Moderation and Restraint in the North: Ideals of Elite Conduct in High Medieval England, Norway and Denmark

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I, Louisa Taylor, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.
Abstract

When Norwegian and Danish elite warriors entered into battle, how were they expected to behave? What ideals, norms and conventions governed their conduct? While in the last twenty years a small number of studies have looked to address these questions, research in this area has mainly focused on searching for the ideals and norms of the Western European warrior elite in Scandinavian sources. These studies consider the impact models such as chivalry, courtliness and knighthood had on Scandinavia, rather than examining the culture of the warrior elite in this region on its own terms. While we need to consider the effect that cultural transfer might have had on elite culture in medieval Scandinavia, we must also investigate how domestic conditions and native ideas informed elite ideals and norms of conduct in this region. In this thesis, I focus on one convention which is said to have been central to Western European norms of conduct: the tendency for elite men not to execute or mutilate social equals they had defeated in battle. By comparing how elite warriors are shown to behave after conflict in England, Norway and Denmark, I seek to understand the factors which influenced the development of elite ideals and norms of conduct in each of these kingdoms. I conclude that although pan-European, and specifically Christian, ideals did influence the development of norms which governed how elite men treated opponents during, and after, battle, these norms were not adopted into Norway and Denmark from Western Europe. They evolved within the Danish and Norwegian elite communities respectively, in response to domestic social, economic and political conditions. These norms had a tangible use within conflict in each of these kingdoms, and it was this that meant they became important conventions within the practice of warfare in England, Norway and Denmark.
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A Note on Names

In this thesis, I will adhere to national conventions regarding medieval names. I have not sought to anglicise Old Norse names in discussions of Norway, instead retaining the original form. I have adhered to modern Danish conventions when using texts which discuss this region. My preference is for Knud in relation to Denmark, although the translator of the *Gesta Danorum*, Peter Fisher, has used Cnut. Likewise, I have used Svend rather than Sven. I have not altered these translations as the original Latin makes it clear who is being referred to.
1 Introduction

When Norwegian and Danish elite warriors stepped into battle, how were they expected to behave? Did they adhere to their own native ideas of military conduct? Were they influenced by foreign or pan-European ideas? Did they seek to emulate the example of other European elites? While in the last twenty years a small number of studies have looked to address these questions, research in this area has mainly focused on searching for the ideals and norms of the Western European warrior elite in Scandinavian sources.\(^1\) The dominant models of chivalry, courtliness and knighthood remain at the forefront of these studies, even when domestic influences are taken into account. This approach can lead to Scandinavia being treated as a peripheral region which is seen to have been transformed by outside influences. I believe we need to take a more balanced approach in order to understand the cultural identity of this region. It is important to examine how norms and ideals spread across regional boarders, but we must also recognise the role played by domestic conditions and existing cultural ideas in shaping the culture of elite men in Norway and Denmark.

In this thesis, I will compare depictions of elite behaviour in Norway and Denmark to those from high medieval England in order to reappraise the extent to which these kingdoms were influenced by Western European ideals of elite conduct. I will examine the evidence for each region independently, before comparing the results in the conclusion chapter. By placing these studies side-by-side, I will demonstrate how cross-European influences, domestic conditions and native traditions combined to influence the norms of conduct which were adopted by the elite group in each place. In making these points, I will also reconsider the manner in which historians have investigated elite warrior culture in high medieval England. By comparing England with regions with

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different levels of political stability and institutional development, I will reappraise the factors commonly cited as important in the development and adoption of certain elite ideals in high medieval England.²

Space constraints mean that I will focus on one norm considered central to Western European elite culture in the high medieval period: the tendency for elite men not to execute or punish with violence social equals they had defeated in battle. This restraint of violence has been seen as one of the key changes to the norms of elite conduct in England after the Norman Conquest.³ John Gillingham has argued that ‘societies in which kings, would-be kings and their aristocratic supporters were executed, murdered or mutilated,’ or where this was thought to be acceptable, were ‘unchivalrous’ and therefore different to societies in which the norms of chivalry were observed.⁴ As we shall see later on in this thesis, this would clearly include Denmark and Norway. However, Matthew Strickland and Richard Kaeuper have noted that even in places where conventions developed which restrained the most violent excesses of warfare, elite men could still be killed, massacres could still occur and mutilation was not unknown.⁵ Warfare was a bloody affair and even elite men could not escape the dangers of armed combat. Despite this, Strickland argues that after the eleventh century in

England and France, elite men generally avoided killing their peers wherever possible. Capture and ransom became established norms and elite men were rarely executed.6

Scholars of medieval Norway and Denmark have tended to see the development of restraining and moderating ideals within these regions, including the merciful treatment of opponents, as largely driven by the spread of the kind of Western European norms already present in England. Thomas Heebøll-Holm argues that the ideology of the Western European warrior class, as well as their modes of combat, had an impact on Danish elite culture by the twelfth century. These foreign ideas and behaviours were, however, modified by domestic conditions.7 Mia Münster-Swendsen believes the Danish text, the Lex Castrensis, to be a demonstration of how European ideas of curialitas, which encompassed the values of clementia, mansuetudo, hilaritas, facetia and affabilitas, were adopted into Denmark in the twelfth century.8 Hans Jacob Orning, Bjarne Fidjestøl and Marlen Ferrer, among others, have pointed to new translations of French romances at the court of King Hákon Hákonarson as actively introducing new ideas about how society should be structured and how elite men should behave into Norway from Western Europe.9

This scholarship raises a number of interesting issues. First, it encourages us to consider what we mean by chivalry and what categorising a region as ‘unchivalrous’ tells us about the ideals and norms of elite warriors in such places. Second, it prompts us to question how we understand difference in a medieval context. Does categorising a region by its adherence to one specific form of conduct help us to understand its culture? I would

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7 Heebøll-Holm, “Priscorum quippe curialum.”
8 Mia Münster-Swendsen, “The Formation of a Danish Court Nobility: The lex castrensis sive curiae of Sven Aggesen Reconsidered,” in Statsutvikling i Skandinavia i Middelalderen, ed. Sverre Bagge et al. (Oslo: Dreyers Forlag, 2012), 257–79.
argue that it does not. Third, it highlights the importance of understanding how external influences interacted with native ideas to shape elite culture. In this thesis, I will reflect upon these issues by investigating how defeated opponents are shown to be treated in historical narratives which describe high medieval England, Norway and Denmark. By examining a form of behaviour which is seen as central to Western European ideals of elite conduct after 1066, I will be able to analyse the part played by cultural transfer in the evolution of elite norms of conduct in Norway and Denmark in the period. I will also consider the extent to which norms of behaviour developed organically within these regions and the part domestic conditions could play within this process.

Throughout this thesis, I discuss ideals and norms as two separate entities. This is because ideals do not always translate directly into particular modes of behaviour. An ideal which promoted moderation and restraint, for example, might encourage the development of different behavioural norms in different places in response to varying social, political and economic conditions. The norms which developed within any warrior class were the product of a wide range of influences, from the way warfare was fought in a particular region, to the political situation, and the power of individual kings and magnates. The transfer of ideals and cultural norms across regional boarders was equally part of this process, but it was no more important than any other aspect.

In order to properly situate my research, it is essential that I discuss the various areas of scholarship which have influenced its development. I will begin by considering how scholars have understood the use and restraint of violence among the elite group. I will then review scholarship on elite culture in England, Norway and Denmark more generally. I will finish by briefly discussing how I will approach the study of ideals and norms within this thesis.

1.1 Elite Warriors – Violent and Unrestrained?

Before the advent of more anthropologically-inspired approaches to the study of medieval culture, scholars frequently assumed that the laity in the earlier medieval period were emotional, irrational and out of control. The sociologist Norbert Elias
believed that medieval elites were spontaneous individuals who were driven by their natural desires and lived under the constant threat of violence. Johan Huizinga referred to ‘the extreme excitability of the medieval soul,’ which encouraged unpredictable and irrational conduct which was directed by an individual’s passions. While in the 1980s, Stephen Jaeger argued that the expression of courtly ideals in European literature from the second half of the twelfth century was a response to the excesses of knightly behaviour.

It was the expression of a movement aimed at taming the reckless assertiveness of the European feudal nobility, at limiting its freedom in manners and morals, at restraining individual willfulness, and at raising this class from an archaic and primitive stage of social and civil life to a higher stage, imbuing it with ideals of modesty, humanity, elegance, restraint, moderation, affability, and respectfulness.

In this way, elite warriors were ‘civilised,’ their violent tendencies restrained by moderating ideals which encouraged new forms of controlled, mannered, behaviour.

Like other historians in this area, Jaeger was influenced by the work of Norbert Elias, who sought to explain how European society underwent a civilising process from the medieval period to around the end of the eighteenth century. Elias argued that as societies became increasingly centralised from the twelfth century onwards, individuals became more restrained in their behaviour. The state began the process of curbing private war and this forced the aristocracy to compete for favour and position at court, rather than on the battlefield. In this new environment, elite men demonstrated their worth by adopting highly aestheticized gestures and manners. This served to reduce the

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13 Ibid., 5–9; Richard Kaeuper was similarly influenced by the questions Elias posed about medieval elite conduct. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence*, 7.
violent activities of these men while also encouraging them to refine and structure their
conduct. Elias believed that the aristocracy were ‘civilised’ by these changes.14

Arguably, it is Elias’ model and the questions he asks which have been of interest to historians, rather than the reasons he cites for historical change. Although Jaeger names Elias as an influence, he recognises the flaws in his work, not least his sparse use of medieval sources to support his claims.15 While he agrees that it was in the environment of the court that the changes Elias identified took place, he argues that these developments were driven by individuals and education rather than the advent of stronger state institutions.16 Focusing specifically on the court of the Ottonian-Salian kings, Jaeger posits that it was clerics at court who first adopted restrained and moderate forms of conduct in order to operate within that environment. Central to this courtly ideal was an elegance of manners which was expressed through the adoption of virtues like mansuetudo, affabilitas, moderamen, moderatio and mensura. Clerics actively disseminated these virtues to the lay nobility and ensured their propagation.17

Jaeger acknowledges the agency of the lay elite within this process. He notes that we should not discount the possibility that the elite were inspired by these new moderating ideals and chose to adopt them because they were perceived to be ‘loftier and more humane’ forms of conduct. This element of choice would help to explain why high-ranking nobles adopted these courtly virtues. As these men were materially and politically powerful already, they did not necessarily need to gain a perceived advantage through adopting new forms of behaviour. However, the intrinsic appeal of these new behaviours might have persuaded them to modify their conduct.18 This question of choice is an issue I shall return to at the end of this chapter.

Both Elias’ and Jaeger’s arguments are built on the belief that elite men in the high medieval period were violent and uncontrolled and that their behaviour needed to be

16 Ibid., 7–9.
17 Ibid., 19–48, 211–35.
18 Ibid., 212–3, Quote at 212.
restrained. However, studies of the use of emotions in the medieval period have convincingly challenged this premise. Gerd Althoff has shown that the overt displays of emotion depicted in medieval texts were not signs of a lack of restraint, but a method of communication.

Many of the mannerisms of medieval communication, which may appear to us overemotionalized, were bound up with this demonstrative function – especially the demonstration of anger.¹⁹

Stephen D. White has argued that depictions of emotions within medieval narratives must be examined and understood within their particular cultural context. This approach allows us to get a better understanding of how contemporaries interpreted particular displays of emotion and the conventions which governed their acceptable use. That is not to say that narrative sources contain accurate depictions of the emotions of their subjects, but rather, that their authors must have had a shared perception of the meaning communicated by certain displays of emotion.²⁰ We must discover how certain forms of behaviour were interpreted by contemporaries before we can understand why elite men are depicted as they are in historical narratives.

In the medieval period, emotions tended to be expressed publicly and had their own function within disputes. An elite man who had been insulted, for example, had to express his ‘just anger’ in public or risk being shamed for inaction.²¹ However, while a display of anger could begin a dispute, it was not inevitable that it would lead to a violent confrontation. As Richard E. Barton has noted, disputes were regularly settled in more peaceful ways, through mediation, compromise or the reconfiguration of the relationship between the disputing parties.²² Geoffrey Koziol has highlighted the

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²¹ Ibid., 142.
importance of public displays of contrition within the resolution of conflict. Public submission followed by a display of forgiveness by the injured party could often facilitate a reconciliation between those involved.  

However, we should not think about moderating tendencies in emotional terms only. Pragmatic considerations could also prompt elite men to avoid violence. For example, military leaders frequently avoided engaging in open battle in high medieval England for fear of the consequences this could have. Battles were a risky business as they exposed participants not only to the possibility of injury and death, but also to potential humiliation by stronger opponents. As Matthew Strickland has observed, only when a force had a great advantage, or no other option, was open battle generally attempted.  

One does not, therefore, need to argue that there was a time when elite men were impulsive or lacked self-control in order to conclude that these men moderated their behaviour or saw the benefit of using violence strategically. The recognition that new moderating behaviours evolved during the high medieval period does not necessarily imply that none existed before.

Older conventions and behaviours which acted to restrain violence could be replaced or usurped by newer moderating modes of conduct. Matthew Strickland, for example, has argued that the norm that elite men should avoid killing their noble opponents was adopted, although by no means always followed, in England in the eleventh century. Yet he also recognises that the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings had more peaceful ways of settling disputes which avoided the escalation of violence. Truces and agreements to pay tribute enabled hostilities to be brought to an end and hostages could be exchanged to ensure such agreements held. Although these men still engaged in violent acts for their own advantage, they also saw the value of more moderate behaviour. Strickland similarly believes it was the usefulness of certain restraining behaviours which prompted the elite


24 Strickland, War and Chivalry, 331–32.

group in England to adopt them after 1066. In contrast to Jaeger and Elias, Strickland sees many of the norms which moderated elite violence as products of, and responses to, the conditions of the battlefield, not the court.

John Gillingham has suggested that domestic economic conditions might also have had a part to play in the development of moderating norms, and, in particular, the convention of capturing rather than killing elite opponents. Gillingham has tentatively suggested that ‘the conventions of chivalry were appropriate to a certain stage of socio-economic development...,’ where individuals held towns, castles and wealth which they could bargain in exchange for their release. By chivalry, Gillingham is specifically referring to the development of norms which limited the violent treatment of defeated opponents after battle. Conversely, in societies with little centralised authority, and few strongholds from which regions could be controlled, the only way to ensure opponents were defeated in the long term was to kill or mutilate them. Following Gillingham, Sverre Bagge has suggested that the lack of castles in Norway might have made war ‘less gentlemanly,’ citing the frequency with which pretenders to the throne and prominent men were killed in war.

It is claims such as these which I will test in this thesis, by comparing the behaviour of elite men in regions with different levels of economic and institutional development.

I do not have space to evaluate the behaviour of elite men in England, Norway and Denmark prior to the mid-eleventh century. However, I do not think it is necessary to assume that this period was a time of unrestrained violence in order to investigate the development of norms which moderated elite conduct later on. In this study, I seek to analyse, and compare, elite culture during a specific period of time. I make no comparisons to earlier periods. Instead, by using the comparative method, my research will provide an alternative insight into the factors which influenced the development of restrained behaviours among the warrior class in England, Norway and Denmark.

26 Strickland, War and Chivalry, 17, 331.
27 Gillingham, “Conquering the Barbarians,” 53–5, Quote at 55.
28 Bagge, Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom, 66.
1.2 Elite Culture in England, Norway and Denmark: Previous Scholarship

1.2.1 The Problems of Chivalry and Courtliness

The moderation of violent behaviour in war has been seen as a key element of ideal elite warrior conduct in Western Europe and of the ideology of chivalry in particular. John Gillingham has argued that the sparing of defeated elite opponents was the defining feature of chivalry. For him, chivalry was:

...a secular code of values, and – more precisely – a code in which a key element was the attempt to limit the brutality of conflict by treating prisoners, at any rate when they were men of ‘gentle’ birth, in a relatively humane fashion.\(^{29}\)

This restraint of violent behaviour is also central to Matthew Strickland’s view of elite culture in high medieval England.\(^{30}\) Both Strickland and Gillingham see the movement of elite warriors as integral to the spread of these norms. They argue that in England, it was Norman invaders arriving after 1066 who introduced the idea that elite men should treat their defeated peers magnanimously.\(^{31}\) The extent to which Norman, or French, ideals and norms were brought to England after the Conquest is not a question I shall address here. However, David Crouch has noted that the ideal that forbearance and mercy should be shown towards other warriors was a prominent feature of noble society in France in the eleventh century.\(^{32}\) It is important, therefore, to keep in mind that ideals could be disseminated across frontiers.

When scholars discuss the spread of Western European ideals and norms of conduct, they rarely focus on individual ideas. Instead, research in this area has centred on models of conduct, like chivalry and courtliness.\(^{33}\) *Chevalerie*, the root of the modern

\(^{33}\) For example, see Heebøll-Holm, “Priscorum quippe curialum”; Bengtsson, *Den Höviska Kulturen*. Heebøll-Holm and Bengtsson do examine the individual components of these models, but only in order to demonstrate that chivalry or courtliness had been adopted in a particular time or place.
term chivalry, looms large in discussions of Western European elite culture. However, the values referred to by this term, the precise dating of this phenomenon and how it developed over time have been extensively debated. Part of the problem stems from the medieval usage of this term, which was both varied and, arguably, constantly evolving. It could simply denote a warrior on horseback, but it could also be used to describe the behaviour of warriors or the ideal conduct expected of someone in their position.\textsuperscript{34} Maurice Keen, Richard Kaeuper and Constance Bouchard have emphasised the difficulty of pinning down the true meaning of chivalry and even the futility of insisting upon a comprehensive definition for the high medieval period.\textsuperscript{35} This means that in order for modern scholars to discuss chivalry, they must first define it.

Richard Kaeuper emphasises the importance of the battlefield in his definition of chivalry and argues that prowess was its key component. Men who did not embody this virtue could not hope to gain the admiration of their peers, even if they displayed other supposedly chivalrous qualities.\textsuperscript{36} However, others have suggested that the various environments in which elite men operated could each exert an influence on elite warrior mentality. Maurice Keen, for example, saw chivalry as ‘an ethos in which martial, aristocratic and Christian elements were fused together.’\textsuperscript{37} Chivalrous men sought out adventure and were determined to show their prowess, bravery and hardiness in war, but they were also loyal and had the kind of manners expected of those who resided at court.\textsuperscript{38} The court, Christian teachings and the experience of war could therefore all have an influence on elite ideals and norms of conduct across this period.

The question of how the values of the court might have influenced the idea of chivalry across the high medieval period is a troublesome one. The manners and aestheticised behaviours often associated with the court are generally referred to as ‘courteous,’ or as expressions of ‘courtesy,’ from the French term \textit{courtoise}. For Stephen Jaeger, the

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{35} Kaeuper, Chivalry and Violence, 125–26; Bouchard, Strong of Body, 104; Maurice Keen, Chivalry (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 1–2.
\textsuperscript{36} Kaeuper, Chivalry and Violence, 129–60.
\textsuperscript{37} Keen, Chivalry, 16.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 1–17, 21.
\end{footnote}
adoption of courtly ideals by the warrior elite was a process which began in the second half of the twelfth century. It was at this time that the authors of courtly romances started to depict the heroes of their texts as adhering to both the militaristic ideal of warrior prowess and valour as well as the ideals of courtesy. In these, the values of the battlefield and the aristocratic world were united in the idea of the ideal warrior. However, Jaeger does not argue that these texts were a reflection of how elite men behaved at the time they were produced. He believes that elite warriors only adopted courtly behaviours after they had discovered them in courtly literature. Jaeger thus perceives elite culture to have evolved as it came into contact with new influences and ideas.

Constance Bouchard’s suggestion that we define chivalry ‘operationally,’ takes this evolution into account. She argues that we should focus on explaining what we see described in our sources rather than being constrained by a fixed idea of what chivalry is. In her analysis of medieval French elite culture, Bouchard agrees that values like prowess, courage, loyalty and strength were important components of elite identity from the eleventh century. By the end of the twelfth century, these militaristic virtues were joined by ones which emphasised moral and social values. These values encouraged the proliferation of conduct often seen as central to the idea of courtly behaviour, such as elegant speech and politeness. This courtliness was not the product of this earlier warrior mentality, however, it was adopted into it later on.

It is therefore important to think about how individual ideals and norms developed as well as how they interacted with one another. David Crouch has looked for the roots of the ideal of the restrained and courtly man in medieval England and France. He disagrees with Bouchard’s and Jaeger’s assertion that warriors only adopted courtly behaviours in the second half of the twelfth century. He points to the existence of the ideal of the preudomme by at least the end of the eleventh century in England and France, and perhaps even before. This ideal encompassed many of the elements associated with the

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idea of courtliness.\textsuperscript{41} The question of how the ideals and norms of the elite warrior class developed and evolved is thus still an important and debated issue.

It is not my intention to investigate whether Denmark and Norway adopted chivalric or courtly modes of conduct, whatever these are taken to mean. By focusing on whether or not particular regions adhered to ill-defined models of conduct, like chivalry, we risk missing evidence for the adoption of the individual ideals and norms which these models are often said to comprise. We need to reconsider whether we should expect elite warriors in different political and socio-economic environments to have perceived the same mix of behavioural ideals to be appealing, and even useful, within their own societies. Here, I return to my point about ideals not being the same as norms of conduct. Different elite communities could believe in the same ideal, but act in different ways to convey their adherence to this standard. This is an idea which I shall explore and develop throughout this thesis.

This approach is particularly useful given that recent studies of Scandinavian elite culture have tended to look for the presence of knights, chivalry and courtly behaviour within this region.\textsuperscript{42} In the next section, I will consider how elite warrior culture has been discussed in the scholarship of medieval Norway and Denmark and examine the influence studies of Western European ideals of elite behaviour have had on how this topic has been approached.

\subsection{1.2.2 Scholarship on Elite Warrior Culture in Denmark and Norway}

There have been no large scale studies of the behaviours and norms which were considered to be ideal for Danish and Norwegian elite warriors in the high medieval period. Where scholars have addressed questions of elite conduct, they have tended to

\textsuperscript{41} Crouch, \textit{Birth of Nobility}, 29–46.
\textsuperscript{42} The main studies of chivalry, knighthood and military culture in high medieval Denmark are Heebøll-Holm, “Priscorum quippe curialum”; Karl-Erik Löfqvist, \textit{Om Riddarväsen och Frälse i Nordisk Medeltid: Studier Rörande Adelsståndets Uppkomst och Tidigare Utformning} (Lund: Gleerup, 1935); Rikke Agnete Olsen, “Riddertid i Danmarks Middelalder,” (Pré) \textit{Publications nr. 191} (2003): 17–21; Herman Bengtsson’s important study looks at both material and textual evidence for Western European court culture in Norden. Bengtsson, \textit{Den Höviska Kulturen}. These concepts are also discussed elsewhere as part of wider studies. I shall reference these as I mention them.
do so as part of wider studies and have often looked towards scholarship on the Western European elite to guide their work.\textsuperscript{43} This has led scholars to try to understand when, or indeed if, chivalry and courtliness were adopted by the Scandinavian elite. However, as we have seen, defining chivalry and courtliness can be problematic. These terms do not refer to static collections of ideals and norms, but rather to evolving ideas of appropriate behaviour. Shami Ghosh, for example, has warned of the dangers of applying models like courtliness to Scandinavia ‘without further critical reflection’ when there are so many different opinions about what courtly culture actually was.\textsuperscript{44} We must therefore be careful when we invoke the use of these concepts in a Scandinavian context.

In an important article from 2009, Thomas Heebøll-Holm argued that Western European forms of knightly combat, as well as knightly ideology, had been integrated into Danish culture by the twelfth century. These behaviours and ideas were subsequently adapted to fit into that society.\textsuperscript{45} Importantly for this study, one of the norms he identifies as having some impact on Danish elite culture is the granting of mercy towards defeated opponents. In his short discussion of this particular issue, he suggests that the twelfth-century Danish King Valdemar was less ruthless than earlier Danish kings and seems to have been more likely to pardon and exile his opponents than to execute them. Heebøll-Holm does recognise that this leniency might have had a strategic function. Indeed, he questions the extent to which we can know whether Valdemar’s conduct was influenced by the introduction of so-called knightly ideals as opposed to, for example, political concerns.\textsuperscript{46} While being careful to take these concerns into consideration, Heebøll-Holm still views foreign ideas as having an important impact on the development of Danish elite culture across the high medieval period.

\textsuperscript{43} For example, Thomas Heebøll-Holm looks towards French and English scholarship to provide a definition of chivalry which he then compares to the picture of elite warrior culture he finds in sources for Denmark. Heebøll-Holm, “Priscorum quippe curialum,” 27–28; Herman Bengtsson’s study examines how continental concepts of courtliness, chivalry and knighthood impacted on Denmark, Norway and Sweden up to c.1520. Bengtsson, \textit{Den Höviska Kulturen}.

\textsuperscript{44} Shami Ghosh, \textit{Kings’ Sagas and Norwegian History: Problems and Perspectives} (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 182–83, Quote at 183.


\textsuperscript{46} Heebøll-Holm, “Priscorum quippe curialum,” 34, 45–47.
Heebøll-Holm has provided scholars of medieval Denmark with a useful starting point, however there is much work still to be done. Heebøll-Holm himself notes that the few scholars who have looked at this subject were more interested in the development of the nobility as a social class than in the cultural ideals of the elite group. He cites the approach of Karl-Erik Löfqvist, who aimed to find the point at which elite men who were dubbed knights in Scandinavia became separated from common warriors. Löfqvist shows no interest in examining whether this group had a shared culture. Recent studies by Hans Jacob Orning and Lars Hermanson have examined elite political culture and in particular, how elite groups in Denmark and Norway were organised, and subsequently behaved, in conflict situations. A series of edited collections have continued this focus on elite politics, networks and conflict resolution within Scandinavian scholarship. However, this scholarship generally addresses the ideals and norms of the elite warrior class only as part of its wider focus on politics. A full investigation of the conduct portrayed as ideal for elite warriors in Norway and Denmark, especially from the point of view of the battlefield, is still lacking.

The *Lex Castrensis sive Curiae*, which purports to be a law code for warriors in the Danish king, Knud II’s (r.1018-1035), household, has been of particular interest to scholars working on elite culture in medieval Denmark. One version of these ‘laws’ was composed by the twelfth-century writer Svend Aggesen, but they are also included in Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum* in a slightly different form. Stephen Jaeger has argued that the *Gesta*’s version refers to courtly ideals which are not present in Aggesen’s text. He notes Saxo’s assertion that this code was used to reform Knud’s men and instruct them in a ‘beauty’ of conduct more appropriate to life off the battlefield. Jaeger therefore views this text as an example of how moderating manners could be

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48 Löfqvist, *Om Riddarväsen*, 2–3, 24–66; See also Olsen, “Riddertid i Danmarks Middelalder.”
disseminated through the active education of the lay elite.\textsuperscript{51} Yet Jaeger argues that Saxo generally remains a critic of courtliness in that he sets the heroic exploits of older times against the luxurious and effeminate lives of his contemporaries. Saxo does not object to the introduction of courteous behaviour in general, but to certain forms of conduct encouraged by the ideals of courtly manners.\textsuperscript{52} In his argument, Jaeger recognises, as I do in this thesis, that ideals can be different from the conduct they inform.

Pil Dahlerup disagrees with Jaeger’s assertion that Svend Aggesen’s work does not bear the influence of courtly language and virtues. Dahlerup believes that Aggesen depicts figures as possessing courtly characteristics within another of his works, the \textit{Compendiosa Regum Daniae Historia}, and suggests that their inclusion could be the result of his continental education. It has been suggested that Aggesen may have spent time in France, and Dahlerup believes that he could have learnt of courtly ideals during his time there.\textsuperscript{53} Mia Münster-Swendsen has similarly stressed that the \textit{Lex Castrensis} belongs to a ‘common European learned tradition.’\textsuperscript{54} In her opinion, the text

\ldots should be read as a didactic treatise in the shape of a pseudo-historical construct that uses descriptions of more or less fictitious cases and legal developments to express, in a careful and deliberately indirect manner, the ideological concerns of its learned aristocratic author and his social and cultural milieu.\textsuperscript{55}

Its purpose was to promote peace among the elite group by encouraging the reduction of bloodshed in both private and judicial situations. To this end, Aggesen positions \textit{clementia} as the main royal virtue within his text, and promotes \textit{mansuetudo}, \textit{hilaritas}, \textit{facetia} and \textit{affabilitas} as its companions.\textsuperscript{56} The \textit{Lex Castrensis} is thus, Münster-

\textsuperscript{51} Jaeger, \textit{Origins of Courtliness}, 136–40; also see 34.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 185–90.
\textsuperscript{54} Münster-Swendsen, “Formation of a Danish Court Nobility,” 260.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 277.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 264–70.
Swendsen contends, a reflection of how the European-wide ideas of *curialitas* were adopted in twelfth-century Denmark.\(^5^7\)

Marlen Ferrer has argued that the ideals of courtesy were similarly adopted into Norway in the high medieval period. Natively-produced, thirteenth-century texts such as the *Hirðskrá*, a set of laws governing the Norwegian king’s retainers, and *Konungs Skuggsía*, an instructional text, promoted the avoidance of conflict, violence and feud and encouraged men to moderate their emotions.\(^5^8\) Indeed, the early thirteenth century has traditionally been seen as a pivotal moment for the introduction of Western European ideals into Norway. Hans Jacob Orning has pointed to translations of French romances initiated by King Hákon Hákonarson around this time, the first probably being *Tristrams Saga ok Ísöndar* in 1226, as a deliberate attempt to import these ideas into Norwegian elite society.\(^5^9\) Herman Bengtsson has shown how continental connections, forged by factors like diplomacy, marriage, the exchange of gifts and the activities of the medieval Church, could encourage the spread of foreign ideas and customs into medieval Denmark, Norway and Sweden.\(^6^0\)

The existence of these continental connections suggests that the Danish and Norwegian elite communities were not unknowledgeable about foreign lands. Despite this, Hans Jacob Orning argues that the ‘world of *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* must have been alien to an Old Norse audience in the 1220s.’\(^6^1\) It prized tournaments as the place where warriors could showcase their strength and bravery and lauded those who adhered to certain standards of dress and courtly manners. Most importantly, Orning argues that romance translations introduced the concept of a hierarchical society with the king at its head, as opposed to one based on friendship bonds as he believed Norwegian society to be at this time.\(^6^2\) Orning asserts that these literary expressions of courtly ideas


\(^{59}\) Orning, “Reception and Adaptation of Courtly Culture,” 115.

\(^{60}\) Bengtsson, *Den Höviska Kulturen*.

\(^{61}\) Orning, “Reception and Adaptation of Courtly Culture,” 126.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 122–26.
‘exerted considerable influence on actual behaviour.’\textsuperscript{63} Like Ferrer, he points to \textit{Konungs Skuggsjá} as evidence that the ideals contained within newly translated romances had an impact on Norwegian society by the mid-thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Konungs Skuggsjá}, Orning argues, aimed to ‘differentiate an upper class of royal servants from the rest of the population’ and encouraged elite men to see the value of serving the king within this newly organised society.\textsuperscript{65} For Orning, these texts had the ability to actively effect cultural change.

Orning is not the first academic to appeal to the transformative nature of this translated literature. Bjarne Fidjestøl suggested that the European society presented in translated French romances was organised in a fundamentally different way to that of Norway, which Fidjestøl categorised as ‘comparatively egalitarian.’ He tentatively proposed that the Norwegian king might have used this literature to show Norwegian elites an ideal of how they should behave within a more ‘European’ society, with the king at the top of the social hierarchy and a much sharper differentiation between men deemed to be of different status.\textsuperscript{66} Following Knut Helle and Sverre Bagge, Ferrer similarly suggests that courtly literature was produced in Norway as part of a royal policy to strengthen the king’s position by promoting ideals that controlled the conduct of the aristocracy.\textsuperscript{67} Sverre Bagge comments that ‘Til en viss grad kan den betraktes som en slags <<kulturell opprustning,>> dirigert av kongen.’\textsuperscript{68} Liliane Irlenbusch-Reynard has argued more recently that the works translated at the court of Håkon Håkonsson were selectively chosen to promote certain values which supported the political aims of the king.\textsuperscript{69}

However, we must be careful when considering the interaction between literature and real behaviour. We cannot assume that ideals and norms became known in Norway at the same time as they appeared in Norwegian literature. \textit{Konungs Skuggsjá}, for

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 116.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 127; Ferrer, “State Formation and Courtly Culture,” 6–8; On Konungs Skuggsjá see also Sverre Bagge, \textit{The Political Thought of The King’s Mirror} (Odense: Odense University Press, 1987).
\textsuperscript{65} Orning, “Reception and Adaptation of Courtly Culture,” 127.
\textsuperscript{66} Fidjestøl, \textit{Selected Papers}, 351–65.
\textsuperscript{68} Bagge, \textit{Mennesket i Middelalderens Norge}, 187 “To a certain extent, it can be considered as a kind of ‘cultural rearmament,’ directed by the king.”
\textsuperscript{69} Irlenbusch-Reynard, “Translations at the Court of Håkon Hákonarson.”
example, could have been intended as an instructional text which aimed to improve the conduct of elite men, rather than promote new ideas.\(^{70}\) These texts might therefore not be evidence that Norwegian elite culture altered as a result of the deliberate introduction of foreign ideals and modes of behaviour. They could just as easily be a sign of much more gradual and organic change within Norwegian elite society. Herman Bengtsson suggests that we see the importation of courtly behaviours as part of a gradual cultural transition, rather than a complete abandonment of what went before.\(^{71}\)

Even if we believe that the translation of these texts introduced new ideals of appropriate elite behaviour to Norway, we need to explain why elite men would have chosen to adopt these new modes of conduct. Indeed, the fact that moderating ideals also seem to have had a use within conflict situations suggests that we cannot completely explain elite behaviour in high medieval Norway by reference to imported ideas. Sverre Bagge, for example, has noted that in *Sverris saga*, the saga of King Sverrir of Norway, figures are depicted being motivated by political considerations to act mercifully towards enemies. Yet Bagge also notes the influence that Christian teachings about forgiveness had on this behaviour. He thus recognises how ideals and practical concerns could combine to influence elite conduct. However, Bagge does not believe that conventions which restrained the behaviour of Norwegian warriors had developed before the early thirteenth century. He argues that ‘it is clear...that there were no general norms demanding men of high rank to be treated with greater leniency than ordinary warriors and no strictly defined “chivalrous” elite whose members had to fight one another in a particular way.’ Bagge believes that the choices Norwegian elite warriors made during conflict were much more informed by strategy and tactics before the thirteenth century.\(^{72}\)

Bagge is right to be wary of seeing the behaviour of Norwegian elites as dictated by strictly defined rules. However, we cannot ignore the significance of the patterns of merciful behaviour he identifies. In his studies of the kings’ sagas, Ármann Jakobsson

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\(^{71}\) Bengtsson, *Den Höviska Kulturen*, 31.

\(^{72}\) Sverre Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord’s Anointed: Kingship in Sverris Saga and Hákonar Saga Hákonarsonar* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1996), 49.
has observed that mercy was perceived to be a royal virtue. Kings were ‘obliged’ to spare defeated opponents and there were specific rules which governed the manner in which this was done. Although there are examples of men being treated more harshly, enemies who surrendered would generally escape execution.  

Bagge does see changes to the Norwegian state as having an impact on elite behaviour later in the thirteenth century. He argues that saga evidence shows that by the mid-thirteenth century the Norwegian elite were becoming less defined by their military role, and more by their administrative functions within the developing state. Within this stronger state, elites could earn a living serving their king rather than having to rely on their income from the battlefield. Arnved Nedkvitne and Anton Rygg similarly see the relationship of the king to his men as instrumental in restraining violence. Nedkvitne suggests that the kings’ sagas, and particularly the latest of them, Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar, portray the Norwegian king as having a monopoly on violence and encourage the avoidance of private war. However, we should heed Stephen Jaeger’s and Matthew Strickland’s warnings against assuming that elite men were simply forced to accept certain ideals of conduct by external pressures, especially if we wish to explain why the most powerful magnates adopted these ideals of behaviour. We should not discount the appeal that certain ideals may have had to this group or the practical uses that norms of conduct could have.

In this thesis, I investigate how elite men are shown to treat defeated opponents during, and after, conflict in order to understand the ideals and norms which governed elite behaviour in these situations. Were elite men influenced by societal expectations of appropriate behaviour? Did politics play a role? Did the experience of war in each kingdom shape elite conduct? The main sources for this study, historical narratives,


74 Bagge, Mennesket i Middelalderens Norge, 175–79.


76 Jaeger, Origins of Courtliness, 212–13; Strickland, War and Chivalry, 331–33.
present a number of challenges to those who wish to use them to understand elite ideals of behaviour. As I shall discuss in the following chapter, these texts do not provide us with an accurate description of ‘real’ behaviour. Depictions of historical figures are, to a greater or lesser extent, constructed to convey a certain image to the audience of a text. It is unlikely, therefore, that we will ever really know why individual elite men chose to behave as they did. We can, however, investigate the ideals and norms which the authors of historical narratives present to be both laudable and useful for elite men in high medieval England, Norway and Denmark. This approach can help us to understand the kind of behaviour considered to be appropriate, and inappropriate, within elite society in each of these kingdoms.

1.3 The Study of Ideals

In this final section, I will outline my approach to the study of ideals. I have already touched upon the issue of agency and choice. Here, it is important to consider how elite men were influenced by, and responded to, ideals and norms which existed within their own societies. Were ideals and norms imposed upon these men, or did they have agency within the process? Björn Weiler believes that elite men did have a choice in how they behaved and has elucidated this point in an article discussing norms of moral and spiritual conduct for bishops in high medieval England.

...ideals and expectations mattered. They provided a set of concepts, practices and modes of behaviour that demonstrated exemplary adherence to widely shared norms. Naturally, not all prelates abided by those norms. That an ideal was not uniformly upheld does not, however, mean that it lacked potency, that it could not provide a standard by which prelates were judged or to which they might seek to aspire (or at least be seen to aspire). Even if behavioural rules were well-defined in theory, it is unlikely that they were followed to the letter in practice. Not only was it the case, as Richard Kaeuper has noted, that elite warriors could choose to adopt some ideals whilst ignoring others, but it was

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77 In the following chapter, ‘Comparing Elite Culture across the North: The Source Material,’ I discuss how I will approach the use of textual sources within this thesis.

also possible that two different people could interpret the same ideal in different ways.\textsuperscript{79} This could mean that different people could act in different ways while still attempting to adhere to the same idea of ideal behaviour.

Elite men chose how to behave in order to portray a certain image of themselves. Kim Esmark has shown that public display was intrinsic to the chivalrous society, where individuals were judged by their actions, rather than defined by their own internal identity or personality. Within this kind of society, the choices elite men made about how to act shaped the perception others had of them.\textsuperscript{80} Hans Jacob Orning has similarly noted that although individual behaviour could be confined by the expectations and norms of a particular society, people within that society still had some choice about how to act in particular situations.\textsuperscript{81} The decision to ignore an ideal or norm is therefore as significant as the decision to conform to these expectations.

In his work on eighteenth-century politics, Quentin Skinner has noted that individuals are faced with many competing concerns when deciding how to behave in particular situations. They must consider how society expects them to act, how they believe they should act according to their own moral values, and how they should act in order to further own aims and desires. A person’s aims and desires might well encourage them to choose a course of action not objectively compatible with their own value system or that of their society. Indeed, they might profess to adhere to a particular ideal simply to justify their own behaviour or further their aims. However, this does not mean that these ideals were not important or that they cannot help explain why a person acted as they did. Indeed, the individual in question would not have decided to profess that they adhered to that specific ideal if it did have a particular significance within their society.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{79} Kaeuper, Chivalry and Violence, 4.
The selection of one ideal over another can tell us much about what this individual hoped to achieve and how they wished to present themselves. The frequent appearance of particular ideals and norms within a written corpus thus attests to their significance within the society which produced them. It is not necessary for us to know whether the individuals professing these ideals believed them to have some sort of value in and of themselves.

My focus in this thesis is not how elite men really behaved during conflict in high medieval England, Norway and Denmark. This is because we cannot know the extent to which depictions of medieval conflict are accurate reflections of how elite men behaved. Instead, I will consider the attitude the authors of historical narratives have towards certain post-war conduct in order to understand the kind of behaviour considered acceptable for elite men at this time. I will investigate the benefits these authors suggest could emanate from restrained and merciful conduct and analyse the range of motivations put forward for magnanimous acts. In the next chapter, I will further discuss this approach as well as explaining how I will use textual evidence within this thesis.

1.4 Thesis Outline

In this study, I will investigate the portrayal of elite warriors during periods of conflict in England, Denmark and Norway respectively, focusing in particular on how elite men are shown to behave towards their defeated opponents. I begin with a re-examination of the evidence for the adoption of restraining behaviours by elite men in England, before investigating how elite men are portrayed in historical narratives which depict Denmark and Norway. Finally, I will compare the evidence across these three kingdoms and make some suggestions about how we can use the comparative method to better understand the conduct of elite men in high medieval Europe.

I have chosen to compare England, Denmark and Norway for the reasons outlined above. It is traditionally argued that Norwegian elite warriors did not adopt moderating ideals of behaviour before the mid-thirteenth century. Scholars have argued that Denmark was influenced by the moderating ideals of chivalry and courtliness earlier on,
although they see this kingdom as a largely passive recipient of these ideas. I could have chosen to examine Sweden and Iceland as part of this project too, as they have been treated as peripheral regions in much the same way. Space and time prevent this. This project attempts to describe elite warrior culture in Norway and Denmark as it is found in historical narratives without trying to measure it against models of conduct from Western European scholarship. It may well be that these models of conduct did have some influence. However, in order to understand this, we need to have a better idea of the ideals and norms of conduct which were promoted as positive for elite warriors in high medieval Denmark and Norway more generally. This approach will give us a different perspective on the culture of English elite warriors as well.
Comparing Elite Culture across the North: The Source Material

Expressions of elite culture can be found in all kinds of evidence, from material culture, to law codes, writs and charters and hagiography. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to examine all of this evidence in the space and time available for a PhD project. I have therefore restricted my investigations to a group of sources which provide extensive evidence for medieval attitudes towards conflict: historical narratives. As I have already highlighted in the introduction to this thesis, the authors of historical narratives crafted their texts in order to convey certain meanings to their audience.\(^{83}\) Therefore, in order to interpret these texts, we must first understand how these authors conceived of their task. In this chapter, I will outline the main sources for each of the regions discussed in this thesis and consider some of the issues the historian has to negotiate when using them to investigate the behaviour of elite men.

Compilers of historical narratives in the medieval period did not value truth and objectivity in the way modern historians are expected to. They sought to construct narratives which entertained and educated while retaining the veneer of plausibility. Although invention was expected, it was controlled by the conventions of historical expression. Despite their invented speeches, conventionalised depictions and forged documents, historical texts had to be verisimilar.\(^{84}\) In her study of medieval writing, Ruth Morse demonstrates that "however convincing, charming, fresh, or intelligent an account, it may be no more (but no less) than a plausible construction which refers to known patterns of human character, behaviour, and event."\(^{85}\) These accounts were often constructed to act as exempla, where depictions of past deeds are used to instruct the reader in appropriate behaviour.\(^{86}\) We must understand the portrayal of individuals

\(^{83}\) It is obviously problematic to refer to these texts as having authors according to the modern meaning. Many medieval texts are anonymous or bear the mark of multiple authors. Most contain sections which have been inserted or copied from other texts. For ease, however, I refer to authors, compilers and writers interchangeably throughout this thesis.


\(^{85}\) Morse, *Truth and Convention*, 95.

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 92–94.
within historical narratives in light of these conventions and the medieval uses of this genre.

Patricia Pires Boulhosa has highlighted the problems of viewing medieval narratives, and in particular sagas, according to modern concepts of history and fiction. Instead of categorising sagas as more, or less, historical, we should approach the sagas as historical sources ‘in so far as they communicate historical meanings, that is, they convey ideas which can be related to a specific period of history.’

We should view these texts not only as the result of a concern to remember the past, and thus in some way historical, but also as products of their own cultural community and its concept of historical expression. They can provide us with an insight into the cultural ideas of the time and place in they were written, even if the truth of their narrative is, to a greater or lesser extent, questionable.

In this thesis, I use historical narratives to examine, and compare, depictions of conflict in England, Norway and Denmark. My particular concern is with the behaviour of elite men towards defeated opponents and the ideals of moderation and restraint which might inform their conduct. Lack of space means that the evidence of legal texts, charter evidence or purely religious works cannot be examined here. Similarly, an investigation of literary texts, and in particular romance literature such as the riddarasögur, would be a complete project in itself. In what follows, I shall briefly outline the narrative sources which will feature in this study and how I will approach them.

2.1 England

The corpus of extant historical writing for high medieval England dwarfs anything that survives from Denmark and Norway. I therefore do not have the space to undertake a full analysis of all the source material available or comprehensively discuss each of the texts used in this thesis. Instead, I shall provide an overview of the textual landscape from the mid-eleventh to mid-thirteenth century in order to provide some context for

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later discussions of individual sources. It should be noted, however, that I shall only refer to histories I use within this thesis and not all historical works which contain evidence for England in the high medieval period. Those which are not useful for this study, or which there was no room to include, have, of necessity, been left out.

In general, I will use only sources produced in England. However, for the period around 1066 I draw on both Norman and English texts, although I do not profess to any detailed assessment of continental sources. The implantation, and eventual assimilation, of the Norman elite into England after 1066 makes this a necessity. To this end, I make use of William of Jumièges’ *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* and William of Poitiers’ *Gesta Guillelmi*, both produced in the eleventh century, and Orderic Vitalis’ *Historia Ecclesiastica*, from the first half of the twelfth century. Orderic Vitalis was born in England but had been sent to the Abbey of Saint-Evroul as an oblate and it is here that he composed his *magnum opus*, the *Historia Ecclesiastica*. His work is a reminder of the connections between Normandy and England at this time and the importance of looking towards Norman texts for a view on England into the twelfth century.

Traditionally, there is said to have been a period of relative quiet after the Norman Conquest during which very little history was produced in England. It was not until the end of the eleventh century that there was renewed interest in producing histories of England, as opposed to the hagiographies and histories of monastic communities which had dominated the previous period. The first half of the twelfth century saw the production of the text known as the *Chronicle* of John of Worcester, William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta Regum Anglorum* and its continuation, the *Historia Novella*, as well

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as Henry of Huntingdon’s *Historia Anglorum*. These histories, with the exception of the *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, continue into the reign of King Stephen and are joined by the *Gesta Stephani* as sources for Stephen’s battle against the pretensions of his cousin, Matilda.\(^2\) This period also saw the production of the first extant English history in the vernacular, Geoffrei Gaimar’s *Estoire des Engleis*.\(^3\)

Histories with a local focus can provide another point of view on this period. The *De gestis regis Stephani et de bello Standardii* of Richard of Hexham is an important contemporary record of the Scottish incursions into England from 1135 to 1139.\(^4\) Works produced at Durham offer a similar insight into Northern affairs. Of particular use for this study are the *De injusta vexatione Willelmi Episcopi*, composed at the end of the eleventh century, the *Libellus de exordio atque procura istius, hoc est Dunhelmensis, Ecclesie*, from the beginning of the twelfth century, and Lawrence of Durham’s mid-twelfth century *Dialogi Laurentii Dunelmensis monachi ac prioris*.\(^5\) For more southern regions, local histories like the *Liber Eliensis*, composed towards the end of the twelfth century, are available.\(^6\)

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The diverse and experimental nature of historical expression in high medieval England is particularly evident in the work of Jordan Fantosme. Fantosme’s putative eyewitness account of the 1173 to 1174 war between Henry II and his son, Henry, the ‘young king’, was composed in the vernacular and designed to be spoken, rather than read. It appears unique for its time in its form, combining, as it does, the literary styles of epic and romance with a desire to record events according to the rules of medieval historical expression.97 The early thirteenth-century *L'Histoire de Guillaume le Marechal*, a secular biography of the life of and times of William Marshal, earl of Pembroke, is a later example of the influence the development of romance literature had on historical writing.98 It too was composed in the vernacular and constructed in poetic form. David Crouch has argued that like Jordan Fantosme, the author of *L'Histoire* drew inspiration from ‘the well-established framework of the romance-epic.’99

Chronicle writing endured, although the information their authors chose to record changed. The chronicle of Roger of Hoveden, which ends in 1201, shows a strong interest in administrative affairs, a tendency which is reflective of many histories from the second half of the twelfth century onwards. The chronicle commonly referred to as ‘Benedict of Peterborough’ has a similar fascination with the court and governmental processes.100 In the 1190s, William of Newburgh, a canon at the Augustinian monastery of Newburgh, composed a history of England.101 For the first half of the thirteenth century, the chronicle of Ralph of Coggeshall, the so-called Barnwell Chronicle and Roger

of Wendover’s *Flores Historiarum* provide a view of the reign of King John and the succession of his son, King Henry III.\(^{102}\)

It would be impossible to fully account for all the peculiarities of the texts utilised within this study. I shall therefore discuss these as and when they are relevant. Here, I simply wish to highlight the diversity of material extant for this period in England and the variety of forms historical writing took. It provides a stark contrast to the sparse narrative evidence that survives for medieval Denmark and Norway. In what remains of this chapter, I will offer a more extensive discussion of some of the challenges of using these texts within a comparative study. I do not intend to privilege these sources over those I use for England. Rather, I hope to show how texts produced in Scandinavia can be compared within a wider European context.

### 2.2 Denmark

Our view of Denmark until 1185 is dominated by the *Gesta Danorum*, which is by far the largest and most detailed narrative to survive from this time. While a few chronicles are also extant, they are much briefer than the *Gesta*, which is comprised of sixteen books covering Danish history up to the early years of Knud Valdemarson’s reign (r.1182–1202). It is generally believed that the *Gesta* was composed in Denmark around 1200 by Saxo Grammaticus, a highly educated cleric with a wide knowledge of classical works.\(^{103}\) The identity and position of this Saxo has been much debated, but Karsten Friis-Jensen’s argument that he was probably a canon at Lund is convincing.\(^{104}\) This would have put

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104 Friis-Jensen’s argument is expounded in Karsten Friis-Jensen, “Was Saxo Grammaticus a Canon of Lund?,” *Cahiers de L’institut du Moyen-Âge Grec et Latin* 59 (1989): 331–57 Friis-Jensen’s views are in opposition to scholars like Weibull, Gertz and Kroman who believed that the secular tone of the Gesta and its focus on military events suggested that Saxo was a secular elite man (342-3).
him in close contact with the Gest’a patron, Absalon, who was archbishop of Lund from 1178 until his death in 1201 and a close adviser of the Danish King Valdemar I. The later books of Saxo’s history focus primarily on the actions of Absalon and Valdemar.

A lack of alternative narrative sources means that most of the evidence for elite conduct in Denmark used within this thesis is taken from the Gest. I have tried to draw on alternative sources where possible, but many of the chronicles and historical works composed in Denmark which survive from this period lack sufficient detail for this particular study of elite conduct. Chronicles and annals such as the Chronicon Roskildense, Annales Lundenses, Annales Ryensis and Chronica Jutensis, among others, can provide details about high-status prisoners or the outcomes of battles, but rarely provide any analysis of why certain decisions were taken.  

Svend Aggesen’s Compendiosa Regum Daniae Historia, composed in the late twelfth century, presents another, albeit brief, view of Danish history. Aggesen knew that Saxo Grammaticus was working on a much longer historical work and urged those who wanted more detail to seek out Saxo’s Gest. Despite this, his work contains some interesting information, especially about Aggesen’s ancestors. Another of his works, the Lex Castrensis sive Curiae, purports to be a treatise on a military code originating in the time of King Knud II, who ruled Denmark from 1018 to 1035, although was actually written down at the end of the twelfth century. The question of whether these rules are a record of an older oral code or simply twelfth-century attitudes projected onto a past world is difficult to answer with any certainty. Mia Münster-Swendsen has argued that this text is an attempt to create a connection between Knud’s army, who conquered England and Norway, and the Danish nobility in Svend’s own time. Münster-Swendsen believes that Svend is trying to understand the change which had occurred between these two periods.

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107 Münster-Swendsen, “Formation of a Danish Court Nobility.”
prior to it being written down, as well as any sources with which to compare its depiction of elite behaviour during Knud’s reign, we can only approach this text by considering Svend’s attitude towards what it depicts. From this, we can understand the behaviour Svend considered to be appropriate according to the standards of his own society.

It is unfortunate that the narrative evidence for high medieval Denmark outside of the Gesta is so brief, as it forces us to rely heavily on the evidence of a single source. All textual sources from the medieval period have their own individual problems. The Gesta is no different in this sense and I shall address any particular issues when appropriate throughout this thesis. However, here it is useful to point out that Saxo probably had a fair amount of contact with the Danish warrior elite. Even though Saxo was a cleric, his father and grandfather had served Danish kings in military roles. It is not unlikely that he met other secular warriors who passed through Lund, especially those with ties to his patron Absalon, who was himself a military leader as well as a man of God.

Given his involvement in militaristic activities, Absalon would have been a good source of information too. In the preface to the Gesta, Saxo notes that Absalon had provided him with tales about his own life.

...Absononis asserta sectando, que uel ipse gessit uel ab aliis gesta perdidicit, docili animo stiloque complecti cure habui...

...I have followed the statements of Absalon concerning his own exploits and those which he learnt about from others, and with dutiful mind and pen taken pains to include them...

Of course, this does not mean that Saxo’s text is an accurate reflection of contemporary events. As will become evident throughout this thesis, Saxo embellishes Absalon’s role within events and uses his characterisation of historical figures to convey a particular


\[110\] Saxo Grammaticus, GD, 2015, I:6–7 (Pr 1.5).
image of Danish society to his audience. His judgement of certain forms of behaviour as positive or negative will provide points of comparison for the qualities praised in texts depicting England and Norway in this period.

Texts composed outside of Denmark can be used to give another perspective on Danish elite conduct at this time. The *Chronica Slavorum* is a useful source, especially as it reaches beyond the terminus of both Saxo and Aggesen’s histories in 1185. The text up to 1171 was composed by Helmold of Bosau, a priest from Saxony, and continued by Arnold of Lübeck to take it up to 1209. Also useful is *Knýtlinga saga* which was composed in Iceland around the mid-thirteenth century. There are good indications that the author of *Knýtlinga saga* was the Icelander Ólafur Þórdarson. Ólafur held a high position in Icelandic society and was at one time a lawspeaker at the Althing. Both *Knýtlinga saga* and *Þorgils saga skarða*, also composed in the thirteenth century, suggest he spent time with King Valdemar Sejr (r.1202-1241) in Denmark, who told him stories of past kings. Eric Christiansen has also suggested that the author of *Knýtlinga saga* may have used a lost history of Denmark for some of his narrative. Therefore, although Ólafur was an outsider, writing much later than the reigns of the kings he records, it is likely that he was well informed about high medieval Denmark.

The sporadic survival of narrative texts from high medieval Denmark means that the bulk of the evidence in this thesis comes from descriptions of events which occurred before 1185. This terminus of this study is around 1250, but my discussions on Denmark generally focus on the pre-1200 period. It is difficult to set an earlier limit for the reach

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of this particular part of my research as the most extensive extant sources for Denmark were composed towards the end of the twelfth century and into the thirteenth. It is questionable whether these narratives can be used as evidence for the ideals and behaviour of the elite class in Denmark in the eleventh century. At best, we can say that these texts reflect the attitudes of twelfth- and early thirteenth-century Danish elite society. Indeed, this is what I will use them as evidence for.

Out of necessity, Saxo’s narrative dominates my discussions of Denmark, as it provides the most detailed picture of Danish elite society in the high medieval period. However, at times, other sources can help verify, or question, its claims. The evidence for the high medieval period in Denmark is therefore limited, especially in comparison to what we have for England, and it is important to be aware that this is the case. Despite this, the few sources we do have can still provide an insight into Danish elite society at this time.

2.3 Norway

The main sources for Norway until the 1250s are the kings’ sagas. Written in the vernacular Old Norse, these texts were composed at varying times from c.1185 to c.1265, mostly by Icelanders, occasionally by Norwegians, and focused largely on the biography of Norwegian kings. They range from large compendia like Morkinskinna, Fagrskinna and Heimskringla, to single sagas focusing on particular kings, like Sverris Saga and Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar. There are older extant histories of Norway which address the high medieval period. Two of these texts reach into the period studied here, the Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium of Theodoricus Monachus, composed around 1180, and Ágrip, written around 1190. However, neither text offers sufficient depth to be of extensive use.\(^{115}\) The Historia Norwegiae ends in the early eleventh century and thus is out of the period of this study. Space and time constraints mean I cannot undertake an investigation of Norwegian legal texts or ecclesiastical sources. The law code of the king’s military retainers, the Hirðská, composed in the 1270’s, will be

\(^{115}\) Ghosh, Kings’ Sagas, 6–7.
referred to, although not fully analysed. My investigation into the mid-thirteenth-century instructional text, *Konungs Skuggsjá*, is more extensive.

The compendia, *Morkinskinna, Fagrskinna and Heimskringla*, were all composed in the early thirteenth century. The first of these, *Morkinskinna*, was composed c.1220, followed by *Fagrskinna* around c.1225 and *Heimskringla* sometime between 1225 and 1235. The authors of *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna* are unknown. *Heimskringla* has been attributed to Snorri Sturluson, although this attribution is not unchallenged. I will, however, follow convention and refer to Snorri as the author of *Heimskringla* throughout this thesis. The compendia are largely similar in the stories they tell, if not always in the details and interpretation they provide of particular events. This is largely because the authors of *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* used *Morkinskinna* as a source for their narratives. It is probable that the author of *Heimskringla* also referred to *Fagrskinna* at some point in his work.

*Sverris saga* predates these texts, having been composed sometime from the end of the twelfth century into the thirteenth. The Icelander Abbot Karl Jónsson wrote at least part of the saga, although scholars have disagreed on whether the whole text can be attributed to him. The prologue to *Sverris saga* notes that the protagonist, King Sevrrir, instructed Abbot Karl in his writing. The latter part of the saga was informed by the stories of those who had either been present at, or heard about, the events which

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118 Ibid., 16.


120 Scholars have disagreed on whether or not Karl Jónsson wrote the entire saga. For this debate see Þorleifur Hauksson, “Implicit Ideology and the King’s Image in Sverris Saga,” *Scripta Islandica* 63 (2012): 128–30; Bagge, *Gang Leader to the Lord’s Anointed*, 15–18; Ludvig Holm-Olsen, *Studier i Sverres Saga* (Oslo: Dybwad, 1953).
are related in the text. However, this is no guarantee of this saga’s reliability. There is evidence that *Sverris saga* was, at least in part, intended to legitimise Sverrir’s kingship and present Sverrir as possessing all the virtues expected of European, Christian, king. We must take this into account when examining this text.

*Bøglunga Saga* continues the narrative of *Sverris saga* up to 1217, describing the struggle for the throne between the Baglar and the Birkebeinar factions after Sverrir’s death. It survives in two versions, a shorter one which ends in 1210 and a longer one which continues to 1217. The shorter version survives in two known Old Norse manuscripts. The longer redaction is mostly preserved in a Danish translation from the early 1600s. The relationship between these two texts has been debated. The shorter version focuses much more on the activity of the Baglar faction, but Knut Helle argued that the text is neutral in its support for either side. The longer version includes much more information on the Birkebeinar and, so Helle believed, shows a preference for this faction. However, Hallvard Magerøy has argued that the longer version is closer to the original text of this saga and that the shorter version was adapted from it, acquiring a sympathy towards the Baglar in the process. In contrast, Þorleifur Hauksson tends towards the view that the longer text is the later version and argues that it was written around 1220. The original version of events from 1202 to 1208 was probably recorded just after the time it describes.

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122 Lars Lönnroth has discussed how dreams are used within *Sverris Saga* to establish Sverrir’s position as a legitimate, Christian, king of Norway. Lars Lönnroth, “Sverrir’s Dreams,” *Scripta Islandica* 57 (2006): 97–110; Þorleifur Hauksson argues that the author of *Sverris saga* depicts Sverrir possessing the four cardinal virtues of sapientia, iustitia, fortitudo and temperantia. Þorleifur Hauksson, “Implicit Ideology and the King’s Image in Sverris Saga.”
While we know nothing about the author, or authors, of the various versions of Bǫglunga Saga, we know that the saga which succeeds it chronologically, Håkonar saga Håkonarsonar, was commissioned by King Magnús Hákonarson, the son of the eponymous King Hákon.\(^{126}\) Its author was the Icelander Sturla Þórðarson who had come to the Norwegian court in 1263 after falling into trouble with the Norwegian king’s representative in Iceland. When he arrived, he found that King Håkon had gone on campaign in the Western Isles. The king did not return to Norway before he died later that year. Sturla began his history in 1264 and had completed it by 1265.\(^{127}\) Sturlu Þáttr records that he was informed in his work by Hákon’s son, King Magnús, and the reports of other wise men.\(^{128}\)

My interest here is not to establish the truth of particular narratives of the past, but rather to examine elite culture as it is presented within narrative histories. Where we see differences in the textual representation of the elite culture of a particular place, we must seek to explain why this is the case. Where we do not, we may tentatively suggest that the picture our textual sources are showing us is, to some extent, a reflection of the ideals and norms which were present within that society. These ideal behaviours do not need to have been adhered to by everyone in order for us to conclude that they were the standard by which the conduct of individuals was measured.

This study covers a fairly long period of time, from roughly 1066 to the mid-thirteenth century. However, it is not my intention to examine the development of ideals and norms across this period. It is not possible to properly consider this issue while also comparing three kingdoms. Where developments in elite culture are visible, I will describe them and offer some limited analysis. This would, however, be a profitable vein of research for the future.

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\(^{127}\) Bagge, Gang Leader to the Lord’s Anointed, 91.

2.4 Comparing Narrative Histories across the North

I intend to approach the sources within this study in light of Jean Blacker’s comments on Anglo-Norman histories. Blacker has argued that while the authors of medieval histories profess to value historical truth, frequently claiming that their narratives will be as truthful as possible, they did not value accurate portrayals of historical figures in the same way. Instead, figures were described, to a greater or lesser extent, using collections of ideal behaviours, or non-ideal behaviours, depending on the author’s intentions. Blacker has argued that these characterisations can help us understand the kinds of qualities a society valued at a particular point in time.\textsuperscript{129} I believe that this is the case for Scandinavian narrative sources too.

Some scholars of Scandinavian history, however, would not agree with Blacker’s argument. Sverre Bagge, for example, has argued that \textit{Sverris saga} does not seek to portray its protagonist as an ideal king in the manner that he believes clerics sought to portray kings in histories elsewhere in Europe. King Sverrir’s actions are not explained within a religious framework, but as the result of ‘human motives, and cause and effect.’\textsuperscript{130} Bagge sees \textit{Sverris saga} as representing the story of an individual and his success at war. This is in contrast to the more distant portrayal of King Hákon Hákonarson in his saga, whose individual character is hidden in favour of a focus on his position as a divine king, a \textit{rex iustus}. Bagge argues that \textit{Sverris saga} represents the classical saga tradition in its portrayal of Sverrir, while \textit{Hákonar Saga Hákonarsonar} represents a developing literary tradition focused on monarchy and the Church.\textsuperscript{131}

This position has been challenged by Þorleifur Hauksson who argues that King Sverrir is portrayed as a king who extolled the royal and Christian virtues extant across Europe at the time this text was composed.\textsuperscript{132} This does not refute Bagge’s argument that the way

\textsuperscript{130} Bagge, \textit{Gang Leader to the Lord’s Anointed}, 65.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibíd., 156–60.
in which kings were presented in the kings’ sagas changed across the high medieval period. It simply acknowledges the influence of European ideals on the kings’ sagas. Ármann Jakobsson has argued that the þættir, short narrative episodes, within another kings’ saga, Morkinskinna, are used to illustrate the exemplary conduct of their protagonists and discuss the ideal behaviour expected of kings. He believes these exempla instruct Morkinskinna’s audience in courtly behaviour, something which, as I have shown in the introduction to this thesis, is traditionally said to have originated in Western Europe.¹³³

Indeed, the similarities between particular stories in the kings’ sagas and Anglo-Norman historical works suggests that there was a process of cultural transfer across the medieval North. Elizabeth Van Houts has attributed the existence of Scandinavian literary elements and tales in the literature of Normandy and England in the eleventh century to continuing cultural connections between these regions.¹³⁴ Paul White has suggested that this cultural transfer may have run both ways, with Scandinavian travellers being influenced by the Norman historical works they encountered while in Normandy.¹³⁵ White also notes the possibility that, as Jan de Vries has argued, both Normandy and Scandinavia were subject to the influence of common literary traditions from Southern Europe in this period. Norman and Scandinavian armies who travelled to the Mediterranean may well have transported these ideas back home.¹³⁶

The acknowledgment that figures in Scandinavian texts were crafted in order to present a particular image to their audience does not deny the possibility that these texts could also reflect a person’s ‘real’ character on some level. The fact that some kings’ sagas were written by men who knew their subjects, or were guided by men who did, must be

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¹³³ Ármann Jakobsson, “King and Subject in Morkinskinna,” Skandinavistik 28 (1998): 101–17; See also Ármann Jakobsson, A Sense of Belonging: Morkinskinna and Icelandic Identity, c.1220.
taken into consideration. This is also true of some histories composed in England. *L'Histoire de Guillaume le Marechal* was written at the request of William Marshal’s son and was probably informed by men who knew the Marshal.137 Roger of Hoveden, who wrote histories of England, was probably a clerk at the court of Henry II and may well have met, or viewed from afar, many of the men he wrote about.138

Ármann Jakobsson notes that kings within *Morkinskinna* are not merely presented as uncomplicated collections of lifeless personal traits. They are shown to have complex characters, as capable of virtuous behaviour as they are of breaking the rules.139 However, the existence of complex characters does not preclude an author having constructed these figures to convey a particular image, either consciously or unconsciously, to the text’s audience. Blacker argues that the effect of ‘individualization’ could be achieved through an author’s choices in how they portrayed historical figures. Orderic Vitalis is highlighted as someone who created particularly ‘individualized characters,’ not in terms of their ‘inner psychology’ but in the variety of details and personal characteristics applied to each historical figure. This gives the illusion of individuality and reality, even though familiar models of conduct are still being used.140 As Ruth Morse has concluded, ‘Medieval and renaissance readers recognized themselves and their human situations – but...these tended to be moral or ethical perceptions rather than psychological or social ones.’141

In this thesis, I will examine how elite men are depicted behaving towards defeated opponents in order to understand the norms and ideals which governed how high-ranking men in England, Norway and Denmark acted in these situations. By investigating the kind of conduct which is portrayed as praiseworthy, and comparing it to that which is criticised, I hope to understand the standards of acceptable behaviour in each kingdom. The extent to which individual narratives are accurate reflections of real events is less relevant to this study. I am more interested in the motivations attributed

139 Ármann Jakobsson, “King and Subject in Morkinskinna,” 109.
to individuals and how these are judged by the authors of these narratives. These explanations can often tell us much about why certain conduct was understood to be both beneficial and laudable. I shall begin by considering the evidence for high medieval England.
When describing King Richard I’s (r.1189-1199) victory at Nottingham in 1194, the author of *L’Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal* was careful to note just how magnanimous Richard had been in victory. Rather than executing those who had fought against him, the king allowed them to ransom themselves, a lesser, although not insignificant, punishment. His actions were all the more laudable given that the castle was being defended by the men of his brother, John, who had opportunistically tried to secure the English throne for himself after Richard was taken captive by Duke Leopold of Austria in 1192. His scheming had come to nothing however, as Richard was able to quell John’s rebellion once released in 1194. Despite this, once Richard had achieved his military aims at Nottingham, *L’Histoire* claims that he allowed those involved in its defence to retain their life and limbs. His conduct raises a number of questions about elite behaviour in war in the high medieval period. Was such merciful conduct normal? Were all opponents treated in a similarly lenient manner? Were alternative methods of punishment used? These questions will guide this investigation into the ideals and

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norms which governed the treatment of defeated opponents in high medieval England.
3.1 Were all Knights ‘Elite Warriors’?: A Preliminary Discussion of Status, Titles and Rank

Studies on restraint in battle often make a distinction between how knights and ordinary soldiers were treated during military conflict. Matthew Strickland has argued that the high medieval period in England saw ‘the extension and reinforcement of pre-existing notions of a common profession of arms, a knightly militia.’ This, along with self-interest and the changing nature of warfare, motivated warriors to attempt to capture, rather than kill, their ‘noble opponents.’\textsuperscript{143} While knights were still killed during, and after, battle, Strickland argues that these norms provided elite men with some level of protection against violent and vengeful acts.\textsuperscript{144} John Gillingham has similarly noted that from the mid-eleventh century, high-ranking enemies were treated more humanely than those of low status. He also points to the existence of ‘a certain camaraderie and a code of values common to the great aristocrats and their armed companions.’\textsuperscript{145} However, the extent to which knights could be considered to be a unified and definable group across the period studied here has been questioned.\textsuperscript{146} In order to understand if knights were treated differently to other warriors, we need to examine the kind of men who became knights in high medieval England.

A complete examination of this subject is outside the scope of this study. However, given this previous scholarship, it is necessary that I suggest a way in which these issues can be navigated. Two questions in particular must be addressed. First, it is important to consider the extent to which knights in high medieval England formed a distinct group with shared ideas of how to behave during conflict. Second, we need to ask whether all knights were considered to be elite men throughout this period. This is an essential point

\textsuperscript{143} Strickland, \textit{War and Chivalry}, 133–8, Quote at 137.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 138–42, 162–69.
to consider if we are to investigate the role status played in dictating the treatment of defeated opponents.

If we are to argue that knights were treated differently to other combatants, then we must accept that knights treated one another in similar ways across this period regardless of individual differences in economic, social or political power. I do not believe this was the case. As I will show in this chapter, while this group may have had a shared respect for certain ideals, it does not necessarily follow that concern for these overrode differences in position and influence. In this thesis I argue that while there was an ideal that elite men in England should be restrained in their treatment of one another after battle, this restraint was afforded to men for a variety of reasons, not simply their adoption of knighthood. The convention of showing clemency to one’s opponents was part of a much wider belief that restrained and moderate behaviour was both virtuous and strategically useful. Indeed, high-ranking knights were much more likely to benefit from the merciful acts of their peers than their humble counterparts, not least because of their greater wealth and political importance.

To begin, we need to understand the kind of men who became knights. Traditionally, historians have argued that the knighthood was united by its common occupation. Jean Flori saw the knighthood as a profession, a group linked by their employment in war. Maurice Keen similarly believed that the possession of knightly arms and training in cavalry warfare helped to foster a sense of identity amongst mounted warriors. However, it is apparent that not all knights across the medieval period were wealthy or noble. Jean Scammell has noted that before the late twelfth century knights often did not own their own weapons, instead borrowing them from their lords in exchange for military service. Scammell argues that these men should only be considered knights when in possession of these knightly accoutrements, meaning that they were barely, if at all, separated from the agricultural class from which they originated. With this claim, Scammell perhaps stretches the evidence a little too far. However, her suggestion that

knights were not a united social class before the second half of the twelfth century is thought provoking. For Scammel, it is more appropriate to view society before this time as consisting of lords who controlled the allocation of resources and those who depended upon them.\footnote{Scammell, “The Formation of the English Social Structure: Freedom, Knights, and Gentry, 1066-1300,” 591–93; CF John Gillingham, “Thegns and Knights in Eleventh-Century England: Who Was Then the Gentleman?,” Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 6th, 5 (1995): 129–53. John Gillingham strongly disputes Scammell’s suggestion that there were knights who were also cultivators before the end of the twelfth century. He argues that in early twelfth century, and probably before, knights were considered “gentil hommes.”}

In her study of administrative records and charters, Kathryn Faulkner has highlighted just how wide a variety of men became knights before the thirteenth century. Using the curia regis and eyre rolls, Faulkner identified a number of administrative tasks which are stipulated as solely undertaken by knights in the Tractatus de legibus et consuetudinibus regni Angliæ, the earliest treatise on English law composed in the 1180s, commonly attributed to Ranulf de Glanvill.\footnote{Faulkner, “Transformation of Knighthood,” 1–2.} Many of the individuals designated as knights by virtue of their involvement in these tasks were actually landless or held less than one knight’s fee. Faulkner thus argues that an individual’s status as a knight was not dependent on their material wealth or land ownership, even in the second half of the twelfth century.\footnote{Ibid., 12–13.} It was only between 1215 and 1230 that the knighthood became the preserve of the wealthy and well bred. It is in this period that administrative sources show lower-status knightly families beginning to stop using the title knight.\footnote{Ibid., 15–16.} For the twelfth century, Faulkner argues, ‘It is tempting, but anachronistic, for historians to try to impose...a clarity of definition’ onto those who used the title knight.\footnote{Ibid., 14; See Peter Coss’ discussion of Falkner’s article in Coss, The Origins of the English Gentry, 69–108; and also Scammell, “The Formation of the English Social Structure: Freedom, Knights, and Gentry, 1066-1300.”}

Peter Coss broadly agrees with Falkner’s assessment of the transformation of the knighthood in thirteenth-century England, although he does not believe the decline in the number of knights was as sudden as Falkner suggests. He argues that the decline was more gradual, continuing into 1240s and even beyond, albeit at a slower rate.\footnote{Coss, The Origins of the English Gentry, 91–97.} He
agrees that from the eleventh century onwards the knighthood was comprised of men of a wide range of means and circumstances. These men shared a particular approach to fighting, and perhaps even a particular attitude towards war, but they did not have a shared culture or lifestyle. They were divided by all manner of differences, from their material wealth and political influence to the nobility of their birth.\textsuperscript{155} As Coss notes, ‘some of them gave orders, and others obeyed.’\textsuperscript{156}

However, Coss warns against concluding that knighthood did not confer status and prestige upon all those who accepted it, even lesser knights. The possession of arms granted some dignity to the bearer in and of itself and knights were further elevated by the extended role they played within the legal system from Henry II’s reign onwards. Yet Coss still recognises just how varied this group was, not only in their income but also in their ways of earning it. While some knights possessed their own lands, however modest, others served in the households of greater lords. Some even combined the two.\textsuperscript{157} He concludes that, ‘Knighthood in Angevin England carried social status, but it did so without entirely displacing the earlier ideas of knighthood as a function and as a particular form of service.’\textsuperscript{158}

Despite these differences within the knightly group, Coss still believes that over time the group developed a ‘common mentality.’\textsuperscript{159} This began to develop in the first half of the twelfth century, when certain ideals can begin to be identified as part of a knightly ethic. One of the ideas Coss identifies as part of this ethic is the reluctance to kill fellow knights. However, as the nobility began to adopt this knightly culture as their own, it became increasingly associated with a more elite style of living. Coss concludes that ‘the elaboration of knighthood as an expression of status by the higher nobility not only led directly to a thinning of knightly ranks at the lower end but also threatened the viability of knighthood as it had been traditionally understood.’\textsuperscript{160}

\textsuperscript{155} Coss, \textit{The Knight in Medieval England, 1000-1400}, 5–71.  
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 7.  
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 31–43.  
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 46.  
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 7.  
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 49–51, Quote at 51.
I find Coss’ and Faulkner’s arguments persuasive. They demonstrate how careful we must be not to assume that knights prior to the beginning of the thirteenth century were necessarily of high status. While knights probably shared a common idea of their function, and perhaps even had a shared notion of the kind of conduct their society considered valorous in warfare, these men were distinguished by their birth, nobility, or lack thereof, and material wealth. When considering attitudes towards defeated knightly opponents within textual sources, we must consider the effect that these differences had on how individuals are shown to have been treated.

Some differences were more important than others. Men of noble birth had greater opportunities to progress within elite society even if they lacked land and wealth. Success on the battlefield allowed these opportunities to be realised. William Marshal, for example, is famously known for having been a landless household knight for many years despite his great reputation as a warrior and relatively noble birth.\textsuperscript{161} Despite his landless start, William rose to become earl of Pembroke and regent of England. His biographer even alleges that he knighted the young king, Henry, heir to the English throne, while he was still a landless knight.

Seignors, iceste grant enor
Fist Dex al Mareschal le jor:
Veiant contes, veiant barons
E veiant genz de si haut nons
Ceinst l’espee al rei de Engletere;
Si n’aveit il reie de terre
Ne rien fors sa chivalerie.

My lords, this high honour
God granted the Marshal on that day:
before the assembled counts and barons,
and before other men of such high rank,
he girded the sword on the King of England.
And yet he had not one strip of land to his name
or anything else, just his chivalry.\textsuperscript{162}

\textsuperscript{161}For more about William Marshal see Crouch, \textit{William Marshal}.

To see William as a lowly knight, even when he was landless, would be wholly incorrect. William was a man of good lineage with excellent political connections. It was this which allowed him to gain his fortune and great reputation.

It is highly unlikely that the lived experience of a noble knight like William Marshal was the same as that of the minor knights who were falling out of the knighthood in the early thirteenth century. As Peter Coss points out, there is evidence to suggest that some knights rarely fought. Indeed, some may never have done. The number of knights falling into this category probably increased in the later twelfth century, when the Marshal was in his prime.\textsuperscript{163} It therefore makes sense to distinguish between different kinds of knights when considering high medieval elite warrior culture. David Crouch has reasonably suggested that we should not look for the essence of knightly culture among knights who were primarily landholders and servants to higher-ranking men. Rather, it was among retained knights in military households that a united warrior culture most strongly developed.\textsuperscript{164}

We must be aware of the limitations of our source material when considering individual knights like William Marshal. The authors of narrative histories were highly selective about who they included within their texts, generally only naming those of high rank. The experience of lower-status men and unnamed knights in warfare is therefore largely hidden from us. Administrative records and charters, such as those used by Faulkner, provide us with a more inclusive record of the kind of men who adopted knighthood across the period examined here. However, they give little insight into the attitudes and ideals held by these men. We must be aware of how narrow the picture these narratives provide of knighthood in high medieval England can be.

The composition of the knighthood in England changed across the high medieval period. In the beginning, this title was used in a general sense to denote men who engaged in a certain kind of warfare and who had certain administrative responsibilities, but shared few commonalities beyond this. Later on, this title evolved to signify an individual who

\textsuperscript{163} Coss, The Origins of the English Gentry, 43–44.
considered themselves to be part of an exclusive social and cultural milieu. In this thesis, I will focus on elite men rather than knights. This deliberately vague term refers to those considered to be of high status, with the influence, power and importance this denotes, but makes no judgements about the titles, honours or cultural signifiers which may have been associated with such a position. I do not assume that all knights referred to in narrative sources are equal. Instead, I consider how they are treated within each narrative relative to men we know to be of high rank in order to investigate the factors which influenced the treatment of defeated opponents. I approach the elite group as one with many internal differences of status, wealth, political power and influence over the king.
3.2 Restraint and Moderation as Ideal Characteristics

As I have already discussed in the introduction to this thesis, both Matthew Strickland and John Gillingham have noticed differences between the behaviour of the English elite before 1066 and in the centuries after. In their respective research, they suggest that Anglo-Saxon elite men were more likely to meet their end in battle than their Anglo-Norman counterparts. It is not the aim of this project to investigate the extent to which Norman elite culture impacted upon the development of English ideals of appropriate elite behaviour after 1066. However, in order to illustrate the kind of behaviour which was valorised within the elite milieu of this region, it is useful to begin with an examination of a text produced in Normandy across this period of transition. This text is the Gesta Guillelmi, the greater part of which was completed before the Conquest, probably by 1060, but which was added to and revised between 1067 and 1070. It therefore provides an interesting point of comparison for a discussion of the ideals and norms which historical narratives promote as praiseworthy elite values in England after 1066.

3.2.1 A Norman King of England

William of Poitiers’ biographical history of Duke, and later King, William of Normandy and England (r.1066-1087), the Gesta Guillelmi, paints its protagonist as the ideal warrior and war leader. William is fierce in war, ruthless in avenging wrongs, and yet frequently merciful to his opponents in conflict. Despite the difficulties most elites must have faced in balancing the need to showcase one’s prowess as a warrior with the ideal that mercy and peace were virtuous qualities, the William of the Gesta Guillelmi negotiates such tensions with ease. William’s clemency towards opponents is a central feature of conflict narratives within this text. Poitiers takes care to fully expound the motivations behind William’s actions, grounding them within a set of general ideals of

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166 William of Poitiers, Gesta Guillelmi, xxvii.
conduct William is often said to follow. William’s merciful nature is set forward as an example for all elite men.

In his description of William’s uncle, Count William of Arques’, rebellion against his rule, Poitiers comments that the duke wanted to be victorious without bloodshed. He besieged his uncle’s castle intending to starve his opponents into submission. The text continues:

Monet equidem digna ratio et hoc memoriae prodere, quam pia continentia caedem semper uitauerit, nisi bellica ui aut alia graui necessitudine urgente. Exilio, carcere, item alia animaduersione, quae utam non adimeret, ulcisci malebat; quos iuxta ritum siue legum instituta, caeteri principes gladio absurnunt belli captos, uel domi crimum capitalium manifestos, salubriter pensans qui arbiter, quam tremendous, terrenae potestatis acta desuper prospiciat, moderatae clementiae ut immoderatae saeuitiae omnique meritorum qualitati sua cuique decernens.

We are impelled by right reason to place also on record that through his virtuous restraint he always avoided slaughter unless the pressure of war or some other grave necessity compelled it. He preferred to punish with exile, imprisonment, or some other penalty which did not cost life, those whom other princes, in accordance with custom or established law, put to the sword: namely, prisoners of war, or those who were clearly guilty of capital crimes at home. He wisely had in mind how redoubtable a judge looks from on high on the deeds of earthly powers, and distributes mercy and punishment to each according to his deserts.167

In his comparison of the duke’s reluctance to execute opponents with the use of such methods by other princes, Poitiers invites his readers to view the duke’s behaviour as exceptional not only in its rarity, but also in its adherence to a virtuous, and Christian, ideal. It was not only conduct influenced by the religious ideal of mercy, something which all Christians would eventually require from God, it was also the kind of virtuous behaviour expected of a great leader. It is telling that Poitiers repeats William’s desire to avoid bloodshed elsewhere in his text: ‘hominum sanguini, quanquam nocentissimo,
parcere maluit’ [he preferred to spare men’s blood, however guilty].\textsuperscript{168} William’s dislike for violence is a central feature of his characterisation within this text.

Of course, Poitiers’ narrative is undoubtedly a panegyric of William of Normandy’s rule thus far. Its depictions of William’s conduct as structured and consistent betray the author’s intention to memorialise his subject as an ideal duke and king. However, this need not cause concern if we are aware of the conventions of medieval texts. Poitiers’ approach is reflective of historical writing from the medieval period in general which characteristically tends to describe its subjects according to their positive or negative attributes.\textsuperscript{169} Descriptions of behaviour during warfare are often crafted in much the same way, to reflect positively or negatively on those concerned. There are times at which certain events need to be explained. A particularly ruthless killing or political act must either be justified or atoned for. These moments give us an insight into the complexity of conflict and are a constant reminder that we are rarely being presented with the reality of these situations. We must therefore be conscious of the particular limitations of our textual sources and use what we know about the production of medieval narratives to guide our research.

Indeed, the manner in which depictions of historical figures are crafted within these texts can be a help, rather than a hindrance, to a study of medieval ideals and norms of conduct.\textsuperscript{170} By seeking to present Duke William as an ideal figure, Poitiers inadvertently gives us an insight into the kind of conduct viewed as positive by the elite Norman community from which this text emanated. William of Poitiers was well placed to provide such an insight as he was not only Duke William’s chaplain, but had also been a soldier before he entered the church.\textsuperscript{171} Of course, William of Normandy was no ordinary elite man. He was the ruler of a dukedom when the greater part of the history was finished, at least by 1060, and a king by the time it was revised and extended from

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\textsuperscript{168} William of Poitiers, \textit{Gesta Guillelmi}, 60–61.
\textsuperscript{169} Blacker, \textit{The Faces of Time}, 54.
His princely status intrinsically separated him from other elite men and this may have influenced the way in which he is presented in Poitiers’ history. Despite this concern, the *Gesta Guillelmi* still provides a good starting point from which to consider the ideals and norms of conduct circulating among the Norman elite at that time. Many of these men would, after all, take the place of the conquered Anglo-Saxon elite class in England after 1066.

The *Gesta Guillelmi* depicts William of Normandy as being generally reluctant to treat his opponents in a cruel or violent manner once they had been defeated. Poitiers notes how when at war with Geoffrey Martel, William did not plunder the wealth of his enemy even though he had the opportunity to once he had put them to flight.

Sed nout esse prudentium uictoriae temperare, atque non satis potentem esse qui semet in potestate ulciscendi continere non possit.

But he knows that it is the characteristic of wise men to temper victory, and that the man who cannot restrain himself when he has the power to take vengeance is not really powerful.

The taking of vengeance is characterised as a spontaneous and immoderate emotional response and stands in contrast to the self-control military leaders should show during conflict. Such moderation is *prudentium* as well as an outward sign that an individual possessed, or was at least purported to possess, the ideal emotional characteristics desired of an elite man.

This moderation is a feature of William’s character throughout this text. After his conquest of England it is claimed that ‘moderatius ire placuit atque clementius dominari’ [he preferred to act more moderately and rule with greater clemency], even though he could have justly punished the English who had fought at Hastings for following his rival

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Harold Godwinson. The accuracy of this claim is less important than the fact Poitiers makes it. William was probably no less ruthless than he needed to be in order to secure the throne. As Antonia Gransden has noted in relation to Poitiers’ depiction of William, ‘Although other authorities confirm that he [William] was brave and pious, they do not confirm that he was merciful to the English.’ The emphasis Poitiers’ places on William’s clemency demonstrates how important he perceived this characteristic to be, both as a laudable secular ideal and as a Christian virtue.

It might seem strange that Poitiers is so concerned with William’s merciful qualities, especially when he had achieved so much through violence and war. Indeed, William’s prowess in warfare was fundamental to his reputation and this is reflected within Poitiers’ text. In order to reconcile William’s military prowess with his moderate nature, Poitiers makes a distinction between what he sees as ‘necessary’ violence and ‘unrestrained’ or ‘unnecessary’ violence. For example, he justifies William’s violence when defending his lands against the ravaging of the French King in 1057 as necessary within that context.

...fortissimus uindex in residuos insiluit, cecidit populatores, parcere flagitium credens, cum patriae sauciatae adeo necessaria causa ageretur, infestissimo hoste in medio sinu eius deprehenso.

...the redoubtable avenger hurled himself at the rest and slaughtered the plunderers, believing it a crime when the survival of his wounded country was at stake to spare the dangerous enemy captured on his own territory.

William is thus drawn as a strong military leader who terrifies his opponents into submission. At the battle of Val-ès-Dunes in 1047 he is similarly characterised: ‘Irruens enim strage pauorem iniecit, quo fere corda adversariis erepta sunt, brachia debilitata.’ [Rushing in, he spread such terror by slaughter that his adversaries lost heart and their arms weakened.] By categorising acts of violence as legitimate or illegitimate, Poitiers...

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175 Ibid., 142–43.
177 William of Poitiers, Gesta Guillelmi, 54–57.
178 Ibid., 10–11.
is able to present William as a brilliant warrior who also showed moderation and compassion to his opponents when appropriate.

It is not my intention to argue that Poitiers was deliberately trying to create a convenient narrative to explain William’s more ruthless acts. The brutality of warfare was an accepted part of elite life and was not considered to be incompatible with the decision to treat defeated opponents more mercifully once fighting had ceased. It is important to note that Poitiers presents each element of William’s conduct during war as ideal. Poitiers could have ignored William’s lack of mercy completely if he had wished to focus on his leniency alone, however, it was essential for the duke to be depicted as an exemplary leader in war as well. Poitiers’ choices are visible if we compare his account of the attack of the French King in 1057 with another, contemporary, Norman description of this event. In the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, William of Jumièges does not shape his account of this conflict in order to highlight William’s exemplary character as Poitiers does. His less colourful narrative simply mentions that those who were not slain were imprisoned across Normandy.\(^{179}\)

Indeed, other accounts of William’s life offer an alternative view of his conduct after conflict. The *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* notes that William had men who had mocked him at the siege of Alençon mutilated. His ruthless acts encouraged the inhabitants to surrender out of fear of similar treatment.\(^{180}\) Unsurprisingly, William of Poitiers does not mention this claim in his account.\(^{181}\) Anglo-Norman authors writing in the first half of the twelfth century were also generally less positive about the Normans and their manner of waging war. Henry of Huntingdon writes that the Normans were savage and did not know how to avoid brutality.

Natura siquidem eorum est, ut cum hostes suos adeo deesserunt, ut adicere non possint, ipsi se deprimant, et se terrasque suas in pauperiem et uastitatem redigant.


\(^{180}\) Ibid., II:124–25.

Indeed, their character is such that when they have brought their enemies so low that they can cast them down no further, they bring themselves down, and reduce their own lands to poverty and waste.\(^{182}\)

It is unlikely that William was as kind to his opponents as the *Gesta Guillelmi* suggests.

However, our concern here is not whether William the Conqueror was truly a merciful leader with a strong belief in clemency. Rather, these examples serve to show how moderation and clemency were seen as ideals to aspire to in Normandy at the time of the Conquest. We must now consider the extent to which the ideals depicted in the *Gesta Guillelmi* are also present in historical narratives which depict the English elite after 1066.

### 3.2.2 Restraint and Moderation after the Norman Conquest

The poetry of the twelfth-century elite warrior Bertran de Born is an important reminder of the ferocity with which medieval war was conducted and the very human reactions combatants had when faced with the swords of their opponents.

\[\text{E quand er en l’estor intratz,} \\
\text{chascus hom de paratge} \\
\text{non pens mas d’asclar caps e bratz,} \\
\text{car mais val mortz qe vius sobratz.}\]

And when he enters the fray, let every man of rank think only of hacking heads and arms, for a dead man is worth more than a live loser.\(^{183}\)

Like William of Poitiers, Bertran recognises that war is a violent, and necessary, business, during which survival and success were an elite warrior’s main thoughts. However, Bertran had strong ideas about how elite men should conduct themselves during war too. In a poem written to Henry II’s (r.1154-1189) son Geoffrey of Brittany, he reflects on the personal qualities to which men and women should aspire. Notably, he denounces the man who ‘qui merce-il qier, non perdona’ [does not pardon someone


who asks his mercy], 184 showing how even in a violent world, magnanimity was expected.

Bertran was not born in England, but his connections to the English realm are illustrative of the wide-reaching continental interests kings of England and their elite subjects had across the high medieval period. Bertran, a troubadour and lord whose lands lay in the border region between the Limousin and Périgord, spent time at the continental courts of Henry II’s sons. He recognised the king of England, first Henry II and later Richard I, as his lord and was thoroughly immersed in the world of these Angevin royals. 185 In 1183, he even supported the young king, Henry, in his revolt against his father, Henry II, alongside English-born nobles like William Marshal. 186 Of course, this did not make Bertran English, and we should not deny the influence that the culture of his home region would have had on his cultural attitudes. However, it is safe to say that he was very familiar with Angevin elite culture and the way warfare was practiced by those with lands in England.

Indeed, chroniclers writing in England similarly recognised that battles were violent and uncontrolled. In his description of events after King Stephen (r.1135-1154) was captured at Lincoln in 1141, Henry of Huntingdon contrasts the frenzy of a pitched battle, in which individual deeds are difficult to distinguish, with the much more structured military manoeuvres which were taking place at that time.

Conflicts took place every day, not in pitched battles but in the excursions of knightly manoeuvres. Valiant exploits were not recognizably confused as in the darkness of war, but the prowess and glory earned by individuals

184 Ibid., Poem 13, 200-1.
185 Ibid., 19–22.
appeared in the open, so that for all the participants, exalted in the splendours of illustrious deeds, this interlude was a source of gratification.\textsuperscript{187}

Henry contrasts behaviour in actual war, \textit{in belli}, with the kind of skirmishes more reminiscent of the tournament circuit. He juxtaposes war with intent with war for show.

If pitched battles were characterised by confusion as Henry claims, then one can imagine that it was difficult to both give and receive clemency while combat continued. Even if a warrior wanted to be merciful to men on the opposing side, it is unlikely he would risk his own death to do so. It was a different story, however, when the battle was over. Orderic Vitalis has King William Rufus’ (r.1087-1100) magnates counsel him that clemency was the appropriate response for a victorious leader.

\begin{quote}
 Decet nimirum ut sicut tumidos et uecordes uicisti fortitudine sic humiliatis et penitentibus parcas mansuetudine.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
 It is most proper that, just as you conquered them in their pride and folly by your strength, you should by your graciousness spare them now that they are humbled and penitent.\textsuperscript{188}
\end{quote}

Those who kill men who have surrendered are often viewed with disdain. In his \textit{Gesta Regum Anglorum}, William of Malmesbury writes of the killing of the English Earl Uhtred by King Knud in 1016 in disparaging terms: ‘Itaque, licet se dedidisset, barbarica leuitate iussus est iugulari’ [Thus Uhtred, although he had surrendered, was sentenced with typical barbarian lack of principle to have his throat cut…].\textsuperscript{189} In his reflection on this past event, William displays his contemporary values. The execution of those who had surrendered was incompatible with his twelfth-century ideals.

The author of \textit{L’Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal} took pains to highlight how gracious King Richard I was in victory. As I noted at the start of this chapter, Richard had been freed from captivity in 1194, and had returned to reclaim his throne from his brother, John. He besieged Nottingham castle, which was occupied by John’s supporters, and

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{187} Henry of Huntingdon, \textit{Historia Anglorum}, 740–41.
\end{footnotes}
quickly achieved their surrender, securing his crown in the process. After his victory, King Richard is said to have treated those who had sought to overthrow him well.

Quant venu furent li prison,
Si ourent molt meilleur prison
Que il meïsm ne quiderent,
Qu’en dotance de membres erent.
Mai d’itant ne deit doter nus:
Quant prusdom est plus el desus,
De cruelté e de mal faire
Tant s’en deit il plus beal retraire;
E itant vos di, c’est la some,
Que le desus del malveis home
Torne a cruelté e a hunte.
Ne voil or ci plus tenir conte,
Meis li reis fu si amiables
E si doz e si pïetables
Que sanz regroz e sanz tençon
Les mist a dreite raançon.

When the prisoners arrived, they were given far better conditions of imprisonment than they had thought they would, for they feared they would lose life and limb. But nobody should have any doubt on this point: the more a worthy man has the advantage, the more he should show his worth by desisting from doing harm and from acts of cruelty. And so much do I say to you, in a word, that when a bad man has the advantage, cruelty and outrage are the consequences. I have no wish to say any more here on the matter, except that the King was so compassionate, so gentle and full of mercy, that, without any recrimination or dispute, he set a fair ransom on their heads.¹⁹⁰

However, other commentators took a different view of Richard’s actions at the siege of Nottingham. Roger of Wendover suggests that Richard greedily exacted ransoms from some of the garrison because he was in dire financial need after his release from captivity, rather than because it was what was expected from a fair king. Such actions

were not, Roger acknowledges, befitting the royal dignity of a king, although they ought to be forgiven in light of Richard’s great need. The differences in these two accounts demonstrate the problem we have in understanding the motivations of historical figures. Historical accounts only provide us with interpretations of an individual’s actions and the reasons behind them. These interpretations can, however, show modern readers the kind of behaviours and motivations which were considered positive within a particular period. Roger defends Richard’s greedy behaviour for the same reason that the author of *L’Histoire* lauds his merciful and fair ransoming: both knew that kings were expected to show clemency to those they defeated in war.

Roger and the author of *L’Histoire* do not judge Richard simply by his actions; they are also concerned with what motivated them. Both agree that Richard ransomed his opponents. However, for Roger, Richard’s intention to ransom his opponents in order to acquire money, rather than because it was the right thing to do, is problematic. In practice, many elite men ransomed prisoners for financial gain and this was undoubtedly an additional incentive to capture, rather than kill, elite opponents. However, the fact that Roger feels the need to explain away Richard’s actions shows how distasteful it was to be perceived to be actively seeking material wealth rather than the admiration of one’s peers.

Indeed, on other occasions, the author of *L’Histoire* similarly criticises those who act out of a desire for profit, rather than a desire to showcase their prowess. Directly addressing his audience, the author of *L’Histoire* relates how he dreams of a day,

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Que chivalerie e proëce
E bronté de cuer e largesse
S’en istreient parmi sa porte;
Si serreit avarice morte.
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...when Chivalry and Prowess, Nobility and Generosity, would emerge from his gates, and Avarice would die the death.\footnote{Holden and Crouch, \textit{History of William Marshal I}, I:220–21.}

He calls the nobleman Sir Roger de Jouy greedy for wanting to team up with William Marshal during tournaments in order to increase their winnings. Unsurprisingly, the Marshal is not denounced in the same way, despite being apparently more successful than anyone else at winning booty.\footnote{Ibid., I:172–73.} Instead, \textit{L’Histoire} highlights William Marshal’s generosity. He is even depicted freeing a number prisoners without ransom when they place themselves under his protection during a tournament. On this occasion, fifteen knights are said to have surrendered to him rather than be taken by another group who were besieging them. The Marshal accepted their surrender, but was threatened by the besieging group who believed he had deprived them of an opportunity for ransom. The Marshal pledged to protect his new captives, as he was bound to do having accepted their surrender, and his opponents soon realised there was little point in pursuing the matter on the battlefield. Despite his prisoners offering to ransom themselves, the Marshal granted them their freedom without any payment being made.\footnote{Ibid., I:204–9.}

This loss of ransom is likely to have been perceived as a great sacrifice to contemporaries who were aware that most elite men needed to make a profit from the battlefield. Indeed, at this point in his history, the Marshal was still a landless knight and so did not have any possessions from which to draw a stable income.\footnote{Ibid., I:356–59.} Instead, he had to rely on the money and gifts he received in return for his service to various households and the ransoms and plunder he obtained during tournaments and warfare. That is not say he was short of funds. However, he, like many other elite men, supported his noble lifestyle with profits from his military activities.\footnote{Crouch, \textit{William Marshal}, 39–41.} By including this tale within his narrative, the author of \textit{L’Histoire} is able to illustrate how the Marshal prioritised magnanimous behaviour over financial gain.
I have shown here that elite warriors were praised for their mercy, clemency and moderation in high medieval England. I have also demonstrated some of the difficulties we face when trying to understanding what motivated these men to act in this manner. Certain motivations do seem to have been more admirable than others. While restrained conduct was laudable in and of itself, the highest praise was often reserved for those who were motivated by a desire to act virtuously, rather than because they believed they might profit from their merciful behaviour. As we shall see throughout this chapter, the belief that moderation and restraint were virtuous behaviours was influenced by both secular and religious ideals. It is therefore important to consider the influence religion had on the ideals and norms of the warrior elite in high medieval England.

3.2.3 Mercy and Religion

The composers of medieval narratives were generally men of the church, from monastic authors like William of Malmesbury and secular clergy like Henry of Huntingdon to clerks with religious positions like Roger of Hoveden. Their education and life experiences, no less than their institutional biases, coloured their work. It is therefore unsurprising that they often ascribe religious motives to elite warriors in their narratives. However, it can be difficult to know whether these Christian motivations reflect how elite men actually thought about conflict. They could be evidence of attempts by clerical authors to instruct their audience in appropriate Christian behaviour. How far are we to believe that an elite man’s faith influenced his behaviour on the battlefield?

Religious imagery, motifs and ideology feature heavily in conflict narratives. Warriors are frequently shown invoking the aid of heavenly powers with the expectation that God might intervene in their earthy struggle. Jordan Fantosme recounts how Roger de Stuteville encouraged his men with the proclamation ‘Deus nus defendra’ [God himself will defend us] and subsequently thanked God for preserving his men against the might of the King of Scotland. Cries of ‘Dex aïe al Mareschal!’ [God is with the Marshal!] are

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198 Matthew Strickland has cautioned that clerics’ narratives of conflict can be infused with their own judgements about warriors’ actions and the reasons for it. Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 12–16, 75–77.
said to have accompanied William Marshal into battle. Religious ceremonies were woven into the preparations for conflict. Before the Battle of the Standard in 1138, where northern forces faced an invading Scottish army, Archbishop Thurstan of York and his fellow clergy conducted a range of religious services for the English. The soldiers made their confessions and received absolution from any sins they might commit during the engagement. Saints’ banners and a pyx carrying the consecrated Host were brought to the battlefield and hung aloft a ship’s mast to create the eponymous standard. It therefore cannot be said that a warrior ignored his faith when he went to war or that the clergy did not see a role for themselves within these situations.

In *L’Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal*, elite warriors are shown to acknowledge God’s ability to direct the course of a conflict. In an imagined speech given by William Marshal to his men before they travelled to Lincoln to face invading French forces in 1217, William’s biographer writes:

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Diex nos a doné tens e ore,
Soie merci, de nos vengier
De cels que por nos ledengier
Sunt ci venu e por mal faire
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Let us give thanks to God, who has given us the opportunity to take our revenge on those who came here to do us harm and damage.

The Marshal outlines the aims of their military intervention. Not only do they seek to protect their homeland, their families and their reputations, but they also aim to protect

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‘...la pais de sainte Glise’ [the peace of Holy Church], which the French had broken when they invaded. By doing so they might earn redemption and be pardoned for their sins.  

Historical narratives from England thus depict elite men being motivated by their faith to act in a Christian manner. By pleasing God they might earn favour and show themselves to be penitent sinners. We have already seen the idea that there was a mode of behaviour more worthy of Christians in William of Poitiers’ *Gesta Guillelmi*. Poitiers reasons that Duke William of Normandy spared opponents because:

...salubriter pensans qui arbiter, quam tremendus, terrenae potestatis acta desuper prospiciat, moderatae clementiae ut immoderatae saeuitiae omnique meritorum qualitati sua cuique decernens.

He wisely had in mind how redoubtable a judge looks from on high on the deeds of earthly powers, and distributes mercy and punishment to each according to his deserts.

This concern to act in manner which will please God is similarly reflected in depictions of prisoners being released just before, or just after, a king’s death. Roger of Hoveden claims that on Henry’s II’s death, his wife Eleanor ordered all prisoners to be freed as it would benefit Henry’s soul. He notes that King Richard continued his mother’s activities after his accession, restoring rights to those Henry II had disinherited, recalling those he had banished, and releasing those he had imprisoned. Hoveden concludes: ‘...quos pater causa justitiae diversis poenis afflicit, filius causa pietatis refocillavit’ [...those upon whom the father, in the cause of justice, inflicted punishment, the son, in the cause of humanity, forgave].

To what extent can we believe that these acts were really prompted by a concern to behave in a Christian manner? I do not think we should expect the motivations given in

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203 Ibid., II:308–9.
207 Ibid., III:6.
narrative sources such as these to be accurate. After all, it is highly unlikely that the authors of these histories knew why their subjects acted as they did. However, histories from high medieval England clearly show that warriors who acted mercifully towards those who had wronged them were considered to be both pious and virtuous.

Indeed, chroniclers encourage elite men to conduct themselves according to religious principles by including examples of good, Christian, behaviour in their histories. Roger of Wendover, for example, relates the story of a knight who had been exiled for hunting King Richard I’s deer. The knight’s punishment had reduced him to begging in the streets. In a last attempt to alleviate his suffering, he sought out King Richard in order to beg for his mercy. The knight found Richard in a church where he was about to hear mass. While waiting for the king, the knight began to pray, and the king was astonished to see an image of Christ bow in response to the knight’s pleas. He summoned the knight and asked him to explain his current situation, before testing his piety by enquiring whether he had ever acted out of respect for, and in honour of, the Holy Cross. In response, the knight related the story of his father’s murder and his subsequent attempts to avenge his death. The killer had evaded him for several years until they chanced upon one another on the way to church to hear mass. At the sight of the knight, who had raised his sword to attack, the murderer embraced a nearby cross and beseeched his pursuer to spare him in the name of Christ. The guilty man vowed to appoint a chaplain to perform mass for the knight’s father’s soul each day in return for his life. The knight was moved to pity by this scene, and because of his love for Jesus, he forgave his father’s murderer. Having heard the story, King Richard in turn forgave the knight’s trespasses and restored his property.209 In this episode, both the knight and King Richard are encouraged by their faith to practice forgiveness and mercy.

Moderation, mercy and the practice of clemency are thus viewed by high medieval chroniclers in England as the kind of behaviour expected of good Christians. While it is difficult to know whether elite men were really influenced by their faith when deciding how to treat defeated opponents, it is instructive that these chroniclers depict them as

being so during conflict situations. It shows that this behaviour was considered to be positive and virtuous within the chroniclers’ society. Indeed, even if the elite men within these histories did not act in a pious manner in reality, they may well have wanted to be seen to do so in order to match this ideal. The evidence outlined here suggests that Christian ideology interacted with, and informed, ideals of appropriate elite conduct in high medieval England.

Acts of clemency and mercy are thus shown to be motivated by a range of factors within our textual evidence, from a concern to appear pious, to a desire to behave in a virtuous and praiseworthy manner. Other influences will be explored as this chapter progresses. What is not yet clear, however, is whether elite men were expected to show mercy towards all opponents. Gerald of Wales suggests in his Expugnatio Hibernica that there was some discussion around exactly when, and to whom, clemency should be shown. An in-depth consideration of a single example from this text will allow me to outline some of the contemporary arguments which will be further investigated throughout this chapter.

3.2.4 Barbarian Enemies or Vanquished Opponents?: A Discussion in Gerald of Wales

Gerald of Wales’ Expugnatio Hibernica is a contemporary account of Anglo-Norman military incursions into Ireland in the later twelfth century. Within this text, Gerald recounts the defeat of the men of Waterford and their allies by a force led by his cousin, Raymond le Gros, in 1170. During the battle, Raymond’s force had taken seventy Irish men prisoner and now he and his men had to decide their fate. Should they be spared, or executed? In an imagined speech inserted after Raymond’s victory, Gerald has Raymond extol the virtue of showing compassion towards conquered opponents.210

Nec enim hostibus parcendum ulla racione decreverim. Sed hi non hostes iam, sed homines; non rebelles, sed debellati, sed victi, sed fatis urgentibus ob patrie tutelam superati. Honesta quidem occupacio. Non fures, non

210 Giraldus Cambrensis, Expugnatio Hibernica: The Conquest of Ireland, ed. Francis X. Martin and A. Brian Scott, trans. A. Brian Scott, A New History of Ireland Ancillary Publications, III (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1978), 56–65; John Gillingham opens his discussion on war against groups perceived as “barbarian” by the English in the twelfth century with this example. For his views on this topic, see Gillingham, “Conquering the Barbarians.”
facciosi, non proditores, non predones. Eo iam numero sunt constituti, ut in eis potius locum habeat pietas ad exemplum quam crudelitas ad tormentum. Difficile quidem est, et tanto virtus antiquior, effrenes semper et luxuriantes in commodis animos inter prospera temperare. Efficiat igitur in nobis dignissima laude clemencia, ut cetera qui vicimus animos vincamus et iram. Solet quippe precipites animi motus modus et modestia mitigare.

For I would not by any means insist that we should spare our enemies. However these are not enemies, but fellow human beings; they are not rebels, but beaten and vanquished opponents, men who, in consequence of the remorseless will of fate, have been defeated by us while they were defending their country. Assuredly an honourable avocation! They are not thieves, seditious, traitors or robbers. They are now in such a position that in their case there is scope for showing mercy, to give a good example, rather than for displaying cruelty to torture them. It is a difficult feat – and consequently all the more desirable as a virtue – to restrain in good fortune those spirits which are always unbridled and undisciplined in prosperity. So let that quality of compassion which is most deserving of praise be seen in us, and enable us, who have conquered everything else, to conquer our own anger and violent passions. For self-restraint and moderation usually quieten the head-strong emotions.  

Raymond lays out the case for clemency in emotional terms. He does not argue that these men should be spared in order to gain profit or advantage, but rather, because it is the right thing to do. Like L’Histoire in its description of Richard’s defeat of John’s forces at Nottingham, Gerald has Raymond praise restraint after victory as a desirable virtue which can only be achieved when one has control of their emotions. Emotional responses driven by anger and passion need to be governed and controlled if a person is to stand out as an example of a virtuous man. The fact that this level of self-control is so difficult to achieve makes it even more praiseworthy.

Gerald has Raymond make a distinction between the behaviour expected of a warrior during battle and that expected after it, something we have already seen in other examples from this period. Elite warriors were always at risk of being killed during violent confrontations, even in situations where their opponents might be willing to capture them for ransom. Indeed, Raymond even says in his speech that a soldier has a

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211 Giraldus Cambrensis, Expugnatio Hibernica, 58–61. Raymond is careful to note that mercy should only be granted to those who had not committed a crime such as rebellion, treason or robbery.
duty to kill in a ferocious and brutal manner during battle. However, once the battle was over, and one’s opponents had surrendered, mercy, rather than cruelty, should rule. As the speech concludes:

...bellico cessante tumultu, armis iam exutis, feritate quoque deposita, resumi debet humanitas et animo nobili pietas et mansuetudo renasci.

...when the turmoil of battle is over and he has laid aside his arms, ferocity too should be laid aside, a humane code of behaviour should be once more adopted, and feelings of mercy and clemency should be revived in the spirit that is truly noble.

It was probably not always as easy as Raymond suggests to tell when battle had ended. While the narrative form of our texts encourages us to think of conflict as having distinct stages, it is unlikely that medieval warfare was so structured. Despite this, the fact that Gerald has Raymond make a distinction between active war and peacetime is significant. It suggests that Gerald perceived the submission of defeated opponents to signal a change in the relationship between the two sides. This change was accompanied by a shift in the way enemies were expected to ideally behave towards one another.

It is interesting that the counter-argument to Raymond’s pleas for mercy, which Gerald has Hervey de Montmorency voice, does not take issue with this reasoning. Clemency should be shown to supplicant opponents. However, Hervey challenges Raymond’s assertion that victory had been achieved. Instead of viewing the battle that had just been fought as a self-contained conflict, Hervey considers the conquest of Ireland as a whole when evaluating the situation. As Ireland was not yet subdued, he could not consider the conflict to be over.

Dum adhuc superbi dumque rebelles sunt populi, pietate postposita, modis sunt omnibus expugnandi. Cum vero iam subditi, iam servire parati, tum demum, salvo regiminis moderamine, cum omni mansuetudine sunt tractandi.

While peoples are still proud and rebellious they must be subdued by all possible means and clemency must take a back seat. But when they have

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212 Ibid., 60–61.
213 Ibid.
been subdued, when they are ready to be obedient, then and only then are they to be treated with all possible clemency, without prejudice to good government.\textsuperscript{214}

Hervey does not deny the importance of mercy as a virtue or revoke the paradigm of behaviour in war and peace that Raymond expounds. His problem is with Raymond’s analysis of the conflict as having ended. He reasons that opponents who are granted clemency while the wider conflict continues can simply re-join opposing forces elsewhere.\textsuperscript{215} They must therefore be permanently removed. Ultimately, Hervey’s arguments are said to sway the English and the captives are killed.\textsuperscript{216}

In his speech, Hervey questions whether the Irish would show them the same mercy. The Irish were, after all, considered to be barbarians by the English in this period.\textsuperscript{217} Indeed, we should be under no illusions as to Gerald’s view of the Irish. In his \textit{Topographia Hibernica} he concludes that the Irish are a ‘gens barbara.’\textsuperscript{218} Despite this, he does not seem to think the Irish to be completely irredeemable.

...numquam invenies gentem aliquam nisi peccatis exigentibus expugnatam. Aut igitur gens Hibernica que, delictis urgentibus et spurciciis, advenarum incurvis meruit expugnacione turbari, nondum tamen, implacabiliter offenso judice supremo, vel omnino subici meruit vel deleri, aut Anglorum populus gentis ex parte subacte et servire parate nondum plene subieccionis imperium et tranquille servitutis obsequium potuit ex meritis obtinere.

You will never find that any race has ever been conquered except when their sins demanded this as a punishment. This being the case, the Irish people have deserved to suffer the confusion attendant on invasion and conquest by foreigners, since their misdemeanours and vile practices demanded this punishment. However they have not as yet implacably offended the Supreme Judge, and have not deserved to be completely crushed or wiped out. Or alternatively, the English have not as yet won the right to obtain the

\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 62–63.
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., 64–65.
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid., 62–65.
full submission and placid obedience of a race that is already partly conquered and ready to serve them.\textsuperscript{219}

Neither the English or the Irish, he continues, seem to have won or lost God’s favour completely and so neither side is victorious.\textsuperscript{220}

However, this episode is less a consideration of how the English should treat the supposedly barbarous Irish and more an exposition of the kind of conduct expected of elite men in this period. It seems that Gerald intended for his audience to sympathise more with Raymond’s position than Hervey’s. Raymond was Gerald’s cousin, and it is clear that he was using his history partly to highlight the actions of his kin in the conquest of Ireland.\textsuperscript{221} R. Rees Davies referred to the Expugnatio as ‘the family chronicle of an aggressive, tightly-knit and fiercely proud lay and ecclesiastical dynasty.’\textsuperscript{222} It is thus unsurprising that Gerald positions Raymond as one of the principal heroes of the Norman involvement in Ireland within his narrative.\textsuperscript{223} In contrast, Hervey de Montmorency is not depicted favourably. Gerald even questions his military record elsewhere in the text.

Vir olim Gallica milicia strenuus, sed hodie plus habens malicie quam milicie, plus fraudis quam laudis, plus eminencie quam existencie...

He formerly showed courage during the wars in France, but today displays more malice than military prowess, a greater capacity for deception than for winning renown, more apparent distinction than real worth...\textsuperscript{224}

Therefore it seems that Gerald wished for his audience to view Raymond’s message of clemency as the more laudable position.

Although clemency is not ultimately shown to the Irish captives, neither party in this episode argues that mercy in peacetime was not a praiseworthy behaviour. However,

\textsuperscript{219} Giraldus Cambrensis, Expugnatio Hibernica, 232–33.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., xxi.
\textsuperscript{222} R. Rees Davies, Domination and Conquest: The Experience of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, 1100-1300 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 32.
\textsuperscript{223} Giraldus Cambrensis, Expugnatio Hibernica, 300 n.67.
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., 160–61.
Hervey’s attempts to avoid seeing the end of the battle as the end of the conflict raises interesting questions about whether it was always practical to show clemency to one’s opponents. We therefore need to consider the extent to which it was possible to live up to these ideals at all times. The decision not to kill a submissive opponent merely led to another question: how to best deal with a defeated enemy?
3.3 The Practice of Warfare: Restraining Violence

Elite men may have ideally been expected to show mercy to those who wronged them and moderate their violent tendencies, but it was not only the desire to match this ideal which encouraged elite men to spare opponents in practice. Clemency was also part of the conventions of warfare and had a tangible use within the resolution of conflict. However, those who avoided death were not necessarily spared punishment. Financial extractions, lengthy imprisonment and exile could all be used to weaken an opponent and lessen their ability to make war. In this section, I will outline some of the practical uses clemency is shown to have within different conflict situations and consider the implications that the granting of mercy had for both victorious warriors and their defeated enemies.

3.3.1 Ransoming: Respect for Rank or a Desire for Profit?

The capture, and subsequent ransom, of enemies during battle is a common feature of depictions of conflict from high medieval England. A warrior’s talent for capturing opponents was a measure of his prowess, and by ransoming these prisoners, this success could be turned into profit. The author of the *Gesta Stephani* boasts of one baron from the South West, Henry de Tracy, who captured one hundred and four knights in a single cavalry battle while pursing King Stephen’s interests. John Marshal, William Marshal’s nephew, is similarly singled out in *L’Histoire* for his feat of capturing seven barons at the battle of Lincoln in 1217. His feat was all the more impressive for the fact that his captives were high-ranking men who were important enough to fly their own banners.

Therefore, while military leaders had specific aims for their armies during any period of conflict, the elite warriors within these forces also saw war as an opportunity to improve their own reputation and make a profit. *L’Histoire* describes how those at the battle of

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Lincoln in 1217 were able to enrich themselves while also fighting to repulse the invasion of Louis, son of the King of France.

Nus chevaliers qui volt emprendre
A gaaign n’a chevalier prendre
Ne pot mie faillir le jor

No knight eager
to win booty or capture knights
could fail to do so that day.²²⁷

Although the ultimate aim of these elite warriors was to protect their country from foreign invasion, *L’Histoire* suggests that each knight was also thinking about his own advancement. The capturing, rather than killing, of opponents could therefore be seen to be a pragmatic choice intended to earn wealth and glory for the captor.

This is borne out by the observation that elite men actively sought to take high-ranking men and knights as prisoners. While they would also capture and ransom ordinary soldiers, it was through the capture of higher-status warriors that they could best demonstrate their skill in war and earn ransoms of significant value. In *L’Histoire*, knightly prisoners are so prized that the Marshal is shown to put himself into danger in order to capture them. In one episode, he is criticised by his fellow warriors for a particularly risky feat of daring. The Marshal is claimed to have retorted:

Uns chevaliers ert a chival
Entre els, nel tenez mie a mal,
E se par le frein le tenisse,
Ove mei venir l’en feïsse

Please don’t take exception, for there was one knight amongst them on horseback,
and, if only I could have taken him by the bridle,
I would have made him come with me²²⁸

The manner in which the Marshal tried to capture his opponent, by attempting to seize his horse’s bridle, is significant. This kind of non-lethal, and deliberate, mode of capture,

²²⁷ Ibid.
had the express intention of capturing an opponent without injuring them. Roger of Wendover describes a similar scene at the battle of Monmouth when Baldwin de Guînes tried to capture Richard Marshal by seizing his horse and trying to drag him away.\textsuperscript{229} The weakness of this kind of tactic becomes abundantly clear, however, when the reader is told that Baldwin was mortally wounded by a crossbowman's arrow during the capture, allowing Richard to go free.\textsuperscript{230} Regardless of whether or not elite men actually did successfully capture opponents with this kind of approach, its presence in medieval war narratives is another sign that members of elite society were seen to be reluctant to kill their peers.

It was clearly not easy to capture an opponent during battle itself, especially if one's opponents were reluctant to surrender. Those who did not surrender were heralded for their bravery, but they also put themselves at considerable risk. \textit{L'Histoire} records that many knights fought on rather than sue for ransom during the battle at Lincoln in 1217. In choosing to fight on, they were exposed to the dangers of war, meaning they could be killed, maimed or forcibly captured.

\begin{verbatim}
Ilec ot fet d'armes assez,
Car de bleciez e de quassez
E de folez e de batuz
E de pris e de retenuz
I ot molt, c'est la verité,
Des trovez dedenz la cité,
E des nos genz lediz sovent,
Car nuls n'i quereit tensement
N'amercier ne metre en taille;
Tuit tendeient a la bataille.
\end{verbatim}

There were many feats of arms performed there, and the truth is that there were many of their men who were found within the walls wounded and maimed, trampled on and beaten, and many taken captive, and many of our own also came to grief, for nobody there sought protection

\textsuperscript{229} Roger of Wendover, \textit{Flowers of History III}, III:62.
\textsuperscript{230} Ibid., III:62–63.
or gave himself up for ransom or wished to be enrolled among the prisoners; all were intent on the fight.\textsuperscript{231}

Those who capitulated were not able to gain the fame that came from continued feats of bravery, but they often preserved their own lives.

Even if the decision was made to battle on against the odds, contemporary narratives still suggest that elite warriors did genuinely try to avoid killing elite opponents on the battlefield. *L’Histoire* recounts how distressed William Marshal was when he thought he had caused the death of the Count of Perche at the battle of Lincoln in 1217. The Marshal had attempted to capture the count, but the count had resisted, striking him with his sword, before falling limply to the ground. The Marshal thought the count had fainted and was worried that he would be blamed for injuring his noble opponent. However, the count had already been mortally wounded by Sir Reginald Croc, who had thrust his sword through the eyehole of the count’s helmet during the battle. When the Marshal and his men saw that the count was dead, they are said to have felt intense sorrow.\textsuperscript{232}

Despite this claimed outpouring of grief, the nature of the fatal strike, which had been aimed at a weakness in the count’s armour, suggests that Sir Reginald had intended harm to come to his opponent. Roger of Wendover, who also describes these events, does not mention the Marshal’s involvement, but tells us that the count had been surrounded by knights who had asked him to surrender so that he might live. His subsequent refusal to capitulate had led to his death, killed by an unnamed knight.\textsuperscript{233} Although elite men could reasonably have expected to be offered the chance to surrender, those who refused it may have found themselves being made to submit by force.

Even if we take into account this general reluctance among elite men to kill their peers, we must still recognise the danger that men of all ranks faced during armed conflict.

\textsuperscript{232} Ibid., II:338–41.
L’Histoire relates that ‘E maint boin chevaler de pris / I out naufré ou mort ou pris’ [many a prized and valiant knight was wounded, killed, or taken prisoner] in conflicts between Earl Patrick of Salisbury and William Marshal’s father John.\textsuperscript{234} Roger of Hoveden writes that during Richard I’s assault on Nottingham castle in 1194, the king himself killed an opposing knight with an arrow.\textsuperscript{235} It is therefore unwise to assume that all who could be taken prisoner were and that all who were killed were impossible to capture. In active warfare it would not have been realistic to practice any code of \textit{always} capturing, rather than killing, elite opponents.

However, it seems that there was a desire, albeit one that was not always realised, to avoid violently harming elite men both during, and after, conflict. This does not preclude high-status men being killed in battle or exposed to violent attacks. However, once conflict had ended elite men were likely to see violent punishment as inappropriate for their peers, even when at war against foreign forces. L’Histoire claims that English knights who were involved in the naval battle at Sandwich in 1217 prevented the execution of thirty-two defeated French knights by English rank-and-file soldiers. We later hear that all the French soldiers who had been captured had been killed, except for the knights, who had been imprisoned in Dover.\textsuperscript{236} Elite men, and at times this does mean knights, do seem to have been treated more leniently than ordinary soldiers.

The question is whether this leniency was prompted by a desire to earn ransoms or by a concern to adhere to accepted norms of appropriate elite conduct. The fact that warriors did not always get to keep the men they captured suggests that although ransom was a factor, the capture of opponents was also expected, and even planned for, by military leaders. Some military leaders seem to have reserved the right to decide what happened to opponents captured by their men. Roger of Hoveden includes in his history a letter allegedly sent from the English king, Richard, to Philip, bishop of Durham, in which Richard details the knights his force had captured in battle against the French king at Gisors in 1198. The letter recounts that as many as one hundred French knights

\textsuperscript{234} Holden and Crouch, \textit{History of William Marshal I}, I:10–11.
\textsuperscript{235} Roger of Hoveden, \textit{Chronica Magistri III}, III:239.
\textsuperscript{236} Holden and Crouch, \textit{History of William Marshal II}, II:374-5-3.
were taken and promises to send on the names of the main prisoners to the bishop. This could not currently be done because Mercadier, one of Richard’s commanders, had taken thirty knights whom the king had not yet seen. Roger of Wendover describes a similar process occurring after assaults on Beauvais and Milli by King Richard’s men. Richard’s nobles similarly handed their captives into his custody.

However, elite warriors do seem to have eventually benefited from the capture of their opponents. High-ranking prisoners often formed part of the rewards military leaders granted to their men. Jordan Fantosme notes that at Alnwick in 1174, the human spoils of the war were shared out amongst the victors:

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Mes bien vus voil
Ke Willame de Vesci rainst tut a sun talent.
E Bernart de Baillol e l’autre bone gent,
Waltier de Bolebec, Odinel ensement,
En orent des prisuns a lur departement.
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...but I must not omit to tell you of nearly a hundred whom William de Vesci put to ransom just as he pleased. And Bernard de Balliol and those other fine personages Walter de Bolebec and Odinel also had prisoners when they were portioned out.

The value of these prisoners lay in the large ransoms that could be extracted from them. As Maurice Keen observed, even though the practice of capture and ransom meant an elite man did not lose his life, it may well ruin him and his family financially. Roger of Hoveden records that King Richard paid King Philip of France three thousand marks of silver as ransom for the knights and soldiers his forces had captured at Aumale. Robert de Breteuil, fourth earl of Leicester, paid a costly ransom of a different kind when he was captured by the French in 1194. He spent over a year in captivity and finally had to give up his rights to the castle of Pace-sur-Eure in order to secure his release. The exchange of castles in return for high-ranking prisoners was not uncommon. King

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239 Jordan Fantosme, Jordan Fantosme’s Chronicle, 140–41.
240 Keen, Chivalry, 221.
241 Roger of Hoveden, Chronica Magistri IV, IV:5 Hoveden claims that Robert also had to give King Philip two thousand marks of silver.
Stephen was only able to secure the release of his steward, William Martel, after ceding the castle of Sherborne to Earl Robert of Gloucester. It is not difficult to see how these financial incentives might have encouraged elite men to capture as many high-ranking opponents as possible.

Lower-ranking captives were not necessarily worthless either. King John (r.1199-1216) is reported to have rewarded his men after the siege of Rochester with the right to ransom lower-ranking soldiers, referred to as servientes. Our evidence for these lower-ranking men is, unsurprisingly, particularly limited. Servientes probably assisted knights on the battlefield, but they are rarely mentioned in contemporary works, even though they were important enough to have had some value as captives. As high medieval historical narratives are dominated by the affairs of the noblemen who frequently patronised them, it is difficult to investigate the experience more ordinary soldiers had of war. We lack the evidence required to fully examine how varying levels of non-noble men could expect to be treated if they were captured. However, we should not ignore the evidence that non-noble warriors could also be ransomed for profit.

In high medieval England, elite men generally attempted to capture, rather than kill, their peers during battle. There were both practical and ideological reasons for this behaviour. Capturing high-ranking opponents was one way in which elite men demonstrated their prowess and valour in war, and there were great profits to be earned from ransoming prisoners. However, there is also evidence of a wider norm of conduct which encouraged elite men to act moderately towards those of similar rank. While it was not always possible to adhere to this norm during battle itself, elite men generally had the opportunity to surrender if they faced immediate death. Those who refused to surrender were praised for their bravery, but continued to expose themselves to the danger of armed combat.

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243 Roger of Wendover, Flowers of History II, II:151.
Those who were captured had to wait to see how they would be treated by their opponents. While it was unlikely that they would be executed or mutilated, they could be punished in other ways. They might be forced to pay a high price for their freedom, with elite men even handing over castles or towns in exchange for their release. However, Imprisonment could be also used as a punishment for high-ranking opponents who were too dangerous to be released or who had offended too greatly. Indeed, not all who were spared death regained their freedom.

3.3.2 Prison as a Punishment

Not all captives were allowed to buy their freedom. In particular, high-ranking men, and especially those who had rebelled, could be imprisoned for significant amounts of time, often with little expectation of release. Robert de Mowbray, earl of Northumberland, for example, was imprisoned for twenty or thirty years after rebelling against William Rufus.245 Indeed, after being imprisoned by Henry I (r.1100-1135), Robert of Bellême was never released.246 Although these men were not executed, it is hard to imagine that such lengthy captivity was not a significant hardship. They may have been spared death and mutilation, but they could still be made to suffer for their actions.

Orderic Vitalis explores the use of imprisonment as a punishment in William the Conqueror’s death scenes. He has William explain his reasons for imprisoning various men during his lifetime.

Morcarum nobilem Anglorum comitem iam diu uinctum tenui et iniuste, sed pro timore ne per eum si liber fuisset turbaretur regnum Angliæ. Rogerium uero de Britolio quia ulde contumaciter contra me furuit, et Radulfum de Guader sororium suum et multos alios in me prouocaut in uinculis artaui, et quod in uita mea non egrederetur iuraui. Sic multos uinculis inieci ex merito propriæ peruersitatis aliosque plures pro metu futuræ seditionis. Hoc enim censura rectitudinis exigit, et diuina lex per Moisen rectoribus orbis precipit ut comprimant nocentes ne perimant innocentes.

I have already kept the noble Earl Morcar a prisoner for many years, not for any just cause but for fear that if he were free he would stir up rebellion in England. As for Roger of Breteuil, I flung him into prison and swore that he should never leave it as long as I lived, because he treacherously rebelled against me and carried with him his brother-in-law, Ralph of Gael, and many others. In this way I have condemned many to captivity deservedly for their own disloyalty, and many others for fear of future treachery. Right custom requires, and the divine law given through Moses commands, earthly rulers to restrain evil-doers so that they cannot injure the innocent.\textsuperscript{247}

Orderic has William justify his actions by referring to his responsibility to keep the peace. As king, he had a Christian duty to ensure peace and justice throughout his kingdom, and imprisonment was a tool which allowed him to achieve this. However, Orderic also suggests that there were political reasons for having high-ranking men incarcerated. Long imprisonment was a way to remove dangerous opposition without having to execute particular powerful men. Prisoners could be released if it became politically favourable to do so.\textsuperscript{248}

High-status prisoners were useful bargaining chips to have in reserve. They could, for example, play a role in the negotiation of political settlements. In 1174, prisoners were released as part of the reconciliation between Henry II and his rebellious sons. Some prisoners were required to give hostages as security for their good behaviour, while others had to get their friends to swear oaths guaranteeing their future loyalty. However, the noble prisoners, King William of Scotland, Earl Robert of Leicester, Earl Hugh of Chester and Ralph de Fougères, were exempt from the agreement as King Henry had already decided their fate.\textsuperscript{249} These prisoners were valuable enough to demand their own settlements. The King of Scotland had to agree to a number of humiliating terms in order to secure his release, even pledging to hold his lands from King Henry as his liegeman.\textsuperscript{250} We should therefore distinguish between men of different rank when thinking about how captured men were treated by their captors. Lower-ranking warriors, or knights, held little political value, other than as part of a mass transfer of

\textsuperscript{247} Orderic Vitalis, \textit{Ecclesiastical History IV}, IV:96–97.
\textsuperscript{248} Strickland, \textit{War and Chivalry}, 240.
\textsuperscript{250} Ibid., II:79–82; Hoveden used the text known as “Benedict of Peterborough” for these events. See Stubbs, \textit{Benedict of Peterborough}, I:78; 95-9.
prisoners. However, high-ranking prisoners could be used to secure and strengthen an individual’s position.

Contemporary commentators did not see imprisonment as a soft form of punishment. Various sources attest to prisoners being kept in squalid and unpleasant conditions. Jordan Fantosme writes that on being captured by Henry II, Earl Hugh of Chester ‘est dolenz e irez: Ne quide en sa vië estre desprisunez’ [is overcome with grief and woe: he thinks he will not be freed as long as he lives]. In his *Estoire des Engleis*, Geoffrei Gaimar describes the northern earl, Morcar, and Bishop Aethelwine as foolhardy enough to have surrendered to the forces of William the Conqueror after their rebellion had failed. They died during their long imprisonment. The *Estoire* goes on to note that others put in prison with them suffered so much that it would have been better if they had died on the battlefield. The author of the *Gesta Stephani* is equally damning in its judgement of William de Mohun, the future earl of Somerset’s, treatment of defeated opponents during the disturbances of King Stephen’s reign: ‘pecuniosos, quibuscumque occurrerat, uinculis et cruciatibus immiseranter exponere’ [any rich man he met he mercilessly delivered over to chains and torments]. Similarly, Alan, earl of Richmond, was captured ‘supplicisique in carcerali squalore fuit addictus’ [and subjected to torment in a filthy dungeon] by the earl of Chester after the battle of Lincoln in 1141. His punishment only ended when he agreed to do homage to his captor, hand over his castles and relinquish his earldom of Cornwall.

Although captors did not always treat their prisoners well, there was still a general reluctance to have them executed. Henry of Huntingdon writes a lengthy polemic against Robert of Bellême who he thought had a policy of killing captives. Henry notes that ‘Nec curabat captos redimere, sed interimere’ [He would not trouble to ransom prisoners, but killed them]. He goes on to claim that Robert delighted in using strange methods of execution including piercing both men and women from anus to mouth with

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254 Ibid., 116–17.
stakes.\textsuperscript{255} Huntingdon is probably, at least to some extent, exaggerating Robert’s cruelty. Indeed, he does little to hide his hostility towards his subject. However, Kathleen Thompson has encouraged scholars to remember that Robert lived in an age where violence was commonplace amongst the elite community. Huntingdon is probably right in his assertion that Robert tended to refuse ransom in situations in which others would have accepted it. However, he also tended to simply keep his captives in prison, rather than kill them.\textsuperscript{256} Huntingdon’s reaction, however, shows just how unacceptable it was to have a policy of indiscriminately killing all prisoners.

Of course, not all prisoners were equal, and one can only wonder whether Huntingdon would have been equally critical if he thought Robert was executing low-status men while sparing those of higher rank. As we have begun to see, the status of an opponent was an important factor in how they were treated after conflict. While both higher- and lower-ranking elite men could be financially valuable to the victor, the highest-ranking elites also had political value. These magnates were the prime movers in rebellions and private wars and could even become powerful enough to oppose the king directly. Imprisoning these kind of men removed the threat of further military action and helped to secure the position of the victor. Releasing them, however, could bring huge ransoms of land, money and even lordship of a particular domain. These financial extractions could neutralise the threat of further military action, leaving the ransomed warrior without the resources to respond. However, it could also leave them free to take up arms again if they were able to fund their activities in another way. The decision about how to deal with these high-ranking men was therefore influenced by a range of financial, political, and ideological considerations.

We must keep in mind the effect that status could have on how defeated opponents were treated when we consider the behaviour of victors in other conflict situations, such as during sieges. Sieges were different from battles in that they often ended with a negotiated surrender and the mass release of the besieged. In these situations,

\textsuperscript{255} Henry of Huntingdon, \textit{Historia Anglorum}, 602–3.

victorious forces were confronted with supplicant men of all manner of rank and status. Descriptions of these kind of engagements thus provide up with an opportunity to further examine how status informed the conduct of elite men after conflict.

3.3.3 Sieges and Castle Warfare

3.3.3.1 Mercy after Siege Warfare

Pitched battles were rare in the high medieval period. They were risky, unpredictable and often unfortunately decisive. William of Newburgh claims that it was for these reasons that King Henry II and King Louis VII of France were reluctant to engage in battle on an occasion when they found themselves facing each other’s forces. Having camped in their own territory, they waited in the hope that they would neither be forced to advance nor shamed by retreat.

Paratiorque erat uterque uel princeps uel exercitus propter bellici discriminis ambiguos exitus proelium excipere quam inferre.

Both princes and both armies were readier to forgo rather than to join battle, because of the uncertain outcome of the hazards of war.257

Ravaging and plundering were safer tactics to deploy, as it allowed damage to be inflicted upon opposing forces without the need to engage them in battle. However, sieges also came to dominate military conflicts in this period as wealthy lords built and upgraded an ever increasing number of private castles and fortifications. The capture of these fortifications brought not only wealth and status but also strategic advancement, providing the victorious force with another stronghold from which to defend their position.258

The strength of castles and city fortifications, alongside the preparedness of their garrisons for this kind of offensive, meant that sieges often become protracted

stalemates. In the short term, attacking forces could order a direct assault on the fortification and try to force a surrender. They could even attempt to get members of the opposition to betray their comrades to the enemy. However, if these proactive offensives failed then the consequence was an unwanted impasse. It was not uncommon for sieges to last for months, and even years, quickly becoming a costly drain on a lord’s resources. Besieging forces could, and did, simply give up and go home.259 However, if the attacking force was able to pressure the besieged into surrendering, then they had to decide how to deal with their supplicant enemies. Although there are examples of opponents being executed or mutilated after sieges in this period, defeated garrisons were normally allowed to keep life and limb. As in pitched battle, the cost of capitulation was more likely to be felt through imprisonment, the extraction of ransoms and the loss of political influence.

The offer of surrender was a significant point within any siege. It signalled the desire of the besieged to move from a period of active warfare to a period of submission and settlement. It seems to have been generally expected that offers of surrender would be accepted. Contemporary descriptions of sieges show that once the besieged force had surrendered, it was considered harsh to continue the siege. The author of the Gesta Stephani describes how during the siege of Baldwin de Redver’s men in Exeter castle, King Stephen initially ignored the pleas of the besieged to break the siege and negotiate terms of surrender. He saw that his opponents were in bad shape and was persuaded by his brother, the bishop of Winchester, to wait until they were willing to surrender on whatever terms he asked. However, this upset not only his own barons, many of whom had kinsmen amongst the besieged force, but also his opponents’ allies.260 He notes that ‘alii Balduini dissensionis conscii et cooperatores pro obsidione consentaneis suis tam obstinate intenta non minimum effrenduerunt’ [others, accomplices and helpers in Baldwin’s rebellion, were highly indignant at so determined a siege of their
sympathizers]. Approaching the king together, they argued that Stephen had already gained victory over his opponents by winning back what he rightfully owned.

...ideoque dignitati suæ esse aptius, regiæque pietati competentius, captiuis supplicibus uitam donare, quam usque ad mortem punitis, quod parum uitæ supererat immisericorditer auferre.

...and therefore it was more consonant with his lofty position and more befitting royal clemency to grant life to suppliant prisoners than by inflicting the death penalty ruthlessly to deprive them of the little life they had left.  

These men, they continued, had only taken up arms in loyalty to their lord, Baldwin. In fact, they could not even be accused of betraying the king as Baldwin had never recognised Stephen’s right to the crown and they had not sworn allegiance to him. It made little sense to carry on with the siege, they reasoned, as the castle was already won. Surely, it would be more beneficial for Stephen to redirect his resources towards other ends.

Stephen capitulates and is actually more lenient than he needed to be. The Gesta notes that he not only allowed his enemies to leave the castle along with their possessions, but that he also granted them the freedom to choose to follow any lord they wished. While this may seem particularly merciful, it could also be perceived to be a poor strategic choice. After all, these newly-freed warriors could have chosen to attach themselves to one of Stephen’s enemies. However, the Gesta claims that Stephen hoped his show of clemency would help win the loyalty and devotion of his former enemies. By granting favourable terms to the defeated, Stephen attempted to counter any resentment his enemies might have felt after their defeat.

Not all contemporaries agreed with this reasoning however. Henry of Huntingdon believed that Stephen had made a strategic error when he let these men go free as it meant that he faced more resistance later on in the civil war. Here we see the

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261 Ibid., 42-43.
262 Ibid.
263 Ibid., 41-43.
264 Ibid., 42-43.
potential tension which could exist between the conduct seen as ideal for elite warriors and the behaviour required to win a war. Regardless of whether Huntingdon is correct in his analysis of the situation, his comments suggest that there was some debate about the use of clemency during war. Clemency could be viewed as part of a strategy to placate defeated opponents, but it could also be perceived to be disadvantageous within protracted conflict.

However, the fact that elite warriors knew that sooner or later they would find themselves in the same position as their defeated opponents seems to have overridden any tactical concerns victors may have had. Roger of Wendover claims that this argument was put to King John when he ordered the hanging of William d’Albini’s forces in 1215. John had besieged William’s men for almost three months in the castle of Rochester and was outraged by the number of men and the amount of money he had lost during that time. When the garrison finally surrendered, John demanded that they be punished. However, Roger claims that the nobleman Savari de Mauléon implored him to consider a different course of action.

Domine rex, guerra nostra nondum finita est, unde vobis diligenter pensandum est, quam varios eventus bella sortiantur; nempe, si nobis istos nunc suspendio tradatis, barones adversarii nostri vel me forte vel alios de exercitu vestro nobiles intercipere poterunt consimili casu in brevi et exemplo vestri suspendio tradere, quod absit a vobis ne contingat, quia tali conditione nullus in vestro obsequio militaret.

My lord king, our war is not yet over, therefore you ought carefully to consider how the fortunes of war may turn; for if you now order us to hang these men, the barons, our enemies, will perhaps by a like event take me or other nobles of your army, and, following your example, hang us; therefore do not let this happen, for in such a case no one will fight your cause.

Following this advice, the king begrudgingly imprisoned the high-status men among his opponents instead. The ordinary soldiers were passed to his men to be ransomed. Only

the crossbowmen were hanged because they had slain so many of John’s knights and men.269

Those who showed little concern for preserving the life and limbs of defeated foes not only upset the supporters and allies of these men, but also encouraged their enemies to treat them in the same ruthless manner. As elite warriors in high medieval England were frequently exposed to the possibility of capture, both on the battlefield and at tournaments, it made sense that conventions developed within this loosely-defined group which offered some level of protection from execution and mutilation. Therefore, while the idea that moderation was a virtuous behaviour does shape the kind of conduct thought ideal for elite men in high medieval England, conventions which encouraged the sparing of elite opponents were also the result of the reality of medieval warfare. Indeed, they were built into the conventions of siege warfare.

3.3.3.2 Mercy within the Conventions of Siege Warfare

In theory, the leaders of any armed band had ultimate authority over the decision to offer and accept surrender. However, these men could find it difficult to enforce their decision if they were not present. This was a fairly common occurrence during siege warfare, as lords often left castle garrisons to defend fortresses on their behalf. Despite this, in many cases, garrisons are still depicted deferring to their lord before surrendering. When Wark was besieged by the Scottish king’s forces in 1138, for example, Richard of Hexham records that the town only surrendered after they received a message from their lord, Walter Espec, telling them to do so. Walter was not at the siege himself, but had sent William, abbot of Rievaulx, to order the surrender after

269 Roger of Wendover, Flowers of History II, II:150–51; The Barnwell chronicler records that only one man was hanged: a crossbowman who had been brought up in King John’s household. William Stubbs, ed., Memoriale Fratris Walteri de Coventria, vol. II, Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores 58 (1873. Reprint, Wiesbaden: Kraus Reprint, 1965), 227; The fact that crossbowmen were almost universally hated must be taken into account when we consider how they were singled out for punishment. Robert Bartlett, The Making of Medieval Europe: Conquest, Colonisation and Cultural Change 950-1350 (London: Penguin, 1994), 64.
hearing that the town had been driven to desperation by famine. Those inside had been waiting for such an order, having agreed to defend the town to the last.270

This kind of loyalty was a valuable commodity. Those who stood steadfast in the defence of castles and towns on behalf of their lords are praised in historical narratives. Jordan Fantosme lauds the barons of England for their staunch resistance against the invading forces of the Scottish king from 1173 to 1174.

Sufferunt e atendrunt de ço si funt que sage,
Mes lur chastels ne rendrunt pur aver grant damage.

They will endure and wait patiently, acting wisely in so doing, but they will not surrender their castles no matter what harm may come.271

Similarly, Roger of Wendover claims that the besieged occupants of Dover castle refused to surrender to the invading Louis of France even after finding out that their lord, King John, was dead. Roger tells how Louis offered the constable of the castle, Hubert de Burgh, various honours, including an important post among his advisers, in return for the castle. However, when Hubert discussed the offer with his knights, they all refused to surrender ‘ne illud turpiter reddendo notam proditionis incurrerent’272 [lest they might be branded with treachery for a cowardly submission].273

In contrast, Richard of Hexham condemns the garrison defending Norham castle against invading Scottish forces in 1138 for surrendering too soon. According to Hexham, the garrison did not believe that they were strong enough to face the attack, having only nine knights in a largely inexperienced company. They also thought that they would receive little help from their lord, Bishop Geoffrey of Durham. Despite these circumstances, Hexham takes a dim view of their actions. They surrendered, he writes, ‘cum et vallum optimum esset, et turris fortissima, et eis victualia habundarent,’274 [while as yet the wall was in good condition, the tower very strong, and their provisions

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270 Richard of Hexham, “De Gestis Regis Stephani et de Bello Standardii,” 100.
271 Jordan Fantosme, Jordan Fantosme’s Chronicle, 44–45.
272 Roger of Wendover, Flowers of History II, II:199.
273 Roger of Wendover, Roger of Wendover’s Flowers of History, II part II:381.
They were disgraced by their lack of resistance. However, Bishop Geoffrey was equally condemned for having failed to properly garrison his fortress. By not aiding his adherents adequately, he broke the agreement between himself and his soldiers which exchanged their loyalty and service for his lordly protection.

Garrisons are often depicted asking their lord for aid and threatening to surrender if it is not given. Henry of Huntingdon writes that the garrison besieged by King Stephen at Wallingford wrote to their lord, and Stephen’s rival for the throne, Duke Henry of Normandy, and asked him to either send aid or allow them to surrender the castle. The *Gesta Stephani* tells the story slightly differently, but still emphasises the consequences which could face a lord who did not aid his men. In this version, one of the leading men within the Angevin group, Earl Roger of Hereford, who had been aiding the garrison, wrote to Henry to ask for aid in general terms. In his letter, he is said to have bemoaned King Stephen’s constant attacks which had not only weakened their cause but were also driving their supporters to think about reconciling with the king. He warned that there could be dire consequences if Henry did not come at once. Absent lords who did not aid the military forces that were fighting for them could not expect to retain their support.

The idea that lords should bring help to those fighting on their behalf was so entrenched in medieval warfare that the process of asking for aid was even built into the conventions of siege warfare. Garrisons could request a truce from their attackers to allow them time to ask their lord, or their allies, for assistance. In his *Chronicle*, Jordan Fantosme refers to Roger de Stuteville, castellan of Wark castle, asking for, and being granted, a truce of forty days by the Scottish king, William, who had attacked him. Roger was open with William about his intentions to visit his lord, King Henry II, and ask him for aid. He knew he could not defeat the Scottish king alone, warning that ‘Si dunc ne me puis succurre, par raisun en avant / Perdu avez senz faille tute Northumberland’ [If

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277 Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 211.
then I cannot procure help, from then on you [Henry] will certainly and rightly have lost the whole of Northumberland].  

Roger could not be expected to hold the castle if his lord was not willing to support him. King William did not hesitate to grant the truce, giving Roger enough time to bring forces from the south to bolster his defences. Faced by these reinforcements, William lost confidence in his ability to defeat his opponents and turned his attentions elsewhere.

The agreement of a truce or offer of respite during conflict seems counterproductive to the modern observer, especially as these often seem to be granted when the attacking force is close to victory. However, they are such a common element of depictions of warfare that it is seems unlikely that they were not a real feature of siege conflict. It appears that these conventions, like the sparing of defeated opponents, grew out of the recognition that all elite warriors, at one time or another, would find themselves facing defeat.

These conventions meant warriors could surrender honourably if they faced certain death or were not able to get aid from their lord. When Jordan Fantosme has the English baron Robert de Vaux proclaim: ‘Fel seit ki se rendra tant cum viande li dure!’ [cursed be he who surrenders as long his food lasts out!], he suggests that those facing starvation could respectfully surrender. In another episode, Fantosme recounts the capitulation of knights defending a castle which had been set ablaze. King William of Scotland had overwhelmed the small defensive force of Brough castle and set fire to the tower in which the remaining knights were sheltering. Fantosme comments that, ‘Ainz frunt que chevalier: al rei se rendrunt, / Kar il veient tres bien nul sucurs n’avrunt’ [they will act as knights should and will surrender to the king, for they see plainly that no help is coming to them]. One knight is praised for holding out longer than his comrades in a great display of his bravery. However, even he is said to have surrendered when the

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281 Ibid., 38–41.
282 Ibid., 106–7.
283 Ibid., 110–11.
fire in the tower reached him. Fantosme notes that he could not be blamed for surrendering given how close he was to death.\textsuperscript{284}

It is interesting that even in situations where it was obvious that an opponent had been defeated, or faced certain death, elite warriors are still shown to offer to surrender. Their opponents could have captured them or chosen to spare them when it was obvious they had been defeated, however the act of surrendering seems to have had a symbolic role within the reconciliation process. If a warrior hoped to receive clemency, then it was important that they were perceived to voluntarily surrender and submit before being physically forced to do so.

However, the act of surrender and the act of submission should be considered to be two different things. When a force surrendered, they simply acknowledged that they had been defeated. By also submitting to their victor, they were acknowledging that their fate was in their opponents’ hands. Roger of Hoveden records that when King Richard besieged Tickhill in 1194, the garrison, composed of his brother, John’s, men, offered him possession of the castle. Richard refused to accept it, however, because his opponents were not also offering to put themselves in his mercy. It was only after discussions with the bishop of Durham, who promised them that they would not lose life or limb, that they agreed to submit.\textsuperscript{285} Surrender and submission were two different acts. Both were required before terms could be agreed between combatants.

Conventions which served to restrain violence, from truces during sieges to the release or ransom of defeated enemy garrisons, were a prominent feature of warfare in the high medieval period. They allowed disputes to be resolved without an escalation of violence and gave each side a chance to preserve their troops and resources. While lower-ranking men did benefit from grants of clemency made to entire forces, elite men seem to have been singled out for special treatment, generally avoiding execution and mutilation on account of their status. However, it is important to examine this conclusion more closely and consider whether elite men of different levels of power and importance could

\textsuperscript{284} Ibid., 110–13.
\textsuperscript{285} Roger of Hoveden, Chronica Magistri III, III:238.
expect to be treated the same following conflict. In the next section, I shall further consider the impact status could have on how warriors were treated during, and after, periods of conflict.
3.4 Mercy, Position, and Status

Ordinary soldiers were not always treated more harshly than elite members of an armed force. I have already shown that lower-ranking soldiers could be ransomed and could benefit from collective grants of mercy. However, they also benefited from not being the kind of prisoners their elite opponents really desired, meaning that they were often given much less thought than their high-ranking comrades. The Liber Eliensis claims that after being victorious against supporters of the exiled Bishop Nigel of Ely, ‘hostilem turbam fugavit, milites vero teneri iussit’\(^\text{286}\) [Earl Geoffrey [de Mandeville] put the enemy’s common soldiery to flight but ordered that the knights be held captive].\(^\text{287}\) As ordinary soldiers were not that great a prize for their enemies, it seems that in many cases they were simply ignored.

However, ordinary soldiers’ general lack of value could also leave them vulnerable to being killed during conflict. Their deaths could be used to set an example to others, for example. Roger of Hoveden records that servientes who had been captured at the siege of Nottingham in 1194 were hanged during the siege itself, probably as a reminder to the besieged forces inside the castle of their fate should they not yield.\(^\text{288}\) Those who eventually surrendered the castle were ransomed, which suggests that many of these unlucky men’s compatriots were spared.\(^\text{289}\) Lower-ranking soldiers seem to have been used, killed, ransomed or ignored, depending on the situation at hand.

Norms encouraging the sparing of elite warriors gave elite men extra protection from being killed during warfare or executed once hostilities had ceased. However, it is important to ask exactly who these elite men were and whether they could all expect to be treated equally. When we look at the elite group more closely, we see differences in the status, wealth and position of its members which could affect how individuals were

\(^{286}\) Blake, Liber Eliensis, 319.
\(^{287}\) Fairweather, Liber Eliensis, 393.
\(^{288}\) Roger of Hoveden, Chronica Magistri III, III:239; Servientes probably took on the function of providing support and assistance to knights, but they were not of high status and lacked the wealth to take on knightly rank. They therefore did not have the protection these attributes may have afforded. Nicholson, Medieval Warfare, 55–56.
dealt with by their enemies. A magnate was likely to be more concerned about the consequences of mutilating or executing a fellow magnate than a lower-ranking man of property whose power base was decidedly local. In this section, I will consider how disparities in status and power affected how elite men treated one another during conflict.

3.4.1 Finding and Understanding Elite Men in Medieval Historical Narratives

Medieval chroniclers in the eleventh and twelfth centuries recognised that there were high-ranking men with great power and wealth, but they did not attempt to differentiate between these men in any kind of formal way. They were, of course, aware that there were differences between those at the top of society and those below them. As David Crouch has noted: ‘In any group, medieval people would have had little problem with rating individuals by their own importance, bringing into play a range of factors, economic and social.’ However, these judgements are rarely visible in historical accounts.

Those of particularly high status might be named, as might those of local significance to the composer, but most conflict narratives also feature a homogenous groups of knights who are unnamed and untitled. At the start of this chapter I discussed the problems associated with assuming all knights were elite men, or indeed, that all knights were noble. Prior to the thirteenth century, the term knight could be used to describe men with a wide range of circumstances. However, the title began to become more synonymous with those who held noble status at some point between the second half of twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth. This leaves us with a problem when we investigate men who are identified as only knights before this time. Should we assume that medieval chroniclers named all the men who they considered to be of significant elite status, with none being labelled as simply knights? If so, how are we to approach the unidentified knights? It is evident that some knights were afforded an amount of protection from execution or mutilation after warfare, first, as a result of

their position and second, on account of their worth as captives. However, I will show here that these unnamed knights, and indeed even lower-level elite men, could not always expect to be treated as well in defeat as the highest-ranking magnates.

The issues we face in understanding the status of those mentioned in historical narratives become clear when we compare different accounts of the same conflict. An instructive example is that of the besieging, and consequent defeat by King Stephen, of the men of William fitz Alan, who were defending the castle he held at Shrewsbury in 1138. William had escaped with his family before the king’s arrival, leaving his uncle, Arnulf de Hesdin, and his men, to defend Shrewsbury. Henry of Huntingdon describes that William fitz Alan held the castle at Shrewsbury, ‘...quod rex quidem cepit armis, captorumque nonnullos suspendit’ [which indeed the king took by force of arms and he hanged several of the men who were captured.] He does not give any details about the status of these men so we may assume, reasonably, that they were rank-and-file soldiers. However, the Chronicle of John of Worcester elaborates further, noting that ‘Quinque ex eis uiri nobiliores suspenduntur’ [Five of the higher rank were hung], suggesting that some of the more elite men involved in the conflict had been executed.

Orderic Vitalis provides even greater detail and claims that Arnulf de Hesdin proudly rejected repeated offers of peace made by the king and forced others who wanted to surrender to persist in the rebellion. King Stephen is claimed to have reasoned that ‘...qua pro mansuetudine sua contemptibilis contumacibus uidebatur...’ [because unruly men regarded his gentleness with contempt], Arnulf was to be hanged along with around 93 other men who had defied him. Many of these men, including Arnulf, begged the king to spare their lives and offered great sums of money for reprieve, but the king is said to have wanted revenge on those who had opposed him. Neither the Chronicle nor Henry of Huntingdon offer any insight into why the king had these men hanged when

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296 Ibid., VI:522–23.
he had previously spared other garrisons, but we may infer that Arnulf’s refusal to surrender prompted the king’s actions. This refusal was not only an insult: it also forced the king to mount a strong response to the siege. Stephen risked being made to look weak if he treated with kindness those who had refused to submit so many times.

However, we also need to consider whether Stephen would have acted in this way had Arnulf been of the highest elite rank, something like an earl or count. Arnulf was an elite man, but he was not by any means one of the most influential men in the realm. His father, also Arnulf, had held extensive lands in Wiltshire. However, Arnulf had received only part of these, with a good proportion of the inheritance instead passing to Patrick de Chaworth via the younger Arnulf’s sister, Maud. Arnulf’s nephew, William fitz Alan, who actually held the castle at Shrewsbury, was a prominent landowner. He held lands centred on Oswestry, as well as the shrievalty of Shropshire and the castles of Shrewsbury and Bridgnorth. He had even married a niece, or close relative, of Earl Robert of Gloucester. We may perhaps wonder whether William’s departure was the result of his greater status and importance to the Angevin cause. It is important to consider the effect Arnulf’s execution would have had if he been one of the leading magnates in the Angevin faction.

Yet, it seems to have been Arnulf’s refusal to surrender which ultimately sealed his fate. While the norms of warfare might have offered those of mid- or lower-elite status some protection from execution or mutilation, those who wished to take advantage of these protections had to follow the convention of first surrendering to their opponent. This was an important aspect of the process of granting mercy. Those who did not surrender, or accept generous offers of surrender, could not expect to be protected simply by virtue of their elite status. They would be forced to capitulate. Of course, even in these situations, some men were so powerful that they were unlikely to be executed by their

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enemies. However, mid-ranking elite men like Arnulf might not get away with such a slight, especially during a tense period of civil war.

We should not therefore think of the elite group as a homogenous mass of powerful people. It contained a wide variety of men, each with different levels of material, military and political power. Even those of middling elite status could find themselves being dealt with harshly if they refused to obey those with greater power than themselves. Robert fitz Hubert, for example, a Flemish knight of noble birth, was executed in 1140 after disturbing the plans of Earl Robert of Gloucester. Robert fitz Hubert was in the paid service of the earl, a stipendiarius or paid soldier, but struck out on his own to opportunistically capture Devizes castle. The Historia Novella and the Gesta Stephani both agree that his insistence on keeping the castle for himself led to him being hanged, although they, and other sources, differ on who ordered the execution. A consideration of the various accounts of this episode will illustrate how differences in status and power among the elite group could affect how these men interacted with one another during conflict.

According to the Gesta Stephani, after refusing to hand Devizes over to the earl, fitz Hubert had been captured by John Marshal, whose castle he had tried to gain through trickery. When Earl Robert eventually heard of fitz Hubert’s capture, he resolved to deal with his disobedient servant himself, having him taken to Devizes and hanged. In contrast, the earl does not feature in William of Malmesbury’s account of fitz Hubert’s demise in the Historia Novella. It is John who has fitz Hubert hanged for refusing to hand over Devizes to the Empress Matilda. This implies that John’s support for the Angevin faction in the civil war was a factor in fitz Hubert’s execution and that this was, at least partly, a political decision. Malmesbury writes that John imprisoned him and ‘more latronum suspensus est’ [hanged him like a common thief]. The author of the continuation of the Chronicle of John of Worcester blames both John and the earl for fitz Hubert’s death, adding that fitz Hubert’s nephews were also hanged.

300 Potter, Gesta Stephani, 104–9.
Neither the Gesta nor the Historia Novella leave the reader in any doubt that Robert fitz Hubert was deserving of such an end. The Gesta refers to the killing as ‘condigna Dei ultione’ [a most righteous vengeance of God] on a man who had tormented thousands of men with his evil deeds.303 Malmesbury describes fitz Hubert as a ‘immanis et barbarus’ [cruel and savage]304 man, who boasted of having watched monks burn in a church and who rarely released prisoners without first torturing and then ransoming them. It is claimed that he used to coat his prisoners in honey before leaving them naked outside so that insects would sting them. In Malmesbury’s eyes, Robert’s execution was just. He concludes: ‘Mortis illius auctores digno attollendi preconio’ [Those who brought about his death must be given the praise they deserve].305

Given that both sources agree on the just nature of fitz Hubert’s execution, it is curious that Malmesbury is so eager to avoid mentioning his patron, Earl Robert, within his account. It is possible that Malmesbury was not aware of his involvement, or indeed, that the author of the Gesta Stephani and the continuation of the Chronicle are wrong in ascribing responsibility for the execution to him. However, it is more likely that Malmesbury wanted to avoid associating Earl Robert with such an act. As David Crouch has commented, ‘Malmesbury preferred to dwell on the nobler aspects of Gloucester’s character.’306 This is to be expected, given that the prologue to the work suggests that the Historia Novella was commissioned by the earl himself.307 In omitting the earl from his narrative of this event, Malmesbury was probably attempting to protect the earl’s image by placing blame for fitz Hubert’s execution on another person who was known to be at the scene, John Marshal.

Indeed, Malmesbury is similarly vague about the earl’s war activities elsewhere, such as in his description of the earl’s campaigns in the South-West from late 1139 to early 1140. He simply notes that the earl ‘modeste se agere, nichil magis cauere quam ne uel paruo detrimento suorum uinceret’ [behaved with restraint, and avoided nothing more

303 Potter, Gesta Stephani, 108–9.
304 William of Malmesbury, Historia Novella, 74–75.
305 Ibid., 76–77.
carefully than even a slight loss of men to gain a battle].\textsuperscript{308} To depict Earl Robert executing Robert fitz Hubert a mere few passages later would not fit with this image of the earl as restrained and moderate in war. If Malmesbury did deliberately avoid mentioning the earl in this episode, then this would suggest that although he believed fitz Hubert’s execution was justified by his wicked actions, such behaviour was not compatible with his understanding of the ideal elite man.

In contrast, the \textit{Gesta Stephani} shows the earl purposely seeking vengeance on his disloyal servant. The earl allegedly ‘non mediocriter collætabatur’ [rejoiced not a little]\textsuperscript{309} when he heard that this \textit{nefandissimum}\textsuperscript{310} was in John’s custody. He was present when fitz Hubert was hanged and ensured the execution was carried out in front of all his men. However, the earl did not gain possession of the castle even after his violent intervention. The \textit{Gesta} claims that Devizes remained in the hands of fitz Hubert’s kinsmen and allies even after fitz Hubert’s death. King Stephen later acquired the castle, but he did not do so with violence. He bought it at great cost from fitz Hubert’s compatriots.\textsuperscript{311} This suggests that fitz Hubert was not executed simply because Earl Robert wished to regain Devizes castle, as his actions did not even achieve this aim. Rather, his execution was an act of vengeance.

The variation in these accounts demonstrates the difficulty we have in understanding how elite men really behaved towards captured opponents and what motivated them to act in this manner. It does not seem to have been uncommon for medieval chroniclers to edit out, or write around, inconvenient truths. In an early version of the obituary of Henry I in the \textit{Historia Anglorum}, Henry of Huntingdon accuses Henry of cruelly blinding the count of Mortain while he was his captive. He is the only contemporary to do so. The accusation was removed and the allegations of cruelty on Henry I’s part were softened, however, in a later, revised text produced after Henry II, Henry I’s grandson, came to the throne in 1154. Diana Greenway suggests that this re-write was prompted by the

\textsuperscript{309} Potter, \textit{Gesta Stephani}, 107–8.
\textsuperscript{310} Ibid., 106.
\textsuperscript{311} Ibid., 108–9.
confirmation in 1153 that Henry II would be heir to the throne. John Gillingham has argued that the suppression of this crime is an indication that these kind of violent punishments were increasingly considered to be unacceptable. It is likely that other chroniclers similarly edited out cases of violence from their works because they were distasteful to their elite supporters and patrons.

It is possible, however, that like Arnulf de Hesdin, Robert fitz Hubert was executed for failing to surrender. The *Chronicle of John of Worcester* suggests that this may have been the case. The *Chronicle* claims that after John had captured fitz Hubert, the earl offered him 500 marks in return for having possession of the prisoner for 15 days. During this time, the earl asked him to give up the castle voluntarily. When fitz Hubert refused, the earl threatened to have him hanged. Although fitz Hubert and his men had sworn not to surrender the castle, fitz Hubert capitulated and agreed to hand over the castle on the condition that he was not killed. The earl, in turn, promised to grant the castle to John. John, however, had other plans to get hold of the castle. He sent letters to fitz Hubert’s men, swearing that neither he nor the earl would hurt fitz Hubert and that his men could keep their oath not to surrender the castle. The earl, however, had left instructions that if fitz Hubert did not surrender the castle he was to be hanged. John’s trickery was successful, and when the time came to surrender, both fitz Hubert and his garrison refused to relinquish the castle on account of their oath. Keeping their promise, the earl’s men immediately hanged fitz Hubert and his nephews. The earl was not present for the hanging, instead leaving behind one of his men to carry out his wishes. This account suggests that fitz Hubert was of little concern to the earl beyond the achievement of his larger aim.

In this narrative, fitz Hubert’s hanging is explained by his perceived refusal to adhere to the conventions of surrender. If we are to believe these claims then his case becomes very similar to that of Arnulf de Hesdin. However, there is also a sense that the authors

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of these accounts knew that elite men often acted to suit their own purposes. Earl Robert might well have wished to take the opportunity to rid himself of a disloyal servant and John of Worcester seems to believe that John Marshal was capable of manipulating events to his own advantage. Therefore, when considering the development, and subsequent use, of norms of conduct, we must also be aware of the agency those involved in warfare had. The evidence of contemporary chronicles suggests that it was virtuous to spare defeated elite enemies, and that it was the norm for this to happen too. Indeed, as I will discuss more extensively later in this chapter, grants of clemency could also be used as tools to defuse conflict and encourage peace. However, elite men could also find themselves in situations where they could manipulate these norms, or ignore them, in order to gain an advantage over their competitors.

Robert fitz Hubert was not a man of mean status. He may have been a stipendiarius who served a greater lord, but he was also a kinsman of William of Ypres, sometime claimant to the county of Flanders, and a miles.315 Indeed, we should not assume that paid warriors were not drawn from the nobility in this period.316 As Eljas Oksanen has noted, ‘The logistics of warfare – of organising, supplying and motivating a large body of armed men – meant that there was always an element of payment for military service.’317 As a young, landless knight, William Marshal attached himself to households which he expected to provide him with the essentials he required: bed and board, horses, military equipment and occasional gifts. He and his fellow landless knights moved between different households in order to access the best rewards for their service.318 By the later twelfth century, paid soldiers were starting to be identified as a group with all the negative connotations conferred by the term routiers, or the modern term, mercenary. However, in the first half of the twelfth century, these negative stereotypes had not yet

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315 Ibid., III:284 The Chronicle refers to Robert as a knight who was the son of Hubert, a noble man.
316 Steven Isaac, “The Problem with Mercenaries,” in The Circle of War in the Middle Ages: Essays on Medieval Military and Naval History, ed. L. J. Andrew Villalon and Donald J. Kagay (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999), 108–9; William of Ypres is often cited as an example of a paid soldier of high status who acquired great influence. A claimant to the County of Flanders, he came to England and was a close ally of King Stephen. For a view on William’s status in England at this time see Oksanen, Flanders and the Anglo-Norman World, 1066–1216, 225–31.
crystallised. The Chronicle of John of Worcester implies that Robert was a valuable prisoner, given that the earl offered 500 marks to have possession of Robert for a mere 15 days. Such a transaction suggests that Robert would have been of considerable value to John Marshal if he had ransomed him.

This episode, and that of the siege at Shrewsbury, show that contemporary commentators acknowledged that in certain circumstances, mid-status elite men were executed if they challenged higher-status elite men and refused to surrender to their wishes. The killing of Robert fitz Hubert in particular, shows how these norms could be ignored or subverted by scheming competitors or those who were powerful enough to enforce their will. However, the fact that William of Malmesbury seems to deliberately deflect blame for the killing of Robert fitz Hubert from Earl Robert of Gloucester suggests that it was problematic, and not ideal, for elite men of his stature to execute their elite opponents. We must also question whether Earl Robert or King Stephen would have been so quick to execute these men if they had been earls or counts. It is unlikely that they would have been. Differences in the means, power and political influence of elite men could affect how they interacted with one another during conflict.

These examples have raised the issue of how elite men used violence to further their aims more generally. Conflict and war was, after all, a competition. Monarchs fought to win and protect their thrones, elite men used violence to both defend and advance their claims to territory, and those fighting for their lords did so in hope of reward. Yet we very rarely get much insight into the smaller squabbles and private wars which must have occurred on a local level. Did the elite men who fought in these type of conflicts adhere to the ideal behaviour expected of elite warriors? Did they see a use for the norm that elite men should spare one another in battle? I shall use an example of a local conflict which has been recorded in detail in order to consider these issues.

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3.4.2 Elite Men and Local History

William Cumin, chancellor of Scotland and archdeacon of Worcester, was particularly ruthless in his bid to win the prized bishopric of Durham in allegiance with the Scottish king, David I. In the early 1140’s, Cumin, presumably taking advantage of the chaos of King Stephen’s reign, began to administer the see as though it were his own. He gathered a number of barons in support of his claim, namely Eustace fitz John, lord of Alnwick and Malton, Robert Bruce, Bernard of Balliol, lord of Bywell and Gainford, and Hugh of Morville. These were men of not insignificant material and political means. Robert Bruce and Hugh of Morville were often members of the Scottish king’s retinue, as well as that of his son, and witnessed many of their charters. Eustace fitz John was influential at both the Scottish and English courts during his lifetime. Each held vast lands. However, Cumin faced resistance to his plans to become bishop. His violent reaction to this opposition led to a conflict which would draw in a wide range of elite men with land and interest in North East. In this section, I will consider how the status of these individuals is shown to have affected how they were treated by their opponents during this conflict.

Unable to stop the election of William de St. Barbe, dean of York, to the bishopric in 1143, Cumin pursued his aims through force, breaking into Durham cathedral, attacking monks and the bishop’s men and killing, mutilating and capturing anyone who stood in

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320 During his life Eustace was influential at both the English and Scottish courts, having switched sides in the war between Stephen and Matilda. Seemingly a friend of Henry I, he went on to support King Stephen before switching sides to join the Scottish king’s retinue at the Battle of the Standard. The Scottish king’s son, Earl Henry, confirmed the lands he had held in chief of King Henry I and King Stephen which lay in Northumberland and also gave him possession of five manors in the honour of Huntingdon. Young, “William Cumin,” 12–13; Rollason, Libellus de Exordio, 300–301.


322 Balliol does not seem to have supported Cumin for very long as Cumin ravages his lands, killing some of his men, around Christmas 1143. Rollason, Libellus de Exordio, 302–3; Young, “William Cumin,” 13–14.

323 Hugh held many estates in Scotland, being granted the lordship of Cunningham and having lands in Galloway, Lauderdale, and in the Tweed valley below Melrose at St. Boswell’s, Mertoun and Dryburgh. By 1140, Hugh was also Constable of Scotland. Young, “William Cumin,” 12.

324 Ibid., 12–13.
their way. As the continuator of the *Libellus de Exordio* writes, ‘modus iam crudelitatis non erat’ [his cruelty knew no moderation].

Neque enim solis rapinis et spoliationibus metiebantur audaciam; sed usque ad corporum laniationes atque cruciatus accedebant, non tamen clam, siue per noctem, aut quoslibet homines, uerum luce, palam, nobiliores quosque ad tormenta rapiendo.

They did not measure their audacity in plunder and ravaging only, but they went as far as bodily mutilation and torture, not even secretly nor at night, but some men they seized in broad daylight and openly, even dragging away and torturing men of nobler sort.

A variant version of the continuation suggests that these *nobiliores*, who are referred to in this version with the more neutral *locupletiores*, the richer sort, were tortured until they paid to be released. In his *Dialogi Laurentii Dunelmensis Monachi Ac Prioris*, Lawrence of Durham similarly refers to some of those who are tortured as *proceres*, nobles. Lawrence of Durham was unusually close to these events as he was one of the monks driven out of the monastery in Durham when it was occupied by Cumin’s forces. Despite this, we still lack detail about the status of these noble men. The fact that these men are not named would tend to suggest that they were not within the higher ranks of the elite group. However, both texts imply, although not clearly, that these men were ransomed by Cumin’s forces, rather than killed.

The captured men who are named within the *Libellus de Exordio* were all ransomed. Humphrey de Thorpe was captured while at home and offered for ransom. A man identified as one of Bishop William de St. Barbe’s barons, Aschetin of Worcester, was tricked by one of Cumin’s associates and captured. He was imprisoned and eventually offered for ransom. Robert of Amundeville, who held five fees of St Cuthbert’s demesne,
had the same fate.\textsuperscript{332} The continuator also notes that despite his violent attacks in pursuit of the bishopric, Cumin actively tried to capture Bishop William, rather than to remove him in a more permanent sense.\textsuperscript{333} Cumin and his men seem to have followed social conventions and spared those of significant status.

When Cumin finally abandoned his aims and submitted, prostrating himself naked at the feet of Bishop William, even he was not dealt with harshly. The \textit{Libellus de Exordio} claims that he simply had to swear an oath to compensate those he had affected by his actions.\textsuperscript{334} Lawrence of Durham views these events in Christian terms, as an example of how God’s mercy and power can bring peace.\textsuperscript{335} Indeed, Cumin’s defeat was merely a setback, and his violent actions did not prevent him from re-entering either the ecclesiastical, or the political, world. He was able to gain the support of Theobald, archbishop of Canterbury, in his attempts to earn future ecclesiastical offices. He also later witnessed a number of Henry II’s charters, both before, and after, he became king, suggesting that he had support at court as well. By 1157, he had probably regained the archdeaconry of Worcester from which he had been removed during the conflict.\textsuperscript{336}

Cumin’s origins are somewhat obscure. He first appears as a clerk in the English chancery around 1121, and as Alan Young suggests, ‘It seems unlikely that a position as clerk in the English royal chancery, a stepping-stone to high office, could be given to a person of mean birth.’ However, Young counters, there is no reason to suspect that Cumin was part of one of the noble, landed families who came to England from Normandy. It is more plausible that he belonged to a family of clerks of reasonable means.\textsuperscript{337} Cumin rose to a high administrative rank as chancellor of Scotland.\textsuperscript{338} He also had an ecclesiastical position as archdeacon of Worcester. However, we must be careful not to see his administrative or clerical career as placing him outside of the warrior

\begin{footnotes}
\item[332] Ibid., 304–5; Young, “William Cumin,” 23.
\item[333] Rollason, \textit{Libellus de Exordio}, 304–5.
\item[334] Ibid., 310–11.
\item[335] Lawrence of Durham, \textit{Dialogi Laurentii}, 38–40 Book 3 lines 237-322.
\item[337] Ibid., 4–5.
\item[338] Ibid., 6 Cumin had been appointed Chancellor of Scotland sometime in, or before, 1136 when he witnessed a royal act of endowment to Melrose Abbey as chancellor.
\end{footnotes}
Lawrence of Durham notes that he was ‘Fortuna locuples, ære juvante potens’ [By fortune rich, with gold’s assistance strong]. His Durham exploits show that he not only had his own knights but was also willing to use violence to forward his aims. He ransomed local, landed, barons according to the conventions of conflict, yet simultaneously engaged in unacceptable conduct when torturing richer and more noble men and committing atrocities in broad daylight. Even in depictions of local war, elite men still seem to follow the norm that they should eventually spare or ransom other elite men, even if their initial treatment of them was not particularly humane. We should not forget that Cumin had some of the men he ransomed tortured before he released them. Even those who ransomed their opponents could still show a distinct lack of restraint in how they treated their captives.

Although elite men might be spared or ransomed, they might also be exposed to torture or other violent treatment during active conflict or captivity. Indeed, this does not seem to have been uncommon. I have already discussed other examples of elite men facing poor conditions while in prison. Similarly, although in general elite men were not executed, those of more modest elite status could be killed if they deliberately obstructed the aims of more powerful men. However, the efforts authors like William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon seem to have made to distance elite men from violent acts within their histories, suggests that such behaviour ran counter to the concept of the ideal elite warrior. Here, as in descriptions of William Cumin’s attacks in Durham, we see the ideal of elite conduct come into contact with the realities of medieval conflict.

Thus far in this section, I have discussed the treatment of lower-ranking elite men, men of mid-level elite status and the evidence of local conflicts. It remains to consider the behaviour of magnates and their relationship to the king. Magnates could be a

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340 Lawrence of Durham, Dialogi Laurentii, 7 Book 1 line 246.

significant threat to a monarch’s position and their rebellions had to be dealt with carefully. Within such conflicts, clemency could have an important strategic role. In the next section, I will discuss how clemency could be a useful tool for kings in their conflicts with magnates.

3.4.3 The Uses of Clemency: Rebellion and Civil War

From the rebellious magnate trying to increase their power and influence to disputes over who should possess the crown, war was frequently used by elite men to further their political interests in medieval England. The English king needed to think carefully about how he reacted to the elite community’s warlike activities and act in order to maintain the stability of his realm. A balance had to be struck which maintained the king’s authority, but also kept the elite community, and especially the most powerful magnates, on side. Kings did not have a monopoly on the loyalty of these men, especially during periods of civil war, and they would often switch their allegiances in search of better opportunities. It is thus perhaps unsurprising that a large percentage of the conflict engaged in by kings and elite men in the Norman and Angevin periods was in support, or defence, of rebellions.\footnote{342 Strickland, War and Chivalry, 230.} As these uprisings were challenges to the king’s power, we might expect rebellious conspirators to be executed. However, this was rarely the case. These delicate political situations often called for a much more nuanced and varied approach.

In his political treatise, \textit{Policraticus}, which was completed in 1159, John of Salisbury praised the Emperor Trajan for his merciful approach towards elite men who had wronged him.

\begin{quote}
...adeo ut totius imperii sui curriculo unus damnatus sit senatorum nobiliumue urbis, licet inueniantur plurimi in ipsum grauiter deliquisse.\footnote{343 John of Salisbury, \textit{Ioannis Saresberiensis Policraticus I-IV}, ed. K. S. B. Keats-Rohan (Turnhout: Brepols, 1993), Book 4, Ch. 8, 260.}
\end{quote}
I submit that in the course of his entire imperial reign only one of his nobles or senators of the city was punished, although it might have been discovered that many more had transgressed seriously against him.\textsuperscript{344}

He uses the example of a musician to describe how princes should treat dissident nobles. The musician is able to tame a wayward string and bring it into harmony with the others by bending and relaxing it, not by breaking it entirely. Princes should create harmony amongst their subjects in a similar way, by treating those who wrong them ‘nunc rigore iustitiae, nunc remissione clementiae’\textsuperscript{345} [at one time by the vigour of justice, at another by the forgiveness of mercy].\textsuperscript{346} Salisbury quotes Ovid: ‘Est piger ad poenas princeps, ad praemia uelox, quique dolet quotiens cogitur esse ferox’\textsuperscript{347} [The prince is reluctant to punish, quick to reward, and is saddened whenever he is thought to be fierce].\textsuperscript{348}

Of course, those who rebelled were criticised and often punished for their disloyalty. They were, however, rarely executed. As John Gillingham has noted, ‘the kings of England chose not to execute aristocratic rebels – though they had no hesitation about calling them traitors.’\textsuperscript{349} The question of whether rebellion was considered to be treason in high medieval England is not to be considered here. However, it is important to note how often treason and rebellion are conflated within our sources. Rebels were traitors, however there was little appetite for them to be violently treated. Orderic Vitalis has the count of Meulan outline his definition of treason in a speech to Henry I and his magnates:

\begin{quote}
Certum est quod quisquis dominum suum in mortis periculo sponte deserit, aliumque pro aviditate lucri appetit, seu militare seruitium quod ultro pro defensione regni exhibere debet regi suo uenale facit, eumque propriis spoliare dominiis contendit iudicio rationis et æquitatis ut proditor iudicabitur, et hæreditariis rebus merito nudatus extorris effugabitur.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{345} John of Salisbury, \textit{Ioannis Saresberiensis Policraticus I-IV}, Book IV, Ch. 8, 260.
\textsuperscript{346} John of Salisbury, \textit{Policraticus}, 51.
\textsuperscript{347} John of Salisbury, \textit{Ioannis Saresberiensis Policraticus I-IV}, Book IV, Ch. 8, 260.
\textsuperscript{348} John of Salisbury, \textit{Policraticus}, 52.
\textsuperscript{349} Gillingham, “1066 and the Introduction of Chivalry,” 220.
There is no doubt that anyone who chooses to desert his lord in an hour of deadly danger and seek another lord for greed of gain, or insists on payment for the military service that he ought to offer freely to his king for the defence of the realm, and attempts to deprive him of his own demesnes will be judged a traitor by a just and equitable judgement, and will rightly be deprived of his inheritance and forced to flee the country.\footnote{Orderic Vitalis, \textit{The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis: Volume V Books IX and X}, ed. and trans. Marjorie Chibnall, vol. V (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 316–17.} Exile and the loss of possessions, rather than execution, is cited as the appropriate punishment for this kind of betrayal.

Legal works from this period provide some guidance as to how traitors should be punished, yet they ultimately agree that the punishment of traitors was at the king’s discretion. The legal treatise composed by Glanvill towards the end of the twelfth century, notes that if an individual was found guilty of treason then the question of whether he would lose life or limbs rested with the king.\footnote{George D. G. Hall, ed. and trans., \textit{The Treatise on the Laws and Customs of the Realm of England Commonly Called Glanvill}, with a guide to further reading by Michael T. Clanchy, New Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 171.} \textit{De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae}, composed around the 1220s or 1230s, notes that accusations of treason were commonly trialled by a duel and similarly leaves the ultimate decision of how to punish offenders to the king. The author does provide some suggestions for punishment, however. Those convicted on the basis of public opinion, as opposed to a specific accusation, should suffer the most extreme penalties and torture while their property was forfeit and their heirs disinherited.\footnote{Henry de Bracton, \textit{Bracton on the Laws and Customs of England Volume Two}, ed. George E. Woodbine, trans. Samuel E. Thorne, vol. II (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 334–37.} These texts show that even from a legalistic perspective, kings were perceived to have the last word on the punishment of rebellion.

Historical narratives suggest that this was the case in practice too. Monarchs frequently moderated their punishments when dealing with the elite community, varying their reprimands depending on the situation and the person that they were dealing with. This means that at times, individuals involved in the same rebellion received different punishments. An examination of the aftermath of the 1095 rebellion by Robert de
Mowbray, earl of Northumberland, against William Rufus shows this kind of varied approach. John of Worcester writes that during the siege of Robert de Mowbray’s castle, William Rufus captured not only Robert’s brother but also nearly all of Robert’s best knights, placing them all in prison. The earl himself was captured later and remained in prison for the next twenty or thirty years. High-ranking elite men like Odo, count of Champagne, and Philip, son of Roger, earl of Shrewsbury, were imprisoned. Odo also lost his English lands. Others escaped imprisonment, but were forced to pay large fines before being allowed to reconcile with the king. For Orderic Vitalis, this was a shrewd move on the part of the king. By avoiding harsh punishments, William was able to reduce the possibility of revenge attacks from the friends and relatives of the rebels. He notes that ‘pro nobilium reuerentia parentum qui talionem in Normannia recompensare possent uelle suum prouide dissimulauit’ [out of respect for their exalted kinsfolk who might have sought vengeance in Normandy he carefully concealed his real wishes]. William is said to have turned a blind eye to the participation of some particularly high-ranking men in the rebellion, in order to avoid creating even more discontent amongst this group.

However, the king’s mercy was selective. While many high-ranking men, including those working both sides to their advantage, were bought off with gifts and offers of support after the 1095 rebellion, two men were treated quite differently. John of Worcester notes that William of Eu, who ‘in duellio uicti’ [had been defeated in a duel] was ordered to be blinded and castrated after his loss. Another man identified as an accomplice to the plot, William of Aldrie, was hanged. How are we to explain these two violent punishments?

William of Eu’s trial by battle was probably not a punishment, but rather the result of his attempts to defend himself against accusations of treason. William of Malmesbury claims that William of Eu offered to face those who were accusing him of being part of the plot in a duel, in order to prove his innocence. Malmesbury concludes that William

355 Orderic Vitalis, Ecclesiastical History IV, IV:284–85.
‘se segniter expurgat, cecatus et extesticulatus est’ [being sluggish in justifying himself, was deprived of his eyes and testicles]. His loss was taken as a sign of his guilt. In cases of treason, trial by battle was allowed within the law codes of this time. In Ranulf de Glanvill’s legal treatise, if a person made a specific accusation of treason towards another man, then the accused could protest their innocence in trial by battle. William’s eventual mutilation therefore seems to have been the direct result of his decision to ask for a duel. Had he not asked for trial by battle he might have been put in prison like his fellow rebels.

There is a suggestion in Orderic Vitalis’ history that William of Eu’s treatment may have been the result of Hugh, earl of Chester’s, personal vendetta against him. William was married to Hugh’s sister and had been consistently unfaithful to her, leading to three illegitimate children. However, it seems strange that a king would allow his magnates’ desire for revenge to dictate what Orderic Vitalis otherwise suggests was a strategy of punishment guided, at least in part, by political concerns. In fact, William of Eu may not have been the only person who was tried in this manner. In a unique account, the Warenne Chronicle records that having been accused of treason, probably as part of the 1095 plot, Ernulf, or Arnulf, de Hesdin successfully protested his innocence by having one of his men duel with one of the king’s.

It is unclear why Wiliam of Aldrie was treated differently to his elite co-conspirators. William of Malmesbury believed that Aldrie, and indeed many other men implicated in the plot were ‘innocentes plane et probos uiros’ [perfectly innocent and worthy men]. In this history, Aldrie’s hanging is portrayed as a grave mistake on the part of a king whose bad rule had, in many ways, encouraged this rebellion. The author of the Warenne Chronicle also protests Aldrie’s innocence, and adds that magnates at court begged the king to spare his life, offering gold and silver in return. We should note

359 Orderic Vitalis, Ecclesiastical History IV, IV:284–85.
362 Van Houts and Love, Warenne (Hyde) Chronicle, 38–39 This detail is not mentioned anywhere else.
Aldrie’s status here. He seems to have been a steward of William of Eu, holding the manors of Littleton Pannell and Compton Basset from him. If we are to believe the Warenne Chronicle then he had friends to take up his cause. However, he was not a magnate. One can only imagine the violent reaction which would followed had the earl of Northumberland been executed.

There is no evidence that William of Aldrie offended any more than his co-conspirators. Indeed, the earl of Northumberland, Robert de Mowbray, had been part of the rebellion of 1088 which supported William Rufus’ brother, Robert’s, claim to the English throne. How Robert was dealt with on this occasion is unclear, but there is evidence that he may have been forced to go into exile. He was still, however, allowed to inherit the English lands of his uncle, and leader of the 1088 rebellion, Geoffrey of Coutances in 1093. In this case, reconciliation had been possible. Robert de Mowbray’s much harsher punishment after 1095 removed his ability to make trouble entirely, even though he was not executed.

Mowbray’s rebellion in 1095 could be seen as evidence that although the lenient treatment of rebels might lead to a reconciliation between warring parties, it was not successful in winning their adherence in the long term. However, we need to think of the choices William Rufus was faced with in 1088. He had only just ascended to the throne and needed to win as much support as possible for his kingship. He could not afford to upset large numbers of the most powerful men in his kingdom. Although, in many ways, William of Aldrie’s execution in 1095 feels like an anomaly in the record which we may never understand, it is also perhaps the exception that proves the rule. Despite having faced two major rebellions, and been betrayed by countless men who professed to support him, William Rufus is only said to have executed one man of elite rank in response to both. Aldrie’s execution caused some consternation, but it did not lead to war or further rebellion.

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365 Barlow, William Rufus, 168–69; See De injusta vexatione Willelmi Episcopi in Symeon of Durham, Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia, I:192 for evidence that suggests Robert de Mowbray went into exile after the rebellion.
Executions as a punishment for rebellion did occasionally occur post-Conquest, however, they were rare enough to stand out in our sources as particularly harsh. Other forms of violent punishment, such as the mutilation that William of Eu endured, also had some use in this period, but the extent to which they were applied is unclear. Klaus van Eickels has argued that castration and mutilation became a more common punishment for those who conspired against their lords in the Anglo-Norman period.\textsuperscript{366} His conclusions are echoed in a text commonly referred to as ‘The Laws of William the Conqueror,’ which is probably a collection of miscellaneous laws and customs set by King William across his reign.\textsuperscript{367}

\begin{quote}
Interdico etiam, ne quis occidatur aut suspendatur pro aliqua culpa, sed eruantur oculi et testiculi abscidantur; et hoc praeceptum non sit uiolatum super forisfacturam meam plenam.\textsuperscript{368}
\end{quote}

I also forbid that anyone shall be slain or hanged for any fault, but let his eyes be put out and let him be castrated. And this command shall not be violated under pain of a fine in full to me.\textsuperscript{369}

According to William of Malmesbury, Henry I punished opponents with mutilation in order to prove his strength as king.

Principio regni, ut terrore exempli reos inureret, ad membrorum detruncationem, post ad pecuniae solutionem procluiuor.

At the beginning of his reign, in order to set a fearful example and make a lasting impression on evildoers, he was more inclined to exact loss of a limb, and later to require monetary payments.\textsuperscript{370}

There is evidence, however, that Henry’s willingness to use violent punishment may have been a reflection of his personal style of rule. There is undoubtedly a ruthless element to the portrait Malmesbury draws of the king. He writes that Henry’s ‘odii et amicitiae in quamlibet tenax’ [hatreds and his friendships were maintained to any

\begin{footnotes}
\item[369] Douglas and Greenaway, \textit{English Historical Documents 1042-1189}, II:432.
\end{footnotes}
He was consistent in applying justice and even *inflexibilis* when pursuing those who broke the law. Nobles who rebelled against him were, Malmesbury claims, brought back into his loyalty ‘per asperitatem uulnerum’ [by the severity of the wounds] he exacted upon them.\(^{372}\)

We should not ignore the numerous claims that kings and their elite subjects used mutilation and torture to punish their opponents. However, even those who made use of more severe reprimands were still, in general, wary of executing their high-ranking enemies. The extensive use of clemency alongside other forms of non-lethal punishment, such as ransom, fines and imprisonment, suggests that elite men were aware of the benefits of more moderate approaches. Overly harsh treatment of defeated opponents could foster resentment amongst their supporters and provoke further conflict. It was better for kings to have powerful men on their side.

Geoffrey de Mandeville’s reaction to being accused of treason by King Stephen is an example of how conflicts between kings and their elite men could quickly escalate. Geoffrey, who was the earl of Essex, was first accused of treason by the king’s councillors in 1143. Their complaints were, so the *Gesta Stephani* claims, twofold. First, they were concerned that Geoffrey had been appropriating royal prerogatives and gaining too much power. However they also, more seriously, claimed that he was plotting against the king to place Matilda on the throne.\(^{373}\) Eventually, Stephen ordered Geoffrey and his followers to be arrested and threatened to hang him if he did not hand over the Tower of London, which was currently in his possession, as well as other castles he had built. Although he wisely submitted to the king’s request, surrendering the castles and earning his freedom, Geoffrey’s imprisonment only served to turn him further against the king. The *Gesta* notes that having left custody, Geoffrey collected an armed force and began

\(^{371}\) Ibid., I:742–43.


\(^{373}\) Potter, *Gesta Stephani*, 160–63; The Walden history and William of Newburgh suggest that envy and fear of Geoffrey’s powerful position had led to these accusations. Newburgh even claims that it was King Stephen himself who feared Geoffrey’s power, as Geoffrey had cunningly acquired extensive resources including custody of the Tower of London. Leslie Watkiss and Diana Greenway, ed. and trans., *The Book of the Foundation of Walden Monastery* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 14–15; William of Newburgh, *English Affairs: Book I*, 66–67.
a rebellion against Stephen which culminated in him receiving a fatal wound while besieging Burwell in Cambridgeshire. The author of *The Book of the Foundation of Walden Monastery* perceived Geoffrey’s rebellion to have been prompted by the injustice he felt at his treatment by Stephen. Geoffrey’s rank and personal means made him a dangerous individual, yet when he initially submitted to the king he was granted his freedom. Had he not died in battle, he might have once again received the king’s mercy or been placed in prison.

If the claims that Geoffrey had defected to the Angevin cause are true, then he was certainly not unique in his actions. He was one of many elite men who defected to Empress Matilda after Stephen’s capture at the battle of Lincoln in 1141. Waleran of Meulan, Gilbert fitz Gilbert, earl of Pembroke, and Earl Hugh Bigod of Norfolk were some of the most significant. However, these men were not substantially punished for their defections. Earl Hugh was never disinherited despite aiding Geoffrey in his attacks on the king, plundering his Suffolk manors in 1145 and making a general nuisance of himself. Likewise, Gilbert fitz Gilbert eventually reverted to the king’s faction, apparently returning to the court and even being granted wardship of the earldom of Buckingham in 1143. However, Stephen could not maintain Earl Gilbert’s support. He rebelled against the king in 1147, after Stephen refused to entrust some castles to him which had been seized from his nephew, Gilbert de Clare, earl of Hertford. Stephen successfully put down the rebellion and the earl once again reconciled with the king.

Kings were not guaranteed the support of their elite subjects, they had to earn it. As William Aird has noted, even the future King Henry I would often shift his allegiance between his brothers before he became king. However, disloyalty could result in a loss of political influence. *L’Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal* comments that supporters

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of the young king, Henry’s, rebellion against his father, Henry II, lost their ability to gain favour at court, even though they were allowed their liberty.

Ne furent puis preisié en cort,  
Einz les i teneit l’om si cort,  
Quant il i aveient a faire  
Qu’a peine i poeient riens faire.

They enjoyed no esteem at court after that;  
indeed, they were held on such a short rein  
that, whenever they had any business there,  
they could scarcely make any progress in the matter.\textsuperscript{380}

This loss of favour was not an insignificant punishment. Elite men relied upon alliances and kingly favour to further their position. Therefore, again, we see how non-violent methods of punishment could be used to curb the power of elite men.

That is not to say that these more moderate, and merciful, punishments were always successful. Contemporary chroniclers recognised the flaws of showing clemency. I have already noted elsewhere in this chapter, for example, that Henry of Huntingdon blamed King Stephen’s problems with insurrection throughout his reign on his tendency to treat opponents mercifully. In particular, Huntingdon claims that Stephen faced resistance to his rule later in his reign because he did not punish Baldwin de Redvers and his men after he won their surrender at Exeter castle in 1136.

Sero tamen redditum est ei castellum, et uindictam non exercuit in proditores suos pessimo consilio usus. Si enim eam tunc exercuisset, postea contra eum tot castella retenta non fuissent.

At long last the castle was surrendered to him, and taking the very worst advice, he did not execute punishment on those who had betrayed him. For if he had done so at that time, there would not have been so many castles held against him later.\textsuperscript{381}

This is only Huntingdon’s opinion, yet it raises a number of interesting questions. If Stephen had been more ruthless to his opponents, how could he have expected to have

\textsuperscript{380} Holden and Crouch, \textit{History of William Marshal I}, I:122–23.  
\textsuperscript{381} Henry of Huntingdon, \textit{Historia Anglorum}, 708–9.
been treated when he was captured and imprisoned later on in the war? Would his attempts to punish powerful magnates have led to further rebellions as it did in the case of Geoffrey de Mandeville? A policy of executing powerful men might have equally led to further unrest. The extensive rebellions caused by the mere seizure of castles by kings suggests that the friends, family and allies of any magnate would have responded in a swift, violent and destructive manner to their execution.

King Henry III (r.1216-1272) is similarly criticised by Roger of Wendover for his leniency towards the rebellious William de Forz, count of Aumale, after the siege of Bytham in 1221.\textsuperscript{382} There were many reasons behind the count’s decision to move against the king and his government, but the government’s attempts to reclaim possessions which Count William had acquired during the turbulent period at the end of King John’s reign and into Henry III’s minority were a key motivation.\textsuperscript{383} After years of antagonism, Count William took up arms, but was eventually forced to submit after King Henry’s men besieged Bytham castle. During the siege Count William was not at Bytham, but in hiding at Fountains abbey. He was brought to Bytham after the surrender by the archbishop of York. Roger of Wendover claims that the king, allegedly on the advice of the archbishop, pardoned the count in recognition of the service he had given to him and his father in their wars.\textsuperscript{384} Some of the count’s men were imprisoned or exiled, but they were probably all pardoned and released before the end of the year.\textsuperscript{385}

The treatment of these men stands in contrast to Henry III’s punishment of William de Bréauté and his men in 1224 at Bedford castle. William’s brother, Falkes de Bréauté, had similarly been ordered to return possession of a number of castles and shrievalties he held to the crown. His refusal led him to quarrel with Henry and his government.\textsuperscript{386} After

\textsuperscript{382} Roger of Wendover, \textit{Flowers of History II}, II:256.
\textsuperscript{384} Roger of Wendover, \textit{Flowers of History II}, II:256.
\textsuperscript{386} For Falkes de Bréauté’s conflicts with the king, his advisers and many of the nobility see Carpenter, \textit{The Minority of Henry III}, especially 301-375. See also D. J. Power, “Bréauté, Sir Falkes de (d. 1226),”
a lengthy period of antagonism between the two sides, Falke’s brother, William, decided to seize Henry of Braybrooke, one of King Henry’s judiciaries, and take him to Bedford castle, which Falkes held. The reasons for this are not entirely clear. Falkes is said to have denied ordering his brother to capture Braybrooke. However, even if this is true, it is likely that he aided William in the aftermath of Braybrooke’s seizure. King Henry attacked Bedford and after an eight week siege the king’s men were able to destroy large parts of the castle and force entry. Seeing that they could no longer hold the enemy back, the garrison sent the women in their company, along with a few soldiers, to the king to ask for mercy. They took Henry of Braybrooke and other prisoners with them to offer in return for their surrender, but their requests were denied. The king’s troops pushed on and were able to comprehensively take the castle the next day. They executed many of those inside. Falkes submitted soon after the siege had ended and was stripped of all of his property and forced into exile.

It should be noted that neither the Count of Aumale nor Falkes were actually present at either of these sieges. This may have influenced the kind of punishment the king felt he was able to apply to the besieged. Indeed, it is surely significant that the two highest-ranking men in both situations were not harmed. Falkes claims in his Querimonia, a defence of his actions which he had sent to the Pope, that after the siege of Bedford, the bishop of Bath commented that Henry’s earlier leniency at Bytham had encouraged men to rebel against him. Roger of Wendover repeats this charge in his account of the siege of Bytham. In view of the evidence discussed here, it may seem that these criticisms are justified. However, these two conflicts actually presented different challenges and could not be handled in the same way. After Bytham, the earls of Chester,


Roger of Wendover claims that Henry was seized at the command of William’s brother Falkes de Bréauté, who actually held Bedford castle. However, as David Carpenter notes, Falkes always denied that he had ordered Henry’s capture. Ibid., 361; Roger of Wendover, Flowers of History II, II:278–79; Alternate depictions are in Ralph of Coggeshall, Radulphi de Coggeshall Chronicon Anglicanum, 206–7; Stubbs, Memoriale Fratris Walteri de Coventria II, II:253–54 The Querimonia Falcasii, a defence of Falke’s actions which he had sent to the pope, can also be found in this text (259-72).

Roger of Wendover, Flowers of History II, II:280–81; The extant accounts of the hanging are collected together in Kate Norgate, The Minority of Henry the Third (London: Macmillan, 1912), 296–99.


Stubbs, Memoriale Fratris Walteri de Coventria II, II:268.

Roger of Wendover, Flowers of History II, II:256.
Gloucester, Salisbury, Pembroke and Surrey had stood security for the count’s good behaviour along with John de Lacy, Robert fitz Walter, Falkes de Bréauté, Brian de Lisle and Gilbert de Laigle. The fact that the count could gather such support suggests that the king, or more likely his government, would not have taken the decision to execute him lightly. They could have chosen to punish him in other ways. However, the loss of Bytham castle would have already been a great blow to the count’s power and perhaps Henry’s government were simply content to have this back in the royal domain. By May that same year, the count was adequately in favour to be granted a market at Cockermouth.

Although Falkes de Bréauté was not executed either, his punishment was much harsher. David Carpenter has reasoned that ‘the government could not simply ignore the affront to the king’s dignity caused by the seizure of a royal justice’ by Falke’s brother. Indeed, the king’s anger that the situation had escalated to this level may have contributed to his decision to hang the defenders of Bedford castle. Roger of Wendover claims that the king swore during the siege that if he had to use force to achieve a surrender then he would hang all of the besieged. However, these threats merely incited those within the castle to be more determined in their resistance. We have already seen how those who refused to surrender could not expect merciful treatment. Yet according to the Barnwell Chronicler, the garrison at Bytham had also initially refused to surrender. It seems that Falkes de Bréauté and his brother, William’s, behaviour prior to the siege had caused the king to be particularly unforgiving.

Kings were not consistent in the punishments they doled out to rebels in high medieval England. Their choices could be influenced by a number of different factors, from the political context behind the rebellion, to the identities of the men involved and the actions of those men during the conflict. Kings needed to respond flexibly to threats to their position and punish defeated opponents in a way which not only secured their

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crown, but also avoided upsetting the allies of those they had overcome. However, a lord could not afford to be seen as weak. Those who were particularly dangerous, especially those who had rebelled more than once, could be imprisoned or exiled to ensure they did not cause any further trouble. Elite rebels, and especially magnates, were rarely executed. Such a move might have prompted further uprisings. Instead, the outcome of rebellion was politically managed to not only ensure that peace was achieved, but also that as many elite men as possible, including those who had rebelled, saw the advantages of loyal service to their lord. After all, it benefited the king to have as many supporters as possible.

It seems unlikely that so few elite men would have been executed had there not been a social convention that this was inappropriate behaviour. The fact that elite men were lenient in situations when it was perhaps not strategically beneficial to be so, and were lauded for merciful actions, suggests that there was an ideological element to the sparing of elite opponents. However, clemency was also a useful tool which could help achieve peace and reconciliation. It was this utility which encouraged its use on an even wider scale. Merciful behaviour was part of the elite ideal, but it was also the product of the reality of war. As a form of conduct, it was both idealistic and pragmatic. Its application was similarly so.
3.5 Conclusion

The authors of high medieval historical narratives about England praise men by reference to their clemency. The most virtuous men treated their opponents, and in particular their elite opponents, mercifully, imprisoning or ransoming them rather than having them executed or mutilated. By acting in this way, elite men could showcase their self-control and personal restraint. Indeed, the most venerated figures in historical narratives are often shown to possess these positive qualities. However, when considering what motivated elite men to act mercifully towards defeated opponents, we cannot only look towards ideological influences. The development of a norm which encouraged the sparing of elite men after battle was also partly a response to the realities of war in this period. There were pragmatic reasons for this convention. As most elite men would get captured at some point in their lives, it made sense that those within the elite community would spare one another in the expectation that when they were next captured, they too would benefit from such leniency. However, the process of ransom also allowed soldiers of all ranks to profit from their involvement in military affairs. The fact that ordinary soldiers were also allowed to ransom themselves shows that this behaviour was motivated by more than ideology and mutual benefit. It was also a way to make money.

Behaviours which restrained or moderated violence, such as clemency, ransom and imprisonment, also had a use within the mechanics of conflict. We could even tentatively conclude that they were propagated, and consequently endured, because they had a tangible function. This function went beyond the preservation of the elite class. After rebellion, kings used grants of clemency to placate their elite subjects, win back their support and restore peace. Of course, there are examples of elite men being executed, but it is instructive that these men tended to be mid- or lower-ranking elite men or those designated simply as knights. Therefore, while status did matter to victors when they were considering how to deal with defeated or captured enemies, it is too simplistic to conclude that elite men were spared while non-elite men were killed or ignored. There is a distinction to be made within the elite group too. The prevailing norms of conduct in this period meant that lower-ranking elite men could generally
expect not to be executed or mutilated, but they were not protected in the way those of the highest elite status were. Magnates undoubtedly had the greatest protection from violent punishment as a result of their power, influence and military strength.

It is important to note, however, that those who were spared death or mutilation were not necessarily spared punishment. Those who had offended could be reprimanded in other ways with exile, imprisonment or the loss of possessions and influence. We should not ignore how damaging and unpleasant these alternative forms of chastisement could be. Captives could face torture and abhorrent conditions in prison and lengthy imprisonment, however comfortable, must have been a significant hardship. Exile was damaging to the interests of enterprising elites, while the loss of influence at court could cut off their opportunities for progression completely. Those who were ransomed could equally find themselves ruined by extortionate financial payments and the loss of castles, towns and authority. We should not therefore think of those who were captured during these period as necessarily being fortunate. There could be significant consequences for the losers in any conflict.

We must remember that medieval warfare was complicated, brutal and completely political. Elite men used war and rebellion to advance their own cause and opportunistically gather power, wealth and influence. It is unlikely that the ideal that elite men should maintain self-control at all times, be merciful towards those who asked for it, and moderate their violent tendencies would have been adopted, and endured, if it had not been perceived to be relevant and useful within this environment. While it is clear that the authors of medieval histories of England believed merciful behaviour to be part of the ideal that elite men were expected to aspire towards across this period, the norms which were informed by these ideals developed to address particular needs within conflict. They moderated violence and facilitated a route towards reconciliation. Medieval warfare in England was violent, but the ideals and norms which encouraged the sparing of opponents after warfare meant that conflict did not need to end with the violent punishment of those involved.
...quippe subiugare hostem quam necare tanto prestantius esse, quantum pietas a seueritate distare cognoscitur.

...it was all the more laudable to bring an enemy to submission than to kill him, inasmuch as gentleness is recognized as far superior to harsh treatment.  

In his account of the Danish assault on Arkona in 1168 or 1169, Saxo Grammaticus relates a conversation which was said to have taken place between the Danish King, Valdemar I (r.1154/1157-1182), and his councillors. The Arkonians had offered to surrender and on the advice of his right hand man, Bishop Absalon, Valdemar had accepted and outlined a number of terms that had to be met in exchange. The pagan Arkonians had to convert to Christianity, hand over any treasures associated with their religion and agree to send yearly payments to the Danish king. On top of this, they had to be prepared to assist Danish military forces when called upon. The Arkonians agreed and gave hostages as security for their fidelity.

This surrender was not only costly for the Arkonians. The ordinary soldiers in Valdemar’s army also lost out when these terms were agreed. Ending hostilities deprived them of the plunder and spoils they could have acquired following an outright victory. Indeed, Saxo claims that Valdemar’s soldiers were so enraged by this acceptance of surrender that they even threatened to abandon their king. For King Valdemar, however, a negotiated settlement was advantageous. It avoided the cost of further conflict and allowed him to extract promises of future payments from the supplicant Arkonians. Their submission was achieved without the uncertainty that further warfare could bring.

The decision to offer, and to accept, surrender, and the agreement of the terms under which this would be done, was not an insignificant choice for either side. Those involved

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had to think about the repercussions each option could have. In this case, Saxo suggests that Valdemar was worried enough about the reaction of his men to re-appraise his initial decision. However, his councillors urged him not to be swayed by the arguments of his men. The Danish Archbishop, Eskil, advised the king to spare the supplicant Arkonians. Showing pity and kindness towards supplicant enemies was, so Saxo has Eskil proclaim, more virtuous than treating them severely. Surely, he reasoned, the Danes had already achieved the greatest reward from their action: the conversion of a pagan group? If they pushed on with their campaign in the Baltic, rather than continuing this engagement simply for financial gain, they would be able to achieve the submission of even more strongholds in the region.

However, these arguments had little appeal for Absalon, who Saxo depicts as more concerned with the practicalities of carrying on the siege than with discussing which form of conduct would be the most virtuous. Absalon allegedly advised that it would take a lengthy and costly siege to comprehensively take the fortress. Even if it could be done, it might actually work against their greater aims, as it would encourage the garrisons of other strongholds in the region to fight even more desperately against them out of fear that they might not be spared if they capitulated. Sparing the Arkonians would set an example to others that they could expect clemency if they surrendered, allowing the Danes to avoid lengthy and expensive engagements.

In Saxo’s depiction of the assault on Arkona, the sparing of opponents is shown to be both a praiseworthy behaviour and a useful military strategy. We must, of course, be reasonably sceptical about the ability of historical narratives from high medieval Denmark to provide us with an insight into the motivations behind individual decisions to spare enemies. However, these texts can shed light on how contemporary commentators thought about restrained and merciful behaviour in warfare. In this chapter, I will examine the extent to which moderate behaviour was considered to be an ideal mode of conduct for elite men in Denmark and whether these ideals translated into the merciful treatment of defeated enemies on the battlefield. An investigation of these ideals will be the starting point of this chapter.
4.1 Restraint and Moderation as Ideal Characteristics

Archbishop Absalon of Lund was King Valdemar I’s right-hand man: his loyal servant and trusted adviser. He was also the patron of the *Gesta Danorum*, our most extensive source for the high medieval period in Denmark. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that in this text Absalon is held up as an example of ideal elite behaviour. He is frequently portrayed attaining higher standards of conduct than his king. He was a better statesman, made better military decisions and had more virtuous personal characteristics. As Birgit Sawyer concluded: ‘Valdemar is constantly compared unfavourably with Absalon; where Valdemar is undecided and weak, Absalon is resolute and strong; while Valdemar is thoughtless, impulsive and has violent changes of mood, Absalon is farsighted and consistent in his conduct.’ Saxo even refers to Absalon as *patrie columen*, the pillar of our fatherland. It is therefore instructive that he is characterised as showing moderation and restraint in conflict situations throughout the *Gesta*. By examining how Absalon is depicted acting in war, I will demonstrate that restraint, moderation and self-control were seen as ideal personal characteristics for elite men in high medieval Denmark.

In 1180 the people of Skåne began to move against the government of King Valdemar, beginning a series of popular rebellions which would last until 1182. When during the first period of rebellion, they attacked Absalon’s residence in that region, he explicitly forbade his men to cause any harm to his attackers.

*Sed neque se pacis studium, cuius condende causa aduenerit, humano sanguine polluturum aut pias pastoris partes truculento percussoris officio mutaturum.*

He would not allow human blood to besmirch his endeavours for peace, which he had come there to establish, nor would he exchange the duties of a benevolent shepherd for the grim task of a slaughterer.

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399 Sawyer, “Valdemar, Absalon and Saxo,” 691.
401 Ibid., II:1460–1 (15.4.8).
When Absalon’s men caught the instigator of the uprising, even he escaped with only a beating. Saxo praises Absalon’s mercy at length, lauding his noble qualities of ‘innocentia ac moderatione.’

Igitur patricii spiritus pontifex ut tranquillum ita salutare consilium secutus pietatem seuitie preferendo, dum gregi pariendo consult, plus glorie et uirtutis in innocentia ac moderatione quam lesionum suarum ultione constituit. Quo enim se longius a ferri licentia retraxit, hoc religionis laudi propius admouit.

In this way the archbishop’s noble spirit, pursuing a design as placid as it was advantageous, setting tenderness above savagery, and concerned to spare his flock, set more honour and worth in harmlessness and moderation than in taking vengeance for the injuries he had suffered. The farther he withdrew from letting loose the sword, the more he deserved praise for his holiness.

Saxo’s promotion of Absalon’s moderation and mercy stands in contrast to his presentation of King Valdemar, who is shown reacting angrily when told of the Scanians’ attack. Saxo claims that Valdemar initially threatened to torture the rebels, but was persuaded by Absalon’s entreaties to enter negotiations instead. These failed, however, when having been goaded by the Scanians, Valdemar lost his temper and sent a threatening letter to his rebellious subjects. The Scanians rose up in response and the king was forced to send his troops to counter the threat. The contrast between Valdemar’s and Absalon’s actions is made clear in the Gesta. Valdemar’s anger led him to act in a way which provoked a strong response from the Scanians, while Absalon’s moderate, and non-violent, approach is praised by Saxo as an example of his great piety.

Absalon is shown encouraging Valdemar to use restraint against the Scanians on other occasions. When Valdemar took up arms against Scanian opponents at Dysjøbro, Absalon questioned whether the king would prefer to use clubs rather than weapons against his subjects. However, Valdemar asserted that force would be required to resolve this issue.

402 Ibid., II:1460–1 (15.4.9).
403 Ibid.
404 Ibid., II:1462–5 (15.4.11–14).
Igitur non ire aut furoris impulso concitatus, sed conspicua animi industria ad corrigendam ciuium insolentiam metumque consimilis audacie ceteris iniiciendum aliquid ab inuisissima sibi feritate mutuandum ratus, mansuetudinem ingenii sui deposita ad tempus clementia crudelitatis actus imitari coegit.

He was not therefore impelled by the incitement of rage or madness, but by his notable resolve to check the arrogance of those citizens and to strike a fear of showing similar presumption into all the rest; reckoning that he should assume a measure of savagery totally inimicable to him, the monarch laid aside forbearance for the time being and forced his naturally mild character to emulate deeds of cruelty.\(^{405}\)

The fact that Saxo feels the need to explain that Valdemar’s natural character tends towards moderation and patience highlights just how unpalatable the use of unrestrained force was. The use of particularly strong force, which Saxo himself notes is a cruel act, needs to be justified if this episode is not to be perceived as evidence of Valdemar being prone to savagery.

Indeed, Saxo is quick to defend against the suggestion that Valdemar’s actions were impulsive or driven by anger. Instead, he asserts that it is the need to end the revolt and prevent further uprisings which impels him to take this course of action. In his work on emotions, Stephen D. White has suggested that elite men who displayed unrestrained anger were viewed negatively in this period. He has argued convincingly that ‘...conventions about displaying anger were so clear that nobles could be implicitly or explicitly criticized for showing excessive or totally inappropriate anger.’\(^{406}\) Displays of anger were not in themselves a sign of a ‘bad’ or uninhibited individual. Anger was a suitable reaction to situations in which an individual had, for example, been shamed by another or disobeyed by a subordinate.\(^{407}\) However, this anger had to be prompted by a ‘just’ provocation and expressed in a socially acceptable way.\(^{408}\) This is the case in Saxo’s text. In this example, Saxo signals to his audience that although Valdemar’s actions were severe, they were not prompted by an emotional or out-of-control

\(^{405}\) Ibid., II:1474–5 (15.4.26).


\(^{408}\) Althoff, “Ira Regis,” 70.
response. They were therefore an acceptable, although not necessarily ideal, reaction to this situation.

Just like anger, moderation had its own set of conventions guiding its use. By describing a figure’s emotional responses as either matching, or differing from, conventional behaviour, Saxo and his fellow historians are able to signal to their audience whether an individual’s conduct was appropriate or not. In this episode, although Saxo is careful to explain Valdemar’s more forceful actions towards the Scanians, it is clear that he intends his audience to see Absalon’s push for moderate behaviour as the more praiseworthy approach.

Even when Valdemar attempts to practice the ideal conduct expected of someone in his position, Saxo portrays him as being unable to do so convincingly. In one episode, Absalon is depicted chastising Valdemar during an attempted campaign to the Baltic for making what he thought to be a strategically bad decision. Saxo writes that Valdemar was intensely angry at Absalon’s frank criticism of his decision, but did not want to appear to ignore his opinion. He is therefore said to have showed his characteristic moderation by giving a measured response. His face, however, betrayed the true extent of his anger. Saxo has Absalon judge the king’s response to be inappropriate; one should not lose their temper when offered constructive criticism.\(^{409}\) Although Valdemar was aware of the ideal response to this situation, he was unable to hide his true emotions.

In contrast, Saxo’s Absalon maintains his self-control when faced with criticism from others, even his own men. During one expedition into Slavic territory, the Jutlanders accompanying Absalon panicked after their escape route was blocked by the enemy. The Jutlanders blamed Absalon for this and accused him of bad leadership, even though it was said to have been their error in judgement which had caused the situation. Despite the insults of his men, Absalon controlled any feelings of anger he may have had.

\(^{409}\) Saxo Grammaticus, *GD*, 2015, II:1128–31 (14.23.7–8); Another of Valdemar’s advisers, Peder, is said to have agreed with Absalon’s judgement of the king’s reaction. He counselled Valdemar to listen to his friends’ advice with less hostility. Ibid., II:1132–3 (14.23.10).
Quam insectationem Absalon adeo patienter ac moderate tulit, ut nihil ex consueto mentis aut uultus habitu deponere uideretur...

This tirade Absalon bore so patiently and with such equanimity that he seemed to shed none of his usual qualities of mind or expression.\footnote{Saxo Grammaticus, GD, 2015, II:1336–7 (14.42.11.).}

The fact that Absalon is consistently depicted as moderate, restrained and merciful towards those who wrong him suggests that these were positive characteristics for elite men to possess in twelfth-century Denmark.

Absalon’s conduct is held up as an example of ideal elite behaviour. Kings are frequently shown taking his advice and subsequently being lauded for doing so. Valdemar’s son, Knud VI, who reigned from 1182 to 1202, followed Absalon’s guidance in dealing with the Scanian issue when he took the throne. The rebellious Scanians having once again been defeated, King Knud arrived in the region to punish those who had moved against him.\footnote{Ibid., II:1494–1503 (16.1.2–2.2.).} He proposed ravaging Frosta as suitable retribution, however, Absalon dissuaded him from this course of action and acted as a mediator between the king and some of the rebels. As a result, the Scanians were merely fined for their treacherous activities. Saxo leaves his readers in no doubt that Absalon was the prime mover behind this leniency, although he still praises Knud for ultimately agreeing to take a milder path.

\begin{quote}
Quo exemplo ceteri ad spem uenie erecti mitissima Absalonis opera parem regis mansuetudinem experti sunt. Egregium tunc Kanutus moderati animi specimen dedit, cum ultionem, quam uniuersorum crimen meruit, unius amici precibus donauit.
\end{quote}

This precedent encouraged the rest to hope for pardon, and following the archbishop’s amazingly kind gesture they experienced a similar mildness from the monarch. At this juncture Cnut displayed an outstanding example of his moderation, when he surrendered to the entreaties of this one friend the retribution which their universal transgression had earned.\footnote{Ibid., II:1502–3 (16.2.2.).}

In this passage, Absalon acts as a guiding figure, encouraging others to live up to the ideal conduct he espouses. The choice to apply a lesser punishment is not only shown to be the more virtuous option, it is also said to be effective in encouraging other rebels...
to surrender. Saxo thus highlights the uses clemency could have within the course of a conflict.

Despite this veneration of clemency, contemporaries also recognised that ruthless acts were sometimes necessary in war. While it was considered ideal for warriors to be moderate and merciful, the reality of conflict could encourage military leaders to think in more pragmatic terms. Saxo addresses this issue directly. He considers the outcome of one battle between King Knud V (r.1146-1157) and King Svend Grathe (r.1146-1157) during the civil war which raged from the abdication of King Eric III Lamb in 1146 until 1157. Svend had triumphed and Knud had fled. A number of Knud’s men had been captured, and Svend now had to decide what to do with them.

Helias, bishop of Ribe, looking round at all the inmates, said that the monarch should imitate a gardener, who encourages growth in the useful plants but rids his plots of harmful weeds. His words were certainly harsh on the surface, but anyone who cares to ponder more deeply would have to admit that he chose them with special care. Although his message was short, he spoke aptly. If Sven had taken heed of him, without question he would have laid to rest all his rival’s self-confidence. Even though he could have taken revenge on his captives on the score of the damage they had inflicted on him, he was in fact swayed by his natural scruples to pronounce a gentler sentence; the majority were given the possibility of ransom, and others, after being received into his allegiance either with an oath or backed by guarantees, were not allowed to suffer capital punishment. Only a couple were ordered to be executed, both endowed with unique criminal records, the one through leading a life of vicious robbery, the other for entrapping and murdering in his sleep a man to whom he owed the highest favours;
neither was disciplined for his actions in war, but each for his nefarious conduct.\footnote{Ibid., II:1014–5 (14.4.9).}

Saxo sets out the dilemma faced by all victors, especially those fighting for political influence and control. Naturally, there was a military advantage to be had from executing an opponent’s supporters and weakening his forces. However here, Saxo suggests that Svend saw such behaviour as inappropriate, a sentiment which matches Saxo’s tendency across the rest of this text to praise lenient acts towards defeated enemies. He is careful to explain that the two men who were executed did not lose their lives as a result of their acts during the battle, but due to criminal behaviour on previous occasions. Their punishments are thus judicial, and not expressions of vengeance on Svend’s part. If Svend had executed these men as a direct result of their involvement in the battle, his actions would have been viewed in a completely different way. The motivations behind individual decisions to execute or spare opponents are therefore just as important as the acts themselves when trying to understand the kind of conduct viewed as ideal in high medieval Denmark.

Indeed, if being patient, restrained and not acting out of revenge were positive behavioural ideals, then how are we to understand the bishop of Ribe’s exhortation to act harshly towards the defeated? Saxo was perhaps reflecting on how useful clemency was as a strategy during prolonged conflict. A spared opponent might forsake all future opposition to the victor out of gratitude for his clemency. However, he might equally return to his leader and continue to fight. This is what Knud’s men do after being released by Svend.

\begin{verse}
Complures ex superioribus tribute sibi salutis immemores acceptum ab hoste beneficium repetita Kanuti militia neglexerunt, eisque pristina fides recenti charior erat.

A large number of the above, forgetful that they had been granted their lives, overlooked the kindness bestowed by their enemy and once more sought to join Cnut’s entourage, feeling their old loyalty more precious to them than their new one.\footnote{Ibid., II:1014–7 (14.4.9).}
Given this outcome, the bishop of Ribe’s suggestion seems like the more effective, albeit more ruthless, political option. Saxo notes the merits of such behaviour, directly addressing the audience to ask them to consider the benefits of exacting revenge, even though he concedes that the idea is *horridum*. We need to remember that these comments refer to a relatively recent period of history for Saxo. With the benefit of considerable hindsight, Saxo could be commenting on opportunities lost during the civil war and how individual decisions could shape a long-running conflict. Saxo thus uses this scene to muse on how war ends, rather than to provide an accurate description of Svend’s motivations at this time, which he surely could not know for certain.

Saxo Grammaticus praises historical figures by reference to their restrained and moderate behaviour, especially when at war. Although it is difficult to know the extent to which the promotion of these ideas motivated elite men to alter their conduct in reality, contemporary textual evidence suggests that those who did practice self-control were considered to be more virtuous than those who did not. However, elite men did not act in this way simply to appear virtuous. It is suggested that shows of clemency could be strategically advantageous too. I shall consider the practical uses of clemency later on in this chapter. Moderation is also linked to piety and Christian principles within the *Gesta*. It is therefore important to consider how Christian ideology interacts with this ideal of restraint and moderation and examine whether a concern to appear pious is shown to prompt merciful acts within historical narratives depicting high medieval Denmark.

4.1.1 Mercy and Religion

Saxo often uses Christian imagery in his descriptions of warfare between Christians. In his account of a battle between Danish forces and an army of Saxons and Wends, men he refers to as having a common faith, he notes that the Danes took care to avoid killing their opponents.
Tunc quidam ex nostris, quos ex fugientibus occupabant, nuda hastarum parte equis detrudere contenti ob communem religionem ferro prosternere passi non sunt, ne peremptorum cedes plus percussoris anime noceret quam glorie prodesset.

At this point some of our militia, if they overtook any escapers, were happy to dislodge them from their horses with the blunt end of their lances, since they were prepared, as an acknowledgment of their common faith, not to strike them down with the steel tip; they were concerned that an orgy of slaughter might be more harmful to the aggressor’s soul than profitable to his honour.\(^\text{415}\)

Saxo takes care to emphasise just how rare, and therefore just how praiseworthy, this kind of Christian mercy was. Saxon counts who heard tales of this battle were said to be amazed by the *clementia* of the Danes, who spared their enemies even though they could have feasibly captured and killed them.\(^\text{416}\) Their behaviour is even more laudable in that it was a deliberate choice, one which other groups may not have made.

The motif of defeating an enemy with the blunt part of a weapon is used elsewhere in medieval literature. The eleventh-century author of the *Vita sancti Geraldi* describes how the Frankish count, and later saint, Gerald of Aurillac, commanded his men to fight their opponents with the back of their swords and the reverse of their spears. As Katherine Allen Smith points out, while war can encourage men to engage in many unchristian practices, it is also ‘potentially an instrument for restoring order and protecting the innocent, provided warriors fight defensively rather than for vengeance or gain.’\(^\text{417}\) In this sense, war could be fought on Christian terms.

Saxo does not discourage the practice of warfare against Christian subjects, but he does have an opinion on the behaviour which was acceptable within these kind of conflicts. On one occasion, it is explained that King Valdemar was struck down by an illness sent

\(^\text{415}\) Ibid., II:1370–1 (14.45.6).
\(^\text{416}\) Ibid., II:1370–1 (14.46.1).
from God in order to prevent him from attacking the inhabitants of Falster who were accused of treachery.\footnote{Saxo Grammaticus, \textit{GD}, 2015, II:1120–3 (14.22.4).}

\begin{quote}
Nec minus Waldemari innocentie quam insontis populi saluti misso coelitus languore consultum.
\end{quote}

Heaven sent the infirmity to keep Valdemar blameless, just as much as for the deliverance of an innocent people.\footnote{Ibid., II:1120–1 (14.22.4).}

Divine will restrains Valdemar from using his military resources against his own subjects, thereby saving him from making what Saxo refers to as a grievous error in judgement.\footnote{Ibid., II:1120–3 (14.22.4).} By showing certain actions as displeasing to God, Saxo is able to emphasise how unacceptable certain forms of behaviour were. Not only is using military force against one’s own subjects wrong in Saxo’s eyes, it is also not the kind of conduct expected from a good Christian.

Saxo believed that Danish military resources should have been focused towards the conversion of the so-called heathen peoples who populated the Baltic, rather than on warfare against fellow believers. He proclaims: ‘Quod enim sacrificii genus scelestorum nece diuine potentie iocundius existimemus?’ [What kind of sacrifice could we imagine more pleasing to the Almighty than the slaughter of wicked men?].\footnote{Ibid., II:1512–3 (16.5.1); I have modified Peter Fisher’s translation of “scelestorum” to read “wicked men,” as per Eric Christiansen’s 1981 translation. Saxo Grammaticus, \textit{Saxo Grammaticus Books X-XVI Vol. II: Books XIV, XV and XVI Text and Translation}, trans. Eric Christiansen, vol. II, 118(i) (Oxford: BAR International Series, 1981), 611.} He shares the tale of a Danish force who had been sent to combat Baltic pirates. During their journey they had stopped off at the Swedish island of Öland. Although the Swedes and Danes were at odds at that time, the Danish warriors did not attack the island because they did not want to use their resources against Christians when their mission was to destroy heathen forces. They are said to have preferred to focus on their shared religion, rather than the antagonism between their kingdoms.\footnote{Saxo Grammaticus, \textit{GD}, 2015, II:1314–5 (14.40.3).}
Throughout the twelfth century, Danish kings launched expeditions into the northern region of modern-day Poland and Germany. These men are referred to in Danish sources as Wends, although in reality this region was occupied by a number of distinct groups. For ease, this is the term I will use here. The reasons for these expeditions are debated, but it is fair to say that not all Danish military activity in the Baltic was motivated by a concern to Christianise this largely non-Christian region. Some of these attacks, especially earlier on in the century, were retaliation for Wendish raids on the Danish coast. However, the question of whether or not the large period of warfare in the middle of the century, from 1147 to 1185, was conducted as a crusade, with the Christianisation of these peoples as its main aim, is contested. Eric Christiansen has argued that although in 1147 the Danes did campaign under papal authorization, the wars after this were largely an excuse for Valdemar to increase his ‘wealth and prestige.’ He believes that Valdemar and his ally, the Saxon duke, Henry, fought both the heathen and Christian Slavs, as well as each other, primarily in order to advance their position in the region. In contrast, Janus Møller Jensen argues that although there were economic and political motivations for Danish campaigns in the Baltic, this does not exclude them from being crusades. He believes that these campaigns were seen as holy wars of conversion within the crusading ideology of this time.

The Danes did take steps to remove the native religions they found in Wendish lands. They destroyed heathen shrines, looted their treasures and forced Christianisation on some of the Wendish towns they conquered. However, it is difficult to know the extent to which differences in religion influenced the Danes’ behaviour. One significant issue is the rarity with which the Gesta, our main source for this activity, mentions the faith of Wendish opponents. If we do not know the religion of Wendish elite men, it makes it

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423 A number of different peoples are grouped under this name, including the Abotrites, Pomeranians and Rugians. Janus Møller Jensen, “Sclavorum Expugnator: Conquest, Crusade, and Danish Royal Ideology in the Twelfth Century,” *Crusades* 2 (2003): 60.
424 Ibid.
difficult to understand how religious similarities and differences influenced the manner in which Danish elite men behaved towards them.

An example will serve to show the problems this can cause. The *Gesta* recounts that the Danish nobleman, Knud Lavard, criticised King Niels (r.1104-1134) for allowing his bodyguard to hold the Pomeranian prince, Vartislav, effectively prisoner despite pledging him safe passage to join negotiations with them. By detaining the prince, Knud argued, Niels had broken the trust implicit in his guarantee of safety, diminishing his own honour and renown in the process. He had allowed his bodyguard to act aggressively when he should have been showing his *temperantia*, his personal restraint and self-control. He concluded that the crime would bring shame to the whole of Denmark if Vartislav was not released.\footnote{Saxo Grammaticus, *GD*, 2015, II:920–1 (13.5.2–3).} Saxo does not refer to Vartislav’s religion as informing his treatment by King Niel’s men. Instead, the bodyguard are judged by the standards of their own community. It was considered shameful to deceive someone who had been granted safe passage, regardless of who they were. Although the *Gesta* is silent on Vartislav’s faith, we know from elsewhere that he was probably a Christian. He encouraged other Wendish chiefs to accept Christianity and even took into his protection the missionary Otto of Bamberg.\footnote{Saxo Grammaticus, *Saxo Grammaticus Books X-XVI Vol. I: Books X, XI, XII and XIII*, trans. Eric Christiansen, vol. I, 84 (Oxford: BAR International Series, 1980), 304; Helmold of Bosau, *Helmoldi Presbyteri Bozoviensis Cronica Slavorum*, 83.} If he had not been Christian, would Knud have cared about his treatment? Saxo’s lack of consideration of Vartislav’s faith makes it difficult to understand if religious difference affected how the Danes dealt with their opponents.

In contrast, the author of *Knýtlinga saga* places much more emphasis on the religious aspects of agreements between the Wends and the Danes in this period. In its account of the agreement made between the Danish king, Valdemar, and the leaders of Rügen, King Tetislav, his brother Jarimar and their leading nobility, the conversion of these men takes centre stage. They are said to have surrendered to Valdemar before proclaiming that the king could do with them what he wished. Valdemar wished for them to become
Christian and so they agreed. Saxo does not mention this conversion in his account of this event, although he notes that these men did agree to surrender on the same terms as the citizens of Arkona had previously. These terms had included an agreement to follow the Christian religion. However, Saxo does not draw attention to the conversion of these Wendish leaders as Knýtlinga saga does. This could have been a stylistic choice, but it is also possible that Saxo either assumed this information was already public knowledge, or that it was simply not crucial for his narrative. If Saxo is not always forthcoming in attributing Christian motivations to Danish warriors in the Baltic, then we can only wonder at what other information he chose to leave out of his history.

Saxo rarely cites religious differences as having an impact on the treatment of Wendish elite opponents. King Valdemar, for example, is said to have spared the Wendish leader, Otimar, because he believed not to do so would bring him shame. He did, however, allow his men to kill the male inhabitants of Otimar’s town and enslave its female citizens. Again, the Gesta does not comment on whether Otimar himself had converted, although Eric Christiansen has suggested that Otimar might be the Kotimar we see referred to elsewhere as a donor to the abbey of Dargun. Does this explain the clemency he received? We cannot discount the possibility that he was spared solely as a result of his status. This could explain the harsher treatment meted out to the ordinary residents of his town. Saxo does refer to these Wends collectively as a barbarian people. However, as we shall see throughout this chapter, Danish armies did spare ordinary Wends on other occasions. This would suggest that they did not have a consistent approach to dealing with the Baltic peoples.

Danish forces are shown to be willing to negotiate with non-Christians and it does not seem that they always forced their opponents to Christianise. The Wendish leader Pribislav, for example, paid to secure a two year truce with the Danes even though the region he governed was largely pagan. Saxo writes that while the majority of the chiefs

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431 Ibid., II:1380–1 (14.47.9).
433 Saxo Grammaticus, GD, 2015, II:1378 (14.47.7).
in the region acknowledged Christianity, the ordinary people condemned it. Even those who said they were Christians did little to show their commitment to the faith in their everyday lives. Despite this, Saxo explicitly notes that the Danes did not try to impose Christianity on them.\textsuperscript{434} This example is representative of much of the Baltic region during this period. By the mid-twelfth century there had been so much missionary and military activity in this area, especially in Pomerania, that many Wendish leaders would have been at least nominally Christian. The same, however, could not be said for the majority of the Wendish population.\textsuperscript{435}

The fact that the Danes did not fight any less vehemently against Wends who were said to be staunch Christians is further evidence that they were not entirely focused on conversion. The governor of Stettin, Vartislav, is said to have been a committed Christian. Yet the Danes still attacked his town, forcing him to plead to be allowed to surrender. This was accepted in return for hostages and a vast sum of money after which the town was taken into Danish control. Vartislav was subsequently allowed to hold it, but only as a royal gift.\textsuperscript{436} In such acts, the territorial ambitions of the Danes are clear.

However, there is some indication that Wendish elites were generally required to adopt Christianity if they wanted to forge long-lasting peace with their Danish opponents. \textit{Knýtlinga saga} recalls how a Wendish leader’s son was captured in battle and subsequently stayed with King Valdemar and become a Christian. However, when the Danes later fought against his father, who was not a Christian, his father was killed fleeing the battlefield and his head was impaled on a nearby tree. We cannot know whether his son’s conversion to Christianity was a prerequisite of his being spared, however the author of this text suggests that his father’s pagan faith had led to his death later on. The son is said to have commented that his father could not have expected a different outcome because he had not embraced the true God.\textsuperscript{437} A similar, and perhaps related, version of this story is told in the \textit{Gesta}. The Wendish prince, Prislav, had been driven from his country after adopting Christianity and had joined with the Danes, even

\textsuperscript{434} Ibid., II:1388–9 (14.51.4).
\textsuperscript{435} Christiansen, \textit{The Northern Crusades}, 29–31, 50–72.
marring King Valdemar's sister. When German forces killed Prislav's father, Niklot, in battle, they brought his head back to the camp they shared with their Danish allies as a gruesome testament to their success. Prislav simply commented that it was a fitting end for someone who had rejected God.438

The *Gesta Danorum* encourages men to wage war in a Christian manner. Militaristic energies were supposed to be directed towards the conversion of heathen regions, rather than the slaughter of fellow Christians. Moderation and mercy are depicted as pious behaviours which convey honour and praise on those who practice them. However, it is much more difficult to understand the extent to which elite warriors’ actual conduct was influenced by their faith. It is unclear whether decisions to spare Wendish opponents were taken based on whether they were Christian, but the Danes do not seem to have been committed to a policy of conversion or slaughter. Indeed, Wendish elites often seem to have been treated fairly well by their opponents. This may have been the result of them having previously adopted Christianity or agreeing to convert after defeat, but it could equally have been informed by their status. While there is evidence that ordinary Wends received much harsher treatment than their leaders, it is difficult to know whether this was as a result of their lower status, differences in religion or even their worth as slaves. Similarly, it is not possible to say that Wendish elite men were always treated more harshly in defeat than their Danish equals. In fact, as shall become clear, many may have benefited from the norm that mercy should be shown to all supplicant opponents.

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4.2 The Practice of Warfare: Restraining Violence

Many of the examples throughout this section, and in my examination of siege warfare in particular, come from accounts of Danish military activity in the Baltic. This focus on the Baltic is unfortunately one of necessity, as so much of our evidence for Danish forces engaging in war in the twelfth century comes from descriptions of campaigns in this region. These accounts do, however, present us with an opportunity to assess whether there were any differences in how warriors were expected to behave in domestic versus foreign, and sometimes non-Christian, warfare. This will help us to understand not only the situations in which the authors of historical narratives believed warriors should show mercy, but also who was intended to benefit from such restraint. I have separated my discussion into shows of collective mercy and the individual sparing of opponents respectively, in order to investigate whether different conflict situations encouraged particular forms of behaviour.

4.2.1 Sieges, Towns and Collective Mercy

The *Gesta Danorum* recounts that upon seeing the Danish army approaching, the inhabitants of the Baltic town of Rügen sent a negotiator, Dombor, to Absalon to sue for peace. Dombor initially offered the supplication of his people, however, once he saw the Danish fleet up close, he realised that they were facing a number of difficulties. Taking advantage of the situation, he withdrew his offer and suggested that it would be more appropriate for them to agree equal terms as his people currently surpassed the Danes in strength and success. The Danes were forced to abandon their expedition before terms could be agreed, but Dombor’s suggestion that the people of Rügen were a match for the Danes was not forgotten.439 When the Danes later returned to the region, Dombor was once again sent to negotiate peace. At first, Absalon tried to obstruct Dombor’s pleas to negotiate, reminding him of his previous claims that Denmark was in

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a weak and destitute state.\textsuperscript{440} However, Dombor was eventually able to win him over by noting the benefits of accepting his offer of surrender.

‘Nil factum est...quod homines patrocinii tui indigos ab illius clementie sinu repellis, quam nemo supplicium unquam difficilem habuit...Si sanguinem sititis, ultro iugulum gladiis uestris feriendum prebebimus. Si seruitium affectatis, quid deditione maius prestare poterimus? Quis autem tam effere mentis, qui eius oblatoribus parcere presto non sit? Extreme autem dementie est uelle laboribus adipisci, quod ocyo possit acquiri...’

‘Nothing’s been done to make you repel people who need your protection, and refuse that benign sympathy which no supplicant ever found difficulty in obtaining...If you thirst for our blood, we’ll voluntarily present our throats for your swords to cut. If you aim to make us slaves, what more can we offer than our surrender? Yet whose mind is so fierce that he wouldn’t be ready to spare any who proposed surrendering themselves? Wanting to gain something by one’s exertions is the very height of madness, if it could be acquired by remaining idle...’\textsuperscript{441}

Dombor offers Absalon the choice between further warfare driven by anger and revenge and the submission which they could achieve with ease through clemency. It is surely not prudent, Dombor goes on to argue, to waste limited resources on an already supplicant enemy? A person would only do this if they wanted to exact vengeance on their opponents and punish them harshly. This advice is said to have appealed to Absalon, and he advised King Valdemar to accept Rügen’s surrender.\textsuperscript{442}

It is not clear which of Dombor’s arguments might have resonated most strongly with Absalon. On one hand, Saxo has Dombor appeal to the norms of conflict with his statement that supplicant enemies were never denied clemency, but he also cites the utility of accepting surrender. Ending conflict with a negotiated surrender saved the resources and effort required to completely defeat an opposition force. The refusal of the surrender is, therefore, madness: something only contemplated by those who desire revenge. However, the Danes were not interested in revenge. Their targets were Wendish towns and settlements which they aimed, to various degrees, to plunder,

\textsuperscript{440} Ibid., II:1174–5 (14.25.22).
\textsuperscript{441} Ibid., II:1176–9 (14.25.24).
\textsuperscript{442} Ibid., II:1178–81 (14.25.25).
Christianise and possess as overlords. Although Danish forces were attacked by Wendish armies as they roamed throughout this region, we should not forget that much of this conflict was driven by their incursions into Wendish territory. They were an invading force.

It is therefore interesting that Danish elite men are often depicted choosing to act in a virtuous way, even if it meant missed opportunities for profit. Contemporary commentators recognised that granting clemency to defeated opponents was not always the most strategically advantageous or profitable course of action. However, clemency is still advocated as not only the ideal, but also the expected, mode of behaviour for elite warriors. Saxo writes that the Wendish leaders Bugislav and Kazimar offered money and the release of captured Danish prisoners in return for peace with the Danish forces who were roaming in their lands.⁴⁴³ Absalon, who was leading the expedition along with King Valdemar’s son, Knud, discussed their proposal with the leaders of the Danish force. He tells them that he had been offered terms

...quarum usus perniciosus patrie sed gratus, contemptus uero commodior quam charior esset futurus. Siquidem pecuniam regi, pacem ciuibus, captiuis missionem pacti nomine lucrari fauori quam utilitati propius emolumentum esse, iisdem uero pro nihilo ductis a bello non recedere saluberrimum.

...which, if accepted, would be welcomed by the Danes, yet detrimental to them; should they reject them, however, it would be a more appropriate, though not as popular a move; for if their king gained money, their countrymen peace, and the prisoners their freedom by such a pact, it would win them what was more like a favour than an advantage; on the other hand, it would be highly beneficial to treat these conditions as worthless and not back out of war.⁴⁴⁴

The Wends were so weak that they would have been quickly forced to surrender if the Danes had engaged them militarily. Despite this, Absalon’s followers choose to sue for peace in the hope that it would win them ‘publicus fauor’ [public acclaim].⁴⁴⁵ Although the Danes would have profited financially from attacking Wolgast directly, they were

⁴⁴³ Ibid., II:1448–9 (15.1.4).
⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., II:1448–9 (15.1.5).
⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., II:1450–1 (15.1.5).
still able to achieve the town’s submission by agreeing peace terms. Saxo notes the opportunities the Danes lost when they accepted an early surrender, and yet he still posits a lenient approach as more the more popular, and laudable, choice.

As we have already seen in relation to England, the behaviour expected of elite warriors once surrender had been accepted was different from the kind of conduct which was permissible while hostilities continued. During active warfare, elite men could be freely killed if they had not declared that they were willing to surrender. However, once surrender had been offered, and accepted, elite men could expect to be spared. *Knýtlinga saga*’s description of King Knud IV’s death in 1086 demonstrates this idea. It tells of how some of Knud’s followers refused to stop fighting, even after he had died. Knud’s brother, Benedikt, recklessly attacked those who had killed his brother, and was subsequently overwhelmed by their greater numbers and cut down. The saga observes ‘En er þeir váru látnir, þá staðnaði bardaginn’"446 [Once they were dead the fighting was over]. 447 Those of the king’s men who were still alive were offered mercy, grið, by their attackers and peace was established.448 Had Benedikt not continued to attack the rebels after they had achieved their aim, the death of the king, then there seems little to suggest that he would not have been offered quarter along with his companions.

In these portrayals of warfare, the acceptance of surrender, which generally included the submission of the defeated to the victor, seems to mark the point at which the authors of these texts believed clemency should be shown. Those who refused to accept the submission of a supplicant enemy could not expect their actions to be viewed in a favourable light. However, as we have seen in England, our sources suggest that it was possible to manipulate these conventions to a certain extent.449 Saxo depicts Danish forces, and Absalon in particular, trying to avoid having to accept surrender when on campaign in the Baltic. In one example, the Wendish chieftain, Otimar, asked for peace during an attack by the Danes on his stronghold. Saxo relates that Otimar adapted his

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448 Bjarni Guðnason, “KS ÍF,” 197. See the chapter on Norway for a discussion of the use of the term grið in the kings’ sagas.
449 See 104-10 in this thesis.
offer to how well he thought the Danes were doing, being more sparing with his entreaties when his opponents were weakening, but becoming more insistent when they pressed forward. Peace had still not been agreed as night began to fall, and King Valdemar became concerned that he might not be able to take the town without a protracted siege. He began to wonder whether he should accept Otimar’s offer. However, Absalon did not believe things were so bleak, and worked against the king to ensure the assault continued. He persuaded the translator who was carrying messages from Otimar to render these communications incorrectly so that peace would not be agreed, and encouraged his men to fight on with even more zeal. The town was eventually won and the Wends put to flight.\footnote{Saxo Grammaticus, \textit{GD}, 2015, II:1374–81 (14.47.3–9).}

This episode is clearly intended to contrast Absalon’s proactivity and positive attitude with Valdemar’s hesitancy. While Valdemar was only willing to accept surrender when he thought there was a danger he might not win a complete victory, Absalon is depicted defiantly ignoring Otimar’s pleas and launching a new offensive. This is not the first time Absalon is portrayed doing this. He had also made it difficult for Dombor to present the Rügen surrender by refusing to send him a boat to convey him to the Danish fleet.\footnote{Ibid., II:1174–5 (14.25.22).} Furthermore, when his comrades decided to accept the offer of peace made by Bugislav and Kazimar, Absalon is said to have been forced to accept their judgement. Conversely, it is claimed that King Valdemar was overjoyed at the decision, although he conceded that they would have gained more profit from war.\footnote{Ibid., II:1450–1 (15.1.6).}

Yet it is telling that Saxo does not depict Absalon or his companions refusing to accept surrender. Instead, they think up elaborate ways to avoid the issue. This suggests that Saxo knew a direct refusal of surrender and submission would have been viewed negatively, even when fighting against armies which had non-Christian elements. Saxo recognises mercy as a virtue for warriors to aspire to in war against Christian enemies, but he is less clear in his opinions of how non-Christian opponents should be treated. He notes the Danes’ reputation for never refusing clemency to a supplicant foe, but also

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Saxo Grammaticus, \textit{GD}, 2015, II:1374–81 (14.47.3–9).}
\item \footnote{Ibid., II:1174–5 (14.25.22).}
\item \footnote{Ibid., II:1450–1 (15.1.6).}
\end{itemize}
points out how the acceptance of surrender could frustrate victory. We might well see this as evidence that he was comfortable with a more vigorous approach being taken against non-Christian enemies. He certainly depicts his patron, Absalon, acting in this way. However, as we have already seen, many Wendish leaders had already adopted Christianity. This makes it difficult to point to religious difference as the only factor influencing warrior behaviour in these Baltic conflicts.

Saxo does not suggest that the Danes viewed the Wends as a homogenous group. They recognised differences in rank and were willing to make allowances for leading men. I have already noted that after Otimar’s defeat ‘trucidantur mares, foemine captuantur’ [the males were put to the sword and the females enslaved].\(^{453}\) However, King Valdemar chose to spare Otimar, despite being urged to take him captive.

\[
\text{Quem, ne recentis uictorie gloriam unius hominis perfida captione corrumperet, inuiolatum dimisit hostique parcere quam fame nocere maluit.}
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…but Valdemar was loth to sully the honour of his recent victory by the dishonest imprisonment of one man, so that he sent him away unharmed, choosing to spare his enemy in preference to injuring his own name.\(^{454}\)

The difficulty of knowing Otimar’s religion has already been discussed. He might have been Christian, and this may well have made him eligible for clemency.\(^{455}\) However, Otimar’s status also seems to have influenced how Valdemar behaved towards him. It is significant that clemency is not only said to be an honourable behaviour, but something which if not carried out could actually bring disgrace. This clemency was not extended to all, and there is nothing to suggest that contemporaries thought it should be. Low-status Wends do not seem to have been protected from the violence of their conquerors, although they might have benefited from general peace agreements.

Status mattered within the Danish army too. An individual’s position and rank within a Danish force influenced their approach to surrender and its aftermath. Those leading the force had different aims to the various ranks of warriors they employed. While these

\(^{453}\) Ibid., II:1380–1 (14.47.9).
\(^{454}\) Ibid.
\(^{455}\) See 146 in this thesis.
leaders might seek longer-term political and strategic advantages over their enemies, as well as short-term profits, ordinary soldiers wanted the more immediate rewards that good service provided. During his battle against Otimar, for example, Absalon is depicted encouraging his men to fight on more vigorously by promising them that they would be entitled to booty if they won the battle.\footnote{Saxo Grammaticus, \textit{GD}, 2015, II:1378–9 (14.47.7).} Soldiers could also earn an income from the ravaging and plundering tactics employed during longer campaigns. Saxo thus notes that on one campaign, when Valdemar saw that there was no opportunity to attack the Wends, he allowed his men to spread out and pillage the area.\footnote{Ibid., II:1242–3 (14.32.3).}

The prohibition of plundering was therefore a significant blow to the opportunities of the rank and file. It seems that although these men were allowed to gather spoils during active campaigning, once surrender had been accepted, and therefore peace had been agreed, plundering was no longer allowed. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that in the \textit{Gesta}, ordinary soldiers are depicted railing against surrender. When Valdemar granted a truce to the governor of the Wendish city of Stettin, Vartislav, so that he could offer surrender, the ordinary soldiers in his force are said to have lost their enthusiasm for the battle.

\begin{quote}
Quo uiso Danorum populus languidius pugnam exercuit, periculis sui regi pecuniam emi seque eius cupiditate victoria pariter ac preda fraudari conquestus.
\end{quote}

When they saw this, the Danish common soldiers became less enthusiastic for combat and complained that the king was receiving money which they were paying for by risking their lives; his avarice was cheating them of both victory and plunder.\footnote{Ibid., II:1350–1 (14.43.4).}

It is claimed that Valdemar did not want to be seen to be putting his own desires before those of his men and so urged them to press on with their attack. However, he later realised that it would be far too difficult to take the stronghold by storm and agreed to begin discussions with Vartislav. Saxo claims that in return for accepting their surrender, the King was paid a sum so large that the whole Wendish nation had difficulty funding

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\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Saxo Grammaticus, \textit{GD}, 2015, II:1378–9 (14.47.7).}
\item \footnote{Ibid., II:1242–3 (14.32.3).}
\item \footnote{Ibid., II:1350–1 (14.43.4).}
\end{itemize}
it. He also took control of the town and gave it to Vartislav to hold as a royal gift. Once these terms had been agreed and hostages given, Valdemar recalled his men and refused to allow them to plunder the town.\textsuperscript{459}

The acceptance of surrender is said to have been a concern for the Danes who fought at Arkona in 1168 or 1169 too. Saxo notes that when Valdemar agreed to discuss surrender with the Arkonians, the ordinary soldiers in his force threatened to abandon him for putting financial gain before the glory of a total victory.

\textit{...quod propinque uictorie premiis spoliatus nihil ex tanta fatigatione preter ictus et uulnera retulisset, quodque sibi de pene uicto hoste tot injuriarum ultionem proprio arbitrio exigere non licuerit...}

\textit{...if they were deprived of the rewards of their forthcoming victory, they would have carried away nothing from that debilitating struggle but wounds and bruises, and were not at liberty to take the vengeance they wished on those they had come close to conquering, to compensate for the many injuries they had received...}\textsuperscript{460}

Irritated by these complaints, Valdemar is said to have asked his councillors for their advice on how to proceed. During the discussion which followed, the archbishop of Lund, Eskil, pointedly reminded his king that ordinary people should yield to their lords and not the other way around.\textsuperscript{461} Of course, in reality, ordinary soldiers were probably rarely listened to. However, these episodes serve to highlight the potential division between the aims of military leaders and their men, as well as the kind of conduct expected from an armed force after they had accepted the surrender of their opponents.

There are commonalities in the way conflict is shown to end across the examples cited here. Virtuous elite men accepted surrender when it was offered, after which the conflict ended and plundering was forbidden. When attacks were made on towns and fortifications, surrender was generally offered, and accepted, on a collective basis. In the case of warfare in the Baltic specifically, it is apparent that not all defenders and

\textsuperscript{459} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{460} Ibid., II:1292–3 (14.39.26).
\textsuperscript{461} Ibid., II:1294–7 (14.39.27–8).
non-combatants could expect to be automatically spared. At times they were, however, they could also be killed or sold into slavery. Wendish leaders tend to have been treated better, probably as a result of their status, although it is unclear what influence their religion had on these decisions. If Wendish elite men were generally Christians, then it might well have been irrelevant. Even if we lay potential religious differences aside, it is significant that the *Gesta Danorum* insists that the Danish king and his councillors adhered to the ideal that mercy should be shown to those who asked for it, even in foreign warfare. Whether or not this was how the Danes really behaved in the Baltic is not important here. It is Saxo’s desire to characterise Danish elite men as adhering to these ideals and norms which is instructive.

In this section I have looked at how groups of opponents were treated at the end of conflict. It now follows to look at how individuals are shown to treat one another during, and after, military engagements. Once again, the nature of our source material presents challenges. The main focus of the *Gesta Danorum*’s account of high medieval Denmark is the deeds of kings and a number of important bishops. Little is said about elite men without religious positions below the level of the king, his heirs and claimants to the throne. Given these constraints, in the next section, I will consider how we might approach the study of the behaviour of individual, non-religious, elite warriors in warfare in high medieval Denmark.

4.2.2 Capture and Individual Mercy

There are few descriptions of named warriors engaged in war in sources for high medieval Denmark. Despite this, there is some evidence that contemporaries recognised that elite men could, and did, chose to surrender to their opponents. There are accounts, for example, of warriors choosing to carry on fighting even though it is suggested that they could have surrendered. The *Gesta Danorum* records the valorous actions of one Danish knight against Wendish opponents in the Baltic.
Qui cum nemine sociorum comitante fugam hostium auidius quam cautius
insecutus fuisset, barbaris, qui effugerant, ut se eis capiendum preberet,
rogantibus spreta prece equo desiliuit mortemque dimicans quam deditus
lucem amplecti maluit.

...unaccompanied by any of his associates, he had pursued the fugitive
barbarians with greater enthusiasm than wariness, till, having ceased flight,
they demanded that he surrender himself as their prisoner; spurning this
request, however, he leapt from his horse, since he preferred to struggle to
the death rather than admit defeat and survive.462

While it is notable that the men who offer surrender here are Wends, this example is
more a comment on how Saxo understood the norms of conflict, than on the behaviour
of warriors from the Baltic. Saxo was aware that Danish warriors could be offered
surrender and indeed, that they could earn bravery and valour by refusing it.

Those who refused to surrender gained the glory that this brave decision conferred.
*Knýtlinga saga* relates how in 1086, King Knud IV’s brother, Benedikt, refused to
surrender his king to the rebels amassing against them in order to save his own life. Its
author claims that Knud believed that if he capitulated, the rebels would *grant* *grið*,
mercy, to most of his men and spare their lives. However, Benedikt refused to allow this,
saying that Knud’s men would never shame themselves by surrendering him to his
enemies’ weapons, even if they might be saved.463 Once again we see a recognition that
surrender was considered a possibility, even if it was not asked for.

Equally, surrender could be asked for and not granted. The *Gesta Danorum* relates how
during one battle between the rival kings Knud V and Svend Grathe, Saxon soldiers on
Knud’s side were denied surrender.

Promptissimus horum Folradus eo prelio cadit neque captorem reperire
quiiuit, quamquam obrutus prendi se plurimum precaretur.

463 Bjarni Guðnason, “KS ÍF,” 188–89.
The most courageous of this company, Folrad, fell in that skirmish; he could find no one to take him prisoner, even though he made constant pleas to be captured after being struck down.\footnote{Saxo Grammaticus, \textit{GD}, 2015, II:1022–3 (14.5.9).}

Saxo does not seem to suggest Folrad’s actions were out of the ordinary. He even feels it is necessary to explain why the Saxons received such harsh treatment from Svend’s forces after their victory.

\textit{Condixerant enim uictores nemini parcere deuictorum, tum Saxonum odio, tum quia proximo bello captos et a se redimendi potestate donatos denuo hostes experti fuissent.}

The winners had proclaimed that they would spare none of their conquered opponents, party through their hatred of the Saxons, partly because they had proved that those they had taken during the last war and who had been given the chance to ransom themselves were now their antagonists for a second time.\footnote{Ibid.}

Saxo’s dislike for the Saxons is visible throughout the \textit{Gesta Danorum}, so it not surprising to see him making this kind of comment here.\footnote{The Saxons are referred to as greedy and Henry, duke of the Saxons, is portrayed as a tyrant who suppressed his own people. Ibid., II:1246–7 (14.33.3); 1478–9 (15.5.3).} More interesting is his suggestion that those who had been caught and ransomed on a previous occasion were not allowed to ransom themselves again from the same enemy. This shows that he was thinking about the situations within which ransom occurred.

In general, the evidence for ransom being practiced in Denmark is fairly limited. This may be the result of the lack of focus on individual warriors in extant texts, but it could equally be evidence that ransoms were not conventionally expected from men who were spared. At best, we may tentatively suggest that ransom was practiced at least occasionally in Denmark in this period. For example, Saxo refers to King Knud V getting back captured soldiers by paying their ransom.\footnote{Ibid., II:1008–9 (14.4.3).} However, individual warriors are not depicted capturing and ransoming opponents as they are in English sources. If this were an important aspect of Danish military culture, and if the capture of high-status prisoners conveyed the sort of prestige that it did in England at this time, then it is
difficult to see why such behaviour would not be more visible in high medieval depictions of Denmark.

Despite the lack of evidence for ransom on an individual level, contemporary accounts do suggest that Danish elite men could reasonably expect to be put in prison, rather than executed, if captured by their peers. The Danish noble, Knud Karlson, was taken prisoner by the men of Halland after he attacked them in a bid to agitate the Danish king, Valdemar. He is said to have been imprisoned with one of his previous co-conspirators, Magnus Erikson, who had repeatedly plotted against the king.\textsuperscript{468} One of Magnus’ messengers was also imprisoned for his part in Magnus’ final scheme.\textsuperscript{469} King Valdemar’s second cousin, Buris Henriksen, was put in chains for high treason\textsuperscript{470} while Svend Aggesen records that his grandfather was bound with iron shackles and imprisoned by King Niels in the fort overlooking Schleswig.\textsuperscript{471}

The length of these imprisonments varied widely. Bishop Valdemar Knudsen was captured and imprisoned by King Knud VI after he began harrying Denmark in 1192 with a view to claiming the throne for himself. He was imprisoned for fourteen years before he was released.\textsuperscript{472} Count Adolf III of Holstein’s imprisonment by the Danes was much shorter. He was forced to capitulate by invading Danish armies on two occasions before he was finally imprisoned by Duke Valdemar of Schleswig in 1202 for not fulfilling his promise to hand over the castle of Lauenburg.\textsuperscript{473} He was free again by 1203, having provided hostages as security.\textsuperscript{474} The expansion of castle and fortress building during the reign of King Valdemar I and his sons supported this kind of long-term imprisonment. In the 1160s, castles were built in Copenhagen, Vordingborg, Tårnborg and Søborg. This last fortification may be the one the \textit{Gesta} records Archbishop Eskil had built, however this is disputed. In the same period, Esbern Snare protected Kalundborg with a new

\textsuperscript{468} Ibid., II:1450–1 (15.2.1); 1436–7 (14.56.3).
\textsuperscript{469} Ibid., II:1434–7 (14.56.2).
\textsuperscript{470} Ibid., II:1254–5 (14.34.9).
\textsuperscript{471} Sven Aggesen, “Svenonis Aggonis Filii Brevis Historia,” 132.
\textsuperscript{472} Skyum-Nielsen, \textit{Kvinde og Slave}, 216; 233-4; Pertz, \textit{Arnoldi Chronica Slavorum.}, 172-3-40; Kroman,\textit{ Danmarks Middelalderlige Annaler, Annales Lundenses: 60-1; Annales Ryensis: 168; Chronica Jutensis 284-5.}
\textsuperscript{473} Pertz, \textit{Arnoldi Chronica Slavorum.}, 172-3-1-7; Skyum-Nielsen, \textit{Kvinde og Slave}, 213–19.
\textsuperscript{474} Pertz, \textit{Arnoldi Chronica Slavorum.}, 238–39.
castle. These new fortifications provided elite men with a place to hold their prisoners indefinitely.

The evidence for how prisoners were treated is scarce, but there are indications that not all prisoners were treated well. The *Annales Ryenses*, for example, claim that Buris Henriksen was blinded and castrated after he was imprisoned, something Saxo does not mention. In fact, Saxo makes only one reference to mutilation being applied as a punishment in Denmark from the civil war period onwards. He relates that during the conflict between Knud V and Svend Grathe for the throne, Svend Grathe had one of Knud’s men, Sune, blinded for encouraging Svend’s men at Roskilde to surrender the town. However, Saxo does not suggest that Svend’s behaviour was particularly harsh or unusual. Although mutilation was not an uncommon punishment across the Scandinavian region in this period, we cannot be sure of the extent to which it was used specifically after conflict in Denmark.

Despite the limitations of the narrative sources we have for high medieval Denmark, there is evidence that elite men could reasonably expect to be either spared or imprisoned, rather than executed, if they were captured during battle. This mercy had a limit, however, and those who had already benefited from the clemency of an opponent might not be treated so leniently a second time. Prisoners do seem to have been ransomed on occasion, although the evidence for this practice is not extensive. Similarly, there is some evidence that captives might have been mutilated, but again, we lack enough evidence to suggest that this was common.

The nature of our source material means that we have few extant descriptions of how elite men who were not kings treated one another after violent conflict in high medieval Denmark. We must, therefore, question just how representative the evidence cited here is of secular elite behavioural norms in general. In the second half of this chapter, I will...

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475 Saxo Grammaticus, *GD*, 2015, II:1186–7 (14.26.9) and 167; 1260-1 (14.36.5); Hybel and Poulsen, *The Danish Resources*, 239.
476 Kroman, *Danmarks Middelalderlige Annaler*, 166.
consider, as far as possible, how different kinds of elite men approached the end of conflict. I will begin by examining how kings and claimants to the throne dealt with challenges to their claims and authority.
4.3 Elite Men, Rebellion and Revolt

Danish society in the twelfth and early thirteenth century was characterised by periods of domestic unrest. Conflicts between claimants to the throne could divide elite society, while rebellions and revolts against established kings could threaten the stability of their reigns. Although a military defeat could bring an end to the current activities of an opponent, it did not guarantee ongoing peace. The victor had to think carefully about the approach he was going to take towards his defeated opposition if he hoped to reduce the chance of further conflict. Longer-term settlements could help to restore relationships between warring groups, but they could also provide antagonists with an opportunity to regroup and renew their opposition. Executing the leaders of an opposition force provided a more permanent solution, but by the mid-twelfth century it seems to have been more common for elite rebels to have been imprisoned. Here, I shall consider why this may have been the case by exploring how political concerns, especially the maintenance of ongoing peace and stability in the realm, influenced the treatment of defeated elite opponents.

First, it is useful to outline what the elite group looked like in high medieval Denmark. The scarcity of material for this period, as well as the nature of our sources, means that when I refer to elite men in Denmark, I am, by necessity, referring only to those with the greatest power who are specifically named in historical narratives. We have little information about those of mid- to lower-elite status and no real knowledge of those with local positions of power. Of those who are depicted, most of them had connections, either through blood or marriage, to one another as well as to the king. Even when these connections were fairly distant, they still seem to have been considered significant by contemporaries.

Many of the most powerful elite men were related to the monarch himself, and some even had equal claims to the throne. The problems that this could cause are most clearly visible during the Danish civil war, which began when King Erik III (r. 1137-1146) abdicated in 1146 and left no clear successor to the throne. A number of candidates were able to step forward, each with connections to the royal line. Svend III Grathe, the
illegitimate son of King Erik II (r.1134-1137), was elected king by magnates on Zealand, whilst Knud V, whose grandfather was King Niels (r.1104-1134), was elected by the magnates of Jutland. Initially, the future King Valdemar I was a prominent supporter of King Svend’s cause, however he later joined Knud’s side and subsequently became a competitor for the throne in his own right. His claim to the throne was through his grandfather, King Erik I (r.1095-1103), and he was therefore also a cousin of Svend Grathe. Knud V was also distantly related to Valdemar and Svend as his grandfather, King Niels, was the brother of King Erik I.

At various points these kings agreed to rule together, however this merely resulted in a momentary pause in hostilities. Valdemar was crowned co-ruler alongside Knud in 1154 after Svend was exiled to Germany. When Svend returned to Denmark in 1157, supported by the German duke, Henry the Lion, the three pretenders agreed to divide the kingdom among themselves. This peace did not last long, however, as Svend launched a surprise attack on his fellow monarchs during a celebration banquet in Roskilde. Knud was killed and Valdemar narrowly escaped with his life. A final, decisive, battle for the throne took place a few months later, during which Svend died, leaving Valdemar sole king in Denmark.

Even when the war was over and Valdemar became sole ruler, family connections continued to cause problems. Valdemar faced rebellions from Magnus Erikson, son of King Erik III and his second cousin, and Buris Henriksen, another second cousin. Magnus was joined in his rebellion by Knud and Karl Karlson, who were distant relatives of Valdemar and great-grandsons of King Knud IV. Valdemar’s son, King Knud VI, faced a challenge from Bishop Valdemar Knudsen, an illegitimate son of King Knud V. Rebels with connections to monarchs were particularly dangerous as they not only had the power, but also the legitimacy, to claim the throne. While non-royal elite men might rebel and demand privileges, land and influence, those with a connection to a previous king, however distant, could also try to claim the throne for themselves. Those without a royal connection could attempt such a coup, but their lack of royal blood made it very difficult to claim legitimacy as monarch. Given the danger men with royal connections posed, could we expect them to be treated leniently when defeated?
4.3.1 The Battle of Grathe Heath

King Valdemar was faced with this dilemma after the battle of Grathe Heath in 1157. He had defeated his remaining rival king, Svend Grathe, and had to decide how to deal with his supporters. Should he execute them and remove the threat of future opposition, or should he attempt to integrate these men into his new regime? Valdemar and his advisers did not treat all of Svend’s followers equally. Some received much harsher punishments than others. By looking at each of these punishments in turn, I will investigate why this was the case and consider what role, if any, clemency could have in the aftermath of war.

Saxo begins by telling of two men who were executed, Ulf and Detlev. Detlev was responsible for the killing of King Knud V, who at the time of his death had been allied with Valdemar. It is for this crime that he is said to have been tortured and killed. Saxo does not explicitly comment that Ulf was involved in this deed, however he does cryptically note that Knud’s soldiers had him executed in the belief that this might placate the spirit of their fallen leader. It is significant that these two men were specifically singled out, not only by Valdemar in his execution of them, but also by Saxo when he chose to mention their fates while ignoring those of others within Svend’s force. How can we understand the decision to execute these men?

Lars Hermanson has argued that Detlev was executed because, as a foreigner, he lacked networks of kinship and friendship within Denmark and therefore had no one to campaign against his execution. His position had to a large degree depended on the personal favour of Svend Grathe, who had been killed as he fled from the battle. There is little evidence which directly supports or rejects Hermanson’s suggestion, but I think it would be unwise to ignore the impact that Detlev’s act of regicide would have had on Valdemar and his advisers. Saxo leaves his readers in no doubt as to his feelings about Detlev. While Ulf is simply said to have been executed, Saxo immortalises a picture of

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480 Ibid., II:1110–1 (14.19.16).
Detlev as a weak and emasculated man who faced death in a manner unbecoming a warrior.

Prensus quoque Thetleuus, quum ad eculeum abstraheretur, primo culpam apud captores excusare pergebatur. Postremo, quum sine effectu preces esse cognosceret, adeo effoeminate se gessit, ut uirum exuere uisus ne lachrymis quidem abstineret aut planctu muliebremque animum uirili corpore clausum confteretur. Itaque prius dedecore, deinde morte multtatus geminam interfecti a se principis manibus poenam persoluit.

When Detlev was also imprisoned and dragged off to the rack, he first of all proceeded to furnish his captors with excuses for his crime; by the end, once he realized that his entreaties were useless, he proved so girlish that he seemed to shed his masculinity and could not restrain his tears; his wails revealed a woman’s spirit enclosed within a man’s body. In this way he was first punished with humiliation, then with death, paying double satisfaction to the shade of the prince he had killed.482

Similarly, while Knýtlinga saga does not even mention Ulf being executed, merely that he fell in battle, it notes that Detlev was broken on a wheel, even providing a witness for this event.483 As the supposed killer of King Knud, a man who Saxo presents as being a close ally of Valdemar before his death, it is perhaps unsurprising that Detlev would be singled out for such punishment.484

Although the Gesta does not comment on Ulf’s involvement in the killing of Knud, the author of Knýtlinga saga believed that he had, at the very least, encouraged the deed. He claims that Ulf counselled Svend to contrive a plot to kill his opponents, Knud and Valdemar, using underhand methods if necessary.485 Although he is not mentioned in either text as being present at Knud’s killing, it is plausible that he was involved in some sense.486 The Gesta’s suggestion that Ulf’s death could help appease Knud’s ghost alludes to this. If he was involved in Knud’s death, this may well explain his execution.

484 Valdemar was originally one of Svend’s followers, but he later abandoned Svend in order to ally with Knud. Saxo Grammaticus, GD, 2015, II:1052–5 (14.14.1–3).
486 Ibid., 287–88.
There are also other, more pragmatic, reasons why Valdemar might have found it politically expedient to execute Ulf. Ulf seems to have been a man of considerable standing.\footnote{Hermanson, *Släkt, Vänner och Makt*, 227.} He certainly had some powerful friends. Esbern Snare, Bishop Absalon’s brother, even petitioned against his execution. He is said to have been the only person who did though, which would suggest that most of Ulf’s support lay in Svend’s faction.\footnote{Saxo Grammaticus, *GD*, 2015, II:1110–1 (14.19.16).} Saxo notes that Ulf was a particularly loyal supporter of Svend’s cause and *Knýtlinga saga* describes him as one of Svend’s councillors.\footnote{Bjarni Guðnason, “KS ÍF,” 274–75.} When defeated earlier on in the civil war by a united force of Valdemar’s and Knud’s soldiers, he had refused to switch allegiance even though many of his comrades did. He is said to have thought it shameful to obtain pardon in this manner, preferring capture and exile to surrender.\footnote{Saxo Grammaticus, *GD*, 2015, II:1072–5 (14.16.11).} Perhaps this previous lack of flexibility convinced Valdemar that it would be impossible to gain his support in the long term.

One other named person is implicated as having some involvement in Knud’s killing. In the *Gesta*, Knud’s men are said to have lobbied Valdemar to punish one of Svend’s councillors, Thorbjørn, for his suspected involvement. Thorbjørn protested his innocence and the *Gesta* does not mention him being punished.\footnote{Ibid., II:1112–3 (14.19.18).} However, it is possible that he was involved to some extent in Knud’s killing. Like Ulf he had been a strong supporter of Svend, and had followed him in refusing to switch sides when captured by Knud’s and Valdemar’s force.\footnote{Ibid., II:1090–1 (14.18.3).} He had also been present at the feast where Knud was killed.\footnote{Ibid., II:1234–5 (14.30.9); 1240–3 (14.32.2); 1342–3 (14.42.16).} Despite this, he is later mentioned as being part of Valdemar’s army, even commanding a ship within his fleet.\footnote{Ibid., II:1352–3 (14.43.7).} The *Gesta* does note in passing that Thorbjørn had been exiled at some point in his life, although the reason for this exile is not given.\footnote{Ibid., II:1352–3 (14.43.7).} It is possible that this was Thorbjørn’s punishment for his involvement with Svend’s cause. However, if this was the case, then it is not clear why Ulf was executed but Thorbjørn was spared. One explanation might be that Ulf was more directly involved
in Knud’s killing than Thorbjørn, but we do not have enough evidence to prove this. It is also plausible that he was killed for refusing to support Valdemar. This seems unlikely though, as it does not seem that Thorbjørn had any problems reconciling with Valdemar even though he had vigorously supported Svend. Thorbjørn’s later reconciliation with Valdemar suggests that strong support for Svend was not in itself an impediment to being pardoned, as long as those involved were willing to pledge their future loyalty to Valdemar.

In fact, most of Svend’s high-status supporters were spared. Valdemar chose to spare Magnus Erikson, for example, the illegitimate son of King Erik III Lamb, who had a good claim to throne himself. Despite this, Valdemar treats him mercifully.

Quem Waldemarus sibi a captoribus presentatum sub respectu cognationis non spiritu modo, sed etiam honoris ac potestatis incrementis donauit. Cumque abunde esset impunitatem tribuisse, etiam liberalitatem adiecit, ne districtum ultorem agendo plus ire quam necessitudini indulsisse uideretur. Itaque, tametsi injurie supplicium deberetur, propinquitati salus tributa est. Igitur non minus in adversario affinitatem quam in fautoribus fidem atque obsequium ueneratus hostem amicis premio equauit.

As soon as he was led before Valdemar by his captors, the other not only granted him his life, out of consideration for their family connection, but also increased his public honour and authority; though it was more than enough to have let him go unscathed, he even added his generosity, for he did not want it to appear that he had played the uncompromising avenger and given way to wealth before the claims of kinship. So, even if Magnus’s wrongdoing deserved retribution, their relationship granted his preservation. Respecting consanguinity in an opponent no less than loyalty and obedience in his own adherents, he rewarded an adversary just as he would have done his friends.496

It is difficult to believe that Valdemar was motivated to spare Magnus solely because of their kinship, something which he would have had with many elite men in Denmark. Given that most high-ranking elite men in Danish society were related either through blood or marriage, it would be fairly easy for contemporary commentators to put this

forward as a reason for almost any decision taken by elite men regarding their peers. Yet the status these familial ties would have given Magnus would undoubtedly have been a factor in Valdemar’s calculations. Powerful men like Magnus had to be managed and the threat they posed neutralised.

Valdemar could have chosen to punish Magnus by imprisoning him or sending him into exile. He could have extracted fines from him or seized his lands. Instead, Valdemar tried to win Magnus’ future support by rewarding him just as he would his own men. However, despite this generosity, Magnus plotted against Valdemar later in his reign. Saxo’s response to Magnus’ machinations reflects on the benefits he had received after the battle of Grathe Heath.

...cum Sueononis partibus militando bello Grathico captus fuisset, non solum spiritu, sed etiam amicitie et familiaritatis iure donatus atque ex priuata fortuna ad eminentem dignitatis locum proiectus fuerat. Tantam uictoris charitatem supplicii, quod meruerat, loco expertus est.

...when Magnus had fought on Sven’s side and been captured by Valdemar at the battle of Grathe Heath, the monarch had not only spared his life but allowed him the privilege of intimate companionship and from the lot of an ordinary citizen had advanced him to a position of high eminence. Instead of the punishment he deserved, he enjoyed this great affection from his conqueror.

Valdemar had to establish his position as sole king after Grathe Heath. In order to do this, he needed the support of men like Magnus who had the power and resources to oppose him. Valdemar could have punished Magnus, perhaps even by executing him, but he had to think about the effect this would have had on the elite community. As Lars Hermanson has noted, using harsh punishments against powerful men could encourage their supporters, including their elite allies, to retaliate. Such instability could threaten a king’s position, especially early on in his reign.

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497 For a discussion of elite networks in Denmark across the twelfth century see, Hermanson, Släkt, Vänner och Makt. Hermanson argues that Valdemar’s actions can be explained as part of a strategy to create a powerful alliance with those who supported Svend. In theory, these men would support Valdemar out of gratitude for his leniency (228).
499 Hermanson, Släkt, Vänner Och Makt, 228.
Indeed, Saxo suggests that Valdemar was reluctant to punish elite opponents with banishment in case they joined against him and opposed his kingship. It is claimed that he already suspected some elite men, and specifically the Danish noblemen Buris and Knud Henriksen, of duplicity.

At rex metuens, ne, si tot gentis sue nobiles exilio mulctaret, Kanutom Buryriumque dubia fide suspectos proscriptorum aduersum se armis instrueret, ueniam sontibus quam emulis opem afferre maluit.

Nevertheless the king, afraid that if he punished so many noblemen of his own race with banishment, he would be supplying Cnut and Buris, whose allegiance was suspected of wavering, with the weapons of the outcasts against himself, preferred to pardon the guilty sooner than help his rivals.\(^{500}\)

However, Knud V’s men are said to have thought Valdemar was too lenient with his enemies and put pressure on him to punish those they saw as responsible for Knud’s murder. Not wanting to appear lax in his pursuit of justice, Valdemar is said to have relented, allowing Knud’s men to choose a few men to be exiled. However, he provided a way back even for these men, declaring that they could return when those who had sent them away, Knud’s men, allowed them back into Denmark. The rest of Svend’s men were pardoned so that they might be put to use as soldiers within Valdemar’s army. Saxo is keen to stress that Valdemar offered his friendship based on how closely an individual was involved in Knud’s murder.\(^{501}\) He presents this as being by far the most important factor dictating the treatment of Svend’s defeated men. However, Valdemar’s actions suggest that he had been motivated by much more pragmatic concerns. By gathering Svend’s supporters to his own cause, he could strengthen his own resources while reducing the amount of disaffected soldiers available to his opponents. Granting these men their lives and freedom was beneficial for both parties.

Indeed, Valdemar could hardly punish those whose only crime was choosing the wrong side. After all, he had initially been one of Svend’s followers. He may even have fought alongside Magnus, Ulf and Thorbjørn. It seems to have been fairly common for elite men to switch allegiance, especially during the civil war period. Sune Ebbeson, a cousin of


\(^{501}\) Ibid.
Absalon, first appears in the *Gesta* as a supporter of Svend Grathe, but is later depicted defecting to Valdemar. At first, Saxo claims that Sune changed his allegiance because he felt he had been treated badly by Svend, who it seems had seized Sune’s family estate. However, Sune was unmoved when Svend promised him it would be restored, which implies that there were other reasons for his defection. The *Gesta* notes that there were a number of factors which influenced Sune’s decision.

Quamobrem potioris partis amplexu solitariam transitionem non ueritus ab iniurioso sibi rege salutari consilio descuiuit. Itaque iustum defectionis titulum secutus Waldemarum auite paterneque familiaritatis respectu transfugio petuiuit.

He felt no qualms about going over independently to join the stronger side and for this reason followed his judicious plan of abandoning a monarch who had treated him so badly. With an eye to his father’s and grandfather’s friendship for Valdemar, he found an honourable pretext for his desertion and directed his course to the opposing camp.\(^\text{502}\)

Sune’s family connections to Valdemar may have made it easier for him to switch sides, but it is unlikely that they had a great influence on his choice of allegiance, especially as Valdemar had also initially supported Svend. Saxo’s suggestion that Sune defected because Valdemar had the stronger force is perhaps closer to the reality of the situation.

Sune is not alone in having changed sides in search of the best opportunities. In the *Gesta*, Archbishop Eskil is said to have originally favoured Svend’s faction, although he later switched his allegiance to Knud and Valdemar. The first time Eskil had attempted to join Knud’s faction, Svend had prevented him from doing so by capturing him in battle and imprisoning him. Svend was able to win back Eskil’s support by granting him new lands.\(^\text{503}\) Later on, Eskil was finally able to leave Svend and join Knud’s and Valdemar’s unified force, having first negotiated a generous reward for doing so from his new leaders.\(^\text{504}\) On each occasion Eskil, like Sune, had to provide plausible justifications for his defection. On the first occasion, he claimed that Svend had wronged him.

\(^\text{502}\) Ibid., II:1068–9 (14.16.5).
\(^\text{503}\) Ibid., II:998–1001 (14.3.3–4).
\(^\text{504}\) Ibid., II:1070–1 (14.16.8).
So that he might gain a pretext for changing sides and put forward a plausible reason to give colour to his sliding allegiance, he made out that Sven had done him wrong...  

On the second, he accused Svend of not providing enough sustenance to the men from his region, and asked him to release from his allegiance those he was not capable of feeding. Saxo explicitly comments that this provided the necessary rationale for his defection.  

Men like Sune and Eskil must have been of considerable value to the rival kings, especially as they brought with them extra troops and resources. When Eskil deserted Svend, he took with him a contingent of men from Scania. Indeed, Svend was so incensed at his defection that he is said to have commented that Eskil deserved to lose his head for his actions. Valdemar was similarly said to have brought a great number of men to join Svend’s forces when he had supported him. Kings, claimants to the throne and elite men who wished to advance their prospects needed to maintain the support of other powerful men. These men may well have been connected to them by kinship ties, but this was unlikely to be the main reason that they supported one another. Gifts, rewards and opportunities for personal advantage seem to have been greater motivations.  

In the aftermath of the battle of Grathe Heath, Valdemar was reluctant to execute those who had supported his rival, King Svend. Instead, he tried to win his opponents’ allegiance by first sparing them, and then offering rewards in return for their future support. Ordinary soldiers were similarly absorbed into his own force. Only two men are explicitly said to have received violent punishments and there is good evidence that this was because of their reprehensible behaviour during the conflict. An individual warrior’s
conduct is therefore shown to have had more influence on how they were treated by their opponents than their various allegiances.

However, the battle of Grathe Heath could be seen as a special case. It was the concluding battle of the Danish civil war and left Valdemar as sole king of Denmark. In this situation, it is understandable that he would seek to unite the various factions who had supported his rivals in order to ensure that his own kingship was not challenged. Clearly Valdemar felt clemency had a role to play in achieving these aims. The question we must ask now, however, is whether Valdemar’s actions after the battle of Grathe Heath were representative of how Danish kings dealt with opposition more generally. Were defeated elite opponents always treated so leniently?

4.3.2 Rebels, Relations, and the Importance of Winning Elite Support

After the battle of Grathe Heath, King Valdemar was concerned to win the continued support of those who had fought for him, as well as to secure the allegiance of those who had opposed him. Elite men on both sides received generous rewards and gifts. Despite this, Valdemar still faced rebellions later in his reign. In this section, I will examine how King Valdemar dealt with these rebellions and consider whether there was any difference in his approach once his position was more established. I will also investigate what happened when kings used harsh reprimands against their opponents and examine the role that clemency could play in the ending of conflict.

Buris and Knud Henriksen, Valdemar’s second cousins, were rewarded for their support during Valdemar’s campaign for the throne. Buris received wealth and favour, while Knud was made Duke of Schleswig. Valdemar had good reasons for trying to ensure their backing. Early on in the civil war, they had been on opposite sides of the conflict, with Knud Henriksen allied to King Knud and Valdemar attached to King Svend’s troops. Valdemar had even fought Knud for possession of the Duchy of Schleswig and won. His later gift of the duchy to Knud was therefore particularly apt and may have been an

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510 Ibid., II:1006–7 (14.4.1).
attempt to lay this former quarrel to rest. However, Saxo records that Buris Henriksen later plotted with his Norwegian kinsmen to overthrow Valdemar. He was caught and put in chains for his treason. The *Annales Ryenses* claims that he was also blinded and castrated. Whatever the truth of Buris’ punishment, the fact that he rebelled despite his earlier rewards demonstrates how difficult it was for a king to maintain an elite man’s support in the long term. Even those who were rewarded could seek opportunities elsewhere.

Saxo is keen to establish that Valdemar was not deceived by Buris and Knud. He even implies that their treachery was to some extent expected. I have already noted Saxo’s suggestion that Valdemar had doubts about Knud’s and Buris’ loyalty after the battle of Grathe Heath. Absalon is even said to have included Buris in a party which accompanied Valdemar to visit Emperor Frederick ‘ne quid interim in patria nouaret’ [in case he should try to promote national changes during their absence]. Despite these concerns, Saxo suggests that Buris’ support was important enough to Valdemar that he did not act on his suspicions. Instead, Valdemar is depicted actively trying to maintain Buris’ allegiance. When Buris was less than supportive of Valdemar’s plan to crown his son king during his lifetime, Valdemar is said to have granted him land in Jutland in exchange for his homage to the new king. After this, however, the king was apparently so angry that he had been forced to effectively buy Buris’ support that Buris was no longer considered a firm friend, a pronouncement which would have reduced his influence. Although this settlement may have harmed personal relations between these men, it did ultimately give both parties what they wanted. Valdemar was able to settle his disagreement with Buris in a peaceful, albeit expensive, way, while Buris profited from his obstinacy. Most importantly for Valdemar, Buris’ support was maintained.

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511 Ibid., II:1250–5 (14.34.4–9).
512 Kroman, *Danmarks Middelalderlige Annaler*, 166.
514 Ibid., II:1198–9 (14.28.5).
515 Ibid., II:1244–9 (14.33.1–4).
Saxo depicts Valdemar as willing to give those who challenged him a fair amount of chances to win back his favour. This is evident in his portrayal of Valdemar’s dealings with Magnus Erikson. Magnus plotted to remove him from the throne on two occasions. For Saxo, such behaviour was incomprehensible given that he had been treated with such leniency after the battle of Grathe Heath.

Cuius insidiarum apparatus hoc securior, quo incredibilior extitit. Neque enim facile regis animum subire poterat ab illo sibi insidias necti, cui quondam salutem a se tributam a se tributam meminerat.

His preparations for the plot were all the safer inasmuch as no one would have particularly believed in it; the fact that a web of treachery was being woven for him by this man could not easily enter the sovereign’s mind, remembering as he did how he had once granted Magnus’s preservation.516

The first time Magnus plotted against Valdemar, Valdemar granted him mercy in return for his confession. The king did not, however, restore him to his close circle of friends.517 When Magnus rebelled against Valdemar for a second time, he was imprisoned, even though Saxo acknowledges he could have been executed.

Hunc rex ad urbem Laterensem missum Thorbernique custodie traditum carcere quam morte mulctare maluit.

The king sent him to be guarded by Thorbjørn in the stronghold of Søborg, deciding that he would sentence him to imprisonment in preference to execution.518

Magnus’ example seems to suggest that there was a general reluctance to punish elite men with execution even if they rebelled on multiple occasions. However, we may wonder at the treatment Magnus received in prison in light of the suggestion that Buris Henriksen was mutilated during his imprisonment. We can similarly only speculate about the extent to which Magnus was punished financially or through the removal of landed possessions.

516 Ibid., II:1392–3 (14.54.1).
517 Ibid., II:1418–9 (14.54.35).
518 Ibid., II:1436–7 (14.56.3).
However, it is instructive that Magnus’s co-conspirators also seem to have received non-violent punishments. Christiern Svenson, for example, confessed his role in Magnus’ first conspiracy and was sent into exile. He was even allowed to keep his possessions.

Qui cum se consortis indicio proditum accepisset, defensionis inops confessione uniam impetrauit nec solum spiritum, uerumetiam bonorum omnium incolumitatem assecutus est, exilio dumtaxat poenas dare coactus, ne promptus ad crimen regressus suppeteret. Ita moderatio manifestam militis culpam extremumque supplicium meritam proscriptione insequi contenta extitit.

As soon as he learnt that he had been betrayed by his partner’s disclosure, helpless to defend himself he confessed and obtained pardon; he did not just secure his life, but the safe retention of all his property, and was simply forced to pay the price of exile, to avoid a possible return to wrongdoing. Valdemar, typically restrained, was satisfied with outlawing this warrior, whose obvious guilt deserved the extreme penalty. 519

It is significant that Saxo feels the need to point out that Valdemar deliberately chose not to execute rebels. It suggests that he wanted his audience to be aware of Valdemar’s choice. Valdemar’s leniency was a reflection of his restraint and moderation and illustrative of his positive personal qualities.

King Valdemar certainly appears to have been a king who preferred to spare, rather than execute, elite men who moved against him. He is shown to have used rewards, forgiveness and even gentle chastisements in his attempts to win back rebels’ support. However, the fact that he faced rebellions across his reign is not an indication that his policy of clemency was a failure. Indeed, historical narratives rarely mention the positive relationships Danish kings must have had with many of their elite men and are generally silent about periods of peace. After all, dangerous rebellions are particularly noteworthy. The status quo is not. At least some of the men Valdemar reconciled with after the battle of Grathe Heath must have remained loyal throughout his reign, but we are unlikely to see this depicted in our sources. We must also consider the effect that ruthless punishments would have had on Valdemar’s ability to rule in peace. In order to

519 Ibid., II:1418–9 (14.54.36).
investigate this, I will examine the impact that King Knud IV’s harsh treatment of opponents had on the stability of his reign.

King Knud IV reigned from 1080 to 1086. His relentless attempts to uphold the law are said to have created animosity towards his rule among both magnates and the masses. Knýtlinga saga records that at the beginning of his reign, Knud travelled around Denmark forcing the population to agree to new taxes and ensuring that previous laws and privileges were strongly enforced.\textsuperscript{520} The Chronicon Roskildense, a more contemporary record, similarly notes that Knud compelled the people to pay new taxes.\textsuperscript{521} Both rich and poor were equally affected by Knud’s zealous enforcement of the law.

\begin{quote}
Jafnan dóm lét hann hafa ríkan sem óríkan. En þat varð mjók ofundsamt af þeim mönnnum, er létu göfga frændr sína at dómi konungs, þó at sakar væri sannar til.\textsuperscript{522}
\end{quote}

He imposed the same sentence on rich and poor, but those who had lost noble kinsmen as a result of the king’s judgment, even though they had been proved guilty, found this not at all to their liking.\textsuperscript{523}

Knud’s quest for justice led him to use violent punishment against high-status men. He is said to have executed an elite man, Egil Ragnarsson, for killing the crew of a Norwegian ship, despite Egil’s kinsmen offering money in exchange for his life. Egil’s men were punished too. Some were put to death while others were maimed or banished. No one, the saga notes, was allowed to go unpunished.\textsuperscript{524}

This was not a good political move for the king. Egil came from a high-ranking family who were upset at his execution.

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{520}] Bjarni Guðnason, “KS ÍF,” 145–47.
\item[\textsuperscript{521}] Gertz, “CR,” 23–24.
\item[\textsuperscript{522}] Bjarni Guðnason, “KS ÍF,” 148; The Gesta similarly notes that Knud’s magnates hated him deeply. Saxo Grammaticus, GD, 2015, II:830–1 (11.11.3).
\item[\textsuperscript{523}] Pálsson and Edwards, KS, 57.
\item[\textsuperscript{524}] Bjarni Guðnason, “KS ÍF,” 159–63.
\end{itemize}
Eptir þetta viku hófdingjar til sundrþykkis við konunginn ok tíku mjók at stirðna við hann, ok þar eptir gerði alþýðan. Pótti þeim hann ríkr ok refsingasamr, en þeir áðr vanir sjálfræði.525

Consequently, the chieftains grew hostile towards him and gave him a great deal of trouble, and the people in general followed suit. They thought him authoritarian, too ready to inflict punishment, and they had been accustomed to getting their own way.526

Egils’s kin, along with the rest of the elite community, had previously been able to act however they liked, with little fear of sanctions from the king if they broke the law. Now, so Knýtlinga saga claims, their independence was being challenged by Knud’s assertion of royal and legal power. His decision to punish his elite subjects harshly provoked the kind of resentment which led to rebellion.

According to Knýtlinga saga, it was Knud’s harsh behaviour which caused the revolt against him which led to his death.527 This ruthless behaviour not only encouraged the revolt to begin, it also removed the possibility of ending the conflict in relatively peaceful terms with a negotiated surrender. Knýtlinga saga makes it clear that those in the rebel force knew there was little point in surrendering as it was unlikely that they would receive clemency from Knud. Knud’s previous ruthless behaviour meant that there could only be two outcomes to this conflict: victory or death. This meant that when Knud offered reconciliation to one of the rebel leaders, Jarl Asbjorn, the Jarl did not even bother to pass on his offer to the wider force. Instead, he strove to convince his fellow rebels that Knud would seek revenge against all those who had opposed him.528 The author of Knýtlinga saga has one of Asbjorn’s comrades comment; ‘íllt skal nú at hætta á hans miskunn’529 [it would be foolish now to gamble on his [Knud’s] mercy]530. Knud’s unwillingness to negotiate with his opponents escalated the conflict and forced his opponents to pursue their aims all the more vigorously.

525 Ibid., 162–63.
528 Ibid., 87.
529 Ibid., 187.
530 Pálsson and Edwards, KS, 87.
Opponents who felt that they had little hope of receiving clemency were unlikely to offer surrender. The refusal to spare opponents could therefore simply serve to perpetuate conflict and encourage those involved to fight even more strenuously for their cause. Offers of clemency could be a useful tool to bring conflict to an end in a manner which benefited both parties. Rewards such as those offered to Magnus Erikson by King Valdemar could potentially secure the goodwill of previous enemies and win their support in the long term. Although it is clear that this approach was not always successful, the alternative, strict punishment, could provoke resentment among the elite class and encourage rebellion. Imprisonment and exile were useful mid-way points which punished elite rebels while allowing for the possibility of a later reconciliation.

The focus of this section has been how kings related to those who opposed them. As I have already noted, the king-focused nature of our sources means that we have little evidence for the conduct of elite men beyond these monarchs, their close supporters and direct opponents. It is important to recognise the limitations this puts on our ability to study the high medieval Danish elite. In the next section, I shall consider the extent to which the picture of elite ideals and norms portrayed in these texts can be considered to reflect those of the elite group as a whole.
4.4 Bishops, Kings, and Elite Men

The later books of Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum* present bishops as being at the heart of the Danish king’s government. Although Archbishop Absalon takes a central role, other prelates are also shown to have had influence in both political and military affairs. *Knýtlinga saga* shares the *Gesta’s* interest in the activity of bishops during King Valdemar’s reign. It is possible that *Knýtlinga saga’s* concern with Valdemar and his loyal councillor, Absalon, is partly the result of its author having used a now lost Danish source for the period 1134 to 1187. It is suspected that Saxo also used this source for his *Gesta Danorum*.\(^{531}\) We are thus faced with a situation whereby prelates dominate the most extensive written sources for high medieval Denmark. These bishops are shown to lead Danish armies into battle, act as councillors to the king on military matters and even have their own bands of warriors. We therefore need to consider whether bishops followed similar conventions of behaviour to secular elites when they involved themselves in warfare and conflict. When Absalon’s behaviour is presented as an ideal for others to aspire towards, is it an ideal for other bishops, or for all elite men?

The portrayal of kings presents us with a similar issue. Kings were, in theory, placed above their elite subjects. However, these men had also been part of the elite community before they became monarchs and would have been judged by the ideals of that group. It is possible that on becoming king, these men had to adopt new behaviours applicable to their elevated role. They might have been expected to adhere to a different ideal of conduct to their elite subjects. We need to consider the extent to which this was the case. In this final section, I shall discuss these issues and reflect upon what narrative histories from high medieval Denmark can tell us about the ideals and norms of secular elite warriors in general.

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4.4.1 The Conduct of Bishops

Eric Christiansen has argued that the twelfth-century archbishop of Lund, Eskil, fell somewhere between being a worldly prelate, involved in the more secular pursuits of marriage, castle building and acquiring wealth, and a religious man focused on his duties to the Church and Christianity. We cannot deny Eskil’s faith: he visited St Bernard of Clairvaux and was a supporter of monastic orders. Yet we must also acknowledge his militaristic activities. Christiansen says of Eskil: ‘He was an invaluable ally on crusade, because he talked the language of the soldiers and carried with him a network of noble kinsmen, as well as believing in the spiritual value of what he was doing.’

While Christiansen is right to point out the duality of Eskil’s role, he may be in danger of overestimating how much Eskil had in common with elite warriors. How do we know that Eskil spoke the so-called ‘language’ of Danish soldiers? Should we assume that because he came from a noble family and led a military force, he was not only familiar with elite warrior culture but that also he aspired to meet its ideals? What influence did his religious education and role have on his conduct? These are questions we must address.

At a basic level, all high-ranking individuals destined for the church must have been aware of the way non-religious elite men operated. Many prelates grew up surrounded by relatives and friends destined for secular paths. Absalon, for example, spent his childhood with his foster brother, the future King Valdemar, and his elder brother, Esbern. He may even have received some military training himself during this time. If he had, this would explain Saxo’s later comment that he possessed ‘prima rei bellice peritia’ [supreme skill in the art of war]. Knýtlinga saga similarly recognises Absalon’s warrior qualities, commenting that he was ‘hvatastr ok vápndjarfastr’ [exceptionally bold and brave]. According to the Gesta, Absalon was always the first into battle and

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532 Christiansen, The Northern Crusades, 60.
533 Saxo Grammaticus, GD, 2015, II:1076–9 (14.17.3).
534 Ibid., II:1242–3 (14.32.3).
536 My Translation
the last to leave, while he is said to have always had as his companions the young Danes who were most eager for booty and renown.\textsuperscript{537}

Although we know little about the education of elite youths, we can assume that at some point those destined for the Church would have been sent to acquire the education required for such a position. In some cases, this meant travelling abroad. Anders Suneson, who was made archbishop of Lund in 1201, travelled to France, Italy and England for his education. His learning made him suitable for the position of royal secretary.\textsuperscript{538} Archbishop Eskil attended the cathedral school at Hildesheim as well as a number of others in Germany, and Absalon received an education in Paris.\textsuperscript{539} This learning must have set them apart from their non-religious colleagues, not least in that it allowed them to play significant roles in the administration of the realm. We can, however, only guess at the effect it had on the way in which they conceived of their role in war.

We must be careful when using texts like the \textit{Gesta Danorum} to examine the role of prelates in this period. I have already noted that Saxo aimed to present Absalon as the linchpin of the Danish government. In contrast, when Arnolde of Lübeck mentions Absalon in his \textit{Chronica Slavorum}, it is not as a military leader, but as a religious reformer who sought to reform the liturgy, promote chastity and encourage generosity in religious donations.\textsuperscript{540} Given this alternative view, how far are we to believe Saxo’s depiction of Absalon as a great warrior?

It would be reductionist to suggest that Absalon could not have embodied both of these descriptions, especially as there is good evidence that Absalon engaged in militaristic activities. In his brief \textit{Historia Compendiosa}, Svend Aggesen notes that he saw Absalon level the walls of Jomsborg.\textsuperscript{541} Although little is known of Svend himself, he mentions

\textsuperscript{537} Saxo Grammaticus, \textit{GD}, 2015, II:1242–3 (14.32.3).
\textsuperscript{538} Saxo Grammaticus, \textit{GD}, 2015, I:4–5 (Pr. 1.2).
\textsuperscript{540} Sawyer, “Valdemar, Absalon and Saxo,” 703–4; Pertz, \textit{Arnoldi Chronica Slavorum.}, 3.5; 5.18.
\textsuperscript{541} Sven Aggesen, “Svenonis Aggonis Filii Brevis Historia,” 118; Eric Christiansen discusses the evidence for this event, and when it may have occurred, in Sven Aggesen, \textit{The Works of Sven Aggesen Twelfth-}
that he knew Saxo was working on the *Gesta* and even refers to him as his colleague. We can therefore assume that he was in some way linked to Absalon and his group or that he at least knew of them.\(^{542}\) He also mentions that he saw the surrender of the Pomeranian duke, Bugislav, to the Danish king, Knud VI, during the Baltic campaign of 1185.\(^{543}\) He was therefore well placed to be aware of the kind of role Absalon had within the Danish monarch’s force.

Archbishop Eskil’s military activities are similarly ignored in the *Exordium Magnum* of Conrad of Eberbach, a compilation of stories concerning the foundation and subsequent history of the Cistercian order composed between the 1180s and 1215.\(^{544}\) In this text, Eskil is portrayed as a Christian soldier: a warrior of God rather than of the temporal world.

Dabat etiam operam paganitatis ritus, quibus adhuc ex magna parte terra illa imbuta erat, radicitus exstirpare et christianae disciplinae moribus omnes salubriter informare, superbientes et contemnentes ultionis mucrone ferire. Ita denique zelo iustitiae armatus noxia quaeque et superstitione eliminare et omnia saluti animarum profutura genti suae prouidere satagebat, ut a multis retro temporibus nullum in metropoli illa antistitem sedisse putemus, qui tantum in ecclesia Dei fecerit fructum, quantum fecit ipse.\(^{545}\)

He also worked to uproot completely the pagan superstition with which a large part of the country was sullied and to form his people in the saving discipline of the Christian religion. He smote the proud and the scornful with an avenging blade and, armed with a zeal for righteousness, he set out to destroy everything that was noxious and superstitious and strove to introduce all the things that would help to save the souls of his people, and he did it so well that with hindsight we think no other occupant of that see could have produced better fruit in God’s Church than he.\(^{546}\)

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\(^{543}\) Ibid., 140–41.


Eskil became a monk at Clairvaux before his death and his contact with this house suggests that his faith was an important aspect of his life. This does not at all preclude his involvement in war. It simply highlights the various aspects of his character and the difference between himself and an elite warrior who, although certainly religious, would not have the concerns of a man who held religious office.

A prelate’s special status meant that although he could choose to act like his secular peers, it was unlikely that he would be treated as one by his opponents. Elite warriors could be thrown in prison with little concern, but to hold a bishop captive was an entirely different matter. Prelates could call upon a particular type of spiritual leverage when they were in trouble which was unavailable to their secular peers. Saxo claims, for example, that Svend Grathe feared being excommunicated after he imprisoned Archbishop Eskil. Likewise, Bishop Valdemar Knudsen received support, albeit not particularly sustained support, from Pope Celestine III and Pope Innocent III after he was imprisoned in 1192. Pope Celestine viewed Valdemar’s imprisonment as a crime, and ordered Archbishop Absalon to actively work for his release. If Bishop Valdemar was not released, then Absalon was instructed to excommunicate Duke Valdemar of Schleswig, who had imprisoned Valdemar, along with those who had used violence against the bishop, and place the Danish kingdom under interdict. This should only be lifted when those responsible had repented, paid penance and sought absolution. However, Pope Celestine does not seem to have pressed this issue strongly. Neither Denmark nor Bishop Valdemar’s captors suffered spiritual sanctions, and it was not until 1203 that Celestine’s successor, Pope Innocent III, once again called for Valdemar’s release. It is clear from this example that the intervention of the Church in such affairs was not always particularly effective or successful. However, the fact that it was available, and that those who offended the Church could be threatened with excommunication, added

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an extra dimension to the interaction elite secular men had with the prelates who opposed them.

Saxo recognised that prelates could be both military leaders and spiritual guides. His depiction of Absalon embraces both of these roles.

Itaque non minus patrie parentem quam pontificem egit, militie et religionis sociato fulgore conspicuus.

He [Absalon] was a parent as much as a pontiff of his country, striking for his brilliant combination of soldiering and priesthood.\textsuperscript{550}

The \textit{Gesta} even depicts Absalon interrupting the celebration of mass to engage with approaching enemy ships.

Igitur reuocatis, qui sacra gestabant, cupide concitatam classem obuiam hosti in altum direxit, armis, non precibus deo libamenta daturus.

Calling back those who were celebrating mass, he resolved to dedicate his offering to the Lord not with prayers but weapons and, eagerly alerting the fleet, guided it out into the open sea to confront its opponents.\textsuperscript{551}

However, there are occasions when Saxo criticises the warlike activities of religious men. Bishop Rike of Zealand, for example, was killed by Olav Haraldsen, a pretender to the Danish throne, and his men. Saxo comments that Rike put his own safety before concerns for his religious position when he fought against his assailants. He was ultimately killed and Olav was excommunicated by Pope Innocent II.\textsuperscript{552} Saxo seems to suggest that Bishop Rike’s use of arms to defend himself was not compatible with his religious role. However, we do not need to see this as evidence that Saxo was uncomfortable with the idea of prelates taking part in military conflict. It is possible that Saxo was opposed to Bishop Rike’s taking up of arms with the intent to injure, rather than his involvement in conflict per se. Indeed, while the \textit{Gesta} is full of examples of bishops engaging in military affairs, there are few examples of them actually fighting.

\textsuperscript{551} Ibid., II:1512–3 (16.5.1).
\textsuperscript{552} Ibid., II:990–3 (14.2.10–11).
Could Saxo be suggesting that bishops could involve themselves in war, but that they should not shed blood?

Archbishop Absalon, for example, is said to have carried a small hatchet into battle\textsuperscript{553} and worn armour,\textsuperscript{554} but he is not explicitly said to have drawn blood. It is not implausible that he carried weapons in self-defence. It is important to note, however, that there are also few depictions of secular elite men actively engaged in warfare in sources for this period. Historical narratives generally provide broad outlines of how an engagement progressed, but rarely focus on individual acts. Therefore, the fact that bishops are not depicted giving battle in any meaningful sense tells us little about how these men acted during war. We cannot conclude that bishops did not fight just because they are not shown to.

However, bishops did die in warfare. The \textit{Chronicon Roskildense} claims that at the Battle of Fotevik, where King Niels of Denmark faced Erik Emune in 1134, five bishops died.\textsuperscript{555} \textit{Knýtlinga saga} relates that: ‘Þar fellu sex biskupar af liði Níkuláss konungs’\textsuperscript{556} [There fell six bishops from King Niels’ force].\textsuperscript{557} This suggests that the bishops were considered part of the military force. However, its author also notes that some clergymen were present in order to provide religious services before the battle. The text relates that Archbishop Asser of Lund brought clergymen with him to hear the confessions of Erik’s men before the fighting began.\textsuperscript{558} Priests often accompanied medieval armies, providing spiritual support and praying for the success of the campaign. After the capture of Arkona, for example, Danish commanders are said to have sent their chaplains into the city to provide instruction in Christian rites to the pagan inhabitants.\textsuperscript{559} Regardless of the role individual clerics may have had within the battle itself, they were set apart by their unique ability to provide salvation to others. They may have understood the secular

\textsuperscript{553} Ibid., II:1306–7 (14.39.39).
\textsuperscript{554} Ibid., II:1380–1 (14.47.8).
\textsuperscript{555} Gertz, “CR,” 29; Saxo writes that this war was notable for how much bishops’ blood was spilled during it. Saxo Grammaticus, \textit{GD}, 2015, II:968–9 (13.11.11).
\textsuperscript{556} Bjarni Guðnason, “KS ÍF,” 261.
\textsuperscript{557} My translation.
\textsuperscript{558} Bjarni Guðnason, “KS ÍF,” 260.
world of the elite warriors they sometimes accompanied on military campaigns, but they were not the same as them.

Prelates were not the same as secular elite men in high medieval Denmark, even though they might, at times, adopt their behaviours. Their particular role not only gave them an extra set of spiritual responsibilities not required of their secular counterparts, it also meant that they were protected by conventions which informed how clerics should be treated. Despite this, it seems plausible that they would have known the kind of behaviour which was expected of their secular counterparts in war, even if this conduct was not necessarily expected of themselves. It is possible, therefore, that prelates would have wanted to have been seen to adhere to these ideals when advising their king on how to treat defeated opponents.

However, the issue here is not how bishops behaved in reality, but rather how chroniclers of medieval Denmark wished to portray the conduct of prelates during war. Did these chroniclers portray prelates as adhering to the kinds of behaviour expected of secular elite men in high medieval Denmark? Throughout this chapter, I have shown that both kings and prelates were praised by the authors of historical narratives for being restrained in their behaviour and showing clemency to their opponents. Clemency is therefore shown to be an important ideal for both secular and religious men to aspire to. I have also demonstrated that clemency was a useful tool which could help to end conflict and encourage reconciliation between warring factions. Again, there seems little reason why both bishops and secular warriors would not both perceive the moderate treatment of defeated opponents to be a useful strategy during war. Indeed, the granting of clemency to enemies is a prominent feature of narratives which describe warfare in Denmark in the high medieval period. This suggests that it was one of the conventions of how war was waged at this time. As I will show in my discussions on the conduct of kings below, merciful acts were considered ideal, and indeed appropriate, conduct not only for bishops and kings, but for all elite men.
4.4.2 The Conduct of Kings

In the *Lex Castrensis*, Svend Aggesen recounts how while in England, King Knud the Great, who ruled Denmark from 1018 to 1035, ‘iracundie accensus furore…quendam militem suum exempto mucrone iugulauit interemptum’\(^{560}\) [fell into a passion and drew his sword and killed one of his own warriors].\(^{561}\) Knud and his men had agreed on a code to govern their behaviour, commonly referred to as the Law of the Retainers or *Lex Castrensis*, which set out punishments for misdeeds such as this. However, Knud’s crime was so novel that his warriors were unsure how to respond.

Ambigua quippe fertur sententia, ancipitique fluctuabant iudicio, utrum ob facinoris noutatem capite princeps plecteretur, an ei competeteret indulgentia. Nam si date sententie rex subderetur, tanquam acephali et profuge a regione exterminarentur aliena; sin autem regie indulgeretur reuerentie, corruptionis exemplo et indulgentie a ceteris (*similiter peccari*) potuisset.\(^{562}\)

For their opinions were divided, and their verdict was doubtful and uncertain: whether to punish the king with death on account of the novelty of the crime, or was he entitled to pardon? For if the king were to undergo the prescribed sentence, they would be driven out of this foreign country as leaderless fugitives; but if they were swayed by their reverence for the king, the example of their corrupt indulgence would enable others to commit the same offence.\(^{563}\)

In the end, Knud’s men allowed him to atone for his crime and subsequently pardoned him. However, Svend is careful to note that the clemency shown to Knud did not set a precedent. If any of the king’s men killed one another in the future, they would either be sentenced to death or exiled from the king’s men and made an outlaw.\(^{564}\) The king’s position made him a special case.

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\(^{563}\) Sven Aggesen, “The Law of the Retainers or of the Court,” 38.

\(^{564}\) Sven Aggesen, “Svenonis Aggonis Filii Lex Castrensis,” 80.
The confused response of Knud’s men to this incident is a testament to the exceptional position a king held. Regardless of the truth behind the story, Svend reminds his readers that rules could always be manipulated if the circumstance required it. I have already argued in relation to England, that high-ranking elite men in this period could also be considered influential, and indeed dangerous, enough to require a similar kind of special handling. I have shown that the same is true of Denmark. Indeed, Svend claims that the next person to break the law of the retainers, his grandfather, Kristiarn Svensen, was also too influential be treated according to convention. Kristiarn had wounded his fellow retainer Thuri Doki, but the king was wary of punishing a man with such strong allies.

Quo facto regis extitit perplexa sententia. Nam et regni sui aduersari decreuit imperio eiusque incolumitati obuiare, et porro cognatis illius uniuersis tam quam regni potioribus contrarium existere, si cum probroso nuncupationis vocabulo, id est Nitingorsoth, eliminaretur curia, presertim cum duo fratres sui famosissimi tunc temporis extiterunt episcopi...

After that, the king was faced by a difficult decision. For he thought it would be harmful to the authority of his government and would undermine its security, if Kristiarn were to be expelled from the court with the shameful name of Nithingsorth. It would also offend all the man’s kinsmen, who were the most powerful men in the realm, and all the more so because two of his brothers were greatly renowned bishops at the time.

After consulting with elders about previous judgements relating to this kind of crime, it was decided that the rules regarding the punishment of these acts should once again be changed. Settlement was now to be made in financial terms, with forty marks payable to the king, forty to the injured party, along with two marks weight of gold, and forty marks to his fellow warriors.

The status and power of individuals mattered when they were judged by their peers, but it was not only kings who could maneuver around existing rules. As a result of Kristiarn’s influence in the government of the realm and his powerful allies, Knud is encouraged to treat him in an exceptional manner. As king, Knud was also able to escape...
the punishment his men would ordinarily have thought appropriate for his crime. Both Knud and Kristain ignore the ideal behaviour expected of men of their rank and position, but are powerful enough to avoid the serious consequences others may have faced.

I do not wish to argue that high-ranking elite men were subject to the same expectations of appropriate behaviour as kings, or that they were as powerful as the monarchs they served. Rather, I seek to highlight that an individual’s status, his influence and even the power of his supporters, informed how others within his society related to him. In Svend’s narrative, Knud has the support of the elite men who serve him and this puts him in a relatively secure position. In contrast, a king who had lost control of his elite subjects faced a precarious situation. The example of King Knud IV is a case in point. As I have already noted, one reason given for King Knud IV’s downfall is that he upset his elite subjects. By not behaving in the way they expected, he lost their support and fuelled a rebellion.\(^{568}\) In the *Lex Castrensis*, Svend Aggesen addresses the responsibilities a king owed to his men. A king must be courteous and amiable and pay his warriors promptly and without dispute. In return for pay and rewards, the king’s men committed to obey his commands and orders.\(^{569}\) The fact that Svend follows these musings with details of how warriors could renounce their homage to their lord is telling.\(^{570}\) Elite men expected to benefit from their relationship with the king and if they did not, they could shift their allegiance to another lord.

I have already shown how historical narratives from high medieval Denmark depict kings sparing elite opponents in an attempt to win, and sustain, the support of these important men. In contrast, ruthless behaviour is often presented as having the opposite effect. King Erik Emune, for example, treated his opponents harshly and was eventually killed by one of his retainers at an assembly in 1137.\(^{571}\) Before being made king, Erik had campaigned against King Niels of Denmark ostensibly in retaliation for Niels’ son, Magnus, having ordered the murder of Erik’s brother, Knud Lavard. After defeating Niels and his son, Erik was made king. *Knýtlinga saga* claims that Erik not only ruthlessly

\(^{569}\) Sven Aggesen, “Svenonis Aggonis Filii Lex Castrensis,” 74.
\(^{570}\) Ibid., 76.
punished those who had been friends with Niels and Magnus, but also ‘refsingasamr við alla þá menn, er hann þóttisk stórsakir við eiga’\textsuperscript{572} [punished severely all those with whom he thought he had a score to settle].\textsuperscript{573} He even had his own brother, Harald, and all but one of Harald’s sons killed after Harald tried to have himself proclaimed king.\textsuperscript{574} \textit{Knýtlinga saga} relates that Erik was eventually killed by Plov, a man of fairly high status, in revenge for Erik having had Plov’s father killed for speaking against him at an assembly.\textsuperscript{575}

The \textit{Gesta} does not comment as to Plov’s reasons for killing King Erik,\textsuperscript{576} although Saxo does note that Erik spared no noble man in his pursuit of justice.

Irrogatas minoribus iniurias superiorum suppliciis pensabat nihilque familiaritati aut necessitudini parcens aut ferro aut laqueo inconsultam maiorum auaritiam castigabat.

Injustices inflicted on humbler folk he would recompense by punishing their superiors; sparing neither friend nor relative, he would chastise inconsiderate greed among the nobility with the sword or the noose.\textsuperscript{577}

This is said to have gained him the hatred of the elite community, but the support of the common people.\textsuperscript{578} Interestingly, Erik’s attitude contrasts with that of his son, Svend Grathe, when he meets Plov later on. Saxo writes that Plov was part of a force fighting for King Knud V which surrendered to Svend. Unlike Erik, and indeed Plov, Svend did not seek revenge. Instead, he spared all of Knud’s men, believing that they could never be loyal to him even if he tried to absorb them into his force.

Neque enim a patris interfectore poenas exigere uoluit, plus deditionis moribus quam ultionis aculeis debiturus. Ceteros quoque nec morte nec captione mulctatos absque redemptione dimittit, prefatus se eorum obsequia ac odia iuxta estimaturum. Nihil enim iis prospere cessurum, qui toties mobili fide et sacramento fuissent.

\textsuperscript{572} Bjarni Guðnason, “KS ÍF,” 263.
\textsuperscript{573} Pálsson and Edwards, \textit{KS}, 140.
\textsuperscript{575} Bjarni Guðnason, “KS ÍF,” 268–69.
\textsuperscript{577} Ibid., II:978–9 (14.1.9).
\textsuperscript{578} Ibid.
He had no desire to claim satisfaction from his father’s murderer, being inclined to give more due to the practice of surrender than to the barbs of vengeance. The rest, too, were not punished with death or captivity but were sent away unransomed, after Sven had stated that their obedience and their hate were all the same to him; as far as he was concerned, no success could ever be expected from men who had so constantly changed their loyalty and oath of allegiance.\textsuperscript{579}

The truth behind this story is not our concern here. However, Saxo’s desire to show Svend as merciful, even towards the man who killed his father, is notable. Saxo does not deride Svend for his actions, rather he views this as ‘singulare pietatis specimen’ [a unique example of compassion].\textsuperscript{580} He respects the conventions of surrender by not killing those who willing capitulated, sparing their lives even though he knew they would not support him.

How are we to understand Svend’s and Erik’s contrasting behaviour? At times, Saxo does question the practicality of sparing opponents. We may recall Elias, the bishop of Ribe, who is supposed to have exhorted Svend to imitate the gardener ‘qui utilibus herbis incrementa conciliat, noxiis locum uacuefacit’ [who encourages growth in the useful plants but rids his plots of harmful weeds.].\textsuperscript{581} However, the fact that Saxo praises so many kings, as well as bishops, by reference to their restraint and leniency is instructive. It suggests that although this practice may at times have been impractical, unsuccessful or even completely ignored, it still resonated as an ideal, and useful, behaviour among the elite group more generally.

Kings had different uses for clemency to their elite subjects. High-ranking elite men did not have to deal with rival kings or deadly rebellions. However, this does not mean that non-royal elite men did not see a use for clemency or that they were not be inspired by mercy as an ideal. Indeed, the emphasis put on the granting of clemency within conflict narratives suggests that warrior society as a whole recognised moderate behaviours as having an established function within war.

\textsuperscript{579} Ibid., II:1032–3 (14.7.7).
\textsuperscript{580} Ibid., II:1032 (14.7.7); My translation.
\textsuperscript{581} Ibid., II:1014–5 (14.4.9).
Of course, elite men were not always merciful, even if they are characterised as such. However, the fact that moderate behaviour is attributed to elite men who chroniclers wish to praise suggests that it was understood to have positive connotations among the elite group more widely. Saxo emphasises Knud the Great’s natural inclination towards mercy, for example, even though he killed one of his own men in anger. He notes how reluctant King Knud was to show severity towards those who served him, even if they had been guilty of wronging him or his men.

Ita rex proscriptione suos quam nece puniri maluit, delectumque fuge, ne violentiam representaret, indulsit.

The monarch thereby wished his followers to be punished by outlawry sooner than by death and conceded the option of exile instead of taking violent measures against them.⁵⁸²

This is reiterated a few passages later: ‘Adeo enim rex contumeliam sontium, non sanguinem sitiebat…’ [The king in fact did not hanker after the blood of offenders, but only for their reproof...].⁵⁸³ Although at times Saxo seems to have doubted the practicality of treating opponents mercifully, especially during a civil war, he still saw this as a positive behaviour which demonstrated an individual’s virtue.

Despite this rhetoric, we cannot ignore the brutality of medieval conflict. Claimants to the throne, including those who became king, were often involved in bloody wars against their challengers, with many dying during their campaigns. However, it is instructive that in the more contemporary section of the Gesta, the explicit murder of kings and elite men is often presented negatively. Just as the men who killed King Knud V are demonised in the Gesta and Knýtlinga saga, the Danish people are said to have despised King Niels and his son for their involvement in Knud Lavard’s death in 1131.⁵⁸⁴ The author of Knýtlinga saga notes that Neils and his son Magnus were ‘stórilla þokkaðir af þessu verki’⁵⁸⁵ [detested for this deed]⁵⁸⁶ and lost a lot of their support in Denmark.

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⁵⁸² Saxo Grammaticus, GD, 2015, I:760–1 (10.18.11).
⁵⁸³ Ibid., I:762–3 (10.18.14).
⁵⁸⁶ Pálsson and Edwards, KS, 135.
Saxo in particular had a reason to denigrate Knud Lavard and King Knud V’s killers. I have already noted that Valdemar had been allied with Knud V, and was also the lord of Saxo’s patron, Absalon. Knud Lavard had even stronger significance, as he was Valdemar’s father. The fact that these rivals for the throne were killed gives an insight into the kind of society these men resided in. The monarchy was not yet strong enough to ensure the crown passed smoothly from king to heir. In such situations, anyone with a claim to the throne was at risk of being assassinated by their rivals or killed during a battle for the crown.

Even Valdemar had to dispose of Svend Grathe in order to become sole king, although he is never accused of having Svend killed. Saxo and Svend Aggesen assert that King Svend was captured by peasants and slain.\footnote{Saxo Grammaticus, \textit{GD}, 2015, II:1108–11 (14.19.15); Sven Aggesen, “Svenonis Aggonis Filii Brevis Historia,” 138.} In contrast, the author of \textit{Knýtlinga saga} names Svend’s killer as Gvenmar Ketilsson, one of the \textit{høfðingjar}, chieftains or important men, who accompanied Valdemar on his first expedition into Wendish territory.\footnote{Bjarni Guðnason, “KS ÍF,” 293–94.} There is no suggestion that Valdemar sought Svend’s death in order to secure his own position, yet it was surely convenient that Svend was not captured. If he had been, then Valdemar would have been faced with the very difficult decision of what to do with his co-ruler. As is often the case, our perception of these events is shaped by how contemporaries chose to relate these stories. Valdemar is not said to have desired Svend’s death, therefore we do not consider that he did. However, it is not at all unthinkable that he would secretly, or perhaps even openly, have wanted his rival to meet a swift end.

We do not know if non-royal elite men killed one another to get ahead as kings and claimants to the throne did. It could be tentatively suggested that as the stakes were higher in competitions for the crown, claimants were more inclined to ruthless behaviour in war. After all, what does a monarch do with a defeated rival king or claimant? These men merely served as a rallying point for future rebellion. However, the same can surely be said about powerful elite men like Magnus Erikson who we see being
spared and imprisoned. Magnus had not, however, been elected king. It was perhaps the legitimacy conveyed by this election which sealed the fate of rival kings, rather than the mere fact of their opposition to others’ claims.

That the authors of historical narratives are so keen to portray kings, as well as bishops, acting with restraint towards defeated opponents is a sign that this was considered to be a virtuous mode of behaviour. Moderation is not shown to be the preserve of kings. Indeed, many of the conventions of warfare portrayed across these texts, and in particular, the suggestion that those who surrendered should be shown leniency, could be applicable to any elite man. If it was ideal, and useful, for kings and bishops to show restraint in these situations, and in these ways, then it is logical that it was ideal for non-royal elite warriors also. Kings were exceptional, and those with enough support could always manipulate the rules to meet their own needs. However, this could equally apply to their high-status supporters, many of whom had equally good claims to the crown. If kings found grants of mercy both laudable and practical, then it is highly likely that these men did too.

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589 Saxo Grammaticus, GD, 2015, II:1392–1419 (14.54.1–35); 1434–7 (14.56.1–3).
4.5 Conclusion

Restraint, mercy and moderation are depicted as a positive characteristics for elite men, both secular and religious, to possess in texts detailing high medieval Denmark. Expressions of these qualities, such as the granting of clemency to surrendering opponents and the imprisonment rather than execution of high-ranking rebels, are central to their portrayals of warfare. In situations of siege, garrisons who surrendered, submitted and agreed terms with their opponents were not normally punished with violence, even when some of the defeated were not Christian. However, as our sources rarely depict elite men actively engaging in combat, it is difficult to assess what happened during battle itself. There is some tentative evidence that elite men who surrendered might have been taken prisoner rather than killed, but we can do little more than speculate about whether this was a common feature of warfare in this period. The nature of our evidence also makes it impossible to comment on the way elite men of different levels of status and influence were treated after conflict, although it is likely that the most powerful magnates could reasonably expect the best treatment. The few references we have to mutilation being used as punishment within these sources remind us, however, that those who were not executed may still have been punished in unpleasant ways. Although we have no record of the conditions in which prisoners were kept, the loss of freedom this entailed must have been a hardship in itself.

Moderate behaviour had a practical use within the mechanics of conflict. It allowed opponents to submit in the knowledge that they would not be immediately executed and thus encouraged weaker enemies to offer surrender earlier on in a conflict. Those who were ruthless towards their enemies not only risked upsetting their supporters and allies, but also encouraged their opponents to resist even more strongly. Agreements which allowed defeated armies or individuals to keep their lives, possessions or lands could therefore be a useful tool for ensuring peace and security in the longer term. Of course, attempts at reconciliation were not always successful, but the decision to execute elite opponents could be even more problematic, not least because it could stimulate rebellion or revolt. Even when shows of mercy were not successful in restraining violence or settling a conflict, they would always make an individual look
virtuous. This was the case regardless of whether they were a king, bishop or elite warrior.
5 Norway

...þar líknaði sá er valdit átti, ok vegr var þat en eigi lítilæði.\textsuperscript{590}

...the man who had the power showed mercy, and there was honour in that action and no lack of authority.\textsuperscript{591}

In this way, the author of \textit{Morkinskinna} praised King Haraldr Sigurðarson for sparing his former friend, and present agitator, Finnr Árnason. Finnr had once been Haraldr’s close ally and adviser, but they had quarrelled and Finnr had switched his allegiance to the Danish king, Svend Estridsen.\textsuperscript{592} When Haraldr’s Norwegian forces attacked Denmark, Finnr aided his adoptive countrymen in their defence and was captured for his troubles. However, Haraldr did not treat Finnr harshly, even though he had supported his enemies.\textsuperscript{593} Finnr was spared and was even eventually allowed to return to King Svend in Denmark.\textsuperscript{594} How can we understand Haraldr’s lenient treatment of a former friend turned opponent? After all, Finnr was a powerful man. He had been made a Jarl by Svend and possessed significant lands in Denmark.\textsuperscript{595} Releasing an opponent of such standing had risks. However, the author of \textit{Morkinskinna} clearly thought this show of mercy to be behaviour worthy of someone of elite, and even kingly, status. Merciful acts did not diminish a person’s authority, they were simply a reflection of their honourable nature.

In a similar way to texts which depict high medieval England and Denmark, the kings’ sagas show elite warriors refraining from the violent treatment of elite opponents after conflict. Merciful and moderate behaviour is shown to be virtuous and honourable, and clemency is portrayed as having a use within conflict. The process by which warriors

\textsuperscript{591} Andersson and Gade, \textit{Msk}, 232. As there are good modern English translations of Morkinskinna, Fagrskinna and Heimskringla, I have used these throughout this chapter. The most recent English translations of Sverris saga and Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar are from the 1890s and so translations of these texts are my own.
\textsuperscript{593} Ármann Jakobsson and Þórhur Ingi Guðjónsson, \textit{Msk If}, 2011, 246–51; 253.
\textsuperscript{594} Snorri Sturluson, \textit{Hkr If}, 1951, III:155.
\textsuperscript{595} Ibid., III:135.
asked for, and were granted, mercy developed its own set of conventions and features prominently within these texts. These conventions are not exactly the same as those we see depicted in evidence for England and Denmark. Indeed, we should not expect them to be as they, like those in Denmark and England, developed at least partly in response to political, economic and social conditions. In particular, the series of civil wars which raged from around 1130 to 1240 had an effect on how Norwegian elite men conducted themselves during war. We must understand this conflict if we wish to investigate the extent to which Norwegian elite men accepted, and adhered to, moderating ideals in this period.

Before the mid-thirteenth century, it was not uncommon for multiple kings to rule Norway at the same time. Custom dictated that the sons of former Norwegian kings had a claim to the throne, regardless of whether they were of legitimate birth. However, this lineage did not guarantee that an individual would become king. Those who claimed royal ancestry also had to be elected monarch at one or more of the regional assemblies which were convened across Norway. It was thus useful for claimants to have gathered a good amount of support, both military and otherwise, to their cause, especially if a king already sat on the throne. Reigning kings rarely took kindly to the arrival of men claiming kingly parentage and frequently showed themselves to be prepared to defend their position from these newcomers. From the death of King Sigurðr Jórsalafari in 1130, Norway was troubled by succession disputes and battles for the throne. While some kings did attempt to share power and rule together, this often ended in conflict, even when the kings were brothers.

It may be difficult to imagine that mercy and clemency could play much of a role within this context. However, texts which record this period of Norwegian history frequently refer to men being treated mercifully by victorious opponents. In this chapter, I will consider why certain men were spared while others, generally rival kings, were swiftly dispatched. I will investigate the part that grants of clemency could play within the resolution of conflict, and seek to understand how this leniency was rationalised within Norwegian society. Like all the texts examined in this thesis, the narrative content of the kings’ sagas has been crafted, to a greater or lesser extent, to highlight the positive and
negative behaviour of individual elite figures. However, by looking for patterns in the ideas presented, rather than for the truth of individual events, we are able to gain an insight into the mentality of elite society in high medieval Norway. I will begin by considering how elite men were ideally expected to behave towards those who angered, injured or opposed them.

5.1 Restraint and Moderation as Ideal Characteristics

At the Battle of Fimreite in 1184, King Sverrir Sigurðarson (r.1177-1202) finally defeated his main rival for the Norwegian throne, King Magnús Erlingsson (r.1161–1184). Magnús had been killed during the battle and Sverrir sent one of his men, Svína-Pétr, to announce his demise at an assembly in Bergen. According to Sverris Saga, Svína-Pétr proclaimed that now the war was over, a new time of peace had to begin. Sverrir and his men, nicknamed the Birkibeinar, had to become peacemakers.

Nú er í brotu sá Sverrir er við hernaði fór til margra kaupstaða. Brautu eru nú ok þeir sǿmu Birkibeinar er hér sveimuðu um bœinn ok sópuðu öhreinliga hǫndum um hirzur yðrar búanda. En hér munu nú koma með konungi várum mjúkir hirðmenn ok hógværir, er vera skal láss ok lykill fyrir frelsi ok friði þessa kaupstaðar ok annarra.596

The Sverrir who approached many market towns with warfare is now gone. Also now gone are those same Birkibeinar who wandered around the town here and carried off your farmers’ stores with unclean hands. And now meek and gentle hirðmenn will come here with the king, who shall be lock and key before the freedom and peace of this market town and others.597

The saga’s author outlines how a shift from war to peace must be accompanied by a similar shift in the kind of behaviour expected of elite men. This sentiment is echoed in a speech later in the saga where Sverrir is shown to castigate his men for their lack of restraint.

596 Þorleifur Hauksson, Ss íF, 149.
597 Translations of Sverris saga are all my own.
Minnizk nú á hversu ólíkt þetta lífi er því er vera skyldi. Því at öllum hlutum skyldi stilling fylgja. Hermenn skyldu vera hógværir í friði sem lamb, en í ófriði ágjarnir sem león.598

Now call to mind how unlike this conduct is to what it should be. For calm moderation should accompany all things. Warriors should be gentle as a lamb in peace, but fierce as a lion in war.

The roles of fierce soldier and gentle peacekeeper are not mutually exclusive within this text. Different modes of behaviour were acceptable in different situations. Warriors could showcase their prowess through violent acts in war, but once the conflict had ceased it was expected that they would control their excesses.

Warriors were not criticised for killing men during sanctioned war. Like Sverris saga, Konungs Skuggsjá, a mid-thirteenth-century instructional text, makes a distinction between the behaviour expected of a warrior during active conflict and outside of it. The text instructs that manslaying should be generally avoided.

En ilmænilegre orrosto æptir retto boðe hofðingia þins þa skallt þu æigi mæirr skirrazk manndrap hælldr en æitt hvært værc þat annarra er þu væizt at gott værk er oc rett599

But in ordinary warfare on the lawful command of your chief, you need to shun manslaying no more than any other deed which you know to be right and good.600

The author of this text is not suggesting that warriors could behave however they liked during a violent confrontation. Konungs Skuggsjá explains that although elite warriors must fight with vigour and bravery, they must also maintain their self-control. Warriors should ‘askipi bæriazk sæm a lannde mæð goðu gefna geðe’601 [Fight on sea as on land...]

598 Porleifur Hauksson, Ss Íf, 160.
599 Ludvig Holm-Olsen, ed., Konungs Skuggsjá, 2nd ed., Norrøne Tekster 1 (Oslo: Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskrift-institutt, 1983), 59. Holm-Olsen aimed to reproduce the various manuscripts he had used faithfully. His edition therefore contains capital letters, italics and signs which denote various manuscript features. I have largely removed these, although the Old Norse had not been standardised. Where a “v” type sound is suggested in the text, and where this makes sense in relation to the Old Norse, I have inserted this letter in the place of Holm-Olsen’s notation. (xviii-xix).
601 Holm-Olsen, Konungs Skuggsjá, 60.
with an even temper]⁶⁰² and ‘sva sæm af goðo skapi oc þo driugleghre reiðe’⁶⁰³ [as if in the best of humor, though filled with noble wrath]. They should be bold in battle but not rash or impulsive.⁶⁰⁴ The ideal warrior fought to prove his bravery and prowess, not as the result of an emotional reaction to some assumed slight. Warriors could be fierce as lions, but they were expected to express this fierceness in the appropriate way.

The Hírðskrå is a late thirteenth-century collection of rules and supposed laws relating to the king’s hírð, his personal retinue. In it, members of the hírð are similarly urged not to react too quickly to those who had offended them. They should take time to assess the situation before taking revenge, ensuring that innocent men are not accidentally implicated. Any vengeance that is exacted should not be excessive.⁶⁰⁶ Most importantly, all members should take steps to avoid the cardinal vice of ‘hæiftug ræiði með grimmv langræke’⁶⁰⁷ [vehement anger with a fierce inclination to bear a grudge].⁶⁰⁸ Moderation and level-headedness were valued at all times.

This praise for moderation and the avoidance of uncontrolled violence extends to descriptions of warfare as well. In Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar, Skúli Bárdsson (d.1240), regent of Norway from 1217 and later claimant to the throne and king, is praised for subduing his opponents, the Ribbungar, without giving battle. The Ribbungar supported another claimant, Sigurðr Erlingsson ribbungr (d. 1226), and encountered Skúli while campaigning in eastern Norway. After a number of skirmishes between the Ribbungar and Skúli’s men, Sigurðr realised he was beaten and asked Skúli what terms he would receive if he were to surrender. Skúli did not seek to eliminate the Ribbungar, despite his own aspirations to the throne. Instead, in return for Sigurðr and his men’s submission, Skúli granted Sigurðr his friendship and agreed to help him reconcile with the current king of Norway, Hákon. As the author of Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar notes:

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⁶⁰² Larson, The King’s Mirror, 215.
⁶⁰³ Holm-Olsen, Konungs Skuggsíá, 59.
⁶⁰⁴ Larson, The King’s Mirror, 214.
⁶⁰⁵ Holm-Olsen, Konungs Skuggsíá, 59.
⁶⁰⁶ Steinar Imsen, Hírðskröen: Hírðloven til Norges Konge og Hans Håndgangne Menn: Etter AM 322 Fol (Oslo: Riksarkivet, 2000), 112.
⁶⁰⁷ Ibid., 110.
⁶⁰⁸ My translation.
Jarl tók vel við honum ok var til hans sæmiliga. En sá orðrómr lék á í Vikinni at þessi væri hinn fegrsti sigr er jarl hafði unnit, þar sem hann hafði orrostulaust eytt svá miklum flokki ok styrkum sem Ribbungar váru ok komit því áleiðis at þá var friðr orðinn um allan Nóreg. 609

The Jarl received him well and treated him honourably. And that report spread round the Vik that this was the fairest victory that the Jarl had achieved, as he had without battle eliminated such a large and strong band as the Ribbungar were and brought it about that there was peace over all Norway. 610

Part of the admiration for Skúli’s victory lay in its relative ease. However, the description of it as fegrsti, the fairest or the most beautiful, suggests that there was more to commend about this victory than the mechanics by which it was achieved. A moral judgement is being made about Skúli’s choice of tactics. Skúli did not need to engage in violence simply to prove how powerful he was; he could gain the admiration of others by choosing reconciliation when it was offered.

Skúli’s decision to accept peace over war is interesting given that he is depicted in the rest of the saga as a fairly ruthless individual. He had a man hanged for refusing to give him information 611 and ordered his followers to murder one of the king’s men, Þórir on Borri. 612 As regent, Skúli proposed sending an armed force to Iceland in order to bring it under the control of the Norwegian kingdom. The king, Hákon, who had little practical power at that time, was reduced to pleading with him to not use such force on the grounds that the violence would affect many guiltless Icelanders. As he faced opposition from others present as well, Skúli capitulated and instead sent Snorri Sturluson to negotiate a peace settlement between the two countries. 613 These examples remind us that elite men could choose to ignore ideals when it suited them.

The author of Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar, Sturla Þórðarson, contrasts Skúli’s behaviour towards opponents with King Hákon Hákonarson’s inclination towards mercy and peace. King Hákon, who ruled from 1217 to 1263, is repeatedly praised in Hákonar saga

609 Sverrir Jakobsson, Porleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsH ÍF I,” 256.
610 Translations of Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar are my own.
611 Sverrir Jakobsson, Porleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsH ÍF I,” 271.
Hákonarsonar for preferring to resolve conflict in more peaceful ways. In his epitaph, it is written that ‘Af tók hann öll manndráp ok fóthögg innanlands ok svá handhögg, útan ærnar væri sakir til.’\(^{614}\) [He stopped all manslaying and chopping off of feet inside the land and also chopping off of hands, unless there were good reasons for it]. This is an ethos reflected throughout the text. Sturla notes that when Hákon learnt there was turmoil in Iceland, he asked Sturla Sighvatsson to try to quell the disruption by taking sole control of the land. However, he should not do so ‘með manndrápum’\(^{615}\) [by manslaying]. Instead, he should ‘taka menn ok senda útan eða fá riki með öðru móti...’\(^{616}\) [seize men and send them away or get their power in some other way]. King Hákon’s virtuous nature is exemplified by his avoidance of violence.

The author of *Sverris saga* is similarly keen to point out the merciful actions of King Sverrir, and even depicts him granting mercy to men who had previously betrayed him. The lendr maðr, Jón Hallkelsson, and his sons are said to have been granted mercy a number of times, even though they had fought against Sverrir as supporters of his rival king, Magnús Erlingsson. They first appear in the saga obtaining quarter from Sverrir after a battle between Sverrir’s and Magnús’ forces in Bergen.\(^{617}\) A few pages later we see them asking Sverrir for mercy again. His reply reveals the true extent of their duplicitous behaviour.

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\begin{align*}
\text{En er Jón Hallkelsson ok synir hans kómu á fund Sverris konungs þá bauð hann þeim at fara í griðum hvert er þeir vildu, norðr til búa sinna eða austr eftir Magnúsi konungi, en þeir beiddusk at fara til Sverris konungs. Konungr mælti móti, - „því at tysvar hafi þér áðr svarit mér eiða ok halðit hváriga.” Ok eigi at síðr svǫrðu þeir enn it þriðja sinn Sverri konungi, ok lítlu síðarr fóru þeir í brot ok austr til Magnúss konungs.}\(^{618}\)
\end{align*}
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When Jón Hallkelsson and his sons came to meet King Sverrir, he commanded them to go in peace wherever they desired, north to their homesteads or east after King Magnús, but they asked to go with King Sverrir. The king objected, ‘For you have twice previously sworn oaths to me and you kept them neither time.’ But none the less they swore again for the

\(^{614}\) Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsH ÍF II,” 265.
\(^{615}\) Ibid., 25.
\(^{616}\) Ibid.
\(^{617}\) Þorleifur Hauksson, *Ss ÍF*, 119; Jón Hallkelsson is also shown being granted mercy earlier on in his military career in Heimskringla. Snorri Sturluson, *Hkr ÍF*, 1951, III:392.
\(^{618}\) Þorleifur Hauksson, *Ss ÍF*, 121.
third time to King Sverrir and a little later travelled away east to King Magnús.

Sverrir is not criticised for this act however, or portrayed as naïve. In fact, it is suggested in *Sverris Saga* that this kind of behaviour was not uncommon. During one battle later in the saga, King Sverrir is shown granting mercy to one man three times:

Einn búandi var så er tekinn var þrim sinnum um daginn, ok gaf konungr honum í hvert sinn grið, en hann hljópsk enn til búanda ok barðisk. It fjórða sinn var hann tekinn ok dreppin.  

There was one farmer who was taken three times during the day, and the king gave him mercy each time, but he escaped each time to the farmers and continued fighting. The fourth time he was taken and killed.

In the preface to *Sverris saga*, it is claimed that Sverrir oversaw at least part of the saga’s composition. If this is the case, then it is probable that the kind of characteristics Sverrir is shown to possess within the saga are those which both he and its author perceived to be praiseworthy.

Sverrir’s leniency towards defeated opponents is contrasted with the more ruthless behaviour of his rival, King Magnús. While Sverrir is shown to grant mercy to anyone who asks him for it, the saga repeatedly suggests that the same could not be expected from Magnús and his men, the Heklungar. In a speech to his army, Sverrir tells his men ‘at illt mun griða at leita undir þá Heklunga’ [that it will be hard to seek mercy from those Heklungs]. At another point in the saga, Magnús and his men are said to spread out across a town with the intention of slaughtering Sverrir’s men. The saga notes that, ‘engi þurfti þar grið at nefna’ [no one there needed to mention mercy]. It is not clear whether Magnús’ men were failing to offer mercy, or whether Sverrir’s men did not ask for mercy because they were sure they would not get it. Either way, it is instructive that

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619 Ibid., 261.
620 Ibid., 3; Sverre Bagge has argued that Sverris Saga was written to prove the just nature of Sverrir’s claim to the throne. The saga’s author did this by highlighting Sverrir’s success in battle and prowess as a leader. Sverre Bagge, “Ideology and Propaganda in Sverris Saga,” *Arkiv För Nordisk Filologi* 108 (1993): 1–18.
621 Þorleifur Hauksson, *Sís ÍF*, 73.
622 Ibid., 108.
the author of this saga specifically points out that mercy was not available to the defeated men. The lack of moderation shown by Magnús and his men is deliberately highlighted in order to make a comment about their behaviour during war.

In the kings’ sagas, good kings are merciful kings. The ideal monarch showed mercy to defeated opponents and tempered his emotional responses during both war and peacetime. This behaviour was equally expected of a king’s elite subjects. The ideal warrior was valiant in battle, but recognised the need for moderation and gentle behaviour once conflict had ended. He maintained self-control at all times and reacted in a measured way to perceived injuries. That this ideal of moderation and restraint is described in texts of various kinds, from legal works, to instructional treatises and historical narratives, suggests that it resonated strongly within the Norwegian elite who often patronised these works.

We must now consider the various factors which influenced the development and adoption of this ideal. I shall begin as I have previously, by considering the impact religious ideals are shown to have had on the practice of mercy and moderation. As in England and Denmark, the actions of kings and elite men in Norway are sometimes explained in Christian terms, with an individual’s faith said to have encouraged merciful behaviour. It is therefore important to consider the impact that ideas about good Christian behaviour had on the ideal of positive warrior conduct in high medieval Norway.

5.1.1 Mercy and Religion

In the kings’ sagas, kings are shown to be conscious of acting in a Christian manner during warfare. King Hákon Hákonarson, is said to have protected the Church and vulnerable members of society, like women and children, from the violence of armed conflict.623 When Hákon sent some of his men and their bands of warriors north to fight his rival for the throne, Skúli’s, men, it is claimed that ‘Hann bauð þeim at halda vel

kirkjugrið ok kvønnafríð, svá sem allt hans forellri hafði gert fyrir honum.\textsuperscript{624} [He commanded them to keep the peace of the church well and to spare women, just as all his forefathers had done before him]. Similarly, after a victory against Skúli, Hákon ensured that his men did not attack Skúli’s men when they blockaded themselves inside a church.\textsuperscript{625} The author of \textit{Konungs Skuggsjá}, which was probably composed just before \textit{Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar}, considered it an evil deed to slay a person who has sought safety in a church.\textsuperscript{626} Indeed, Archbishop Eiríkr Ívarsson of Nidaros had even sent letters to Iceland in 1189 and 1190 which reiterated the prohibition that violent attacks should not be made on sacred ground.\textsuperscript{627} In his saga, King Hákon is depicted conducting himself according to the teachings and principles of the Church. He is held up as an example of how good Christians should behave in war.

It was believed that worthy men like Hákon would receive the aid of God during their conflicts. King Hákon is shown to receive God’s mercy while on campaign. This enabled him to avoid difficult situations and achieve his military aims. On one occasion, for example, he is said to have found himself surrounded by a number of bands of Skúli’s men.

Gerði Guð þá miskunnsamliga við konunginn er hvárigir réðu á hann, því at ef aðrir hvárir hefði á råðit þá væri hann skjótt í foraði ok þeir menn er með honum váru.\textsuperscript{628}

God then acted mercifully towards the king when neither attacked him, because if either of the others had attacked him then he would have been in danger quickly, and those men who were with him.

Similarly, when battling against the Ribbungar, the saga’s author, Sturla Þórðarson, notes that ‘gerði Guð sem jafnan mikla miskunn við Hákon konung’\textsuperscript{629} [God showed

\textsuperscript{624} Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsÍF II,” 63.
\textsuperscript{625} Ibid., 106–8.
\textsuperscript{626} Holm-Olsen, \textit{Konungs Skuggsiá}, 121.
\textsuperscript{628} Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsÍF II,” 99.
\textsuperscript{629} Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsÍF I,” 324.
great mercy, as always, to King Hákon]. Sturla thus casts Hákon as a Christian king who is pious enough to deserve divine aid.

Christian ideals are thus shown to influence and shape individuals’ behaviour within Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar. This is also the case in Sverris saga, where it is suggested that King Sverrir demonstrated his gratitude for divine aid in battle by granting mercy to defeated opponents. Mercy is portrayed as an act thought to be pleasing to God.

Sverrir konungr þakkaði nú allsvaldanda Guði ok heilagri Guðs móður Máriu ok Öláfi konungi þenna fagra sigr er Guð gaf honum, ok sýndi hann þat með því at hann gaf hverjum grið, þeim er þess beiddi.\textsuperscript{630}

King Sverrir now thanked almighty God and Holy Mary mother of God and King Öláfr for this fine victory which God gave him, and he showed that for he gave mercy to everyone who asked for it.

Similarly, after the Battle of Fimreite, Sverrir’s actions are shown to be dictated by his concern to show gratitude to God for having intervened in the conflict.

Ok eigi megum vêr kenna oss þenna fagra sigr annan veg en þetta hafi farit eftir Guðs vilja ok hans tilskipun. Nú skulum vêr hér í mát veita honum makliðar þakkir ok þægillig laun. Er þat fyrst at halda vel grið vár við þá menn alla er til griða hafa gengit við oss. Veitum ok hjálp sárum mònnum. Vêr skulum ok veita gröft líkum þeim òllum er vêr megum ná, eftir sið kristinna manna.\textsuperscript{631}

But we cannot perceive this fine victory as ours in any other way than that it has happened after the will of God and at his arrangement. Now we must here give fitting thanks to him and acceptable recompense. First we must keep truce well with all those men who have obtained mercy from us. We also provide help to wounded men. We will give burial after the custom of Christian men to all the dead who we are able to find.

The granting of mercy towards defeated opponents is thus associated with good Christian conduct.

\textsuperscript{630} Þorleifur Hauksson, Ss ÍF, 25–26.
\textsuperscript{631} Ibid., 145.
The author of *Sverris saga* had good reasons to emphasise King Sverrir’s Christian credentials. The king’s relationship with the Church had been fragile even before he took the throne. The Archbishop of Nidaros, Eysteinn Erlendsson, had been an ally of his rival, King Magnús Erlingsson. Both before and after Magnús’ death, Sverrir struggled to gain the support of the Church and Eysteinn was even forced to flee to England in 1180. They later reconciled and he was able to return. He did not fare any better in his relations with Eysteinn’s successor, Eiríkr Ívarsson, who treated him as a usurper and refused to crown him. Sverrir in turn accused Eiríkr of breaking the law and accumulating too many men in his household. Rather than submit to Sverrir, Eiríkr fled to the archbishop of Lund, Absalon. He wrote to the Pope, as he had been doing since the conflict began, and once again protested against Sverrir’s behaviour. After receiving letters from the Pope denouncing Sverrir’s actions, Eiríkr took steps to excommunicate Sverrir in 1194. Sverrir would continue to be in conflict with the Church over who had overall control of the institution until his death in 1202.

This context partly explains why King Sverrir’s grants of mercy are so often said to be motivated by a desire to act in a Christian manner. The author of *Sverris saga* would have been aware of Sverrir’s tumultuous relationship with the Church and appears to have taken care to highlight Sverrir’s Christian qualities. He even comments directly on Sverrir’s concern for his eternal soul. The saga narrates how Sverrir pardoned the earl of Orkney, Haraldr Maddaðarson, who had supported a revolt against his rule, because he felt that they both needed mercy: Haraldr from him, and himself from God.

...því at ek mun þess þurfa af allsvaldanda Guði at hann miskunni mér framarr en ek hefi til gótr.

...for I [Sverrir] will need from almighty God that he shows mercy to me more than I have deserved.

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634 Ibid., 191.
Sverrir’s merciful acts are portrayed as visible expressions of his own piety at a time when his excommunication publicly questioned his faith in the strongest terms.

Mercy is associated with piety throughout this saga. *Sverris saga* relates that towards the end of his life, Sverrir besieged a number of men who were part of the Baglar faction on the rock of Tønsberg. When conditions for the besieged became unbearable, a small number of Baglar came to Sverrir to ask for mercy, which he granted to them. Upon seeing how favourably their comrade were treated, others within the force decided to ask for mercy too and eventually their leader, seeing that he could not win, requested this for all his men. However, when Sverrir solicited the opinion of his men on this request, he received a less than positive answer. Sverrir’s men were concerned that having been pardoned, their opponents would become part of their force. This, as I shall discuss later, was part of the convention of these kind of exchanges. However, Sverrir explained to his men that by forgiving others they would earn forgiveness from God for their sins.635

„...Hér í Túnsbergi felldu Baglar Híða, bróður minn, en í Ósló Philippum jarl, frænda minn ok marga aðra, en nú í vetr munu þér heyrð hafa at þeir hafa Sverri kallat bikkju eðr meri ok morgum qðrum illum nöfnnum. Nú vil ek þat fyrirgefa þeim fyrir Guðs sakir ok vænta þar á móti af honum fyrirgefnningar þess er ek hefi honum á móti gört. Eigu þér ekki síðr sálur en ek ok eigið þess at minnask. Engi maðr mun kalla yðr at heldr bleyðimenn fyrir þessa sók.Ö636

‘...Here in Tønsberg the Baglar killed Híða, my brother, and in Oslo, Jarl Philippus, my kinsman, and many others, and now this winter you will have heard that they have called Sverrir bitch and mare and many other bad names. Now I am willing to forgive them for God’s sake and in return, I hope for forgiveness from him for that which I have done against him. You have souls no less than I and have to remember this. No man will call you cowards any the more because of this.’

Sverrir’s pleas for God’s mercy are particularly pertinent given that this passage is placed just before his death scene within the saga.637 In this episode, the author of *Sverris saga*

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635 Ibid., 276–78.
636 Ibid., 277 See 208-10 for the attack on Sverrir’s brother Híði the previous summer in Tønsberg.
637 Sverre Bagge has noted that the author of *Sverris Saga* contrasts Sverrir’s merciful nature with that of Magnús in order to show him to be the better Christian. Sverre Bagge, “Debatt. ‘Gang Leader’ eller ‘The
has one last chance to demonstrate the pious behaviour of this excommunicate king. By showing forgiveness and mercy to defeated opponents, men like Sverrir could follow God’s example and show themselves to be good Christians. Importantly, it is made clear that merciful conduct does not contradict secular values which required a person to respond to personal attacks and injuries. Sverrir and his men would be praised for forgiving the Baglar who had wronged them, rather than criticised for failing to seek vengeance.

In the compendia, references to Christian behaviour in warfare are much less apparent, perhaps because, unlike Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar and Sverris saga, they do not focus in detail on one specific king. However, it is clear that their authors saw a king’s faith as an important aspect of his character. We need only look to the depiction of King Sigurðr Jórsalafari’s journey to Jerusalem to see how faith could inform military conduct in high medieval Norway. Morkinskinna records that King Sigurðr, who ruled Norway from 1103 to 1130, wanted to travel to Jerusalem ‘at kaupa sér Guðs miskunn ok góðan orðstír’ [to earn God’s mercy and a reputation for valor]. It is claimed that on his journey he fought eight battles against heathen armies and even received a piece of the holy cross from King Baldwin of Jerusalem. The authors of these texts also discuss the kind of behaviour considered appropriate for Christians. The author of Morkinskinna has King Haraldr Sigurðarson, who reigned from 1046 to 1066, comment that viking expeditions were not appropriate activities for Christians to engage in. These form of attacks were greatly offensive to the Christian faith. Christian teachings thus shaped the kind of conduct seen as ideal for elite warriors in high medieval Norway.

In Sverris saga, the Christian virtues of mercy and forgiveness are directly associated with acts of clemency after battle. In Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar, King Håkon mirrors the contemporary concerns of the Church by respecting the rules of sanctuary and

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639 Andersson and Gade, Msk, 313.
protecting non-combatants from the violence of armed conflict. Christian ideas are thus depicted as having a restraining influence on warrior conduct. We must now consider how important considerations of faith were in the development of ideals and norms of conduct more generally. As we shall see, the restrained behaviour depicted in the kings’ sagas was the product of a number of influences, not least the experience of war itself. Indeed, it is clear from our sources that mercy was not granted indiscriminately. There were unspoken cultural norms which influenced how, and when, quarter was granted. We must investigate how elite men are shown to behave after conflict in order to understand how these norms developed.
5.2  Granting *Grið*, Mercy, and Peace: The Practice of Warfare

When Norwegian warriors offer mercy to opponents within the kings’ sagas, they are often said to grant *grið*. The granting of *grið* signifies the intention of the victor to spare the life and limbs of defeated opponents. It is therefore similar to the sparing of surrendering enemies, or at least those who were of high status, which I have already outlined in relation to England and Denmark. It is apparent, however, that there were differences in the conventions which governed the granting of mercy in each of these kingdoms. In this section, I will outline the conditions in which elite men asked for, and were offered, mercy in high medieval Norway. I will consider how warriors could expect to be treated after they had been spared execution and whether the English norm of ransoming opponents was prevalent within this society.

5.2.1  Understanding *Grið*

The term *grið* is generally translated using a range of English words, from truce, to quarter, pardon, mercy and peace. It can also refer to a home or domicile, hinting at the safety such places are often seen to provide. In *Hirðskrá*, *grið* is used in a legal sense to refer to the protection granted to an individual who was travelling to the king in order to be tried for alleged crimes. One law describes how a man could be sent by a *syslumaðr*, a local official, to the king for judgement ‘i griðum’\(^642\) [in peace]. The *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for Nordisk Middelalder fra Vikingetid til Reformationen* defines one element of *grið* as: ‘fred el. trygd som ein kan få for ei viss tid el. på ein viss stad.’\(^643\) However, it also notes that *grið* can refer to the permanent habitation of a free person in another person’s home. These residents are referred to as *griðkona or griðmaðr* and were a feature of the Free State period in Iceland.\(^644\) During this time, householders were expected to protect all those who resided within their household, regardless of whether they were family members. The extension of protection to those outside of the

\(^{642}\) Imsen, *Hirdskråen*, 136.

\(^{643}\) Arne Bøe, “Grið,” in *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for Nordisk Middelalder fra Vikingetid til Reformationstid*, ed. Allan Karker et. al, vol. 5 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1956), cols. 463-4. “...peace or insurance which one can get for a certain time or in a certain place.”

\(^{644}\) Ibid., col. 463.
family group was termed *grið*.

The Church could similarly choose to grant *grið* to those who sought sanctuary. The term *grið* thus has two aspects. First, it communicates the idea of protection and safety. Second, it is something which is given by one individual or group to another. *Grið* can be demanded, but it is ultimately the decision of the stronger party to grant it to the weaker.

*Grið* is used within the kings’ sagas to denote grants of safe passage and protection. When describing how Erlingr Skakki travelled to Denmark to meet the Danish king, Valdemar, on behalf of his son, King Magnús Erlingsson, the author of *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturluson, uses the word *grið* to refer to Valdemar’s offer of safe passage to Erlingr.

> Konungr mæltd: „Grið skuluð þér hafa, Erlingr, sem þú beiðisk. Á engum manni niðumk ek, ef á minn fund kømr.”

> The King said: ‘You shall have a truce, Erlingr, as you ask. I do not act the villain to any man if he comes to see me.’

It is also used to refer to periods of truce. In *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, King Hákon is depicted denouncing his father-in-law, Skúli, for crowning himself king and raising a force against him when *grið*, the truce between them, had not yet been broken. The saga similarly notes that on another occasion when Hákon tried to agree a winter truce with Skúli he proposed that ‘*grið* skyldi setja’ [a truce should be set].

However, *grið* had a much more specific meaning within the context of post-conflict negotiations between victorious and defeated forces. Sverre Bagge has noted that victors often made a choice between killing their captives and granting them *grið*. Those who were spared were often made to join the victor’s force, or, at the very least, to

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646 See, for example, Holm-Olsen, *Konungs Skuggsió*, 121.


649 Sverrir Jakobsson, Porleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsH If II,” 90.

650 Ibid., 59.
swear not to fight against them again. Bagge does not believe that this tendency to spare defeated opponents was the result of any kind of societal code obliging warriors to act in a particular way. Rivals for the throne were, he suggests, simply too dangerous to keep alive.\(^{651}\) However, ordinary warriors could be absorbed into the victor’s army more safely. Bagge believes that it was the opportunity to do this which motivated grants of *grið*.\(^{652}\) For Bagge, the granting of *grið* was a consequence of elite individuals’ need to build up their military forces rather than the expression of an ideal mode of behaviour.

Hans Jacob Orning has also discussed the practical uses the granting of *grið* had during domestic conflict. Orning notes that good kings are often characterised as being merciful within the kings’ sagas.\(^{653}\) These kings would grant truces, spare opponents, and prohibit plundering after battle. In theory, a king’s decision to grant, or refuse, mercy was made on an absolute basis, with his judgement applying to all. However, Orning makes a distinction between how kings should conduct themselves in theory, and how they were actually able to conduct themselves in practice. Indeed, Orning believes that in reality, kings were often much more selective in their clemency. This was not only because kings were choosing to be lenient only when it suited them, but also because they often struggled to get their retainers to obey their commands. While a king was concerned with his overall military and political strategy, his retainers were more interested in taking revenge on opponents who had wronged them, sparing their friends on the opposing side and acquiring plunder. They might ignore their lord’s commands to spare or execute opponents if it went against their own wishes. This meant that the conduct of kings could be influenced by the behaviour of their retainers.\(^{654}\)

In quarrels with magnates, kings could also show themselves to be merciful overlords by sparring those who submitted to their power. Orning has argued that, in theory, magnates who wished to have the king’s mercy needed to first ask for it and then cede control to their monarch by submitting to him. Kings were not supposed to refuse to

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\(^{652}\) Ibid., 92–97.

\(^{653}\) Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence*, 173.

\(^{654}\) Ibid., 137–53.
grant mercy when explicitly asked for it. In practice, however, when magnates and kings had a disagreement, their reconciliation was often made on more equal terms. Kings did not have the power to dominate these powerful men. Instead, they used grants of mercy to resolve conflicts in a manner which was agreeable to all involved.\textsuperscript{655} Orning therefore dismisses the idea that mercy had a cultural function which brought honour and virtue to individual warriors. He concludes: ‘In an ideological perspective the king [who granted mercy] stood out as the great forgiving lord, but in practice his clemency was not so much an expression of his all-embracing power as a sign of his lack of power.’\textsuperscript{656} Kings granted clemency in order to placate powerful elite men and protect their position.

Although I agree to a certain extent with this assessment of what the sagas are trying to show us, I think Orning is too quick to dismiss the power ideals could have. The kings’ sagas clearly show that elite warriors could be lauded for adopting ideal forms of conduct. Indeed, the use of mercy, as described by the sagas, is influenced by a wide range of cultural, political, strategic and religious factors beyond those which Orning and Bagge have identified. In this chapter, I argue that \textit{grið} was not simply granted in order to gain military support or facilitate reconciliations between warring elite men. It was an intrinsic component of the conventions of war which developed in response to the realities of conflict in high medieval Norway. At the same time, it was an ideal mode of conduct which Norwegian warriors were expected to aspire towards. There is no need to assume that there was always such a big divide between the ideals of a community and the norms of conduct its members are shown to adopt and practice.

### 5.2.2 The Granting of \textit{Grið}

The kings’ sagas present the offer, and acceptance, of \textit{grið} as having a number of features. The basic process can be seen in this example taken from \textit{Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar’s} narration of the conflict between King Hákon and his former guardian, Skúli, who was challenging his former charge for the throne. The saga relates how after one battle, Hákon granted \textit{grið} to a man called Árni, an important member of Skúli’s

\textsuperscript{655} Ibid., 163–92.  
\textsuperscript{656} Ibid., 192.
faction. Afterwards, Árni is said to have joined the king’s men for a meal, a sign of his inclusion into the king’s forces.

Þeir sátu þá báðir saman at mat, Þorsteinn heimnes ok Árni rúfa. Var konungr þá svá vel til Árna sem hann hefði honum jafnan fylgt. Ok svá grimmr sem Hákon konungr hafði verit um daginn at fyrirkoma sínum óvinum þá var ok eigi hitt minnfr frá möti hversu miskunnsamr hann var síðan í gríðagjöfum við alla þá er á hans vald gengu.657

Þorsteinn heimnes and Árni rúfa then sat together eating. Then the king was so kind to Árni as if he had always followed him. And as fierce as King Hákon had been during the day to destroy his enemies so it was no less exceptional how merciful he was afterwards in granting mercy to all those who came into his power.

The rest of Skúli’s forces were treated equally leniently. Those who had sought sanctuary in a Church were offered mercy and then shared among the various bands in Hákon’s force.658 As a result of sparing these men, King Hákon was able to increase his troop numbers, reconcile with his elite opponent, Árni, and gain praise for his merciful behaviour.

Of course, grants of mercy did not always have such positive outcomes in the long term. Even if reconciliation was achieved, there was no guarantee it would last, especially if tensions remained between supposedly reconciled opponents. This is exemplified in accounts of the pardoning of Finnr Árnason, a Norwegian magnate, by King Haraldr Sigurðarson. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, Finnr had allied himself to the Danish king, Svend, who in return had given him the rank of Jarl.659 When King Haraldr harried Denmark, King Svend engaged the Norwegian fleet and Finnr was captured by his former Norwegian comrades in the ensuing battle. As Fagrskinna relates, King Haraldr was delighted with how things had turned out and mocked Finnr’s bad luck.


658 Ibid., 107–8.
taka grið af Þóru, frændkonu þinni?”...Pá mælti Finnr eitt orðskrök, þat er síðan er uppi haft, hversu reiðr hann var, er hann fekk eigi stillt orðum sinum:
“Eigi er undarligt, at þú hafir vel bitizk í dag, er merrin hefir fylgt þér.” Finni jarli váru gefin grið, ok var hann með Haraldi konungi um hrið.660

Then the king answered, ‘Will you accept quarter, although it is not deserved?’
Then said the jarl, ‘Not from your dog.’
‘Will you accept quarter from your kinsman Magnús?’ He was commanding a ship then.
The jarl said, ‘How can that whelp offer quarter?’
Then the king laughed and found it fun to have to do with him, and said, ‘Will you accept quarter from your kinswoman Þóra?’...
...Then Finnr uttered a nasty speech that has since been remembered, showing how angry he was, so that he was unable to restrain his speech:
‘No wonder you have bitten hard today, since the mare has come with you.’
Jarl Finnr was given quarter, and he stayed with King Haraldr for a while.661

At no point do the kings’ sagas attempt to explain Haraldr’s motivations for pardoning Finnr. However, it seems unlikely that Finnr was spared because Haraldr thought he could win back his support. After all, Finnr had already refused to submit and was not willing to pledge allegiance to Haraldr. He had also already proved himself untrustworthy when he chose to ally with Haraldr’s rival, King Svend. As these concerns do not seem to have made Finnr ineligible to receive a pardon, it seems probable that Haraldr was motivated by less pragmatic concerns when he chose to spare his former friend.

For the author of Morkinskinna, merciful actions were laudable in and of themselves, regardless of the reasoning which preceded them. Haraldr’s public show of kindness gained him cultural capital and did not diminish his perceived political power.

Ok i annan stað, er sagt var áðr frá orðaviðskiptum þeira Haralds konungs ok Finns jarls; þar liknaði sá er valdit átti, ok vegr var þat en eigi lítiræði.662

660 Bjarni Einarsson, “Fsk ÍF,” 269.
661 Finlay, Fsk, 214.
Moreover, when the exchange of words between King Haraldr and Finnr jarl was told, the man who had the power showed mercy, and there was honor in that action and no lack of authority.\footnote{Andersson and Gade, Msk, 232.} It is therefore more likely that Finnr was spared because King Haraldr felt it would be unacceptable to execute, imprison or punish him, rather than because he thought it was strategically advantageous to do so. Their kinship and former friendship might also have been a factor. Finnr had been very close to Haraldr before his defection to Denmark. Finnr was married to Haraldr’s niece and Haraldr was married to Finnr’s niece.\footnote{Snorri Sturluson, Hkr ÍF, 1951, III:126.} These ties, as well as the belief that merciful behaviour was virtuous and expected, probably informed Haraldr’s decision to pardon Finnr.

After receiving his pardon, Finnr is said to have stayed with Haraldr ‘um hrið’\footnote{Bjarni Einarsson, “Fsk ÍF,” 269.} [for a while].\footnote{Finlay, Fsk, 214.} Ágrip of Nóregskonungasǫgum records that Finnr ‘…fluttisk heim með Haraldi til eigna sinna’\footnote{Bjarni Einarsson, ed., “Ágrip af Nóregskonunga Sǫgum.,” in Ágrip of Nóregskonungar Saga. Fagrskinna - Nóreg Konunga Tal, Íslenzk Fornrit, XXIX (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1985), 38.} [returned home with Haraldr to his estates].\footnote{Matthew J. Driscoll, trans., Ágrip af Nóregskonungasǫgum: A Twelfth-Century Synoptic History of the Kings of Norway, 2nd ed. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2008), 57.} Pardoned men, and especially ordinary soldiers, are often said to have stayed with, or even joined, their opponents’ force after conflict. In Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar, Erlingr rómstafr, a man who had supported a rival of King Hákon, accepted grið from Hákon and joined the king’s army, even becoming part of an expedition against his former comrades.\footnote{Sverrir Jakobsson, Porleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsH ÍF I,” 320.} Likewise, during his conflict with Skúli, King Hákon granted mercy to a number of Skúli’s men, the Várbelgir, who had sought sanctuary in a church. Afterwards, ‘Fóru sumir til konungs en sumir til búa sinna’\footnote{Sverrir Jakobsson, Porleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsH ÍF II,” 68–9, Quote at 69.} [Some went to the king, but some went to their own homesteads].

Saga authors recognised that these transfers of allegiance were not always permanent, especially if they were entered into unwillingly. In Heimskringla, Snorri Sturluson claims...
that Finnr was given permission by King Haraldr to leave his company when it became obvious he resented being made to stay.

Var Finnr heldr ókátr ok ómjúkr í orðum. Þá mælti Haraldr konungr: „Sé ek þat, Finnr, at þú vilt nú ekki þyðask við mik ok við frændr þína. Vil ek nú gefa þér orlof at fara til Sveins, konungs þíns.” Jarl svarar: „Þat vil ek þíggja ok því þakksamligar, er ek kóm fyrr í brot heðan.”

Finnr was rather gloomy and abrupt in what he said. Then said King Haraldr: ‘I can see, Finnr, that you will not now be friends with me and with your kinsmen. I will now give you leave to go to your king, Sveinn.’ The jarl replies: ‘I will accept that, and all the more thankfully in that I may the sooner get away from here.’

Haraldr and Finnr had not truly reconciled and this made their ongoing relationship untenable. The most successful reconciliations were those which were willingly entered into by both parties.

Sturla Þórðarson has King Hákon advise his men likewise in Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar. Hákon wanted to offer his long-term opponents, the Ribbungar, grið, even though they had supported the pretender Sigurðr Erlingsson ribbungr until his death and had more recently taken on a new leader, Knútr Hákonarson. After such a long period of antagonism between the two groups, Hákon wanted peace. He reasoned that even though the Ribbungar had caused him so much trouble and cost him so many men, he had to forgive these past indiscretions if a reconciliation was to be achieved.

En ef vér viljum þeim grið gefa þá skulum vér þat með því móti gera at þeir skulu vera af oss klandalauðir um alla hluti þá er þeir hafa við oss misgert, svá sem siðr er til góðra höfðingja, ella jättum þeim engum griðum ok fylgjum þeim nú sem fastast...

672 Snorri Sturluson, Hkr, 2015, III:94.
673 Sverrir Jakobsson, Porleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsH ÍF I,” 328–29; Hans Jacob Orning misinterprets this episode when he suggests that King Hákon is telling his men to refuse to give quarter to the Ribbungar. The king is actually making a point about the conditions under which grið must be given. A person who grants grið must be willing to forgive the past offences of their opponent. Orning, Unpredictability and Presence, 138.
But if we are willing to give them mercy, then we should do that in such a way that they shall not be bothered by us about all those things which they have wrongly done against us, as is the custom of good princes; otherwise we grant them no mercy and follow them now as fast as we can...

A proper reconciliation could not take place if Hákon’s men were not willing to forgive their opponents’ wrongful deeds. Forgiveness and mercy went hand in hand.

This might explain why the act of asking for mercy seems to be a prerequisite for it being granted. The importance of this act is indicated by the regularity with which the kings’ sagas note whether or not grið was asked for and the consequences faced by those who would not capitulate. Sverris saga records an occasion when King Sverrir burnt down the houses of some farmers who refused to submit to him. He only stopped the attack when a young boy from the area begged him not to burn his father’s farmstead.

The king replied: ‘I shall certainly not burn his farmstead, since you ask, and none would have been burnt today if the farmers had been at home and sued for mercy, and tell them so. And none shall be burnt from now on.

The next day the householders submitted to the king and paid fines. By asking for mercy and submitting, an individual was signalling that they were no longer a threat and were willing to settle the conflict. In theory, this meant that there was no reason to continue to fight, as one side had already achieved their aim of bettering the other and could now consolidate their position as victors. Until this happened, however, there was still a reason for the violence to continue.

In a similar episode in Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar, King Hákon is said to have travelled to Vermaland in Sweden because the inhabitants there had been supporting his rival, Sigurðr ribbungr. Although Hákon was willing to use force to subdue the region, he

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674 Þorleifur Hauksson, Ss Íf, 266.
675 Þorleifur Hauksson, “Implicit Ideology and the King’s Image in Sverris Saga,” 131 Hauksson points out that Sverrir’s harsher attacks on enemies in Sverris Saga are justified by the fact his opponents would not make peace with him.
hoped that he would be able to win the inhabitants’ adherence more peacefully. He is depicted eagerly awaiting the residents’ surrender so that he might be able to avoid having to use force against them.

...kómu allir sveitarhöfðingjar til konungs, ok var herrinn þá mjök ákafr, ok vildu brenna byggðina. En konungr frestaði á morgininn fram ok hugði at bændr mundu koma til hans ok biðja miskunnar ok bjóða yfirbætr. Ok er honum þótti sú ván þrotin þá tóku menn ok brenndu allar byggðir þar sem þeir fóru.676

...all the leaders of the troops came to the king, and the host was then very eager, and wanted to burn the settlement. But the king delayed advancing until the next day and thought that the farmers would come to him and ask for mercy and offer atonement. But when it seemed to him that hope was gone, then the men took and burned all the settlements there as they went.

As in the example from Sverris saga, a woman is said to have begged Hákon not to burn her house down. Hákon agreed not to attack and commented that if more of her neighbours had come to him and begged for mercy, he would have spared their homes as well.677 In both this episode, and that from Sverris Saga, peace is promoted as more desirable than unnecessary destruction. When non-violent settlement is offered, it is taken.

Therefore, although the king’s sagas show mercy being granted to those who were reluctant to ask for it, there is strong suggestion in these texts that surrender and submission had to be offered willingly. This is an idea which is reflected in biblical examples included in Konungs Skuggsjá. Konungs Skuggsjá is constructed as a discussion between a Father and his Son on the correct way to conduct oneself at the Norwegian court. In this text, the Father makes a clear distinction between those who ask for mercy and those who do not.

Abiron oc dathan þa er þeir hœyrðu þat af Moysi at þeir hofðu misgort þa urðu þeir reiðer amot oc iðraðuz æigi oc fello þeir þvi vægðar laust at þeir leitaðo ængrar vægðar...En þeir er i hinum siðarrum dœmum synda ec þeir um aaron oc ur eða dauði eða allir aðrir þeir er i þeim dœmum gat ec þa dulðu þeir æcki ill virka sinna gengo sva viðr sinar af gerðar, sæm þær varo

676 Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsH ÍF I,” 283.
677 Ibid., 285.
Dathan and Abiram, when Moses told them that they had done evil, became angry and refused to repent; and they perished without mercy because they sought no mercy...But those whom I pointed out to you in the later accounts, Aaron, Uri, David, and the others who were mentioned in those examples, did not conceal their wickedness, but confessed their misdeeds as they were; hoping for pardon, they begged mercy and clemency, and offered to atone, as He should determine, Who, they knew, had the decision in His power. And they promised that nevermore would they fall into such guilt, if they might become fully reconciled.679

Those who wished to be pardoned had to actively seek clemency and reconciliation by confessing their evil deeds, repenting to God and submitting to his judgement.680 The Father juxtaposes the treatment of Judas, who did not see pardon as an option for himself, with that of Peter, who openly asked for pardon and mercy.

Judas fell in the beginning into sin through avarice and love of wealth and took a bribe to betray his Lord. His repentance was such that he could not hope for pardon, and he asked for no mercy but punished himself with a sudden death. But Peter wept bitterly in his repentance, and, hoping for mercy, implored forgiveness. Furthermore, Judas had the greater guilt, for he sold his Lord; and though he repented, he craved no pardon; and he did not abide the judgement of God, but condemned himself forthwith. But Peter denied his Lord through sudden fear and repented immediately in great fear of God...
sorrow; he submitted to the judgement of God and abided it, and did not condemn himself as Judas did.\footnote{Larson, \textit{The King's Mirror}, 284–85.}

Judas condemned himself through his own inability to believe that he could gain the mercy of God.\footnote{Sverre Bagge has argued that this episode demonstrates that it was not enough for a sinner to repent, they must also humiliate themselves by directly asking for mercy from God. However, the author of \textit{Konungs Skuggsiá} does not necessarily show asking for mercy to be a humiliating act. It is not suggested that Judas was too proud to ask for mercy, or that he thought such an act was shameful, but rather that he had convinced himself that he was beyond help. Bagge, \textit{The Political Thought of \textit{The King's Mirror}}, 59–60.} Those who wished to receive the mercy of both God and their fellow man had to openly ask for clemency to be shown.

Although there are examples of elite men being treated mercifully even though they had refused to submit, it is clear that in theory, only those who asked for grid were eligible to receive it. Those who were spared often joined their opponents’ force as a condition of their receiving clemency. I have already noted a few reasons why victorious armies and individuals might have chosen to spare their opponents. The granting of mercy was a laudable behaviour which demonstrated an individual’s Christian qualities as well as being part of the conventions of war. However, it is notable that, unlike in England, ransoms do not seem to have been paid by those who were spared. In England, one of the factors which encouraged elite men to spare their elite opponents was the profit they could make from their ransom. If Norwegian elites did not gain financially from sparing their opponents, did they benefit in other ways from granting mercy?

\subsection*{5.2.3 Ransom and the Treatment of Individuals}

Before this question can be answered, it is important to consider the evidence for ransoming in Norway. There are very few references to men being ransomed within the kings’ sagas and it was by no means a defining feature of warfare in Norway. Even where financial transactions are shown to have taken place between victors and their defeated opponents, these could more correctly be categorised as punishments or opportunistic extractions. They were not the result of a norm which encouraged the ransom of individual warriors. Matthew Strickland has made a useful distinction between ransom
following battle and payments paid following a revolt. We must be equally careful to distinguish between different forms of financial extraction in our evidence for Norway, especially when the use of certain terms within historical accounts might suggest ransom had taken place. In this section, I will briefly discuss the kind of payments we see being made by defeated opponents in the kings’ sagas.

After defeating an uprising of local men in Vik, the author of Morkinskinna notes that King Eysteinn Haraldsson ‘drap mart af þeim ok tók gjǫld ok gísla ok útlausnir af sumum’ [killed many of them, took hostages, and exacted payments, though some were permitted to ransom themselves]. This idea of ransom, here denoted by the Old Norse ‘útlausnir,’ is not present in Heimsrkingla’s account of this event, although Snorri does note that some sort of payments were made to the victors. Snorri comments that the defeated locals submitted to the king, after which they ‘guldu gjǫld stór, en konungr tók gísla af þeim’ [paid great fines, and the king took hostages from them]. Therefore, although the language used by the author of Morkinskinna implies that these men were ransomed, these payments might be more correctly seen as punishments. They were made after a period of revolt and appear to have been paid by the defeated men as a whole, rather than individually. Ransoms are shown being extracted from groups of men in high medieval England, but it is much more common to see individuals being captured and ransomed. There are few examples of this kind of behaviour in the kings’ sagas.

To a certain extent, this may be the result of the lack of detail the kings’ sagas give us about the behaviour of individual elite men and ordinary soldiers during war. The authors of these texts tend to focus on what happened during conflict more generally and only refer to the actions of individual men who were not kings in exceptional cases. However, given how often the granting of grið is mentioned in narratives of conflict, it seems unlikely that ransom would not be depicted if it were a common mode of

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684 Strickland, War and Chivalry, 187.
685 Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, Msk If, 2011, II:216.
686 Andersson and Gade, Msk, 390.
687 Snorri Sturluson, Hkr If, 1951, III:326.
behaviour at this time. Indeed, it is telling that financial payments are rarely shown to motivate the sparing of opponents.

While we cannot discount the few examples we have of ransom being paid, references to this sort of behaviour are few and far between. Yet the few examples we do have tempt us to wonder what the authors of the kings’ sagas might have left out of their accounts. For example, Snorri writes that when Erlingr Skakki finally defeated King Hákon herðibreiðr, who had challenged his son Magnús for the throne, ‘engi þurfti griðin at nefna af Hákonar mǫnnum nema þeir einir, er ríkismenn tóku á vald sitt ok festu fé fyrir’689 [there was no point in any of Hákon’s men speaking of quarter except just those that men of the ruling class took into their power and pledged ransom for].690 However, even if this kind of behaviour was more common than the kings’ sagas suggest, this merely prompts further questions. If men could ask for ransom, why are they not depicted doing so? It could be that this practice was more common among elite men than kings, which would explain why it is rarely mentioned within our king-centred texts. However, it seems more likely that financial extractions were made on a much more ad hoc basis, when warriors felt they had an opportunity to profit.

This appears to have been the case during foreign campaigns as well as in domestic conflict. When King Eysteinn Haraldsson captured the earl of Orkney, Haraldr Maddaðarson, while campaigning in the Northern Isles and Scotland, he had him pay a ransom in return for his release. As Snorri writes: ‘Hann leysti sik út með þrimr mǫrkum gulls...’691 [He ransomed himself with three marks of gold].692 Morkinskinna claims that it was seven.693 However, there is no indication that a desire to be merciful, or to be perceived as such, was behind Eysteinn’s actions. Rather, it seems that Eysteinn was trying to make the most out of the opportunity presented to him. Orkneyinga saga even suggests that Eysteinn made Haraldr hand over control of Orkney and subsequently hold

690 Snorri Sturluson, Hkr, 2015, III:239.
691 Snorri Sturluson, Hkr ÍF, 1951, III:327.
it from him as a subject lord.\textsuperscript{694} Such an offer was unlikely to have had much effect in the long term, especially as Eysteinn’s brothers and co-kings, Ingi and Sigurðr, also had a claim to the Earldom.\textsuperscript{695} Eysteinn was simply trying to extract as much as possible from the earl.

Ransom was a way for Norwegian kings to profit from foreign war. \textit{Fagrskinna} records how King Sigurðr Jórsalafari acquired wealth ‘með útlausn þeira manna, er hann hafði tekit í orrostu’\textsuperscript{696} [as ransom for the men he had captured in battle]\textsuperscript{697} against the ruler of Galicia. This is not mentioned in either \textit{Heimskringla’s} or \textit{Morkinskinna’s} version of these events, although all three narratives note that Sigurðr’s forces took a large amount of booty before they left the region.\textsuperscript{698} Similarly, while \textit{Morkinskinna} refers to Magnús berfœtttr (r.1093–1103) harrying Halland, which was at that time part of Denmark, and winning ‘mikit fé, sumt með ráni en sumt með útlausnum’\textsuperscript{699} [a great deal of money, some by plundering and some from ransom],\textsuperscript{700} \textit{Heimskringla} and \textit{Fagrskinna} do not mention ransoming at all in their accounts.\textsuperscript{701} It seems that although the authors of the kings’ sagas knew what ransoming was and recognised it as a behaviour their kings utilised during military campaigns, they were not especially concerned about recording it. This is in stark contrast to these authors’ tendency to note whether \textit{grið} was, or was not, given in domestic warfare. Ransom does not seem to have been viewed by these authors as an intrinsic feature of warfare in high medieval Norway.

As all historians know, and the cliché reminds us, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. However, in this case, there are good reasons to think that the few examples we have of payments being made by defeated opponents to victorious forces in high

\textsuperscript{694} Finnboði Guðmundsson, ed., \textit{Orkneyinga Saga}, Íslenzk Fornrit, XXXIV (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1965), 240.
\textsuperscript{695} Barbara E. Crawford, \textit{The Northern Earldoms: Orkney and Caithness from AD 870 to 1470} (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2013) See sections 6.1 and 6.2 for a discussion of how the Scottish and Norwegain Kings in this period sought to control the northern Earldoms.
\textsuperscript{696} Bjarni Einarsson, “Fsk ÍF,” 316.
\textsuperscript{697} Finlay, \textit{Fsk}, 253.
\textsuperscript{699} Ármann Jakobsson and Þórdur Ingi Guðjónsson, \textit{Msk ÍF}, 2011, II:38.
\textsuperscript{700} Andersson and Gade, \textit{Msk}, 297.
\textsuperscript{701} Snorri Sturluson, \textit{Hkr ÍF}, 1951, III:212; Bjarni Einarsson, “Fsk ÍF,” 302.
medieval Norway were fines or opportunistic extractions. There is little evidence to suggest that ransom was the norm or that it was a central feature of the process by which mercy was shown to defeated opponents within this society.

If warriors in medieval Norway did not generally profit from sparing defeated opponents, then we must ask what other motivations they might have had for adopting, and adhering to, this convention. Indeed, we must consider why this convention developed in the first place. These questions are particularly pertinent given that from the twelfth to the mid-thirteenth century, Norway was disturbed by a series of civil wars. It may have been ideal for elite men to show mercy to their defeated opponents, but during civil war it could not always have been politically expedient to do so. We must consider whether ideals and conventions of conduct survived when confronted by the demands of civil war and rebellion.
5.3 Mercy, Pragmatism, and Civil War

The twelfth century saw the beginning of a series of civil wars and intra-family disputes in Norway during which the elite group fragmented into loosely defined factions. Challenges for the throne caused much of this conflict, with pretenders who claimed royal connections forming war bands to fight for their cause. However, quarrels between co-ruling kings could also lead to war. The reigns of the brothers King Sigurðr Haraldsson (r.1136-1155), King Ingi Haraldsson (r.1136-1161) and King Eysteinn Haraldsson (r.1142-1157), for example, ended with the deaths of both Sigurðr and Eysteinn in battle against Ingi. Ingi was, in turn, killed in battle against the claimant, King Hákon Sigurðarson, nicknamed Hákon herðibreiðr. One might wonder what place the ideals of restraint and moderation could have within this climate of endemic war. If defeated pretenders and rival kings were allowed to live, then they could serve as a rallying point for their previous supporters. Their military forces were equally dangerous, as they could easily coalesce around a new challenger for the throne. In this section, I will discuss how kings and challengers to the throne dealt with defeated opponents and whether clemency had any role to play within these conflicts.

5.3.1 The Uses of Clemency during Civil War

The authors of the kings’ sagas comment that Erlingr Skakki, the father of the future King Magnús Erlingsson, was ruthless both in his attempts to win the throne for his son as well as in his subsequent efforts to defend it against pretenders. According to Snorri Sturluson, Erlingr’s contemporaries considered him cruel and hard. His unwillingness to show mercy encouraged opposition.

En hitt var þó mest, at hann lét óvini sína fá eina landsvistina fá, þótt griða beiddisk, ok urðu fyrir þá sok margir til at hlaupa í flokkana, þegar er hófusk í móti honum.703

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702 See Sverre Bagge, “The Structure of the Political Factions in the Internal Struggles of the Scandinavian Countries During the High Middle Ages,” Scandinavian Journal of History 24, no. 3–4 (1999): 299–320; Bagge, Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla, 64–75 As Sverre Bagge has noted, these factions were probably loose groups bound together by friendship and mutual benefit.

703 Snorri Sturluson, Hkr IF, 1951, III:412.
But the real thing was that he gave only a few of his enemies permission to stay in the country, even when they begged for quarter, and for this reason many ended up running off to join the bands when these rose against him.\textsuperscript{704}

\textit{Fagrskinna} adds that Erlingr’s policy of driving all men of importance into exile left him open to raids from those who had supported the pretenders Hákon herðibreiðr and Sigurðr Sigurðsson. Erlingr had defeated their forces in order to win the throne for his son, but his lack of clemency afterwards encouraged their supporters to continue their opposition.\textsuperscript{705}

Even during conflict itself, Erlingr’s refusal to accept surrender merely served to prolong the violence. On one occasion, when a number of men supporting Sigurðr Sigurðsson secretly asked Erlingr for \textit{grið}, Erlingr replied that while he was willing to grant \textit{grið} to anyone who asked for it, he would reserve the right to exile anyone who had committed a serious offence against him. Convinced that this would be made to apply to themselves, the men decided to keep their band together for fear of being made to leave Norway.\textsuperscript{706} Knowing that they would be unable to submit and come to terms with Erling, his opponents’ only choice was to continue to fight. Had clemency been offered, the conflict might have been brought to a close sooner.

In his work on medieval Germany, Gerd Althoff noted how conventions such the granting of mercy could be used as a method of dispute resolution. He argued that medieval warriors had a set of unwritten rules which allowed them to navigate conflict and avoid it when necessary. Threats and posturing did not necessarily have to lead to violence if a resolution could be bought about according to the customs of the elite group.\textsuperscript{707} By ignoring these customs, Erlingr was restricting the ways in which he could end conflict and making a strategic choice about the method he would use to maintain power. He was committed to a policy of completely defeating and removing all of his opponents, rather than attempting to reconcile with them or win their support.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{704} Snorri Sturluson, \textit{Hkr}, 2015, III:258.
\textsuperscript{705} Bjarni Einarsson, “Fsk ÍF,” 348.
\textsuperscript{706} Snorri Sturluson, \textit{Hkr ÍF}, 1951, III:386; Bjarni Einarsson, “Fsk ÍF,” 342.
\end{flushright}
I am not suggesting that Erlingr never granted mercy to his opponents. We cannot ever really know the extent to which he showed clemency during his lifetime. However, saga authors chose to depict him as believing that executing his opponents was the best way to strengthen his position. He is shown to be ruthless towards men of all ranks, despite the resentment this could create. Fagrskinna’s account of Erlingr’s execution of two men, Friðrekr and Bjarni, shows the problems his approach caused. Erlingr had Friðrekr tied to an anchor and thrown into the sea and Bjarni hanged. It is said that the death of Bjarni ‘var þat engum manní harmandi, en Friðrekr var ættstórr maðr ok var hann mjǫk harmaðr í Þrœndalǫgum’ [caused no one any grief; but Friðrekr was a man of great family and was much mourned in Þrœndalǫg]. Friðrekr had connections to the most important families in Þrœndalǫg and they are later said to be ill-disposed towards Erlingr because of this killing. Erlingr’s decision to execute his opponents meant he had little hope of earning the support of the friends and kinsmen of these unfortunate men.

It is instructive that Erlingr’s actions are not always shown to have been supported by those around him. Even his own son, Magnús, is said to have had qualms about some of his more ruthless decisions. He faced opposition when he wanted to execute a child, Haraldr, who was the reputed son of King Sigurðr Haraldsson and Erlingr’s own wife Kristín, and therefore also King Mágnus’ half-brother. Many asked for Haraldr to be shown mercy and encouraged King Mágnus to intercede and stop the killing, but Erlingr would not be swayed from his course. He was convinced that his opponents would put this child forward as a candidate for the throne and so had him executed. The author of Fagrskinna notes that Erlingr was greatly condemned for this deed, but Snorri Sturluson comments that Erlingr was convinced of its necessity. He is said to have warned his son: ‘...þú munt litla hríð ráða ríkinu í frelsi, ef þú skalt heilhugaráðum einum fram fara’ [you will not long rule the country in peace if you are always going to act with goodwill towards everyone]. Erlingr’s method of dealing with opposition is clear.

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709 Finlay, Fsk, 281.
712 Bjarni Einarsson, “Fsk ÍF,” 358.
714 Snorri Sturluson, Hkr, 2015, III:257.
However, the fact that others are depicted disagreeing with his actions demonstrates that his attitude was not shared by all. The condemnation he received upon executing Haraldr is a testament to the dishonourable nature of his actions.

In his treatment of opponents, Erlingr’s behaviour stands in contrast to someone like King Sverrir who, as we have seen, is portrayed as being particularly merciful. I have already noted how, in a speech the morning after the Battle of Fimreite, during which Sverrir’s main rival, King Magnús Erlingsson, was killed, Sverrir is said to have instructed his men how to behave now the conflict was over. His first thought was to his defeated opponents.

Er þat fyrst at halda vel grið vár við þá menn alla er til griða hafa gengit við oss. Veitum ok hjálp sárum mǫnnum. Vér skulum ok veita groft líkum þeim ǫllum er vör megum ná, eftir sið kristinna manna.\(^\text{715}\)

First we must keep truce well with all those men who have obtained mercy from us. We also provide help to wounded men. We will give burial after the custom of Christian men to all the dead who we are able to find.

The way in which Sverrir treats his opponents is an important aspect of his characterisation within Sverris Saga. We cannot know if this clemency was politically calculated to win Sverrir as much support as possible. The saga is silent on this aspect of his leadership as it chooses to focus on Sverrir’s behaviour as a reflection of his virtue and piety, rather than his political machinations. However, even if Sverrir was not pardoning his opponents in order to achieve some political end, his tendency towards leniency affected how opponents viewed him. Sverrir’s leniency is said to have encouraged opponents to surrender and come to terms with him. However, it is also evident that some of the men Sverrir spared returned to their former opposition after gaining their freedom. Both Sverrir’s and Erlingr’s approaches to defeated opponents had positives and negatives.

This is illustrated in Sverrir’s case by his relationship with Nikolás Árnason, bishop of Oslo, who was a former supporter of King Magnús Erlingsson. Nikolás plotted against

\(^{715}\text{Þorleifur Hauksson, Ss ÍF, 145.}\)
Sverrir but was subsequently pardoned. After this, Bishop Nikolás is said to have become Sverrir’s close ally and adviser. He was even given the chief role at Sverrir’s coronation.\(^\text{716}\) However, Bishop Nikolás’ loyalty eventually wavered and he later conspired to place King Magnús Erlingsson’s alleged son on the throne. He raised a band of men called the Baglar and began a military campaign against Sverrir.\(^\text{717}\) Sverrir’s earlier clemency had not been successful in winning the long-term support of his previous agitator.

Despite Nikolás’ recidivism, Sverrir did not treat him any more harshly when he was next approached for a reconciliation. Nikolás sent a priest to Sverrir to negotiate on his behalf. *Sverris saga* notes that although the king was unsure of how successful any reconciliation would be given Nikolás’ previous duplicity, he was willing to give him *gríð* if he came to see him in person, thereby insisting on the individual submission conventionally required before mercy could be granted.\(^\text{718}\) Sverrir’s attitude towards opponents is illustrated in his comment to the priest that he would not hurt Nikolás if he came into his hands.

“...máttu svá segja honum at mart þykki mér meira til frægðar at vinna en drepa hann ef hann kemr á mitt vald...”\(^\text{719}\)

‘...you can also say to him that I have more ways to achieve renown than to kill him if he comes into my power...’

For Sverrir, killing one’s opponents did not bring great renown or honour and therefore was not a useful mode of behaviour. The author of *Sverris saga* wants his audience to know that Sverrir had others ways to achieve power and maintain his position.

Sverre Bagge has questioned whether King Sverrir’s leniency ultimately led him to face more resistance, as he neither killed his opponents nor was successful in winning their

\(^{716}\) Ibid., 188–89.

\(^{717}\) Ibid., 194–205.

\(^{718}\) “...unna mynda ek Nikolási gríða ef hann kömi sjálfr á minn fund...” [I would grant Nikolás mercy if he came himself to see me] ibid., 204–5, Quote at 205.

\(^{719}\) Ibid., 205.
sustained loyalty. However, before we conclude that this means that leniency was a bad method of dealing with opponents, we need to consider whether elites in high medieval Norwegian society expected long-term loyalty as the outcome of their deals. It is unlikely that they did. When King Hákon Hákonarson finally defeated his main foes, the Baglar, the leaders of this band came to terms with him and peace ensued. However, many of them later turned against him after receiving little favour. Guðólfr á Blakkastöðum, a former Baglar leader, was not granted the local royal office of sýsla because he had earned a bad reputation when he had previously held one. This snub encouraged Guðólfr to seek out a new challenger for the throne and form a new band of men known as the Ribbungar. Another former Baglar, Gunnarr Ásuson, also joined the Ribbungar because he received no honour from the king. In return for his defection he was granted local office. The support of elite men had to be first won and then maintained. Reconciliation could only develop into a more enduring alliance if both parties continued to feel that their relationship was advantageous.

Disloyalty could also hardly have been unexpected given the frequency with which elite men are shown to change sides within the sagas. The sparing of opponents might buy an individual’s allegiance for a while but it could not guarantee it in the long term. In his study of Norwegian elites, Hans Jacob Orning notes that kings ‘had more limited and modest expectations’ of the loyalty of their magnates in practice. Despite this, Sverrir is never presented as being naïve for choosing to pardon his opponents. In fact, the author of Sverris saga suggests that Sverrir granted mercy to opponents even when he

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720 Bagge, “The Structure of the Political Factions in the Internal Struggles of the Scandinavian Countries During the High Middle Ages,” 315 In a speculative piece, Bagge wonders whether King Sverrir faced ongoing opposition throughout his reign because he was unable to fully reconcile with his high-status opponents. Although is it difficult to find the root cause of this issue, Bagge suggests that one factor might have been Sverrir’s tendency to promote his low-born Birkibein supporters rather than those from within the established elite. However, Sverrir’s reconciliation with Bishop Nikolás, and Sverris Saga’s assertion that Nikolás became one of Sverrir’s intimate advisers after this, suggests that this was not necessarily the main reason for Nikolás’ opposition.

721 Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsI ÍF I,” 222.

722 Ibid., 228.

723 Ibid., 244; Gunnarr was granted lén, which Steinar Imsen defines as “the economic output of the local royal office called sysla”. Gunnarr, like Guðólfr, desired the stewardship of a local region in return for his support. Steinar Imsen, “King Magnus and His Liegemen’s ‘Hirdskrå’: A Portrait of the Norwegian Nobility in the 1270s;” in Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe: Concepts, Origins, Transformations, ed. Anne Duggan (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000), 205–20.

724 Orning, Unpredictability and Presence, 210
suspected them of disloyalty. The saga alleges, for example, that Sverrir was sceptical of Bishop Nikolás’s fidelity from the beginning and yet still chose to treat him mercifully. When it was first suggested that Nikolás should be elected bishop early on in Sverrir’s reign, Sverrir is said to have doubted whether his favour could encourage him to be more loyal in the long run.

En konungr kvaðsk ófúss vera at gera hann at meira manni en þá var hann ok lét þess ván, ef hann fengi nókkut ríki í Nóregi, meira en äðr hafði hann, at hann myndi hafa sama hug til hans, ok ekki myndi trúleikr hans vaxa þó at hann hefði hæra nafn en þá hafði hann.725

But the King said that he was unwilling to make him a greater man than he then was, and expected that if he obtained any more power in Norway than he had before, he would have the same attitude towards him, and would not grow more faithful even though he had a higher dignity than he had before.

Of course, it is not surprising that Sverris saga claims Sverrir was aware of Nikolás’s true nature all along. The author of this saga would probably have known that Nikolás would go on to strongly oppose Sverrir’s rule. However, it is significant that Sverrir is not portrayed as weak for showing mercy to men who had betrayed him. Instead, he is praised for living up to the behavioural ideals of his time.

We can never really know whether a policy of clemency was more successful as a means of securing long-term power and peace than a strategy of killing one’s opponents. It is possible to say, however, that acts of mercy could have a strategic use within war. They gave both sides an opportunity to bring conflict to an end and paved the way for reconciliation. In addition, it is clear that this was considered to be the more virtuous mode of behaviour for elite men in high medieval Norway. Despite this, the frequency with which challengers for the throne were killed or mutilated during the civil war period suggests that in times of endemic warfare it was harder to pursue a policy of restraint towards opponents. After all, what does one do with a defeated king?

725 Þorleifur Hauksson, Ss Íf, 170.
5.3.2 Ignoring the Ideal: The Killing of Kings and Claimants to the Throne

Despite the promotion of mercy as ideal conduct, and the presence of a norm which encouraged the sparing of elite opponents, it was not uncommon for kings and pretenders to the throne to be executed or mutilated during the civil war period. However, it is significant that those who are said to have been involved in these violent acts are generally criticised in the king’s sagas. *Fagrskinna* notes that there was a negative reaction, for example, to the killing of King Sigurðr Haraldsson, commonly known as Sigurðr Munnr, by the forces of his brother King Ingi Haraldsson.

Þá var illa um þetta verk rœtt, ok kenndu menn ráðin Inga konungi, en þat hafa flestir menn fyrir satt, at þat hafi engi hans ráð verit...\(^{726}\)

This deed was criticised, and people held King Ingi responsible, but most accept that it was not his idea...\(^{727}\)

The saga claims that Sigurðr had asked for mercy from his brother Ingi when he was first attacked and that Ingi had granted this. However, Ingi’s men had not heard his command and so had killed Sigurðr.\(^{727}\) *Heimskringla* and *Morkinskinna* also record that Sigurðr asked Ingi for mercy, although neither text says that it was granted as *Fagrskinna* does.\(^{728}\) It is perhaps telling that many of Sigurðr’s men are said to have been granted mercy even though Sigurðr himself was killed.\(^{730}\) If Ingi’s men had been willing, or indeed, allowed, to spare their adversaries when they asked for mercy, why would they not spare Sigurðr? It is not unthinkible that King Ingi had ordered his men to refuse Sigurðr clemency. Regardless of who these sagas try to blame, Ingi was probably to some extent complicit in his brother’s killing, even if only as a result of his initial decision to send men to attack him.

\(^{727}\) Finlay, *Fsk*, 271–72.
\(^{728}\) Bjarni Einarsson, “Fsk ÍF,” 336.
It is therefore interesting that the kings’ sagas try to divert blame for this killing away from Ingi. Both *Morkiskinna* and *Heimskringla* claim that many of Ingi’s advisers were against the attack and that they tried to dissuade him from this course of action. However, his closest adviser, Grégóriús, encouraged him to strike quickly in order to protect his interests.\(^{731}\) *Morkiskinna* supports its telling of this incident with skaldic verse which blames Ingi’s men, rather than Ingi, for Sigurðr’s death. Before the poem, we are told that the third of the co-ruling brothers, King Eysteinn Haraldsson, met with Ingi after his battle with Sigurðr. He was concerned to know what part Ingi had played in Sigurðr’s death and asked the skald Einarr Skúlason who he thought was most responsible for this killing. He replied in verse.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Alls engi þarf Inga} \\
\text{arngrennir þat kenna} \\
— \text{hverr spyri satt frá snerru} \\
\text{seggr} — \text{at gram bitu eggjar.} \\
\text{Bōð gatat stillir stōðvat} \\
\text{styrjar mildr, þött vildi;} \\
\text{fūs vas fjǫrspell vísa} \\
\text{fylkis sveit at veita.}\quad^{732}
\end{align*}
\]

No eagle feeder [WARRIOR] can blame Ingi that sword blades bit the king; let every man hear the truth about the attack. The battle-generous leader was unable to stop the onslaught, although he may have wanted to: the king’s retinue was eager to inflict death upon the ruler.\(^{733}\)

The author of *Fagrskinna* also copies this verse into his narrative.\(^{734}\) The inclusion of this poetry serves to deflect guilt away from Ingi and allows his character to remain untarnished by these events.

I do not wish to comment on the question of the reliability of skaldic verse as historical evidence. Although this is an important issue, it is outside the scope of this study.

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\(^{734}\) Bjarni Einarsson, “Fsk ÍF,” 337. There are some minor differences in how these poems are recorded in these two editions.
However, the way in which this verse is used within the construction of saga narratives is of relevance here. Theodore Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade have argued that the authors of *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* used skaldic verse as ‘historical verification,’ choosing to include stanzas which supported their prose narrative. The author of *Morkinskinna* was less selective, but he still used skaldic verse to support his version of events.\(^{735}\) This selective use of skaldic verse allowed each author to shape the way in which their audience viewed figures like Ingi. If it had been left out, the denial of Ingi’s guilt would have been weaker as a result.

King Eysteinn was right to have been suspicious about Ingi’s involvement in Sigurðr’s killing, as when he was later captured by one of Ingi’s men, Símon skálpr, he was executed mercilessly. *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* quote skaldic verse which condemns the killer’s actions.\(^{736}\) *Fagrskinna* relates:

\[
\text{Mun sás morði vanðisk}
\text{margillr ok sveik stilli,}
\text{síð af slikum rǫ́ðum}
\text{Simon skalpr of hjalpask.}\(^{737}\)
\]

The man accustomed to killing,
who the king betrayed, most evil,
Simon skálpr, will but slowly
for such deeds get absolution.\(^{738}\)

*Heimskringla* notes that ‘Símun skálpr var it mesta óþokkaðr af verki þessu, ok var þat alþýðumál’\(^{739}\) [It was Símun skálpr that was most criticised for this deed, and this was how the common people reacted to it].\(^{740}\) Snorri also recounts that there were rumours that Ingi had been told of Eysteinn’s capture and had cryptically commented to the messenger that he never wanted to see Eysteinn again. However, even Snorri does not

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735 Andersson and Gade, *Msk*, 56–57, Quote at 57.
737 Bjarni Einarsson, “Fsk Íf,” 341.
Regicide seems to have been considered a particularly detestable act. Indeed, it is significant that the authors of the kings’ sagas do not try to hide the fact that Ingi had other opponents killed during his reign. When Ingi’s close ally and friend, Grégóriús, defeated the forces of King Hákon herðibreiðr, Ingi is said to have ordered the death of many of those who had sided with his opponent. Others were punished with exile, fines and the destruction of their farms. Snorri does not name those who were executed, but one might tentatively suggest that he would have done so had these men been of particularly high status. Ingi is not criticised for ordering their deaths. His act is simply described without comment. The killing of a king is thus marked out as a striking, and unusual, act, and one which was wholly inappropriate for a king to be involved in.

Even when kings are shown to be directly involved in the violent treatment of their kingly opponents, the authors of the kings’ sagas attempt to justify, and even excuse, their actions. Morkinskinna narrates that when King Haraldr Gillikrist (r.1130-36) captured his opponent and co-ruler King Magnús Sigurðarson (r.1130-1135; 1137-1139), it was Haraldr’s men who counselled him to have Magnús blinded and mutilated. The sentence was not carried out by Haraldr or his men, but by the king’s slaves. Although the author of Morkinskinna regards the blinding of Magnús as “illt ok ókonungligt” [wicked and not worthy of a king], he accepts that it was directed more by the king’s

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742 Ibid., III:348–49.
743 Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, Msk ÍF, 2011, II:162.
744 Ibid., II:162; Heimskringla expands on Morkinskinna’s telling, adding that Haraldr and his men sought out Reinaldr because they thought Magnús had given him his valuables and treasure for safekeeping. The bishop denied this and offered to undergo the ordeal to prove his innocence but Haraldr refused, instead ordering him to pay 15 marks of gold. Not wanting to burden the Church’s finances with such a payment, Reinaldr refused to pay and was hanged. Snorri Sturluson, Hkr ÍF, 1951, III:287–88.
745 Andersson and Gade, Msk, 364.
advisers than by the king himself. Haraldr’s followers are similarly blamed for his
decision to later hang a bishop, Reinaldr, for refusing to hand over thirty marks of gold.
According to Morkinskinna, this act caused great grief among the good men of Norway
and foretold the country’s doom. Although Haraldr also had the warrior Ívarr Qzurarson
blinded and Hákon faukr, Magnús’ uncle, killed, it is Haraldr’s mutilation of a king and
execution of a bishop which are most problematic. Haraldr’s ruthless treatment of
King Magnús and Bishop Reinaldr is condemned, but his acts are mitigated in the
narrative by the alleged involvement of his advisers.

In contrast to his treatment of elite opponents, Haraldr is said to have been willing to
show leniency to the rank and file of Magnús’ force. Fagrskinna records that few men
were killed and most were given grið. Morkinskinna expands upon this, noting that
Haraldr took many of Magnús’ men into his retinue. It is not possible to say, therefore,
that Haraldr simply killed all of his opponents. He also used grants of mercy to win the
support of former enemies and expand his army. Like other kings, he was confronted by
the considerable problem that captured rival kings and pretenders presented to
victorious monarchs. He made a pragmatic choice to permanently rid himself of the
opposition living rivals encouraged. The fact that saga authors chose to deflect blame
for this act away from Haraldr, just as they did for King Ingi, shows that such behaviour
was unacceptable for kings, even if it was considered necessary.

During periods of intense war between rivals for the throne, it was not uncommon for
kings and pretenders to be killed by opposing factions. Despite this, mercy is still held
up as an ideal to aspire to in texts which describe these events. Elites who grant mercy
are praised, even if their actions are not beneficial to their cause in the long run. In
contrast, those who commit regicide are condemned, even if it was a strategically
advantageous move. That saga authors seek to shift blame for the killing and mutilation
of kings away from victorious monarchs and onto their advisers and followers is telling.
Such acts were considered too reprehensible to be attached to someone as important

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746 Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, Msk ÍF, 2011, II:162.
747 Bjarni Einarsson, “Fsk ÍF,” 325.
as a monarch. Therefore, while kings probably did engage in unsavoury deeds when required, and especially during civil war, it is clear that they were expected to, and wanted to be seen to, act in a virtuous manner.

5.3.3 Feud and Vengeance

In order to understand how violence was used towards opponents in medieval Norway, it remains to investigate two categories of violence which are often applied to the study of medieval conflict: feud and vengeance. Some historians have argued that individual revenge killings were characteristic of, or the first step towards, a category of conflict called ‘feud’. However, the meaning of this term has been much debated and a consensus has not yet been reached. Some historians have categorised feud as revenge attacks made in response to perceived injuries, while others believe feud is characterised by reciprocal violence perpetuated by the enduring enmity of those involved. The kind of people involved in the conflict mattered too. Feud can be seen as violence between groups, either drawn together by their kinship or, in other definitions, by their agreement to support one another. There is clearly a difference between a single act of vengeance, a response to a specific injury, and violence which was perpetuated by a succession of violent acts. However, whether this difference was recognised as indicative of a particular form of violence, necessitating different norms of conduct, is another question. I will end my discussion of how clemency was both used,


751 Hudson, “Feud, Vengeance and Violence,” 34.
and ignored, by demonstrating why I believe it is unhelpful to think of violence in terms of vengeance and feud. In this way, I will explain why I have not used these categories in my investigations of conflict in England and Denmark.

Acts of revenge were an accepted part of life in high medieval Norway. King Hákon Hákonarson, for example, is said to have stopped all ‘ættvíg,’ killing of one’s own kinsmen, so that no man would suffer for another man’s bad deeds. Konungs Skuggsjá even takes time to discuss the appropriate manner in which vengeance should be sought by the virtuous warrior.

If you are angry with any man because of a law suit or some evil deed, take careful thought before seeking revenge, as to how important the matter really is and how great a retribution it is worth. When you hear things in the speech of other men which offend you much, be sure to investigate with reasonable care whether the tales be true or false; but if they prove to be true and it is proper for you to seek revenge, take it with reason and moderation and never when heated or irritated. Even though you hear tidings which seem damaging to yourself or your business, such as loss of property or men, always bear it with a calm and undaunted temper.

Vengeance taken swiftly and with little concern for either the truth of the situation, or the consequences of such action, was unseemly and not the kind of behaviour expected of the ideal warrior. Just like warfare, revenge was ideally pursued in a calm and moderate fashion. It should never be undertaken in anger.

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752 Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsH ÍF II,” 265.
753 Holm-Olsen, Konungs Skuggsjá, 66.
754 Larson, The King’s Mirror, 231–32.
The idea that a person could seek revenge in a calm and unemotional manner seems a contradiction in terms. Indeed, some historians and literary scholars have argued that vengeance was primarily an emotional response. Richard Kaeuper characterises the vengeance portrayed in tales of elite warriors from North-Western Europe as a ‘visceral’ impulse.

The evidence appears to be straightforward and clear: among powerful chivalrous ranks vengeance achieved through prowess ranks as an honourable right and duty for the *bellatores*; as God takes holy vengeance on humans for sin, his good warriors on earth wipe out wrongs, harm and shame inflicted on them, edged weaponry in hand.  

Stephen White has objected to Kaeuper’s characterisation of medieval vengeance as the product of emotional, and often irrational, impulses, not least because it ignores the way in which emotions were constructed in medieval narratives. Emotions were not generally used to communicate how an individual really felt. Instead, they conveyed ‘political and legal meaning’ and signified that an individual had made an appropriate response to a particular situation. Therefore, vengeance taken in the wrong manner could be criticised. Revenge had to be sought in the way society expected.

Unfortunately, the nature of the extant source material for high medieval Norway can hinder our attempts to find out what these expectations were. The kings’ sagas rarely give us an insight into how the friends, family and supporters of those killed in revenge attacks reacted. *Heimskringla*, for example, tells how a warrior, Eindriði Jónsson, asked King Ingi Haraldsson for mercy during a battle. Ingi wanted to grant him this, but before he could do so, Eindriði was killed by another man, who claimed Eindriði had been involved in the killing of his father. Eindriði’s killer is said to have been criticised for his act, but the saga does not suggest that Eindriði’s supporters sought revenge in turn. Of course, we cannot conclude that they did not retaliate just because the saga does not

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756 White, “Feelings in the Feud”; White responds similarly to Paul Hyams’ view that medieval feuding and vengeance were primarily emotional responses to perceived injuries. Hyams, “Was There Really Such a Thing as Feud in the High Middle Ages?”; Hyams, *Rancor and Reconciliation in Medieval England*.
757 White, “Feelings in the Feud,” 290–1, Quote at 291.
record that they did. Eindriði’s death is said to have caused much grief as he was apparently the most popular man in Þrændalǫg. Yet the lack of detail in our source material means we have no understanding of the long-term effects of this killing. However, Snorri does suggest that the perpetrator acted inappropriately when he sought vengeance in this manner. This might well be a comment on the actual killing of Eindriði, but it could equally be a judgement on the manner in which the act was carried out. Eindriði’s killer ignored the conventions of mercy and acted contrary to his society’s concept of ideal warrior conduct. While revenge was an accepted part of Norwegian medieval society, it was not an excuse for uncontrolled violence.

*Heimskringla* similarly relates how a wealthy landowner was criticised for killing King Haraldr Gillikrist’s brother, Kristrød, while fighting for Haraldr against his rival, King Magnús Sigurðarson. Afterwards, the killer tried to justify his ‘illa verk’ by declaring the wrongs Kristrød had committed against him.

> „Nú veit hann þat, er þeir hjoggu bú mitt í sumar ok tóku allt, þat er heima var, en hofðu mik nauðgan í her með sér. Síkt hugða ek honum fyrr, ef ek fenga fong á. “

> ‘Now he knows that, for they slaughtered my animals in the summer and took everything that was in the house, and forced me to go with them into their army. I had been planning this for him earlier if I had an opportunity.’

This is clearly a revenge killing in all but name, but once again we have no record of what happened to the landowner afterwards. *Fagrskinna* does not even mention how Kristrød was killed, noting only that he fell during the battle. Was the landowner punished for his actions? Did King Haraldr want revenge for the killing of his brother? Was this a planned killing supported by the landowner’s allies, or was it an impulsive

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759 Ibid., III:281.
763 Bjarni Einarsson, “Fsk IFF,” 322.
act? The sagas are silent on these points and our knowledge of this kind of violent dispute is diminished.

John Hudson has noted that the focus on single incidents of vengeance in early and high medieval sources for England similarly hinders our understanding of how conflicts such as these might develop. While this absence of evidence might suggest that single acts of revenge did not generally evolve into long-running disputes, it could equally be a reflection of the way in which contemporaries recorded violent episodes. As conflicts are often defined as feuds partly on the basis of their duration, this lack of detail is problematic. William Ian Miller, for example, has distinguished between feud and ‘simple revenge killings that involve no one beyond the killer and his victim.’ The fact that the kings’ sagas rarely comment on what happened after revenge killings makes it difficult to assess whether vengeance ever turned into a conflict which could be defined as a feud.

Despite this, there is still little evidence to suggest that men always sought vengeance when they were wronged. Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar records, for example, that Skúli had King Hákon’s supporter, Þórir on Borri, murdered. However, his son did not try to avenge his death, instead accepting grid from his father’s killer. Afterwards the son is said, as is typical, to be ‘mez hertuga’ [with the duke], meaning Skúli. Þórir’s son must have felt that given his precarious situation his best bet was to side with Skúli, even though it might have brought him honour to avenge his father. Þórir’s killing had been part of Skúli’s strategy to kill as many of the king’s men as possible in the hope of weakening his power base. If Þórir’s son wished to escape his father’s fate, then he needed to act pragmatically and shift his allegiance. Revenge was not achieved, but Þórir’s son survived.

As Sverre Bagge has argued more generally, while individual disagreements between elite men in Norway could lead to ‘dramatic situations’ like killings, they did not tend to

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765 Miller, Bloodtaking and Peacemaking, 180.
766 Sverrir Jakobsson, Porleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsH İF II,” 54–5, Quote at 55.
767 Ibid., 52.
lead to full-scale conflicts unless there were ‘long-term interests involved.’\textsuperscript{768} Norwegian society had processes by which smaller, individual conflicts could be resolved. The granting of mercy was but one of the approaches which could be used. Guy Halsall has suggested that it is useful to consider whether violence was either ‘tactical’ or ‘strategic’ when trying to understand its aims. Strategic violence entailed the use of public threats, anger and symbolic acts of violence to highlight an offence or injury in the hope that third parties might intervene to bring about a settlement between disputing parties. In contrast, tactical violence is used to bring a dispute to an end. It could involve the killing or mutilation of an opponent, seizure of property or revenge attacks. Halsall notes that when tactical violence is used, ‘The relationship between the attacker and the attacked is direct, and the disputant’s aim is achieved directly by violence against his or her opponents.’\textsuperscript{769} For Halsall, feud in its truest form is composed of strategic acts of violence. Yet he contests that most early medieval vengeance killings were tactical, with violence aimed at decisively ending the dispute.\textsuperscript{770} From the evidence of the kings’ sagas, it seems that this was the character of most disputes in high medieval Norway as well.

Disputes in the kings’ sagas are often shown to be resolved reasonably quickly, even when they had the potential to escalate into the kind of self-perpetuating series of revenge killings often associated with feud. Tactical violence could help to bring these conflicts to an end, but so could mediation, negotiation and clemency. The example of the slaying of Geirsteinn illustrates how potentially dangerous conflicts between kin groups could be resolved. \textit{Morkinskinna} relates how Geirsteinn, a rich man who was friends with King Sigurðr Haraldsson, was killed by a man, Gyrðr. Gyrðr had killed Geirsteinn on behalf of his foster-mother, Gyða, who Geirsteinn had been tormenting. Gyða anticipated that Geirsteinn’s friends and family would seek to avenge him, and so sent Gyrðr to stay with her sister Ragnhildr. While there, Gyrðr sought the help of Ragnhildr’s son, Grégóriús. Although he was initially reluctant to get involved, his family persuaded him to take charge of the situation, citing the justice of Gyrðr’s actions and

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\textsuperscript{768} Bagge, \textit{Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla}, 82. \\
\textsuperscript{769} Halsall, ‘Reflections on Early Medieval Violence,’ 11. \\
\end{flushright}
the shame he would accrue if he refused to defend his kinsman. On the opposing side, Geirsteinn’s sons had approached King Sigurðr for help. The king suggested caution rather than angry vengeance, and counselled Geirsteinn’s sons to restrain themselves while the facts of the case were ascertained. He recommended seeking compensation for the killing, rather than Gyrðr’s death, and sent men to discuss the case with Grégóriús. However, one of these men, Rauðr, took matters into his own hands, and devised a plan to attack Grégóriús and his men. When his plan was foiled, he and his men were taken captive and subsequently hanged at an assembly. Enraged by these killings, Geirsteinn’s sons requested an armed force from King Sigurðr and faced Grégóriús, who ultimately put them to flight. They were subsequently killed by Grégóriús’ forces in battle after attacking, and killing, some of Grégóriús’ kinsmen. According to Morkinskinna, Grégóriús’ actions earnt him ‘mikinn sóma ok virðing’ [great honor and glory].

This episode is interesting for a number of reasons. First, we should note the behaviour of King Sigurðr, who is depicted following the moderate ideal outlined in Konungs Skuggsjá. He did not respond angrily to Geirsteinn’s sons’ allegations, but tried to discover the truth about what had happened before choosing how to act. He sought to resolve the dispute by the payment of compensation and only provided military support once Grégóriús had escalated the conflict with his hanging of Rauðr and his men. Second, Grégóriús’ initial reluctance to aid his kinsmen is a reminder that ties of kinship could not necessarily be relied upon. That is not to say that the protection of kin did not convey honour. Grégóriús was ultimately praised for his valorous acts in defence of his kin. However, it was his choice to get involved, even if his family did put pressure on him to do so. Third, we should note that the dispute is resolved with a violent act which brings conflict to an end: the killing of Geirsteinn’s sons. The conflict is not said to escalate any further, and Geirsteinn’s sons’ allies are not shown to avenge their deaths. The conflict ends when the injured party are permanently removed.

772 Ibid., II:229.
773 Andersson and Gade, Msk, 398.
774 Larson, The King’s Mirror, 231–32.
Writing on France around the year 1100, Stephen White has argued that it might be counterproductive to search for a definitive definition of what feud was in the medieval period given the variety of forms these disputes could take and the imprecise nature of the language used to refer to them in medieval sources. Instead, he proposes we identify feuds by their common traits, namely, that the participants were largely adult or adolescent men of at least relatively elite status, who engaged in feud as part of a group that aimed to avenge some perceived wrong. These feuds were conducted according to the shared norms of this kind of conflict.\textsuperscript{775} While we have evidence of men engaging in revenge killings in Norway, and it is certainly plausible that these men acted as part of a group, there is little evidence that these killings were governed by their own set of norms and ideals distinct from other forms of conflict. In \textit{Konungs Skuggsjá} and the kings’ sagas, those seeking revenge are expected to conduct themselves in the same way as all others who were engaged in conflict. It therefore does not seem helpful to our understanding of elite behaviour to categorise certain killings as feud, regardless of the definition we use.

Vengeance killings did occur in high medieval Norway, but the enmity between the parties involved tended to cease once the initial quarrel had been resolved. This might be achieved with more, or less, violence depending on the original offence and the attitude of those involved, but conflicts are not generally shown to escalate into a series of ‘back-and-forth’ revenge attacks which utilised symbolic violence as per Halsall’s understanding.\textsuperscript{776} While it is useful to think about the kind of conduct which was expected from warriors during conflict, attempts to categorise various forms of violent dispute can be restrictive. There is little evidence that medieval warriors adhered to different ideals and norms of conduct depending on the kind of conflicts they were engaged in. I believe we should consider each example of violence on its own terms, free from the constraints of modern terms like feud, however defined.\textsuperscript{777} This is the approach I have taken throughout this thesis. Instead of fixating on categorising forms of violence, it is more useful to examine the various political, social and economic factors

\textsuperscript{776} Halsall, “Reflections on Early Medieval Violence,” 11–12.  
\textsuperscript{777} Guy Halsall has argued similarly in relation to early medieval Europe. Halsall, “Reflections on Early Medieval Violence.”
which informed how elite men treated one another in conflict. In this examination of high medieval Norway, it remains for me to consider the effect that status had on how elite men treated one another after conflict.
5.4 Status and the Granting of Mercy

Many of the examples of restrained behaviour in this chapter thus far have concerned kings and the leaders of war bands. This is largely due to the nature of our sources, whose main purpose is to narrate the acts of kings, rather than the elite class more generally. Where other elite men are mentioned, it is often in their interactions with kings, rather than with other elite men. Therefore, while our sources clearly show that clemency and restraint were ideal forms of warrior conduct in high medieval Norway, it is difficult to get a picture of the extent to which these ideals were reflected in the behaviour of the wider elite community. In this section, I will discuss the evidence we have for the adoption of norms of moderate behaviour among the elite group more generally, and consider whether we can make any conclusions about how status informed the conduct of men who went to war.

5.4.1 Military Leaders and their Men: Who Made the Decision to Grant Mercy?

In theory, the leaders of armed forces had overall control of the behaviour of their men during war. They could grant mercy *en masse* and dictate how their forces treated surrendering opponents. Elite warriors are frequently depicted providing counsel to these leaders and they must often have influenced these decisions to some extent. However, we also need to consider whether these men granted mercy to individual opponents during war as well. Did military leaders reserve the right to decide the fate of all opponents, or were individual warriors allowed to independently grant mercy? If individual warriors were allowed to grant mercy, then how did they decide who to spare? By answering these questions, we can understand whether merciful acts were expected of all warriors on the battlefield, or whether norms encouraging men to spare their opponents were only relevant to, and adopted by, certain groups.

Although elite warriors are depicted granting mercy during warfare, the kings’ sagas make it clear that, in theory, the leader of a faction had ultimate control over who could
be pardoned. We see this in practice in Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar. During his conflict with Skúli, King Hákon is said to have sent some of his men to engage Skúli’s forces in the north of the country. Hákon’s men prevailed and consequently granted Skúli’s men a sort of temporary peace, which would stand until they were able to see King Hákon in person. It is said that when Skúli’s men reached the king, ‘Hákon konungr gaf öllum grið, þeim er á hans vald kómu’ [King Hákon gave mercy to everyone who came into his power]. Even in the absence of King Hákon himself, his men are still shown to treat their opponents leniently. However, it is notable that King Hákon makes the final decision as to their fate. Individual warriors could choose to spare opponents, but their lord still theoretically retained ultimate control over who was granted clemency.

If mercy was to be used in a tactical way, in order to either win support or remove potential opposition, then it was necessary for military leaders to enforce their right to decide who was spared. Military leaders are therefore frequently depicted telling their men before battle whether they would, or would not, allow their opponents to receive mercy. That this decision could be taken before a battle began, is another illustration of how clemency could form part of the military strategy of individual leaders. King Sverrir is depicted giving this kind of directive before facing the Baglar faction at Strindfjorden.

„Ef svá ferr sem mik varir...at vér sigrismk þá minnizk þér nú þess er Baglar sveltu yðr fyrra sumar í Bjǫrgyn í borginni, ok gefið engum manni grið nema þeim er á minn fund komask, fyrir því at nú er auðsynt at með engu qðru fám vör eytt vörum fjándmönnum nema oddi ok eggjú. Margan munu þér hitta í dag með Þogllum eiðrofann ok konungsníðing. Skulu þeir nú allir sárliga þess gjalda.”

‘If it turns out that we are victorious, as I expect, then remember now how the Baglar starved you last summer in the castle in Bergen, and give mercy to no man, except those who come to meet me, because now it is clear that in no other way will we destroy our enemies except by force of arms. Today you will come upon many an oath breaker and traitor to the king among the Baglar. Now they shall all pay sorely for this.’

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778 Matthew Strickland has noted that this was the case in England also. Strickland, War and Chivalry, 190.
779 Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsH ÍF II,” 63.
780 Þorleifur Hauksson, Ss ÍF, 244.
Sverrir is not refusing to grant his opponents mercy. Rather, he is enforcing his right to choose who was spared, just as King Hákon is shown to do in the previous example. He intends to grant grið to all those who submit to him in person, but he denies his men the ability to engage in this process themselves. He retains control over the application of this convention.

The author of *Sverris saga* makes it clear that this episode is not intended to show a more ruthless side of Sverrir’s character. He refers to the many offences the Baglar had committed against Sverrir and his men in order to justify Sverrir’s comment that these oath breakers and traitors would pay for their previous behaviour. As Lars Hermanson has noted, oath breaking is commonly used to identify individuals as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in medieval texts. The Baglar are thus shown to be legitimate targets for the anger of the Birkibeinar and Sverrir gives his men the opportunity to not only get revenge on their long-term enemies, but also to defeat them once and for all.

Sverrir’s orders are, ultimately, shown to be ineffective. During the battle, some of his men are depicted freely granting mercy to opponents. This leads to conflict with those who had followed the king’s orders.

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782 Þorleifur Hauksson, *Ss ÍF*, 245.
should seek out those men who had killed their kinsmen and he bade them to avenge themselves. After that the troops went around the town, and picked out each other’s kinsmen until all were slain.

The author of *Sverris saga* suggests that some of Sverrir’s men expected to be able grant mercy to their opponents. Indeed, those who do are identified as *sveitarhofðingjar*, troop leaders, suggesting that they were not men of mean status. These men may have felt that they had the authority to grant mercy irrespective of the king’s decision. However, this expectation is at odds with their king’s command and so causes problems during the battle. Sverrir is not said to be angered by his men’s disobedience, he simply leaves his troops to solve this issue among themselves. The saga thus implies that these kind of issues were not unexpected during war and therefore did not necessitate any particular form of punishment.

Other sagas tell of soldiers similarly ignoring the orders of their leaders. Bǫglunga Saga relates how a man, Einarr, and his armed followers were confronted by a Baglar force after taking sanctuary in a Church. Einarr was a relative by marriage of the Birkibæin king, Hákon Sverrisson (r.1202-1204), and so was of high status within Norwegian society. The Baglar force offered Einarr *grið*, and Einarr swore to never again attack the Baglar claimant to the throne, Erlingr steinveggr. However, when Einarr left the Church, he was killed by Baglar soldiers, even though the leaders of the Baglar allegedly wanted to show him mercy. Four of his followers were also killed, but fifty were allowed to live, suggesting that the Baglar were most interested in ridding themselves of their elite opponent.\(^\text{783}\) It is interesting that the Baglar leaders are said to oppose this killing. If we believe that these men did want to show Einarr mercy, then this episode could illustrate how elite men’s opinions about who should be granted mercy, and in which situations, could diverge from those of their men. However, it could equally be an attempt to blame ordinary soldiers for an important man’s effective execution. If this was the case, then

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Einarr is probably the same man who is said to have married King Hákon Sverrisson’s sister earlier in the saga (4).
once again, we see just how dishonourable it was for elite men to engage in this kind of
behaviour.

In both this and the previous episode, certain men are spared while others are killed. In
the case of Einarr, his status and political influence seems to have sealed his fate. In the
example of Sverrir’s men, the sveitarhøfðingjar are said to have favoured their kinsmen
and friends, rather than showing mercy to all who asked for it. This might suggest that
they were not granting mercy to opponents in order to adhere to the conventions of
war, but rather, that they saw clemency as a way to save their friends and kin among
the enemy force. However, we need to question how important these ties were in
medieval Norway before we can conclude that they had a significant impact on decisions
to treat opponents mercifully. In relation to medieval Iceland, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson has
argued that ties of friendship were more useful than ties of kinship. The chance nature
of kinship meant that it was not always that beneficial to have the aid of one’s relations.
Indeed, even if the support of a particular relation was considered to be useful, it was
not automatically given on account of any blood relationship. In contrast, friends could
be selected based on the advantage which could be gained from their support. In a
conflict between a persons’ friends and their kin, it was no more likely that an individual
would support family members over their friends, unless they were particularly close
relations.784 The sagas do not tell us how selective warriors were in choosing which of
their relations and friends to spare. Therefore, although we have examples of ties of
kinship and friendship influencing who was offered mercy, we do not have enough
evidence to conclude that these relationships were the most important factor in these
decisions.

The depiction of King Magnús Erlingsson’s and King Sverrir Sigurðarson’s armies drinking
together while their leaders negotiated is a timely reminder of how interconnected the
warrior class was.785

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784 Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Den vennlige vikingen: Vennskapets Makt i Norge og på Island ca. 900-1300 (Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2010), 139–41.
785 Orning, Unpredictability and Presence, 142.
Menn Magnúss konungs hófu róit nokkurum skútum upp í ána, en Birkibeinar gengu ofan í mótt þeim ok léttu bera mungát ofan ór þaumum. Settsusk allir saman út á Brǫttueyri, drukku þar ok toluðusk við, þó at þeir væri í tvennum flokum. Dá váru þeir margir frændr eða mágar eða hófu fyrr verit vinir.\(^{786}\)

King Magnús’ men had rowed some of their cutters up into the river, and the Birkibeinar went down to meet them and had ale carried down from the town. They all sat down together out on Brǫttueyri; they drunk there and talked together, even though they were in two different bands. Many of them there were kinsmen or in-laws or had been friends before.

We must naturally allow for an element of exaggeration here, but the evidence of the kings’ sagas more generally does seem to suggest that warriors, and especially those of high rank, often found themselves fighting against familiar faces. Not only were many of the elite group related either by blood or marriage, but these men were also frequently asked to pick sides in disputes between rival kings. It is likely, therefore, that many men ended up on the opposite side of conflict to their kin and friends, or even former friends. Indeed, I have cited examples of elite men granting mercy to men who were their kinsmen or former friends throughout this chapter.

However, it is rarely clear that it was specifically these ties which encouraged elite men to spare one another. When Ingi Haraldsson allowed his closest adviser and friend, Grégóriús, to pardon one of their enemies, Sigurðr of Reyr, he is said to have done so on the grounds that Grégóriús and Sigurðr were related.

Grégóriús hafði tekit honum grið af Inga, at hann skyldi hafa eignir sínar allar, því at þeir Grégóriús ok Sigurðr váru náfrændr.\(^{787}\)

Gregorius had received quarter for him from Ingi, so that he might keep all his possessions, for Gregorius and Sigurðr were close relatives.\(^{788}\)

However, Grégóriús’ and Sigurðr’s kinship did not stop them attacking one another on other occasions. Later in the saga, Grégóriús tried to burn down a house which he thought contained Ingi’s rival for the throne, Hákon herðibreiðr, and Sigurðr. They were,

\(^{786}\) Þorleifur Hauksson, *Ss ÍF*, 94.
however, in another house and managed to escape. In retaliation, Sigurðr and Hákon attacked the estates of Grégóríús’ brother-in-law, Halldór Brynjólfsson. After setting fire to the buildings and killing Halldór and his men, they forced Grégóríús’ sister, Sigríðr, to flee into the forest and captured other family members.\footnote{Snorri Sturluson, \textit{Hkr ÍF}, 1951, III:362–63.}

Given this later behaviour, we must question the impact Sigurðr’s and Grégóríús’ kinship had on the way they treated one another in war. It is possible that Grégóríús spared Sigurðr in order to adhere to the norm that mercy should be granted to those who asked for it, rather than because they were related. We do not know if Sigurðr asked for mercy, but it is not unthinkable that he did. Indeed, Grégóríús is also shown to be merciful to defeated opponents that he had no previous connections to. It is claimed that he helped one opponent, Ívar, escape from battle after he was seriously wounded. Grégóríús and Ívar are said to have been friends from then onwards.\footnote{Ibid., III:357.} Elite men decided to grant mercy for a number of different reasons, not simply because they wished to spare their kinsmen.

Kings and military leaders theoretically had control over who was shown clemency. However, in practice, individual warriors, and especially those of high status, seem to have expected to be able to spare opponents too. Although there is some evidence to suggest that warriors were more likely to spare their kin and friends, this does not seem to have been the only factor influencing their behaviour. Ties of kinship do not appear to have prevented family members attacking one another with the intention to kill. Indeed, bonds of kinship were probably weaker than those of friendship, as friends could be selected for the benefits they offered. We also cannot discount the effect that status had on the decision to grant mercy, even when we see friends and kin being singled out for clemency in our sources. Elite men who chose to spare family and friends were generally also choosing to spare their social equals. We must therefore consider the effect that status is shown to have not only on who was offered mercy, but also who is shown to grant mercy. Did ordinary soldiers, as well as elite men, grant \textit{grið}?
5.4.2 Did Ordinary Soldiers Grant Mercy?

There is evidence that men of varying levels of status granted mercy to opponents during battle. In *Sverris saga*’s description of the battle of Fimreite, both King Sverrir and his men, the Birkibeinar, are depicted granting mercy to defeated opponents.

Birkibeinar reru út á smábátum ok drápu menn á sundi, en sumum gáfu þeir grið. Allir fengu þeir grið er náðu konungs fundi. Skipstjórnarmenn Sverris konungs gáfu grið fræendum sínum ok vinum.\(^{791}\)

The Birkibeinar rowed out in small boats and killed the men who were swimming but to some they gave mercy. Everyone who obtained a meeting with the king got mercy. King Sverrir’s ship captains gave mercy to their kinsmen and friends.

By differentiating between those Birkibeinar who are dealing with their swimming opponents, and the ship captains who are shown granting mercy to kinsmen and friends, this extract suggests that both leading figures within a force, as well as those lower down the social scale, chose to spare opponents. While the social class of the Birkibeinar in the small boats is only implied, it is unlikely that they were particularly elite men as they are not named or referred to by their position as the captains are. In contrast, the king enacts mercy on a wider scale. As Sverrir considered himself monarch over all those on the battlefield, even those who fought against him, he would have seen himself as having a wider remit to act mercifully for the benefit of all his subjects. His extensive granting of mercy reflected his authority and showed him to be a merciful and forgiving king, who ruled fairly and with moderation.

We are on much firmer ground when discussing the way kings are depicted in these scenes than when considering elite men in general. Not only is it often difficult to decide who was considered to be of elite status within our sources, it is also hard to understand how the elite group itself was composed and the level of cohesion within it. This is not just a problem in Norwegian sources, but also, as I have previously shown, in those which detail high medieval England and Denmark. Another example from *Håkonar saga*

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\(^{791}\) Þorleifur Hauksson, *Sís ÍF*, 144.
Hákonarsonar illustrates the specific problems we face when trying to understand the effect status could have on how defeated opponents were treated during, and after, conflict in Norway. In this episode, a band of men belonging to the Ribbungar faction, who opposed King Hákon’s rule, are said to have attacked one of Hákon’s kinsman, Óláf mókr, at a wedding and trapped him inside a building. Óláf is claimed to have had the ‘hirðmenn konungs ok gesti ok marga aðra góða menn’ [king’s hirðmenn and guests and many other good men] in attendance. Despite the presence of these high-status royal servants, the Ribbungar only offered to show mercy to Óláf. It is not said that any of the other men asked for mercy, yet it is interesting that only Óláf was deemed worthy enough to be spared. He was the highest-status man present as he held a stewardship from the king and was also his kinsman. From this, one could tentatively suggest that the Ribbungar, and the author of this saga, did not think that the other men were important enough to be automatically treated well.

However, the rest of the story suggests that the Ribbungar behaved inappropriately, and contrary to the conventions of conflict, in their dealings with Óláf. Óláf refused to accept the safety being offered by the Ribbungar and insisted that he would not leave the building unless his men were also granted mercy. Although the Ribbungar agreed to this, when Óláf and the other wedding guests left the building, the Ribbungar killed everyone except Óláf and forced him to swear to never fight against them again.793 The fact that Sturla, the author of this saga, depicts Óláf asking for his guests to be spared, suggests that this was a reasonable request. That the Ribbungar showed clemency to Óláf, even when they could have easily killed him along with his men, suggests that they knew there were conventions about how certain men should be treated during conflict. It is unclear whether Sturla is intimating that Óláf’s guests ought to have been spared because of their position within society, or simply because the conventions of war dictated that those who asked for mercy should receive it. However, Sturla does emphasise the rank of those who were killed, something which would signify that they

792 Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset, “HsH ÍF I,” 273.
793 Ibid.
were, at least, men worthy of note. He concludes, ‘Þar fellu sex tigir manna ok tuttugu hirðmenn’ [there fell sixty men and twenty hirðmenn].

Descriptions of non-royal men granting mercy rarely mention the motives of those involved. *Heimskringla*’s account of Erlingr Skakki’s final victory over King Hákon herðibreiðr is a case in point. Snorri notes that ‘engi þurfti griðin at nefna af Hákonar mǫnnum nema þeir einir, er rikismenn tóku á vald sitt ok festu fé fyrir’ [there was no point in any of Hákon’s men speaking of quarter except just those that men of the ruling class took into their power and pledged ransom for]. King Hákon himself was also able to gain the protection of some forecastlemen within Erlingr’s force during the battle. These men took him into their group and ‘heituðusk at verja hann’ [had promised to defend him] from those who wanted to cause him harm. Snorri claims that Erlingr had no objection to Hákon being given *grið*, although, conveniently for Erlingr, Hákon was killed in a skirmish later in the battle. We are not told how the ships captains and forecastlemen decided who to show mercy to. There is some suggestion that the ships captains were trying to make money from this situation, but we cannot be sure that they were not sparing everyone who asked for mercy and profiting from their merciful actions at the same time. Likewise, we cannot know if King Hákon’s status affected the way the forecastlemen treated him.

We have examples of men of different levels of status both offering, and receiving, mercy after conflict, which would suggest that this practice was not confined to kings and the leaders of military forces. The reasons why men spared opponents probably varied depending on their status, position and role within an armed force. However, unfortunately, we do not have enough evidence of what motivated lower-ranking men to grant mercy to make any substantial conclusions on this point. Friendship and kinship may have been a factor, but it is unlikely to have been the only one. Indeed, we have examples of high-ranking men, ships captains and ordinary soldiers showing mercy to

794 Ibid.
men who are not said to fit into these categories. Similarly, we cannot say for certain that lower-ranking elite men and ordinary soldiers were not inspired by the ideal that warriors should act moderately and with self-control. It is perhaps less problematic to suggest that the norm that those who asked for mercy should be granted it had a greater impact on how these men chose to act. This norm was, of course, influenced by the ideal that elite men should act with moderation and restraint, even if this ideal itself is not explicitly shown to motivate men of all ranks. The propagation, and adoption, of this norm of conduct is a sign that restraining ideals had a tangible effect on the practice of warfare in high medieval Norway.
5.5 Conclusion

In high medieval Norway, it was considered ideal for elite warriors to restrain their behaviour in warfare and act moderately towards those who had wronged them. This ideal influenced the development of a convention which encouraged elite men to spare those they had defeated in battle. The asking for, and granting of, grið is an important feature of conflict narratives within the kings’ sagas. Warriors who granted grið to surrendering opponents not only ensured that they adhered to the norms of warfare, but also earnt praise for their virtuous behaviour. Spared enemies often joined the victor’s force, changing their allegiance and in some cases, physically staying with their former antagonist’s band of men. However, these men might choose to switch their allegiance if they found favour and advantage not to be forthcoming from their new lord. Lords had to actively earn and maintain the support of their men. These conventions are central to the way in which authors writing from the later twelfth to the mid-thirteenth century understood, and thus depicted, the practice of warfare in Norway.

Mercy was not only shown to opponents because it was an ideal mode of behaviour. It also had a function within war itself. It allowed opponents to surrender in the knowledge that they would be spared. Those who habitually refused clemency are often shown to have faced more prolonged resistance than those who were known for their tendency to pardon enemies. As spared warriors often joined their opponents’ force, victors could also use clemency as a way to build up support. This was not always successful, however, as those who were spared could, and did, simply leave and join another enemy faction. However, the alternative, killing all opposition, could create resentment among the family and friends of those who were executed. Both approaches to post-conflict situations are shown to have been used by military leaders in the kings’ sagas and each had positives and negatives. However, it is interesting that those who are ruthless, who kill rival kings and murder other elite men, are not lauded for their pragmatic success. Their involvement in the deaths of their elite opponents is either justified or condemned. In contrast, those who show mercy, even when the consequences of this choice are shown to be negative, are always praised for their virtuous behaviour.
The king-focused nature of our sources makes it difficult to assess how differences in status affected the treatment of defeated opponents. Even when these texts do discuss non-royal elite men, we are rarely given any insight into the motivations behind their actions, either real or perceived. However, there is good evidence that men of varying status did capture and spare opponents, although the leader of any armed force reserved the right to overturn their decision if it did not align with his overall aims. Of course, the ideal king or elite man would never refuse mercy to those who asked for it. Yet the fact that clemency was a useful strategic tool which had a function within warfare undoubtedly encouraged its use by elite warriors. The norm of granting mercy to defeated opponents was informed by an ideal which encouraged moderate behaviour among the elite class, but it developed in response to the realities of conflict in high medieval Norway.
6 Conclusion: Comparing England, Norway and Denmark

Moderate and restrained behaviour was considered ideal and virtuous in high medieval England, Norway and Denmark. Good kings were peace-loving, merciful, slow to anger and magnanimous, and their elite subjects were expected to follow a similar example. By showing mercy to defeated opponents, elite warriors could showcase these qualities and earn the praise of their peers. Historical narratives which depict conflict in England, Norway and Denmark demonstrate the existence of norms of conduct which encouraged the sparing of surrendering enemies. Indeed, the merciful treatment of defeated opponents was part of the conventions of war in each of these kingdoms. Yet these conventions did not develop directly from the ideal that warriors should favour restraint over violence. They were shaped by the social, economic and political conditions in each kingdom. We should not be surprised, therefore, that the manner in which mercy was shown to opponents differed in each of these realms. There were different ideas about who could be pardoned, the conditions under which this could be done and the consequences for those who were spared. In this thesis I have shown how cross-European cultural influences, such as the teachings of the medieval Church, combined with native conditions to shape the norms of conduct adhered to by the elite class during conflict.

Although the processes by which mercy was shown to defeated opponents in England, Norway and Denmark differed to some extent, there were some common elements. The requirement for opponents to submit and surrender before they could be shown mercy is a feature of Norwegian, Danish and English forms of clemency. There were also a number of differences. In Norway, ransoms were not generally extracted as they were in England. There is some evidence of ransoms being paid in Denmark in this period, but we do not have enough evidence to know if this was common practice. Danish sources rarely refer to acts of clemency being motivated by financial gain, although this was often a feature of the terms besieged forces surrendered on in the Baltic, for example. While Danish kings and military leaders generally benefited from these agreements, ordinary soldiers often lost out financially when enemy forces surrendered. This was because once the surrender of an opposing force had been accepted, all plundering was
prohibited. In England, the taking and ransoming of prisoners was a central component of a warrior’s income. Yet even here, ransom was not simply a tool for financial exploitation. Other factors are shown to influence the sparing of opponents.

Clemency had a tangible use in conflict, whether it was in England, Norway, Denmark or even the Baltic. The ideal that elite men should moderate their violent tendencies and show self-control at all times informed the development of norms which served to limit violence in warfare. However, it is unlikely that these norms would have evolved if they had not also had a practical use. On a basic level, the existence of a convention whereby elite men spared one another execution or mutilation was particularly beneficial in societies where war, rebellion and revolt were common. The expectation of clemency could also encourage opposing forces to capitulate, secure in the knowledge that although they had lost the fight, they would not lose their lives. This provided both sides with a route out of the conflict, and encouraged reconciliation to take place. Of course, elite men did ignore these conventions, but ruthless acts are often shown to have provoked retaliation from the friends, family and allies of injured parties. Non-violent methods of punishment, like imprisonment, negotiated settlements and the transfer of support from the defeated force to the victor, could achieve peace and an increase in power for the victor without arousing the ire of powerful men.

It may seem that elite men in Norway were more willing to ignore the norm that they should show mercy to surrendering opponents than their equals in England and Denmark. It is true that there are many examples of rival kings and claimants to the throne being murdered or executed in the kings’ sagas. This stands in contrast to the treatment of King Stephen after he was captured at Lincoln, for example. Yet it is clear that there was an established process by which warriors and armed forces could ask for clemency in Norway, typified by men asking for *grið*. Those who grant *grið* to opponents are lauded for their moderation and held up as ideal men and good Christians within the kings’ sagas. Indeed, the difference between the treatment Stephen received from his enemies in England and that which rival kings were subject to in Norway, can probably be explained by the novelty of Stephen’s incarceration. The civil war era in Norway saw many men try, and fail, to become the dominant king in this region and it was common
for multiple kings to exist at the same time. The Norwegians, therefore, had plenty of practice dealing with defeated kings, and they had realised that most of these men were simply too dangerous to keep alive. This was not the case in England. Stephen’s imprisonment was a rare event. In the event of his capture, his enemies did not take the bold decision to execute a king, potentially out of fear of the stigma they might face for such an act. However, the authors of the kings’ sagas did not see the killing of rival kings as appropriate behaviour either. They condemn those who participated in these acts and actively seek to exonerate other kings from involvement. The execution of rivals for the throne was unacceptable according to the ideals and norms of elite Norwegian society, even though it was a relatively common occurrence during this period.

That elite men are shown to ignore the norms and ideals of their society does not suggest that these men thought these conventions to be unimportant. Rather, it highlights the agency that elite men had when choosing how to act. The authors of the kings’ sagas are particularly willing to depict both positive and negative behaviour among the elite community. They freely acknowledge that the pragmatic killing or mutilation of opponents was one way in which elite men could attempt to gain power. However, they are careful to show that the merciful treatment of opponents was the ideal, and indeed acceptable, mode of conduct for elite warriors. Arguments based on the extent to which men are shown following, or ignoring, the norms which are promoted within historical narratives are therefore difficult to sustain. The existence and development of certain norms is not dependent on them being followed at all times, but on them being seen as the ideal form of conduct within particular situations.

Indeed, there is evidence that elite men in England were not always as merciful as they first appear. The expectation that elite men would spare one another once conflict had ended, or surrender had been offered, provided a good deal of protection to men of high status. However, mid- or low-ranking elite men, or even ordinary knights, who offended their superiors might find themselves being treated less than mercifully. Indeed, we must remember that elite men of all ranks used violence to advance their own cause, even manipulating or ignoring conventional behaviours when the situation required. Only the greatest magnates were powerful enough to ensure that they
generally avoided sanction, but even they might be imprisoned and exiled if they proved too dangerous.

When trying to understand the impact differences in status had on how elite men treated one another during conflict in Denmark and Norway, we are limited by the nature of our source material. Historical narratives in these regions focus on kings and claimants to the throne, and rarely depict the conduct of individual warriors during war. We can only make tentative suggestions about the kind of men who benefited from merciful treatment in these realms. In Norway, as I have already discussed, elite men who claimed the throne were often killed, but we cannot conclude from this that high-status warriors in this region were not spared on account of their status. Indeed, there is evidence that all kinds of men were offered grid. In Denmark, there are some indications that status did influence who was chosen to be spared, but histories which depict this period also suggest that mercy was granted more widely, especially after siege warfare. Elite warriors are even praised for sparing non-Christian opponents while on campaign in the Baltic. Yet, the danger posed by high-ranking elite opponents, and especially those who rebelled, in both of these regions, meant that these men were often singled out for the most lenient treatment. They might even be granted money, lands or new opportunities in an attempt to win their support. In this sense, clemency could form part of a political strategy to manage violent rebellion and secure long-term peace.

It is important to note that the granting of clemency does not preclude the punishment of enemies. Non-violent reprimands could considerably weaken opponents without upsetting their supporters. Lengthy imprisonment, exile or the loss of possessions could successfully remove the threat of future reprisals from previous enemies. In Norway, the convention whereby defeated opponents often joined their leader’s faction not only strengthened a victor’s forces, but also reduced the number of men who could potentially fight against them. Leniency was not always successful, but the alternative, the execution of high-ranking men, was equally problematic.
Clemency therefore had similar uses in high medieval England, Norway and Denmark, even though there were different economic, social and political conditions within these kingdoms. How can we explain these similarities? The exchange of ideas seems to have only been part of the story. Pan-European, and specifically Christian, ideals of moderation and restraint did influence the kind of behaviour which was seen as appropriate and laudable in each kingdom. However, the process by which restraint was shown to defeated opponents in each of these realms was different. These processes, or norms, were shaped by domestic conditions. This suggests that these norms developed within each kingdom. They were not simply imported from elsewhere in Europe.

The way in which clemency was shown to defeated opponents in Norway, and to a lesser extent Denmark, was more relevant to a society where elite men did not have castles, towns and other possessions to exchange as ransoms.\textsuperscript{800} Elite men did not need to be motivated to act mercifully by the promise of profit in these kingdoms. They recognised that merciful acts carried other benefits. Victors could hope to adopt defeated opponents into their band of men, while the avoidance of ruthless behaviour could curtail further resistance. However, we should also not forget that, as in England, moderation demonstrated through the sparing of opponents, and in particular, elite opponents, was perceived to be ideal conduct. It denoted an honourable, and virtuous, elite man. Clemency was not simply a way of strengthening one’s position, nor was it practiced solely because it was part of the norms of conflict. It was also an ideal, and appealing, mode of behaviour for elite warriors.

In the introduction, I suggested that we need to move away from focusing on the extent to which the norms of warrior conduct in a particular place matched pre-defined models like chivalry. This approach hinders our understanding of why certain norms of conduct developed, and were subsequently adopted, by restricting our investigations to only that which adheres to a particular idea of superior conduct. It is chivalry, however defined, which is often presented as the premier ideal of the European military class.

We search for its presence in regions traditionally not seen as chivalric and argue over how well elite men ‘really’ adhered to its values. I think we miss much when we investigate our sources with an idea of what we should, or should not, find.

It is not the existence of *chevalerie* as a medieval ideal which is the problem here, but rather the traditional approach scholars have taken towards the study of chivalry and norms of conduct more generally. In regions where there was a large amount of cultural transfer, and the practice of warfare became fairly homogenous, like England and France, shared norms of conduct could develop. However, this does not preclude a norm promoting the sparing of elite opponents being present in regions less influenced by this process of cultural transfer.

That is not to say that Norwegian and Danish warriors were ignorant of how elite warriors elsewhere in Europe conducted themselves in warfare. Danish warriors were used to fighting against foreign forces like the Saxons, who were themselves subject to the influence of Western European forms of cavalry warfare. Thomas Heebøll-Holm has argued that by the twelfth century, Danish warriors had also adopted, to some extent, Western European modes of combat. It is also likely that Norwegian elites knew about the military tendencies of other European kingdoms, especially considering their frequent travels in Europe and Byzantium and their participation in the crusades. Yet it is clear that the norms of conduct of the Danish and Norwegian elite communities were forged within domestic warfare, even if they were influenced by pan-European ideals.

There is much work still to be done in understanding the culture of the warrior elite in Denmark and Norway across the medieval period, and many insights to be gained from

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802 Heebøll-Holm, “Priscorum Quippe Curialum”; Robert Bartlett has argued that German heavy cavalry and siege techniques were introduced to Denmark during the civil wars of the 1130’s. Bartlett, *The Making of Medieval Europe: Conquest, Colonisation and Cultural Change 950-1350*, 83.

comparing this traditionally peripheral region to the rest of medieval Europe. Comparative approaches allow us to interrogate and test the conclusions made in single country studies. Yet we rely on the latter for wider, and more in-depth, perspectives on cultural change than comparative studies generally have space for. It is important, for example, to consider how norms encouraging the merciful treatment of opponents interacted with other warrior ideals such as generosity, prowess and bravery. This has not been possible in a comparative study such as this. Both single country and comparative studies are therefore essential if we are to understand the cultural world of medieval Europe. I hope this research will encourage others to engage in this kind of investigation in order to further our knowledge of cultural change across the European elite, from Scandinavia to the Iberian Peninsula.
Primary Sources: Editions and Translations


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