

BLOODIED BANNERS: MARTIAL DISPLAY ON THE MEDIEVAL BATTLEFIELD

ROBERT W. JONES

Bloodied Banners: Martial Display on the Medieval Battlefield, the groundbreaking new study about the role of armour, weapons and heraldry in medieval warfare, is now available as major new publication of our [Warfare in History](#) Series. Rob Jones, the author of this exciting and engaging book, answered a few questions and tells about the initial idea of his research, the involvement of biology, re-enactment and why his book represents a completely new perspective on the study of medieval warfare.

What inspired you first of all to study this particular aspect of medieval history?

I've been interested in military history for a long time. When some excellent lecturers at Cardiff University kindled a love for the medieval period in me, a combination of the two was inevitable. I've also been a re-enactor for twenty years and I've found that recreating the past can give added insights into the way people thought and why certain things are done in certain ways. Much of my interest in display, the ritual connected to medieval combat and the psychological impact of wearing arms and armour comes from that experience.

Can you explain the central idea behind 'Bloodied Banners'?

Basically, it's that all of the pomp and ceremony of medieval warfare – the heraldry on the colourful banners, the brightly painted shields, the trumpets, the horses, the shining swords and armour – wasn't just the social elite showing off; it was a vitally important part of the way in which they made war, practically, culturally and psychologically. Some of it is cultural – heraldry displays a certain specific set of social ties, for example. Some of it is anthropological, common to all cultures – almost all human cultures have rituals for preparing for war whether it be formal declarations or religious rites. Some of it is very deeply ingrained, programmed in at a biological level – the way in which animals and humans use body language and eye contact to communicate threat and mood. I hope I have shown how all three levels were present in the display seen on the medieval battlefield and how they could interrelate.

You dedicate this book to your wife who with her background in biology 'planted the seed of the study' in your head. Can you explain how this initial idea grew and how it links to martial display on medieval battlefields?

The Trooping of the Colour had been on the TV and the commentator had been talking about the thin red line and the way in which the guardsmen's bearskins made them look taller and more imposing. Liz pointed out that for biologists this was pretty obvious stuff; display and posturing was a normal part of animal – and plant – interaction and behaviour. As the conversation continued over dinner (and the wine flowed) I came to believe that there was something here that historians hadn't really thought about and was worth understanding better. I quickly realised that the subject was huge and so focused it on the period I knew best, the middle ages. The book really grew from there.

There are so many studies about heraldry, badges, swords, war tactics etc, but there has never been a study which combines all of these different research areas as you do in your study. Why do you think the subject has not been properly examined until now?

The study of medieval display is generally worked on by social historians who, quite rightly, see heraldry, badges and livery as reflecting social functions. But they concentrate on obvious places of social interaction – court, church, town, essentially civilian life, not on the battlefield. By contrast, military historians tend to see only the purely functional uses of display; banners are rallying points, trumpets are used to give the order to charge. Weapons and armour have been the preserve of the collector and the curator. They are artefacts to be dated and catalogued or pieces of art to be marvelled over. I hope I've managed to blur the boundaries between these approaches, as well as bringing in ideas from other disciplines including anthropology and biology, to show that whilst they are all valid in their own right, they offer a much more complete picture if integrated.

From all your research, which of all your findings surprised you the most and which had the greatest impact on your research?

I think that the findings that had the greatest impact was the recurring motif of donning armour, and in particular the helmet as preparation for battle, and how this could be imbued with symbolic significance. I first found it in the romance literature; no surprise there, they're full of symbols and ritual, but it was also in the chronicles and historical narratives too, and in the visual sources, the manuscript illuminations and funeral effigies. This one act embodied all of those different levels of understanding of martial display that I had been talking about; it was a practical thing, you put on armour prior to battle for physical protection, but it also declared your intent to fight and, in marking you as one of the knightly elite, your right to do so. It was also clear that the action prepared the warrior for combat, altering the way he perceived the world around him, and this tied in with the findings of studies of the modern experience of combat by the likes of John Keegan, Joanne Bourke and Dave Grossman.

Did you observe an overarching pattern in each region and period or were there various different trends?

My research is unusually broad for an academic work; it covers western Europe and the Latin East between 1000 and 1400, with occasional references beyond both those chronological and geographical boundaries. What I think holds it together is the shared cultural experience of the warrior class in western Europe in the middle ages. And, of course, one of the key themes is that there are forms and functions of military display that are shared across cultures and times.

We have lots of titles in our medieval studies list which are quite popular with re-enactors. Do you think that your innovative study would appeal to re-enactors as well?

I'm a re-enactor and it appeals to me! Seriously, I'd like to think that re-enactors will find useful material in the book. I feel that my study opens up a new vista on the way in which the medieval warrior thought and fought, and perhaps re-enactors might feel able to use some of this to change the way in which they view the kit they wear and the way in which they behave and act when in it.

Where will your research take you now?

I'd like to turn the study on its head, and consider how arms and armour, and indeed other forms of material culture, came to have a symbolic significance in the wider civilian culture (in so far as there was a distinction) of the middle ages. I'm really interested in how the form, function and symbolic significance of an object are interlinked. After that, who knows? The middle ages are such a rich period of history in terms of symbolism there should be plenty to keep me going for years.

Thank you.

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£50.00/ \$95.00, August 2010, 9781843835615, 17, 14, 232pp, HB, Warfare in History, Boydell Press