

Prisoners of War in the Hundred Years War

Ransom Culture in the Late Middle Ages



RÉMY AMBÜHL

CAMBRIDGE

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HUNDRED YEARS WAR

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To my mother and to the memory of my father.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I crossed the Channel for the first time in October 2003. I wanted to improve my English and research skills by doing a Masters in History at the University of Nottingham, and I did so. But what was supposed to be a one-year-long interlude in my Franco-Belgian education ended up more like a turning point in my academic life. Nine years later, my adventure in the UK is still running. It has even been given a new impetus thanks to the Leverhulme Trust and the University of Southampton which generously agreed to fund a new research project on the capitulation of castles and urban communities in the Hundred Years War. I hope that the future holds many other good surprises like this one. British academia has been as welcoming as inspiring. Along the years, I have had the chance to meet leading scholars without whom this adventure would have been much shorter, and without whom this book would almost certainly not have seen the light. I owe them a great deal.

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It seems almost unforgivable not to write a good book in such favourable circumstances, all the more since I also found all the support that I could imagine to have in my friends and family. My grateful apologies go to all those who carefully listened to my prisoners' stories and engaged with them, even if they did not ask to do so. Finally, I would like to address a special thanks to Brigid Bradley who shared this adventure with me from almost the beginning to almost the end.

NOTE ON CURRENCY

There was a distinction between money of account, used as 'measure of value' and real money, that is, the actual coins, used as 'medium of exchange' in the late Middle Ages. Many a ransom or grant appears in *livres tournois* (*lt*) in the sources; this money of account was widely used in late medieval France.¹ The pound sterling (£), which was the English equivalent, was worth 6 *lt*. The actual coins which circulated in late medieval Europe were made of gold, silver or billon (silver-copper alloy). Gold coins were used not only for costly 'international' transactions but also for the payment of ransoms, whatever their rate. France was the main theatre of war in the Hundred Years War, and most ransoms were set and paid in French gold coins. The *franc d'or* (*fō*) was the principal gold coin in France from the 1360s to the 1380s. It was progressively replaced by the *écu d'or* (*eo*) in the fifteenth century. From 1422 to 1453, the English government issued a rival gold coin to the *eo* in northern France: the *salut d'or* (*so*). The reader will also come across other currencies in this book. Given the wide fluctuations in the value of the different coins (especially in the first half of the fifteenth century), it has been deemed appropriate to leave all the amounts in their original currency. The following table, based on Peter Spufford's *Handbook of Medieval Exchange* (London, 1986), gives an idea of the comparative value of the different currencies in that period.

	Pound sterling (£)
Livre tournois (<i>lt</i>)	£1 = 6 <i>lt</i> (ratio: 0.167)
Livre parisis (<i>lp</i>)	£5 = 24 <i>lp</i> (ratio: 0.21)
Mark sterling	£2 = 3 marks (ratio: 0.66) – fixed rate
Écu d'or (<i>eo</i>)	£2 = 9 écus d'or (ratio: 0.22)
Salut d'or (<i>so</i>)	£2 = 9 écus d'or (0.23) ²
Franc d'or (<i>fō</i>)	£1 = 6 francs d'or (ratio: 0.167)
Florin (Rhine)	£1 = 6 florins (ratio: 0.167)

¹ 1 livre = 20 sous or shillings (*s*) = 240 deniers of pennies (*d*).

² BNF Ms. Fr. 25772, no. 925 (December 1434).

ABBREVIATIONS

ACO	Archives Départementales de la Côte d'Or
ADN	Archives Départementales du Nord
AN	Archives Nationales (Paris)
BEC	<i>Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes</i>
BIHR	See HR
BJRUL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library</i>
BL	British Library
BnF	Bibliothèque Nationale de France
CCR	<i>Calendar of Close Rolls</i>
CGEB	<i>Comptes généraux de l'état bourguignon entre 1416 et 1420, M. Mollat, ed., 3 vols. (Paris, 1965-69)</i>
CPR	<i>Calendar of Patent Rolls</i>
DKR, 44, 48	'Calendar of French Rolls' in <i>Reports of the Deputy Keeper. Appendix to 44th Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records</i> (London, 1883), pp. 543-638; <i>Appendix to 48th Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records</i> (London, 1887), pp. 217-450.
EHR	<i>English Historical Review</i>
eo	écu(s) d'or
fō	franc(s) d'or
Foedera	<i>Foedera, conventiones, litterae, etc.</i> , T. Rymer, ed., 20 vols. (London, 1704-35).
Foedera (PRO)	<i>Foedera, conventiones, litterae, etc.</i> , T. Rymer, ed., 7 vols. (London, 1816-69), new edition ordered by the Public Record Office.
Froissart (KL)	J. Froissart, <i>Oeuvres</i> , J. M. B. Kervyn de Lettenhove, ed., 28 vols. (Brussels, 1867-77).
Froissart (SHF)	J. Froissart, <i>Chroniques</i> , S. Luce, G. Raynaud, L. and A. Mirot, 15 vols. (Paris, 1869-1975).

List of abbreviations

HR (BIHR)	<i>Historical Research</i> (formerly the <i>Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research</i>)
JMH	<i>Journal of Medieval History</i>
KBR	Koninklijke Bibliotheek van België/Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique (Brussels)
KLW	M. Keen, <i>The Laws of War in the Later Middle Ages</i> (London, 1965).
lp	<i>livres parisis</i>
lt	<i>livres tournois</i>
NMS	<i>Nottingham Medieval Studies</i>
ODNB	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
Poitiers	F. Bériac-Lainé and C. Given-Wilson, <i>Les Prisonniers de la bataille de Poitiers</i> (Paris, 2002).
POPC	<i>Proceedings and Ordinances of the Privy Council of England</i> , N. H. Nicolas, ed., 7 vols. (London, 1834-7)
PP	<i>Past and Present</i>
PROME	<i>The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England</i> , C. Given-Wilson et al., eds., 16 vols. (Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester, 2005).
RDP	<i>Recueil des documents concernant le Poitou contenus dans les registres de la chancellerie de France</i> , vol. iv: 1369-76; vol. v: 1376-90; vol. vii: 1403-30; vol. viii: 1430-47, vol. x: 1456-64, P. Guérin, ed. (Poitiers, 1888-1906).
so	<i>salut(s) d'or</i>
st	<i>sou tournois</i>
TNA	The National Archives (London)
TRHS	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
TSLME	The Soldier in Later Medieval England (online database: www.icmacentre.ac.uk/soldier/database)

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INTRODUCTION

PRISONERS AND RANSOMS

The fate of prisoners of war in the Middle Ages is intimately connected with the growth of the practice of ransoming. Ransoming has been practised since time immemorial.¹ But while in former times it was only one fate amongst many, and not necessarily the preferred option – indiscriminate slaughter, enslavement or mutilation seem to have been more common – the situation changed in the Middle Ages. It has been argued that the Christian doctrine encouraged the Christian community to free or to ransom its fellow believers.² There is still debate amongst historians as to when widespread recognition and acceptance of ransoming occurred in medieval Europe. Two opposing interpretations have been put forward. For Matthew Strickland and John Gillingham, the transition took place in northern France in the tenth and eleventh centuries.³ These historians

¹ For the treatment of prisoners in ancient Greece, see P. Ducrey, *Le Traitement des prisonniers de guerre dans la Grèce antique* (Paris, 1968); see also P. Sabin, H. van Wees and M. Whitby, *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2007), vol. 1, pp. 181, 396–7, 415, 459, 511. Ducrey (p. 270) argues that once Rome was involved in the eastern Mediterranean, exchanges of prisoners, which took place between Greek cities, were no longer practised. It must be noted, however, that the practice of ransoming was not totally unfamiliar in early Roman history, see E. Levy, 'Captivus redemptus', *Classical Philology*, 38 (1943), 159–76, at pp. 160–1. For various fates of prisoners in ancient Rome, see Sabin et al., *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, vol. II, pp. 140, 200–1, 299, 371.

² This was 'both a work of mercy and a dramatisation of the Christian's personal and corporate experience of redemption by Christ from captivity to sin and death'. C. Oysek, 'The Ransom of Captives: Evolution of a Tradition', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 74 (1981), 365–86, at p. 385. For an example of a political use of the practice of ransoming in the early Middle Ages, see W. Klingshirn, 'Charity and Power: Cesarius of Arles and the Ransoming of Captives in Sub-Roman Gaul', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 75 (1985), 183–203. For alternative fates of prisoners of war, see G. Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450–900* (London, 2003), p. 213.

³ M. Strickland, 'Slaughter, Slavery or Ransom: The Impact of the Conquest on Conduct in Warfare', in C. Hicks, ed., *England in the Eleventh Century* (Stamford, 1992), pp. 41–60; M. Strickland, 'Killing or Clemency? Ransom, Chivalry and Changing Attitudes to Defeated Opponents in Britain and Northern France, 7–12th Centuries', in H.-H. Kortum, ed., *Krieg im Mittelalter* (Berlin, 2001),

associate the foundations and emergence of ransoming with the development and diffusion of the chivalric ethos in that period. Strickland suggests that several decisive factors played a part in this process. Warfare was confined to conflicts between rival Frankish dynasties or to small-scale local skirmishing between rival nobles within the limit of the *regnum*; since enslavement of prisoners was not practised between Christians, these internal wars within the Frankish nobility encouraged some form of leniency in the treatment of prisoners of war. Dissemination of the practice of ransoming as the preferred option is likely to be linked with this increased political fragmentation and the rise of castle-based warfare; this required financial resources for the construction and defence of castles, which made rapid conquest more difficult. Prisoners were therefore seen as offering opportunities to make profits in a context that also created more favourable circumstances for negotiations. The payment of a ransom was facilitated by the growing availability of coins in a developing monetary economy.

This theory, however, is not universally accepted. Yvonne Friedman contests the late evidence on which it is based. For her there is no clear sign of the inception of chivalric mores before the twelfth century. She sees the adoption of the practice of ransoming as occurring during the Third Crusade, arguing that before that time crusaders (Franks) showed no willingness to ransom captives.⁴ The turning point for Friedman is the battle of Hattin in 1187. As she puts it, 'when almost the entire fighting force of the Latin Kingdom fell into captivity the image of captivity was bound to change.'⁵ From that point onwards, crusaders adopted the practices of ransoming and prisoner exchange which were already established in the Muslim world. Writing in the 1960s, Colonel G. I. A. D. Draper had also considered the possibility of 'borrowing' from the war practices of the Muslims. He also speculated that the practice of ransoming might have entered western Europe gradually, long before the crusades, via the Eastern Empire of Byzantium which was regularly at war with the Muslims from the seventh century onwards.⁶ Matthew Strickland

pp. 93–121; J. Gillingham, '1066 and the Introduction of Chivalry into England', in G. Garnett and J. Hudson, eds., *Law and Government in Medieval England and Normandy: Essays in Honour of Sir James Holt* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 21–55.

⁴ Y. Friedman, *Encounter Between Enemies: Captivity and Ransom in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Leiden, 2002). See also her book review of J. Dunbabin, *Captivity and Imprisonment in Medieval Europe, 1000–1300* (Basingstoke, 2002), in the *Medieval Review* at <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.baj9928.0401.006> (accessed on 7 April 2008).

⁵ Friedman, *Encounter*, p. 7.

⁶ G. I. A. D. Draper, 'The Law of Ransom during the Hundred Years War', *The Military Law and Law of War Review*, 5 (1968), 263–77. The exploration of the origins of ransom practice is the most original part of this article which otherwise discusses at length Maurice Keen's *The Laws of War in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1965). Strong evidence of ransoming practice between Byzantine and Arab empires in the second half of the eighth century is to be found in E. W. Brooks, 'Byzantines and Arabs in the Time of the Early Abbasids', *EHR*, 60 (1900), 728–47.

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has challenged the theory of 'borrowing' from the East, questioning the reliability of the sources used by Friedman which allege extensive massacres before the battle of Hattin, and reasserting the validity of his own sources and the arguments for the development and dissemination of the practice of ransoming from northern France.⁷ These debates will no doubt continue.

Jean Dunbabin has added an extra theoretical layer to these ideas. According to her, 'in the course of the thirteenth century, the status of prisoner of war, which was tacitly acknowledged by the code of chivalry [through ransoming] had also found its theoretical foundation with the emergence of the notion of public war'.⁸ In other words, since only just wars were considered to be public wars proclaimed and waged by sovereign authorities, in her view,

it became possible to distinguish between the soldier who was doing his duty towards his sovereign and who was not therefore a criminal, and the soldiers participating in his lord's feuds or seeking revenge on his neighbour or promoting his own personal gain, who might deserve punishment for his offences.⁹

Thus, by the end of the thirteenth century, knightly soldiers captured in public wars would normally enjoy the differentiated status of prisoners of war, which guaranteed their lives would be spared and their freedom regained through the payment of a ransom.

Another activity which was firmly grounded in the experience of warriors – the tournament – may have had a greater impact on the progress of the practice of ransoming within knightly mores. The rise of the tournament in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is likely to have contributed to the establishment and codification of ransoming practices in the habits of combatants.¹⁰ Indeed, in this period, there were few rules to distinguish tournament from real battle, apart from the object of the tournament which was to capture and ransom, rather than to kill, knights. The code of conduct of the 'game' specified that the prisoner could not be held in captivity and was to be released as soon as he had agreed on the price of his ransom. Knights who felt themselves mistreated could seek redress from the great lords who acted as referees. All these rules, as we shall see, prefigure the ransom system as it applied during the course

⁷ M. Strickland, 'The Vanquished Body: Some Conclusions and Comparisons', in M. Fierro and E. García Fitz, eds., *El cuerpo derrotado: como trataban musulmanes y cristianos a los enemigos vencidos (Península Ibérica, ss. VIII–XIII)* (Madrid, 2008), pp. 531–70.

⁸ Dunbabin, *Captivity*, p. 86. ⁹ Dunbabin, *Captivity*, p. 10.

¹⁰ M. Keen, *Chivalry* (London and New Haven, Conn., 1984), pp. 100–1; J. R. V. Barker, *The Tournament in England, 1100–1400* (Woodbridge, 1986), pp. 44, 134, 143–4; R. Barber and J. R. V. Barker, *Tournaments, Jousts, Chivalry and Pageants in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1989), pp. 14–15, 21, 190.

Introduction

of the Hundred Years War. These last theories remain rather speculative, however. The causal link between the status of 'prisoner of war' and the emergence of the notion of the public war, and between the practices of tournaments and war, is never explicitly stated in the sources.

One of the attractions of the Hundred Years War for an in-depth examination of ransoms and prisoners of war is that the wealth of sources allows the historian to go beyond speculation in exploring the different aspects of this topic. Such sources allow the period to be studied in its own right without the need to bring in material from a later period, a problem which besets those writing on earlier periods. There is a danger of falling into a teleological argument, i.e. the interpretation of a fact or phenomenon in terms of its supposedly inevitable consequences. Although he does it very cautiously, Matthew Strickland, for example, investigates the law of arms in the eleventh and twelfth centuries using the hindsight of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which are not only far better documented but also saw the constitution of a more formalised legal code of conduct in war.¹¹ Any form of 'logical' evolution which is imposed needs to be identified and its validity questioned. The late Middle Ages is usually seen as a period of transition between the feudal and chivalrous high Middle Ages, when war was an individual business, and the early modern period, when emerging modern states took a firm hold of the whole-process. This paradigm, according to Philippe Contamine, is not appropriate in the case of prisoners and ransoms. In his comparison of evidence for the thirteenth century and for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, he finds that the French crown interfered more persistently in the earlier period.¹² Whilst he makes the observation based on a relatively small sample of evidence from the thirteenth century, a period when source materials are more exclusively royal and princely than in ensuing centuries, his remark is an important call for vigilance. It reminds us of the need to examine the sources closely and to be particularly careful in using appropriate terminology.

What was a prisoner of war in the time of the Hundred Years War? Interestingly, the phrase 'prisoner of war' seems to have made its first appearance in that very period both in its French form, 'prisonnier de guerre', and in its Latin form, 'prisionarius de guerra'.¹³ The earliest

¹¹ M. Strickland, *War and Chivalry: The Conduct and Perception of War in England and Normandy, 1066–1217* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 31–54.

¹² P. Contamine, 'Un contrôle étatique croissant: les usages de la guerre du XIV^e au XVIII^e siècle: rançons et butins', in P. Contamine, ed., *Guerre et compétition entre les états européens du XIV^e au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1998), pp. 199–236, at pp. 204–6.

¹³ See the remark of Philippe Contamine in 'Un contrôle étatique croissant', p. 201. There is no reference to this phrase in Godefroy's *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes*

references that I have come across date to the 1420s. The first known reference involves a legal suit held in the *Parlement* of Paris (i.e. the Supreme Court of France) in 1424 in which Sir John Fastolf claimed Denis Sauvage as his 'prisonnier de guerre'.¹⁴ Sauvage contested Fastolf's claim on the ground that 'il n'est point prisonnier de guerre et n'est poursuivy que pour plegerie' (he is not prisoner of war and is sued only for his acting as a surety for the payment of a ransom). Two years later, we learn in a letter of remission issued by the French royal chancellery of Henry VI in May 1426, that the English esquire William Godebec wondered whether the Norman prisoner who was in his hands could be considered as 'prisonnier de guerre', or whether he should be punished as a criminal.¹⁵ About two months later, the knight Sinador de Giresme and several other French soldiers told the *Parlement* of Paris that they had taken prisoner one Robert Parentis between Paris and Luzarchais, and while they were on their way with their 'prisonarium de guerra' to Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, they were arrested and their prisoner seized from their hands.¹⁶ Finally, the English esquire John Stille declared to the English authorities in 1428 that he had considered Guillaume Leheux as 'prisonnier de guerre' because he had not sworn allegiance to the English king and because Leheux was captured while riding on a horse along with the enemies of the king.¹⁷

Down to the 1420s the closest match was 'prisonnier de bonne guerre [prisoner of "good" war]' (1415).¹⁸ More commonly, in the fourteenth century a combatant would be said to have been 'pris ... par/pour fait de guerre' (taken ... by act of war) (1351, 1360),¹⁹ 'tempore guerrarum ... captum fuisse' (having been taken in time of war) (1363,

du IXe au XVIe siècles, 10 vols. (Paris, 1881–1902), nor in the *Anglo-Norman Dictionary* (www.anglo-norman.net/cgi-bin/form-s1; accessed on 24 January 2012). The first mention of the English form 'prisoner of war' dates back to 1608 according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (www.oed.com/view/Entry/267433; accessed on 24 January 2012).

¹⁴ *English Suits Before the Parlement of Paris, 1420–1436*, C. T. Allmand and C. A. J. Armstrong, eds. (London, 1982), pp. 31, 33.

¹⁵ *Chronique du Mont-Saint-Michel (1294–1376)*, S. Luce, ed., 2 vols. (Paris, 1879–83), vol. 1, pp. 244–7, no. 81.

¹⁶ AN, X1a 9191, fol. 34v–35v (27 July 1426). On this case, see also G. Little, *The Parlement of Poitiers: War, Government and Politics in France, 1418–1436* (London, 1981), p. 172.

¹⁷ BL, Add. Ch. 3622 (24 April 1428).

¹⁸ AN, X1a 4791, fol. 8v–9r (2 December 1415). 'Good war' in this example seems to refer to the circumstances of open war as opposed to truce and 'guerre couverte' (a form of private war), rather than to the circumstances of 'just' as opposed to 'unjust' war, but this is not wholly clear. There are later occurrences after the 1420s of the phrases 'prisonnier de bonne guerre' and (prisoners captured) 'in facto bone guerre'. AN, X1a 67, fol. 105r (10 June 1430); 9194, fol. 144r (4 August 1436).

¹⁹ P.-C. Timbal et al., *La Guerre de Cent Ans vue à travers les registres du Parlement, 1337–1369* (Paris, 1961), p. 332 (3 July 1351); AN, JJ 90, fol. 237v–238, no. 474 (March 1360).