The Politics of Practice: Historical, Philosophical, and Methodological Reflections on Conflict and Community

Session 1J

Session Moderator: Phillip Thurtle, Comparative History of Ideas
Mary Gates Hall 271
1:00 PM to 2:30 PM

* Note: Titles in order of presentation.

Merchants and Pirates: How the Hanseatic League’s Founding Principles Shaped its Conflicts with England
Jonah Bomgaars, Senior, History
Mentor: Charity Urbanski, History
Mentor: Ileana Rodriguez-Silva, History

From the late 14th through the 15th century, the German Hanse was a major player in economic, political, and military conflict – areas traditionally associated with state actors – throughout northern Europe, despite being a decentralized, non-sovereign, non-territorial entity. The Hanse was a late medieval/early modern trade organization, the driving purpose of which, from its founding and throughout its development, was to provide for the mutual protection of its member cities’ merchants in the course of their business and ensure and expand their rights and privileges in foreign ports; to protect their merchants against the predations of both pirates and kings. It is thus one of the great historical ironies that the Hanse became a source of piracy and the harassment of English merchants represented a natural continuation of their founding principles. My research addresses questions of the motivations and internal dynamics of one of the most successful and longest-lasting international trade leagues to-date as it interacted with more traditional state-entities in diplomatic and economic contexts.

Poster Session 2
Commons West, Easel 3
2:00 PM to 3:30 PM

Robin Hood, Poaching, & Non-Noble Perceptions of Forest Law in Medieval England
Erik Adam (Erik) Scheer, Senior, History
Mentor: Charity Urbanski, History
Mentor: Ileana Rodriguez-Silva, History

Following the Norman invasion of England in 1066, King William I instituted a new system of royal forests throughout England. Intended as royal hunting preserves, these areas were vast in extent, and a distinct system of law restricting land usage and hunting rights applied within their bounds. While information on baronial reactions to this change is readily available, the attitudes of commoners and the lesser gentry are more obscure. I argue that the primary audience of the ballads of the famed English outlaw Robin Hood was non-noble, and examines their earliest editions – and the activities of historical outlaws in the 15th century – in the context of both forest law and the appearance of a non-noble “middle class” concurrent with the tales’ apparent origins. Beginning with the origins of forest law and its departures from Anglo-Saxon precedent, I focus on the symbolic significance of the deer-hunt as a royal or noble privilege and the way deer-poachers, fictional and historical, both mocked and mimicked noble hunting rituals – a tendency inexplicable by the mere need for food. Most Robin Hood scholars seek either to identify the tales’ primary audience, or to identify a “historical” Robin Hood; those few that address forest law do not seek to tie these tales’ popularity to the resentment of noble privilege rife at the time of their inception. Robin Hood’s portrayal as a paragon of justice, coupled with his direct defiance of forest law, reveals a complex view of the matter: the stories’ hero defies laws that are specifically royal while upholding the status quo values of his time, up to and including the concept of kingship itself. Resentment is focused against
the attempted royal monopoly of a symbolically-charged re-
source, rather than against the hierarchical structure of society
as a whole.