

War and Peace in Ancient and Medieval History

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Philip de Souza

John France

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Jenny Benham

Reading the introduction to this book one may be forgiven for thinking that the title is somewhat misleading for a volume given to the examination of 'the processes of the making and breaking of peace treaties and truces', rather than to war (p. 1). However, though this is not a book that is concerned with the role of war in a traditional sense, it does do something far more important: it recognises that war and peace are two sides of the same coin. In doing so, all of the essays in this volume, to a greater or lesser extent, focus on the contribution that treaties, truces and negotiations made to political development, showing the legal, theoretical and ideological framework as well as the more pragmatic limitations of military and political power.

Beginning in Ancient Greece, P. J. Rhodes investigates the various kinds of ambiguity found in treaties from the Greek world of the 5th and 4th centuries BC. Through an analysis of a number of agreements, Rhodes considers the extent to which 'a treaty meant what its participants wanted it to mean', while nevertheless stressing that these agreements did matter, particularly when they were reinforced by oaths (p. 11). He also examines the role of language in treaties, arguing that 'different states on different occasions' used ambiguous expressions with the intention of interpreting them to their own advantage (pp. 24, 27).

This emphasis on realism and *realpolitik* is aptly followed up by Eduard Rung's essay on Graeco-Persian relations from the 6th to the 4th century BC. Here, Rung examines how in this period diplomacy was often preferred by both the Greek states and the Persian kings in order to maintain a balance of power. This was a pragmatic and constantly evolving response to political circumstances from two sides whose capacities for direct confrontations were reduced by numerous internal problems.

Turning to practices in the western Mediterranean, J. W. Rich aims to set out 'a novel conception of the role of treaties of alliance in the extension of Roman dominance in Italy' by showing that the orthodox view that all non-colonial Italian allies were tied to Rome by treaties is too simplistic (p. 75). Traditionally, it was assumed that the Romans used two treaties of alliance – the equal treaty (*foedus aequum*) and the unequal treaty (*foedus iniquum*) – but Rich shows that there was 'considerable diversity, ranging from specially favoured nations to those whose treaty terms were harshly unequal' (p. 59). Rich concludes that while some of the Italian allies may have been bound to the Romans by treaty, others may simply have been tied to them through *deditio* (an act of surrender) or capture and subsequent restitution (p. 70).

Leaving practical diplomacy behind, Philip de Souza's article investigates the role of the Roman emperor as a maker of both war and peace. Through an analysis of the works of a number of well-known Latin writers, de Souza explores the ideology and expectations on successive emperors from Augustus to Constantine as successful war leaders, fighting just wars in order to bring peace to Rome and her provinces. Achieving success in performing this role was a delicate balancing act for the emperors, who frequently came under pressure from the established aristocratic elite demanding victories, while at the same time having to appeal to those in the provinces for whom peace, order and justice were more important.

Moving into late antiquity, A. D. Lee focuses on the mechanics of treaty making and on the strategies by which the late Roman empire dealt with its neighbours at a time when it was being seriously threatened to the north (by Germanic tribes) and to the east (by Persia). Lee argues that dealings with these different enemies had certain distinctive and individual features, notably the use of written treaties in dealings with Persia, yet, there were also some shared broader features. Hostages, for instance, feature in the empire's dealing with both its northern and Persian neighbours, even though they had quite different roles. In agreements with northern peoples, hostages were usually handed over as a guarantee for an extended period, while in Roman-Persian relations they served only 'as short-term guarantees until the implementation of an agreement' (p. 116).

Staying in the same period, Michael Whitby explores the role of good faith and trust in Byzantine diplomacy. Whitby shows how in this period diplomatic structures emerged between Rome and Persia so as to facilitate more regular and formal contacts. Between these two established powers there were tangible benefits to appear to be trustworthy, but Whitby argues that the Romans did not expect their European ('barbarian') neighbours to be as reliable as the Persians.

Catherine Holmes continues the investigation into Byzantine practices through a discussion of the diplomatic relations between Byzantium and the Islamic world during the 10th and 11th centuries, arguing that it can reveal much about frontier governance in this period. Holmes argues that Byzantine rule in the East has often been represented as being founded on a principle of 'persecution of non-Greek Orthodox populations by a rigid and unresponsive administration run from Constantinople' (p. 146). Refuting this, and using the 969 treaty of Aleppo as her model, Holmes shows that the Byzantines were often very flexible in their relations with Muslims, deploying tribute agreements and 'gradual absorption of local administrative and political structures' (p. 156).

Using a comparative approach, John France investigates the conduct of combatants attacking castles and fortified sites showing how though it is too early to speak of the 'Laws of War' in the 12th century, there were nevertheless unwritten rules guiding the actions of warring sides. France argues that in the medieval West, 'despite occasional acts of brutality', the principals in wars usually extended mercy to one another, because wars were controlled by aristocratic elites who had links and ties of loyalty with other similar elites

(p. 161). In the Latin East, however, France concedes that wars between men of different religions tended to have a bitter edge. Yet, in both the East and the West, 'practical military necessity usually obliged all sides to support the conventions of surrender' (p. 171). For instance, it was usually understood that besieged could negotiate better terms the earlier they gave in and, similarly, that 'any fortress that held out to the end was at its attackers' mercy' (p. 172). Thus, France's study shows that attacks on castles and fortified sites may have dominated medieval warfare, but they presented such formidable problems for both attackers and defenders that both sides were often pre-disposed to negotiations.

The last two essays in this collection deal with events in the Medieval West. Richard Abels turns to a much discussed problem with wider implications, namely how peace was made between a settled kingdom and a fluid and changing group of raiders; the Vikings.⁽¹⁾ He argues that dealing with these enemies presented particular problems for kings because of a conceptual difference in what constituted peace and because Viking chieftains 'were not usually territorial kings and their forces were not a people' (p. 179). Making peace with one chieftain and his men did not, hence, guard against attacks by another Viking band. Abels argues that peacemaking with such foes could only be successful after a demonstration of military strength and when Viking leaders sought to redefine themselves as territorial rulers. The point is aptly proved through an analysis of agreements concluded between Anglo-Saxon rulers and Vikings between the 9th and the early 11th centuries. 'In short', Abels concludes, 'when Viking leaders had something to gain from making and keeping peace with English rulers, they did so' (p. 192).

Esther Pascua's piece on 12th-century peacemaking between kings in the medieval West traces the process of centralisation of royal power and the role played by war and negotiations in that development. She focuses on the practices of the nobility and their 'principal strategy' of 'multiple services to different kings' (p. 202), arguing that in such a political environment, agreements 'were tools to define political equality and to subordinate the nobility to political and territorial frameworks' (p. 210).

War and peace are familiar terms to historians, yet secondary literature is still skewed in favour of the former of these concepts. As a book dealing firmly with both of these topics, this volume will make a welcome contribution to the secondary literature. Indeed, there is much to commend in this collection of essays. They are clearly written, arranged in a logical manner and there is a good bibliography. Certainly, one of the strongest features of the book is the fact that each article can be easily followed by non-specialists on the subject or the period. This feature is also one of the most interesting aspects of the volume, and, I suspect, one of its more enduring characteristics, for there is a wealth of material here for the historian to ponder, and which will allow him or her to compare and contrast practices across a long time period and a wide geographical area. For instance, the investigations by Rung and Lee into the mechanics of diplomacy will appeal to historians of the Medieval West not just those of Ancient Greece and late antiquity. Similarly, de Souza's article surveying Latin writings on the ideology of war and peace is of great interest to this particular historian of 12th-century Europe. These are just three examples from a volume with 11 fine essays.

Notes

1. For some examples, see Ryan Lavelle, 'Towards a political contextualization of peacemaking and peace agreements in Anglo-Saxon England', in *Peace and Negotiation: Strategies for Coexistence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. D. Wolfthal (Turnhout, 2000); R. Abels, 'King Alfred's peace-making strategies with the Vikings', *Haskins Society Journal*, 3 (1991); Niels Lund, 'Peace and non-peace in the Viking Age: Ottar in Biarmaland, the Rus in Byzantium, and Danes and Norwegians in England', *Proceedings of the Tenth Viking Conference, Larkollen, Norway, 1985*, ed. J. E. Knirk (Oslo, 1987).[Back to \(1\)](#)

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3754>