

Introduction

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Research on medieval bodies prospers. We have learned a lot about body concepts in medicine, theology and philosophy. A lot of work has been done to help us understand how body has been used as a metaphor in prose, poetry, etc.¹ The medieval religious concept of the body was not in favour of the physical body. It was regarded as a tool or means to carry the immortal soul. The faithful believers had to worry about their soul, not about their body. Physical discomfort was regarded a consequence of the fall of mankind. The body could be neglected and famous preachers and ascetics, such as Franz von Assisi, have claimed that the body has been their greatest enemy.²

However, this was only one body concept in the middle ages. There was also a more optimistic view on the bodies to find; a view that regarded the human body in God's own likeness. Therefore, one should maintain the body or even exercise to keep the body in good shape. This was very important for the epic heroes in court literature for example. They had been very important for the development of chivalric culture in late medieval Europe for they could be used as some kind of role model for the real fighters. Such a warrior had to exercise his bodily abilities and fighting skills as well. To be in good shape was, together with boldness and skill, a requirement to become a good and

1 See for example KALOF, 2010; KALOF/BYNUM, 2010.

2 FRANZISKUS-QUELLEN, 2009, p. 86.

successful fighter. To be a fighter implies to take good care of your body because it was your most important tool.³

To be a fighter implies also that you are prepared to expose yourself to the dangers of battles and other forms of military activities. In all cases, the men had to deal with two very important aspects – two sides of one coin. On one side, the fighters had to anticipate in killing other men, in most cases fellow Christians. On the other side, there was the possibility that their body was injured by swords, arrows, pikes etc. or even by horses. In the context of the famous and fierce battles in France, England, Scotland and Spain a fighter was lucky if he was not slain on the spot but able to survive – sometimes without bodily wounds, sometimes injured. In case where a fighter survived his injuries, he may have had the chance to show the scars as a sign or signature of his boldness. However, if he had lost a leg or an arm, it was likely that he had to live as a beggar the rest of his life – given that he was not a member of a noble family.

The conference was an attempt to obtain an impression of the way in which the fighters handled the experience of the clash on the battlefields, of killing other men or being wounded by other men. We want to know more about the practices they have used to communicate their bodily experiences to others. Therefore, the focus of the articles in this volume is on shaping bodies for battle, using bodies in battle, bodily injuries by means of battle and on dead bodies of fighters.

As far as I can discern, we cannot find the immediate experiences of the fighters in our sources. They have always undergone a process of reflexion and they are imbedded in the practice of narrating such experiences in a social group or society. I believe we can distinguish between two principle forms of that type of narratives. There are the stories of famous battles told by the well-known chroniclers such as Jean Froissart and Jean Le Bel for the Hundred Years War, or Walter Bower, writing about war and fighting in his *Scotichronicon*. These men were not fighters themselves, and have written their accounts based on second hand knowledge, which they collected from fighters through interviews or other means. These texts are of great value, of

3 This point has been stressed by the authors of mirrors of chivalry like Geoffrey de Charny or Ramon Llull. See CHARNY, 1996; LLULL, 2013.

course, because they deliver important information about the practice of “talking” about war with specific text patterns.⁴

Then we have the so-called self-assessments of fighters who wrote down or dictated their experiences on the battlefields at some point in their lives. Like Thomas Gray did in his *Scalacronica* or several German and Swiss fighters such as Georg von Ehingen or Ludwig von Diesbach. Even when we read their accounts, we must bear in mind that the writer is not identical with the protagonist in the narrated past. However, the bodies in these texts can function as a link because they are object and symbol at the same time. We can assume that the writer had used the bodies in the texts to communicate his experiences.⁵

Thomas Gray, for example, constitutes the bodies of fighters by using specific narrative patterns, which are the performance of Deeds of Arms, physical toughness or resilience, the ability to recuperate after injuries and the description of horse and fighter as a common fighting body.⁶ These stylistic devices are also present in Froissart’s Chronical. When he describes the heroic death of James Douglas on the battlefield by Otterburn in August 1388, he uses comparisons with ancient heroes: Douglas was fighting like a hardy Hector. It takes three spears to stop this human fighting machine – one struck him in the belly, the second in the shoulder the third in the thigh. “Sore hurt” in that way Douglas died on the battlefield.⁷ Ralph Percy was another fighter who was sore hurt during the battle of Otterburn. When he was taken prisoner by a Scottish knight because he was too exhausted to fight any longer, he said, “My chausses and my greave are full of blood already”.⁸ These examples show that the real valiant fighters had been those who fought until exhortation – ignoring the injuries they received in the press. It is likely that the contemporary readers or listeners to such narrative understood the argument well.

One focus of the articles is on the preparation of bodies for fighting;⁹ another on the description or narration of physical pain caused by weapons, and how it felt to give and receive blows or even

4 CLAUS, 2016.

5 See ROGGE, 2016.

6 GRAY, 2005; ROGGE, 2011, p. 270.

7 FROISSART, 1978, pp. 342f.

8 IBID., p. 343.

9 See the contributions by MENGLER; BURKHART; JAQUET in this volume.

being killed on the battlefield.¹⁰ They contribute to the ongoing debate on the practice of writing or telling pain and other emotions in the Middle Ages.¹¹ This, for example, concerns the problem that physical pain is felt by all humanity, but could not be shared directly. This is why the writers have used similes, metaphors or specific narrative patterns to describe or convey their experiences.¹² By asking how pain is denoted in our sources, we can obtain further information about the practice that has been used to express pain in different historical contexts. Furthermore, we can learn how the written expression of physical pain was culturally conditioned – in our cases the culture of war and fighters of course.¹³

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10 See the contributions by BERNDT; RUSSELL SMITH; MOROSINI; MACINNES in this volume.

11 See COHEN, 2000.

12 See the contribution by SCHUH in this volume.

13 See the examples from the Byzantine Empire given by MALEON in this volume.

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