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Peacemaking in the Middle Ages: Principles and Practice

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This book analyses the process of peacemaking in the Angevin world and the kingdom of Denmark in the period when they were ruled, respectively, by Henry II and his sons (1154?1216) and Valdemar I and his (1157?1241). The conjoining of these two zones is justified by the author on the grounds that their rulers, Henry II and Valdemar I, each came to power after bitter civil conflicts, faced problems with the Church, and owed allegiance for some of their lands to a powerful neighbour; in the case of Denmark this was the Emperor. However, as Benham readily admits, they were very different entities, with England being ?one of the richest and most highly bureaucratised kingdoms of the medieval West?, while Denmark was ?an upstart? (p. 7). This seems to undermine the very basis of the book?s focus, especially as it is made very clear that only exiguous documentation on diplomacy has survived from Denmark. Moreover, the book considers events both earlier than 1216 and later than 1241. In fact, there is quite a lot of reference to other parts of Europe so that when this somewhat eccentric focus is reasserted the reader may be rather surprised. The book appears to be founded upon the author?s doctoral thesis, so this focus was presumably intended to make it ?doable?, an important characteristic of such an undertaking. However, the author at times demonstrates much wider knowledge and her scholarship, with references to early medieval, late medieval and even Roman peacemaking practices, is very impressive. It is a pity, therefore, that this study is so confined because a wider take on the subject, of which she is demonstrably capable, could have produced a better-balanced study.

The book takes as its point of departure (p. 4) the notable article by C. W. Holdsworth, ?Peacemaking in the twelfth century? (1), which drew attention to the very limited modern work on peace-making in the Middle Ages. In fact, since it was published rather more studies, even in the two areas under consideration, have appeared, notably the work of Eickels and Gillingham, so that the relatively empty landscape remarked on at the start of this book is now rather more populated.(2) Benham?s book, however, is a noteworthy contribution to this growing literature, especially in its emphasis on the personalised nature of the process, and the need to see it through the eyes of the individual rulers.

The main thrust of the book lies in understanding the principles and practice of peacemaking. Her perception that making peace, like making war, was an essentially personal function in which high-ranking individuals came together and entered into a relationship is a reflection of her accurate knowledge of the nature of the medieval ?state?. One aspect of this is made very clear in part one (pp.19?68) where Benham demonstrates the care with which sovereigns selected places to meet. The underlying concern was that each needed to avoid any appearance of subordination or weakness such as would be apparent if one crossed into the lands of the other. As a result, rulers often chose to meet on islands in a river, on bridges or even on boats. Very different considerations came into play when it was a case of a meeting between a superior and one of inferior rank, in which case the latter was expected to approach the former in his territory. This process had its subtle variations. English kings did not always demand that Welsh princes come to their heartlands, and used places like Worcester and Gloucester in acknowledgement of the high status of those with whom they were treating. It might be added that even to this apparent principle of preserving the sense of equality there were exceptions. Benham alludes (pp.75?6) to the meeting of the Emperor Henry II and Robert II of France on the Meuse in 1023, which advisors on both sides felt should take place on an island or on boats. However, Glaber tells us that Henry took the initiative and crossed to Robert who returned the visit on the morrow.(3) This could surely be seen as a subtle assertion of supremacy by Henry. In this discussion Benham shows herself to be well aware of the weak structure and diversity of the medieval state which ruled out frontiers in the modern form of ?lines on a map?, and she points out that kings chose to meet where their spheres of influence came together: the Elm of Gisors was one of these for the French and English kings. And she further points out that territorial agreements were made in terms of delineating which important vassals and holders of castles were subordinate to whom. There is, however, little stress on the internal effect of this in subordinating vassals to rulers by, as it were, narrowing their options. The interplay between peace-making and state-building, which has been explored in a notable article by E. Pascua, is therefore not really discussed in this book.(4)

In part two (pp. 69?114) Benham discusses the rituals of peacemaking. She accords such acts as gift exchanges and gestures of submission some importance, but intelligently emphasises that they have to be

seen in the context of the numerous other activities which surrounded making peace. Prominent amongst these, as she shows in part three (pp.115?42), was the role of envoys and negotiators. Here Benham is sceptical of the idea that in the 12th century there was a distinction between plenipotentiary envoys whose masters were bound by their decisions and others who needed to seek ratification for their agreements. There were always, she suggests, escape clauses by which royal masters could renege on unwelcome agreements. This description of *realpolitik* is surely correct. When, after the battle of Hattin, Saladin reproached Raynald of Châtillon, for breaking treaties, he responded: ?This is how kings have always behaved: I have only followed the path of custom?.(5) In fact what was most important, as Benham says, is that envoys were very important figures: ?Quite simply, envoys and mediators were the most trusted servants of their masters? (p.137). In part four (pp.143?78), ?Guaranteeing the peace?, the ubiquity of the oath, with its appeal to worldly and religious piety, is stressed, but of course it was never enough, and in the second chapter of this section she traces the way in which territorial sureties tended to replace hostages in the process of reaching agreements, and connects this with the rise of Roman law. In part five (pp.179?200), ?Treaties, terminology and the written word?, Benham argues very soundly that far more treaties were made than have survived, and goes on to stress the sheer difficulties of medieval terminology. The words used by chroniclers and those in actual surviving documents are very varied, and this makes defining a ?treaty? remarkably difficult ? a problem which, it must be said, afflicts many fields of study.(6) Further, many treaties have been preserved only in the works of chroniclers, and here the historian needs to disentangle their take on the subject from what may or may not have been contained in the original. This point is very well made in Benham?s extremely able discussion of the treaty between Richard of England and Tancred of Sicily (pp.74?8). In her conclusion (pp. 201?16) Benham argues that historians have too often judged the success or failure of treaties with the benefit of hindsight, and makes a plea for them to be seen through the eyes of the makers and in their immediate context. Thus in 1177 Henry II and Louis VII came to terms on some matters, while simultaneously disagreeing and even fighting about others, but clearly, because they avoided a general conflagration, this was seen by both parties as in some sense satisfactory. Similarly she argues that Le Goulet was quite a success for John and Phillip II, and that only hindsight has led to its damnation by historians. Benham makes a very good case for seeing peace-making as provisional and conditional, and as something which was intended to meet the needs of the moment rather than to provide a long-term framework for relations, and in this she is surely right.

This is an interesting and perceptive book, and the author is capable of very careful and subtle analysis, demonstrating an excellent knowledge of the realities of European politics and recognising that peace and war were not opposites. Yet one is obliged to ask how far the evidence it cites is representative of European practice and how far, therefore, the book merits its title. It is at its strongest on the Capetian-Angevin world, and it might have been better to make that the sole focus, but perhaps over a longer period. The evidence for the Danish experience is very limited, and while in itself interesting, contributes little to the general picture. Moreover, the issue of time-span is important, because change and development over time may have occurred. Benham suggests that knowledge of Roman law became critical, and she at least implies that practice in Italy was more advanced because the practice of Roman law was more widely diffused there. It is surely the case that there is something in that idea, but it is here simply left hanging. This is largely because of the self-imposed limitations of the book, but it is also because the highly analytic pattern adopted tends to obscure any pattern of change over time.

In the 12th century war and peace were inevitable concomitants. No European power, royal or other, could avoid war, but nor could any wage total war or even sustain it uninterruptedly over long periods. Clausewitzan triumphs on the field of battle were rare, and much conflict resembled a process of bloody nagging, interrupted by truces and peaces but rarely given a decisive end. Benham clearly understands this and given the evident intelligence of the book and the importance of its subject it is to be hoped that she will return to peacemaking because there is plenty of evidence. A key source is Gilbert of Mons, for he was at the very centre of European diplomacy in the late 12th century and his *Chronicle of Hainaut* is valuable for an understanding of peacemaking of war and peace in Western Europe.(7) Moreover, Gilbert?s master was not a king and this directs attention to peacemaking in Europe at a very different but still very important level. The later stages of the English civil war under Stephen saw major nobles negotiating treaties amongst

themselves and this pattern may have been more common than we think. At a quite different level, the Crusades witnessed frequent peace-making and the development of agreements of friendship such as those which established Italy city-states in the major cities of the Holy Land. In addition, even there, and despite the driving hatred generated by crusade and *jihad*, peace had to be made because, as in Europe, no power could wage anything like total war, and the process of peace-making has begun to command substantial academic attention.(8) Benham?s *Peacemaking in the Middle Ages* is best regarded as a very valuable reconnaissance of an important topic. It is to be hoped that the author will return in force for a more discursive treatment.

Notes

1. C. W. Holdsworth, ?Peacemaking in the twelfth century?, *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 19 (1998).Back to (1)
2. Notable recent works are K.van Eickels, *Vom Inszenierten Konsens Systematisierten Konflict* (Stuttgart, 2002); J.Gillingham, ?The meetings of the Kings of France and England, 1066?1204?, in *Normandy and its Neighbours, 900?1250*, ed. D. Crouch and K. Thompson (Turnhout, 2010).Back to (2)
3. Rodulfus Glaber, *The Five Books of the Histories*, ed. J. France (Oxford, 1989), pp. 108?1.Back to (3)
4. E. Pascua, ?Peace among equals: war and treaties in twelfth-century Europe?, in *War and Peace in Ancient and Medieval History*, ed. P. de Souza and J. France (Cambridge, 2008), 193?210.Back to (4)
5. Imad ad-Din al-Isfahani (1125/519 ? 1201/597), *Ciceronian Eloquence on the Conquest of the Holy City* (translated), in *Arab Historians of the Crusades*, ed. F. Gabrieli (New York, NY, 1957), p.134. Back to (5)
6. See for example, D. Bachrach, ?English artillery 1189?1307: the implications of terminology?, *English Historical Review*, 121 (2006), 1408?30.Back to (6)
7. *La chronique de Gislebert de Mons*, ed. L. Vanderkindere (Brussels, 1904) has recently been translated into English by L. Napran as Gilbert of Mons, *Chronicle of Hainaut* (Woodbridge, 2005). Back to (7)
8. Y. Friedman, *Encounter between Enemies: Captivity and Ransom in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Leiden, 2002).Back to (8)

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