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Prisoners of War in the Hundred Years War: Ransom Culture in the Late Middle Ages

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The significance of ransoming has long been recognised by students of medieval chivalry and diplomacy. Seen as key to the development of an international aristocratic ethic that mitigated some of the worst excesses of medieval combat the ransom system led to a pan-European conception of a chivalric brotherhood. Ransoming a defeated member of the military elite became seen as indicative of much that was civilised about Western European aristocratic culture in the final 400?500 years of the medieval period. By contrast, those who slaughtered, mutilated, or enslaved members of the aristocratic elite were considered inherently ?barbarous?. The importance of individual prisoners of war (a somewhat anachronistic term for much of the middle ages) has also been of great interest to scholars. With regard to the Hundred Years War a good deal of work has been published on the political and diplomatic implications of the imprisonment of major figures. Royal captivities, such as those suffered by the Scottish kings David II and James I of Scotland, and Jean II of France have received considerable attention, as have those (other) major figures captured at battles such as Poitiers (1356) and Agincourt (1415), most famously Charles d?Orléans.

In an important contribution to the subject, Rémy Ambühl explores the wider process of ransoming and examines how it applied to society as a whole during the period of the Hundred Years War. He moves the discussion beyond a consideration of how being captured in battle impacted on the career, life and family of the high nobility and those of royal blood, to explore how the culture of ransoming also influenced the lives of ordinary soldiers. The book is concerned chiefly with the mores and practices of ransoming, and with the experiences of captive and 'master', and less consideration is given to the technical and legal aspects of the process – these, however, are not ignored. Chapter one, 'Law, ransom and the status of the prisoner of war?' reviews some aspects of legislation, namely the 'law of arms?', royal ordinances, and contract law.

The increasing professionalisation of military activity (perhaps a military revolution) had a considerable impact on the process of ransoming during this period. Changes in recruitment, strategy, tactics, payment, equipment, and other facets of military activity brought new pressures and possibilities. As ransoming had developed, primarily, as a practice between members of the aristocracy, the increasing importance of the 'common soldier', of longbowmen, infantrymen, and gunners, had major implications (see for example pp. 112–15). Because of this, and because of the political and financial importance of many prisoners certain efforts were required to systematise the process and to assert royal rights over those taken captive in the Anglo-French wars. Regulations might also be needed for reasons of military security – to break ranks in a desperate hunt for a substantial ransom could be perilous in the context of a battle in which infantry discipline was essential to success. Some brief mention is made of changing military tactics in the book. These might be considered in a little more depth although some of these changes are disclosed through the many case studies.

Because of the changing nature of the battlefield, the Plantagenets established clear rules by which they could acquire prisoners of note/public standing. Set out in indentures, these also might specify the proportions of a ransom which a soldier could be required to pass on to his commander. It became usual practice over the course of the war for a third of the value of a captive to be given to the captor's superior and a third of that (i.e. a ninth) to be passed to the Crown (unless one's superior was the king who in that case received a third). In return for reasonable compensation English monarchs also had direct rights to the most important enemy commanders. From the late 14th century English royal ordinances were also issued prior to campaigns to clarify expectations concerning military conduct. If such orders were enforced in the expeditionary forces of Edward III no clear evidence for them still exists, although orders were issued before specific battles in an effort to maintain order in the ranks. The ordinances reflect the need to control the natural greed of soldiers, who, after all, had been recruited with the promise of booty, of which ransoms might be the most valuable, forefront in their minds (pp. 28–31, 98–106, 115).

The terms by which Valois kings could purchase English soldiers and their allies were, by comparison, rather vague, although tradition appears to suggest that the Crown could purchase any prisoner for a sum up to 10,000 *fo* (*franc d'or*). The evidence concerning greater, but more importantly lesser prisoners encourages the author to re-evaluate what has often been seen as the primacy of the role of the state in the business of ransoming. He suggests that views such as Contamine's exaggerate the reality. (1) Ambühl argues that although the state interfered in the business of ransoming at times to direct the process of ransoming and to prevent individuals or groups being freed, these were rarely long-lasting prohibitions, when they were properly observed. One of the book's most important contributions is to nuance and clarify the balance between public and private interests in the business of ransoming.

The military r/evolution brought a change in the social complexion of armies and also a change in what had been the typical relationship between 'master' and prisoner. The author considers the significance of honour in securing payment and the means by which an aristocratic prisoner might be publically shamed if he did not fulfil his obligations to his captor. In the context of the Hundred Years War in which the common soldiery played an increasingly important role we see a greater use of formal contracts between master and prisoner which perhaps reflects a belief that honour might not offer sufficient security when dealing with those of markedly different social status or with those for whom honour was not valued as a public declaration of identity. Such contracts fixed the size of ransoms and the terms of payment. Although it is

difficult to be certain quite how far down the hierarchy such contracts operated they certainly appear to have been fairly common.

Because of work undertaken by the author and others, most notably Chris Given-Wilson and Françoise Beriac-Lainé (on the prisoners captured at Agincourt and Poitiers respectively) the book focuses on two main periods – the 1370s and the years between c.1420 and c.1440.⁽²⁾ It was in this latter period that the term ‘prisoner of war’ (*prisonnier de guerre* / *prisonarius de guerra*) was first used. Prior to this descriptions range from *prisonnier de bonne guerre* (prisoner of ‘good’ war) or, more commonly, a combatant would be said to have been *pris par/pour fait de guerre* (taken by act of war) (pp. 4–5). This, of course, raises important questions about who was considered a combatant during the Hundred Years War and whether this indicates a marked change in ransoming culture.

Over the course of the war it is clear that the position of prisoners of war shifted according to political circumstances and changing concepts of sovereignty were also significant – throughout the book the author returns to issues of kingship. This is entirely appropriate, and was, potentially, of striking importance to contemporaries since, in theory, any French prisoner of war could be considered guilty of *lèse-majesté* and executed. Such concerns were brought into sharp relief when the treaty of Troyes was sealed in 1420 (see chapter three, ‘Status and politics in Lancastrian Normandy?’). Thereafter, partisans of the Dauphin were no longer enemy combatants (prisoners of war) but rebels. In practice, however, this made little difference. In English Normandy, however, an attempt to exterminate pockets of resistance did threaten the safety usually enjoyed by those captured: the distinction between a criminal and a prisoner of war became very uncertain (see for example pp. 87–97).

Although the ostensible purpose of the book is to examine the process and practice of ransoming as it applied to the ‘lower orders’, matters pertaining to the elite and, indeed, to kings are considered in considerable detail. Indeed, although the author does an admirable job in casting his net widely to explore the broad social ramifications of ransoming, perhaps inevitably a substantial number of examples are drawn from the ranks of the elite. The political and diplomatic value of high-ranking prisoners is well-known in shaping the diplomacy of the Hundred Years War: the capture of Charles de Blois led to the treaty of Westminster (1356), that of Jean II to the treaty of Brétigny (1360), for example. Chapter seven also explores the means by which kings and princes could raise the necessary revenue for their own ransoms (pp. 184–202). A capture might also offer the opportunity to influence diplomatic arrangements of a lesser sort such as an exchange of prisoners or one could bribe or pressurise a prisoner to change their allegiance (pp. 150–7).

The book provides a clear overview of the process of ransoming from capture to captivity and to possible release. The author considers in some detail the actual moment of capture, the necessary words, gestures and pledges offered (pp. 106–9), as well as the criteria used to judge a prisoner’s financial value. Chivalric treatises such as those written by Honorat Bovet and Christine de Pizan argued that a ransom should approximate to a prisoner’s annual income. Ambühl notes that, in reality, an earl or a count would rarely secure his freedom for less than £5,000, an annual income which only the wealthiest enjoyed. The author shows that a man’s reputation, his social and political connections, as well as his apparent wealth were all taken into account when setting a ransom, as were the costs incurred during his captivity. Consequently, there was little uniformity when setting the ransoms of the elite, especially as political and military circumstances might also influence the amount demanded. Chivalric concerns could also be important: the celebrated case of Bertrand du Guesclin captured at the battle of Najera (1367) and purchased by the Black Prince is a good example of this (pp. 136–7). After taunting the prince that he feared to release him, Edward demanded that he place a value on his own freedom. Du Guesclin did so – a splendidly vast amount – and Charles V paid the sum. The king soon appointed Bertrand Constable of France from which office he engineered the reconquest of all the English had gained up until the treaty of Brétigny – much of which had been governed by the Black Prince. Not all prisoners fared so well. Greed was the cause of the deaths and suffering of many – one Robert Chesnel employed a torturer who had responsibilities to encourage prisoners to increase the values they placed on their lives (pp. 37, 127).

Although the value placed on the freedom of the elite was subject to wide variation, the ransoms of the lesser soldiery became increasingly standardised over the course of the struggle (pp. 141-5). This was an important development in the whole business of ransoming – its extension to the lower echelons of the military hierarchy. A scale of ransom prices for those below the elite became increasingly systematic. Alongside this process the costs associated with the maintenance of a prisoner (board and lodging) became fixed. Known as *les marz*, this was usually calculated as worth about a fifth of the ransom.

Once a ransom was set prisoners might petition their commanders to assist them with payment. Apart from in a few exceptional cases, there was no contractual obligation for them to do so, and Ambühl argues that ‘Princes simply could not afford to give support to all their subjects who were prisoners of the enemy’ (p. 227). This is a telling statement in many ways and it reflects the wider importance of this subject – so many were involved in the culture of ransoming either as ‘masters’ or prisoners. In another context we learn of the unfortunate John More, a sergeant-at-arms was captured on seven occasions, and the terminally unlucky Jean de Rousselet who was taken prisoner no fewer than 14 times.

Should a prince not be forthcoming with assistance a prisoner might turn to his social circle for aid (chapter nine). This brings us to the familiar and yet still awkward subject of defining friendship in the later middle ages.⁽³⁾ The author is perhaps wrong to say that ransom cases don’t shed any clearer light on the subject. He offers several intriguing examples and is perhaps somewhat restricted in his wish that the document explicitly use the terms ‘friend’ or ‘friendship’ (pp. 230-1). The role of brothers-in-arms is also considered in this context with those familiar examples of John Clanvowe and William Neville (pp. 243-4) and Nicholas Molyneux and John Winter (p. 244)

One might quibble that the book could do more to show clearly the changes in the practice of ransoming which took place over the course of the Hundred Years War. This is, in part, because the author discerns few major turning points in the process during the struggle. The appearance of the phrase ‘prisoner of war’ in the 1420s may be indicative of changing attitudes, although it was probably introduced simply to distinguish between an enemy combatant and a criminal. As the author acknowledges, however, much of his evidence focuses on Normandy, Maine and Anjou, and evidence from elsewhere in France might provide a slightly different picture of developments.

The book has much to offer those interested in prisoners of war in other periods, they will, however, need to be well briefed about the context from which the many examples are drawn. There is little here to guide those with no background knowledge of the Hundred Years War. It is also the case that those other theatres in which the Hundred Years War was fought, particularly Scotland and the Iberian Peninsula, receive little attention. This is chiefly restricted to some consideration of Edward III’s prisoners, including David II, from the battle of Neville’s Cross (1346), and the clash between Henry IV and Hotspur over those captured at Humbleton Hill (1420) (pp. 56-7). These, however, are minor quibbles; this is an important book based on excellent and extensive research. The archival work, in particular, is most impressive. On occasion one wishes that the author might chance his arm with some possible interpretations of evidence, but Ambühl offers a very balanced consideration of the subject, replete with examples. We are offered a nuanced interpretation of the business of ransoming which sees it as evolving as a consequence of influences from below which were at least as significant as those imposed from above. This, then, is a book which details the practicalities and ethos of ransoming, and provides us with a new perspective on not only prisoners of war but wider considerations of economics, chivalry, social bonds and sovereignty.

Notes

1. P. Contamine, ‘The growth of state control: practices of war, 1300-1800 – ransom and booty’, in *War and Competition between States*, ed. P. Contamine (Oxford, 2000), pp. 164-93. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Rémy Ambühl, ‘A fair share of the profits? The ransoms of Agincourt’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 50 (2006), 129-50; idem, ‘Le Sort des prisonniers d’Azincourt (1415)’, *Revue du Nord*, 89 (2007),

755?88; Françoise Beriac-Lainé and Chris Given-Wilson, *Les Prisonniers de la bataille de Poitiers* (Paris, 2002).[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. See for example P. Maddern, 'Best Trusted Friends?: concepts and practices of friendship among fifteenth-century Norfolk gentry?', in *England in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. N. Rogers (Stamford, CT, 1994), pp. 100?16.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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