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Rémy Ambühl, *Prisoners of War in the Hundred Years War: Ransom Culture in the Late Middle Ages*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. xiv, 301. ISBN 978-1-107-01094-9.

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With *Prisoners of War in the Hundred Years War*, Rémy Ambühl (Univ. of Southampton) has made a welcome contribution to the literature on late medieval military society. He examines the culture of ransoming in both France and England during the 1370s and between 1420 and 1440. He particularly highlights the practical adaptations made by soldiers themselves; this is in contrast to earlier views of ransom culture, which accentuate princely interference and the romanticized images in chivalric texts and court documents. Ambühl argues that the business of ransoming was essentially a private matter between prisoners and masters, only sometimes subject to princely intrusion. The “state-centered” nature of many surviving sources has led to an exaggeration of princely involvement, which “can eventually lead one to believe that ransoms were a ‘political fact’” (17). Ransom became more systematic over the course of the Hundred Years War, a change, Ambühl believes, that came from below, through the actions of individual masters and prisoners. Hence his stress on the private, non-princely, character of ransom culture.

The book has nine chapters, best understood as forming three parts. The first, comprising chapters 1, “Law, Ransom and the Status of the Prisoner of War,” 2, “Princes, Masters and Prisoners,” and 3, “Status and Politics in Lancastrian Normandy,” explains the framework of ransom negotiations. The second, comprising chapters 4, “The Process of Ransoming (I): From Capture to Captivity,” 4, “The Process of Ransoming (II): The Price of Freedom,” and 6, “Merchants, Banking and Trade,” concerns the mechanics of ransoming, tracing the process from capture to ransom with a strong emphasis on the practicalities—locations to keep prisoners, establishing the value of a prisoner, and so on. The third part, comprising chapters 7, “Assistance to Prisoners (I): Vassals and Subjects—The End of Customary Aids?” 8, “Assistance to Prisoners (II): Kings and Princes—First or Last Resort?” and 9, “Assistance to Prisoners (III): The Social Circle of the Prisoners,” considers the assistance available to prisoners, from customary aids (monetary contributions) from subjects and vassals to princely grants to prisoners’ immediate families, friends, and companions-in-arms.

The first part of the book does the crucial work of defining the term “prisoner of war” and the prisoner’s legal status, exploring the laws, codes, and tacit rules governing ransoms. Chapter 1 addresses the features of the legal landscape that masters and prisoners had to navigate, specifically “(1) the law of arms; (2) royal ordinances of war; (3) honour; (4) the law of contracts; ... (5) the law of retaliation” (20), and (6) money. The first two of these “governed matters relating exclusively to the masters of prisoners, such as the division of the spoils of war and the settlement of disputes among rival claimants to the capture of a prisoner or to the latter’s ransom” (51). Honor and contract law governed relations between prisoner and master. Although oath-taking was a central aspect of capture, contract law often superseded the laws of arms and honor. The final two principles, the *lex talionis* and money, helped determine prisoners’ fates.

Chapter 2 centers on the “rules” governing princely interference, namely the acquisition of specific prisoners from private masters. Ambühl uses five case studies (three English, two French) to explore what “princes made of these rules and how soldiers responded” (52). The case studies (Edward III and Neville’s Cross, 1346; Henry IV and Humbleton Hill, 1402; Charles V and the 1372 Franco-Castilian alliance; Charles VII and the alliance with Scotland, 1419–24; Henry V after Agincourt) all show princely interventions in the business of ransoms. In each case, “masters’ private interests rarely fit with the sovereigns’ political ambitions” (77), although the only truly spectacular clash between a king and a subject involved Henry IV and Henry “Hotspur” Percy after the battle of Humbleton Hill. The strength of a given king’s position certainly influenced his ability to interfere: Henry V, for example, could sometimes ignore masters’ rights, but

Charles VII as Dauphin was in such a precarious position that he rarely interfered and even made extra concessions.

Chapter 3 explores what the unique political situation in Lancastrian Normandy meant for both prisoners and masters. It begins with the distinction of “enemy” from “traitor.” A man who had never sworn allegiance could be an enemy as regarded his person but a traitor as regarded his property. Although conditions in Normandy, which included guerrilla warfare, provided opportunities for interference, such actions were seldom taken, in part because they necessitated a specific definition of just who was a prisoner of war, a criminal, and a traitor.

The book’s second section moves from the political and legal frameworks of ransoming, which gave masters and prisoners considerable freedom, to the more practical aspects of ransoming. Chapter 4 covers the process from the seizure of an individual through his time in captivity. Individual captors, Ambühl argues, were the central figures, bearing “full responsibility for their prisoners” and obliged to “protect their prisoners as individuals as well as to protect their own rights over them” (126); masters, particularly lower-ranking ones, were vulnerable to losing their prisoner and any claim on his ransom. The author finds little evidence of state intervention in these early stages except for imposing security measures, which were unevenly observed.

Chapter 5 discusses the price of the ransom, underscoring the discrepancy between amounts demanded and what was actually paid, as well as the importance of dialogue between masters and prisoners. The discussion of masters’ calculation of a prisoner’s value is particularly interesting for its explanation of what a master could reliably know about a captive’s estate, his yearly land revenues, status, offices, reputation, and connections. These factors all affected the size of the ransom demanded. All in all, the arrangements were both private and individualized. At the higher social levels, the ransoms demanded varied greatly. At lower levels, however, “the mechanisation of the process of ransoming ... took two different forms: the standardisation of the price of ransoms and the standardisation of the costs of custody (*le marz*). This seems to have been a necessary evolution to make the ransoming of lesser soldiers profitable. Such an evolution may have had a considerable impact on the lives of these men, who were more readily spared as a result” (159). One wishes the author had clarified whether and how this standardization may have reflected the increasing professionalization of the late medieval military.

Chapter 6 deals with the raising of funds by prisoners and those helping them. This entailed dealing with moneychangers and moneylenders, as well as the actual transfer of money, including specie, jewels, and plate. Bills of exchange were also used, and trade, too, could be an attractive option. Many prisoners had to use several methods to pay their ransoms, including seeking aid from other sources.

These other sources of assistance are treated in the final third of the book. Chapter 7 examines the use of customary aids in France. It begins with princely and noble levies, then explores the possibility “that ransom aids were assimilated within rapidly expanding French royal taxation” (185). Ambühl first addresses the obvious example of King John II’s ransom after his capture at Poitiers in 1356. The king, he suggests, met with little resistance to the levy because his case was one of “evident necessity.” While John II drew on an aid to help pay his ransom, nobles began to substitute provincial levies for customary—and contentious— aids. Ultimately, these aids were subsumed under royal taxation. Ambühl rightly cautions against oversimplification and argues that customary aids and royal taxation should be seen as distinct, sometimes overlapping, levies.

Chapter 8 addresses the role of kings and princes in assisting prisoners. Receiving princely aid depended on several factors: the prisoner’s own initiative and personal appearance (or that of a close associate), his record of service to the crown, and an enquiry into his claims. Princes, of course, could not afford to help everyone financially, but they could offer such alternatives as prisoner exchanges, land grants, and licenses and safe conducts necessary to conduct trade.

Since princely contributions rarely covered the ransom expense in toto, Ambühl describes a final source of assistance in chapter 9: the prisoner’s family, friends, and companions in arms. While he finds little evidence of solidarity between a captain and his men, he does argue for close friendships between pairs of sol-

diers. These “brothers-in-arms” often provided assistance, as did family members. Wives were active and resourceful in ransoming their husbands. Ambühl finds, unsurprisingly, that parents made every effort to rescue sons, while sibling rivalries sometimes played out through the ransom process. That such personal relationships and channels were the basis of assistance to prisoners supports Ambühl’s thesis that ransoming was inherently private in nature.

This well organized and clearly written book rests on extensive and impressive archival research. That said, it also assumes a reader with some previous knowledge of the Hundred Years War and late medieval military society. The case studies of princely interference, for example, omit any discussion of the relevant military context. Also, the argument for the evolution of ransoming practices from below needs more examples from the lower ranks; as it stands, the evidence adduced is weighted toward elite figures. However, these are minor drawbacks in an otherwise meticulous and nuanced study of ransom culture and the experiences of late medieval soldiers.