’ violence in maintaining social and familial structures. The violence could range in severity from ‘minor’ acts of correction that both parties see as legitimate to extremely injurious assaults, or even death.

The anecdotes serve as illustrations of certain widespread conceptions in Muslim medieval literary approaches to violence against women. Although it is difficult to disentangle fact from fiction in such literary works, one is able to decipher certain aspects of the value system in which these works were comprehensible. The way these texts framed these episodes on violence is ultimately bound up with larger socio-cultural processes. The reality is of course difficult to capture but the material draws for us the social context in which the textual edifice was constructed.

Bibliographical Essay

There has been an increasing output on the subject of violence against women in early Islam. Most of it focuses on the Qur’anic verse in Surat al-Nisa’ (4:34) which gives the husband the right to correct a disobedient or recalcitrant wife, and analyses discussions in the exegetical and traditional literature. In this connection the articles by Manuela Marin, ‘Disciplining Wives: A Historical Reading of Qur’an 4:34’, Studia Islamica 97 (2003), 5–40, and Mohamed Mahmoud, ‘To Beat or Not to Beat: On the Exegetical Dilemmas over Qur’an 4:34’, Journal of the American Oriental Society 126 (2006), 537–50, both review the exegetical literature and provide a novel assessment, bearing in mind the Muslim feminist interventions of, among others, Amina Wadud’s Qur’an and Woman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Fatima Mernissi’s The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1993). This feminist intervention has brought about a radical articulation in the interpretation, implying a virtual abrogation of the verse. A special issue of Comparative Islamic Studies in 2008 includes a number of articles interpreting Q 4:34, notably Karen Bauer’s ‘Traditional Exegetes of Q 4:34’ and Laury Silvers’s “‘In the Book We Have Left Nothing’: The Ethical Problem of the Existence of Verse 4:34 in the Qur’an’. Ayesha S. Chaudhry’s Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition: Ethics, Law, and the Muslim Discourse on Gender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) provides an extensive study of the intellectual history of Q 4:34, tracing the intellectual history of Muslim scholarship on this verse from the ninth century to the present day and providing a nuanced study of how scholars have approached this question juridically and exegetically.

A central issue to this discussion is marriage, which has been brought into focus by Kecia Ali, Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,
2010), who analyses the diversity of opinion in early legal thought as well as the influence of hierarchical social structures on the jurist’s vision of marriage which is key to any understanding of family and family relations.

While most secondary literature focused on analysing religious and juridical texts for the sake of interpreting the Q 4:34, much less discussion is available for the less prescriptive texts, notably historical chronicles and adab. In Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), Thomas Sizgorich rereads works of the early Muslim historians as they narrated violence perpetrated by Khawarij in order to help understand the problem of how militant piety was understood within the early Muslim community. Nadia Maria El Cheikh’s Women, Islam and Abbasid Identity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) is useful for its analysis of the way anti-heretical polemic was used in mainstream Abbasid sources, including the historical chronicles and adab sources with respect to the Qaramita.

Nadia Maria El Cheikh’s ‘Women History: A Study of al-Tanukhi’, in Manuela Marin and Randi Deguilhem (eds.), Writing the Feminine: Women in Arab Sources (New York: I. B. Tauris, 20012), pp. 129–48, looks into the two adab anthologies of al-Tanukhi and analyses the type and quality of information on women they contain, as these compilations tend to focus on situations rather than actions. An analysis of the content of these works offers one route towards understanding women’s role and gender relations in the society that produced them. Ultimately, the weight of the investigation will have to be carried by the sheer accumulation of evidence from a multitude of adab and other works.
How Violent Were the Middle Ages?

Medieval Europe boasts a long-standing reputation for brutality and disorder. Nurtured by formative scholars such as Henry Charles Lea and Johan Huizinga, this vision of endemic violence and lawlessness is deeply entrenched in scholarly perceptions of the Middle Ages. In this narrative, violence was a normal part of everyday life in medieval Europe. The scope of that violence is illustrated by two now infamous anecdotes. Fulminating on the pervasive and unrestrained violence of medieval urban life, Barbara Hanawalt explained that a person had a better chance of being murdered in medieval Oxford or London than of dying in an accident.¹ James Given delivered an even more dire warning about life in medieval Europe, remarking that every person, ‘if he did not personally witness a murder, knew or knew of someone who had been killed’.² This long heritage of hyperbole prompted Marcus Bull to observe that ‘[v]iolence was everywhere [in the Middle Ages], impinging on many aspects of daily life’;³ while Peter Hoppenbrouwers more recently coined the phrase a ‘culture of violence’.⁴

Why medieval Europe was so violent is still a contentious subject. Appropriating theories from psychology, anthropology and sociology, historians have crafted a miscellany of incongruous answers to this question. At

one end of the spectrum, we have those who see medieval man as having been stunted in his intellectual growth, lacking basic emotional controls. For example, Marc Bloch described violence as the inexorable outcome of medieval human nature. Medieval man was an unstable creature whose decisions were irrational and impulsive, and ‘emotionally insensitive to the spectacle of pain’. Homicide resulted from spontaneous heated exchanges in dense living conditions with no forethought or remorse. J. B. Given’s provocative assertion that medieval man was incapable of thinking about the future and thus could not comprehend the consequences of his actions falls much into the same category. Norbert Elias’s hypothesis of murder and torture as ‘socially permitted pleasure(s)’, ultimately forsaken by the elite in favour of more civilised (that is, restrained) behaviours, also ranks highly in its inflammatory analysis of medieval violence.

At the other end of the spectrum, Michel Foucault’s Discipline and Punish provides a more thoughtful yet narrowly political framework for the ideology that ‘might makes right’. He sees violence as an integral part of the process of medieval state building. The growth of monarchy was predicated on a monopoly of violence, intended to subdue destabilising violence with the coercive violence of a centralised state. To this end, the state engaged in a policy of terror, sponsoring public spectacles of violence in which punishment was stamped on the bodies of those who affronted the state in order to foster loyalty and ultimately deter resistance. Even if built on somewhat faulty underpinnings, Foucault’s theory continues to garner strong support among historians. Only recently have historians begun chipping away at the foundations of Foucault’s compelling proposition. Where Foucault imagined a murderous, tyrannical state whose authority feeds on its subjects’ fear, study of extant records reveal instead a state heavily reliant on the voluntary cooperation of a broad base of energetic subjects, which favoured conciliation over compulsion, where violence was most likely to be enacted on purses rather than bodies. Before the fifteenth century, executions were rare and distinctly unspectacular, and subjects were more bloodthirsty than

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were their kings, complaining loudly when the crown failed to command the violence justice seemingly demanded.

This vision of a callous and savage era is undermined further by the jarring realisation that the medieval records preclude us from accurately measuring rates of violence. Historians who employ the tools of modern criminology, measuring homicide rates as \( \frac{n}{100,000} \) persons per year in order to compare medieval and modern rates of violence, open themselves up to scathing criticism for a variety of reasons. First, the survival rate of records for the medieval era is spotty at best. Wars, fires and inadequate storage techniques can be blamed for some of the losses. However, at times it is clear that the bureaucrats who created the records saw them as personal possessions and did not deposit them in a central repository as one might expect. Second, we do not have suitably reliable population estimates for the Middle Ages to be able to utilise the statistical formula in any meaningful way.

Third, medieval states did not have the same objectives in mind when creating legal records as do modern authorities; often they do not contain sufficient data to provide appropriate comparisons. For example, medieval case records frequently omit sentencing. Can we comfortably compare medieval indictments with modern sentences? This is especially pertinent when we take into account the cavernous gulf between the theory and the practice of the law. While it was not the state’s intention in devising the law, medieval communities regarded indictment as punishment: public pronouncement of one’s crimes and time spent in prison awaiting trial was humiliating and financially debilitating, punishment enough for most crimes. Conviction was reserved for repeat offenders whose crimes were deemed egregious and highly antisocial. This distinctly medieval attitude led to a low number of actual convictions. Criminologists today would consider this a sign of systemic failure. In the Middle Ages, few convictions signalled a system functioning according to the needs of the people.

Finally, adding the final straw to our precarious heap, the works of Philippa Maddern and Claude Gauvard (among others) remind us that the legal records upon which these studies are founded cannot be read straightforwardly. Shrewd litigants regularly employed legal fictions, injecting force and arms (\textit{vi et armis}) into indictments to bring a case into the king’s jurisdiction, or inflating the number of violent acts to justify a death sentence. More confusing still, the terminology of crime has changed dramatically over time, so that ‘rape’ in the Middle Ages might better be termed ‘elopement’ today. Once again, changes of this magnitude make it difficult to compare like
entities. The unavoidable conclusion is that no meaningful statistics about overall levels of violence can be drawn from such dissimilar sources.

### Christianity and Violence

Where does the historiography leave us? Thankfully, we do not need to measure violent acts in order to recognise that violence held significant meaning in medieval society and not all violent acts enjoyed equal value. Europeans judged some forms of violence as not only necessary, but also laudable, even pious. Despite Christ’s stirring model of absolute pacifism, medieval Christian society preferred to dwell on God’s wrath. His was the archetype of principled violence wielded by a righteous authority for the greater good. God’s vengeance for a sinful life manifested itself through well-deserved physical suffering: the sexual sinner tormented by leprosy, the usurer afflicted with bubonic plague. Building on Old Testament conceptions of divine justice, sermon stories regularly depicted a ruthless God striking down the sinner with cruel punishments: being thrown into a furnace or incinerated in a house fire. The saints also punished vindictively those who disrespected their eminent status. A lame boy who sought healing from St Thomas Becket but fell asleep atop the martyr’s tomb was rebuked with a visitation from the saint himself, cursing him for his insolent behaviour and rejecting his appeal for intercession.9 A man who laid hands on St Carthach was punished with a ruptured eyeball and ensuing madness.10 Prayers for intercession also sometimes included requests for violent action. A knight from Gascony praying at the monastery of Sorde around 1100 begged God to help him catch his brother’s murderer. His prayers were answered; the fugitive was not only arrested, his face was mutilated, and his hands and feet were cut off, as were his genitals. In thanks for God’s assistance, the knight presented his enemy’s armour and weapons to the monks of Sorde who accepted them as evidence of a miracle.11

Christianity’s earthly representatives mirrored the violence of the divine realm. Medieval monks fashioned an identity for themselves as soldiers of Christ engaged in spiritual warfare, fighting demons and the sins they incited.

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Crusaders were literally holy warriors, taking vows to slaughter the infidel in the name of Christ. Even the parish clergy participated in the violence of warfare when the need arose, as evidenced by the musters of clergy in northern England during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In compliance with the Fourth Lateran Council’s ban on clerical participation in bloodshed, the clergy endeavoured to keep its hands clean. Yet prelates regularly ordered that sinners be whipped in procession around the parish church or marketplace, sentenced bigamous clerics to life in prison with little food or comfort, and sanctioned the torture and execution of recalcitrant heretics, even if the actual burnings at the stake were carried out by the state. The physical church itself was far from the peaceful refuge we might imagine it to be. Churches were prime locations for incarcerating the violent insane, chained in corners or near the tombs of saints in the hopes of a cure, or to await the return of lucidity. Churches also served as sanctuaries for felons who threw themselves upon the mercy of the church, keen to escape the lawful punishment their actions deserved. Indeed, permanent sanctuaries (such as St Martin Le Grand in London) were cities unto themselves, populated chiefly by confessed felons and their families. Given the violence sanctioned by the church, it is no surprise that the taboo against striking a priest, despite an automatic sentence of excommunication (latae sententiae), does not seem to have acted as much of a deterrent to angry parishioners.

Christian doctrine justified violence as both necessary and virtuous. The pains of hell and purgatory, celebrated widely in both popular art and literature as an incentive to Christians not to stray from the path, emphasised the cleansing value of violence. Justice in the form of execution, shaming ritual or torture, when enacted by the church or the state, fell neatly in line with this purgative view of violence, removing sin from self and society before it infected others and before redemption was beyond hope. The religious ascetic who tormented the body in order to master the soul perhaps best exemplifies the critical function of violence in pursuit of the ideal Christian kingdom. Renowned German mystic and doctor of the church Henry Suso raised holy self-violence to the level of an art form. For twenty-two years he engaged in ascetic practices, ranging from the proverbial hair-shirt to affixing a life-sized cross to his bare back, with nails hammered into the cross in such a way as to continuously prick his skin, transforming himself into a perpetual physical reminder of Christ’s Passion, if somewhat bloodier. Church Fathers and theologians also adopted a militant Christianity. St Augustine composed a theory of just war, in which a legitimate authority, provoked by a just cause, and fighting with the right intent, might take solace
that killing in war was righteous, not murder demanding atonement. St Thomas Aquinas was even a staunch proponent of the death penalty, seeing the execution of a malefactor as an aid to communal tranquillity and as necessary for the Christian community as the amputation of a festering limb is to an ailing patient. The violence of the early church created a model that pervaded all ranks of society. If disobedience to God was best punished through shows of physical force, then what better way to correct other infractions of the medieval world’s highly regimented social hierarchy?

Violence and the Family

St Augustine’s formulation of just war theory set the standard for the medieval world’s use of violence: violence was legitimate when it was carried out by a figure of authority against a social inferior for the purpose of moral correction. This vision of violence as a tool of the state was easily adaptable to the medieval family. Building on Aristotelian political philosophy, the medieval world understood the family as a microcosm of the state. The state’s well-being was tied integrally to the family unit: thus, for the sake of the state, fathers and husbands, as kings in their households, were expected to govern their dependants with a firm hand. Unruly households might lead to a crumbling foundation for the state. With such high stakes, husbands who failed to govern appropriately needed to be publicly disgraced. Judges and juries alike blamed husbands for failing to chastise their wives sufficiently when their wives’ behaviour landed them in court.

Homiletic exempla, once again, played a key role in the dissemination of a strong masculine ideal, teaching husbands to rely on coercion instead of reason. ‘A Roper’s False Wife’ offers an instructive example of the threatening behaviour sermon stories permitted a husband in the name of moral correction. Fearing rightly that his wife was engaged in an adulterous affair, the roper hired a physician prior to breaking his wife’s legs. His goal was to keep her housebound and thus prevent her from continuing to see her lover. When even her crippled state failed to stop the lecherous woman’s immoral activities, the roper caught his wife and her lover in flagrante, stabbing them through with a knife so that they were fixed to the marriage bed they desecrated with their lust. Rather than arrest the roper for homicide, his

12 See Chapter 20 in this volume.
neighbours (and so, too, the priest recounting the story to his rapt parishioners) lauded the man for his swift action and moral integrity.\footnote{13} Justification for violent resolution lay in scripture. As Aquinas instructed, since divine law sanctioned the stoning of an adulteress, a husband who slew his adulterous wife was not committing a sin; he was merely carrying out the dictates of divine law. Admittedly, most medieval states did not enshrine a husband’s right to slay his disobedient wife in law. Yet some did. Because of the centrality of the honour code in Mediterranean culture, Italian states were most indulgent in this respect. The constitutions of Sicily, for example, establish a husband’s impunity for slaying his wife and her lover if discovered in the act. If revealed by some other means, the law permitted him only to cut off her nose.\footnote{14} Elsewhere, even if the law still classified a husband’s slaying of his wife as homicide, it was unlikely that judge or jury would convict him if his wife’s depraved behaviour incited the killing(s). Moreover, popularly, violent punishments, such as cutting off an adulterous wife’s nose, were not only excusable, but were the normal response.

Not only wives but also children needed to be governed vigorously. Youth was not a shield from violence. In the monastic environment, St Benedict argued that ‘bold, hard, proud and disobedient characters’ should be taught ‘by stripes and other bodily punishments’, citing the popular proverb ‘Beat your son with the rod and you will deliver his soul from death.’ \footnote{15} St Anselm also advocated the beating of children by parents and teachers as a necessary and pious endeavour, although he reserved the most rigorous discipline for the strongest souls, observing that violence benefits the soul only when one is spiritually ready for it. Given the endorsement of two influential church authorities, it should come as no surprise that historians looking for child abuse in the medieval records have had little success in finding it, implying that what passes for abuse today then was simply a matter of discipline. In the absence of child abuse, Richard Helmholz has found instead a multitude of instances of ‘parent abuse’, indicating just how deeply the medieval world respected the fourth commandment.

While both church and state recognised the value of a firm hand in maintaining an orderly household and state, violence was not without limits.

While well-meaning discipline was laudatory, abuse fuelled by anger and revenge, especially when enacted in a public space, was evidence of failed masculinity, an inability to govern one’s household appropriately. Informal arbitration and/or ritual shaming by family and friends were the two usual solutions to the problem, reminding us that marriage was a much more public institution in the Middle Ages than it is today. Jewish communities in the kingdom of France and the Holy Roman Empire imposed the most stringent limitations on a man’s behaviour, advocating corporal punishment for abusive husbands. In Christian society, a woman’s right to sue her husband for abuse was greatly constrained. In the north, where coverture held sway, a wife could not sue her husband because, once married, her legal personage merged with his: effectively, a suit against her husband was a suit against herself. More generally, Europeans viewed women as legal minors; as such, the law prohibited a woman from pursuing a suit without the permission and support of her husband as guardian.

At the very least, a husband’s right to beat his wife was counterbalanced by a wife’s right to seek a judicial separation (divorcium a mensa et thoro) from the church on the grounds of cruelty (saevitia). A judicial separation authorised a wife to live separately from her husband, although the marital union technically remained intact. The lawyer-pope Innocent III proffered useful advice for determining what constitutes documentable evidence of cruelty. He wrote, ‘if a husband were so cruel to his wife that no security would permit her to live with him without fear, the wife would be justified in living separately from her spouse’. Consequently, wives who sued their husbands for a separation typically alleged multiple unsuccessful attempts at homicide. Even so, the church rarely awarded judicial separations on these grounds. With the exception of those cases of adultery mentioned above, husbands did not hold the right to life over their wives. If a man participated in uxoricide, his actions were deemed felonious. Similarly, the Gregorian Decretals limited a father’s right to discipline his children ‘in a reasonable manner’. Homicide of one’s children was not permissible. Even death resulting from parental negligence found its way into the church courts; while the state did not consider neglect a felonious act, the church and the communities in which those parents lived pursued a programme of public humiliation intended to prevent such abuses from recurring. Further, some parents were prepared to

launch suits against teachers, priests and neighbours who exercised excessive violence against their children.

Women and Violence

If violence was laudable only when wielded by a figure of authority to preserve the social hierarchy, how did medieval society react when the tables were reversed? Stemming from the ideal that a man is king in his own household, English law categorised homicide of one’s husband as petty treason. The same classification applied when a clergyman killed his prelate, or a servant his master. The *ius commune* did not employ this derogatory label. However, the elements of rebellion and betrayal intrinsic to the crime ensured that courts everywhere treated such transgressions as more egregious than mere homicides. Both the church and the medical community expounded a view of women as inherently passive creatures. A physically violent woman was thus unnatural. For that reason, the law punished aggressive women more harshly than it did men. While courts normally sentenced male felons to hanging or decapitation, they condemned female felons to death by fire, drowning or burial alive. Women’s remarkably low rate of participation in violent crimes implies that medieval perceptions were sensitive to a reality in gendered behaviours. The records indicate a preponderance of men. Carl Hammer’s study of medieval Oxford sees a 6 per cent participation rate by women in homicides. Barbara Hanawalt’s study of fourteenth-century England offers a marginally higher figure, with women taking part in 7 per cent of felonious crimes (including non-violent felonies). In France, only 4 per cent of the petitions for royal pardons of serious crime originated with women. Historians have provided two wholly incongruous explanations for the diminished involvement of women in violent crimes. First, the passivity expected of women worked to their benefit. Since medieval society deemed violence a masculine trait, homicide investigations regularly overlooked women associated with the victim as potential suspects. Accordingly, women’s actual rates of participation in violent crime were probably much higher than is documented. Second, women are naturally less

violent. Thus, violent crime in the Middle Ages, much as it is today, was primarily a masculine activity.

Expectations of passivity had implications also for sexual violence against women. As Ruth Mazo Karras has observed, the medieval world envisioned sex as an act that a man performed on a woman. Linguistic usage underscored this construction of sex. While today we use intransitive verbs to indicate an act that two people engage in equally (‘to have sex’, ‘to make love’), the medieval world instead employed transitive verbs to express sex as an act that a man (subject) does to a woman (object).20 Because women were not expected to be active participants in sexual encounters, it was difficult to draw a firm line between consensual and non-consensual sex. From the perspective of a court, the experience remained essentially the same for a woman regardless of her consent. The matter of rape was complicated further by its Roman legacy as a property crime in which the woman’s father was the victim. Accordingly, it was not usually the woman’s permission that the law required, but that of her male guardian. Law in practice narrowed the scope of the crime even further by placing restrictions on the victim’s marital status. In many places, a woman had to be a virgin to cry rape; at the very least, she had to be a woman of honourable reputation. Because a woman’s voice carried little weight in the medieval courtroom, the courts expected rape accusations to be sued with the support of a male family member. In Castile, for example, the law permitted only men to initiate a suit; women could not sue their own rapists. As all of these conditions and limitations imply, the medieval courts were not eager to try rapists. Few men stood trial for rape; even fewer were punished. Edward Powell’s study of the English Midlands over a thirty-year period in the fifteenth century produced 280 indictments of rape: none of them resulted in a conviction.21 The records for both Nuremberg and Venice reveal similar results.22 Much ink has been spilt on the subject of why so few rapists were convicted for their crimes. The general consensus would seem to be that the penalties for rape were too strenuous. Medieval justice was founded on the premise of an ‘eye for an

eye’, and quite simply, judges and jurors did not see death as a fitting punishment for sexual violation. The dismissiveness of a patriarchal society towards sexual violence is encapsulated best in Andreas Capellanus’ treatise on courtly love. The cynical chaplain gently reminds his noble reader that true love can exist only between those close in rank. Thus, the nobleman’s feelings for the buxom peasant woman are not love but lust, and he should purge his desires by indulging in them whenever a ‘suitable spot’ arises ‘by rough embraces’.23

Homicide and Murder

The courts tended towards leniency also in cases of homicide. In late medieval England, acquittal was the norm. Conviction rates for homicide ranged between 12.5 per cent and 21 per cent.24 On the continent, the figures were much higher. For example, fourteenth-century Milan boasted an 80 per cent conviction rate.25 Despite the broad disparity in rates, the actual numbers of those punished remained roughly the same. The distinction lay in the law’s approach to flight. The vast majority of murderers in the Middle Ages fled the scene immediately after the crime and were never heard from again.26 The English reacted to flight by outlawing the accused. That is, rather than trying him in his absence, after a series of four unanswered summonses the accused was ousted from the protections of the law. Because of this process, English conviction rates do not include outlaws. Roman law, on the other hand, treated flight as a confession of guilt and proceeded to trial and conviction in the perpetrator’s absence, inflating continental conviction rates.

The predominance of flight speaks to the nature of medieval law enforcement. Across Europe, law enforcement was typically communal and unpaid: only some of the Italian city-states enjoyed genuine police forces with salaried officers. For most of those who fled, evading the legal consequences for one’s actions entailed moving outside one’s home community, either permanently or until tempers cooled and memories faded. Further, a whole host of

26 For example, between 1385 and 1429 in Milan, 2,000 of the 3,000 felony suspects fled and were convicted in their absence. Dean, Crime in Medieval Europe, p. 10.
'loopholes' existed to escape the death penalty. Throwing oneself on the mercy of the church, a confessed felon might claim sanctuary and then abjure the realm. Affluent felons might also pay their way out of trouble by applying for a pardon or letter of remission; while such an endeavour was costly, it resulted in royal protection from further prosecution. Compensation to the family of the victim, while formally abolished in most places after the thirteenth century, still existed informally and was tolerated by the courts across Europe. Indeed, in Siena, the offender could secure an instrument of peace (*instrumentum pacis*), a notarised document signed by the injured person and his heirs, in which they promise not to seek revenge. A felon might also convince the court that he was a member of a religious order by shaving a tonsure or reading a passage of the Bible. This permitted him to claim *privilegium fori* (in England, benefit of clergy), that is, the right to have his case transferred before an ecclesiastical tribunal where capital punishment was not an option. In England, a confessed felon might also turn approver, negotiating a lesser plea by abandoning his former accomplices. What is relevant here is the simple fact that most homicides in medieval Europe went unpunished. Presumably having murderers wandering freely about in medieval society did little to diminish rates of violence.

For those who stood trial, there was still a good chance of acquittal. In general, medieval men and women did not often see death as a fitting punishment for homicide. Far too many homicides resulted from a 'fair fight'. Such a death was better punished through indictment and time spent in prison awaiting trial than through the death penalty. Moreover, the legal definitions of 'self-defence' would have transformed most reasonable men into cowards; thus the popular imagination supported an expanded version. Conviction was significantly more likely to be the outcome when the crime was premeditated, marked in England by the use of the term 'murder' as opposed to 'homicide'. Homicide convictions in fourteenth-century Venice nicely document this trend: 49 per cent of homicides of passion ended in conviction, while 85 per cent of premeditated murders did.27

Most medieval killings were a product of hot blood and close living conditions. However, bloodfeud or vendetta also played a key role, especially in Scandinavian and Mediterranean cultures. The cycle of violence prompted by the obligation to defend one's family honour led to stringent regulation of vendetta by regional law codes. In Iceland, the law permitted licit revenge up

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until the time of the next Althing (the parliament). However, the law restricted the targets of revenge to those who actually carried out the offence. If an individual avenged a homicide within the family, he needed the evidence to prove in court that his actions were lawful; otherwise, the avenger would be charged with homicide.28 The overall impact of rigorous legal control of blood-feud was meaningful. Despite the ‘social legitimacy of violence’ in Iceland, the ultraviolence of the saga literature does not seem to have been reflected in society.29 Over the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Italian city-states struggled with a variety of legislation in an effort to contain violence to the offender and the victim. A common approach was to pass laws penalising secondary vendetta, that is, the taking of revenge against anyone other than the original aggressor. For example, in Florence, those who engaged in secondary vendetta, targeting the aggressor’s brother or an uncle, found themselves sentenced to decapitation, their property forfeited to the family of the victim.30 As Trevor Dean explains, penalties against secondary vendetta do not imply that primary vendetta was ‘tolerated and sanctioned’. Statutes of Camerino and Spoleto, for example, make it clear that revenge killing of the principal aggressor was punished according to the ordinary penalty for the crime.31

In this climate, serial killings were an aberration. Yet, the exploits of Gilles de Rais, a Breton nobleman famed for being one of Joan of Arc’s early companions, reminds us that sociopaths are not exclusively a product of the modern world. His 1440 trial at Nantes revealed years of depraved criminal activity, in which he kidnapped and sexually abused over one hundred boys between the ages of 8 and 16, then ruthlessly murdered them, dismembered their corpses, and ordered his servants to bury the remains surreptitiously. Lia Ross has compared Gilles’s perverse behaviour to that of Jeffrey Dahmer, one of twentieth-century America’s most notorious serial killers, who raped, murdered and dismembered sixteen boys and men between 1987 and 1991. In a detailed psychological analysis of Gilles, she explains that ‘[f]or both killers the victim was a dehumanized, aesthetic object to be collected’.32 At his trial, Gilles blamed his nature on his upbringing, warning fathers ‘to bring children up

31 Ibid., 8–9.
32 Lia B. Ross, ‘Deviance in the Late Middle Ages: The Crimes and Punishment of Gilles de Rais’, in Albrecht Classen and Connie Scarborough (eds.), Crime and Punishment in
The various historians who have endeavoured to make sense of Gilles’s actions have pointed to the medieval world’s rigid social hierarchy that both facilitated dehumanisation and led to abuses of power, particularly among the medieval knightly society where violence was a way of life. Nevertheless, it seems clear that Gilles was in no way typical of medieval criminals.

Of all violent acts, self-killing was the most reprehensible. Stirred by biblical interpretations of Judas’s hanging, medieval Christianity identified suicide as an act of despair, in itself a form of apostasy. As a result, the church denied church burial to those individuals who took their own lives. Traditional burial rites for suicides include the punishment and exorcism of the body, indicating that popular ideals linked self-killing to diabolical intervention. In thirteenth-century Lille, the law dictated the body of a female suicide should be burned, while the body of a male suicide was dragged to the gallows and hanged. In Zurich, the law punished the body according to the nature of the suicide’s death. Those who died by stabbing had a wooden wedge driven into their skulls; those who drowned were buried in the sand 5 feet from the water’s edge; those who leapt to their deaths were buried under a heap of stones with big stones on their head, stomach and feet. In England, not law but custom encouraged the burial of a suicide at the crossroads, with a stake driven through the chest pinning the corpse to the ground. The intention behind this bizarre rite was to prevent the spirit of the dead from reentering society and wreaking further havoc. If the stake did not imprison the spirit, the crossroads might encourage it to choose the wrong road and thus harass the inhabitants of some other town. While the justification for doing so varied, the property of the dead was typically confiscated into the king’s treasury, depriving a suicide’s family of future support. In Normandy, and perhaps also England, authorities took it a step further by destroying the property altogether: burning fields, cutting and uprooting vines, felling woods. Normally reserved for treasonous acts, the destruction of the land ensured the utter devastation of the suicide’s reputation, and also his family’s.

33 Dean, Crime in Medieval Europe, p. 21.
34 For a discussion of knightly violence, see Chapter 21 in this volume.
Conclusion

While actual rates of violence in the Middle Ages are difficult to calculate, it is clear that fear of violence escalated over the course of the period. The reasons for this are manifold, including among others the entrenchment of a crusading mentality, the development of R. I. Moore’s ‘a persecuting society’, the implementation of the Inquisition by the church and the fear mongering over heresy that accompanied it, as well as a sense of crisis heightened by the Black Death, environmental change, and an almost constant state of war. All of these factors led to a distinct sense that violence was on the rise. As K. B. MacFarlane has observed, in England escalating panic is registered in the ‘preambles to statutes, the denunciations of moralists and reformers, and the _ex parte_ statements of those engaged in litigation’, painting an image of the Middle Ages as one of ‘bloodshed and injustice’.37 The benefits of widespread fear were not lost on late medieval government. Municipalities across Europe grasped the opportunity to expand their powers into the realm of social control, by criminalising a wide variety of social misbehaviours, such as gambling, eavesdropping, scolding and vagrancy, as well as a variety of sexual and moral offences. Monarchies, too, expanded their armoury of weapons to preserve the social order. In France, Claude Gauvard sees late medieval fear as an essential tool employed by ambitious monarchs to justify paternalistic and oppressive legislation, paving the way for the crisis in order of the early modern era.

Bibliographical Essay


Violence and Murder in Europe


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PART IV

RELIGIOUS, SACRED
AND RITUALISED VIOLENCE
Traditions of Violence in Chinese Religion

Tracing the persistence of violence by and against religious groups and individuals over a thousand-year period, while illuminating in itself, also raises questions about persistence, and in particular about the factors fuelling the constant repetition of violent behaviour. By the middle of the first millennium CE we can see that the parts of East Asia that used writing in the form of Chinese had inherited substantial literary traditions describing their dealings with the unseen world, together with who knows what oral traditions on the same topic that will forever lie entirely beyond our knowledge, save through such traces of them as may perhaps be reflected in the remains of material culture. Two of the elements in the written tradition had, moreover, recently achieved a coherence that ensured that their records were subject to preservation and transmission as distinct bodies of knowledge, and these we now know as Buddhism and Daoism. The former allows us to see the extent to which the area in question was affected by developments in other parts of Asia, whereas the latter, since it drew on the accumulated lore of earlier phases within the Chinese world itself, offers evidence of the prevailing views of violence in the realms of the unseen. In both cases the religious literature considered canonical further provided normative descriptions that, together with representations in religious iconography, established for later ages at least to some degree the acceptability or otherwise of forms of violence for adherents of these traditions. Depictions of warrior gods or guardian deities capable of crushing demons did not necessarily provide role models for the conduct of the believer, but when others were demonised this may even so have had the potential for encouraging violent actions.
The texts of medieval Daoism, and the sources reflecting the earlier history on which they drew, make it quite clear that whatever the actual incidence of collective and individual violence in the world of the everyday, the unseen world was seen as riven with conflict in ways that could readily spill into and add to our immediate experience of suffering. The insurrectionary armies that had crippled the power of the house of Han, the only stable unified imperial dynasty the Chinese world had seen, in the second century CE, had consisted of ‘ghost soldiers’, self-consciously identified as agents of unseen powers, and the scriptures that in the fourth century formed one of the nuclei of the future Daoist canon are equally full of ghost armies and ghost generals, their ranks now swollen by the spirits of those who had perished in the warfare of the entire era of collapse and political division. At the same time the violence inflicted on more prominent officials in the course of these centuries resulted in judicial consequences in the unseen world for their descendants, with the ghosts of the unjustly killed capable of securing retribution in the form of inflicting illness on the living.¹ No wonder that the youngest adherents of Daoism received not a baptismal certificate but a document specifying to potential malevolent spirits the ranks of the unseen generals upon whose authority they could call, and they hoped in time to accumulate more such military forces to their name.² This is not to deny that the celestial bureaucracy of Daoism also contained civil officials, but simply to point out that the military, violent side of the world unseen was of the most immediate interest to ordinary believers. And the future was by no means necessarily bright, for apocalyptic visions in some texts threatened this world with an invasion of yet more terrible demon armies, composed of troops of non-Chinese origin.

The Chinese Buddhist Tradition and Violence

The teachings of the Buddha, which had clearly reached China by the late first century CE, at first sight provide a contrasting demilitarised zone. ‘Wherever the Buddha goes, all under Heaven is harmoniously ordered . . . There is no need for soldiers or weapons’ runs one text widely circulated in China.³ Where military analogies are adduced in another famous scripture, it is made perfectly

clear that they are no more than analogies for more spiritual matters. Not only did monks and nuns undertake vows of non-violence, but the most widely known Chinese rules governing Buddhist lay adherents also commanded abstention from any form of involvement in killing. Even violence against the self was not permitted: in one early scriptural compendium in Chinese the Buddha condemns self-castration. One can further appreciate that the Buddhist notion of the transfer of merit allowed for the expeditious propitiation of the marauding, non-socialised ghosts of victims of mass slaughter through such straightforward means as the copying of the Buddha’s word, rather than the complex, text-based interventions of Daoist priests or the unrestrained sacrificial appeasement of dead generals undertaken by adherents of popular cults – one of the earliest Chinese Buddhist manuscripts we possess, from 359, is dedicated to precisely such a task.

But the picture is not quite so clear cut, and this not simply because within the vast wealth of Buddhist stories imported into East Asia were some that prominently featured not only self-sacrifice but also more negatively portrayed reprehensible violent acts, such as parricide. Eminent Buddhist monks, for example, might be thought to have gained through their meditative exercises the power to predict the outcome of battles, which inevitably excited the interest and unsolicited patronage of warlords. An eschatological strain in Buddhist thought had also arrived in China that predicted both destructive foreign invasions and fratricidal dissent within a future much corrupted monastic community. A mid-fifth-century suppression of Buddhism in north China, prompted in part by the willingness by this point of Daoists to offer an alternative, seems further to have foregrounded fears of the extinction of the tradition through the murder of its clergy, a notion of Chinese origin that was thereafter deemed a true account of Indian events. Though subsequent control of the canonical literature of Chinese Buddhism

9 Stuart H. Young, *Conceiving the Indian Buddhist Patriarchs in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015), pp. 69–76, though the author himself feels that this tale of the extinction through murder of Buddhism in India was written to exhort the Chinese to greater efforts, rather than to despair.
appears to have kept at the margins further innovations ascribing Indian origins to accounts of the spirit world as violent as those in Daoist texts, such sources became influential, and remain so.

Religion and Rebellion in China after Antiquity

Given the level of violence that had come to characterise scripture, the repeated outbreaks of armed rebellion by religious groups from late antiquity onward are not in themselves difficult to understand, even when the precise nature of the ideas animating these uprisings is sometimes subject to debate. The notion of a corrupt clergy that needed to be purged by force, even if originally an argument for the exercise of authoritarian monarchical control over the Buddhist community, would have had unusual cogency in a north China in which the power of monasteries to organise manpower in a society struggling to recover from decades of strife had perhaps caused the state to assign them a position very different from that of the unworldly order of ascetics depicted in the earliest layers of Buddhist literature. From 515 to 517 a rebellion led in the wake of a period of severe famine by a dissident monk that caused tens of thousands of deaths in north China seems to have particularly targeted Buddhist monasteries and their inhabitants, declaring the arrival of a new Buddha. Though anticlericalism eventually faded from the repertoire of most rebel ideologies, the notion of a new age or kalpa, a development set by scholastic Buddhism in the far future, was to become a commonplace into modern times.

For the association between rebellion and religious leaders had already had and was to continue to have a very long history in China. This phenomenon has prompted much discussion, especially by scholars interested in popular resistance to authority, and not all would see popular belief even in the arrival of new ages as inherently a challenge to the existing order. The association was frequent enough, however, that governments generally took no chances and extirpated any sect they deemed possibly tinged with such beliefs, thereby perhaps precipitating pre-emptive acts of defiance from those who expected persecution in any case. Already in the sixth century, however, it is possible to see that an association between violence and religion did not have to hinge on eschatological beliefs of any kind. In the middle of the sixth century the explicitly pro-Buddhist dynasty of the Liang collapsed with remarkable suddenness after apparently instituting a stable peace in the area that had lasted several decades, and in the internecine warfare that followed the mid-Yangzi region saw the emergence of a powerful military
leader probably of non-Chinese origin who adopted a semi-clerical Buddhist persona. It may be that the cohesive potential of new, more universal Buddhist beliefs allowed hill peoples to compete militarily with the Chinese of the plains, in like fashion to rebel groups in the uplands of Burma in the late twentieth century asserting a Christian identity.\textsuperscript{10} Certainly one late seventh-century revolt of a non-Chinese group seems to have involved a Buddhist element.

**Violence against the Self, State Violence and Interpersonal Violence**

Meanwhile the period of intensified doubts and regrets that marked the late sixth century also brought into sharper focus existing Chinese traditions of self-inflicted violence within religious contexts. The most spectacular of these, already well attested in Buddhism, was the practice of self-immolation, often a public, fiery spectacle. But ritualised forms of self-harm in both Buddhism and Daoism that seem to have literally involved ‘beating oneself up’ also appear in religious literature, and would appear to have become an entirely accepted form of behaviour, mentioned in passing in popular materials.\textsuperscript{11} This particular ritual seems to have disappeared eventually, though self-inflicted violence remained an important element in later religious practice. In fact the practice of austerities including forms of self-mutilation are already depicted frequently in Buddhist and Daoist sources of this period.

The justifications for collective violence contained within the Buddhist tradition could also be co-opted by power holders in the mainstream of Chinese society, who were happy to adapt to their ideological needs the concept of the Wheel-Turning King, or Cakravartin. The narrative of Buddhist kingship related to this term that became established in China in the sixth century included in its scope the renunciation of violence, but only after a career of bloody conquest – a convention of particular value to the re-unifier of China, Emperor Wendi of the Sui dynasty, that derived from the historical career of the Indian ruler Asoka.\textsuperscript{12}

On occasion China’s ruling warriors could moreover draw on the efforts of military forces composed of fighting monks. The most celebrated of these were the monks of the Shaolin Monastery at Songshan in Henan who in 621 assisted the founders of the Tang dynasty in dealing with rivals, thereby establishing an officially recognised tradition of martial arts which flourishes there in its modern forms even today. While such direct involvement in warfare may have been unusual, the history of Buddhist monasticism in Asia includes a fair number of examples of communities of monks employing clerical or semi-clerical enforcers to protect their material interests in the face of the violence of frequent small-scale banditry. At the same time even the most eminent leaders of the clergy, both Buddhist and Daoist, were expected not only to offer up prayers but also to employ the supernatural powers attributed to them to confound any armies launched against their royal patrons, and seem to have been quite happy to do so.13

The exercise of the power to harm through the control of unseen forces was at a personal level apparently seen as more the province of Daoist priests, and it was collusion between such figures and members of the imperial harem, where competition for influence over the emperor was often intense, that was always very vigilantly policed, though accusations of sorcery did sometimes rebound on the accusers.14 The military culture of the eighth century and later included its own ritual observances, which according to some sources stipulated the practice of human sacrifice, though actual records of the stipulation ever having been carried out do not appear in the historical record.15 The existence of such sources does however help to explain the occasional outbreaks of panics in China sparked by rumours that government agents were out looking for human victims. Apparent manuscript descriptions, too, of human sacrifice within the antinomian world of Tantric texts in Tibetan have been recovered from tenth-century China, but though these materials provide ample testimony for the violent imagery that reached East Asia especially from the eighth century onwards as a result of the rise of this form of Buddhism, there is nothing to show that the manuscript in question prompted any actual homicides in the Chinese world,

or indeed anywhere. In Chinese materials themselves, moreover, we find by this point no more than an account of recently converted anthropophagous monsters being ingeniously provided by the Buddha with a short-term means of continuing to feast on post-mortem human hearts.\footnote{16}

**State Persecution of Buddhism and Religion in a Collapsing State**

Rather, for members of the Buddhist clergy it was the potential violence of the state that was plainly the main worry for them, even if forced laicisation only entailed ejection from the stable world of the monastic economy rather than instant death. A second major persecution of Buddhism had been carried out in north China in the late sixth century prior to reunification, involving such a high figure – 3 million – for persons returned to lay life that some have supposed that this represents the extension of state control over the broader manpower formerly under the command of the monasteries.\footnote{17} At all events an upheaval on this scale left a profound sense of unease, visible in anecdotes concerning Buddhist monks from the late eighth century, who patently live in fear of the authorities: it is surely significant that state agents in one such source are characterised as ‘demons’.\footnote{18} Since moreover legal process in premodern China routinely involved violence in the form of beatings, it comes as no surprise either to find that an awareness of the punishments of the law entered the Chinese Buddhist consciousness during this period.\footnote{19}

When the axe eventually fell on Buddhism in the 840s, the effects – save in one or two outlying areas beyond the effective control of central government – were empire-wide and utterly devastating. The seriousness of the impending persecution was already underlined in 843, when the reigning emperor is said by contemporary and later sources to have killed all the priests of the foreign religion of Manichaenism present in China; the same year 300 Buddhist monks who had attempted to conceal the fact that they were not properly registered with the


authorities were executed too, and further such executions followed in the next year. In 845 the full-scale dissolution of the monasteries turned loose large numbers of now destitute monks, who in some cases resorted to brigandage and even murder. But with the death of the persecuting emperor, the year after that saw a complete reversal of policy, and the execution of those Taoist priests who had encouraged the suppression of their rivals. Any return to the previous normality, however, seems to have been slow, and was in any case overtaken in the 880s by rebellions signalling not simply the collapse of the dynasty but also the extinction of the entire aristocratic social order that had endured for centuries, thus removing a group that had provided important patronage for monastic forms of religion. Now our sources suggest that Daoists too, whose religion had been supported as the family cult of the ruling house, felt a new vulnerability: only a miracle is said to have saved the birthplace of Laozi, the alleged dynastic ancestor and founder of the religion, from destruction by rebel troops, while some leaders in this tradition seem to have preferred employment by the independent generals who were now busy carving out their own territories as the dynasty entered its death throes, though sometimes both general and magus came to violent ends even before the murder of the last emperor in the Tang line.20

For the tenth century our transmitted sources, much edited and often concerned to emphasise norms over realities, are augmented by a store of manuscripts from Dunhuang in the far north-west, some of them written long before they were eventually concealed at the start of the following century. It is here that we find Buddhist texts excluded from the transmitted canon that show how, even by the time of their composition in the sixth century, Daoist notions of violent apocalypse had been absorbed by Chinese Buddhist writers; one or two composed at a point much closer to the end of the tenth century clearly maintain this negative outlook as well, though given the violence of the age it is mildly surprising not to find more accounts of desperate peasants greeted the arrival of a self-proclaimed messianic deliverer than we might expect, even if one rising of 920 has attracted some attention for reasons that will be explained below. The presence of violently eschatological literature in a monastic centre never marked by any form of popular rising, even though by the tenth century it had been through foreign conquest and eventual liberation, suggests that such texts were far from marginal, and were in fact very widely diffused.21 We also encounter less

unexpectedly illustrated materials used in popular education wherein the magical power of the Buddha’s immediate acolytes to quell demons is emphasised.

Religion and the Violent Outsider: Demons and Warriors

In several manuscripts, too, it is possible to find brief mention of a new type of deity associated with a tutelary role guarding the fortunes of walled communities, a sort of god already attested in one eighth-century anecdote. Such deities became common in the new age that followed the tenth century, and can be construed as continuing the long-standing cults of dead heroes that had been recognised by earlier dynastic authorities. Now, however, there seems to be on occasion a readiness to recognise the cults of dead generals, a category formerly avoided in favour of heroes displaying more civic virtues. In one case we are told that the tutelary figure had been a military leader of an indigenous ethnic group who in life had proved a loyal friend to the Chinese. Possibly the expansion of a burgeoning population of Chinese speakers into alien territories prompted fear of reprisals that made dead warriors a more acceptable form of divine patron, even if in the long run such city gods became no more than the unseen world’s counterpart of the local civil mandarin. Similar fears over the religious practices of alien peoples newly encountered may also lie behind some of the tales of human sacrifice that appear in our sources under the new Song dynasty.

The most powerful enemies of the Song period Chinese lay, however, on their northern borders. From the start of the dynasty the Kitan in the northeast presented formidable problems, until the sudden appearance of the Jurchen ancestors of the Manchus, who by 1125 had overthrown the Kitan and by 1126 ejected the Chinese from the whole of north China. After they were in turn overthrown in 1234 by the Mongols, the resistance of the southern Chinese to these new enemies managed to maintain their southern capital until 1276, but after its fall the days of the dynasty were effectively numbered. Such a sustained period of armed state–state confrontation

22 Dudbridge, Religious Experience and Lay Society, p. 189, no. 77, and cf. p. 136.
naturally had profound effects on the conduct of warfare, especially in the
development of military technologies such as the use of gunpowder. These
developments were not without consequence in the religious sphere, and in
fact it is possible in one instance to suspect a change in religious iconography
before any clear records in military sources. This concerns the use of
gunpowder to fire projectiles, something not clearly attested either in writing
or by the archaeological retrieval of actual examples of cannon until after the
appearance of the Mongols. Even so, a sculpture of a group of weapon-
carrying demons that has been dated to 1128 has been interpreted as showing
one carrying a firearm.25

But the use of pyrotechnics in religious contexts may have gone beyond
mere representation. A close reading of Daoist texts of the period on Thunder
Magic, a procedure perhaps derived perhaps from the sorcery of southern
peoples but one that was taken up and improved especially by mandarins
anxious to have the ritual means at their disposal to overawe indigenous
opposition, suggests that sufficient quantities of gunpowder were incorpo-
rated into exorcisms to blow apart the shrines of their opponents. Evidently
recourse to violence, including technologically enhanced violence, was seen
as legitimate in both the seen and the unseen realms. No shift of perspective
was in fact required, for we know that the troops of the Jurchen armies were
regarded as demons, as were the Mongols somewhat later, and eventually the
Manchu armies facing the nineteenth-century Taiping rebels: the elision
between ‘foreigner invader’ and ‘demon’, as we have already seen, goes
back centuries.26 Whether the Jurchen troops considered the Song armies
demonic we do not know, but it would seem that the rise of one of the most
formidable warrior gods of late imperial China, Zhenwu, was prompted by
his worship by the Jurchen military before he attracted adherents among the
Song Chinese, so it may be that these notions were shared between opposing
camps.27 Since Zhenwu had already performed a minor role in the Daoist
pantheon in earlier times there was no problem with accepting him as a
recognised deity, but some other cases illustrate the way in which popular
and often quite ferocious gods, while expected to conform to norms
approved by the state, might also reflect non-state understandings of their

26 See T. H. Barrett, ‘History Writing and Spirit Writing in Seventeenth Century China’,
27 Shin-yi Chao, Daoist Ritual, State Religion, and Popular Practices: Zhenwu Worship from
role. The plague god Marshal Wen, for instance, while possessing red hair, green skin and tusks, suggesting that he was originally understood as a demon, did become acceptable as a Daoist deity once stories were circulated variously explaining away his appearance as due to a joke gone wrong, or his self-sacrificial ingestion of plague agents. For just as successful bandits might be co-opted into imperial forces, so demons too might make a like transition to join the forces of law and order in the spirit world. Similarly, though the state was reluctant to recognise gods in non-human form other than the impeccably imperial dragon, one exception seems to have been made for a white ape, a figure that was certainly anthropoid but that was also associated with the martial arts.

Religion and Violence among the People

But this signing up of doubtful popular gods on the side of law and order was not the only process at work during this period. We also find one Buddhist figure of Indian origin to some extent supplanted by a local avatar understood in terms of popular religion as a deity drawing her power from her violent death, in this case at the hands of her father. The state did not have it completely within its power to civilise the religious conceptions of its subjects, who often continued to favour gods who were at the very least disruptive of good order. Tantric Buddhism in particular allowed scope for the introduction of fierce deities who were taken up by the populace as embodiments of Chinese understandings of violence, and especially the potential for violence within the family.

Religious imagery in general continued to include scenes of supernatural violence, too. Though most Song painting seems to embody qualities of unbroken serenity, a closer look reveals religious themes featuring as before the wild attacks of demon hordes on the unassailable Buddha. The violence of these materials, however, pales by comparison to those on display in cliff sculptures of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, which preserve in graphic detail the tortures of hell, drawing on the type of imagery already attested in tenth-century manuscripts and some earlier sculpture of the same

date, but now presenting it unsparingly in three dimensions. Violent religious imagery was, furthermore, in all probability much more widely diffused thanks to the creation of printed ephemera, such as those depicting the immortal Zhong Kui subduing a demon by gouging out its eyes – such apotropaic prints derived from earlier painting from this period onwards seem to have been put on display very widely.31

Religion and Popular Uprisings

These concessions to images of divine power long cherished by the population were no doubt expedient in a state committed to protracted military struggle with northern invaders. But the most formidable enemies in the religious sphere were probably those within Song territory, and not just unassimilated non-Chinese peoples but also regular inhabitants of Chinese cultural areas who took up forms of religion seen as inimical to good order. The Manichaeans, for example, had not been extinguished by the persecution of 843, but continued to find adherents among the Chinese population. The rebellion of 920 alluded to above, though apparently within the tradition of Buddhist sectarian uprisings prompted by Chinese transformations of the apocalyptic beliefs, was blamed by one learned Buddhist on Manichaeans, perhaps as a diversionary tactic.32 In the wake of the famous Fang La rebellion of 1119–21, which exploited religious imagery but does not seem to have had a strong religious element, a local magistrate was persuaded to allow the execution of several hundred ‘vegetarians’. These may well have been adherents of the later Manichaean tradition, but given that allegedly some 1–2 million perished in this uprising, these executions were in all probability merely precautionary and should not be seen as evidence of their insurrectionary ambitions.

In fact a lack of insurrectionary intent would seem to hold true for the subsequent history of this religious tradition in China, though it would have been amongst those groups viewed with suspicion by the government, since it came within the catch-all title devised at about the time of this episode to define unacceptable religious groups as those who ‘eat vegetables and worship demons’. A vegetarian diet was a common feature of many Chinese religious movements, especially Buddhist ones, and the notion of demon worship was also so unclear that at one point a master who was a pillar of the

Buddhist community suffered accusation under this rubric. The later Manichaeans used the name ‘Teaching of Light’, but this did not mean that various rebels claiming to be ‘Kings of Light’ had any connection with them. That term, as the name of a future ruler, may be traced back to early origins in the Buddhist-inflected apocalyptic literature of the late sixth century, though it also occurs perfectly innocently in orthodox Buddhist sources. The other groups targeted by the pronouncements against vegetable-eating demon-worshippers, such as the White Lotus and White Cloud movements, were Buddhist associations of believers that had developed beyond the purview of monastic Buddhism, but they too apparently never harboured violent ambitions either.

The potential, however, for uprisings fuelled by apocalyptic expectations of the collapse of the existing order had by no means evaporated. This had become clear already in 1047, when a rebellion erupted in Hebei, predicting the arrival of Maitreya, the Buddha of the future; one of the scriptures named in the background to this rebellion, though previously unknown, is again mentioned in the late twelfth century. Messianic rebellions also troubled the Jin dynasty in 1161 and 1171; conquest by the Jurchen seems to have precipitated the appearance of a number of new religious movements that were viewed with suspicion by the government, though, for most, precise details of their beliefs remain obscure. In general the sources on religious ideas in rebel movements up to the end of the thirteenth century do not provide enough documentation to be clear what beliefs were in play, beyond the use of popular prognostication manuals. By this point the whole of China had fallen to the Mongol invaders, an achievement that allowed Chinggis Khan to be identified posthumously by their Chinese Buddhist subjects as a Cakravartin world ruler, whose conquests furthermore took place under the auspices of fierce Tantric deities. Given that the figures that they themselves worshipped were thus nothing if not wrathful, the Mongols seem to have been entirely relaxed about the objects of worship preferred by their Chinese subjects, so those erstwhile marginal groups that had been criticised for eating vegetables and worshipping demons under this regime flourished with little apparent fear of persecution. Conflict between Buddhists and Daoists did lead Khubilai Khan to decree the destruction of

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the canon of the latter in 1281, though this measure was eventually relaxed, and no general persecution of Daoism was ever contemplated.

**Religious Rebellion and a New Era**

But belief in the imminent arrival of Maitreya surfaced once again in the fourteenth century, with a rebellion in 1338, and a further two in 1351. One of these, often designated the Red Turban uprising, proved to be the environment out of which the future Ming dynasty arose. The consequences of this are that though the movement unleashed widespread warfare across central China, the record of its religious message and of the relationship of the Ming founder to that message has been very carefully obscured in our sources. Official history does show what was apparently undeniable: that Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–98), the future emperor, had passed some time as a Buddhist monk in early adulthood. It is also clear that the Red Turbans had proclaimed the coming of a King of Light, and that the son of the original but rapidly eliminated leader was known as the Lesser King of Light. After the ostensibly accidental drowning of this young man while under the protection of Zhu Yuanzhang, the Ming – literally the dynasty of ‘light’ – was announced in 1368. Though this move may have been designed to bring in the remains of the Red Turban forces, the Ming founder spent the rest of his reign cracking down hard on any forms of religious organisation that did not accord with the carefully regulated clerical forms of Buddhism and Daoism recognised by his government.

Such precautions did not prevent his immediate successors from having to face further rebellions, as false Maitreyas continued to appear in quick succession. One religious uprising in 1420 was led by a woman who managed after its suppression to evade arrest. She is said to have declared herself a ‘Buddha mother’, that is, in all likelihood a manifestation of the Tantric goddess Cundī, who appears as a powerful figure in popular novels from later in the dynasty, suggesting that her cult had found some resonance beyond clerical circles; the term had already appeared in 1338 applied to the wife of a rebel leader. The characterisation may, however, be due to her pursuers: no one can be faulted for not catching an eighteen-armed goddess. Her legend certainly outlived her by centuries.

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New Religious Ideas and New Forms of Writing Violence

It is also possible that this rebellion with its female leader foreshadowed important shifts that took place during the rest of the century that were to make the world of sectarian cults much more volatile during the period after 1500. A religious reformer from a Buddhist background named Luo Menghong (1443–1527), also known by other names, such as Luo Qing, propounded an understanding of this tradition based on his own religious experience of seeking a true spiritual home. The ‘true emptiness’ in which he discovered the object of his quest he described as ‘Mother’ of all things. Soon adherents of this reformed religion personalised the ‘Eternal Mother’ as the deity to which mankind should return. This soteriology no longer expected a future Maitreya, but placed the believer in an immediate eschatology wherein those who heeded the homecoming call of the Eternal Mother saw themselves as at odds with the rest of society.

These developments, and the violent ramifications of the religious conflicts that resulted in local society and especially with the representatives of the state, do not concern us here, but have been traced after 1500 in the much more abundant archival sources available for all forms of historical research in China. The sequence of development before and after the lifetime of the founder also come into clearer focus because of the preservation of much more of the literature of sectarian groups in printed form, including later printings of the works of Luo Menghong himself. His ideas, moreover, are not the only ones already present before the end of the fifteenth century that become clearer to us through their presentation in publications that do not actually date to this time.

By the fifteenth century the major novels to emerge from popular storytelling in printed form at a slightly later date were all no doubt in existence as oral or written texts, even if not yet published, so their depictions of religion and violence can be used as evidence for the popular understanding of the relationship that came to be inherited by later ages. In one case we have not only scattered evidence for the development of a legend but also a full textual source from the Song period that gives a good picture of an early stage in the evolution of the Journey to the West, which depicts the exploits of a Tang

monk and his companions on a journey to India. The monk himself lifts not a
finger to combat the various monsters that assail his little band: the fighting is
left primarily to a simian alter ego, who lays about him to great effect with a
cudgel, or else with a deadlier variant of the staff carried by all itinerant
Buddhist monks.38 Monks wielding lethal versions of the staff are described in
a number of fictional sources, notably the Ming novel Water Margin, which
goes back to tales of Song period outlaws. Daoist military leaders, on the
other hand, are portrayed in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, for indeed
during the second to third centuries in which the novel is set at least two
organised religious movements did contend with the generals who vied for
power at the time, though the novel itself is primarily interested in strategy
and does not dwell on religious motivations. All in all, though, early popular
fiction suggests that the idea of fighting clerics was as commonly accepted in
China as the notion of fighting bishops in Europe.

Violence and Religion in China Reconsidered:
Who Were the Demons?

Yet the narrative of the ten centuries during which organised Chinese clergy
attached to a canonically defined Buddhism and Daoism had been in exis-
tence does point to some clear differences from the European experience. At
no time, for example, do we find crusades mounted against unbelievers or
inquisitions imposing specific beliefs. The persecutions of Buddhism were
aimed at the enforced laicisation of the monastic community. This altered the
fiscal relationship of monks to the state, and if this was resisted punishment
seems to have been brutal, but no attempt was made to ban their beliefs.
Likewise any sign that a belief in the coming of Maitreya implied a challenge
to prevailing authority provoked ruthless suppression of the believers, but
the notion of a forthcoming appearance by Maitreya was not in itself targeted
for eradication; indeed, at least one ruler co-opted the notion to bolster her
own imperial legitimacy.39 The state required orthodoxy of Buddhists and
Daoists, but only enforced this when its own interests were threatened; in the
first instance, moreover, such enforcement was aimed at heterodox texts
rather than individuals.40 This order of priorities is spelled out instructively in

38 Glen Dudbridge, The Hsi-yu chi: A Study of Antecedents to the Sixteenth-Century Chinese
39 N. Harry Rothschild, Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic
40 Barrett, Taoism under the T’ang, pp. 24–5.
the legal code of the Tang: to call down demons on another with intent to kill them could incur one to three years of penal servitude; to call down demons on the emperor or even to be an accessory in doing so resulted in execution.\textsuperscript{41}

The legal recognition of the existence of violent unseen entities who might cause harm to humans highlights the importance of demons to the outlook of the Chinese population during this span of history. However, it needs to be seen in conjunction with another aspect of the unseen world that was also important to Chinese perceptions of their situation. Though hells might be seen as subterranean and heavens as located above our world, there was also a tendency to understand the unseen world as also existing in the same plane as ours. If one could make it to certain islands in the eastern seas, for example, one need never die.\textsuperscript{42} If one travelled far enough westward, one would encounter a goddess.\textsuperscript{43} A study of early attitudes towards the denizens of the dense subtropical forests of south China suggests that the very nature of their environment made it unlikely that they were human: they were animals, perhaps, or demonic spirits.\textsuperscript{44} As for northern invaders, it was constantly stressed in later writing that the Mongol empire had arisen from out of a desert, again no fit place for human beings. In a work of 1366 it is said that because they were thus from beyond the world of light, that is why they used paper money, otherwise used by the Chinese themselves only for the dead.\textsuperscript{45} Such a view would accord well with that taken of the Mongols by at least some Tibetans by this point.\textsuperscript{46} That the Mongols were considered demons may explain the barbarities inflicted on them by the Red Turban rebels, though the rebels seem to have spared no one in their savagery anyhow.\textsuperscript{47}

In sum, the record shows that one of the main sources of violent behaviour in religious contexts and perhaps beyond was generated by the belief that any outsider – that is, anyone from a world unknown or unseen – might be a demon. Occasionally these unknown intruders might even be agents of the

\textsuperscript{42} Bokenkamp, \textit{Ancestors and Anxiety}, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{43} Suzanne Cahill, \textit{Transcendence and Divine Passion: The Queen Mother of the West in Medieval China} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 18–19.
\textsuperscript{44} Von Glahn, \textit{The Sinister Way}, pp. 78–97.
government, who came from a world very different from that inhabited by the ordinary peasantry. In any case, exposed to constant depictions of the demonic and of the need to crush any manifestation of the demonic even in human form with utter ruthlessness, the constraints that might operate in conflicts between fellow members of society could be and often were abandoned. In times of social collapse in particular, the moral teachings of China’s sages bore little weight against the fears that dominated perceptions of the unseen world.

Bibliographical Essay

Though the study of violence as a separate topic formed no part of traditional Chinese historiography, recent historical studies of China have begun to explore the possibilities offered by surviving sources for such research in several different ways, for example through local studies. But these have tended to concentrate on modern centuries, for which local sources and central and other archives exist in some quantity; much less has been written about earlier periods, other than the earliest, for which it has been possible to explore the norms incorporated into the literature of antiquity that remained the object of memorisation and recapitulation for all subsequent ages, into the twentieth century. Thus beyond this corpus it would for example be desirable in order to understand popular constructions of violence to analyse the imagery of wrathful guardian deities widely disseminated among the populace in printed form, but as is observed in one Chinese monograph that touches on this, Zhu Qingsheng, Jiangjun menschen qiyuan yanjiu: lun wujie yu chengxing (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998), pp. 12–13, such ephemera were scarcely collected in China before the sixteenth century.

The period from c. 500 to 1500 has moreover rarely been written about as such, in part because in Chinese terms it spans two very different epochs. The early collapse of a unified empire in China, which in effect began to take place in the second century CE, and the violent end of the second period of unification in the early tenth century that ushered in a new age characterised especially from the following century by a very different culture – marked for example by much greater urbanisation and the use of printing, ceramics and improved agricultural techniques – has meant that students of Chinese history in the Anglophone world have tended to specialise in the first millennium CE or the second, but not both. For the first millennium the sources preserved within religious traditions provide an important though not entirely independent counterpoint to the historiographic mainstream, and these sources are also present for the second millennium CE, but they have perhaps been assigned a lesser relative importance; consequently religious topics during these two periods tend to be dealt with separately. This explains why a scholar of religion and violence such as Martin Broy deals with violent Buddhists in two separate journal contributions, ‘Das dharma schützen, das Reich schützen, sich selbst schützen? Militärisch tätige buddhistische Mönche in China in den Dynastien Song und Ming’, Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft 15.2 (2007), 199–224, and ‘Martial Monks in Medieval Chinese Buddhism’, Journal of Chinese Religions 40 (2012), 45–
89. However, one monograph that atypically but very usefully draws on and much extends existing work on the first millennium, but then shows its continued relevance for the second, concerns a celebrated form of self-inflicted religious violence, namely James A. Benn, *Burning for the Buddha: Self-Immolation in Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007).

More common, however, are diachronic studies that deal to some extent with the period before 1000 CE, reaching back into early Chinese times, but find a greater weight of useful evidence in more recent centuries. This is true for example of a major study of the important topic for violence in religious contexts of Chinese demonology, Richard von Glahn, *The Sinister Way: The Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). The advisability of taking into account the persistence of long-term cultural phenomena within very different historical periods in China is illustrated in this case by long-lived traditions of what might be called ‘demonography’, describing harmful entities and how to combat them: Donald Harper, ‘A Note on Nightmare Magic in Ancient and Medieval China’, *Tang Studies* 6 (1988), 69–76, finds writing in this tradition in the manuscripts recovered from Dunhuang that evidently kept alive very ancient beliefs, even though these were not the province of an established – and bibliographically self-aware – tradition like Buddhism and Daoism.

At times a divergence of approach in assigning significance to much earlier evidence in interpreting later phenomena seems to reflect different historiographic communities, even within Anglophone scholarship. North American scholars, for instance, following earlier Chinese publications, tend to assign considerable importance to the role of Manichaeans in violent uprisings, such as those that resulted in the founding of the Ming dynasty, whereas in European publications much greater reserve on this matter has generally been expressed. In part this may follow Japanese scholarship, as in T. H. Barrett, ‘Chinese Sectarian Religion’, *Modern Asian Studies* 12.2 (1978), 333–52, at 337, but in the main it is due to a perception of the probable persistence of earlier, non-Manichaean forms of eschatology: a good example would be the diachronic survey of Hubert Seiwert, in collaboration with Ma Xisha, *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). At this point any history of religion and violence spanning 500–1500 is bound to be a tentative construct, but it may have its uses in bringing into relation studies never associated before, and thereby pointing to possibilities for future work.
The theme ‘religion and violence’ or ‘religious violence’ gained worldwide attention after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in 2001.¹ In Japan, this theme was already being publicly discussed in 1995 when the gas attack on passengers in the Tokyo subways occurred, for which a new Buddhist group was blamed.² Surprised reactions to both revealed the widespread opinion that religion had nothing to do with violence. However, historical studies show that religious groups are prone to violence, and since they elaborate the causes they may contribute to understanding modern cases better. In the end we must ask whether ‘religious violence’ exists, or whether the relationship between ‘religion and violence’ is rather arbitrary.

In premodern Japan³ at least five forms of violent actions involving Buddhist groups can be observed: (1) conflicts between adherents of the newly introduced Buddhism and those of indigenous beliefs; (2) sectarian conflicts among competing Buddhist groups; (3) conflicts between established Buddhist schools and newly founded groups; (4) battles between Buddhist groups and secular authorities; and (5) violent Buddhist peasant uprisings. This chapter follows more or less the historical order of developments.

³ I do not use the term ‘medieval Japan’ because historians doubt whether the European term applies to Japan. In this study the general term ‘premodern Japan’ covers the period from the sixth to the seventeenth centuries.
The Early Introduction of Buddhism and Conflicts with the Native Religion

Buddhism was introduced from Korea to Japan first unofficially and then officially during the sixth century. According to the court annals *Nihon-gi*, in 552 the king of Paekche sent an embassy to the Yamato court (in central Japan) with presents, including a Buddhist statue and sutras. However, some thirty years earlier a Korean guild of saddlers (*kura-be*) had settled in the realm of the Soga clan in the Yamato region who adhered to Buddhism. Their craft not only consisted of the skills to treat wood, leather and metal, but enabled the advanced technique of warfare on horseback. Thus Buddhism was introduced to Japan through the vehicle of culture transfer. Subsequently, the Soga clan took over the foreign belief and built a hall for Buddha worship.

According to the *Nihon-gi*, from 552 conflicts arose repeatedly about the worship of the ‘foreign deity’ (*atashikuni no kami*) as the Buddha was referred to. The Mononobe and Nakatomi clans insisted that the court should follow only the traditional worship of the ‘Japanese deities’ (*kunitsu kami*), whereas the Soga clan defended the introduction of the Buddha. The Soga argued that advanced countries such as Korea and China were venerating the Buddha, therefore the Yamato kingdom should not stay behind. When plagues broke out, the traditionalists took them as signs of divine warnings and urged the emperor to order the destruction of Buddhist worship. The Buddha hall was burned and the Buddha statue thrown into the Naniwa canal. Thus, religious dissent among the clan chiefs evolved into a violent conflict. The same sequence of Buddha worship, plague and destruction occurred again in 584. Later, however, when the emperor’s servants suffered from diseases, he permitted the private worship of the Buddha.

Since the Mononobe and Nakatomi continued to oppose the introduction of Buddhism, the religious struggle evolved into an open war in 587. The Soga warriors carved wooden figures of the Shi-tennō, the divine guardian kings protecting Buddhism in the four cardinal directions, fixed them on their heads, and prayed for divine help. People of these times believed that physical warfare on the ground was accompanied by spiritual warfare between the deities, and it was the latter who decided victory and defeat. Owing to the superior spiritual powers and the advanced military techniques of...

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7 Ibid., pp. 101–4
the Buddhist saddlers, the Soga clan finally defeated the Mononobe and Nakatomi clans and secured the Buddha worship. The Soga fulfilled their vow to reward the Shi-tennō with the construction of a temple, the famous Shitennō-ji (in present-day Osaka). After the Soga had defeated the Mononobe, they began to exert influence at court. As a result, the emperor also adopted Buddhism in addition to kami-worship.

The Establishment of Buddhism as the State Religion (Nara Period)

Owing to Korean and Chinese influence, during the Nara period (eighth century) Japan was transformed from a clan society with an emperor as primus inter pares to a centralised state headed by an emperor in the capital city. Emperor Shōmu (701–56) chose Buddhism as the state religion and built a huge temple in the new capital, Nara, as well as branch temples in the provincial capitals. Some clans developed into the court nobility. They built family temples in Nara and employed monks and nuns to pray for their prosperity and the well-being of their ancestors. At the same time they continued to keep their kami-shrines for traditional rituals and festivals.

Local conflicts between indigenous beliefs and Buddhist worship continued, however. They erupted mostly when Buddhists planned to build sanctuaries at certain sites; since the kami dwelled and reigned everywhere in Japan, spiritual and physical fights arose. The legendary (setsuwa) literature preserved stories of such conflicts. The Sanbō-e transmits a foundation story of what later became Daian-ji, a famous Nara temple: ‘The officials in charge of its construction cut many trees from the shrine of the local deity and used them for building. The deity was enraged and spat out flames that burned the temple.’9 Trees growing on sacred ground are called ‘divine trees’ (shinboku); they belong to the kami and were not to be freely disposed of.

A story of the Hokke genki tells that a pious layman built a pagoda on a mountain in the Nagano area. However, ‘thunder rolled and lightning struck and shattered the building’.10 The man rebuilt it, but the same damage occurred again. After a third futile attempt, a Buddhist priest came and promised to protect the pagoda by the ‘power’ of the Lotus Sutra. He recited

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8 Kamstra, Encounter, p. 240.
the sutra with a loud voice, and again thunder began and lightning flashed. Suddenly, a boy fell from the sky, revealing that he was the incarnation of thunder and lightning, and that the earth deity, his friend, had asked him for help: ‘A pagoda has been built on top of me and I have lost my place. Destroy the pagoda!’ However, now ‘the mysterious power of the sutra has subjugated everything and the Earth Deity has moved elsewhere. I am also frightened and awestruck by such power as this.’ The priest caught the incarnation of the thunder deity and ordered him to open here a well so that the priests did not need to fetch water from the valley below. ‘The prostrated Thunder respectfully received the priest’s orders and acted accordingly.’ This case illustrates the power struggle between Buddhist priests and the native kami. Like in the spiritual warfare of pre-Nara times, Buddhists attempted to subjugate the kami. Hence, one kami had to escape, while the other had to serve the temple. A peaceful coexistence seemed impossible, only the choice between Buddha and kami remained. This encounter followed the principle of battle: either victory or defeat.

The state-temple Tōdai-ji, as well as the clan-temples of the court nobility in Nara, such as Kōfuku-ji of the powerful Fujiwara, were at the same time monasteries housing monks and nuns. Here different Buddhist doctrinal schools emerged and sectarianism began in Japan. At the end of the eighth century, these temple-complexes competed in such a way for patronage that their quarrels threatened public peace. In 802, in order to control these conflicts, Emperor Kammu (737–806) ordered the sects to participate in annual doctrinal debates attended also by an imperial supervisor. Depending on the success in such debates, the schools received novices and economic support. The transformation of these sectarian quarrels into peaceful forms of communication seems to have functioned only for a short while.

Aristocratic Buddhism and the Emergence of Warrior Monks (Heian Period)

Conflicts between Buddhists and kami-worshippers continued during the Heian period (794–1185), but now both parties learned to live with each other, either in a serving or in a dominating role. During this time, Buddhist beliefs spread among the nobility, which required the coexistence

11 Temples and monasteries, as well as monks and priests, cannot always be distinguished terminologically because their functions are overlapping.
between indigenous and foreign worship. This was brought into the formula honji sui jaku (original ground – left traces): kami was interpreted as manifestations (‘traces’) of the Buddhas in Japan before the actual arrival of Buddhist worship. This dual system functioned in a way that the kami were in charge of inner-worldly concerns and the Buddhas cared for the afterlife.

At the beginning of the Heian period, two new schools were established in the mountains more or less distant from the worldly centres, the former capital Nara and the new capital Heian-kyō (Kyoto): Tendai on Mount Hiei (north-east of Kyoto) and Shingon on Mount Kōya (today’s Wakayama Prefecture). In addition to performing official ceremonies for the well-being of emperor and state, Buddhist priests increasingly cared for individual needs of believers, such as healing sickness or exorcising, mostly for the aristocracy. Two socio-economic developments during Heian times are relevant for our theme. The first is that aristocratic families gave into the care of monasteries those sons and daughters whom they did not need for their stable continuation or for marriage politics, resembling similar developments in medieval Europe. This implied generous donations, such as estates. Donations are a virtue in Buddhism and help accumulate merits, in much the same way as in the medieval Catholic church. Up till then monastic offices had been occupied by monks who qualified on their merit; now noble monks assumed such functions (up to that of the abbot) owing to birth. The aristocratisation of monastic complexes meant also that the economic and political interests of noble families influenced the monasteries.

The second phenomenon concerns socio-economic developments. During the Heian period, fighting over land possession and farm produce took place between different landowners, as well as between aristocratic proprietors in the capital and local administrators. Subsequently, servants and workers were equipped with weapons, and warriors (tsuwamono) were employed for the protection of their estates. Out of these conflicts developed the bushi class (later called samurai). Parallel to these developments, warriors

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14 In the long run, kami-believers could not bear that their worship had been subdued by Buddhists. Hence, during the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, this system was turned upside-down by ‘Shintō’ believers, as the native worship was now called. Subsequently, the buddhas were treated as manifestations of the kami who had been ruling and protecting Japan since its creation. Eventually, politicians in the Meiji period (1868–1912) put an end to this ‘dual system’ by establishing ‘state Shintō’.

also emerged in manors owned by monasteries, such as Kōfuku-ji (Nara) or Enryaku-ji (Mount Hiei). They were menial workers and low-ranking monks who were called summarily dōshu (hall monks, workers) or daishu (big crowd). These low-ranking monks were called ‘evil monks’ (akusō), because Buddhist monastic codes strictly prohibit the use of weapons. In later times, these monks were called ‘warrior monks’ or ‘monastic warriors’ (sōhei). The original word akusō clearly expresses the moral value judgement that the institutional or economic requirements of the temples contradict the Buddhist ethics of non-violence strictly prohibiting the killing of living beings. An early source mentioned that in 937 a small band of akusō from Nara prevented the influential Enryaku-ji abbot Ryōgen (912–85) from participating in an official disputation. Ryōgen himself is blamed for polarising the relationship between Enryaku-ji on Mount Hiei and Mii-dera (also called Onjō-ji), another Tendai monastery nearby on that mountain. This led to many armed conflicts between the two monasteries in the eleventh century. Enryaku-ji employed one of the most notorious groups of ‘evil monks’; its relative proximity to the capital meant that it was prone to getting involved in worldly power struggles. The aristocratisation of the monastic leadership played a significant role in the militarisation of monasteries because religious interests for economic and political power and those of the aristocratic families were intertwined.

The following cases illustrate the extent of the violence committed by akusō. According to the contemporary source Gukan-shō, akusō of Enryaku-ji burned down the Mii-dera at least five times in 1081, 1121, 1140, 1165 and 1214. Many monks and servants were killed and numerous sacred scriptures and images were burned. Armed conflicts took place within one school, but also within one monastery. In Enryaku-ji, for example, lower-ranking monks (dōshu) revolted against the higher scholar monks (gakushō) in 1167 and 1178. Internal fighting also resulted in abbots being chased away in 1184, 1203 and 1205. Violent conflicts occurred between denominationally different monasteries. In 1113 Kiyomizu-dera (in Kyoto) was caught in a conflict between Enryaku-ji and Kōfuku-ji (in Nara) over competing claims.

18 Weinstein, Aristocratic Buddhism, pp. 486–97.
19 Delmer M. Brown and Ichirō Ishida (trans.), The Future and the Past: A Translation and Study of the Gukanshō, an Interpretative History of Japan Written in 1219 (Berkeley: University of California Press 1979), pp. 322, 324, 328, 342. It was compiled by the Tendai monk Jien from a noble family, who due to monastic turmoils was appointed Enryaku-ji abbot four times and sacked accordingly.
for its affiliation. In the end, it was burned down by an army of akusō from Nara.  

Akusō became involved in a political dispute for the first time in 1156, when Kōfuku-ji monks fought in the Hōgen Disturbance triggered by a quarrel over the imperial succession. The Tendai monk Myōun (or Meiun, 1115–83) engaged his monastic army in secular conflicts between the emperor and a military leader on a larger scale. Myōun had already assumed the office of the Enryaku-ji abbot in 1167 by violent means, which left forty-eight persons dead. In 1177 he sent his monastic army in support of one of the foremost military leaders of the time, Taira Kiyomori. Later he changed his allegiance to Emperor Go-Shirakawa and fought against the Taira. Finally he was shot and beheaded in 1183 when trying to escape in a related fight. Jien wrote: ‘Myōun was a person who did one evil thing after the other . . . Since Myōun acted in such a way, many people were naturally very critical, even though they lived in the Final Age. And they declared that “His taking up arms again is not right.”’ There were other well-known akusō, such as the Tendai monk Kōmyō, who had been involved in the Genpei War (1180–5) between the Taira and the Heike military clans and who was called the ‘great evil monk’ (dai akusō). And the Kōfuku-ji monk-commander Shinjitsu, who may have been engaged in the Hōgen Disturbance, was known as ‘Japan’s number one evil martial monk.’ These cases show that the monastic, noble and military world in late Heian Japan were intertwined. When aristocrats increasingly entered monasteries, they also became commanders of monastic forces. Diaries of the twelfth century provide the impression that the role of the monastic armies grew in such a way that no warlord could control central Japan without their support.

Even the Shingon school in the remote area of Mount Kōya was not exempt from violent conflicts. In 1168, monks of the main monastery Kongō-buji began to quarrel with monks of Denbō-in over the privilege of wearing certain garments during ceremonies. After the latter was moved to

21 Adolphson, Teeth and Claws, p. 132.
22 Ibid., p. 46. For the following, see Brown and Ishida, Future and the Past, pp. 124, 137–8, 333; cf. 132, 332, 339. Adolphson, Teeth and Claws, pp. 138–41, 183–5.
23 Se no matsu or se no sue, another expression for mappō, the Period of the Final Dharma (see below).
26 Ibid., p. 87.
27 Ibid., p. 48.
Mount Negoro in 1288 and the new cloister complex Daidenbō-in grew considerably in size and economy, it also entered the battles of the monastic armies right up until the sixteenth century, when the military leader Oda Nobunaga defeated and destroyed the Shingon warriors.\footnote{Ibid., p. 47.}

Contemporary observers were quite critical of the akusō, as Jien’s comment about Myōun indicated. According to the Heike monogatari (Tale of the Taira Clan), Emperor Shirakawa (r. 1072–86) was reported to have said: ‘The flow of the Kamo River, the role of the dice, and the mountain clerics are things I cannot control.’\footnote{Adolphson, Teeth and Claws, p. 70.} This shows the power of Enryaku-ji on Mount Hiei. Another aspect is that temples and shrines enjoyed judicial immunity for secular authorities. Emperor Toba (r. 1107–23) complained in an edict: ‘Throwing away learning, they embrace weapons; they take off their monk’s garments and put on armour to burn down hermitages and destroy monk dwellings.’\footnote{Ibid., p. 77.}

Some modern historians have argued that the emergence of monastic warriors resulted from a ‘decline of Buddhism’. Such an explanation probably derived from contemporary Buddhist sources, which perceived their time as the ‘Period of the Final Dharma’ (mappō) according to the Buddhist view of history. Recent historical research, however, makes it quite clear that ‘the emergence of monastic warriors in organized bands must be seen in conjunction with the general militarization of society rather than the decline of Buddhism or certain monasteries’.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 6 and 9.}

The different kinds of violence carried out by ‘evil monks’ indicate various reasons and purposes of their military actions. In the beginning they had to defend and protect monastic manors, that is, the economic base. Then violence was used increasingly in rivalries between different schools, between different monasteries of the same school, or even within one monastic complex. Here the motivation was rather striving for sectarian predominance and for gaining more economic support from the ruling classes. Eventually, when aristocratic abbots became military leaders, they engaged their monastic armies in secular wars between leading military clans, or between the imperial family and military clans. These battles were fought for political influence and for increased patronage. None of these different kinds of violent actions can be called properly a ‘religious war’, that is, a battle for the sake of one’s faith, and the defeat of the other’s ‘false beliefs’, as happened in Europe. The goals of the monastic forces during the

30 Ibid., p. 47.  31 Adolphson, Teeth and Claws, p. 70.  32 Ibid., p. 77.  33 Ibid., pp. 6 and 9.
Insei (1086–1185) and Kamakura periods (1185–1333) were competition for land and for religious status among the leading monasteries. The monks were fighting for the same reasons as the secular elites: for supremacy of lineage, resources and land. Secular and religious institutions were connected through mutual relationship because the monasteries depended on patronage by nobles and the monks performed rituals in their families and at court.

Doctrinal Justifications for Religious Violence in the Insei Period

Incorporations of various martial elements are found among Buddhist icons. As mentioned, the ‘Four Celestial Kings’ (shitenno) helped the Soga clan to defeat the Mononobe and Nakatomi clans and their indigenous kami in war. As protectors of Buddhism in the four cardinal directions, they are clad in armour, bear weapons, have fierce facial expressions, and trample on subdued demons. Other fierce-looking Buddhist deities equipped with a broad range of weapons are the ‘Mantra Kings’ (myōo), who remove all obstacles in the Buddhist path and use force to lead believers to awakening. The most famous Mantra King in Japan is the ferocious-looking Fudō Myōō, keeping a sword and a rope in his hands and standing (or sitting) in front of an aureole of flames.

In his study of monastic warriors, Adolphson claims that Buddhists in Japan did not attempt to justify the akusō through doctrines:

Christian rhetoric strongly informed the mission of crusades and monastic knights, though political and diplomatic motivations certainly came into play as well. But the Japanese monk-commanders do not appear to have resorted to religious ideas at all to justify their activities, even though state ideologies contained the clear notion of mutual dependence between the imperial court and Buddhism... in view of the European example, the lack of express religious justification for monastic violence is a noteworthy difference.

In conclusion, the author suggests

that the category of religious violence provides little if any help in understanding the role of religion and monastic warriors in Japanese history. Instead, a careful examination of the political, military, and ideological contexts in which such violence occurred is far more illuminating and relevant than

34 Ibid., pp. 37–8, 42.
36 Ibid., pp. 81–3.
consideration of religious violence alone. Monastic warriors acted not differently than their secular counterparts, nor do they appear to have been motivated by a religious rhetoric qualitively different from other ideologies condoning violence in the Heian and Kamakura eras. In fact, the absence of religious rhetoric is itself of great interest, in view of our current assumptions about holy wars and crusaders. It suggests that other factors played at least as important a role as religious commitment for those fighting in the name of the Buddha.37

One problem with Adolphson’s research is that he does not recognise the religious elements in contemporary secular sources. Reading noble diaries or historical records more carefully one will find that at least the patrons of the monasteries recognised the contradiction between the basic Buddhist teaching of non-violence and the warfare of the ‘evil monks’, and they criticised it quite clearly. Another problem is that Adolphson does not investigate contemporary religious sources. Criticism by patrons forced at least the scholar monks to respond by formulating theories justifying monastic violence – otherwise they would have lost their support.

During the Insei period, when monastic violence emerged on a larger scale, two religious theories for its justification became popular. We have already encountered one teaching in the Gukan-shō, where Jien explained Myoun’s militancy with the deplorable ‘Final Age’.38 This expression derives from the Buddhist view of history consisting of the periods ‘True Dharma’ (shōbō), ‘Imitation Dharma’ (zōbō) and ‘Final Dharma’ (mappō). In Japan, the year 1052 came to be acknowledged as the beginning of the mappō period.39 An important scripture treating this subject is the Mappō tōmyō-ki (Record of the Candle of the Latter Dharma). Since it was quoted for the first time by Hōnen (1133–1212), it must have been compiled during the Insei period. It presupposes that mappō had begun already. Here we read:

Within the Latter Dharma only the written teachings exist. There is neither practice nor enlightenment. If precepts existed, then it would be possible to break the precepts. But since precepts no longer exist, what precepts are there to break? And since it is no longer possible to break the precepts, how much less can one keep the precepts?40

38 Brown and Ishida, Future and the Past, p. 138; cf. 4ff.
Since the sutras, including the precepts, disappeared during mappō, it was not necessary, and not even possible, to keep the precepts. Moreover, even though the Three Treasures (Buddha, dharma, monastic community) no longer existed, the ‘nominal monks’ still must be revered by laypeople because nothing else of Buddhism was left in this age. Mappō is here perceived as an objective historical development that cannot be changed by religious reform or any other endeavour. Hence, evil monks are exculpated and laypeople have no reason for criticism. Moreover, since there are monks in name left, patrons have to continue supporting them economically without any questions. This argument is the main aim of the Mappō tōmyō-ki.

The second form of a religious justification of evil monks was the teaching of the hongaku hōmon. During the Insei period, Tendai scholars developed the doctrinal distinction between the ‘Dharma gate of inherent awakening’ (hongaku hōmon) and the ‘Dharma gate of acquired awakening’ (jigaku hōmon). Traditional Buddhism teaches the latter, that human beings should strive through religious practice to achieve religious awakening or liberation. Part of such practice is also to follow the precepts, such as the prohibition of taking life. Since the akusō had to kill their enemies in order to protect the economic base of the monasteries, the hongaku hōmon offered a new path for liberation that inherently, or by birth, they had already attained awakening. They were therefore exempted from the necessity of pursuing the path of Buddhist practice, that is, from keeping the commandment prohibiting murder. This conclusion is quite similar to that of the Mappō tōmyō-ki.

The Sanjūshi-ka no kotogaki (Notes on Thirty-Four Articles), for example, treats this problem under the heading ‘Karma is identical with liberation’ (gō soku gedatsu):

According to the interpretation of our school, being originally nondual in essence is called ‘identity’ (soku) ... When one knows the doctrine of perfectly interpenetrating true aspect, deluded action in its essence is endowed with all dharmas; thus it is not merely deluded action but the perfect interpenetration of the dharma realm in its entirety. A hawk seizing a

43 Contemporary Pure Land Buddhists such as Hōnen drew other consequences from the mappō belief which did not suspend the religious practice. Cf. Martin Repp, Hōnens religiöses Denken: Eine Untersuchung zu Strukturen religiöser Erneuerung (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), pp. 336–9.
44 This theory is based on the teaching of the ‘Buddha nature’ inherent in human beings universally. However, it does not make religious practice and transformation obsolete, as hongaku hōmon does.
bird is, without transformation of its essence, precisely the true aspect of liberation. A fierce dog pursuing a beast is, without transformation, precisely the true aspect of liberation. And all other sorts of actions should be understood in light of these examples . . . One should simply sweep aside all partial views and dwell in the undifferentiated true aspect. One who does not dwell in understanding of the undifferentiated dharma realm has not yet grasped the meaning of karma being precisely liberation.45

Whereas Buddhism normally teaches the transformation process of first getting rid of evil karma and then creating good karma in order to achieve liberation, hongaku texts claim that despite having accumulated bad karma, an evil person as such attains awakening without previous transformation. Similarly, the Kankō ruijū (Digest of the Light of Han) presupposes that evil karma (akugō) is essentially identical with liberation. From here it discusses whether a person practising the Tendai contemplation (shikan) may commit evil deeds such as theft or murder:

However, if, returning (to the realm of daily affairs) from the inner enlightenment of calming and contemplation, one were to commit evil deeds without selfish interest (musa) in accordance with circumstances (nin’un), there could still be no difference (between karma and liberation). This is what is meant by Kannon appearing as a fisherman and killing all sorts of water creatures.46

Considering the fact that, wherever Buddhism was introduced, its missionaries taught fishermen and hunters to stop killing, the contradiction of the new teaching becomes apparent. If even Kannon, the Bodhisattva of compassion, incorporates herself as a human being killing fish, nobody may object to killing. The hongaku literature and Mappō tōmyō-ki are apocryphal scriptures introducing new teachings anonymously or under false names. The latter addressed mainly the irritated patrons and the former probably internal monastic critics, since it argues with sophisticated metaphysical deliberations.47 Both tried to overcome the massive contradiction between the claim of Buddhist morality and the social reality by eliminating the necessity for religious practice. The hongaku literature is not the reason for the moral decline of Buddhists, as Japanese scholars claimed, but its doctrinal justification.48

46 Ibid., p. 220; italics the author.
47 Repp, Höbens religiöses Denken, pp. 496–503.
48 Ibid., p. 499.
A comparison with the Pure Land movement which also arose also during the Insei period will help to put such approaches into perspective. The Pure Land teaching, too, presupposed the entry into the period of the Final Dharma and focused particularly on the liberation of ‘evil persons’ (akunin ōjō, akunin shōki-setsu, akunin jōbutsu). However, in marked difference to hongaku-hōmon and the Mappō tōmyō-ki, the Pure Land teachers taught the necessity of practice and spiritual transformation.49

Oppression of Pure Land Groups by Monasteries in the Kamakura Period

During the transition from the Heian to the Kamakura period (1185–1333), the warrior elite took over political rule from the court nobility. The shogunate established its government in Kamakura (close to present-day Tokyo). Violent conflicts between different Buddhist schools and monastic institutions also continued during this time. When the new Pure Land groups of Hōnen and his disciple Shinran (1173–1263) emerged, Enryaku-ji and Kōfuku-ji began to suppress them. Established religious institutions viewed a newly founded group as a competitor. There was yet another reason: Hōnen taught that faith in Amida Buddha and the calling of his name (nenbutsu) would be sufficient for religious liberation. This implied that offering donations to monasteries or entering celibacy would not produce religious merits. Because these two important Buddhist practices constituted the basis of Buddhist monasteries, Hōnen and his followers came in for harsh criticism. Subsequently, Enryaku-ji and Kōfuku-ji succeeded in convincing state authorities to punish the new group. In the end, Hōnen, Shinran and followers were sent into exile in 1207 and two of Hōnen’s students were executed.50 In his work Risshō ankoku-ron (Treatise on Establishing the Proper [Teaching] for the Safety of the Country) Nichiren (1222–82), for example, complained about the devastating economic and social consequences of Hōnen’s doctrine:

The rulers of the nation contributed counties or villages so that the [dharma] lamps might continue to burn bright before the images, while the stewards of the great estates offered their fields and gardens (to provide for the upkeep of the temples). But because of this book by Honen, this Senchaku Shu, the Lord Buddha Shakyamuni is forgotten and all honour is paid to Amida, the

49 Ibid., pp. 500–1; cf. 503–12.
50 For descriptions and analyses of these conflicts, see ibid., pp. 290–4.
Buddha of the Western Land . . . If temples are not dedicated to Amida, then people no longer have any desire to support them or pay honour to the Buddhas enshrined there; if monks do not chant the Nembutsu, then people quickly forget all about giving these monks alms. As a result, the halls of the Buddha fall into ruin, scarcely a wisp of smoke rises above their mossy tiles; and the monks’ quarters stand empty and dilapidated, the dew deep on the grasses in their courtyards.\(^{51}\)

This and other cases suggest that the reason for intra-Buddhist violence was not so much a new or a heretical doctrine. The hongaku hōmon teaching could be called heretical because it eliminated practice and transformation, but its representatives were not persecuted because they supported the economic and social functioning of the monasteries. The reason for the violent oppression of the nenbutsu movement was that it endangered the economic support and decreased the monastic membership.\(^{52}\) In this respect, Hōnen’s teaching and practice had a similar impact to those of Luther. In my view, the Roman Catholic church’s violent reaction aimed not so much at eliminating a heretical ‘new faith’, but at preventing the socio-economic damage caused by his teachings.

**Religious Revolts and Wars of Buddhist Peasants (Muromachi Period)**

As mentioned above, the monk armies of the big monastic complexes were active until the end of the Muromachi period (1338–1573). During this time a new group entered the stage of history: Buddhist lay believers belonging to the lower classes. From Shinran’s teachings emerged a movement which gained followers particularly among peasants, craftsmen and traders. Alongside the aristocratic Buddhism of the court and the military elite there now developed a people’s Buddhism.\(^{53}\) Shinran’s descendants became the movement’s leaders in succession. Probably the most influential one was Rennyo (1415–99) since he transformed the movement into an established

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53 Ulrich Pauly, ‘Ikkō-Ilki: Die Ikkō-Aufstände und ihre Entwicklung aus den Aufständen der bündischen Bauern und Provinzialen des japanischen Mittelalters’, unpublished thesis, Bonn University, 1985, p. 252. Buddhism had already spread among ordinary people since the Nara period, but it was not the dominating force in society, as the Pure Land movement became.
religious institution spread across several provinces. Its headquarters was named Hongan-ji. Because some Tendai temples in Ōmi province (next to Mount Hiei) had joined Hongan-ji, Enryaku-ji forces attacked its religious centres in 1465 since it had lost revenue from these temples. First, Hongan-ji could settle the conflict by paying large amounts of money, but then its members also became involved in violent upheavals against Enryaku-ji in 1465 and 1468. Such uprisings were called ikkō ikki. Ikki is the name for peasant groups which, because of economic exploitation, stage uprisings against feudal lords. Ikko is a Pure Land Buddhist term meaning ‘complete determination’ in pursuing the religious path. Hence, ikkō ikki denotes the peasant uprisings of Hongan-ji members. In 1488, Hongan-ji peasants in Kaga province (north-east of Ōmi province) suffered under heavy taxation, started a revolt, defeated the governor and began to control the land. This came as a shock for the other rulers.

Whereas Rennyo does not seem to have actively supported these ikkō ikki, even though he was closely related, his son Jitsunyo (1458–1525) directly ordered Hongan-ji members to fight. The time of his reign (1489–1525) was turbulent and during this period Hongan-ji became militarised. The conflicts extended geographically and rose from provincial to national level in 1506. The causes of the violent conflicts were disputes over tax, rent and land ownership. Moreover, Jitsunyo legitimised warfare. Richmond Tsang calls him the ‘warrior patriarch’.

His successor Shōnyo (1518–54, r. 1525–54) continued the policy of his father. During the Daishō ikki of 1531 in Kaga province he consolidated his power by defeating competing factions within the Hongan-ji community and assumed the provincial government, thereby increasing his secular power. Between 1532 and 1536, Hongan-ji was engaged in the Tembun War against a deputy shōgun. In 1532, ikkō ikki warriors burned down Kōfuku-ji in Nara and killed monks because it had outlawed them in Yamato province. In the same year, the shōgun asked members of the Nichiren sect to attack Hongan-ji, which at this time was located in Yamashina (between Kyoto and Ōmi province).
province). After the fortified headquarters fell in 1532, Hongan-ji was relocated to Osaka and built as a castle. In another quarrel, akusō of Enryaku-ji destroyed Nichiren temples in Kyoto in the years 1534–6, because they had dominated the capital for some time. In 1540, Hongan-ji had become so strong that it could cease paying tax to Enryaku-ji. In the 1530s, Shōnyō issued an ‘afterlife pardon’ (gosho gomen) for his warriors, which extinguished their bad karma accumulated through killing and instead ensured their safe birth into the Pure Land. He had become almost like a daimyō (feudal lord).

His son Kennyo (1543–92, r. 1554–92) behaved accordingly. Through huge possessions of land and governing the whole of Kaga province, Hongan-ji had developed into a powerful social and economic organisation, which also played a role in politics. In Mikawa province, temple towns connected with Hongan-ji claimed tax exemption from secular authorities. This triggered a conflict called Mikawa ikki lasting from 1563 until 1564. Also ordinary warriors (bushi) took part on the Hongan-ji side as in previous and subsequent battles. Kennyo did not attempt to justify war and killing in religious terms. The reason was, as Richmond Tsang assumes, that fighting was a natural part of the Time of Civil Wars (sengoku jidai; c. 1470–1580).

In these civil wars, feudal lords and warlords were the main agents, but monasteries such as Kōfuku-ji, Enryaku-ji and Negoro continued to play a significant role, as did the newcomers such as Hongan-ji and Nichiren-shū. During the later part of the Time of Civil Wars, the warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534–82) had emerged and eventually succeeded in uniting and pacifying Japan. Part of his endeavour was a lengthy war with Hongan-ji warriors and its feudal allies from 1570 to 1580, called the Ishiyama War. The banners of the ikkō ikki warriors read: ‘Those who advance (attack) will be born in (the Land of) Utmost Bliss; those who retreat will fall into the hell of uninterrupted (suffering).’ In the end, Nobunaga defeated them and destroyed the Hongan-ji castle. Hence, the ikkō ikki perished, and Hongan-ji lost its political independence.

Richmond Tsang comments that in the case of Hongan-ji a religious group provided the power of cohesion and loyalty. However, she does not see this power grounded in the Shin-Buddhist teaching of equality (byōdō) because she argues that this religious concept had not been transformed into a social one. Still, in his thorough study, Pauly emphasises that the religious ideas of dōgyō (fellow practitioners) and dōbō (fellow brethren) and the accompanying

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practice in equality replaced the hierarchical structures in court, state and aristocratic Buddhism as well as in the feudal society. At the same time, such concepts provided the ordinary believers with a sense of responsibility and subjecthood. 66 Hence, Pauly believes that the idea of equality provided the strongest religious-ideological support for the peasant leagues. At the end of such religious upheavals, however, as Richmond Tsang explains, Nobunaga’s (and later Hideyoshi’s) victories over the monastic armies and the Hongan-ji warriors ‘redefined the place of religion in society, severing it from its independent economic and military base and confining it to a far narrower band of operation’. 67

The Extermination of Monastic Militancy and the Defeat of the Shimabara Uprising

Adolphson observes that the monastic armies of Enryaku-ji, Kōfuku-ji and Negoro outlasted the Kamakura and Muromachi periods combined (1165–1573). In other words, they were more or less active over 400 years. The wars and rebellions fought by Buddhist monasteries as well as the rebellions and battles staged by Hongan-ji were not isolated incidents. They have to be seen in social, economic and political contexts, such as the battles among the feudal lords, warlords, court nobility and imperial house.

In his attempts to unite the country under a central government, the warlord Oda Nobunaga crushed the monk warriors of Enryaku-ji in 1571 and burned down the whole Tendai monastic complex. In the same endeavour to appease the country and to earn more taxes he also destroyed the Hongan-ji castle in the Ishiyama War of 1580. In 1585 Nobunaga’s successor Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–98) defeated the last Buddhist military stronghold in Negoro, the Shingon monastic complex.

Another revolt occurred in 1637–8, in which many Christians participated. European missionaries had proselytised quite successfully in Japan since 1549. However, they eventually came into conflict with state authorities. Because of the possible threats of Portuguese military involvement and of Japanese Christian daimyō becoming disloyal to the national cause, the warlord Hideyoshi and his successor Tokugawa Ieyasu persecuted Christianity at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Owing to this oppression, in the southern island of Kyushu many peasants suffered from hunger and

eventually staged an ikki under a young Christian leader. There were many Christians among the insurgents. Nevertheless, this ikki cannot be called a ‘Christian revolt’ because many non-Christians participated who equally suffered from malnutrition. The centre of the rebellion became Shimabara castle in the south. With the help of the Protestant Dutch, the rivals of the Catholic Portuguese traders, the rebellion was crushed and Japanese troops killed the insurgents without mercy. Subsequently, Christianity was prohibited until 1873, the country was closed to the outside world from 1639 until 1854, and strictly controlled Dutch trade replaced the Portuguese trade in Nagasaki. During the Tokugawa period (1603–1867), civil wars did not happen, although 2,719 peasant uprisings occurred between 1590 and 1867.

Conclusion

Adolphson’s approach to ‘contextualize religious violence’, that is, to ‘consider it not only from an ideological perspective but also from a social and political vantage point’, is indispensable for investigating the topic of ‘religion and violence’. He nevertheless doubts whether ‘the distinction between secular and religious violence can be sustained in historical analysis’, because both were analogous phenomena in Japanese history. Moreover, he argues, our modern Western approach presupposes the separation of the ‘political and religious spheres’, which does not apply to premodern Japan. Whereas it is true that the popular notion of ōbō-buppō (imperial law – Buddha’s law) does not indicate a separation, it does contain an obvious distinction as well as a correlation. After all, many lay people expressed their criticism of akusō quite clearly. Hence we may speak of ‘religious violence’ in premodern Japan. Our study has shown that religious people were conscious of the contradiction between the Buddhist teaching of non-violence and violent actions in society. Therefore they sought and developed theories that justified the evil behaviour before and after, such as the hongaku hōmon of Tendai or the ‘afterlife pardon’ of Hongan-ji. Religious teachings also provided stimulation and encouragement before and during fights, such as the Soga’s prayers to the Shi-tennō or the Hongan-ji’s slogan ‘The attackers will be born in the Land of Utmost Bliss; those who retreat will fall into the hell of constant suffering.’

70 Adolphson, The Teeth and Claws, p. 2. 71 Ibid., pp. 1–2. 72 Ibid., pp. 21, 35.

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Figure 18.1 Monk on horseback orders samurai to attack a monastery of another sect. Honen Enku Daishi-den.
Figure 18.2 Samurai attack monks. Honen Enku Daishi-den
Finally, there were also teachings that helped motivate people to engage in war and uprisings, such as Hongan-ji’s religious idea of social equality. Certainly, the main causes for uprisings and wars by religious groups were mundane, such as economic, social or political interests. The efforts of religious organisations to defend, maintain or increase their economic and social basis were accompanied by individual ambitions of religious leaders for power and fame. Religion cannot exist without an institution since teaching and practice must be transmitted on an economic and social basis. In respect of cause, form, contents and goals of violent conflicts, we may conclude that ‘religious violence’ played a significant role in premodern Japan.

Bibliographical Essay

The first book-length historical study of the warrior monks during the Heian and Kamakura periods in English is Mikael S. Adolphson, *The Teeth and Claws of the Buddha: Monastic Warriors and Sōhei in Japanese History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007). Using Japanese sources and historical research he clarifies the relevant terminology (*akusō*, later *sōhei*) and shows that this phenomenon is not a sign of ‘Buddhist decline’, as it is often portrayed, but part of the overall ‘militarization of society’. From the Insei period, warriors (*bushi*, later *samurai*) emerged as a profession and social class who had to protect landed estates of the nobility in the countryside because of increasing conflicts about ownership. As their counterpart, warrior monks were employed by the temple complexes to safeguard their manors, which constituted their economic basis (Figures 18.1 and 18.2). However, Adolphson neglects the religious criticism as well as the religious justifications for violence and warfare because his research relies mainly on secular sources.

If the Buddhist literature from the Insei period is read in its social context, as Martin Repp in *Hōnens religiöses Denken: Eine Untersuchung zu Strukturen religiöser Erneuerung* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), pp. 496–512 does, justification for violence can be found. First, the Mappō tōmyō-ki (Record of the Candle of the Final Dharma) argues that, since during the present period of the ‘final dharma’ the sutras including the precepts have disappeared, it is impossible to keep them any longer. Second, the *hongaku hōmon* (Dharma Gate of Inherent Awakening) literature argues that monks may attain liberation without religious practice, such as keeping the precepts, because they are already inherently awakened. Hence, murder and warfare are no hindrance for them. Whereas on the one hand Jacqueline Stone, in *Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press 1999), treats these texts as purely religious discourses, thereby following well-known Japanese scholars, Adolphson on the other hand neglects these and other relevant texts justifying Buddhist violence. Because of religious justifications we may speak here of ‘religious violence’.

The first comprehensive research on the *ikkō ikki* (peasant revolts by Shin-Buddhist communities) in a European language is the dissertation by Ulrich Pauly, ’Ikkō-Ikki: Die Ikkō-Aufstände und ihre Entwicklung aus den Aufständen der bündischen Bauern und Provinzialen des japanischen Mittelalters’ (Bonn University, 1985). This unpublished dissertation starts with a description of the peasant uprisings between the thirteenth and
fifteenth centuries. Its main part consists of a detailed account and analysis of the various ikkō ikki uprisings and their developments between 1465 and 1585, keeping the religious as well as the socio-economic factors in mind. He also provides relevant illustrations and maps.

Carol Richmond Tsang’s War and Faith: Ikkō Ikki in Late Muromachi Japan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) was the first book in English on the ikkō ikki uprisings. It covers the period between the Hōgan-ji abbots Rennyo (d. 1499) and Kennyo (d. 1592). However, it falls far behind Pauly’s study because of its inaccuracies in the religious terminology, mistakes in historical dates and shortcomings concerning references to sources, including maps. Most of all, the author fails to situate the ikkō ikki in its socio-economic contexts, in order to make this phenomenon understandable. As in the case of ‘warrior monks’, research into ‘religious wars’ requires a focus on secular and religious sources at the same time.
Religious rituals are addressed to supernatural powers such as gods, spirits or ancestors. They require a particular knowledge of the addressee’s demands and forces and of the ritual practice itself. This knowledge is often controlled by certain groups or specialists (e.g., elders, shamans or priests) and may become a source of power. The audience (if there is any), the ritual executors, the victims and the supernatural are expected to behave according to prescribed norms. Variation, misconduct and the breaking of rules may jeopardise the success of the entire act. Therefore ritual violence is also characterised by a certain formality, regularity and timing.

Human sacrifice and other forms of ritual violence, such as auto-sacrifice (e.g., bloodletting) were widespread in the pre-Columbian Americas. Societies differed widely in their political and economic organisation, ranging from small mobile egalitarian bands of hunter-gatherers to complex urban states. In the last period before the European conquest major parts of the continent were claimed by two empires, the Inca in the central Andes (c. 1400–1532 CE) and the Aztec in Mesoamerica (c. 1428–1521 CE), each with several million subjects.

Numerous artefacts related to ritual violence such as sacrificial knives and axes have been found. Demarcated ritual spaces, typical architecture (e.g., temples) or outstanding environmental features (e.g., springs, caves, sinkholes and mountains) served as its stages. Ritual violence is prevalent in the iconography of pre-Columbian sculpture, on ceramics and other media. Early colonial ethnographic and linguistic sources and, in the case of Mesoamerica, epigraphic analysis of autochthonous writing systems point to indigenous understandings of the rituals. These data are enriched by the bio-archaeological study of human remains. The age, gender and geographic origin of a
victim may be detected by osteological and isotopic analysis. The archaeological context, the treatment of the victim’s body (e.g., traumata), the probable cause of death and deposit formation provide important clues on ritual practices and their sequence. It may be possible, for example, to ascertain if an individual was burned before his or her demise. Cut marks, bone breakage, missing body parts and the comparison with animal food processing may indicate post-mortem treatments such as fleshing and flaying often related to ritual cannibalism and trophy cult.

Information about ritual violence is often controversial and biased by normative or strategic considerations. Colonial and postcolonial discourses have frequently either exaggerated or downplayed such practices. Thus, the critical analysis and cross-checking of data from different sources are necessary. Methodological challenges have to be met to sort out myth, ideology, hearsay, observation, interpretation and actual behaviour. Contradictions between the sources are common and the cultural context is often deficiently documented or neglected. These problems are particularly acute for the egalitarian societies in the pre-Columbian Americas. In the following, we will therefore focus on ritual violence and human sacrifice in the ranked and stratified societies in the south-western and south-eastern culture areas of North America, in Mesoamerica and in the central Andes. The Aztec example will play a major role for several reasons: first, ritual violence and human sacrifice were particularly prominent in the Aztec empire. Second, various depictions of such ritual practices can be found on pre-Columbian sculptures and in early colonial codices. Third, they are also referred to in eyewitness accounts of Spanish conquistadors. Fourth, the Aztec sacrificial complex was studied by early Spanish chroniclers, such as the mendicant missionaries Bernardino de Sahagún and Diego Durán. While the relevant information is relatively sparse for other Amerindian groups, these works offer profound and detailed historic and ethnographic descriptions of ritual violence and its mythological background. The chapter will end with a brief comparison of Aztec and Inca human sacrifice and some general conclusions concerning the functions and meanings of ritual violence.

2 Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1982); Diego Durán, Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e islas de tierra firme, 2 vols. (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1984).
Ritual Violence and Human Sacrifice
in the Americas

Ritual violence in Mesoamerica relied on a common base of ancient religious concepts. Practices described for the Aztecs – the sacrifice of children related to rain deities, for example – may have developed even before the Olmec cultural horizon (1200–400 BCE) which is indicated by the excavation of dispersed infant bones and two primary infant burials close to natural springs at the sacred site of Cerro Manati near San Lorenzo in Veracruz, Mexico, dated to 1700–1600 BCE. The rain and water deity Tlaloc or its representation in other Mesoamerican cultures, such as Chaak and Cocijo in the Maya and Zapotec regions, was of crucial importance for the indigenous economy based on rain-fed and irrigation farming. It represented a fertility cult directed to prevent draught, storm or hail and to secure a convenient timing for the rainy season and a good harvest. The lasting importance of ritual violence in Mesoamerica is also confirmed by early depictions of such practices. A carving on Monument 3 at the Zapotec site of San José Mogote, Oaxaca, dating to c. 600 BCE, is one of the earliest references to heart sacrifice. It depicts a male victim with an opened chest from where blood scrolls emerge.

In addition to its representations in the iconography, the long tradition of auto-sacrifice is proved by the excavation of cutting instruments for bloodletting and perforations made of jade, bone, obsidian, the spiny maguey plant and other materials. Elite tombs indicate that auto-sacrifice was a particular responsibility of priests and rulers. Findings in elaborate tombs from the Late Preclassic (400 BCE–100 CE) at the large highland Maya site of Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, for example, contained several stingray spines. Much later the depiction of a ball of twisted grass storing spines for bloodletting even became a symbol for the Aztec nobility. Blood was drawn from the lips, earlobes, genitals and other body parts. Women and children also participated in blood sacrifice. As shown on the famous Classic Maya lintels at Yaxchilan, Chiapas, Mexico, self-mutilation could include pulling a thorn-lined rope through the tongue.

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The Aztecs idealised the Teotihuacan (1–650 CE) and Toltec states (900–1200 CE) as particularly civilised, and adopted cultural elements of both. They reused relic sculptures and vessels, imitated the architectural style, referred to the same major gods, such as Quetzalcoatl or Tlaloc, and adopted various religious symbols. The expansion of both states was intimately related to militarism, human sacrifice and trophy cult. At Teotihuacan, the remains of about 200 individuals were found at the Temple of the Feathered Serpent (or Temple of Quetzalcoatl) erected between 100 and 250 CE. The predominantly male victims had been placed in groups of four, eight, eighteen and twenty, pointing to a numerical or calendrical symbolism. Seventy-six individuals were clearly identified as soldiers because of the weapons and the rich regalia found in the burials. The arrangement of real and imitated human and canid maxillae as their pectorals or necklaces refers to the custom of collecting human trophies. Depictions of felines, owls and eagles devouring bleeding hearts in Teotihuacan murals confirm the importance of war, blood and sacrifice.6

The Toltec state is renowned for a particular type of ritual platform often decorated with stone reliefs or sculptures of human skulls. The Aztecs called it tzompantli and used it as the base for racks to display the heads and skulls of sacrificed individuals. However, one of the earliest deposits of wooden skull rack posts and associated bones and platforms dated around 550 CE was found in the Chalchihuites culture site of Cerro de Huistle at the north-western frontier of Mesoamerica.7 Tzompantli platforms appeared later in other parts of the region including Tula, Oaxaca and the northern Maya lowlands (e.g., Chichen Itza and Uxmal).

The arrival of Central Mexicans has been made responsible for the introduction of cannibalism in the North American Southwest and for an increase in ritual violence particularly in the Chaco Canyon of the Anasazi region around 900 CE.8 However, local Anasazi elites may have adopted these cultural elements as a

8 Christy G. Turner II and Jaqueline A. Turner, Man Corn: Cannibalism and Violence in the Prehistoric American Southwest (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999), pp. 1–9, 459–84.
consequence of increasing trade relations. The growing importance of Mesoamerican corn may have induced a need for corresponding new rituals.

Andean societies had a long tradition of ritual violence just as the Mesoamerican cultures. Some of the earliest examples of human sacrifice were found at the Peruvian coast. Child burials had been deposited in architecture at Aspero and La Paloma dating between 5000 and 2800 BCE. In the early Cupisnique (coastal Chavin) culture dating to the last two millennia BCE trophy heads indicate an early connection between raiding, warfare and ritual violence similar to the examples mentioned from the Nasca, Moche, Tiwanaku and Wari cultures.9 The Incas preferred large animals such as llamas for sacrifice for most of their official ceremonies. However, humans, particularly children and adolescents, were killed on special occasions. Ritual death was considered prestigious, offering the opportunity to accompany the gods. For the important state ritual of capacocha (or qhapaq hucha, translated as ‘solemn sacrifice’ or ‘royal obligation’) the most beautiful male and female children from different regions were selected, often sponsored by their parents who were rewarded with prestige and tax reduction. The children were sent to the capital of Cuzco adorned, celebrated, ritually married and sanctified and subsequently distributed to the most important sanctuaries in the empire to be sacrificed. Capacocha rituals took place all over the Inca realm in times of ecological crisis (e.g., droughts, earthquakes, eclipses) and in the context of important political events, such as an emperor’s enthronement or death. Child sacrifice also accompanied dedication rituals of sacred sites on mountain peaks, for example. In so-called itu rituals the palpitating hearts of sacrificed llamas or dogs served to augur if a war campaign would be successful or not. However, sometimes children were also sacrificed for this purpose.10

Ritual Violence in the Aztec Empire

The sheer number of killings gains the Aztecs a top position among the societies that realised human sacrifices in the world. Between 20,000 and 80,000 victims alone were sacrificed during the inauguration of the

enlargement of the Templo Mayor or the Great Temple (huay teocalli) in the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan (today Mexico City) in 1487 according to Spanish chroniclers. These numbers are certainly exaggerated. Nevertheless, even conservative sources estimate that at least several thousand victims were sacrificed under Aztec hegemony per year in a population that probably ranged between 3.3 and 4.56 million people in Central Mexico in the early sixteenth century.  

The Templo Mayor was not only the scene of human sacrifice but the spiritual centre of the empire’s religious cult. The stepped pyramid rested on a large platform and was enlarged several times corresponding to the increasing power of the Aztec state. Two sanctuaries oriented towards the west were located on the platform on its summit, one dedicated to Tlaloc and the other to the war, sun and tribal god Huitzilopochtli. A tzompantli platform decorated on three sides with about 240 carved stone skulls was situated close to the building. The Spanish conquerors reported high wooden racks with numerous human skulls and heads on top of important temples. In the Templo Mayor more than 100 offerings and funerary urns including over 7,000 objects were excavated. A cache below eleven polychrome sculptures of Tlaloc contained infant bones including forty-two skulls. The infants, whose sex and social status could not be determined, had been 3 to 7 years old and were probably killed by cutting the throat.  

However, war captives represented the largest group of victims sacrificed by the Aztecs. The second largest group were male and female slaves bought on the markets. They had to be purified in a ritual bath before being sacrificed. The possibility of raising one’s prestige by offering a sacrificial victim was thus opened to Aztec citizens who could not take prisoners in war. Other victims were orphans, individuals considered abnormal (such as albinos or twins) or people chosen for their immaculacy, age or name that made them eligible to represent a particular god (see below).  

commoners as well as the inhabitants of the city-states under the empire’s hegemony contributed to the steady supply of victims needed for the frequent rituals by sending slaves and sometimes even family members.

Victims were killed by diverse methods, among them heart-extraction, beheading, shooting by arrows or darts, cutting the throat, drowning, burning, battering to death, strangulation, entombment alive, starving, or killing during gladiatorial combats. Most met their fate on sacrificial stones or altars on top of the temple pyramids or other buildings in the ceremonial precincts. Others were slain at important natural sites.¹⁴

Humans or animals were sacrificed in all major Aztec rituals, such as the installation of a new ruler (tlatoani) or of other important dignitaries, the celebration of victories in war, times of severe crisis or the inauguration of a temple. Sacrifices dedicated to one or more gods and goddesses occurred regularly on the festivals of the Mesoamerican calendar. In the eighteen-month cycle of the vague solar year (xiuhpohualli) of twenty days plus the five so-called ‘unhappy days’, nemotemi) rituals were particularly frequent, including about ninety occasions of human sacrifice. The divinatory calendar cycle of 260 days (tonalpohualli) and the combination of both cycles into a period of fifty-two years yielded additional occasions for ritual killings.¹⁵

Religious feasts often lasted for days and included preparatory and purification rituals of cleansing, sweeping, consecrating and energising the ritual locations, sexual abstinence and fasting of important protagonists, nocturnal vigil, processions, dancing, music, contests, ritual bloodletting, incensing, special costumes and other ritual paraphernalia, and diverse offerings and meals.

The Meaning of Human Sacrifice

Deities were strongly associated with nature and celestial bodies (and their movement). Their beneficial and destructive aspects represented the ambivalent relation between society, environment and history. Human sacrifice was generally perceived as tribute, gift or debt payment to gods in return for their protection, favour and the preservation of the well-being of state and society in the Americas. Divine violence was experienced on earth in the form of natural disasters or military defeat. Among the Aztecs: ‘Men acquired water and crops, and were free of illness and plagues in exchange for offerings of

¹⁴ Duverger, La flor letal, pp. 93–100, 138–66.
¹⁵ Dodds Pennock, Bonds of Blood, p. 23.
blood, hearts, fire, copal incense, and quails. The vocabulary in use indicated that in reality it was a kind of business transaction: sacrifice was called nextlahualiztli, literally an “act of payment”, and offering fire was tlenamaca, meaning “to sell fire”.  

The gods had practised auto-sacrifice in the process of creation to bring into being, energise and move the sun and the moon and to sustain men with corn and life according to some myths. However, the energy consumed had to be restored or recharged by sacrifice, otherwise the gods would languish and become unable to maintain the cosmic order.

The following paragraphs will briefly discuss possible meanings of human sacrifice in the Americas.

**Dying Like a God**

Mesoamerican temple-pyramids have been characterised as stages for rituals, and the buildings as symbols of sacred mountains. The two sides of the Templo Mayor have been interpreted as symbolising the Tlaloc-related Tonacatepetl (Mountain of Sustenance) where man obtained corn from Quetzalcoatl, and as Coatepetl (Snake Mountain) where Huizilopochtli was born fully dressed and armed and defended his mother, the earth goddess Coatlicue (also known as the Mother of the Gods), against his aggressive siblings (the so-called Centzohuitznahua or Gods of the South). Thus, the human sacrifices at the temple during festivals such as panquetzalistli andetzalcualiztli dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc may be interpreted as parts of mythical dramas. The sacrificial death of a victim as divine impersonator was called teomiqui (‘dying like a god’). The re-enactment of the god’s dying in sacrifice can be seen as the necessary condition for his or her subsequent rebirth, rejuvenation and regeneration by transforming death into life. In a third of the yearly festivals in Tenochtitlan women were chosen as victims, mostly to become impersonators of goddesses. Female impersonators were primarily sacrificed in rituals related ‘to the earth and to naturally occurring forces, substance and conditions’. Before being killed, the victims were costumed and treated as if they were gods over a period

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19 David Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), pp. 73, 190.
ranging between a few days and four years. They had to pass through their different roles, aspects and transformations. Such re-enactments including sacrifice are also known from the Maya and Moche cultures, among others. Decapitation (ch’ak b’iah) by axe was associated with creation myths in the Maya region and the ruler executing this act thus represented a primordial creator of the cosmic order. Among the Moche, human sacrifice was part of burial rites as well as of regular and special ritual events directed by high-status elites. According to Christopher Donnan, various themes in Moche iconography mirror actual activities of leaders identifiable by elaborate clothing, weapons, ornaments and position. Numerous narrative sequences show humans, men and women, who apparently take over the roles of heroes and mythological beings while interacting with gods, ancestors or representations of natural powers. Humans and supernatural actors are shown killing victims by slitting the throat with a ritual knife (tumi) or cutting off the head and drinking the blood. These sacrificial re-enactments are often symbolically related to the agricultural cycle and to fertility.

Energy for the Gods

The belief in the possibility to transfer animistic energy or vital force from a person to a receptor is central for understanding ritual sacrifice and autosacrifice in the Americas. Thus the preparation, execution and post-mortem processing of the victims should be understood as a procedure to control and deliver vital energy to the supernatural beneficiaries. The rituals were strongly influenced by emic concepts about the victims and their bodies. Aztec metaphors for the human heart (‘precious eagle cactus fruit’, quauhnochtli) and for the blood (‘precious liquid’, chalchiuatl) indicate that certain fluids, organs and other body parts were considered the gods’ preferred food. Hearts and blood caught on paper were burned immediately after the sacrifice in order to deliver their vital force to the supernatural. Blood was sprinkled on the floors and walls to charge the temple with energy or smeared into the mouth of the sculptures that represented the gods.

The Aztecs recognised three main centres of force in the human body: the head (cuaitl), the heart (yollotl) and the liver (elli), with their respective

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22 Carrasco, City of Sacrifice, pp. 108, 133–4.
25 Duverger, La flor letal, p. 92; López Austin, Human Body, p. 29.
26 López Austin, Human Body, p. 168.
Animistic forces tonalli, yolia (or teyolia) and ihiyotl. The shock of hair (temilotl) on the crown of the head was considered the seat of the tonalli, which was sent from the gods to the unborn child and determined his temperament. The tonalli could increase during one’s life-time by gaining prestige in the fulfilment of public duties. It could also leave a person temporarily or be damaged by transgressions, sickness or fright. Representations depicting the capturer grasping his enemy’s shock of hair not only symbolise the victim’s subjection but also the appropriation of his tonalli. The yolia, received before birth, was associated with vitality, knowledge, inclination and fondness. The ihiyotl entered the body during childbirth. Since the liver housed passions, feelings and vigour it was considered a source of emotional energy. These divine forces were released at the moment of death and returned to energise the gods during the sacrifice.  

Perceived as divine or as the gods’ representatives on earth, rulers could also be rejuvenated or empowered by absorbing the vital force of sacrificial victims. Inauguration rites were generally accompanied by human sacrifices. The widespread killing of children in these contexts is probably related to the belief that they were pure and fresh contributors of energy. During the Aztec Festival of the Flaying Men (tlacaxipehualiztli) dedicated to Xipe Totec (typically depicted as wearing a human skin), a prominent male captive was sacrificed and skinned. The Aztec supreme ruler became the impersonator of the deity while dancing clothed with the victim’s skin. The skins of additional victims provided novice warriors with divine energy in an initiation ceremony.  

**Enhancing Energy?**

Among the Aztecs, war captives were not the personal property of their captor but ultimately belonged to the gods. Their treatment varied according to their behaviour, the roles they were to play in the rituals, and the strategies of the responsible authorities. Although attempts to escape are reported, many captives apparently accepted their destiny and tried to die conforming to the ritual norms. While the impersonators of gods received much respect for a certain time period, other victims were brutally dragged up the temple by their shocks of hair accompanied by malice and scolding on the day of their sacrifice.

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31 Ibid., pp. 135–6.
Most Aztec rituals required a mobilisation of the victim’s energy by various means. In the vigils during the eighth festival of huey tecuilhuitl dedicated to the young corn goddess Xilonen and in vigils of other festivals, for example, music, singing and dance were employed to prevent the victims from falling asleep. They often had to dance to the point of exhaustion. In some rituals, adolescent women had sexual intercourse before being killed. Tension was produced by torture in other cases. The infants who represented the water and rain deity or his helpers during the festival of atl caualo, for example, were disquieted to keep them awake and their fingernails were torn out to make them cry because their tears stood for the rain to be summoned. During the festival of xocoll huetzi the victims were thrown into a large fire and almost burned to death. Then they were withdrawn from the large brazier and sacrificed by heart extraction.32

Torture was also employed in other parts of Mesoamerica. Murals found at the Maya site of Bonampak, for example, display nude captives whose fingernails had been torn out expecting their death in sacrifice. A famous painting on a Maya vessel shows a ritual procession accompanied by musicians approaching a bound and stripped victim on a scaffold. While he is still alive his intestines are torn out by a man using his lance.33

At the Moche Huaca de la Luna architectural complex near Trujillo, Peru, the remains of numerous sacrificial victims have been recently discovered. That most of them were adolescents or young male adults between 15 and 35 years of age suggests that they were warriors. Before being killed, mainly by slashing their throats to collect their blood, the victims had been tortured and made to bleed, for example by being struck on the face. Still alive, their noses were fractured, their scalps slashed, their faces probably flayed and their fingers and toes injured. These findings confirm depictions in Moche iconography showing similar treatments of nude bound captives.34

Duverger considers the pre-sacrificial violence and torture, at least in the Aztec case, mainly as means to discharge as much vital force or energy from the victim as possible.35

32 Duverger, La flor letal, pp. 119–23, 128–9; Carrasco, City of Sacrifice, pp. 84–5, 196–7.
35 Duverger, La flor letal, pp. 118–38.
Human Sacrifice and Ritualised Violence in the Americas

Ritual Anthropophagy and Relics

The human became sacred through the act of sacrifice according to Aztec beliefs. While some parts of his body were offered to the gods or consumed by the priests, the remains were delivered to the captor’s family for a ceremonial meal and the manufacture of relics. Thus, the victim’s spiritual force ritually energised the social group participating in the meal besides nourishing the gods. The flesh was regarded as ‘consecrated and blessed and they ate it with such reverence and so many ceremonies and fastidiousness as if it were something celestial’. According to some sources, the captor could not eat the meat since a symbolic kin-relationship had been established with the victim. The victim’s head, skin, hair, mandibles or femurs were conserved as a lasting manifestation of the sacred energy appropriated by the captor and piously spent for the gods. The relics or trophies also demonstrated the military or economic success of the victims’ providers. The hundreds or thousands of enemy skulls on the skull racks illustrated not only the gods’ repletion and hence the community’s well-being, but also the power of the Aztec state.

The collection and display of trophies has also been reported from the Mississippian, Anasazi, Maya, Wari, Paracas, Nasca, Cupisnique and Moche cultures in North, Central and South America, among others. The head was particularly sought after as an ‘entry point of the human self’ and important animistic centre of vital forces, as ethnohistoric sources from the Aymara, Central Mexicans and Maya suggest. While some of the heads found in the archaeological record may have been the remains of venerated ancestors, most were actual trophies obtained during warfare or sacrifice and sometimes used for magical purposes: Nasca interments of headless male and female adults and children as well as trophy heads were excavated at the Peruvian south coast. Early Nasca art associates trophy heads with mythical beings and fertility symbolism. They probably served religious specialists using hallucinogenic drugs to communicate with the spiritual world to foster the regeneration of plants and secure a good harvest. Magical powers (such as protective, oracle or mediator functions) may have also been important in

the Wari culture, where heads, often of children, were preserved for ritual purposes.\textsuperscript{40}

\textit{Animating ‘Things’ and Honouring the Dead}

The animating, rejuvenating and strengthening powers of blood and human sacrifices were also employed in the dedication and sanctification rituals of buildings or other sacred sites. This is indicated by caches containing human victims (often children) or by deposited corpses found at the corners or in the centre of buildings and beneath important monuments. As the findings at the Akapama, a large architectural complex in the Andean political centre of Tiwanaku (500–1000 CE) reveal, some rituals were accompanied by great dedication feasts while others represented more intimate venerations of ancestors.\textsuperscript{41} Altars in the temples on top of pyramids covering the tombs of Maya rulers or in front of their stelae (e.g., at Copan) were locations for ritual sacrifices dedicated to their commemoration or invocation. Features, such as tubes connected to tombs (psychoducts), helped to deliver the offerings to the deceased ancestors as in the Late Classic sepulchre of Janaab’ Pakal at Palenque. Stela 40 at Piedras Negras shows a ruler delivering his blood through a channel in the building to an ancestor awaiting it in the tomb below.\textsuperscript{42}

\textit{Burial Rites and Human Sacrifices}

Human sacrifice also constituted an important element of burials rites in the American ranked and stratified societies; 272 individuals, most of them probably sacrificial victims, were buried in at least six burial episodes spanning from c. 950 CE over about 100 years in the earthen Mound 72 at Cahokia near St. Louis, one of the largest Mississippian centres. In episode Sub 1, two males were buried close to each other with numerous grave goods. One of them, the famous ‘Birdman’, is deemed to have been a ruler. His cape was decorated in the design of a falcon and covered with 20,000 shell beads. Several slain men, some of them without hands and skulls, accompanied both individuals. In addition, fifty-three young women were arranged in two separate layers in a mass grave.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{42} Markus Eberl, \textit{Muerte, entierro y ascención} (Mérida: UADY, 2005), pp. 65, 152–4.
The sacrificial victims found in Teotihuacan’s Temple of the Feathered Serpent had also once accompanied important dignitaries. Additionally, in a recent excavation of the site’s second largest pyramid, the Temple of the Moon, erected between 50 and 400 CE, the remains of three dignitaries with rich offerings, killed animals and several sacrificed humans, most of them with the hands tied on their back, were discovered.44

Slain individuals, including children, also accompanied the deceased kings and queens in the Maya area. Such is documented for the burial of Janaab’ Pakal in the Temple of Inscriptions at Palenque. Maya rulers were usually buried capped and gowned and their tombs richly furnished with goods such as elaborate vessels filled with cacao and other nourishing substances. The faces of the deceased were covered with vivid masks of jadeite and other precious materials and red pigment (such as cinnabar and hematite) to symbolise the preservation of their life force for the afterlife. Some of the kings were also mumified. The meticulous documentation of the well-preserved Moche elite tombs in the Huaca Rajada at Sipan in the coastal valley of Lambayeque, Peru, dating between 50 and 260 CE allows archaeologists to distinguish between victims sacrificed as companions (probably wives), retainers (servants), guardians (soldiers) and high-ranking individuals (military leaders). Some victims had their feet amputated presumably to prevent their spirits from abandoning the ruler. Llamas and dogs were also killed.45

While only a few humans were sacrificed in Sipan, deceased Aztec dignitaries were generally accompanied by many victims who became their ‘beds’ (pepechtin).46 During the funeral ceremonies of Axayacatl, for example, all his female and male slaves, hunchbacks and dwarfs perished on the sacrificial stone. The hearts of the fifty to sixty victims were thrown into the fire during the cremation of the deceased ruler.47 The more elite members were distinguished from commoners in the ranked and stratified societies, the more divine they became, and the more animistic energy was conceded to them for their afterlife. In addition, the elite’s special living conditions, such as courtly life, had to be continued after death, which was not perceived as a final stage but as passage into a new sphere. Slaves,

45 Walter Alva, Gold aus dem alten Peru: Die Königsgräber von Sipán (Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 2001), pp. 38–211.
46 López Austin, Human Body, p. 377.
captured warriors, retainers, soldiers, military chiefs, counsellors and wives had to follow the deceased ruler for his company, support, entertainment and protection, thus confirming and communicating his social status in the afterlife.

Political and Social Functions of Ritual Violence

While warfare played a role in all complex societies in the Americas, it was particularly important in the Aztec empire as a major means of political expansion and tribute extraction. Consequently, the state promoted a religious ideology based on the sacrifice of war captives. The religious architecture and rituals legitimised Aztec hegemony, demarcated a hierarchy between centre and periphery, and fostered social and political cohesion. The elites of the numerous city-states that made up the empire were integrated into a redistributive network of marriage partners, goods and sacrificial victims. Aztec supreme rulers (huetlatoque) even invited hostile kings to Tenochtitlan to witness the sacrifice of the latter’s compatriots caught in war. Thus, the ritual killing of scores of victims displayed Aztec might and helped to impress allies as well as enemies. The longings of the gods mirrored the exigencies of the expanding state. This led to an increase in war and human sacrifice, because ferocious divine beings could not be appeased unless more victims provided a larger amount of animistic energy.

Human sacrifice not only demonstrated a polity’s might to neighbours but also corroborated unequal power relations between classes, generations and genders within the society. In Moche iconography, for example, elite members are depicted as executers in sacrificial dramas, which underlines their fundamental role in mediating between the human and the divine worlds, protecting their realms against enemies, and procuring plant growth, life and well-being. This is confirmed, for example, by grave goods such as ritual knives with representations of the sacrifice of victims found in Moche elite burials in the Huaca Rajada at Sipan.

In the Aztec case, no human sacrifices have been recorded from the private sphere, although domestic religion was important and house altars were

50 See, e.g., Alva, Gold, pp. 93–101.
ubiquitous. A hierarchy of political and religious authorities controlled ritual human sacrifice. Through its institutions and agents the elites monopolised the task of detecting the needs and moods of the major divine beings. Although their responsibility was to deliver, appease and strengthen the gods, the latter’s caprices provided the state with a certain ideological flexibility. Sacrifice and auto-sacrifice confirmed the social order and the essential role of elites and rulers for securing the society’s well-being because of their special qualifications in upholding the political-cosmic order. Maya iconography and hieroglyphs, for example, describe the flow of the king’s blood as k’uhul, meaning ‘sacred’ or ‘saint’, and associate it with the colours yax (green) and k’an (yellow) symbolising vitality. Thus the ruler was perceived as a divine being. The essence in the blood of the ‘godly king’ (k’uhul ajaw) represented a holy force and vital energy needed for agriculture and the maintenance of life.

Warriors not only were the main agents of state expansion but also provided ‘food’ for the gods by capturing sacrificial victims. Therefore, they were particularly honoured. Warriors accompanied their captives to the temple and danced with them before the sacrifice. They ascended the military ranks according to their personal merits, especially in taking captives. Commoners could raise their status to that of the lower nobility. Death on the battleground (‘flowery death’, xochimiquiztli), or as victim on the sacrificial stone, in the case of men, and dying in childbirth, in the case of women, promised a prestigious afterlife at the House of the Sun (a celestial paradise). As in other warrior cultures, death as sacrificial victim was as prestigious as being killed in battle. Even sacrificed slaves gained a prestigious afterlife. The children offered to Tlaloc passed over into the god’s realm (Tlalocan) where fertility and food abounded. An ordinary death, in contrast, was barely attractive. The underworld was regarded as an inhospitable place of suffering to be reached after a troublesome journey. This may explain why, according to Spanish records, some victims destined to human sacrifice refused to be freed and parents occasionally offered their infants as sacrificial victims.

Violence also fulfilled a didactic function and was part of the socialisation in households and schools. Elders depicted the world as a cruel, tough and dangerous place in their moral discourses (huehuetlatolli) to young nobles. From an early age, children watched sacrifices to gods and even participated as assistants cleansing the temples or decorating them with flowers. Thus the

55 Carrasco, City of Sacrifice, p. 177; López Austin, Human Body, pp. 82, 253–4, 313–43.
young were seasoned to violence, death and killing, preparing the next warrior generation. No wonder that Aztec warriors had the reputation of being particularly ferocious.

Ritual violence was also important with respect to gender relations. In the Aztec case, for example, it confirmed male dominance. Although individuals of both genders were sacrificed, their executioners were invariably male. After flaying a woman representing a godess her skin was donned by a man transforming him into the respective deity. The most important roles as priests, mediators or executioners were all filled by men.

Human sacrifice was also a thrilling entertainment for the audience, as indicated by the gladiatorial combats and the ritual ballgames where much betting took place. Some ballgames also had important political implications as some rulers allegedly played for the autonomy of their polity. The matches were dedicated to particular gods and self-sacrifice as well as human sacrifice took place in the ball courts, which proves that the ballgame had also important religious functions. This is confirmed by ball court decorations and other iconographic data from many Mesoamerican sites. In Yaxchilan a ruler is represented as a ballplayer waiting to play a ball bouncing down the stairs of the pyramid delimiting the playing field. The ball, however, is not just that but a bound victim. In fact, victims were mostly slain by decapitation in the rituals related to the ballgame. The iconography also highlights water symbolism and plant growth, which indicates a strong relationship to a creation and fertility cult. Rubber, the material from which the balls were made, was a symbol for blood. Thus ballgames should be interpreted as a combination of sport and ritual where gods could be honoured, nourished, challenged and maybe also entertained.

The frequency of ritual violence seems to be relevant for its performance. In Tenochtitlan, for example, it could be observed almost daily at one of the temples. This may also explain why some sacrifices were carried out more dramatically than others. The dramaturgy helped to establish and demarcate a hierarchy between rites, their protagonists or executioners, and the gods addressed.

57 Dodds Pennock, Bonds of Blood, pp. 27–33; Carrasco, City of Sacrifice, pp. 188–92, 205–10.
59 Duverger, La flor letal, p. 94.
Aztec and Inca Human Sacrifice Compared

The Aztec and Inca empires had grown to prominence since the early fifteenth century by a combination of conquest and alliances with polities controlled by local elites. While human sacrifice was present in both states, it was a key aspect of ritual, cosmology and politics only in the Aztec empire. Among the Incas, adult war captives were not sacrificed and there are no known myths highlighting the need of Inca gods to be fed with human victims.

Demographic or cultural materialist interpretations have been suggested to explain Aztec mass sacrifice. Michael Harner and Marvin Harris once argued that the dense population in the Valley of Mexico suffered from a diet deficient in protein owing to the absence of meat from large animals (domesticated herbivores, such as the llamas and alpacas in the Andes) that had to be compensated for by sacrifices and anthropophagy. The argument is not convincing, however, since the consumption of human flesh was mostly confined to the elite and to ritual contexts. Given the dense population, ecological restrictions and land distribution forms in central Mexico, additional enslaved workers were not needed, according to Harris and López Austin. Unwilling to send the captured enemies home, where they would have been a future threat, and having no capacity to integrate the captives socially or to exploit them economically, it seemed much better to assure the favour of the gods through their sacrifice.

In the Inca realm, in contrast, labourers were a prized resource. The administration struggled to distribute workers needed for state or temple farms according to economic necessities. Some groups (mitmaqkuna) were relocated to cultivate virgin lands, access new resources or intensify agriculture and herding. Their production was delivered to a complex system of redistribution.

Although both the Incas and the Aztecs were aggressive towards their enemies, and their state ideologies focused on co-optation, for example highlighting the ruler’s benevolence in terms of social well-being and protection, the Aztec state was relatively weak when compared with the Inca empire. In the Aztec empire, in contrast, the inability to effectively control the conquered

61 Harris, Kannibalen und Könige, pp. 159–65; López Austin, Human Body, pp. 82–3.
polities was probably a major factor in explaining the huge numbers of human sacrifices, who were mostly captured warriors. Massive population growth in the Valley of Mexico and the rapid expansion of the Aztec state had resulted in ecological instability, organisational stresses, and crises affecting both commoners and leaders. Mass human sacrifice can be considered here as a form of political terror to hold allies in line in the relative absence of institutionalised structures of domination.\textsuperscript{63} Thus, ‘the increase and decrease in human sacrifice must be related to the stage of political domination’.\textsuperscript{64}

### Conclusion

Human sacrifice in the Americas and beyond is based on the belief that nature, humans (living and deceased), rulers, gods and even physical objects such as buildings housed spiritual forces that could be addressed, animated or strengthened by offerings. The killing liberated the victim’s spiritual vigors and transferred it to the desired destination. The sacrificed individuals were often selected according to their gender, age, social position and personal qualities such as name, birthday or beauty. Infants, children, females or male adults died according to the particular ritual. However, war captives and slaves provided the bulk of the slain. The Aztec case provides some clues to the possible functions of violence in the sacrifice. It probably increased the potency of the ritual by attracting the attention of the audience and the addressee and enhanced the spiritual force, that is, the energy delivered, by the discharge of the victim’s adrenalin and the tension of the observers. The violence lent more weight to the ritual’s messages by impressing the observers and inscribed it more deeply in their memory. Beyond this, the violent killing demonstrated the priests’ and rulers’ power over life and death, heightening their capacity to inculcate dominant norms. However, human sacrifice may also foster social cohesion by providing an opportunity to experience community in the realisation of an act meaningful and important to the society. Several objectives of human sacrifice and other forms of ritual violence can be discerned:

- Human sacrifices represented regular donations of energy to the supernatural sphere, a kind of ‘food for the gods’ to maintain the cosmos.

\textsuperscript{63} Carrasco, \textit{City of Sacrifice}, pp. 76–7.
\textsuperscript{64} López Austin, \textit{Human Body}, p. 83.
This kind of energising was extended into the human sphere in ranked and stratified societies. High-ranking (god-like) individuals had to be strengthened to fulfil their duties.

Companions and retainers were sacrificed as attendants of deceased high-ranking personages. Thus, the afterlife mirrored the social hierarchy on earth.

Humans were also offered for the dedication and sanctification of temples to animate or ‘ensoul’ the buildings or other sacred sites and attract the attention of spiritual beings.

Some sacrificial victims became impersonators or representations of deities and other supernatural powers in ritual re-enactments of particular myths.

They were considered messengers or mediators in the communication with the spiritual sphere or served to augur the future.

Humans were sacrificed as special donations pleading or reciprocating for certain benefits, such as a good harvest.

The sacrifice could be an act of expiation, penitence and relinquishment redressing faults or sins of the sacrificing individual or collective.

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Circumscribing European Crusading Violence

Susanna A. Throop

Traditionally the crusading movement has been distinguished from other forms of Christian violence motivated or justified in religious terms. In the Western world, innumerable books and articles discuss ‘the crusades’ or ‘the crusading movement’ as discrete entities. The crusades, so the narrative goes, began firmly in 1096 when an armed, penitential expedition set out to Jerusalem in response to the 1095 appeal of Pope Urban II, and ended less conclusively at some point before the onset of modernity. Meanwhile, in a broader global context and across a wider range of media, some continue to invoke the crusades as explanation for ongoing geo-political conflict. These invocations, too, implicitly suggest that the historical phenomena designated the crusades can be contained by clearly marked boundaries, even if they maintain that the crusades have not yet ended.

If indeed the crusades could be neatly cordoned off, then assessing crusading violence would be a relatively straightforward exercise. One need only inquire as to the violence perpetrated during the crusades by participants. However, the idea that the crusades can be nicely delineated is a necessary but anachronistic fiction. The minute one tries to trace the purportedly clear boundaries separating the crusades from other elements of Latin Christian culture in the Middle Ages, one encounters two central difficulties. The first is the thorny problem of what defined a crusade from the perspective of contemporaries. Close on its heels is the second difficulty, namely which contemporary perspectives should be prioritised when attempting to make this definition. Do we primarily listen to popes or kings, critics or supporters, crusaders or those they fought? These difficulties are not unique to the study of the crusades, and the problems with attempting to fit the past into digestible analytical pieces are not new. The point for our current context is that, without knowing ‘the crusades’, how can one assess ‘crusading violence’?
Full careers have been devoted to defining the crusades, and this is not the place to resurrect the debate. Suffice it to say that the majority of crusade historians at this moment in time recognise something like the pluralist position articulated by Jonathan Riley-Smith: crusades were identifiable to Latin Christian contemporaries on the basis of papal authorisation, the taking of vows, the penitential nature of crusading warfare and resulting remission of sins, and certain other elements. Based on these criteria, crusades were fought not only against Muslim adversaries in the eastern Mediterranean, but also within Europe against purported heretics, pagan non-Christians, and political adversaries of the papacy.

From a pluralist perspective, not only was the geographical range of the crusades broad, but the chronological timeframe for crusading was nebulous. The so-called First Crusade (conventionally 1096–9) can be relatively firmly fixed as a starting point – though even that is debated – but pinning down an end to the crusading movement is difficult if not impossible. The crusader states in the Levant ended in 1291, though the order-state of Malta lasted until the end of the eighteenth century. The final multinational military expedition authorised by a pope was declared in 1684 against the Ottomans, yet there were resonant echoes of crusading (including the creation of a new military order, L’Institut Religieux et Militaire des Frères Armés du Sahara) as late as the nineteenth century. When seeking to define the crusades, then, even the pluralist position is admittedly imperfect.

Those imperfections intensify when it comes to thinking about crusading violence, because even papally authorised crusades resulted in violence that was not authorised and yet was indubitably directly linked to crusading in the minds of the perpetrators and victims alike. The most obvious example is crusading violence against Jews, which accompanied the launch of major crusades in Europe from the First Crusade onward, despite the explicit disapproval of the papacy and, in several instances, secular rulers. And if we consider crusading to have been a cultural movement expressed through a variety of media and relationships, rather than a series of military expeditions that conformed to specific criteria, the lines between crusading violence and other medieval Christian violence – chivalric violence, violence against non-Christians and other non-conformists, wars considered justified and/or sacred even if not papally authorised – become faint indeed.

Nonetheless, it seems clear that for many of us at the present time, crusading still remains something that is recognised when seen, in large part because the evidence strongly suggests that medieval contemporaries recognised crusades when seen. The lines separating crusading from the
rest of Latin Christian culture may be virtually invisible at the edges, and yet the implicit consensus was, and remains, that there was some central core to crusading that was distinct. What was that central core? At the risk of stating the obvious, both violence and Christianity must have been part of it. To examine crusading as a spiritual or penitential activity without acknowledging its intrinsic violence, or alternatively to view it as violence merely cloaked in religion, would be at best inaccurate and at worst a historical injustice. Whatever its spiritual characteristics, crusading was explicitly violent; whatever the violence involved, crusading was also explicitly Christian.

Yet we cannot conclude that the central core of crusading was ‘violence by Christians against non-Christians’, both because such violence occurred well outside crusading (however defined) and because crusading violence was at times directed at self-proclaimed Christians. The constant of crusading violence was the Christian identity of the perpetrators, rather than the identity of their opponents. We also cannot say that the central core of crusading was simply ‘Christian violence’; that would be too broad, encompassing virtually any violent act performed by a professed Christian. We are left to discover what distinguishes the nature of crusading violence. That, then, is the task of this chapter: what, if anything, was crusading violence, above and beyond Christian violence?

The chapter will first explain why crusading violence cannot be distinguished on the basis of its practices or its brutality. Similarly, while it is tempting to construct an elaborate picture of intertwining and complex conceptualisations, or ideas of crusade, as a means of understanding crusading violence, that approach is also insupportable. In contrast, I will argue that crusading violence can be identified in a simpler set of ideas. In summary, crusading violence was spiritually beneficial for the individual and the Christian community, was directed at the ‘enemies of Christ’, and took the form of organised and purportedly authorised endeavours.

Before turning to this argument, however, let us consider the alternatives. To begin, on the whole, we cannot distinguish crusading violence by its practices. Christian warfare was fully Christianised before the First Crusade, and while the crusading movement adopted many rituals and symbols for its own use – most notably the cross – it is hard to claim that it was distinctive in so doing, or that its claims to such rituals or symbols obliterated all others. To give one example, and at the risk of simplifying the point, there were Christian wars prominently accompanied by crosses before 1096 and
Christian wars that were not crusades prominently accompanied by crosses after.

Similarly, while it is unquestionably true that European warfare – and violent practices more broadly – were affected by crusading, it is difficult to identify the ‘crusading-ness’ of crusading in these evolving practices. This is true in the first place because of the diversity of crusading warfare. Crusaders adapted their violence in different ways in different locations at different times: crusading in the Levant led European armies to adapt their cavalry tactics; crusading in northern Europe led to a unique seasonal routine of so-called perpetual crusades; in the later Middle Ages crusading was increasingly undertaken by leagues, that is, multinational alliances of secular powers authorised by the papacy. None of these examples applies to crusading violence as a whole, across the entire period and geographical range of crusading. Secondly, we cannot identify the central core of crusading in evolving practices of violence, because these practices were happily used by practitioners of violence regardless of whether they (or anyone else) considered themselves to be crusading.

Nor on the whole did the nature of crusading violence reside in its brutality or extremity. Admittedly there were a few notable examples of crusading violence that exceeded the norms of the time. For example, many episodes in the Albigensian Crusades and the Baltic Crusades were grim and unrestrained by the standards of the day. Yet taken as a whole, while crusading violence may look distinctly brutal to modern eyes, by the standards of European warfare in its time it was not inordinately so. Savagery was not a consistently distinctive feature of crusading violence.

The conceptualisations of crusading – the ideas that underpinned the crusading movement and arguably lay at its central core – bring us closer to the nature of crusading violence. Contemporaries, so the argument might proceed, conceived crusading violence to be not merely a just activity, but indeed a penitential and spiritually meritorious activity. It was a form of imitatio Christi, the imitation of Christ, the highest Christian spiritual ideal in medieval Europe. It was an act of Christian love and also of godly vengeance. It tapped into apocalyptic concerns and belief in the miraculous. Crucially, it was authorised by the pope himself, and was directed at those deemed by the pope (and thus, it was contended, by God) to be enemies of God and the Christian church. Arguably, we could locate crusading violence in this complex network of ideas.

Unfortunately there are three challenges that can be put forward against this argument in its totality. The first and most obvious is simply that
members of the laity – from men-at-arms to kings – laid claim to some of the same conceptual frameworks for their own acts of violence, whether or not they were papally authorised. Indeed, well before the First Crusade Christian violence had a long history of related conceptualisations. Furthermore, as Katherine Smith has eloquently demonstrated, Christian spiritual practices had a long history of violent imagery and rhetoric.\(^1\) On neither side – actual Christian violence or rhetorical Christian violence – did the First Crusade emerge from a vacuum, as I discuss further below.

The second challenge is almost equally obvious and has already been noted: not all crusading violence – if we mean violence committed by crusaders – was in fact authorised by the pope and directed at those considered legitimate enemies of the Christian Church. The examples of such unauthorised crusader violence run from the massacres of European Jews in 1096 through the assaults on the Christian cities of Zara and Constantinople in 1202 and 1204, and on forward.

The third and final challenge strikes at the very emphasis on conceptualisation contained in such a definition of crusader violence. Undoubtedly, conceptual frameworks for crusading came into being over time, as writers crafted narratives of the crusades, artists of all kinds celebrated and commemorated them, legal scholars and theologians applied themselves to their justification, and the papal see consolidated its own position and procedures. Yet are we to believe that this framework was fully formed and neatly slotted into place in 1096 – or, alternatively, that the early crusades somehow did not include crusading violence, because this framework was not yet as cohesive as it would be later on? Furthermore, should we conclude that all crusaders – all those who performed crusading violence – were aware of and on board with the fine details of these conceptualisations? Surely not.

We must seek, then, a simpler conceptual framework that can be recognised from the First Crusade onwards in all kinds of crusading violence, whether authorised or not. To this end, my argument here is that, first, crusading violence was understood to be ‘not cruelty but piety’,\(^2\) to use the words of St Jerome. Crusading violence was considered to be spiritually beneficial for the individual and directed against the enemies of Christ, and thus beneficial for the Christian community and distinguishable from other

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kinds of violence considered to be cruelty. Furthermore – and this is what most clearly distinguishes crusading violence from other forms of Christian violence described in this volume – crusading violence took the form of organised group endeavours that participants and their contemporaries considered to be or successfully represented as approved by the papacy.

To begin, crusading violence was accompanied by the belief that this violence was spiritually beneficial for the individual agent. For this to make sense, we must recognise that the Latin Christian tradition viewed violence as ethically neutral. Violence took its ethical colouring from context, most notably from the intentions of its perpetrators. Thus, well before the First Crusade, ‘Christian violence’ was most definitely not an oxymoron, as it sometimes appears to modern eyes, nor was it simply a necessary evil. Given the right agent, with the right intentions, violence could be a Christian good.

In theoretical terms, to be violent with the right intentions meant above all to act from Christian love. This emphasis on loving intentions was a pillar of medieval ideologies of Christian violence from the Church Fathers through the early Middle Ages, and was further advocated by eleventh- and twelfth-century theorists like Ivo of Chartres, Anselm of Lucca and Gratian. In more pragmatic terms, to be violent with the right intentions meant to be violent, in the words of John France, ‘to maintain Christian society and its stability’. As France notes, this Christian violence included both violence in war and violence against criminals.

The traditional narrative of the origins of crusading ideas would leap from Augustine’s thoughts on just war to the papacies of Gregory VII (r. 1073–85) and Urban II (r. 1088–99). According to this narrative, Latin Christianity moved from just war to holy war to crusade, largely thanks to the words and deeds of the eleventh-century papacy. However, without seeking to deny the significance of the eleventh century, it is important to recognise that there was a well-established trend of Christian violence encouraged and participated in by the Latin Church well before then. We can witness this trend in any number of contexts, including Carolingian violence, violence committed by particularly assertive bishops, and violence against criminals.

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4 Ibid., 598.
5 Examples can be found in David S. Bachrach, Religion and the Conduct of War, c. 300–1215 (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2003) and also in France, ‘Christianity, Violence, and the Origins of Crusading’, 596.
Muslims in the Mediterranean advocated and actively participated in by popes from the late eighth century onwards. There was clearly a belief that such violence merited spiritual reward well before the First Crusade; to give one example, Pope Leo IV (r. 847–55) promised the Franks that those who died while fighting on behalf of the Christian faith would surely receive eternal life.

By the eleventh century, the church reform movement and popes sympathetic to its aims, most notably Gregory VII, strengthened this established trend. Gregory VII claimed ultimate authority over all Christian society, including kings and emperors, and articulated more forcefully than his predecessors the belief that this authority conferred upon the papal see the right to wage war and reward those who fought for him (that is, for the cause of the Latin church) with spiritual benefits. To give one example, he assured those who fought against his adversary Emperor Henry IV (r. 1084–1105) that they were fighting on behalf of Sts Peter and Paul, and as a result would receive blessings on earth as well as remission of sins.

It was during the papacy of Pope Urban II that Latin Christian culture moved towards the idea of penitential warfare. To fight a penitential war is to fight with the knowledge that one’s violence is not just in accordance with God’s will and merits reward – those ideas were already well established – but moreover constitutes in and of itself an act of penance. One’s violence is thus a pious act that helps repay God for one’s debt of sin and limits the amount of ‘repayment’ required from one after death.

Once again, it is important to distinguish theory from practice. Even during the First Crusade penitential warfare was taken to mean different things. Most notably, some represented it as a sort of instant entrance pass into heaven or automatic grant of martyrdom status. Later popes and theorists adjusted and adapted the idea, shifting away from, back towards, and then again away from the idea of crusading as penance that earned remission of sins. Meanwhile broader European culture continued to interpret such theories in different ways. However, what did remain intact for centuries and constant throughout Latin Christian culture was the idea that contributing to crusading violence – both through personal acts of violence

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and through financial support for these acts – was spiritually beneficial for the individual.

Was it really crusading violence that was seen as spiritually beneficial, though? Perhaps it was the suffering undergone by the crusaders that was so beneficial, rather than the acts of violence they committed. Undoubtedly, Christian suffering, not least the suffering experienced during a long and dangerous pilgrimage to the Holy Land, had long been viewed as spiritually meritorious, and it is indisputable that this was part of why crusading was viewed as spiritually beneficial. Indeed, one of the most constant crusading themes was also one of the most pervasive spiritual themes of the Middle Ages – that of the imitatio Christi. To follow Christ and his example, to carry one’s own cross, was to imitate Christ, and this constituted the very highest spiritual ideal for Latin Christians in the Middle Ages. Unsurprisingly, then, it was incorporated into crusading from the beginning. For example, the very earliest account of the First Crusade, the Gesta Francorum et aliorum Hierosolymitanorum, began with an explanation for the First Crusade rooted in the imitatio Christi:

When now that time approached which the Lord Jesus daily points out to the faithful, especially saying in the Gospel, ‘Anyone who wants to follow me, should deny himself and bear his cross and follow me’, a great movement was undertaken through all the regions of Gaul, [with the purpose] that if anyone wanted to follow God zealously, with a pure heart and mind, and wished to bear the cross after him faithfully, [that one] would not be unwilling to quickly take up the way to the Holy Sepulchre.9

In the Gesta Francorum, then, the ideal of imitatio Christi was not simply part of crusading ideology, it was its source. (The Gesta Francorum is unique in this emphasis. Other accounts of the First Crusade attribute a great deal more agency to Pope Urban II and emphasise a broader range of ideas.) From the First Crusade onwards, the imitatio Christi continued to play a major and ongoing role across crusading media (and thus across a wide variety of different audiences) and throughout the geographical range of crusading.

However, crusading constituted the imitatio Christi for two reasons: suffering and victory. Crusaders imitated Christ’s suffering through the hardships they endured while on crusade (including death) and the sacrifices they made in order to crusade. But they also imitated – or tried to imitate – Christ’s victory over sin and death on the cross. That victory was perceived and

described clearly and consistently as a military triumph, and Christ victorious as a successful military leader who defeated his adversaries. As discussed earlier, this rhetoric was not unique to crusading, but it certainly was emphasised in crusading sources, even some of the earliest. To give just one example, a verse depiction of the First Crusade described the crusaders imitating Christ through suffering and fighting:

hanging from a shining cross
Christ advances, victory yields to Christ.
The cross which sustains was our cure:
Therefore with equal right those who wish to imitate Christ
Bow their heads and endure vicissitudes.
They fight safely who fight beneath such a leader [dux];
To those who will fight, the good leader [dux] will give reward.\(^{10}\)

The crusaders did endure hardship, but they also fought, and they fought for a Christ who led them in war (as a dux) to victory. Likewise, one of the more intriguing prose narratives of the First Crusade drew an elaborate parallel between the crucifixion of Christ and the crusade. In a vision, Christ declared a hierarchy among the crusaders; those who stood at the front line and were not afraid were most worthy, and indeed were like Christ crucified, while those farther back in the ranks were less worthy, and those who hid like cowards at home were like the Jews and Pontius Pilate.\(^{11}\) The equation between committing acts of violence and imitating Christ could hardly be clearer.

For modern readers, it may be tempting to read the constant parallels drawn in many different media between crusading violence and Christ’s Passion as post hoc airbrushing or outright self-delusion, but to do so is to ignore the historical evidence. Crusaders – those who participated directly and those who supported the cause – imitated Christ through suffering and through violence. Indeed, going further, even to stress a distinction between Christian suffering and Christian violence may be anachronistic. One could read in both examples just given that suffering was violence (and vice-versa). In any event, crusading violence was not incidental to the endeavour, nor did it need excuse in the eyes of Latin contemporaries; it was not a necessary evil but a positive good.

Arguably the clearest example of crusading’s central link between violence and individual spiritual benefit is the creation and perpetuation of the military orders. The first and most famous military order, that of the Knights of the Temple (or Templars), was founded in Jerusalem in the aftermath of the First Crusade conquest of the city in 1099; it was formally recognised by the Latin church in 1129 at the Council of Troyes. The order combined key aspects of life within a religious order – chastity, individual poverty, obedience, and a commitment to spiritual conflict with the forces of evil – with a commitment to physical violence on behalf of God, the Latin church, and fellow Christians.

Although regarded with both early support and early scepticism, the concept of a ‘military order’ rapidly became popular. Another religious order in the Levant, that of the Hospital of St John (the Hospitallers), militarised from the 1120s onwards. The Templars founded houses back in Europe to supply the Levant with funds and fighters. Other military orders were created and played key roles in different European locales, often (though not always) within a crusading framework. In the Iberian peninsula a great number of local orders under royal direction made possible the Iberian ‘reconquest’, in northern Europe the Sword-Brothers of Livonia and the Teutonic Knights oversaw crusades and Germanic colonisation, and in northern Europe and the Mediterranean military orders even formed ‘order-states’ – Prussia, Rhodes and Malta. While we have to be careful not to conflate the military orders and the crusades – one could be a crusader without being a member of a military order – the two phenomena were linked closely in both ideological and practical terms. Crucially for our purposes here, the military orders, like the crusades, explicitly linked the individual spiritual advantages of joining a religious order with a mandate for violence.

Members of the military orders were not only concerned with the fate of their own souls; they also worried about the fate of Christendom. This urges us to recognise that crusading violence was considered spiritually beneficial not only for the individual agent. In addition, it was to some degree considered beneficial for the broader Christian community. This was true in part because of a non-specific, broadly conceived connection between individual piety and community favour in the eyes of God. As a result of this connection, victory on crusade signalled divine favour, while failure indicated the opposite. From the later twelfth century onwards, this divine favour or condemnation was believed to apply to all of Christendom, not just those who participated in a given crusade.

Yet it was also true because of the community function ascribed to crusading violence. Crusading violence served to combat wrongful violence
and punish those who had done wrong, and in so doing it promoted the good of the Christian community. This was in line with the emphasis on violence to protect the Christian community widespread in the earlier Middle Ages and already discussed above. It is worth repeating that, for contemporaries, this function of crusading violence did not contradict the imperative to commit violence as an expression of Christian love. Christian love for the individual could motivate one to violence. As Ivo of Chartres expressed it in 1094, to seek to ‘push [another] away from the bad and pull him to the good’ was an act of love, not persecution. Furthermore, however, Christian love for the community and for God’s will could also motivate one to violence. As Anselm of Lucca expressed it in his treatise De caritate, also in the eleventh century,

just as Moses the lawgiver by divine inspiration allowed to the people of God an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and so forth to repress the ungodliness of the peoples, so we will and applaud that princes should exercise vengeance against the enemies of the truth according to zeal, to a purpose of divine love and the duty of godliness.

Christian violence could be an expression of love not only for its target; it could also be an expression of love for the Christian community. Lest we believe these ideas were confined to the intellectual world of theorists, we should remember that Bruno of Cologne’s violence against others in his community was defended on the same lines: ‘it is only by doing these things that the guardian and teacher of the faithful brings to them the rare gift of peace and saves them from the darkness in which there is no light’.

There are a number of textual examples to show how these general ideas about Christian violence and its benefits for the Christian community found fertile ground in the crusading movement, but perhaps the best choice for our purposes is from the account of the 1147 conquest of Lisbon during the Second Crusade. According to this account, a rousing and lengthy sermon was preached by the bishop of Oporto to the crusaders urging them to fight. In the represented words of the bishop,

But now, with God inspiring you, you bear arms with which murderers and plunderers should be wounded, the devious controlled, the adulterers punished, the impious lost from the earth, the parricides not allowed to live, nor the songs of impiety [allowed] to go forth... Deeds of this kind are the duty of vengeance which good men carry in good spirit... It is not cruelty but piety for God.¹⁵

Crusading violence, then, was not cruel and instead was directed against the cruel; it was pious and directed against the impious; and it functioned to benefit the broader community by cleansing it of wrongdoers.

The quotation from Jerome and its reference to cruelty deserves closer scrutiny. As Daniel Baraz has explained, Latin Christendom was indebted to imperial Rome for a discourse on cruelty that was less pronounced in Christian Rome and almost invisible in the early Middle Ages. In contrast, he notes, the twelfth century saw the start of strongly renewed cultural attention to cruelty that ramped up into the early modern period, specifically as a characteristic that justified violence against perceived threats primarily inside, but also outside, Christian society.¹⁶

It is hardly surprising that in the central and later Middle Ages Jerome’s ideas returned with force to promote pious violence against the impious, who were so often identified as the cruel. In the fourth and fifth centuries, Baraz explains, Jerome had been ‘creating one of the most potent apologies for violence during the Middle Ages’.¹⁷ For Jerome, just as an individual limb might be harmed in order to protect the health of the body, so might an individual person be harmed in order to protect the health of Christianitas. Such violence should be deemed not cruel, no matter how painful or severe, but rather pious. These ideas were clearly relevant for the crusading movement.

Who were the ‘cruel’, the ‘impious’, the targets of crusading violence? If we want to leave room for all those who did in actual fact endure crusading violence, then we must limit ourselves to saying that crusading violence was directed at those purported to be the ‘enemies of Christ’. This was the language repeated over and over to describe crusading targets, including Muslims, Jews, heretics, and adversaries of the papacy. Critical readers will rightly note that ‘purported to be’ is rather open to interpretation. ‘Purported

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 17.
to be’ by the pope or by a random individual Christian? Similarly, they might query, is not ‘enemies of Christ’ a rather broad formulation? The response must be yes to both questions. But the great range of historical evidence makes it impossible to claim that crusading violence was only directed at targets approved by the papacy or targets actually attacking or threatening to attack Christian society. It is likewise impossible to claim that all crusading violence was even believed to be so directed – by the papacy, or by the majority of Latin Christians, or even by the majority of crusaders in a given expedition. After all, the Fourth Crusade alone furnishes a vivid example of an expedition containing plenty of crusading violence that was hotly debated by the crusaders themselves.

What is clear is that, around the Mediterranean and across the centuries, the various targets of crusading violence were consistently depicted as the enemies of Christ. As enemies of Christ – whether Muslims, Jews, heretics, pagans, or political opponents of the papacy – they were assumed to be actively working against the will of God and the good of Christian society. Thus Christendom benefited from crusading violence; it was protected from threat and/or assault. And of course, as already noted, to the extent that individual piety was linked to the overall spiritual well-being of Christendom, crusading was also spiritually beneficial for the broader Christian community.

There are additional conceptual themes that support the point that crusading violence brought spiritual benefits to crusaders and Christendom alike. For example, the ideas that crusading was an act of Christian vengeance, an apocalyptic undertaking or one awash with the miraculous all relate to and elaborate the main theme: the spiritual benefits of crusading violence. That said, dissecting all these related themes in depth is not necessary to appreciate the central point. Furthermore, to do so runs the risk of creating the impression that crusading violence conformed to an intricate pattern of conceptualisations, always and across the board.

Last but not least, however, we do need to recognise the communal nature of crusading violence. As already noted, not all crusading violence was actually authorised by the papacy, or even by any recognised authority, ecclesiastical or not. But indisputably crusading violence was undertaken by groups of Christians, not by individuals, even when the rhetoric used nodded to judicial punishment more than warfare and even though, admittedly, individual crusaders took individual vows. These groups were organised and logistically complex, either to a great extent, as with the grand passagia to the Levant, or to a lesser extent, as with smaller or more local
endeavours. They were frequently, though not always, multinational. Even when crusading became a phenomenon dominated by leagues of states in the later Middle Ages and early modern period, these leagues maintained an emphasis on alliance across political borders. And it seems indisputable that these groups considered (or at least successfully convinced others that) their violence was appropriately authorised, whether or not all of their contemporaries or modern historians would agree with them.

I have argued here that crusading violence was Christian violence that was considered spiritually beneficial for the individual, beneficial for the Christian community, and directed against the perceived enemies of Christ. Furthermore, this crusading violence was communal; it was undertaken by groups who believed (or at least convincing represented that) their endeavours were authorised. This understanding of crusading violence is narrower than undifferentiated ‘Christian violence’. At the same time, it is broader than many might like. If correct, then crusading violence was not bound within the confines of any given expedition or series of expeditions, not targeted at one particular group, nor necessarily restrained by submission to a higher authority, papal or secular. Additionally, crusading violence was not solely a product of crusading; it tapped into established ideas about Christian violence that predated 1095. Likewise, crusading violence was fully compatible with, and presumably often accompanied or was conflated with, other forms of Christian violence, such as those described in other chapters in this volume. After all, crusading violence empowered rather than restrained its agents, and its agents in turn empowered it. Whether or not we can circumscribe the crusades in other ways, in terms of their violence, the line between the crusades and the rest of medieval Latin culture is little more than the very faintest pencil mark, poised for erasure.

Bibliographical Essay

Not Cruelty but Piety

It may cause some surprise that a chapter on Medieval European chivalry takes as its focus issues of causation or even encouragement of violence, rather than its restraint or careful moderation. Within modern Western culture the popular view on chivalry has been generated by glowing cinematic images, by novels bearing bright covers featuring brave men rescuing beautiful women, and by the endless heroic fantasies of video gaming. All these ubiquitous purveyors of the past perpetuate a conception of chivalry that might well generate surprise at the more sombre analytical approach taken here.

In fact, the roots of this problem of interpretation reach much more deeply into our cultural past than its topsoil and spread far beneath the glowing surface of the present to draw upon embedded interpretations now centuries old. From at least the late eighteenth century, and powerfully throughout the nineteenth century, the groundwork was laid by Romantic writers and scholars who produced both historical accounts and imaginative fiction (easily blurred categories, of course). To them the medieval past was not merely colourful; they were certain how wonderfully usefully this period could point the way to solutions for a wide range of issues that much concerned them. The polymath intellectual Henry Adams unambiguously stated the benediction by declaring that ‘The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were a period when men were at their strongest.’ These neo-Romantics found purity and clarity of vision in medieval people (a view reflected in Pre-Raphaelite painting or neo-Romanesque and neo-Gothic art and architecture). Medieval ideals and

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1 His declaration is quoted (along with similar benedictions from other eminent Victorians) in the Silver Jubilee edition of James J. Walsh, *The Thirteenth, Greatest of Centuries* (New York: Catholic Summer School Press, 1932). Originally published in 1907, the book was reprinted several times. See the discussion in H. W. Kirwin, ‘James J. Walsh – Medieval Historian and Pathfinder’, *Catholic Historical Review* 45 (1958–9), 409–35.
practices, they thought, offered hopes for reform of the nineteenth-century world, which always was caught between optimism and moral and cultural peril. Most Europeans were certain that, at the grandest level, national greatness had been nurtured in the Middle Ages. Even some Americans joined the chorus, however much they might insist that medieval ideals needed refinement in the fires of the Reformation, Enlightenment and American Revolution. With less difficulty, leading European nations could trace their origins directly back into that medieval past. Drawing upon its ideal cultural and moral standards, society in general could be elevated, made less grasping, less drab and soullessly grey. The pall of materialism symbolised by the dirty smoke billowing from tall factory stacks need not utterly darken the blue skies above.

If medieval forms and ideals in general could be useful in a distantly post-medieval world, chivalry in particular was worthy of revival; it could address what Victorians thought of as ‘the boy problem’, for it might channel excessive male vigour and a regrettable tendency to violence by directing these impulses into safer and less disruptive outlets. The magisterial French medievalist Léon Gautier even constructed a tablet of the chivalric Ten Commandments that, in effect, provided a sacred valorisation for nineteenth-century nationalism, sustained by Roman Catholic morality.²

In an atmosphere dominated by such views it became almost impossible for scholars to look back through this rosy mist and to see chivalry as it was in its own time and place. Instead, they tended to see what they wanted: knights in shining armour riding to the rescue of the oppressed (and especially the rescue of women), or surging forward to fight boldly in morally sound causes (however reluctantly they indulged in bloody violence). Even in the present we continue to think of modern movements we like as crusades and have a long history of labelling them as such. The colourful and hopeful images can scarcely be erased.

Obvious importance attaches to understanding the sheer scale and significance of elite warrior violence throughout nearly half a millennium of early European history. Far from being merely frivolous, ideals of chivalry spoke to such basic dimensions of life as acceptable violence, destructive and profitable war, religious piety, social status and distribution of wealth, and gendered relationships. Our analysis in this brief chapter, thankfully, can focus on the violence, though that task is challenging enough, since licit and even lauded

² Léon Gautier, La chevalerie (Paris: Victor Palme, 1884). The commandments are explained in the first three chapters.
violence was entangled with so many basic structures of medieval thought and practice.

Scraping away centuries of romantic tinsel can clear a path to genuine medieval sources. Yet even when we reach this authentic medieval evidence caution is again needed, for medieval thinkers knew the power of chivalry in their world and wanted to shape it according to ideal standards. The famous prescriptive treatises so often used by scholars are, of course, highly informative, for they show us what thoughtful writers wanted in an ideal practice of chivalry. Yet these views (of John of Salisbury, Ramon Llull and Christine de Pisan, for example) can all too easily be taken as showing accepted and common practice of knighthood, rather than reformist propaganda directed at perceived social dangers. In fact, idealist views are more likely to show us what learned commentators in that world thought was actually missing in chivalric practice; their sharp pens point to gaps, rather than achieved standards. We need authentic knightly opinions, cutting through the lush and obscuring undergrowth of post-medieval romanticism and recognising medieval voices of reform for what they are.

The goal, in short, must be to find and understand working codes of medieval chivalry, the sets of issues and ideals for behaviour that elite medieval warriors could discuss over mulled wine after dinner in a castle hall, or while sitting around the embers of an open-air fire on one of their seemingly endless campaigns. Though they might well have read or heard idealistic treatises, they absorbed some ideals and downplayed or submerged others. The task would be easy if men at arms simply and obediently followed the ideals urged upon them by reformers who tirelessly announced that ‘the good knight’ adopts some particular frame of mind or course of action, namely whatever these reformers see as socially needed and morally sound. Likewise, the picture would be simple if these complex elite warriors could be reduced to quasi-brutes, bereft of any sensitivity to ideals at all, so that we could comfortably ignore continual reforming efforts, often carried forward by practising knights. In fact, the knights needed a framework of ideals for their hard lives; they picked and chose the advice that they would follow, and themselves created many of the standards they would accept, a point to which we shall return.

Where can we find the voices of the knights themselves or those very close to chivalry as it actually functioned? Two outstanding sources come quickly to mind. A History of William Marshal, one of the outstanding knights in the territories bordering the English Channel in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, was written under commission by his son after
William’s death in 1226. To a certain extent William is, himself, almost a co-author, as the account often draws on his own stories and reflections, or at least on the memories and opinions of those close to him. The result is a priceless portrayal of chivalric life and values. More than a century later, Geoffroi de Charny (d. 1356), one of the most renowned knights during the first phase of the Hundred Years War, wrote his own prose Book of Chivalry, along with a shorter version in verse and a book of questions to be debated by the royal order of chivalry founded by his king, Jean le Bon. Both William and Geoffroi were vigorous knights, held up as models. The book about the Marshal and the prose treatise by Messire Geoffroi will be used extensively, for they bring us as close as we are likely to come to working codes of chivalry. They show us a tough and pragmatic warrior code, far from anything frivolous, never an impossible dream.

This analytical focus entails no denigration of medieval achievement, no denial that chivalry still charms us with colourful costumes, courtly speech and dramatic gestures. Nor should it lead to denial that chivalrous patrons sought and gifted authors produced a glorious literature that can be read with pleasure and admiration to this day. Some modern people still take respectful instruction from certain abstract ideals such as chivalric loyalty and what modern admirers at least understand as chivalric honour. Yet we must exercise great caution and be certain of understanding how such values worked in their own society, whom they benefited, what needs they met, and especially within what social limitations they applied. Above all we must always keep in our sights the joyous approval of elite violence that occupied so central a role in chivalric thought and practice.

With a focus on such evidence close to the warriors, three approaches will help us towards understanding actual, working chivalric codes and the practice of chivalric violence. The first is a consideration of how heroic warrior violence was valorised through a widespread chivalric ideology. Although chivalric ideals could never display a simple uniformity across the considerable time and space of medieval Europe, certain fundamentals formed a recognisable core over several centuries; we can look for what was commonly said across a wide swath of time and space about the

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involvement of the lay elite in violence. Whenever warnings are given to warriors, these, too, will demand attention. A second approach considers more specifically the significant, if complicated, relationship that bonded chivalry to the religious ideals of its world. This topic is too easily limited to crusading and the ideals associated with it. All these ideals were certainly at issue; but the approach must be much broader than crusade and it must link quotidian life and practice to dominant religious values preached to and accepted by the lay elite. If the first two approaches regularly focus on what knights heard and thought, we need finally to look clearly at what they did as warriors. This inquiry will take us to their beloved tournament fields and onto the campaign trail and the battlefield. In each of these three efforts, it is worth emphasising, we must try to get as close to the men at arms as is possible, seeking to understand how they conceptualised their lives, their elevated status, and their profession as elite fighters. Only by edging as close as possible to their thought and practice can we discover how they conceived of the bold actions they took.

Chivalric Ideology

Since it contributed to so many structural elements of society and culture, chivalry was valorised by voices utilising a range of terms of praise to compliment the knights and men at arms for desired qualities. Commentators were sure that all of these qualities fused in their ideal heroes. Yet one bond fusing two superlative traits usually took a central position in these garlands of praise draped around the shoulders of valued warriors: this central bond was prowess securing honour (and to these, as we will see in the following section, religious justification was significantly joined). These terms had specific resonances in the medieval period. Modern conceptions of these terms may be misleading. Honour did not simply imply our sense of ‘being honourable’ (reliable, polite, truthful, fair); the medieval term denoted a social more than a moral quality; it involved a touchy sensitivity to public status and regard.5 Above all, honour induced and justified a compulsion to react with force and vigour against any perceived slight; for any offence allowed to fester without a suitable response would bring dread shame, the opposite and solvent to honour, which must be avoided at all costs. The

much admired knight Geoffroi de Charny compared honour in chivalry to the soul in matters spiritual; it was priceless and eternal, and in comparison mere death was of no account. And if honour was priceless, prowess was the endlessly praised chief agency that secured honour. Far from meaning simply developed physical skill or a form of abstract moral courage, it specifically identified ardent (and ideally victorious) combat conducted with edged weaponry. In short, feats or deeds of arms (often revealingly termed ‘chevalries’) constituted prowess and yielded the great prize of honour. Though the cause should be just, few warriors would have considered their arduous fighting unjust.

Fully citing the evidence from practising knights or those very close to them would exhaust the entire remaining space allocated to this chapter; but we can sense the force and tenor of this evidence by drawing on what was written about or by William Marshal and Geoffroi de Charny, our two fully active knights who were taken as models in their own age. Drawing on these two unexcelled sources allows us to stride back through the centuries and almost listen to armoured men talking about their profession.

The Histoire, which conveys the life and views of the great Marshal, offers a veritable hymn of praise to the firm bonding of prowess and honour, with numerous warnings about incurring shame if the bond is severed. His early career showed the practicality of earning honour – and sustaining it by considerable profit – in successful tournament encounters. As was typical of so many knights, William Marshal thought of chivalry as almost defined by the good exercise of prowess. His biographer describes one body of knights who were sallying forth against their enemies from a besieged castle as charging ‘por faire chevalerie’, that is to do chivalry.\(^6\) He later praises chivalry as ‘Such a difficult, tough and very costly thing to learn that no coward ventures to take it on.’\(^7\) And the lavish praise – even in this authorised biography – is not confined to the Marshal. John de Préaux, for example, is praised for taking and giving blows in best knightly fashion, as

\begin{quote}
a man who was pure gold when it came to taking blows; 
but those who tangled with him

did not get off lightly themselves,

for he was well capable of showing them what he was made of,

since he knew all about handling arms.\(^8\)
\end{quote}

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Of course the goal is ever to win honour and deflect shame. When jealous detractors accuse him of an affair with the wife of the Young King, son of Henry II, the Marshal meets the challenge characteristically with martial defiance. Not only will he fight any man openly making the accusation, proving his innocence by victory, like the fictional Lancelot in the world of chivalric romance, he will even voluntarily cut off from his sword hand one of the fingers essential to gripping and wielding that weapon. To this bold challenge there were no takers. John of Earley, a close companion of the Marshal, lectures his fellows, worried about retaining their wealth during one crisis, that

One should be concerned with his honour, so that no tale of our wrongdoing can be told; shame lasts longer than destitution.

He even warns that those who flee honour and fail to perform well by defending their lord’s lands (in Ireland) should be cursed to eternal shame by God. If, as we have already seen, Charny paired the soul and honour, the Marshal’s close friend linked chivalric shame with an eternity of hellfire.

Geoffroi de Charny was obsessed with prowess and honour as central elements functioning as a great Gothic arch upholding the structure of chivalric thought. Any reading of his works makes this clear. The very frequency with which he employs these terms in his most important work, the *Livre de Chevalerie*, underscores the point. Honour and terms based on that root-word appear 230 times in this relatively short treatise of about 100 pages in modern print; prowess and references to deeds of arms appear 146 times. The fusion of prowess with honour is dramatically emphasised in his opening pages, where Charny lays out a simple but revealing scale of increasing knightly honour won through martial violence. Combat in individual jousts within a tournament is surely honourable, he says; participation in the group combat within the tournament (known as *mêlée*) brings a man even more honour; but outright war itself (rather than the extreme sport of

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10 *History of William Marshal*, vol. 11, lines 13,719–42.
11 I am grateful to Alan Unsworth who used the following software program to make these searches: Stéfan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell, Voyant Tools Web (2016): https://voyant-tools.org/. The word count for ideas of honour includes nine instances of warnings against dishonour. The deeds or feats of arms or of chivalry that Charny constantly lauds are relentlessly martial. Thanks also to Nor Dimmock who recommended use of this software.
tournament) is truly the most honourable enterprise for a knight. The reason for this scale, as he explains, is that each new level requires more physical effort and presents more danger. He does not, of course, denigrate any demonstration of prowess and in fact seems never to have witnessed such a display that he did not admire. As he writes, ‘Indeed, all deeds of arms merit praise for all those who perform well in them. For I maintain that there are no small feats of arms, but only good and great ones, although some feats of arms are of greater worth than others.’ His advice to ambitious knights is clear: the goal is to:

- seek constantly and diligently opportunities to perform deeds of arms. And when God grants you the good fortune to find them, do your duty wisely and boldly, fearing nothing except shame, striving with the skill of your hand and the effort of your body to as great a degree as your powers can extend in order to inflict damage on your opponents, always being among the first in battle.

To a significant degree honour, in Charny’s view, is won physically; it is achieved through notable deeds of arms; it can be lost in any action that brings shame or any failure to take suitable vengeance. When a man he had paid to open a gate into the English-held fortress at Calais sprang a trap on Charny instead (resulting in Charny’s capture), Messire Geoffroi caught and killed the man, quartered his body and displayed the results publicly. The wisest and most able knights, Charny insists, fear shame more than mere death. He warns his readers to imagine the shame that would disgrace any man in old age if he has not done all that he could to win honour in arms.

Idealistic and reforming writing presented warnings and admonitions aimed at modifying aspects of knightly behaviour. The good knights, they pointedly declare (with fingers crossed) fight only in just causes; they do not despoil churches or trouble the poor; they obediently follow the guidance of clerics on all such matters. Prescriptive urgings by writers such as John of Salisbury, Ramon Llull and Christine de Pisan

12 Kaeuper and Kennedy, _Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny_. The same sentiment is expressed by a combatant in the famous ‘combat of the thirty’ which took place in Brittany, according to the chronicler Jean le Bel: The True Chronicles of Jean le Bel, 1290–1360, trans. Nigel Bryant (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2011), p. 213.
17 Discussed ibid., section 19.
are well known. But do results along these lines of exhortation or even close engagement with them appear in working codes of chivalry close to active knighthood? Even a hasty look into such working codes as those of William Marshal and Geoffroi de Charny reveal a much more limited and directed focus. The piety of knights is clear and not the issue at hand. What emerges is the sense that these men at arms – while considering themselves models of piety and members of one of the orders of society instituted by God – show an independent cast of mind in matters of profession and status. They stress the need to avoid dishonour and shame. As the writings by or about our two admired knights have already indicated, warnings within their codes were likely to stress preserving all-important warrior honour from shame, rather than any altruistic desire to reduce the exercise of violence as a social good. The focus, that is, remains within the social level of the knightly, with little concern for the sub-chivalric.

Shame emerged from multiple causes, of course, and was not limited to failures of knightly vigour. The *Histoire* of William Marshal makes this broad point clearly, sternly admonishing warriors that any act violating elite social norms – spreading falsehood, disloyalty, treason – could release corrosive shame upon resplendent honour. Yet this emblematic work elaborately highlights the shame resulting from weakening or severing the bond between prowess and honour. Any unwillingness to fight, any cowardice or reluctance to cure dishonour with violence, brings shame. A classic statement is given in one of the Marshal’s pre-battle speeches:

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This is not the time for idle threats,
let us quickly launch an attack on them [the French].
Let us give thanks to God, who has given us the opportunity
to take our revenge
on those who came here
to do us harm and damage.
Nobody should hold back:
a man takes full revenge for the wrong and shame done to him
when he overcomes his enemy. 19
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18 An argument developed in R. W. Kaeuper, *Holy Warriors: the Religious Ideology of Chivalry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). 19 *History of William Marshal*, vol. ii, lines 16,188–96. When, much earlier, the Chamberlain of Tancarville warns that allowing the burning of the town of Drincourt would be shameful, the reason is that his forces are defending it and must not allow the enemy to bring about its destruction. Ibid., lines 844–60.
Relentlessly self-referential, such working ideals offer no parallel to altruistic constraints on action in defence of honour that flowed readily from the pens of idealistic reformers.

This point of view emerges with even greater clarity from Geoffroi de Charny. Writing during the early phase of the Hundred Years War, Charny is particularly worried that French knights and men at arms will not hear the clarion call to arms, will not stir themselves to drive out the English from the kingdom. The constant enemies of honour are close at hand – sloth, timidity and the agreeable soft life. Warriors must play the tough game of war, not real tennis; they must don chafing armour, not doublets adorned with pearls; they must accept the inevitable gamble of combat, rather than the mild uncertainty of games of dice. Once roused and on the field, they can licitly collect loot, but never let it hinder the valorous engagement and pursuit of the enemy. Far from unique or idiosyncratic, this broad view can be found in the values of admired knights throughout medieval Europe and across the medieval centuries suffused with chivalry.

Religious Valorisation

If main lines of thought cherished by active warriors valorised prowess generating honour, how did men at arms come to terms with basic principles of their religion within a tough and demanding profession of arms? A first thought might be that medieval religion would function as a major agent in controlling or reducing the violence of the chivalrous, especially as it impacted the population at large. Did religious thought not purvey basic pacifism, or at least mercy and forbearance that would soften the warriors’ tendencies to settle issues with sword or torch in hand? Had the Prince of Peace not admonished his hot-tempered disciple Peter to put the sword back into its scabbard? Did not the good knights at least limit their fighting to crusade? Some historians interpret holy war as a worthy alternative to knightly fighting at home, especially if the combat took place at a considerable distance from Europe.

20 Kaeuper and Kennedy, Book of Chivalry, Sections 19, 42 and 43 present these diatribes.
21 The History of William Marshal documents this view on both sides of the Channel in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The biography of Don Pero Niño written by his standard bearer shows highly similar views in Castile in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century: Gutiere Diaz de Gamez, El victorial, ed. Juan de Mata Carriazo (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, SA, 1940).
Good evidence suggests a more complex paradigm. Churchmen did, indeed, strive in general to reduce the violence among the lords and kings of Christendom. On many a battlefield the fateful clash of armies was at least delayed while a concerned bishop or papal legates attempted to negotiate an end to hostilities. Yet the papacy under the vigorous pontiff Innocent III blessed a French invasion of the kingdom of England unresponsive to the directives and interdict from the Holy See and he launched a crusade against Cathars within southern Europe, in addition to a crusade originally intended for the Holy Land that veered, to his intense displeasure, to target Constantinople. Bernard of Clairvaux, in effect an uncrowned pope, had already enthusiastically promoted crusade and had written his famous treatise for the Knights Templar, labelling their knightly action not man-killing but the killing of evil.22 In an obviously dangerous world, churchmen knew that some violence was necessary and thought of rigorous pacifism as a notion of heretics who could not accept clerical authority. Even divine power had been obliged to resort to violence. God was the Lord of Hosts no less than the Prince of Peace; he had fought – and, of course, won – warfare in heaven against rebel angels led by Satan. European knights considered themselves heirs of loyal angels who had secured this victory. And clerics, as God’s agents on earth, continued to direct righteous force where it was needed, in an environment troubled by enemies within and without. Pure pacifism was out of the question and few churchmen could doubt that violence in good causes required knighthood. Thus knightly violence necessarily generated broadly positive evaluation, even though the speakers or writers also harboured doubts and worries about social costs. They loved the Latinate word play contrasting militia (knighthood) and malitia (evildoing). A peaceful and ordered world made their essential work possible.

However, if some clerical intellectuals in academic studies regularly blended considerable criticism with praise and valorisation, commentators closer to the warriors both in social environment and intellectual attitude tilted the balance of the scales of judgement decisively towards praise. Of course men who were vigorously professional knights – or those who wrote about them specifically – stood in the front ranks of the positive. They were sure of unwavering knightly piety. Some practising knights wrote their own views. Religious thought was not generated by clerics alone. Practising

knights cherished religious ideals; they welcomed them in the imaginative literature they patronised and read (and occasionally wrote); and a few of them even composed elaborate statements of the link between undoubted piety and their hard professional practice.

Clearly, views on religion and knightly violence could not represent straightforward opposition or contradiction. Instead, they intertwined in a great range of thought on chivalry appearing in formal treatises, in vernacular manuals, in chivalric biography and in the overwhelming corpus of imaginative literature (especially in *chansons de geste* and romance). Once again, if we can scarcely catalogue the full range and tenor of reformist opinion, we can continue the crucial task of seeking working views of the elite warriors themselves by noting how they accepted, adapted or quietly rejected the religious ideals that might give their profession particular shape.

Ever a good witness, the Marshal, as his biographer tells us, thought of chivalry as an honour divinely bestowed. It came to him in a court ceremony at Drincourt: ‘There William the Marshal was dubbed / a knight, and he willingly accepted the honour / accorded him by God.’

Throughout his career, we learn, God’s grace was so bountiful that his performed feats of arms always covered him in glory. When that career had catapulted him to the peak of chivalry, the Marshal was given the honour of knighting the Young King (son of Henry II of England). The language again shows significant lines of thought. The Young King says to William, ‘From God and from yourself, / My lord, I wish to receive this honour.’ Girding on his sword and kissing him, the Marshal asks that ‘God keep him most valorous, / honoured and exalted’, the poet adding ‘As indeed God did’.

In the heat of combat the cry raised by the Marshal’s men was ‘God is with the Marshal!’ A ‘loyal and whole-hearted friend’ of the Marshal (who considers him a suitable marriage match for his sister since ‘he carried well his shield and lance’) sings out in pious praise. ‘May the God who advances the cause of all worthy men / Take revenge for him on all those who have done him Harm and ill, although he has done no wrong!’

God is an imminent presence throughout the *History*. He thinks like a knight, advancing the careers and honour of the just, bringing wrongdoers to shame. The knightly sense of close companionship with the divine is striking, but not surprising. After all, Christ appears to be one of them, the holy warrior against evil who died heroically from a lance stroke in the climax of

23 *History of William Marshal*, vol. 1, lines 815–19. 24 Ibid., lines 823–6. 25 Ibid., lines 2,088–95 26 E.g. Ibid., lines 5,226, 5,862, 6,226, 9,608. 27 Ibid., lines 6,285–92.

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his earthly career. Not only does he value strenuous physical effort, his distribution of rewards is keyed to the severity of the effort undertaken. As William’s biographer says, ‘our omnipotent and most mighty God / Renders to each according to his effort, / Providing his effort is spent on doing what is good and / Honourable’.

In rewarding the members of the knightly order he has ordained, God relies on a scale of increasingly tough meritorious action, not unlike the scale of honour advanced by his devoted servant Geoffroi de Charny. In fact, Charny once again provides intimate insight into knightly thought. Beyond his ceaseless references to God and the Blessed Virgin Mary, he is even more explicit than the Marshal’s History on the bonds joining knightly suffering, merit and reward. After noting the merit readily earned by monks and clerics who lead a properly ascetic life (through sexual abstinence, frugal diet and hours of kneeling in prayer), he proudly awards the palm of meritorious physical suffering to the stout members of the order of knighthood:

this [suffering by those in religious orders] is all nothing in comparison with the suffering to be endured in the order of knighthood. For whosoever might want to consider the hardships, pains, discomforts, fears, perils, broken bones, and wounds, which the good knights who uphold the order of knighthood as they should, endure and have to suffer frequently, there is no religious order in which as much is suffered as has to be endured by these good knights who go in search of deeds of arms in the right way.

God values the very toughness of their hard profession, gauging his rewards by this scale. Triumphantly, Charny asks, ‘And where are the [non-chivalric] orders which could suffer as much?’ He caps this case by declaring, ‘Indeed, in this order of knighthood one can well save the soul and bring honour to the body.’ Once again his view is no outlier in chivalric thought. As far back as the Song of Roland the link between physical suffering in knighthood and spiritual merit that could reduce the payment owed for sin had appeared. In that foundational chanson, Archbishop Turpin calls out to the knights that God requires of them only one penance for their sins: ‘to strike’ the enemy.

As Charny’s contemporary knight on the English side of the Channel, Henry of Lancaster, succinctly states,

28 Ibid., lines 8,871–2. 29 Ibid., lines 9,224–7.
30 A theme developed in Section 40 of his Book of Chivalry. He piously notes that those who fight more for salvation than for glory in this world will be forever honoured in Paradise.
31 He develops this argument in Section 40 of his Book of Chivalry. 32 Ibid., laisse 89.
I can understand that through the slight pain I endure on earth I can be quit of the great pains of hell. This is a good deal (Ceo seroit une bon merchandise) as for a little suffering in this world, which is nothing to endure, one can escape the pains of hell, which are so terrible and joyless: and a man certainly cannot earn more by well enduring your gift of suffering than to have by this a reduction of the pains of purgatory.\textsuperscript{33}

The medieval church taught that God (who had in Christ died on Calvary to redeem humanity) was mollified by virtuous human suffering; it reduced the terrifying punishments for sin that loomed for every human in the afterlife. The knights, following their hard profession, reduced the punishment for inevitable sin. It was, as Lancaster drily noted, a good deal. If campaign and battle established dominance, ensured honour, provided sustaining profit, the very rigours and perils – blows, wounds and even death – ever present in armed combat, became forms of penance within the religious system they fully accepted.

The framework must not be imagined as limited to crusading. That crusade was meritorious fighting could never be gainsaid. The warriors lauded and exhorted in the \textit{Song of Roland} are fighting Muslim enemies (with almost demonic allies); both Charny and Lancaster served as crusaders; Charny praised the fighting on crusade as ‘righteous, holy, certain, and sure’.\textsuperscript{34} Clerics, joined by some modern historians, would have been happier if the knighthood of Europe had indeed limited their combat to crusade, most of it far enough away from the homeland to reduce disruption. But this is far from the attitudes embedded in what we can recover as working codes of chivalry. If crusading claims an honoured place, all good knightly combat is viewed as meritorious, as productive of both prized earthly honour and eternal heavenly reward. In effect, the rich fabric of crusading merit is stretched to cover all knightly combat.

Whatever view we take of the moral results of a fusion between chivalric practice and undoubted knightly piety, recognising the power of the bond remains crucial. Just before the fatal sword blow ended Charny’s life on the battlefield of Poitiers in 1356, the thoughts active beneath his helm must have included not only details of effective combat and the protection of the king of France, but probably the honoured reception awaiting him in a gloriously chivalric heaven, presided over by the Lord of Hosts. If clerics valiantly tried to mould knighthood into compatibility with their conception of social and


\textsuperscript{34} The Book of Chivalry, laisse 35.
religious order, the knightly working codes of chivalry suggest a piety that valorised their profession and justified the elevated social status that it ensured.

Tournament and War

Medieval society in the ‘age of chivalry’ was clearly obsessed with the range of extreme chivalric sport we simplify as the tournament, though the violent action took numerous forms. This sport fills many pages of romance, where it regularly settles a range of matters at issue, its drama and colourful display appear in eye-catching paintings that still fill modern books, and it commands constant attention in chivalric biography and vernacular manuals. Modern audiences still flock to see its enthusiastic recreations outside genuine castle ruins in Europe or at ‘Renaissance fairs’ in the United States. We are primed by all such representation to think of it, at minimum, as colourful fun, and at maximum, as the moral equivalent of war, a channelling of competitive male urges that is safely restricted to a specified location and not, in intent at least, fatal.

It is important for analysis, once again, to look beneath the polished surface. The forms of tournament evolved over several centuries and only gradually took on the stylised pattern we think of most readily. Early tournament was simply arranged combat with, as in much knightly combat, the goal of overcoming elite opponents and securing valuable captives for ransom and possession of their expensive mounts. It was a wild as well as an exuberant enterprise, with bands of horsemen (and occasional support from foot soldiers) ranging over the countryside to ambush and engage opponents. The strenuous and dangerous group fighting of mêlée that Charny admired more than individual jousting enjoyed a long lifetime, though individual jousts came to predominate.

Social disruption was always a danger. Verdant fields and hedges might not survive. Even travellers and innkeepers on the roads leading to and from the designated region (originally not a single field) might be victimised. Ordinary agricultural families must have found even greater cause for fear. Townsmen would have been caught between greed and alarm. If the lads paid for goods and service they were a source of profit; yet they could in effect be dangerous visitors, fully armed and often inebriated, operating on a keen sense of entitlement.35

Lay and ecclesiastical governing agencies originally viewed the entire business with uneasy muttering and head shaking. Church officials firmly denounced tournaments as a potent source of sin, until they gave up the futile effort. Kings often tried to prohibit or at least to regulate the sport in the interests of public peace and in fear that armed gatherings could cover the beginnings of rebellion. Finally kings and great lords (and some urban governing bodies) decided the best and most congenial course was to lead rather than to prohibit. The plethora of chivalric orders founded in the later Middle Ages stands in witness to their adoption of this policy. By the end of the Middle Ages the tournament had come to be more limited to a set tourney ground, where individual jousting in massive plate armour could provide the thrill with less danger to participants and to social order. Tournament had travelled a long road to this point.

If tournament had long been a source of mixed pride and worry as near-war, the question then becomes how the exercise of the knightly profession in full-scale warfare affected society. Whatever idealistic treatises might urge, what was the impact of working ideas of chivalry on the practice of warfare? Beginning students tend to assume that the chivalrous were, above all, concerned with protection of ‘civilian’ populations in general, trying manfully to limit the depredations of ‘the common soldiers’, an attitude that makes of the knights the medieval version of idealised elite officers projected by their Victorian or Edwardian contemporaries. Such views are often joined by ideas of knights carefully and self-consciously ‘fighting fair’, of their never starting – but always finishing – fights, and of a distinct disinclination on their part to make warfare a source of grubby profit. Conceived in this vein, medieval war seems a rather elegant game played cleanly by gentlemen; their working chivalric ideals are viewed as a precursor of the Geneva Conventions or even the Marquis of Queensbury rules for boxing. They wanted to avoid war, abhorred bloodshed, preferred self-sacrificing fairness to victory, and disdained loot.

Sound evidence leads to a quite different picture. Warriors who knew that they might live or die and their cause triumph or perish adopted many a ruse on campaign and in battle; and their tactics were praised. The admired William Marshal advised Henry II of England, during the endless border war with the king of France, to seem to disband his army, but secretly to keep

it in readiness; he need only wait for the opposing king to do the same, and then to strike decisively. King Henry praised this pragmatic advice as mult corteis (wise, or even ‘quite courtly’). More than a century later, Jean le Bel described a ‘brilliant trap’ by which many of the knights of the French royal chivalric order were slaughtered. Likewise, choice of a site for combat favourable to one’s own side represented common sense. More than a few castles were taken by a stealthy climb up an unguarded wall on a moonless night; a hefty payment might simply open a key gate. The protection on offer by the knightly unsurprisingly referred to one’s own territory and its people, not the unarmed mass in general.

Of course warfare could not be successfully pursued in utterly chaotic and formless conditions. Basic notions and a broad framework were needed; but they were mainly concerned with warrior relations, rather than warrior relations with civilians. Given the shifting fortunes of war, the men at arms knew that any mistreatment of other elite fighters might someday be turned against them. The set of questions that Geoffroi de Charny proposed for discussion by the royal French Order of the Star focus pragmatically on distribution of loot and arrangements for ransom. They do not concern the treatment of non-combatants or seem at all to represent forerunners of the Geneva Conventions.

This pragmatic framework was clearly still emerging in the mid fourteenth century. But basic groundwork had been effected several centuries earlier as martial norms developed. This case has been persuasively argued by Matthew Strickland and John Gillingham. The era in which chivalric ideas began to emerge saw an end to aspects of warfare that had characterised the earlier Middle Ages, in what is sometimes termed the ‘heroic age’ of Germanic and Viking warfare. Significantly, enslavement or even killing of defeated enemies gave way to the widespread and profitable practice of ransoming elite captives. More broadly, rampant slave raiding declined dramatically in western Europe. Such changes seem well documented and of obvious importance. The chivalry which developed in the later eleventh and the twelfth centuries could scarcely have come into being without them.

38 History of William Marshal, vol. 1, lines 7,800–1.
40 See the case of Charny’s effort at Calais: The Book of Chivalry, pp. 10–13.
41 See Walter Mauny’s advice to Edward III about the prudent treatment of those who surrendered Calais: The True Chronicles of Jean le Bel, trans. Bryant, p. 201.
42 At least some of their numerous works are briefly discussed and fully cited in R. W Kaeuper, Medieval Chivalry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 78–9.
These changes did not, of course, lead to a romanticised view or practice of chivalric warfare. The plain fact remains that this chivalric warfare was conducted, in no small measure, by the ravaging of an opponent’s lands and the looting, often the displacement or even the killing of some of its people. The process was, as Strickland notes, the most devastating form of war practised before the advent of massive aerial bombardment in the Second World War. Ravaging, looting and arson were not exceptional practices promoted by a few exceptionally vicious combatants, but the common method of conducting war, century after medieval century. In this sense, the era of chivalry did not transform war into something much less devastating, nor into a gentler form unique in world history. Elite, well-mounted warriors, wearing good armour and plumes, may not often have dismounted to carry a blazing torch towards the dwellings or waving grain fields of villagers or the shops, bridges or ships of townsmen; but their policies are clear from the actions taken under their leadership.

Major battles did indeed take place, often with decisive results. But commanders knew the risks involved in these throws of the dice and often contented themselves with the torch, rather than the sword. Serious local disputes and border raiding had long followed these tactics, but by the fourteenth century the enhanced state power that could energise and implement war, based on effective apparatus of taxation, brought about the remarkably devastating raids through the French countryside that characterised the Hundred Years War. The chronicler Jean le Bel, like Jean Froissart who followed him in his earliest narrative, introduces his detailed account of the early campaigns of seemingly endless Anglo-French war by assuring readers that his admired fighters on land and sea had ‘displayed such valour that they should be deemed worthy men indeed, supremely so’. What will probably impress readers – almost to the point of numbness – is the tireless account of looting and burning; in parts of his narrative so many villages, towns and surrounding fields are looted or destroyed that even the meticulous le Bel confesses he cannot list them all for the reader; detailing one major raid into Normandy, he has to fall back on regional dimensions to designate the region devastated:

I’m mentioning only those towns that were particularly big and wealthy. I couldn’t give you the names of all the middling or small towns and ordinary villages – the list would never end. But I tell you this: between the city of

Paris and the port of Saint-Vaast-la-Hougue in the Cotentin where the king [Edward II] landed, the most direct route would be a journey of five or six days; and over all that distance along a front at least a day’s ride wide, that whole rich land was laid waste.  

Of the raging civil war dividing Brittany (1341–65) le Bel says with complete frankness, ‘The countryside was ravaged and laid waste by both parties, and it was the poor people who paid for it.’ Yet successes could be unstintingly praised. Here is Jean le Bel waxing lyrical over the vast devastations wrought by Edward III. He had:

Ravaged and wasted all of Poitou and won many major towns and strong castles such as Lusignan, Saint-Jean d’Angély and the city of Poitiers, and likewise the great land of Brittany; and he personally had destroyed and laid waste the lands of the Cotentin and Normandy and the county of Évreux as far as Paris, and crossed the great River Seine at the bridge of Poissy and ravaged and wasted the country around Amiens and Beauvais and the county of Ponthieu. 

The chronicler continues with praise for the stunning victory won on the battlefield at Crécy and the siege and capture of Calais. Yet he rolls all these aspects of campaigning together in exuberant praise: ‘It seems to me that such great and lofty exploits are not without high honour, and that one cannot praise, esteem or honour too much the very noble king whom God so clearly wished to help.’  

Le Bel sees the entire enterprise as the king’s honourable achievement of dominance under divine blessing. There is no trace of a claim that the great battle and successful siege alone are the honourable military work, with the ravaging a regrettable action carried out by common and sadly uncontrollable soldiery who lack the elite code and breeding. This point of view appears in an incident related by the contemporary English chronicler Geoffrey le Baker (who may well have been a member of the Carmelite house founded by Edward III). In a dramatic night-time scene, Sir Geoffrey le Scrope, a prominent former justice and current military commander of Edward III, took a visiting cardinal who had come as a papal legate to investigate the damages caused by ravaging in the opening phase of the Hundred Years War, to the top of a tall tower. Proudly, he showed the

45 Ibid., p. 174.  46 Ibid., p. 196.  47 Ibid., p. 205. Describing a great raid in Normandy he says it was no wonder the people were in a state; after long peace they ‘were seeing people slaughtered without mercy, houses set ablaze and pillaged, and the land laid waste and burnt’: ibid., p. 171.  48 Ibid.
papal envoy how the fires from burning villages illuminated the entire night sky; they stretched in a blazing ring 15 miles wide all around. In an admonitory speech the cardinal had lectured his hosts that the kingdom of France was united, as if tied by a silken cord that could not be severed; now Scrope archly asked if it did not seem evident that this cord had been severed.\textsuperscript{49}

Geoffrey le Baker clearly believed that rulers were responsible for the character of their military campaigns. He claimed King David of Scotland, captured by the English, could not assert the knightly privilege of ransom; his ravaging of the north of England with fire and sword reduced him to the status of a ferocious brigand; he had no just cause. The unspoken contrast, of course, was that Edward III had just cause and could lead a ferocious campaign of the same sort; it is the abstract right that mattered, not the effect of the campaign on the society under attack.\textsuperscript{50}

The evidence, in sum, suggests that, contrary to many notions surviving from its post-medieval romantic reinterpretation, chivalry was at minimum as much a part of the problem of violence in the Middle Ages as any solution or serious form of control and diminution of violence (at least once the shift towards ransoming of prisoners and a radical decline in slave raiding had occurred in what Jean Flori would term the prehistory of chivalry).\textsuperscript{51} A law of arms was emerging, even if the details were still under construction; but these norms were largely concerned with the relationship of warriors with other warriors, and were intended to edge their hard and profitable profession away from disabling chaos. These norms were not generally concerned with the security or well-being of the general population of farmers, merchants and local monks and clerics, that is, not concerned with the vast body of non-combatant men and women, the elderly and children. At the core of chivalric beliefs stood not self-restrictive and broadly protective impulses, but a proud, touchy and violent pursuit of prized honour through fully physical violence.

**Bibliographical Essay**

Richard Kaeuper’s work constitutes the best study of chivalric violence, due in large part to his emphasis on the violent nature of medieval chivalry. See R. Kaeuper, *Medieval*


\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 84.


Chivalric Violence


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When discussing violence in the Islamic milieu, the word *jihad* inevitably comes to mind, especially in the modern world. Jihad is almost invariably translated as ‘armed combat’ or ‘fighting’ in both academic and non-academic circles, and even as ‘terrorism’ in politically charged contexts. Such a monovalent understanding of jihad emerges primarily through consultation of the juridical literature and official histories that were produced after the eighth century CE and that are unduly privileged in academic discussions of this subject. However, jihad emerges as a much more complex term when a broader range of primary Arabic sources are consulted. Such sources include the Qur’an and Qur’an commentaries (*tafsir*), collections of Hadith, which refer to the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and legal works, all of which will be discussed in greater detail below. The central premise of this chapter is that a closer study of relevant Qur’anic verses and a comparison of early and late extra-Qur’anic sources drawn from the above genres allow one to chart both the constancies and the shifts in the spectrum of meanings assigned to the term jihad. This in turn allows us to understand how changing socio-political circumstances affected the way Muslim scholars of different stripes conceived of the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate violence over time.

The Qur’anic Discourse

Any discussion of jihad must of course start with the Qur’an, the central sacred text of Islam which Muslims regard as divinely revealed scripture. Jihad is a broad term in the Qur’an and its basic meaning is ‘struggle’, ‘striving’ and ‘exertion’. When the word jihad (or its derivatives) is joined to the phrase *fi sabil Allah* (literally, ‘in the path of God’), the full expression in Arabic, *al-jihad fi sabil Allah*, means ‘struggling/striving for the sake of God’. The Qur’an uses a different term – *qital* – to refer specifically to ‘fighting’ or ‘armed combat’ that is permitted under certain conditions. *Harb* is the Arabic
word for war in general. The Qur’an uses this last term four times: to refer to illegitimate wars fought by those who wish to spread corruption on earth (5:64); to the thick of battle between believers and non-believers (8:57; 47:4), and in one instance to the possibility of war waged by God and His Prophet against those who would continue to practise usury (2:279). This term is never used with the phrase ‘in the path of God’ and has no bearing on the concept of jihad.

Muslim scholars divide the Qur’anic revelations into two main periods, corresponding to the two phases of the Prophet Muhammad’s career. The first is the Meccan period, 610–22 CE, when Muhammad lived and preached in Mecca in the Arabian peninsula. The second is the Medinan period that began in 622 when Muhammad and his followers emigrated to Medina, a city to the north of Mecca about 200 miles away. This period lasted until the death of the Prophet in 632 CE. Islamic sources typically refer to the period before 610 as al-Jahiliyya, or ‘the Age of Ignorance’, the implication being that those the Qur’an regards as ‘pagan Arabs’ or ‘Arab polytheists’ were ignorant of the one God (Allah) who had sent his revelations periodically through history to select prophets. The ‘Age of Ignorance’ is characterised by Muslim historians as one that was marked by constant violent feuds among the various tribes that made up pre-Islamic Arabian societies. Extant pre-Islamic poetry and battle accounts corroborate this depiction. Pre-Islamic Arabs worshipped multiple deities and are said to have paid homage to as many as 360 idols housed in a cube-shaped shrine called the Ka’ba in Mecca. A prominent Meccan tribe, the Quraysh, into which Muhammad was born, was in charge of the Ka’ba and controlled the revenues that flowed in from the annual pilgrimage to it. Meccan hostility, and specifically Qurayshi hostility, to Muhammad’s preaching of monotheism arose against this historical backdrop – not only did he rebuke the Meccans for their worship of idols, he also threatened to disrupt one of their principal sources of livelihood centred on the pilgrimage to the Ka’ba.¹

The Meccan Period

Although the term jihad is often used by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars almost exclusively in a military sense and this understanding is

¹ In Islamic tradition, the Ka’ba is said to have been founded by Abraham and his son Ishmael; the removal of the idols from within it when Mecca fell to the Muslims in 630 represented, from the Muslim perspective, the return of the Ka’ba to the proper worship of the one God of Abraham.
then projected back to the Qur’an, a careful examination of Qur’anic verses themselves provides an important corrective to this perception. Jihad and related terms frequently occur in the Qur’an in a non-violent sense during both periods. During the Meccan period, when no fighting was permitted, Muslims were allowed to engage only in non-violent struggle against their pagan Meccan persecutors. In around 610, when Muhammad began publicly preaching his message of monotheism to the Meccans, he frequently faced hostile resistance from the latter. When the number of his followers began to grow, they too began to face persecution from the Meccan polytheists.

The Qur’an and the biographical literature on the Prophet detail some of these aggressive attacks on the early Muslims, which included eviction from their homes, physical torture, financial deprivation and forced starvation. Despite the growing aggression, Muslims were not granted permission to retaliate physically against their persecutors during this period. Instead the Qur’an counselled them to forgive those who caused them harm and to bear with patience the trials and tribulations that were visited upon them. Qur’an 42:43 states, ‘Whoever is patient and forgives, that is indeed the best resolution of affairs.’ Another verse (Qur’an 3:200) counsels, ‘O those who believe, be patient and forbearing, outdo others in forbearance, be firm and revere God so that you may succeed.’

In these and other verses, the Qur’an highlights ‘patient forbearance’, termed sabr in Arabic, as a highly significant, non-militant dimension of struggling against wrongdoing (and, therefore, of jihad) in this early period. A cluster of verses (Qur’an 42:40–2) further amplify this non-violent aspect of jihad. They state:

The requital of evil is an evil similar to it: hence, whoever pardons and makes peace, his reward rests with God – for indeed, He does not love evil-doers. Yet surely, as for those who defend themselves after having been wronged – no blame whatever attaches to them: blame attaches but to those who oppress people and behave outrageously on earth, offending against all right; for them is grievous suffering in store!

Non-violent struggle against wrongdoing is not the same as passivity, however, which when displayed in the face of grave oppression and injustice is clearly marked as immoral in the Qur’an (4:95).

The term jihad itself is also used in the Qur’an during the Meccan period in a non-combative sense. Two important verses may be cited in this context as examples. The first is Qur’an 22:78, which states, ‘Strive (jahidu) in regard to God a true straining as is His due’; the second is 29:69 which states, ‘As for
those who strive in regard to Us (jahadu fina), we will surely guide them to Our paths. Indeed, God is with those who do good.’ Early exegetes from before the tenth century, like Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d. 767), understood the Arabic verbs jahidu and jahadu in Qur’an 22:78 and 29:69 respectively to refer to the general striving of believers to obey God in their actions and to please Him. They also emphasised that, since these verses are Meccan, they could not therefore be referring to the military jihad.

Later scholars, however, among them the celebrated exegete Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923), assigned military meanings to these verses. After him, influential exegetes like Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210) and Muhammad al-Qurtubi (d. 1273) attached both combative and non-combative meanings to these verses. Thus, with regard to Qur’an 22:78, they understand two types of exertion to be implied in the verse: (a) the spiritual exertion required to overcome one’s base desires in order to obey God; and (b) the general, physical exertion required to carry out one’s religious obligations, including military activity. With regard to Qur’an 29:69, al-Razi additionally understands the intellectual effort of the believer to increase in knowledge of God to be indicated in the verse.

Another critical Meccan verse is Qur’an 25:52, which states: ‘Do not obey the unbelievers and wage a mighty struggle (jihad kabir) with it.’ An overwhelming majority of the exegetes understand this striving to be carried out by means of the Qur’an, referred to in the pronoun ‘it’. One exegete explains that the Arabic phrase jihad kabir (‘a mighty struggle’) in the verse refers to jihad of the tongue, that is to say, the struggle to preach the message of Islam.  

The Medinan Period: Establishing Just Cause for Military Combat

In other verses, the Qur’an treats specific just causes (casus belli) for which recourse to military force may be sanctioned. According to the exegetical literature, roughly two years after the emigration to Medina, two Qur’anic verse (22:39–40) permitting fighting were revealed which led to the first major battle in Islamic history called the Battle of Badr (624). These verses state:

Permission [to fight] is given to those against whom war has been initiated, and indeed, God has the power to help them: those who have been driven from

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their homes unjustly for no other reason than their saying, ‘Our Provider is God!’ For, if God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques – in all of which God’s name is abundantly glorified – would surely have been destroyed.

In Qur’an 42:40–3, previously cited, in which non-violent self-defence is allowed, the reasons are the wrongful conduct of the enemy and their oppressive and immoral behaviour on earth. Here, in Qur’an 22:39–40, another two explicit reasons are given: the initiation of fighting by the enemy and the wrongful expulsion of people from their homes for no reason other than their affirmation of belief in one God. Furthermore, these verses assert, if people were not allowed to defend themselves against aggressive wrongdoers, all the houses of worship – it is noteworthy that Jewish and Christian places of worship are included alongside Muslim ones – would be destroyed and thus the word of God extinguished. It is reasonable to infer from this verse that Muslims may resort to defensive combat also on behalf of non-Muslim monotheists who are the object of the hostility of polytheists.

Similar reasons which legitimate an armed response to the adversary are contained in another important group of verses – Qur’an 9:12–13 – which state:

If they break their pacts after having concluded them and revile your religion, then fight the leaders of unbelief. Will you not fight a people who violated their oaths and had intended to expel the Messenger and commenced [hostilities] against you the first time?

The overwhelming majority of exegetes stress that the violation of pacts by the polytheists, their denigration of Islam, hostile intent towards Muhammad and their initial act of aggression against Muslims had made fighting against them necessary. Therefore, when both just cause and right intention exist, fighting in self-defence against an intractable enemy may become obligatory. Qur’an 2:216 states: ‘Fighting (al-qital) is prescribed for you, while you dislike it. But it is possible that you dislike a thing which is good for you, and that you love a thing which is bad for you. God knows and you know not.’ Although this verse, when taken out of its historical context, may imply that fighting was henceforth to be considered obligatory for Muslims in perpetuity, the commentary literature makes clear that a majority of the medieval exegetes understood these verses to be applicable only to the time of the Prophet and his Companions and to have no further applicability.3

3 Ibid., pp. 65–71.
The Qur’an further states that it is the duty of Muslims to defend those who are oppressed and who call out to them for help (4:75), except against a people with whom the Muslims have concluded a treaty (8:72).

The Qur’an also has specific injunctions with regard to initiation of hostilities and conduct during war (*ius in bello*). Qur’an 2:190, which states ‘Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not commit aggression, for God loves not aggressors’, forbids Muslims from commencing hostilities; fighting can only be undertaken in response to a prior act of aggression by the opposite side. The Qur’an further counsels (5:8), ‘Let not rancor towards others cause you to incline to wrong and depart from justice. Be just, this is closer to piety.’ The verse may be understood to complement 2:190 in spirit and intent, warning against succumbing to unprincipled and vengeful desire to punish and inflict disproportionate damage. Proportionality is explicitly stressed in Qur’an 2:194, which states ‘Whoever attacks you attack him to the extent of his attack.’

Other verses in the Qur’an make clear that fighting is defensive and limited in nature and must cease when the other side lays down arms. Two significant verses (Qur’an 60:8–9) mandate kind and just interactions with those who are peaceful, regardless of their religious beliefs, in contrast to those who wilfully commit aggression:

God does not forbid you from being kind and equitable to those who have neither made war on you on account of your religion nor driven you from your homes; indeed God loves those who are equitable. God forbids you however from making common cause with those who fight you on account of your religion and evict you from your homes and who support [others] in driving you out.

Similarly, Qur’an 4:90 states: ‘If they hold themselves aloof from you and do not wage war against you and offer you peace, then God does not permit you any way against them.’

Al-Tabari, in his exegesis of Qur’an 60:8–9, affirms that these verses clearly permit Muslims to be kind to all those who bear no ill-will towards them, regardless of their religion and creed. For God, he says, loves those who are equitable, who give people their due rights, are personally just to them, and do good to those who are good to them. These views were repeated by practically all the exegetes who came after him; among the later exegetes, al-Qurtubi is the most adamant in maintaining that the exhortation in Qur’an

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60:8 to be kind to those who had caused Muslims no harm was applicable to everyone who belonged in this category, regardless of their religious affiliation, and that the command was unambiguous and valid for all times.5

Another important verse – Qur’an 8:61 – requires Muslims to cease fighting as soon as the other side desists from fighting and makes peaceful overtures. The verse states, ‘And if they should incline to peace, then incline to it [yourself] and place your trust in God; for He is all-hearing and all-knowing.’ This point is stressed by al-Tabari, who comments that when a people enters into Islam, or pays the jizya (a kind of poll-tax), or establishes friendly relations with Muslims, then the latter should do the same ‘for the sake of peace and peacemaking’.6

But there were other scholars and authorities in later centuries who wished to promote the view that the Qur’an mandates continuous warfare against non-Muslims as non-Muslims, and that fighting in the Qur’an was not only defensive but offensive as well. These changes in interpretation may be attributed to certain demographic and historical developments over time. Muslims became majority communities outside of the Arabian peninsula starting roughly in the late ninth century and they began to develop a growing sense of communal solidarity vis-à-vis non-Muslims. Such a sense of solidarity was often forged against the backdrop of continuing skirmishes with the Byzantine Christians through the Abbasid period which intensified during the bloody encounters with the crusaders from the late eleventh century onwards. By the Mamluk period (1250–1517), when the Muslim world was besieged by a new vicious enemy, the Mongols, readings of the Qur’an that sanctioned offensive warfare became predominant. Proponents of this position cite two verses in particular: Qur’an 9:5, which is understood to mandate fighting against all non-Abrahamic non-Muslims until they convert; and Qur’an 9:29, which is read to require fighting against the People of the Book until they either submit to Muslim rule, signified by their payment of the poll-tax (jizya), or embrace Islam. Since Qur’an 2:190, 60:7–9, 4:90 and 8:61, cited above and when taken together, clearly establish that fighting was contingent on the prior aggression of a hostile force and that peaceful people, regardless of their religion, could not be attacked under any circumstance, these more ‘hawkish’ scholars had to develop an interpretive tool or principle for effectively ‘cancelling’ these verses. This tool or principle is known in Arabic as naskh, which is usually translated as ‘abrogation’. According to this

6 Al-Tabari, Jami al-bayan, 6:278.
principle of abrogation, later verses in the Qur’an, such as 9:5 and 9:29, may be understood as superseding earlier verses – such as 60:7–9 and 8:61 – whose texts taken together may appear contradictory. These views did not go uncontested; our brief discussion of these two verses below conveys the tenor of some of these contestations.

Qur’an 9:5 states:

When the sacred months have lapsed, then kill the polytheists (al-mushrikin) wherever you may encounter them. Seize them and encircle them and lie in wait for them. But if they repent and perform the prayer and give the zakat, then let them go on their way, for God is forgiving and merciful.

Prior to the Mamluk period (so, roughly speaking, before the mid thirteenth century) Muslim exegetes generally restricted the applicability of this verse to the Arab polytheists of the seventh century with whom there was no pact. Typically, the same exegetes did not maintain that Qur’an 9:5 had abrogated other verses in the Qur’an that counsel good relations with peaceful people, regardless of their religious affiliation. The twelfth-century exegete al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144), for example, identifies the intended polytheists in the verse as those who break their pledges and display a priori hostility to Muslims – thus, not polytheists as a rule. Like al-Tabari before him, he does not consider this to be an abrogating verse. Similarly, the thirteenth-century Andalusian scholar al-Qurtubi (d. 1273) considers the verse to be neither abrogated nor abrogating.

It is also highly significant that none of the exegetes up to al-Qurtubi referred to it as the ‘sword verse’ (Ar., ayat al-sayf), which is the name given to it in later commentaries. We encounter this designation specifically for Qur’an 9:5 in the commentary of the fourteenth-century exegete Ibn Kathir (d. 1373). His commentary on the verse indicates that a partiality had developed by the Mamluk period for the derivation of an expansive general mandate from otherwise historically circumscribed Qur’anic verses (as understood by earlier exegetes) to fight or punish all those deemed enemies of Islam in the later period – these were the crusaders as well as the Mongols, against both of whom thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Muslim forces were at war.

8 Al-Qurtubi, Jami’, 8:70.
Qur’an 9:29 also came to be understood by a number of influential exegetes, from roughly the eighth century on, as granting permission to Muslims to fight a different group of non-Muslims – the People of the Book – who refuse to accept Islam or submit to Muslim political rule. The verse states: ‘Fight those who do not believe in God nor in the Last Day and do not forbid what God and His messenger have forbidden and do not follow the religion of truth from among those who were given the Book until they offer the jizya with [their] hands in humility.’

The early eighth-century exegete Mujahid b. Jabr (d. 722) understands this verse to refer specifically to the Byzantines, who are said to have amassed their forces on the Syrian border in preparation for an attack on Muslims in the year 630. Arabic sources refer to the event as the Battle of Tabuk, although no battle was eventually fought since the Byzantine forces failed to materialise. Exegetes after Mujahid, however, identify the referents in this verse as Jews and Christians in general who are expected to pay the jizya humbly in return for their protection by Muslim rulers. Al-Tabari acknowledges that the historical context for the revelation of this verse was the campaign of Tabuk. But unlike Mujahid, who specifically identifies the warring Byzantine Christians as the referent in this verse, al-Tabari treats Jews and Christians as undifferentiated collectivities; no distinction is made between hostile and peaceable factions within them. Furthermore, he stresses their legal subjugation and general doctrinal inferiority to Muslims. Al-Tabari’s views are consistently replicated by later exegetes, with the notable exception of al-Qurtubi, who pleads for respectful and compassionate treatment of the People of the Book.

At the same time, al-Tabari and al-Qurtubi maintain that these same verses (9:5, 9:29) do not abrogate the peaceful, conciliatory verses in the Qur’an and dismiss the views of others who adhere to this position. Al-Tabari, for example, cites the example of Qatada b. Di’ama (d. 736), a Successor (i.e., a member of the second generation of Muslims), who maintained that Qur’an 8:61 (which exhorts Muslims to incline to peace when the other side does) had been abrogated by Qur’an 9:5. Al-Tabari dismisses this interpretation as insupportable on the basis of the Qur’an, the Sunna (the practices and custom of the Prophet Muhammad) or reason. The unabrogated status of the verse

13 For this discussion of the exegeses of Qur’an 9:29, see Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God*, pp. 75–9.
was similarly affirmed by a majority of exegetes after him.\textsuperscript{15} The invocation of 
the principle of abrogation by some scholars testifies to the determination of 
a number of jurists who, in different historical contexts, attempted to find 
scriptural sanction for war that might be fought offensively, thereby over-
riding the categorical Qur’anic prohibition against the initiation of fighting 
(2:190).

Martyrdom in the Qur’an

The Qur’an does not have a single word for ‘martyr’ or ‘martyrdom’, 
concepts that became linked to the idea of jihad as armed combat against 
the enemies of Muslims. The common Arabic word for martyr outside the 
Qur’an became \textit{shahid}. It is telling that nowhere in the Qur’an is the term 
used in the sense of ‘martyr’; rather it is only used to refer to a legal witness or 
eyewitness. Only in later extra-Qur’anic tradition does this word acquire the 
specific meaning of ‘one who bears witness for the faith’, particularly by 
laying down his or her life. Extraneous, especially Christian influence may be 
suspected here. There is evidence for the influence of the related Syriac word 
for martyr-witness sahed on the Arabic \textit{shahid} and the latter’s subsequent 
an acquisition of the secondary meaning of ‘martyr’.\textsuperscript{16}

The Qur’an instead uses the phrase ‘those who were/are slain in the path 
of God’ (Ar., \textit{man qutila fi sabil Allah}) to refer broadly to people who die for a 
righteous cause and/or in a righteous manner, which might include dying in 
battle but is not necessarily restricted to this meaning. One Qur’anic verse 
(3:169) typically seen to refer to the special status of the military martyr states, 
‘Do not think that those who were slain in the path of God are dead. They are 
alive and well provided for by their Lord.’ In his exegesis of this verse, al-
Tabari relates it specifically to those Companions killed at the Battle of Uhud, 
fought in the year 625 after the emigration (Ar., \textit{hijra}) to Medina. The verse 
served to inform Muhammad that he should not regard them as dead, that is, 
devoid of feeling and the ability to feel pleasure. Rather, they are to be 
regarded as being alive in the presence of God, exulting and rejoicing in 
what God grants them from his generosity and mercy.\textsuperscript{17}

A different Qur’anic verse (22:58), however, contains a clear stricture 
against the glorification of military martyrdom. It states, ‘Those who

\textsuperscript{15} Afsaruddin, \textit{Striving in the Path of God}, pp. 90–3.

\textsuperscript{16} Arthur Jeffrey, \textit{The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’an} (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), 
p. 187.

\textsuperscript{17} Al-Tabari, \textit{Jami’ al-bayan}, 3:513.
emigrated in the path of God and then were slain or died [of natural causes], God will provide handsome provisions for them; indeed God is the best of providers.’ Al-Tabari – again, late ninth century – held that the verse was specifically revealed in regard to certain Companions who debated the status of those who had perished in ‘the path of God’. Some were of the opinion that the one who was slain and the one who died naturally were of the same status while others assigned greater merit to the one who was slain. God revealed the verse, in al-Tabari’s view, to inform Muhammad that both the one who is slain and the one who dies in the path of God attain the same reward in the hereafter.\(^{18}\)

Later exegetes offer a similar view. Al-Razi (late twelfth century) cites a Hadith in explanation of this position: ‘The one who is slain in the path of God the Exalted and the one who dies [of natural causes] in the path of God are the equal of one another in regard to the blessings and reward [that they are entitled to].’\(^{19}\) In his exegesis of Qur’an 22:58, al-Qurtubi notes that some scholars were of the opinion that the one who is slain in the path of God is better than the one who dies of natural causes, but the revelation of this verse affirmed that both were equal in status and thus equally assured of a handsome provision in the hereafter. Al-Qurtubi, writing in the thirteenth century, notes that Islamic law, however, came to view the status of the battlefield martyr as superior, this in spite of Qur’an 22:58 that makes no prima facie distinction in status between the naturally deceased and the fallen in battle. It should be noted that this superior status is reflected in the special funerary practices (e.g., bathing the body and manner of praying over the deceased) that developed over time in Islamic jurisprudence and that are reserved exclusively for the military martyr.\(^{20}\)

### Jihad in the Hadith Works

After the Qur’an, the Hadith literature containing the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad is the most important source of law, ethics and morality for Muslims. Hadith works typically have a special section devoted to the topic of jihad, usually in a military sense. Two early Hadith works from the first half of the ninth century are particularly helpful in tracing the debates among early Muslims concerning the purview of jihad and martyrdom. These works, each entitled Musannaf, by Abd al-Razzaq al-San’ani (d. 827)

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 9:182.

\(^{19}\) Al-Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir* (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-Turath al-‘Arabi, 1999), 8: 244.

and Ibn Abi Shayba (d. 849) contain reports attributed not only to Muhammad but also to his Companions (that is, his closest associates), as well as to the next generation of Muslims (the Successors), who speak on their own authority. As a result, these works preserve for us a broader range of highly significant reports containing multiple, contested perspectives on jihad and martyrdom that are often missing from later works.

The multiple ways of carrying out jihad are heralded in a noteworthy report recorded in Abd al-Razzaq’s *Musannaf*. It has a number of the Companions sitting with the Prophet when a man of muscular build, apparently a pagan from the tribe of Quraysh, comes into view. Some of those gathered exclaimed, ‘How strong this man looks! If only he would exert his strength in the way of God!’ The Prophet asked, ‘Do you think only someone who is killed [that is, in battle] is engaged in the way of God?’ He continued, ‘Whoever goes out in the world seeking licit work to support his family is on the path of God, and whoever goes out in the world seeking licit work to support himself is on the path of God. Whoever goes out seeking worldly increase has gone down the path of the devil.’

The report is noteworthy for at least two reasons. First, it contains a clear rebuttal to those who would understand the idea of ‘striving in the way of God’ primarily in military terms. It praises instead the daily struggle of the individual to live his or her life ‘in the way of God’ which endows even the most mundane of licit activities with moral and spiritual significance. Second, the report emphasises the importance of sincere personal intention in determining the moral worth of an individual’s act. One may therefore understand the report to be counselling caution against assuming that what appears to be a pious activity to humans – such as the claim to be waging a true jihad – will be deemed as such by God, who alone can know the true intention of the individual.

There are several reports in the *Musannaf* of Abd al-Razzaq that record the displeasure of certain Companions at the perceived military adventurism of the Umayyads, the first Arab-Islamic dynasty (661–750 C.E) whose capital was in Damascus, Syria. Pious Muslims tended to regard the Umayyad rulers as immoral and unscrupulous. One report specifically warns the pious not to join in the military campaigns of those ‘who fight seeking [the gains of] the world’ – here a pointed reference to the Umayyads – for then they would forfeit their ‘portion in the hereafter’.

22 Ibid., 5:189.
We often see a regional division, one partly reflecting the shift to Abbasid rule in 750, between the supporters and opponents of the Umayyads, with mostly Syrian scholars expressing support for them, while non-Syrian scholars, often based in Mecca and Medina (called the Hijaz), expressing opposition to them. The former group tended to support offensive jihad while the latter was against it. Thus pious Hijazi scholars like Abd Allah ibn Umar (d. 693) and Ata ibn Abi Rabah (d. 733) are on record as having opposed what must have appeared to them as unseemly glorification of military activity in pro-Umayyad circles, at the expense of the cultivation of the usual religious virtues and duties. According to one significant report, Abd Allah ibn Umar was once asked by a young man why he did not take part in the military jihad. Ibn Umar is said to have first turned away from him, and then responded after his initial silence:

Indeed Islam is founded upon four supports – performance of prayer, giving of the required alms – and no distinction is made between the two; fasting during the month of Ramadan; and pilgrimage to the Ka’ba for the one capable of undertaking it. Jihad and non-obligatory charity (Ar., sadaqa) are among the good voluntary activities.

The report critiques the promotion of the combative jihad by some as a religious obligation and asserts instead that fighting is at best a voluntary and optional activity. Early reports such as this convey to us that a cult of the military jihad and martyrdom that clearly took shape during the Umayyad period did not go unchallenged, nor was it fully formed during the first and second centuries of Islam.

In contrast to these Hijazi scholars, Syrian scholars, like Makhul al-Shami (d. c. 730) who was close to the Umayyads, tended to champion military activity as religiously mandated. According to a noteworthy report contained in Ibn Abi Shayba’s Musannaf, Makhul is said to have sworn for ten days while facing Mecca that ‘fighting is incumbent upon you’. No doubt he was influenced by the fact that the Umayyads were engaged in constant border warfare with the Byzantines and there was a perceived need to justify these military campaigns on a theological and legal basis. It would not be an exaggeration to state that expressing support for expansionist war during

this time was tantamount to proclaiming one’s support for the Umayyad government and its imperial ambitions.

With regard to the notion of martyrdom that is connected with the military jihad, we find that there are multiple, competing definitions of who qualifies as a martyr, invariably called *shahid* in the Hadith literature in contrast to the Qur’an. The *Musannaf* of Abd al-Razzaq contains a number of reports that relate competing definitions of the notion of shahid. One report attributed to the famous Companion Abu Hurayra states that the shahid is one who, were he to die in his bed, would enter heaven. Another report also recorded by Abd al-Razzaq declares that there are four types of shahada or martyrdom for Muslims: the plague, parturition or delivery of a child, drowning, and a ‘stomach ailment.’

Significantly, in this early report, there is no mention of martyrdom being earned on account of dying on the battlefield. An expanded version of the report, however, quotes the Prophet as adding to this list, ‘one who is killed in the way of God.’ It is this expanded version containing all five definitions of a shahid that is frequently recorded in later Hadith collections.

Another eighth-century Hadith compilation records multiple significations of the term shahid. The *Muwatta* of the famous jurist Malik b. Anas (d. 795, the eponymous founder of the Maliki school of law) records that the Prophet identified seven kinds of martyrs alongside those who died fighting in God’s way.

He who dies as a victim of an epidemic is a martyr; he who dies from drowning is a martyr; he who dies from pleurisy is a martyr; he who dies from diarrhea is a martyr; he who dies by [being burned in] fire is a martyr; he who dies by being struck by a crumbling dilapidated wall is a martyr; and the woman who dies in childbed is a martyr.

This report therefore draws attention to the suffering of the believer – whether on account of debilitating illnesses or other afflictions in life, including undertaking the arduous task of defending Muslims on the battlefield – as the core ingredient of martyrdom rather than the manner of dying itself.

Compared to the two earlier *Musannafs*, later Hadith compilations, starting with the famous collection of al-Bukhari (d. 870) called *Sahih* (referring to ‘sound,’ therefore, reliable Hadiths) record more reports attributed to the

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27 Ibid., 5:271
28 Ibid., 5:270–1.
Prophet that contain effusive praise of the military jihad with generous posthumous rewards promised to the military martyr. One such report states that there is an ‘abode of martyrs’ (dar al-shuhada’) that is the best and most excellent of abodes in the hereafter.\textsuperscript{30} Another Hadith quotes the Prophet as saying that ‘Coming and going in the path of God (referring to military activity) is better than the world and what is in it.’\textsuperscript{31}

Other hierarchies of moral excellence are suggested in various reports contained in the Sahih of another famous Hadith compiler, Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (d. 875), a collection considered very close in rank to that of al-Bukhari. According to one such report, faith in God and striving (jihad) in the path of God are equally the most meritorious of actions. Here jihad is clearly military in nature, for the report continues with an unnamed man asking if all his sins would be forgiven if he were slain in the path of God. The answer was in the affirmative, with the exception of personal debts. Several variants of this well-known Hadith are given.\textsuperscript{32} One Hadith recorded by Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj states that fighting in the path of God on horseback was the best way to earn one’s livelihood.\textsuperscript{33}

Some Hadiths warn, however, that the exalted status of the warrior should not lead to the deliberate courting of martyrdom on the part of the faithful by seeking to confront the enemy. One such report relates that the Prophet during a military campaign would customarily wait till the sun had tilted towards the west and then address his troops thus, ‘Do not wish to meet the enemy, O People, and ask forgiveness of God. When you meet them, be forbearing and know that paradise lies below the shade of the swords.’ Other variants are given.\textsuperscript{34}

These and other Hadiths that document the merits of the military jihad tended to reappear, usually verbatim, in nearly all subsequent compilations after al-Bukhari and Muslim. Because jihad from the ninth century onwards is customarily discussed in the context of international law, we also see more legal Hadiths dealing with issues of prisoners of war, division of spoils and other related matters included in standard compilations. Notions of jihad as a moral and spiritual struggle, however, continue to be preserved along with the notion of jihad as military activity in most Hadith collections. In a number of these reports that focus on jihad as a moral and spiritual endeavour, the

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 4:410.
\textsuperscript{32} Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, Sahih, 3:1,192–3, ed. Nasiruddin al-Khattab as The English Translation of Sahih Muslim (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007).
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 3:1,195.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 4:481–2.
emphasis is on charity and prayer and on non-militant acts of courage such as, for example, speaking truth to a tyrant even at the cost of imperilling one’s life or facing other negative consequences. These meanings are consistent with the famous prophetic Hadith which describes the various means of carrying out jihad: by the hand, by the tongue and, silently, by the heart (that is, with intent). A particularly well-known Hadith quotes the Prophet as remarking on his return from a military campaign, ‘We have returned from the lesser jihad (that is, physical, external struggle) to the greater jihad (that is, spiritual, internal struggle).’ The report underscores the two principal modes of carrying out jihad and reflects a hierarchical ordering of their merits, with the internal, spiritual struggle taking precedence over the external, physical one. This terminology – spiritual struggle (Ar., \textit{jihad al-nafs}) versus military struggle (Ar., \textit{jihad al-sayf}) – became quite prevalent in later edifying, particularly mystical (Sufi) literature and represents an evolution of the Qur’anic terms \textit{sabr} and \textit{qital} which, as we recall, refer to ‘patient forbearance’ and ‘fighting’ respectively.

So far we have discussed jihad and martyrdom as conceptualised by prominent Sunni scholars. Among the Shi’a, the other major branch of Islam, ‘redemptive suffering’ and non-violent martyrdom loom large because of the trajectory of Shi’i history. The largest Shi’i group, the Twelver Shi’a (Ar., \textit{Ithna Ashariyya} or \textit{Imamiya}), holds that all twelve of their religious leaders, known as imams, a line of male descendants of the Prophet, were martyred, starting with Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661), Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law. The events at Karbala (680), during which a small band of Ali’s descendants were ruthlessly massacred by the Umayyad army, created a special reverence for martyrdom among the Shi’a, especially in relation to the family of the Prophet (Ar., \textit{ahl al-bayt}), and more broadly in relation to believers who are assumed to have been oppressed and wrongly killed. In the absence of their rightful imam from 941 CE onwards, the military jihad fell into abeyance for the large majority of the Shi’a in the premodern period. Consequently, martyrdom was conceptualised primarily as death resulting

36 This is a Hadith reported by Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj and included by al-Nawawi in his\	extit{Forty Hadith}, trans. Ezzeddin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 110.
37 For further attestations of this Hadith, see John Renard, ‘\textit{Al-Jihad al-Akbar}: Notes on a Theme in Islamic Spirituality’, \\textit{Muslim World} 78 (1988), 225–42.
from suffering and persecution, rather than from military exploits on the battlefield.39

Jihad in Legal Works

Medieval Muslim jurists, usually in contradistinction to exegetes of the Qur’an, Hadith scholars and ethicists, primarily discussed jihad as one of the obligations of the Muslim ruler and of his Muslim subjects in the context of external relations with non-Muslim polities. The law of nations or international law (Ar., siyar) as an integral part of Islamic law developed early due to this pragmatic juridical concern for the intricacies of political relations with the broader non-Muslim world, as well as with religious minorities within Islamic realms. Within these legal-administrative contexts, jihad is primarily military in nature. Realpolitik, rather than religious doctrine, frequently coloured legal treatments of jihad and allowed for distinctive – and contested – juridical perspectives to emerge on this topic, shaped by the historical and political contingencies in which they were progressively articulated.

The gradual formulation of fairly monolithic classical juridical views of jihad owes considerable impetus to the rise and consolidation of the imperial Umayyad and Abbasid states and the establishment of a strong military during these periods. This is reflected in the way that some jurists working in the heartlands of Syria and Iraq, such as the previously mentioned Makhul al-Shami, in the eighth century, and the later jurist al-Shafi’i, in the ninth century (see further below), were often willing to defer to realpolitik. As a result, they were willing to interpret the military purview of jihad in ways that were at times downright contradictory to Qur’anic injunctions, for example, in their endorsement of offensive military campaigns. Support for statist policies of territorial expansion provided the impetus, at least partially, for this juridical development. Other early jurists, like Abu Salama ibn Abd al-Rahman (d. c. 722) and Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 777), not known to be close to ruling elite circles, would endorse only a defensive jihad in response to a prior act of aggression by enemy forces.

By the Abbasid period (750–1250), the term jihad had essentially become conflated with qital (‘fighting’), collapsing the distinction that the Qur’an frequently maintains between the two. As the jurists and religious scholars of all stripes became consolidated as a scholarly class and acquired considerable

39 Following the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and during the Iranian war with Iraq in the 1980s, leading Shi’i voices revived the notion of military martyrdom, using it to mobilise the Iranian population against national enemies.
religious authority by the tenth century, they arrogated to themselves the right to define jihad authoritatively and circumscribe the range of activities prescribed by it. To this end, they did not hesitate to wield the powerful theory of abrogation (naskh) at their disposal. As a result, some of the jurists effectively rendered null and void the positive injunctions contained in specific Qur’anic verses that explicitly permitted the conclusion of truces with foes and counselled peaceful co-existence with in particular the ‘People of the Book’.

In deference to hard-headed political realism, a major legal development occurred in the ninth century when the Abbasid era jurist Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi’i (d. 820) hypothetically divided the world into *dar al-islam* (‘the abode of Islam’) and *dar al-harb* (‘the abode of war’, referring to non-Muslim territories). He also allowed for a third realm called the *dar al-ahd* (‘the abode of treaty’) or *dar al-sulh* (‘the abode of reconciliation’), to which abode non-Islamic states that had entered into a peace treaty with the Islamic state by rendering an annual tribute might be admitted.\(^40\) None of these concepts has any basis in the Qur’an or in the Hadith literature. Rather, they were the result of al-Shafi’i’s independent legal reasoning (Ar., *ijtihad*). In the absence of actual hostilities, the Shafi’i school of law posited an existing state of ‘cold war’ between the abodes of Islam and war, which required constant vigilance on the part of the former against the latter.\(^41\) Many jurists after al-Shafi’i would enshrine this concept in their writings by averring that one of the duties of the caliph was to launch the military jihad at least once a year; although others were of the opinion that this duty could be fulfilled by simply being in an adequate state of military preparedness to forestall enemy attacks.\(^42\)

Al-Shafi’i’s perspectives on jihad were, in many ways, a marked departure from earlier juristic thinking and reflect a certain hardening of attitudes towards non-Islamic states by his time. This is quite evident when his views are compared with those of jurists from the earlier Hanafi school of law. Early Hanafi jurists, for example, did not subscribe to a third abode of treaty, as conceived of by al-Shafi’i, but were of the opinion that the


inhabitants of a territory which had concluded a truce with the Muslims and paid tribute to the latter became part of the abode of Islam and entitled to the protection of the Islamic government. The Hanafis also adhered to the position that non-believers could only be fought if they resorted to armed conflict, and not simply on account of their disbelief. This remained a principle of contention between later Shafi’i and Hanafi jurists.

Thus we find that the eleventh-century Shafi’i jurist Ali ibn Muhammad al-Mawardi (d. 1058), in his famous legal work *The Ordinances of Government*, articulates a theory of offensive jihad by applying the hermeneutic principle of abrogation to Qur’an 2:190 which, as we learned before, categorically prohibits Muslims from commencing hostilities. Al-Mawardi was aware of the position of the early Meccan jurist Ata ibn Abi Rabah (d. 733), who had asserted on the basis of this verse that it was never permissible to fight those who do not fight. Al-Mawardi, however, takes exception to this view and comments instead that Qur’an 2:190 may be understood to be abrogated by later verses, such as Qur’an 9:5, which, in his understanding, permits offensive warfare. But al-Mawardi considers the obligation to fight the non-Muslim enemy as a collective rather than an individual one: as long as there is a sufficient number of Muslims carrying out the military jihad, others are exempt from undertaking it themselves. This view became prevalent in the other Sunni schools of law as well.

Early and later jurists, however, typically held firm on the issue of just conduct (ius in bello) during battle and emphasised the immunity of non-combatants based on precedents set by the Prophet and his Companions, as well as by other early Muslims. Thus the previously mentioned eighth-century jurist Malik ibn Anas quoted a report from Abu Bakr (d. 634), the first caliph, in which he famously proscribes attacking different groups of civilians, and forbids the burning of fruit-bearing trees and the unnecessary killing of animals. Malik then cites a Hadith in which Muhammad explicitly forbids the killing of women and children. And he adds a much-quoted report in which the Prophet expresses remorse and displeasure on seeing a slain woman during one of his campaigns and prohibits the killing of women and children. The Prophet’s injunction forbidding deception in the division

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46 Ibid., 1:357–8.
47 Ibid., 1:358.
of spoils, the commission of treachery and mutilation is also widely reported in the legal literature.\textsuperscript{48} To the list of women and children who enjoy non-combatant status are added the elderly, the blind and the chronically ill in general, as well as non-combatant men such as farmers, slaves, hermits and monks whose dwelling-places cannot be attacked. If any of these non-combatants engage in warfare, however, then they may be fought.\textsuperscript{49} If the enemy uses women and children as human shields, they may be attacked if there is no other recourse, as is the case for Muslim prisoners used in the same manner.\textsuperscript{50}

*Hiraba* was the term (borrowed from Qur’an 5:33–4) used by the premodern jurists to refer to illegitimate violence, whether on the basis of intent, or on the basis of conduct during its commission, or both, and its perpetration by extra-state rogue elements.\textsuperscript{51} A legitimate military jihad could only be proclaimed by the recognised ruler of the Muslim polity – the caliph or, in later periods, the sultan. In the premodern juridical literature, *hiraba* was typically associated with brigandage and highway robbery, piracy, sedition, and the more general concept of ‘causing corruption on earth’. In modern parlance, *hiraba* may be considered to be the equivalent of ‘terrorism’, whose perpetrators show callous disregard for the sanctity of civilian life and instil widespread fear among the general population.\textsuperscript{52}

**Conclusion**

The various sources of Islamic thought maintain a clear distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence. Although the Qur’an and Hadith are frequently invoked to establish these parameters, jurists, in particular from the eighth century on, often appealed to realpolitik to subvert particularly Qur’anic injunctions in order to expand the boundaries of legitimate violence. Given the predominance of Islamic law in determining relations between Muslims and non-Muslims at the state and international level, the Qur’anic jihad with its multiple meanings became reduced over time to refer

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 13:141.
\textsuperscript{51} The classic study of this phenomenon is Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
\textsuperscript{52} For this comparison, see Sherman Jackson, ‘Domestic Terrorism in the Islamic Legal Tradition’, *Muslim World* 91 (2001), 293–310.
essentially to armed combat in legal and administrative literature. Similarly,
the concept of martyrdom, which is a much more expansive one in the early
period, became progressively restricted to military martyrdom and a specific
cult arose around this concept, despite Qur’anic strictures against the very
construction of such a cult. These developments were contested and debated
particularly in non-juridical circles. A careful engagement with a range of
sources allows us to retrieve these premodern debates and to interrogate the
monolithic understanding of jihad, and therefore of legitimate violence, that
is prevalent within Islamic thought today.

Bibliographical Essay

The Qur’an – the earliest recorded text we have dating from the first century of Islam or
the seventh century CE – is the point of departure for discussion of the earliest diverse
meanings of the concept of jihad. One of the best English translations is by M. A. S. Abdel
Haleem, simply titled The Qur’an (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Key Qur’anic verses that deal with jihad were interpreted in multiple ways by
succeeding generations of Muslim scholars. These diverse interpretations become very
evident in Qur’an commentaries produced in different historical circumstances. The
exegetical works consulted in this study include the very early ones by Mujahid ibn Jabr
(d. 722) composed during the Umayyad period and Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d. 767) from the
early Abbasid period; the acclaimed classical commentary of Muhammad ibn Jarir al-
Tabari (d. 923) and of al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144), both from the height of the Abbasid period;
the commentary of the formidable polymath Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210) from the Seljuq
period, and of the Andalusian exegete al-Qurtubi (d. 1273) in the thirteenth century. The
exegesis of the popular commentator from the Mamluk period, Ibn Kathir (d. 1373), is also
a highly important source for understanding both the symbolic and the concrete roles of
the military jihad during this fraught period when the Muslim world was under attack by
ferocious enemies. For an overview of some of these commentaries in English in reference
to select Qur’anic verses concerning jihad, the recently published The Study Qur’an: A New
Translation and Commentary (New York: HarperOne, 2015) is to be highly recommended.

Hadith works containing sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad also preserve a
variety of perspectives on jihad as well as on the related concept of martyrdom. The early
Hadith work al-Musannaf of Abd al-Razzaq (d. 827) and the similarly titled Hadith
collection of Ibn Abi Shayba (d. 849) contain a number of very early reports which
relate multiple combative and non-combative definitions of jihad as well as of
martyrdom, which are not always reproduced in later compilations. The two later more
famous Hadith collections called the Sahih of al-Bukhari (d. 870) and the Sahih of Muslim b.
al-Hajjaj (d. 875) appear more streamlined in comparison with the two Musannafs, since
many of the earlier reports of doubtful reliability were winnowed out in accordance with
these two compilers’ more stringent standards of codification. The Sahih of al-Bukhari is
available in translation by Muhammad Muhsin Khan, as The Translation of the Meanings of
Sahih al-Bukhari (multiple editions), and the Sahih of Muslim by Nasiruddin al-Khattab as

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The English Translation of Sahih Muslim (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007). These and other English translations of both Hadith works are available online as well. The Hadith work of the early jurist Malik ibn Anas (d. 795), the Muwatta, widely regarded as the first work of Islamic law, is another important repository of early perspectives on the meanings of jihad and martyrdom. The Muwatta is available in an English translation by Aisha Bewley as Al-Muwatta of Imam Malik ibn Anas (Granada: Madinah Press, 1991). For specifically Shi’i perspectives on martyrdom in the absence of their rightful religious leader (imam), Mahmoud Ayoub’s Redemptive Suffering in Islam (The Hague: Mouton, 1978) remains a masterful study.

A number of influential jurists during the Abbasid period approached the topic of the military jihad from the perspective of the state and interpreted relevant religious texts in accordance with their primary objective of guaranteeing its security against the encroachment of external enemies. This perspective is quite evident in the classical legal texts of the master jurist al-Shafi’i (d. 820) titled Kitab al-umm and al-Risala. The latter work is available in a new translation by Joseph E. Lowry, The Epistle on Legal Theory (New York: New York University Press, 2013). Deference to realpolitik is also strongly evident in later legal treatises, such as al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyya of al-Mawardi (d. 1058), which has been translated by Wafaa Wahba as The Ordinances of Government (Reading: Garnet, 2000). Further such works include al-Mudawwana al-kubra of Sahnu (d. 845), the Kitab al-mabsut of al-Sarakhsi (d. 1096) and the Kitab al-mughni of Ibn Qudama (d. 1223).

Modern studies that shed extensive light on how the understanding of jihad as both a legal and an ethical term evolved through variegated historical circumstances include Majid Khadduri’s War and Peace in the Law of Islam (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1955); Ahmad Mohsen al-Dawoody’s The Islamic Law of War: Justifications and Regulations (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and my own Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). The essay by Roy Mottahedeh and Ridwan al-Sayyid titled ‘The Idea of the Jihad in Islam before the Crusades’, in Angeliki E. Laiou and Roy Parviz Mottahedeh (eds.), The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001), pp. 23–9, also provides a valuable synopsis of multiple interpretations of jihad in the early period. Khaled Abou El Fadl’s Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Sherman Jackson’s ‘Domestic Terrorism in the Islamic Legal Tradition’, Muslim World 91 (2001), 293–310, are particularly helpful for understanding how internal political rebellion and domestic terrorism respectively were dealt with by Muslim jurists in the premodern period.
Although he was not the first to do so, canonist and Dominican master general Raymond Peñafort (d. 1275) tidily shows how medieval Latin Christians created a single demographic that was set in opposition to Raymond’s orthodox co-religionists. Writing in his *Summa de paenitentia et de matrimonio*, Raymond considered ‘those who dishonor God by worshiping vilely, namely Jews, heretics, and Saracens’. Closer to our own time, gathering Christianity’s ‘others’ together in a single scholarly view is already apparent in the late nineteenth century, in the French historian and archivist Ulysse Robert’s investigation of mass persecution of Christian Europe’s medieval ‘others’ through the imposition of external signs. And as is well known among medieval historians, R. I. Moore brought together Jews, heretics, Muslims, lepers and homosexuals as a class of ‘out-groups’ demonised by Latin Christians in the high Middle Ages, ‘created’ by them and redefined for purposes of state and clerical power. This has prompted debate within medieval historiography over violence against religious others as a new component of, in Moore’s words, a high medieval ‘persecuting society’. Understanding medieval Christian violence against different groups as a single unitary project, then, has a long history, with modern scholarship reflecting medieval categorisations.

This chapter surveys violence imposed by medieval western European Christians upon their chief religious ‘others’: heretics, Jews and Muslims. A primary challenge is to mediate similarities and differences in the experience of each. Orthodox Christians had associated Jews and heretics since antiquity; after the coming of Islam in the seventh century, Muslims were added in a

pure triangulation of imagery and polemic. This happened in two ways: Christians employed similar tropes for all three (sexual licence, demonism), and built actual historical links between them (for example, Christians commonly credited the birth of Islam to monophysite Christian heretics, sometimes in league with heterodox Jews). Medieval violence against all three lay within, and was influenced by, a single totalising Christian spiritual geography born in antiquity but expanded in the Middle Ages. Still, while the norm in analysis is often usefully collective, we will try below to disassemble the differences in why and how Christians wielded violence against each.

Many diversities and contingencies cripple a single, easy narrative of Christian violence against Jews, heretics and Muslims. Within Latin Europe, Christians and their religious minorities had varying situations; there were places of common coexistence, and places without it. Muslims were geographically limited in the Latin West, while Jewish communities were more common and widespread, with thriving urban centres as well as less visible rural presences. ‘Heretics’ were inherently more demographically slippery, as this identity within Christianity in many ways depended on perspective and judgement – it was readily possible to disagree on whether someone was a heretic or not – and it could be denied, or change quickly with retraction and penance. A heretic’s return to orthodoxy happened much more frequently in medieval Europe than did conversion from Judaism or Islam. Christian violence against religious others also had various domains, from street to court, and various forms. It was imposed formally by people in power, or in moments of impulsive chaos; it was committed by individuals, institutions and armies. It was ad hoc and planned, deviant and formalised, incorporating street fights, pogroms, crusades, executions, conversions by force and expulsions. And for Jews, Muslims and heretical Christians alike, the real violence to which they were subject was accompanied by various forms of secular and ecclesiastical legal restraint, control and supervision – for example, bars to holding office or serving as witnesses – and we should remember this broader context of repression.

Moreover, Latin Christian violence against religious others did not result from the same reasons in all cases, and multiple motivations could coexist. Christian violence could be simultaneously savvily instrumental and genuinely pious. This is one reason why we will emphasise what this violence

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4 There were instances where persons disagreed on Jewish or Muslim identity (say, with mixed parentage, with a parent’s conversion or after forced conversion), but this was not the norm.

5 As in Hussein Fancy’s argument that ‘Aragonese kings’ increasingly radical claims to universal and omnipotent authority found their clearest – and perhaps only – expression
tells us about Christianity and its historical mutations. Christian violence tells us primarily about orthodox Christian conceptions and constructions of their faith, and not chiefly about the daily experiences of medieval Jews, heretics and Muslims. This runs the risk of not taking that experience seriously, or implying that the Christian response was sensible. But the key lesson here for the history of violence is Christianity’s ability to generate it. The violence we see below was expressly Christian, not despite the theological and historical foundations of the faith, but rather because of them. One way to connect Christian belief with Christian violence is the work done by clerical ideology, via different media, in inspiring, fomenting and justifying violence in medieval Europe. As we will see, Christian violence depended upon accusations of prefatory violence by Jews, heretics and Muslims. This supposed violence was diverse: it had souls, bodies, Christianity and Christ himself as targets; it did not occur just in the present, but ranged over the past. This is fundamental in understanding Christian violence against religious minorities: as earthly, gritty and corporeal as it was, Christians often proposed it to themselves as resting within a transcendent complex of divine and human violence; not as proactive eradication, but as pious defensive response.

Christian Violence against Jews

The appalling drama of medieval anti-Jewish violence – and the ways in which it has seemed useful for explaining, through etiology, inexplicable modern violence and attempted genocide – has often crowded out both medieval peculiarities and the breadth of Jewish life in the European Middle Ages. As Jonathan Elukin has remarked disapprovingly, ‘Violence is traditionally perceived to be at the core of the Jewish experience in medieval Europe.’ Some scholars have emphasised rather the intellectual and social richness of medieval Jewish communities, as well as the days of quiet routine. The task here is to attend to changes in the violence committed against Jews by Christians, while always remembering that these incidents


could coexist with both interreligious harmony and flourishing Jewish experience.  

To generalise: in the early part of the Middle Ages, Jewish communities received legal protections and sometimes privileges from secular authorities. These protections cooperated with, and were reinforced by, ecclesiastical exhortations to Christians to tolerate Jews in a ‘doctrine of witness’. This theological premise of toleration, credited to Augustine of Hippo (354–430), emphasised the utility of Jews in focusing Christian memory onto Christ’s sacrificial death. Other theological premises contributed; so, for example, Jews would convert as a sign of the apocalyptic Last Days, and spiritually ‘blind’ Jews were prevented from properly recognising Jesus as messiah. We should not misunderstand or overcredit the legal status assigned to Jews by secular authorities, however, as ‘protection’ enshrined difference, and could be capriciously withdrawn. As servi of kings, Jews’ protection was expressly exceptional and circumstantial, not a matter of course. Moreover, there were already theological and conceptual limits to the notion of Jews as living testimonies to Christ. For instance, the ‘doctrine of witness’ coexisted with the traditional interpenetration of ‘heresy’ and Judaism in rhetoric and the adversus hereticos and adversus Judaeos polemical genres.

These sentiments and tactics are not easily mapped in time, and they often coexisted with and even reinforced each other. In the early Middle Ages, insecurity of the Jewish experience is perhaps most visible amid the religious and political tensions of the Visigothic kingdom on the Iberian peninsula, a post-Roman state that struggled to establish royal legitimacy, smooth succession, and maintain harmony between its Germanic ruling elite and the majority Ibero-Romans. The Arian Christianity of the Visigoths conflicted with their subjects’ Nicene Christianity and Judaism, eventually leading to King Reccared’s conversion to Nicene Christianity in 589. What followed were state attempts to eradicate both Arian Christianity and Judaism, and there were repeated calls forcibly to convert the kingdom’s Jewish community. This was not the last time that Judaism would be swept up in a totalising

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vision of a united Christian community, or was teamed with ‘heresy’ as an object of persecution. Still, the early Middle Ages demonstrate comparatively few instances of violence against Latin Europe’s Jews.

This is one reason why historians of Jewish–Christian relations struggle with long-view interpretation. The early Middle Ages show us little violence; by the late Middle Ages, the violence was marked. Can or should we identify a ‘watershed’ moment? An apparent one is 1096, when rogue soldiers en route from France to Palestine to fight the First Crusade attacked Jewish communities in the Rhineland towns of northern France and Germany. The sources, both Christian and Jewish, that inform us of these attacks cite efforts, ultimately futile, by local bishops to protect the Jews, and various strategies by the communities to obviate the violence. The crusaders gave Jews the choice between conversion or death, and sources described the choice of many Jews to commit suicide or kill relatives as a rejection of idolatry, a ‘sanctification of the divine name’.

While the sources are problematic, what seems sure is that the new ideology of crusade – which impugned intra-Christian violence while morally valorising violence against Christianity’s supposed enemies – influenced these attacks. This was so despite clerical and papal insistence that the situation of Europe’s Jewish subjects differed radically from Muslims in the Holy Land. Nevertheless, crusading and anti-Jewish violence remained close ideologically and in reality. The famous Cistercian monk Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) preached both in favour of the Second Crusade, and against anti-Jewish violence, in 1146. The Crusades brought into public discourse language about ‘enemies of God’; more subtly, they formed part of a broader ecclesiastical globalist ideology that affected popular notions of Jews’ place within Christian polities.

Various kinds of violence against Jews accelerated after the Rhineland attacks in 1096. Accelerating simultaneously was a changing narrative about European Christians’ Jewish neighbours. Beyond the experience of crusades – but fitting neatly into their moral and theological anthropology dividing the world into Christians, not-yet-Christians and enemies of Christians – Jews began to be depicted increasingly as the third of these categories. Commercial changes in

11 For example, Bernhard Blumenkranz, Juifs et chrétiens dans le monde occidental, 430–1096 (Paris: Mouton, 1960).
the urban economies of the high Middle Ages led to the involvement of Jews in usury (lending money at interest), an activity from which Christians benefited and in which they gladly engaged, but that generated accusations of Jewish financial exploitation and greed. Relatedly, accounts began to appear in chronicles and sermons of Jews using ill-gotten gains to purchase church plate for blasphemous purposes, as a language of filth, pollution and diabolism became more prominent in anti-Jewish rhetoric.\textsuperscript{13} To be clear: there was still protection by secular authorities, and there were still exhortations to toleration by ecclesiastical ones. But perceptible in the twelfth century is a slow grinding of the wheel in another direction, the eventual turning of popes and kings away from these protective attitudes, and changing perceptions of the Jews themselves. What is not easily readable is the directionality of the relationship between anti-Jewish slander and anti-Jewish violence – that is, how finely and directly each influenced the other.

The most notorious example of interpenetrating slander and violence – premised upon the notion of Jews’ own past and present violence – is the development in the twelfth century of accusations of ‘ritual murder’ and ‘blood libel’. In tales of ritual murder, Jews were accused of kidnapping Christian children at Easter to restage Christ’s crucifixion, thus associating the supposed guilt of long-dead, faraway Jews with present crimes of Jewish Europeans. ‘Blood libel’ claimed that Jews used Christian blood in order to make the unleavened bread eaten at Passover. The historian Gavin Langmuir identified an English monk, Thomas of Monmouth, as the shaper of this legend (c. 1150), in his eagerness to transform the slain child William of Norwich into a saint. Still, we should note that, in Thomas’s tale, the Christian who found William assumed the murderer was a Jew because of the ‘unusual cruelty’ apparent in his manner of death. It was this assertion of Jewish cruelty and wickedness that sustained the numerous reported cases of ritual murder, premised upon ridiculously scanty or non-existent grounds, dotting the rest of the Middle Ages and beyond.\textsuperscript{14} These accusations usually led to violence, whether the attacks of a mob enraged by the supposed crime, or secular punishment following from legal procedure or formal charges. Instances of the latter are the case of Blois in 1171, where the count of Blois

executed about thirty Jews by burning, and the death of Simon of Trent in 1475 in Italy, after which Trent’s entire Jewish community was arrested, and several Jews were tortured and executed.\textsuperscript{15}

As the Middle Ages progressed, we see a general cultural-religious conclusion among Christians of all kinds that Jews were enemies of Christ and of Christians, and that conclusion created a versatile template for violent action. The notion of an international Jewish conspiracy to do harm to Christians that appeared in some ritual murder accusations was expandable. New circumstances could be adapted to this template to generate and justify further violence. After the coming of the Black Death to Europe in 1347, Jews were believed to have caused the illness by poisoning the drinking water in wells, and were burned. German chronicler and canonist Heinrich von Diessenhofen (c. 1300–76) recounted a full year of torture and killings for ‘all the Jews between Cologne and Austria’ during 1348 and 1349. These burnings were both ad hoc and formal, and, as would be the case with inquisitions, violence spurred further violence as torture prompted ‘confessions’ that validated past, and justified future, persecutions. Jewish communities in Germany experienced popular violence throughout the fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{16} Yet it is important to note that violence against Jews did not result only from accusations of immediate guilt; it was rather embedded within a general conception that violence was a means to glorify God. One of the most striking incidents of anti-Jewish violence arose amid the preaching tours of Dominican friar Vincent Ferrer (d. 1419) in Iberia. Their resultant blend of Christian piety and violence in pogroms produced a sizeable new demographic of converted Jews.\textsuperscript{17}

The intersection of conversion and violence was complicated.\textsuperscript{18} In the Middle Ages forced baptism of adults and children (sometimes seized from their parents for this purpose) was generally a result of popular upheaval, and

\textsuperscript{15} R. Po-chia Hsia, 


\textsuperscript{18} Jews, particularly in Iberia, were sometimes required by secular authorities to attend sermons and disputations; while fundamentally performative, these at least made a
not of state or ecclesiastical policy. Indeed, popes and clerics reiterated that Jews were not to be compelled to the faith through violence. The forced baptism of Jews was treated frequently in canon law, and commented upon by canonists interpreting it, over the medieval centuries. From the ecclesiastical councils of Toledo in early medieval Visigothic Iberia to the canonist Gratian’s masterful law compilation, the Decretum (c. 1140) and on, canonists pondered forced baptism, including the difference between ‘absolute’ and ‘conditional’ coercion. What constituted a theologically valid baptism? What were the distinguishable shades of both ‘coercion’ and ‘consent’? For instance, a struggling Jew held forcibly down while water was poured on his head and the baptism formula pronounced – that is, absolute coercion – differed from a Jew given a choice of conversion or death by a man holding a bloody knife.

Despite this pondering about consent, we should not assume that clerics interpreted ‘force’ generously. Here too we see change by the high Middle Ages. Pope Innocent III (r. 1198–1216), so fond of crusades against Islam and the caller of the Albigensian Crusade against heresy, issued Maiores ecclesie in 1201, which contended that only active physical resistance could prove an invalid baptism. One of our best glimpses into forced conversion – and how Christians could read it afterwards as salutary divine intervention – is the case of Baruch the German, converted in 1320 during the Pastoreaux rampages in southern France (the region brought into the French domain by the Albigensian Crusade, see below). This so-called Shepherds’ Crusade, an outgrowth of lingering crusading fervour after the wars in the east effectively ended in 1291, included mass attacks upon Jews and lepers by wandering, self-styled ‘crusaders’. Baruch (who had several Christian friends) submitted to a hasty baptism during a day in which he estimated 150 of his fellow Jews in Toulouse were killed. When Baruch later returned to Judaism, maintaining that his baptism was invalid, he was arrested as a relapsed heretic. His inquisitorial trial for relapse, conducted by Jacques Fournier, bishop of Pamiers, lasted weeks, hinging on notions of consent, resistance and Trinitarian theology. Reflecting Maiores ecclesie, Bishop Fournier insisted that Baruch’s baptism was valid, a denouement that allowed its Christian feint at persuasion. Nina Caputo and Liz Clarke, Debating Truth: The Barcelona Disputation of 1263: A Graphic History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Robert Chazan, Barcelona and Beyond: The Disputation of 1263 and its Aftermath (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Jeremy Cohen, The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Semitism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

witnesses to cast ‘conditional’ force as divine will, an imperfect beginning that ended in the positive good of a saved soul.  

As Baruch’s case also demonstrates, popular violence and forced conversion interpenetrated with another way in which Jews began to suffer increasing ‘official’ violence as the Middle Ages wore on. The ecclesiastical courts of inquisitiones hereticae pravitatis, and their accompanying coercions of arrest, torture, punishment and execution, were not technically the domain for unbaptised Jews. But after heresy inquisitions were installed in western Europe beginning in the 1230s, both converted and unconverted Jews were gradually drawn into its jurisdiction. That expansion was related both to Christian universalism (Jews lay within the theological space of Christianity, whether they recognised it or not) and to the narrative of Jews as enemies of Christ and Christians. Pope Clement IV’s Turbato corde (1267), which was reissued by successive popes, instructed heresy inquisitors to pursue not only Christians who ‘have damnably crossed over to the rite of the Jews’ (both those born Christians and converts from Judaism), but also Jews who had persuaded them to convert. Medieval inquisitions, which were institutionally weak and not especially institutionalised, were more concerned with Christian heresy. But the Spanish Inquisition was explicitly founded in 1478 by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to pursue Jewish converts to Christianity (conversos) believed guilty of reverting to Judaism, as well as various people, beliefs and actions tinged with ‘judaising’.

Violence against Jews was never uncomplicated, particularly when the state’s competing interests – to protect the Jews from violence or to impose it – had to be weighed. An example is the anti-Jewish riots in England at the ascension of Richard I (r. 1189–99), which began in London and spread geographically in the kingdom. His coronation was coincident with calls for the Third Crusade (to recover Jerusalem, lost to Saladin in 1187), and crusade fervour against non-Christians combined with anger over debts owed to Jews. The violence crested in York in 1190, when after a few days of attacks the city’s Jewish community, about 150 strong, was massacred at

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their refuge in Clifford’s Tower. According to the Christian chronicler William of Newburgh, the violence in York was a combination of enraged frenzy and reasoned strategies to erase debts; it was committed by nobles and the ‘mob’ alike; it involved authorities who both protected and abandoned the Jews. Also, the palette of violence in the York incident was varied: theft, arson, forced baptisms and murder. In the English episodes of 1189–90, neither the Christian violence nor King Richard’s interests in responding to it can be reduced to a single motive, and we see how violence betrayed the complex role of the state. Sometimes the state itself enacted or permitted violence against Jews. Nearly a century after the York massacre, England’s aggressive prosecution of ‘coin-clipping’ in 1278–9 led to the execution of about 300 Jews. Yet sometimes the state restrained violence. Bishop of Lincoln Robert Grosseteste (c. 1170–1253) once intervened to free several Oxford students who, significantly, had been imprisoned for attacking local Jews. A Jewish chronicler reported that even though Count Theobald of Blois executed Jews by burning in 1171, he also angrily punished Christians who attacked Jews escaping the fire, distinguishing between extra-judicial and his own judicial violence. Secular rulers gained little in permitting the lawlessness signalled by popular attacks upon Jews – which undermined authority and potentially found other targets – but they also risked much from subjects and even some clerics in defending them. What determined the course of state action was a host of multi-layered contingencies, including concerns about public order, local intrigues, efforts to increase or to redeploy state power, the piety of the individual ruler, and also that ruler’s own conception of what treatment of Jews that piety demanded.

This was the backdrop for a different kind of anti-Jewish violence: the forced expulsion of Jewish communities. Edward I expelled Jews from the kingdom of England in 1290, Philip IV from the kingdom of France (1306), Ferdinand and Isabella from the newly united kingdom of Spain (1492) and João II from Portugal (1497). Several other expulsions took place, too, in smaller localities. King of Naples Charles II, expelling Jews from his French counties of Anjou and Maine in 1289, even provided for the ‘citizen’s arrest’ of

23 Sarah Rees-Jones and Sethina Watson (eds.), Christians and Jews in Angevin England: The York Massacre of 1190, Narratives and Contexts (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2013). As had also been reported of the Rhineland communities in 1096, many Jews in York committed suicide and murder rather than submit to conversion or death at the hands of Christians.


25 Chazan, Church, State, and Jew, p. 304.
any Jew discovered in hiding, who would be ‘properly beaten without the
inflicting of wounds’.26 Expulsions could be unintentionally temporary, as in
the repeated permissions for Jews to return to parts of France after the 1306
expulsion. (There were indeed Jews like Baruch living in Toulouse to be
attacked by the Pastoureaux in 1320.)27 These expulsions often seem influ-
enced by rulers having reached their limits in financially exploiting the Jews,
although this is not satisfying as a sole reason. Here too we have multiple
coexisting motivations, both immediate circumstances and the result
of centuries of a Christian universalism that had slowly squeezed out space
for Jews in Christian polities. Expulsions were a statement that the traditional
models of tolerance and protection for Jews no longer applied. By the later
Middle Ages, many medieval Latin Christians no longer believed that their
Jewish neighbours were the ‘same’ Jews for whom Augustine had urged
toleration (even if, ironically, tales of ritual murder still cited collective guilt
in the crucifixion).

Christian violence against Jews was irregular, disparate, of different origins
and actors, and governed by contingency and circumstance. It was morbidly
creative and adaptive: when João II permitted Spanish Jews to enter Portugal
at a price in 1492, he forcibly sent their children to the newly colonised, but
underpopulated, Atlantic island of São Tomé. At the same time, and despite
immediate moments of peace and security, a bird’s-eye view of anti-Jewish
violence in the Middle Ages shows it to have worsened and quickened as
centuries passed. This change had much to do with the growth of the
medieval state. But it was also tightly bound to the development of
‘Christendom’ as a politico-religious, global entity with the pope at its
head, and to a theology of radical inclusion and transcendent violence.
Christian depictions in diverse media insisted that Jews were instigators,
not victims, of bodily violence, with Christian violence as salutary revenge
or justice. The experiences of anti-Jewish violence were themselves offered as
proof: through ‘confessions’ and through plaints that Jews escaped the
‘justice’ of violence through bribery. Each supposed instance of Jewish
violence and greed was layered upon its predecessors and gestured to the
moment of the crucifixion. As Heinrich von Diissenhofen reported, the
death of the Jews sent them ‘to hell’, and in it ‘the curse seemed to be

26 Ibid., p. 316.
27 Robin Mundill, England’s Jewish Solution: Experiment and Expulsion, 1262–1290
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), especially ch. 7, ‘Dissolution and
Cerf, 2004).
fulfilled: ‘his blood be upon us and upon our children’. Christian violence was folded into divine violence and divine justice.

Violence against Christian Heretics

If the violence that is the subject of this chapter depended upon the identity of its victims, that matter was more complex with heretics than it was with Jews or Muslims. The question of violence against heretics is inseparable from the troubled question of heresy’s existence and categorisations in medieval Europe. Heresy was, simply, more subjective than was Judaism or Islam, and scholars debate hotly the degree to which medieval clerics began to identify scattered beliefs and actions as ‘heresy’ for the purposes of building power. Regardless, an identification as ‘heretical’ applied to Christians, and the violence attached to heresy inquisitions was related to Christian notions of body and soul. (We do not see this with anti-Jewish violence, although its justifications lay within that Christian worldview.)

The penitential whipping of Benedictine monk Gottschalk of Orbais (d. c. 866) for heterodox views on predestination was, indeed, Christian violence against heresy. It was violence, however, located within centuries-old ascetic and disciplinary traditions that used pain and the body to cultivate or to correct the soul.

After the execution of Iberian bishop Priscillian of Avila for sorcery and heresy in 385, we see very little violence against heresy in Latin Europe for centuries. Heresy again appears as a concern of Christian clerics, authorities and chroniclers in the eleventh century, with loose, disparate and barely definable religious movements they deemed ‘heretical’. These groups were often reformist; were opposed to ‘accretions’; were anxious about clerical wealth and corruption (unchastity, simony); and showed dualist hints of mistrusting the fleshly and material. In the twelfth century, larger and more coherent movements arose, although we should remember that their designations as ‘heretical’, and estimates of their size and power, resulted from clerical impressions and descriptions that are not necessarily reliable. The two movements that would attract the most concern in the twelfth and into the thirteenth centuries were the Waldenses, a lay movement of ‘apostolic poverty’ born in Lyons, and the ‘Good Men and Women’, eventually credited by ecclesiastical writers with strict dualist principles and a large, efficient organisation.

As soon as heresy in Latin Europe re-emerged (or, more precisely, as soon as groups were defined as heretics by clerics and authorities), so did violence against it. We glimpse very different kinds: king of France Robert II the Pious (r. 996–1031) formally burnt a number of supposed heretics at the stake, including members of the city’s clerical elite, at Orléans in 1022. Yet other groups were the victims of what more closely resembled mob violence. A group was burned by city authorities in Milan in 1028, although the archbishop of Milan, Aribert, objected. In the 1070s, a northern French heretic called Ramihrd was burned by an angry crowd. Similarly, a heretical group led by two brothers, Clement and Evrard, in Soissons were seized and burned by a mob in 1114. In both of these cases, the crowds appear to have acted to ‘correct’ the local authorities’ reluctance to punish.

But as we move further into the twelfth century and its religious movements, we see violence on both sides in an environment of reform. The anti-clerical monk Henry of Lausanne, who took control of the city of Le Mans c. 1116, violently attacked clergy and ordered ‘unchaste’ women to burn their clothes and hair. He was eventually imprisoned. Peter of Bruys (d. c. 1139), a wandering preacher in southern France, likewise saw religious reform as destruction; his followers forced monks to marry, and burned crucifixes and other church implements. Peter died when a mob pushed him into one of his bonfires. The Augustinian canon Arnold of Brescia (1100–55), a fierce critic of the church’s wealth and temporal power, seized control of Rome for several years. After the election of Adrian IV as pope in 1154, Arnold was arrested and then burnt in Rome. In these episodes, the ‘heretics’ themselves adopted violence in reforming the church, and their efforts at reform were expressly tied to politico-ecclesiastical dynamics that responded in kind.

Also visible in the twelfth century is the building of a narrative that would ultimately justify violence, just as one formed for Jews in the same period. We see a greater concern about heresy in ecclesiastical writing, the resumption of antique language of insanity and pollution, and the careful weaving of present circumstance into past ecclesiastical history. As with Jews, rhetoric about diabolism and immorality became more heated, and polemical treatises, preaching tours, disputations and other strategies belied a panic about ‘heresies’ that were not always detailed or clearly identified.

The supposed popularity of the Good Men in southern France, when combined with existing language of crusade and Christian universalism, produced an instance of anti-heretical violence unlike any experienced by Jews in Europe. Heretics did not have their own state. But Pope Innocent III railed against the secular rulers in this territory who neglected to pursue and
to eradicate heresy. After the murder of Innocent’s papal legate in 1208, the pope called a crusade, intending to replace dukes and counts putatively soft on heresy with Catholics more pious and eager to prosecute it. The Albigensian Crusade (1209–29) was the first conscious application of the holy violence of ‘crusade’ to European Christians. The war was fought primarily by crusaders from the kingdom of France, who received the traditional crusade indulgence for their service. By the war’s end in 1229, it was girded equally by the expansionist ambitions of France’s ruling royal house, and the church’s misguided belief that war could eradicate heresy. After an epilogue rebellion by count of Toulouse, Raymond VII (r. 1222–49), in 1244, the crusade’s final victory was the royal army’s seizure of the fortress at Montségur, where ‘Good Men’ had taken refuge. Over 200 heretics were executed by burning. Crusade appeared to be salutarily applied to heresy, and later anti-heretical crusades were called by Pope Gregory IX (r. 1227–41): the ‘Stedinger Crusade’ was a war against peasant farmers deemed heretics in northern Germany in 1232–4, and the pope also attempted a crusade against Bulgarian dualists in 1238. While ‘heretics’ in future crusades sometimes merely meant papal opponents, the least successful ‘crusade’ against heresy was against a group revelling in its difference. The Hussite wars in Bohemia (1420–31) were invoked after the followers of Czech priest and reformer Jan Hus, executed at the Council of Constance in 1415, rebelled. The partial victory of Hussites in the war signalled the ability of ‘heretics’, with cooperating state power and popular support, to shape a polity.

Wars did not end heresy, and in partial response inquisitorial courts were installed wherever heresy seemed popular. While inquisitions have captured the post-medieval imagination as a symbol of violent repression and religious intolerance, most germane for a discussion of Christian violence is the organic way in which their violence developed from previous Christian norms, and the way in which it was described and understood by clerics. As was the case with anti-Jewish violence, the violence associated with inquisition took different forms; even more so, perhaps, it played different roles, with inquisition’s explicit goal of returning heretics to orthodoxy. Suspected but recalcitrant heretics could be licitly tortured during interrogation in order to impel a cleansing confession. In 1252, Pope Innocent IV (r. 1243–54) allowed inquisitors to absolve each other for irregularities in

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procedure, a privilege often read by modern scholars as tacit permission to torture. This reflected the inquisitorial (indeed, general Christian) sentiment that *vexatio dabit intellectum* – ‘vexation will bring understanding’ – as well as the observation that suspects for secular crimes were tortured. What was more transcendentally criminal than heresy? On the other hand, the punishment of ritually flogging a guilty heretic was violence *after* that ‘understanding’ had been demonstrated through confession. Publicly beating a heretic at mass or in a procession imported traditional penitential monastic violence into the lay sphere, while it also served as a visible lesson for others. Finally, the death penalty for heresy belonged to a third register of violence. In 1231, Pope Gregory IX proclaimed recalcitrant or relapsed heretics to be subject to the ‘deserved punishment’, meaning the secular penalty of death for heresy. Consequently, executing heretics was violence done in delicate cooperation between ecclesiastical and secular authority; clerics were forbidden from shedding blood, and the sentence of ‘handing over to the secular arm’ meant that the guilty had exhausted the penitential opportunities of inquisition’s ecclesiastical court.

State responsibility for executions in no way meant that Latin Christian clerics disapproved of them. Inquisitor Bernard Gui famously observed that there were two ways to eradicate heresy: by converting heretics back to orthodox Christianity, or by killing them. Yet the justification for the death penalty was not just tactical. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries – building upon rhetoric about heresy that clerics had begun to deploy in the eleventh century – inquisitors and popes used biblical exegesis, theology and church history to craft a tradition of God’s own violence in which they placed execution. God would surely damn these self-condemned heretics in hell, making their deaths an apt preview and prologue. In a more banal appeal resembling that made about torture, clerics argued that heretics, as murderers of souls and traitors against God, surely deserved at least as much as earthly traitors and killers. This was partly analogous to justifications of violence against Jews – an ascription of guilt casting Christian violence as responsive, punitive and moral – but it also differed, by labouring even harder at constructing theological foundations. To extend crusading or persecutory violence to Christians (heretics always remained Christians) was, quite simply, troubled.

This points to a few peculiarities in anti-heretical violence. First is the possibility that it exceeded that against Jews and Muslims in its brutality.

Malcolm Barber has argued that even contemporaries saw the Albigensian Crusade as exceptionally violent and dehumanising, in part failing to distinguish between ‘heretical’ and orthodox residents of Languedoc. Bernard Gui noted approvingly that after heretic Dolcino of Novara and his lover Marguerite were captured by an inquisitorial army, ‘there was a deserved execution of justice . . . Marguerite was cut up limb by limb before Dolcino’s eyes; next, Dolcino was cut through limb by limb; and the bones and limbs of both were burned together . . . as their crimes deserved.’ It is not coincidental that vivid descriptions of graphic violence in both purgatory and hell – violence imposed by God on sinners – also arose in these centuries. Indeed, it was probably mutually influential. Second, and relatedly: as violence against heretics became more common and institutionalised, churchmen appealed more energetically to models in the Bible and church history to justify it. This is simply not as visible in the case of violence against Jews and Muslims, even when we acknowledge that anti-Jewish violence often invoked the crucifixion. One reason is that, unlike the cases of Jews and Muslims, mob violence against heresy ended in the mid thirteenth century, after the installation of inquisitions. (Popular violence turned instead against inquisitors themselves.) Clerics engineered and more directly imposed violence against heretics, which was generally formalised, demanding the cooperation of church and secular authorities. It required more theological spadework, more effort in preaching and teaching on the ground, to persuade European Christians that it was spiritually licit to kill their Christian neighbours, even the heretical ones.

### Violence against Muslims

We will spend less time on Christian violence against Muslims, which in the Latin West was by far the most rare. In some ways, perhaps strangely, anti-Jewish and anti-heretical violence seem to resemble each other more than each does anti-Muslim violence. We can credit this to some simple differences: Muslims had states, while Jews and heretics did not, and Muslims were geographically restricted, with comparatively small populations in western

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32 Gui, Pratca, p. 342.  
Europe. Despite the enormous significance of Muslim–Christian violence in the crusades, and the real ways in which crusading ideology and experience in the East influenced perceptions back home (and vice-versa), demographics prevented more direct engagement between European Christians and Muslims. Our focus will be strictly on Iberia and southern Italy. In both, beginning in the eleventh century, Muslims transformed from hegemonic rulers into subjects, and from majority into (eventually) a numeric minority.

After the Muslim conquest of most of the Iberian peninsula in 711, a Muslim polity of one kind or another would exist on the peninsula until 1492. First was Al-Andalus, a western outpost of the Umayyad caliphate, which in the tenth century evolved into the flourishing, independent caliphate of Cordoba. This eventually fragmented into several smaller, disjointed taifa kingdoms. Muslim Iberia was reunited through conquest, first by the Almoravids and then by the Almohads from Muslim North Africa. But this re-entrenchment could not ultimately stem the military expansion of Christians from the north of the peninsula, and by the end of the thirteenth century only the small Muslim kingdom of Granada in southern Iberia remained. This long arc was tracked with violence of different kinds, and reflected Christian Iberia’s increasing links with its western European neighbours as conquest expanded. That expansion corresponded with the increasing coherence and sophistication of the most important Iberian kingdoms – Aragon and Leon-Castile – and engagement with Latin Christian politics, papacy ambitions, and ecclesiastical culture and mentality. By the thirteenth century, the language of ‘crusade’ was unsurprisingly applied to this warfare, and the claim of ‘reconquest’ sought to assert the permanent Christian identity of the land. Likewise, the Muslim population in southern Italy resident since the Muslim conquest of Sicily in the ninth century gradually attenuated after the Christian Norman conquest in the eleventh, with a near extinction beginning with king of Sicily and Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (d. 1250) in the thirteenth.34

The discussion of the crusades in this volume can flesh out Iberian and Italian warfare between Muslims and Christians. Yet more pertinent as a comparison to anti-Jewish and anti-heretical violence is the treatment of Muslim minorities. In Christian anti-Muslim violence, there are many resemblances with the above violence against Jews and heretics. In the Iberian

kingdoms (where Muslims living under Christian rule were known as *mudéjares*) and in Sicily, the Muslims’ position resembled that of the Jews, with Muslims belonging to the king as *servi* and under his jurisdiction, a position of simultaneous protection and insecurity. While there were long periods of peace and examples of contact and friendship, multiple motives and moments of stress prompted Christian popular violence against Muslim minorities. In Norman Sicily, for example, the years around 1160 saw several massacres of Muslims in Palermo and elsewhere, related to the murder of ‘amir of amirs’ Maio of Bari in 1160, and to palace intrigue, noble conflicts with royal administrators, and anger at the loss of colonies in Africa. In Iberia from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, anti-Muslim violence and riots repeatedly struck newly Christian towns. Also, as was the case for Jews and heretics, the twelfth century saw a rise in polemics written by clerics – who may never have met a Muslim – as churchmen like Peter the Venerable and Guibert of Nogent condemned Islam with accusations of diabolism, sexuality and heresy; disseminated outrageous stories about Muhammad; and delved into the Qur’an in order to discredit it. As did Jews, many European Muslims converted in order to avoid violence, creating the demographic known in Iberia as *moriscos*, who like *conversos* were accused of backsliding and were eventually vulnerable to the Spanish Inquisition.

While we see many similarities in violence, there are important differences between Muslims on the one hand and Jews and heretics on the other. Unlike Jewish communities, Muslims were not stable, centuries-old subject settlements, but rather groups that beginning in the high Middle Ages had to accommodate new Christian rulers, new Christian neighbours, and new Christian legislation governing their religious, social and political lives. In addition, this redefinition of their status, and its management, occurred within a broader context of Muslim rule and power elsewhere. European Christians and Muslims alike were sensitive to the existence of Muslim


polities in North Africa and in the East. This exacerbated Christian fears about Muslim minorities, influencing both secular and ecclesiastical discussions about violence against them. Muslims in Iberia and Italy were frequently suspect as a sabotaging fifth column, seeking external support from Muslim states to rebel against Christian rulers. (Muslims remaining in non-Muslim states – dar al-harb, the ‘house of war’ – were liable to criticism from co-religionists living properly under Islamic law.) Years of rebellions by Sicily’s Muslim minority, encouraged by Muslim amirs in North Africa, eventually led Frederick II to deport Sicily’s Muslim community to the town of Lucera in 1223.38 In Iberia’s expanded Christian kingdoms, which initially struggled to boost Christian settlement in formerly Muslim territory, a persistent fear was mudéjar rebellion aided by North African Muslims. This violence indeed dotted Valencia and Leon-Castile. According to King Jaume I of Aragon and Valencia, ‘He should expel all the Moors of the Kingdom of Valencia, because they are all traitors . . . whereas we treat them well, they are ever seeking to do us harm.’39 King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella’s conquest of Granada in 1492, ending centuries of a Muslim polity on the peninsula, may have resulted from their worry over a surgent Ottoman empire.

Consequently, and strangely, it is fair to say that medieval Christians recognised Muslims’ own power and violence, and not just in the fearful terms of a threat demanding divine justice or salutary Christian violent defence. Christian and Muslim confrontation in warfare fascinatingly produced a kind of valorisation of Muslim ‘chivalry’ that appeared in a long tradition of romance literature. On the ground, that recognition also appears in the practical acceptance of Muslims as agents of violence who could be usefully deployed, as in the five Muslims who, in 1285, rode to Christian Aragon on mules they had borrowed from Jews in Muslim Granada, and placed themselves in King Pere III’s military service. No Christian ruler had Jewish or heretical Christian bodyguards, like the Muslim corps surrounding both Emperor Frederick II and king of Aragon Pere III (r. 1276–85).40 Alongside familiar demonising rhetoric, and both popular and state persecution, European Christians carved out (at least temporarily) a space for Muslims that juxtaposed both theological error and damnation, and practical utility.

Conclusion

There was no single form, single cause or single rationale for Christian violence against Jews, heretics and Muslims. Instead, there is a dizzying variety of actors, motives and methods. Even amid a perceptible change over time, there was not constant insecurity. Always there was the messy human reality in which religious identities did not always weigh so heavily amid other interests or other violence. Jonathan Elukin has argued that we must contextualise both anti-Jewish violence and the rhetoric that fed it within a general medieval environment of (non-religious) violence and slander, appreciating how groups would have evaluated their own experience. Indeed, Muslims and Jews directed violence at each other that was influenced by Christian narratives.41 On the other hand, we should assume neither that all Christians wholly embraced religious violence, nor that they lost their agency however much popular anger or however many clerical tales existed. As a priest in Toulouse insisted plainly when faced with Baruch, ‘I certainly won’t forcibly baptise this Jew or anyone else.’42

Finally, we might emphasise that this violence, and its built foundations, was Christian. That is, its genuine links to the rise of the state, the rise of the church as a state, and institutional power do not exclude the many ways in which Christians excavated past and present church history and belief in order to describe and justify it. We cannot simply say that European Jews, heretics and Muslims were a convenient ‘scapegoat’ for blame because of their existence as Christianity’s ‘others’. While violence and law in many ways excluded these groups, violence was also an assertion that Jews, heretics and Muslims lived within the Christian God’s domains. Psychology has been an attractive explanation for this violence: Gavin Langmuir credited it to doubt, while Ora Limor cites ‘anxiety’.43 Yet this can occlude both how medieval Christian violence was coloured by scripture and theology, and how religion generally is compatible with violence. Latin Christians were hegemonic in western Europe and able to exercise violence against their most vulnerable subjects. Yet they were not historically unique in mediating (or putatively protecting) faith through violence, using it to assert their

41 Elukin, Living Together, pp. 89–115; Nirenberg, Communities of Violence.
42 Goodich (ed.), Other Middle Ages, p. 45.
religious rightness, or wielding it as a tool of piety in honouring a God himself violent against his enemies.

Bibliographical Essay

The following gathers works into themes that illuminate medieval Christian violence against heretics, Jews and Muslims.


Heresy as construction: R. I. Moore, The War on Heresy (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2012) and Mark Gregory Pegg, The Corruption of Angels: The Great Inquisition of 1245–1246 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) argue that the organisational and theological coherence of ‘Cathars’ (that is, Good Men and Women) was exaggerated or invented by clerics from scattered dissent or local custom. An energetic rejoinder is Peter
Biller, “Goodbye to Catharism?” in a volume encapsulating the debate: Antonio Sennis (ed.), *Cathars in Question* (York: York Medieval Press, 2016), pp. 274–304. This debate is crucial for interpreting anti-heretical violence: scholars like Biller contend that ‘heresy as construction’ devalues victims’ faithful suffering, while the Pegg/Moore school emphasises the political or religious dynamics of violence for its actors.
‘Fighting for Peace’
Justifying Warfare and Violence in the Medieval East Roman World

JOHN HALDON

Violence and the State

The term ‘Byzantine empire’ refers by convention to the eastern Roman empire from the fourth (or sixth, as some prefer) century to the fifteenth century, that is to say, from the time when a distinctively East Roman political formation began to evolve with the recognition of the cultural divisions between ‘Greek East’ and ‘Latin West’ in the empire’s political structure, to the fall of Constantinople on 29 May 1453 at the hands of the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II. And although within this long period there were many substantial transformations, the elements of structural continuity are marked enough to permit such a broad chronological definition. More important for the definition is the fact that this was a Christian state, or at least became so in the course of the fourth and early fifth centuries.¹

The eastern Roman state is distinguished from its western medieval and – more obviously – its Islamic neighbours to the east through its maintenance of the traditions of Roman law through to the end of its existence in the fifteenth century. From the later sixth century onwards there took place an ever greater convergence of the secular and ecclesiastical realms in law and regulation.² The close association between secular and religious law in fact intensified the penetrative authority of the state, while at the same time


strengthening the role of the imperial church as a key reinforcing and structuring element in Byzantine notions of empire and imperial rule at the humblest level of village society. While it is clear that local justice, ‘rough justice’, popular justice certainly prevailed in some contexts away from the capital, it is nevertheless also the case that imperial governance reached down into Byzantine society and that Roman law in the provinces was applied through the courts of the various administrative officials who ran the empire. Roman law continued to apply as regards property rights, inheritance, testamentary matters and many other aspects, but it was increasingly influenced and inflected by canon law, generally in the direction of a more humane treatment for certain types of criminal offence.

Attitudes to violence in society more broadly can only be assessed through the literature that was produced, much of it by a small educated elite, so that it is difficult to generalise. There is evident in narrative histories, for example, a degree of voyeurism tinged by horror regarding brutality and violence. This is especially so in accounts of battles or of single combat,\(^3\) or of massacres of civilians or others in riots and other moments of unrest, as well as, and in particular, in accounts of the sufferings of the victims of persecution by the state. Such representations owed much to the traditions of the early Christian martyr literature, some of which, it has been argued, has a distinctly sexual-sadistic or sado-masochistic inflection, in which the most gruesome aspects of torture and the infliction of pain are presented in often uncomfortable detail.

While there has recently been some excellent discussion on these aspects of late Roman and Byzantine culture, many aspects remain unexamined and many questions on the cultural psychology of both interpersonal and mass violence remain unasked.\(^4\) There is a great deal of empirical evidence from sources such as hagiographies – Lives of saints – as well as from accounts in various types of chronicle literature, and in official and semi-official texts such

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as military handbooks, and there is also material cultural evidence, from archaeology or from pictorial representations. All this permits us to develop some ideas of how violence was experienced, how it was perceived and rationalised or justified, and how examples of violence were understood and dealt with by courts or treated in legal literature. There is also a broader level of what has been dubbed ‘structural violence’, which relates to normative societal conditions that may result in harm or injury to the population or sections thereof, and should include, for example, domestic violence as one significant element – an issue that also overlaps in several ways with studies of gender, marital relationships and sexuality.5

The punishment for an act of violence was, according to Roman law, determined by the social status of the accused and was reflected in the nature of the weapon or object used to harm the victim of the act. But justice, as it was defined and understood within the East Roman Christian world, also entailed violence of varying degrees, depending on the nature of the crime committed as well as the status of the individual found guilty. Corporal punishment was understood as a remedy for practices defined both as immoral and as crimes against person or property, and the redemptive and rehabilitating aspects of punishment were also part of cultural attitudes to transgressions of all kinds. Evidence for the ways in which acts of violence were dealt with by the courts at Constantinople and in the provinces is sparse and mostly from the later period – from the eleventh century onwards – but it is fair to assert that the rule of law as exercised through provincial and metropolitan administration was enforced to a surprisingly effective degree, even if it also clear that the socially and economically least privileged had least access to law, and when they did gain access their chances of winning a case against a social superior were not strong. Yet there is some evidence to show that even the poorest rural inhabitants of the provinces could pursue a court case through to the final court of appeal in Constantinople, and with success, so estimations of the efficacy or ‘fairness’ of the system need to be balanced carefully against the available evidence.

The standard punishment for acts of violence resulting in death or serious injury, even if the victim did not die, was capital punishment, or social sanctions which were viewed as effectively equivalent (‘social death’ such as banishment and confiscation of property). For offences where the victim died accidentally, punishment was negligible or non-existent, although a system of compensatory fines existed. Punishments also reflected social status – those belonging to the

upper strata of society who held imperial titles or office were not subject to corporal punishment, although exile and confiscation were tantamount to social death and were regarded as capital; those lower on the scale were subject to death. But while these regulations remained in force, the influence of the church introduced a number of important changes in the period between the sixth and the later ninth century. Chief among these was a greater element of ‘philanthropy’ with the aim of permitting an offender to repent of the crime and do penance. The process of change did not happen overnight – it was in negotiation, as can be shown from several key texts, by the early tenth century, but had been more or less completed by the early eleventh century.\textsuperscript{6}

The church traditionally had a right to grant asylum to any orthodox person seeking refuge from a threat of physical harm or imprisonment, and this was confirmed in imperial legislation from the fourth century. Some individuals were excluded, however – notably murderers, adulterers and rapists – on the grounds that refuge was to be granted to those fleeing injustice rather than those committing it. This seems to have remained the situation until the tenth century, when a compromise was reached whereby a wilful murderer could claim asylum provided he admitted his crime and surrendered himself (just as in the medieval West). Such persons were still to be punished according to the law, but this would consist of lifelong exile, loss of title and the right to hold office, and confiscation of property. A portion of any confiscated property now went to the victim’s family, while the place of exile was stipulated to be far distant from the scene of the crime in order to avoid the possibility of future blood feud. By the early twelfth century the abuse of these provisions seems to have produced a reaction and a return to the earlier legislation, or at least an attempt on the part of the imperial government to oversee the ways in which asylum was employed at the capital, Constantinople, where the great church of the Holy Wisdom enjoyed particular privileges in this respect.\textsuperscript{7}


Societies generally have a range of means at their disposal for mitigating the impact of violence at different levels, and in the Byzantine case this rested to a large extent on public and private charitable institutions founded on the principle of *philanthropia*, defined variously according to context but relating primarily to concepts of respect for one’s fellows (also, of course, defined socially and thus by no means an inclusive category). The imperial court as well as the church, monastic communities and private individuals supported or endowed institutions such as hospitals, poorhouses or similar institutions whose existence had the effect of compensating for the ‘structural violence’ inherent in economic class distinctions, poverty and exclusion.  

In general, it can be said that acts of violence, where the perpetrator(s) could be found, were treated by the authorities – subject to the social distinctions and prejudices already noted – with the aim of maintaining both social and political equilibrium on the one hand and of meeting contemporary perceptions of natural justice as understood within a Christian moral-ethical framework. Naturally, the social violence that occurred throughout this medieval society remained largely unseen by the political authorities – such affairs were, as in all societies, regulated through kinship relations, through communal ties of reciprocity, and by various forms of feud.

**Warfare and the Christian State**

As a fundamentally pacifist system, Christianity never developed formally an ideological obligation to wage war against non-Christians, although at times individual theologians spoke and acted as though such a justification could be made. Indeed, the thirteenth canon of St Basil expressly advised those who engaged in warfare to abstain from communion. Yet defending the Christian Roman state had to be justified and the tension between the pragmatics of political and ideological survival on the one hand and pacifist Christian precepts on the other overcome or bridged.

Early Christian thinkers had evolved a number of objections to warfare and violence in general, and more especially to serving in the armies of the

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pagan Roman emperors, and many believers before the ‘conversion’ of Constantine felt that Christians could not serve two masters – Christ and the Roman state – especially when the latter was on occasion actively hostile to their beliefs or their very existence. Indeed, the liturgy of the period before the Peace of the Church and the Edict of Toleration issued by Constantine I in 313 forbade soldiers who wished to become Christians to take life, whether under orders or not.10

The adoption of Christianity by the emperor Constantine I and the reformulation of imperial political ideology which followed radically altered this situation, and while the debate about the justness of waging war continued, soldiers now became, not servants of an oppressive pagan empire, but fighters for the faith and defenders of orthodoxy, at least in theory. Soldiers were fully accepted members of the Christian community, who had a recognised and indeed worthy role to play. Liturgical prayers evolved from the fourth and fifth centuries in which the military role of the emperors and the need for soldiers to defend the faith were specifically recognised: ‘Shelter their [the emperors’] heads on the day of battle, strengthen their arm . . . subjugate to them all the barbarian peoples who desire war, confer upon them deep and lasting peace’ is an illustrative example from a fifth-century liturgical text. But this did not, of course, mean that warfare and the killing of enemies were in themselves intrinsically to be praised or regarded as in some way deserving of a particular spiritual reward. Quite the reverse, for however much Christians were able to justify warfare, whether from a defensive need (to preserve orthodoxy, for example) or in what we would see as an offensive context (to recover ‘lost’ Roman territory from non-Christians or barbarians or heretics, still judged as defensive action) killing remained (and continues to remain) a necessary evil from the Christian standpoint: this is such a strong

tradition within Christian culture, indeed, that even in the modern highly
secularised world of advanced technological warfare, Western strategists,
military theorists and anthropologists or sociologists of war point to the need
still felt to justify war-making in terms established by this pre-medieval
moral-ethical context. And of course matters became more complicated
when warfare between Christians also had to be taken into account.

Warfare, Violence and Belief

In spite of the reservations expressed by a number of Christian thinkers, the
view that warfare – however regrettable – in a just cause was acceptable
became widespread, partly, of course, because from a pragmatic standpoint
the Roman state, whatever faith it professed, had to defend its territorial
integrity against aggression. So some rationalisation of the need to fight was
inevitable. Eusebius of Caesarea, the Christian apologist for Constantine I
whose intellectual influence in this respect played a key role in the compro-
mise between pagan and Christian attitudes to the empire, the emperor, and
the imperial cult, expressed a view that can indeed be understood to repre-
sent warfare with the aim of promoting the new imperial faith as a type of
holy war. The symbol of the cross appeared both in imperial propaganda and,
more significantly, among the insignia of the imperial armies. The Christian
labarum and the chi-rho symbol – seen in a vision by Constantine himself
before his victory over Galerius in 312 – was carried by the standard-bearers of
the legions, as well as appearing on imperial coins and in association with
images or busts of the emperors. Warfare waged against the enemies of the
empire was now warfare to defend or extend the religion favoured by the
emperor and, from the time of Theodosius I, the official religion of the state
as such. Enemies of the empire could be portrayed as enemies of Christianity,
against whom warfare was entirely justified, indeed necessary if the True

11 For a summary of the debate with sources and literature: J. F. Haldon, Warfare, State
and Society in the Byzantine World, 565–1204 (London: UCL Press, 1999), ch. 1. For the
liturgical texts and their complex history, see P. N. Trempelas, The Three Liturgies
According to the Athens Codices, Texte und Forschungen zur byzantinisch-neugriechi-
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1935) (in Greek), and pp. 185–6 for this passage. On attitudes to warfare within the
Christian cultural world, see, for example, the discussion in the introductory chapter
of John Keegan’s A History of Warfare (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); or the
introduction by the editor of the volume, Thomas Gregor, to A Natural History of
Peace (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996); with Stouraitis, Krieg und Frieden,
pp. 193–7; J. Stouraitis, ‘Byzantine War against Christians. An Emphylios Polemos?’,
Faith were to fulfil the destiny inhering in divine providence. To a degree, therefore, warfare of the Christian Roman empire against its enemies and those who threatened it, and therefore God’s empire on earth, was holy war. That this was a paradox within Christian attitudes to warfare is clear; but pragmatic considerations made a solution essential.\textsuperscript{12}

Throughout its history and the many wars it had to fight – given the strategic and geopolitical situation it occupied – religious motifs played a key role in the ideological struggles waged by the empire. This religious element was especially the case when the rulers of neighbouring hostile peoples or states actively persecuted the Christian communities within their territories, and the wars with the Persians were frequently presented both to the soldiers of the Roman armies and to the wider populace in the light of a struggle between Christianity and the forces of evil.\textsuperscript{13}

Awareness of difference in religion as at least one element among many in the accounts of war between the Christian Roman state and its enemies is hardly surprising, of course, and that is not an issue here. Throughout the seventh century Byzantine theologians as well as writers of miracle collections and lives raise the issue of Jewish or heretical hostility to orthodoxy; religious debate and theological argument became, indeed, the language through which politics and theories of power and authority were expressed. This is a development that can be seen increasingly from the later sixth century, but was given huge impetus after the defeats suffered by the Romans at the hands of Islam and the Arabs in the 630s and 640s. Yet the wars which were fought against the Persians by the emperor Heraclius, culminating in the complete defeat of the Sassanid forces in 626–7, had an ideological quality which, as has several times been pointed out, differentiates them from earlier conflicts. One of the hallmarks of the contemporary and later accounts of these wars is the pre-eminence of the cross as a symbol of imperial victory, and of the strongly religious element in imperial propaganda: this was a war


fought by Christians under the victorious sign of the cross, with the aid of the Theotokos, the mother of God, against pagans who had impugned the integrity not only of the Roman empire, protected by God, but of the True Cross, the symbol of the faith itself.

As the East Roman empire became increasingly threatened and beleaguered during the second half of the seventh century and afterwards, so its religious identity came ever more to the fore; and logically enough, its struggle for survival took the form of a struggle between good and evil, between Christianity and its enemies. This affected internal politics and social attitudes as much as it affected attitudes to warfare, of course. But it meant that, in one sense, all wars were now holy wars, for the very survival of the God-protected realm of the Chosen People was under threat.  

A passage from the introduction to the Ecloga of the emperors Leo III and Constantine V, an abridged codification of law issued in 741, admirably sums up the key elements in the East Roman attitude to warfare: undesirable, but at the same time justified in order to maintain order and achieve peace:

Since God has put in our hands the imperial authority . . . we believe that there is nothing higher or greater that we can do than to govern in judgement and justice . . . and that thus we may be crowned by His almighty hand with victory over our enemies (which is a thing more precious and honourable than the diadem which we wear) and thus there may be peace.

Yet the evidence for eastern Roman or Byzantine attitudes to warfare and fighting contains a number of ambiguities and paradoxes, ambiguities that have existed throughout the history of cultures dominated by Christianity. Some of these societies have developed a reputation for being more warlike or more peace-loving than others, however, both in the eyes of their contemporaries and in those of the modern commentator. Western medieval society gave the former impression to others when it was involved in warlike confrontation with them (as during the crusading period, for example), and Byzantium is placed usually in the second category.

It is precisely because the Byzantine, or East Roman, self-image was one of a beleaguered Christian state, fighting the forces of darkness, that this was the

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case. Against its foes it had constantly to be on its guard, and to evolve a whole panoply of defensive techniques, among which warfare was only one element, and by no means necessarily the most useful. In the middle of the tenth century the Italian diplomat Liudprand of Cremona saw the position of the empire accurately enough when he described it as being surrounded by the fiercest of barbarians – Hungarians, Pechenegs, Khazars, Rus and so forth. For him, this was a truly frightening situation, quite unlike anything faced by the Lombard princes or the papacy in Italy.16

Symbols of the faith, reflecting this awareness of difference (and also a felt superiority) were ever present in Byzantine military contexts, while the association of the faith with the struggle against the outsider was constantly reinforced also in day-to-day religious observance. At one level, that of public petitions for peace or success in war as enunciated in the orthodox liturgy, this had a formal, almost ritualistic quality which may have impacted only superficially on the awareness of most listeners. But at another level – that of occasional sermons or homilies praising imperial victories, warning of the dangers of barbarian attack; or that of the cult of saints, especially the various military saints whose exploits in saving soldiers and armies as well as ordinary people from enemies, or intervening to bring about Christian victories – the association must have been very apparent.17 While it hardly encouraged a simple pacifism among the mass of the population, neither was warfare in the name of the orthodox faith a particularly exceptional state of affairs. Indeed, the church and the emperors actively employed religious symbols as palladia in the wars with enemies of the state: quite apart from the sacred images carried with armies or placed as protective devices on the walls or gates of cities, emperors endowed their armies with ceremonial crosses richly adorned with precious stones. These were important enough to act as both standards and talismans for the Byzantine soldiers, and as worthwhile objects for capture by their opponents: the capture of richly decorated crosses of gold and silver is frequently mentioned in Arab historical accounts of campaigns against the Rum, the Byzantines, just as their recovery is praised in Byzantine texts. The general, later the emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (963–9)

recaptured a number of crosses during his campaigns in Syria, and they are mentioned specifically as ‘military crosses’. Relics of saints or other figures in the Christian symbolic world were similarly deployed: in the ninth to twelfth centuries, for example, and almost certainly beforehand, emperors on campaign took along with them as a talisman an elaborate cross, including at its centre reliquaries containing a number of relics of saints and other sacred items, including a part of the Virgin’s girdle and a residue of her milk. Special imperial crosses, richly bejewelled and decorated, were kept in the precincts of the palace for ceremonial processions. They also accompanied the emperors when they went on campaign. This tradition, legitimating warfare directed against those who threatened the Christian Roman state, is expressed in many contexts, not least the Byzantine war cry ‘The Cross has conquered’.18

In non-military contexts, too, imperial and other donations to monasteries made reference to the military role of the emperor, divine support for the empire’s military enterprise, and prayers spoken for the success of the armies,19 while throughout the military handbooks the authors refer constantly to the help given to the Romans by God, under whose protection (and that of the Virgin) the soldiers fight. In every aspect of public and private life, what Byzantines did was explained in terms of divine providence, and justified by recourse to God’s will and design. In military contexts, this becomes especially apparent on the occasion of imperial triumphs, staged entries into the capital city involving the whole senior bureaucracy and court, the clergy of several churches, set acclamations orchestrated by imperial officials at key points along the processional route, frequent stops for prayer at churches along the route, distribution of largesse, display of prisoners and booty, and the close association of Christian spiritual with secular concerns. The connection between warfare and Christianity, the struggle for survival of the Chosen People, led by the emperor chosen by God, at the head of his armies (frequently also described as theophylactoi – protected by God) was quite explicit. All warfare was, in this sense, about Christianity and the Christian empire. To isolate a particular war or type of war as ‘holy’ was

unnecessary, and would in fact have seemed absurd. This is reinforced by the fact that a desire for peace, and a regret that war should be necessary, were constant motifs in imperial and church ideology.20

Liturgies for the troops were often held before battle; supplicatory prayer before and prayers of thanksgiving after battle were recommended; priests accompanied the army, at least on major expeditions, and played an important role in maintaining the soldiers’ morale; and whether the enemy was pagan or Christian (for example, the Bulgars), these tokens of Byzantine orthodoxy and God’s support against those who threatened the Chosen People were regularly employed. When the soldiers went into battle, they were instructed to remain as silent as possible until the command was given to shout the battle-cry. But they should also cry out, in unison, on leaving camp, either ‘nobiscum deus’ (God is with us) or ‘Kyrie eleison’ (Lord have mercy), and invoke Christ as the Lord of battles, before advancing in formation upon the enemy.21

These values are constants throughout the existence of the empire. In the thirteenth century the courtier Nikephoros Blemmydes composed a short treatise belonging to the genre generally known as Mirror of Princes, a book of advice but also in praise of the emperor of the day, a genre which reached back into Roman times. In this, Blemmydes, writing for Theodore II Laskaris (1254–8), the son of the emperor John III Vatatzes (1222–54), offers advice on, amongst other aspects of the imperial office, military discipline and training, strategy and tactics. He stresses the need for ruthless action in dealing with enemies (the empire at the time was engaged in conflicts with the Seljuq Turks in Asia Minor, the Latin empire and princes who had partitioned the Byzantine empire after the Fourth Crusade in 1203–4, and the Bulgars), and warfare is clearly taken for granted as a normal activity for an emperor. Yet, at the same time, fighting and the need to wage war are understood as regrettable, something forced upon an emperor by the circumstances in which his beleaguered state finds itself.22


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Similarly, the writer Theognostos, writing in the first half of the thirteenth century, penned a *Mirror of Princes* in which military activity is a taken-for-granted part of a ruler’s life, and in which warfare to defend the empire of the Romans, the orthodox empire of the Chosen People, was a day-to-day matter. When victories are achieved, God should be thanked; when defeats are suffered, these are to be accepted as God’s punishment for the sins of the Romans. Warfare was, on this account, by definition a religious matter; but it was a regular, everyday affair, unexceptionable in this respect. Whatever the achievements of individual emperors or the Christian Roman people as a whole, therefore, there was no reason in this context to treat warfare against the enemies of the empire as a special event. All fighting was for orthodoxy and the empire; all warfare was, thus, holy war; and while it was to be regretted, and avoided wherever possible, it was also part of daily life for the empire and many of its inhabitants. Crucially, and in contrast to the West, fighting and warfare were ultimately the responsibility of the emperor, appointed by God to lead the faithful in defence of the Chosen People. Such views were particularly clearly enshrined in the preambles to imperial grants of revenue to soldiers in the twelfth century and after, texts that neatly sum up these values:

But we must welcome with the best we can the soldiers and warriors who show courage against blood-thirsty barbarians, since they give up body and soul for the people called after Christ, and expose themselves to the greatest of dangers.23

Official secular as well as religious belief accepted warfare as endemic, unavoidable, but nevertheless a bad thing. The opening statement of the emperor Leo VI, ‘the Wise’ (886–912), in the preface to his treatise on military tactics and strategy, provides an excellent example of this attitude. In Leo’s view, humans are essentially peaceful by nature, valuing their own security and embracing peace as the best means of maintaining a tranquil life. But the devil, by tempting people to sin, causes conflict and violence, stimulating men to wage war in spite of themselves and contrary to their own real interests and desires. The orthodox Christian empire was – as the earthly version of the kingdom of heaven – quite justified in fighting to defend itself

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against external aggression. Defensive warfare was, in this view, God’s struggle, and was perfectly acceptable. And even though the interpretation of ‘defensive’ could vary, so that warfare to recover formerly imperial lands might also thus be justified, yet Leo insists that aggressive warfare and the needless shedding of the blood of even barbarians should be condemned. The ambiguity was explicit even in the words of a Father of the Church: for while condemning murder, the fourth-century Athanasius of Alexandria emphasised that killing one’s enemies in battle was both just and praiseworthy, bringing honour on those who thus distinguished themselves.  

The Rejection of ‘Holy War’

No concept of holy war comparable to that familiar from Islam, nor of the just war such as was enunciated before, during and after the crusades in western Europe, ever evolved in Byzantium. The waging of war against unbelievers is, of course, only one, and in Islamic theory not the most important, of four ways to fulfil the duty of jihad, which signifies the struggle to propagate Islam by the heart (i.e., inner struggle), the tongue, the hand (i.e., by upholding good against evil) and the sword. Those who died in the course of this struggle for the faith were understood immediately to be brought to paradise. But there was never anything approaching this complex and multi-faceted notion generated by Christianity. And reducing the terms of the debate to a crude opposition between the western crusade and Islamic jihad does not help in the appreciation of the much more complex reality of Byzantine attitudes and practice.  

That aspect of jihad that Byzantines could actually see, the physical fighting directed against the enemies of Islam, became early on something that Byzantine thinkers had to contend with. By the early ninth century, Byzantine critics of Islam knew that those who died in fighting for the faith had been promised paradise; they also thought that those who killed for the
faith, in a more positive and intended way, as opposed merely to dying for it, were likewise promised paradise. But such views do not seem to have provoked any special response until well into the ninth century, when Niketas of Byzantium set out to show that Islamic jihad was both inhuman and misguided. Ironically his argument was very different from that of the Syrian Christian churchman John of Damascus a century or more earlier, who argued that if God willed it then it was permitted to kill in defence of the faith (Christianity), where the killing was adjudged a neutral act or as absolute obedience to God’s command (citing Old Testament precedents). Niketas paraphrased the Islamic position to say that there were two forms of killing, those commanded by God in respect of defeating unbelievers or those who opposed Islam, which were acceptable and licit; and those in which a Muslim killed another Muslim, which were illicit. Niketas argued that there can be no such thing as a good killing, since by definition the taking of human life was against God’s law, a position intended no doubt to draw a clear distinction between Christian and Muslim ethics in this respect.

A later tenth-century prayer to be recited by the troops as they march to attack the enemy is as follows:

Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy on us. Come to the aid of us Christians and make us worthy to fight to the death for our faith and our brothers, strengthen our souls and our hearts and our whole body, the mighty Lord of battles, through the intercession of the immaculate Mother of God, Thy Mother, and of all the saints. Amen.

In the context of the considerations dealt with so far, the reluctance of the church to accept that soldiers who fell fighting for the empire should be counted among the martyrs (as the emperor Nikephoros II proposed in the 960s, for example) is readily understood. The idea was not new. In the military treatise compiled by Leo VI, the Tactica, the reward of the soldier who fights for the faith is expressed in terms not simply of doing his duty as the companion in arms of the emperor, but also in spiritual terms: fighting the


28 See Stouraitis, ‘Jihad and Crusade’.
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enemies of Christendom brings immediate spiritual benefit, and for those who die in battle, perpetual contentment. It has been pointed out that in the same Treatise Leo describes his understanding of the Islamic notion of jihad, and that his own remarks suggest a remarkable parallel between the spiritual rewards reaped by the Christian soldier who falls in battle, and Muslim attitudes.29

The proposal of Nikephoros II highlights the difference between the official and theologically respectable views of the ‘establishment’, and those of the ordinary population of the empire, especially of the soldiers who did the fighting and the rural or urban populations who experienced warfare on a regular basis. Here we find a somewhat different set of values in operation. All accepted the fundamental ethics of Christianity, and along with them the officially maintained political-ideological values of the Christian Roman empire. But it is clear that there was a gulf between the common sense of everyday life on the frontier or in the provincial armies, and that of Constantinople and the metropolitan region. These differences are only rarely given expression in literary form, but when they are they are very clear.

Such differences between metropolitan and provincial culture should not be exaggerated. Both shared a common Christian and Hellenised tradition; both also shared similar structures of family relationships and the loyalties that accompanied them; and both shared, at base, similar notions about public and private expressions of honour and shame. The court actively emphasised the divine support granted to imperial military undertakings. Both central and provincial forces were accompanied from the fourth century by crosses of varying patterns and sizes, from simple wooden constructions to much larger and more elaborate bejewelled examples. That their religious and ideological significance was recognised is clear in the ninth century and after from the efforts made by Muslim forces to capture them, and from the attempts made by the Byzantines to recover them, the latter an event greeted with great jubilation.30

It is precisely because the Byzantines fought under the symbol of the cross, and because they saw themselves as soldiers of Christ fighting to preserve


God’s kingdom on earth, that no theory or doctrine of ‘holy war’ evolved. Warfare was almost by definition of a religious character, since the East Roman empire was the sole orthodox polity fighting to preserve and extend the Christian faith. Together with the doubts expressed by the Fathers of the Church in respect of killing, and the unbroken cultural tradition that bound medieval East Rome to its late Roman and early Christian origins, it is not difficult to understand this. Indeed, the elements of discontinuity in the medieval West and in the nascent Islamic civilisation in the East have been singled out as major factors which contributed in both cases to the evolution on the one hand of the notion of jihad, and on the other of a warrior caste, the theory of the ‘three orders’ (or its practical realisation in the period from the ninth to the twelfth centuries), and the notion of the crusade.31

From the fifth century to the end of the empire, therefore, there is a mass of evidence for the formal and official acceptance by both church and court, as well as by the ordinary population, of the need to wage war, the fact of divine support for such warfare, and the need to maintain and to rely upon heavenly aid in waging war. And although the notion of ‘holy war’ in the sense understood by the crusaders, or by non-Muslims as typical of Islam, had thus a very brief life in the Byzantine world, this does not mean that the ways in which warfare on behalf of the Christian Roman state were understood did not experience a certain evolution. On the contrary, it is very clear that Byzantines were constantly aware of the need to justify their wars, and this need became the more pressing in a time of political and military expansionism such as the tenth century. Constantine V is reported to have characterised as ‘noble’ his campaign into Bulgaria in 772/3 because no Roman soldiers died; and by the time of the compilation of the Tactica of Leo VI the notion that a war had to be justified in accordance with orthodoxy and the existence of the Roman state was clearly set out: as long as the defence of Roman interests, however broadly defined, was at stake, then warfare was acceptable and just. From this time on, the notion of the just war in defence

of the God-granted mission and purpose of the East Roman emperors and the Chosen People was a standard aspect of imperial political propaganda, directed both externally, to the empire’s neighbours, whether hostile or not, and internally, as an element in the practice of political-ideological legitimisation of state, society and their institutional structures. War with other orthodox Christians was, of course, to be avoided; yet it could also be justified if the one true empire, that of the Romans, were to be attacked by the misguided rulers of such lands, a position perfectly exemplified in the letters of the patriarch Nikolaos I in the early tenth century to the Bulgar Tsar Symeon.32

Bibliographical Essay


Few works have been dedicated specifically to the question of Byzantine attitudes to warfare, and none has been devoted to the question of Byzantine attitudes to violence, although a number pay passing reference to the former. For some general reflections see D. Baraz, Medieval Cruelty: Changing Perceptions, Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); and from the extensive literature on late antique and medieval violence the essays in C. Dietl and T. Knäpper (eds.), Rules and Violence: On the Cultural History of Collective Violence from Late Antiquity to the Confessional Age (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014); H. A. Drake, Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); M. Carlson, Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-modern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2010); T. Sizgorich, Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

The major works on East Roman attitudes to warfare are I. Stouraitis, Krieg und Frieden in der politischen und ideologischen Wahrnehmung in Byzanz (7.–11. Jahrhundert) (Vienna: Fassbaender, 2009), which presents a detailed account of the evolution of Christian attitudes to warfare and to the state, in the context of a careful analysis of how these attitudes were represented in actual warfare and combat as well as in literary and

ideological contexts. His long article, ‘Byzantine War against Christians. An Emphylios Polemos?’, *Byzantina Symmeikta* 20 (2010), 85–110, deals with the issues that arose when, once warfare in defence of the empire had become acceptable, Christian apologists had to wrestle with the problem of justifying warfare against other Christians, showing how notions of heresy and heterodoxy were deployed in order to justify and legitimate such warfare. A useful collection of older essays is provided in T. S. Miller and J. S. Nesbitt (eds.), *Peace and War in Byzantium* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995).

More challenging for scholarship has been the question of whether the Byzantines evolved a notion of ‘holy war’ or ‘crusade’. The chief protagonist of the argument that they did has been Athena Kolias-Dermitzaki, in her book *Byzantine Holy War: The Concept and Evolution of Religious Warfare in Byzantium* (Athens: Basilopoulos, 1991), written in Greek, but with a recapitulation and restatement of the arguments in a later article that took up some of the critical views on the book: “‘Holy War’ in Byzantium Twenty Years Later: A Question of Term Definition and Interpretation’, in J. Koder and I. Stouraitis (eds.), *Byzantine War Ideology between Roman Imperial Concept and Christian Religion* (Vienna: Austrian Academy, 2012), pp. 121–32. On the whole, however, scholars view the notion of a Byzantine concept of holy war with considerable doubt, as can be seen from the survey of the literature and discussion of the sources in Stouraitis, *Krieg und Frieden*.

In a different, art-historical context, N. Oikonomidês likewise challenged the idea of a Byzantine concept of holy war and pointed out that for the eastern Roman state and its population all warfare was, in a sense, ‘holy’. See ‘The Concept of “Holy War” and Two Tenth-Century Ivories’, in Miller and Nesbitt (eds.), *Peace and War in Byzantium*, pp. 62–86. In Byzantine political theology the emperor was appointed or chosen by God to lead the Romans who had inherited the role of the Chosen People, forfeited by the Jews when they failed to recognise Christ as the Messiah. Warfare to protect and defend this God-protected empire and to extend the realm of orthodox Christianity was thus quite legitimate, and no special theory justifying it was necessary: Byzantine political theory did that as a matter of course. Most scholars have argued in this vein, most notably A. Laiou, ‘On Just War in Byzantium’, in S. Reinert, J. Langdon and J. Allen (eds.), *To Hellenikon: Studies in Honor of Speros Vryonis Jr*. (New Rochelle: Artistide D. Caratzas, 1993), vol. 1, pp. 153–74, for example.

In the context of Islamic notions of jihad, scholars have likewise noted the substantial theological and philosophical differences between Byzantine and Islamic approaches to the question, even though it is clear that some Byzantines were quite familiar with the notion: see, for example, the important short article by D. Krausmüller, ‘Killing at God’s Command: Niketas Byzantios’ Polemic against Islam and the Christian Tradition of Divinely-Sanctioned Murder’, *Al-Masa¯q* 16 (2004), 163–76, and the more detailed analysis of East Roman texts relevant to this in G. Dagron, ‘Byzance et le modèle islamique au Xe siècle, à propos des Constitutions tactiques de l’empereur Léon VI’, *Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 1983), pp. 219–43.

Finally, there has been an effort to demonstrate the important differences in attitudes to warfare among Byzantines themselves in respect of their social and cultural context.
Frontier and provincial warlords and military leaders had a different approach, for example, from that seen in the metropolitan culture of the imperial capital, Constantinople, or again from those held by provincial or metropolitan churchmen, as is shown by P. Magdalino, ‘Honour among Rhomaioi: The Framework of Social Values in the World of Digenes Akrites and Kekaumenos’, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 13 (1989), 183–218.
PART V

DEPICTIONS OF VIOLENCE
Pre-Columbian Maya (pre-1502) ritual practices encompassed a range of violent acts generally glossed by the catch-all term ‘sacrifice’, including bloodletting and other forms of self-inflicted injury, staged combat, animal sacrifice, child sacrifice, and the torture and execution of captives. These practices are evident in ancient imagery and text, in artefacts, and by traumatic injury observable in human remains from archaeological sites. This chapter will all too briefly highlight examples of these data, drawing especially from the author’s own (bio)archaeological field and laboratory research, and will discuss the religious philosophy behind these practices. Central to the Pre-Columbian Maya worldview was an understanding of personal burden and obligation to one’s fellow humans as well as to the ancestors, gods and other spirit beings. Humans were forever indebted for the gifts of creation and to the great works of those who came before them. Repayment was required in flesh and blood, either one’s own or that of a suitable substitute.

The Maya

In terms of contemporary people, ‘Maya’ refers to the speakers of roughly thirty different (but related) Mayan languages across eastern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and portions of El Salvador and Honduras. The Pre-Columbian Maya were the ancestors of those people who occupied roughly the same territory as today. Although this volume is chiefly concerned with 500–1500 CE, that is an arbitrary and awkward timeframe within which to consider the ancient Maya. Instead, this chapter focuses chiefly on the Maya of the Classic period (250–900 CE), but also draws on information from the Late Preclassic (400 BCE – 250 CE), Postclassic (900–1502) and Post-Columbian Maya (1502 to the present). The Preclassic period was a time of emergence and transformation: the ancestors of the Maya transitioned
from semi-sedentary populations, reliant on foraging and horticulture, to fully sedentary agricultural villages. It was from these roots that kingship emerged. The Classic period was the epoch of the great polities of the southern lowlands (northern Guatemala, southern Mexico and Belize) and is generally divided into the Early Classic (250–600) and Late Classic periods (600–900). By the Late Classic period this region comprised a dense constellation of polities consisting of urban centres and nearby smaller villages. Although alliances and hegemonies were occasionally forged, most notably by the royal dynasties at Tikal and Calakmul, the region was never politically unified. Nevertheless, much was shared across the Maya world in terms of artistic style and especially the calendar and hieroglyphic language for which the Maya are best known. The end of the Classic period was marked by the demise of the southern polities, their particular system of kingship and much of the tradition of writing on stone, including the use of a long-count calendar that marked the passage of time from a fixed point in the past. Nevertheless, new polities and even hegemonies emerged during the Postclassic period in the northern lowlands (notably at Chichen Itza and later Mayapan) as well as in the Chiapan and Guatemalan highlands during the Late Postclassic period (1200–1502).

Sacrifice: Self

Early Spanish chroniclers observed that the Maya pierced and cut themselves with a variety of implements, including obsidian blades, thorns and stingray spines (Figure 25.1). Historical accounts and images from the Classic period show that blood was dripped onto paper and collected in ceramic vessels (Figure 25.2). Alternatively, straw, paper or some other material was inserted into the wounds to collect the vital fluid. The Maya perceived blood as embodied with vital essences, the substance of one’s souls (the plural is intentional, as multiple entities coexist within the Maya body). In ancient


2 A huge body of ethnographic literature pertains to Maya bodies, blood and souls. A few key publications include Pedro Pitarch, The Jaguar and the Priest: An Ethnography of Tzeltal
times, the blood, bodies and very beings of the nobility, particularly the kings and queens, were perceived to be of a special quality. Described by the adjective *k’uhul*, these beings were akin to that of the gods, *k’uh*. Therefore, noble blood was especially potent in rituals of conjuring, as testified on an array of images depicted on stone sculptures and painted vases. Nevertheless, stingray spines, obsidian blades and other bloodletting implements have been found in a range of archaeological contexts, from

\[\text{SOURCES}\]


royal tombs and elite ritual deposits to non-elite households and marketplaces, suggesting that to some degree all members of Maya society may have practised bloodletting. Chronologically, bloodletting implements have been found at archaeological sites throughout Mesoamerica and the ritual is among the earliest sacred rites depicted in Preclassic art, including the famed murals at San Bartolo, Guatemala.5

Piercing generally targeted the skin and cartilage including the earlobes, lips and cheeks, and the foreskin of the penis. Blood was also let from the tongue. In part, these choices reflect convenience – they are anatomical

Figure 25.2 Yaxchilan Lintel 17 depicting Lady Mut Bahlam (left) guiding a rope through her pierced tongue and Bird Jaguar (right) with a piercing implement in hand, both situated around a bowl with blood splattered paper.

Yaxchilan (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 1982).
5 Karl A. Taube et al., The Murals of San Bartolo, El Petén, Guatemala, part 2, The West Wall (Barnardsville: Boundary End Archaeology Research Center, 2010).
features that will produce copious amounts of blood yet their wounds can be
stopped and will heal over time. Nevertheless, by targeting the mouth, ears
and genitalia the Maya were also acknowledging that these are the very
structures through which spiritual essences entered and exited the body.  

Classic Maya texts identify bloodletting as ch’ahb, a term that is sometimes
translated as ‘to do penance’ and also ‘to be pious’ or ‘to punish’. These readings
draw inspiration from Spanish chroniclers of the conquest who frequently
referred to auto-sacrifice and other offertory rites as acts of ‘penance’. Penance is, of course, one of the seven sacraments of Catholicism and is undergone when one needs to atone for past wrongdoings. For sixteenth-century Spaniards, that atonement involved a broad swathe of behaviours, including those that emphasised bodily discomfort and even pain, including fasting, wearing cilices and self-flagellation. Spanish chroniclers (and contemporary observers) apparently saw superficial parallels between their penitential acts and the indigenous ritual practices of fasting, sexual abstinence and bloodletting.

However, the underlying theology of Catholic penance and indigenous self-sacrifice was fundamentally different and there is little to suggest that bloodletting and similar acts were motivated by a desire to seek redemption for past transgressions. Rather, indigenous acts of offering and sacrifice, including bloodletting, reflect a broader worldview that emphasises the importance of duty, obligation and burden, to one’s fellow humans and especially to the gods and other supernatural beings. This concept is well captured in Sahagún’s chronicle of the Aztecs, the Florentine Codex, which refers to bloodletting and related acts as ‘debt-payment’ as opposed to ‘penance’.

Colonial and contemporary use of the Mayan ch’ab further clarifies the
meaning of the Classic period ch’ahb. The sixteenth-century Motul Dictionary defines ch’ab as ‘criar algo de nada, que es propia de dios’ (to create something from nothing, that which belongs to god) and most other Yucateco Mayan dictionaries define ch’ab as ‘to create’. In Tzotzil ch’ab is

6 For more on the association between bodily orifices and sacred essences see Houston et al., Memory of Bones; Stephen D. Houston and Karl A. Taube, ‘An Archaeology of the Senses: Perceptions and Cultural Expression in Ancient Mesoamerica’, Cambridge Archaeological Journal 10 (2000), 261–94.
8 For example, the term ‘penance’ is used throughout Diego Durán, Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar (1574–6), trans. Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971).
‘to end (as in argument, court case, war, pain)’ and similarly ch’abal means ‘estar silencioso’ (to be silent) in Tzeltal. 11 Today, Tzeltal shamans are known as ch’abajom and, as Pedro Pitarch explains, their songs are ch’abajel ‘because the main function of the shamans is to silence the huge noise produced by spirits, as well as to extinguish the intense heat – that is, fever – released by their emotions of anger and rancor’. 12

Today, Tzeltal and other Maya shamans make offerings of alcohol, incense and candles, and occasionally animals, in order to appease and placate the supernatural. 13 The preferred incense today and in antiquity is the tree resin referred to in Spanish (from the Nahuatl) as copal. In a number of Mayan languages another term, kik, is used for blood and incense implying a conceptual continuity between the two. Spanish chroniclers indicate that copal was sculpted into the form of different offerings, the resin serving as a representation or substitution of the animal or human that was represented. 14 Such modelled copal has been found in the cenote at Chichen Itza. 15 Ancient iconography attests to the importance of incense and other burnt offerings and a wide array of censers and related fire paraphernalia are found throughout the Maya world. In modern times the supernaturals are understood to sustain themselves on incense, other burnt offerings, music and other sensory stimuli. In antiquity blood was one of the chief substances upon which the supernaturals fed and there is a complex range of imagery that illustrates that many Maya gods were blood drinkers. 16


14 Tozzer, Landá’s Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán, pp. 144–5.


Although the Maya no longer make sacrifices of themselves or others, endurance, self-restraint and discomfort remain vital to indigenous religious experience. Such practices relate to a broader concern with controlled bodily comportment as the ultimate physical expression of the self. Especially important was the control of emotion during these acts of endurance, as evident in the dispassionate visages of Maya lords and ladies engaged in bloodletting. In ancient times, pain and discomfort were a vital component of many rites of passages, including the deformation of infant heads and especially the modification of the teeth at the transition to adulthood. Among the Maya, the first bloodletting, *yax ch’ahb*, was a celebrated rite of passage for royals, as depicted on a panel from the site of Dos Pilas, Guatemala. Although we do not know the age of the youth, he is depicted as a child of perhaps 6 to 8 years judging by his size in the image.  

A similar first bloodletting is referenced on an unprovenanced Early Classic period Maya stela now in the collection of the Princeton University Art Museum (the so-called Hauberg Stela). The text describes a *yax ch’ahb tu k’uhil*, the ‘first bloodletting for the god’. The stela depicts the aquatic form of the Maya Sun God (GI) (or perhaps a human impersonator thereof) clutching an object covered in scales from which spews a stream of blood and three disembowelled figures, flames erupting from their abdomens. The stream of blood flows past the supernatural being’s mouth, his shark-tooth incense see Gary H. Gossen, *Telling Maya Tales: Tzotzil Identities in Modern Mexico* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 18. For discussion of the symbolism of supernatural blood drinking see Karl A. Taube and Stephen Houston, ‘Masks and Iconography’, in S. Houston et al. (eds.), *Temple of the Night Sun: A Royal Tomb at El Diablo, Guatemala* (San Francisco: Precolombia Mesoweb Press, 2015); Stone and Zender, *Reading Maya Art*, p. 53.


incisor embedded in the stream, implying he is consuming the offering. The precise relationship between text and image is unclear but the basic sense is that the first bloodletting described in the text, presumably for a young Maya prince, was enacted in parallel to the primordial sacrifice depicted on the stela. In this manner, royal bloodletting was likened to divine sacrifice.

The scene on the Hauberg Stela resonates with a broader trope in Mesoamerican spirituality whereby gods and other supernatural beings are not only consumers of human blood but sacrificers themselves. Creation is understood to have been wrought through sacrifices of the gods and the images of those gods in the living world. Maya lords and ladies were obliged to repeat these generative acts in their own sacrifices and ultimately serve as sacrifice themselves at the time of their deaths. Such myths are diverse and varied but one persistent theme is the slaying and dismemberment of a great beast with crocodilian attributes from which the earth is rendered (the scaled object on the Hauberg Stela may be a representation of part of this beast). Another common myth involves the self-immolation of a sickly youth who, after days of making offerings of his own blood and other goods, bravely throws himself into a fire to rise again as the current sun. Postclassic period myths of both the Aztec and the Maya further emphasise how this solar god himself requires blood offerings and human sacrifice in exchange for his life-giving heat and flame. In all contexts of supernatural sacrifice, the emphasis is on duty, obligation, bravery and other forms of morally correct action.

The Postclassic myths of solar sacrifice emphasise a link between sacrifice, the sun, creation and the very passage of time. The Pre-Columbian Maya understood time as segmented, comprised of episodes of varying sizes that repeat themselves or, perhaps better, transition from one to the next. The smallest unit was the count of days, interpersed by periods of darkness (night). Darkness is a time of instability in Mesoamerican thought, likened to the primordial time before creation. Larger blocks of time are also understood to transition through periods of darkness. For the Maya, especially important was the winik haab’ or k’atun, as it was more commonly known, a period of time roughly equivalent to twenty years in our calendar. For the Maya, temporal transitions were times of sacrifice and they perceived a link between time and corporal offering. We see the connection, for example, in the earliest depictions of Maya day signs, which are shown as bloody severed heads.19

At the time of the conquest, the Spanish identified priests among the Maya as men who had devoted their lives to the service of communication with the

19 Houston et al., Memory of Bones, p. 73.
supernatural and thus were frequently involved in acts of sacrifice. The
Spanish foot soldier Bernal Díaz del Castillo reported Maya priests as having ‘long hair reeking with blood, and so matted together that it could never be parted or even combed out again, unless it were cut’. Aztec priests are similarly described and illustrated as men with unwashed long hair, matted with blood and filth, and even sprouting vegetation. Similar garb is shown in Classic period Maya imagery, as costume elements worn by Maya lords and ladies who bear the title of *ch’ajoom*, literally a person of incense, and the full figure glyph incorporates these costume elements. The implication is that one of the principal duties of Maya kings, queens and other lords was to serve as ritual specialists and directly engage the supernatural through acts with which the *ch’ajoom* title is associated: censing, bloodletting, fire-making and child sacrifice. Notably, no textual references to *ch’ajoom* nor to any of its attendant imagery are related to the sacrifice of adult captives taken in war. Rather the imagery suggests that the work of *ch’ajoom* was to make offerings of blood and fire in part to placate and appease supernatural entities (not unlike modern Tzeltal *ch’abaloom*) and perhaps also to petition their aid in acts that we might gloss as witchcraft or sorcery.  

Aside from locating the implements used in bloodletting, auto-sacrifice is difficult to identify in the archaeological record. However, pots containing severed fingers and avulsed teeth are probably also deposits left by men and women engaged in ritual acts of personal injury. Like spilt blood, these body parts were perhaps intended for supernatural consumption and again serve as testimony to the importance of pain and endurance in Maya ritual practice. Imagery from the Classic period also indicates that the Maya participated in violent, staged mêlée combats as a form of sacrificial offering. Some of these contests seem to have taken place at the ball courts, ceremonial entrances to the underworld. Much like the *tinku* fights waged today by indigenous people of South America, the blood, pain and injury that resulted from these fights were probably understood as offerings for otherworldly beings.


Sacrifice: Animals and Other Foods

K’ex – substitute or exchange – is central to modern Maya religious philosophy. For example, among the modern Tzotzil, ritual specialists are known as k’exoliletik and are literally the ‘substitutes’ for the ancestral gods in terms of the positions they hold and the duties they fulfil. K’ex is also pertinent to understanding Maya sacrificial practice. Today, animals are offered in sacrifice so that they may serve as stand-ins for human souls which are coveted by malevolent supernatural forces. Such sacrifices can be performed as a prophylactic, as when chickens are sacrificed following the construction of a new home to prevent harm from befalling the dwellers. Moreover, these sacrifices appease supernatural beings that may have had a claim on the construction materials. Alternatively, k’ex sacrifices may be curative, to stop a malevolent spirit that has already endangered a human soul. Animals may also be offered during requests from supernatural beings, particularly the earth lords (spirits that dwell in the mountains) who can grant good fortune and wealth but tend to be capricious, greedy and possessed of voracious appetites.  

The notion that animals may be used in sacrificial exchange relates directly to how the Maya perceive human souls. Although the specifics of belief vary across time and space, the Maya generally understand humans to be inhabited by an assemblage of essences (or co-essences). These essences serve as the vital, animate forces of life and help define individual character. Illness and even death may occur when malevolent spirits capture and consume human co-essences. Although ancient Maya understandings of the soul are murky, there is good evidence that they also recognised the existence of co-essences, including a class of spirit beings known as way (a term that is still used by some Mayan speakers today) which are one of the primary subjects on Maya polychrome vases. Judging by their names, some ancient way also seem to be the embodiment of diseases, and the ancient Maya, like the modern Maya, understood their well-being as contingent on safeguarding their souls against malicious acts of other spirit entities. One characteristic of Classic Maya way is that they had a predilection for dining on human body
parts and so it seems likely that some of the offerings made by the ancient Maya were similarly intended to appease malevolent way and other supernatural beings.  

Although chickens are the favoured animal offering today, these birds were introduced during Post-Columbian times. Spanish chroniclers report the offering of small birds – particularly quail – among the Aztecs at the time of the conquest. In the Classic period, birds are frequently found in ritual offerings, both inside royal tombs and in cache vessels associated with ritual structures. The most common bird in such offerings at Maya sites is the bobwhite quail (*Colinus virginianus*). Although we do not know why birds were favoured as sacrificial offerings, it could be that these birds, like chickens today, were seen as appropriate substitutes for the human soul. Indeed, depictions of the flowery paradise of the Classic Maya afterworld consistently include depictions of small birds. With their capability of flight, birds may also have been seen as appropriate emissaries to otherworld places. In the art of the Classic period, Maya gods are shown to have had avian avatars or counterparts.

Along with birds, early Spanish chroniclers report that a wide variety of animals were sacrificed, including dogs, peccaries and fish. Animal offerings are reported to have been made both raw and cooked. The Late Preclassic murals from San Bartolo, Guatemala, show three braziers, each respectively laden with a fish, a deer and an oscillated turkey. Each animal represents a particular domain – water, earth or sky – and these environmental

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relationships are reinforced by associated symbolism (e.g., water below the brazier of the fish). These three animals are also among the preferred food-stuffs of the Maya. The San Bartolo murals then reinforce the alimentary nature of Maya sacrifice, while suggesting that the animals chosen were metaphors for other dimensions of Maya spirituality.\textsuperscript{25}

Beyond animals the Spanish chroniclers also report offerings of bread, drink and other foods. Even today, maize breads are made as offerings to the supernatural. The best evidence for such offerings in ancient times are the ceramic vessels placed within many Maya graves and in cache deposits, such as those that contain the remains of birds as noted above. Ceramic vessels were widely used in bloodletting rites not merely as convenient containers but to underscore that the offerings made were comestibles for otherworldly spirits. Indeed, this was also true of the cached fingers and teeth noted above. Moreover, ceramic vessels are understood to have operated as portals to otherworldly places in Pre-Columbian times.\textsuperscript{26}

\section*{Sacrifice: Children}

In ancient times k’ex sacrifice also included the offering of children, whose remains are found in ceramic vessels, caves, royal tombs and other contexts across the Maya lowlands. Child sacrifice dates at least as early as the Late Preclassic period, as evidenced by a recently discovered deposit at El Palmar, Guatemala. It continued into the conquest era, as reported in a number of early Spanish accounts. Although the significance of child sacrifice probably varies by context, the overall value of child offerings presumably relates to their significance as unblemished emblems of fertility and vitality. Children would thus have been ideal substitutions, valued exchanges that were offered during episodes of extreme crisis to placate the supernatural realm.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{25} For an account of animal sacrifice see Tozzer, \textit{Landa’s Relación de las Cosas de Yucatan}, p. 114. The sacrifices of animals in the San Bartolo murals are detailed in Taube et al., \textit{Murals of San Bartolo}, p. 27.


Royal death was one such crisis that seems to have warranted child sacrifice. Throughout the Maya lowlands, kings and queens were interred in the company of children. The number varies by tomb, from as few as one child in Piedras Negras Burial 110 to as many as six at El Zotz Burial 9 and eight children and an adult in Burial 10 at Tikal. All of these tombs are from the Early Classic period and at some sites, like Tikal, the practice diminished in the Late Classic period, while at other sites, such as Piedras Negras, it continued throughout the Classic period.

Due to the poor skeletal preservation in the Maya lowlands, much of the evidence for child sacrifice comes from context and the distinct demographic profile of the victims. Moreover, some of the child sacrifices may have been carried out with poison or suffocation, acts that would not leave marks on the bone. In El Zotz Burial 9 the primary occupant was laid out on a funerary bier underneath which were placed six sacrificed children ranging in age from newborn to 5 years old, each placed within a large, lidded ceramic dish. Although only one possible cutmark was detected on one of the children's cranium, the two oldest individuals were represented by detached heads. Outside the tomb, archaeologists found two other ceramic vessels containing children's skeletons, one of whom was also decapitated. In this case, context, the distinct demographic profile of the skeletons and the unusual pattern of representation (heads only for the two oldest children) provide good evidence for sacrifice. Moreover, the children's remains show moderate thermal alteration, consistent with exposure to fire (but not full immolation) as would be expected based on imagery of fiery offerings of child sacrifices.

The transition between major periods of time and perhaps during the accession of a new king required child sacrifice, as evidenced on monuments such as Piedras Negras Stela 11 and 14 (Figure 25.3). These sculptures show sacrificed children lying on ceramic vessels. Kings sit on scaffold thrones in scenes that are generally interpreted as their royal accession. However, a careful reading of the texts indicates that instead these monuments were probably erected to celebrate the ending of a k’atun period (a roughly twenty-

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Figure 25.3 Child sacrifice on Piedras Negras Stela 11.
year cycle in the Maya calendar). In these rituals and through these monu-
ments the Maya conflated the cycling of time to the changing of kings
dangerous but necessary transitions in the flow of the world. The associated
imagery indicates these rites were framed within the metaphor of the
primordial dawning that marked the passage to a safer more ordered state
of existence that was wrought by the gods through sacrifice at the start of
creation. Such sacrificial rites have a parallel in the famed New Fire
Ceremony of the Aztecs, celebrated every fifty-two years at the completion
of the ritual calendar. The Aztec New Fire Ceremony and the period ending
rites of the Maya involved sacrifice, as well as the burning of the slain victims
as a means of replicating the mythic dawning enacted by the gods. The
burning of the children is alluded to on the Piedras Negras stelae, by what is
probably a ball of copal resin in the children’s open chests and kindling
underneath the body. Further evidence for the burning of children comes
from the remains at El Zotz, as noted above. Early Spanish accounts describe
the burning of captive children as sacrificial offerings. We do not know the
identity of the children sacrificed in Pre-Columbian times. According to
Spanish chroniclers, ‘some in their devotion gave their little children, who
were made much of, and feasted up to the day’. Yet other reports indicate
that young boys and girls, particularly orphans, were kidnapped or purchased
for sacrifice.30

Sacrifice: Adults

Ancient imagery pertaining to the sacrifice of adults shows a variety of
methods of killing and post-mortem body treatment, including decapitation,
heart extraction, disembowelment and immolation. Sacrifice by bow and
arrow is also reported at the time of the conquest. All of the epigraphically
named captives who are presumed to have become victims of sacrifice are
identified as enemies taken during war. However, considering the political
and historical emphasis in Maya inscriptions, it is entirely possible that non-
captured adults of inconsequential identity were also sacrificed. At the time of
the conquest the Maya of the Yucatan are reported to have sacrificed slaves,
although we do not know whether slavery was also practised during the
Classic period. Although the majority of all images of captives show men,

30 Tozzer, Landa’s Relación de las Cosas de Yucatan, pp. 116–17. For burning of Spanish
children during the conquest see Robert T. Chamberlain, The Conquest and Colonization
p. 241.
examples of female captives are known and conquest era documents indicate that women were also sacrificed.  

The Maya perceived a parallel between warfare and the hunt, and presumably the burning of captives was understood as akin to the roasting of game. One unusual figurine likens a captive to a deer, the victim garbed in a deer headdress and lashed in impossible quadrupedal (i.e., animalistic) position, each of his four limbs tethered to the corner of a square wooden scaffold. Scaffolds were an important element of a variety of Maya rituals, presumably set on fire at the culmination of the rite. An unprovenanced ceramic vase curated at Dumbarton Oaks (K2781) depicts a captive bound to a wooden scaffold, surrounded by two men wielding torches. Altars from Tikal and other Classic period sites show captives trussed, lying on their stomachs, dumped over wooden scaffolds or surrounded by burning torches. Similarly, a figurine from the Baltimore Museum of Art depicts a captive with torches strapped to his back, his body arched in the throes of agony. The burned prone bodies of two men were recently uncovered at Tikal, the remains of an Early Classic period sacrificial rite. Conquest era accounts indicate that the immolation of captives was still practised in the Yucatan in the sixteenth century.  

Although not always easy to access, we must consider the full sensory experience of Maya sacrifice: the grisly sight of bleeding, disembowelled and dismembered bodies. Sacrifice was accompanied by the smell of blood and roasting flesh and the screams of the tortured. These intense phenomena, coupled with sonorous music, elaborate costumes and wafting incense, helped frame ritual as grand spectacle. However, the Maya were quite cognisant that the real consumers of this sensory feast were the gods, much as the sights and sounds of contemporary Maya festivals are understood as necessary to appease the saints and other supernaturals. Indeed, of the corpus of imagery relating to captives and sacrifice from the Classic period, only a small selection of imagery shows the act of killing or the

31 Tozzer, Landa’s Relación de las Cosas de Yucatan, pp. 116–18.
body post-mortem. Rather, the bulk of imagery relating to violent ritual pertains to the display and torture of captives who cower, whimper, and even wail in pain, quite in contrast to the stoicism demonstrated by Maya lords and ladies in their own acts of bloodletting as noted earlier. The Maya even reserved a specific term for torture by fire, *pulyi*, an act that was directed against both real and mythic captives.\(^{33}\)

After death, body parts of sacrificial victims (and enemies slain on the battle field) were taken as ‘trophies’, objects of display and remembrance. Maya lords are shown wearing skull pectorals and actual trophy crania have been found at Copan and other Maya sites. Flayed skin masks, often shown stretched over shields, were another common trophy. Skulls demonstrating evidence of flaying have been found at a number of Maya sites, including the famous skull pit from Colha, Belize.\(^{34}\)

The taking of trophies was part of a broader practice of memorialisation of war. These acts were not, however, simply for the sake of bravado and posturing. Rather, captives were probably used to leverage tribute from defeated kingdoms and even in death their names (and perhaps body parts) served as powerful metonyms for the vanquished places. At the Maya site of Yaxchilan, the scribes frequently used the ‘count of captives’ epithet in place of the king’s name, as for example when Bird Jaguar IV is named as ‘He of Twenty Captives’. The Maya term for captive, *baak*, is the same as that for bone, perhaps suggesting a double meaning whereby the Maya king also retained bone trophies from those very captives. The other common epithet for Bird Jaguar is ‘Master/Guardian of Aj Uk’, the first captive he claimed prior to acceding to the throne. Aj Uk was from Santa Elena, a site located to


the north of Yaxchilan’s arch-rival, Piedras Negras, and presumably of some geo-political significance. When captives’ names are given in Maya inscriptions they are invariably paired with the polity from which they originated, not the place where the battle occurred. Thus, the memorialisation of captives relates less to the memory of specific battles but more to the potential political, economic and historical outcome of those battles.35

The celebration of particular captives also hints at the vendettas that may have fuelled Classic Maya conflict. Bird Jaguar’s father, Shield Jaguar III, proclaimed himself ‘Master/Guardian of Aj “Nik”’, his first captive that he took from La Florida/Namaan in 681 CE. Significantly, the wife of Shield Jaguar’s rival, K’inch Yo’nal Ahk II, king at Piedras Negras, was also from Namaan. The queen, Lady K’atun Ajaw, is one of the most celebrated in Maya history and is honoured on numerous monuments at Piedras Negras. The betrothal took place under the dying supervision of Yo’nal Ahk’s father in 686 CE, five years after Aj ‘Nik’ was captured and when the queen was a young princess of 12 years. In that context, the celebration of Aj ‘Nik’s’ capture was perhaps as much a statement of the military prowess of Shield Jaguar III as it was an insult to the homeland of the Piedras Negras queen.36

Conclusion

As a result of the Maya’s own predilection for depicting ritual violence in their art, popular consciousness has long associated the Maya with titillating acts of human sacrifice. Undoubtedly, bloodletting, ritual combat, animal and human sacrifice, and especially the ritual killing of children should give us pause. However, we also must consider the framework within which these acts were conducted. First and foremost, sacrifice was enacted out of duty and obligation to supernatural beings, gods who sacrificed of themselves to bring about creation and order. Sacrifice also served to establish hierarchy whereby lesser beings (animals, small children, enemies) were killed for the benefit of higher-order beings (kings and gods). In that framework, the Maya

were not so different from the many other societies discussed in this volume where violence is used to empower some and disenfranchise others.

Nevertheless, all members of Maya society were expected to contribute body and blood. Although Maya lords and ladies may have escaped death through proxy sacrifice, they nevertheless were obliged to suffer the pain and discomfort of spilling their own blood for the greater benefit of the whole.

Bibliographical Essay


Imperial Chinese society accepted and even lauded certain types of violence. Fundamental views of sanctioned violence developed in reaction to that culture’s particular views of masculinity. China represents what anthropologists term an honour culture. While youths in some places can publicly prove their manhood through a singular rite of passage, China lacked this sort of dramatic ordeal. Instead, men had to construct their masculine façade gradually through the course of a lifetime, consistently behaving in ways appropriately manly and avoiding any hint of shame. As in other honour cultures, violence often served as a dramatic means to display orthodox manhood.

The chaotic history of ancient China attests to the regularity with which men resorted to violence as a strategy for gaining honour. Records of the tumultuous Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–221 BCE) describe men starting wars, hunting and engaging in competitive archery not just for tangible gain, but also to stake a claim to successful manhood. Because these acts brought manly honour, society endorsed and even encouraged certain kinds of violence, however much suffering this behaviour produced.

Not only did ancient views of manhood foster group violence via warfare, but they also destabilised society at the grassroots level by encouraging vengeance. Both popular opinion and classical texts affirmed a man’s duty to seek revenge for injustice and shame. If a man felt publicly dishonoured, he might wound or kill the person who had affronted him to restore his manly image. Men also felt shamed by the murder or mistreatment of someone in their in-group and frequently sought revenge. Historical records describe many incidents in which the murder of a family member, a teacher or even a

friend provoked a violent response. Sometimes the family of a convicted criminal murdered a local magistrate who had sentenced their relative to death, even though he had merely been enforcing the law. Sanctioned vengeance gave rise to endless vendettas and made life unpredictable. For Chinese to construct a more stable society, they had to overcome the vengeful aspects of masculine honour that incited chaos.

After the unification of China in 221 BCE and the establishment of the imperial system, the suppression of sanctioned vengeance became an important political goal. Max Weber pointed to a monopoly of violence as fundamental to the success of any political system. In early imperial China, when an untested new administrative apparatus strove to maintain national unity, this project became particularly urgent. Rulers and officials faced the extraordinary challenge of stabilising a state of unprecedented size. Holding together the world’s most populous polity required ending extra-legal violence. So, out of necessity, Chinese gradually reassessed some of the basic values underpinning classical ideas about manhood. They began to denigrate violent acts and encouraged the use of pacific activities to prove successful masculinity. For this gigantic state to remain intact, men had to reimagine Chinese manhood and eschew violence. As a result, society increasingly contained and devalued most forms of violence.

Chinese sought to decrease threats to national unity and social harmony by relegating violent acts to the margins of respectability. Instead of glorifying warrior heroes, historians put more emphasis on mythical sage rulers of remote antiquity, who created order by behaving morally and setting down the fundamental rules of civilisation. Downplaying violence emphasised peaceful order as a regular state of affairs and implied that violent episodes represented an anomalous violation of normative civilisation.

This negative view of violence influenced its representation in art and literature. Whereas some cultures, such as Japan, took violence as a major theme in the visual arts, Chinese artists rarely depicted violent acts. Visual representations of violence were almost completely absent from the most respected artistic genres such as literati painting, and were mostly confined to woodblock illustrations of inexpensive popular narrative works. Even pictures and carvings of Guan Yu (also known as Guan Gong and Guan Di), the god of war in folk religion, often depicted him in a static pose. Portraying the god of war in the guise of a dignified ruler or official, instead of a soldier

brandishing a weapon, made him seem lofty and respectable. Written representations of the past tended to downplay violence as well, concentrating on historical figures who had generated social order by deploying ritual, ethics and efficient administration. Banishing representations of violence to the margins of discourse made it seem lowly and insignificant.

After China’s unification, war and vengeance steadily diminished as markers of status and male identity. Nevertheless, society still needed military men, and in times of crisis generals and warlords rose in importance. For example, during the latter part of the Tang dynasty (618–907), military commanders in the border regions became virtually autonomous. They intermarried repeatedly with the imperial house, demonstrating their social and political importance. But in times of peace, the high gentry avoided military duties and condescended towards officers. Because civil and military officials competed for power and resources, the gentry sought to decrease the influence of martial rivals. Authors associated with the civil bureaucracy portrayed military officers as marginal and inferior to civil bureaucrats.

After the destruction of the hereditary aristocracy in the final decades of the Tang, a flourishing literati culture emerged that allowed men to gain prestige by excelling in education, scholarship and other cultured activities. The rise of high culture as the primary characteristic of elite status implicitly rejected sanctioned violence. In the first century CE, if a man felt humiliated he might well respond with violence, and the community would probably condone his actions. By the tenth century, however, observers would have derided this sort of reaction as betraying a disgraceful lack of cultivation and self-control.

The elite increasingly turned to high culture to stake a claim to respectability, immersing themselves in an arduous educational curriculum based on literary composition and memorisation of the classical canon. In addition, they devoted themselves to mastering a range of polite accomplishments, such as poetry, calligraphy and painting. Making proficiency in high culture the key to elite manhood deliberately rejected violence as a way for the most important people in society to garner respect.

Ethical Systems

China’s major belief systems fostered the gradual rise of gentility over the centuries. Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism all exerted a pacifying

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influence. Rarely did someone receive inspiration from just one of these intellectual composites. It usually makes little sense to label a Chinese thinker as singularly ‘Confucian’ or ‘Buddhist’, as ideas from these schools of thought permeated the culture. Although these three major intellectual composites differed considerably, all generally discouraged violence. As educational levels rose, ideas counselling peace and harmony increasingly informed behaviour, discouraging the use of violence as a way to gain status or settle disputes.

Righteousness (yì) and ritual propriety (lì) stood at the centre of the Confucian ethical system. Rituals provided detailed instructions on how to behave in specific situations, while righteousness set down general moral guidelines that could help determine ethical conduct in the absence of a specific rule. These twin ideals had not always been completely peaceful. Ancient rites included some violent ceremonies such as human sacrifice. And some early thinkers appealed to righteousness to justify vengeance and vigilantism. Over time, however, moral authorities steadily reinterpreted these cardinal virtues to restrain extreme emotions and prevent wanton violence. Other Confucian virtues such as benevolence (rén) further denigrated destructive acts. Overall, the Confucian project aimed to civilise society by moderating behaviour. Propagating benign moral norms encouraged tolerance and the peaceful settlement of disputes.

The philosopher Xunzi (c. 312–230 BCE) explored the relation between Confucian virtue and military force in detail. During a debate on military affairs, his pragmatic interlocutors took a conventional view of the matter and emphasised factors such as choosing a battlefield with proper terrain, carefully observing rival troops, and deceiving the enemy. In contrast, Xunzi held that subjective moral elements hold the key to military success. He argued that when a ruler behaves cruelly, troops will not want to fight on his behalf. In contrast, a virtuous lord will earn his subjects’ loyalty and they will fight fiercely. Moreover, the virtuous monarch finds it much easier to maintain his grip on the state. If he captures territory through force alone, it will be

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6 At first glance, T. H. Barrett’s contribution to this volume seems to take the opposite position, as he discusses how religion often motivated violence in China. However, we discuss religion from different standpoints. While I show how religious ideas were used to temper violence, he illustrates how they sometimes justified violent acts. Religion could be put to many uses, and reading these two essays in conjunction highlights the functional complexity of religion in regards to violence.


difficult to hold. But by winning over his subjects with righteousness and benevolence, he becomes a ‘true’ king who rules legitimately and enjoys popular support. Through these sorts of moralistic arguments, Confucian ethical discourse denigrated the efficacy of violence, even during wartime.

Many thinkers conceptualised violence by dichotomising wen (civil) and wu (martial) affairs. Throughout China’s history, the relation of these contrary concepts remained highly contested. Although Chinese required a strong tradition of wu to defend the borders, they tended to look down on military matters as a grim necessity. In contrast, they extolled wen as the basis of civilisation. But however morally uplifting and cultured civil values might be, lauding them at the expense of wu could be dangerous, as insufficient respect for military culture would demoralise soldiers and weaken national defence.

Although religion and philosophy could be used in various ways, and often served as justifications for war, in many respects Daoism exerted a tempering influence on Chinese society. Classic Daoist texts taught that weakness can often overcome strength. Automatically responding to a show of force with contrary aggression often makes matters worse. Calm words, an air of humility or a strategic retreat might disarm a threat more effectively than violence. Daoists consider life extremely precious and seek to live as long as possible. Because antagonism and aggression raise the possibility that lives might be cut short, they should be avoided. Some Daoist masters even counselled their followers to make themselves deliberately useless so that they could live out their natural allotted lifespan. Woodcutters chop down trees with straight trunks while leaving behind those with twisted limbs, and prominent people similarly make conspicuous targets.9 By lying low and avoiding trouble, a person is more likely to live a long life.

Although the teachings of Buddhism differed considerably from those of Daoism and Confucianism, this school of thought also counselled concord over hostility. During the third century, this foreign religion became extremely popular and exercised a major influence on the Chinese worldview. The Buddha believed that the workings of karma ultimately hold each of us responsible for actions that cause suffering to others. To ensure a good rebirth, people must forgo violence and practise compassion towards all living things. Buddhists even extended their creed of non-violence to animals.10 Many devout Chinese Buddhists became vegetarian because they

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were unwilling to kill an animal or even allow it to be slaughtered on their behalf. While few people could adhere to all of the strictures of Buddhist compassion and non-violence, these lofty values informed quotidian behaviour.

The Mandate of Heaven

Just as Chinese society developed mechanisms to diminish violent acts, political ideology also conceptualised violence negatively by associating it with destruction and chaos. Any discussion of Chinese political thought must begin with an appreciation of that country’s immense size. Holding together such a huge realm posed immense difficulties, and the ability of Chinese to repeatedly bind together the world’s largest state and maintain unity for centuries at a time stands out as one of the greatest achievements in world history. The difficulty of maintaining national unity conditioned the ideas of thinkers and statesmen, who realised that any disorder could quickly spin out of control and lead to a dynasty’s collapse. This intense fear of instability shaped their attitudes towards violence.

When Chinese thinkers looked back on their long history, they saw alternating periods of order and chaos as a fundamental pattern. Accounting for this oscillation in a way that could bolster national unity became a key objective of political discourse. At the beginning of the Western Zhou dynasty (eleventh century BCE), authorities devised the theory of heavenly mandate (tianming) to explain the repeated construction and collapse of political order.\(^1\) According to this belief, a ruler did not exercise sovereignty due to force, heredity or the popular will, but because he had received the sanction of heaven. Conceptions of heaven varied considerably but usually remained conveniently vague. Although the emperor worshipped heaven as a god, it was not anthropomorphic. Heaven represented an abstract force that enforced the laws of both nature and ethics. Although the ruler derived his power from a remote supernatural authority rather than the human realm, heaven responds to worldly events and remains intimately linked to human activities.

According to this viewpoint, violence should be understood in relation to the mandate of heaven. If a ruler behaves unjustly, ruling by threats and force rather than virtue, he will lose the mandate and be destroyed. After the fall of

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a morally decayed dynasty, a period of chaos ensues, unleashing war and horrific turmoil. In the end, however, one of the military leaders will eventually obtain heaven’s mandate, reunite China, and put an end to unrestrained violence.

The mandate of heaven theory informed the ideas of Sima Qian (c. 145–86 BCE) and other early historians, who rejected the possibility that history consists of random contingency. By applying this ideology to their historical investigations, they depicted the workings of the past as an organised process overseen by an overarching moralistic supernatural force. This sophisticated conceptual framework became a standard model for discussing violence.

The theory provided Chinese with a way to understand large-scale violence by imbricating it within a larger ideological framework that they could use to stabilise and govern their vast polity. The heavenly mandate system envisioned violence as neither random nor meaningless. Instead it functioned as both cause and effect within a dynastic cycle of rise, decay and fall. This viewpoint delegitimised violence by presenting it as an aberration in the basic fabric of the cosmos that civilisation must overcome.

Sedentary–Nomad Relations

However much Chinese political ideology and moral discourse strove to minimise disorder, influential voices tolerated and even lauded certain forms of violence. Throughout its history, China had an extremely long and porous border requiring constant vigilance. The need to defend against foreign enemies frequently gave rise to acts of sanctioned violence. China faced relatively little threat from agricultural peoples on their southern periphery. Most invasions came from the north and west, where nomadic peoples frequently conducted limited raids and occasionally launched a full-scale invasion. Chinese had no choice but to respond, making the management of these conflicts an important topic of debate in the halls of power.

Despite the importance of these interactions, Chinese usually misunderstood the motivations of steppe peoples. Authorities almost always dismissed nomads as unreasonable, ferocious, barbaric, malevolent, and relentlessly intent on invading and subjugating China. But in fact nomads tended to see relations with their southern neighbour in extremely realistic terms. Greatly outnumbered and lacking the experience needed to rule such a large and

complex polity, most tribal leaders recognised the difficulty of trying to conquer and hold Chinese territory. Instead of permanent conquest, they sought to extract maximum resources from the gigantic economy to their south. China’s sedentary society supported a high level of material culture that could provide nomads with goods that they found difficult to produce themselves, such as silk, grain, alcohol, metal and myriad luxuries. If the leader of a nomadic clan or tribe could obtain these treasured items from China, either by force or by diplomacy, he could distribute them to attract a base of supporters, thus constructing and consolidating a parallel polity on the steppe. Not coincidentally, the unification of China coincided with the establishment of a Xiongnu state, the first large nomadic confederation on China’s periphery.

A unified China provided nomads with a dependable source of prestige goods that their leaders could use to unite fissile kin-groups into a coherent polity. So instead of trying to destroy China, nomads actually preferred a strong Chinese government that could provide a steady flow of gifts intended to bribe them into docility. Aggressive nomads who sought to conquer China usually came from the outer steppe. They did not understand how to obtain a steady flow of resources with minimal force, so they carried out full-scale invasions with the aim of looting or occupying China. The perennial difficulties that conquest dynasties faced in ruling a much larger populace attest to the wisdom of the inner steppe peoples who manipulated relations with China to their own advantage. Due to this policy, trade and two-way cultural influence alternated with raids and wars.

While nomads saw their relations with China in terms of material benefit, Chinese usually took a more abstract view. They sought to apply the mandate of heaven ideology to regularise relations with nomadic peoples. The mandate received by the emperor of China theoretically made him the concurrent ruler of ‘all under heaven’ (tianxia) or the entire world, so he claimed to be the overlord of other peoples as well. Because Chinese officials relied on this ideology to hold their state together, they sought to bring foreign peoples under the same rubric by demanding symbolic obeisance to their ruler, the son of heaven.

Chinese tried to use political ritual, which reflected the mandate of heaven theory, to organise their relations with other peoples. Emperors and officials put enormous stress on symbolic matters such as formal declarations of submission and allegiance and the adoption of Chinese official titles and patents of nobility. Within nomadic cultures, however, Chinese rituals, symbols and appellations carried little significance. Nomad leaders often
gladly carried out what they considered meaningless ceremonies in exchange for lavish gifts, which the Chinese justified as beneficence from a virtuous ruler to his loyal subjects. China continued to use ritual as the basis for foreign relations down to the nineteenth century. When England sent an embassy in 1793 to open up trade relations, the Chinese demanded that ambassador Lord Macartney perform a kowtow and acknowledge the king of England as a vassal of China’s emperor.  

The failure of this diplomatic initiative eventually led to the Opium Wars, which forced China to abandon traditional rituals regulating relations with foreign peoples.

Sometimes ritualised détente broke down. Nomads regularly launched limited raids into China to force a settlement that would include a steady flow of gifts northward. Alternatively, if Chinese felt that the ritual order had been violated, they might launch a military incursion into the steppe. But due to the insoluble logistical problems of feeding an army amid barren grasslands, and pursuing foes on horseback who usually just rode away and disappeared, these military adventures rarely had a conclusive outcome. More often than not the two sides came to an uneasy compromise, with nomads cynically observing ritual conventions and Chinese rewarding their pro forma compliance with gifts. Nomadic and sedentary peoples thus found ways to minimise conflict, even as each side misunderstood the intentions of the other.

Romance of the Three Kingdoms

The fourteenth-century novel Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo yanyì), attributed to Luo Guanzhong, has long been acclaimed as one of the four great classical Chinese novels, and remains extremely popular to this day.  

This book vividly illustrates how ideological and moralistic interpretations of violence worked their way into the popular consciousness during the imperial era. Many of these beliefs continue to inform mainstream Chinese thinking about politics, war and ethics.

Romance of the Three Kingdoms focuses on the decline and fall of the Eastern Han dynasty and the immediate aftermath, a chaotic period spanning the years 169 to 280. After the dynasty’s collapse, China split into three states ruled by warlords who vied to reunify the empire. While based on

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real events, the author mixes in legends and detailed fictional character studies to produce a nuanced meditation on profound topics of perennial interest, such as the nature of human character and the relations between order and chaos.

_Three Kingdoms_ dramatises the workings of the mandate of heaven by describing how evil officials take control of the government at the end of the Han dynasty, misleading naive emperors and persecuting men of virtue. A long series of immoral acts finally provoke heaven into removing its mandate, resulting in the dynasty’s inevitable breakdown. With the government terminally weakened by corruption and maladministration, rebellions break out. Enfeebled emperors empower several talented generals in the hope that they can defeat the rebels and restore order. Instead, they make themselves independent warlords. Rather than strengthening the dynasty, these generals destroy it as they struggle for power among themselves. The novel culminates in the pivotal Battle of Red Cliffs in 208, where the warlord Cao Cao, de facto ruler of north China, fights the combined armies of generals in control of the south. Their defeat of Cao Cao finalises the separation of north and south, guaranteeing that China will remain weak and divided for centuries thereafter.

This epic portrays war, chaos and dynastic ruin not as random occurrences but as comprehensible events that occur due to cause and effect. Generations of readers have regarded Cao Cao’s inability to defeat his opponents and restore national unity as one of the most poignant moments in China’s long history. These inconclusive wars initiated a long era of national weakness, internecine conflict and eventual foreign occupation of the north. By using the mandate of heaven ideology to interpret these complex and chaotic events, the author makes them seem not only comprehensible but worthy of sustained reflection.

This narrative also imposes a clear moralistic template upon its violent subject matter, using the characters to depict classical Confucian ethics and depicting these virtues as practicable for ordinary people. In particular, the author emphasises how the application of ethical norms can counter nihilistic chaos. Ever since antiquity, situational ethics has held an important place in Chinese moral discourse. Confucius recognised the need to adjust one’s behaviour pragmatically to fit specific circumstances, so he gave very different advice to each of his disciples. A rich literature of history, biography and fiction arose to explore how basic Confucian principles can be applied to particular situations. The complex interactions described in _Romance of the Three Kingdoms_ fit into this larger moral project. This novel demonstrates
how Confucian virtues might sometimes be useful in times of hardship, while under other conditions they could easily fail.

The beginning of the novel, which describes the decline and fall of the Eastern Han dynasty, dramatises the importance of the mandate of heaven. A series of weak-willed rulers and evil officials tyrannise the realm, inviting their own destruction. By situating the story within a larger moral and cosmological context, the author makes the era’s violence seem comprehensible. As the story plays out, the reader sees how violent conditions provoke ethical responses from key figures.

Most importantly, several characters in the novel remain fiercely committed to the key virtue of loyalty (zhong). Their allegiance takes several forms. Some remain faithful to the dynasty in spite of its hopeless corruption. Others stay steadfastly loyal to a superior, sometimes choosing fidelity over personal gain. The novel also focuses on devoted relationships among pairs or groups of men who see their relationship as akin to brotherhood. This survey of the various manifestations of loyalty explicated a key Confucian virtue for the reader’s benefit. In this manner, the author demonstrates how classical virtues might foster tight social bonds to overcome violence, reunite China and bring about the rebirth of a stable political system.

The fundamental Confucian virtue of righteousness (yi) also plays an important role in the interactions between the novel’s characters. Because the characters feel that they can depend on a counterpart who consistently acts according to righteousness, this virtue becomes a way to bind people together, forging intense links between powerful men. Just as the immoral behaviour of the powerful has shattered society and the state, righteousness presents a way to decrease violence and restore constancy to social relationships. Even as Romance of the Three Kingdoms details a long series of battles that use violence to try to quell violence, the author constantly emphasises ethics as an equally useful tool for countering disorder. Restoring normalcy to both the political and the social realms requires more than just the exercise of force. Leaders must also apply virtue in an enlightened manner to decrease violence and make way for a new age of beneficent calm to emerge.

Shrews and Domestic Violence

Literature also often explored problems related to violence in the domestic sphere. Chinese law traditionally treated the relation of husband and wife as a hierarchy, with each spouse having different rights. Although the specific content of laws varied in each era, generally speaking a husband received
little or no punishment for assaulting his wife, while a wife was held culpable for assaulting him. A wife might readily put up with considerable abuse from husband and in-laws, as she needed the support of a family to survive. Nevertheless, many fictional and historical writings describe wives verbally or physically abusing their husbands, and the shrew became a standard archetype in Chinese literature.¹⁵

Records from antiquity mention angry, jealous, dangerous and loquacious wives in passing. In the third century, the shrew emerged as a stock literary character. After the fall of the Han dynasty, strict standards of behaviour fell into abeyance and it became common for women and men to express their feelings publicly. Some wives took advantage of the new atmosphere of freedom to give vent to extreme emotions, including possessiveness. Laudatory epitaphs began to praise a deceased woman for having lacked jealousy, implying that men no longer automatically expected wives to be meek and tolerant.

The Grand Princess Lanling, daughter of Emperor Xiaowen (r. 471–99) of the Northern Wei dynasty, became particularly notorious for her jealousy.¹⁶ After her husband Liu Hui impregnated a servant, Lanling killed her rival in a fit of rage. The unhappy couple routinely quarrelled and Liu beat his wife severely while she was pregnant, causing her to miscarry and eventually die. This early historical narrative set the tone for the shrew genre, and these stories remained a popular literary theme until the end of the imperial era.

Despite the violent behaviour of shrews, they often struggled to achieve a more intimate type of marriage. Violently jealous women became a common topic of discussion due to the inequality of the Chinese marriage system. While a wife was ideally expected to devote herself to just one husband, a man could take multiple concubines and freely seek sexual adventure outside the home. The blatant unfairness of these inconsistent standards drove some women to extremes.

Ironically, the shrew longed to bring her husband closer and guarantee his fidelity. Steadfastly dedicated to her marriage, she expected comparable fidelity from her husband. Yet because marriages were arranged by parents, spouses often lacked deep feelings for one another. The wife’s tenuous


emotional hold on her husband easily gave rise to insecurity and suspicion. Although men could seek sexual and emotional satisfaction outside of marriage, growing emphasis on female chastity exacerbated women’s desire for a completely monogamous union. Female jealousy thus expressed the wife’s frustration with the double standards of traditional Chinese marriage.

Authors and readers exhibited an enduring fascination with shrews. These fierce women appear frequently in histories, popular literature and polite letters. Educated gentlemen saw shrews as a threat to the prevailing patriarchal order. More directly, men dreaded the possibility their wife might make a fuss and bring public humiliation. Because men hated and feared shrews so much, authors almost always portrayed these women negatively as petty, tyrannical, insubordinate and out of control. Jealous wives may have seen themselves as victims, but they bullied and abused others, often persecuting weaker female rivals such as concubines and servants. Sometimes a fictional shrew appears in comic guise as an ugly, lazy, gluttonous woman who has alienated her husband through her own faults. Moreover, a jealous woman opened herself up to suspicions of licentiousness. Her obsession with male attentions could well be due to rabid sexual desire rather than ordinary marital fidelity. By casting a wide range of aspersions on shrews, censorious authors encouraged men to assume a strong marital role and firmly manage a wayward wife.

The shrew casts light on an intriguing aspect of female agency in imperial China. Male anxiety about termagants gave the aggressive woman a degree of power over her husband. Given the importance of a man’s public image to his masculine identity, even the threat of domestic violence or public insult might frighten him into submission. The use of jealousy to terrorise husbands highlights how women could manipulate social conventions to negotiate a position of authority in spite of their supposedly weak status within the prevailing patriarchal system. For those in a position of inferiority, the strategic deployment of violence could sometimes empower them.

Sanctioned Self-Mutilation and Suicide

The ancient and revered *Classic of Filial Piety (Xiaojing)* forbade self-mutilation and suicide. The author reasons that because we receive our body as a precious gift from our parents, deliberately damaging it shows ingratitude.

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Yet in spite of this belief, certain types of self-inflicted harm became sacralised. When performed under particular conditions, directing violence towards oneself could express lofty moral sentiments.

In ancient China, a few exemplary figures mutilated themselves for the sake of loyalty to a superior or parent. As the cult of filial piety developed, stories of model sons focused on extreme acts of sacrifice, including self-mutilation, to emphasise the importance of this virtue. Moreover, traditional medical teachings held that human flesh has powerful curative properties, making it the best possible medicine to offer a sick parent. Of course this item could not be purchased, so someone had to voluntarily cut off a piece of their own flesh for medicinal use. When a son cut off part of his body to cook and serve to an ailing mother or father, he expressed consummate filial devotion. Actual cases of self-mutilation were always probably extremely uncommon. Even so, people enjoyed reading about these dramatic incidents, and self-mutilation became a standard theme in biographies of filial sons.\(^{18}\)

Although Chinese initially associated filial mutilation with sons, this practice gradually became closely tied to women. In antiquity, when the judicial system often resorted to mutilating punishments, many people considered cutting, tattooing and branding inappropriate for women. Some ancient legal codes commuted mutilating punishments to incarceration when an elite woman was involved. However, shifts in attitudes towards medicine and morality led some women to mutilate themselves voluntarily, to express moral sentiments.

Although women originally owed filial devotion mostly to parents, changes in the kinship system shifted the focus of this obligation towards parents-in-law. Biographies of women also increasingly featured violent self-sacrifice as a way for women to display virtue. It became conventional to describe the ideal daughter-in-law as cutting off a breast, a slice of her arm, or even a piece of liver, then using this precious meat to brew a medicinal soup for her ailing mother-in-law. Confucian authorities such as the ancient philosopher Mencius (c. 372–c. 289 BCE) considered filial piety the most basic foundation of moral order, and introducing violence further emphasised its importance.\(^ {19}\)

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Self-mutilation became one of the most widely discussed acts of exemplary female behaviour, and the number of cases increased over time. The standard history of the Eastern Han dynasty, compiled in the fifth century, mentions only one woman who mutilated herself. Official histories of the Tang dynasty (618–907) include twenty instances of female self-mutilation. However, in the fourteenth century, violence became an extremely common theme in narratives about exemplary women. The eighteenth-century encyclopedia Complete Collection of Illustrations and Writings from the Earliest to Current Times (Gujin tushu jicheng) mentions 2,470 women and men who mutilated themselves to obtain flesh for use as medicine.

This gruesome practice evoked concern from authorities. While the government never outlawed self-mutilation, edicts of 1394 and 1426 forbade women who had cut their bodies from receiving official commendation as role models. However, periodic attempts to restrict the practice failed and it became more common than ever. By cutting her body, a woman transformed it into a tangible symbol of virtue. Given this symbolic potency, mutilation remained a topic of frequent discussion in spite of widespread unease about these disturbing acts.

Suicide became another dramatic way for women to express virtue. Although both sexes killed themselves on occasion, suicide became very closely associated with female rectitude. Today we consider suicide a highly personal act. But in imperial China, people often committed suicide in intentionally public ways, using self-destruction to convey important ideals. A woman sometimes even wrote a poem before killing herself to ensure that this deed would not be misunderstood. The earliest descriptions of virtuous women record very few suicides. But during the fourteenth century, this violent act became closely associated with female righteousness, and compendia of exemplary female biography feature numerous accounts of suicide.20

Women committed suicide for various reasons. The most highly regarded suicides occurred to preserve chastity. In antiquity, female virtue consisted of manifold behaviours, but over time women’s probity became increasingly identified with their physicality. Maintaining sexual purity and offering the body to one man through the course of a lifetime served as the primary manifestations of female virtue. Generally speaking,

a woman killed herself not just for her own sake but also out of a sense of duty to her husband and his kin, who would be disgraced if she had sex with another man. For example, a woman might kill herself to avoid being raped. She might even commit suicide upon a husband’s death, either to express marital loyalty or because poverty would otherwise force her into a disgraceful remarriage. By the fifteenth century, it became common to portray female virtue as the quintessence of ancient classical teachings, hence emblematic of Chineseness. Authors often regarded female martyrs as having sacrificed themselves for the sake of civilisation itself.

Suicide carried highly subjective meanings, and the reasons behind a woman’s self-destruction were often subject to interpretation. As the marital bond strengthened in the late imperial era, it became common for wife and husband to enjoy close emotional rapport. As a result, a widow might commit suicide as a dramatic romantic sacrifice. Alternatively, greedy in-laws who wanted to take possession of a widow’s property might hound her to death. Or a woman who suffered abuse or shame might kill herself as a form of public protest. A woman could even kill herself as an act of aggression, embarrassing those who had bullied or threatened her.

Whatever the intentions behind a woman’s suicide, her death might be deliberately misrepresented. Instead of admitting the negative reasons behind it, those around her might portray it as righteous self-sacrifice performed for the sake of loyalty or chastity. The subjective meaning of female suicide highlights the importance of interpretation in assessing the meaning of any act of violence. Did a woman die for the sake of love, loyalty, despair or spite? When violence entered into an area as hotly contested as female virtue, its significance became subject to manipulation.

The emergence of self-destructive violence as a way to claim lofty virtue cannot be ascribed to a single cause. A convergence of factors pushed women to take these extreme measures. For example, the increasing association of female fidelity with male loyalty increased the importance of female self-sacrifice. A woman who damaged her body dramatically expressed a virtue highly respected by men. Governments patronised the chastity cult to gain prestige for local elites and the state. And male authors actively encouraged female martyrdom, garnering respect by portraying themselves as devoted to the highest ethical standards. In other words, men could burnish their own public image by encouraging women to harm themselves. The pragmatic functions of female violence gave it varied functions and meanings.
Anomaly Tales

While painters and sculptors usually avoided explicit depictions of violence, literature often featured violent acts. However, authors tended to tame depictions of disorder by setting them on the outermost margins of society. For example, readers in the late imperial era became fascinated with stories about outlaws. Descriptions of hooligans brawling and killing implied that violence had no place in reputable society. Transgressive violence marked degraded social station.

Another literary trend marginalised violence even further by removing it from the ordinary world and associating it with the supernatural. Beginning in the third century, narratives about odd or mystical events became extremely popular. These stories coalesced into a genre called zhiguai (‘stories of the strange’), known in English as anomaly tales. The emergence of supernatural fiction marked a major turn in Chinese literature, which initially recorded purportedly true events. During the medieval era, many authors began to make up stories, crafting them in such a way that they seemed believable despite their imaginary content. Yet in spite of the rising acceptance of fabricated narrative, authors usually portrayed supernatural fiction as a record of true events, borrowing the conventions of historiography to fashion a realistic atmosphere. So while the stories may have been fiction, authors and readers colluded to pretend that they were factual accounts. Treating the false as real made the audience read these stories more intently, heightening their entertainment value.

Since the early imperial era, Chinese have attributed strange powers to supernatural beings. In addition to minor deities, dead people could become ghosts, while demons arose from the spirits of animals and even of trees. Even though supernatural beings did not come from the human world, they often acted according to the same motivations as living people and often behaved malevolently. For example, many ghosts appeared among the living to demand post-mortem justice. A person who had been murdered or wrongly executed might assume an angry spectral form after death to demand requital. Paranormal beings resorted to violence much more frequently than their human counterparts, and the objects of their wrath often ended up dead.

The plots of some supernatural tales feature pacific characters and events, such as a gentleman who encounters a beautiful female ghost

who brings him good fortune. Even so, a large number of stories centre on violence, with death as a common theme. Angry ghosts terrify or harm the living and people die in unusual ways. Even as violent vengeance steadily declined, literature maintained it as a stock theme. These narratives appealed to readers not just because of their entertainment value, but also because supernatural beings frequently appealed to justice to validate their violent actions. Supernatural tales thus satisfied a deep psychological desire for a better society.

Significantly, although these narratives deliver up satisfying examples of justice accomplished, often by killing the guilty, authors attributed retribution to the supernatural realm. Framing violence within a mystical context and removing it from the everyday world implied that violent acts contravened the normative order. So, when writing about violence, authors repressed this unsettling theme by safely locating it in an exotic non-human realm that readers knew they would probably never encounter themselves.

These stories further undermine the legitimacy of supernatural violence by portraying ghosts and other unearthly beings in highly ambiguous terms. These creatures do not always act righteously, and their unpredictability highlights the dangers posed by their relentless desire for vengeance. Some ghosts even appear as comic objects of mockery. Sarcasm belittled these unnatural creatures and their trademark violence. Even while seeking justice, ghosts do not obtain respect from the living. A ghost cannot be considered a moral paragon even if it is motivated by righteousness. To the contrary, obsession with revenge makes them seem extremely unpredictable and potentially malignant. Associating violence with the supernatural thereby implicitly questioned the morality of vicious acts. Even when used to seek righteous vengeance, literature portrayed violence as an unsettling subject that contravenes the world’s normative order.

Conclusion

In China, as in other regions of the world, violence had to be brought under control as a prerequisite for building a complex society. However, maintaining peace and stability in the world’s largest polity presented a daunting challenge. In high antiquity, the martial rulers of the Shang dynasty made do with simple institutions. They fought frequent wars and treated deviants and the debased cruelly. Over time, administrative techniques became steadily
more sophisticated and society stabilised. Maintaining order over an immense population spread across a vast realm was never easy, yet China’s rulers often succeeded in taming violence for centuries at a time. Bringing order out of chaos on such an immense scale stands out as one of humanity’s great achievements. The Chinese themselves certainly regarded it as such, and their mythology and historical writings celebrate this feat.

Although warfare forged their earliest states, Chinese nevertheless deeply mistrusted violence. Early on, the elite recognised the potential for chaos implicit in the routine application of brute force. In reaction, religion, ethics and literature all counselled caution. As the Chinese state developed, thinkers crafted ideologies and institutions that allowed orderly rule and minimised the application of violence. Behavioural norms also adopted these pacific values, and the elite increasingly prided themselves on their gentle manners.

Nevertheless, violence remained a part of society, so it had to be confronted and understood. Writers sought to explain violence in ways that made it not just comprehensible, but also potentially manageable. China’s trove of historical discourse depicted the destructive violence of past eras not as random occurrences, but as meaningful episodes subject to cause and effect. In discussing violence, they emphasised the possibility of overcoming it by cultivating morality and building institutions. Writers also denigrated violence by associating it with weird supernatural beings, uncouth foreigners and people of mean status.

Often these rhetorical strategies succeeded. Even when dealing with foreign peoples, Chinese rulers encouraged potential foes to accept ritual norms, ethics and the Chinese worldview celebrating order. Agricultural societies on China’s margins usually accepted these values, as peaceful relations with their colossal neighbour served their own interests. However, when dealing with northern pastoralists, who organised their societies according to very different principles, Chinese ideals often failed to protect them from razzias and invasions.

Violence played a fundamental role in China’s social dynamics as well. Although historians most often emphasise how violence served the interests of the state and elite, disadvantaged groups could also sometimes direct it to serve their own ends. A wife could gain power within the family by threatening to humiliate her husband by publicly abusing him. And sons and daughters-in-law might mutilate themselves or even commit suicide to act out their virtue dramatically. For some, public acclaim seemed worth these terrible sacrifices. In sum, violence has remained a perennially powerful force in
China. Whether it was suppressed or utilised depended on the particular interests of individuals or groups.

**Bibliographical Essay**


analysed every aspect of this famous work, and many researchers have explored the ways it portrays violence, as exemplified by Peter R. Moody, Jr. ‘The Romance of the Three Kingdoms and Popular Chinese Political Thought’, Review of Politics 37.2 (1975), 175–99.

Research into intellectual and cultural history provides the background information necessary to appreciate the highly refined intellectual and ethical systems that informed views of violence. Benjamin I. Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1985) presents a superb overview of the most important ideas that stimulated Chinese thinkers. Although little attention has been given to violence in Chinese art, Oliver Moore. ‘Violence Un-scrolled: Cultic and Ritual Emphases in Painting Guan Yu’, Arts Asiatiques 58 (2003), 86–97, describes the ways that artists portrayed Guan Yu, a hero who became euhemerised as the god of war.
Equivocal and ubiquitous in modern usage, ‘violence’ is a term that has no premodern Japanese counterpart. I employ the vocabulary of violence as a conceptual framing tool to probe the possible meanings that underlie descriptions of injured, dismembered or lifeless bodies, perhaps the most legible and emotive evidence of warfare violence. The images I examine emerged during the War of Northern and Southern Courts (c. 1331–92), a seminal conflict that shook Japan’s medieval world and charted a new trajectory for the country’s relations of power. In this war, hitherto rare or unseen representations of dismembered bodies and mutilating acts proliferated. Approaching these images as consciously crafted gendered embodiment of the character of this war, I localise an understanding of violence as expressions of the specific political, philosophical and economic circumstances.

The chapter is divided into four sections. First, I establish the historical context for the War of Northern and Southern Courts by explaining how, in the fourteenth century, Japan had two legitimate governments – the imperial court and the warrior government, or the bakufu. I then describe the court’s succession disputes, the bakufu’s involvement, and the eventual rebellion by Emperor Go-Daigo against the bakufu. I point to a factor I consider important for decoding the images of ruptured bodies: a deeply rooted sense of shared spiritual and moral space governing warriors and aristocrats, despite the status differences and armed conflicts.

The second section introduces and analyses two types of sources, the administrative document and the military tale. I explain how they both present dismembered bodies in unprecedented clarity and detail and, despite the differences in format and purpose, synchronically reinforce and mutually support the value accorded to the mutilated body images. I then search for the reasons for these representations by focusing on the narrative set up of the tale in relation to the actual political conditions.
The third section isolates and analyses a recurring theme in the tale: the iconic image of seppuku or disembowelment, possibly the most potent and enduring legacy of the entire panoply of representations from the war. I ask why this war in particular suddenly induced seppuku images and what narrative and symbolic purposes they are intended to serve. I also question the gendered meaning of seppuku and the construction of masculinity through the act of self-mutilation.

Expanding on the gendered analysis of the images of injured bodies, the fourth section examines the depictions of women in war and violence. In different ways, the two sources expose women’s disqualification from official recognition of martial valour, while granting immunity from battlefield violence in the discursive space of a military tale.

A brief summary follows. While being determined by the economic, political and moral contexts in which they reside, the depicted images also offer us a possible portal for rethinking ‘violence’, a near universal concept that is as obfuscat ing as it is revealing.

The Historical Context

The War of Northern and Southern Courts (c. 1331–92) was unique. Neither a conquest of a frontier people, the pacification of rebels and pirates nor a territorial dispute between warrior groups, this war pitted the imperial court against the warrior government, and later two splintered imperial courts against each other. Leading to this dramatic moment was the evolving relationships between the court and warriors, which were always hierarchical and generally mutually accommodating.

The Japanese archipelago became centralised gradually from the fourth to the seventh centuries, as regional powers integrated the existing beliefs in deities (kami) with Buddhism and Chinese statecraft, such as bureaucracy, laws and the emperor-centred celestial order. The imperial court set up a land allotment and taxation system, which included military conscription, but redesigned it in the ninth century to command military service from elite warriors. Leaders among these warriors were typically descendants of the superfluous sons of emperors, a condition that helped to create a vaguely connected ritual community.

In the mid twelfth century, the Taira, a warrior house descended from Emperor Kanmu (r. 781–806), manoeuvred through patron–client networks to rise within the court. Resentful of these upstarts, a prince solicited other warriors to destroy them. Minamoto Yoritomo – from Emperor Seiwa’s (r.
858–76) line – obliged, and annihilated the Taira in the famous Genpei War (1183–5), described in a legendary classic war tale, The Tale of the Heike, discussed below. Yoritomo established the bakufu, a warrior government administratively distinct from and recognised by the imperial court, purportedly aimed to protect the courtiers’ private landed interests and keep peace. The warriors’ political rise, despite their subordinate position in the hierarchy of rank, titles and birth, nonetheless prompted one retired emperor to stage an unsuccessful anti-bakufu uprising in 1221. This boosted the bakufu’s power by making the land of the banished courtiers available to bakufu vassals.

The bakufu’s reach was in fact modest and mostly limited to its own vassals through rewarded land. It developed a sophisticated judicial system and ruled more through law and adjudication than might. At the helm of warrior power were the Hōjō, who rose from a relatively obscure background to be shogunal regents, thanks to Hōjō Masako, wife of the first shogun. At no time did the Hōjō harbour a plan to destroy the imperial government or its occupants, much less the larger institutional and symbolic system. Status differences notwithstanding, warriors, aristocrats and royalty existed within a shared cosmological system with overlapping ancestral deities. Importantly, the Confucian notion of celestial rule underpinned the spiritual and ritual aspects of the political order. The idea of the mandate of heaven in China, which justified rebellions against emperors who lost virtue, never took root in Japan. A semblance of relative stability and peace prevailed within an established hierarchy of resource sharing, despite warriors’ steadily advancing encroachment into aristocrats’ land rights.

The direct seeds of the War of Northern and Southern Courts sprouted within the court when two adult sons of Emperor Go-Saga (1220–72; r. 1242–6), both already retired emperors, competed over the throne via their progeny. Faced with an impasse, the court requested mediation from the bakufu, which eventually proposed a succession alternating between the two lines. This measure assured a relief until Emperor Go-Daigo (1288–1339; r. 1318–39) of the junior line, highly versed in the Chinese classics, blamed the bakufu for what he saw as an untenable system. He aspired to eliminate the bakufu and rule in the manner of a Chinese son of heaven.

Go-Daigo won the support of the bakufu’s dissatisfied retainers, whose numbers were increasing due to the economic hardship caused partly by generations of divided inheritance and the shortage of reward land in the aftermath of the failed invasions by the Mongols, who brought no spoils
They also saw that the Hōjō were stockpiling lucrative military posts. Warriors were thoroughly pragmatic; they chose sides not for moral or philosophical principles but for land rights, which only the victorious lord could certify.

Go-Daigo experienced mixed results, until Ashikaga Takauji (1305–58), a bakufu retainer, switched sides in 1333 and quickly crushed the bakufu, enabling Go-Daigo to institute hegemonic imperial rule. But in less than three years Takauji turned against Go-Daigo, installed a different emperor and built a new bakufu, while Go-Daigo fled to the south. Thus began the so-called period of the ‘Northern and Southern Courts’ with Takauji’s puppet emperor in Kyoto and Go-Daigo and his heir in Yoshino to the south, a situation that would last till 1392. Although a serial turncoat, Takauji, like the Hōjō, never wavered in his commitment to the symbolic authority of emperors, the political structure they headed, the myriad associated deities and buddhas, and the moral principles of the institution. Takauji vigorously kept the imperial system alive and intact. The Ashikaga’s new bakufu lasted to 1573, and the northern imperial line continues to reign in today’s Japan.

Sources

*Body as Register in Gunchūjō, or ‘Report of Loyal Military Service’*

Warriors joined wars in order to receive compensation. Reward land stood for more than material benefits; it included the reputation and pride attached to the family’s name. The process to receive rewards was never simple, whether as new rights or as reconfirmation of existing rights. But this war, with the shifting alliances at multiple levels, compounded the issues involved in merit recognition, not to mention a fair assessment of a warrior’s service. If an ideal war is ‘organized and coherent violence conducted between established and internally cohesive rival groups’, this war was its opposite.¹ To ease the confusion, the gunchūjō or ‘report of loyal military service’ came into use. The combatant initiated the report by registering the wounds carved on his and his comrades’ bodies, which officials checked for accuracy and gravity. The report documented the

degree to which the body had been utilised to serve the lord and helped to evaluate the man’s performance in terms of reward worthiness.\(^2\)

The ‘report of loyal service’ is a sober and matter-of-fact document. Couched in the language of loyalty, it tendered the warrior’s injuries to the lord’s view. But the sense of loyalty that underscored the document was often temporary, for many reward-aspiring fighters would defect to a better prospect. The nature of landholding rights, which required confirmation by a higher authority, partly explains the reason for this tendency. In medieval Japan, rewards took the form of \textit{shiki} (a percentage of rights to a parcel with corresponding responsibilities). Shiki was not territory that one could take over but a cluster of negotiable and transferable rights pertaining to land. One parcel often had multiple built-in shiki, variously held by aristocrats, warriors and cultivators. Each shiki was independently transferable, divisible, alienable and often saleable. Importantly, shiki rights were legally sealed, confirmed and reconfirmed by a legitimate higher authority as the need arose. While the warriors’ shiki reward was based on the recipient’s ‘merit’, no guideline defined the content of ‘merit’ or ‘deservedness’, except the vague language of ‘serving loyally’. The gunchūjō was intended to solve the ambiguity in merit management by transcoding the location, quantity and quality of injuries on the combatants’ bodies as intelligible indicators of merit or signs of loyalty. The visible signs of violence were reconfigured as calculable markers for merit recognition and, eventually, land rights.

The gunchūjō system benefited both the fighters, who fought for rewards, and the lords, who needed to prevent chances of defection. Reward as an idea bound and obligated the lord to his followers, and the followers, who risked their lives, rightfully sought documentation of their work. The \textit{Taiheiki} (Records of Grand Pacification), the military tale to be discussed below, orchestrates this point. It narrates that a warrior joined Go-Daigo’s force ‘none other than to receive rewards based on merit in fighting’. Although we do not know if this man submitted a gunchūjō, disappointment was likely: ‘Once Go-Daigo succeeded and a temporary order returned, an untold number of those who served him loyally waited to be awarded. But with the exception of those originally belonging to the imperial court, there have been none who received rewards.’\(^3\)

A sample gunchūjō from the Kumagai house archive, dated shortly before the bakufu’s fall, illustrates how a warrior in the bakufu camp documented

\(^2\) Not entirely new, a few gunchūjō had appeared in the aftermath of the Mongol invasions (1274, 1281), when the prospects for reward were dismal. Tōru Urushihara, \textit{Chūisei gunchūjō to sono sekai} (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Köbunkan, 1998), pp. 3–44.

the bodily injuries incurred during ‘loyal military service’. The author, Kumagai Naotsune, apparently navigated the complexity of war wisely and succeeded in keeping his land intact; he managed to receive confirmation of his rights serially from the bakufu, Go-Daigo and Ashikaga.4

A long-term retainer of the bakufu, Naotsune was a man of stature, with ancestral lands to preserve and vassals (servants) to protect. His legendary ancestor had fought against the Taira in the Genpei War. The following, recording the battle against Go-Daigo’s general, illustrates the process which systematically recorded, measured and certified the palpable evidence of battlefield violence. Through this process, combatants and lords collaborated to transform bodily injuries into a register of calculable economic benefits. (The original document is to be read vertically from right to left: Figure 27.1.)

[endorsement by officials in different hands]
Jōkei [kaō signature]5
Sukekiyo [kaō signature]

I [Naotsune] hereby submit.
Regarding those who received wounds.
Kumagai Koshirō Naotsune – right leg: two places inside and outside, shot [by an arrow] through the bone; under right arm, shot through the armour; outside the left thigh, same as above; total four places
‘deep’ [inspector’s notation]

Flag carrier, Naka Heizo Onoko – right knee joint, one place; outside the right thigh, two places; inside the right thigh, one place, left ankle, shot through the bone; total five places
‘shallow’ [inspector’s notation]

Naotsune, on the 25th day of the second month (1333), made a drive against the Kusunoki Fortress, launched an attack on the moat on the side of the front gate, buried the moat with several tens of shields and dirt and rocks, engaged in numerous battles, and fulfilled loyal service. Moreover, on the intercalary second month, sixth day, we ran up once again to this fortress – it is called ‘Chihaya’ – established a scaffold at the moat on the side of the front gate, and engaged in several bouts and excelled in loyal service. Moreover, on the first of this month, Naotsune took the lead in climbing to the centre

5 Kaō, or ‘flower seal’, is a stylised personal signature.
slope of the hills to the west of the front gate, was wounded and excelled in loyal service. Therefore, I report thus.

Shōkyō 2 [1333]. 4.2 Taira [Kumagai] Naotsune [kaō signature]⁶

The signatures at bottom right (in English, at top) are those of officials who verified the location of the wounds and evaluated them. The notations of ‘deep’ and ‘shallow’ are added, as well as a series of check marks next to the description of each wound, suggesting the real-time process of reviewing the document against the actual body. The date and Naotsune’s signature are on the last line to the left.

From Naotsune’s view, ‘deep’ certainly was better than ‘shallow’. The merit evaluation included the wounds of followers, here the flag carrier, reflecting the lord’s requirement for additional labour, and Naotsune’s effort to maximise the Kumagai house’s collective merit.

The battlefield was indeed a coordinated theatre of opportunity where one raised one’s profile through the disfigurement of one’s self and others, in partnership with special military administrators (gun bugyō), who organised inspectors and secretaries to record the dead and the wounded. The Taiheiki describes the scene of attack against the Chihaya involving Kumagai Naotsune: ‘Twelve secretaries, without resting the brush, recorded for three days and nights.’ The gunchūjō, prepared by the participants themselves and legitimated by their signatures and those of inspectors, served as a permanent testimonial to the martial, and in turn economic, worth of the injured male body in purposeful engagement with ‘loyal military service’. The document translated the incalculable force of violence into measured effects on human flesh.

Narrative Representations in the Taiheiki

The second source, the Taiheiki, is a narrative that covers the half century of turmoil from 1318 to 1367. It belongs to the genre scholars call ‘military tales/records’ (gunki), which began to be composed in the tenth century. Scholars name a priest working with possible associates as possible authors. Probably composed during the war’s progress and completed only a few years after the last event mentioned, the work suggests a close relationship between the narrative content and what the author(s) observed. It features 2,000 or so named historical figures and their real or imagined actions. Along with the Tale of the Heike, it ranks among the most popular and influential of all Japanese war tales into modern times.

The Taiheiki’s narrative is distinct from other war tales in the attention it pays to the body, body parts, injuries and mortal action. Comparison with the Tale of the Heike highlights the differences. The Heike’s classic opening phrase, ‘revealed is the principle that the prosperous necessarily decline’ (shōja hissui no

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7 Taiheiki 1, p. 217.
8 Courtier diaries and letters of the 1370s mention the Taiheiki, but the oldest extant manuscript is from the late sixteenth century: Hiroshi Kami, Taiheiki kyōjushi ronkō (Tokyo: Ōfūsha, 1985), pp. 9, 112, 114, 121, 123. Political climates adjusted the images of the Taiheiki’s warriors, viewed as patriotic heroes during the Second World War for example. Yūichi Ōtsu, Gunki to ōken no ideorogi (Tokyo: Kanrin Shōbō, 2005), pp. 7–30. Compilation of the Tale of the Heike, originally an orally transmitted story, probably began in the mid thirteenth century and was shaped into a now standard text in the fourteenth century.
kotowari wo arawasu\(^9\) becomes ‘remaining are corpses that reveal that the prosperous necessarily decline’ (shōja hissui no kabane wo nokoseri) on the battlefield.\(^9\) Another instance substitutes the term ‘bone’ for ‘valley’ in describing where the ‘holes from arrows and scars from swords’ were found.\(^11\)

The Taiheiki’s narrative not only is body-conscious but also is ‘impressive in its meticulous attention to minute details and forceful dynamism’ in depicting the process of death ‘captured with a cool-headed eye’.\(^12\) With realism and precision, the text often includes the measurements and directions of cuts: for example, a man who was ‘cut deeply from the bottom corner of his left eye down through the right edge of his mouth including his nose’, or another who lifted up a youth by his armour-braid and ‘with one hand sliced off legs at his knees, and threw him about three bow-lengths away’.\(^13\)

The accountability of dismemberment in the Taiheiki parallels that seen in the gunchūjō. The Taiheiki and the gunchūjō emerged from the same violent space, where its consequences must have been visible to or personally felt by those present. The tale’s author and the reports’ inspectors could have been at the same scene, both with a brush, paper and plenty of ink. The anatomy of the wounded called for a meticulous attention from the gunchūjō reporters and also inspired the journalistic and literary imagination of the tale’s author. Needless to say, while reports had a clear administrative purpose – to document the injuries and calculate their worth, and convert merit into shiki rights to land – the Taiheiki was a literary production, whose creative goals were complex and multi-layered. Together, however, the two forms of writing powerfully suggest a culture of war that illuminates the tangible material worth of the meritorious body in combat, along with its vulnerability and glory, undergirded by the lofty notion of a real or imagined loyalty binding the lord–vassal relationship that rested on economic exchange.

*The Moral Order of the Royal Domain*

I have demonstrated the distinct quality of the violent images that the Taiheiki presents. I now turn to the tale’s framing concept in order to

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10 Taiheiki 1, p. 348.  11 Heike 2, p. 18; Taiheiki 1, p. 316.


13 Taiheiki 2, p. 293; Taiheiki 1, p. 296.
probe the meanings embedded in those images. Viewing all military tales, ‘from Masakadoki (Records of Maskado; comp. 940) to the Taiheiki’, as texts subjected to the ideological framework of a symbolic structure, Yūichi Ōtsu advances that they are ‘histories/stories about a shared community (kyōdōtai) existing in the royal domain, and which consistently narrate crises and recoveries of kingship’. In other words, military tales and the world they represent have a coherent framework shaped by a community that concerns itself with heavenly rule. All protagonists, the war’s winners and losers alike, participate in the narrative community that celebrates the symbolic authority embedded in the imperial order, standing on the moral foundation shaped in ancient China. We can readily see this in the way anecdotes of events from the Chinese classics are interspersed in texts as referential and validating models. They often serve to explain and embellish the protagonists’ specific movements by analogy and to enfold the episodes into the symbolic moral order of ‘all under heaven’.

In the contemporary vocabulary, the conflicts that the Taiheiki and other war tales narrate were more than a contest of opposing military camps; they were a condition in the heavenly moral order. Wars were identified as ran (disorder) or hen (change), both terms describing an aberration in the ideal realm balanced by the elements of heaven, earth and humans. Ran most poignantly addressed a crisis where the orderly realm was disrupted by turmoil, confusion, unrest and destruction at all levels of society. Hen, also inauspicious, described a departure from cosmic stability, an ideal condition in the Confucian concepts of universal order centred around the North Star, which was the emperor.

The concept of ran presumed ‘order’ in imperial authority, which possessed the prerogative and responsibility of overseeing the celestial calendar and designating era names. Because of this, particular cases of ran were typically identified by the imperial era name during which they occurred, for example, ‘ran of the Genkō era (1331–4)’, when Go-Daigo attempted his second attack against the bakufu in 1331. The War of Northern and Southern Courts, however, was an ‘internal ran (nairan) between the two courts’ or ‘disorder of “all under heaven”’ (tenka no ran), probably because each of the two imperial courts had its own era name. The other term, hen, or ‘change’, pointed more narrowly to an abnormal means of enacting a possible change in the dynastic order, for example palace intrigues initiated by insiders.

14 Ōtsu, Gunki to ōken no ideorogi, p. 16.
15 Eki (Ch., yi), deriving from ‘labour’, also meant war or conquest, initiated by the state, usually directed at the ‘other’, for example the Mongols and the Koreans.
Go-Daigo’s initial scheme against the bakufu in 1324 was called ‘hen of the Shōchū era (1324–6)’. Unnamed, ‘violence’ did not constitute a separate conceptual category in the encompassing moral vision of ‘order’ and ‘disorder’.

The first and last passages in the Taiheiki reveal the text’s concern over the state of moral virtue. The preface suggestively expounds on the notion of virtuous heavenly rule by an enlightened ruler and upright ministers, who together maintain the righteous path.\textsuperscript{16} Referencing the Chinese classics, it warns against abandoning moral principles, as did Emperor Jie (1728–1675 BCE), the last emperor of the Xia, China’s oldest dynasty.\textsuperscript{17} The closing sentence of the Taiheiki celebrates the new generation of ‘effortless perpetuation of order’, which follows the appointment of 10-year-old Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408) as the third shogun.\textsuperscript{18} Adages from the Chinese classics that extoll the moral order bookend the Taiheiki’s forty volumes.

The articulation of the problematic status of virtue distinguishes the Taiheiki from other tales. The text castigates: ‘above, the emperor betrayed imperial virtue, and below, subjects lost ministerial proprieties’.\textsuperscript{19} As Hiromi Hyōdō emphasises, although all military tales may be about the heavenly rule, the Taiheiki differs from others in its critical attitude towards the absence of virtue in both the emperor and subject vassals.\textsuperscript{20}

How did the tale represent the deeply problematic condition of moral virtue? My answer is in the tale’s innovative representations of rupture in human flesh. The sense of fissure in the moral order may have stimulated the production of the distinctively violent images. The wounded bodies symbolically bear witness to the tension in the realm, for which the emperor himself was deeply responsible. I argue that the cut-up body, which is consistently male, is a symbolic representation of disorder. The metaphor of violence encoded on men’s bodies communicated an unprecedented aberration in the imperial realm. The visually striking expressions of torn limbs and cut flesh represent the macro-level disorder started, ironically, by the son of heaven. The torn bodies in the Taiheiki illuminated at the human level the manifest instability that shook the world and affected the narrative community.

\textsuperscript{16} Taiheiki 1, pp. 34–5.  \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 34.  \textsuperscript{18} Taiheiki 3, p. 480.  \textsuperscript{19} Taiheiki 1, p. 35.  \textsuperscript{20} Hiromi Hyōdō, ‘Taiheiki to rekishi ninshiki: “Nanbokuchō jidai” to iu monogatari’, in Tadashi Hasegagwa et al. (eds.), Taiheiki no sekai, Gun’ki bungaku kenkyū sōsho 9 (Tokyo: Kyūko Shoin, 2000), pp. 29–48.
Seppuku (Disembowelment)

Among all forms of bodily mutilation, the frequently featured practice of seppuku most clearly sets the Taiheiki’s text apart from other war tales. In the last battle scene in the Tale of the Heike, most of the defeated drown in the sea with no mention of cut flesh. But in the Taiheiki, collective bloody disembowelment (seppuku) in the Hōjō camp dramatises the denouement. This section asks why seppuku images suddenly appear in this war tale, what coherent textual meanings they convey, and how those meanings relate to the concept of ‘violence’. We begin with an episode taking place at Tōshōji Temple, where ‘Nagasaki Jirō Takashige, who had been fighting bravely in support of the Hōjō drank sake in three sips’, and:

Pushed the sake cup to Dōjun. Saying, ‘Have this cup, and use THIS as an accompanying snack’, he stuck his sword to his left side, sliced long all the way across to the right side, pulled out his intestines with his hand, and with it, fell in front of Dōjun. Dōjun then took the sake cup, exclaiming, ‘Wonderful snack!’

The scene shows that the mode of self-slicing comes with an infectious spirit of camaraderie:

Most fully have the young men displayed their loyalty. It will not do for others to be idle, or to say, ‘I am ripe in years’. From this time forth, let all eat of this repast! [Dōjun] cut open his belly in a cross, drew forth the dagger again, and laid it down before His Lordship the lay monk (Hōjō). While in the hall, Hōjō kinsmen and men of other houses bared their snowy skins to the waist, some cutting open their bellies and some striking off their own heads. Truly two hundred and eighty-three men of the Hōjō took their lives, each striving to be first.

The temple is then torched, and as the smoke rises, other warriors outside also cut their bellies. Some died by jumping into the flames, and others cut each other and died in a heap.

As a great river was the rushing of their blood . . . [Later it was known that more than eight hundred and seventy men perished in this one place. Truly it is said in Kamakura alone they were more than six thousand persons [who killed themselves].]²¹

The textually preferred mode of cutting, the warriors’ shared sense of ownership of the act, accompanying language of bravado, and the numerical scale easily impress the reader and imprint the image with great poignancy.

In exploring the meanings that support the image, the first thing to note is that these are representations. Representation and historicity of what is represented belong to two different traditions and analytical categories. Unfortunately, treating the Taiheiki as ‘history’ instead of as a ‘tale’ is fairly common, partly because the narrative follows evolving events in close to ‘real time’. It is often stated that the ‘Japanese traditional practice’ of seppuku began in the time of the Taiheiki. While it is possible that people actually committed seppuku, the tale’s descriptions cannot serve as evidence of it; moreover, there is no contemporary documentary, archaeological or forensic basis for it. I probe the narrative purpose of seppuku and its meaning by viewing the tale as a literary text and approach instances of seppuku as an element of the entire textual production. This means attending to narrative techniques, such as exaggeration, allusions and so on. Weighing seppuku in light of other extravagant deeds also may help to suggest its function. For example, one amazing episode describes Nitta Yoshisada who, shot with an arrow in the forehead, determinedly cuts off his own head and buries it deep in the mud, and lies down over it. But an enemy runs up, skewers the head on the tip of his spear, and takes it away along with Yoshisada’s armour, sword and dagger. This vignette is not only somewhat comical but also highly useful, because an impossible act such as this one relativises other acts, including seppuku.

The Taiheiki’s narrative movement also calls our attention to another prominent feature: the many allusions to Chinese historical cases to explain the conditions at hand, not to mention the overall Confucian-style moral framework in which the narrative operates. By adopting select situations in classical Chinese texts, the tale shows both the reason for the protagonist’s act as well as its legitimacy. The prevalence of textual connections suggests the author’s deep knowledge of legends and anecdotes featured in various Chinese compendia, which the Japanese elites read eagerly.

22 Physical remains of the dead have been discovered in the areas of Hōjō’s mass suicides, but the skeletal remains show head wounds. No forensic evidence of seppuku is available. Highly problematic is the interpretation that conflates the seppuku images in the Taiheiki with those from later centuries, during which it evolved into an execution method and obtained very different meanings.

23 Taiheiki 2, p. 320.
Seppuku by Akahashi Moritoki, a vassal of the Hōjō, serves as an example of the explanatory power of Chinese models. Moritoki, in his words, makes references to Chinese classics in two ways. The first relates to the timing of his seppuku, an act that is typically done in the face of certain defeat. Moritoki explains why he is killing himself now: ‘I shall cut open my belly in this place without waiting to know the fate of our house. Similarly, China’s Han Gaozu withstood eight years of many defeats but finally destroyed Xiang Yu in a war with Chu.’ By referencing Han Gaozu’s eventual victory, Moritoki suggests the Hōjō, who may seem to be losing now, eventually might win. Therefore, his seppuku at this moment may seem premature. What, then, compels him to commit seppuku now? Moritoki, whose sister was the wife of the enemy Ashikaga Takauji, wants to avoid the situation in which: ‘Lord of Sagami (Hōjō) and others of my kinsmen shame me by looking upon me with distrustful eyes, by reason that I am kin to Lord Ashikaga through a woman.’ His act to silence himself by suicide is modelled after China’s Tian Guang, who killed himself in order to keep secret the information his superior, Yan Dan, had shared with him in strict confidence. Similar to Tian Guang, Moritoki killed himself in order to pre-empt any suspicion of betrayal by remaining alive. ‘He thus went inside the tent, threw away his armour, cut his belly across, ending it with a cross-shaped cut, and lay down with his pillow to the north. More than ninety samurai followed him in death.’

In a similar way that allusions to earlier poetic phrases shape meanings in courtly literature, such as the Tale of Genji, references to characters and situations that appeared in the Chinese classics often explain protagonists’ motives and actions in military tales. This has the effect of inscribing the similar moral virtues expressed, for example, by Chinese officials’ noble suicide to the Japanese situation. It is probably no coincidence that many, though not all, of the allusions come from the literature that describes periods of division and moments of turmoil, such as the Spring and Autumn period (eighth to fifth centuries BCE) or the Three Kingdoms period (220–80 CE), a complex time of division, with multiple potential winners, during which any soldier’s loyalty easily could be questioned. For example, a story of mass suicide following the death of the leader Qin Mukong (r. 660–621 BCE) and another about cutting one’s belly and extracting intestines by Hong Yan of Wei appear in the Shi Ji by Sima Qian (first century BCE), and

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24 Adopted from McCullough, Taiheiki, pp. 287–8. The reference is from the Shi Ji (The Records of Grand Historian) by Sima Qian, comp. 91 BCE. In citing, romanisation of names has been changed from Wade-Giles to Pinyin. Taiheiki 1, p. 334.
the *Annals of Lü Buwei*, a Qin dynasty minister (third century BCE). The war that the *Taiheiki* describes resembles certain conditions in classical China in which one’s loyalty could be at stake or misunderstood. As for the mass suicide of the Hōjō, a possible model may be found in the case of An Jincang of the Tang dynasty (618–907), who chose to cut himself open in front of Empress Wu Zetian (r. 690–705) instead of giving false confession under torture that the prince, the heir apparent, was plotting against the empress. His five organs fell out as he bled profusely. China’s dynastic histories repeatedly included this legend. It seems entirely possible that the Japanese author of the *Taiheiki* was familiar with such stories, borrowing the motif and underlying meaning, and adjusting its dramatic image to fit the Japanese situation.

The *Taiheiki*’s abundant connections to Chinese legends may serve to suggest a reason for enlisting such numerous cases of disembowelment in shaping the narrative. As for the Hōjō’s spectacular seppuku, I re-emphasize the incontrovertible fact that the war was initiated by the emperor against the Hōjō, and posit that their seppuku may have been textually constructed to signal and symbolically explain the Hōjō’s innocence, as did the belly-cutting of An Jincang of the Tang dynasty, who sacrificed his anatomy to prove the prince’s innocence, and in turn his own righteous stand towards the empress. After all, the Hōjō did not rebel against the imperial symbol or authority. They were the recipients of aggression by a disgruntled emperor.

In addition to the Hōjō’s innocence as a possible explanation, the *Taiheiki*’s narrative invests several other meanings in the act of seppuku. The most readily apparent is to show the idealised sense of loyalty that justified the will to die and upheld the warrior order, expressed by the protagonists’ martial resolve in times of defeat. The second point is connected to the text’s larger commentary on the war as a caricature of disorder, or ran. The preponderance of seppuku, the potent physical act


26 For example, in *Jiu Tang shu* (*Old Tang History*), compiled in the Later Jin period (936–46), An Jincang is named in the section on exceptional people under the classification of loyalty. Liu Xu, *Jiu Tang shu*, 16 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, [945] 1975), ch. 187a, p. 4,885. The difference from the Japanese version is that An Jincang is saved because a doctor comes to sew him back up. Jonathan Skaff suggests Wu Zetian, China’s only female emperor with an affinity to Buddhism, may have been moved to save him, as he was Buddhist. For a seventeenth-century illustrated version, see Liang Yannian (ed.), *Shengyu xiang jie* (*Imperial Edicts with Illustrations and Annotations*) (n.p., 1902), vol. 111, pp. 50–2. I thank C. S. Chang, Jonathan Skaff, Qiuli Zhao, Miranda Brown and Jidong Yang for assisting me with Chinese sources.
of self-destruction, occurring across the narrative space, is an emblematic embodiment of the ‘disorder’ itself. Yet the third point is that the act of seppuku not only plots a man’s end to his fight and life, but also prompts closure to the perpetuation of violence in each battle and the war. Importantly, seppuku has the power to reinstate order in the condition of disorder.

The Taiheiki empowers the act of seppuku to represent both disorder and the promise of a return to the moral order of ‘normalcy’, as predicted in the tale’s concluding chapter. Far more than an anatomical event, seppuku in the narrative of the war tale viscerally and visually communicates the disorder, ran, and a promise of its dialectical opposite, the normalcy of moral order.

Gender of Violence

All cases of bodily mutilation, described in the administrative record and the tale, pertain to male bodies. Female bodies, or women themselves, existed outside the administrative scope of gunchūjō and the combat-based sphere of violence in the Taiheiki. Instead of accepting the warrior’s maleness and the masculine character of violence as a universal given, I seek explanations for their formulation in the local context of this war. The first thing to note is the fundamental concept of the five cardinal relations within the Confucian moral order, which framed the war tale. It grants women a limited agency by including them only in the husband–wife axis. Men additionally functioned in the ruler–subject, father–son, older brother–younger brother and friend–friend relations. For war efforts, the critical axis was that of the ruler–subject (lord–vassal), which was bound by the language of ‘loyalty’. ‘Reward’ was the concrete return for a viable lord–vassal relationship. The merged concept of ‘loyalty’ and ‘reward’, formerly available to men only, possesses the explanatory power for meritorious male actions, often suggesting their value for patrilineally descending progeny through the possession of the material reward. Thus a man featured in the Taiheiki would join a battle ‘in order to receive rewards and leave them for the glory of one’s posterity’.27 Reward was the moral foundation upon which the world of combat was built. Wounds accorded men the authority and power fitting their profession through their rewarded land, which in turn upheld the family name, a symbolic embodiment that defined their family both backward and forward.

in time. Women received no recognition for fighting, even if they in fact had fought, and were never depicted bearing wounds that had the exchange value of men’s wounds.

While the *Taiheiki* features no female fighters, the *Tale of the Heike* famously presents Tomoe, who ‘was especially beautiful, with white skin, long hair, and charming features’, but was also ‘a warrior worth a thousand’. Tomoe is a beloved literary and media figure throughout the centuries, for the story offers a rare combat space for an expert female warrior. Despite the praise given to her bravery and skills, the tale nevertheless allows her only an episodic appearance. Apparently Tomoe has accompanied Yoshinaka, a principal lord, throughout battles but the narrative includes her only in the single scene preceding his death. While also extolling her martial prowess that easily severs a man’s head, the text assigns Tomoe the function of invalidating the place of women on the battlefield, as Yoshinaka sends Tomoe away by admitting that he would be shamed if he were to die with a woman on his side. Tomoe’s narrative role appears to be to disgrace Yoshinaka, whose life ends in a miserable and unworthy death. Men who come into contact with women on battlefields, the space of masculinised action, die an unworthy death, even if the women are entertainers, as in the *Taiheiki*.

In the text, women are both excluded and immune from violence, and remain outside the parameter that yields high values such as honour and prestige. The *Taiheiki* shows that women fit ambiguously into the symbolic combat-based and violence-generating dichotomy that necessarily separates ‘we’ from ‘they’ and ‘licit’ from ‘illicit’, illustrated by a phrase: ‘Because we are women (onna), there must be a place where we can hide’, or ‘enemies are blocking roads . . . but since you are a woman (nyoshô no mi nareba) it should be possible to escape’. The narrative posits women to be incompletely integrated into the violent dimensions of the war system.

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29 Women in fact did participate in military duties in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries as holders of inherited reward land. The *Tale of the Heike*, depicting a twelfth-century war but in fact compiled in the fourteenth century, as was the *Taiheiki*, both features and delegitimises women’s participation in war. By the mid fourteenth century, women were gradually losing rights to property, a pattern perhaps reflected in the *Taiheiki*. For a variation in Tomoe’s background, her relationship to Yoshinaka and her actions, appearing in various tales, art forms and performances, see Steven T. Brown, ‘From Woman Warrior to Peripatetic Entertainer: The Multiple Histories of Tomoe’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 58.1 (1998), 183–99.
30 Yoshinaka’s horse gets stuck in a muddy rice field, and he is shot in the head by a man of no distinction. McCullough, *Heike*, pp. 291–2.
31 *Taiheiki* 1, p. 222. 32 Ibid., p. 362.
In the *Taiheiki*, the dialectics of male gender and female gender can be read most poignantly in the use of *hara* (stomach, belly, womb). The words *seppuku* (cut-belly) and *harakiri* (belly-cut) are written with the same two Chinese characters and mean the same act. The one term hara applies to male and female, but hara for women functions to identify a notable child’s biological origin and lineage, for example ‘Prince Sonryō had been in the honorable hara of Tameko’.

Hara for men in the *Taiheiki* is a portal for resolve and self-annihilation. It signifies the interdependency between creation and destruction, life and death. The term’s translation into English conveniently suggests the gendered distinction. When used for women, the translation is ‘womb’. When used for men, the translation is ‘stomach’ or ‘bowel’, as in ‘disembowelment’. The *Taiheiki*’s narrative community perpetuates itself by suggesting this dichotomous construction of male/female: men who fought and women who bred; men who destroyed and women who created.

The *Taiheiki* is a text that elevates and celebrates maleness and its violent manifestation. Seppuku definitively seals the combat/male/violence nexus. But in its destructive capacity seppuku also predicts restoration of order, and the generative power of women’s hara reassures the dialectical cycle. Although androcentric narrative is found in other warrior tales as well, the *Taiheiki* amplifies it as never before, and the depiction of the war-mutilated male bodies plays a major role in this construction. While unnamed in the medieval sources, ‘violence’ occurs most immediately and poignantly on man’s flesh.

**Conclusion**

I find that idealised notions embedded in the premodern imperial order, such as loyalty, cosmic order and gender distinctions, underscore what appear to be quintessential representations of violence in the materially intelligible, mutilated male flesh.

This chapter has sought to localise the meaning of violence as it is represented in writings generated by a particular war in Japan’s medieval times. It has used ‘violence’ as a method to analyse representations of particular warfare conditions and illuminated the ideas of order and disorder and their manifold expressions. The gunchūjō, which measured combatants’

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injuries as evidence of their meritorious work, and the Taiheiki, which narrated the progress of war in great detail and embellishment, both illuminated the value and function of violence as it manifested itself on human flesh, without identifying it by name. The mutilated male body was a caricature of disorder (ran), which was the war. The body was a register for cuts, punctures and other forms of mutilation, an investment underscored with a hope for a commensurate and tangible return. The textual appearance of seppuku and other forms of disfigurement expressed and possibly explained the operation of moral order and disorder, a concept deriving from highly gendered Confucian precepts. Mutilating acts and their outcomes textually validated the symbolic and economic worth of the injured, which excluded women. The most potent manifestation of moral disorder was belly (hara)-cutting, which marked the finale for the man and promise of a new order, while the hara of women stood for a generative site of propagation, residing outside the textual space governed by violence.

Bibliographical Essay

The general history of warriors, which helps to situate fourteenth-century events, begins with the ‘origins’ of the warrior class in the ancient period. Hiroaki Sato, in his Legends of the Samurai (Old Saybrook: The Overlook Press, 1995), offers a convenient summary of samurai history, translated myths and legends, a special section on ‘decapitation and disembowelment’, and an extensive chronology of notable events from the sixth to the twentieth centuries, including the 1970 disembowelment of Mishima Yukio, a right-wing author. Despite its fame, only twelve out of forty chapters of the Taiheiki, or The Tale of Grand Pacification, are available in English, expertly translated by Helen Craig McCullough as The Taiheiki: A Chronicle of Medieval Japan (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle, 1959). She describes the epic as ‘episodic, disorganized accounts of fights’ similar to those in certain Icelandic sagas, and ‘a first-rate entertainment’ (p. xvii). McCullough also translated The Tale of the Heike (Heike monogatari) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), which is shorter and more coherent than the Taiheiki.

In his Warriors of Japan as Portrayed in the War Tales (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1994), H. Paul Varley presents a synopsis of various war tales, including The Tale of Hōgen (Hōgen monogatari), The Tale of Heiji (Heiji monogatari) and The Taiheiki, translated as the ‘Chronicle of Great Peace’ (pp. 159–216). He notes the Taiheiki’s exceptional length and broad coverage, and its presentation of Go-Daigo as a prototypical Confucian ‘bad ruler’ who listens to women’s selfish advice, abuses public revenue and fails to reward vassals impartially.

Historians view Go-Daigo in two contrasting ways. Paul Varley, in his Imperial Restoration in Medieval Japan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), offers a conventional view that Go-Daigo and his imperial restoration were anachronistic, and
therefore doomed to failure. Andrew Edmund Goble’s *Kenmu: Go-Daigo’s Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1996) sees him as a revolutionary who fitted ‘a society undergoing substantial political, social, economic, and intellectual changes’ (p. ix).


Disembowelment, *harakiri* or *seppuku*, often deemed ‘a unique Japanese method of self-destruction’, is typically discussed as a component of a related concept, *bushidō*, or ‘Warriors’ Way’. Jack Seward pursues seppuku’s origin, types, customs and formalities, and its later institutionalisation, in *Hara-kiri: Japanese Ritual Suicide* (Rutland: Charles Tuttle, 1968). Andrew Rankin offers a more thorough examination in his *Seppuku: A History of Samurai Suicide* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2011). These authors would agree that seppuku evolved to define certain moral principles that came to be associated with samurai and, in modern times, further evolved to serve a nationalistic agenda. The rhetorical impact of scenes from the *Taiheiki* upon the later performance of the actual disembowelment is unmistakable. *Inventing the Way of the Samurai: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushidō in Modern Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), by Oleg Benesch, explains seppuku’s modern manifestations and dispels the notion that bushidō was a constitutive element of Japan’s warriors from their origins.
This chapter explores the visual sources for violence and warfare created over the millennium from 500 to 1500 in the lands where Islam became a major presence. These sources, which draw upon a rich visual tradition known from pre-Islamic times in the Mediterranean, the Near East, Iran and Central Asia, range from individual scenes depicted on ceramics, metalwares and other portable objects to sequential images and narratives in murals and manuscripts, the last produced mainly though not exclusively in the Persianate world after 1250. Subjects depicted include the hunt against both real and imaginary creatures, murders, single combats, battles, sieges, torture and more.

The chapter seeks to examine how we can use these illustrations in addition to the simple identification of individual weapons and materials employed to carry out such violence and warfare, including swords, maces, composite bows, lamellar armour and siege engines. What else do these depictions tell us about the society in which they were created? How do they relate to the stories or texts that they illustrate? Can they be seen as metaphors or commentaries? How much of these depictions is stereotyped and choreographed, or do some of them draw from actual experience? Do they ever reflect the personal views of the artists or patrons? How do they change over time? Do they differ in different regions? The aim is to show how visual sources can add another layer of meaning to the written word.

Sources of Visual Imagery

It is widely held that Islam fosters a culture without images, but this is incorrect. Muslims traditionally eschew figural imagery as part of their

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1 On the problems of interpreting the accuracy and reliability of visual evidence this way in contemporary European art, see Mitchell B. Merback’s chapter ‘Violence and the Force of Representation in European Art’.
religious practice. There are therefore few, if any, figural images in mosques or madrasas (theological schools) or on the objects associated with these religious buildings such as the minbar (pulpit), the mihrab (the niche in the wall that indicates the direction of prayer towards Mecca), and manuscripts of the Qur’an, accepted by Muslims as the series of revelations that God delivered to the Prophet Muhammad at the beginning of the seventh century in Arabia. But in more private settings, whether in houses and palaces or on objects associated with everyday life, many works of art made in the Islamic lands often include figural imagery, some of it related to violence.

Given the wide geographic spread of this faith and the culture associated with it from southern Spain to northern India over the millennium from 500 to 1500, it is not surprising that the usage, quantity and quality of figural imagery, some of it with scenes of violence, varied considerably. Iran and Central Asia had a strong tradition of figural imagery; Arabia and North Africa much less so. Therefore to survey this vast and sometimes disparate material, the chapter adopts a chronological approach, dividing the millennium into three periods: early (c. 500–1000), middle (c. 1000–1250) and late (c. 1250–1500). While certain themes run through all the periods, the division into three periods allows for the concentration on different visual sources for violence that predominate in each of the three periods: architectural decoration, portable objects and illustrated manuscripts, respectively. As the range and number of these buildings and objects are broad, the chapter focuses on a few well-known examples for each period and material, but many of the points can be applied to other works of art as well. A summary at the end encapsulates themes that run through these myriad scenes of violence produced in the Islamic lands.

Early Period

Muslim rulers in the Umayyad period (661–750) occasionally used visual imagery depicting violence as an official statement of both religion and state. For a brief time between 693 and 697 (AH 74–77), mints in Syria issued a small number of gold coins showing the standing figure of the caliph

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2 In contrast, the chapter ‘Jihad in Islamic Thought’ by Asma Afsaruddin in this volume discusses religious violence in Islam.

3 The chronological period 500–1500 is somewhat arbitrary, as the revelation of Islam did not begin until c. 610, and is not always applicable for the Islamic lands (see the comments in Jürgen Paul’s chapter, ‘Armies, Lords and Subjects in Medieval Iran’), but for convenience it is accepted here to accord with the other chapters in the volume. I have generally adopted Common Era dates.
dressed in fine robes with his hand resting on the hilt of his sword and an unexplained knotted cord hanging from his waist. As Luke Treadwell noted in his careful analysis of these coins, the image was a fitting testament to the caliph’s newly found authority, resulting in part from his military success in putting down other claimants, and to the power of the religion on which his status as caliph rested. These coins, however, were a limited issue, and from the hijra year 77 (696–7) the Umayyads adopted a new type of coinage that was strictly epigraphic, without human or other images on it, a standard that has remained current until the present day.

In contrast to the coins, which were struck for a short time in a single region, the remains of palaces in Syria and Central Asia offer richer material with figural decoration from a wider area during the early period when Islam spread from the Arabian peninsula west across North Africa to the shores of the Atlantic and east across the Iranian plateau to the steppes of Central Asia. Glass or stone mosaic floors, typical around the Mediterranean, usually show single scenes, while painted stucco, which was common everywhere, allowed not only for individual vignettes but also for multi-frame scenes decorating the interiors of rooms. In all cases, these images continue local traditions, but with new permutations and multiple interpretations.

The evidence from the Syrian steppe comes from a group of country residences and estates (Arabic qasr/quṣur), often with associated bathhouses, that date from the reign of the Umayyads or slightly later. Two examples, both attributed to the libertine prince al-Walid II in the decades before he became caliph (r. 743–4), are particularly relevant for the discussion about depictions of violence. The first is Khirbat al-Mafjar, a ruined site north of Jericho with a square residence, a bath complex and a mosque, all grouped around a courtyard with a spectacular fountain. The most lavish part was the bath. The floor of its small audience room (Arabic diwan) is decorated with a splendid mosaic pavement, showing a lion attacking a gazelle on the right.

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side of a pomegranate tree while two other deer graze peacefully on the opposite left side (Figure 28.1). 8

The second important princely residence from the early period in greater Syria is Qusayr ‘Amra, an estate 61 kilometres east of Amman that was discovered in 1898, cleaned in 1974 and the subject of an interpretive monograph in 2004. 9 The bathhouse there preserves a complete programme of fresco paintings. In addition to depictions of six kings, bathing beauties, dancing girls, signs of the zodiac and other subjects, the frescoes in the main room depict a ferocious hunt. The long panel along the east wall shows salukis pursuing onagers, culminating in several figures slitting the throats and disembowelling the carcasses of their prey, some of them oryx. The upper side of the west wall

8 Bloom and Blair, Islamic Arts, fig. 14; Ettinghausen et al., Islamic Art and Architecture, fig. 47.
9 Alois Musil, Kusejr ‘Amra (Vienna: Gerold, 1907); M. Almagro et al., Qusayr ‘Amra, residencia y baños omeysas en el desierto de Jordania (Madrid: Instituto Hispano-Árabe de Cultura, 1975); Garth Fowden, Qusayr ‘Amra: Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
preserves a long scene of horsemen pursuing a herd of onagers into a net (Figure 28.2).

These animal scenes reflect a long tradition in the region.¹⁰ The depiction of a lion attacking a weaker animal dates back millennia, possibly with astrological overtones of the triumphant lion as Leo.¹¹ The format with the animals posed next to a tree was common in the classical world: the spandrels over the fountain in the nymphaeum of the first-century CE House of Neptune and Amphitrite at Herculaneum display a similar scene of dogs attacking stags. Large-scale hunts in fenced parks are also a frequent theme in the region, and one that continued into Islamic times, as attested by the extensive enclosure or reserve (Arabic hayr) found at the ninth-century site of

Samarra in Iraq.\(^{12}\) One of the most spectacular examples depicting such a hunt covers the walls of the rock-carved grotto at Taq-i Bustan just east of Kirmanshah in Iran, where reliefs on the side walls of the large iwan (a barrel-vaulted space open at one end) show the king hunting, probably the last great monarch of the Sasanian dynasty, Khusraw II Parviz (r. 590–628). The lively reliefs depict fenced parks enclosing hunt scenes. The right side shows a stag hunt; the left, an elaborate boar hunt in the marshes. Men on elephants beat the quarry towards the king, who stands erect in a boat accompanied by courtiers, musicians and ladies, while the carcasses are being carted off on elephant back at the far right.\(^{13}\)

The hunting scenes common in the desert estates of the early Syrian steppe can be interpreted in several ways.\(^{14}\) One explanation for their ubiquitous presence is that they depict a pastime enjoyed by the patrons, but they also display the patron’s wealth as shown by his ability to organise large-scale hunts. The vignettes, especially the violent slaughter of animals, also underscore the patron’s generosity and open-handedness. The scene of a lion attacking a deer, found at both Umayyad sites, may also have had erotic overtones, as the lion in Arabic poetry represents the strong impulsive lover while the gazelle is the fair maiden being pursued.\(^{15}\) Such an erotic interpretation is strengthened by the frequent depiction in other parts of the baths of females, often naked or half-dressed. These hunting scenes may also represent the triumph over nature, a theme evoked by similar scenes in late Roman architecture, in which landscape expresses the powers of nature and the gods, challenging human control of the natural world and implicating the viewer in the dangerous world of myth.\(^{16}\)

Narrative tales including scenes of battles and punishment shown in frescoes from contemporary Central Asia reinforce such interpretations of the triumph over nature and the power of myth. The interior of one of the larger private houses constructed in the eighth century at Panjikent near Samarkand in Central Asia had a strip-like sequence of murals showing the

\(^{12}\) Alastair Northedge, *The Historical Topography of Samarra* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2005), ch. 7.


eastern Iranian hero Rustam of Sistan battling divs (demons).\textsuperscript{17} Rustam, astride his trademark chestnut stallion Rakhsh, wrestles and lassoes his enemies; he slays a serpent-like she-dragon (Figure 28.3). The murals depicting the mythical hero, who reappears as one of the central characters in the \textit{Shahnama}, the Persian national epic compiled by the poet Firdawsi in the early eleventh century, were no doubt intended to glorify the owner of the house and link him to the epic past. But they also evoke the transitory nature of life, the possible loss of power, and the ever-present revolution of the wheel of fortune. The role of the viewer is ambiguous, as voyeur, participant and potential victim.

Middle Period

Whereas mosaics and murals preserve the best evidence for scenes of violence from the early period, portable objects offer a particularly rich source of imagery for the middle period. The production of such objects blossomed at this time, notably in Iran during the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but also in Iraq, Syria and Egypt. Such scenes occur on inlaid metalwares and ceramics made in a variety of new forms including candlesticks, ewers, buckets, bowls and other utensils. Some individual vignettes can also be found on textiles and glassware. Many are brilliantly coloured. Unlike the courtly palaces from the early period, these items were produced mainly for non-royal though certainly well-to-do patrons, and attest to the urbanisation of Muslim society in this period.

Exploiting a variety of techniques, these objects display refined designs whose striking use of human and animal figures suggests a meaningful system of visual images. At least three themes have been identified. In addition to astronomical subjects with apotropaic meanings and a cycle of love or meditation, the most important theme – and the one most pertinent to depictions of violence – is the princely cycle, an umbrella term that covers a wide range of events including combat and hunting. These scenes belong to the ancient Iranian theme of *razm-o bazm* (fighting and feasting), which included battles, duels and the hunt alongside banqueting, both indoors and out.

Most metalwares display a number of individual, discrete scenes. One of the showiest examples is a small (ht 18 cm) bucket of cast bronze inlaid with silver and copper made for a prosperous merchant in 1163, probably at Herat in western Afghanistan (Figure 28.4). The bulbous body is decorated with five horizontal bands, three containing Arabic inscriptions alternating with two of figural scenes. The second band from the top shows vignettes of entertainment such as drinking, making music, playing games including


backgammon, and facing off with sticks. The fourth band shows scenes of horsemen hunting and fighting. Even the handle is decorated with fierce animals: the middle section displays four lion heads, and the loops show leaping lions on the outside and snake-like dragons on the inside. The panoply of individual scenes does not present a narrative but, like the decorative inscriptions that accompany them, may have been intended to convey good fortune and prosperity to the recipient of this object, which seems to be a fancy version of an ordinary pail to hold and dispense water for washing in the bathhouse. It was a gift for the man who had everything, with the decoration, including the scenes of fighting and hunting, intended to magnify his stature.

The westward dissemination of the inlay technique allowed metalworkers in Iraq to decorate their wares with even more elaborate scenes of hunting, fighting and other violence. One centre of inlay production was Mosul. The most important object made there is the so-called Blacas ewer dated April 1232. Its pear-shaped body and tall neck are decorated with genre scenes set in friezes and medallions against a geometric ground. The varied scenes

21 British Museum 1866, 1229.61; www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=239367&partId=1; Bloom and Blair, Islamic Arts, fig. 145; Ettinghausen et al., Islamic Art and Architecture, fig. 405; Ward, Islamic Metalwork, fig. 59; Canby et al., Court and Cosmos, no. 15, pp. 74–5.
include enthroned rulers, musicians, hunters and soldiers. One scene can be identified as the legendary hero Bahram Gur: he is mounted on a camel with his consort seated behind him carrying her harp; in front of them runs a gazelle with its ear and hoof pinned together by Bahram Gur’s arrow. The figural band on the widest part of the body with swordsmen, warriors and fierce animals is an animated inscription, but the figures have so overwhelmed the letter shapes that the words are virtually illegible. Like the vignettes on the bucket made for the merchant in 1163, the scenes on this anonymous ewer were probably intended to glorify the owner.

Painted ceramics allowed artists more latitude for depiction. A few objects display a single scene of violence intended to commemorate a particular historical event. The best example is a large (diameter 47.8 cm; now in the Freer Gallery of Art) enamel-painted plate whose front side shows the successful siege of a castle in a rocky landscape (Figure 28.5). An army of horsemen, foot soldiers and a tan elephant attack from the right, while the leader of the besieged castle plummets to his death, his falling body pierced by two arrows. The ground is littered with dismembered bodies. Labels around the heads and bodies identify the seven major attackers, probably Turkish amirs, and the remains of a readily readable, if only half intact, inscription around the rim implies specific narration, with the identification of an event (the battle) and a place (Khalkhal on the south-eastern border of Azerbaijan). While the left side summarises the progress of the battle, the right encapsulates the decisive moment of victory. The scene suggests that the plate was intended as a trophy or piece of memorabilia designed to celebrate the victors of a particularly fierce battle.

The specific historical image on the front of the siege plate contrasts with the generalised scenes on the back. The back rim is inscribed with a band containing the standard good wishes written in a stylised and difficult to read script. The sloping sides show four feats of hunting: slaying a dragon, shooting a quadruped, clubbing what appears to be a feline and shooting a griffin. Two other hunters are also shown, including one who leads a cheetah and carries an ox-headed mace. The imaginary animals and the attributes such as the ox-headed mace show that these are not ordinary mortals like those depicted on the front but epic heroes such as Bahram Gur, Faridun.

22 www.freersackler.si.edu/?s=F1943.3&search_context=objects&post_type=tms_object; Sims, Peerless Images, pp. 92–3, no. 2; Ettinghausen et al., Islamic Art and Architecture, figs. 274–5; Renata Holod, ‘Event and Memory: The Freer Gallery’s Siege Scene Plate’, Ars Orientalis 42 (2012), 194–219.
Rustam, and similar protagonists from the *Shahnama* and other tales. The images are presumably meant to link the prowess of the warriors named on the front to the feats of legendary heroes.

At least one enamel-painted ceramic shows a continuous narrative from an epic tale: a beaker also in the Freer Gallery of Art (Figure 28.6). Despite its small size (ht 12 cm), the beaker illustrates the ancient love story of Iranian hero Bizhan, who accidentally meets the beautiful Turanian princess Manizha. Decorated in strips of images that unfold like those in a comic

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book, the beaker has twelve scenes arranged in three registers of small linked panels. The episodes begin with the lovers’ tryst and discovery. Bizhan is then captured, led off half-naked in shackles, and imprisoned in a pit sealed with a boulder. Manizha entreats the hero Rustam to rescue her lover, and while she looks on, Rustam lifts the giant boulder and releases the prisoner.

Like the murals at Panjikent (see Figure 28.3), the scenes on the beaker are designed to link the user to the heroic exploits of legend. At Panjikent the murals would have framed the owner of the private house and been visible to his assembled guests, whereas the tiny scenes on this beaker (each register

Figure 28.6 A beaker painted with scenes from the tale of Bizhan and Manizha; Kashan, c. 1200.
measures only 2.6 cm) would have been visible only to the owner, who must have held it in his hand and rotated it counter-clockwise three times to ‘read’ the whole episode. It carried a far more private message.

The images on these objects played a range of functions and conveyed an array of meanings. Cosmically charged, they symbolised power and victory, with the figures serving as agents in the constant struggle between good and evil. The scenes also functioned as allusions, abbreviated narrative signifiers that were immediately recognisable to contemporary viewers. They were visual clues for mental reconstruction. As the heroes depicted on the objects were esteemed as much for their attributes as for their accomplishments, the images served as exemplars for proper behaviour. They are visualisations of the literary genre known as ‘Mirrors for Princes’, books that were intended to instruct kings or lesser rulers on aspects of rule and behaviour and more broadly to create royal images for imitation or avoidance. The images show how the pervasive monarchical metaphor of dominance had become part of the daily visual landscape in a time of constant political upheaval and shifting allegiances and ethnicities.

Later Period

Violent figural scenes from the princely cycle and depictions of heroes from the legendary past continued to be depicted on portable objects made in the period after 1250. Tiles from the palace built at Takht-i Sulayman in north-western Iran in the 1270s, for example, display hunters, heroes and magical creatures such as the dragon and the simurgh, a winged creature with a lion’s head and long flowing tail. But the florescence of illustrated manuscripts in this later period, especially in Iran and Central Asia, provides for far more exhaustive depictions of violence.

On the most basic level, these manuscript illustrations provide detailed information about the implements used to wage war and carry out other acts

of violence.\textsuperscript{27} Such information is immensely practical, as these were turbulent times. The Mongols, for example, used conquest and warfare to create the largest contiguous land empire in world history, stretching across much of Eurasia. The paintings made for the Ilkhanids, the branch of the Mongols who ruled Iran and Iraq from 1256 to 1353, provide some of the best visual information we have about the specific weapons and tactics used in the mighty Mongol military organisation.\textsuperscript{28}

The most valuable of these images illustrate copies of the world history known as the \textit{Jami‘ al-tavarikh} (‘Compendium of Chronicles’) compiled for the Persian vizier Rashid al-Din (1247–1318) in the early fourteenth century. Several manuscripts made under the author’s supervision survive, with the most vivid scenes of warfare illustrating an Arabic copy of the volume containing the history of the non-Mongol peoples that is now divided between Edinburgh University Library and the Khalili Collection in London.\textsuperscript{29} In addition, other illustrations showing warfare have been detached from the volume on the history of the Mongols and are now mounted in albums in Istanbul and Berlin.\textsuperscript{30} For example, a double-page composition in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin (Diez A, fo. 70, S. 4, right, and S. 7, left) that depicts the Mongol capture of Baghdad prominently displays the lamellar armour, trebuchets, bows, quivers, shields and war drums used to terrify and subdue the enemy (Fig. 28.7).\textsuperscript{31} Another detached image in the same collection (Diez A, fo. 70, S. 19, no. 2) shows horsemen leading away

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} Michael V. Gorelik, ‘Oriental Armour of the Near and Middle East from the Eighth to the Fifteenth Centuries as Shown in Works of Art’, in Robert Elgood (ed.), \textit{Islamic Arms and Armour} (London: Scolar Press, 1979), pp. 30–63.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Simms, \textit{Peerless Images}, fig. 58 (right half only); Komaroff and Carboni (eds.), \textit{Legacy of Genghis Khan}, nos. 24–5 and figs. 33 and 35; \textit{Dschingis Khan und seine Erben}, no. 279.
prisoners trapped in a two-pronged wooden shackle, an unusual Persian
device called a *dushkha* (literally, ‘two-branched’).{32}

These images, then, literally illustrate the history of warfare. They can be
used to reconstruct different sorts of weaponry that have not survived, such

{32 Illustrated in *Dschingis Khan und seine Erben*, no. 280; May, *Mongol Art of War*, 5, bottom.}
as the variety of arrowheads ranging from narrow ones for armour-piercing arrows to wide blades for slicing and blunt arrows for stunning opponents.33 These scenes are important furthermore for siege and combat not only in West Asia but also in China, where painting produced during the Mongol

33 May, Mongol Art of War, pl. 8.
period was typically more concerned with building civic society or encouraging individual exemplary conduct.\textsuperscript{34}

Such weaponry was obviously new and intriguing to the Persians to whom it was introduced by the Mongols. This is evident from the unique copy of a dispersed Persian manuscript entitled \textit{Mu\'nis al-ahrar fi daga`i\'q al-ash`ar} ("The Free Men’s Companion to the Subtleties of Poems") completed at the city of Isfahan in central Iran in February–March 1341.\textsuperscript{35} The poetic anthology once contained six illustrated folios that were detached and sold separately. In addition to a section on signs of the zodiac, the illustrated folios contain a second section with a curious poetic device matching individual words with images that function like visual glosses. The reader was supposed to recite the first line of each couplet and then supply the rhyming words of the second verse by looking at the pictures. Most of the illustrations depict regalia, jewellery and gems, birds and animals, plants and trees, musical instruments and other exotica, but several paintings show weapons, including a spear, a sword, a javelin, a corselet, a helmet, an acton (a padded coat), a shield, a mace, a dart, a crook, an arrow and an axe. These illustrations provide a rare correspondence between words and images that helps us to identify the names for weapons used during the Mongol period. The images also show that such words for weapons of violence had become part of the vocabulary of an erudite reader in fourteenth-century Iran.

The metaphoric role of violent feats in overcoming supernatural beasts and adversaries is clear from the so-called Great Mongol \textit{Shahnama}, arguably the finest and most ambitious manuscript produced during the fourteenth century and one of the greatest copies of the Persian national epic ever made.\textsuperscript{36} The large two-volume manuscript, probably produced in the 1330s for the Ilkhanid court at Tabriz in north-western Iran, originally had some 200 illustrations. The most heavily illustrated cycle was that of Alexander (Iskandar), which once had seventeen illustrations on fifteen folios, of which twelve illustrations survive.\textsuperscript{37} The cycle is framed by two images

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\textsuperscript{34} See Chapter 26 in this volume.


showing Alexander’s enthronement and the bereavement over his coffin. In between are six illustrations of his travels to strange lands, two illustrations of him combatting ferocious supernatural beasts (a horned wolf-like monster and a dragon), and two illustrations of him defeating the King of Hind. In one, Alexander cleverly terrorises the Indian army of elephants by assembling a cavalry of iron riders and horses mounted on wheels, filled with naphtha and set afame. The Indians flee in terror in face of the relentless onslaught. In the other, Alexander administers the coup de grâce after a clamour and cloud of dust arose from the ranks and caused the Indian king to avert his head. These are some of the most striking and emotional images of warfare and violence produced in the Persian tradition, far from the ballet-like corps favoured in fifteenth-century copies of the epic.

The choice to illustrate this particular cycle so heavily in this royal copy of the Persian national epic was not surprising, as the Ilkhanid ruler was metaphorically dubbed the ‘Alexander of the Age’ (iskandar-i zaman). The paintings serve to legitimate the Mongols, who like Alexander were foreigners ruling Iran. The scenes emphasise conquest, military prowess and might, all themes that occur in other illustrations in the manuscript, which show equally stunning scenes of legendary heroes such as Bahram Gur hunting and killing wild animals and savage beasts. Violence pervades this copy of the epic. In addition to the standard scenes of warfare showing battles, combats, sieges and prisoners, the illustrations include striking depictions of death and mourning, including one in which a grieving father cradles his son’s severed head. Several scenes show murders, beheadings and executions as well as a poisoning, a castration and a flaying, many of them examples of the public spectacles of pain designed to create a sense of legitimacy in this highly militarised period (Figure 28.8). The choice of

Art here is propaganda in service to the Mongol court, and the pictures reflect the turbulent times in which this stunning manuscript was produced.

This deluxe manuscript also seems to have set the precedent for another, equally ambitious copy of the epic produced two centuries later for the Safavid ruler of Iran, Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524–76). The massive volume has 258 illustrations, many stressing different aspects of warfare. The choice of

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38 See Chapter 8 in this volume.
subjects to be illustrated may again have been engendered by the contemporary historical realities and political chaos, as the Safavids, themselves riven by civil war, were threatened by the Ottomans on the west and the Uzbeks

Figure 28.8 ‘Afrasiyab executes Nawdar’, painting from the Great Mongol *Shahnama* made at Tabriz in the 1330s.
on the east. These military and political tensions clearly moved beyond the battlefield to shape the cycle of illustrations in this ambitious copy of Firdawsi’s epic.

These images made in Iran post-1250 were part of a new visual language that was disseminated widely in this period through the use of designs on paper. Images of warriors, hunters and combat worked out on paper for manuscripts were repeated in other media, including inlaid metalwares, ceramics, textiles and other portable arts produced not only in the region but also elsewhere. Most of the metalwares produced for the Mamluks, a sequence of sultans who ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 to 1517, are decorated with inscriptions, but one superb inlaid bronze basin is enveloped with images of people and animals set against a dense vegetal scroll. Known today as the Baptistère de Saint-Louis, the basin was probably made in Egypt or Syria in the 1330s or 1340s and then made its way to the French court where it was used from the seventeenth century for baptism. Originally it was probably part of a set with a matching ewer for hand-washing, a function underscored by the fantastic fishpond inhabited by crabs, eels, tortoises, frogs, a lizard, a wild duck, a pelican, a crocodile and two harpies that decorates the bottom of the interior.

The panels decorating the sides of the Baptistère include a variety of scenes that can be divided into groups. The four panels on the exterior show processions, two of Mamluk amirs and two of native servants who can be distinguished from the amirs by dress, hairstyle and facial type. The panels on the interior show amirs hunting savage animals and battling their enemies. One prominent figure, probably an unidentified Mamluk sultan, wears lamellar armour over a quilted garment and a helmet with long ear flaps, the lower part of his face covered by an aventail. He has just discharged an arrow which lodges in the neck of his adversary who sports a flat turban surmounted by a pompon and who is mounted on a horse with distinctive harness. He may represent a defeated Mongol. The second battle scene is more tumultuous, with three riders armed with a lance, a bow and a sword.

The ferocity of the encounters between the two enemies is clear from the dismembered limbs and heads that litter the ground around them, including one severed head with a flat turban and pompon. Like their Mongol counterparts, the Mamluks saw combat and war as sources of legitimation, but without any reference to an epic past.

Most of these objects were made for daily use, but occasionally religious subjects could serve as the foundation for images of violence. The Qur’anic description of heaven and hell inspired a range of extra-Qur’anic literature, particularly cultivated by poets and mystics. The most startling images of torture illustrate a copy of Mir Haydar’s Mi’rajnama created c. 1430 at Herat or Samarkand in Central Asia. The text in eastern Turkish describes the ascension of the Prophet Muhammad from Jerusalem on his human-headed beast, Buraq. During his miraculous journey the Prophet passes through the seven celestial spheres to Paradise before descending to hell, and this copy of the text contains sixty-one fantastic paintings of the journey lavishly painted in gold and other brilliant pigments. The scenes of hell in particular captured the imagination of the artists, who devoted sixteen paintings to the tortures of hell versus a mere five more tranquil scenes of Paradise. These grisly scenes show adulterous women suspended by hooks through their breasts, wine drinkers with poison pored down their throats, the proud locked in boxes and tormented by snakes and scorpions, and similar subjects with red-tipped flames engulfing the sinners (Figure 28.9). To create these startling images of hell and torment, the painters had to search for models beyond the conventions of Persian painting to the imagery of Central Asia and the nomadic shamanistic life there.

This world of the steppe can be glimpsed from a group of bizarre images and individual leaves depicting nomads, dervishes, shamans and monsters, many mounted in two albums in the Topkapi Palace Library in Istanbul (H.2153 and H.2160). Several paintings were later inscribed ‘work of Muhammad Siyah

43 On the Qur’anic descriptions of the End of Time, see Chapter 29 in this volume.
Qalam’ (‘Muhammad of the Black Pen’), although they are not all by a single hand, and the epithet should be taken to refer to a style, not a person. Painted
with heavy outlines in sombre colours, mainly red, blue and brown, the figures are set against the coarse unpolished paper without any indication of landscape, setting or text. Many of the figures represent demons, with exaggerated gestures, distorted faces and enormous gnarled feet with prominent toenails. Some figures are half-naked, wearing only a knee-length skirt rendered with thick and heavy folds. Some are enchained (Figure 28.10); others dance berserkly. One set sacrifices a horse, with the demons tussling over the dismembered limbs. These weird figures seem to derive from an oral tradition of storytelling and allude to a strange place beyond the civilised world, but the exact attribution of these paintings is controversial: they have been assigned variously to western or eastern Iran or Central Asia in the fourteenth or the fifteenth century. Their meaning is equally allusive.

Conclusion

Individually these depictions of violence produced in the Islamic lands from 500 to 1500 play different roles, but several themes emerge collectively. On a
prosaic level, the many scenes reflect the unsettled times and places where these objects were made and the constant occurrence of battles and warfare, some of it with sophisticated weaponry. But the vignettes of warfare and fighting also reflect a more positive view of violence, designed to invoke the prowess and heroism of the object’s owner. This triumphal theme extends to nature and the animal kingdom, as man dominates and tames the often inhospitable landscape and the wild beasts in it. Many incidents also allude to the legendary and literary past, particularly in Iran, where violent actions recall tales of heroism and adventure. The scenes on these objects are typically not narrative but metaphorically evoke a story, often an oral rather than a written tale of superhuman heroism. Torture and hell also seem to have provoked a more emotional response than heaven and paradise. In short, scenes of violence produced in the Islamic lands from 500 to 1500 are multivalent, not always just what they appear at first glance.

Bibliographical Essay

There are no studies of violence as shown in the arts produced in the Islamic lands 500–1500, despite the many depictions of it. Many good pictures and discussions of individual objects, including those showing violence, can be found in general surveys of the field. The standard reference works are the two volumes on the earlier (pre-1250) and later (post-1250) periods in the Pelican History of Art series: Richard Ettinghausen, Oleg Grabar and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, *Islamic Art and Architecture 650–1250* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) and Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250–1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). Colour pictures of the major objects discussed here are also available in the volume published by Phaidon in their Art and Ideas series: Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair, *Islamic Arts* (London: Phaidon, 1997).

One should also consult Eleanor Sims, *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and its Sources* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). It covers not only manuscript illustrations but also paintings on other types of objects, including murals, ceramics, metalwares and the like, although it is limited to greater Iran and Central Asia. In addition to a chronological overview, it offers a rare survey organised by theme. Topics such as razm-o bazm (fighting and feasting), the hero, and the illustration of texts allow readers to peruse images that often show violence across media and time.

Exhibition catalogues also offer good colour pictures of major works. Three of the most important for the discussion here are Sheila Canby et al., *Court and Cosmos: The Great Age of the Seljuqs* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016); Linda Komaroff and Stefano Carboni (eds.), *The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); and David J. Roxburgh (ed.), *Turks: A Journey of a Thousand Years, 600–1600* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2005). All are multi-media, although the latter two have a heavy emphasis on manuscript painting. All also include illustrations of objects and sites that are related to the works in the exhibition. The first
covers the arts produced in the middle period. The second treats the work made during the Mongol period in Iran, a particularly inventive era when a new visual language was created. The third takes a wide view of the Turks, including material that was produced from Central Asia across Iran to Anatolia.

Monographs offer more in-depth analysis of individual objects or manuscripts. Some are cited in the chapter for the individual works of art, but many of them are also covered in Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair (eds.), *Grove Encyclopedia of Islamic Art and Architecture*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) or at Grove Art on-line available through subscription at oxfordartonline.com. ArtStor, organised by the Mellon Foundation as the visual counterpart of Jstor, also offers good photographs, but again only through subscription. All readers should also consult the information available on museum websites. The one for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, is easily searchable by various terms and also has an excellent timeline with essays on different aspects of Islamic art.
Violence as event is chaotic and arbitrary, destructive and intrusive. Violence as concept is evasive and elusive. It can be one thing and its opposite: therefore violence can be meticulously planned but it can also be random and irrational. Violence is often simultaneously legitimate and illegitimate, determined by the perspective of its representation. Thus it is both universal, for it appears to transcend time, place and culture, and particular, for it is extremely contextual. In the words of Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, ‘violence gives birth to itself’. ¹

The following survey eschews any attempt to define what might have constituted violence in Arabic literature. Instead I present a number of pressure points, of contact zones in what I understand to be the spectrum of violence, nodes around which the fears, anxieties, concerns and aspirations provoked by instances of violence and their representation were concentrated. ² I discuss the following ‘pressure points’: the war against time; apocalypse; the anxiety of remembrance (specifically vituperative poetry, love poetry, and the martyr poetry of a group of early Islamic insurrectionists); abomination (especially encounters with non-Muslim peoples the Rus and the Franks); the non-human world; spectacle (in particular corporal punishment and the inviolability of the human body). These zones are not discrete: they do not constitute categories of violence, but, like violence itself, are porous and mimetic.

The temporal focus of the survey covers some six centuries, from the pre-Islamic sixth century to the twelfth century and the crusades. The survey does not, however, proceed chronologically: the temporal focus of each section is determined by the historical context of the textual sources discussed.

² This survey does not consider gender violence, criminal or domestic violence, slavery, the violence of rebellion or violence of the kind inflicted on humans by supernatural beings typical of popular storytelling traditions. For an example of the latter see The One Hundred and One Nights, ed. and trans. Bruce Fudge (New York: New York University Press, 2016).
The War against Time

Pre-Islamic poetry was a series of responses to the violent actions of men fighting for survival in a universe of savage unpredictability, ruled by inexorable Time. This warrior poetry emerges into the light of history in the second half of the sixth century, though it was not written down for some two centuries when it was collected by philologists in Iraq in the latter half of the eighth century.

The majority of the poetry that has survived originated in Najd, the highlands of Arabia. It was produced by a warrior elite and intones a litany of themes: the value of human action in an unpredictable universe; loyalty to family and kin-group; devotion to war and conflict to defend one’s group and to endow one’s actions with worth; dedication to glorious ancestors; unwa-vering pursuit of a manly ethic, expressed through a warrior’s accoutrements: camel and horse, armour and weaponry; the importance of posthumous fame. Set against a backdrop of desert hardship these warrior poets waged unremitting war on time, their ultimate and perpetual enemy.

The Snub-Nosed Doe, al-Khansa’, the poetic name of Tumadir bint ‘Amr (d. 644), lost both her brothers, Sakhr and Mu’awiyah, on the battlefield at the end of the pre-Islamic era. She converted to Islam and spent the rest of her life composing threnodies bemoaning their loss. The following lament for Sakhr is typical of the death-songs she left behind:

Why? Why this reign of terror?  
Why does Death claim a hero each day?  
Death fixates on our chiefs,  
chooses our best.  
If the world were fair,  
fate would take other men,  
not just our heroes.  
Death’s part of the deal  
is to come back and demand more.  
Ours is to pay on time.

Death, why did you not yield to Sakhr?  
He was pure, true to his word,  
a chief, stern but kind,  
our paragon, these fifty years,  
God grant him mercy and peace!  
Autumn rains nourish his grave!  

Al-Khansa’ devoted her life to giving voice to her grief, to the inexpressible sorrow that effectively silenced her, despite the mournful beauty of her many verses. Poem after poem returned to the same themes: the nobility of her fallen brothers, the need to avenge their deaths, the brutal unpredictability and inscrutable workings of chance. And yet the poet rarely addressed the cosmic force at work in her universe: time (dahr). For al-Khansa’ and her fellow poets, time was the great enemy. It was the eternal force of annihilation whose tyranny governed existence. Whatever gods al-Khansa’ may have worshipped before embracing Islam, they were powerless to stop the onslaught of time.

The pre-Islamic conceptualisation of time included notions of death and fate, of chance and randomness, and of hostility and disease. All acts of violence, be they perpetrated or suffered, were connected with time. Its frequent irruptions into human life and society threatened man by reminding him of the futility of his efforts to protect his kin-group (family, clan and tribe), to preserve his honour (‘ird) through valour (hamasa), and to be true to his ethic (mu’awwada). Time’s challenge to man was met, not by submissiveness, but by resistance, by the requital of like with like. If time’s cycle had turned and thus made it possible for an enemy to mount a raid or kill kinsfolk in battle, the proper response was to restore honour through retribution, to force the cycle of time to turn by turning the mill of war, almost in spite of time, and thus to regain a state of health through attacking the disease brought by time. Deaths should be avenged, bloodshed should be atoned for through the spilling of blood, insults should be repaid in full, reputations should be built, protected and immortalised through valiant deeds and celebrated in verse, for memory, ancestor worship and the veneration of the glorious dead guaranteed defiance of time. Life was viewed as a violent game of chance. The pre-Islamic ethic required that a man risk his life, be it on the battlefield or through reckless and often violent acts of generosity. This risk of life would ensure the perpetuation of his memory.

Among the corpus of poetry composed and recited by such warriors against time during the century and a half or so before the advent of Islam one figure stands out above all: ‘Antara ibn Shaddad, the black warrior of the tribe of ‘Abs. The poems of ‘Antara, the blow-fly, portray a living embodiment of war. His most famous poem, a Mu’allaqa (i.e., a ‘hanging’ poem, a work so celebrated that it was thought to have been written out on cloth and suspended on the walls of the Ka‘ba), is a bravura celebration of the pre-Islamic ethos of violent defiance through surrender to the cosmic forces of annihilation.
This war song is addressed to ‘Abla, a woman the poet loves but who is now unattainable. ‘Antara’s state of loss is a manifestation of how time works against the best efforts of man. It is the poet’s task to respond to the loss inflicted on him by time. He must satisfy the demands of his ethic, through proving his manliness and imposing his valour on his foes:

The ironweight champion unyielding, avoided by the enemy –
I give him a swift thrust, a straight, well-tested, true-shaft
a spear-gash hole, wide as a well-bucket.
The thud of the thrust sounds the signal to the hungry hyenas.
Noblemen are fair game for my spear: it mucks up their fancy clothes!
I left him there, meat that night for the predators and they tore him,
head to toe.  

The final lines of the poem reveal that two sons have vowed to avenge the death of their father killed by ‘Antara:

I fear I’ll die before the mill of war can pulverise both sons of Damdam.
Their vow of vengeance was unprovoked, an attack on my honour,
and now they cower and hide. It’s time for them to act!
I killed their father – carrion for gimpy hyenas and grizzly vultures.

Apocalypse

During the first quarter of the seventh century, the Qur’an was revealed into this world of pre-Islamic Arabia, with its warrior caste’s never-ending battles against tyrant time. Islam’s sacred text was communicated to the people of Mecca by Prophet Muhammad, in the Hejaz, the western barrier that separates the coastal plains of Arabia (Tihama) from the highlands of Najd. The Qur’an is an apocalyptic text. As revelation it is a divine irruption into the world of man and thus heralds the onset of the End Time. As the last in a long sequence of such revelatory irruptions over the course of human history, it signals the end of history, for it clarifies once and for all what is right and what is wrong. Thus revelation represents the first stage of the Last Judgement.

Human autonomy is the consequence of God’s gift of choice to man. The decision whether to comply and acknowledge God’s authority or violently recuse it represents the second stage of the Last Judgement. God has sent the Qur’an from heaven to earth because of the violence of human unbelief

(kufr). Central to the Qur’anic notion of unbelief is the idea of ingratitude. Apostasy, idolatry, hypocrisy, obstinacy in rejecting God’s message, complacency, arrogance, irreverence, impiety, these are some of the major characteristics of unbelievers. At their heart lies a fundamental sense of a lack of gratitude to God for the gifts of His creation, for His clemency and solicitude for man, for His overwhelming benefaction. God has filled the world with the signs of His kindnesses, pre-eminent among which are the verses of His revelation. Acts of benefaction were thought to require expression of gratitude on behalf of those who received the benefit. Thus, rejection of God’s signs and of the verses of the Qur’an was a failure adequately to express gratitude to the benefactor, God. Such ungrateful disobedience in rejecting God’s message merited hell-fire (Qur’an 2:39). Equally, belief was the proper, righteous expression of gratitude to the beneficent God and merited paradise.

The Qur’an abounds in punishment stories in which God sends past peoples a messenger. Invariably these peoples reject their messengers in acts of wanton violence. There ensues an apocalyptic cataclysm and the people are destroyed. In Qur’an 26 (al-Shu’ara’, The Poets) seven punishment stories are framed by verses (1–9) that condemn rejection of God’s revelation and by verses (192–227) that establish the authority of the revelation as of divine and not human provenance. The story of Moses at the court of Pharaoh and the Exodus from Egypt (verses 10–68) is followed by Abraham’s rejection of the idolatry of his people (69–104). Noah and the Flood (105–22) leads into the punishment of ‘Ad for their rejection of Hud (123–40) and then the Thamud are punished for their rejection of Salih (141–59). (‘Ad and Thamud were two ancient Arabian peoples.) The sequence culminates in the destruction of the People of the Grove (Midian) for their failure to hearken to Shu’ayb (176–91). History is thus a foretelling of the Eschaton, a prediction of futurity.

Only God knows the time of the apocalypse, the third stage of the Last Judgement, the display of divine majesty and might in which the earth will be torn asunder by a massive earthquake, when the sun and the stars will be extinguished, the sky will pour down like molten metal, the seas will surge, and the mountains, the pre-eminent pre-Islamic symbols for eternity, will be teased and plucked like carded wool.

Qur’an 88 (al-Ghashiya, The Firewave) conjures the aftermath of the Last Judgement (verses 2–16) before evoking the End Time (17–20). It concludes with an intonation of the present-ness of future events (21–6). The Firewave is an apocalypse for a desert people. In a drought to end all droughts God
withholds water and unleashes a cosmic firestorm. But however violent and traumatic these events appear to be, however much terror they instil in our hearts, their violence is as naught when compared with the violence of man’s ingratitude to God, the ultimate catalyst of the End.

There is a profound intimacy between Qur’anic revelation and Qur’anic time: the act of revelation is itself conceived in apocalyptic terms (see Qur’an 101, al-Qari’ah, The Salvo). Past events are limned as present advents of future inevitability, for man, in order piously to appreciate and prepare for the End Time, must view the future retrospectively, in terms of past cataclysms. What Sieburth calls ‘mantic hysteria’ and ‘messianic inevitability’ create in all who receive God’s revelation an ‘acute anticipatory angst’. Indeed, the very language of the Qur’an is transformative, its verses so fraught with such an ‘alarming surplus (or abyss) of meaning’ that its verse-signs are themselves the apocalypse.5

The Anxiety of Remembrance

How a person would be remembered and commemorated was a source of considerable anxiety. Remembrance is unpredictable because after death it is entirely beyond a person’s control: it requires reciprocity. A man could strive to ensure that his good name would live on forever, but that requires acknowledgment, acceptance and acquiescence on the part of his society, those who survive him. Remembrance is communal. A good reputation is a benefit to the groups of which I am a member, a bad one not so. Remembrance is also open-ended and precarious, for just as I can never know that I have done enough to ensure memorialisation through positive renown, so too renown can all too easily be lost, destroyed by a memorable vilification. And it is also paradoxical, for a bad reputation is more likely to last for longer than its opposite.

When Mu‘awiya, the brother of al-Khansa’, died in battle, the responsibility for blood-vengeance fell to his brother Sakhr. Vituperative poetry (hija’) attacking a killer was an accepted part of vendetta, and often sounded a call to combat. When urged to compose hija’, Sakhr declined out of a desire to protect himself from ‘foul speech’. It was not that Sakhr did not want to demean himself by stooping to conquer his foes. He did not want to provoke further poetic vilification in turn, and thus risk his renown. He wanted his act

of revenge to speak for him, once and for all, and did not want to give his opponents an occasion to tarnish his remembrance.\footnote{G. J. van Gelder, The Bad and the Ugly, Attitudes towards Invective Poetry (hija’) in Classical Arabic Literature (Leiden: Brill, 1989), p. 18.}

In the context of violence, I want to highlight three of the many possible responses to the predicament of remembrance that stand out: poetic vituperation (hija’); self-sacrifice in love (ghazal); the martyrdom in battle that was typical of the insurrection movement known as Kharijism.\footnote{Kharijism takes its name from a group of supporters of the fourth caliph ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib who ‘went out’ (kharaaja) from his army as a display of their rejection of his decision in 657 to agree to arbitration with Mu’awiya, who, as governor of Syria, had refused to pledge allegiance to ‘Ali. The original Kharijites moved to the east of the Tigris and waged continual insurrection against the caliphate. They developed a strict notion of what it meant to be a Muslim, condemning as unbelievers those they deemed not to be consistent with this definition. This condemnation was effectively a termination of the right to live.} In each response poetry was the battleground in which the struggle for remembrance was waged.

\textit{Hija’}

Hija’, vituperation or lampoon, was the poetry of privation, a violent assault on person, community and memory. It was a weapon to be feared. Poets often described the tongue as a sword, and the damage inflicted by verbal insults as physical wounds. Therefore, glossectomy was a common punishment inflicted on poets for their invective. The vituperative poetry that survives from the pre-Islamic period represents an attack on an individual or a kin-group for failing to live up to the warrior ethic, an attempt to memorialise this failing in words for all eternity. During the Umayyad caliphate (661–750), one type of hija’ came to predominate the political stage: the poetic jousting competitions known in Arabic as \textit{naqidah}, pl. \textit{naqa’id}, ‘flying’. A flying usually involved two poets, though there were jousts in which three poets were involved, and the response did not necessitate a word-for-word rebuttal, simply that any rebuttals be cast in the same metre and have the same rhyme scheme as their targets. Parasitic, obscene, outrageous, entertaining and politically powerful, the flying was hugely popular with elites and commonalty alike, and poets represented their clan, tribe and patronal group. What was at stake was the struggle to determine how these groups were to be spoken of, respected and memorialised. The greatest fear for an individual or group thus vilified was for an insult to become popular among children, for this was how maximal damage could be inflicted.\footnote{Van Gelder, The Bad and the Ugly, p. 38.}
Ghazal

The Umayyad caliphate witnessed the emergence of a genre of love poetry, known as the ghazal, a genre that has remained a feature of Arabic poetry to this day. The ghazal was an expression of public intimacy, a declaration of personal sentiment addressed to the object of one’s devotion, but shared with an audience. In the most iconic type of ghazal, known as ‘Udhri because of its association with the Hejazi tribe of ‘Udhra, the lovers are unable to be together, yet, despite the unattainability of the object of his love, the male lover declares his intention to stay true even unto death. He decides to reject the norms of society, to dominate and thus dedicate his soul, to memorialise his feelings and secure his remembrance through devotion to a woman. In the process he is renamed: Jamil ibn Ma’mar (d. 701) becomes Jamil Buthaynah, for example: the Jamil who belongs to Buthaynah.

This kind of ghazal poetry presents love as a sickness, an act of violence that tore the lover from his community, and required of him an act of self-sacrifice, cast as an act of martyrdom. In some of the most famous verses of Arabic love poetry, Jamil declares

> People say, ‘Jamil go on a raid, fight the jihad!’
> but what jihad can I wage, if not for woman’s sake?
> Talking to them brings me joy –
> every lover who dies in their midst is a martyr!9

This holy war can only be fought for love: to die of love is an act of martyrdom. Like the poet’s love, martyrdom is an act of self-denial. It is a refusal to change, a death-wish, yes, but one that patiently waits for death – it does not anticipate death through taking one’s life. The ‘Udhri ghazal was a poetry of denial, of violence directed at the self.

Kharijism

From their very inception in 661, Kharijite insurrectionists waged jihad on the battlefield for the soul of Islam and memorialised their martyrs in a proud poetry of threnody and vaunt. Theirs was no patient waiting for death to transport them to salvation. It was self-immolation through total war. Kharijism was a pietistic cult of annihilation. More a fissiparous series of sects than a concerted resistance movement, the cult fought to defend the integrity of the Muslim community through the extermination of all Muslims
whom it deemed to be in violation of its rigourist creed of askesis and selfprivation. Its aim was primordialist, in that it strove to recreate the purity of the community under Prophet Muhammad and the first two Rightly Guided Caliphs, Abu Bakr (r. 632–4) and 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634–44). The purity of the community could only be restored by pursuing through martyrdom its soteriological fulfilment and its celestial realisation in paradise. Therefore the Kharijites fought to rid the earth of corruption by extirpating all Muslims – themselves included. The sources attribute horrific atrocities to them. Easily the most terrifying was their reputed disembowelling of pregnant women and slaughter of the unborn child in the womb.

Kharijite poems voiced an ideology of complete annihilation, in expressions of death, alienation, suffering, sacrifice and renunciation. These poems strove to recast and remake the language of early Arabic poetry and the Qur’an, because other Muslims, the enemies of the Kharijites, had distorted language and the Qur’an for their own perversions of God’s faith, their actions directed by self-serving interests rather than selfprivation. Paradoxically, Kharijite martyrdom attempted the annihilation of communal identity, of poetry and of language – in other words, of remembrance.

Abomination

From the outset, Arabic writing about travel and encounters with other peoples exhibited what Joseph Conrad once called ‘the fascination of abomination’. One of the earliest such accounts to have survived is the report submitted to the court of the Abbasid caliph al-Wathiq (r. 841–7) in Baghdad by Sallam the Interpreter, sent on an expedition to the north to check on the status of the wall built to contain the Gog and Magog (Yajuj and Majuj) of Qur’an 18 (al-Kahf, The Cave), a people who were the very embodiment of Islamic abomination: naked, anarchic, primitive. In the tenth century Accounts of India and China by Abu Zayd al-Sirafi, a miscellany of data and anecdote from the Indian Ocean trade, amongst notices on the sea route from Siraf to Khanfu, on pearl fishing and on whales and ambergris, we learn how in Sri Lanka people were so addicted to gambling over backgammon that some would use their fingers as stakes in the game.
**Ibn Fadlan**

One text dominated by Conrad’s ‘fascination of abomination’ is the *Account* of Ibn Fadlan, a member of the caliphal embassy that left Baghdad on 21 June 921 and travelled some 3,000 miles via Bukhara and the Ust-Yurt plateau into the peoples of the north, to arrive on 12 May 922 at its destination, the court of the king of the Volga Bulghars. This was a *mission civilatrice*, intended to establish Islam among the king’s subjects.¹²

Ibn Fadlan was a functionary at the Baghdad court of the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908–32). His role in the mission was to ensure that court protocol was adhered to in the presentation of the various gifts and missives that the mission had been provided with. At some point, either on his return from the Volga Bulghars, or during his year-long trek to the frozen lands of the north, he kept a record of the peoples he met, the things he saw, the customs he experienced and the marvels he witnessed. Like Sallam the Interpreter before him, Ibn Fadlan’s expedition also encountered Gog and Magog, not contained behind a wall but in the form of the skeleton of a giant.

Ibn Fadlan came face to face with living abomination by the River Volga when he encountered the Rus, a people of presumably Scandinavian origin trading in the northern Russian steppes and forest. The Rus threatened Ibn Fadlan’s very sense of self: he could only liken them to palm-trees and to asses left to roam the fields. Every aspect of Rus behaviour he was exposed to violated his beliefs or practices: the lack of modesty and propriety shown when merchants copulated with their slaves in full view of their comrades; the lack of cleanliness, ritual or personal, when the Rus shared their ablutions in a communal basin; the lack of any reason or sense in their attempts to appease their many gods through animal sacrifice.

When he witnessed what was to him a bizarre Rus funeral, Ibn Fadlan’s narrative was almost reduced to silence as his fascination with abomination became terror. He described how the rites were presided over by a woman known as the Angel of Death, rites that included the selection of a slave-girl to accompany her master on his voyage to the afterlife, preparation of funerary raiment, a funeral pyre, the slaughter of a dog, two horses, two cows and a cock and a hen. Ibn Fadlan’s fascination with this abomination reached fever pitch when he described how the girl was taken on board the ship, repeatedly raped and then brutally slaughtered by the Angel of Death. The whole scene,

as we hear it through his remarkably dispassionate words, is a spectacle of violence.

Yet the greatest challenge the violence posed for him came when one of the Rus, these embodiments of abomination, upbraided Ibn Fadlan and his co-religionists for burying their dead. One can sense the violence wrought on Ibn Fadlan by these events when he found corroboration of the Rus’s words in the speed with which the ship is burnt to a fine ash.

Usama ibn Munqidh

In 1183, towards the end of a long life of chivalry, learning, poetry and warfare, Usama ibn Munqidh (1095–1188) completed his Book of Contemplation in his fortress at Shayzar in northern Syria. It is a work intended to give its readers advice on how to live a good life. He did not have to travel to strange lands to witness marvels or monsters, for the crusades had brought Frankish embodiments of abomination to his very doorstep, the family castle of Shayzar.

Usama penned a famous description of the Franks that he came into contact with during his long career of active campaigning and politicking, depicting them as animals able to accomplish basic tasks such as the bearing of burdens but requiring no use of reason to do so. Usama presented his Franks as a conundrum: how could they fight so bravely and show such valour when they did not possess the set of basic emotions that he thought bravery and courage were predicated upon? For example, they did not display the sense of propriety that Usama and his fellow Muslims deemed necessary for keeping one’s womenfolk safe. Thus we hear of a Frank who has his wife’s pubic hair shaved by a male bath attendant, of another Frank who brings his daughter into the male bath, and of yet another Frank who finds his wife in bed with another man but merely rebukes the man for sleeping in his bed. Yet some Franks did exhibit some traces of reason and intelligence, especially those longest exposed to Muslims, who did not try to prevent Muslims from praying towards Mecca.

For Usama the abomination of the Franks was at its most acute in terms of justice and medicine. The fight between an aged peasant accused of complicity with Muslim bandits and a young blacksmith was at such a far remove from Muslim legal courts, with their system of witnesses and notaries, and the ruling of the cadi. A Frankish doctor amputated a man’s leg that a

Christian physician in the service of Usama’s uncle had healed through the application of a poultice. This doctor then proceeded to disregard the Christian physician’s diagnosis of a woman whose humoral balance had gone completely out of kilter. He declared her insane, had her head shaved, took a razor and cut open her head in the shape of a cross and rubbed salt in her skull. Usama remarks that she died on the spot.

The violence of these abominations, be they of the Sri Lankan gamblers, of the peoples of the north or of the Franks, unsettled and fascinated those who witnessed them and who sought to communicate this fascination to their audiences.

The Non-Human World

The image of the king as mighty hunter is an ancient Near Eastern symbol of legitimate kingship. Central to this ideology is the vision of hunting as a form of sanctioned violence that indicated a ruler’s fitness to rule. Violence inflicted on the non-human world by the king as hunter thus attested to his ability properly and legitimately to exercise legitimate violence in the human world.14

Hunting was a key activity for Muslim elites. It was considered vital training for warfare, and hunting expeditions were an opportunity for social networks to be developed and maintained. It was also an arena in which future leaders were tested and could display their mettle and fitness to lead. Usama ibn Munqidh, for example, concluded his Book of Contemplation with an extended section of observations, memories and anecdotes about hunting with raptors and hounds, and the chase on horseback.15

Hunting Poetry

From the eighth to the tenth century, poetry devoted to all aspects of the hunt enjoyed great popularity and an impressive array of hunters was described. We encounter falcons, sakers, peregrines and merlins; hawks, primarily goshawks but also the smaller male tiercels, and sparrow-hawks; eagles; saluki sighthounds; cheetahs; and horses for hunting. Among the animals hunted we hear of gazelles, oryx, onagers, partridges, teal, mallard

15 The Book of Contemplation, pp. 201–35.
and ibis. In view of the regal ideology of the hunt, it is hardly surprising that one of the major hunting poets was Abd Allah Ibn al-Mu'tazz (d. 908), a high-born Abbasid who was to rule as caliph for a day and a night.

Of the 300 or so poems that have survived, the majority follow a simple pattern. The departure of the hunting expedition is described, and the terrain and location are noted. There then follows a description of the hunter and the prey, usually culminating in the climax: the kill, often in double figures, which, even allowing for some poetic licence and braggadocio, is a large number for one day’s hunt. Many poems end with the feasting and revelry that would conclude a successful hunt, and the poet will thank God.

Some of this poetry tells of hunting for survival. This is especially true of the poems devoted to the saluki, as the raptors (and cheetahs) were distinctly elite possessions and could probably only be afforded by the super-rich. But most poems describe expeditions conducted solely for the purpose of inflicting death on non-human animals. Even when we allow for the maintenance of social networks these occasions enabled, and for the martial skills required by the demands of the hunt, these poems are essentially hymns to death. The poet boasts of how he unleashes the primal power of the raptor or other hunter, whose skill and training are emblematic of his own prowess. Thus he inflicts death on unsuspecting animals. In other words, the poetry celebrates man’s (temporary) control of the agency of Fate, the thrill of becoming death the destroyer.

**The Brethren of Purity**

Man’s arrogance in how he views his role in the natural world, and his arrogation to himself of the violence of death, are central to a text that purports to describe a debate that took place between non-humans and man at the court of the king of the Jinn.

The text was produced by a coterie who identified themselves as the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwan al-Safa’), a group of philosophically minded thinkers who explored the secrets of nature and God’s creation in each other’s company. These enigmatic writers composed, probably towards the end of the ninth and in the first half of the tenth century, an encyclopaedia of fifty-two epistles, in which all learning, wisdom and bodily regimen would be set forth. So committed were they to rejecting their physical selves, so keen was their desire to efface their corporeal individualism and to annihilate personal identity, that, for all the popularity their writings enjoyed in the Muslim world, we do not know their identities for certain or even precisely when the epistles were written.
Epistle 22 is devoted to zoology: *On the Classes of Animals, their Wondrous Physiques and Unusual Behaviour.*\(^\text{16}\) But this is not a scientific exposition of animal taxonomy or ecology. Instead, we find ourselves on an idyllic island in the Indian Ocean near the equator: the kingdom of Biwarasp the Wise, the king of the Jinn. The Brethren give us a brief history of human civilisation. Exiled from the Garden, Adam procreated and his descendants spread throughout the Earth. For as long as they were outnumbered by the animals, the humans lived in far-away places, in fear, as vegetarian gatherers and foragers who did not molest or interfere in the animal kingdom. With towns and cities came the domestication of the animal kingdom. Domestication led to the enslavement and enforced labour of the beasts, much to their chagrin. The animals that remained wild then inhabited the far-away places where once men lived in fear. But unlike the animals that did not molest these reclusive humans, the humans went beyond domesticating animals to hunting and trapping them, out of a conviction that the animals were runaway or rebellious slaves. Things continued thus, even after the arrival of Prophet Muhammad and his conversion of many of the Jinn.

The Epistle describes how Biwarasp and his people live in paradisiacal bliss until a ship carrying merchants reaches their shores. The humans from the ship settle and build towns in this paradise regained. They impose their will on the animals, beasts and cattle which, prior to man’s arrival, also inhabited the island in a state of natural splendour and harmony. In other words, humans are caught in a cycle of repression and unthinking hostility to the animal kingdom. This time, however, the animals send a delegation to Biwarasp and protest about their treatment at the hands of the humans who deem the animals their runaway slaves.

Biwarasp, a wise and just king, invites seventy humans to come to his court to defend their position against the plaint of the animals. A long and brilliant debate ensues, in which a dazzling array of positions are presented. In the end the Brethren give a surprise victory to the humans, but only just. The humans are victorious for the one thing that lifts them above the level of both human and animal: their ability to attain the status of ‘friend of God’ – i.e., the human capacity to leave being human behind:

Please realise that these men who are the friends of God, the purest and best of all of His creation, behave honourably and pleasingly, with deeds that are

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pious, learning that is multifarious, insight deific, character angelic, lifestyles just and beatific, behaviour wondrously majestic.

The crux of human superiority is ultimately ineffable:

No one can describe their essential attributes adequately, and tongues grow weary when eloquent speakers try to list them. Over the ages many may have spoken of them in public gatherings, long homilies may have been devoted to the explanation of their exemplary lives and goodly ethos, but still their true nature has not yet been comprehended. 17

Man is victorious, not because he is the talking animal, or superior to nature or to the eloquent representatives of the animal kingdom – quite the opposite, he is bested at every turn by the plaintiffs from the animal kingdom. Man is victorious because he has the ability to appreciate that God’s universe is not anthropocentric, but is theocentric. Man has sadly convinced himself that God’s gift of choice is a warrant for his vision of creation as anthropocentric. Thus his violence towards the non-human world is an unintended consequence of this divine gift – it is a perversion of choice. But through emulating the example set by the Friends of God, man has the potential to abandon his violence towards the non-human world, to reject what has made him primarily human in his own eyes in favour of that which makes him essentially human.

Spectacle and the Inviolate Body

Human violence against the non-human body was the antithesis of the sacrality accorded to the human body. The human body was inviolate. It was a protected space. A man’s honour, the public manifestation of the inviolate body, was thus a protected space. A man’s home, and especially the women who dwelt there, were the non-public site of the inviolate body and so were protected space. In the urban settings of the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258), this notion of protected inviolability was also thought to extend to semi-public spaces like the market place, the cemetery and the mosque. In this way, violence inflicted on the body becomes both an unveiling, as exposure of the body as protected space, and an inscribing of shame, as manifestation of the loss of inviolability.

17 Ibid., Arabic edition, pp. 278–9; see the alternative translation of Goodman and McGregor, p. 315.
Reverence for the sacrality of the body is a major theme of a work by the Basran intellectual and theologian al-Jahiz (d. 868/9), whose association with the caliphal court in Baghdad and Samarra lasted for some five decades. His *Fi al-Nabitah* (On the Upstarts) is the preface to a lost composition, his *On the Arabs and their Clients* (which presumably dealt with the culture wars concerning the respective merits of Arab and non-Arab accomplishments). The work begins with a brief history of the disintegration of the creedal unity of the Islamic community. This is a history told through acts of violence wrought on protected spaces, except that this time the spaces are the bodies of sacred persons, i.e., caliphs and key members of the Prophet’s family. Al-Jahiz begins with the assassination of the third caliph, ‘Uthman (r. 644–56):

‘Uthman (God be pleased with him!) was assassinated and violated. He was hit with weapons, his stomach pierced with lances, his jugular slit with arrow heads and his skull cracked open with staves, even though he did not lift a finger to protect himself. . . . He was violated: his womenfolk were beaten in his presence and men burst into his private quarters. His wife removed her veil and lifted her skirts in an attempt to restrain his assailants and break their resolve. She tried to shield ‘Uthman with her hands and had two fingers cut off. He was violated: they jumped on his ribs, and dragged and tossed his dead body, naked, on the dung heap—the butchered remains of the man considered by God’s Prophet (God bless and cherish him!) a fit match for his daughters, unmarried women and cherished womenfolk.

The outrage consists in the violation of the three protected spaces: body, home (and womenfolk), honour. For al-Jahiz this outrage is by extension an act of violence on the memory of the Prophet.

Or take al-Jahiz’s condemnation of how the Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Mu’awiya (r. 680–3) attacked Mecca, bombarded the Ka’ba, violated the sanctuary of Medina, and in 680 murdered al-Husayn ibn ‘Ali, the son of the caliph ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, surrounded by his household, when al-Husayn had refused to pledge the oath of allegiance to Yazid:

20 The persons of caliphs and members of the Prophet’s family were deemed especially sacrosanct. When the Abbasid caliph al-Amin was beheaded in 813, the tradition recoils in horror, abandons its customary garrulousness and seeks refuge in laconic references. See Tayeb El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Harun al-Rashid and the
Yazid rammed his sceptre in the mouth of al-Husayn. He transported the daughters of God’s Prophet, in full view, uncovered, upon packsaddles with no curtains, tied to the backs of restive camels. He exposed the genitals of his son ‘Ali ibn al-Husayn, when his legal majority was a matter of doubt, with the intention of killing him if it was discovered that he had grown pubic hair, and, if not, of carting him away in exactly the same way that the commander of the Muslim army carts the captured children of polytheists away.

For al-Jahiz, outrages such as these were made much worse by the collusion of those believers who did nothing to prevent them.

*Ibn al-Rumi’s Funeral Ode for Basra*

A similar set of concerns for protected spaces forms the focus of Ibn al-Rumi’s (d. 896) funeral lament for Basra, sacked by Zanj slaves in 871 during their rebellion led by an ‘Alid pretender, ‘Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad, who claimed he was the Mahdi. (The Zanj were slaves of East African origin who were forced to work in the plantations of southern Iraq. Their rebellion lasted from 870 to 883.) In this long poem of eighty-three verses, Ibn al-Rumi gives voice to his grief at the violation of Basra. He describes how families were killed in their homes, but his plaint is at its most anguished when he describes the fate of the womenfolk in verses 23–4 and 26–8:

So many young virgins, God’s seal intact exposed, unveiled by them in public!
So many chaste young maidens enslaved, left with nothing to hide their faces.

... 

Did any of you see how they were herded in captivity, bleeding head to toe?
Did any of you see how the Zanj


surrounded them and cast lots for them?
Did any of you see them taken as slaves,
those women accustomed to being waited on and served?

Ibn al-Rumi’s poem, like al-Jahiz’s treatise, is fuelled by outrage that there was no one to defend the victims (verses 29–30):

My heart burns at the thought of what the Zanj did!
What a bitter insult. I am in so much pain
at the thought of what the Zanj did!

The threnody ends, in verses 72–83, with an appeal for vengeance, for it is not Basra that has been violated, but the caliphate and the Islamic community.

The ruling elite, in order to inflict violence as a way of seeking to control its subject populations, used the violation of the protected body as spectacle to drive home the message that its rule of the body politic was realised through the disciplining of the bodies of its subject population. At various times and places, ruling elites inflicted the following punishments on subject populations, offenders and enemies: flogging; crucifixion – both ante-mortem crucifixion and the post-mortem gibbeting of bodies; the mutilation and exposure of naked corpses in semi-public spaces such as the market place or above the entrances to shops and houses, as well as in public spaces such as city gates; banishment; decapitation; the blackening of faces; removal of facial hair, especially the beard; ignominious parades through mosques, markets and streets in shame; the bestialisation of humans through contagious exposure to non-human animals; glossectomy; and possibly even the ritual slaughter of humans as if they were sacrificial animals.

The spectacle of violence (however achieved) effectively demarcated the public sphere and declared that sphere a possession of a ruling elite. The performance of the spectacle was meant to act as deterrent and thus effect social cohesion. Depending on time and place, these spectacles of violence could be ritualised as symbolic manifestations of divine justice, and they were often performed with arrogated eschatological meanings, either as anticipations of God’s punishment of the damned or as harbingers of a messianic age.22

The ruling elites may have been able to control the infliction of violence as spectacle at the moment of its enacting, but how such spectacles lived on in the collective memory was quite another matter, as the following two cases

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illustrate. The first is the flogging of the holy man Ibn Hanbal (d. 855). The second is the crucifixion of the vizier Ibn Baqiyya in 977.

The Flogging of Ibn Hanbal

Ahmad ibn Hanbal devoted his life to emulating what he understood to be the lifestyle of Prophet Muhammad. It was a life of self-denial, of scrupulous avoidance of anything tainted, and of devotion to learning, for in order to understand how the Prophet lived Ibn Hanbal was convinced that he had to acquire and learn as many of the Prophet’s sayings and accounts of his deeds (known in Arabic as the Hadith) as he could muster. It was, he held, crucial to accumulate Hadith because this could guarantee that a believer would not have recourse to the application of reason (which was unreliable) to fill in any gaps in his knowledge of how the Prophet might have acted in any given context.

Not surprisingly, such a commitment to the avoidance of a lifestyle built upon reason attracted the attention of al-Ma’mun (d. 833), a caliph very much given to the application of reason. Al-Ma’mun had set up a process known as the Inquisition (Mihnah), a caliphal scrutiny into private belief, a process whereby judges, notary witnesses, and scholars of Hadith were quizzed on an item of belief that could only be answered on the basis of the application of reason: whether God had created the Qur’an. (Many believers held that the Qur’an was the word of God and thus enjoyed a special ontological status.) The caliph had Ibn Hanbal detained for questioning but died before Ibn Hanbal could testify.

In September 835, Ibn Hanbal was summoned before al-Ma’mun’s successor, the caliph al-Mu’tasim (d. 842), and asked to declare the createdness of the Qur’an. Ibn Hanbal steadfastly refused because he knew of no verse of the Qur’an or no Hadith that declared the Qur’an was created. In the end he received a flogging. There is disagreement about whether he did capitulate or not.

The afterlife of this incident can hardly be exaggerated. Some three centuries after the event, the Hadith scholar Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1200) wrote a remarkable biography of Ibn Hanbal. One of its highlights is chapter 69, the heroic tale of Ibn Hanbal’s trial, and it makes for fascinating reading. Ibn Hanbal was transmogrified by his supporters into the archetype of pious commitment to the ideals of authentic Islam. The flogging became a

testimony to the foundational truths of the community and Ibn Hanbal became the representative of an uncompromising devotion to the lifestyle of the Prophet (the Sunnah in Arabic) and the eponym of the Hanbali school of law. His memory was thus instrumental in the emergence of the version of Islam today known as Sunnism.

The Crucifixion of Ibn Baqiyya

During the emirate of the Buyids (a dynasty of warlords of Iranian origin who came from the Daylam region on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea), when their power was at its apogee, Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Baqiyya served as vizier to the amir ‘Izz al-Dawla (d. 977). Ibn Baqiyya had risen from a position in the amir’s kitchen to the highest office, that of the vizierate, but made a fatal mistake. He advised his master to wage war against his cousin ‘Adud al-Dawla (d. 983). ‘Izz al-Dawla was defeated, had Ibn Baqiyya blinded and put him under house arrest until he handed him over to ‘Adud al-Dawla. The victor had elephants crush Ibn Baqiyya to death and his body gibbeted.

Ibn Baqiyya had been a patron of Ibn al-Anbari, a notary-witness. Moved by the fate of his patron, Ibn al-Anbari composed a lament and circulated it through the streets of Baghdad. The poem, in which crucifixion is magically transformed into a spectacle of victory, was so powerful and moving that ‘Adud al-Dawla is said to have wished that he and not Ibn Baqiyya had been crucified and to have remunerated Ibn al-Anbari handsomely for his composition. Clearly the poem made ‘Adud al-Dawla only too conscious of the ephemerality of the punishment. A century or so later the theologian and language-expert Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d. 1078), who quotes many verses of the poem in his Asrar al-Balaghah (The Secrets of Rhetoric), had this to say of the poem:

We all agree that in this world there is no form of exemplary punishment or public chastisement more shameful and repulsive, more effective and terrifying than the sight of a person killed and then gibbeted on the trunk of a tree. No sight is more likely to move our souls to disapproval, to fill our hearts with distress, or force us to beseech God for deliverance from such an awful and dire fate. Yet consider the lament Abu al-Hasan al-Anbari composed for Ibn Baqiyya when he was gibbeted. Contemplate the magic his craftsmanship produces by transforming the sheer loathsomeness of gibbeting into its very opposite through figures and tropes that fill you with wonder.

Any legitimacy that may have accrued to ruling elites through the spectacle of violence was transient and ephemeral, fixed as it was to the moment of death. The violent spectacles that lived on in the collective memory were remembered, not as legitimate acts of public discipline, but as violations of the protected space of the body, as offences against the sacredness of the person.

Bibliographical Essay


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There are many approaches to literature, which could be viewed as a medium of entertainment, as an aesthetic phenomenon, as a cultural-historical element, or as a political status symbol. Literature in general is not concerned so much with reality, but reflects it in myriad ways, responding to particular aspects in society and nature, often suggesting or outlining alternatives or dream images (utopias or dystopias). This allows poets to analyse the human condition through a fictional lens, which is just as valuable as a factual lens insofar as the literary text presents both the possible/imaginary and the real, particularly reflecting on fears, desires, apprehension, wrath and other emotions. It may even be possible by means of literature to penetrate deeper into the human psyche or mind-set, to comprehend better the history of mentality, the everyday life conditions, the world of emotions, and religious, spiritual but also highly personal concerns by way of a literary analysis than through scientific measures, as recent research has amply demonstrated.¹

Violence, unfortunately a constant element in all of human life, can be studied highly productively through a literary investigation. After all, a large percentage of world literature has been predicated on the experience with or performance of violence, whether we think of heroic epics, courtly romances, modern war novels, tragedies, police or detective novels, and so forth, with writers continually endeavouring to come to terms with this phenomenon, either to contain or even suppress it, unless they have deliberately glorified war and violence as a heroic mode of operation.²

² Albrecht Classen, ‘Die sich selbst verschlingende Gewalt: Grundsätzliche Gedanken zu einem global-menschlichen Phänomen mit mediävistischen Perspektiven auf Wernhers
This chapter is concerned with violence in medieval literature, a topic which offers intriguing bridges to historical analysis because the premodern world was deeply determined by military conflicts, both in defensive and offensive terms. The textual examples chosen here are the *lai* ‘Equitan’ by the Anglo-Norman writer Marie de France (c. 1190), the anonymous Middle High German epic poem *Nibelungenlied* (c. 1200), the anonymous sentimental verse romance *Mai und Beaflor* (c. 1280), Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (c. 1350) and the early fifteenth-century verse narrative ‘The Innocent Murderess’ by Heinrich Kauffringer (c. 1400), hence a wide spread from the twelfth to the fifteenth century and from various languages and countries. Of course, we could easily expand our scope and include also the Old Norse *Egil’s Saga* (middle of the thirteenth century) or Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken’s *Königin Sibille* (1437), since we can discover there also many examples of violent, brutal, unjustified violence driven by personal envy, anger, jealousy, fear or sexual lust. Early medieval literature likewise contains many examples of violent behaviour, but whether we think of the Old Norse sagas, of the Old High German ‘Hildebrandslied’ (c. 820) or of the Anglo-Saxon ‘The Battle of Maldon’ (after 991), there the issues of violence are mostly correlated with war situations or personal struggles to survive in a hostile world. Only since the high Middle Ages do we encounter literary examples where we are specifically confronted with private conditions, personal suffering or individual conflicts commonly viewed by the poets/narrators rather critically. In other words, my interest centres on the presentation of physical violence which we today would identify as a crime, whereas physical actions within a war setting belong to a different category characterised by works such as the Old French *Chanson de Roland* (c. 1160–70) or the devastating struggle in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Willehalm* (c. 1218–20).

**Theoretical Approaches to Violence I**

Before we turn to a discussion of our chosen texts, we need to outline the historical and political history of violence in the Middle Ages and to gain an understanding of the religious and philosophical discourse regarding violence in the premodern world. After all, the post-Roman period was tragically determined by a lack of peaceful settings, by the absence of a police force as we know it today and by a high degree of readiness to engage in violent acts.
in order to gain the upper hand in conflict situations. The tensions between the religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) and between the main church and many different splinter groups commonly erupted into violence (pogroms, crusades, persecutions, inquisitorial trials, etc.), but all those belong to a different sort of violence which was often more or less officially sanctioned or carried out by the authorities. Until today, war, especially in the case of a defence against a hostile attack from the outside, has been regarded as politically legitimate, and not as violence that needs to be suppressed as destructive for society at large.

While the early centuries witnessed many attacks by outside forces, such as the Huns, the Saracens (Arabs), the Magyars (Hungarians), the Vikings, and also the Mongols, from the high Middle Ages the Christian church called for crusades (from 1095), turning itself into a church militant. Moreover, medieval Europe witnessed countless military conflicts between the various kingdoms and smaller political units, a phenomenon that was sustained, of course, by the very fact that feudalism served the principal purpose of making possible the institution of knighthood. That, in turn, fulfilled the function of defending society from outside threats. Despite many pleas for peace and a peaceful solution of conflicts, medieval society experienced numerous wars and actually glorified military skills in a most explicit fashion. Sadly, not much has changed in this regard even today, as we have constant warfare all over the globe while many different social groups are calling for peace and the reduction of the military-industrial complex.

Personal violence, however, is not simply the same as a military and hence also violent operation. We experience and witness violence on both a large and a small scale, both domestically and publicly, and thus it affects individuals and society at large, in the Middle Ages and today. The debate whether


people are innately violent has never been fully decided, but there are good reasons to suggest that human life is almost always accompanied by some form of aggression, physical and psychological. Even though we often hear the myth of the Middle Ages as being a ‘dark age’ in which violence and barbarity allegedly dominated all of life, we may question that notion and argue rather that we live in such an age today, in the light of the overwhelming evidence from the twentieth and now also the twenty-first centuries, with a dramatic increase in violence compared to previous centuries. Similarly, it would be wrong to assume that medieval individuals, groups or larger entities did not try to seek avenues towards peace, whether they were successful or not. Irrespective of the crusades, for instance, St Francis and his followers worked hard to establish peace and spread it over the world.\(^5\) Representatives of other monastic orders were equally dedicated to the pursuit of peace and to the repression of violence in favour of love for God and one’s fellow people.\(^6\)

Violence and Crime in the Private World

To narrow our focus, here I examine only concrete forms of violence mostly within a domestic setting in medieval literary texts since they serve exceedingly well as textual witnesses of a discourse throughout the entire period through which both the phenomenon of violence itself was exposed and strategies could be developed to combat this problem. But we have to be even more specific than that. Most courtly romances present much violence, but in those cases we tend to deal with knightly issues and challenges, individuals either defending a helpless victim or fighting for a good cause. We would be hard pressed to identify a literary text in which violence would have been the sole \textit{raison d’être}, but this would not be much different in modern narratives. In other words, we are not dealing with sado-masochistic


themes avant la lettre. Instead, as our analysis will indicate, all depictions of violence have specific purposes behind them, since the patrons of those works and the poets themselves undoubtedly intended to achieve a certain effect. In most cases, the drastic if not graphic representation of violence was aimed at criticising and condemning such behaviour, especially when it was directed against women.\footnote{Albrecht Classen, \textit{Sexual Violence and Rape in the Middle Ages: A Critical Discourse in Premodern German and European Literature} (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2011).} However, we will also observe cases in which women were the perpetrators, whether justified in their actions or not.

What types of violence can we expect to encounter in medieval literature? Here, excluding the themes of knightly combat, tournaments, jousts, etc., we regularly learn of warfare and duels, but then also of domestic violence, almost always with women as the victims at their husbands’ hands.\footnote{See the contributions to Anna Roberts (ed.), \textit{Violence against Women in Medieval Texts} (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998).} Medieval poets did not shy away from discussing issues such as incest, rape, kidnapping, beating, manslaughter, murder, and many other forms of physical violence, especially because they never hesitated to reflect ordinary life as much as possible. The highly popular \textit{Apollonius of Tyre} (c. second or third century CE), who was copied and translated into many languages well into the seventeenth century, specifically addresses incest, proscription, attempts to murder the protagonist, kidnapping, prostitution, and other crimes or efforts to commit them.\footnote{Elizabeth Archibald, \textit{Apollonius of Tyre: Medieval and Renaissance Themes and Variations: Including the Text of the Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri with an English Translation} (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991).} To be more specific, I will identify a type of violence which was already generally recognised as a ‘crime’, that is, a deviance from the public norms, or a transgression of the basic ethical and moral standards of that society. Even within the world of courtly romances we observe the application of different types of violence, which could have been viewed as justified or as unjustified, depending on the circumstances.

We can illustrate this powerfully with Wolfram von Eschenbach’s \textit{Parzival} (c. 1205), where the young protagonist enters the world of King Arthur after his mother Herzeloyde has given him some bad advice. Taking that too literally, he abuses lady Jeschute, not even knowing what he is doing to her honour and well-being. Subsequently he kills his uncle Ither whose armour he wants to acquire, again without knowing who that person is and why he could not really demand that armour from him.

In fact, as scholarship has long recognized, young Parzival leaves a trail of violence until he finally begins to learn how to adjust to the norms of the

8 See the contributions to Anna Roberts (ed.), \textit{Violence against Women in Medieval Texts} (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998).  
Arthurian world, but it takes him much longer to understand what the Grail court is expecting from him, though he can thereby ultimately establish peace and family bonds with his half-brother Feirefiz. Parallel to Parzival, his friend Gawan struggles hard to win the love of the Duchess Orgeluse, and in this process has to overcome the evil machinations of the rapist knight Urjans and fend off the brutal operations by the magician Clinschor, a kinsman of Virgil, liberating a large number of noble ladies kept as prisoners. 10

But there other forms of questionable violence that pertain to the domain of knighthood, as when the young knight Segramors and then the court seneschal Kay attack Parzival while he is in a trance and stares at three drops of blood in the snow. The discussion of violence thus depends heavily on the circumstances, the direction of the physical or psychological action, the formal framework, the ethical and moral norms, religious ideals and political conditions. As to be expected for a medieval poet, Wolfram consistently idealises knightly activities, which involve tournaments, hence jousts and the mêlée (group fight, also böhort), but as soon as there are innocent victims, especially women, he raises his critical voice and indicates through the narrative development how much he was truly opposed to non-legitimate types of violence. 11

Theoretical Approaches to Violence II

In other words, the justification or condemnation of violence depends on different perspectives; on those who are in charge and hold the authority as lawmaker, or on those who as leaders of their people enjoy general support and are regularly entitled to decide on their own whether a violent act was to be viewed as legitimate or illegitimate. For our purposes, we at least do not have to engage with the difficult issue of how to differentiate between ‘gewalt’ as a form of political expression and ‘gewalt’ as the term for physical violence, as is the case in German. 12 To make the subsequent discussion easier, we can limit ourselves to those situations in pan-European medieval

literature where protagonists’ actions are globally viewed as negative, if they are transgressing the common laws, and hence would deserve punishment by the authorities according to the law books, for instance. To make sense of our text selection, the focus will be the experience of physical victimisation, whereas psychological torture, for instance, would be a very different topic.

Whether we may be able to observe in this investigation a process of or towards civilisation, a change of society at large, depends on so many contradictory factors that it will be advisable not to venture into such theoretical reflections. In his seminal study *The Civilizing Process*, first published in German in 1939, ‘rediscovered’ by modern scholars only some thirty years later, Norbert Elias assumed that the emergence of the absolutist state with its monopoly on violence and the development of highly ritualised forms of courtly life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries created innovative control mechanisms and imposed heretofore unknown levels of shame, heavily reducing the degree to which impulses could dominate human behaviour, hence leading to a notable decline in aggression and violence.

This optimistic perspective of historical progress from the early to the high Middle Ages, and from there to the Renaissance and the Baroque, has undergone dramatic reversals in recent years, and a more realistic evaluation of human relationships seems to indicate the pervasiveness, continuity and regular re-emergence of violent phenomena because of love, hatred and aggression. Our literary analysis will confirm that premodern authors already had a very clear sense of legal norms and the dangers of violence if it erupted within the framework of courtly society. In this regard, it would be rather questionable, if not even dangerous, to weigh the medieval world against the Renaissance, for example, since we could argue that the degree of physical violence (e.g., the witch craze, the development of mercenary armies, women’s common brutalisation by their husbands, etc.) actually

increased. The process of civilisation within the concept of ‘violence’ appears as a rather relative concept then.

In fact, as has been pointed out by many sociologists, especially by representatives of the Chicago School, the breakdown of family and community, the rise of mass society, the emergence of modern industrialisation with its subsequent features of mass alienation, the new development of a capitalist class structure, and, above all, unprecedented degrees of aggression by the state against its citizens, led to unforeseen levels of violence in modern times. We are obviously faced with two contradictory paradigms, built on very different sets of criteria for determining violence. Nevertheless, we still need to ask whether Elias’s theories can be supported in the light of these phenomena in modern times.\footnote{Eric A. Johnson and Eric H. Monkkonen, ‘Introduction’, in Eric A. Johnson and Eric H. Monkkonen (eds.), \textit{The Civilization of Crime: Violence in Town and Country since the Middle Ages} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 5.} For instance, Julius Ruff, among others, contradicts the notion that violence has dramatically increased over the last hundred years, but especially since the end of the Second World War. A careful comparison of late medieval society with the modern world, for instance, would demonstrate, as Ruff suggests, rather a remarkable decline in violent crimes. Indeed, by ‘the mid-nineteenth century, in fact, the collective violence . . . was an anachronism in much of western Europe’.\footnote{Julius R. Ruff, \textit{Violence in Early Modern Europe} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 213.} Even if this observation holds true, violence as such both on an individual and on a state level has not abated even today, though its targets and strategies may have shifted, especially as state violence has tremendously multiplied worldwide.

\textbf{Violence and War in the Middle Ages}

Since the earliest time of written human records, violence, however defined, has been a topic of universal concern. In his \textit{Sermon 302: On the Feast of St Laurence}, St Augustine (354–430) tackles the question of violence and clearly states that even violence done in the name of revenge engenders new violence. He asks his audience: ‘Why do you treat those who are bad violently?’ and immediately responds himself: ‘As soon as you treat them violently, you add yourself to them.’\footnote{Augustine, \textit{Political Writings}, ed. E. M. Atkins and R. J. Dodaro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 113.} Augustine was not so naive as to believe that goodness would automatically lead to goodness in other people
as well, and he refers to the martyrs as an example of the tragic death of good people. Those who have to die an unjust death gain praise and admiration from posterity, whereas those who are considered evil will find their own judge. 18 True Christians should stay away from any blood shedding, even when the person on trial proves to be extremely evil, as he would face double punishment: ‘you should grieve for him twice as much, because he is dead twice over, once in this temporary life, and once in eternal life’. 19 In a way already anticipating Mahatma Gandhi, Augustine appealed to his listeners: ‘I urge you, please, by the Lord and his gentleness, to live gently and peaceably; and to allow the authorities to do their job in peace.’

Almost a thousand years later, Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1175), following Augustine’s teachings, observed that only few people display a natural tendency towards virtue, whereas the majority need external discipline and education to combat their ‘evil disposition’ and ‘vice’, requiring the authorities to impose penalties and punishments in order to instil fear in them: ‘When they are thus kept from doing evil, a quiet life is assured to others; and they are themselves led eventually by force of custom to do voluntarily what once they did only from fear and thus to practise virtue.’ 21 Deeply distrustful of human nature, Thomas Aquinas supports the use of strict laws to combat the dangers resulting from the human monster in man: ‘Man, if perfect in virtue, is the best of animals; but if he becomes separated from law and justice, he is the worst of animals. For man, unlike other animals, has the weapon of reason wherewith to exploit his base desires and cruelty.’

Aquinas was obviously not blind to the real conditions of human society and explicitly warned against the dangers of unchecked violence by the individual. Moreover, he raised his voice even against unjust wars and wanted the authority of launching any military action being limited to the legitimate rulers. Those, in turn, had to have a just cause for such action, a mainstay of theological arguments since the days of St Augustine, whose sermon Against Faustus XXIII, 73 Aquinas quotes as a corroboration: ‘To maintain peace within the natural order of men, rulers require the power and decision to declare war.’ 23 Moreover, parallel to John of Salisbury’s (c. 1115–80) teachings, tyranny is condemnable and could justify an entire people to rise up against its ruler: ‘Therefore the overthrow of such government is not

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18 Ibid., p. 114. 19 Ibid., p. 117. 20 Ibid., p. 118. 
22 Ibid., p. 371. 23 Ibid., p. 381, quoted from Summa of Theology II–II, q. 40, a.1.
strictly sedition, unless perhaps when accompanied by such disorder that the community suffers greater harm than from the tyrannical government.  

In other words, violence, however defined, appears to rest in the heart of human society and will never disappear, irrespective of how much suppressive forces might be applied, which would be regarded as violence again by those affected by it. We return hence to medieval literature as a highly effective platform for the investigation of this universal phenomenon, not in the hope of overcoming and controlling it, but in the firm conviction that the literary analysis will make it possible for us to comprehend better how and why people in the past have turned to violence and how this was subsequently viewed by the various audiences.

The lais by Marie de France

Marie de France has long been recognised as a major psychologist, to use an anachronistic term. In her lais (c. 1190), she presents numerous cases of human relationships, always erotic in nature, examines conflicts in marriage, adultery, the quest for love, the tension between society and the individual’s wishes, unrequited love, and many other issues. In ‘Equitan’, the focus rests on the affair between King Equitan and the wife of his seneschal. Even though she at first resists the king’s wooing, arguing against his attempts to win her love because she feels inadequate for his social standing, she finally gives in. Since he then submits to her and identifies himself as her servant in love, she accepts his love and enjoys their secret meetings until the time comes when his councillors and advisers begin to urge him to marry in order to secure progeny. Even though the king does not want to submit to their urging, it becomes clear that their happiness has come to an end unless they find a way out of that dilemma. In this situation the seneschal’s wife conceives of a murderous plot to get rid of her husband, setting up a bloodletting scene which appears to be ideal in view of her intention to kill him.

The sequence of the murderous scheme begins with the king himself assuring her that he would never marry another woman and that he would


25 Some of the ideas and formulations from above I have borrowed from the introduction to my edited volume Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature. In contrast to that study from 2004, however, here my efforts are directed at refining the notion of violence and at disentangling it from the military concept as outlined in a selection of medieval poems.
wait until her husband had died. Once she knows of his firm intention in that regard, she outlines an apparently preconceived plan to get rid of the seneschal which would be safe and secret, but it would require Equitan’s help. After a bleeding session people always look for some refreshment in a bath, but in this case the water in the tub for her husband would be boiling hot, bringing about his immediate death: ‘I shall see to it that the bathwater is heated and the two tubs brought in. I shall make his bath boiling hot; there isn’t a man alive under heaven who would not be scalded and brought low as soon as he sat in it.’

Tragically, however, the murderous couple then fail because they cannot contain themselves and immediately enjoy each other’s body in the bedroom as soon as the seneschal has left for some diversion. Although they should control themselves and prepare for the scheme to come to fruition, they become victims of their passion and are thus surprised by the seneschal who suddenly returns and forces his way into the room. In order to hide his shame, Equitan jumps into the tub and is himself scalded to death, whereupon the seneschal grabs his wife and drowns her in the other tub.

As the commentator remarks, ‘Evil rebounded on him’, and ‘those who seek the misfortune of others have all the misfortune cast back upon themselves’ (20). In no other lai does Marie investigate criminal behaviour more drastically, and she is very clear about her condemnation of the evil thinking, which rebounds on the perpetrators. In ‘Bisclavret’ the wife also acts badly by having a knight steal her husband’s clothing once she has learned of his transforming into a werewolf for three days a week. Without his clothing it is impossible for him to regain his human shape. At the end, after Bisclavret, that is, the werewolf, has already been found and accepted as a friendly pet by the king, he has a chance to avenge his wife’s evil deed and bites off her nose, which publicly reveals her criminal action and allows the protagonist ultimately to recover his own self. The narrator clearly condemns the wife for her betrayal, though we might also have good cause to reflect upon Bisclavret’s failure to communicate clearly with his wife about his fearful second nature.

In ‘Eliduc’ the protagonist, though happily married, elopes with a princess from Exeter and brings her back home to Brittany. The truth is revealed during a storm when they are crossing the Channel, and the young lady

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swoons when she realises that she had been deceived, but later Eliduc’s wife
revives her and then, having understood her husband’s change of heart,
releases him from their marriage vow, which thus allows him to marry the
princess, while his first wife enters a newly erected monastery.

Even though Eliduc normally seems to be in command of all events in his
life, as soon as this new love has struck him, he begins to act irrationally, and
even murderously. During the sea voyage, when they are all afraid of sinking
because of the massive storm, one of the sailors calls out that they should
sacrifice the princess in order to appease God since Eliduc is about to commit
adultery and bigamy at the same time. This enrages the protagonist so much
that he takes an oar, hits the sailor, and shoves the unconscious body into the
water (81). Indirectly we learn that this was the one person commanding the
rudder, so, once he has killed him, Eliduc takes over the rudder and can thus
safely steer the ship into a near-by harbour. From there he takes the body of
his beloved, still in a coma, to an abandoned hermit’s cell, and places her on
the altar, but he does not know how to proceed from there. It takes his wife’s
action to bring about the dramatic change, which then leads to the strangely
happy ending. Did Eliduc murder the sailor? Did he act in self-defence, or out
of revenge for the sailor’s vicious comments, or did he simply allow his anger
to come forth? Would the sailor have been justified in his suggestion of
tossing the young woman into the sea so that they all would be saved –
another type of murder?

The situation proves tantalising since both men reveal a criminal mind.
But only Eliduc can get out of this situation and achieve true happiness
because of his wife’s selfless sacrifice.27 He himself only knows how to
operate effectively and efficiently whenever he faces a military situation,
yet he becomes very confused and insecure when he is confronted with
matters of love. It may seem understandable that he kills the sailor since the
latter’s threatening words might endanger his mistress’s life, but he murders,
after all, and he is about to commit bigamy, not knowing at all how to handle
this dilemma.

In ‘Yonec’ (no. VII), the husband kills the competitor for his wife, the
knight who transforms into a goshawk, by having sharp spokes planted into
the window frame through which the latter flies in. But many years later,
when the married couple, by then with their grown-up son accompanying
them, visit a foreign castle, the truth is revealed that the young man was

27 Albrecht Classen, ‘Guildeluëc in Marie de France’s “Eliduc” as the Avatar of Heloise?
The Destiny of Two Twelfth-Century Women’, Quaestiones Medii Aevi Novae (Poland)
fathered by that mysterious knight. The wife swoons and dies, and her son decapitates the old man who had kept his young wife as a prisoner for so long and had murdered the lover. Similarly, in ‘Laüstic’ (no. VIII), the jealous husband orders his servants to catch the nightingale which is allegedly keeping his wife awake at night, kills the bird and throws the dead body at her chest, which symbolises the enforced end of her love for a neighbouring knight. At the same time, the narrator voices vehement criticism of the brutal and mean-spirited husband and condemns him for his violent behaviour: ‘With his two hands he wrung its neck; he did this most villainously’ (56).

In other words, Marie engages intensively with the phenomenon of physical violence as an obstacle to the experience of love, though she still outlines, perhaps in a dreamlike fashion, how happiness in love could be achieved, especially if evil-mindedness and brute force can be overcome. The world of courtly culture was not, as these examples and many others (Parzival, Tristan, Erec, Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal, etc.) indicate, simply peaceful. Even if the various courtly narratives and romances may have over-dramatised the effect of violence, there is little doubt that the ideal of love was regarded as almost utopian and yet highly desirable, especially in the face of harsh and at times brutal conditions within marriage.28

Politically Motivated Violence in the Nibelungenlied

We encounter a remarkable case of a criminal form of violence in the heroic epic of the Nibelungenlied (c. 1200), which is deeply determined by violence on a large scale in any case. Siegfried appears at the court of Worms, violently demanding that they all submit to him, and then Hagen informs the Burgundian kings of Siegfried’s heroic actions against the dwarfs and the dragon, which ought to give them all pause for thought about this dangerous figure. Subsequently, Siegfried is integrated into the court after all and assists them in the war against the Saxons. Later he helps King Gunther to gain the hand of the Icelandic Queen Brünhild by employing his cloak of invisibility and hence by substituting for Gunther in the athletic though almost mortal competition. But after the queen has arrived in Worms, she continues to question Gunther’s true ability and rejects him on the wedding night. This calls Siegfried into action again, who, upon the king’s urging, stealthily assumes the other’s identity by means of his invisibility cloak and can finally

crush Brünhild, a scene which could, or rather should be interpreted as rape.29

If that were not already rather terrible and frightening, this heroic epic turns further into an abyss of violence and transforms into a veritable Armageddon when at the end the Burgundians visit their sister Kriemhild, by then married to the Hunnish King Etzel/Attila. Since she is entirely bent on avenging the death of her first husband, this ‘court festival’ turns into a brutal and deadly battle in which virtually everyone dies, including the Burgundian kings, their entire army, all of Etzel’s men, and many other warriors. The cause célèbre consists of Hagen’s murder of Siegfried, which constitutes the next example for our investigation.

While the entire epic poem is deeply marked by military aggression, violence as a form of transgression against the basic norms of society erupts only at that point when Hagen has finally identified an opportunity to murder his opponent, Siegfried, a true nemesis, whom he regards with the greatest suspicion, fear and envy, and probably a feeling of inferiority. Kriemhild, upon her visit at the Worms court after ten years of marriage with Siegfried, publicly insists on her higher social status than Brünhild because of her husband, who had, as she now reveals in front of everyone, slept with Gunther’s wife and had subdued this warrior-like woman for her husband.

Even though it is entirely clear that Hagen does not intend to face Siegfried in an open and honourable confrontation, and explicitly plans on murdering him, the three royal brothers only faintly protest and in reality acquiesce with this strategy. Young Giselher tries to object, emphasising that ‘Siegfried has never in any way deserved such hatred that he should die for it’ (117). Yet Hagen controls their debate and decisively proceeds with his plan to kill their opponent who has always provoked them through his super strength and his boisterous performance, ridiculing each one of them by displaying his absolute superiority. Gunther pretends to protest against the plot: ‘Siegfried was born for our honour and good fortune’ (117); but at the end the narrator simply informs us: ‘The King followed his vassal Hagen’s advice, to evil

effect, and those rare knights began to set afoot the great betrayal before any might discover it’ (118).

Siegfried is then murdered by Hagen, who thrusts a spear into his back, at the very spot where he is vulnerable (like an Achilles’ heel), which then sets in motion a long sequence of events, at the end of which everyone involved has died. For the poet, this murder is one of the worst deeds anyone could commit: ‘Never should a man practise such monstrous treachery’ (123); and he subsequently outlines in great detail how Hagen proceeds with his plan and carries out the slaughter, which he comments on in most negative terms: ‘No warrior will ever do a darker deed’ (130).

Even though the battle between the Burgundians and King Etzel’s men appears as the darkest moment in the entire epic, and perhaps in world history, the murder proves to be worse than anything else. Kriemhild’s hatred and desire for revenge, Hagen’s utmost efforts to defend himself and the Burgundians, the desperation by Rüdiger and many other vassals who are forced to get involved in the fighting because of their obligations to the Hunnish king, and even the final execution of Hagen and Gunther could be understood as consequences of a warrior society in which killing the opponent almost represents the common modus operandi. However, Hagen’s murder of Siegfried emerges as true violence in the sense as defined above, a breaking of all norms and standards, not to mention any laws, and as such this murder unleashes a torrent of subsequent violence that ultimately engulfs both the world of the Burgundians and all of the Huns under Etzel’s rule.

While the conflicts between Siegfried and Hagen in the first part of the epic represent almost expected conflicts between heroes, and while the struggle at the end for survival represents a valid attempt by the Burgundian guests to defend themselves, Hagen’s murder proves to be a heinous act, which characterises him significantly as a liminal, devastating, almost devilish figure who thus causes the collapse and total destruction of two kingdoms and their people.

Justified Matricide in *Mai und Beaflor*?

Horrible and destructive as all wars have been throughout history, and negatively as they have mostly been portrayed in literary texts, the kind of violence perpetrated by some of the characters in Marie de France’s *lais* and in the *Nibelungenlied* represents a different category since it is committed with a vicious intent for selfish reasons and against the norms of society, even if
Gunther, for instance, indirectly condones Hagen’s action. This kind of criminality is also perpetrated by the mother-in-law Eliacha in the anonymous Middle High German *Mai und Beaflor* from c. 1290.  

The Roman emperor commits incest with his daughter Beaflor, who is so distraught about it that she is even considering suicide. Then, however, she manages to escape from Italy and to reach Greece, where the Prince Mai falls in love with her and marries her. His mother, Eliacha, however, not knowing anything about her background, develops great hatred against this foreign woman and at one point tries to get Beaflor killed. The narrator is not very specific about the actual motivation for this vicious dislike and radical rejection; instead he focuses on her strategy, which proves to be nefarious. While her son is on a crusade in Spain, Beaflor delivers their first child and sends a messenger to her husband. This messenger makes a stop at Eliacha’s castle, where the old queen makes him totally drunk. During his stupor, she replaces the letter with her own, which now tells Mai that his wife has delivered a wolf’s child after she had allegedly committed adultery with two priests.  

The poor king is desperate when he receives this terrible but falsified news, and even tries to commit suicide, which his friends prevent him from doing. Then Mai responds in a letter informing his council to take no action until his return home. Tragically, however, that letter is falsified by Eliacha as well, who thereby instructs the counts in Greece immediately to kill mother and child by quartering (5,531–2). Fortunately, this does not happen, and instead Beaflor is allowed to escape secretly with her son, so she returns to Italy where she stays in hiding in order to prevent her father from learning about her existence nearby. In the meantime, Mai has returned home and realised that his own mother has been responsible for all those machinations, leading to the alleged death of his wife and child. Furiously Mai confronts his mother, and once she has produced, under duress, the original letters, he can no longer hold back and stabs his mother to death (6,921–3).  

Sorrowful as the narrative development may be, the poet proceeds and ultimately has Mai take a journey to Rome where he wants to secure the pope’s absolution for his sins. Through fortunate circumstance, there he finds his wife again; her father then admits his guilt and abdicates from the throne.

which makes it possible for Mai to be crowned as the new emperor, while his son will later assume the throne of Greece. Even though we face a highly dramatic, deeply sentimentalised and emotional account, the poet also included numerous narrative elements addressing the very nature of violence and how to deal with it. Beginning with the emperor’s incest, Beaflor has to submit to a life of suffering, though at the end she enjoys happiness again when she is finally united with her husband.

Not only Mai and all of his friends but also the narrator himself harbour nothing but contempt and outright hatred for the old Queen Eliacha. He calls her ‘vngetriwe’ (5,476; disloyal) and identifies her actions as a ‘mort’ (5,652; murder). Moreover, in an earlier passage he characterises her as the worst possible woman on earth and condemns her in the strongest terms (5,263). Mai’s execution of his own mother constitutes matricide, but there is no one at court who would dare to raise any criticism against him, since she is clearly marked as a she-devil who deserves the death penalty for her terrible wrongdoing, certainly criminal in nature, as we would call it today.

Intriguingly, the poet clearly differentiated between military violence and private violence, signalling to us that killing of opponents in a war situation (crusade in Spain) must be viewed in an entirely different light from killing a criminal person (Mai). Moreover, Eliacha pursued the entire process of falsifying those letters not just to malign her daughter-in-law, but in order to make the counts at her son’s court execute her in a most gruesome fashion. This old woman proves to be vicious, mean-spirited and criminal at the same time, and the two counts, who would have been responsible for carrying out the faked command from Mai, voice great surprise that such a high-ranking and worthy lady would be prepared to carry out such a ‘mort vnd vnstæte’ (6,790; murder and evil deed). Moreover, they cannot believe that a woman could be driven by so much hatred as to pursue the death of her own completely innocent grandchild (6,800–1). The narrative account hence serves as a warning to all women not to fall into the trap of such violent and criminal behaviour (6,802–5).

Even though Mai’s revenge finds full approval amongst the courtiers, he himself immediately feels great remorse (6,927) and would have almost tried to commit suicide once again, which signals that even under the present circumstances matricide is viewed here as sinful and to be condemned. In fact, the bishop of Anderville has her buried in a worthy fashion and then orders an impressive epitaph to be erected above her grave, whereas no one in the city feels any pity for her or grief over her death; instead they all sympathise with Mai, and the narrator even comments that Eliacha did not
really deserve such a dignified interment (6,966–7). Altogether, as this verse romance indicates once again, medieval poets had a clear sense of what they regarded as evil, sinful and particularly criminal. Mai’s violent action against his mother needs to be atoned, hence his voyage to Rome, but there he is actually redeemed even by God since he is allowed to find his wife and son again and then receives the imperial crown.

Endless Concatination of Murder in Boccaccio’s Decameron

Two more examples in late medieval literature, which I can touch upon only briefly, confirm how much the literary discourse in the premodern world was already concerned with violence as breaking of laws, and as physical acts intended to hurt or even kill people in a domestic or private setting. In the case of Boccaccio’s Decameron (c. 1351), in many ways still deeply steeped in the Middle Ages, we encounter numerous examples of violence, both within the family and outside, which thus expands the notion of violence to some extent.31

In the seventh tale of the second day, the sultan of Babylon, Beminedab, sends his daughter, Alatiel, as a bride for the king of Garbo, but she experiences a shipwreck, and is rescued by a nobleman, Pericone da Visalgo, who is immediately enthralled by her appearance yet does not know how to communicate with her. After some time, Pericone convinces her to sleep with him, but soon his brother Marato wants to conquer her for himself, so he murders Pericone and escapes with the lady (127). However, the two Genoese merchants who had taken the couple on board likewise fall in love with the lady, so they murder Marato by throwing him into the sea. However, in their fight over who should sleep with Alatiel first, they kill each other. This train of murders continues for quite some time, one man after the other lusting after this Oriental beauty and paying for it with their own lives. Alatiel has no real concern for any of these men and can be easily consoled when another one appears, but Boccaccio was apparently more interested in studying the consequences of unbridled sexual passion and the phenomenon of subjectively motivated violence.

Curiously, there are no comments about the string of violent acts themselves, and when Alatiel is finally united with her original fiancé, King Garbo,
the narrator only remarks: ‘she, who had lain perhaps ten thousand times with eight different men, went to bed with him as if a virgin and made him think she was one’ (138). Each man had committed murder, so Boccaccio continued with the tradition that I have outlined above of presenting cases of ‘private’ violence, here resulting from love and lust. Alatiel can never speak with any of her new ‘owners’ and simply enjoys the sexual pleasures, which take the men to their own death. The global context confirms, however, that Boccaccio strongly objected to this violence and thus also criticised its cause, the physical desire for this woman. However, he also reflected on a world obviously filled with violence, which makes it actually possible for the audience of this tale to laugh about the comico-tragic development of the events, with Alatiel being the plaything for the men, although she is the only one who survives.  

Murder or Self-Defence: Heinrich Kaufringer

We encounter an even more complicated case of triple murder in Heinrich Kaufringer’s late medieval German tale ‘The Innocent Murderess’ (c. 1400), where a princess, who is about to marry the king, finds herself in a horrible dilemma, having been deceived by a knight who pretended to be her fiancé and thus could have sex with her the night before the wedding. Foolishly, he subsequently admits it, but then falls asleep. In her panic, she takes a knife and cuts off his head, thus taking her revenge. But the body is too heavy for her, so she begs the gatekeeper for help; however, he demands that she first sleep with him. Under this duress, she has to submit, but when they later try to throw the corpse into the castle well, she manages to lift the keeper off his feet and to toss him into the well, killing him as well. When the wedding night arrives, she convinces one of her maids to sleep with the king in order to pretend that his wife is still a virgin. Tragically for the queen, the maid then refuses to abandon her position in bed because she wants to be queen herself. In her desperation, the wife sets fire to the room, rescues her husband, but locks the door and thus has the maid burn to death.

32 There is much research on Boccaccio; see, for instance, Marilyn Migiel, A Rhetoric of the Decameron (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 52–3, 67–9, et passim.
Can someone like her be innocent? She clearly committed three murders, but her husband does not reproach her when she finally admits her guilt to him thirty-two years later. Instead, he explicitly praises her for her deep sense of honour, for her hard struggle to protect his own honour, and for her love for him: ‘‘You had to pay dearly for me,’’ he said to the lady. ‘‘I want to live with you forever as your loyal servant because you have suffered much on my behalf, no doubt about it’’ (79–80). In other words, she is not incriminated, her violent behaviour is even acknowledged as justified, as a form of self-defence, which thus leads to the narrative aporia of having a murderess who is identified as innocent. The lady committed egregious acts of violence, and yet we are invited to feel deep sympathy for her since she was caught in a terrible dilemma and could only resort to those murderous acts in order to protect herself, her honour, her family, and her future husband. But would that have justified her actions altogether?

Conclusion

In sum, medieval literature is filled with cases of violent behaviour, not only within a military setting, but also often in domestic and private contexts. Poets regularly engaged with this topic and treated it from different perspectives. The reason for this great interest is not hard to understand because violence always tends to disrupt all social conditions and undermines ethical, moral, religious and philosophical norms and ideals. Marie de France deeply problematised personal violence and viewed it critically, though even she projected cases where the evaluation of personal violence proves to be not straightforward, as in ‘Bisclavret’. In the Nibelungenlied we seem to be asked to condemn Hagen as a brutal murderer, but there are many alternative perspectives that could cast his action in a different light. He kills Siegfried both out of personal concerns and for political reasons and thus operates both beyond the law and outside of all ethical standards. In Mai und Beaflor, Eliacha’s strategies could have led to horrible murder, but Beaflor and her son survive because they enjoy so much emotional support and can escape in time. While the narrator strictly condemns this mother-in-law for her vicious character, Mai’s matricide is viewed almost positively because he kills a truly evil person. Boccaccio, on the other hand, almost like a psychologist, presents many cases of violent behaviour resulting in the victims’ death, condemning the motivations and suggesting in strong terms that excessive passion such as lust is to be blamed for these murders. Finally, Kaufringer treats a case of triple murder, but here we are asked to evaluate it very differently and to
condone the woman’s actions because she committed those murders virtually in self-defence.

Just as the topic of love and death emerged in medieval literature, so too does the theme of violence appear. As the examples reveal, medieval poets and their audiences were obviously deeply concerned with this issue and debated its causes, consequences and etiology in a highly complex manner. Violence was ubiquitous, and yet the many different literary voices undoubtedly signalled how perpetrations and transgressions were viewed highly critically. Violence is not simply violence; much depends on the circumstances, the motivations, the intention, and the general framework within which it is committed. In other words, just as today, medieval poets reflected the great need to think about violence, to evaluate its etiology, and contain or remove it by legal means, by better communication, and by laws, of course. Nevertheless, personal violence is often actually described as necessary, logical and unavoidable in order to protect one’s honour or the well-being of a kingdom, or to punish evil-doers. But in every case discussed here we notice how much violence is described as caused by emotions, passion and lack of self-control.

Bibliographical Essay

To understand what violence meant in medieval literature requires a solid understanding of the cultural context, which Joachim Bumke, *Höfische Kultur: Literatur und Gesellschaft im hohen Mittelalter* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1986), has illuminated most comprehensively; English translation by Thomas Dunlap: *Courtly Culture: Literature and Society in the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). Attitudes to violence are the result of general mentalities that provide the relevant framework, as scholars such as Peter Dinzelbacher have discussed at length: Peter Dinzelbacher (ed.), *Europäische Mentalitätsgeschichte: Hauptthemen in Einzeldarstellungen*, 2nd rev. and expanded edn (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 2008 [1993]). Violence emerged both in simple physical form (crime), see Albrecht Classen and Connie Scarborough (eds.), *Crime and Punishment in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Mental-Historical Investigations of Basic Human Problems and Social Responses* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), and in its often very harsh punishment, see Mitchell B. Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), while the entire world of knighthood was based on the concept of controlled violence for the purpose of defending a country, see Richard W. Kaeuper, *Medieval Chivalry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). It was also an essential component of religious history, pitting especially Christians against Jews during the Middle Ages, see Anna Sapir Abulafia (ed.), *Religious Violence between Christians and Jews: Medieval Roots, Modern Perspectives* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002). Nevertheless, throughout the Middle Ages major attempts were made to combat violence and war

Modern criticism has also alerted us to the many forms of violence in the domestic sphere, which is often mirrored both in legal documents and in literary texts from the Middle Ages, see Eve Salisbury, Georgiana Donavin and Merrall Llewelyn Price (eds.), *Domestic Violence in Medieval Texts* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002). Consequently, the topic of rape as reflected in medieval French literature, for instance, has also been studied at length by Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), and by the contributors to a volume edited by Noah D. Guynn, *Violence and the Writing of History in the Medieval Francophone World* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013). As Helmut Brackert has shown, in “‘Der lac an riterschefte tôt’: Parzival und das Leid der Frauen’, in Rüdiger Krüger, Jürgen Kühnel and Joachim Kuolt (eds.), *Ist zwîvel herzen nâchgebûr: Günther Schweikle zum 60. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart: Helfant, 1989), pp. 143–63, analysis of Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* reveals how the young protagonist involuntarily commits many acts of violence before he can reach his ultimate goal, the Grail. Many poets, however, exposed the dangers of violent behaviour and outlined ways to establish peace, as discussed by Albrecht Hagenlocher, *Der guote vride: Idealer Friede in deutscher Literatur bis ins frühe 14. Jahrhundert* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), Stefan Hohmann, *Friedenskonzepte: Die Thematik des Friedens in der deutschnsprachigen politischen Lyrik des Mittelalters* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1992) and James Turner Johnson, *The Quest for Peace: Three Moral Traditions in Western Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). Most heroic and saga literature is predicated on violence that needs to be met and overcome, or on violence as the basic modus operandi, as in the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*, where the final battle between the Burgundians and the Huns turns all of the men into berserks, see Jan-Dirk Müller, *Spielregeln für den Untergang: Die Welt des Nibelungenliedes* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1998). Recent studies on medieval literature have thus removed the traditional sheen cast on those texts and exposed the true dimension of violence addressed there.
Is There an Iconography of Violence?

Properly speaking, violence does not comprise a subject of premodern European art. This statement will at first sound counter-intuitive. After all, many of the canonical subjects medieval artists were expected to treat were tales of human aggression, conflict, combat and destructiveness; remembrances and forewarnings of disasters natural and supernatural, worldly and otherworldly; visions of wounding, torture and dismemberment; parables of suffering, abjection and pain. That the salvation narrative informing the Middle Ages’ whole repertoire of devotional and liturgical arts revolved around the torture-execution of Jesus; that it ended in the explosive violence of apocalyptic confrontation and devastation, the unimaginable destruction of the world, the reign of Antichrist, the wrathful return of Christ, and the consignment of the damned to that great, terrifying factory of pain – these were the indelible lineaments of the Christian European world-picture down to the industrial era. Everywhere one looks, violence seems to be visually threaded through the whole fabric of medieval life and imagination. While secular chronicles and the luxury arts adorning castle and court narrated battles both historical and legendary, casting them as heroic epic, fantasies of sacrilegious violence by demons, Jews, witches and macabre armies of the dead danced through the popular imagination. Even ordinary housewives couldn’t keep their innate combativeness in check, at least if visual satire is to be believed!

Viewed as a panorama, such images easily reinforce that cherished historical picture of the Middle Ages as an era obsessed with End Times, acculturated to the sight of blood, intimate with pain, and haplessly driven by uncontrolled aggressiveness – ‘a world of thin skins, short fuses and physical
violence’.¹ The great French historian Marc Bloch (1886–1944) called medieval violence the ‘distinguishing mark of an epoch’: ‘deep-rooted in the social structure and in the mentality of the age’, it played a crucial part in economy, law and manners.² No wonder art is compelled to reflect it. But does the sprawling collection of violence imagery constitute a unified ‘theme’ in the imagination of premodern Europe? Is scholarship justified in seeking a ‘visual culture of violence’ peculiar to the era?

Headaches of taxonomy are not the only reason to doubt the viability of an iconography of violence in the visual arts before 1500. Modern understanding has long tended to reify violence as a transcendent category of human experience, one encompassing physical force and coercion, aggression and cruelty, bodily violation and suffering, and non-physical violences such as symbolic exclusion, horror and psychological trauma. In contrast, medieval people tended to grasp violence according to its particular forms, as distinct problems begging solutions. Violent disruptions to social or political order – the endless feud, the vendetta, duelling – called forth clerical peacemaking efforts, for example, or royal legislation, or civic justice. Terrifying ecological upheavals such as plague, famine or foreign invasion, interpreted as divine chastisements, called forth communal supplications in the form of processions, votive offerings or mass displays of penance. Many of these critical solutions, it has been remarked many times, themselves entailed violence. The holy warrior, the exorcist, the inquisitor and the flagellant each engaged in his own, specific form of violent problem-solving. This reminds us that before 1500 European Christians recognised many good, salutary forms of violence: the righteous warfare preached by the church militant and put into practice by crusading elites; the punishing ‘sword’ of earthly justice that reversed the pollution crime brought upon the social body; the ascetic tortures that appeased God’s wrath, tamed the passions and sanctified the body; and those many dramatised violences – the tournament, the charivari, the mystery play – that channelled potentially disruptive psychic or social energies into useful ritual forms. Even the exclusionary violence of the urban pogrom or the witch trial, irrationally cruel rites of scapegoating to modern eyes, displayed a kind of rationality in the way they worked to regulate the

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social body, to quell the internal violence compounded of the ‘dissensions, rivalries, jealousies and quarrels within the community’.3

Medieval thought and behaviour everywhere registered the *ambivalent* nature of violence, but did so, it seems, without recourse to an encompassing definition of ‘violence’ as a category of action and experience, and without the moral disapproval that shadows most modern discussions. Defining categories for representing violent behaviour did find currency in the Middle Ages, for example in words like *crudelitas*, with its more circumscribed meaning of excessive and depraved violence. Such distinctions were no doubt as available to the artist representing a biblical slaughter as they were to the chronicler describing Mongol wartime atrocities, or the hagiographer detailing the tortures inflicted upon the martyr.4 Complexities such as these place the art historian’s desire to isolate and analyse violence as ‘a subject of artistic speculations’, as one practitioner put it, seriously into doubt.5 Like the historian’s effort to trace a coherent yet encompassing discourse of violence across a range of medieval sources, it is doomed to anachronism. Art historians, like cultural historians, can no longer do without an appreciation of how fluid and shifting perceptions of violence and vengeance, cruelty and pain could be, and how dependent the effort to represent them in the visual and dramatic arts was on the contexts in which images were seen, the cultural practices that engaged them, the perspective of their audiences, and the rhetorical intention and moral directionality behind the representation.6

Part of the problem is the persistent assumption that the fundamentally imitative nature of European art lent itself to a kind of progressive refinement of art’s capacity to capture and mediate violence, widening art’s documentary potential. Another problem is the situation of the work of art within relations of power, wherein the work of art is reduced to technique of ideology or a fulcrum for the construction of hegemonic identities. Under the weight of the *realism fallacy* what suffers is the recognition of the work’s rhetorical structure, its identity as the bearer of a distinctive kind of aesthetic force in the work of description, dramatisation, and persuasion it performs. While under the weight of the second, *instrumental fallacy*, we risk missing what is often playful, ironic,

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comedic or therapeutic in works that a greying historicism has deemed in advance to be deadly serious. Here I explore one way these fallacies might be overcome, the how the dimensions of violent imagery that they eclipse can be recovered. My overarching emphasis is well summed up by Mary Carruthers in her recent defence of medieval aesthetic experience: ‘Medieval art is not only explained by considerations of semiology and representation, mimesis . . . but also by persuasion . . . [it] seeks to effect in its audience . . . “a confident consent to believe”’. Persuasion in the sense of fostering conviction and belief is, however, only part of the story when it comes to violent imagery and the matrix of perception and affect built up around it. Also at stake is the quasi-material capacity of visual and verbal signs (signa) to impact the internal senses, to ‘strike’ the receptive intellect by virtue of their peculiar power to produce emotion, to ‘move’ the soul of the beholder from one state to another. It is well to remember that the root of our word ‘violence’, violentia in Latin, is not only the noun that found currency, in Old French for example, in words like violer, meaning the use of force in general (and rape in particular), but also the adjective describing a quality of mind we call ‘vehement’ and ‘impetuous’ (violentus in Latin) – a ‘passion’ – as well as the trait of ‘having some quality so strongly as to produce a powerful effect’. Violence in the visual, verbal and dramatic arts, we might say, can be recognised principally by its effects, and known through the evidentia of those effects, both physical and psychological.

Ripe for re-examination in these terms are images of combat and armed conflict, the most characteristic type being representations of battles, the subject of the first section of this chapter. To the extent that medieval and early Renaissance military genre captures violence’s most characteristic historical form, we will see that it refuses violence in a telling way: it very rarely rises to (or descends into) a ‘documentary’ realism. Its attractive power trades, rather, on the percussive and penetrating force of representation itself – its figures, formulas, codes and clichés – in such a way that violence is displaced from the visible scene of bloody struggle to those invisible movements of the soul targeted by rhetorical persuasion. Images of warfare, physical attack and massacre (discussed in a subsequent section) offered the artist a unique opportunity to affect the imagination of the beholder in a space between narration and presentation. The idea, first

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heralded in ancient theories of oratory, was to produce an image that could, by virtue of the vividness of its description, make an impact in the mind and stick in memory – effects understood in terms of what the Aristotelian and Galenic tradition called *accidentia animae*, ‘things that happen to the soul’. This sympathetic transfer of violent effects from image to spectator is by no means unique to the battle piece. It extends to other domains of violent imagery before 1500 as well: visions of eschatological turbulence in the apocalyptic tradition, descriptions of hell’s tortures, even the charming fantasies of animal combat found in Romanesque art (discussed below). And it is clearly operative in the notoriously brutal devotional imagery of the later Middle Ages, an expansive topic I will save for my concluding section.

**Battle Images, Visual Rhetoric and the Force of Conflict**

Battles and warfare pose a special problem of representation. A privileged and complex type of event, the battle vexes in perfect proportion, it seems, to everything historical experience seeks to discover or preserve in the act of describing it. Tactics that won the day, the chaos of clashing forces, the confusion of the scene amidst rising dust, hails of arrows, the smoke of cannons, the abjection of the fallen – to record a battle in word or image is to be faced with an unruly surplus, a spectacle of ‘endless detail’ according to Voltaire, one that has always challenged the available means of description. J. R. Hale put it with blunt precision: ‘Battles sprawled. Art condensed.’ Yet images of warfare have routinely been treated as documents and historical sources to be mined for information. The antiquarian impulse to trace a particular type of cavalry formation or the use of longbowmen, for instance, the workings of a siege engine or the appearance of the stirrup, or the peculiar fate met by famous men on the battlefield – such questions give the battle piece its uneasy identity as a document, whereby its ‘reliability’ as a source of visual evidence is measured according to a variety of factors (Figure 31.1).

But artists rarely behave as mere recorders of events, and claims of historical eyewitnessing are very often only that. Medieval and early...
modern images of battle were designed to arouse the wonder and admiration of their beholders in a shared present, one in which reception is performed as much as experienced. Considering battle images as sources for the history of violence in the modern sense highlights this challenge and reveals its dilemmas. In fact, the most essential happenings of warfare – the primal actions of killing and being killed – are the most elusive when it comes to the search for historical realities. ‘Real violence’, then, may paradoxically be the first casualty of war – at least as far as evidentiary status of the work of art goes. This is because violence, knowable only through its effects and the evidence of those effects, is not to be found ‘outside’ the image, somewhere in past reality, but ‘inside’ the circuit created between maker, artefact and beholder.

For all its colourful specificity and descriptive detail, a work such as Paolo Uccello’s (1397–1475) three-part monument to the Battle of San Romano (divided today between London, Florence and Paris) is a work that subsumes ‘accuracy’ and ‘reliability’ beneath a concern for figural inventiveness, rhythmic force and what John Pope-Hennessey, responding to centuries of criticism of the Florentine master’s ornate style, called the painting’s ‘all-pervading decorative sense’. All three panels once adorned Lorenzo the Magnificent’s chamber in the Medici family palace. In the widely accepted

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reconstruction it was the Uffizi’s panel, depicting the pas de deux in which Bernardino della Ciarda, condottiere for the Sienese army, is unseated by Niccolò Mauruzi da Tolentino, commander of the Florentine forces, that occupied the central position (Figure 31.2).14

Because Uccello’s innovative cycle celebrates a recent event, still alive in the minds of contemporaries, expectations for its historical value have been high among past commentators. This is in contrast to trecento battle scenes based on episodes from the vita of a military saint, for example Altichiero’s fresco in Padua depicting St James at the Battle of Clavijo,15 where the hunt for verisimilitude must content itself with genre-like military details such as armour, weapons and heraldry – ‘accurate’ precisely because they are anachronistic. Historical battles as ancient as David’s assault on the Amelakites or Saul’s rout by the Philistines (I Samuel 30:16–19 and 31:1–6 respectively) were rendered in completely contemporary terms by the French illuminators of the Morgan Bible of c. 1250, where biblical cavalrymen sport the trappings and employ the tactics of chivalric warriors (Figure 31.3).16

15 Reproduced and discussed in Hale, Artists and Warfare, pp. 149–52.
16 On this manuscript, see William Noel and Daniel H. Weiss (eds.), The Book of Kings: Art, War, and the Morgan Library’s Medieval Picture Bible (Baltimore: Walters Art Museum, 2002), pl. 20, with text in translation on p. 184.
Despite Uccello’s proximity to the historical event he describes – a surprise attack by Tolentino against Siena’s cavalry after a few hours of heavy fighting on 1 June 1432 – and despite the availability of eyewitness reports and textual
accounts, the three panels emphatically foreground their own artificiality. Noting the processional quality of the troop’s entry from the left in the London panel, where parade regalia rather than combat helmets are worn, Hale observes, ‘the whole work shows battles as episodes in a pageant, well removed from any apprehension of the reality of war’. Starn and Partridge (1984) concur. In their view the three paintings ‘positively insist upon their painted superficiality as flat spaces on which colors are variously circumscribed and arranged’. This is the outcome of Uccello’s effort to transpose the storytelling conventions generally reserved for heroising legendary and classical subjects onto a grand scale, and onto a contemporary subject. A similar impulse ‘to prettify and anecdotalize conflict’ is characteristic of the fashionable painted marriage chests (cassoni) of the period. Measured in documentary terms, they come up woefully short of what Peter Paret has termed ‘serious representations of war’.

At first glance, northern European battle images from around the same time, despite their crisp optical naturalism, are even further removed from Paret’s realist categorisation. Pagan bodies are impaled, trampled and crushed in the terrifying onslaught of Christian knights in the Master of St Lambrecht’s twilit scene, now in Graz (Figure 31.4).

The panel, still in its original frame, ostensibly depicts the fourteenth-century victory of King Louis of Hungary and Croatia (r. 1342–82) over the Serbs, but is cast in even more contemporary terms as holy war against the Ottoman Turks. Crowned and clad in iron plate armour and chain mail, his sword raised in a gesture of divine vengeance, Louis leads the cavalry from atop a white charger, recalling St James in his legendary role as the ‘slayer of Moors’ (Santiago matamoros) at the Battle of Clavijo. That the crusading king also defends the holy church as he delivers his territory from infidel occupation is shown by the monumental figure of the Virgin, pictured as a living cult-image (Gnadenbild), a ‘Mother of Mercy’ who harbours the faithful under her protective robe. This identifies the work as a votive offering. Meanwhile, the picture’s storybook quality, its indeterminate space and non-progressive narrative, the sense of discoordinate pieces brought together in a visionary or

17 Hale, Artists and Warfare, p. 155.
21 Hale, Artists and Warfare, p. 169.
symbolic space, even the patterning of stars that suggests a tapestry (the privileged medium for battle scenes among French aristocrats) – all of this casts Louis’s quest as holy and his victory as a chivalric tale of sacrificial valour.

Amidst the violent pageantry of the Graz panel, it is easy to overlook the little scene of ambush and murder unfolding in its foreground. Taking place at the margins of the main action, yet directly aligned with the beholder’s angle of view, this knaves’ scuffle recalls the soldiers gambling for Christ’s robe in countless Crucifixion images. In this sense it is a stock motif among others. Yet it also projects a genre-like realism that shows the painter attentive to the collateral violences of war: the looting and pillage, the flight of refugees, the desperation of the wounded. Anti-heroic interpersonal violence and crime, perpetual companions to warfare, are here contrasted with the sanctified violence enacted by the Christian warrior. It would be nearly a century, however, before European artists would begin to address – in a serious way – the horrors and moral paroxysms unleashed by war: Urs Graf’s Schlachtsfeld drawing in Basel (1521) may be the first instance; better known are Jacques Callot’s Les grandes misères de la guerre (1633) or Francisco Goya’s Los desastres de la guerra (1810–20).

Preoccupied with ennobling violent action at narrative hotspots, late medieval battle pieces north and south of the Alps indulge cliché, formula and

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22 As observed by Hale, *Artists and Warfare*, p. 169.
decorative fantasy over the recollection of facts. If such images frustrate the historian’s effort to recover the reality of military violence, they nevertheless disclose the historical experience of violence in ways that have escaped notice. Among the historical forces often cited in discussions of late medieval warfare are the effects of shifting military practices, technologies and tactics. Key examples are the increasing use of the English longbow, with its range of 100 yards; the mobilisation of infantrymen to complement the heavily armoured, charging knight; the Swiss use of pikesmen to degrade or halt cavalry advances; and above all the growing reliance by major warmaking powers – city-states, kings and emperors – on mercenary armies led by professional military contractors (condottieri). Each of these changes contributed to a greater tactical emphasis on the clash of massed forces, a greater ruthlessness in killing, as well as a broader rippling out of the social devastations wrought by war. San Romano was, in fact, exceptionally bloody. Even with the new emphasis in warfare, however, the charging line of mounted knights remained the defining feature of open battle, and the tournament-like, chivalric pas de deux its dramatic focal point. It was against a backdrop of chivalry’s growing military obsolescence, then, that our Italian and Austrian masters foregrounded the ‘beautiful feats of arms’ (belli fatti d’arme) of the chivalric commander, whose deeds and honour the battle piece commemorated, often crossing the line into portraiture (this is another way Uccello’s cycle may be interpreted).

In this strategy of stylisation we can recognise the counter-documentary dimension of battle images and their functional identity as artful fictions. Their conscious artifice allowed them to be, on the one hand, patently propagandistic: it was for the edification of his Florentine patrons, after all, that Uccello projected an image of glory upon a war that had actually ended in stalemate. On the other hand, it allows them to be distinctly memorable. Their unstated aim is to produce what Aristotle and his medieval commentators called ‘mental impressions’ or ‘impressions in the soul’, that is, signs that produce meaning by imposing themselves on cognitive operations rather than reality itself. Calling attention to the artificiality of means, the choreography of gesture, the familiar conventions for describing armed conflict and bloody violence, the painter’s description assumes the quality

24 Borsi, Paolo Uccello, p. 310.
26 Borsi, Paolo Uccello, p. 308.
of a rhetorical exercise keyed to the spectator’s capacities. The ancient
doctrine that every art (technē) can, with the means available to its practi-
tioners, ‘move’ the soul from one state to another would become enshrined
in quattrocento art theory around the same time Uccello painted his San
Romano cycle. Its most influential exponent was Leon Battista Alberti (1404–
72). In Book 2 of Della pittura (1435–6) Alberti explains that it is visible move-
ments (mozione) that reveal the invisible movements (emozione) of their
characters’ souls, for like begets like, and this mimesis extends to the
beholder: ‘It happens in nature that nothing more than herself is found
capable of things like herself; we weep with the weeping, laugh with the
laughing, and grieve with the grieving.’

Contemporary works, especially those conceived in a mythological vein,
could dispense with the pretence of historical description or legendary
narrative altogether to spotlight these effects. To modern eyes, Antonio
Pollaiuolo’s celebrated engraving known as the Battle of the ten nude men,
having eluded any satisfactory iconographic explanation, seems to approach
the conditions of ‘pure violence’ (Figure 31.5).

But rather than a meditation on the primal origins of human combative-ness or aggression, Pollaiuolo’s collection of lunging, hacking, stabbing and wrestling figures trades on the rhetorical power of expressive and agitated gesture, implied movement and rotation, the percussive clash of weapons and the penetration of bodies. In proclaiming mozione, the beautiful and terrifying movement of live bodies in space, to be the visible outward form of emozione, the turbulent ‘passions’ of the soul, Pollaiuolo certainly touches his era’s moral understanding of physical violence; but he also registers an awareness that the beholder’s mind is the real arena in which violentia plays out.

Description, Force and Fantasy in Medieval Art

Foregrounding the means of representation, highlighting the principles of design, deploying style as a force for persuasion – these are artistic strategies that ingrained habits of historical (and ahistorical) thinking attribute to the Renaissance and typically deny to the Middle Ages. But centuries before the interdependence of imitation, invention and imagination was formally worked out in Italian art theory, medieval writers had reactivated the ancient equation of style with persuasion, and painters and sculptors had already learned to produce powerful visions of violent struggle, likewise capable of mobilising the minds of their viewers.

A canonical instance is the breathtaking carved column at the Abbey of Sainte-Marie in Souillac, in southern France, a monumental work designed to serve as a trumeau but now installed, along with several other displaced fragments, inside the western entrance to the church (Figure 31.6). Renowned for its formal daring, the Souillac trumeau presents a tangle of rapacious beasts on its facing side, chaotic on first impression but organised into repeated pairings of diagonally crossed animals (apparently lions and eagles or griffins) who bite at a common victim held between them. Twisting around the scalloped colonettes that run the support’s length at its four corners, the pattern of knotted bodies simultaneously obeys and violates what Henri Focillon (1881–1943) called Romanesque art’s ‘law of the frame’ (loi du cadre). It was this dynamic explosion of form that American art historian Meyer Schapiro (1904–96), writing in the run-up to US involvement in Europe’s war, set out to investigate in his classic study of the carved

29 Carruthers, Experience of Beauty, esp. pp. 135–64.
30 Focillon’s theory was worked out by his student, Jurgis Baltrušaitis, La stylistique ornementale dans la sculpture romane (Paris: E. Leroux, 1931).
Figure 31.6 Southern France; animal combat with allegorical figures, trumeau re-installed near western interior wall, Abbey Church of Sainte-Marie, Souillac, c. 1140–50, carved stone.
ensemble. Keen as Focillon was on discerning the visual intelligence of the medieval sculptor, Schapiro sought in the Souillac carvings a ‘conscious method of design’, one in which the fantasy of the artist freed itself from a priori architectural constraints. Significantly, the result was a spectacle of expressive form on the margins of the church’s official programme. As a formalist, Schapiro based his study on a highly original set of observations and diagrammatic drawings – a model analysis, then as today. As a Marxist, he parlayed these observations into a theory that the abandonment of formal symmetry at Souillac, and the embrace of ‘discoordination’ as a design principle, owed something to the tensions and conflicts inherent in feudal society.

Schapiro attributed to the sculptors a new kind of achievement in embodying meaning directly in images. Precisely because the trumeau was not constrained by iconographic reference, the fear of violence and the attractive power of physical force could ‘strike’ the senses with an overwhelming immediacy and attain a robust metaphorical expression. Religious meaning is likewise subordinated to the tension between sensory perception and metaphor. Concentrated in the raw dynamism of bodies in space, the imagery’s visual force exempts it from the routines of sublimation or idealisation:

The fear of violence or the respect for aggressive force which was usually sublimated in mythical themes of divine protection ... is here embodied directly in a non-religious fantasy of rapacious beasts. The very existence of the trumeau implies that sculpture has begun to emerge as an independent spectacle on the margins of religious art, as a wonderful imaginative workmanship addressed to secular fantasy. But this fantasy is governed by the content and material levels of social experience. The trumeau is a passionate drôlerie, brutal and realistic in detail, an elaboration of themes of impulsive

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and overwhelming physical force, corresponding to the role of violence at this point in the history of feudal society.33 Schapiro clearly saw the force of representation as a gathering point where social and spiritual experience reflect each other, where metaphors of predation and domination (hunting, overtaking, trapping, devouring) stand in for the conflicted character of feudal relations (the bondage of the contract, the dream of rebellion). Spiritual conceptions reveal their secular axis (121) and secular desires their spiritual (i.e., penitential) value for the individual. In the art historian’s eyes the ‘incipient realism’ of twelfth-century sculpture links artistic style in its changing aspects to the violence of the individual’s spiritual struggle – metaphorically, materially and psychologically. By emphasising the role of fantasy Schapiro also acknowledged a commonplace of medieval faculty psychology: the doctrine that mental images were formed from the raw material of sense perception, and that the resulting ‘phantasms’ were something like a sympathetic union of outer fact and inner attraction, making every mental image a partial reflection of the beholder’s desire.34 Violent images could therefore be attractive and repellent, beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

Subsequent art-historical writing on the Souillac trumeau has expanded the metaphorical reach of its expressive visual violence. British art historian Michael Camille (1958–2002), most notably, called attention to the monument’s thematisation of the mouth. Somatic site of primal terror and pleasure, as he put it, the mouth was the place of ‘vocal production as well as material ingestion’, an ambivalence especially marked in the monastic context.35 In his effort to clear a path for a discussion of the ‘uninscribed codes and cultural practices’ in which the trumeau’s imagery participates, Camille, with knowing irony and unabashed verve, doubled down on Schapiro’s modernist exercise in formal criticism:

On its front face, stone turns to feathers, claws and fur, textures that ruffle and slither between the cranky joints of shaft and pillar to create an architecture of animality, a spiraling ascent and descent of biting bestiality. Four birds on the left and four lions on the right twist inward and upward to engorge a small, torn, helpless thread of quadrupeds in the center, dragging them downward. Contrary to their fall, a naked man struggles upward at the summit, his vulnerable flank torn by a beak and his face contorted with pain as he is held in the vice-like grip of a lionish mouth.36

Few art historians have used exuberant description so effectively to map the formal violence of an image; fewer still would dare use it to assert a work’s resistance to iconographic decryption, what Camille calls the trumeau’s ‘anti-textuality’. Far more explicitly than Schapiro, Camille designates the trumeau’s riot of violent form as a site of desire, and the art historian’s text as a register of description’s struggle against sublimation. Certainly both scholars had in mind the indelible example of St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), the Cistercian abbot whose famous iconoclastic complaint about profane images in the monastery also took the form of a showy rhetorical exercise:

in the cloisters, before the eyes of the brothers while they read – what is that ridiculous monstrousity doing, an amazing kind of deformed beauty and yet a beautiful deformity? What are the filthy apes doing there? The fierce lions? The monstrous centaurs? The creatures, part man and part beast? The striped tigers? The fighting soldiers? The hunters blowing horns? You may see many bodies under one head, and conversely many heads on one body. On one side the tail of a serpent is seen on a quadruped, on the other side, the head of a quadruped is on the body of a fish. Over there an animal has a horse for the front half and a goat for the back; here a creature which is horned in front is equine behind. In short, everywhere so plentiful and astonishing a variety of contradictory forms is seen that one would rather read in the marble than in books, and spend the whole day wondering at every single one of them than in meditating on the law of God.37

Puritanical in his official outlook, Bernard intended not to stoke desire or afflict the receptive soul of his reader but to satirise Cluniac luxury, and advance his own order’s cause of clerical reform. Nevertheless, his powerful evocation of a contradictory creaturely carnality – an imaginative fantasy that employs rhetorical antithesis (quaedam deformis formositas ac formosa deformitas) among other stylistic devices – demonstrates a strong awareness that the receptive intellect of a reader or a beholder could be ‘impressed’ by violent and monstrous imagery, for better or worse. For Bernard as for numerous other monastic authors, acts of seeing and reading – whether in stone or on the page – could be metaphors and prompts for a spiritual striving in the ‘morally-divided individual’ (this is Schapiro’s phrase). That striving was visualised as combat between the vices and virtues, for example, between lust and chastity (Figure 31.7).38 Against the background of this martial model

of the soul’s movements, seeing and reading were material-cognitive processes, undergirded by a specific psychology of the receptive mind and the sensitive soul as image-making organs.

Staging a Massacre

Art historians have struggled to identify the sculptures Bernard describes, and candidates have cautiously been put forward; but it is nearly certain that his account is ekphrastic. This single fact opens a broad vista onto medieval representations of violence. For it reveals the particular ways premodern writers and image-makers negotiated the challenge of mapping violence between its visibility before the eyes and its invisible reception in the soul. Concentrating on its emotional effects, rhetorical description exploits the power of style, artifice and even sheer convention to convey the ‘indescribable’ surpluses of warfare, massacre, torture and cataclysm.

A long tradition of description geared towards making the reader see what’s portrayed ‘as if’ with his or her own eyes can be traced from the rhetoricians of the ancient schools – figures such as Hermogenes of Tarsus (d.
180 CE) and Quintilian (d. 100 CE) – through early Christian writers and Byzantine homilists – such as the two Gregories, Basil the Great and Basil of Seleucia (fifth century) – down to their numerous medieval readers and commentators. The full extent to which such models of eloquence guided the work of medieval painters and sculptors is still difficult to assay, given the dearth of ambitious studies among medievalists. Pioneering in this respect is Henry Maguire’s 1981 work on Byzantine homilies and hymns from roughly the fifth to the twelfth century. Maguire showed how Christian preachers with classical educations, in their effort to embroider the characteristically spare narratives found in the New Testament, drew upon the advice, conventions and formal techniques of pagan oratory to create strikingly vivid, mimetic images that would move the souls of their listeners. Maguire’s first example is directly germane to our purposes: the adaptation of ancient rhetorical descriptions of war to the gospel story of Herod’s persecution of the first-born sons of Bethlehem, the Slaughter of the Innocents (Matthew 2:16–18).

A sermon penned by the fifth-century archbishop of Seleucia, Basil (d. 460), influential in later centuries, is foundational for the genre. Following Quintilian’s advice for rendering the horrors of war vivid and memorable, Basil first describes the preliminaries: Herod enthroned in splendour, taking counsel from advisers, then levying the troops and exhorting his soldiers to ‘rush like lions upon the city’. The narrator follows this with a long, grisly account of the slaughter, a spectacle of cruelty in which children are torn from their parents’ grasp, sliced open and dismembered, or murdered in their mothers’ arms, even as the more courageous ones fend off ‘the sword edges with their hands’. Finally, with an evident taste for horror, the bishop describes the aftermath: the deluded celebrations of the ‘victors’, the tearful laments of the victims, and the macabre search for remains. Basil describes how ‘each mother tearfully collected together the sundered limbs of her child, searched for any part of the body that might be missing, and, having found it, kissed it. At last she placed the complete corpse in her bosom, and broke into vehement cries.’

By the Middle Byzantine period (c. 843–1204) many of the descriptive clichés Basil employed had entered the artistic tradition; conversely the sermons themselves, according to Maguire, begin to betray a productive interchange with visual representations, perhaps even a kind of rivalry with...

the painter’s descriptive art. A sermon composed in Greek by the south Italian monk and preacher Philagathus of Cerami (d. 1154 or later), for example, introduces the rhetorical conceit of claiming that he had seen Herod’s massacre depicted on a painted panel (en pinaki). This allows him to explore the scenes of carnage and desolation – Herod ordering his troops ‘to mercilessly harvest the field of children’, mothers ‘given to a piteous lament and mixing tears with blood’, and so on – not once, but twice for his rapt audiences. In the painted depiction, Philagathus explains, the soldiers sprang ‘like wild beasts’ and ‘pitylessly dismembered the wretched infants’. With equal vividness the painter,

depicted the unhappy mothers given to a piteous lament and mixing tears with blood. And one tore her hair, another scraped her cheeks with her nails, another tore apart her robe, and baring her chest, showed her breast, deprived of the feeding baby. Another collected together the scattered limbs of her dismembered child; and another held her newly slain infant on her knees and bitterly wept.41

With this last cliché Philagathus betrays his knowledge of the homiletic tradition as well as the technical advice of the pagan orators.

Did medieval artists engage in a similar process of transforming bare narration into full-bodied description? Were the new descriptive details we find progressively added to the visual tradition of Herod’s massacre over the course of nine centuries transferred there from the literary repertoire, or instead from the emergent tradition of religious drama, which included Herod spectacles enacted during the feasts of Epiphany and Corpus Christi?42 Although Matthew’s account navigates around the killing itself, from the earliest attempts at pictorial narration, especially in the medieval West, it was precisely the violent actions of the soldiers that took centre stage.43 Early medieval artists learned to provide the missing details. A Carolingian ivory relief carved in the famous Metz workshop for a gospel book cover now in Paris, for example, telescopes the narrated and unnarrated elements of the gospel story into an explosive, near-simultaneous sequence of command, execution and response, all within a continuous space of action (Figure 31.8). While Herod issues his orders from stage left, two soldiers fling

41 Quoted in translation in ibid., p. 27.
42 For the former, see Max Harris, Sacred Folly: A New History of the Feast of Fools (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), pp. 41–53; for the latter, Nicole R. Rice, “‘Whom seek ye, sirs?’: The Logic of Searching in the York ‘Herod and the Magi’”, Comparative Drama 43.1 (2009), 89–112.
43 Maguire, Art and Eloquence, p. 28.
the helpless baby-martyrs above their heads, preparing to dash them to the ground.

No artist deserves more credit for transforming the Herodian massacre into an elaborate spectacle of terror than Giovanni Pisano (c. 1250–1319), the master sculptor from Pisa, whose work precedes Giotto by about a generation. Four
years in the making and completed in 1301, Giovanni’s multi-panelled, hexagonal marble lectern for the Romanesque church of Sant’Andrea in Pistoia was modelled on his father Nicola’s innovative project for Pisa’s baptistery (1260) (Figure 31.9). In both, elaborate relief panels are coordinated with three-dimensional console figures around a polygonal module, allowing the salvation narrative to be telescoped into five marble reliefs, meant to be viewed in counter-clockwise rotation. At Pistoia the scene of massacre, which spreads across the entire south-west-facing panel, is given striking prominence. As the beholder circumnavigates the lectern, he or she finds that a riot of killing has already broken loose.

Chaos control is Giovanni’s pictorial challenge, and it is through the precise interleaving of sculptural units, and the alternation of two types of figure-vignettes – those displaying agitated movement, and those frozen in expressions of horror – that he achieves it. The imperious and implacable Herod, commanding the troops with an outstretched hand, galvanises the outrage of those around him. Anticipating the beholder’s actual position in space, Giovanni has ensured that the most interesting angle of view would align with the dominant one inside the narrative. A shared focal point, Herod is now framed dramatically by the pitiable spectacle of mothers weeping over the dismembered bodies of their children, each of them a biblical Rachel, ‘refusing to be comforted’ (Matthew 2:18) (Figure 31.10).

The Pisano lecterns have been the subject of sustained attention by art historians for several decades running, and the Pistoia project in particular has been studied in the light of Giovanni’s transformation of antique models; innovations in Christian storytelling; eucharistic and baptismal symbolism; and communal responses to regional warfare in the Tuscan city-states. What has still not emerged with clarity is Giovanni’s complex strategy for addressing the beholder as both a witness to and a subject of overwhelming violence – a strategy that combines formal inventiveness with the mobilisation of descriptive clichés, both borrowed and newly elaborated. Consider

the two schema he develops for the abduction of the babies and the climactic coup-de-lance. Towards the centre of the composition a soldier thrusts a sword
Figure 31.10 Giovanni Pisano, detail from ‘Massacre of the innocents’ panel, viewed from the ground.
into the back of one infant; the victim grimaces in pain, recoiling his right leg and reaching pitifully back towards the weapon, a gesture betokening resistance. Where a youthful soldier grasps the feet of another victim in the panel’s upper-left corner, we discover a shocking contrast. Helplessly inverted, the infant here is visually equated with a small animal, ready to be bled and eviscerated. This equation of child-murder with butchery refracts older descriptions of Herod’s soldiers as carnivorous beasts, ‘lions’ unleashed by their master; it seems to raise the terrifying spectre of cannibalism.\textsuperscript{45} Suddenly Herod’s riot of pre-emptive political murder looks to be transformed into a blood-soaked pagan rite. Yet Giovanni’s visualisation of extreme cruelty is just as likely to be based on conventional descriptions found in the pictorial and ekphrastic tradition. The motif of the soldier holding the child upside down by the ankle in his left hand can be found in earlier visualisations of the scene, and may also reflect Old Testament scenes such as the Judgment of Solomon.\textsuperscript{46} Similarly, the Pistoia lectern’s wild-eyed Herod closely approximates Philagathus’ description of him as ‘sitting proudly on some high throne, giving sharp and savage looks with wide-open eyes . . . Stretching out his right hand, he seemed to be commanding the soldiers.’\textsuperscript{47}

Whatever can ultimately be said of Giovanni’s procedures of borrowing and translation, it bears emphasising that the sculptor has not conjured atrocity away, nor has he dissolved its victims into ‘faceless’ exemplars of terror, unrecognisable to those who mourn them. Violence has been granted a kind of immediacy, but not as an unmediated extension of the real. It is, rather, \textit{mediations themselves} that produce the effects of violence. The agitation of form is transferred by the concrete action of signs (\textit{signa}) to the soul of the beholder because the latter is already receptive, and because that receptivity is determined, according to Aristotle’s theory of rhetorical persuasion, by a ‘disposition’ (\textit{diathesis}) in the soul, shaped by the passions (\textit{pathē}) unique to the individual.\textsuperscript{48} Late medieval devotional culture understood that disposition as a special receptivity to suffering-with (\textit{compassio}), a yearning for

\begin{footnotes}
\item Cannibalism is one of the oldest of cruelty tropes, often intertwined in medieval sources with massacre and organised rape; see Baraz, \textit{Medieval Cruelty}, pp. 96–105, 126–7, 150–1.
\item Maguire, \textit{Art and Eloquence}, pp. 29–30, cites the \textit{Rabbula Gospels} (Biblioteca Laurenziana, MS Plut. I, 56, fo. 4v) and an earthen medallion from the Abbey of St Columban at Bobbio (sixth or early seventh century). On the possibility that Old Testament imagery is being adapted, pp. 30 and 120 n.43.
\item Ibid., p. 29.
\end{footnotes}
affective experience that merged penitential spirituality and Christian virtue-ethics. Indescribable yet described, overwhelming in its *varietas* but ordered by the artistic form, the visual violence of late medieval imagery ‘makes sense’ most powerfully as a collection of effects – but only when the beholder, the addressee of the picture, consents to become a subject of violence.

**Conclusion: ‘There Must Be Blood’**

Descriptive elaborations of gospel stories such as those found in the sermons of Basil of Seleucia, the marble reliefs of Giovanni Pisano or the painted panels of the late medieval Master of the Karlsruhe Passion required little defence as products of the pious Christian imagination, however disturbing their violence (Figure 31.11). Contemporaries recognised that the gospel accounts were stories plainly told, written in a popular, almost lapidary style, and that they always fell short of describing all that Christians naturally wanted to know. Matthew’s account of the Bethlehem slaughter, for example, is the very model of what ancient rhetoricians called simple narration: nothing described, nothing adorned.

Absence of detail and adornment is especially marked in the gospel sequences encompassing the Passion of Christ. Consider the night-time seizure of Jesus on the Mount of Olives: from Mark we learn only that, after being identified by the traitor Judas, ‘they laid hands on him, and held him’ (14:46); Matthew’s account hews closely: ‘Then they came up, and laid hands on Jesus, and held him’ (26:50); Luke is still more matter-of-fact: ‘And apprehending him, they led him to the high priest’s house (22:54); and John, while insisting that the soldiers led Jesus first to Annas, father-in-law to Caiaphas, adds little to the action itself save the posse’s composition: ‘Then the band and the tribunal, and the servants of the Jews, took Jesus, and bound him’ (18:12). In contrast, a German Passion tract from around 1350, entitled *Christi Leiden in einer Vision geschaut* (Christ’s Passion as Seen in a Vision),

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revisualises the scene as a dramatist might, fleshing out the basic action and turning it into a savage rumpus:
Then they seized Christ with raving violent devilish gesticulations, one grasped his hair, a second his clothes, a third his beard. These three were as foul hounds as ever might cling to him... and so he was pulled away, with violent wild raving abandon, with fierce blows of mailed hands and fists upon his neck and between his shoulders, on his back, on his head, across his cheeks, on his throat, on his breast... They tore his hair from his head so that the locks lay strewn around on the ground; one pulled him one way by the hair, the other pulled him back by the beard [twelve further lines of print]. So they dragged him down from the Mount... [four lines]. And they hauled him to the gate of the town in such a way that he never set foot properly on the ground.

According to the accepted scholarly view, the growing appetite for narrative detail exemplifies the profound changes that came over Christian art and literature in the later Middle Ages, a time when the humanity of Christ and the Virgin took centre stage in devotional culture. Visual devotion and meditative visualisation were promoted as personalised forms of ‘witnessing’ the events of sacred history. And violence? Mental, verbal and visual recreations of the Passion under this paradigm acknowledged an almost obligatory abundance of brutality and gore. One fifteenth-century French playwright insisted upon it when, in his stage directions for his Passion play, he noted: “There must be blood.” Yet it was not unaided imagination that stepped in to provide this detail but rather, as F. P. Pickering demonstrated long ago, a creative process of embroidery based on Old Testament exegesis, a ‘translation of ancient [i.e., biblical] prophecies, metaphors, similes and symbols... into “history”’.

The problem of defining the nature, function and meaning of ‘sacred realism’ within Europe’s diverse devotional regimes before 1500 has preoccupied scholarship for well over a century, and the place of violence within them has received ample attention. Although Pickering recognised the rhetorical character of the tracts he edited, his explanation for the introduction of new elements into late medieval Passion narratives focused on textual methods of translation, de- and re-composition, not their persuasive impact on listeners or readers. Yet there can be little doubt that the learned author of

Christi Leiden conceived his text as a pious ekphrasis, beginning with its framing avowal to be a description of a vision, and extending to the rapid-fire litany of blows, slaps and kicks, the vivid, bestialising characterisations of the soldiers, and the frenzied assault on their prey. To the degree that the middle Rhenish Karlsruhe Master followed the lead of the Passion tractates, it is anything but servile. Bright colour and varietas; the play of textures – absorptive and reflective surfaces – that guides the eye through the work; the sense of forceful gesture and movement swirling around the sorrowful Christ; the mixing of fearsome ‘real’ violence with contrived onstage buffoonery – these are the distinctive elements of a painterly style capable of instigating a transfer of violent effects from the image to the mind of the spectator. Painters matched wits with poets well before Renaissance humanists gave them licence to do so.

Neither the claim that an ekphrasis is based on a vision nor the brutality of its contents should lead us into thinking of this imagery as untamed emotional extravagance. Despite its reputation for wallowing in violent effects, for prolonging the spectacle of sacred bloodshed beyond what audiences could endure, late medieval Passion piety was not designed to run experience off the emotional rails. Pious witnessing was above all a performative cultivation of virtue – emotional and intellectual, spiritual and ethical – for the sake of the soul. We miss this inherent therapeutic dimension when the frame for interpreting late medieval imagery is that historicist construct of a ‘violent’ medieval Weltbild. Medieval devotional texts and images have a clear logic, and they display a diversity of methods for ‘grounding the medieval imagination in the physicality of violent acts’.54 To grasp the rhetorical elaboration of violence in medieval texts and images is to come to terms with their essential rationality.

Bibliographical Essay

The literature germane to this topic straddles a number of conventional divides. Chronologically the period in question encompasses the Middle Ages and Renaissance, as well as the first century of what is now called Early Modernity. Art history’s traditional north–south divide masks regional differences to which scholars are increasingly attentive. Methodologically, one could distinguish between iconographic studies strictly speaking, thematically driven studies that harness iconographic research to larger cultural-historical questions, and monographic investigations that make productive contributions to violence studies without framing them as such. Iconographic sourcebooks or manuals

are not mentioned here, and no effort is made to distinguish studies by art historians from scholars in other disciplines who have contributed handsomely to the field.


A more comprehensive bibliography would include special sections devoted to representations of premodern warfare, battle, chivalric combat and the portrayal of military men; violence in medieval drama and other kinds of ritual spectacles (for example, flagellant processions); the sexualisation of violence, especially in martyrdom and witchcraft imagery; representations of plague and other ecological upheavals, the eschatological violences of Antichrist’s reign, the parousia and Last Judgment; and the era’s extravagant imaginative visions of purgatory’s pains and hell’s horrors.
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