

Religious Exemption in Pre-Modern Eurasia, c. 300-1300 CE: Introduction

Charles West*

Claims to exemption from state demands on religious grounds were both common and important across Eurasia between the age of ancient empires and the onset of the Black Death. Yet although aspects of the topic have often been studied within particular geographical and cultural historiographical frameworks, the issue as a whole has hardly if at all been considered at the Eurasian scale. This is perhaps especially surprising given that such claims to exemption were located precisely at the intersection of religion and the state, two central themes for historical enquiry. This special issue of *Medieval Worlds* is intended to provide a preliminary but panoramic view of the subject, drawing on the collaborative expertise of fourteen historians based in nine different countries.¹

The value of taking a global historical perspective has been acknowledged for many years by historians working on canonical antiquity on the one hand – typically focused on comparisons between Rome and China – and by those working on the late medieval/early modern world on the other, as the integration of the Americas into already intensifying Eurasian exchange networks durably (and violently) shifted the material balance of power, as well as challenging long-held cultural assumptions on both sides of the Atlantic. If historians working on the period in between have in general been slower to recognise the possibilities afforded by globalising their approaches – though there were important pioneering attempts reaching back into the 1980s – that is partly because of the practical challenges involved.² This was a time of great and perhaps widening cultural diversity, and of relatively slow connectivity across Eurasia as a whole, even if by the late thirteenth century we may follow Janet Abu-Lughod and talk tentatively of a Eurasian ›world system‹.³

There are however many signs that earlier medieval history is now beginning to take the global turn.⁴ In any case, readers of this journal hardly need to be reminded of the value of taking a wider view. A globalised modern world naturally encourages historians to broaden

* Correspondence details: Charles West, Department of History, University of Sheffield, Jessop West, 1 Upper Hanover Street, S3 7RA Sheffield. Email: c.m.west@sheffield.ac.uk.

1 This special issue is the product of a conference held in Sheffield (UK) in April 2016, funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council, AH/L010623/1. I am extremely grateful to Elizabeth Goodwin and Nicole Smith for their assistance with running the event; to Julia Hillner, Edward Roberts, Naomi Standen and Martial Staub who chaired panels; and to Stuart Airlie and Conrad Leyser for contributing to the discussions. My thanks also to Celine Wawruschka for her invaluable and patient assistance in putting this special issue together.

2 Here it is important to mention the role played by R. I. Moore, who introduced perhaps the UK's first World History course stretching from antiquity to the modern world in Sheffield's Department of History in the 1980s.

3 Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*.

4 For instance, the Global Middle Ages research network, whose focus is in general a little later than that pursued here, reaching into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries CE. See Holmes and Standen, Defining the Global Middle Ages, for a preliminary survey.

the scope of their enquiries, and to expand the scale of their analysis – and understandably so, since after all there is no ›right‹ scale for historical enquiry as a whole, only the right scale for addressing particular questions. And there is much to commend the Eurasian frame for pursuing the issue of religious exemption, as the studies that follow demonstrate, drawing on evidence from Western Europe, India, south-east Asia and China, not so much as to trace the connections as to study the similarities, and the contrasts, between different parts of this great landmass.

The studies that follow clearly bring out the challenges involved in such enquiry. If ›religion‹ and ›state‹ are vexed terms in the European tradition in which they developed, they are all the more problematic when applied to contexts far removed in both time and space. But though comparative research carried out in this vein must learn to deal with such methodological jeopardy, contributions to this special issue also indicate its potential rewards. It seems that almost everywhere in medieval Eurasia people claimed and were often granted – by virtue of their membership of a religious group or community – special treatment by the authorities that raised taxes and delivered justice,. In this way, different kinds of resources were – as R. I. Moore suggests in the collection’s framing paper – taken out of the normal circuits of exchange, and placed at one remove from the competing demands pressed by established families in the regions and by state authorities from the centre. Of course, precisely how this was done and with what consequences varied considerably, creating a diversity and breadth of experiences that should inform specialist interpretation of the many geographical and cultural areas covered here: comparative enquiry, after all, should aim not only to bring out the commonalities but also to define more clearly what was distinctive.⁵

Following Moore’s framing paper, the first set of contributions sets out a series of developing cultural traditions relating to religiously-founded immunity. Kanad Sinha tracks how hermits were represented in ancient and medieval Indian literature. Occupying a liminal space between stable settlements in the plains and the cities and the untamed and threatening spaces of the vast Indian forest, and between the new styles of ascetic renunciation and the traditional Indian household centred on family and cult, these hermits were granted respect and privileges by kings who saw them as bridgeheads of civilisation. As forested lands were increasingly integrated into patterns of rule by other means, the position of hermits became more peripheral; yet at the same time, their hermitages became ever more fantastic in the literary imagination, harmonising nature and society.

Mario Poceski’s paper similarly traces the impact of new forms of religious practice on established tradition and practices of rule, in this case in China. Here too Buddhist ideas of asceticism and renunciation clashed with traditional family-centred piety. The result was a large-scale but uneasy integration: state authorities regulated Buddhist monasticism, for instance by issuing certificates to permit formal conversion. But as early as the fifth century, the monk Huiyuan made the case that monks should not have to kneel before emperors – an argument that the emperor at the time seems to have accepted, in an intriguing symbolic concession that may remind western medievalists of later debates over investiture.

5 Wickham, Problems in Doing Comparative History.

Two papers then provide perspectives from the Latin West. Kriston Rennie's article continues with the theme of monastic exemption. Kings and bishops both competed to offer privileges to western Eurasian monastic communities in the early Middle Ages, but as the content of these privileges gradually came to focus on protection, it was the papacy in Rome that was best placed to issue exemptions, and thereby to bind monasteries to itself. Finally, Anne Duggan examines the central question of clerical immunity from state jurisdiction in the Latin West, from the time of the Christian Roman emperors through to the legal wrangling of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As in Poceski's China, the end-result was a messy and complex compromise, not least because the clerics themselves stepped back from demanding complete immunity: state power was too useful for that.

The second section of this special issue turns its attention more specifically to how religious exemption affected the distribution of resources, reminding us that exemption was never simply a matter of prestige or symbolism. In a jointly-written article, Dominic Goodall and Andrew Wareham compare two instances in which rulers conferred practical privileges of exemption: on the one hand upon the temple of Vat Phu in the Khmer empire (based in modern-day Cambodia), and on the other upon a series of churches in Mercia (modern-day midland England). These grants took very different forms – freedom from military obligations on the one hand and tax remittances in gold, spices and livestock (including elephants and turtles) on the other – and were moreover recorded in different ways, on parchment and in a recently discovered stone inscription. These rulers were thousands of kilometres apart, wielded wildly differing state capacities, and had no trace of direct or indirect contact between them that is discernible or even likely. Yet both sacrificed revenues and dues to religious communities, whether for intangible spiritual benefits or, more pragmatically, to normalise their growing demands elsewhere in their realms – or, most likely, both.

The ways in which the bestowal or withholding of exemption formed part of wider economic, political and ideological strategies is further brought out in the case of India by Ulrich Pagel and for China by Antonello Palumbo. Pagel shows how Buddhist monks attempted to negotiate state taxation in India through avoidance, legal argument and outright evasion in the early centuries of the first millennium. Yet despite their efforts, they failed to achieve the privileged status enjoyed by brahmins and Hindu ascetics, who were economically marginal but ideologically central to the dominant ruling structures. In a broadly contemporary *›Late Antique‹* China, as Palumbo demonstrates in a very wide-ranging paper, the limited exemptions enjoyed by Buddhist communities who took their place within a spectrum of state interactions with the growing monastic network. Simple plundering of their resources was another tactic that rulers had at their disposal, as was tight regulation: both proved vital in underpinning the halting but nevertheless tangible revival of imperial-scale rule that gradually differentiated eastern from western Eurasia.

This special issue's final section provides a very different perspective, moving away from structures to individuals, and from broad overarching trends to particular flashpoints, events and decisions. Claims to religious exemption inevitably worked within (and upon) pre-existing structures, but they were nevertheless articulated, and instrumentalised, by individuals and communities for specific reasons. Uriel Simonsohn presents a number of case studies to show how in the Islamic world – where institutional forms of religious exemption were much less important than individualised ones – individuals could instrumentalise the legal consequences of conversion to the faith to extract concessions from their own religious communities. Another kind of instrumentalisation is studied in Thomas Kohl's paper, which takes us to the middle Rhineland around the year 1000, and to a dossier of royal documents

written in favour of the bishop of Worms. That this dossier was forged by a wily bishop enhances rather than detracts from its interest, allowing Kohl to infer that the bishop was as concerned with the practical and political implications of immunity as with its symbolic content.

The final two papers look at the interactions between rulers and senior clerics in western Europe, in case studies separated by two and a half centuries. Rutger Kramer revisits a dispute over asylum that broke out in 802, involving the Frankish emperor Charlemagne and two of his most eminent courtiers, Alcuin and Theodulf. The issue of what to do with a fugitive cleric who had claimed sanctuary at Alcuin's monastery at Tours raised thorny questions about who held the right to decide about such cases, and how much room there was for exceptions to be made to church rules in Carolingian Francia. The question of where authority over clerics lay was still being debated in twelfth-century England, and it contributed to the assassination of Thomas Becket, the archbishop of Canterbury, in 1170. But through studying two representations of English kingship produced just a few years before that momentous event, around 1163, Judith Green points out that at that date such an outcome was far from inevitable: although tensions between King Henry II and Thomas were already noticeable, contemporaries still tended to see king and church as working together rather than in opposition. Together, all four of these papers show how behind what may seem like grand clashes of principles, there also lay personal interests, political scheming – and often enough, a considerable amount of collaboration and co-operation in pursuit of shared goals.

A concluding reflection is offered by Julia McClure, representing the vantage point of a late medieval global historian looking back at these relatively under-networked centuries. For McClure, the value of the collection lies partly in the uncovering of ›horizontal continuities‹ across Eurasia, in particular in questions of value plurality and the permeability of religious and secular forms of power; but she points out too the potential of the approach to excavating the ›vertical‹ or historical continuities that have done much to shape today's unequal world, and that deserve to be set in a much deeper historical context than is customary in an increasingly present-minded age.

As tax-collectors travelling up the Mekong River, canon lawyers arguing in Bologna and monks meditating in their mountainous retreat at Lushan would all surely have agreed, the question of religious exemption is an important one, with plenty of explanatory potential. Exemption concentrated resources, authorised practices of rule, shaped disputes over authority, and contributed to the delineation of the social order more generally, in ways that rhymed but never repeated each other over the great swathes of land and time that are explored in the articles that follow. Yet a collection such as this cannot claim to be comprehensive or definitive. Indeed it is our hope that our readers will be left asking for more: more comparisons, more sustained research, more exploration of a central and quite specific issue that rests at the heart of both the exercise and the classification of power in medieval Eurasia. These studies are therefore an exploration of an underworked theme that merits much more attention; they are also, we hope, an advertisement for the value and interest of a more global earlier Middle Ages.

References

- Abu-Lughod, Janet, *Before European Hegemony: The World System 1250-1350* (Oxford, 1991).
- Holmes, Catherine and Standen, Naomi, Defining the Global Middle Ages, *Medieval Worlds* 1 (2015) 106-117.
- Wickham, Chris, Problems in Doing Comparative History, in: Patricia Skinner (ed.), *Challenging the Boundaries of Medieval History: The Legacy of Timothy Reuter*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages 22 (Turnhout, 2009) 5-28.