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Friends, Lovers, Rivals, Enemies: Blood-brotherhood on an Early-Modern Balkan Frontier¹

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In 1660, during the Venetian-Ottoman war, Evliya Çelebi of Istanbul, Ottoman official and indefatigable traveller, was in the Dalmatian hinterland carrying information to the beglerbeg of Bosnia, Melek Ahmed-Pasha. In the course of his mission he found himself caught up in a border skirmish with Venetian troops. His travel account describes the battle, the capture of the Christian forces, the debate over how to deal with the captives – including notable border irregulars and renegades from Islam – and the subsequent decision to execute them to prevent them ever again fighting against the Ottoman forces. Then he describes a curious incident. A border warrior or *ghazi* had tried to hide and protect one of the Christian irregulars. The two were discovered and dragged before Melek Pasha, but when the Pasha ordered that the Christian be executed, the *ghazi* cried out:

Mercy, Great Vezir! I have sworn brotherhood with this captive on the battlefield, we have pledged each other our faith. If you kill him, he will go to paradise with my faith and that will be an injury to me, wretch that I am; and if I die, the faith of this captive with whom I have sworn brotherhood will stay with me, and we will both go to hell, so that again I am the loser.'

¹ This is a revised version of a paper originally published in *Contracting Border Societies on the Triplex Confinium (1700-1750)*, edited by Drago Roksandić & Nataša Štefanec (Budapest, CEU Press, 2000), intended as a chapter in a future book on culture and society on this three-way frontier. I owe thanks to Alex Drace-Francis, Ivo Žanić and especially the late Alan Bray: their generosity with time and references demonstrates the limits of those skeptical Balkan-wide proverbs about friendship and interest: 'love for love but cheese for money' or 'even if we are brothers, it doesn't mean our purses are sisters'. [Fratele e frate, dar brânza e pe bani]

He had thrown himself on his prisoner and would not rise from him. When the valiant Pasha asked: 'Hey, ghazis, what is the matter with this man?' the frontier ghazis answered: 'When our heroes on this border fall into Christian captivity and then eat and drink at table, they swear brotherhood with the Christian and give an oath to him on their faith. The Christian pledges his faith to the Muslim that he will redeem him from infidel captivity if need be, and the Muslim also [does the same] and says: "If you fall captive to us, I will redeem you from the Turks". And then they pledge each other their firm faith [ahd-ü eman], having said: "Your faith is mine, and my faith is also yours". "Is it so?" "It is". Then they lick each other's blood. This is how a Muslim swears brotherhood with a Christian. And so in this case this infidel is the sworn brother of this ghazi. He once redeemed this Muslim from captivity. Now, behold, this infidel who is in the hands of these men has become a captive. If [the ghazi] hides him and if he is saved, then he will have fulfilled his sworn word and faith. Then he could redeem his faith from him, and return [the Christian's] faith to him. But if this Christian is killed now, he will go to paradise, and this [Muslim] will go to hell with the faith of the infidel. Although this is written neither in the Muslim nor in the Christian [holy] books, this is nonetheless the custom on this border.'

When they had explained all this to the Pasha, he said: 'I release them both.' And they both prostrated themselves and then disappeared. But we were all astonished at this conversation.²

It was precisely because he was astonished that Evliya Çelebi – an outsider recording his impressions of border warfare on the military frontier or *krajina* – thought it worthwhile to recount the incident in detail, leaving us an account of the institution of *pobratimstvo* or blood-brotherhood as seen from the Ottoman side.

Çelebi's account provides a good starting point for a discussion of the institution of frontier *pobratimstvo* across religious and political lines on the three-way frontier between the Venetian Republic, the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire. This frontier is often treated as a major fault-line in Europe, where the forces of Islam and Christianity battled to a standstill, in the process preserving and deepening the already existing cleavage between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, between Eastern and Western cultural and political heritage. The notion of a 'clash of civilizations' has long defined the region, in the minds of its imperial rulers as well as in twentieth-century political discourse. How accurate this notion is, and how complete the divisions it assumes, is debatable. The tie of blood-brotherhood between Muslim ghazi and Christian irregular shows there might be different allegiances and values at work.

Celebi's account (along with other, less indulgent sources deploring the custom) can be used to give us an alternative model of the frontier, one that points up a fundamental disjunction between imperial and ecclesiastical projects on the one hand, and popular values and behaviour on the other. But looking more

² Çelebi, 1967, 147-148.

closely at frontier pobratimstvo also suggests that things were more complicated. Read one way, pobratimstvo shows us a border society characterized by cohesion and tolerance, where Christian and Muslim frontiersmen find ways to overcome religious and political boundaries, recognizing their common interests and shared values. Read another way, however, the same institution (and sometimes even the same documents) can also offer an insight into the persistence of frontier conflict and the pervasiveness of its violence, drawing attention to other, no less bloody divisions between predators and victims. In teasing out some of the possible meanings and uses of the blood-brother relationship on this early modern frontier, I intend to show the complexities of a specific time and place – one that is relatively unknown to many Western historians. But the problems highlighted by the institution of pobratimstvo should be very familiar: the troubling ambiguities of friendship, with its quality of simultaneously including and excluding; the boundaries between affection and interest, or between camaraderie and desire; the obligations (and the potential resentment) conferred by gifts; the moral dilemmas posed by cross-cutting obligations.

* * * * *

The relationship that so surprised Ćelebi had long been familiar among both Catholic and Orthodox South Slavs (as well as among Vlachs, Albanians, Greeks and Romanians). Pobratimstvo was one of a variety of forms of fictive kinship (others include co-parenthood or *kumstvo*, cemented by standing witness at a marriage, baptism, circumcision or first haircut).³ References to blood-brotherhood in the region have been documented well before the seventeenth century and were found in this area into the twentieth century.⁴ The main features of the custom remained fairly consistent. Pobratimstvo was a deliberate extension of kinship ties created out of mutual assent, entailing reciprocal obligations (aid and protection), and incurring specific restrictions (creating an obstacle to marriage between blood brothers' kin).

The ritual cementing the relationship emphasized its reciprocal character: this usually involved an exchange of blood (the symbol both of kinship and of honor)

³ Studies of pobratimstvo and similar forms of fictive kinship among the South Slavs include: Hammel, 1968; Kretzenbacher, 1971; Palošija, 1975, 59-65; Stojanović, 1977, 291-320; Kretzenbacher, 1979, 163-83 (this includes a useful bibliography); for the Romanian lands, Cront, 1969, especially 31-34 (I owe this reference to Alex Drace-Francis). On ritual brotherhood more generally, see the articles in the symposium on the subject published in *Traditio*, vol 52, 1997, especially Brown, 1997 and Rapp, 1997.

⁴ Accounts of the custom in Dalmatia and the hinterland may be found in Fortis, 1774, 58-60; Lovrić, 1948, 86-88; Bogišić, 1874, 385-389; Gavazzi, 1955, 17-30; Zaninović, 1971, 713-24. I have made use of scattered references from a long period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and a large area of the frontier, though the greater part come from the Venetian hinterland in Dalmatia; the frontier epics (especially the early eighteenth-century collection known as the Erlangen manuscript, published by Geesemann, 1924); and, for comparative purposes, the accounts by nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnographers cited above.

and a mutual pledge of faith, as described by Çelebi, reinforced by the sharing of food and drink. Çelebi describes sworn brothers as also having exchanged their faiths in a quite literal way (“Your faith is mine, and my faith is also yours”). This belief is not recorded elsewhere. Çelebi may well have misunderstood the South Slav word *‘vjera’*, meaning both ‘creed’ or ‘religion’ and ‘oath’ or ‘bond of honour’, mistaking a reciprocal ‘pledge of faith’ for an exchange of religions. But it is not inconceivable that border fighters could have understood blood-brotherhood across religious boundaries as involving an exchange that needed to be redeemed for spiritual reasons. Certainly the failure to uphold this pledge of faith was understood as profoundly sinful. One anthropologist has interpreted this passage by pointing out that in popular belief an act of mercy speeds the charitable to paradise, while a sin sends the perpetrator to hell. Was the sin made weightier by the infidel’s unredeemed good deed on the other side of the scale?⁵

The incident described by Çelebi was slightly unusual, in that it involved a Muslim and a Christian. Blood-brotherhood was usually contracted between like and like: that is, between members of the same sex or the same religion (thus between man and man; woman and woman; Catholic and Catholic; and so on). But the relationship could cross the boundaries of sex (contracted between a man and a woman) and could also cross the line drawn by a difference in faith (thus between Catholic and Orthodox, or not uncommonly between Christian and Muslim, as in this case). Nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnographers have enumerated a variety of reasons for contracting *pobratimstvo* across religious boundaries: to cement an alliance or friendship; to solicit or return a favour (such as saving someone from misfortune, as in Çelebi’s account); to restore social equilibrium or mark a reconciliation (to bring a feud or conflict to an end). Similar circumstances operated in our period, and it is possible to find references to all these functions of blood-brotherhood between Christian and Muslim on the frontier.

The ritual used to cement the relationship often had a religious character when it bound together Christians: it could be celebrated in or in front of church, with a priest officiating, and culminating in the sharing of communion. There are examples of liturgical rites for the ‘making of brothers’ in both Latin and Church Slavonic from the area (as well as Greek versions dating to the tenth century).⁶ Çelebi’s *ghazis* were wrong to say that the practice did not appear in the Christian holy books, at least. But in spite of the widespread use of religious rites to cement the relationship, both Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiastical authorities were dubious about lending their authority to such practices, and attitudes varied from the acceptance indicated by the appearance of the rite in liturgical manuals, to attempts to restrict its use, to outright condemnation.

The historian John Boswell has suggested that ecclesiastical uneasiness about blood-brotherhood ceremonies stemmed primarily from a concern over

⁵ Lory, 1997 analyses this text to demonstrate the shared code of values held on the frontier, and what he calls the ‘réversibilité des mérites’. Betrayal of one’s sworn brother is included in the genre of epic song enumerating the sins punished by the torments of hell (Brkić, 1961, 56-58).

⁶ Zaninović, 714-16; Kretzenbacher, 169-72; Boswell, 1994.

homosexuality within such relationships. He asserts that the ritual consecrating such a union had initially been established by the church to solemnize a “passionate friendship” between individuals of the same sex, and was essentially a same-sex marriage. Boswell argues that an increasing revulsion against homosexuality in the West spelled the end of ecclesiastical tolerance for such unions, but claims that the practice survived longer in Eastern Europe “with its original meaning”; and he uses ethnographic material from Dalmatia, Montenegro and Albania to assert the institution’s fundamentally sexual, homoerotic aspect.⁷ Certainly the popular assumption in this area was that the emotional bond between sworn brothers ought to be intense, stronger even than that between brothers of the same blood. One epic noted down in the nineteenth century characterizes the affection between the epic hero Marko Kraljević and his blood-brother Miloš in passionately physical terms: “One kissed the other’s white face / because of the tenderness between the two pobratims. / The pobratims caressed each other so much, / their horses exchanged their manes, / and the heroes exchanged their moustaches and whiskers...”⁸ Other accounts describe the sworn brothers as sharing a common bed following the ceremony.⁹ Should we read such descriptions of physical intimacy and emotional ties as evidence of a socially acceptable homosexuality? Or should this be seen as part of the conventions of friendship and blood-brotherhood, and as a way of emphasizing the appropriately intimate nature of such a relationship?¹⁰

Critics might object that we do not wish to see evidence of an acceptable homoeroticism in this society, and therefore screen it out (and Boswell suggests just this). Certainly since at least the eighteenth century commentators did imply that blood-brotherhood might serve as a cloak to conceal sexual relations between men (and it is largely this evidence that Boswell draws upon).¹¹ But this does not show that such relations were accepted as part of the norms of pobratimstvo, nor that these were practices that South-East European society treated with equanimity. As elsewhere in early modern Europe, those responsible for public morals condemned homosexual acts and prescribed severe penalties.¹² Popular attitudes on the frontier

⁷ Boswell, 265-78.

⁸ From S. Stojaković, “Pobratimstvo u srpskijem narodnijem pjesmama”, *Crnogorka* (Cetinje) 8 (1885), cited according to Stojanović, p. 30. This is an almost comic exaggeration of a common motif, in which brotherly love is paralleled by animal affection.

⁹ This incident was noted, without comment, by a Venetian official reporting on a pact between a Habsburg frontiersman of Senj and an Ottoman border commander to regulate the levels of ransoms, confirmed by a ceremony of brotherhood (Archivio di Stato, Venice, Archivio dei baili veneti a Constantinopoli, 305: 13 Jan 1590). See Bracewell, 1992, 182, for a detailed discussion.

¹⁰ See Bray, 1990, 1-19, for a discussion of these issues in another context.

¹¹ Ivan Lovrić, in disputing Abbe Fortis’s account of pobratimstvo in Dalmatia, insinuated that Fortis, like other clerics, saw the relationship in this light (Lovrić, 87; see Wolff, 1998-99, 157-78, 21-22. Boswell cites in particular Durham, 1928, 158; P. Näcke, “Über Homosexualität in Albanien”, *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Homosexualität* 10 (1908): 313-37; Tomašić, 1948.

¹² For Orthodox canon law, and comparisons with penalties in the West, Levin, 199-204. The law code of Poljica (15th-17th c.) prescribed burning ‘without any mercy’ for those

towards same-sex eroticism are harder to trace, but there is little evidence that they were noticeably latitudinarian.¹³

Regardless of attitudes to homosexual activity, other evidence suggests that in these societies *any* erotic attachments within the relationship were seen as illicit. A text from the early eighteenth-century Erlangen collection of frontier songs makes the point vividly. In this song, a girl takes a *hajduk* or bandit as a blood-brother to protect her on the way through a forest. She then proposes that he make love to her, but he refuses in horror, since she is his blood-sister. Wherever the girl passes, the green forest withers in shame; wherever the hajduk passes, the dry branches leaf out and the withered grass turns green, in a nice reversal of the way nature usually passes judgement on the evils of banditry according to the conventions of the epic. The song acknowledges that sexual attraction is possible within a heterosexual sworn friendship, but emphasizes that the kinship bond created by *pobratimstvo* makes this unthinkable.¹⁴ Both the suggestion that *pobratimstvo* served as a means of *concealing* homoerotic attachments and the presumption that *pobratimstvo* created consanguinity, and therefore an incest taboo, strongly imply that in Balkan frontier society the institution did not have the publicly acknowledged sexual dimension that Boswell suggested – though it is perfectly possible that individuals could have used the rite of *pobratimstvo* to cement or celebrate a sexual relationship.¹⁵

caught in this ‘unclean sin’ (90, art. 84a); in 15th-17th-c. Dubrovnik ‘sodomites’ were to be beheaded and then burned, though there is no evidence this penalty was ever applied (Krekić).

¹³ There has been very little research on the history of attitudes to sexuality in this region; what follows is necessarily sketchy. Vladimir Škarić claimed that the populace in 18th c. Bosnia regarded homosexuality more with scorn than with horror, on the basis of comments made by the diarist Bašeskija on Sarajevo’s ‘dilberi’ – but he was hardly typical, as a Sufi bent on cultivating a lofty distance from everyday life (Škaric, *Iz stare mahale i čaršije*, 1925, p. 28). Islam was popularly believed to license homoeroticism, and the Ottomans were thought responsible for the spread of such practices (see e.g. Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 164-68; R. Jeremić & J. Tadić, *Prilozi za istoriju zdravstvene kulture starog Dubrovnika*, vol. 1 (Belgrade, 1938), p. 130); this belief was still current in the 19th century: homosexuality ‘doesn’t exist, except in the villages of central Hercegovina, where it was introduced by the Turks and Greeks’, according to an informant in Bogišić’s survey of customary law, p. 630. *Pobratimstvo* – with or without sexual connotations – never seems to have been associated with Ottoman influence, unlike *šišano kumstvo* (hair-cutting co-parenthood), popularly attributed in the 18th c. to the influence of Turks and Vlachs (Kadžić, 1729, 420).

¹⁴ Geesemann, no. 150. Another song from the same collection (no. 190) in which a sinner confesses to a hegumen, includes making love with sworn sisters (and killing sworn brothers) in the catalogue of heinous sins. Both these motifs, specifying the sinfulness of sexual relations within a sworn kinship, are repeated in later variants. While epic singers were not much interested in homosexual relations, judging by the absence of such motifs, they were very concerned about sexual transgression between kin. This set of priorities is also reflected in Orthodox Slav canon law (Levin, 136-59).

¹⁵ Boswell’s analysis has provoked widespread scholarly discussion (though not yet, so far as I know, among Balkan historians or anthropologists). A survey of the literature is given in Brown, 261-84.

But the point is not to discover what pobratimstvo ‘really’ was about – if indeed this is possible with any social institution. The scattered and fragmentary sources on frontier pobratimstvo make it difficult, in any case, to say much about typicality or change. But each document, however random, does preserve traces of the ways that particular people, in particular contexts, reacted to or were affected by blood brotherhood. And these reactions, in turn, tell us something about the variety of meanings that the custom could have in practice, and why it could be such a source of anxiety.

The strictures of the churchmen make clear the reasons for ecclesiastical uneasiness about pobratimstvo. Orthodox authorities in the South Slav lands appear to have been more or less tolerant of pobratimstvo among laypeople of the same faith but even so there were repeated objections, explained in terms of the pagan overtones of the exchange of blood; on the grounds that the rite singled out particular relationships as especially privileged, disregarding the injunction to love *all* men as brothers (this appears to have been the reason it was generally forbidden to clergymen); and because it provided the occasion for a variety of sins against others (devotional manuals cite conspiracy, robbery, murder).¹⁶

Catholic clerics had an equally ambiguous attitude towards the custom – whether and under what circumstances it might enjoy ecclesiastical support, and in what form, was a matter for debate, and the custom was often banned, with priests being forbidden to officiate at blood-brotherhood rites. There are a number of such examples from sixteenth-, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dalmatia and Bosnia. What was at issue for the authorities here was not friendship between like and like, however passionate. The more pressing concern was for relationships that bridged important divisions. Thus, for example, in 1579 the Split and Zadar Archepiscopal Synod found it necessary to forbid priests to officiate at ceremonies of blood-brotherhood “between men and women, between Catholics and Greek schismatics, and between Turks and Christians” because the resulting “familiarity presents an occasion for many sins”.¹⁷ Similarly, in the 1620 code that Archbishop Sforza Ponzoni assembled for the use of priests in Poljica, clerics were forbidden to celebrate masses solemnizing pobratimstvo between men and women so they might ‘have to do with one another freely, without scandal’ (article 54), nor were they permitted to affirm blood-brotherhood ties with infidels (‘...s nevirnimi pobratimstvo nima ciniti’) (article 114).¹⁸ ‘A Christian’, advised the Bosnian Franciscan Matija Divković, in his 1611 devotional manual *Nauk karstianski za narod slovinski*, ‘should not contract friendship with infidels’.¹⁹ The Catholic Bishop Grga Ilijić’s prohibition of Orthodox-style ceremonies of blood brother- or sisterhood in 1798 characterized the rite as ‘vain, superstitious and exceedingly criminal’, singling out the fact that it was being contracted between men and women (though not specifically mentioning ties with Orthodox believers).²⁰ None

¹⁶ Levin, 1989, 149; Kretzenbacher, 1977; Stojanović, 295-6.

¹⁷ Farlati, vol. 5, 134.

¹⁸ Mošin, 1952, 186, 192.

¹⁹ Divković, *Nauk*, 258a.

²⁰ Džaja, 1971, 169-70, 182.

of these prohibitions are specifically concerned with same-sex unions. On the contrary, the ‘many sins’ that preoccupied the ecclesiastical authorities grew overwhelmingly out of blood-brotherhood relationships that broke down the barriers between difference – between men and women, Catholics and Orthodox, Christians and Muslims – and brought together people who ought, in the eyes of the church fathers, to be kept apart.

This was not just a post-Tridentine desire to reform popular culture by stamping out popular errors, though that element was certainly present in the condemnation of ‘superstition’. More particularly, clerical resistance to inter-faith pobratimstvo was connected with a growing concern with enforcing confessional discipline. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Catholic clerics on the frontier with Islam were increasingly insistent on confessional differences and intolerant of syncretic practices that might blur such distinctions. This impetus towards confessionalization was not only expressed through restrictions on pobratimstvo. In Bosnia between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Franciscans tried to extirpate co-parenthood by hair-cutting (*šišano kumstvo*), often used to link together Christians and Muslims since it did not involve a church rite, unlike co-parenthood by baptism, another popular means of affirming ritual kinship. Such alliances crossing the boundaries of faith and confession were condemned as eroding a distinct Catholic identity and easing the path to apostasy. Nor was it only a matter of relations between Catholics and Muslims. Relations with the Orthodox were also more closely disciplined, particularly in response to Orthodox attempts to assert jurisdiction over Catholics in Bosnia.²¹ Reinforcing religious and jurisdictional boundaries in this way helped develop the sense of civilizational cleavages along the frontier.

As well as the concern for confessional difference, prohibitions against blood-brotherhood also suggest an uneasiness over applications of church ritual to social ends. While clerics recognized that God commanded us to love one another (as cited in the ritual itself), at the same time they were reluctant to countenance relationships that both escaped ecclesiastical control and tested the limits of doctrine. For one thing, brotherhood could be turned as easily to evil as to good – as both Catholic and Orthodox commentators clearly saw, with their references to ‘many sins’. For another, the rite extended the peace of God not just to the community of the faithful but to those who were otherwise excluded – schismatics and infidels. Perhaps this ambivalence explains why Catholic practice attempted to keep the rite at some distance – at the church door, not at the altar; while sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Orthodox handbooks (*trebnici*) sometimes printed both the ritual *and* a note forbidding its use.²²

But the laity (and even the lower clergy) did not always respect the will of the ecclesiastical authorities. Octaviani, Archbishop of Zadar, in his visitation report of 1624, was led to condemn “the excessive and pernicious familiarity of

²¹ Džaja, 1984, 215; and see Stojanović, 296; and Codarcea, 236-37, for similar Franciscan reactions in the Albanian and Moldavian contexts, respectively.

²² I owe these points to Alan Bray’s comparative readings of Catholic and Orthodox liturgical practice. For Orthodox handbooks, Kretzenbacher, 1979, 180.

the Christians with the Turks” in Dalmatia, and similar strictures recurred over and over.²³ The rites of brotherhood may have moved increasingly outside the church – the relationship could be contracted without a formal blessing. But the repeated prohibitions confirm that individuals persisted in seeking religious sanction for these relationships, even across the borders of faith, reflecting a popular conviction that friendship was in some sense a holy thing. It was also a practical statement by those joined in brotherhood that, in spite of their differences, they agreed on some notion of the sacred and its obligations. Evliya Çelebi’s account certainly conveys something of this. But the way the border fighters understood the spiritual dimension of brotherhood would certainly have been seen as pernicious and heretical by Christian clerics, as it was by Melek-Pasha. Even if their pledges did not involve a literal ‘exchange of faiths’, they still cut across boundaries the religious authorities were concerned to reinforce, eroded down the concept of separate confessional identities, and admitted one’s enemy’s capacity for faith.

In contrast to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the Venetian and Habsburg civil and military authorities were never so concerned about pobratimstvo as such (nor were the Ottoman authorities, at least according to Çelebi). There was no principled opposition to the observance of a customary law with no official status, as long as it did not challenge state interests. Indeed, the Venetian authorities were quick to use the institution when it could be adapted to their own political needs, as in a case in 1692 when the Provveditore Generale in Dalmatia ended a damaging vendetta between two rival local commanders with what seems to have been a ceremony of blood-brotherhood, consecrated by a mass and a public pledge of mutual aid.²⁴ The capacity for friendship illustrated by the custom of pobratimstvo could even be advanced as evidence by Italian observers that the Dalmatians, correctly treated, could be expected to develop a political loyalty to imperial Venice.²⁵ Still, military codes were explicit in forbidding fraternization with the enemy, and blood brotherhood between their own subjects and those of a hostile state fell under this ban.²⁶

Occasional cases of blood brotherhood across the frontier are mentioned in official or semi-official reports, particularly when they transgress officially enforced distinctions. Usually what is described is some sort of local accommodation intended to keep frontier conflict to acceptable levels. This might take the form of

²³ Farlati, vol. 5, 159.

²⁴ Desnica, 1950, vol. 2, 281. In 1614 a Venetian representative negotiating free passage for couriers to Istanbul across Montenegrin territory sealed the official agreement with the mountain chieftains with a payment of cash and a pact of blood brotherhood (*le ordinarie frattelanze all’usanza del paese*), Stojanović, p. 300.

²⁵ As Larry Wolff points out in his analysis of the political messages of eighteenth-century disquisitions on the population of Dalmatia (Wolff, 1998-99).

²⁶ The eighteenth-century Military Frontier articles reprinted in Buczynski, 1998, vol. 1, 347-51, are a good example, specifying punishment for those who are ‘in agreement with the enemy’, ‘who will not fight with the enemy’ or who fail to punish such collaboration. See also Article 1 of the 1654 ‘Statute’ of the Dalmatian Krajina, in Desnica, 1950, vol. 1, 74-75; and a much earlier example from the Tkon Codex, in Stefanić, 1977, vol. 2, 23.

an individual act of mercy towards a captive, in anticipation that one day the roles might be reversed (as in the custom *Çelebi* reports), but *pobratimstvo* could also have a collective function – setting a seal on negotiations over the details of ransom payments, for example, or ending a local conflict between two groups. The authorities viewed this sort of arrangement with horror: it flouted the authority of the state, and challenged the assumption that religious and political confrontation defined the frontier. But this sort of opposition was not always in the interests of the frontiersmen themselves. A degree of accommodation with the other side was often desirable, not only for the raiders themselves, but also for local commanders whose own local interests were often at odds with the policies of their superiors directing war from far-off capitals. Thus in the course of the Candian War the Aga of Risan would write to the Captain of Venetian Perast, complaining about a clash between their troops, saying “you yourself know that this is not what we agreed, but rather to wash clean the bloody shirts, not stain them with more blood. For the more they are bloodied, the more painful it is to wash them.”²⁷ Quite so. In such circumstances, sharing blood in brotherhood could be a way to avoid shedding more blood in battle. Frontier epics were sometimes explicit about this desire to put limits to the bloodshed of frontier warfare through such ties: “Meet me where the coast curves and let us make peace and blood-brotherhood. Enough we have fought on our frontiers; heroes enough have died.”²⁸

The correspondence between Habsburg and Ottoman commanders on opposite sides of the frontier shows how appeals to friendship could mitigate conflict. These letters repeatedly rely on the formula ‘my friend, and neighbour on the frontier’, particularly when it is a matter of sorting out some mishap. When Osman-aga Beširević wrote about difficulties over a ransom to the Vice-Captain of Ogulin, lamenting that ‘when you succeeded to the captaincy I did not expect, my *pobratim*, that you and I would stir up the frontier, but rather I thought that we would do what was just, so the poor captives should not curse us’, was he calling on an existing relationship, or was he resorting to the language of friendship in hope of evoking reciprocity and a sense of obligation in a difficult situation?²⁹ In either case, whether as ritual or rhetoric, blood-brotherhood represented an useful tool for frontier coexistence. *Pobratimstvo* shows frontier life to be at least partly about finding ways of getting around the assumptions of unrelenting mutual hostility imposed by warring faiths and empires; of pursuing a minimal amount of peace and security; of escaping the destructive logic of perpetual warfare. This might be contrary to official policy, but it was not easy for the early modern state to enforce decisions taken centrally when communication was slow and local commanders were relatively autonomous. Other frontiers between faiths show similar patterns of coexistence and tolerance, operating together with a culture of religious war periodically rekindled by official campaigns – one well-documented example is the *convivencia* of the late medieval frontier between Granada and Castile.³⁰ *Pobratimstvo* across the boundaries of

²⁷ Butorac, 1928, 127-128.

²⁸ From an epic about the Pasha of Udbina, cited in Durham, 158.

²⁹ Rački 1880, 12 (and see for similar usages pp. 6, 8, 17, 20, 25, also Rački 1879, 89).

³⁰ For the Castilian-Granadan frontier, see Bartlett & MacKay, 1989; and MacKay, 1976, 15-33. Several essays in Power and Standen, 1999, address similar issues. Norman Housley

faith might well be interpreted in terms of frontier pragmatism – a reminder that coexistence and warfare are not mutually exclusive.

But what is striking about the institution of frontier blood brotherhood between Muslim and Christian is that the frontiersmen did not seem to see it as simply a matter of pragmatism and material interest, as the emphasis on its emotional and spiritual dimensions indicates. The word itself, with its root in the word *'brat'*, 'brother', suggests there is more to it. Pobratimstvo converted the enemy not just into an ally, but into kin. These ties were often described as *more* binding than those of actual kinship, since they had been entered into voluntarily and involved a pledge of faith. The idea that enemies could make one another into brothers is intriguing to historians, but the people of the frontier also seem to have been fascinated with the notion, judging by the number of frontier epics where the plot hinges on blood-brotherhood between Christian and Muslim. In the earliest known frontier songs, written down in the early eighteenth century, there are tales of heroes of warring faiths contracting blood-brotherhood in recognition of each other's heroism, in response to the other's plight, out of a desire for peace, to gain an advantage, or simply from a desire to show off, as the more magnanimous hero; tales about the 'good friends' that heroes have in the opposite camp, and the accusations from their own side that this leaves them open to; their refusal to betray one another – and also occasions when they did so (with the moral being the enormity of such treachery, even when an infidel was the one betrayed).³¹ The obligations of 'blood', honor and heroism not infrequently outweighed religious and political considerations in these tales, though how far they actually determined the actions of the frontiersmen is open to question. The point I wish to stress here is that the idea of ties across the divisions of faith gripped the popular imagination. When set against the requirements of religious confession or of political loyalty, the competing obligations of blood-brotherhood provided the moral dilemmas that are the very stuff of the frontier epics.

The men who contracted ties of blood-brotherhood with one another may have been driven by pragmatism and a need to coexist with their enemies, but at the same time they operated in a common moral universe, recognized the same principles, accepted the same standards of honor, heroism and manliness, and respected one another in as much as they embodied these ideals. Shared interests and shared culture were what allowed pobratimstvo to flourish across religious and political boundaries. The relationship was not necessarily straightforward, however. As well as shared interests, affection or respect and a sense of reciprocal commitment, pobratimstvo could involve coercion, dissimulation, competition, calculation. A letter sent by Mustafa-aga, the Captain of Udbina, to Petar Smiljanić, one of the Venetian local commanders in Ravni Kotari, at beginning of Candian War, allows us to glimpse the relationship between frontier 'brothers and friends' in operation:

weighs up the opposing forces of religious conflict and frontier pragmatism in a wide-ranging comparative article assessing local attitudes to wars on religious frontiers (Housley, 1995, 104-19).

³¹ For examples see Geesemann, 1924.

‘From Mustafa-aga, Captain of Udbina and Lika, to harambaša Petar Smiljanić: homage and warm and friendly greetings to our brother and friend.

We wonder at your lordship, that no letter has come from you, you being our father’s friend. Do you think us worth nothing in comparison to our father? We pray, if there is to be no settlement, as we wrote asking you to arrange with the Provveditore Generale, if you see that there will be no peace, we beg you, send us the news secretly, for the sake of our friendship. Our mother greets you and prays you for a Turkish slave-girl, and we will send you what is right. We pray that you will greet your son harambaša Iljia [also a frontier commander] on our behalf. We have heard that he is a hero on the Frontier. God knows that we are pleased by that, for he is one of ours. We are sending a hawk’s feather for him to wear before the heroes. And we ask him to send us a gun, which you know we need. On my faith, we will use it honorably. And God make you merry. And we pray that harambaša Iljia send us a bottle of rakija, so that we may drink our fill. Keep merry. Amin.’³²

Here the relationship is certainly a pragmatic device meant to cope with a likely future hazard, like that described by Çelebi, but it is also presented as more than that. The Muslim commander writes to the Christian as a “brother and friend” and calls on his father’s relationship with Smiljanić. Mustafa-aga addresses Smiljanić as an equal (Smiljanić is wrong to “think us worth nothing”), as an ally (one who will negotiate on his behalf with a Venetian Provveditore and who will keep information secret from the Venetians and the Ottoman authorities), and as a trade partner (trafficking in captives). In spite of Mustafa’s reference to his faith and supplication of a shared God, the request for a Turkish slave-girl seems to underline the irrelevance of conventional religious loyalties (and at the same time subtly indicates Mustafa-aga’s economic standing). The request for a gun does the same with respect to boundaries between opponents facing imminent war.

It is their common status as heroes that over-rides these other differences. Mustafa-aga celebrates his correspondent’s heroism and manliness, both as fellows (harambaša Iljia is a hero and ‘one of ours’) and as worthy opponents, who will be treated ‘honorably’. The recognition of Christian heroism is what Mustafa-aga has to offer in this exchange, though Mustafa is also affirming his own self-perception in his appreciation of Petar and Iljia (he is a frontier hero to the extent that his opponents are also heroic). Moreover, bestowing an emblem of bravery (the hawk’s feather) on Iljia emphasizes his own prior and superior claim to the same quality while it puts Iljia under an obligation to him. The tone is one of jousting comradeship, cemented by the exchange of gifts – tokens of bravery, arms and strong drink – as well as by the title of ‘brother and friend’.

While not at all homoerotic, this relationship could well be described as homosocial, in that frontier notions of worth are tied up with a specific notion of masculinity, and the emphasis on a common masculine honour overrides other

³² In Kreševljaković, 1954, 121.

identities. The institution of *pobratimstvo* was not necessarily *about* masculinity and, as we have seen, was not limited to men. However, when contracted between frontier warriors, it could function as a means of recognizing each others' manliness and heroism – or as a means of competing over who was the more manly and heroic. There is a hint of this competitiveness in Mustafa-aga's letter to Petar Smiljanić. The same point is made differently in an early epic in which a frontier hajduk is captured by an Ottoman pasha, who shares wine with him and asks why he looks so gloomy. Is he sighing for his comrades, his mother, his true love, or for revenge against the Turks? No, the hajduk replies, he is sighing because he has failed to cut off the pasha's head. When his comrades ambush the pair, release the hajduk and seize the pasha, the hajduk refuses the opportunity to cut off his head: "since we are blood-brothers, you are released", and goes his way singing, satisfied his magnanimity makes him the better man.³³ Even when the tie is contracted between men and women, it is usually depicted as rising from the woman's need for the protection offered by a man (as in the song about the girl asking the hajduk to guide her through the forest, cited above) or involving a more or less illicit female attraction to masculine power (a case in point might be Ivan Lovrić's eighteenth-century biography of Stanislav Sočivica, a frontier hero, which discusses the 'Turkish' girl who wished to become blood-sister with the hajduk Sočivica: "thinking perhaps that since he was a hero in arms, he must also be a hero in love").³⁴ In all these cases, *pobratimstvo* affirms a vision of potent masculinity rooted in honor and bravery – and as one of the cardinal social values on the frontier. (It is worth noting that *posestrimstvo*, or sworn sisterhood, is much less visible in the sources, though it is occasionally noted in passing. Although it was formally symmetrical to blood-brotherhood, linking two women in a relationship of affection and mutual obligation, I have not seen it used in the same way as *pobratimstvo* to emphasize the blood-sisters' social role as women. The Italian Abbe Fortis dwelled on emotion and delicacy of sentiment when describing a rite of *posestrimstvo* between two girls, but the idea that such qualities were particularly appropriate to women and blood-sisters is not characteristic of South Slav sources.)³⁵

Still, the manly camaraderie of Mustafa-aga's letter does not altogether mask a certain edginess and sense of dissimulation. After all, the issue here is treachery, though Mustafa's use of the language of friendship adroitly shifts the subject from treason against a state to the faithlessness of a friend. But even so, his requests cannot be made too bluntly. A friend's favours must be offered without compulsion, regardless of the half-hidden expectation of reciprocity – to press too hard would be to risk resentment and refusal, or to reveal too plainly a different, more sordid aspect to their exchange. In spite of his claims of shared values, Mustafa-aga cannot have been sure that Petar Smiljanić would respond with the help and information that he needed. The rights of friendship were not unconditional, even when sanctified

³³ Geesemann, no. 119. The hajduk chooses to view the sharing of wine as creating a tie of blood-brotherhood, the justification for his insolent magnanimity.

³⁴ Lovrić, 204.

³⁵ Fortis, 58.

by the rites of pobratimstvo. Regardless of the effort that both contemporaries and later historians have put into idealizing these relationships, border heroes could and did betray one another. But, like Celebi's *ghazi*, others risked themselves on behalf of their friends. We do not know the outcome of Mustafa-aga's letter but it is worth noting that a few years later the frontier *harambašas* of Šibenik would appeal on behalf of another such a Muslim, captured by Venetian forces and condemned to the galleys, as a friend and someone 'who has given many proofs of affectionate service on behalf of our Morlachs of Šibenik, and has promoted their interests with letters of warning...' just as Mustafa-aga requested Smiljanić to do.³⁶ Their plea was adapted to the interests of their Venetian rulers, but it reveals loyalty as well as self-interest.

* * * * *

The appeal of examples of frontier friendship that cancel out religious and political differences is readily apparent, particularly when many modern commentators have been quick to see the recent bloodshed in this same frontier region as the result of ancient hatreds based on irreconcilable differences in religion or culture. Border blood-brotherhood can be used to make the point that even during wartime, people on this frontier could go to remarkable lengths to bridge the divisions of religion and politics and to make brothers out of enemies. Such tales of blood-brotherhood also fit nicely into a particular interpretation of the relations between the state and society on the frontier. This presents division and conflict as primarily maintained and used by the state and the ecclesiastical authorities to legitimate elite projects and to preserve power; and on the other hand celebrates the capacity of the border population to recognize common values, dilemmas and fates in spite of their rulers' need to keep them apart. From this perspective, the centralizing state and the confessionalized church imposed divisions between faiths, between subjects of different states, between military and civilian populations, on a more tolerant and pluralist social reality, in which people used one another's churches and worshipped each others' holy men, drove their flocks up to pasture regardless of state frontiers, and sent each other hero's feathers to wear on the field of battle. From this perspective, pobratimstvo would be not just an institution of accommodation, but also a measure of resistance to the power of the state. Models of history that stressed common 'Yugoslav' ties among the South Slavs promoted such interpretations (and it is worth noting that the Titoist slogan of 'brotherhood and unity' drew as much on home-grown images of pobratimstvo as on revolutionary *fraternité*).³⁷ So have recent Western works written in opposition to the 'ancient ethnic hatred' model of Balkan history, which instead set up an opposition between the manipulations of the powerful and the essentially tolerant attitudes of the population as a whole (and construct a narrative of violence and warfare that puts the blame squarely on outsiders and political elites).³⁸ There was clearly a gap between official projects and the interests

³⁶ Desnica, I, 62-63.

³⁷ Good examples are Bogdanov, 1957, 353-477; Tudjman, 1970.

³⁸ See, e.g., Glenny, 1999.

and values of the people of the frontier, and acknowledging this does help make sense of some of the complexities and contradictions of frontier life. But mutual respect and the preference for accommodation rather than war is only one aspect of frontier pobratimstvo – and gives only a partial picture of social relations on the Military Frontier. Like approaches to the Yugoslav wars that focus only on top-down pressures, this interpretation provides no explanation for the local dynamics of conflict and violence.

Though pobratimstvo shows that differences could be overcome in the pursuit of common interests, it also suggests that the divisions of frontier society – and especially its religious divisions – were not entirely imposed by outside authorities. Religious identities and religious rhetoric provided a set of referents that could also be adopted and used for local purposes. Claims to defend a Christian *antemurale* against the infidel did legitimate both Habsburg and Venetian power on the frontier; imperial authorities did preserve and promote religious differences partly in order to govern their populations; and vigilance against religious laxity, syncretism or conversion did bolster the authority of all the ecclesiastical hierarchies. But even if they went counter to elite policies, ties of blood-brotherhood between Muslims and Christians did not erase religious differences, and certainly did not prevent Christian or Muslim frontiersmen from using religious rhetoric to justify their raiding across the frontier. Ghazi attitudes – justifying raiding against the ‘abode of war’ that lay beyond Ottoman lands – persisted on the Ottoman side of the frontier even after the 1699 Karlowitz settlement, which formally accepted the frontier as a permanent boundary and no longer an only temporary line of demarcation in the face of the enemy. Even the persistence of the term ‘giaour’ (or ‘kaurin’ – unbeliever, infidel) for their Christian neighbours foregrounded the difference of religion as their only identifying characteristic.³⁹ In their turn, the Christian frontiersmen in Habsburg service stressed that they had taken an oath to their rulers to serve “faithfully and honorably, with gun and with sword, against the infidel Turk”⁴⁰, and both Venetian and Habsburg frontiersmen repeatedly argue that they should be permitted to smite the enemies of the faith, even in peacetime and against the strictures of their governments. Whether or not the official elites so wished, ideas of holy war retained potency and legitimacy in the minds and in the deeds of their subjects. In spite of the fact that the Ottoman threat diminished continually after the beginning of the eighteenth century, and the state authorities strove to preserve peace on the borders, the population of Dalmatia remained convinced that killing “Turks” was not only justified, but also conferred honor and glory on the heroes who so distinguished themselves. This was one of the central points of Ivan Lovrić’s life of the hajduk Stanislav Sočivica, whose friendship with individual Muslims (including a Muslim blood-sister and blood-brother) did not modify in any way his hatred of ‘the Turk’ as a category. Lovrić’s assessment was that the persistent frontier hajdučija or banditry depended on this popular hatred (in spite of constant official attempts to eradicate such lawlessness), since the

³⁹ For this see especially Heywood, 1999, 228-250 and *ibid.*, 1994, 22-53.

⁴⁰ Lopašić, 1899, 26.

population believed that “one can achieve almost total pardon by killing Turks, as though Turks were foul beasts”.⁴¹

The point is that it was not just the state and the church, but also the frontier population that maintained and used religious differences for their own purposes. One could argue that they actively needed such divisions: not just because frontier oppositions were the reason for their existence and their way of life, but also more generally because an ideological framework was needed in order to explain and to legitimate suspicion, competition, and aggression between people who differed only slightly in all other respects – language, way of life and modes of thought.⁴² However it was generated, the frontier between faiths on the frontier was real, and it had a profound effect on people’s attitudes and lives. The institution of *pobratimstvo* might make individual alliances possible, and might facilitate a recognition of your enemy’s heroism and even his essential humanity – but religious difference was still one of the fundamental organizing principles on the frontier. Such differences could be bridged, but they could not be ignored. Indeed, one of the salient points about frontier blood-brotherhood is that it was precisely the gulf between the frontier populations that made such an institution necessary. There is no need for bridges where there is no chasm to cross.

Given the human costs exacted by religious, political and ethnic divisions in recent years, it is hardly surprising that historians have been happy to follow Evliya Çelebi and others who have described *pobratimstvo* in terms of tolerance across the boundaries of difference, or as a device for avoiding conflict and especially the violence of war. Because such friendships gainsay the imperatives of war, we assume that they affirm peace. But stories about blood-brotherhood between Muslim and Christian are often more ambiguous than that. As well as ensuring a minimum of peace and security on a war-torn frontier, blood-brotherhood could also facilitate disorder, plunder and conflict, allowing men of violence to demonstrate their heroism through the use of arms, even when the state proscribed this way of life. This was the case with *hajduks* or brigands – often the term is used to describe those who had started out as frontiersmen and continued living much the same way in peacetime, though in an altered political context. Their activities make an appearance in the records in peace-time, when unauthorized raiding was more likely to be documented – and was more likely to be stigmatized as brigandage. In reality, however, this was not all that different from the animal theft, ransom and extortion that characterized the constant ‘little war’ of the frontier, and that shaded into the competitive and often violent economy of mountain pastoralism. The end of large-scale official war threw such socio-economic patterns into relief, but it did not change them very much. Frontiersmen continued to live much as they had done, from a combination of pastoralism, animal raiding and small-scale agriculture.

It was not unusual for frontier *hajduks* to have allies and protectors across the border. These were known as *jataks* (Tur. bed, refuge; the word has no adequate

⁴¹ Lovrić, 211.

⁴² A point made more broadly about the religiously divided frontier ‘Vlach’ communities in Roksandić, 1997, 79.

English equivalent), who sheltered them, supplied them with food, or passed them information. Such *jataks* were often Muslims. The hajduk epics recount numerous examples of this relationship, and official reports also document the phenomenon.⁴³ Thus we hear of prominent Muslim families in Bosnia and Hercegovina acting as hajduk protectors;⁴⁴ or of the Ottoman and Habsburg authorities cooperating in measures against Christian hajduks and their Muslim allies.⁴⁵ The relationship was often formalized through a tie of blood-brotherhood, as in the case of the Muslim blood-brother who aided and eventually was forced to betray the hajduk Stanislav Sočivica, a motif that occurs both in Lovrić's biography and in hajduk epics involving Sočivica.⁴⁶ The practical advantages of such a relationship in facilitating hajduk raiding is obvious, but what motivated their Muslim blood-brothers? A share in the plunder, certainly. Fear of hajduk reprisal, perhaps (though this must have been less compelling for the beys and agas who are described as aiding the hajduks). Some commentators have suggested a common cause against the Ottoman state, grounded in a sense of shared ethnic origin. Perhaps it was this sentiment that led Mustafa-aga to call Ilija Smiljanić 'one of ours'.⁴⁷ Yet on the basis of the preceding discussion, I would suggest that the hajduk and the *jatak* recognized in each other not so much a common ethnicity, but rather a common code of behaviour and shared values that set them apart – as men and as heroes – from their victims. This shared code could cut across other divisions, both binding together Christian and Muslim and legitimating their acts of plunder and violence in their own eyes. Just as the same socio-economic patterns persisted regardless of the state of war and peace, so too hajduks and their *jataks* reproduced the pattern of alliances between Christian and Muslim frontiersmen.

Looking at the workings of blood-brotherhood from this perspective raises some questions about 'shared culture' as a force for peace and social cohesion on the frontier – and suggests that we should not idealise either *pobratimstvo*, or the concepts of masculinity, heroism and honour it affirmed. True, blood-brotherhood could link Christian and Muslim, cutting across the divisions of church and state, but this did not necessarily lead to frontier stability and a diminution of conflict. Hajduks and frontiersmen may have recognized their counterparts as heroes and as men, but in doing so they could deny or ignore other equally valid claims on their loyalties. Brotherhood between Christian and Muslim heroes, and between hajduks and *jataks*, meant that these men could strive for glory through the use of arms regardless of the state of war or peace, and could flout with impunity the forces of state law (whether Ottoman, Venetian or Habsburg). Even more to the point, every bond contracted between heroes implied an exclusion from this fellowship of brothers. Inclusion and cohesiveness creates in turn exclusion and new boundaries. Frontiersmen and hajduks demonstrated their heroism at the expense of the border population, both Christian and Muslim, who bore the brunt

⁴³ See Popović, 1930, vol. 1, 153-154; Nazečić, 1959, 189-90.

⁴⁴ Popović, vol. 1, 154.

⁴⁵ Dabić, 1984, 132.

⁴⁶ Lovrić, 204; Stojanović, 308, fn. 35. For further examples of Muslim *jataks* see Popović, 1931, vol. 2, 38.

⁴⁷ Mijatović, 1969, 225.

of their raids. Something of this echoed in Çelebi's account when he cited the local Muslim troops' fears that if the Christian captives were not executed they would survive to fight against Ottoman subjects again: "Among the captives there are many evil-doers whose hands are stained with the blood of our black livers. [...] they will return to our frontier to desolate and destroy our land".⁴⁸ By protecting his Christian blood-brother from execution the ghazi was endangering the lives of his fellows in the future. Similarly, Mustafa-aga's promise to use Harambaša Ilija's gun honorably begs the question: against whom? Against Ilija's Christian compatriots, those not protected by the bonds of blood-brotherhood with the enemy. Though underpinned by the same values and ideals as the first set of tales about blood brotherhood, stories of hajduk pobratimstvo fit much less comfortably into a celebration of the tolerance and cohesiveness of border society. Brotherhood between frontier heroes may have bridged divisions between Muslim and Christian, or between Venetian, Habsburg and Ottoman subjects, but it divided frontier society into the strong and the weak, predators and victims, and glorified this division as one between heroic men and those who were less than men.

The eighteenth-century frontier epics contain some pungent assessments of the price others were forced to pay to maintain this sort of brotherhood. In a song exploring conflicts between the demands of political or religious loyalties and the ties between Christian and Muslim heroes, the 'Ban' of Venetian Zadar insults two Christian harambasas by listing their 'good friends' in the Ottoman town of Glamoč, and by pointing out that such alliances allow them to betray both 'Turks' and Christians equally: "the [Christian] whore and the [Muslim] brigand met; you sell Turks to Christians, and Christians throughout the Turkish lands." Pointing out the special circumstances of the frontier is not an entirely convincing response: 'guarding the Krajina is dreadful work, wiping off hands wet with blood'. Harambasa Ivan Šandic finally kills the Ban in fury, preserving his honour and the interests of his blood-brothers in Glamoč – but in effect losing the argument.⁴⁹ Popular culture may have recognized that a shared code of honour was the basis for ties across boundaries, but at the same time it could also acknowledge its darker side. Still, popular reactions to such raiders were ambiguous, since observers regularly reported that the frontier population glorified the hajduks to the extent that they embodied heroism and manliness, regardless of whom they attacked and the effects of their raids. Thus, for example, Gregorio Stratico of Zadar, writing in 1785 for the Venetian authorities on Dalmatia's social and economic problems, noted that "among the people, a particular view of this sort of miscreant has struck root; someone who gives such brilliant evidence of his strength, his daring and his fearlessness is considered a man of renown".⁵⁰ Such attitudes, encouraged by a social and economic system that rewarded aggressive competition for scarce resources and reinforced by a model of masculine honor based on physical prowess and the ability to compel respect, were difficult to extirpate, even after the warfare that had given it official legitimacy had waned. The capacity for violence,

⁴⁸ Çelebi, 147.

⁴⁹ Geeseman, 80-82.

⁵⁰ G. Stratico, *Sistema regolativo della provincia veneta di Dalmazia* (1785), cited in, 1958, 248.

dignified as heroism, retained its character as a source of social prestige – and its glamour – long after the authorities found it desirable to proscribe it.⁵¹ But neither the violence, nor the rites that sustained it, went completely unchallenged. When the raven proposes that he and the wolf join in attacking a man lying wounded ('O you wolf, dear blood-brother of mine ... You shall eat his well-fed flesh, I will drink those dark eyes of his'), each of these pobratims is as black as the other.⁵²

Hajduk brotherhood, as a rite previous to robbery, as well as the cult of heroism and of arms, blood-feud, and an economy revolving around plunder are all familiar touchstones in accounts that interpret conflict in the border regions in terms of an unchanging 'culture of violence'. A harsh environment, perennial warfare and a world only weakly regulated by the authority of the state created a pastoral economy, a society structured around patriarchal kin groups extended through alliance, and a culture characterized by the aggressive defense of honour, a warrior mentality that disdained manual labour, and the glorification of violence as both an obligation and a proof of manliness.⁵³ Such historical-anthropological perspectives have also informed attempts to explain the character of the wars in the Yugoslav space by positing a specific culture characterized by violence, resistance to democratic political institutions, and blood-and-soil ethnic exclusivism, whether described as undifferentiatedly 'Balkan' in journalistic accounts, or more narrowly 'Dinaric' – associated with the frontier-defining mountain range running through Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania. How far the violence of local warfare, patron-client power relations in the political sphere or ethnic nationalism can be characterized as somehow peculiar to the region (and therefore non-Western) is doubtful. Equally problematic is the notion that cultural traits are passed down through the generations as immutable rules, unaffected by the transformations wrought by the processes of modernization in the region over the past two centuries, allowing power-hungry and aggressive frontiersmen to descend periodically from their mountain fastnesses to engage in atavistic violence, linked together by archaic forms of kinship (the tribe or clan) and alliance (blood-brotherhood) as well as ethnicity (also seen as only dubiously modern). But even when applied to the pre-modern frontier, the notion that frontier forms of violence sprang from indigenous cultural determinants, were fostered by institutions such as feud and blood-brotherhood, and were embraced without question is problematic. For one thing, it ignores the roles of the frontier states in promoting, harnessing and institutionalizing frontier forms of violence; for another, it disregards the ways that blood-brotherhood might limit bloodshed, or the fear of vendetta might ward off aggression. It focuses on one set of attitudes (the idealization of heroic violence), while discounting other views that were more critical or skeptical. Worse, by imagining frontiersmen as caught in the iron grip of cultural compulsion, it slides away from issues of choice, strategy and responsibility. (But isn't that just what Mustafa-aga was doing when he tried to influence Petar Smiljanić by drawing his attention to the duties of friendship?)

⁵¹ See Ardalić 1899-1910 for an evocative description of the idealization of manly lawlessness in late 19th-c. Bukovica.

⁵² Olinko Delorko (ed.), *Narodne epske pjesme* vol. 1, (PSHK), Zagreb 1964, p. 161.

⁵³ See, recently, Kaser, 1992.

Gathering together the scattered references to blood-brotherhood on the frontier and considering the ways that different groups of people described the practice and debated it, as well as how they used it, underlines the conclusion that pobratimstvo was not a thing-in-itself. The rites of brotherhood encompassed a range of potentialities. While pobratimstvo might serve to regulate public affairs or private economic interests, this did not mean it could not also in other circumstances consecrate a tie of affectionate friendship – or even, perhaps, erotic love. It could be turned to peace-making, or to plunder; could recognize an equal or fling down a challenge to a rival. Idealizing the practice served some purposes (staking claims to superiority, denigrating the reputations of others, building group solidarity, coercing conformity); unmasking its self-interestedness, hinting at perversity, or mocking hypocrisy served others. Claims are sometimes made that the ‘purest’ form of pobratimstvo – altruistic, loyal to the death – belonged to the Dalmatian Morlaks, or to the patriarchal tribes of the Dinaric region, or to the Montenegrin nation, and that deviations from these norms (in time, place or practice) mark a degeneration.⁵⁴ But the multiple possibilities that inhere in the relationship should give us pause before such claims.

This assessment of the factors of conflict and cohesion on the frontier, seen through blood-brotherhood between Muslim and Christian, gives us a more complex (if perhaps less emotionally appealing) picture of state and society on the frontier than those that would characterize the frontier either as fatally divided in its loyalties, or as culturally united (whether that culture is understood to breed tolerance or violence). It suggests that frontier society was influenced by at least two different sets of referents. On the one hand religious and political divisions separated the people of the frontier; on the other hand common values and institutions drew them together. Both sets of ideals mattered, shaping the ways people thought, setting their aspirations, guiding their actions. People could be pulled in different ways. The workings of ties of blood-brotherhood across the frontiers of religion demonstrate the ways that two sets of values or ideologies could be in tension with one another, or could result in contradictions – something recognized by the people themselves and debated in their songs. But we should recognize too that the people of the frontier were not just prisoners of their environment. They made their own choices, selecting the rhetoric most useful to the occasion, manipulating the rules or exploiting expectations about how they should behave – in their own interests and to their own advantage. The exact mix of conflict and coexistence, the balance between hostility and accommodation, depended on the needs and possibilities of the moment. Much the same thing could be said about the ways we, as historians, chose to tell our own stories about the frontier, balancing between a desire to celebrate the human capacity to make connections across difference and an awareness that every community of brothers is maintained at the price of excluding others.

⁵⁴ Compare Fortis, Miljanov and Geeseman.

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