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Cruelty in the Middle Ages

SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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If you ask the average person on the street what historical period could most aptly be described by the word “cruel,” she will without hesitation answer “the Middle Ages,” as opposed to suggesting perhaps antiquity or the beginning of the modern era. Cruelty is generally perceived as one of the main features of the Middle Ages, alongside darkness, violence, backwardness, and barbarism. However, in many regards this is largely a question of myths, false impressions, and misunderstandings, which have been shaped and cultivated over the centuries both in the ivory towers of the intelligentsia and the forges of popular culture.

This work of nonfiction deals with cruelty in the society and culture of the Middle Ages. My purpose is to explore how cruelty was understood in the culture of the past, how it was expressed, and what attitudes were towards it. I also consider the opposites of cruelty: love for one’s neighbor, mercy, and sympathy. This work emphasizes the period between the 13th century and the first half of the 16th century, a time when cruelty was a significant subject of speculation, definition, and fear in Europe.

I attempt to shed light on the subject of cruelty from the perspectives of different segments of society. The church and its pursuit of power had a significant influence on how cruelty was experienced and viewed. The radical changes in society at the end of the Middle Ages also had great significance. I deal with an extremely varied range of sources, for example the writings of theoreticians, various sorts of hand-
books and essays, the output of chroniclers and poets, theatrical works, visual art, folk tales, and other contemporary materials such as documentary sources and proverbs. I also highlight the difficulties of interpreting textual and pictorial sources: the ways in which cruelty was spoken of in the Middle Ages were unique, which has led to any number of misconceptions in later times. The view nurtured by many historians that the Middle Ages was a cruel time have been based on chroniclers’ accounts of the crusades and the administration of justice; it has been common to ignore the propagandistic, ideological, and didactic goals of authors in the Middle Ages. The same problems are also present in the use and interpretation of visual materials (martyrdoms and other violent depictions) and dramatic materials (e.g. mystery plays).

The subject of cruelty is complex and broad, and there are many different ways it could be approached. In this book I have chosen to focus particularly on those categories that represented inhumanity or “non-personness” in the Middle Ages. These include, for example, war, the rabble, the infirm, women, children, and animals. Within these categories I have attempted to highlight some of the most common misconceptions about the cruelty of the Middle Ages, and my purpose has been to dismantle and correct these misconceptions, adding nuance. Cruelty is a difficult, fleeting concept, because it is “in the eye of the beholder;” that is, it differs based on the observer. Cruelty is always bound to its culture and time: cruelty is always seen as what is cruel from “our” perspective at any given moment. We also commonly forget that at all times and in all cultures, very different perspectives on cruelty have coexisted simultaneously.

The subjects of the first chapter are the concepts of cruelty and compassion in scholarly thought during the Middle Ages. I consider the connection of cruelty to emotions that were considered wrong, to intellectual and spiritual imperfection. The discussion will also include figures and groups that came to exemplify cruelty, places and times of cruelty, and the main opponents of and antidotes to cruelty. It is not an exaggeration to say that the culture of the Middle Ages was in a way obsessed with cruelty: cruelty was actively looked for and feared in “others,” as well as within one’s own social group.

The second chapter deals with the ways and ideals of war, the treat-
why that label has been so enduring. This discussion will address, for
example, the influence of important historians and theoreticians. It is
also warranted to ask what importance maintaining the notion of the
“cruel Middle Ages” has to various products of popular culture and
Middle Ages-themed events and museums.

Cruelty and Compassion
in Scholarly Thought

-Thou shalt not kill.
Exodus 20:13

-Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,
and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength,
and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.
Luke 10:27

The attitudes of scholars in the Middle Ages towards cruelty were
influenced by the Bible and Christian traditions, the views and inter-
pretations of the church fathers and scholars in antiquity. In late antiq-
uity, cruelty was a fundamental subject of discussion for scholars, but
later it faded into the background, only to return to the center of aca-
demic thought at the end of the Middle Ages.

In this chapter, in addition to definitions of cruelty, I also consider
figures and groups that came to exemplify cruelty, as well as places and
times of cruelty. I also address the connection of cruelty to emotions
that were considered wrong, to intellectual and spiritual imperfection,
and ways of resisting cruelty.

Just as in our modern world, the term “cruel” was also ambivalent
in the Middle Ages. It could, on the one hand, refer to the severity of
a blow, injury, or other misfortune, in which case “cruel” was an intrin-
sic characteristic of the thing that created so much pain and suffering.
On the other hand, it could refer to taking pleasure in the suffering of others or the desire to do harm, in which case “cruelty” was an intrinsic characteristic of the individual or being that derived satisfaction from causing or witnessing the suffering of others. The word could also refer to a lack of pity and compassion, insensitivity in the face of others’ suffering.

**Cruelty and Severity**

The writings of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) offer information about how cruelty was perceived and defined in the culture of the Middle Ages, particularly in learned circles. Aquinas was the leading theologian and philosopher of his time. He inherited many of his interests from his teacher Albert Magnus – for example, an interest in reconciling Aristotelian philosophy and Christian doctrines.

Thomas Aquinas examined the meaning of the concept of cruelty in the chapter Quaestio CLIX De Crudelitate of the Summa Theologica and made a clear distinction between cruelty and severity. Cruelty was a vice, but severity a virtue, which could perhaps be called “sensible hardness.”

There were two types of cruelty extant in the thought of Thomas Aquinas: bestial, animal cruelty and, on the other hand, excessive, human cruelty. While the former suggested bestiality and the animal kingdom, the latter suggested human wickedness, which was the direct antithesis of the virtue of clemency (clementia). Aquinas explained that the words saevitae (savagery) and feritatis (brutality), sometimes applied to cruel people, are comparisons to wild animals that attack people with the intent of eating the person, not out of any sense of justice. According to Aquinas, the understanding of justice was closely tied to reason, an attribute animals do not have. If, for example, when meting out punishments one does not take into account the actions of the criminal, but rather operates according the pleasure that one receives from the suffering of others, this demonstrates cruelty akin to bestiality, because this sort of pleasure is not human, but rather animal, and springs from perversion. However, there are also individuals who do take into account the guilt of the victim when rendering judgments, but exceed the limits of moderation in punishment. This sort of cruelty does not indicate bestiality, but rather human wickedness.

As far as the precise definition of cruelty is concerned, Thomas Aquinas explained that the word was derived from the word “rawness” and referred to things that had a disagreeable and bitter taste, because they were unripe or raw (...nomen crudelitatis a cruditate sumptum esse videtur. Sicut autem ea quae sunt cocta et digesta, solent habere suavem et dulcem saporem; ita illa quae sunt cruda, habent horribilem et asperum saporem.). This connotation was widely known in the late Middle Ages; the word “cruel” was often associated with a predilection for bloody meat, i.e. a characteristic that was considered typical of wild beasts.

Many of Thomas Aquinas’s views and attitudes may seem harsh to people today. Like many of his contemporaries, he observed that the corporal chastisement of children was acceptable, that heretics must be excommunicated or sentenced to death, and that women were to be subordinate to men because they were not able to use their reason to the same degree as men. Homosexuality and sexual bestiality were even worse crimes than rape because they violated the order intended by God. In any case, Thomas Aquinas had a great influence on his contemporaries and was given the flattering soubriquet doctor angelicus. He was declared a saint in 1323. In 1567 Pope Pius V elevated him to the stature of church father alongside Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory the Great.

Thomas Aquinas emphasized the free will of man, which individuals were to make use of by directing themselves towards love of their neighbors, peace, and holiness. As he practiced morality in everyday choices and actions, the individual was able to be filled with love towards all that which God loved. By repeating good works, the person achieved moral character, which made it possible for him to do good easily and joyfully.

Man had free will because he had knowledge of the object of his actions and thus a basis for correct action. The goodness or evilness of action depended upon the goal. Humane acts were only praiseworthy if they advanced the purposes and glory of God. Acts became evil when
a person departed from reason and divine moral law. The source of sin was in the will which decided contrary to reason to direct itself towards temporal good instead of eternal good.

**Cruelty and Otherness**

In getting acquainted with the literary materials from the late Middle Ages, one quickly discovers that the word “cruel” was generally used as a very negative attribute, which had connotations of bestiality and “otherness,” tyranny, evil, and sin. When reading these texts it is important to remember the motives and goals of the authors. Many chroniclers were writing to a prince or aristocratic master, to an upper-class audience, to their own peers. The purpose was to condemn cruelty, to reveal it as a base and sinful characteristic, a brutal and abhorrent attitude, which was unbefitting for honorable and virtuous people — for us. Underlining the cruelty of others helped to create distance between oneself and cruelty, to burnish and strengthen the self-image of the virtue and humanity of the definer and his group.

At the end of the Middle Ages, cruelty was often linked not only to the most heinous crimes but also to “bad justice” (male justice): injustice, imbalanced and immoderate justice, the punishments of which gave rise to excessive suffering. Bad justice was not in harmony with the virtues of love of one’s neighbor and equity, rather being based on enmity and iniquity. If the word cruel was used in reports of the issuance of sentences of “good justice” (bonne justice) and the carrying out of such sentences, resulting in much pain and suffering, it meant very severe. For example, in 1345 the Metzian chronicler Philippe de Vigneulles used the word “cruel” in his work to refer to a dismemberment which had been carried out as a punishment. The condemned was a native of Compiègne named Simon who had said that England’s Edward had more right to the crown of France than Phillip. The traitor’s addresses let to immediate detention and execution. De Vigneulles used the term cruel because the punishment was applied in an irregular order — first the limbs and then the head. The punishment in question was thus a deserved, if somewhat enhanced or severe, punishment for a serious crime. (Incontinent fut ampoigné et levé dessus ung eschauf-fault, et en fist on cruelle justice, comme serait dit. Premièrent, il oit les bras couppés, puis après les jambes et les cuisses, et finalement fut décapité; et receupt paines cruelles.) As already mentioned, severity was in harmony with the virtues of love of one’s neighbor and justice. However, many authors preferred to avoid the use of the word cruel in reference to good justice, reserving it for punishments meted out by bad justice and other unjustifiable acts.

In the culture of the Middle Ages, violence and bloodshed could be seen in a positive light as “non-cruelty” if they served the right groups and purposes and if the activities in question were rational and masculine. Female violence could not be approved of because, according to the conception of the time, it sprang from cruelty rather than the pursuit of peace, and it was based on the influence of the sensory soul rather than rational thought. For example, male saints could engage in violent acts in the miracle stories of the Middle Ages. Their violence did not represent cruelty, but rather severity and justice, for it was based on wisdom and virtue. Comparable examples included the good ruler and the perfect knight. Because the group of those who were wise and virtuous was known to be exceedingly small, in the great majority of cases violence was not entirely acceptable or not-cruel.

**Archetypes of Cruelty**

In the culture of the Middle Ages, the word cruel was attached to many negative figures. Generally, archetypes of cruelty included the devils, monsters, and beasts of Hell, various followers of Satan, heathens, heretics, Saracens (Muslims), and historical tyrants such as Emperor Nero (37–68), the monstrous acts of whom were known from Suetonius’ biography (De Vita Caesarum, 121).

This group also included most violent professional groups, such as executioners, butchers, and mercenaries. Cruelty was considered to be the predominant characteristic and identity in the most fundamental sense of the word of these individuals and groups: their violent acts caused great suffering to their victims, and, in addition, these function-
aries were thought to either enjoy causing pain – being extremely eager and desirous to hurt – or to be merciless or insensitive to the suffering of others. These groups could be associated with one or the other of the two categories of cruelty from scholarly thought: excessive cruelty or bestial cruelty.

An example of the definition of the archetypes of cruelty, the problems of definition, and the practical consequences in real life is given by executioners (mercenaries are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 and butchers in Chapter 9). The impression of executioners’ cruelty could be communicated simply by falling silent, but also, for example, by preferring pejorative professional titles that alluded to cruelty (such as the French bourreau). The Flemish jurist Jossé de Damhouder wrote in the beginning of the 16th century in his work La pratique et enchiridion that the word “executioner” indicated cruelty (il a ung nom fascheux et ennuyeux, qui semble estre cruel, et severe, et pas humain). De Damhouder was also of the opinion that the disfavor and bad reputation of executioners was their own fault, being caused by the fact that many executioners treated the condemned roughly (les bourreaulx eux mesmes et leur office font hayr, vilipender, et avoir en hayne, advient par ce que plusieurs bourreaulx leur office ne desservent ou accomplissent aveq telle compassion et humanité vers les pacients comme bien appartient, ains ilz traictent souvent les delinquants et criminalz en les tirant, tuant et meudrissant si irreverement comme s’ilz avoient bestes en leur mains). De Damhouder pressed executioners for more compassion and more humane behavior but, on the other hand, encouraged the common folk to be more understanding toward these necessary criminal justice functionaries.

Scholars and rulers were in a difficult situation. While they considered executioners necessary, they at the same time wanted to distance themselves from them – they supported them, but at the same time frowned upon them, scorning and stigmatizing them. In real life, official executioners had some official perquisites, but their dress, housing, and mobility were restricted, and they were expected to be flawless in the dispatch of their duties. There are several examples of executioners being subjected to fines, imprisonment, or dismissal for having made a mistake. If the executioner was clumsy, it cast doubt on the justice of the verdict. It often happened that there was no chance to punish an executioner because the people took justice into their own hands. Such Lynchings occurred often at the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th centuries. Two judgments from the court at Antwerp show that executioners could be held responsible for their actions even if they were following the orders of their superiors. Twice, in 1425 and 1493, the court of Bergen-op-Zoom arrested and tortured a citizen. In addition to the judges, the executioner also received a sentence – he had to complete a pilgrimage.

The connection of executioners to the concept of cruelty was expressed in the culture of the late Middle Ages in many ways: in addition to the writings of scholars, it was also apparent in visual art, literature, theater, poetry, folk tales, and vernacular nicknames for executioners. All in all, the cruelty discourse had extremely negative effects on the position and status of professional executioners in the society of the late Middle Ages. Executioners were shunned and unpopular everywhere, even though no one really questioned their necessity.

In the theater, in literature, and in art, executioners and other violent professional figures were employed in an effort to drive home lessons about inappropriate and uncouth behavior, vices, and sins – we will return to this in more detail later. These characters were used as examples of the forms of wrong behavior that led people to Hell and reduced them almost to the state of animals. Portrayals of the cruelty of violent professionals were therefore not necessarily connected to the behavior and natures of individuals in real life. For example, there were many businesslike, professional executioners. (…)

Cruelty, Pain, and Death

The familiar consequences of cruelty are pain and death, both of which were greatly feared in the late Middle Ages. The fear of death in the populace at that time was above all the fear of a bad death and the fear of pain in the hereafter, but pain on this side of the veil was also feared, for example as described movingly in 1461 by the poet François Villon in his Testament:
And he who dies, dies in agony:/ Breathing becomes difficult,/ dread fills the heart./ Then the sweat begins, God, what sweat… And who will relieve these agonies?/ For no child, no brother, no sister,/ May then take his place./ Death makes the body tremble, grow pale,/ The nose curl, the veins tighten,/ The body swell, crumble, and rot away,/ The joints, bones, and nerves balloon and stretch./ The female body, which is so fragile,/ Once soft, so beautiful,/ Must you also meet those agonies?/ Yes… or go living up to heaven.

The Burgundian court chronicler Georges Chastellain (approx. 1410-1475) emphasized the frightfulness of the death struggle by pointing to Lazarus (John 11): after being awoken from the dead, he could not forget even for a moment the horror of the death he had experienced. And if righteous Lazarus had so much reason to fear, then how much more did the common sinner have to tremble?

People in the late Middle Ages were both capable of cruelty and at the same time very sensitive to its manifestations. Obvious evidence of this is given by images and depictions of the horrors of Hell. Hell was a kingdom of cruelty and pain, the most awful characteristic of which was the endlessness of its suffering. Comfort and hope suggested images of paradise, where the blessed would be freed from all feeling of pain. Suffering in Purgatory, on the other hand, was finite, and the cleansing pain of those being punished in its fires was not seen as nearly as severe and unbearable as the agonies that awaited the sinner in Hell. The pain of Purgatory was also less personal in the sense that there were no ghoulish, sadistic, malevolent tormentors, no demons.

All positive explanations of the beneficial aspects of pain and its cleansing qualities must be seen as techniques for taming the fear and anxiety that the thought of pain caused in people of the past. At the end of the Middle Ages, the threat of pain was a powerful tool for manipulation, persuasion, and coercion which was used both by ecclesiastical and secular rulers. The fear of a bad death was especially penetrating and was visible in many different forms. People were reminded in sermons, in literature, and through pictures of the endless torment of Hell, the horrible agony of the death struggle, and the appalling stages of decomposition of the body. Due to the ambitions of the church, its teachings focused much more on Hell than on the other places in the hereafter, Paradise and Purgatory. Feelings of guilt were fanned by drawing attention to the innocent victims who had suffered and died as a result of the sins of mankind. All believers were urged to focus their attention on their own sins and the evil of their souls.

From the perspective of the church, definitions of cruelty, threats of hellfire, and creating feelings of guilt were all part of an attempt to bolster its power position and gain a firmer grip on believers. The supremacy of the church was undermined by plagues and their attendant deploration of the workforce, wars, and severe economic problems and internal schisms (the Avignon Papacy or Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy 1309–1377 and the Western Schism 1378–1417).

The penal system of the hereafter was tailored to serve the same goals and purposes as earthly, judicial reality: both strove to keep Christian society on the straight and narrow path and under the control of the establishment (ecclesiastical and secular rulers) by creating a discourse founded on the threat of cruelty and pain, both physical and spiritual. It is clear that beliefs and attitudes related to these two realms of punitive pain inspired, fed, and supported each other. The catalog of hell changed: the traditional “natural punishments” (a frigid river, a well filled with snakes, and so forth) were gradually replaced with more instrumental punishments familiar from everyday life. Instruments (pots, grills, ovens, pincers, pitchforks) and methods recognizable from the domestic and urban milieu made hell an even more powerful device for the church to use in conditioning the populace.

(...)

The Opponents of and Antidotes to Cruelty

The primary opponents to cruelty in the thought and imagination of the Middle Ages were the saints, “the good ruler,” other virtuous figures such as perhaps the ancient philosopher Seneca, valiant crusaders (see Chapter 2), or members of the lay orders of the late Middle Ages. Saints were endowed with spiritual gifts such as wisdom, clemency, and
bravery. They were able to resist cruelty by the force of their intellects and other virtues, fighting against it wherever it appeared, righting and avenging wrongs perceived as cruel – revenge was not a sin for a saint, but rather a just act. Good rulers adopted saints as their role models and followed their examples. The activities of the members of the orders of lay brothers such as in supporting those sentenced to death are described in Chapter 3.

Seneca (c. 4 BCE – 65), who had emphasized the importance of clemency and peace of mind, was admired in antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages. Seneca became a peculiar counterpart to the bestial Nero: he had been Nero’s teacher and advisor, but was forced by him to commit suicide. He wrote his treatise De Clementia (55–56) directly to Nero, with the intention of stressing the importance of the virtue of clemency in a ruler, because a ruler had more opportunity to practice it than others. Seneca reminded him that the cruelty of the common citizen could not cause great harm, but the fury of a prince could lead to war (Est ergo, ut dicebam, clementia omnibus quidem hominibus secundum naturam, maxine tamen decora imperatoribus, quanto plus habet apud illos, quod servet, quantoque in maiore materia apparat. Quantulum enim nocet privata crudelitas! Principum saevitia bellum est). Cruel and merciless anger does not behoove a king, because he then does not rise above others, rather descending to their level. Clemency is the best protection for a ruler, because repeated punishment may crush the anger of a few, but will at the same time arouse it in all others. By removing a few enemies, the cruelty of the king thus increases his total number of enemies, because the parents, children, relatives, and friends of those killed will step forward to fill their ranks (Ita regia crudelitas auget inimicorum numem tollendo; parentes enim liberique eorum, qui interfecti sunt, et propinquii et amici in locum singularum succedunt). Mercifulness therefore will increase the ruler’s honor and solidify his position. The difference between a tyrant and a king is that tyrants are cruel in order to satisfy their desires and kings are severe for reasons of rationality and necessity.

Seneca’s philosophical works dealt primarily with ethics and moral philosophy, and the mention of his works in the literature of later generations demonstrates their enduring popularity. The church father Tertullian (c. 155-230) considered the ancient Greek philosophers to be the spiritual predecessors of the heretics, but regarded Seneca favorably, not associating him with the “others” in his De Anima, but rather with “us” (Seneca saepe noster). In the 14th century, in his Divine Comedy, Dante placed Seneca in the first circle of Hell, where the only punishment of the virtuous heathen was the loss of hope. Seneca’s works were also among the important sources for Thomas More’s Utopia (1515). The views of Erasmus of Rotterdam on the differences between a good ruler and a tyrant (see Chapter 4) were very similar to those of Seneca.

The opposites of and antidotes to cruelty in the thought of the Middle Ages were compassion and love of one’s neighbor. Christian thought had traditionally stressed that it was a serious sin not to experience and display compassion when an innocent was in distress. This view of and requirement for compassion became even more intense near the end of the Middle Ages. The sufferings of Christ and the martyrs, which were constantly on display, were meant to awaken deep pity and compassion. Christ and the saints were not only innocent victims, but victims who had been made to suffer for the sake of other people’s sins. Their trials were much more severe than those that were the lot of common people. Scholars and theologians emphasized that other people were also deserving of compassion. Thomas Aquinas wrote on this topic in his Summa in the depths of the Middle Ages, observing that it was reprehensible to revel in the suffering of others for the sake of the suffering itself, and that the only positive aspect in suffering was its possible beneficial influence – that is, that the sufferer might be refined of the dross of sin.

In later periods this preaching has at times been interpreted as evidence of a lack of the love of one’s neighbor, forgetting that it also reveals the most dearly-held ideals and ambitions of people of the past. In addition, the fact is often overlooked that depictions of the sufferings of Christ and the saints often served as a refined technique for manipulating the imagination: in them, the concept of cruelty was manipulated entirely for religious purposes, to achieve a mystical experience (see Chapter 10).

The most important virtue in Christian thought of the Middle ages was caritas, i.e. the opposite of anger, cruelty, and envy, the opposite of
the passions and sins that fed cruelty. Caritas meant a fervent love for God and one's neighbors (Charité treshaulte vertu de toutes est désir de pensee ardant bien ordonne de aymer dieu & son prouchain, explained the Shepherd’s Calendar.) It was the highest virtue and appeared in many different forms, including mercy, compliance, pity, clemency, charity, patience, compassion, benevolence, and harmoniousness (grace, paix, pitié, douceur, misericorde, indulgence, compassion, beinignité, concorde).

Clergymen and scholars never ceased to emphasize in their writings and sermons the importance of loving one's neighbor and avoiding anger and cruelty. They underlined this as they directed their words to the rich and powerful and as they addressed them to the common folk, the unlearned, and the poor. In the culture of chivalry in the late Middle Ages, brutality towards the defenseless and innocent was seen as a base and dishonorable quality. The ideal knight was just and merciful; he protected and took pity on the weak and lowly. The princely handbooks (Miroirs aux princes), written beginning in the Carolingian period, emphasize that the ruler must pay particular attention to love of one's neighbor in dispensing justice and also in his other actions and duties. The prince was to follow the principle of loving one's neighbor by showing mercy to his subjects, especially to the poor. The avoidance of anger and cruelty and the demonstration of love of one's neighbor were required not only of rulers but of their subjects as well.

In their writings and sermons, the most important clergymen reminded their audiences that only love of one's neighbor can save the soul from eternal torment, allowing entrance into the bliss of paradise; cruelty and anger led to damnation. Therefore the avoidance of anger and cruelty were not only morally correct, but it was also obviously sensible and profitable. Jean Gerson dealt with these topics often, and assured that “faith without love of one’s neighbor is dead” i.e. useless. In a sermon prepared for All Souls' Day, Gerson gave three pieces of counsel by which all of the faithful would be able to live a good life, achieve a good death, and avoid suffering in the hereafter. The believer was to be penitent, patient, and benevolent. Gerson explained that benevolence meant both concrete and spiritual works of love for one's neighbor. There were many ways to demonstrate benevolence: 1) one should aid others in their physical needs, visit them, and comfort them; 2) one should forgive others their trespasses for the glory of God; 3) one should punish in love those who have strayed from the path and those who do evil. In the Middle Ages, allowing evil doers to continue walking their road to damnation was considered to be a great sin, since it left them without the possibility of atonement and purification, which could only be achieved through suffering.

(...) For people in the Middle Ages, cruelty was anything but positive and far from being an insignificant concern; cruelty was one of the keys to damnation. Cruelty became an especially important object of contemplation and definition in the late Middle Ages both for theoreticians and among the common, unlearned rabble. Many different groups exploited the concept of cruelty in the pursuit of political, ideological, and religious goals. Cruelty aroused strong reactions and fears, even to the point that it would not be an exaggeration to speak of an “obsession” with cruelty among the people of the late Middle Ages. This obsession was expressed in numerous cultural artifacts.

In the stream of thought based on the Elias theory of civilization, cruelty and a lack of the ability to identify with others has been considered typical of people in the Middle Ages. According to this model, far-sightedness and self control could not develop, because life in that period was so intensive and violent, unsure and brief. Therefore individual personality was structured differently than it is in modern man, and a broad range of attitudes was lacking.

This popular theory of civilization will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter 11, but let it be stated here that all of its basic elements were clearly apparent in society and culture at the end of the Middle Ages. Even at that time, the state in its various forms, through rulers and the leading classes, was attempting to get individuals to control themselves both physically and spiritually. Virtuous and polite (“chivalrous”) behavior was praised in word and picture. The controlling of feelings and expressions, demure behavior and presence were, according to the general conception, marks of good breeding, intelligence, and spiritual
balance. Many individuals may have come much closer to these ideals in their everyday lives than modern “civilized” people might imagine or suppose.

In the culture and society of the Middle Ages, the concept of cruelty was, in any case, somewhat different than today, and it contained slightly different things in different places and among different social groups at the beginning and end of the Middle Ages. Ideological and social revolutions and other changes influenced the hardening or easing of attitudes. Parallel, partially contradictory conceptions of cruelty and its many faces often coexisted.

Understanding how cruelty was conceived of and how these conceptions were manipulated in the Middle Ages can help us perceive and interpret similar phenomena in the modern world. No doubt images of cruelty are exploited today as well. As an example we might take the demonization of Muslims in certain Western circles for ideological and political purposes, to enable the continuation of warfare, the imprisonment of opponents, and the justification of torture.