

Blood-brothers: a ritual of friendship and the construction of the imagined barbarian in the middle ages

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Abstract

This article analyses the history of blood-covenants in the middle ages. Appearing in various historiographical and literary texts from antiquity onwards, these covenants have hitherto mostly been interpreted by modern authors as a typical feature of pre-modern or even 'primitive' societies. A closer inquiry into the context of the existing source-material reveals, however, that this motif can be characterised as a part of discriminatory narrative strategies which aim at the exclusion of foreign and non-Christian cultures. The analysis of the medieval texts, which were mainly produced from the twelfth century onwards, clearly shows a tendency to attribute this ritual of blood-brotherhood either to representatives of the so-called 'Saracens' or allegedly heterodox cultures, like the Byzantines or the Irish, which populated the margins of the Latin west. Not only does this topical use of the motif invalidate part of the texts' factual source value, but it also proved misleading for the interpretation of pre-modern societies by modern historians. While an older tradition of classical political history mainly tended to note the ritual as a cultural curiosity, more recent studies of ritual structures are in danger of misrepresenting the cultures they focus on.

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A blood-brotherhood then, a real, true blood-brotherhood; the one I have already read so much about! It exists amongst a variety of wild or semi-wild peoples and it is concluded either by the partners mixing their blood which they drink afterwards, or their mutually drinking each other's blood. As a consequence of this act, the

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partners stay together more intensely and altruistically as if they had been born as brothers.¹

The few lines of this quotation are obviously not taken from an academic work; they are part of a novel which exerted a strong influence on the German perception of the North American native tribes during most of the twentieth century: the Saxon writer Karl May's *Winnetou, the red gentleman*. Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, Karl May had never actually been to the countries he described in dozens of adventure novels, but his works are probably far more representative of the common German's opinion about foreign peoples than many ethnographic analyses. They are also very interesting as a point of departure for the purpose of developing my own ideas about the 'blood pact' in the middle ages, which I want to present in the following pages.

My reflections are part of a broad stream of inquiries into the world of medieval rituals which has proved to be very fertile during the last two decades, but which also has its limits.² For more than twenty years now, medievalists have discovered and analysed the importance of personal relationships for the organization of societies before the existence of states in a modern sense of the word.³ By putting the bonds of kinship and friendship on the same systematic level as structures of lordship, historians have considerably rectified our image of the middle ages. A major shift of equal importance certainly is the more recent focus on rituals and gestures which accompanied the verbal discourse about personal relationships on a practical level.⁴ Especially through the fertile influence of anthropological and ethnological theories that enabled us to concentrate on different sets of phenomena, we have learned to interpret the history of bodily rituals and gestures in other ways than just through the lens of Norbert Elias's master narrative of the 'civilizing process'. Klaus van Eickels, for example, could convincingly demonstrate in his analysis of Anglo-French relations in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries how eating together at the same table and even sleeping together in the same bed were part of rituals of alliance and friendship.⁵ In particular, the latter practice of ritualised behaviour cannot simply be interpreted as a sign of homosexual desire and activities, as has been done, for example, in the case of Philip Augustus, king of France, and Richard the Lionheart. Concerning this particular relationship, the contemporary chronicler Roger of Howden tells us in two different versions how the

¹ Karl May, *Winnetou der Rote Gentleman. 1. Band* (Freiburg i. Br., 1893; repr. Bamberg 1982), 416 (my translation). A first version of this paper was presented at the Medieval Friendship Conference at Belfast (26. August 2004). I would like to thank the organizers and the participants for their stimulating comments. I am also indebted to Marigold Anne Norbye (UCL London) for assistance with the final draft of this contribution.

² For a brief overview, see Gerd Althoff, 'Les rituels', in: *Les tendances actuelles de l'histoire du Moyen Âge en France et en Allemagne*, ed. Otto G. Oexle and Jean-Claude Schmitt (Paris, 2003), 231–42, with further bibliographical information. For a critical assessment see Philippe Buc, *The dangers of ritual: between early medieval texts and social scientific theory* (Princeton, 2001).

³ See especially the works of Gerd Althoff, for example, *Family, Friends and Followers. Political and Social Bonds in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 2004) [German orig. Darmstadt, 1990].

⁴ See, for example, Klaus van Eickels, *Vom inszenierten Konsens zum systematisierten Konflikt. Die englisch-französischen Beziehungen und ihre Wahrnehmung an der Wende vom Hoch zum Spätmittelalter* (Stuttgart, 2002) and 'Kuss und Kinngrieff, Umarmung und verschränkte Hände. Zeichen personaler Bindung und ihre Funktion in der symbolischen Kommunikation des Mittelalters', in: *Geschichtswissenschaft und »performative turn«*. *Ritual, Inszenierung und Performanz vom Mittelalter bis zur Neuzeit*, ed. Jürgen Martschukat and Steffen Patzold (Norm und Struktur, 19, Cologne/Weimar/Vienna, 2003), 133–59; Jean-Claude Schmitt, *La raison des gestes dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1990).

⁵ Van Eickels, *Vom inszenierten Konsens*, 341–93; compare Alan Bray, *The friend* (Chicago/London, 2003), chapter 4: 'The body of the friend' (especially 146–56).

two princes, after having concluded a peace treaty at Gisors in 1187, ate together from the same dish and slept together in the same bed, because of their intense mutual love.⁶

By describing this behaviour as part of the way the culture concerned handled the conclusion of a friendship with mainly political effects, one rightly introduces a certain amount of doubt concerning King Richard's position as a prominent member in some 'gay hall of fame'.⁷ On a theoretical level, however, the rationale behind this kind of rectification of our image of the middle ages and medieval cultures comprises structural difficulties which we should not neglect when interpreting the evidence for ritualised behaviour in past societies. In this particular case, the mostly historiographical evidence for this particular aspect of Philip Augustus' and Richard's relationship gives rise to a very specific mixture in the interpretation which contains elements of otherness as well as of identity. If we take Roger's account at face value, both princes (and the surrounding court society) obviously perceived their bodies and physical intimacy fundamentally differently from the way modern politicians do. Nevertheless, this assumption of otherness at the level of interpretation is still accompanied by the presumption of relative identity insofar as the interpretation presupposes the more or less rational use of gestures as a means of political communication and publication. What arises out of this combination of aspects would thus be the idea of rationally acting human beings whose media of communication differed from ours, since they lacked the extensive use of writing which they compensated by other means.⁸

While this approach certainly possesses major advantages in comparison with an older kind of historiography that more or less excluded the phenomena of gesture and ritual from its politically-centred perspective, it also tends to simplify the complex relationship between the factual background of pre-modern societies, the narrative nature of the written sources they produced and the reconstructed image of them that we create for ourselves. In order to do justice to medieval accounts of gestures and rituals, it is not enough to draw conclusions about the real existence of these phenomena from the fact that they gained a structurally important position as 'motifs' in different genres of texts.⁹ We rather have to reserve a special place for what might be called the 'narrative ends' of the use of such motifs which are in certain cases deeply involved in the literary creation of 'otherness' on two levels at the same time: medieval authors might have used them in order to distinguish themselves and their own society from

⁶ Roger of Howden, *Chronica*, ed. William Stubbs, 4 vols (Rolls Series, 51, London, 1868–71), vol. 2, 318; Benedict of Peterborough, *Gesta regis Henrici secundi*, ed. William Stubbs, 2 vols (Rolls Series, 49, London, 1867), vol. 2, 7. On the identity of the second work's author see David Corner, 'The "Gesta regis Henrici Secundi" and "Chronica" of Roger, Parson of Howden', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 56 (1983), 126–44, and Antonia Gransden, *Historical writing in England c. 550 – c. 1307*, 2 vols (London/New York, 1974), vol. 1, 222–3 and 228–9.

⁷ Van Eickels, *Vom inszenierten Konsens*, 348–63, gives an overview on the judgments in contemporary and modern historiography. For one of the most straightforward positions see John Boswell, *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality. Gay people in western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century* (Chicago, 1980), 298: 'In the twelfth century the ... future king of England could fall head over heels in love with another monarch without losing support from either the people or the church.' The scepticism concerning the cited passage, however, does not mean, that King Richard might not have had a certain inclination towards erotic male-male relationships – I would just argue that his sharing the bed with Philip Augustus cannot be interpreted in this way and thus furnishes no proof for Boswell's theory.

⁸ See Gerd Althoff, 'Ungeschriebene Gesetze. Wie funktioniert Herrschaft ohne schriftlich fixierte Normen?', in: id., *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter. Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde* (Darmstadt, 1997), 282–304; id., 'Rituale – symbolische Kommunikation. Zu einem neuen Feld der historischen Mittelalterforschung', *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 50 (1999), 140–54 and id., *Die Macht der Rituale. Symbolik und Herrschaft im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt, 2003).

⁹ See for example Althoff, *Die Macht*, 187.

other groups, and modern historians are in constant danger of relying on them when they reconstruct the otherness of pre-modern cultures, thus preparing the ground for simplifying projections of a modern vision of the primitive medieval man.

The history of — or should we rather say ‘the story about’ — the existence of blood-brotherhoods furnishes a most telling example for those effects. In Robert Brain’s study about *Friends and lovers*, a comparative overview about non-parental, same-sex personal relationships in intercultural perspective, we find a whole chapter on ‘blood-brotherhood’.¹⁰ Amongst references to modern literature and case studies of African customs, Brain describes alliances made by the exchange of blood as a universal means for the conclusion of artificial relationships. Seen from an anthropologist’s perspective, those blood-brotherhoods distinguish themselves from other kinds of friendship by their strong and manifest symbolic component: by mixing and mutually consuming their blood, the partners artificially emulate the bond of parental groups, which would be thought to be interconnected by their sharing the same blood.

If we were to believe the implications of Brain’s presentation, this kind of pact should have been very much in use in the medieval world, especially during the early middle ages. This hypothesis has already been put forward in 1952 by Harry Tegnaeus in his classical study on blood-brotherhoods, where the author presented an overview on the known sources for this phenomenon from antiquity and the middle ages in order to compare this material with African customs, his main focus of interest.¹¹ Like Brain, Tegnaeus explains the use of blood for the conclusion of artificial relationships through the liquid’s universal symbolic and magical value:¹² a pact confirmed by its mutual exchange would have been interpreted by the involved partners as more binding than any other ritual due to its magical sanctioning.¹³ The attribution of this practice to pre-modern or so-called ‘primitive’ societies clearly contains an evolutionist idea; while it had been in use (or still is) in ‘uncivilized’ contexts, it came out of fashion in the course of a historical and civilizing progress that led to the invention of alternative techniques in order to secure social relationships and stable structures of inter-personal coordination.

As a consequence, most of the existing literature on blood-brotherhoods interprets the phenomenon as a primitive, but nearly universal way of creating artificial kinship bonds with political

¹⁰ Robert Brain, *Friends and lovers* (St Albans, 1976). For practical reasons I refer to the German translation: *Freunde und Liebende. Zwischenmenschliche Beziehungen im Kulturvergleich* (Frankfurt a.M., 1978), here 97–116. Compare the general statement by Ronald F.E. Weisman, *Ritual brotherhood in renaissance Florence* (New York, 1982), 98: ‘Brotherhoods in other places and times have made ceremonies like oath swearing or mingling of blood a sign of their bond.’

¹¹ Harry Tegnaeus, *Blood-brothers. An ethno-sociological study of the institutions of blood-brotherhood with special reference to Africa* (Stockholm, 1952).

¹² For brief overviews on the symbolic value of blood in different societies see Jan Hendrik Waszink, ‘Blut’, in: *Realenzyklopädie für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 2, 459–73; *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, ed. Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli and Eduard Hoffmann-Krayer (Berlin/Leipzig, 1927), vol. 1, 1434–42; Heinrich Beck and Kurt Ranke, ‘Blut’, in: *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, vol. 3, 77–80; Hans Wißmann et al., ‘Blut’, in: *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 6, 727–42; Jean-Paul Roux, *Le sang. Mythes, symboles et réalités* (Paris, 1988); Piero Camporesi, *Il sugo della vita. Simbolismo e magia del sangue* (Milan, 1984). A huge quantity of medieval material has already been collected by Hermann Strack with the aim of refuting the reproach of ritual murder made against the Jewish population, see Hermann Strack, *Das Blut in Glauben und Aberglauben der Menschheit. Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Volksmedizin und des jüdischen Blutritus* (Munich, 5th edn, 1900). The most recent contributions from a medieval perspective are the collection *Le sang au moyen âge* (Montpellier, 1999) and Bettina Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood* (Cardiff, 2006).

¹³ Brain, *Freunde*, 99–100; Tegnaeus, *Blood-brothers*, 166. Indeed, the idea already appears in antique sources, see Tacitus, *The annals, books IV–VI, XI–XII*, ed. and transl. John Jackson (Cambridge, MA, 1970), XII, 47: *Id foedus arcum habetur quasi mutuo cruore sacratum*.

or at least functional objectives. John Boswell in his much disputed *Same-sex unions in pre-modern Europe* even went a step further when he referred to an allegedly Irish ritual as described by Gerald of Wales. In his *Topography of Ireland*, Gerald generally characterized the Irish as brutish barbarians who did not keep any kind of agreement, except for those unions which they concluded by a special ritual.¹⁴ This ritual, which included the mutual consumption of the two partners' blood, would have been performed before a priest and created the only bond they considered to be sacrosanct. Due to the circumstances of the ritual structure and to the denomination as *desponsatio* in the Latin original, Boswell claimed Gerald's description to be a positive proof of homosexual marriage.¹⁵ I do not, however, want to address the question of homosexuality in pre-modern times — a much-debated subject which still has to be analysed very carefully.¹⁶ Instead, my focus concentrates on the very existence of the ritual of the exchange of blood in medieval societies itself. Due to the nature of the phenomenon, the relevant sources mainly consist of historiographical or literary texts — a circumstance which governs the conclusions I will draw.

Blood-brotherhoods in antique historiography

If we look at the written evidence at our disposal from antiquity onwards, we can easily establish two initial premises: first of all, blood indeed seems to be an extremely particular liquid that holds special symbolic values for most known societies. Seen from a systematic point of view, the attraction regularly expresses an ambiguous character of its symbolism: it is at once attractive and repulsive, in the truest sense of the word a 'dangerous liquid'.¹⁷ I do not want to expose the details of what might be termed a 'symbolic history of blood' during the middle ages on a general level, since several publications already trace its outlines. Instead, I rather want to concentrate on a second, more restricted phenomenon: the use of human blood for ritual purposes, which has very early taken on a central role in the discrimination of the so-called barbarian in antique and medieval European societies.¹⁸

Several well-known passages can demonstrate this practice: according to Herodotus, the Scythians accompanied sworn pledges with a ritual which included blood-letting from the two partners. The liquid was then mixed with wine and the participants dipped a variety of weapons in it before drinking it, together with the 'most honourable of their followers'.¹⁹ In

¹⁴ See n. 54.

¹⁵ John Boswell, *Same-sex unions in premodern Europe* (New York, 1994), 259–61.

¹⁶ For a brief overview on methodological problems see Bray, *The friend*, 307–23.

¹⁷ Roux, *Le sang*, 28–31.

¹⁸ On the underlying idea that the soul resides in the blood, see Roux, *Le sang*, 47–9.

¹⁹ Herodotus, *Historiae*, ed. Alfred D. Godley, 4 vols (London/Cambridge, MA, reprint, 1963–66), IV 70: 'As for the giving of sworn pledges to such as are to receive them, this is the Scythian fashion: they take blood from the parties to the agreement by making a little hole or cut in the body with an awl or a knife, and pour it mixed with wine into a great earthenware bowl, wherein they then dip a scimitar and arrows and an axe and a javelin; and when this is done the makers of the sworn agreement themselves, and the most honourable of their followers, drink of the blood after solemn imprecations.' For a recent assessment of Herodotus' credibility as a historiographer, see the contributions in *The historian's craft in the age of Herodotus*, ed. Nino Luraghi (Oxford, 2001), especially Nino Luraghi, 'Local knowledge in Herodotus' *Histories*', in: idem., 138–60, and Robert Rollinger, *Herodots babylonischer Logos. Eine kritische Untersuchung der Glaubwürdigkeitsdiskussion an Hand ausgewählter Beispiele* (Innsbruck, 1993). Generally speaking, in Herodotus' account the Scythians mainly serve as a kind of negative mirror of Greek realities, compare Reinhold Bichler, *Herodots Welt. Der Aufbau der Historie am Bild der fremden Länder und Völker, ihrer Zivilisation und ihrer Geschichte* (Berlin, 2nd edn, 2001), 89–90 and 109.

other chapters of his work, the Greek author attributes similar traditions to the Lydians and the Medes.²⁰ As Silke Knipschild recently pointed out in her study on symbolic gestures in international contacts in the antique world, this kind of ritual might have been depicted in a gold object found in a Scythian burial site near Kerč.²¹ The object, probably a girdle-clasp, shows two bearded men drinking together from a horn. Interesting as Knipschild's theory certainly is, the connection with the Greek description of the ritual remains somewhat problematic. Even if there undeniably existed a Greek tradition from Herodotus, which upheld that the Scythian people practised this kind of rites, it is also the case, however, that Herodotus himself apparently did not actually approve of the custom but rather perceived it as something barbarian. According to his usual style, he did not denounce it openly as such, but the exclusive attribution of this and similar rites to non-Greek peoples sheds light on the underlying polemical tendencies.

But even if one admits that the Greek author's description coincides with the intended message of the girdle-clasp's maker, his representation of the motif still remains obscure. If the craftsman really had wanted to refer to a ritual during which such an important liquid as the partners' blood had been used, would he not have chosen to make a more explicit allusion to this in his iconography? Instead, he created the image of two men drinking from the same vessel — which is, I think, exactly what he wanted to show. Knipschild herself convincingly demonstrates that the eating and drinking together was a ritual of peace and community which was well known in the cultures she describes.²² Of course, Lucian tells us in his dialogue *Toxaris* that the Scythians concluded their everlasting and inseparable friendships by mutually drinking their blood.²³ However, how reliable is this text, written by a Greek in the second century A.D., of whom it has recently been written: 'Lucian disliked "lies" but not elegant or beguiling fiction'?²⁴ Moreover, there is no reason to exclude the possibility that Lucian himself might have relied on Herodotus'

²⁰ Herodotus, *Historiae*, I, 74: 'These nations make sworn compacts as do the Greeks; moreover, they cut the skin of their arms and lick each other's blood.' Concerning the Arabs, he describes a different tradition which does not include the incorporation of the partner's blood, Herodotus, *Historiae*, III, 8: 'There are no men who respect pledges more than the Arabians. This is the manner of their giving them: — a man stands between the two parties that would give security, and cuts with a sharp stone the palms of the hands of the parties, by the thumb; then he takes a piece of wood from the cloak of each and smears with the blood seven stones that lie between them, calling the while on Dionysus and the Heavenly Aphrodite; and when he has fully done this, he that gives the security commends to his friends the stranger (or his countryman if the party be such), and his friends hold themselves bound to honour the pledge.'

²¹ Silke Knipschild, »*Drum bietet zum Bunde die Hände*«. *Rechtssymbolische Akte in zwischenstaatlichen Beziehungen im orientalischen und griechisch-römischen Altertum* (Stuttgart, 2002), 143–4 and fig. 23. The object has already been discussed by Tegnaeus, *Blood-brothers*, 19–20, who also established a connection between Herodotus' text and the motif on the girdle-clasp.

²² Knipschild, *Drum bietet zum Bunde die Hände*, 143–4. On the ritual aspects of the shared meal in the early middle ages and later periods see Gerd Althoff, 'Der frieden-, bündnis- und gemeinschaftsstiftende Charakter des Mahles im früheren Mittelalter', in: *Essen und Trinken in Mittelalter und Neuzeit*, ed. Irmgard Bitsch, Trude Ehlert and Xenja von Ertzdorff (Sigmaringen, 1990), 12–25, *La sociabilité à table. Commensalité et convivialité à travers les âges*, ed. Martin Aurell, Olivier Dumoulin and Françoise Thelamon (Rouen, 1992), and Bonnie Effros, *Creating community with food and drink in Merovingian Gaul* (New York, 2002).

²³ Lukian, *Werke*, ed. Jürgen Werner and Herbert Greiner-Mai, 3 vols (Berlin/Weimar, 1974), vol. 2, 247 (c. 37): '... cutting our fingers, we let the blood drop into a vessel, and having dipped the points of our swords into it, both holding them together, we drink it both at the same time. There is nothing which can loose us from one another after that.' English translation cited after Tegnaeus, *Blood-brothers*, 22.

²⁴ C.P. Jones, *Culture and society in Lucian* (Cambridge, MA/London, 1986), 58; compare Brent D. Shaw, 'Ritual brotherhood in Roman and Post-Roman Societies', *Traditio*, 52 (1997), 327–55, here 341–2: 'Of course, this is a distorted "colonialist" fiction — a Greek writer trying to imagine "what the barbarians do" — and therefore a literary interpretation of the realities of Skythian life.'

text as a model for his own description of the Scythian ritual. If Herodotus described the Scythian tradition in a way that clearly showed how he perceived it as being something barbarian which could not have been practised in Greece at the same time,²⁵ other authors also created a narrative difference in analogous ways: one might cite Tacitus' description of the alliance between the Armenian king Mithridates and the Iberian prince Radamistus²⁶ or, as well, Valerius Maximus' story about Sariaster. This latter prince allegedly had conspired with his friends against his own father, King Tigranes of Armenia, and he and his accomplices reinforced their bond by mutually cutting into their right hands and drinking the flowing blood.²⁷

This moralizing story, which clearly expresses a negative judgement on the part of Valerius, coincides with several existing accounts of the famous conspiracy of Catilina on a material as well as on a structural and narrative level. Sallust explained that Catilina, whom he wanted to portray as someone who was capable of practically any kind of crime, had used blood to bind his co-conspirators more firmly. Interestingly enough, he did not specify the origin of the liquid, but just related that 'according to some people' Catilina had offered his accomplices a chalice filled with human blood mixed with wine.²⁸ Apart from the detail concerning the blood's origin, this passage reveals close similarities with Valerius' moralizing account: a group of people is closely bound together by using the magical force of blood. In this functional respect, the two examples can also be compared with the other instances already cited. Tacitus, for example, explicitly states that the Armenians interpreted this kind of alliance as extremely binding due to the sacred nature of the blood they used: *Id foedus arcanum habetur quasi mutuo cruore sacratum*.²⁹ But what is even more interesting, I think, are the similarities concerning the narrative structure of Valerius' and Sallust's texts: both authors refer to the consumption of human

²⁵ Leopold Hellmuth, *Die germanische Blutsbrüderschaft. Ein typologischer und völkerkundlicher Vergleich* (Vienna, 1975), 94. Herodotus clearly perceived the consumption of human blood as a monstrosity which he took care to attribute to foreign peoples, compare Herodotus, *Historiae*, III, 11: '... the foreign soldiery of the Egyptian, Greeks and Carians, devised a plan to punish Phanes, being wroth with him for leading a strange army into Egypt. Phanes had left sons in Egypt; these they brought to the camp, into their father's sight, and set a great bowl between the two armies; then they brought the sons one by one and cut their throats over the bowl. When all the sons were killed, they poured into the bowl wine and water, and the foreign soldiery drank of this and thereafter gave battle.' It might have been descriptions like these which later led to the definition: *Assaratum apud antiquos dicebatur genus quoddam potionis ex vino et sanguine temperatum, quod Latini prisci sanguinem assyr vocarent*: Sextus Pompeius Festus, *De verborum significatu*, ed. Wallace M. Lindsay (Leipzig, 1913), 15.

²⁶ Tacitus, *Annals*, XII, 47: *Mos est regibus, quotiens in societatem coeant, implicare dexteras pollicesque inter se Vincere nodoque praestringere: mox ubi sanguis in artus se extremos suffuderit, levi ictu cruorem eliciunt atque invicem lambunt*.

²⁷ Valerius Maximus, *Facta et dicta memorabilia*, ed. Carl Kempf (Stuttgart, 1888), IX, 11 ext. 3: *Quamquam quid hoc quasi inusitatum illis gentibus miremur, cum Sariaster aduersus patrem suum Tigranen Armeniae regem ita cum amicis consenserit, ut omnes (e d)exteris manibus sanguinem mitterent atque eum inuicem sorberent? vix ferrem pro salute parentis tam cruenta conspiratione foedus facientem*.

²⁸ Sallust, 'Bellum Catilinae', in: Sallust, *Opera*, ed. John C. Rolfe (London/Cambridge, MA, 6th edn, 1965), 1-124, c. 22: *Fuere ea tempestate qui dicerent Catilinam oratione habita cum ad iusiurandum popularis sceleris sui adigert, humani corporis sanguinem vino permixtum in pateris circumtulisse*. Apparently even Sallust himself did not feel at ease with the enormous monstrosity of his reproach, hence the careful distancing from the related information. Parallel accounts reconstruct the events in an even more detailed manner, compare Dio Cassius, *Roman history*, ed. and transl. Earnest Cary (London/Cambridge, 1914), XXXVII, 30: 'He [i.e. Catilina] assembled from Rome itself the lowest characters and such as were always eager for a revolution and as many as possible of the allies, [...] Upon the foremost and most powerful of them, including Antonius the consul, he imposed the obligation of taking a monstrous oath. For he sacrificed a boy, and after administering the oath over his vitals, ate these in company with the others.'

²⁹ See n. 13.

blood in a context in which they clearly want to characterize the aim of the created alliance as profoundly negative and morally condemnable. In this respect, there seems to have been only little difference between those pacts that were concluded by the consumption of the partners' blood, and others, where allegedly the blood of third parties has been used, who mainly appear as victims of some kind of sacrificial ritual, as is the case in Diodorus of Sicily's passages on the Cassandreian tyrant Apollodorus.³⁰ This latter example goes even further than Valerius Maximus and makes the negative image of the ritual still clearer, since the accomplices not only drink the blood of a sacrificed victim, but put themselves under obligation towards the central person of their pact by committing an act of ritual cannibalism. Since the same idea also appears in Dio's passages on Catalina,³¹ it seems that the consumption of blood and the wider phenomenon of cannibalism represented more or less the same degree of uncivilized practices. Recent research into the phenomenon of anthropophagy tends to underline, however, that most of the known instances of so-called cannibalism represent a discriminatory instrument on a discursive level rather than actual practices of the societies to which they are ascribed.³²

Together with Lucian's or Herodotus' stories about blood-alliances, the cited texts enable us to identify three important characteristics of the ritual in the imaginary of the Greco-Roman world: first of all, it is readily accepted as being effective — none of the authors ever tries to ridicule the belief of the participants in such an alliance.³³ Secondly, all the known authors who tell us about this kind of ritual attribute it without exception to peoples or people whom they consider to be barbarians or villains; they distance themselves and their own communities from groups in which such a ritual could be performed. The third point partly overlaps with the second conclusion: in several examples the act serves as preparation for an illicit action. On the whole, the consistent use of the motif of treaties sealed by blood strongly tends to imply that it was exclusively used in polemical contexts which do not lend themselves to interpretation as positive proof for the existence of the described rituals.

Soldiers and martyrs — the role of blood in medieval historiography

If we have a look at the medieval evidence, it is first worth noting the little information we can deduce from Isidore of Seville, the great cornerstone between antiquity and the middle ages. According to him, the word *foedus* itself actually referred to the blood used in the conclusion of treaties, since it was derived from *hircus* and *haedus* (both expressions for a male-goat) — the animal standing here for its blood that was used for the consecration of a pact.³⁴ On the other hand, we

³⁰ Diodorus of Sicily, *Library of history*, ed. and transl. Francis R. Walton (London/Cambridge, MA, 1957), XXII, 5: 'Apollodorus, who aimed at a tyranny, and thought to render the conspiracy secure, invited a young lad, one of his friends, to a sacrifice, slew him as an offering to the gods, gave the conspirators his vitals to eat, and when he had mixed the blood with wine, bade them drink it.'

³¹ See n. 28.

³² This is still the case, even if the position of William Arens, *The man-eating myth. Anthropology & anthropophagy* (New York/Oxford, 1979), has in the meantime been put into perspective, compare *The anthropology of cannibalism*, ed. Laurence R. Goldman (Westport, CT/London, 1999), or Hedwig Röckelein, 'Einleitung — Kannibalismus und europäische Kultur', in: *Kannibalismus und europäische Kultur*, ed. Hedwig Röckelein (Tübingen, 1996), 9–27, especially 15.

³³ Compare also Publicola's life by Plutarch — the author describes how a group of young people conspired against the young democracy of Rome after the flight of King Tarquinius Superbus: '... it was decided that all the conspirators should swear a great and dreadful oath, pouring in libation the blood of a slain man, and touching his entrails': Plutarch, *Lives. Vol. 1*, ed. and transl. Bernadotte Perrin (London/Cambridge, MA, 1914), 511.

³⁴ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. W.M. Lindsay, 2 vols (Oxford, 1911), X, 100: *Foedus nomen habet ab hircu et haedo, F littera addita. Hunc veteres in gravi significatione ponebant, ut [Virgil., Aeneid. 2, 502]: Sanguine foedantem quos ipse sacraverat ignes?*

can conclude that this kind of knowledge was probably more of a theoretical nature and not connected with contemporary practices in the world of the author, since Isidore was obviously disgusted by the alleged Thracian habit of drinking human blood.³⁵ Moreover, it is well known that one aspect of the Christian religion consisted of the abolition of animal, or more generally, of material sacrifices.³⁶

After Isidore, we seem to have to wait for centuries before we can identify new appearances of rituals including the exchange or mutual consumption of blood. This silence of the sources is quite curious, given the common opinion that it was especially during the early middle ages that the heyday of blood-brotherhood was supposedly reached. In the Christian tradition at least, there clearly was no place for this means of creating bonds and communities. To cite just one example: when telling the story of the saints Cassius and Victorinus, Gregory of Tours strictly distinguishes between the blood that was spilled during their martyrdom and which finally earned them their place in paradise (*per effusionem cruoris proprii caelorum regna pariter sunt adepti*) on the one hand, and their fraternal union on the basis of each one's love for Christ on the other (*in dilectione Christi fraterno affectu sociati*).³⁷ Apart from repeated allusions to the blood of the innocent, of saints, and of Christians which was spilled during the time of their persecution,³⁸ we also find references to the binding force of the kin's blood in Gregory's histories.³⁹ But it seems that those evocations possess a primordially metaphorical character, because when it comes to the conclusion of political alliances and friendships, the author never mentions the use of blood in any form whatsoever;⁴⁰ in spite of the obsession in medieval societies with the symbolism and practical duties of parental relations and the surrounding imaginary, there has apparently been little effort to make use of the symbolic liquid in a more practical manner. The same holds true for Bede's *Ecclesiastical history*, where blood mainly occurs in a Christianised context.

As a consequence, the liquid's symbolic value seems somewhat monopolized either by the importance of Christ's blood, given for the salvation of the world and present in the celebration of the Eucharist, or the martyrs' shedding of theirs.⁴¹ Those sacred substances are consequently

³⁵ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, IX, 82: *Saeuissimi enim omnium gentium fuerunt, unde et multa de eis fabulosa memorantur: quod captivos diis suis litarent, et humanum sanguinem in ossibus caput potare soliti essent.*

³⁶ Compare Robert Daly, *The origins of the Christian doctrine of sacrifice* (London, 1978), 8–10 and 135–40; Lorenz Wilkens, 'Opfer und Opferabschaffung im christlichen Kult', in: *Kannibalismus*, ed. Röckelein, 61–73.

³⁷ Gregory of Tours, *Historiarum libri decem*, ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison (*Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (MGH). *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* 1.1 (Hanover, 1937–51), I, 33. On Gregory's life and work see Martin Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours. History and society in the sixth century* (Cambridge, 2001).

³⁸ For example Gregory of Tours, *Historiarum*, I, 18 (*martyrum sanguine*), I, 20 (*sanguine profetarum*), I, 29 (*sanguine christiano*), I, 41 (*sanctorum ... sanguinem*).

³⁹ Gregory of Tours, *Historiarum*, II, 40: *Nec enim possum sanguinem parentum meorum effundere, quod fieri nefas est.* The context of this citation admittedly perverts the phrase's content, since it is direct speech attributed to King Chlodovech who just had the son of Sigebert, thus his kin, murdered. But see also Gregory of Tours, *Historiarum*, III, 28: *Tunc illi a lapidibus, ut diximus, caesi et humo prostrati, paenitentiam agebant ac veniam praecabantur Deo, quod ista contra sanguinem suum agere voluissent.* In this passage Gregory refers to the war between the brothers Childebert and Theodebert on the one hand, and Chlotachar on the other.

⁴⁰ Compare Gregory of Tours, *Historiarum*, II, 35: *Coniunctique* [i.e. Alaricus and Chlodovech] *in insula Ligeris, quae erat iuxta vicum Ambaciensem terreturum urbis Toronicae, simul locuti, comedentes pariter ac bibentes, promissa sibi amicitia, paxifici discesserunt.* Compare also the detailed account of the reconciliation between Sichar and Chramnesind: Gregory of Tours, *Historiarum*, VII, 47 and IX, 19.

⁴¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical history*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and Roger A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), I, 18; I, 27; II, 11; III, 10; IV, 3; IV, 14 and V, 21.

the only varieties of blood that a Christian might consume.⁴² In the thirteenth century, the French encyclopaedist Vincent of Beauvais explicitly declared that God had forbidden the consumption of blood altogether at the time of man's twelfth generation — it was the trespassing against this order which, according to him, brought about the Flood.⁴³

All in all, the shedding of blood had a persistent negative image attached to it, as can be shown in various medieval texts of different genres: in the description of the Norman invasions of 879, for example, the Annals of St Vaast take up a literary stereotype, when the author describes the foreign invaders as 'longing to burn and to loot, and thirsty for human blood,' and thus denounces the military adversaries.⁴⁴ Accusations of this kind were actually widespread and we can find them during the whole middle ages and beyond.⁴⁵ But the practical applicability of such an image was not restricted to moments of war, where the enemy soldier could accordingly be depicted in a negative manner. The *Gesta archiepiscoporum Salisburgensium* furnish a telling example for the construction of the blood-thirsty tyrant (especially if he was a pagan) with literary means: the description of Archbishop Thiemo's death on the crusade in 1101 not only insists on the latter's martyrdom, but it adds gruesome details. According to the author, the archbishop of Salzburg, who had been captured on his way to Jerusalem, was condemned to a most cruel death by a Saracen tyrant for having destroyed the pagan idols the Saracens had asked him to repair (apparently Thiemo had quite a reputation for being an exquisite goldsmith). The leader of the pagans ordered him literally to be cut into pieces, and when the sentence was executed, the author insists, he did not even refrain from drinking the victim's blood.⁴⁶ This passage is by no means the only reference to ritual anthropophagy, which sporadically appeared as a motif in polemical

⁴² See Michel Tarayre, 'Le sang dans le Speculum Maius de Vincent de Beauvais. De la science aux miracula', in: *Le sang au moyen âge*, 343–59, here 356–7; Danièle Alexandre-Bidon, 'La dévotion au sang du Christ chez les femmes médiévales: des mystiques aux laïques (XIII^e–XVI^e siècle)', in: *Le sang au moyen âge*, 405–13. Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi. The Eucharist in late medieval culture* (Cambridge, 1991), 359–60, underlines the complex relation between the symbolic value of the Eucharist and the idea of cannibalism; see also Maggie Kilgour, *From communion to cannibalism. An anatomy of metaphors of incorporation* (Princeton, 1990), 79–85.

⁴³ Vincentius Bellovacensis, *Speculum historiale* (Douai, 1624), I, 100: *Duodecima uero generatione acceperunt homines praeceptum dei ne sanguinem degustarent propter hoc enim diluuium factum est*. Compare Tarayre, 'Le sang', 351.

⁴⁴ 'Annales Vedastini', in: *Annales Xantenses et Annales Vedastini*, ed. Bernhard von Simson, *MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum* 12 (Hanover/Leipzig, 1909), 40–82, here 45: ... *incendiis et devastationibus inhiantes sanguinemque humanum sitientes...* For further examples of analogous arguments see Felicitas Schmieder, 'Menschenfresser und andere Stereotype gewalttätiger Fremder — Normannen, Ungarn und Mongolen (9.–13. Jahrhundert)', in: *Gewalt im Mittelalter. Realitäten — Imaginationen*, ed. Manuela Braun and Cornelia Herberichs (Munich, 2005), 159–79, especially 167–9, and Daniel Baraz, 'Violence or cruelty? An intercultural perspective', in: *A great effusion of blood? Interpreting medieval violence*, ed. Mark D. Meyerson, Daniel Thierry and Oren Falk (Toronto, 2004), 163–89.

⁴⁵ See the examples given in Arens, *Man-eating*, 14, and the appearance of the motif in Matthew Paris (n. 57 and 58).

⁴⁶ 'Gesta archiepiscoporum Salisburgensium', ed. Wilhelm Wattenbach, in: *MGH Scriptores in folio*, vol. 11 (Hanover, 1852), 1–103, here 61: *Rex enim scelestissimus sanguinem bibens in siti sanguinis permanebat, ...* For a more detailed description see John V. Tolan, *Saracens. Islam in the medieval European imagination* (New York, 2002), 108–9. Otto of Freising included an abbreviated version of the events in his chronicle and concluded that the presentation was highly improbable, since the Muslims believed in one god and did not venerate idols. He does not mention the detail concerning the saint's blood, see Otto of Freising, *Chronica sive Historia de duabus civitatibus*, ed. Adolf Hofmeister (*MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum* 45, Hanover/Leipzig, 1912), VII, 7. Compare the denomination of 'Imād ad Dīn Zengi as 'Sanguinus' in William of Tyre's chronicle, see Rainer C. Schwinges, *Kreuzzugsideologie und Toleranz: Studien zu Wilhelm von Tyrus* (Stuttgart, 1977), 174–8.

descriptions of the barbarian peoples of the Orient.⁴⁷ One can only assume that literary constructions of this kind have been part of the mobilisation against all kinds of enemies in moments of war.

While accusations of this type can thus be found in narrative sources of most periods of the middle ages, it is only in the twelfth century that we encounter written evidence for the ritual use of human blood again.⁴⁸ Most of the relevant texts, which originated mainly from the north-western parts of Europe, have already been collected and interpreted by Leopold Hellmuth in his study on Germanic blood-brotherhoods. A short glimpse at the useful tables he added to his work reveals, however, that he mainly dealt with Scandinavian sagas.⁴⁹ It is obvious that these texts form a problematic basis for factual conclusions concerning the social practices of the societies they pretend to describe, due to their curious situation somewhere between legendary literature and historical account. In spite of this need for precaution, Hellmuth applied a positivistic approach and reconstructed a complete system of what he called *germanische Blutsbrüderschaft*. I do not want to enter in detail into the discussion of the source-value of the sagas, which has been outlined amongst others by Jon Sigurðsson.⁵⁰ What I want to emphasise, however, is the fact that all the instances for actual blood-brotherhoods which Hellmuth draws from the sagas exclusively concern heroic characters or even the gods themselves. Moreover, the material which relates to 'blood-free' forms of alliance seems to be at least as plentiful as those passages which explicitly mention the use of blood. Finally, even in the latter case, we do not find clear indications as to the actual use the partners made of the liquid – the texts usually just mention the 'awakening of the blood' and we cannot be sure if they wanted to imply its mixing, let alone the mutual consumption.⁵¹ To us, as to the contemporary readers or listeners, the descriptions leave ample space for imagination and interpretation. The available conclusions include the possibility that the motif of the blood-covenant existed rather on an imaginary level – the descendants of the once heroic societies might well have projected the roots of their own blood-free customs into an archaic age, where the same rites would have been performed in the original, bloodier ways, thus furnishing a convincing foundation myth for their own practices, an 'invention of tradition'.

A look at Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* can by and large confirm this impression: the only actual blood-pact in Saxo's text is mentioned in the context of the legendary king Hading. According to the author, this first Danish king entered into an alliance with the pirate Liser in order to overcome his miserable solitude. Already the setting of this passage is striking, since the bond is said to have been concluded on the initiative of an 'old man with only one eye', who 'happened to

⁴⁷ See Jean Flori, 'Oriens horribilis: Tares et défauts de l'Orient dans les sources relatives à la première croisade', in: *Orient und Okzident in der Kultur des Mittelalters*, ed. Danielle Buschinger and Wolfgang Spiewok (Greifswald, 1997), 45–56, here 54.

⁴⁸ For further reasonings on the date of this reappearance see the forthcoming contribution by Klaus van Eickels, 'Der Bruder als Freund und Gefährte. Fraternitas als Konzept personaler Bindung im Mittelalter', in: *Die Familie in der Gesellschaft des Mittelalters*, ed. Karl-Heinz Spiess (Ostfildern, forthcoming). Van Eickels explains this development with aspects of the strengthened cult of the Eucharist: as a consequence non-Christian groups would have been accused of misunderstanding the spiritual dimension of the Eucharist. From this point of view, blood-brotherhoods would represent a heretical material interpretation of the spiritualized Christian rite. For a similar argument concerning the development of the motif of cannibalism from the twelfth century onwards see Merrall Llewlyn Price, *Consuming passions. The uses of cannibalism in late medieval and early modern Europe* (New York/London, 2003).

⁴⁹ See Hellmuth, *Blutsbrüderschaft*, 33–7 and 49–53.

⁵⁰ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and power in the Icelandic commonwealth* (Odense, 1999), 17–38.

⁵¹ Hellmuth, *Blutsbrüderschaft*, 60–85.

take pity on the lonely Hading, robbed of his nurse, and brought him into friendship with a pirate, Liser, by establishing a covenant between them.’⁵² Not only can this ‘old man’ easily be identified with the god Odin – which confirms the setting in legendary times – but when Saxo continues his story, he explicitly presents the ritual of the alliance as a custom that had been in use before his own days: ‘Now our ancestors, when they meant to strike a pact, would sprinkle their combined blood in their footprints and mingle it, so as to strengthen the pledge of their fellowship.’⁵³

While this passage is situated in a quasi pre-historical setting and implies only the mixing of the blood without its subsequent consumption, Saxo’s contemporary Gerald of Wales presents a different kind of observation. In his *Topographia Hibernica*, he describes in a very detailed manner what he calls ‘a proof of the iniquity [of the Irish] and a novel form of marriage’.⁵⁴ According to Gerald, the Irish ceremoniously concluded friendships in a complicated ritual which began with a meeting at a holy place. They then carried each other around the church three times before they entered the building and received a priest’s blessing. Finally they solemnly reinforced their friendship (*amicitia*) by drinking each other’s blood – this last act is explained in half of the manuscripts as being of pagan origin.⁵⁵ However interesting the designation of this ritual as *desponsatio* might be (as well as the implication of a priest), seen in its polemical narrative context, this passage should rather be read as part of a strategy with the aim to compromise a nation whose members take part in this kind of barbarian activities. This very structure of argumentation also appears in Matthew Paris’ chronicle, when the author describes another ritual executed by the chiefs of Galloway in 1236. Like the barbarians in antique sources, the leaders of those tribes created an indissoluble artificial bond between themselves by drinking each other’s blood – the author explicitly calls them *barbari illi* and the rite itself

⁵² Saxo Grammaticus, *The history of the Danes*, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson, transl. Peter Fisher (Cambridge, 1979), 24; see Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, ed. Alfred Holder (Strassburg, 1886), 23: *Spoliatum nutrice Hadingum grand-eius forte quidam, altero orbus oculo, solitarium miseratus, Lisero cuidam pirate solemnem pactionis iure conciliat. Si-quidem icturi fedus ueteres uestigia mutua sanguinis aspersione perfundere consueuerant amiciciarum pignus alterni cruoris commercio firmaturi.*

⁵³ Compare Inge Skovgaard-Petersen, ‘The way to Byzantium. A study in the first three books of Saxo’s History of Denmark’, in: Saxo Grammaticus. *A medieval author between Norse and Latin culture*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen (Copenhagen, 1981), 121–33, here 124. For a general appreciation of Saxo’s work see Ruprecht Volz, ‘Saxo Grammaticus’, in: *Lexikon des Mittelalters (LexMA)*, vol. 7, 1422–3, and the contributions in Saxo Grammaticus. *Tra storiografia e letteratura*, ed. Carlo Santini (Rome, 1992); on the metaphor of blood-drinking especially Ute Schwab, ‘Blut trinken und im Bier ertrinken. Zur Trinkmetaphorik bei Saxo Grammaticus im Vergleich zu einigen Zeugnissen der germanischen Heldendichtung, besonders des Nibelungenliedes’, in: *ibid.*, 367–415.

⁵⁴ Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topographia Hibernica*, ed. James F. Dimock (Rolls Series, 21.5, London, 1867), chapter 22: *De argumento nequitiae, et novo desponsationis genere*. For further bibliographical information on the author see Michael Richter, ‘Giraldus Cambrensis’, in: *LexMA*, vol. 4, 1459–60.

⁵⁵ Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topographia*, 167: *Sub religionis et pacis obtentu ad sacrum aliquem locum conveniunt, cum eo quem oppetere cupiunt. Primo compaternitatis foedera jungunt: deinde ter circa ecclesiam se invicem portant: postmodum ecclesiam intrantes, coram altari reliquiis sanctorum appositis, sacramentis multifarie praestitis, demum missae celebratione, et orationibus sacerdotum, tanquam desponsatione quadam indissolubiter foederantur. Ad ultimum vero, ad maiorem amicitiae confirmationem, et quasi negotii consummationem, sanguinem sponte ad hoc fusum uterque alterius bibit. Hoc autem de ritu gentilium adhuc habent, qui sanguine in firmandis foederibus uti solent. O quoties in ipso desponsationis huius articulo, a viris sanguinem et dolosis tam dolose et inique funditur sanguis, ut alteruter penitus maneat exsanguis! O quoties eadem hora et incontinenti vel sequitur vel praevenit, vel etiam inaudito more sanguinolentum divortium ipsam interruptis desponsationem.* Compare Boswell, *Same-sex unions*, 259–60 (with English translation).

an ‘abominable habit’.⁵⁶ Seen from a structural perspective, both instances readily supplement parallel sources which were hitherto interpreted as proof for primitive traditions amongst those nations living in the margins of civilized Europe. It is doubtful if such an interpretation can be upheld if we consider their character as part of a narrative structure — is the practical value of such an argument against enemy peoples not just too handy to be true?

In Matthew’s case it is also important to observe the similarities of the cited description with further references to strange and barbarian people, which are equally stereotypical. Hence he characterizes the Tartars as a truly apocalyptic people: ‘The men are inhuman and of the nature of beasts, rather to be called monsters than men, thirsting after and drinking blood, and tearing and devouring the flesh of dogs and human beings.’⁵⁷ But what is most interesting in his case, is that he also transmits this information by way of his illustrations. In one of his manuscripts he shows a group of these barbarian and demonic people preparing their food out of their human adversaries: they roast their victims and cut them into pieces in order to eat them.⁵⁸ The motif does, however, only appear in the context of those strange peoples’ general description — it is curiously absent from Matthew’s work in another setting that often provided the background for the mentioning of blood-pacts: the conflicts between Christians and Saracens in the east.

Barbaric rituals — blood-brotherhoods with the infidel in the east

It is revealing, I think, that much of the well-known material for blood-covenants⁵⁹ comes from a similar clash of two cultures like the one that provided the background for Gerald’s and Matthew’s stories — I refer to the experience of the crusaders in Byzantium and the Near East. Towards the end of May 1204 the newly crowned Latin emperor of Byzantium,

⁵⁶ Matthaeus Paris, *Chronica majora*, ed. Henry R. Luard, 7 vols (Rolls Series 57, London, 1872–83), vol. 3, 365: *Et ut id attemptantes suum certius consummarent desiderium, fœdus inauditum inierunt, quoddam genus arriolandi invenientes, secundum quandam tamen antiquorum atavorum suorum abominabilem consuetudinem. Nam omnes barbari illi et eorum duces ac magistratus sanguinem venæ præcordialis in magno vase per minutionem fuderunt, et fustum sanguinem insuper perturbantes miscuerunt, et mixtum postea sibi ad invicem propinantes exhausserunt, in signum quod essent ex tunc in antea indissolubili et quasi consanguineo fœdere colligati, et in prosperis et adversis usque ad caputem expositionem indivisi.* Tegnæus, *Blood-brothers*, 24, refers to this passage, but erroneously attributes it to Matthew’s *Historia Anglorum*. From the early middle ages on, the denomination as *barbarus* became more and more synonymous with ‘pagan’, although it kept the idea of the savage and uncivilized. Towards the end of the epoch it also came into use for polemics between the European ‘nations’, see W.R. Jones, ‘The image of the barbarian in medieval Europe’ [1971], in: *Facing each other. The world’s perception of Europe and Europe’s perception of the world*, ed. Anthony Pagden, 2 vols (Aldershot/Burlington, VT, 2000), vol. 1, 21–52, here 32, 42 and 47; see also Schmieder, ‘Menschenfresser’, 161, n. 4, with further literature.

⁵⁷ Matthaeus Paris, *Chronica majora*, vol. 4, 76: *Viri enim sunt inhumani et bestiales, potius monstra dicendi quam homines, sanguinem sitientes et bibentes, carnes caninas et humanas laniantes et devorantes...* Compare Suzanne Lewis, *The art of Matthew Paris* (Berkeley, 1987), 287. An analogous example can be found in John of Mandeville’s fictive description of his travels: *There is anothisr yle that men callyn Mica, where wikkede men arn dwellande, for in no ethely thing haue thei wondyr gret delit as in sloughte of men and for to drynkyn here blod.* Mandeville, who draws his information mostly from Vincent of Beauvais, also illustrates the close connection between this accusation and the exchange of blood in order to create personal bonds, since he continues: *And if ony discord falle amongis hem, there may non acord ben mad til eche of hem haue dronkyn of othisr blod.: The Bodley version of Mandeville’s Travels*, ed. Maurice C. Seymour (Early English Text Society, 253, Oxford, 1963), 139.

⁵⁸ Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, ms. 16, f. 166r; see Lewis, *Art*, fig. 180.

⁵⁹ Several sources have already been cited in Charles Dufresne Du Cange, *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*, 10 vols (Paris, reimpr., 1938), vol. 10, 67–70 (*Dissertation XXI: Des adoptions d’honneur en frère, et, par occasion, des frères d’armes*).

count Baldwin IX of Flanders, sent an encyclical letter in which he not only described the events which led to his enthronement, but also developed the image of the morally corrupt Greek. Amongst the variety of accusations which finally served to justify his own rise to power, he also mentioned that they had concluded alliances and friendships with the infidel, using a ritual which included the mutual consumption of blood.⁶⁰ The letter as a whole proved to be very attractive for writers in the Latin west, since it came to be included in several historiographical texts.⁶¹ One can only guess as to what extent the description of alien and barbarian rites might have contributed to this attraction. One thing we can be certain about, however, is the negative and polemical image the western writers developed of the Greeks especially during the twelfth century.⁶²

While the end of the eleventh century might have seen some kind of softening of the Greeks' image, at least amongst the first crusaders and due to individual contacts, the continuing difficulties between the two cultures certainly by and large reinforced the image of the 'perfidious Greek'. One of the elements the Latin authors could readily use was the accusation not only of treacherous behaviour in general,⁶³ but more precisely of alliances with the infidel and thus of an active policy against their fellow Christians. The argument in itself had already been present since the time of the first crusade and it seems that it has been used ever since.⁶⁴ Several treaties and alliances are actually well attested, so they cannot be dismissed as purely Latin propaganda. After all, at least the Greek emperors at the end of the twelfth century do not seem to have troubled themselves with intense reflections on how their alliances might have contributed to a negative image in the western world and furnished material for further propaganda against themselves.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ *De oorkonden der graven van Vlaanderen (1191-aanvang 1206)*, ed. Walter Prevenier, 3 vols (Brussels, 1964–1971), vol. 2, 574: *Hec est enim, que, spurcissimo gentiliu ritu pro fraterna societate sanguinibus alternis ebitis, cum infidelibus ausa est sepius amicitias firmare ferales, et eosdem mamilla diu lactavit huberrima et extulit in superbiam seculorum, arma, naves et victualia ministrando*. The text of no. 271 in Prevenier's edition is taken from the registers of Innocent III. Like two other baronial letters, the description by Baldwin has been written immediately after the events, cf. Alfred J. Andrea, 'Essay on primary sources', in: Donald E. Queller and Thomas F. Madden, *The fourth crusade. The conquest of Constantinople* (Philadelphia, 2nd edn, 2000), 299–318, here 309–310. On Baldwin see Walter Prevenier, 'Balduin. I. Ks. von Konstantinopel', in: *LexMA*, vol. 1, 1368–9, with further bibliographical information.

⁶¹ Arnoldus Lubicensis, *Chronica slavorum*, ed. Johann M. Lappenberg (*MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum* 14, Hanover, 1868), 245–54; *Chronica regia Coloniensis*, ed. Georg Waitz (*MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum* 18, Hanover, 1880), 208–15.

⁶² See Marc Carrier, *L'image du Grec selon les chroniqueurs des croisades: perceptions et réactions face au cérémonial byzantin (1096–1204)* (Sherwood, M.A. thesis, 2000), www.callisto.si.usherb.ca/~croisade/Byzance.htm [20/06/2005], chapter I 3. William M. Daly, 'Christian fraternity, the crusaders, and the security of Constantinople, 1097–1204: The precarious survival of an ideal', *Mediaeval Studies*, 22 (1960), 43–91, furnishes many examples for the mutual development of hostile propaganda between crusaders and Byzantines, but still concentrates on the idea of a common Christian brotherhood. For a general overview see Ralph-Johannes Lilie, *Byzantium and the crusader states (1096–1204)* (Oxford, 1993).

⁶³ In this context it is actually quite surprising that an author like Odo of Deuil already recognized that the Byzantines apparently cherished the idea that any action taken for the well-being of their Holy Empire was in itself justified — see Odo of Deuil, *La croisade de Louis VII, roi de France*, ed. Henri Waquet (Paris, 1949), 43: *Generalis est enim eorum sententia non imputari perjurium quod fit propter sacrum imperium*. Compare Carrier, *L'image du Grec*, I 3.

⁶⁴ Carrier, *L'image du Grec*, I 3.

⁶⁵ Lilie, *Byzantium*, 240. This did not prevent them from taking propagandistic measures themselves, which included amongst others the demonstrative ransoming of Western knights by Emperor Alexios at the beginning of the twelfth century, see Daly, 'Christian propaganda', 58.

A famous example of diplomatic contacts and manifest cooperation is furnished by the treaty between Emperor Isaak and Saladin that can be acknowledged as a historical fact,⁶⁶ since it is not only known through western sources, but also confirmed by Muslim texts.⁶⁷ While the existence of the alliance is beyond any doubt, there is a great amount of uncertainty as to the form in which it was concluded, as well as to the contents of the contract. It is not very surprising that the same accusations that we already encountered in Emperor Baldwin's letter also appear in this context. A dubious letter, which is included in Magnus of Reichersberg's chronicle, describes the relation between first Andronicus, then Isaac, with Saladin in a mainly feudal framework⁶⁸ and thus criticises the fact of the alliance in itself.⁶⁹ Magnus is far from being the only author to refer to the treaty between the Greek emperor and his Muslim counterpart, whose existence was, it seems, to some extent common knowledge amongst western authors even decades later. Roger of Wendover, for example, inserted a letter in his chronicle, which explicitly mentioned the alliance and its negative effects on the crusaders.⁷⁰ Like the letter in Magnus' chronicle, whoever its author might be, this source does not give any details concerning the ritual which was used in order to confirm the pact. The pure fact of its existence must thus be considered to have been scandalizing enough in the perspective of these two representatives of the western culture. But it seems that already some of the contemporary writers tried to add to the discriminatory dimension of the information by drawing on the imaginary 'barbarian' concept of blood-brotherhoods as they must have perceived it within the background of their own profoundly Christian culture. Hence Nicetas Choniates tells us that the soldiers of Frederick I on their way to the

⁶⁶ Lilie, *Byzantium*, 230–41. A first treaty with Saladin had already been negotiated by Andronicus Comnenus, although the details of the agreement remain uncertain, the only text referring to them probably being a letter, deformed for propaganda reasons, in the chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg (see n. 58). Emperor Isaac renewed the treaty after his accession to the throne, probably in 1186. Isaac of Cyprus was equally said to have concluded a ritual blood-brotherhood with Saladin, which has been described in detail by the anonymous chronicler of the third crusade, see *Chronicles and memorials of the reign of Richard I. Vol. 1: Itinerarium peregrinorum et gesta regis Ricardi*, ed. William Stubbs (Rolls Series, 38.1, London, 1864), 183: *Hic Cursac nomine, omnium malorum nequissimus, Judam exsuperans perfidia, Guenelonem proditione, quosunque Christianae religionis professores pertinaciori persequatur protervia. Salahadino dicebatur familiaris, et mutuum singuli hausisse cruorem, in signum et testimonium invicem initae confederationis, tanquam ex commixtione sanguinis exterius revera fierent consanguinei*. Compare *Chronicle of the third crusade. A translation of the Itinerarium peregrinorum et gesta regis Ricardi*, ed. Helen J. Nicholson (Aldershot, 1997), 179. This part of the chronicle was probably written around the second decade of the thirteenth century by Richard de Templo (*ibid.*, 6–7 and 10–11). The source of this passage is Ambroise, *L'estoire de la guerre sainte: histoire en vers de la troisième Croisade (1190–1192)*, ed. Gaston Paris (Paris, 1897), vv. 1382–94. The author had accompanied King Richard I on his crusade and had written his text before 1196, see Gillette Tyl-Labory, 'Estoire de la guerre sainte', in: *Dictionnaire de lettres françaises. Le Moyen Age*, ed. Geneviève Hasenohr and Michel Zink (Paris, 1992), 415–6.

⁶⁷ Carrier, *L'image du Grec*, I 3; compare Bahà ad-Dîn, *The life of Saladin* (London, 1897), 198–202. Imâd ad-Dîn al-Isfahânî, *Conquête de la Syrie et de la Palestine par Saladin*, transl. Henri Massé (Paris, 1972), 244–45, confirms the exchange of letters between Isaac and Saladin in 1190.

⁶⁸ Magnus of Reichersberg, 'Chronica collecta', ed. Wilhelm Wattenbach, in: *MGH Scriptores in folio*, vol. 17 (Hanover, 1861), 476–523, here 511–2; compare Lilie, *Byzantium*, 232.

⁶⁹ Compare also the 'Historia de expeditione Friderici imperatoris', in: *Quellen zur Geschichte des Kreuzzuges Kaiser Friedrichs I.*, ed. Anton Chroust (*MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum nova series*, 5, Berlin, 1928), 1–115, here 39: ... *hanc amico et confederato suo Salahdino Saraceno inimico crucis et omnium christianorum prestare volens gratiam*. Although to some extent the result of practical necessities, the cooperation with Muslim rulers in the Iberian peninsula had been severely criticized as early as in the 860s, see Tolan, *Saracens*, 96f.

⁷⁰ Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum*, ed. Henry G. Hewlett, 3 vols (Roll Series, 84, London, 1886), vol. 1, 153–4.

crusade apparently believed that Emperor Isaac had concluded an alliance with the Saracens by exchanging blood with their leader. According to Nicetas, the Swabian soldiers of Frederick were convinced that Isaac and Saladin had confirmed their bond by cutting into their breasts and each drinking his partner's blood.⁷¹

Seen from a systematic point of view, this kind of accusation does not make sense, since the Islamic tradition strictly forbade the consumption of blood.⁷² But even if some Christian authors realized the need to restrict their polemics against the adversary to more or less justifiable and 'reasonable' arguments, which presupposed a certain knowledge about the other side, this did not preclude a huge number of others from indulging in exaggerated constructions which tell us more about their authors than about the people they pretend to describe.⁷³ The attribution of the ritualised blood-covenant to the Saracens was thus to have a great future – it became part of the stereotypes Christian authors used to describe the infidel.⁷⁴ Apart from historiographical texts or polemical invectives against the infidel, this knowledge also found its way into various other genres – in the second half of the fourteenth century Jean le Bel (if the attribution of the text is correct) compiled a huge and learned text on the 'art of love, virtue and happiness'. In spite of what the title seems to imply, le Bel does not aspire to develop an Ovidian theory of love, but rather outlines a vast collection of insights into human emotions, ethics and social values. What is most interesting in our context is his attempt to furnish a functionalistic explanation for the effects of rituals or gestures which imply physical contact.

There is, of course, an entire tradition of Christian texts meditating on the significance of the kiss, but le Bel's *Ars d'amour* reaches an entirely new level of reasoning, when the author explains: 'in a kiss, the two most connectable things connect and become one...: this is the breath of the kissing, which signifies the connection and the unity and the mixing of the souls ... it is for this reason that those who kiss ... are so moved in kissing that they are as if enraptured and

⁷¹ See *O city of Byzantium. Annals of Niketas Choniates*, transl. Harry J. Magoulias (Detroit, 1984), 225: '... adding that the Germans contended that nothing else could have convinced the emperor of the Romans to disregard the solemn oaths of the western Christians except that he had concluded a peace with the ruler of the Saracens, and that, in accordance with their prevailing custom regarding friendship, they had both opened a vein on their chests and offered to each other the blood flowing out therefrom to drink.' In his dissertation on adoptions and fraternities of honour (n. 59), Du Cange refers to an analogous passage in Georgios Pachymeres' history, which attributes the ritual to the Cumans. In the relevant passages about either the Cumans or the Scythians in general, I have not been able to identify such an attribution, see Georgios Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, 5 vols, ed. Albert Failler (Paris, 1984-2000).

⁷² Roux, *Le sang*, 54-5. This is corroborated by the description of the truce of 1192 from a Muslim perspective, which mentions only a handshake in addition to the Christian noblemen's oath, Bahâ ad-Dîn, *The life of Saladin*, 385; see on the treaty and its background Hans Eberhard Mayer, *Geschichte der Kreuzzüge* (Stuttgart/Berlin/Cologne, 8th edn, 1995), 133-6.

⁷³ Compare the position of Otto of Freising (n. 46), or the development of the 'blood-libel' against the Jews in thirteenth century Germany, see Gavin I. Langmuir, 'Ritual cannibalism', in: id., *Toward a definition of antisemitism* (London/Los Angeles, 1996), 263-81.

⁷⁴ The literature about the development of the Saracens' image in the Occident is abundant, see amongst others Tolan, *Saracens*, Flori, 'Oriens horribilis', and Philippe Sénac, *L'Occident médiéval face à l'Islam. L'image de l'autre* (Paris, 2nd edn, 2000), with further bibliographical references. Although a polemical tradition prevailed, this did not exclude individual positive characterizations of the 'noble Saracens', as was the case with Saladin in certain texts, compare Hannes Möhring, 'Der andere Islam. Zum Bild vom toleranten Sultan Saladin und neuen Propheten Schah Ismail', in: *Die Begegnung des Westens mit dem Osten*, ed. Odilo Engels and Peter Schreiner (Sigmaringen, 1993), 131-55.

out of themselves ...'.⁷⁵ In le Bel's eyes, the kiss is the most efficient act and symbol for any union and thus also used when friendships are concluded to reconcile previous enemies. The gesture derives its value not only from its being a sign for an obligatory contract, but because it actually influences the partners' emotional disposition. While the kiss is the most efficient means for these purposes, since it allows the junction of the most subtle medium, the breath, it could theoretically be substituted by alternative, albeit less effective practices, like bleeding together in a vessel in order to mix the partners' blood. Le Bel traces the origins of this habit back to antiquity, but he also mentions that it was still in use amongst the Saracens.⁷⁶ While the first attribution might be interpreted as an opportunity for the author to demonstrate his erudition with the reference to ancient texts (most probably to Valerius Maximus and the story about Sariaster), such a motivation seems to be unlikely in the second case. The examples cited above, and those I discuss in the following lines, rather seem to imply that le Bel drew on common and stereotypical knowledge about a foreign culture which could in this respect be put on the same level with the pagan peoples of antiquity.

In spite of this attribution, le Bel does not explicitly insert the act into a polemical context, as was usually the case at the end of the twelfth or in the thirteenth century: Alberic of Troisfontaines, for example, referred to this kind of pact when he described the alliance between Raymond III, the Count of Tripoli, and Saladin. According to the ever-polemical Alberic, Raymond had been driven by an evil impetus and wanted the crown of Jerusalem for himself. It was for this reason that he required the help of the Saracen — allegedly the two provided a basis for mutual trust by drinking each other's blood.⁷⁷ Raymond's role and motives are still the subject of dispute amongst modern historians: after all, the only positive contemporary assessment of his career is to be found in William of Tyre's chronicle,⁷⁸ which is hardly conclusive in this respect, since William owed Raymond his position as chancellor of the kingdom of Jerusalem

⁷⁵ Jean le Bel, *Li ars d'amour, de vertu et de boneurté*, ed. Jules Petit, 2 vols (Brussels, 1867-1869), vol. 1, 164-5: *Or est ensi l'entre les choses ki des gens issent est l'alaine plus espiutés; et ce appert, car à paines les puet-on veïr, ne sentir; dont ou baisier les deux choses plus jointables se joignent et un devienent, en mellant l'un avec l'autre: ce sunt les alaines des baisans, senefians le jointure et l'unité et le mellement des corage. Dont il avient as baisans pour le perchevance de la jointure et del unité des cuers, laquele est ensi con souverainement désirée, k'il ont en baisant si très-grand déduit, k'il sunt aussi come ravi et hors d'eaus meismes, nient à paines perchevans ce k'il ont, ne che k'il font...* There is no definitive consensus as to the identity of the author: Charles Potvin, 'Une énigme littéraire. Quel est l'auteur de Li ars d'amour, de vertu et de boneurté?', *Bulletin de l'Académie royale de Belgique, 2^{me} série*, 47 (1879), 455-74, proposed to identify him with the bishop of Utrecht, Jean d'Arckel. On the symbolic and ritual dimension of the kiss in western medieval societies see Kiril Petkov, *The kiss of peace. Ritual, self, and society in the high and late medieval west* (Leiden/Boston, 2003); compare also Willem Frijhoff, 'The kiss sacred and profane: reflections on a cross-cultural confrontation', in: *A cultural history of gesture*, ed. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (Ithaca/New York, 1992), 201-36.

⁷⁶ Le Bel, *Li ars*, vol. 1, 165-6: *Un autre signe poons prendre par les fais des anchiens; et encore le maintienent li Sarrasin: s'aucuns volsist à un autre aliance u amisté faire, il se soloient faire sainier en un vaissiel, pour lor sanc faire meller ensanle, en signe de conjunction et d'unité de corages.*

⁷⁷ Albericus de Trium fontium, 'Chronica', ed. Paul Scheffer-Boichorst, in: *MGH Scriptores in folio*, vol. 23 (Hanover, 1874), 631-950, here 860: *... pepigit cum eo traditionem Ierosolimitani regis et regni, et ut super hoc alter alteri faceret fidem, alter alterius bibendo sanguinem fedo federe sunt coniuncti.* On the political role of Raymond see Peter W. Edbury, 'Propaganda and faction in the kingdom of Jerusalem: The background to Hattin', in: *Crusaders and muslims in twelfth-century Syria*, ed. Maya Shatzmiller (Leiden, 1993), 173-89, with further bibliographical references. The most recent monograph on him is still Marshall W. Baldwin, *Raymond III of Tripolis and the fall of Jerusalem (1140-1187)* (Princeton, 1936). Imâd ad-Dîn, *Conquête*, 17-20, has nothing to say about the ritual, although the author repeatedly refers to the relation between Raymond and Saladin.

⁷⁸ Jean Richard, 'Raimund III., cf. Tripolis', in: *LexMA*, vol. 7, 412-3.

as well as his archbishopric.⁷⁹ The date of Alberic's account as well as his distance to the events,⁸⁰ however, make it improbable that he could furnish a reliable source for the ritual forms of the alliance between Raymond and Saladin. The anonymous *Historia peregrinorum*, for example, which had probably been written in the 1190s by a monk who equally had not been an eye-witness, only states that Raymond had become a *familiaris* of Saladin.⁸¹ Other authors, like Guillaume de Nangis, who wrote a century later, were also glad enough to be able to discriminate against Raymond in a more general manner. Guillaume simply spoke of the 'pacts they swore', and only later on did he reveal the unmistakable sign of Raymond's adhesion to the infidel: when the count of Tripoli was discovered dead on his bed one morning, people could clearly see that he had been circumcised.⁸² It is no wonder then, that Roger of Wendover could plainly accuse Raymond of having been the cause of all mishaps that befell the crusaders in the Holy Land.⁸³

While Guillaume and Roger might have been satisfied for having driven home their point, it seems that Alberic tried to add a more polemical tone to his description of the events. Typically, he did so by embellishing the brief information given by parallel sources with what would have been to him a typical ritual in this context. The whole story finally received its most colourful portrayal in the *Récits d'un ménestrel de Reims*, written around 1260. The author of this text obviously did not work as a chronicler, but rather wanted to entertain his public — it is no wonder then, that he described the alliance between Raymond and Saladin in the most vivid way, including a dialogue between the two protagonists!⁸⁴ The question as to what extent this source might refer to 'real' events seems quite superfluous: the *ménestrel* finishes his description with an explicit judgement of the whole affair, which to him was nothing less than a 'deadly treason', a *traïson mortel*.⁸⁵

The same instrument to create mutual trust between two parties who do not belong to the same religion also appears in an equally indirectly transmitted story nearly one century after Raymond of Tripoli, in Joinville's *Vie de Saint Louis*. According to him, a certain Nargoe (whom he actually confuses with his son Philip), a descendant of the French king Philip Augustus' sister,⁸⁶

⁷⁹ Edbury, 'Propaganda', 179. On William of Tyre see Schwinges, *Kreuzzugsideologie*, here 170–1, id., 'William of Tyre, the muslim enemy, and the problem of tolerance', in: *Tolerance and intolerance. Social conflict in the age of the crusades*, ed. Michael Gervers and James M. Powell (Syracuse, NY, 2001), 124–32 and 173–6, and Peter W. Edbury and John G. Rowe, *William of Tyre. Historian of the Latin east* (Cambridge, 1988).

⁸⁰ For a brief summary see Jan Prelog, 'Alberich von Troisfontaines', in: *LexMA*, vol. 1, 282. The French Cistercian was generally well informed, but he did not begin to write until approximately 1232.

⁸¹ 'Historia Peregrinorum', in: *Quellen zur Geschichte des Kreuzzuges*, ed. Chroust, 116–72, here 119: *Exinde accidit, ut comes in odium regis se familiarem redderet Saladino*. For a brief presentation of the text see Wilhelm Wattenbach and Franz-Josef Schmale, *Deutschlands Geschichtsquellen im Mittelalter. Vom Tode Kaiser Heinrichs V. bis zum Ende des Interregnum*. Vol. 1 (Darmstadt, 1976), 102–3.

⁸² Guillaume de Nangis, *Chronique latine*, ed. Hercule Géraud, 2 vols (Paris, 1843), vol. 1, 86–7: ... *cui statim Saladinus mandavit ut pacta que sibi juraverat jurari faceret a suis. [...] Ea nocte comitem illum ultio divina percussit; nam in stratu suo eum mane mortuum reperiunt. Res dissimulari non potuit, nam corpore defuncti nudato, quia nuper circumcisionis stigma susceperat apparuit: unde palam fuit quod se Saladinus confederatus sectam sarracenisum ceperat observandam*.

⁸³ Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum*, vol. 1, 150.

⁸⁴ *Récits d'un ménestrel de Reims au treizième siècle*, ed. Natalis de Wailly (Paris, 1876), 18: *Par Mahom mon Dieu! dist Solehadins, vous dites bien. Vous le jurez tuit sour vostre loi, et ferez plus: car nous nous saingnerons tuit ensemble, et bevera li uns dou sanc à l'autre en forme d'aliance, et que nous soiens tuit un. Ains que Solehadins le devisa ains i fu fait, et surent saingnié tuit ensemble, et burent li uns dou sanc à l'autre*.

⁸⁵ *Récits d'un ménestrel de Reims*, 19.

⁸⁶ Jean de Joinville, *Vie de Saint Louis [Livre des saintes paroles et des bons faiz nostre saint roy Looÿs]*, ed. and transl. Jacques Monfrin (Paris, 1995), 427 (note to § 495).

accompanied the French army during one year. It was also him who allegedly told the French king that the Latin emperor of Byzantium had entered an alliance with the Cumans against the Greek emperor John Vatatzes. In order to provide mutual trust, so he explains, the parties mixed some of their blood in a silver vessel and then drank the mixture, thereby making themselves ‘blood-brothers’.⁸⁷ This image of a Frenchman trespassing against divine orders proved to be extremely convincing and long-lived: as late as the seventeenth century, Le Nain de Tillemont still referred to this infamous alliance when he described Baldwin of Flanders’ expedition that led to his acquisition of the title of emperor of Constantinople.⁸⁸

Seen in a wider perspective, the story inevitably reminds the reader of the motifs that already appeared in Herodotus’ description of the Scythians’ customs, since the most important men who surround the leaders also participate in the contract and the ritual. The comparison with further sources from the region also makes clear that Joinville apparently made some kind of literary use of the motif. Hence the French *Chronique de Morée*, written in the second quarter of the fourteenth century, insisted that it was John Vatatzes who sought the Cumans’ help against the Latin emperor in Constantinople.⁸⁹ Even in the following passages where he mentioned the Cumans’ presence, he only knew of alliances between them and the Greek emperor Manuel Palaiologus: for the anonymous author, the Cumans constituted an important part of Manuel’s army, but he knew of no particular ritual that would have been necessary in order to ensure their help.⁹⁰ Nevertheless he still characterized them as a ferocious people which was in its habits incompatible with the chivalric virtues of western noblemen⁹¹ — an opinion that is corroborated by what Nicetas Choniates had to say about members of this people: their barbarity could clearly be seen in the way they behaved towards their most precious propriety, their horse: ‘The same horse bears the Cuman, carries him through tumultuous battle, provides him nourishment by having its veins opened, and, as men say, is used by him for copulation to relieve the barbarian’s brutish lust.’⁹² Greek and Latin sources are more or less unanimous in condemning the ferocious people,⁹³ but it seems that the rulers of Greek Byzantium were less timid when it came to concluding military alliances.

⁸⁷ Joinville, *Vie de Saint Louis*, 244: *Il conta au roy que l’empereur de Constantinoble lors estoient alié a un peuple que l’en appelloit Comains, pour ce que il eussent leur aide encontre Vatache [= John Vatatzes], qui lors estoit empereur des Griex. Et pour ce que l’un aïast l’autre de foy, couvint que l’empereur et les autres riches homes qui estoient en Constantinople avec li se seingnissent et meïssent de leur sanc en un grant hanap d’argent; et le roy des Comains et les autres riches homes qui estoient avec li refirent ainsi; et mellerent leur sanc avec le sanc de nostre gent et treperent en vin et en yave, et en burent et nostre gent aussi; et lors si distrent que il estoient frere de sanc.*

⁸⁸ Louis Sébastien Le Nain de Tillemont, *Vie de Saint Louis, roi de France*, ed. J. de Gaulle, 6 vols (Paris, 1847–1851), vol. 2, 345–6: ‘... espérant plus aux hommes qu’en Dieu, il fit alliance avec les Comains, peuples payens, par des cérémonies contraires à la religion et même à l’humanité, qu’on peut lire dans Joinville, et dont les François avoient autrefois fait un crime aux Grecs.’

⁸⁹ *Chronique de Morée (1204–1305)*, ed. Jean Longnon (Paris, 1911), 21–2. In reality the coalitions were rather short-lived and prone to rapid changes: both parties (Latin and Greek) sought the help of the Bulgarians as well as the Cumans who were their allies, compare Georges Ostrogorsky, *Histoire de l’État byzantin* (Paris, 1956), 458–68, and Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford, 1997), 723–730.

⁹⁰ *Chronique de Morée*, 97, 101, 109–10, 176–7 and 187.

⁹¹ *Chronique de Morée*, 187: *Il est verité que li Turq et li Comain ne le Grec ne se puent frandre de bonté de chevalerie a nostre gent; et auxi comme Dieu leur a tolu la bonté, si leur a donné la malice.*

⁹² *O city of Byzantium*, 54; compare Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum libri qui supersunt*, ed. Wolfgang Seyfarth, 2 vols (Leipzig, 1978), XXXI 2,1–12. In Nicetas’ annals, the Cumans are consistently depicted as inimical barbarians; compare *ibid.*, 164, 236–7, 259–60, 338, and 345–7.

⁹³ See Jacques Heers, *Chute et mort de Constantinople, 1204–1453* (Paris, 2005), 168, with reference to Robert de Clari, *La conquête de Constantinople*, ed. Philippe Lauer (Paris, 1924), 63–4.

Like the other examples we have cited, Joinville's narrative is also characterized by its indirect presentation which attributes the ritual to a foreign group. Although the distance between the author of the text and the related events seems quite obvious, the description was to have a great future, since it became one of the most successful stereotypes in the later knowledge about the Cumans: in the beginning of the nineteenth century Friedrich Rühls took it at face value and characterized this people accordingly in his *Handbook on medieval history* and several other authors followed him.⁹⁴

A western exemplum and the invention of the medieval barbarian

In most of the cited sources, the exchange of blood as a means to confirm political friendships and alliances was situated in the contact with foreign cultures. So what about texts which claimed the ritual as something that was practised in the author's own culture? A curious passage of the *Gesta Romanorum*, probably written by a Franciscan in the first half of the fourteenth century, tells the story of two knights, one of them wise, the other one stupid.⁹⁵ Since they loved each other very well, the text explains, the wise knight asked his simple companion if he wanted to conclude a firm and stable union with him. On the other's agreement, he proposed that they drink some of each other's blood in order to signify their inseparable community – afterwards they lived together in one house.⁹⁶ Apart from the ritual itself, this description more or less coincides with a contemporary institution called *frèreche* in the south of France: based on mutual love and friendship, but often still secured by a written contract,⁹⁷ two men form a stable community that includes the sharing of all newly acquired possessions and the cohabitation in one house.⁹⁸ Another concept, which might fit better into the chivalric background of the story, is the idea of a brotherhood-in-arms, which could also aim at the sharing of the partner's material belongings.⁹⁹

Can we thus finally interpret this extraordinary text as positive proof for the existence of the ritual that interests us in medieval Europe? I would hesitate to do so. On first sight it is true that

⁹⁴ Friedrich Rühls, *Handbuch der Geschichte des Mittelalters*, 2 vols (Vienna, 1817), vol. 1, 419, without indication of the source. Strack, *Das Blut*, 22, erroneously thought that the information came from the compilation of Greek sources about the Cumans in Johann Gotthelf Stritter, *Memoriae populorum olim ad Danubium incolentium*, 4 vols (Petropolis, 1771–79), vol. 3; other authors give the correct reference to Joinville, see Tegnaeus, *Blood-brothers*, 25. For a more recent *aperçu* of the Cumans' origins and early history, see Francis Conte, *Les Slaves. Aux origines des civilisations d'Europe centrale et orientale (VI^e–XIII^e siècles)* (Paris, 1986), 369–71.

⁹⁵ *Gesta Romanorum*, ed. Hermann Oesterley (Berlin, 1872), chapter 67. On the authorship and tradition of the text see Brigitte Weiske, *Gesta Romanorum. Vol. 1: Untersuchungen zu Konzeption und Überlieferung* (Tübingen, 1992), 183–94; Udo Gerdes, 'Gesta Romanorum', in: *Verfasserlexikon*, vol. 3, 25–34.

⁹⁶ *Gesta Romanorum*, 378: *Maximianus regnavit prudens, in cujus regno erant duo milites, unus sapiens, alter stultus, qui mutuo se dilexunt. Ait ei sapiens: Nunquid tibi placet unam convencionem mecum ponere? et erit nobis utile. At ille: Michi bene placet. Qui ait: Sanguinem quilibet de brachio dextero emittamus, ego tuum sanguinem bibam et tu meum, in signum quod nullus alium dimittet nec in prosperitate nec in adversitate, et quicquid unus lucratu fuerit, alius dimidietatem habeat. Ait ille: Michi optime placet. Statim cum sanguinem traxissent ambo sanguinem alterius biberunt, hoc facto in una domum semper remanserunt.*

⁹⁷ See the examples in Jean Hilaire, *Le régime des biens entre époux dans la région de Montpellier du début du XIII^e siècle à la fin du XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 1957), 249–76.

⁹⁸ Compare Roger Aubenas, 'Réflexions sur les "fraternités artificielles" au Moyen Âge', in: *Etudes historiques à la mémoire de Noël Didier* (Grenoble/Paris, 1960), 1–11, and Isac Chiva, 'Les fraternités dérivées', in: *La parenté spirituelle*, ed. Françoise Héritier-Augé and Elisabeth Copet-Rougier (Paris, 1995), 265–85, here 270–3.

⁹⁹ Compare Maurice Keen, 'Brotherhood in arms', *History*, 47 (1962), 1–17; Pierre Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston. Edward II's adoptive brother* (Oxford, 1994), 11–22.

the text does not apply the usual structure of attributing a stereotype to an alien culture. Nevertheless, we have to consider the difference the author creates in his narration by situating the *exemplum* in the time of emperor Maximian — for a medieval audience, this could only signify a setting in a time when the Christians were persecuted like the well-known Theban Legion.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps the medieval listener would have imagined the knights as being pagans too? However this might be, it seems important to interpret the passage from the perspective of its ending: because they are inextricably bound to each other, the wise knight follows his stupid companion into a city where they are menaced with death — the whole thing ends tragically. All in all, this is certainly not a model to follow, and the author's moralizing explanation makes this clear: the two knights signify the soul and the body — the soul being wise, the body stupid. In the end, the mutual drinking of the blood is even Christianised, since the author puts it on the same level with the sacrament of baptism.¹⁰¹ Rather than a reference to a current practice, it is thus a metaphor which subtly hints at the dangerous sides of the inextricably interwoven dimensions of human existence.

This interpretation on a metaphoric or spiritualised level is also corroborated by alternative sources from the medieval west: apart from the material we have already discussed, Tegnaeus mentioned several texts in order to demonstrate the existence of blood-brotherhood in a knightly milieu, thus evoking the idea of particularly archaic forms of friendship in a world where Christian ideals blended with the appraisal of masculine, warrior-like behaviour. A closer look at the material on which Tegnaeus based his conclusions unfortunately shows that he became the victim of inexact interpretations. Some of these have been rewritten for more than a century and reveal what might be termed the 'invention of the romantic middle ages'.

To begin with the least serious case: in the middle of the eighteenth century Lacurne de Sainte-Palaye referred to a passage in the *Lancelot du Lac*, where apparently three knights concluded a brotherhood-in-arms by letting blood together and mixing their blood.¹⁰² Several modern authors repeated this information without any verification of the source, which is in fact irretrievable — at least I have not been able to identify it in the text of the original.¹⁰³ Even if we cannot definitively rule out the possibility that the passage in question actually exists, it still seems to be highly improbable, given the lack of analogous source material. Hence a second instance of a blood-brotherhood in the *Waltharius* is nothing more than a corrupt reading of

¹⁰⁰ See Karl-Heinz Krüger, 'Thebaische Legion', in: *LexMA*, vol. 8, 611, with further bibliographical references; Denis van Berchem, *Le martyre de la légion thébaine. Essai sur la formation d'une légende* (Basel, 1956), here 25–6 (on the emblematic symbolism of Maximian's name).

¹⁰¹ *Gesta Romanorum*, 380: ... duo milites anima et corpus; anima est sapiens, corpus est stultus. Isti duo in baptismo sunt confederati adinvicem, quod quilibet sanguinem alterius biberet. Sanguinem alterius bibere est quemlibet pro alio in periculo se ponere.

¹⁰² Jean-Baptiste de La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, *Mémoires sur l'ancienne chevalerie*, 3 vols (Paris, 1759–81), vol. 1, 227–8: 'Les fraternités d'armes se contractoient de plusieurs façons différentes: trois Chevaliers, suivant le Roman de Lancelot du Lac, se firent saigner ensemble, et mêlèrent leur sang. Cette fraternité n'est point une fiction romanesque, puisque M. du Cange cite plusieurs exemples pareils tirés des histoires étrangères, surtout de celles des pays d'outre-mer.'

¹⁰³ The reference has been cited by Tegnaeus, *Blood-brothers*, 25, Keen, 'Brotherhood', 4, and Jacques Flach, *Les origines de l'ancienne France. Vol. 2: Les origines communales. La féodalité et la chevalerie* (Paris, 1893), 471. As far as I can see, there is no such passage in the edition *Lancelot: roman en prose du XIII^e siècle*, ed. Alexandre Micha, 9 vols (Geneva, 1978–83); see also Giovanni Tamassia, *L'affratellamento. Studio storico-giuridico* (Torino, 1886), 31, n. 1: the Italian historian could equally not find the passage, but he decided to trust the reliable qualities of La Curne de Sainte-Palaye.

the text: instead of the correct formula *pactum ... coactum*, Jacques Flach referred to a *pactum ... cruentum* and thus drew the according conclusion.¹⁰⁴

For Maurice Keen, one of the most eminent specialists of the history of knighthood, the cited cases illustrated 'the extremely primitive ideas which underlay' compacts of brotherhood-in-arms.¹⁰⁵ Friendship between knights was undoubtedly one of the most important bonds in the chivalric societies of the late middle ages, but it seems that the archaic picture Keen implies is nothing less than a projection which combines modern interests in the middle ages and the mythical motifs of epic texts. From this point of view, it seems that Charles Mills had drawn a better conclusion, when he stated that 'this custom [i.e. ritual blood-brotherhood], like most others of pagan Europe, was corrected and softened by the light and humanity of religion.'¹⁰⁶ His appraisal of the role of religion surely is disputable, but at least he did refrain from over-interpretations, unlike others amongst his fellow medievalists. Siméon Luce explained that the brotherhood-in-arms of Bertrand du Guesclin and Olivier de Clisson had been concluded by a ritual in which the two partners made themselves bleed together and mixed their blood.¹⁰⁷ In order to prove his point, he referred to the edition of the contract between Bertrand and Olivier which had been made at Pontorson in October 1370. This text actually confirms the conclusion of a sworn relationship, in which the partners promise to behave towards each other as if they were brothers, but there is not the slightest allusion to any ritual whatsoever, apart from the usual oath on the Gospels.¹⁰⁸

One can actually do more than just invalidate the hitherto cited cases of blood-brotherhoods in rather well-documented medieval societies. In order to do so, we have once again to turn back to the situation of inter-cultural contacts and conflicts in the crusader states. Not only princes have been accused of having concluded alliances with the Saracens, but also one of the masters of the Templars in the middle of the thirteenth century. Guillaume de Sonnac, who governed the order from 1245 to 1250, was alleged to have concluded a pact with the Sultan of Egypt.¹⁰⁹ Strictly contemporary sources only imply this relationship when they stress that Guillaume tried (together with the Hospitallers' marshal) to negotiate a treaty between St Louis and the Sultan.¹¹⁰ In spite of the often very negative image of the order, in this particular case it

¹⁰⁴ Flach, *Les origines*, 472; compare Tegnaeus, *Blood-brothers*, 25. For the correct text see the critical edition: 'Waltharius', ed. Karl Strecker, in: *MGH Poetae latini*, vol. 6.1 (Weimar 1951), 1-85, v. 1443.

¹⁰⁵ Keen, 'Brotherhood', 5. Keen mainly drew his information from the *Dissertation* on adoptions etc. in Du Cange (n. 59).

¹⁰⁶ Charles Mills, *The History of chivalry or knighthood and its times*, 2 vols (London, 1825), vol. 1, 119.

¹⁰⁷ Siméon Luce, *Histoire de Bertrand du Guesclin et de son époque* (Paris, 1876), 70, n. 1.

¹⁰⁸ Dom Hyacinthe Morice, *Mémoires pour servir de preuves à l'histoire ecclésiastique et civile de Bretagne*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1742, repr. 1974), 1642-3: ... toutes lesquelles choses dessusdites & chacunes d'icelles nous Bertran & Ollivier dessus nommés avons promises, accordées & jurées, promettons, accordons & jurons sur les seintz Evangiles de Dieu corporellement touchiez par nous & chacun de nous, & par les foyz et sermens de nos corps bailliez l'un à l'autre, tenir, garder, enteriner & accomplir l'un à l'autre sans faire ne venir encontre par nous né les nostres ou de l'un de nous, & les tenir fermes & agréables à tousjours.

¹⁰⁹ See Alain Demurger, *Jacques de Molay. Le crépuscule des templiers* (Paris, 2002), 39. Hans Prutz, *Kulturgeschichte der Kreuzzüge* (Berlin, 1883), 68, qualifies this kind of ritual friendships between Christian and Muslim princes or noblemen in the crusader states as 'nothing out of the ordinary'; see also Vincent-Victor-Henri de Vaulblanc, *La France au temps des croisades, ou Recherches sur les moeurs et coutumes des Français aux XII^e et XIII^e siècles*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1844), 217-8.

¹¹⁰ Johannes de Columna, 'Mare historiarum', in: *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, vol. 23, ed. de Wailly, Delisle and Jourdain (Paris, 1894), 106-124, here 119; Guillaume de Nangis, 'Gesta Ludovici', in: *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, vol. 20, ed. Daunou and Naudet (Paris, 1840), 309-462, here 366-8.

was not until the fourteenth century that the *Grandes chroniques de France* finally presented a very explicit version which confirmed the polemics against the Templars after their destruction.¹¹¹ According to the author, ‘there was such a great love between the Sultan and the Master of the Temple that they made themselves bleed together, from the same arm and into the same bowl.’¹¹² The fact that the anonymous author continued by inserting at least a partial excuse for Guillaume’s behaviour indicates how serious the accusation must have seemed to him, even if it did not include the mutual consumption of the blood.

A brief comparison with the records of the trial against the order in France reveals an analogous passage which confirms the impression that the *Grandes chroniques* reflect the late construction of a negative image rather than an actual historical fact. In his deposition before the inquiring commissaries, the public notary Anthonius Sici de Vercellis explained that the preceptor of the Templars’ house in Sydonia, called Matthew le Sarmage, had been known as brother of the Sultan. The background for this attributed relationship would have been a ritual in which they drank each other’s blood.¹¹³ This drastic accusation is one of the most explicit witnesses for such a ritual, and its integration into a very polemical context is most revealing — back in the times the Templars still enjoyed a certain esteem in the Latin west as well as in the crusader states, this kind of description was virtually unknown.¹¹⁴ It is true that they already provoked a great deal of criticism early on, which mainly concentrated on their alleged unwillingness to fight the infidel or their greed for material wealth. But the appearance of the motif of blood-brotherhoods with the Saracens seems to have been motivated by their adversaries’ desire to construct a most effective and monstrous image of them in the context of the process that led to their suppression.

Barbarians on the margins?

While the presented material seems to be rather conclusive with respect to the societies of the Christianised parts of Europe, the situation is more difficult to judge in the context of those peoples which participated less in this process of Latin acculturation. The Irish tradition in

¹¹¹ For an overview on the (generally rather problematic) reputation of the Templars until the time of the order’s dissolution see Helen Nicholson, *Templars, Hospitallers and Teutonic Knights. Images of the military orders 1128-1291* (Leicester/London/New York, 1993), 44, for the accusation that they preferred treaties with the infidel instead of fighting them. See also Malcolm Barber, *The new knighthood: a history of the Order of the Temple* (Cambridge, 1994), especially 59-63, 98-101 and 125-6, and Alain Demurger, *Les templiers. Une chevalerie chrétienne au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 2005), for example 67-70, 112-9 and 484-94.

¹¹² *Grandes chroniques de France*, vol. 7, ed. Jules Viard (Paris, 1932), 136: *Tant avoit grant amour entre le soudan et le mestre du Temple que quant il voloient estre sainiez, il se faisoient sainier ensamble et d’un meismes bras et une meisme escuelle. Pour telle contenance et pour plusieurs autres, les crestiens de Surie estoient en soupeon que le mestre du Temple ne feust leur contraire. Mais les Templiers disoient que telle amour moustroit-il et telle honneur li portoit por tenir la terre des crestiens en pais, et qu’elle ne feust guerroiée du soudan ne des Sarrazins.* This ‘official version’ of the *Grandes chroniques* was re-written after the death of Guillaume de Nangis, see *Grandes chroniques de France*, vol. 7, xvii.

¹¹³ *Procès des templiers*, ed. Jules Michelet, 2 vols (Paris, 1841-51), vol. 1, 645: *Tempore vero quo hoc audiui, erat preceptor illius loci frater Matheus dictus le Sarmage, Picardus, et de Picardia dicebatur natus fuisse, et frater illius soldani Babilonie qui tunc regnabat, quia unus eorum de sanguine alterius mutuo potaverat, propter quod dicebantur fratres.* Compare Malcolm Barber, *The trial of the Templars* (Cambridge, 1978), 185-6; the text edited by Michelet is the protocol of the papal inquisition on the accusation of heresy against the Templars.

¹¹⁴ Compare Nicholson, *Templars*. Even the critical Matthew Paris, who drew a negative image of the Templars whenever he could, did not indulge in accusations of this kind.

particular contains a certain amount of extraordinary material, where the boundaries between the imaginary and factual description become unclear.¹¹⁵ Even if in this context some of the sources demand a more thorough interpretation as has mostly been the case until now, several difficult passages remain, which seem to imply the real existence of a blood-covenant on the island.

As is the case in Hellmuth's study on the north-Germanic customs,¹¹⁶ the main body of evidence is based on epic traditions, which project the ritual of blood-brotherhoods into the mists of legendary times. It is therefore doubtful if we can interpret the concluding of blood-covenants by Cuchulainn as reflections of the Irish customs at the time when these stories were written down.¹¹⁷ Other texts, like the famous *Boroma*, apparently use the ritual as a metaphor: according to the narration, the king of the Ulaid relates a vision of Conchobar, who saw the conclusion of a blood-covenant between his people and its adversaries. In the following explanation of the ritual, in which the opposing parties are said to have drunk from a barrel which had been filled with human blood, milk and wine, the consumed substances receive a metaphorical explanation.¹¹⁸ Still other sources are widely open to interpretation. Hence a short poem on the encounter between Columcille and Cormac, two Irish monks, refers to a 'union, / As Christ has ordained in our flesh'. The following description of this union remains somewhat unclear: 'Bind upon the thumbs of my hands, / O Cormac of many dignities, / The coils of our noble union'.¹¹⁹ It is only the comparison with ethnographic information, especially from the Balkans and from Africa, which led John Hodges to the conclusion that the description referred to a ritual that probably included the cutting of the thumbs and mixing of the flowing blood.¹²⁰

This background clearly indicates the alienating effects of modern interpretation on the reading of the sources; hence the difficulty to assess those brief indications in annals and other historiographical genres that refer to the mixing of blood or its consumption. The most prominent case one might cite in this context is probably the treacherous imprisonment of King Brian by the son of the earl of Clare in 1277, attested in at least three (partly related) annals. All the texts concur that the two protagonists mingled their blood in a vessel – but they also unanimously refer to Christian rites, like the exchange of vows 'by the relics'.¹²¹ What makes these descriptions so difficult to assess is once again the polemical background of the incident itself – is the description of the ritual, on which the friendship between Brian and his treacherous partner was founded, a realistic representation of actual facts, or does it rather underline the monstrosity of the betrayal by the earl of Clare's son, thus becoming a purely narrative device, which enabled the author elegantly to express his accusations in the form of a telling 'picture'?

¹¹⁵ For a convenient overview on the known material see John C. Hodges, 'The blood covenant among the Celts', *Revue Celtique*, 44 (1927), 109–56.

¹¹⁶ See n. 49.

¹¹⁷ Hodges, 'The blood covenant', 117–33. The same is true for 'The death of Muirchertach Mac Erca', ed. Whitley Stokes, *Revue Celtique*, 23 (1902), 395–437, here 407. The edition by Stokes omits a poem in which the consequences of the treaty are given, see Hodges, 'The blood covenant', 131–2.

¹¹⁸ 'The Boroma', ed. Whitley Stokes, *Revue Celtique*, 13 (1892) 32–124, here 72–7; compare Hodges, 'The blood covenant', 113–7.

¹¹⁹ 'Columcille cecinit, when Cormac came to him from his own country' in: *The life of St. Columba, founder of Hy*, ed. William Reeves (Dublin, 1857), 270–5, here 273.

¹²⁰ Hodges, 'The blood covenant', 134–5.

¹²¹ Hodges, 'The blood covenant' 135–6, referring to the *Annals of Loch Cé*, the *Annals of Ulster* and the *Annals of Clonmacnois*. The first two of these texts are closely related, see *The Annals of Loch Cé*, ed. William M. Hennessy, 2 vols (Rolls Series, 54, London, 1871), vol. 1, xlii.

Modern anthropological and ethnological studies from the nineteenth century onwards tend to confirm that several peoples on the margins of what was once considered the ‘civilized core’ of Europe actually practised rituals of blood-brotherhood at least until the nineteenth century.¹²² It is most irritating, however, that their research and inquiries uncovered structures that closely resemble those polemical images that antique and medieval authors used in order to discriminate against the barbarian aliens they described. By stressing this analogy, I do by no means mean to refute the results of these studies wholesale. But it is important, I think, to examine each reported case very carefully in order to avoid erroneous characterisations of the culture in question.

There cannot be any doubt that structures of ritual brotherhood or friendship ties between individual members of pre-modern societies played an important role in the creation of social groups and bonds of cooperation.¹²³ But this fundamental insight into the mechanisms of remote cultures should not lead us to reproduce the image of ‘barbarians’ which is already present as a polemical strategy in the sources we have at our disposal. In comparison with the material I just exposed, it is revealing that Claudia Rapp explicitly denies the existence of ‘blood-brotherhoods’ in the context of the Byzantine *adelphopoieses*.¹²⁴ Moreover, she also draws attention to the fact that even those brotherhoods which had been concluded in a ‘more civilized’ way were prone to vivid criticism towards the fourteenth century – another indicator of the highly polemical context that governs the textual representation of personal relationships.¹²⁵ After all, we have to allow for the possibility that the sources we interpret tell us more about their authors and their intentions than about the textual content itself.

Conclusion

The material I have presented in this contribution is – for the moment – a more or less exhaustive overview on the known sources concerning the question of ritual blood-brotherhoods in medieval Europe. It has become clear, I think, that the texts we have at our disposal do not allow with any certainty the conclusion that this ritual existed in medieval societies. Nevertheless, this particular example of a ‘barbarian custom’ is most telling and instructive in several respects.

On the most general level, it reminds us once again of the dangers of simplifying the reading of our source material. Just because a given motif or structure is mentioned in documentary evidence (especially in terms of historiography), it would be grossly underestimating the importance of authorial intentions and cultural perceptions if we believed that its literary existence reflected social realities, be it in the particular case described in the text or in a more general

¹²² A frequently cited, classical study is Stanislaus Cisczewski, *Künstliche Verwandtschaft bei den Südslawen* (Leipzig, 1897); see also Tamassia, *L'affratellamento*, 70–3. More recent contributions include Leopold Kretzenbacher, *Ritueller Wahlverbrüderung in Südosteuropa. Erlebniswirklichkeit und Erzählmotiv* (Sitzungsberichte der bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosoph.-hist. Klasse, Munich, 1971), and Walter Puchner, ‘Griechisches zur “adoptio in fratrem”’, *Südost-Forschungen*, 53 (1994), 187–224.

¹²³ Apart from the cited studies and collections by Keen, Althoff, Weissman, and Hérítier-Augé and Copet-Rougier, see especially the contributions by Elizabeth A.R. Brown, Claudia Rapp and Brent D. Shaw collected under the title ‘Ritual brotherhood in ancient and medieval Europe: A symposium’ in *Traditio*, 52 (1997), 259–381. For an exhaustive bibliography see Elizabeth A.R. Brown, ‘Introduction’, *Traditio*, 52 (1997), 261–283.

¹²⁴ Claudia Rapp, ‘Ritual brotherhood in Byzantium’, *Traditio*, 52 (1997), 285–326, here 289, n. 16.

¹²⁵ Rapp, ‘Ritual brotherhood’, 325.

manner. Concerning the ritual in question, my conclusions drawn from the source material are somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, it seems that the idea of the mixing and mutual consumption of the blood of two or more partners has been understood and imaginable in various centuries throughout the middle ages. What is even more, with the exception of Gerald of Wales,¹²⁶ none of the authors doubted its efficiency. It seems that this kind of ritual constantly exerted a very strong attraction on the imaginative forces of pre-modern societies (as it presumably still does today). In the imagination of the authors, the concrete forms of the ritual hardly mattered — for them, a compact could as well be concluded by bleeding together as by mutually drinking the liquid.

The attraction of the motif, however, was nearly always coupled with a strong feeling of rejection that the authors openly expressed or at least implied when they described those rituals.¹²⁷ In other sources, where this structure of exclusion does not apply, the authors use the motif in what might be termed a ‘retrospective projection’. They did not positively claim the ritual as part of their own customs or of the habits of their people, but they attributed it to their (heroic) ancestors, thereby possibly creating a foundation myth for ritual patterns that might have recalled single elements of the allegedly original form. The literary transmission of the related information unfortunately does not allow us to prove the actual existence of the described rites with any certainty.

Concerning the existence of the motif in better documented areas, as for example the Latin high and late middle ages, it is, I think, safe to assume that at least most of the cited texts were probably not based on real events or practices, but rather used stereotypical descriptions for the characterization of foreign cultures as being ‘primitive’ and ‘barbarian’. They adopted a motif that was well-known from antiquity onwards, and flexibly used it for their own purpose. Obviously, this does not mean that blood-brotherhoods actually were unknown in certain societies — the Irish culture in particular seems to have been somewhat of an exception that would have to be re-evaluated in a critical manner —, but it would be unwise to try and base factual conclusions on those texts which either deal with the ‘unknown other’ or the legendary times of the own remote past.

As to the Christian societies of the European middle ages, we can probably assume that blood-brotherhoods of this kind have never been in use as well established social institutions.¹²⁸ We do not have one actual piece of evidence for brothers-in-arms or other types of friends who would have concluded their union by mutually drinking or mixing their blood. Instead of accepting the vague suspicions of studies which admit the existence of blood-brotherhoods in medieval Europe on the grounds of a comparison with evidence from extra-European cultures, it would be interesting to inquire further into the spreading of the motif in those parts of the world which were once called ‘primitive’. The results might prove to be very enlightening — like Harry Tegnaeus’ confession that in the case of the North American native tribes ‘many of

¹²⁶ See n. 55.

¹²⁷ See also Jacques Voisenet, ‘Le tabou du sang dans les pénitentiels du haut moyen âge’, in: *Le sang au moyen âge*, 111–25, here 120: ‘Boire le sang apparaît comme une abomination. C’est le propre des barbares et des païens.’ Voisenet here just refers to Isidore of Seville’s expressed disgust, when he declares that the Huns did not refrain from drinking their horses’ blood when they were hungry in wartime, see Isidore of Seville, *Historia Gothorum*, ed. Theodor Mommsen, in: *MGH Auctores Antiquissimi*, vol. 11 (Hanover 1892), 241–95, here 279. How much more horrible would he thus have considered the consumption of human blood?

¹²⁸ This conclusion does however not preclude the spontaneous use of similar rituals, since the symbolism of blood and its exchange apparently attracted a high level of interest.

the ideas with reference to the blood-pact derived from elsewhere and must sometimes be looked upon as white man's folklore about Indians',¹²⁹ despite my initial quotation from Karl May's 'Winnetou'.

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¹²⁹ Tegnaeus, *Blood-brothers*, 41-2.