

# Introduction: Prisoners of War in Medieval Iberia, Southern France and Denmark

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The texts in this dossier were presented by João Gouveia Monteiro (coord.), Martín Alvira Cabrer, Francisco García Fitz, Miguel Gomes Martins, Fernando Tinoco Díaz and Kurt Villads Jensen at the Summer Conference held in Trondheim (Norway), from 2 to 4 June 2014, under the topic *Common Men and Women at War, 300-1500*. The contributions were brought together for an international panel entitled “Prisoners of War in Medieval Iberia, Southern France and Denmark”.

The articles, which cover a vast area from the Iberian Peninsula (with particular reference to the southern and western regions) and southern France (Albi) to the Baltic Sea, stretching occasionally down to the North African coast (subject to the greed of the first Portuguese explorers) document the extreme importance and analytical plurality (economics, politics, society, culture, religion) of the issue of prisoners of war in the Middle Ages (eleventh to fifteenth centuries).

These six texts mainly address wars between religious opponents – Christians against Muslims, pagans against Christians (Roman or Orthodox), Cathars against Catholics – which give the narratives a partic-

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ularly intense character, with the conventions of war (when those existed) proving to be powerless to stop the escalation of violence and the desire to achieve results which were radical and, as much as possible, definitive. Nonetheless, the texts also deal with the conflicts between Christians (in particular the Castilians against the Portuguese) and also the deep internal rift which hit Occitan society in the first decades of the twelfth century and gave the Albigensian Crusade the character of a civil war.

This investigation encompassed various topics, namely the different scenarios in which prisoners of war could be captured; how they were transported to prisons and the nature of such prisons; the instruments used for the detention of prisoners and the organization of their surveillance; the conditions that prisoners had to endure in captivity (food, hygiene, physical and psychological torture, mutilation, with obvious analogies between the various scenarios); the forced labour to which they were subjected, both concerning agriculture, construction or crafts, beyond the royal navy; the legal status they were assigned by their captors; the possibilities they had to escape or to regain freedom in some other way (including during ceremonies where there was royal propaganda dedicated to the exchange of prisoners), etc.

This way we could realize – with the help of dozens of striking examples, taken from very diverse sources – the (also economic) importance that warrior activity had in medieval society, especially in the border regions (as we can see in al-Andalus). These examples also help us understand the close connection between, on the one hand, the assertion of a style of warfare based on specialized cavalcades and effulgent hand blows and, on the other, the accumulation of immense spoils that could include thousands of cattle and hundreds of prisoners (a very lucrative business, indeed). This way we can also verify from the easy spread of war and its parade of calamities – including prisoners of war – to the ‘civilian’ population, often intentionally struck as a way to militarily weaken the adversary, by limiting their human and economic resources, reducing their taxation base and undermining their moral balance (the ‘strategies of terror’ specific to guerrillas of all ages are also addressed here). Finally, we were able to verify how this made it necessary to find mechanisms for managing the problem of prisoners of war, which led (both in the Christian world and in the Muslim world) to the emergence of specialized professionals to ransom prisoners of war

(the ‘*alfaqueques*’ enshrined in the Iberian municipal charters and, in Grenade, receiving for their services between 10% and 12% of the surrender value in cash!) and, among Christians, the foundation of organizations (such as the Order of the Trinity) or institutions (such as the Ark of Mercy) aimed at resolving this scourge.

Although the sources are silent on some key points and despite the chronological amplitude and diversity of scenarios considered (from the aridity of the Hispanics and North African theatres of war to the ice that lined the Scandinavian paths) the message transmitted to us by the following six texts is unambiguous: at the time no one was safe from being taken as prisoner of war; if that happened, the fate of the targets varied greatly according to their social condition (high profile prisoners could generate extremely valuable ransoms, such as that which was paid by Valdemar II of Denmark, in 1223), to their political and military utility (prisoners were often used as informants, or as weapons to put pressure on decisions involving local or national disputes), to their religion (the *Siete Partidas* by Alfonso X, King of Leon and Castile, clearly distinguishes between ‘prisoners’ and ‘captives’) and also to the very nature and intentions of their captors.

At the outset no scenario was excluded: the regain of freedom through the exchange or the payment of a substantial ransom (which could lead to extreme impoverishment of the family and even ruin an entire lineage); being forgotten and abandoned in prison (mainly for those prisoners with a lower social status and economic capacity); being released in the wake of an act of chivalrous generosity or compassion on the part of the holder of the prisoner; or even religious conversions (which could also be a strong factor favouring release) as a result of a long process of acculturation (language, customs, rituals) matured in the suffering during captivity or as a consequence of a desperate act of self-defence to recover the possibility of reconstructing life and family somewhere away from the land of origin, losing all hopes of returning to it.

This is not a story merely of soldiers, *routiers*, hostages and awards granted to the bravest warriors. This is also a story of common men, women and children involved in and deeply affected by war, a story that tells of slavery, temporary markets, neutral zones for the exchange of prisoners of war, as well as laws on the status and rights of children born in captivity. Furthermore, this is a story that tells of war dogs specialized in the capture of prisoners on the run, but also one that reminds

us of the vehement appeal of fifteenth century treatise writers such as Honoré Bouvet and Christine de Pisan, who were committed to the progressive humanization of martial practices.

Therefore, talking about prisoners of war in the Iberian Peninsula, in Albi or Scandinavia from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries is also to evoke the stories of miracles, specialized saints, votive offerings, martyrs, fraternities and brotherhoods, in other words, every artifice and expedient that men created to mitigate the devastating effects of a ‘cruel and sharp’ war instilled in the everyday life of their communities. After all, and as Aimé Césaire, the celebrated Caribbean poet known as the *poet of blackness* once wrote, “*Culture is everything that man has invented to make the world more liveable and able to face death*”...

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