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Book Review: Peacemaking in the Middle Ages: Principles and Practice

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Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
Because medieval conflict and violence have been so highlighted in the past decade by scholars such as David Nirenberg, Guy Halsall, R. I. Moore, Eve Salisbury, Warren C. Brown, Piotr Górecki, Mark D. Meyerson, Daniel Thiery, Oren Falk, and Peter Sarris, to name but a few, Jenny Benham’s book is a welcome addition to the conversation. The author maintains a sensitive grasp of both the primary source material and the dy-namics of medieval diplomacy. The book itself though rests uncomfortably under an overly broad title (likely the publisher’s decision) and on an overly narrow focus.

In response to medievalists’ lack of attention to the history of peacemaking, Benham has sought to expand on Christopher Holdsworth’s article (“Peacemaking in the Twelfth Century,” Anglo-Norman Studies 19 [1997]) by moving into the next century and into a comparative study with the Danish kingdom. The Plantagenet mon-arcs (Henry II, Richard I, John) shared similar dip-lomatic challenges with Valdemar I, Cnut VI, and Val-demar II (i.e., restoration of royal authority, conflicts with the Roman Catholic Church, and the problem of owing allegiance to a powerful neighboring monarchy), but the two kingdoms had vastly different resources. They also produced vastly different amounts of surviv-ing documentation, and this creates problems for the promised comparative history. The book is at its best when moving within the Anglo-French world, while the reader gets little real sense of the Danish experience. Furthermore, before the period under study there is negligible evidence for even the existence of Anglo-Danish diplomatic relations. So while any effort to ex- tend anglophone historiography beyond the Anglo-French territories should be heartily applauded, selecting the German Empire rather than Denmark would have produced a much richer comparative study—or at least the book would have had more pur-chase on representing European peacemaking practices as the title suggests.

Such strategic concerns aside, Benham handles very well the interpersonal dynamics of peacemaking be tween monarchs. First considering the symbolic power of neutral meeting places for peace negotiations and of gestures evoking the relative status of the two royal in-terlocutors, she next follows Gerd Althoff’s lead with a rich study of peacemaking rituals (e.g., banquets and gift exchanges). The following chapter on gestures of submission—always a ticklish topic in peace negotia-tions—moves from the world of personal diplomacy into that of feudal lordship customs, and here there are some missteps. William of Scotland’s 1190 act of homage before Richard I of England is misinterpreted as a recognition of William’s submission to the English monarch for his kingdom, when in fact William per-formed before Richard I this “homagium pro dignitibus suis habendis in Anglia” (p. 92) as a vassal for his feudal holdings in England, not for his kingdom in Scot-land as an English fief. This feudal distinction was a tacit nod to William’s inherited title as the Earl of Nor-thumbria, of which Henry II had deprived him some fifteen years earlier with the Treaty of Falaise. Yet sev-eral months before this act of homage Richard had al-ready invalidated the Treaty of Falaise in return for 10,000 silver marks from William to assist the English monarch in his planned crusade. Elsewhere King Mal-colm of Scotland is misread as being asked to do hom-age (homagium) to William II of England rather than (as he was actually asked) to do justice (rectitudinem) for the English (not Scottish) territories Malcolm held of the English king (p. 95). We return, however, to more solid ground in the final chapter on keeping the peace once made through oaths, hostages, and sureties. As surviving charters from the period are few and far be-tween, much of the book is based on chronicle sources that depend on the interests of particular chroniclers, but Benham is forthright in acknowledging what can be known and what is interpretive material.

Peacemaking took place in many venues. For exam-ple, there is a missed opportunity to study in more depth Henry II’s role as mediator and peacemaker be-tween the kings of Navarre and Castile, or between the count of Flanders and the French kings. Likewise, at-tention to the works of John Carmi Parsons, Lois Huneycutt, and Helen Maurer on intercession and peacemaking as a key function of medieval queenship would be a valuable contribution. Finally, dispute set-elements have in fact been studied much in the past de-cade or so at many levels of society (see, for example, monographs and edited volumes by scholars such as Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre, Paul Hyams, Ste-phen D. White, and Peter L. Larson), and so a com-parative investigation that reached beyond royal diplo-macy would expand the book. None of this is offered as a criticism, but as an enthusiastic endorsement of Ben-ham’s work and its possible intersections with a broader history of medieval peacemaking. This monograph takes a circumscribed yet important step forward.

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