chapter one

VIOLENCE AND THE MEDIEVAL HISTORIAN

The English knight hit Sir Regnault de Roye very hard near the top of his helm, but did no other damage to him; Sir Regnault hit him on the shield with such a firm, powerful thrust, delivered with so strong an arm – for he was one of the strongest and toughest jousters in France at that time and also he was truly in love with a gay and beautiful young lady, and this contributed greatly to his success in all his undertakings – that his lance pierced the left-hand side of the English knight’s shield and went straight into his arm. As it did so, the lance broke, the longer part falling to the ground and the shorter part remaining in the shield with the steel point in the arm.

Jean Froissart (c. 1337–c. 1410), Chronicles, IV, on the tournament held at Saint-Inglevert in 1390.

Medieval violence seems to exercise a certain fascination for a great many people, as witnessed by the violent tenor of movies or books set in the Middle Ages and of the ever more popular fantasy role-playing games set in medieval-like worlds. The appeal perhaps lies in the fact that violence in the Middle Ages was personal, direct, and visceral; it involved not guns or bombs but swords, knives, and lances, wooden staffs, clubs, and fists. According to the texts that describe it, it was often motivated by equally visceral feelings: anger, shame, and the craving for revenge, but also love, pride, and the desire for justice and glory. Medieval texts make no effort to hide the effects of violence. They tell us quite openly of torn or burnt flesh, spurting blood, the noise of metal striking metal, and the suffering of victims. It is possibly because of these qualities that medieval violence can be compellingly interesting, particularly to undergraduate students; the courses I have taught on violence in the Middle Ages, or on its purveyors such as knights, have consistently been the most well-attended of my offerings.

I too am drawn to medieval violence, not simply because it fascinates me as it does my students, but also because it opens up a route into the medieval worldview. From a modern perspective, medieval accounts of
violence can seem contradictory. They can present violence as lawless and anarchic, as a force for evil that disrupts the right order of the world. They can also present it as a tool of right and justice, as a weapon for the protection of the poor and helpless, and even as God’s way of aiding his faithful. Violence lays waste to villages and towns; it offers its disciples glory, power, and lasting fame. Violence desecrates churches and monasteries; it is also the means by which God and his followers protect the faithful and their interests and avenge wrong. One gets the sense in fact that violence was not considered intrinsically bad. It could rather be good or bad depending on who was using it against whom and for what purpose. More puzzling to modern western sensibilities, it seems that anyone could wield violence. Though bearers of constituted authority, such as counts or kings, did use violence against wrongdoers or those that harmed their interests, so did many other people, often with the applause of their fellows.

Medieval violence presents us, therefore, with attitudes towards violence and its legitimate use, but more fundamentally towards right, wrong, power, and the proper ordering of human society, which differ profoundly from those that dominate modern western societies. We live at the dawn of the twenty-first century in a world in which the dominant idea of order claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence for the state. At the same time, our world is riven by violence, much of which is very difficult to understand when seen through the lens of western ideas about order. Societies that appear to be more violent than our own, or acts of violence that seem particularly incomprehensible – i.e., cruel, unjustified, wanton, irrational, or driven by religious beliefs – are often called “medieval”. Those who do so apparently see the Middle Ages as having been similarly violent and/or disordered.

Yet the societies of the modern West are direct heirs to those of medieval Europe. Studying medieval violence thus gives us an opportunity to explore attitudes towards violence and order that are at once foreign and yet ancestors to our own. If we try to understand how medieval people thought about such things as justice and injustice, power and responsibility, and political order, we might get a sense for how some of our own attitudes towards violence evolved. We come away from the effort being able to see – without necessarily validating – violence in our own world that we do not understand not inevitably as irrational but rather driven possibly by worldviews and ideas of order that are different from our own.

So violent and motley was life, that it bore the mixed smell of blood and roses.

_Johan Huizinga_, The Waning of the Middle Ages (1921).
Were medieval societies more violent than those of the modern West? Much of the past scholarship on the Middle Ages certainly thought so. Two decades after the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga published his famous work on the end of the Middle Ages, the French medievalist Marc Bloch in his *Feudal Society* (1939–40) declared that “violence was . . . deep-rooted in the social structure and in the mentality of the age.”

Bloch’s countryman Georges Duby connected violence particularly with knights; “the brutality of these men,” he commented in *The History of French Civilization* (1958), “accustomed as they are to fighting wild animals, and incapable of checking their anger. The battlefields described in the *chansons de geste* are strewn with severed heads and scattered brains.”

Statements such as this reflect the impression created by all kinds of medieval sources, ranging from histories and literary works to hagiography and charters. These sources were, however, as interested in recording the spectacular, the dramatic, the entertaining, the shocking, the legally important, or the polemically useful as are the stories, journalism, records, and blogs of our own day. It is hard to say for certain, therefore, how well they represent the experience of most medieval people.

One might look for safety in statistics. Though the difficulties are profound, efforts have indeed been made to quantify levels of violence in parts of medieval Europe and to compare them to those in modern societies. One of the best remains James B. Given’s 1977 discussion of homicide rates in thirteenth-century England. Given chose homicide as a relatively clear and measurable index of violence (though more on this below), and looked for incidents recorded in royal circuit court, or eyre court, records from individual English counties, or shires. He chose as his measure one that is still in use, namely the number of homicides per 100,000 of population per year. Using his own estimates of the population in his target counties, Given found the highest homicide rate in Warwickshire in 1232, namely 64 homicides per 100,000 per year. The lowest was in the county of Bristol in 1227 and again in 1248, at 4/100,000/year. Over time, Given found that the homicide rate remained highest in Warwickshire, at c. 47/100,000/year over 25 years, while the lowest was in the county of Norfolk, at c. 9/100,000/year over 23 years.

Population estimates for medieval Europe, however, come with a very large margin of error; even the relatively dense documentation of thirteenth-century England permits at best only an educated guess about the number of people living in a given area. So Given redid his calculations using two other population estimates, one done by J.C. Russell for England in 1377 and one produced for the British parliament in 1801. The first of these calculations produced a high of 30/100,000/year (likewise Warwickshire in 1232) and a low of 11/100,000/year (county of
Norfolk, 1250); the second produced a high of 18.9/100,000/year (Bedfordshire, 1276) and a low of 6.8/100,000/year (Kent, 1227).

Given then noted that the United Kingdom as a whole from 1930 onwards had a more or less stable homicide rate of c. 0.4/100,000/year; the United States in 1974 had a homicide rate of 9.7/100,000/year. Within the United States, figures for major cities in the mid-twentieth century ranged from 5.7/100,000/year for Philadelphia to 15.1/100,000/year for Miami. Since Given wrote, various national and international agencies have continued to compile homicide statistics. The UK Home Office, for example, has issued a set of international comparisons of homicide rates for the years 1999–2001.10 The lowest rates were found in the European Union as a whole, which boasted a homicide rate of 1.6/100,000/year for the period. The highest individual rates within the EU were in Finland at 2.9, Northern Ireland at 2.7, and Scotland at 2.2/100,000/year. The Home Office report found higher rates of homicide outside the EU. Lithuania and Estonia, for example, each had 10.6/100,000/year, while Russia had an eye-catching homicide rate of 22.1/100,000/year. The United States in the same period had a rate of 5.6/100,000/year,11 but interesting peaks and valleys appear in the numbers for individual cities. The report found 8.1/100,000/year in San Francisco and 8.7/100,000/year in New York City, as compared to a modest 2.6/100,000/year in London (for which the 1244 eyre court session had produced a figure of 8, and the 1276 session a figure of 15/100,000/year). Washington DC was, however, in a different league, at 42.9/100,000/year.

When stacked up against Given’s for thirteenth-century England, these figures would seem to indicate clearly that life in high medieval England was more violent than life in the modern developed world. Modern homicide rates are for the most part lower, even much lower than Given’s, the range of Given’s population estimates notwithstanding. And yet, it is hard to make this claim absolutely. Given’s estimate for Bristol in 1227, 4/100,000/year, while higher than the 1999–2001 EU numbers produced by the UK Home Office, is lower than the US average. The picture gets more difficult to assess when we break apart the Home Office’s aggregate figures. With Estonia and Lithuania we start to approach the low end of Given’s range for Warwick (11/100,000/year); with Russia we enter into it. With Washington DC we are comfortably above the middle.

To make matters worse, homicide itself as a measure can be misleading. As Given himself points out, thirteenth-century England did not possess the level of weapons technology available to modern killers. In 1970, he notes, guns were estimated in Chicago to be five times as likely
to kill as knives. Medieval homicide rates may not, therefore, include the number of times someone tried to kill someone else but failed. By the same token, the modern west possesses medical technology vastly superior to that of medieval England. An assault that would in the latter have resulted in death may well be survivable today and thus not show up in the records as a homicide.

It is possible, therefore – counterintuitive as it might seem – that thirteenth-century England as a whole was not significantly more violent than the US or EU around the turn of the twenty-first century. Warwick may have been thirteenth-century England’s Washington DC, while Bristol suffered homicide rates only slightly higher than many places in the modern EU. All of this is to say that while much of the US or EU experiences far less violence than much of thirteenth-century England, some city dwellers in the United States and some inhabitants of Russia endure about the same level. And some parts of thirteenth-century England experienced levels of violence little different from those found in much of the west today.

What is certain, however, is that medieval societies were differently violent. As I noted above, violence played a different and in many cases more central role in many medieval societies than it does in modern western ones; it shows up in medieval sources in contexts that are often unimaginable today. This feature of medieval violence, in fact, may well be responsible for the Middle Ages’ reputation as a violent epoch; a different range of people used violence in situations, in ways, and according to norms different from those we have been conditioned by our own experience to expect.

In recent years, a number of scholars have investigated medieval violence from this perspective; that is, they have asked not how violent were the Middle Ages but rather: how were the Middle Ages violent? They have approached this vast subject either by focusing on a particular part of the Middle Ages, on a particular place, on a particular class of sources (such as literature or charters), on particular social groups within medieval society (such as knights or peasants), on a particular kind of violence (such as vengeance killings), or on particular methodological approaches to violence (such as those informed by anthropology or literary theory).

With the help of some of these studies, I would like to explore the variety of ways that medieval people used violence and understood its use, and the range of norms according to which they legitimated or criticized it. I will offer a series of case studies covering the full range of the Middle Ages in time, and much of medieval Europe in space. These case studies will focus on times and places, as well as on sources, that I
think are particularly accessible and illuminating and/or that have drawn significant scholarly attention or provoked particularly intense debate. At the end, I will sketch a picture of how medieval norms of violence developed over time and space.

At that time, sinners were rising up like stalks of wheat. Evil people wasted the vineyard of the Lord just as briars and thorns choked the harvest of the land. Therefore it pleased bishops, abbots, and other religious men that a council be held at which the taking of booty would be prohibited and the property of the saints, which had been unjustly stolen, would be restored. Other evils that fouled the fair countenance of the holy church of God were also struck down by the sharp points of anathemas.

Letaldus of Micy, *The Journey of the Body of St Junianus to the Council of Charroux (989; text composed c. mid 990s)*.

To begin with, we have to be clear about what exactly we mean by “violence”, and what exactly we mean by “norms”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following definition of violence: “the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property; action or conduct characterized by this; treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly interfering with personal freedom.” This definition probably captures the gut sense for what “violence” means that many if not most people share. Violence is the application of physical force in a way that hurts someone or something or that aims to hurt someone or something, such as people, animals, buildings, or other property. Violence causes pain and injury. The pain and injury do not have to be immediately visible. They can be internal, such as the concussion injuries Flemish townspeople in the fourteenth century inflicted when they struck knights wearing plate armor with spears sporting heavy metal cudgels. Or they can be mental or emotional, such as the anguish and mental trauma caused by seeing one’s relatives killed or one’s house or farm destroyed. Violence is much easier to grasp, however, when the pain and injury are visible, that is, when one sees flowing blood, broken bodies, and shattered buildings. Violence crosses boundaries. It is physical contact without permission (hence the corresponding verb, “to violate”); the quintessential example of this aspect of violence is, of course, rape. Violence also restricts one’s freedom; one cannot protect or control one’s body or property as one would wish.

Because the OED definition is so straightforward, it is tempting to think that violence as a category of action or event is timeless or independent of differences in human culture or experience. Unfortunately (especially for historians of violence) this is not true. Violence is not a static, transcultural concept, nor is it an absolute that always transcends differences
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in perspective. To begin with the word violence itself: the English word, as a catch-all term for the kinds of actions described above, does appear in the Middle Ages, but only from the end of the thirteenth century. As it is used today, the word encompasses acts that for most of the Middle Ages would have been described in Latin and with different words. Violence derives from the Latin *violentia*, which originally denoted a particular quality of behavior, namely vehemence, impetuosity, or ferocity. To capture the sorts of phenomena covered by the modern word violence, medieval sources in general tend to use words more specific to what was happening, such as *occidere* or *interficere* (to kill), *vulnere* (to wound), *pugnare* (to fight), *percutere* (to strike), *perdere* (to destroy), *rapere* (to seize, plunder, or rape), *incendere* (to burn) or *per vim* (with force).

When we use the word violence to capture such phenomena as described in Latin texts, therefore, we are uniting them under our own heuristic umbrella. We are perfectly entitled to do so; the OED definition of violence does map onto something real and observable in medieval sources. Medieval people hurt or killed other people; they forcibly seized people or property; they burned, destroyed, or pillaged buildings; they caused emotional injury or trauma. What is not always easy to see, however, is when they did so and, if they did, whether everyone involved would have agreed on whether a given act of violence was legitimate or illegitimate.

In a seminal essay on violence, William Ian Miller has identified three figures whose perspectives we have to understand in order to decide whether an act was violent and, if so, whether it was legitimate or not: the victim, the victimizer (or perpetrator), and the observer. The victim experiences the violence, the victimizer/perpetrator carries it out, and the observer witnesses and interprets it (either directly or after the fact through someone else’s report). The victim might most easily draw our sympathy, especially if there is blood involved, that is, physical evidence that the victim had experienced terror, pain, and loss of limb or life. Correspondingly, it might seem natural to condemn the perpetrator; he or she caused the terror, pain, and loss of limb or life. But how an observer evaluates what happened really depends on whom he or she asks. In modern accounts of police activity, for example, some victims complain that they were subjected to unjustified violence. The police sometimes respond that they had simply restrained someone who posed a threat to society. It is also not as easy as we might like to identify the figures in Miller’s triad. As Miller himself pointed out, the lines between the figures can become very blurred. The victim can become, after the fact, the observer or reporter; so can the perpetrator. A third-party observer
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can, depending on his or her own worldview and position with respect to the victim or perpetrator, easily identify with one or the other.

Regardless of his or her position in the triad, everyone involved in an act of violence interprets and legitimates what he or she has experienced, done, or seen according to the social norms to which he or she gives priority. In other words, the observer or reporter’s position, whether he or she is the victim, perpetrator, or a third party, is embedded in the norms about what constitutes violence and about when violence is justified that he or she believes to apply, believes ought to apply, or has an interest in applying. When faced with a case of possible police brutality, for example, one person might say that the victim had experienced illegitimate violence. Another might argue that the victim was a criminal trying to escape the consequences of his actions who had forced the police to subdue him. One could easily imagine which position might be taken by a politician campaigning on a platform of law and order as opposed to a social worker fighting for the rights of the disadvantaged. It is entirely possible, therefore, that an account of violence might not really tell us much at all about what happened. It might say more about the reporter’s attitude towards the other figures and the preconceptions he or she brings to the situation.

Violence lends itself to rhetorical use because it is often so messy, painful, and sympathy evoking. The words and adjectives associated by a culture with illegitimate violence in particular (such as “horrific”, “raging”, or “bloody”) trigger very strong emotions. They are, therefore, very good for making those that hear or read them think badly of their target. In short, even while violence might seem to be a fairly straightforward phenomenon, we have to be constantly aware that in any given case violence might simply be something of which we accuse someone when we do not like them or their actions, or when we are contesting interests with them and are trying to gain someone else’s sympathy.

Nevertheless, rhetorical charges of violence can still be quite fruitful for our purposes, because to succeed they have to connect with society’s ideas of what constitutes violence and what the differences are between good violence and bad violence. The norms from which observers or reporters can choose in order to identify, evaluate, and judge an act of violence are limited by the pool of norms that are available in their cultural environment. We can therefore say something about that pool of norms by sifting through what they say.

And if anyone from among our sworn followers wishes to engage in a fight or in some struggle against his enemies, and he calls to himself someone from among his peers so that he might render aid to him, and he [the one called]
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does not wish to and then remains indifferent, let the benefice which he has held be taken away from him and be give to him who has remained firm in his steadfastness and fidelity.

Charlemagne, Capitulary of Aachen (801–813), c. 20.31

I define norms as models, standards, or patterns of social behavior that are accepted or expected by members of a group.32 They are patterns of conduct, reflecting a shared or common sense of “the right thing to do”. Such patterned behavior creates what Neil MacCormick has called “normative order”. To paraphrase MacCormick, whenever people conduct themselves in relation to others on the basis of an opinion about the right thing to do which they suppose to be mutual, there is order, provided that there is sufficient overlap in people’s opinions about what the right thing to do is (there can hardly be order when each member of a group holds a different opinion about what is right and what is wrong).

Norms can be stated explicitly in some form. If they are not, we can infer them by watching how people behave; that is, we can look at the behavior of a given group, identify patterns of behavior, and try to articulate the norm or framework of norms that the members of the group seem to be following. Granted, the actual people involved might not have been consciously thinking in terms of the norm or norms we have derived from their behavior, or, if they were, they might not formulate it in the way that we have. Moreover, if we were able to ask them, different people might express the norms differently, or even disagree with each other about what the norms were. They might tell us that they were following one norm while in reality following another,33 or that their behavior violated their own norms, but that circumstances forced them to act as they did.34 Nevertheless, if the evidence suggests strongly enough that people are acting in patterned ways that can be explained by norms, we are justified – particularly in historical cases where we cannot inquire – in articulating those norms to the best of our ability.

Explicitly expressed norms are easier to grasp. They might show up in our sources in a couple of ways. An author, in order to legitimate behavior of which he approves, or delegitimize behavior of which he does not approve, might write a story about it and express an opinion about how things were done or ought to have been done. No matter how strongly our source expresses his norm, it need not be a norm agreed with by any of the people whose actions he is describing, or by anyone else for that matter; simply because a given writer or text declares a norm does not mean that anyone else in his society agreed or paid attention. Unless our source is a complete outsider to the society he is writing about, however, we can assume that the norm is one that is at least comprehensible in his world.
Another possibility is that someone claiming or recognized as having authority over others explicitly formulates a norm, either by oral declaration (recorded by someone else) or in the form of a normative text. We can call such an explicit norm backed by authority a rule. A rule might express a consensus among members of the group it is targeted at. Or it might not; it might reflect an attempt to impose a new normative order, or to modify an existing one, or to get a subgroup that disagrees with the dominant idea of order to go along with it. The latter seems to be the case with the chapter from Charlemagne’s capitulary of Aachen quoted above. In the early ninth century, followers of the king were supposed to respond when their fellows asked for help in fighting their enemies. Some followers apparently preferred when such situations arose not to get involved, prompting Charlemagne to remind them pointedly what they were supposed to do.

It is when a person or a group of persons with authority over an entire society promulgates rules and tries to enforce them over a long span of time that we reach the arena of law. Rule making and rule enforcing become institutionalized. It is dangerous to apply this definition of law to the Middle Ages, however, because we cannot assume that this is what medieval texts meant when they used words that we might translate as “law”. Law is in fact very difficult to grasp for much of the period. The Latin term for law, lex, originally meant more or less the same thing as law in the modern sense: a binding norm (ius) that had been committed to writing in an authoritative form (thus becoming lex). By the early Middle Ages, however, what lex meant is much harder to understand. The word overlaps, and sometimes appears to be almost interchangeable with, related Latin words such as ius or usus, which strictly translate as “right” and “custom” respectively.

In France and England after the turn of the first millennium, lex (laga or lei in Old English or Old French respectively) could refer either to written law, ranging from the law of the Old Testament to a new law issued by a king, or to all binding norms written or unwritten. It could refer simply to what was considered correct or just in a given situation. It could be contrasted with agreement or settlement, but it could also refer to the terms of an agreement or settlement. Law differed from violent self-help, but some violent self-help was lawful. It is also sometimes difficult to distinguish lex/laga/lei from ius/riht/dreit = “right”, as in “this property belonged to him by right”. Moreover, lex did not necessarily stem from one particular authority. Christian bishops, for example, could issue leges for the members of their own households.

From the later eleventh and twelfth centuries, the medieval idea of law gradually came to focus on what we can call “learned law”, that is,
written, codified, and rationally organized bodies of norms that were studied and taught in law schools by legal scholars and that came to possess their own logic, rules, and vocabulary. One such law (Roman law), however, transcended actual governments and existed seemingly of its own right in its own legal space (though another such law, canon law, was firmly anchored in the government of the Roman Church, and a third, the English Common Law, in the authority of the English kings).41

Along our journey, we will look at how law related to and affected the use of violence in several different contexts. We will do so, however, with the constant awareness that the English word law has associations that might not apply to the world of our sources.

As noted above, different people could observe, experience, or participate in the same act of violence at the same time but understand it in different ways depending on their circumstances, perspectives, and purposes. Some medieval authors understood this perfectly well. Such a clash of norms, for example, forms the central conflict in the early French vernacular poem The Song of Roland. Written down sometime around 1100, Roland tells the mythologized story of a historical figure, Roland, who served Charlemagne in the late eighth century. Nevertheless, the poem puts its characters squarely in the world of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, that is, of knights fighting on horseback with lances and swords, of “sweet France”, and of a campaign against Muslims that evokes the First Crusade. As the poem opens, Charlemagne and his Franks have been campaigning against the Muslims in Spain for seven long years. Tired and eager to return home, they are willing to accept a peace-offer from their foes, an offer that included a wagonload of treasure and a promise from the Muslim king to accept Christian baptism. All of Charlemagne’s barons urge him to agree, save Roland, who is Charlemagne’s nephew and best knight, and one of the Twelve Peers of France. Roland urges Charlemagne not to trust the Muslims, but instead to finish the job they had started.

Nevertheless persuaded to accept the Muslim offer, Charlemagne asks for volunteers to lead the embassy. Roland and others of the Peers step
forward, but Charlemagne refuses them. His Peers are too important and the mission is very dangerous; the last Frankish envoys to the Muslim king were decapitated. Roland then suggests his stepfather, Ganelon, and Charlemagne agrees. Ganelon is outraged. Not only has he been insulted – he is obviously less important than Roland – but he has been ordered to face his possible death at the urging of his own stepson. Roland has thus betrayed the loyalty due to kin. Ganelon therefore (in the passage quoted above) declares his intent to take vengeance on Roland.

Ganelon achieves his revenge by betraying the Frankish army. He suggests to the Muslim king that his forces ambush the Frankish rear-guard as it moves through a narrow pass in the Pyrenees mountains. Commanding the rear-guard would be Roland. The ambush succeeds. Despite a heroic resistance by Roland, his companions Oliver and Archbishop Turpin, and the rest of his troops, the rear-guard is killed to the last man. Only a despairing signal from Roland on his mighty war-horn alerts Charlemagne, who comes thundering back to exact his own vengeance on the treacherous foe.

Ganelon is captured, and taken back to Charlemagne’s palace in France for a trial. There the clash of norms involved in Roland’s death is laid bare. Ganelon argues that he had a valid grievance; he had been insulted and betrayed by his own kin. He had moreover publicly declared his intent to claim revenge and had done so. He was, therefore, perfectly within his rights to arrange for Roland’s death. His argument gains some sympathy among the gathered Frankish magnates. Thirty of his kinsmen agree to support him with their lives, and some of Charlemagne’s advisors urge the emperor to forgive Ganelon and receive him back into his service. Only one man, Thierry, argues to the contrary. Ganelon has committed treason, Thierry declares; though Roland had injured him, Roland’s service to Charlemagne should have guaranteed his safety. Thierry’s position ultimately triumphs because it has the support of God. A judicial duel is held between Thierry and one of Ganelon’s kinsmen. Thierry prevails with God’s help. Ganelon and his entire group of kin and followers are executed.

These two norms – one legitimating a violent response to personal injury or insult and one subordinating the use of violence to the needs and interests of the ruler – are two of the most important norms of violence visible in medieval sources. Medieval people appealed to these norms, but to others as well, according to their needs, their interests, and their particular situations. The story of violence in the Middle Ages, therefore, can be told as the story of the norms that people invoked as they sought to justify the use of violence by themselves or their allies, or to criticize the use of violence by others.
Violence... was as normal and enduring as the public order it afflicted. That it was dis-order, no one who placed their hope in legitimate authority doubted.


At this point it needs to be asked: does violence have to be governed by norms at all? For example, what about pathological violence, i.e. violence that results from mental disorder? Unfortunately, it is very difficult to pin down what different societies regard as pathological. As Michel Foucault and others have made clear, pathology lies very much in the eye of the beholder, who is in turn shaped by his own culture and context. One time and place’s pathology might be another’s valid and normal behavior. Feeding Christians to lions, for example, was regarded by many good, upstanding Romans of the first and second centuries as perfectly understandable, and even necessary for the moral health of society. To many of us, this kind of public execution might seem to reflect a disordered community blood lust.

What about violence provoked by strong emotions? Violence is intimately linked with emotions, especially fear and anger, but also in some cases (as we will see) with passions such as joy and love. It is tempting to assume that emotions are the antithesis of order, that when people are confronted with a situation that provokes a strong emotion such as anger, fear, or disgust, they sometimes simply act in response to that emotion, without spending any time thinking about the norms that according to their society ought to apply. A flagrant injury provokes outrage; the injured party immediately responds with violence.

There is considerable evidence that emotions are hard-wired into the human organism and that physiological responses to emotions are similar across human cultures. There is also considerable evidence, however, that the experiences that trigger a given emotion, and the ways that people react to that emotion, are socially constructed. What makes someone angry in one society may not be the same as what makes someone angry in another; what one does when angry may not be the same either. Moreover, a person who acted violently out of anger, when asked after the fact, will usually explain his or her behavior in terms of some normative framework, even if it is as simple as “he made me angry by doing/saying X and therefore I killed him”. Since norms play an essential role in triggering emotions and in channeling responses, it seems unlikely that emotion-driven violence can be normless – though such violence may well violate a community’s idea of which norms should be followed. A written account of emotion-driven violence may, therefore, tell us about the social norms and beliefs that provoke strong emotions.
and about the responses that these emotions trigger. It may also, however, do no such thing. As we will see, one popular tactic for blackening an opponent is to accuse him or her of having been violent without cause or reason, or of having been driven by wild and senseless emotion. Such an accusation will, however, tell us a great deal about the norms that the author thinks were being violated or ought to have been upheld.

What about violence driven by greed, ambition, or the desire for power, and carried out simply because one can? If one were to try to articulate a norm behind such violence, it might be: “you have something I need or want, therefore I am entitled to take it because I can and because you cannot stop me”. This sort of violence certainly takes place in all societies, and it is disruptive in all sorts of ways. People forcibly steal and rape, and injure and kill, because they have the power, because they want to, and because they want the fruits; such violent acts quite obviously have threatened and continue to threaten or collapse political orders. However, they do not have to; this kind of violence does not by definition mean that normative order has failed.

If the sort of violence described above is going to be more than a short-term activity, it runs into some natural limits. Supposing one steals for profit and kills those who resist. The first time or two will be successful. Sooner or later, however, one’s target, be it an individual, a farm, or a town, will either be dead, have run out of things to steal, or have become good enough at defending itself that the potential cost of stealing becomes too high. Our perpetrator will have to move on to fresher and less prepared targets, that is, become what Mancur Olson has called a “roaming bandit”. Unless one is prepared to move over a very wide range, however, this well too will eventually run dry after all targets have become exhausted or too costly to hit (unless one is in a situation like a small-time criminal in a large modern city, where the scale of violence is small and the supply of potentially lucrative targets is virtually inexhaustible). Over the long term, it is much more profitable to work out an arrangement with one’s target, or with a limited and coherent group of targets, whereby one guarantees it the stability necessary to continue to generate wealth that one can take in exchange for a promise to protect it from other bandits and to leave it enough income to make generating wealth worthwhile. In other words, one becomes a “stationary bandit” running what amounts to a protection racket. At this stage, the bandit and the target by necessity become bound up over time in a set of norms about what level of extortion is permissible, what levels of violence are necessary to maintain the arrangement, what sorts of threats obligate the bandit to defend those whom he is claiming to protect, etc. Olson has gone so far as to suggest that all human government, with its
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taxation, police forces, armies, and laws, originated in some fashion from stationary banditry.

An altercation now arose between certain Franks in Tournai. The immediate cause was that the son of one of them angrily and repeatedly rebuked the son of another, who had married his sister, for neglecting his wife and going after loose women. The young man at fault took no notice. The ill-feeling reached such a pitch that the girl’s brother attacked his brother-in-law and killed him, with some of his relations. Then the brother in his turn was killed by those who had supported his brother-in-law. In the end not a single member of either family remained alive, except one survivor for whom there was no opponent left.

*Gregory, Bishop of Tours (c. 539–594), Ten Books of Histories, X/27.*

Then, [the king] sent Bishop Henry of Würzburg and Erkanbald, abbot of Fulda, to burn and destroy the burg Schweinfurt. When they arrived, Margrave Henry’s illustrious mother, Eila, received and greeted them, as was proper for such persons. As soon as she understood the nature of the king’s orders, she became agitated and hurried to the church, declaring that she would rather die in the flames than cooperate in the burning of this building by departing alive. Hence, the previously mentioned lords, putting aside secular concerns in favor of the love of Christ, modified the punishment and merely pulled down the walls and outbuildings. They also mollified the sorrowful woman with the promise that they would themselves restore everything, whenever the king’s favor permitted.

*Thietmar of Merseburg, Chronicon, V.38 (1003).*

As noted above, people can be violent in response to entirely different needs or desires, that is, those prompted by emotion, by honor and insult, by wrongs that demand to be made right. When violence erupts in such contexts, it can be very disruptive and touch off what is frequently called a “feud”.

Feud is one of those terms that historians like to argue about. The argument rests on the quite reasonable point that for scholars to communicate successfully, they need to agree on what their terms mean. Is any act of personal violence in retaliation for a perceived wrong, that is, for the sake of vengeance, by definition a feud? Or does a violent conflict only reach the level of feud when one such attack follows another in a tit-for-tat chain? Violence for the sake of vengeance shows up quite frequently in medieval sources, often in a tantalizing but ambiguous connection with words such as *faidus* that evoke, but may not necessarily have meant the same thing, as our modern word feud. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that medievalists have argued about how to label it. Some use the term feud for any act of violence carried out for the sake of vengeance. Others restrict the term to series of tit-for-tat actions.
that demonstrate a lasting enmity transcending its immediate cause. Others restrict it to hostility between kin-groups, while still others, faced with sources that do not allow one to put a particular quarrel clearly in one box or another, opt for terms such as “feud-like” behavior.54

Since feud has been understood in so many different ways by so many different people, I am reluctant to use it as a category of analysis, and I will therefore avoid the term wherever possible. I think it is much more helpful and illuminating to talk about acts of violence in the terms used by the sources themselves, which usually have to do with things like right or wrong, vengeance, etc. Otherwise we risk imposing artificial distinctions on our sources and thus limiting our inquiry in an artificial way.

As suggested by the quotation above from Gregory of Tours, vengeance attacks can destroy the parties involved and potentially the society around them as well. So is this kind of violence the enemy of normative order? How do societies that admit (not to mention glorify) vengeance survive? This question was tackled in the latter half of the twentieth century by social and legal anthropologists, who turned it on non-western societies that appeared to function stably despite the absence of the laws, judicial systems, etc. that in modern western societies limit violent self-help. An important result of this work is the idea of the so-called “peace in the feud” advanced by Max Gluckman and since elaborated on by others.55 According to this model, violent vengeance can itself serve as the basis for a functioning social order, especially in smaller scale, relatively egalitarian societies in which people are more likely to know or at least have some sort of connection to each other. Should someone do some sort of wrong to another, he faces the threat of violent vengeance. This threat, however, also affects others. These others can include the victim’s kin, who might be obligated to support one of their own in a vengeance attack, or the perpetrator’s kin, who could expect to have to defend the perpetrator, whether or not they were directly involved in or agreed with his actions. They could also include third parties who might enjoy kinship, friendship, or economic connections with both sides and who see their interests threatened by an outbreak of violence. Whatever the case, those whose interests might be harmed by an outbreak of violence deploy peer pressure, usually with the help of third parties with ties to both sides, to induce (or force) the perpetrator to pay an acceptable compensation of some sort to the victim or his family. This compensation would satisfy the victim group’s need for redress, both materially but especially emotionally; the perpetrator would have acknowledged publicly that he had wronged them. Should one or the other party refuse to give or accept compensation, however, that party ran the risk of losing the support of everyone who felt threatened by
the prospect of further violence, including perhaps their own kin. This is a very dangerous situation in which to be, because without support one has to face the vengeance of one’s probably very angry opponents alone.

Peer pressure and negotiation of this kind require norms, for example governing what level of compensation is appropriate for what level of wrong, whom parties in conflict will accept as third-party mediators, etc. As several scholars have demonstrated in different contexts, these norms can form the basis for a stable social system. Violence has tacitly acknowledged limits; someone with a grievance makes a display of violence to signal his (or her) anger and intent (and ability) to seek violent satisfaction. This sets in motion a dance of counter-threat, of negotiation and mediation, and ultimately compensation and settlement. Quite detailed norms can also govern breaches of the limits that would cause someone to lose all support and be expelled from the community or left open to real retributive violence. For in order for such a system to work, it has to be based ultimately on the threat of real violence. Ritual or token displays of violence have to evoke actual and dangerous violence in order to compel people to follow the rules. They cannot be simple posturing, or no one would pay attention. If one side in a dispute refuses to play ball, so to speak, then the other side has to be prepared to escalate the threat or risk losing its credibility.

The “peace in the feud” model, as I have described it here, poses some problems for medieval historians. To begin with, it tends to reduce human beings to cogs in a theoretical machine. It leaves out all of the individual variations in human temperament and motivation that can produce a thousand variations in behavior in a thousand different cases, and that can explain why in particular contexts some people might be afraid to breach social norms while others roll right over them. Moreover, the model presupposes a closed, small-scale, and egalitarian society in which everybody has more or less the same ability to wield violence and the same access to support from their fellows or to potential mediators. Medieval societies were indeed smaller in scale than our own. Furthermore, they were usually made up of different social groups, each of which in isolation could be said to have the characteristics necessary for “peace in the feud” to work. However, medieval societies were also strongly hierarchical, with marked differences between social groups not only in status but also in access to power. The social norms that applied among the members of the aristocracy, say, who could (with variations in scale, of course) muster at least comparable levels of violence and support from their fellows, rarely applied when it came to conflicts of interest between aristocrats and commoners, and not at all between aristocrats and the unfree laborers known as serfs.
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What the “peace in the feud” model does do is give us a set of ideas about how people might behave, ideas that we can test against medieval sources in order to see whether they help us understand how the sources say medieval people did behave. It also, like Olson’s bandit model, makes at least plausible the proposition that the kinds of violence that might seem most corrosive to normative order can themselves be the basis for a stable order.

At that very moment his muscles lost their ability to move and stiffened completely; the wretch lay paralyzed on the ground, his arms and legs drawn up to his body. In addition, his mouth was stretched back to his ears and gaped obscenely, and the filth that streamed foully from his entrails manifestly revealed how harshly and distressingly he had been afflicted.

Bernard of Angers, Book of the Miracles of Sainte Foy (c. 1013–1020), 1. 6, on the fate of a man who attempted to seize wine belonging to the monastery of St. Foy at Conques.59

Medieval society was not static. Norms of violence will seem to appear and disappear from our sources, and along our way we will see norms emerge that we have not seen before. In order to understand medieval violence, we will need to have some idea about why norms change. Some recent work on norms, both in and outside the field of medieval studies, suggests some possible reasons that have to do with how people in general use and respond to norms.60

What makes someone choose to invoke one norm over another? Self-interest is one answer; I decide which norm from among those available will help me best persuade others that I am right, that my actions were legitimate, and that I therefore deserve community support or should not draw community sanction. To suggest that people act in such a goal-oriented way is not to reduce human behavior to a set of rational calculations or choices made simply to maximize some set of assumed material benefits.61 The community I need to persuade can, for example, include the supernatural. In a world dominated by Christianity, as was medieval Europe, even if my appeal to norms does not satisfy my neighbors or a judge, it may well satisfy God and His saints and therefore increase my chances of salvation. Even without God, I may decide that my sense of what is right and my need to live accordingly override my material well being and thus demand self-sacrifice. My interests may also be emotional. As discussed above, I can choose (or feel driven) to commit an act of violence, or sanction someone else’s act of violence, out of anger and outrage or out of love for some member of my community whom I believe I need to support. I may likewise decide to act, or not, out of fear. A given norm might be supported by my community, and I might fear the
sanctions that the community can impose if I do not follow it. Or the norm might be backed by a powerful person who likewise has painful sanctions at his disposal. Such a person might be a king enforcing his law. It might also be God; as the above passage from the *Miracles of Sainte Foy* illustrates, God may act directly to punish me for behavior that He considers wrong.

There would seem to be little point, however, in invoking or acting according to the norms advocated by a segment of one’s society if that segment has no power to help one or harm one’s opponent. Similarly, it makes little sense to invoke norms backed by a human or divine authority figure, or both, if neither has the power to reward or punish. From this perspective, then, the key to which norms appear to win out in a particular conflict would seem to be the relative amount of power or support each of the parties involved can command. Of course, glaring differences in power remove all ability to negotiate, and therefore make any appeal to norms irrelevant; the more powerful simply act while the less powerful are forced simply to accede. But things get more complicated when the interest groups involved wield comparable levels of power. In this case, the strongest party cannot unilaterally control the outcome of a conflict. Resistance, or the threat of resistance, may force it to acknowledge norms less favorable to itself and its interests than it would have otherwise. Put simply, the more powerful may have to compromise with the less powerful. In such a compromise, the more powerful may be able to win the publicity contest; it may have its norms publicly affirmed. But the less powerful party may be able to win tacit acceptance of some of its claims as the price of settlement.

If the context of a given dispute and in particular the power relationships among the disputants affect the norms that come into play and how they are treated, it follows that changes in that context, i.e., changes in the relative power or even the identity of the interest groups involved, can change the normative system or systems that show up in reports of violent conflicts. In other words, when the relative power among interest groups changes, the weight within the available pool of norms will shift from one norm to another that better serves the newly powerful group. Fredric Cheyette has expressed this idea in the language of genetics. Out of a sea of genetic possibilities, the environmental context determines that a few will become dominant. Should the context change, other genetic traits will prove to be more successful, and the dominant genes will change; so too with norms. The norm or norms around which a new order coalesces can be pre-existing and latent. Or they can be new ones, generated out of conflict as new interest groups assert themselves or imported from the outside and seized upon by those whose interests they serve.
The shift from one normative framework to another does not have to be quick and clean; in fact, it is generally not. Various actors and interest groups within a given society can have conflicting preferences among the normative alternatives available. As we will see, the period of competition among them can be quite long.

Before either Hugh or his men did any harm, the men of the count seized a benefice from Hugh’s men in the name of war (guerra).

*Agreements between Count William of the Aquitanians and Hugh of Lusignan (1028).*

Norms of violence do not just depend on context or on the landscape of power; they also depend on culturally constructed boundaries that separate social groups from each other. The norms that people apply to conflicts can vary a great deal depending on whether the people involved are considered to be “inside” or “outside” a certain culturally drawn circle. To cite an example offered by William Miller: Vikings in tenth- and eleventh-century Europe behaved quite differently to their targets than they did to each other. They were quite tender and nurturing to their own children, but apparently thought nothing of taking small French children in a village raid, throwing them in the air, and impaling them on their spears as they fell. In the modern West, we tend to apply quite different norms to the behavior of people living within nations than we do to the behavior of nations towards each other. The former is (at least ideally) structured by the rule of law and the authority of government. The latter, however, generally follows rules based more on friendship and enmity, face-saving and shame than on the developing norms of international law.

When violence erupts in the context of international relations (i.e., war), it is currently wielded, at least in theory, according to different rules than those that apply to internal violence; people in uniform fighting an enemy nation can be violent in ways that are not legitimate at home (though the boundaries can sometimes swim, as in the case of civil wars, or the “war on terror”). Inside their borders, nation states tend to draw boundaries around violence based on a distinction between “public”, i.e. the sphere of government, and “private”, that is, interactions among citizens in which the government has no interest. The state may wield violence in the public interest, that is, to maintain order and protect its authority; private citizens may not wield violence in their interests, save in exceptional cases such as self-defense. Acts of violence committed by private citizens outside of these exceptions are considered to be serious crimes, or felonies, that merit punishment in order to make it clear how wrong they were and to deter others from doing the same.
Where do we draw the lines of “inside” and “outside” for medieval Europe? Trying to locate national boundaries is difficult. Nation states as we understand them simply did not exist; they only started to emerge at the very end of the Middle Ages. Neither were distinctions between language and culture groups in Europe so starkly drawn as to make it easy to say when one society, like the “French”, was “at war” with another society, like the “Germans”. There are of course clear examples of what we would call war, both external and civil. Among them one could count the civil war among the grandsons of Charlemagne that led to the tragic battle at Fontenoy in 843 or the war between King John of England and his ally, the emperor Otto IV, and Philip Augustus of France that culminated in the great battle of Bouvines in 1214. But these were wars between rulers, not nations. Moreover, it is hard to say for much of the period to what degree Europeans may have conceptually distinguished warfare from other kinds of violence. The Romans had used the Latin word *bellum* to denote public war, while using more specific words such as *pugna*, meaning a fight or combat, to describe other kinds of violent quarrels. Some early medieval authors followed suit. A distinction between warfare and other group violence is also visible in accounts of the often stylized way that early medieval armies were raised and campaigns conducted.

However, as one moves towards the high Middle Ages, the sources tend to use *bellum* and words such as *werra/guerra* (a word of Germanic origin meaning violent strife or quarrel) almost interchangeably, in a way that blurs or eliminates distinctions between royal wars against foreign enemies, rebellions or violent competition between political rivals, attacks to settle personal grievances, or violence employed simply for personal gain. A violent conflict between neighboring knights could be a *werra*, but so could one between neighboring kings; at the same time, a judicial duel could be a *bellum*. In addition, as we will see, kings and their followers often engaged in violence in the same ways and for the same reasons as people farther down the political and social scale. It is often up to the observer, therefore, based on descriptions of particular acts of violence, to decide whether warfare in the modern sense is a useful way to understand them. It is only at the end of our period that royal war begins consistently to be claimed by kings as violence between powers that, when formally declared, changed the rules of the game in a way that delegitimized violence carried out by others.

Inside a given sphere of authority (such as the realm governed by a king), it is also very hard for much of our period to draw a line between “public” and “private”. Many of the people who wrote our sources did have an idea, inherited from Roman tradition, of a community interest
or common weal (*res publica*). Nevertheless, if one tries to understand medieval sources according to the modern notion of a public sphere of interests, regulated by a government’s public power, that is separate from a private sphere, one quickly runs into confusion. One finds oneself faced with what we would call private action backed by royal authority, with kings or other officials blending “public” and “private” interests in a way that we would call corrupt but that they regarded as perfectly normal and even necessary, etc. Similarly, the distinction between a civil wrong as a private matter and a criminal wrong as an injury to the public weal, though it had existed in Roman law, is equally elusive. We cannot really talk about violent “crime” until “crime” as a legal category in the modern sense begins to emerge in the twelfth century. It will in fact be a major part of our purpose in this book to follow how the ideas even developed that there was such a thing as an injury to a king as the embodiment of a people, that a king and his government had qualitatively different rights to use violence than did other people, and ultimately that the government might enjoy something like a monopoly over the legitimate use of violent force.

The clearest lines between “inside” and “outside” in the Middle Ages were based not on political divisions, or on a division between public and private power, but rather on social and economic status. The norms of violence that applied among the aristocracy did not apply when it came to conflicts between the aristocracy and the peasantry, no matter what country one came from or to which king one owed allegiance. Peasants simply did not deserve the same treatment as a fellow aristocrat. One of the starkest examples of this difference in outlook can be found in the *Chronicles* of Jean Froissart, written in the late fourteenth century. Froissart describes the peasants’ revolt, or Jacquerie, that broke out in 1358 in France following a series of devastating defeats of the French by the English in what would later be called the Hundred Years War. He tells in particular of a group of knights, some owing allegiance to the English king and some to the French, who had taken advantage of a truce to go campaigning together in Prussia. On their way home they heard of a group of aristocratic ladies who were trapped by a peasant army in the town of Meaux and hurried to their rescue. The peasants appear in Froissart’s account almost as if they were a different and sub-human race:

The Count of Foix and the Captal de Buch and their men, who were ready armed, formed up in the market-place [where the ladies were lodged] and then moved to the gates of the market and flung them open. There they faced the villeins, small and dark and very poorly armed, confronting them with the banners of the Count of Foix and the Duke of Orléans and the pennon
of the Captal de Buch, and holding lances and swords in their hand, fully prepared to defend themselves and to protect the market place.\textsuperscript{74}

It is across divisions like these, but also divisions such as those between aristocrats and townspeople, or between lay people and churchmen, that we will be looking for differences in attitudes towards violence.

It is time to set out on our journey, a journey that will take us from the dawn of the Middle Ages in the sixth century to its twilight in the fourteenth. We will be spending most of our time on the continent of Europe, both east and west of its major dividing line, the Rhine River. Nevertheless, we will occasionally venture west across the English Channel to see what is going on in England. We will pause in particular periods in particular places that I think are representative, or for which the sources are especially good, to look at the available norms governing the use of violence by individuals and small groups in the course of ongoing social and political interactions. We will also explore how violence fitted in, or did not fit in, to their bag of tools for advancing their own interests and the interests of their allies, and for resisting the interests of their opponents and competitors. Along the way we will explore debates among scholars as they apply to these issues in particular times and places. What we find will help us understand medieval political orders and the degree to which violence, or the absence of violence, supported or undermined those orders. At the end we will also have something to say about broad changes over time in medieval attitudes towards violence.

Exploring medieval violence in this fashion strikes me as an interesting way to explore how violence fitted in to medieval worldviews; moreover, it lends itself to covering a great deal of time and space in a single volume. Taking this route, however, means that we will not take others. I will not be able to talk, for example, about such obvious manifestations of medieval violence as the Vikings or the Crusades. Though there is a great deal to learn about medieval attitudes towards violence from Crusade polemic or from descriptions of Viking raids, these represented incursions by, or campaigns against, cultures outside those I have targeted. Nor will I be able to devote much time to other subjects with which we will cross paths (many of which have in fact already earned their own books), such as sexual violence, violence and gender, violence against minority groups, violence and religion, or violence as depicted in literature. I will address these subjects as they apply to our search for medieval norms of violence, but I cannot in the confines of this book give them all the attention they deserve.

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Much, if not most, of the violence that we will see falls into the broad area of the obvious. Blood, terror, broken bodies, burned and wasted buildings and crops, injury and death, will make it clear that it is violence with which we are dealing. At several crucial points in our story, however, we will be forced out into that penumbra where violence is hard to pin down, where one man’s violence is another’s right order, and where being violent is something you accuse someone else of when you do not like them.

Since we will be looking at how violence fitted into the more or less normal interactions of people within a society, we will spend much of our time looking at the local or small-scale, that is, at violence carried out by individuals or armed bands rather than armies, operating in their own localities or regions rather than in someone else’s. I will avoid large-scale military actions aimed at other polities, as well as violence carried out in extraordinary circumstances that even contemporaries would have described as “public war”. Nevertheless, I will not avoid large-scale acts of violence altogether. As discussed above, kings and armies in the early Middle Ages in particular often carried out violence within their own realms in the same ways and for the same reasons as smaller groups or individuals.

In a couple of situations, I will look on purpose at situations that were quite extraordinary. In the chapters on twelfth-century Flanders (Chapter 6) and fourteenth-century France (Chapter 9) I have chosen to study societies under the stress of civil war, or political collapse as a result of declared war between kings. I do so not only because the sources for each offer extraordinarily rich descriptions of violence. Both sources, as they describe the behavior and claims of competing groups struggling for power, and as their authors filter what they describe through their own attitudes and purposes, highlight competing norms of violence that were there to be worked with in their worlds. In addition, the chapter on fourteenth-century France illuminates a world in which warfare has been more clearly and legally defined as the business of rulers, and thus more clearly distinguished in practice as well as in theory from other kinds of violence. The norms surrounding war in this period had an impact on other norms of violence, that is, on how, why, and when people used violence and how they justified it. The particular conditions we will explore in the chapter will, therefore, help us see some basic attitudes towards violence held by different groups within late medieval French society.

The norms of violence projected by the different sources we will be examining reflect the kinds of sources they are, their purposes, and in particular the often quite pronounced perspectives and agendas of their authors. Medieval writers were not terribly interested in providing
future readers with objective historical information. They were instead unapologetically biased; they were out to make their heroes look good and tar their opponents with the brush of pure evil. They also assumed that the supernatural took an active and interested part in human affairs, an assumption that can baffle us moderns.

However, these characteristics of medieval sources are very helpful for our purposes. Medieval authors constructed images and arguments in terms of norms; they advanced norms that served their purposes, and criticized, or tried to hide, norms that got in the way. They even presented the supernatural as acting in terms of their norms. As a result, we can, by looking at the norms that they advance and trying to uncover those they try to hide, get a good idea of the norms that were present in their society to be played with. So as I tell my story of violence in medieval Europe, I will be doing both some history, some anthropology, some cultural studies, and some literary criticism; I will try to untangle the norms that dictated what each source said and how it said it, as well as to look through the source as best as possible to get at other norms of violence that might have been present in the same society at the same time. In each time and place I will look at the normative worlds projected by different kinds of sources and stand them up next to each other, to see what they have in common and how they differ. My goal is to get a sense for the different ways of thinking about violence that were possible, and how these ways of thinking evolved as the Middle Ages progressed.

Notes

2. For example, during the trial at the Hague of Slobodan Milošević for war crimes in 2002, the chief prosecutor, Carla del Ponte, accused the former Yugoslav president of “medieval savagery”; see Sean McGlynn, “Violence and the Law in Medieval England”, *History Today*, April 2008, 53–9.
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24. OED, s.v. “violence”, definition 1: the earliest appearance in English is in 1290.

25. Lewis and Short, s.v. *violentia*.


30. Ibid., 77.

31. MGH Capit. I, ed. A. Boretius (Hanover: Hahn, 1883), nr. 77, 170–2 @172.


people might not admit to the norm actually governing a situation. Among
the Tonga of central Africa, one supposedly makes gifts of grain out of
reciprocity and as insurance against one’s own future need; one really does
so because one is afraid that if one maintains a grain surplus, a sorceress
might strike out of envy.

34. As, for example, when people who prize non-violence are forced for their
own survival to be violent; I thank Philip T. Hoffman for pointing this out
to me. Nevertheless, their behavior would still reveal a norm, namely that
violence for the sake of survival was acceptable.

35. MacCormick, Institutions, 23.

idem, eds., Conflict in Medieval Europe: Changing Perspectives on Society and
Culture (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 1–35 @7–8.

37. Peter Stein, Roman Law in European History (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1999), 4.

38. Warren Brown, “The Use of Norms in Disputes in Early Medieval Bavaria”,

in England from the Norman Conquest to Magna Carta (London: Longman,

40. Burchard of Worms, “Lex Familae Wormatiensis Ecclesiae”, MGH Const. 1,
ed. Ludwig Weiland (Hanover: Hahn, 1893), 639–44, @prologue, 640.

41. See Chapter 7.

42. The Song of Roland, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (New York: Penguin Classics,
1957), 62.

43. Ibid., 193–202.

44. As n. 26 above.

45. Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age

46. W.H.C. Frend, The Early Church (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982),
58–64.

47. See Miller, “Getting a Fix on Violence”, 60–2; Barbara H. Rosenwein,
Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages (Ithaca, NY: Cornell
University Press, 2006); idem, ed., Anger’s Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion
in the Middle Ages (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Hyams,
Rancor, 34–67.

48. Cf. Barbara H. Rosenwein, “Controlling Paradigms”, in Anger’s Past,
233–47; idem, Emotional Communities, 13–15; Gerd Althoff, “Empörung,
Tränen, Zerknirschung: Emotionen in der öffentlichen Kommunikation
des Mittelalters”, in Spielregeln in der Politik im Mittelalter (Darmstadt:
Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), 258–81; Stuart Airlie, Catherine
Cubitt, Mary Garrison, Carolyne Larrington, and Barbara H. Rosenwein,
“The History of the Emotions: A Debate”, Early Medieval Europe 10,
o. 2 (2001): 225–6; Guy Halsall, review of Rosenwein, Anger’s Past, Early
Medieval Europe 10, no. 2 (2001): 301–3; idem, Warfare and Society in
the Barbarian West (London: Routledge, 2003), 7.

50. Cf. ibid., 568 on Chinese villagers in the 1920s who preferred a stationary bandit to a roving one, even though the former taxed continuously and the latter would have plundered and left. See also a recent application of Olson’s model to Vikings: Peter Kurrild-Klitgaard and Gert Tinggaard Svendsen, “Rational Bandits: Plunder, Public Goods, and the Vikings”, *Public Choice* 117 (2003).


57. Miller, “Getting a Fix on Violence”, 89; Wallace-Hadrill, “Bloodfeud”, 126. Cf. Colson, “Tradition and Contract”, 37 and *passim*, who similarly argues that to understand order in small-scale, stateless societies one has to take fear into account; people may act like they live in a Roussetian paradise because they think that the world works in Hobbesian terms.

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65. Miller, “Getting a Fix on Violence”, 71 and n. 41.

66. Hyams, Rancor, 13. Even in this arena, however, national leaders bent on wielding violence will select from friendship/enmity norms or the norms of international law as suits their interests.


68. Lewis and Short, s.v. bellum and pugna.


70. Halsall, Warfare, 8–9, 14–15.

71. Niermeyer, s.v. werra and bellum.

72. See Brunner, Land and Lordship, 33–5, as well as Chapter 9 below.

73. Here I differ from authors such as Trevor Dean, Crime in Medieval Europe (London: Longman, 2001), who use “crime” as a general word for serious wrong.

74. Chronicles, 154.