

In pursuit of the lost treasure: Justice and emotion in a lawless period

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The aim of this article is to disprove the assertions of historians of modernity concerning emotional displays in the middle ages. These generalizations are based upon two outdated theoretical constructs: Norbert Elias's view of the middle ages as a period of darkness, ignorance, and violence, and Jacob Burckhardt's construction of the Italian Renaissance (periodization unclear) as the era of enlightenment and the creation of modern man (explicitly gendered male). This new creature, so claimed Burckhardt and his followers, was the complete opposite of "medieval man" in all that concerned emotions, self-perception and view of the world.

In order to refute these theories, I have adopted a micro-historical approach: an in-depth analysis of one case, dating from the early twelfth century in northern France: the theft of the treasure of the church of Laon and the revenge wrought by the patron saint of the site, the Virgin Mary. The revenge consists of the identification of the thief, followed by his apprehension, interrogation and execution.

Two insights emerge from this analysis: first, the emotions detailed in the story, both individual and collective, are no different from those attributed to "modern" men. The cultural context of the period does shape their display in ways foreign to modern ones, but the basic emotions remain the same. Second, in a world devoid of any clear operative law or any effective governmental power, the figure in authority (in this case, the city's bishop) had to create his own judicial framework to fit the problem.