

Hostages in the Middle Ages

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The word 'hostage' might immediately bring to mind hostile situations: the entrapment of a wealthy businessman's daughter in exchange for money, a terrorist incident [\(1\)](#) or a manifestation of domestic abuse. [\(2\)](#) However, the meaning of hostageship has undergone many transformations over time, some of which are brought under the microscope Professor Adam Kosto as he dissects the development of this phenomenon during the Middle Ages.

In attempting to emphasise the distinction between the modern perception of hostageship and that of the medieval era, Kosto argues that in the past hostageship was seen as not simply a legal issue, but also as a political one. This distinction between the modern sense of the term and the medieval one is something Kosto continually addresses in his bid to avoid the historian's most cardinal sin, anachronism. The pitfalls of linguistic interpretation in history are evident and Kosto is very good at putting the medieval usage of 'hostage' in context. However, aside from a few pages at the end of the book (p. 220–6), he seems to overlook the modern use of the term and only makes reference to it, briefly, in terms of the Hostage Convention of 1979, the US Lieber Code or the Nuremberg Trials. Kosto somewhat understates the variety of modern hostageship and could have emphasized this further. But essentially, this is a deeply historical investigation and the parts of the book where it deals with the modern period are not central to its thesis. Drawing on the work of Ascan Lutteroth, Kosto also identifies the modern distinction between hostages forcibly taken and hostages given as a result of negotiation, which has been seen as a product of modern international law (p. 5), although it also existed in an exceedingly multi-faceted way in the Middle Ages.

The author is very clear in his claims: firstly, medieval hostageship was not only a guarantee as such, but was firmly embedded in contemporary politics. Secondly, as society changed, so did the nature of hostageship. And finally, despite the societal progress made in key areas such as law and governance, 'physical control over people remained crucial' in the politics of this time, though one also sees international law and economics coming to the fore.

In first providing a general overview of the history of hostages, hostage precursors are revealed in Rome and Persia, and even pre-Islamic Arabia. Nonetheless, the Middle Ages are selected as the main focus of this book, due to the practice of hostageship being at its peak in this period and, as the author puts it, featuring in

‘every major politico-military development or event between the fifth and fifteenth centuries’ (p. 4). However, it is also interesting to discover that hostages were not only used in the context of armed conflict, but also in endless financial transactions.

It is indeed true that medieval hostageship has been – perhaps quite intentionally – overlooked. Many studies on hostages have used a much broader and extensive time frame, covering only briefly developments in the Middle Ages. Kosto recognizes this, and also criticizes the common but mistaken conflation of hostageship with suretyship, and the confusing distinction between, yet simultaneous intertwinement of, hostages on the one hand and captives on the other.

The book’s concern, however, is to investigate the contexts of hostageship rather ‘than with tracing institutional genealogies’ (p. 7). And the contexts undoubtedly seep through, cementing the whole book together in an extraordinary fashion. This contextualization is necessary to understand a concept that is not only complex but also medieval to its core. Not limiting himself to legal history, Kosto is quick to emphasise the social and political history of hostageship, and that does wonders for our understanding of the notion as held in medieval society.

The book lays out the varieties of medieval hostageship. In essence, regardless of the kinds of situation a hostage would be required in, the common thread was the existence of a promise, with or without a temporal deadline. Open-ended agreements were more frequently used in the Middle Ages to display submission by the vanquished side, as a substitution for released captives, and to ensure the loyalty of a ruler’s subordinates and even allies (p. 25–8). However, finite agreements on hostages were not uncommon either and could come in the form of a truce, even for safe passage, such as Otto I’s use of a hostage in Mainz to ensure the safety of his son and son-in-law. By far the most common, however, were ransom agreements.

In chapter two, a distinction between true and conditional hostageship is made and we learn of the preference for appointing sons as hostages, given their position within the family. This is evident in the story of Thietmar of Merseburg, or that of Magnus I of Norway’s success in Denmark (p. 32–4). The use of sons shows how hostageship was based largely on family ties. In fact, family and alliance, according to Kosto, ‘defined early medieval political action’ (p. 54). The chapter also explores the logic behind medieval hostageship, explaining that the question of exactly who a hostage was in the Middle Ages was in fact part and parcel of the question of what the structures of power were.

A thread running throughout the book is the story of William Marshall. This could wear a little thin for those very familiar with the topic, who might welcome more variety in the examples provided – though Kosto does provide these in other parts of the book. However, for the reader new to the topic, the repeated references to Marshall could assist with understanding the practice of hostageship. With Marshall’s story in mind, the reader is able to comprehend the intricacies of each aspect of hostageship.

A study of the Middle Ages would not be complete without a gruesome dimension. On this, Kosto does not fail to deliver. Including stories of the mistreatment and gory decapitation of hostages certainly adds to the drama of the work, though voyeurs should not get too carried away, as we find that these fatal situations were in fact rarities in the Middle Ages.

The Saxons infamously executed on Charlemagne’s orders have always stood out as the best known group of hostages. However, the Carolingians took many other groups as hostages too, including Iberian Muslims, Bohemians, Moravians, Lombards, Danes, Bretons and so on. Furthermore, the Carolingians were not the only ones to make use of hostageship in the early Middle Ages. Rulers from around the globe, such as Islamic Emirs, utilised hostages and this practice became a means of political communication, a sign of good faith. In this sense, hostageship was a common – perhaps universal – language in itself.

But if hostageship was a language then it also possessed many dialects, with political communication not being the only one. Romans used hostages as a means of religious communication, and hostageship could

also be a technique of religious conversion (p. 68). It was therefore not always negative, being comparable to processes such as child oblation, commendation, fosterage or even sponsorship (p. 72–7). Hostages were used to provide a guarantee, but these parallels could well have encouraged the continued use of hostages.

From the 11th century, an almost new era of hostageship emerges. Hostages were subject to an exponential increase, not only in number but also in the variety of contexts in which they were used. This was as a reflection of what was going on in society as a whole. Noticeable changes included the increased use of females as hostages and of hostages as representatives following changes in political geography. Conditional respite and ransom, with their links to the Crusade (p. 114), also had connections to hostageship. Hostages were deemed to have significant, if not substantial, economic worth in a ransom market (p. 118) and were also used in many financial transactions. The laws of war also played a huge role in the formalisation of the legal position of hostages at this time, which became enforceable through formal court processes.

Chapter five discusses conditional hostageship, as the more judicial nature of the practice evolved, with legislation on it widespread by the 13th century (pp. 131; 161). Hostageship was now deemed to be based on the mutual trust between two parties, one of which could guarantee the appearance of the hostage when required to do so. The use of hostages was also being integrated into international affairs, as reflected in international peace treaties. Additionally, money had much more of a role to play at this time, and could now be an object of the agreement as well (p. 157). Moreover, conditional hostageship could also be used as a contractual tactic (p. 160).

Given the recorded accounts of royal ransom hostageship, it is only natural that the author should consider the King's ransom, not merely because the sources are accessible, but also because of its importance to the functioning and development of political life. Hostages were frequently used to acquire royal ransom. Kings, such as Richard I of England, would become useful pawns in endless diplomatic games. Other kings, such as Charles of Salerno, who was released by the Treaty of Canfranc, royal ransom hostages in the Anglo-French War and even James I of Scotland, whose particular innovative hostage situation demonstrated the metamorphosis of captive and captor roles in hostage situations concerning royal ransom, go a long way to show the trends in royal hostageship throughout the Middle Ages.

In addition, the book details the negotiations that went into hostageship and uses evidence that shows that medieval contemporaries were not as concerned with technicalities and formalities as they were with 'behaviour and status' (p. 200). Despite evidence implying a disdain for the practice, it is clear that the use of hostages did not diminish until much later. Although Kosto cites theoretical writers such as Belli, Vitoria and Grotius and their views on hostageship, it is clear that this is the weakest part of the book. Why these writers thought the way they did about the use of hostages is not made clear, and more connections could have been made to previously documented sources.

Nevertheless, the contextual approach taken in this book is still remarkable; as has already been suggested, it is not limited to a survey of familiar work on this topic, but also looks at crucial archival material, showing how comprehensive an enterprise this study actually was. This research could well have been a never-ending endeavor and Kosto has already, in his own words, been 'at it for so long', probing into some very important and wide-ranging points. Needless to say, there is sufficient information in the book to provide a more than well-balanced picture of hostageship in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, Kosto should also be admired for condensing such dense and complex material into a book of only 226 pages. Communicating complicated material can sometimes be a struggle for academics, but this is evidently one of Kosto's strengths.

An impressive range of sources is used, including primary materials that go beyond the usual Eurocentric focus that studies like this often suffer from. The author uses Arab, Slavonic, Hebrew and Syriac sources, as well as the usual European ones, and digs into not only the Christian sphere, but also the Islamic one. This should open the floodgates and appeal to other researchers working in the fields of peace studies, international legal history, the laws of war and so on, drawing their attention to primary sources that they may previously have been unaware of.

Throughout the book, we are introduced to numerous real examples, and their implications and relevance for the understanding of the hostage in the Middle Ages, which help bring this study to life and transport the reader. We are, in addition, given the pleasure of getting to the heart of the author's thought-process in drawing his conclusions. Parts of the book are almost lessons in historical methodology themselves, as Kosto warns of the danger of any historical document being a forgery. How can any document be perceived as neutral? This level of methodological transparency is unique and adds a sense of sincerity to the work.

Ultimately, there was no single model of a hostage in the Middle Ages and it was precisely the ever-changing contexts in which hostages could remain useful to both the hostage-giver and the hostage-taker that made hostageship a widely-used tool in peacemaking in a range of different societies and cultures. Kosto's clear and systematic work is testament to his brilliance, not only as a historian, but also as a storyteller. The book itself is packed with wonderfully illuminating material on the medieval hostage, but also the analogous development of medieval power structures and society. The versatility of this book means that it would not only be of interest to a well-established historian (legal or otherwise), but also to a non-historian, or someone starting out in the field.

Notes

1. Joseph J. Lambert, *Terrorism and Hostages in International Law: A Commentary on the Hostages Convention 1979* (Cambridge, 1990). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Vincent B. Van Hasselt, John J. Flood, Stephen J. Romano, Gregory M. Vecchi, Nathalie de Fabrique, Vincent A. Dalfonzo, 'Hostage-taking in the context of domestic violence: some case-examples', *Journal of Family Violence*, 20, 1 (2005), 21. [Back to \(2\)](#)

The author thanks the reviewer for the careful review of his work and for her constructive observations and suggestions.

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