

# URBAN VIOLENCE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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Europe and the Middle East in the period from 1000 to 1500 AD was undoubtedly a violent place. A society so long militarized to protect and expand territory does not easily set down the tools it has so often used for conflict resolution and for establishment of domination. Yet, while there is a great deal of academic focus upon the phenomenon of chivalric violence, the violence that so powerfully affected the urban areas probably had a more profound impact upon more people. David Nirenberg asserts that each outbreak of urban violence in the middle ages had a local, socio-political cause.<sup>1</sup> However, within the violence, patterns are perceptible that suggest commonalities between incidents as far apart as Baghdad and Florence. Lester Little advocates economic reasons as the binding force behind the descent into violence. As the shift to a profit economy transformed the region, it created tensions that could not be eased by any other means then available.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, that would seem to have some credence. However, what other factors were involved and what can notable instances of urban violence tell us about the conflicting demands and desires of the people, especially those needs that drove them to rebellion?

Violence often occurred when, to the instigators, violence must have seemed to be the best and easiest solution to a grievance, when potential reward outweighed the inevitable risk. Such situations arose especially in locations where the political landscape was fractured, where political power was weak, or where political power lay in the hands of a disconnected minority. In such circumstances, those with grievances often had no other effective means of redress or complaint.

The most striking cases of political violence occurred in the communes of Florence and Rome.

Foregoing the monarchies and noble rule of most of the rest of Europe, these cities floundered in the fourteen centuries. The commune of Florence selected its political system deliberately to prevent any abuses of power by the great magnates of its day and to distribute government and power among the populace. Originally, this must have seemed like a wise idea in the face of the ambitions of the powerful. However, the Florentine experiment went too far. The system of podesta and priors, as described in Dino Compagni's chronicle, was so powerless that it exacerbated rather than diminished tensions.<sup>3</sup> Two month terms for the priors and the exclusion from power of those not in the major guilds meant that weak leadership, corruption and lack of central authority became the norm. In such an unstable system, existing economic and political tensions had no means of release other than through violence.

While the underlying factor in Florence might have been the political landscape but the proximal cause of the violence invariably was economic. One of the most important of merchant cities, Florence was the center of great wealth, wealth that fueled insatiable ambition in many of its population. In the absence of political controls or even an effective and uncorrupted legal system, the rich and powerful used their money as a weapon in a war for control of the city's great financial potential.

In Mamluk Syria, however, there was a political system of overall stability. The Mamluks, after all, lasted as an independent regime for more than two hundred and fifty years. However, as in Florence, the government often could not, or would not, respond to the needs of its citizens, leading to violent episodes. In Syria, the Mamluk elite held exclusive political power in the highest echelons of society. These former slaves, imported from beyond the

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<sup>1</sup> David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996)

<sup>2</sup> Lester Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978)

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<sup>3</sup> Dino Compagni, *Chronicle of Florence*, trans Daniel Bornstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 8.

sultanate, had few links with those that lived beneath them. Some did forge bonds, but many remained focused upon internal struggles with their fellow Mamluk amirs. In the cities of Syria, such as Damascus or Aleppo, the Mamluk *amirs* took a limited approach to governance. They had little interest in administration but rather more in the control of the economy, the benefits of rulership and the maintenance of their power. They distributed bureaucratic, police and minor governmental functions to the local *ulama* and the sheikhs of the quarters, while suppressing citywide groups that they thought might prove the focus of rebellion. With no central government and weak associations, this distributed, decentralized approach led to the ignoring of already marginalized groups and the violence of frustration.<sup>4</sup>

Importantly though for both the Mamluks and the poor was the trigger to these struggles and their ultimate intent. Lapidus notes that the spark that set off violence was economic, especially punitive taxes. The resulting violence then took a specific form. The instigators would murder taxmen or the market inspectors – both financial agents of the Mamluks, shopkeepers would strike and large mobs would appeal to the ruling *amir*.<sup>5</sup> At first glance, any violence would seem to be a dangerous undertaking, challenging the warrior Mamluks and their hegemony. However, the violence was rarely chaotic, and rather than threatening to usurp the Mamluks often seemed to acknowledge their rule of the Syrian cities while criticizing aspects of that rule. Although there were rebellions in Syrian cities that usurped individual Mamluk governors, the system itself was strong enough to replace the offending *amir* and continue.<sup>6</sup> In their case, perhaps violence was the best method the poor of Mamluk cities could have chosen, not only for absence of other routes of redress but because of the nature of the Mamluks themselves. Soldiers, reared on principles of warfare and violence, the Mamluks may well have responded with at least respect that the poor of Damascus or Aleppo could

muster up a show of force for them. Certainly, the violence could even be useful to the Mamluk elite. Often they would manipulate the mobs to their own ends, employing the gangs of *zu'ar* youth in their internecine struggles.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of focusing attacks upon financial agents of a political power appears elsewhere in the history of medieval violence. Nirenberg asserts that the “Shepherds’ Crusade” attacks upon the Jews was such an event. The Jews, as agents of the King of France, might have proven a more fruitful – and more vulnerable – avenue of protest than proceeding directly against the Crown.<sup>8</sup> Nirenberg’s argument, that this was the deliberate and only intent of the shepherds, seems to be overstressing the point, especially as some of the shepherds drifted into Aragon and well away from French royal domains. Still, it may well have been one of the factors that drove the shepherds to massacre Jews.

Nirenberg appears to dismiss the arguments of Lester Little that economics had a great part in the growing violence against Jews in Medieval Europe.<sup>9</sup> However, it would seem that in several cases, the violence against the Jews was economic in origin. In the Shepherds’ Crusade itself, the shepherds could have targeted the Jews as *financial* agents of the King, especially in their role as tax collectors. Little also suggests that, while economics might not be the immediate cause of anger towards the Jews, it was an underlying factor that might impel violence even amongst those who did not necessarily consciously resent Jewish financial activity.<sup>10</sup>

Modern scholars might expect chronicles written contemporaneous to the massacres of Jews to include many assertions of the wickedness of the Jews, and this certainly is the case. However, some chroniclers such as William of Newburgh acknowledged even then the financial motivations to violence. In the wake of Richard I’s coronation in 1189, there was a flurry of anti-Jewish violence throughout England. Newburgh writes that the violence “broke forth not indeed from a pure motive [...]

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<sup>4</sup> Ira M. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) 92, 143.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 145

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 152

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 159

<sup>8</sup> Nirenberg, 50

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 5 commenting on Little 42.

<sup>10</sup> Little, 56

but through envy at their prosperity or desire to seize their fortunes.”<sup>11</sup> The Jews in England, as in France and Germany, had long been predominantly urban and involved in both trade and usury and so were prosperous and vulnerable targets. Little also notes that while Christians also acted as moneylenders, the Church condemned the practice. By attacking the Jewish moneylenders, the Christians in the mob could assuage their guilt at their own sins.<sup>12</sup> In addition, there seem to be analogues between the events in England and the “Holy Week” violence and the resistance to Jewish participation in ritual activities and processions in Aragon as described by Nirenberg. In the latter, the violence took on a ritualistic flavor that Nirenberg asserts was about affirming boundaries between the Christians and the Jews.<sup>13</sup> When considering the events in England in 1189, it is interesting that the Jewish deaths began on the day of Richard’s coronation itself as Jews attempted to observe and to participate in this secular and sacred event. Clearly in the eyes of the Christian observers, the Jews had overstepped their boundaries and intruded upon what should have been a solely Christian occasion. The violent and immediate Christian reaction suggests an unconscious attempt to reinforce these unspoken barriers.

A similar reaction to the crossing of boundaries and the importance of parade and ritual might also be the reason for the otherwise perplexing attacks on Jewish funerals in Cairo, as described in the Cairo Geniza.<sup>14</sup> While Jewish worship within the private spaces of homes and synagogues was acceptable to the Muslim majority, intruding sacred ritual into the public space of the city would appear to have been an affront to the populace. They thus reacted to restore and reinforce the social wall between the adherents of the different faiths.

Economic and political concern over the Jews extended beyond European control. The case of Joseph ibn

Naghrela in eleventh century Granada exemplifies the dangers to minorities of too much success. Joseph was the vizier of the ruler of Granada, Badis ibn Habbus, and had “acquired overriding influence over the prince.”<sup>15</sup> `Abd Allah accuses him of poisoning the ruler’s son (the author’s father), attempting to turn another relative against Badis ibn Habbus and betraying the city to a rival. He further notes, “All sections of the population from top to bottom had a detestation of the underhanded ways of the Jews.”<sup>16</sup> Tensions ultimately rose until the mob usurped Joseph, murdering him and massacring thousands of Granadan Jews in their fury.

Yet, why did the actions of one man reflect upon so many? In the small independent Taifa Kingdoms of Muslim Iberia, power remained in the hands of a few men. The king and his vizier or viziers would command the obedience of the people as well as attempt to inspire and guide. The vast majority of people would thus have remained outside the power equation. In normal circumstances, this does not appear to have been a great problem. The Iberian Muslim commons had never known independence or self-rule, after all. However, they did seem to expect their rulers to show them as much or more consideration than other groups living alongside them. When Joseph came to power, he appeared to be abusing his authority in the twilight of an aged king. To Muslim eyes, this would put them at a disadvantage compared to the Jews in the continuing slow struggle for economic and political advantage. Thus, while Joseph committed the “crimes,” all the Jews in Granada flourished. It was only natural then that when he fell, the anger of the mob would turn not only upon him, but also upon all others who might have benefited from his iniquity. The poet and courtier Abu Ishaq of Elvira confirms the economic motivation of the massacre, writing about Joseph and the Jews,

“Do not spare his people for they have amassed every precious thing. Break loose their grip and take their

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<sup>11</sup> William of Newburgh, *The History*, trans. Joseph Stevenson (Felinfach: Llanerch Press, 1996) 563

<sup>12</sup> Little, 42.

<sup>13</sup> Nirenberg, 218.

<sup>14</sup> S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: an Abridgement in One Volume*, Revised and edited by Jacob Lassner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 295

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<sup>15</sup> `Abd Allah ibn Buluggin, *Tibyan*, trans. Amin T. Tibi, reproduced in Olivia Remie Constable, ed., *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim and Jewish Sources* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 92.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 96

money for you have a better right to what they collect. Do not consider it a breach of faith to kill them – the breach of faith would be to let them carry on.”<sup>17</sup>

While much of the violence aimed at the Jews in both Europe and the Middle East may have been attributable to economic or political concerns, it is difficult to ascribe all the violence to such causes directly. Certainly many contemporaneous sources portray the Jews as a whole in such virulent force that, whatever the underlying cause, the effect must have been quite powerful. Although Nirenberg seems to dismiss the psychological effects of the demonization of the Jewish people upon the European populace, the constant inculcation of hate into the latter must have been a factor in the violence against them. How much easier it must have been for a townsman to believe the wild untruths about the Jews when such stories were common currency, and believing such stories, to turn to violence at the smallest provocation. Even otherwise critical sources seem swept up in it. Richard of Devizes, in his detailed chronicle of the first years of Richard I's reign includes a long story about the murder of a Christian boy by a Jewish artisan.<sup>18</sup> Devizes shows no doubt in the veracity of this story. This may be because the author was a Christian monk with an already established loathing of the Jewish “vermin” indulging in satanic practices.<sup>19</sup> Certainly, monks were not immune to financial pressures from Jewish moneylenders. Yet, it might be that religious feeling and long standing indoctrination of hate are more on show here than pure economic envy.

Intolerance between Christian and Jew was not the only religious incitement to urban violence in the middle ages. Poor relations both within Christianity and within Islam each led to friction and violence. These ranged from the semi-comical to the deadly. The image of a united church was a fallacy in the high medieval period. Regular and secular clergy were often at odds, and these tensions did lead to violence, albeit violence often more muted than

that seen in Florence or Baghdad. In the East of England in 1201, monks of Bury St Edmond's clashed with the clerks of the diocese of Ely,

“The monks of Ely set up a market for buying and selling at Lakenheath [...] We, at first sent messengers [...] praying that they would desist from that which had been begun [...] They would not desist, and threatening words went to and fro, and spears threatened spears.”<sup>20</sup>

Again, although the argument was between two religious entities, the source of the dispute was economic and again, it reached the same conclusion. The following year, after legal struggles had failed to satisfactorily redress their complaints, men associated with Bury attacked the market. As a major source of income for the monasteries, markets were clearly economic assets the abbots were prepared to fight to retain.

In eleventh century Baghdad, the control of markets created great tensions between two Muslims groups that ultimately erupted into deadly violence. Certainly, the stage was set for turbulence. Political power was weak within the city. The Abbasid Caliph, ostensibly the ultimate ruler in the city, was little more than a figurehead for the Buyid kings. Rivals to that position were constantly jostling for the support of the slave troops and the control of the city. To exacerbate matters, poor weathers and failed harvests had increased inflation and caused shortages. With no firm guidance from government and no relief of their distress, the people of the city became increasingly angry. In this case, it was the *ulama*, the notables of the city that finally set off the violence. Preaching in the mosque in 420, the Sunni elite condemned the Shi'ites in the city as heretics.<sup>21</sup> It is difficult to believe that they did not realize that there would be some reaction, but harder still to believe that they desired the firestorm that they unleashed. Perhaps their intent had been religious and they had thought to punish the wayward and unapologetic Shi'ites. Whatever response they had expected, they soon

<sup>17</sup> Abu Ishaq, *Quasida*, trans. Bernard Lewis, reproduced in Constable, 99.

<sup>18</sup> Richard of Devizes, *Chronicle*, trans. J.A. Giles, Medieval Latin Series (Cambridge, Ont: In Parentheses Publications, 2000) 48

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 4

<sup>20</sup> Jocelin of Brakelond, *The Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond Monk of St. Edmundsbury*, trans. and ed. L.C. Jane (London: Chatto and Windus, 1907).

<sup>21</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *al-Muntazam fi al-Tarikh*, trans. R. Howes, year 420.

lost any measure of control of the situation. Murder, arson and considerable violence wracked Baghdad for three years.<sup>22</sup> Disaffected Sunni city-dwellers descended upon the quarter known as al-Karkh, in which there was a high proportion of Shi'ites. Yet, while Ibn al-Jawzi characterizes the violence as exclusively religious in nature, it would seem to have in part an economic component. The Shi'ites of al-Karkh, despite being a little-respected religious minority, constituted a large percentage of the merchants. In the difficult economic circumstances, they must have seemed like ideal scapegoats for the non-merchant urban classes. That the violence was mostly diffuse, not focused such as that seen in Mamluk cities, suggests that deep-seated yet non-specific economic frustrations were pivotal to this outbreak.

A confluence of religion, politics and church-held wealth was at the heart of a 12<sup>th</sup> century rebellion that set the scene for centuries of intermittent conflict. In 1145, Arnold of Brescia arrived in Rome to discover that the Commune of Rome had declared a republic. He joined the group and helped to expel Pope Eugenius from the city the following year. What was initially a political movement aimed at restoring power to the people, Arnold turned in a popular crusade against an affluent and ostentatious church that meddled in secular politics. According to Walter Map,

“The citizens flocked to [Arnold] and heard him gladly [...] they gathered together at the court and abused the lord Pope and the cardinals saying that Arnold was a good and righteous man, and the others were covetous, unrighteous and bad, not the light of the world but the scum of it.”<sup>23</sup>

Map, a clerk himself, shows considerable sympathy to Arnold, whom the German Emperor later defeated and had put to death, which is initially surprising given the latter's rebellion against church and pope. However, Map was, like many others in the clerical hierarchy, acutely aware of the wealth and luxuries of the church elite and

could not reconcile it with his faith. If he could not, a man of the church, then what chance the mob of Rome? In Rome, as in Mamluk Damascus, there was rule by an unapproachable, distant figure, leaving little political voice for the people and little other recourse for their troubles but violent behavior. Maybe the pope had hoped that his position as a religious leader would secure his position, but as Arnold's case shows, if anything it made it worse. Arnold's religious arguments whipped the people, already primed for change, into far more radical action than they might otherwise have taken.

Ultimately, Arnold's rebellion failed and he died brutally in 1155. However, the Commune of Rome survived, albeit in a severely weakened form. As in Florence, this weak city government led to recurring problems. For much of the medieval period, magnates took it in turns to dominate the city, often leading it adrift and disturbed. As one anonymous author wrote, “The city of Rome was in agony. It had no rulers; men fought every day, robbers were everywhere [...] everywhere evil, no justice, no law.”<sup>24</sup> Despite the apparent chaos, the stakes were high. Rome, like Florence, was a trading city and more importantly, it was a destination for pilgrims from all over Europe. Both created a potential for great wealth. Yet, not everyone shared in the wealth and the old class structure of patrician and plebeian still dictated politics in the city.

By the 1340s, the populace was frustrated and ready for a change as drastic as the one offered by Arnold of Brescia almost two hundred years before. Leadership came in the form of Cola di Rienzo, a plebeian. Like Arnold, he understood the people of Rome. Like Arnold, he whipped this mob into a frenzy of anticipation. Yet, unlike Arnold, he appealed to the urgent economic and social concerns of the people rather than via the esoterica of religion. In the ordinances of the Good Estate, Cola promised the people good governance, an effective and prompt legal system and the subjugation of the nobility to the will of the

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, year 420–23.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium* (Courtier's Trifles), ed. and transl. by M.R. James, rev. C.N.L. Brooke and R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford Medieval Texts, eds B.F. Harvey, D.E. Greenaway and M. Lapidge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 83.

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<sup>24</sup> *The Life of Cola di Rienzo*, trans. John Wright, Medieval Sources in Translation 18 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1975), 40.

people.<sup>25</sup> After tapping into the potential for violence in the people and so winning office, Cola thus attempted to neutralize that potential by removing the necessity for violent struggle. Under the Good Estate – in theory at least – every common person could benefit, all could have a say in rule and vitally, all had non-violent redress for their problems. It was a bold and insightful move that appeared at first to work, especially as the nobles appeared too paralyzed by shock to respond. That was not to last. Within months, they had recovered and usurped Cola. The former tribune made a return a year later and at first, the Roman people accepted him happily. However, this time, Cola did not have the pulse of the people. He began to act capriciously and imposed new and increased taxes upon them. Had he forgotten that wealth, or at least the potential for wealth, fired the plebeians? The potential for violence still remained. The plebeians rioted against their tribune and murdered him, displaying his body in a vivid display of their displeasure.<sup>26</sup>

The ritual display of dead enemies might seem to modern eyes a horrific and unnecessary brutality. Yet, in an age before mass communications, it could be a powerful visual tool. To a ruler who had suppressed a rebellion, it might seem a cogent warning to others who might contemplate defiance. To the mob though, it seems to have had a somewhat different meaning. In Cola's case, the treatment of his corpse seems to have been a reassertion of the power vested in the people, that none – not even the great and good – should ignore. Similarly, the display of the decapitated heads of the victims of the English rebellion of 1381 seems to have been about the rebels asserting the power that came from being a united force of men, prepared to commit violence for a cause.

The English rebellion is an ideal example of a rebellion that occurred when the people – in this case predominantly farmers but supported by some townspeople – had reached the point of desperation with their plight. The peasants had borne years of frustrated economic ambitions, laws favoring landlords over tenants, the threats

of war and invasion and an unresponsive government that clearly favored the wealthy over the masses. The final trigger came with the abusive enforcement of an unfair taxation system.<sup>27</sup>

What is most striking about the English rebellion of 1381 might not be that it happened but that the people had not arisen earlier, nor did they rebel again in such numbers. Neither did the city of London see extensive violence of the type that plagued many other cities. Certainly, it was not for want of economic incentive. London was a thriving merchant city, perhaps not as wealthy as Florence at its height, but still more prosperous than many European cities. Why did the merchants and guildsmen of London not fight each other for dominance as they did in Florence or Rome? Aside from questions of temperament, the most plausible explanation must rest in the differing methods of governance between the cities. London was essentially self-administering, ruled by a mayor and aldermen selected for lengthy terms by their peers.<sup>28</sup> They also had a powerful monarchy that could insist upon the maintenance of law and order. England also had a long-established and extensive legal system. This contributed in two ways to a paucity of violence. Firstly, stable and conservative government within a system that was theoretically open to anybody who had the will and the luck to become a liveried merchant brought continuity and prosperity. Few people wished to disturb the *status quo*. Moreover, those who did have grievances had forms of redress less dangerous and more reliable than resorting to violence. Thus, when violence did erupt in London it was usually the result of external influences.

London is an interesting counterpoint because it can be constructive to consider where violence did not occur and why it did not occur, in order to answer the questions about why violence *did* occur where it did. What the case of London seems to confirm is that economic interests alone do not necessarily lead to violence. Otherwise, London should have been as transfixed as Florence or

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 43–44.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 152.

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<sup>27</sup> Henry Knighton, *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (), 135–6.

<sup>28</sup> Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class in Medieval London 1300–1500* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989)

Rome. Violence was thus not an inevitable part of medieval urban life.

For stability – in both Europe and the Middle East – several factors needed to be in balance. There needed to be a stable political system. That system did not necessarily have to be democratic or even very inclusive, but it did have to have the appearance of fairness to the populace and to appear to respond to their needs. A weak system or one too biased in favor of one small section of society, especially a class unattainable by ordinary people, was a fatal flaw that made violence almost inevitable. Add to that religious intolerance or class dissatisfaction and often, that was all that was needed for violence.

Nevertheless, as Little asserted and the examples show, the most common trigger was inevitably economic.

Whenever the poor had to confront their poverty – in times of economic hardship, famine or high taxes – they looked for answers and they looked for relief. Failing to find either in the established government, they took the only other option available to them and the ensuing violence often went farther than the remission of their immediate problems required. In more prosperous economies, the trigger was not so much poverty as the passion for acquiring wealth, to capture a good proportion of the cake. Thus, Florentines and Romans fought for wealth, there being no authority capable of stopping them. Their dangerous political games of risk and reward were more high powered and all consuming than some of the smaller, humbler rebellions and outbreaks of violence, but they were all part of the same, larger pattern.

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