

The Medieval Magazine

Issue 5

March 2, 2015

How to Become the King of England

Lessons
from
Stephen of
Blois on
claiming
the English
throne



Ten Strange Medieval
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Priests and the Black Death

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Cover Image: King Stephen sitting on a throne with a hawk sitting on his wrist. Image from British Library MS Royal 20 A II

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How Well Do You Know the Sixth Century?

The sixth-century was time of Justinian the Great, the Merovingians and supposedly King Arthur. Here are ten questions about the people and events of this century – how many can you answer?



1. Boethius wrote the *Consolation of Philosophy* while he was imprisoned. Who put Boethius in prison and later had him executed?
2. Who wrote *De Excidio Britanniae* (*On the Ruin of Britain*), the only significant historical narrative written in Britain during the 6th century?
3. Who wrote: "Grammar is the mistress of words, the embellisher of the human race; through the practice of the noble reading of ancient authors, she helps us, we know, by her counsels. The barbarian kings do not use her; as is well known, she remains unique to lawful rulers. For the tribes possess arms and the rest; rhetoric is found in sole obedience to the lords of the Romans."?
4. She was the first wife of the Islamic prophet Muhammad - she had already been married and widowed twice, and was a successful businesswoman. What was her name?

5. Who was the 6th century Irish saint was known for legendary voyage to the 'Isle of the Blessed' with sixteen other pilgrims - at one point they land on an island which turns out to be a giant sea monster?
6. She was an actress and a wool spinner before becoming an empress (and some sources said she worked in a brothel too) - who was she?
7. Chariot Racing was the most popular sport in 6th century Constantinople. There were four major teams at the time. What were their names?
8. Who was the ruler who died circa 511 and was the first king of the Franks to unite all of the Frankish tribes under one ruler and is considered the founder of the Merovingian dynasty?
9. The legendary figure King Arthur was said to have lived in the early 6th century. According to the the 10th-century work Annales Cambriae he and Mordred died in battle in the year 537. What was the name of this battle?
10. The Byzantine general Belisarius was one of the most successful military commanders of the 6th century. Which Vandal ruler did he defeat twice in battle?



You can find the answers on page 30



Several hundred years old juniper tree in the Tien Shan mountains of Kyrgyzstan. Photo: Andrea Seim (University of Gothenburg, Sweden)

How Climate Change in Asia brought the Black Death to Europe

A group of Norwegian and Swiss researchers have uncovered links between climatic changes in central Asia and repeated outbreaks of the Bubonic plague in Europe, starting with the Black Death in the 14th century.

In an article published this week in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, the researchers examined tree ring records throughout Europe and Asia, and found 16 instances, ranging between the 14th and 19th centuries, where periods of warm springs and wet summers would corresponded with an upsurge in plague in Europe about 15 years later.

They add that the plague could have spread by trade caravans that crisscrossed Asia along the Silk Road – infecting people or camels, or perhaps with the fleas finding a home in the cargo. This challenges the idea that the plague bacterium *Yersinia pestis* sustained itself among the wildlife in Europe, especially the black rat.

They write: "Our findings support a scenario where climate fluctuations that positively affect tree-ring growth in the juniper trees in the Karakorum mountain range [in the border region of China, India and Pakistan] also affect climate in a larger region in a way that can promote and synchronize plague outbreaks among the rodent populations of Central Asia. When the climate subsequently becomes unfavorable, it facilitates the collapse of plague-infected rodent populations forcing their fleas to find alternative hosts. Such large-scale wildlife plague outbreaks in Asia would, during the time of the second plague pandemic, frequently result in the arrival of plague to Europe harbors."

The researchers note that the ultimate confirmation of this hypothesis depends on the availability of appropriate genetic material of ancient plague victims not only from different periods throughout time but also from different parts of Eurasia. The advent of aDNA techniques and international research collaboration across disciplinary boundaries will most likely be able to shed new light on this fascinating topic at the interface of human history and environmental variability.

Capital and Corporal Punishment may have been rare in Anglo-Saxon England, researcher suggests

A long standing belief about early medieval justice was that many offenders would be executed for serious crimes, or face punishments such as amputations for lesser offences. However, an examination of archaeological data suggests that these kinds of punishments were rare in Anglo-Saxon England.

In her article 'Osteological Evidence of Corporal and Capital Punishment in Later Anglo-Saxon England', Jo Buckberry of the University of Bradford examines the archaeological evidence from burials to see how this correlates with the punishments described in written sources from this period.

She notes that special execution cemeteries

began to be used in the seventh century, and continued as late as the twelfth century. They were created because of the Christian belief that those who were unbaptized, had committed suicide or were criminals, should not be buried with the rest of the community. Instead, separate cemeteries would be established on the edges of a medieval community, where people would be haphazardly thrown into makeshift and shallow graves.

Researchers have already identified 813 individuals who were buried in Anglo-Saxon execution cemeteries, with a ratio between men and women of about five to one. Buckberry explains that while some types of executions, such as decapitation or being burned to death,



Skeletons under excavation at Walkington Wold – photo by Rod Mackey

were fairly easy to detect in an osteological analysis, others such as strangulation or being stoned to death were more difficult to spot.

While various Anglo-Saxon law codes often state that people should be executed for certain offences, Buckberry finds that the archaeological evidence suggests that they were not carried out as often as one might believe. She writes that "many Anglo-Saxon execution cemeteries appear to have been in use for a long period, yet contain relatively few individuals. Both Sutton Hoo and Stockbridge Down appear to have been in use for up to 500 years, but they contain just thirty-nine and forty-nine burials respectively, suggesting executions took place approximately once each decade. At Walkington Wold, a total of thirteen individuals were buried over a period of between 220 and 390 years, suggesting just one or two executions per generation."

The lack of executions might also explain why the patterns of decapitations at some of these cemeteries might suggest that the executioners had little experience in delivering the fatal blows. Meanwhile, evidence for amputations – hands or feet being cut off – among Anglo-Saxons is also very rare. Buckberry concludes: It is quite likely that the corporal and capital punishments in Anglo-Saxon law codes

constitute a deterrent rather than a reality. Most individuals were fined for their crimes, whereas more severe punishments appear to have been meted out infrequently. Thus it could be argued that Anglo-Saxon law codes were effective in preventing the most serious crimes from being committed on a regular basis.

The article 'Osteological Evidence of Corporal and Capital Punishment in Later Anglo-Saxon England' is published in *Capital and Corporal Punishment in Anglo-Saxon England*, which has recently been published by Boydell and Brewer. Edited by Jay Paul Gates and Nicole Marafioti, this is a collection of ten essays that look at how lawbreakers were punished. These include Daniel Thomas' paper 'Incarceration as Judicial Punishment in Anglo-Saxon England' and 'Genital Mutilation in Medieval Germanic Law' by Lisi Oliver.

Jo Buckberry is a Lecturer in Biological Anthropology at the University of Bradford. Click [here](#) to view her faculty page or follow her on Twitter [@osteo_jo](#)



Dr Jo Buckberry with a medieval skull Photograph courtesy Historic Scotland

Pair of 15th-Century Skeletons discovered in York

A project in the English city of York to replace electricity cables has unearthed an enigmatic medieval burial site.

The find, which dates back to the time of Richard III, is the first of its type to be found in the city.

The first bones were discovered in November 2013 by Northern Powergrid and its contractor, Interserve, which were working on Tadcaster Road, known locally as the Knavesmire.

Due to York being one of only five designated UK areas of archaeological importance, Northern Powergrid, Interserve, City of York Council and York Archaeological Trust worked in partnership throughout the major investment project.

A team of archaeologists remained present on site at all times and, on discovering the first bones, were called on to examine the find and start the process of carefully uncovering the skeletons. After initial excavations the team realised that this discovery was something very unusual.

Northern Powergrid provided the £13,000 needed to make further excavation work possible to reveal more of the historic secrets beneath the ground. Meticulous excavation in two trenches revealed 12 skeletons. Analysis by the Trust's Dickson Laboratory and radiocarbon dating of two of the skeletons found that they could be dated to around the 1460s.

The skeletons were identified as male and mostly aged between 25 and 40 at the time of their death. Two had significant bone fractures which could be evidence of fighting, perhaps associated with professional soldiers.

Ruth Whyte, Osteo-archaeologist for York Archaeological Trust said: "We knew this was a fascinating find as, unlike 15th century Christian burial practice, the skeletons were all together and weren't facing East-West.

"The Knavesmire was the site of York's Tyburn, where convicted criminals were executed right up until 1802. Were these individuals criminals or could they have been Lancastrian soldiers? They may have been captured in battle and brought to York for execution, possibly in the aftermath of the Battle of Towton during the Wars of the Roses, and their remains hastily buried near the gallows."

Cllr Sonja Crisp, Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Tourism at City of York Council, said: "As a designated area of archaeological importance it's vital we protect the history beneath our feet. This project is an example of best practice when it comes to protecting York's past while bringing improvements for its future.

"By working in partnership with Northern Powergrid, Interserve and York Archaeological Trust, we have been able to professionally and respectfully unearth some hugely significant finds that will help us to continue our work to create a rich picture of the city's 2,000-year old history."

Northern Powergrid is spending £7 million to renew and replace more than 6,500 kilometres underground cable to strengthen the York's electricity network

Dave Smith, Northern Powergrid's Project Engineer, said: "To unveil a piece of history as part of our £7 million project to reinforce York's underground cable network and create additional capacity for the future is amazing. When we started the 18-month project to replace cables dating back to the 1950s we never expected that we - and our contractor Interserve - would be so instrumental in helping unearth such a key discovery for the city.

The skeletons have been handed over to York Archaeological Trust to protect and preserve. Arrangements are also underway to exhibit one of the skeletons as part of the city's Richard III Experience at Monk Bar in March.

This made them laugh in 13th century Iceland and Norway

By Camilla Smaadal

We tend to think of the Middle Ages as grotesque and dreary. However, 13th century elites made use of laughter quite deliberately – and it resounded most loudly when it was at someone else's expense.

The things that medieval elites considered amusing can act as a window on their interpersonal relations: humour created a form of group solidarity and a clear distinction between friends and foes, thus revealing the power and value of entertainment, according to Beate Albrigtsen Pedersen at the Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History at the University of Oslo.

Pedersen seeks to explore what entertainment and comedy meant to Norwegian and Icelandic society and politics in the 13th century. "Humour has always been a part of our lives," she explains, "and we have always had the ability to laugh at things, but there has been little research into the role of humour in medieval Norse society and how the forms of humour changed over time."

The historian believes that knowledge about the jesting and spite favoured by the aristocracy can help us better understand the society and people of the 13th century.

"Humour is often regarded as a flippant research topic, but the ability to be amused and laugh is an important part of life and may thus provide us with an alternative perspective on the Middle Ages. Our relationship to the saga literature is steeped in national romanticism, and I believe that reading it as entertainment literature will bring out new aspects. The sagas were also intended to amuse people," she says.

No self-irony

And the aristocrats knew well how to have a good time, according to Pedersen. "The elite used humour very deliberately – most often to ridicule others. Humour established a form of group affiliation and a clearer distinction between

friends and foes."

Sarcastic comments and put-downs are elements of our contemporary humour as well, but the essential matter is how it was perceived. Self-irony is a key element in Pedersen's analysis of medieval humour, or more precisely: the absence of self-irony. With no redeeming self-irony, this form of humour was often used to defeat political opponents, or to assert oneself and shame others.

Pedersen adds, "Modern humour is largely based on self-irony, permitting us to laugh at ourselves and others, without any repercussions."

Clearer norms of laughter

New courtly ideals were introduced in the late 13th century as the old society of rival chieftains was replaced by the ideal of the king as the sole ruler, chosen by God. Pedersen is studying what happened to humour during this transition and how the elite culture changed.

She notes that "as the 13th century draws to an end, we can see clearer norms for what were permitted as objects of ridicule. The courtly ideals forced the elite to behave with more decorum, resulting in less ribaldry. At the same time, we can see that self-irony is becoming more common as the 14th century approaches. Sarcastic comments by members of the elite no longer entailed the same grave consequences. They took the ridicule differently – by holding their heads high."

Written by and for a social elite

The humour researcher has reviewed a series of sagas, with sources ranging from the sagas of Icelanders and tales of kings and knights to

sagas, with sources ranging from the sagas of Icelanders and tales of kings and knights to ideological writings.

"I search for humorous features that recur in the sagas, such as ordinary jokes, insults, imagery and metaphors that evoke laughter in different scenes. If I come across similar situations, although laughter is not mentioned explicitly, I may assume that they were intended to be humorous as well."

Pedersen uses the term humour, although this concept did not exist in medieval times. "My research refers to our concept of humour. Humour remains a difficult concept to define. I study the things that they found comical, both what was intentionally comical and what was perceived as such, by the numerous characters in the sagas as well as by potential listeners in the 13th century."

Admittedly, all sources are concentrated at the upper echelons of society. "The sagas were written by and for an elite, so it's difficult to draw any conclusions about the common people. Politics and everyday life went hand in hand for the aristocracy. It is essential to bear in mind that it is the sources' portrayal of life – and how they wanted to describe the past and future – that emerges," Pedersen explains.

Kicking the little guy

In politics, humour was used to add fuel to rivalry and create conflicts – by laughing or remaining silent, the aristocrats took sides in the conflict.

"A prime example is in the story of the wedding at Reikholt in the early 12th century in *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*, when a great feast was held," Pedersen says.

An elderly chieftain is suffering from indigestion. He has heartburn, is burping and feeling quite uncomfortable. The jokes would often be delivered in verse form, and another chieftain stands up and improvises a spiteful verse. A verbal battle ensues between several of the men, and the entire company is laughing at the smelly chieftain. The insolent comments keep coming, and the foul-smelling man finally picks up his things and leaves.

"Scenes like this are quite common," Pederson notes, "the humour is condescending, people are kicking the little guy, most often deliberately wanting to cause insult. We only very rarely see situations in which everybody is laughing together, in a friendly atmosphere. Most often, the joke is at somebody's expense."

Black humour

Black humour also had a natural place in medieval life.

"The typical form this takes is a final punchline before someone dies. A concrete example is provided by *Njáls Saga*, in which there is a description of a swordfight that ends when one of the fighters cuts off the other man's leg. Kol, the man with the severed leg, looks in alarm at the stump, and his adversary remarks: 'There's no need to look, it's just like it seems, the leg is off.' We may regard such final quotes as a dry form of humour, and I believe they were meant to be so at the time of writing as well."



Illustration by Hanne Utigard /
University of Oslo

Rowallan Castle in Scotland to be turned into a hotel

Historic Scotland is transferring control of Rowallan Castle, which dates back to the Middle Ages, back to its owner, who will be converting it into a hotel as part of a golf course development.



Rowallan Castle – photo by Sagereid / Wikicommons Media

In announcement last week, the Scottish government explained they will remove the state guardianship of Rowallan's Old Castle, which was originally built in the 13th century. This will allow Niall Campbell, the castle's owner, to continue with plans for converting the site into a hotel accommodation, as part of the Rowallan Castle Golf Course and Country Club, while maintaining the historic integrity of the building.

Fiona Hyslop, Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs, said: "One of the key priorities of Scotland's recently introduced Historic Environment Strategy, Our Place in Time, is that we have to be ambitious and innovative in our approach to the historic environment. Change is an inevitable part of this and the important thing is how we manage this change – there has to be a balance between protection and innovation. I believe that, thanks to the collaborative working between local

government, the castle owner and Historic Scotland, we've been able to achieve the correct balance and I look forward to seeing the re-use of the building acting as a catalyst for enhancing economic and social wellbeing in the area."

"Scottish Ministers remain absolutely committed to conserving Rowallan Old Castle as a nationally significant monument for future generations to enjoy. This step will pave the way for an innovative and productive partnership between the national agency, the local authority and the building's owner which will be in the best interests of the monument and the local economy."

Niall Campbell, commented, "I'm absolutely delighted with today's announcement. We've come a long way in getting to this point and there's still a bit of work to be done. Thanks to positive discussions with Historic Scotland and East Ayrshire Council, I'm now in a position to

to progress with plans to convert the building into something which can be lived in, using minimal intervention, in a sympathetic manner that is consistent with the building's history and cultural significance.

"The end result will be a wonderful new space for visitors to the area, which retains all of the features that make the castle so special, and will be a benefit to the local community for years to come. I'm sure that my distant relation, James Muir Campbell, who lived in the house seven generations ago, would be proud of what we're trying to do."

Councillor Douglas Reid, Leader of East Ayrshire Council, added, "Tourism is key to the East Ayrshire economy, and an integral part of this Council's economic development plan is to build on our existing tourist product. To that end we are delighted to be able to work with Mr Campbell to add another option for top class accommodation in the area. Building on the recent success story of Dumfries House, and the work we have done with Conservation Area Regeneration Schemes in all our major town centres, today's announcement will undoubtedly add to East Ayrshire's growing reputation for history, heritage and outdoor tourism, as well as creating jobs and bringing money into the area."

Rowallan Old Castle was put under the guardianship of Historic Scotland in 1950. Rowallan has attracted the wider attention of

architects and experts in the heritage sector in recent years. In order to provide for the future conservation and management of the building a detailed, 30 year conservation plan has been agreed upon, which includes conservation and maintenance stipulations as well as public access requirements. The plan was proposed by Mr Campbell and prepared by leading conservation architects with experience of working with historical buildings. The agreement is legally binding and would apply to any future owner or owners of the building during the 30 year period. Guardianship will only be rescinded once Scottish Ministers are satisfied that all these terms have been met.

Neil Baxter, Secretary and Treasurer of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland said, "The sympathetic restoration and adaptation of historic buildings to new uses is in everyone's interests. It recognises that such buildings provide literal touchstones to our shared past, ensures their preservation for future generations to enjoy, provides employment and helps deliver a viable economic future for Scotland's communities. It is often challenging to achieve all of this, but undoubtedly worth the effort."

Work on renovating the castle is expected to get underway this summer and take around 12 months to complete.



Engraving of the castle by James Fittler in *Scotia Depicta*, published 1804

14th century English church awarded funds for conservation project

St Mary's Church in the English village of Cowbit has received £8,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for a project to conserve and communicate the heritage of the 14th-century building and its clock.

The project, led by volunteers from the Lincolnshire community, will repair and improve the clock in the church tower and help promote the heritage of the medieval landmark. The work will start very soon and the project will be completed by the end of 2015.

The grant will allow vital repairs to be carried out to the clock and belfry floor. It will enable new and existing volunteers to undertake research visits to relevant projects, exhibitions and institutions and to work with the National Association of Decorative & Fine Arts Societies (NADFAS) and local school children to develop church trails. This learning will be shared with a wider audience via a display and workshop. A clock commemoration event is planned at the end of the project.

The official project launch will be held at Cowbit St Mary on 11 April starting. This will be an opportunity to meet and share memories of Cowbit and the church. The highlight of the afternoon will be a talk by Darlah and Steve Thomas on the famous manufacturer of the clock.

The Grade I listed Cowbit Saint Mary's, founded by the Prior of Spalding in 1384, is an important local landmark at the centre of the fenland village of Cowbit. A chancel and perpendicular tower were added by Bishop Russell of Lincoln in 1487, and restoration work was carried out in 1882. The clock project is planned as the first of many initiatives to help revive the village, the quality of life for residents and to communicate the Cowbit heritage before it is lost to future generations.

Commenting on the award, Dr Shirley Pugh said, "We are thrilled to have received the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund and are confident the project will ensure the long term future of the clock and help attract visitors back to this historic landmark."



St Mary Cowbit – photo by Rodney Burton

How to Become a King: Stephen's rise to the English throne

By Peter Konieczny

Unless you were the son of a king, the most difficult job to obtain in the Middle Ages was to become a king. Even if you were shrewd and had the support of strong armies, the chances of successfully seizing the throne were often very low. Yet, in 1135 a count named Stephen of Blois was able to become the King of England. Here is his story of success.

The opportunity to become a king only comes when the current king is either incapable or dies without someone to inherit his domain. The latter was the situation that faced England when King Henry I passed away in 1135, Henry had ruled England for 35 years and Normandy for almost as long, and had earned a reputation for being a strong, some would say tyrannical, ruler. However, he only had two legitimate children during his lifetime (he had many illegitimate ones) - William and Matilda. When his son died during the sinking of the White Ship in 1120, Henry attempted to place his daughter Matilda as his successor. She was married to Geoffrey V, Count of Anjou, one of Henry's rivals, and he made his leading nobles swear an oath that only his daughter would succeed him after he died.

Despite being about 68 years old, Henry was still an active ruler and had gone to his domains in Normandy in the fall of 1135. According to the chronicler Henry of Huntingdon, the king had just finished a hunting excursion and was having a dinner of lamprey eels, a food his doctor had told him to avoid. Ignoring the advice, the king ate the food, and "this meal brought on a most destructive humour, and violently stimulating similar symptoms, producing a deadly chill in his aged body, and a sudden and extreme convulsion. Against this, nature reacted by stirring up an acute fever to dissolve the inflammation with very heavy sweating."

On December 1st, about a week after he fell ill, Henry died. If one believes the often hyperbolic

comments of contemporary chroniclers, both England and Normandy fell into immediate chaos. For example, John of Worcester writes that, "conflict arose, infiltrating the tall, massive, and diverse fortifications of both greater and lesser alike, and devastating everything. Each man plundered the goods of others. The strong violently oppressed the weak."

There seems to have been a lot of fear in both England and Normandy that were in great danger as long as the throne remained unoccupied. Those fears seem to have been justified, not only because of local uprisings that were taking place, but because within weeks of Henry's death both the Welsh and Scots were sending their armies into England. People were looking to have a ruler installed quickly.

Into this confusion stepped in Stephen of Blois, Count of Boulogne. Stephen was a nephew of King Henry - his mother Adela was Henry's sister - and he was regarded as a competent member of the Norman nobility. Over the years Henry had treated him well, bestowing on Stephen lands and lordships, but he had never thought of considering Stephen as a potential heir. To begin with, Stephen had an older brother named Theobald, who would have had a better claim to any throne.

This did not stop Stephen from unleashing his plan to become the next King of England upon the

the death of Henry. According to the *Gesta Stephani*, a chronicle that usually had a pro-Stephen point of view, he immediately sailed for England with a few of his supporters, a sea crossing that would have had some danger in December. Upon landing, Stephen:

journeyed hastily to London, the capital, the queen of the whole kingdom. At his arrival the town was immediately filled with excitement and came to meet him with acclamation, and whereas it had been sadly mourning the previous death of its protector Henry, it reveled in exultant joy as though it had recovered him in Stephen. So the elders and those most shrewd in counsel summoned an assembly, and taking prudent forethought for the state of the kingdom, on their own initiative, they agreed unanimously to choose a king. For, they said, every kingdom was exposed to calamities from ill fortune when a representative of the whole government and a fount of justice was lacking.

Stephen realized something that no other potential contender to the English throne realized - if one wanted to rule England he had to gain London. His timing was great too, as the Londoners wanted to have to a king as soon as possible.

The *Gesta Stephani* notes that people of London also believed that:

it was their own right and peculiar privilege that if their king died from any cause a successor should immediately be appointed by their own choice; and they had no one at hand who could take the king's place and put an end to the great dangers threatening them by Providence; all regarded him as suited to the position on account of his high birth and of his good character.

Although the people of London had chosen Stephen to be their king, the count still had to prove himself, and he already had a challenge. Apparently, a local noble, who had been once the doorkeeper for Henry I, was terrorizing the area around London:

With a mixed body of peasants and mercenaries, harassing his neighbours in every direction, he made himself unendurable to all, sometimes by insatiable pillage, sometimes by fire and sword.

At length Stephen met him with spirit and after triumphantly capturing some of his followers either deprived of them of their lives or put them in chains; and shutting up their leader himself together with others he finally hanged him on a gallows.

With this fresh victory, Stephen carried out the next phase of his plan and headed to the city of Winchester. Here his brother Henry was serving as the Bishop, and according to many of contemporary chroniclers, he was very influential in carrying out Stephen's scheme. Besides giving him a warm welcome to Winchester, Henry had been busy trying to convince or bribe the man who had control over Henry's treasury - William de Pont de l'Arche. Once Stephen arrived William gave him the keys to the treasure, giving him access to all of Henry's accumulated wealth.

Now that he had the support of London and a vast amount of money, it is no surprise that various nobles were coming to offer their support. As the *Gesta Stephani* notes:

When report spread through the kingdom the tidings of the new king's arrival, a great many, and those especially who before his accession had bound themselves in friendship to him or his brothers, receiving him with joy and jubilation, followed his lead with all their efforts.

This had all happened within about two weeks of Henry's death. However, Matilda had also moved quickly to secure her claims, and had already gone into Normandy to take possession of several key towns. However, when her husband Geoffrey arrived with his Angevin soldiers, the lingering animosity between them and the Normans soon led to trouble. Orderic Vitalis reports that Geoffrey's army:

which dispersed through the province round about, committed outrages, violated churches and cemeteries, oppressed the peasants, and repaid those who had received them kindly with many injuries and wrongs. After the Normans, who are innately warlike and bold, had realized that the crimes of their guests were stirring up trouble, they too took up arms in their anger and pursued them through villages and woods and, is commonly alleged, put more than seven hundred to death



Marginal drawing in Henry of Huntingdon's Historia Anglorum showing King Stephen - image courtesy British Library

to death with fire and sword. The remainder, terrified by the bloody assaults of the Normans, fled with dishonor back to their own country and, after being severely punished by the sharp swords of the Normans, made no further attempt to repeat the experience for the time being.

This effectively put an end to Matilda's campaign to take control of Normandy, and soon the various nobles from that region were attempting to figure out who amongst themselves should become the next king. However, they seem to have been unaware that back in England Stephen was already completing his plan to take the throne.

The next important phase in his plan was to get approval from the religious establishment, most notably from William de Corbeil, the Archbishop of Canterbury. The archbishop was wary of supporting Stephen's claim, reminding everyone of the oath that he and other nobles had made years earlier to support Matilda so that she could become the next ruler. Stephen's supporters argued that King Henry had forced them to

take that oath, making it invalid. Some also said that on his deathbed Henry had absolved his nobles of the oath and had even picked Stephen to be the new king instead.

It seems that these arguments, and many promises by Stephen to give various concessions to the Church, convinced the archbishop to give him his support. On December 22nd, three weeks after Henry I died, Stephen was crowned at Westminster Abbey.

In looking at his rise to English throne, one should not omit the fact that Stephen made many promises, including lowering taxes and return woodlands seized by Henry - these of promises were very popular, and in the end he would not keep them. Still, it was amazing rise to power for "a man of great valour and boldness" as his commentators described him.

In next week's issue, Stephen will learn that gaining the throne of England and keeping the throne were two different challenges.

Ἡ γὰρ αὖτε καὶ τοὺς κἀστυπῆρας πολὺ

Ten Strange Medieval

By Peter Konieczny



What were some of the more unusual weapons used by medieval armies? We put together a list of the strangest weapons that were ever used (or even designed) in the Middle Ages.



An image from the 12th century manuscript, the Madrid Skylitzes, showing Greek fire in use against an enemy ship.

1. Quicklime



Also known as calcium oxide, quicklime is made from heating limestone in a kiln. When ground into a powder it could be very effective, especially in naval warfare. The 13th century writer Giles of Rome explains:

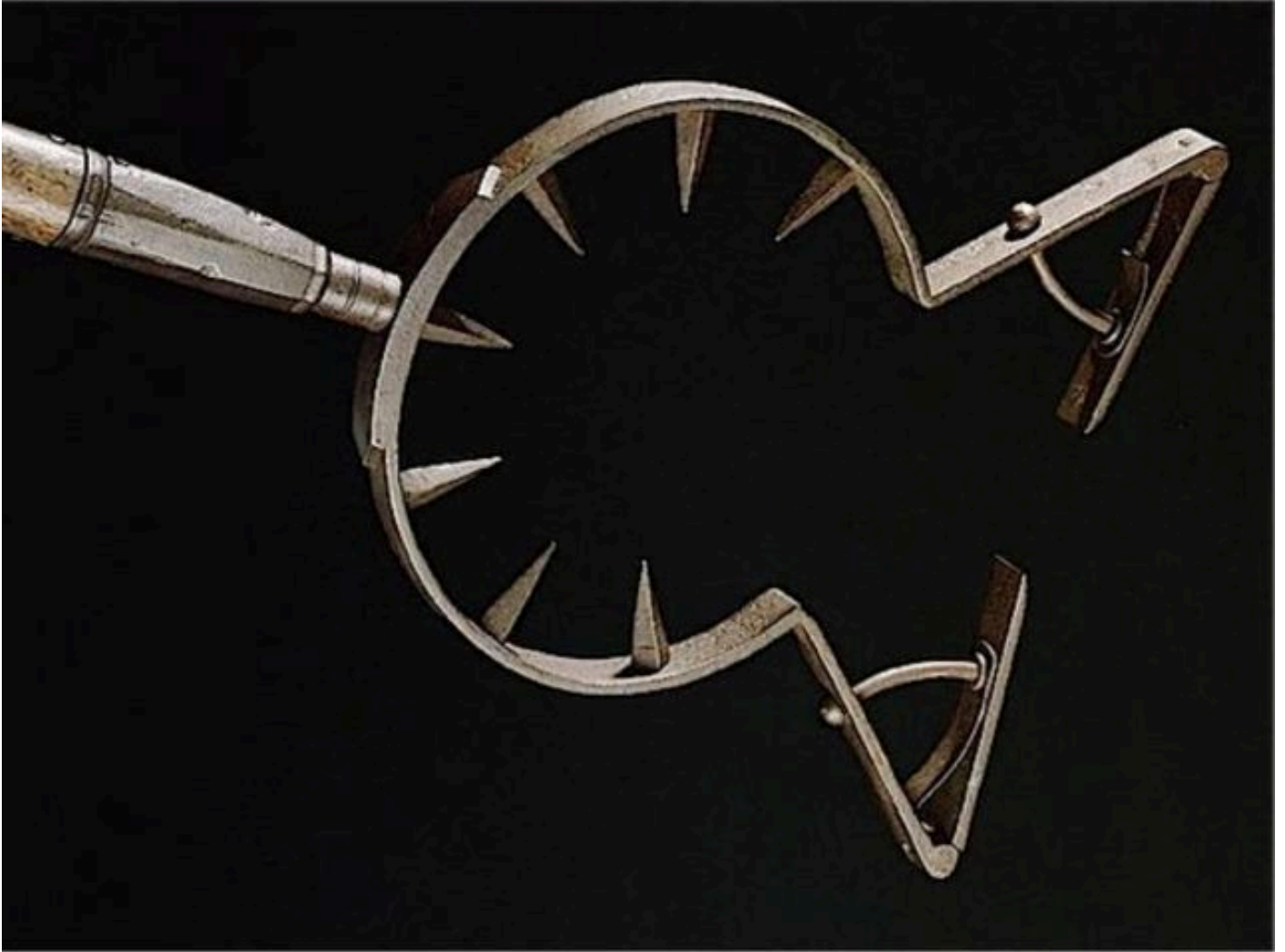
"there used to be a large number of pots filled with ground quicklime, which are to be thrown from aloft into the enemies' ships. When the pots are thrown with force and shatter on impact, the powder rises in the air (as has been noted above in reference to land war) and enters the enemies' eyes and irritates them so greatly that, nearly blinded, they cannot see. This situation is very dangerous in naval warfare because fighting men in such war see themselves threatened with death from every quarter. Wherefore, if the eyes of the fighting men in such a battle are so irritated by powdered lime that they cannot see, they can easily either be slain by their enemies or submerged in the water. "

2. Flying Crow with Magic Fire



The *Huolongjing*, written in 14th century China, contains numerous examples of weapons that could be made with gunpowder: rockets, rocket launchers, land and naval mines, fire lances and types of guns. Among the more interesting devices illustrated was the 'Flying Crow with Magic Fire', an aerodynamic winged rocket bomb.

3. The Man Catcher



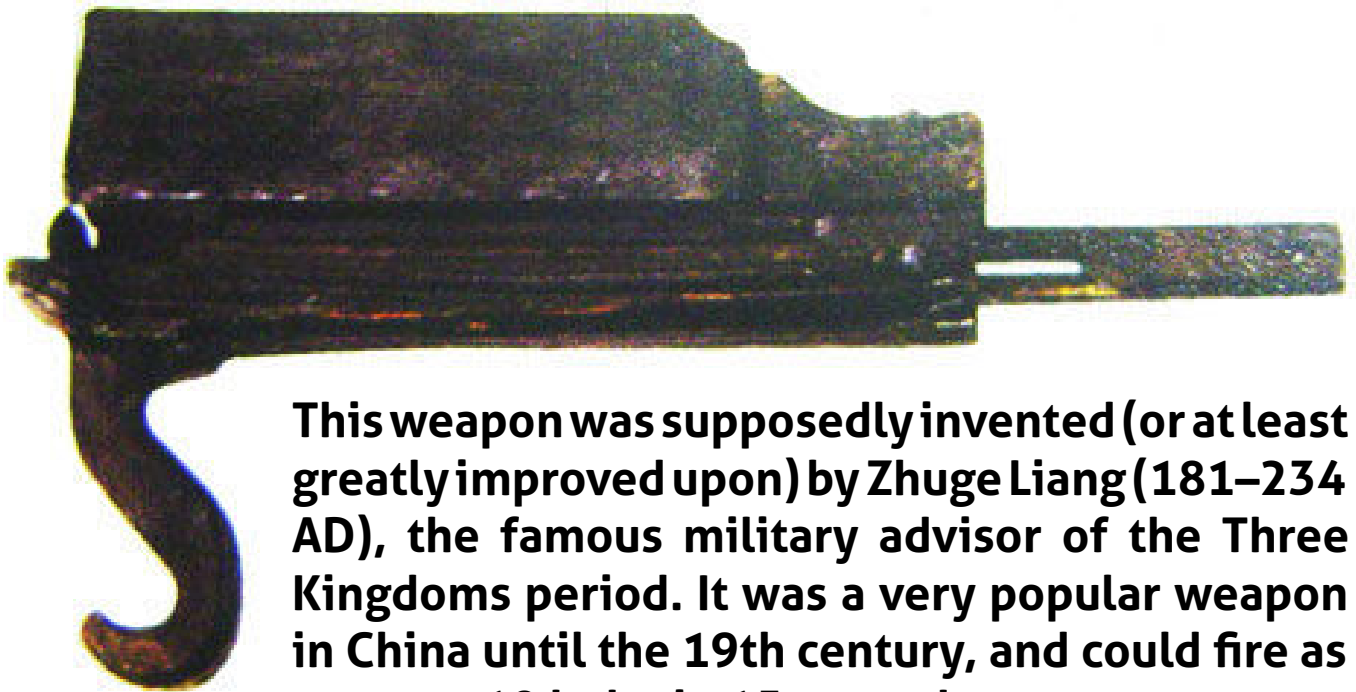
One of the few weapons from the Middle Ages that was meant to be non-lethal, the Man Catcher, was designed to snare men off horseback. Using a pole, the weapon could be maneuvered to be placed around an enemy's body and entrap him. It was expected that the armor of the captured person would protect them against being injured by the metal prongs. Many people would want to use this weapon to capture opposing knights, as they would be very valuable as prisoners for the amount of ransom money they could deliver.

4. Plumbata



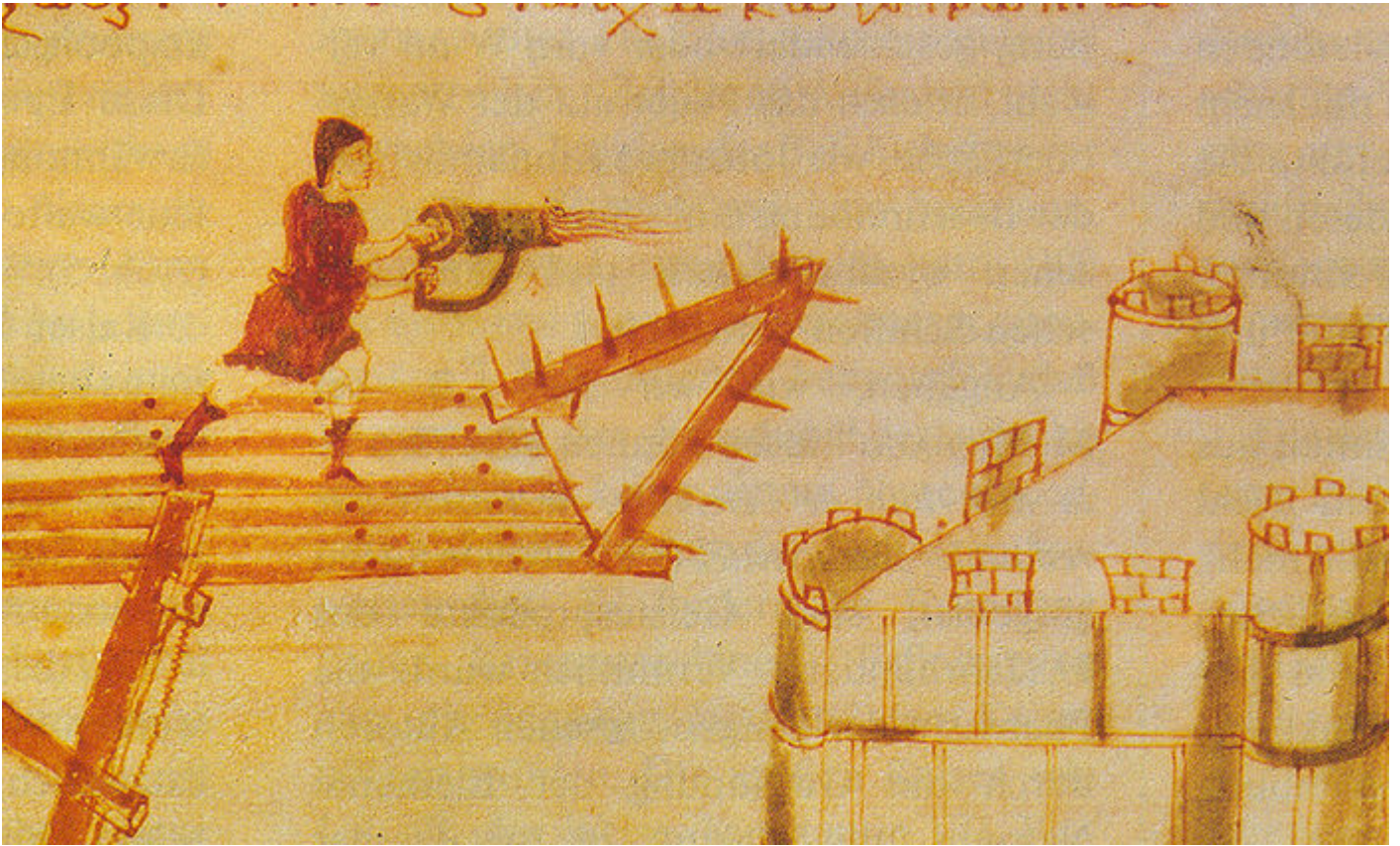
This small iron dart was used among the Late Roman and Byzantine armies. In the 4th century work *De Re Militari*, Vegetius describes how "every soldier carries five of these javelins in the hollow of his shield. And thus the legionary soldiers seem to supply the place of archers, for they wound both the men and horses of the enemy before they come within reach of the common missile weapons."

5. Repeating Crossbow



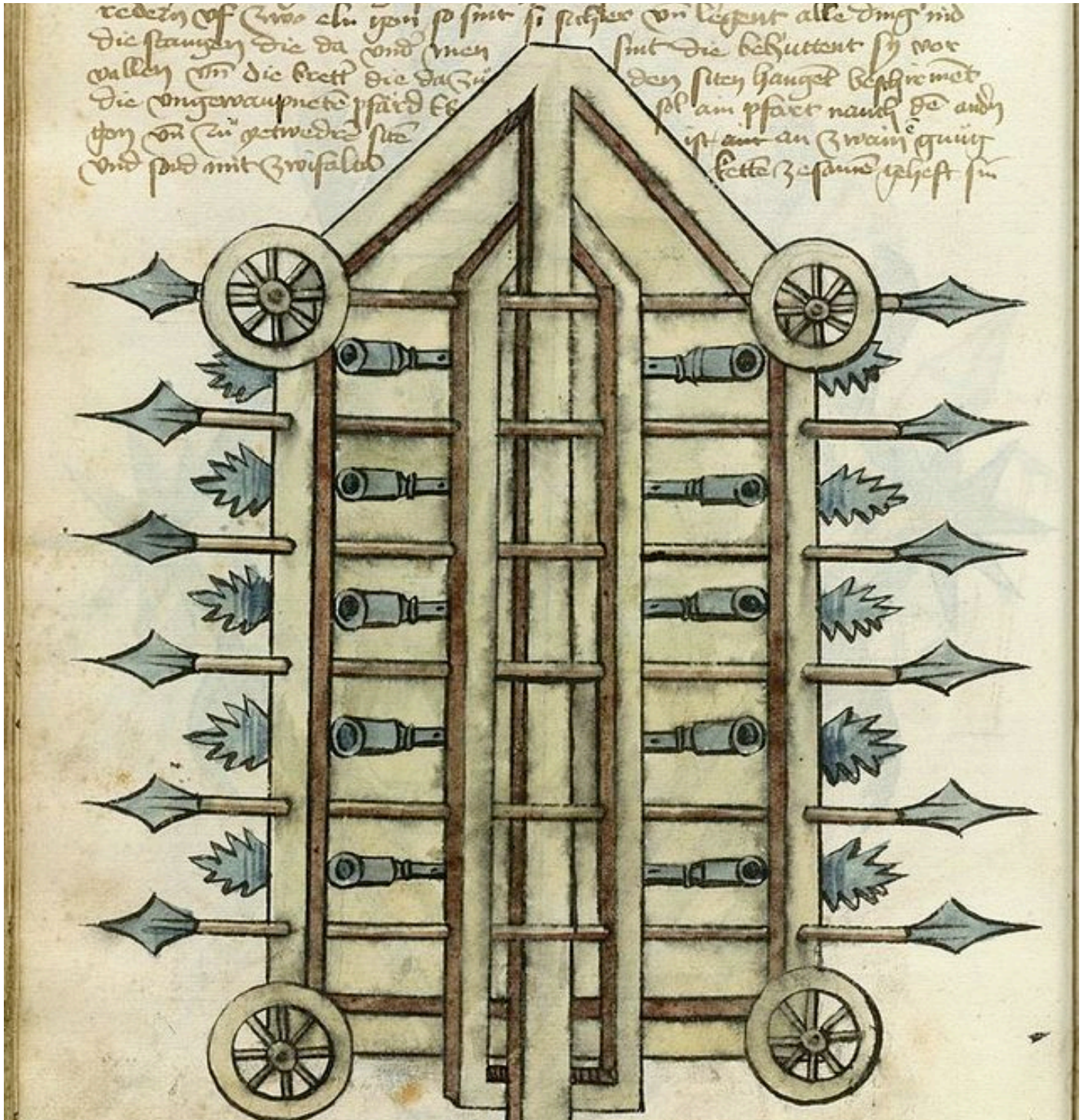
This weapon was supposedly invented (or at least greatly improved upon) by Zhuge Liang (181–234 AD), the famous military advisor of the Three Kingdoms period. It was a very popular weapon in China until the 19th century, and could fire as many as 10 bolts in 15 seconds.

6. Naptha and Greek Fire



Armies were making use of incendiary weapons since Antiquity, and the term naptha applied to weapons made from some type of oil which could continuously burn. The liquid would be put into a container and used as a bomb. In the seventh-century, the Byzantine architect Kallinikos was said to have invented Greek fire using naptha and other ingredients - it was used to defend Constantinople against an Arab fleet, destroying their ships by setting them ablaze.

7. The War Cart of Conrad Keyser



Conrad Keyser (1366-1405) was a German military engineer. His book, *Bellifortis*, contains numerous descriptions and illustrations of medieval weapons, including this one: "this war-cart shreds the ankles of an armed host and mangles unarmored folk by its movements."

8. Wagon fort

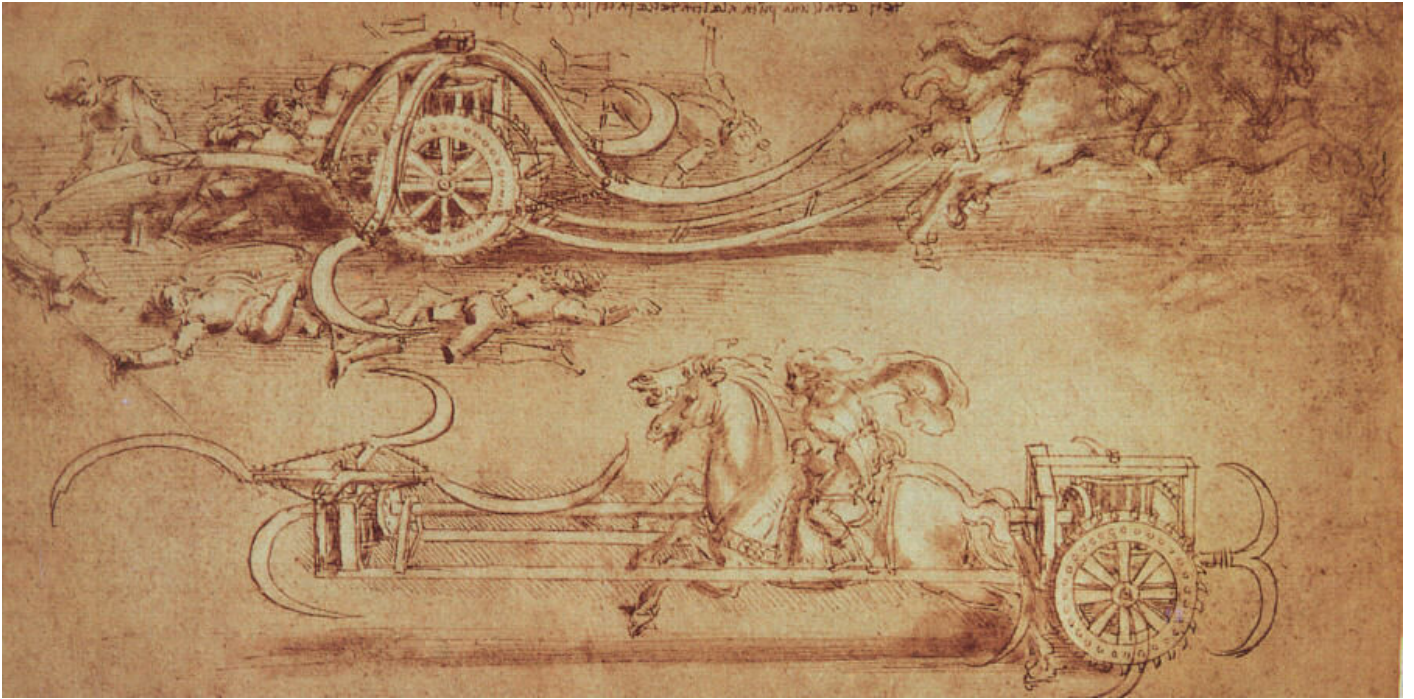
Also known as Wagenburg, these mobile fortifications were extensively used during the Hussite Wars of the 15th century - they could withstand attacks from charging knights and then send out men hidden inside to counterattack.

9. Spring bow

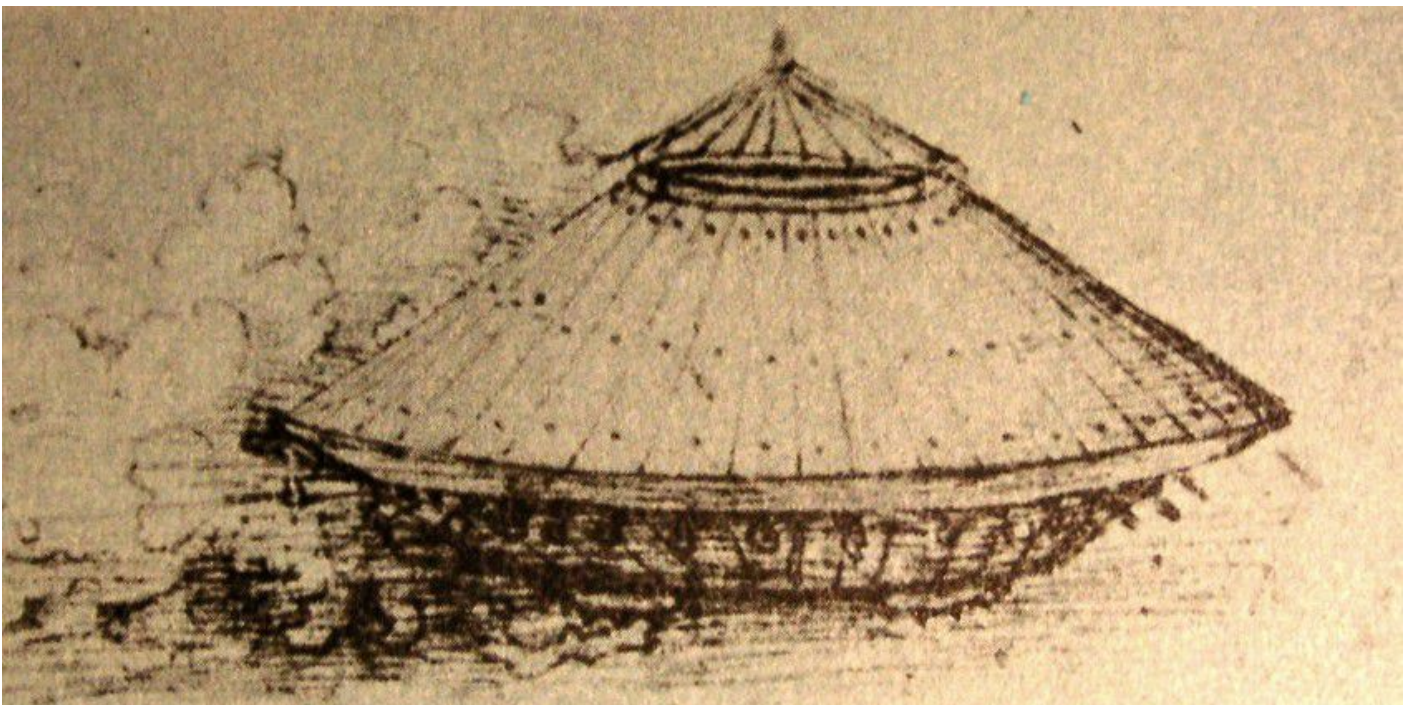


More of a trap than a weapon, it was a type of crossbow that could be triggered by the victim. According to Gaimar's *L'Estoire des Engleis*, when the 11th century English king Edmund Ironside went to use a privy, inside was "a drawn bow with the string attached to the seat, so that when the king sat on it the arrow was released and entered his fundament." Edmund was killed. In another, even less believable tale, Kenneth II, a 10th century Scottish king, was killed when he was tricked into touching a statute, whose movement was rigged to several crossbows that shot him dead.

10. The Inventions of Leonardo da Vinci



While working for the Duke of Milan at the end of the 15th century, Leonardo da Vinci designed a number of instruments of war, including a chariot with scythes on all sides, and a tank. He explains with the latter, "I can make armored cars, safe and unassailable, which will enter the closed ranks of the enemy with their artillery, and no company of soldiers is so great that it will not break through them. And behind these our infantry will be able to follow quite unharmed and without any opposition."



Priests and the Black Death

By Danièle Cybulskie

As news of outbreaks of disease continues to swirl around the world, I keep being reminded of the bravery of the caregivers who bring comfort and aid to the sick and the dying. In the Middle Ages, this would have been local healers, but very often priests, who would have been called to visit people near death in order to hear their confessions, and administer their last rites. During The Black Death of 1347 (and the years following), priests were faced with the task of stepping into sickrooms, knowing that they faced an unseen enemy that very likely would kill them shortly. That thousands of priests took those steps anyway, risking their lives to give hope and comfort to those in pain and fear is something I can't help but admire all these centuries later.



The period of The Black Death was a troubling one for members of the religious community, and faith in the Church as an institution was shaken to its core. The public demanded an explanation for the plague all around them, and while there was a sense it might be punishment for sin, there seemed to be no rhyme or reason to it. Confidence in the power of shrines and talismans that had brought comfort for decades was shattered, and fearful priests who shirked their duties were held up as examples of the clergy's failings as a whole. Cloistered communities were the perfect breeding ground for plague, with whole monasteries and abbeys

being wiped out. It seemed the Church had no answers, but this did not stop vast amounts of local priests from doing all they could to give their parishioners spiritual solace as they faced their deaths.

In *The Great Mortality*, John Kelly says that the mortality for priests during The Black Death was "42 to 45 percent" (p.224), which is higher than the overall mortality rates seem to be for the general population (the death rate has been hotly debated for centuries, but general consensus seems to be around 30%). Clergy who cared for the sick were dying at a high rate, and no wonder:

consensus seems to be around 30%). Clergy who cared for the sick were dying at a high rate, and no wonder: the sheer exhaustion and repeated exposure of moving from home to home at all times of day and night to visit the dying would have made priests especially vulnerable. Because there were so many ill, and so few priests remained as the disease progressed, Clement VI declared that the dying could make their confession to anyone present – “even to a woman”, said an English bishop (Tuchman, p.94) – and that it would still lead to salvation. This was a big deal for the Church, as previously only clergy were permitted to perform last rites. As Barbara W. Tuchman writes in *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, “Clement VI [later] found it necessary to grant remission of sin to all who died of the plague because so many were unattended by priests” (p. 95). The priests were doing what they could, but they were paying with their lives.

In the aftermath of the Black Death, the Church’s reputation never quite recovered, as the new priests who were quickly brought in to fill the void were not as scholarly or thoroughly trained as the old. It became more acceptable to malign the clergy in the years that followed, as Chaucer so bitinglly does with his Summoner and Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales*, and devotion became more personal and insular.

Nevertheless, while it’s easy to be cynical of medieval Christianity, I think it’s worthwhile to take a moment to put ourselves in the shoes of those people who faced their own deaths in order to bring others comfort, whatever that may have been. Priest or layman, man or woman, it takes bravery and selflessness to expose yourself to that risk, so these five minutes are for those people on the front lines, past and present.

You can follow Danièle Cybulskie on Twitter [**@5MinMedievalist**](#)

How Well Do You Know the Sixth Century? - Answers

1. Theoderic the Great
2. Gildas
3. Cassiodorus
4. Khadija bint Khuwaylid
5. Brendan of Clonfert
6. Theodora
7. The Blues, the Reds, the Greens, and the Whites
8. Clovis I
9. Battle of Camlann
10. Gelimer

Medieval Articles

How an Early Medieval Historian Worked: Methodology and Sources in Bede's Narrative of the Gregorian Mission to Kent

By Richard Shaw (PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2014)

This dissertation examines the methods and sources employed by Bede in the construction of his account of the Gregorian mission, thereby providing an insight into how an early medieval historian worked.

[Click here to read this thesis from the University of Toronto](#)

Medievalism and Exoticism in the Music of Dead Can Dance

By Kirsten Yri - *Current Musicology*, No. 85 (2008)

In 1991, the alternative rock band Dead Can Dance released an album that caught the attention of music reviewers by constructing an aural allegiance to the Middle Ages. Suitably called *A Passage in Time*, the album was described as imitating medieval chant, troubadour music, Latin hymns and courtly songs and included Dead Can Dance's hybrid medieval songs as well as performances of actual medieval repertoire.

[Click here to read this article from Columbia University](#)

Infidel Dogs: Hunting Crusaders with Usama ibn Munqidh

By Paul Cobb - *Crusades*, Vol.6 (2007)

Though it has been noted before that the Syrian warrior-poet Usama ibn Munqidh (d. 1188) was reluctant to use the language of jihad to describe his own battles with the Franks, no convincing explanation has yet been adduced for this feature of his writings. This paper argues (among other things) that the discourse of hunting was far more useful to Usama in describing his confrontations with bestial Franks than was the religiously-elevated language of jihad.

[Click here to read this article from Academia.edu](#)

To See with the Eyes of the Soul: Memory and Visual Culture in Medieval Europe

By Henning Laugerud - *Arv. Nordic Yearbook of Folklore*, Vol.66 (2010)

In this article I shall therefore take a closer look at how people thought about the subject of memory and why memory was considered so important in the Middle Ages. Memory was understood in terms of a moral and epistemological integrated perspective, and as something creative and dynamic. Memory, and its art – *ars memoria* or *mnemotechnics* – was of vital importance for what we today would call the "the psychology of knowledge", of which it was seen as a part.

[Click here to read this article from the Royal Gustavus Adolphus Academy](#)

For Your Viewing



Lighting a fire on a whale's back in a 14th century bestiary by Brunetto Latini

Lecture by Chet Van Duzer, given at Santa Barbara Maritime Museum on May 15, 2014: Tracing the history of sea monsters on European maps, beginning with the earliest mappaemundi on which they appear in the tenth century and continuing to the end of the sixteenth century.

King John and the Making of Magna Carta



Carolyn Harris speaking at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies, on October 8, 2014: All sorts of myths and legends grew up around King John and the Magna Carta – this is a part of history that passed into popular culture. So the way we see it today was not necessarily the way John and his barons saw the document in 1215, nearly 800 years ago.