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THE LEGACY OF THE MIDDLE AGES IN THE AMERICAN WILD WEST

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A BLIND spot in the study of the history of the United States is failure to recognize our detailed and massive continuity with the European Middle Ages. One reason for this is our angle of vision. The very vocal New England school of historians naturally has emphasized Puritanism as the basic stratum in our national ideology. Unfortunately, however, we have accepted at face value the Puritan's self-image as a rebel against all that the Middle Ages had stood for. But if we change our stance and look at the Reformation not from the twentieth but from the eleventh century, it appears very different: Protestantism becomes the culmination — or the *reductio ad absurdum*, depending on one's presuppositions — of the most powerful religious tendencies of the later Middle Ages: an erosion of the distinction between the "religious" and the secular life; a reaction against the institutionalization of religion; a new individuation and inwardness of piety. St Bernard, St Francis, William of Ockham, and Gerhard Groote are direct ancestors of Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards.¹

Indeed, a good case could be made for the thesis that today the United States is closer to the Middle Ages than is Europe. Many of the more thoughtful among the early immigrants from Britain disliked Stuart efforts to centralize political authority. In their new home they established loose-jointed late-medieval communities in defiance of the "modernizing" tendencies in the motherland, and at the end of the eighteenth century mediaeval pluralism became the cornerstone of our Constitution. We Americans greatly puzzle Europeans, including Britons, because whereas every European state assumes absolute sovereignty, even over religion, we are still happily mediaeval in political concepts and deliberately splinter sovereignty quite minutely. The central issue in American domestic politics at the present time is whether, or the extent to which, our mediaeval legacy of pluralism is still viable.

Because Latin America was not affected internally by the Reformation and

¹ See my "The Significance of Medieval Christianity," in *The Vitality of the Christian Tradition*, ed. G. F. Thomas (New York, 1944), pp. 87-115.

because it experienced a colonial society established almost on a feudal basis, it has been easier for scholars to the south of us to recognize the continuity and vigor of the mediaeval tradition in their nations. The Mexican historian Luis Weckmann has asserted that

the Middle Ages found their last expression on this side of the Atlantic, where, after the termination of the mediaeval period in Europe, an appropriate setting for the development of mediaeval ideals existed for an extended period in the Spanish New World while, contemporarily in Europe, the Religious Reformation and the so-termed Italian Renaissance were causing the abandonment of the essentials that sustained mediaeval Christendom.²

Most of us Americans would doubtless accept such a view, but it would merely confirm our feeling that whereas colonial Latin America was a transplant of the wilting Middle Ages to a new soil which briefly lent fresh vigor to it, the contrast of our own colonial and frontier experience indicates that on this northern continent the key to understanding breach with the Middle Ages rather than continuity. The most famous of contemporary Mexican historians, Edmondo O'Gorman, agrees: to him, colonial Ibero-America was a mimesis of Europe, whereas, to the north, European modes of life were adapted to new conditions. "Latin America," he writes a bit wistfully, "was never a frontier land in the sense of dynamic transformation that has been given to that term by American historians ever since Frederick Jackson Turner."³

Surely, however, the critique of Turner's fertile hypothesis over the past seventy years has gone far enough so that we can no longer (to use the Toynbeeian jargon) regard the frontier as "challenge" and American life as "response." By far the larger part of a man's ecology is what is inside his skull: a new external problem rarely begets an authentically novel solution. And what was the mental, emotional, and technical equipment in the heads of the men and women who swept the frontier westward?

Obviously the American pioneers took with them, willy-nilly, elements drawn from every epoch of the past. George H. Williams of the Harvard Divinity School, for example, has recently shown⁴ how the attitudes of Americans towards their own western wilderness were significantly shaped by the ancient Hebrew nostalgic idealization of the forty years spent in the desert between Egypt and Palestine. Transmitted and refined by Church Fathers and mediaeval ascetics, elaborated

² "The Middle Ages in the Conquest of America," *SPECULUM*, xxvi (1951), 130; cf. "La edad media en Mexico," in his *Panorama de la cultura medieval* (Mexico, 1962), pp. 7-19; also C. Sanchez-Albornoz, "La edad media y la empresa de America," in *España y el Islam* (Buenos Aires, 1943), pp. 181-199, who considers colonial Latin America the "hija póstuma del medioevo hispano;" C. J. Bishko, "The Iberian Background of Latin American History: Recent Progress and Continuing Problems," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, xxxvi (1956), 50-80. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York, 1961), p. 330, is one of the few North Americans to share Weckmann's view that "In the New World . . . the medieval order renewed itself, as it were, by colonization." Mumford, p. 332, emphasizes the mediaevalism of the settlement plan of the New England village and its challenge to "the anti-democratic assumptions of the new baroque order."

³ E. O'Gorman, *The Invention of America* (Bloomington, 1961), p. 142.

⁴ *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought* (New York, 1962), pp. 98-137.

by mystics and especially by the radical Anabaptist wing of the Reformation which had so many adherents on our frontier, the notion that the wilderness is not merely a dread place of struggle and suffering but also an arena in which spiritual perfection may be won — a land where “men are men”—, has played a great part in American life and emotion. Indeed, without this curious, historically conditioned, affirmation of wilderness, rooted in three thousand years of a specialized religious tradition, it is doubtful whether the American wilderness would have been conquered and settled so quickly.

Yet, admitting that our frontiersmen, whether they knew it or not, were heirs to the ages, they were particularly beneficiaries of the Middle Ages. Their essential equipment was very largely the culture of the mediaeval lower classes. Few who crossed the ocean to the English colonies were educated or prosperous. We are a nation descended overwhelmingly from peasants and artisans fleeing the crushing burden of the European Establishment.

The Middle Ages were far from monolithic. Wat Tyler's followers who in 1381 demanded the abolition of the clerical and feudal aristocracy were no less men of the Middle Ages than were the overlords whom they detested. When our ancestors thwarted the establishment of bishops in the North American colonies, and when they sabotaged all efforts to transfer seignorial regimes across the Atlantic, they stood stoutly in the tradition of the mediaeval proletariat.

Despite its remarkably high general level of erudition, American study of the Middle Ages today, like most of that in Europe as well, has little relation to the totality of the Middle Ages as they once existed. Our mediaeval scholarship is still heavily tinctured by nineteenth-century Romanticism which was compelled by its own psychic necessities to invent a Middle Ages which never existed but which had to be created as a weapon in polemic. The most remarkable book produced in the United States purporting to talk about the Middle Ages, Henry Adams's *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, tells us nothing believable about the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but is a document fundamental for understanding the trauma of Boston in the generation following our Civil War.⁵

Part of the legacy of Romanticism in our present mediaeval studies is disregard for the nine-tenths of the population who worked with their hands, and for their concerns and creativity. Feudalism and the hierarchical church, scholastic debates and the aubades of troubadours, had never been the business of the lower classes; nor did they share in the slightest degree the classicizing enthusiasms of the Renaissance. Yet it was these horny-handed plowmen and craftsmen who populated our continent in a vast differential migration which — in sharp contrast to Latin America⁶ — left the nobility, the bishops and abbots on the east of the ocean. When this rabble struck into the wilderness they generally followed mediaeval patterns of action because those were the patterns that they knew.

⁵ L. White, jr, “Dynamo and Virgin Reconsidered,” *The American Scholar*, xxvii (1958), 183–194.

⁶ Needless to say, proletarians with their full technical and mental equipment formed the bulk of Iberian colonial migration as well; cf. G. M. Foster, *Culture and Conquest: America's Spanish Heritage* (New York, 1960).

II

A symbol of the situation is the way they built houses. Until recently we assumed that the log cabin was such an "obvious," sturdy, and easily constructed sort of shelter that it appeared by spontaneous generation when Jamestown was settled or when the Pilgrims stepped ashore. But now, we know⁷ that nothing of the sort happened. The first English settlers, as quickly as possible, built beam and plank houses exactly like those in the Old Country, including the second-story overhangs so appropriate to the crowded walled cities of the later Middle Ages. The log cabin was introduced to the shores of Delaware Bay by the Swedes among whom it was an inherited mediaeval form of construction, but at first it did not spread among the other colonists who had variant traditions. In the eighteenth century, Germans and Swiss brought slightly different forms of mediaeval log cabins to the Middle Colonies; towards the end of the century the Scotch-Irish immigrants picked up the idea and made the log cabin the typical frontier house from the Piedmont to the Pacific.

The lesson is clear. There is very little creative adaptation to new circumstances. Originality is rare. What the American frontiersman did was to select, and gradually to elaborate, useful elements in the highly diversified mediaeval tradition which he took for granted.

I must emphasize that, although of course the Middle Ages had built upon Antiquity, most of what he took with him into the West was in fact mediaeval. If Seneca, a Spaniard who thought that one could sail west to find *novos orbes*,⁸ had persuaded his pupil Nero to anticipate Isabella's patronage of Columbus, Roman pioneers would have penetrated the American wilderness with an equipment vastly inferior to that which was later available. Let me offer a few deliberately random illustrations of the mediaeval legacy in our Wild West.

Consider, for example, overland transport, a matter crucial for the arid half of our country where few rivers are navigable. The Romans had an adequate harness for oxen, but, for reasons which are not clear, they seldom harnessed teams in tandem.⁹ Their harness for horses and mules was incredibly inefficient. As a result Roman wagons were small and light. The two-wheeled *carpentum* and four-wheeled *pilentum* both had arched cloth canopies¹⁰ which seem to adumbrate the Conestoga wagon which became the prime symbol of the American West, but the reality was very different. While on the American frontier prairie schooners were often drawn by oxen, horses were greatly preferred, and the real ancestor of the Conestoga wagon, the *longa caretta* of the early twelfth century, capable of carrying many persons and heavy loads of goods, did not develop until three other mediaeval inventions related to horse traction laid the basis for it.¹¹

The first of these was the modern harness, consisting of a padded collar and

⁷ H. R. Shurtleff, *The Log Cabin Myth*, ed. S. E. Morison (Cambridge, Mass., 1939), pp. 209-214.

⁸ *Medea*, lines 375-79, in *Seneca's Tragedies*, ed. and tr. F. J. Miller (London, 1927), I, 260.

⁹ Cf. L. White, jr., *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 42, 45, 153.

¹⁰ A. L. Abaecherli, "Fercula, Carpentum and Tensae in the Roman Procession," *Bollettino dell'Associazione Internazionale Studi Mediterranei*, VI (1935-36), 6.

¹¹ White, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-61.

lateral traces or shafts. The earliest example in Europe is found in a miniature of *ca* 800 A.D. It enabled a team of horses to pull between four and five times the load which they could manage with the Roman harness. The second improvement was the nailed horseshoe which appears in the 890's and which greatly increased the staying-power of a horse. The third invention was the whipple-tree, the earliest certain evidence of which is a detail in the border of the Bayeux Tapestry,¹² now generally dated not later than 1077. Because a furrow is kept straight, a horse could probably plow without a whipple-tree, but he could not do heavy hauling. If the traces are attached directly to the load, a left turn puts the whole strain on the right trace, and *vice versa*, risking breaking the harness and upsetting the wagon. The whipple-tree, a grubby but important element in the history of land transport, is a rod to the tips of which the rear ends of the traces are attached, and which itself is linked, at its center, to the middle of the front of the wagon. It thus equalizes the pull and greatly increases both efficiency and safety. With these three elements — horse-collar, horseshoe, and whipple-tree — the big wagon became feasible. In the early twelfth century it appears¹³ in essentially the form which came to dominate the American West in the Conestoga wagon.

Or, ponder the genetic history of the stage coaches which were so spectacular a part of life in the Wild West before the golden spike, driven at Promontory, linked the oceans with rails. In 1857 James Gould of Albany, New York, built one hundred coaches for the Butterfield Overland Mail which ran between Missouri and California. Just as the contemporary clipper ships were the culmination of the art of sail, so Gould's coaches exhibit ultimate beauty of functional simplicity.¹⁴ Since without springs speed is unendurable for any considerable distance over rutted and pot-holed roads, the essence of the coach is a suspended body. The first coach had generally been ascribed to the sixteenth century until, in 1959, Margery N. Boyer of Brooklyn College called attention to a remarkably detailed picture of a coach in a manuscript illuminated in southeastern Germany between 1330 and 1350:¹⁵ the canopied body (seemingly of wicker) seats at least six persons and is suspended on straps attached to vertical springs rising from the two axles. Here we have the basic features of the Butterfield coaches, except mechanical brakes. That this fourteenth-century coach travelled rapidly is made clear by the fact that on its rear is perched a man with bagpipes to clear the road ahead and sound a warning as crossroads are approached: the ancestor of the coach horn and, eventually, of the automobile horn.

So sophisticated an equipage must have had cruder antecedents. The sole, but significant, scrap of evidence thus far located was published in 1775 — a time much concerned with coaching — by the English antiquarian Joseph Strutt, but has been

¹² *The Bayeux Tapestry*, ed. Sir F. Stenton (New York, 1957), plate 12; p. 11 for date.

¹³ White, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67.

¹⁴ See the structural diagram in R. P. and M. B. Conkling, *The Butterfield Overland Mail, 1857-1869* (Glendale, 1947), p. 111, plate 14.

¹⁵ "Mediaeval Suspended Carriages," *SPECULUM*, xxxiv (1959), 363-364, plate II; for the date and provenance, cf. K. Escher, *Die Bilderhandschrift der Weltchronik des Rudolf von Ems* (Zurich, 1935), p. 29.

forgotten since then. The British Museum holds an Anglo-Saxon manuscript of the first half of the eleventh century containing Aelfric's paraphrase of the *Heptateuch*, lavishly illuminated. At one point Joseph, now Prime Minister of Egypt, is going out to greet his aged father Jacob who has come down from Canaan.¹⁶ Joseph rides in a strange vehicle which, as Strutt remarks, "from the simplicity of it, . . . may justly enough be esteemed as the first invention of coaches".¹⁷ It has four wheels; each axle bears a single vertical spring with a hook; and between these hooks is suspended a hammock in which Joseph sits. Here, surely, is the germinal idea of the coach which was to reach full bloom and to die in the American West eight centuries later.

III

A generation ago our thinking about how pioneers mastered the Great Plains was revolutionized by the down-to-earth insights of Walter Prescott Webb of the University of Texas. Others had written of Manifest Destiny, international territorial conflicts, and the like. Webb looked at the matter with the eyes and concerns of the frontiersmen themselves, and pointed to a trinity of gadgets which were fundamental to the speedy success of the process: the revolver, barbed wire, and the windmill.¹⁸ Each of these was an elaboration of the mediaeval legacy.

Gunpowder appeared in Europe by about 1260 in firecrackers and rockets, and by 1327 cannon had been developed.¹⁹ The first firearms were so heavy and cumbersome that about one hundred years passed before military technicians began to make proposals, of slowly increasing practicality, for smaller guns which could be handled on horseback.²⁰ The problem of reloading while astride a horse long made the pistol a dubious weapon. Indeed, reloading any kind of gun in the heat of battle was difficult, and Colt's patent of revolving chambers has a line of ancestry reaching into the early fifteenth century:²¹ it would seem that everyone

¹⁶ British Museum, Cottonian Claudius B. IV, fols. 60^r and 60^v. Fols. 68^r, 71^v and 72^r show the same sort of vehicle but the artist has omitted the end-posts and hooks. Photographs in the Princeton Index of Christian Art. For the date, cf. N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), p. 178.

¹⁷ J. Strutt, *A Compleat View of the Manners, Customs, Arms, Habits, etc., of the Inhabitants of England from the Arrival of the Saxons till the Reign of Henry the Eighth* (London, 1775), I, 45, 113; plate IX, fig. 2.

¹⁸ *The Great Plains* (Boston, 1931), pp. 167-179 for the revolver; 295-317 for barbed wire; 335-348 for windmills.

¹⁹ White, *op. cit.*, pp. 99, 163. What appears to be the simultaneous emergence of cannon in Europe and China is puzzling: L. Carrington Goodrich, in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, LXXXIII (1963), 385, cites a bronze cannon dated 1332 near Peking; cf. *Wen wu* (1962), no. 3, p. 41.

²⁰ P. Sixl, "Entwicklung und Gebrauch der Handfeuerwaffen," *Zeitschrift für historische Waffenkunde*, I (1897), 278-380, figs. 42-44.

²¹ P. Sixl, "Mehrläufige Feuerwaffen in den Handschriften und Waffen-Inventorien," *ibid.*, II (1900-05), 231-236, 269-271; "Orgeln und Orgelgeschütz," *ibid.*, 285-289, 327-329, 361-365; "Mehrröhige Orgeln," *ibid.*, IV (1906-08), 24-27, 84-88. By 1607 a pistol firing eight successive shots from eight fixed barrels had been developed; cf. J. von Kalmán, "Ein Schnellfeuerpistole des 17. Jahrhunderts," *ibid.*, Neue Folge, VI (1939) 86; A. Hoff, "Noch ein Schnellfeuerpistole aus dem 17. Jahrhundert," *ibid.*, 247.

who designed firearms tried his hand at multiple-loading, quick-firing guns. It is the measure of Colt's genius that he cracked a problem which had been under active discussion since the later Middle Ages, and which by the seventeenth century had already produced at least one hand-gun with a single barrel and a rotary set of chambers.²² When he solved it, Colt's first customers were the Texas Rangers, who, on the basis of their frontier experience, made suggestions for further improving his six-shooter.

What about barbed wire? Wire has been used since the beginnings of metallurgy, but for millennia it was forged. The first great improvement, the draw-plate, appears in a famous treatise on craftsmanship written in 1122-23 by a German Benedictine, Theophilus.²³ The second major innovation was the application of waterpower to wire-drawing. In 1540 the Italian metallurgical engineer Biringuccio gives us a clear picture of powered wire-drawing machinery and tells us that heavy iron wire, as distinct from that in softer metals, could be drawn only with the aid of waterpower.²⁴ Despite earlier claims, I have not yet seen firm evidence of a wire mill before 1489-1494 when the young Dürer produced a watercolor of quite a large one, and explicitly labelled it.²⁵ Smooth iron wire was therefore available in quantities before America was settled. It remained for our Mid-West to add the barbs.

The horizontal-axle windmill was invented just before 1185 in the North Sea region, and quickly became common in the areas from which the majority of our first immigrants came.²⁶ Webb neglected to mention that since the windmill of the Great Plains was almost exclusively a pumping device drawing water from a considerable depth, its effectiveness on our frontier depended on combining it with another mediaeval invention, the suction pump. Antiquity knew only force pumps. The suction pump is first found in the notebook of a Siennese engineer, Jacopo Mariano Taccola, dating from the 1440's.²⁷ Thus all three of Webb's dominant frontier inventions are extensions of mediaeval traditions into a new environment.

The distorted and fragmentary image of the mediaeval world which is today current among educated men and women prevents many from recognizing the vast accumulation of things on the American frontier (and, indeed, around us still) which had their roots in the ingenuity and adaptability of the common people of the Middle Ages. One can point out that a cowboy's stirrups appeared

²² A. Essenwein, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Feuerwaffen* (Leipzig, 1872), plate B. xxvi (a), dating from 1620 to 1680.

²³ Theophilus, *On Divers Arts*, Bk. III, c. 8, tr. J. G. Hawthorne and C. S. Smith (Chicago, 1963), p. 87 and note on wire drawing, pp. 87-89; Theophilus, *The Various Arts*, ed. C. R. Dodwell (London, 1961), p. 68. For the date, see L. White, jr. "Theophilus Redivivus," *Technology and Culture*, v (1964), 226-230.

²⁴ V. Biringuccio, *Pirotechnia*, tr. C. S. Smith and M. T. Gnudi (New York, 1942), p. 380.

²⁵ F. Lippman, *Zeichnungen von Albrecht Dürer* (Berlin, 1873), I, plate 4.

²⁶ White, *Medieval Technology and Social Change*, p. 87. Hero's windmill was an armchair invention which was probably never built and had no subsequent influence; cf. A. G. Drachmann, "Heron's Windmill," *Centaurus*, VII (1960), 145-151.

²⁷ S. Shapiro, "The Origin of the Suction Pump," *Technology and Culture*, v (1964), 566-574.

in Europe in the eighth century and his jingling rowel spurs in the late thirteenth.²⁸ they still don't seem "mediaeval" to those who have listened only to the voices of the small minority of feudal and clerical aristocrats during those Protean centuries, and who have never suspected the surge and sweep of the life of the masses of mankind whose concern was neither ruling nor praying, but working. Yet we Americans are biologically descended from those peasants and craftsmen, and we have no reason to disprize them.

IV

I have spoken of the legacy of the Middle Ages in the Wild West primarily in terms of gadgetry, and our rough and practical ancestors would have approved this approach. Nevertheless, more than gadgetry is involved: unconscious mediaeval patterns of preference dominated the American frontier.

David Belasco, born and reared in San Francisco, concentrated the stereotypes of the Gold Rush of '49 in his melodrama *The Girl of the Golden West*, which so caught Puccini's imagination that he made a mediocre opera out of it. Minnie, the Girl, runs a saloon on the Mother Lode. Does she serve the miner's wine? Not at all: that would represent the Roman stratum of our history. Do they drink beer? Not at all: that goes back at least to the ancient Celts and Germans, although it may be noted that we have no word of the use of hops, with their remarkable antibiotic properties for preservation of beer, until St Isidore of Seville.²⁹ The only beverage for a '49er miner was strictly mediaeval: whiskey. The distillation of alcohol was invented in Italy, from a wine base, in the twelfth century.³⁰ Its first use was medicinal, and the new liquid was called *aqua vitae*, "water of life," doubtless because its ability to preserve meat from putrefaction was early noted. Since the flesh of each of us is so dismally subject to decay, it quickly seemed prudent to many people to take their medicine regularly. Wine being scarce in the northern regions, the fermented grain malt used for beer was being distilled in Bohemia by 1420.³¹ Such boreal *aqua vitae* was being made in Scotland certainly by the last decade of the fifteenth century,³² and the Latin name was translated into Gaelic as *usquebaugh*, or whiskey. When the Scotch-Irish reached Pennsylvania, they brought their mediaeval arts with them and extrapolated them with the invention of corn and rye whiskey, and (once over the Appalachians) of bourbon. Minnie's saloon is unintelligible apart from the Middle Ages.

²⁸ For the stirrup, cf. White, *op. cit.*, p. 27. In *Zeitschrift für historische Waffen und Kostümkunde*, Neue Folge, VII (1940), 30-32, H. A. Knorr summarizes the Swedish publications of H. Olssen (1936-37) on the origin of rowel spurs as illustrated by Swedish finds. In the eleventh century prick spurs were supplemented by spurs having a loose ball or small plate. By the thirteenth century this had become a horizontal rowel. The vertical rowel begins to come in at the end of the thirteenth century.

²⁹ F. M. Feldhaus, *Die Technik der Vorzeit, der geschichtlichen Zeit und der Naturvölker* (Leipzig, 1914), p. 87.

³⁰ R. J. Forbes, *Short History of the Art of Distillation* (Leiden, 1948), pp. 87-89.

³¹ K. Sudhoff, "Weiteres zur Geschichte der Destillationstechnik," *Archiv für Geschichte der Naturwissenschaften und Technik*, V (1915), 283-284.

³² J. Read, "Alchemy under James IV of Scotland," *Ambix*, II (1938-39), 63.

Not knowing that he is a stage-coach robber, Minnie falls in love with a handsome stranger. He is wounded during a robbery, staggers to her shack to seek protection and she hides him. The dastardly sheriff (a mediaeval title), who lusts for her, follows a track of blood to her door and finds the miscreant hidden. Minnie, a woman of parts, offers to gamble with the sheriff for her honor and her lover's life. Do they throw dice? Not at all: that would have been old Roman. It is characteristic of frontier mediaevalism that they gamble with cards, a fourteenth-century innovation.³³ Minnie wins the game by cheating: surreptitiously she draws three aces and a pair out of her garter. No Roman ever saw a garter, but about 1348 Edward III of England founded an order of chivalry on one: *Honi soit qui mal y pense!*

Minnie has won; her lover is momentarily spared and escapes. But the miners capture him and decide that he must pay for his crimes.

Men may be killed in many ways. In most societies, however, there are clear rubrics for execution, a tradition of propriety as to the forms of killings committed by the group, which the group feels deeply impelled to follow, perhaps, because to follow them makes the past share the guilt of the execution. To know the subliminal mind of a society, one must study the sources of its liturgies of inflicting death.

Throughout the American Wild West the rubric for execution was single and uniform: hanging by a rope. In Greco-Roman times hanging with a rope or cincture was common as a means of suicide: one recalls Jocasta and Judas. But it is important for understanding any society to distinguish the customs of suicide from those of execution as well as from the rubrics of human sacrifice.

The dismal history of execution has seldom distinguished clearly the various modes of "hanging," — impalement, crucifixion, suspension by the neck in the crotch of a tree, or by a rope — and contemporary accounts are normally ambiguous. All Biblical references to hanging appear to indicate exposure of the impaled corpse after execution, or else crucifixion.³⁴ Execution by suspended strangulation was not practiced by Greeks or Romans in pagan times. The suppression of crucifixion, presumably by Constantine, because of religious sensibility, left a void in the Roman repertory of execution which still existed at the promulgation of the Theodisian *Code* in 438, but which had been filled by 533 when Justinian's *Digest* systematically substituted *furca* for *crux*.³⁵

The *furca* was a post with the fork of two branches at the top. The culprit was hoisted so that his neck was placed in the fork, a piece of wood (*vinculum patibuli*) was nailed behind his head across the fork, and he was left to strangle. Since there is no oriental or classical precedent for such a manner of execution, and since *gabalus*, a synonym for *furca*, is derived (as is the German *Gabel*) from Celtic,³⁶

³³ C. P. Hargrave, *A History of Playing Cards* (Boston, 1930), pp. 39, 88, 159, 223-4, 257.

³⁴ R. von Mansberg, "Die antike Hinrichtung am Pfahl oder Kreuz," *Zeitschrift für Kulturgeschichte*, VII (1900), 52-80.

³⁵ P. Franchi de' Cavallieri, "Della furca e della sua sostituzione alla croce nel diritto penale romano," *Nuovo bulletino di archeologia cristiana*, XIII (1907), 65-78.

³⁶ A. Ernaut and A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*, 4th ed. (Paris, 1959), s.v.

the new rubric probably came from the north. Tacitus tells us that the Germans hanged traitors and cowards from trees,³⁷ presumably *furcae*. The *furca*, rather than the noose, was used for hanging criminals in the Frankish realm.³⁸

The first clear evidence of hanging with a rope comes in Orosius's fifth-century account of how, in 105 B.C., the victorious Cimbri, a tribe out of Denmark, smashed all the arms and armor which they had captured and hanged all the prisoners in nooses from trees.³⁹ The many finds of deliberately twisted and broken weapons in the Baltic region indicate clearly that this destruction and slaughter were an offering to the gods. In later centuries among the pagan Scandinavians hanging with a rope was a highly specialized rubric of human sacrifice to the god Odin. Bodies of hanged victims have been found buried, according to Norse custom, in peat bogs with the noose still around the neck.⁴⁰ That they were hanged and not simply strangled is known from two pictures: first, a man hanged from a tree next to an altar, shown on a stone from Hammars in Lärbro (Gotland), ca 700,⁴¹ second, six men hanging from a pair of sacred trees, shown on a tapestry of the ninth century found in the Oseberg ship burial.⁴² Even in the later eleventh century, Adam of Bremen tells us that a Christian who visited the great shrine at Uppsala counted seventy-two bodies of men, horses, and hounds hanged as sacrifices on the trees of the temple grove.⁴³

Although the suicide of Judas with a rope had been represented since the fifth century,⁴⁴ there is no depiction in Christian art of an execution by hanging with a rope until the first half of the eleventh century when two appear. One, by a strange coincidence, is in the same manuscript of Aelfric in which we found the rudiments of the coach.⁴⁵ The other is in the Roda Bible⁴⁶ from Catalonia. Thereafter, such representations are common. Most fascinating is an Italian miniature of ca. 1130-1140: six men are hoisting a victim with a rope around his neck, but

³⁷ *Germania*, c. 12 (London, 1914), 280: "proditores et transfugas arboribus suspendunt." The Romans spoke of any sort of *crux*, *furca* or *patibulum* as *arbor infelix* or *infelix lignum*; cf. G. Humbert, "Crux," in C. Daremberg and E. Saglio, *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines*, 1 (Paris, 1887), p. 1575.

³⁸ Franchi de' Cavallieri, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-90.

³⁹ *Historiarum adversum paganos libri VII*, v, 16, ed. C. Zangenmeister (Leipzig, 1889), p. 164: "homines laqueis collo inditis ex arboribus suspensi sunt." F. Ström, *On the Sacral Origin of the Germanic Death Penalties* (Stockholm, 1942), p. 141, in an effort to deny the distinction between sacrificial and criminal executions, neglects the implication of the smashed booty and credits the whole episode to *furor teutonicus*.

⁴⁰ Excellent pictures of the Tollund find are provided by P. V. Glob in the *National Geographic Magazine*, cv (1954), 419-430.

⁴¹ Ström, *op. cit.*, frontispiece and p. 144.

⁴² E. Oxenstierna, *Die Wikinger* (Stuttgart, 1959), p. 162, fig.

⁴³ Adam Bremensis, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, iv, 27, ed. B. Schmeidler (Hanover, 1917), p. 260.

⁴⁴ Cf. O. Goetz, "'Hie henkett Judas,'" in *Form und Inhalt: Kunstgeschichtliche Studien Otto Schmitt . . . dargebracht*, ed. H. Wentzell (Stuttgart, 1950), p. 109, note 6.

⁴⁵ Cottonian Claudius B. IV, fol. 57r; cf. *supra* note 16; cf. Strutt, *op. cit.*, plate xv, fig. 6.

⁴⁶ W. Neuss, *Die katalanisch Bibelillustration um die Wende des ersten Jahrtausends* (Bonn, 1922), plate 40; cf. pp. 28-29 for date.

the rope passes not over the beam of a gallows but over the horizontal rod, already nailed in place, across the fork of a *furca*.⁴⁷ Clearly, the artist knows in detail, perhaps from pictures, what a *furca* had looked like, but he no longer knows how it was used: within his horizon the transition to the new mode of public execution was complete.

Since the Viking age was a time of great flux in Scandinavia, it appears that by the tenth century the old line dividing sacrifice from penal execution was crumbling, at least among outlying Norse groups: in 922, Ibn Faḍlān explicitly mentions the rope-hanging of thieves among the Swedes on the Volga.⁴⁸ As for the West, the conversion of Danes, Norwegians, and Icelanders to Christianity about the year 1000, at a moment when Norse influences were prevailing much of Europe, probably secularized the Viking technique of human sacrifice and made it widely available as a rubric of execution. The persistent mediaeval conviction that the oak was a good tree for hanging and that gallows should be built of oak — “Eichbaum gibt gut Galgen” —⁴⁹ has nothing to do with the tensile strength of wood. The oak was so widely regarded as numinous that we can scarcely escape the conclusion that late mediaeval rope-hanging was religious in its origins. When, about 1060, the enraged Duke William of Normandy swore to hang a recalcitrant abbot “ad altiore[m] quercum vicinae silvae,”⁵⁰ his pagan Norse ancestors may have been speaking more loudly than he knew.

Where does all this grisly antiquarianism lead us? Whatever its more remote sources — and doubtless, in time, these will be further clarified — the rubric of hanging with a rope was not generally accepted in Europe until the eleventh century. Thereafter it was dominant. The lynching parties of the American Wild West stood in this later mediaeval tradition.

Lest any of my readers remain apprehensive about the fate of the tenor in *La Fanciulla del West*, Minnie talks the boys out of it.

V

History is a means of access to ourselves. If we Americans are to understand ourselves and our nation, we must ponder the American tradition in its widest context. It is obvious that influences and ideas, as well as people, have flowed constantly in both directions across the Atlantic ever since our settlement began. But it is not enough to include contemporary Europe in our thinking about our past. Equally with Europeans, we Americans are heirs of the Middle Ages. Nor is this vivid legacy from the Middle Ages more intensive on the eastern seaboard than on a cattle ranch in Nevada: as Julian Bishko of the University of Virginia has

⁴⁷ E. Garrison, *Studies in the History of Medieval Italian Painting*, II (Florence, 1956), p. 170, fig. 186; for the date, cf. pp. 228–232.

⁴⁸ A. Z. V. Togan, “Ibn Faḍlān’s Reisebericht,” *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, XXIV, 3 (Leipzig, 1939), 88.

⁴⁹ K. von Amira, “Die germanischen Todesstrafen,” *Abhandlungen der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Kl.*, XXXI, 3 (1922), 89, 93.

⁵⁰ Ordericus Vitalis, *Historia ecclesiastica*, Pars II, Lib. III, c. 13, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia latina*, CLXXXVIII (Paris, 1890), 267.

shown,⁵¹ the world of the American buckaroo is descended in detail from that of the *vaquero* of the high plains of mediaeval Spain. To comprehend ourselves as Americans we must recover, and relate ourselves to, our deeper past, the Middle Ages.

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⁵¹ C. J. Bishko, "The Peninsular Background of Latin American Cattle Ranching," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, xxxii (1952), 491-515; "The Castilian as Plainsman: The Medieval Ranching Frontier in La Mancha and Estremadura," in *The New World Looks at Its History*, ed. A. R. Lewis and T. F. McGann (Austin, 1963), pp. 47-69.