

BOOK REVIEW

Hostages in the Middle Ages, by Adam J. Kosto (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2012; pp. xviii + 281. £60).

For most of recorded history, the *giving* of hostages was integral to the way polities safeguarded the settlement of their disputes. From Antiquity to the cusp of modernity treaties designed to obviate battle or to define the terms upon which a war would end often stipulated the number and kind of hostages to be presented by one party to another, either as a surety for compliance or as a penalty for violating the agreed-upon terms. Throughout the middle ages, the premiss of such transactions was trust, formalised and sometimes ritualised by taking a religious oath. Accordingly, a capacity to receive, as well as offer, hostages in this period reflected the parties' relative power and prestige. But pre-modern hostageship, as Adam J. Kosto's meticulous and richly documented study shows, played other roles as well. As third-party guarantors, hostages were used to facilitate safe passage, secure putative loyalty, enable the release of prisoners, ensure the payment of debts, and even provide a political and religious education for the scions of losing parties. Through and beyond these routine functions, the bond-creating qualities of hostageship offers an insight into medieval society's structure and values, and tracing its history illuminates the transition not only into modernity, but also, and perhaps especially, between the early and later middle ages.

Behind the unassuming title of this book lies a serious ambition, namely to turn past practices of and views on hostageship into an analytical staple. In this Kosto succeeds, both by marshalling an impressive amount of evidence and by underscoring the limits of earlier approaches. The book is based on an examination of some 1,500 cases ranging geographically from the Near East to Ireland and spanning the fifth to the fifteenth centuries. The conclusion of Chapter Two, that medieval hostageship displays 'no single logic' (p. 48), is an explicit critique of previous attempts to shoehorn the phenomenon into a particular theoretical model—be it legal or economic. Neither, Kosto asserts, offers due consideration to the specific tensions under which hostageship was negotiated and the particular horizons shared by each of the parties involved (often more than just two). Still, it is possible to identify some principles, trace certain trajectories, and construct a historical definition from the ground up. For, in addition to explicating how hostageship worked under each of its many guises, Kosto also amply demonstrates that it offers an important key to understanding the changing world-view of medieval political and military classes.

In this analysis, establishing the hostages' profile (age, gender, role, status) is paramount, since it reveals the institution's unique role as a multifaceted channel of political communication. Chapters Three, Four and Six develop a distinction between earlier and later medieval practices. Broadly speaking, pre-millennial hostages were drawn from a leader's real or fictive family. The high esteem awarded to kinship in this period drove the number of hostages, as well as their age, down, and all but excluded the use of women as hostages

as opposed to brides (although one could argue for some overlap between the latter categories). This relatively sharp profile blurs with time, as both the wealth of documentation grows and—more importantly, according to Kosto—the nature of medieval society and politics changes. Post-millennial hostageship was thus not simply more frequent and diverse in form and function (including, for instance, hostageship to facilitate conditional respite and release, and conditional hostageship, which is the focus of Chapter Five), it also reflected the greater number and complexity of later alliances, the monetisation of the economy, the impact of the Crusades, and urbanisation. Hostageship in this period accordingly shifted from individual to bureaucratic and representational, which meant that guarantors could be replaced and rotated as long as they were seen as belonging to the social group, territory, or ally that an agreement stipulated.

Though not doctrinaire, Kosto is explicitly interested in safeguarding rather than challenging some conventional differences between the early and late medieval worlds, and his numerous examples support these traditional distinctions, at least rhetorically. In the absence of a full statistical presentation of the data, however, it is difficult to assess the overarching observations regarding changes in the use of hostageship across time and space. (Kosto's critical treatment and presentation of his data is otherwise commendable.) Either way, as Chapter Seven, on the intellectual history of hostageship, reveals, by early modernity time-honoured practices were being abandoned. The religious transformations of the sixteenth century meant that Christian oaths no longer had the spiritual backing of a papacy with claims to universal jurisdiction. More importantly, perhaps, new institutions such as permanent ambassadorships and rising demands for more efficient forms of surety undermined hostages' viability as third-party guarantors. Instead, military and civilian hostages began to be seized rather than given, first by increasingly professionalised armies and centralised states, and later by non-state agents. Such agents are often accused today of barbaric treatment of hostages. But behaviour of this sort is a modern phenomenon: the well-grounded fear for a hostage's life at present stands in stark contrast to the very rare executions of hostages throughout the middle ages.

This new history of, and framework for understanding, hostageship is a major contribution that will make the hostages of the past difficult to ignore. Military, legal, political, diplomatic, social and economic historians of numerous periods and regions will read this book with great reward.

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