

Ritual Brotherhood across Frontiers in the Eastern Adriatic Hinterland, 16th-18th centuries

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Wendy Bracewell, Professor of Southeast European History, SSEES, University College London, Gower St. London WC1E 6BT; w.bracewell@ucl.ac.uk.

Abstract: Ritual brotherhood, or *pobratimstvo*, is attested by a range of sources dealing with the Adriatic hinterland between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Read one way, *pobratimstvo* shows us a border society characterized by cohesion and tolerance, where Christian and Muslim frontiersmen find ways to overcome religious and political boundaries, recognizing their common interests and shared values. Read another way, however, the same institution (and sometimes even the same documents) also offers an insight into the persistence of frontier conflict and the pervasiveness of its violence, drawing attention to other, no less bloody divisions between predators and victims. In teasing out some of the possible meanings and uses of ritual sworn brotherhood on this early modern frontier, I attempt to give due weight to the complexities of a specific place and culture. But the problems highlighted by the institution of *pobratimstvo* are more widespread: the troubling ambiguities of friendship, with its quality of simultaneously including and excluding; the boundaries between affection and interest, or between camaraderie and desire; the obligations (and the potential resentment) conferred by gifts; the moral dilemmas posed by cross-cutting obligations.

Keywords: *pobratimstvo*, *ritual brotherhood*, *blood-brotherhood*, *friendship*, *frontier warfare*.

An astonishing incident

In 1660, during the Venetian-Ottoman war, Evliya Çelebi of Istanbul, Ottoman official and indefatigable traveller, was in the Dalmatian hinterland carrying information to the beglerbeg of Bosnia, Melek Ahmed-Pasha. In the course of his mission he found himself caught up in a border skirmish with Venetian troops. His travel account describes the battle, the capture of the Christian forces, the debate over how to deal with the captives – including notable border irregulars and renegades from Islam – and the subsequent decision to execute them to prevent them ever again fighting against the Ottoman forces. Then he describes a curious incident. A border warrior or *gazi* had tried to hide and protect one of the Christian irregulars. The two were discovered and dragged before Melek Pasha, but when the Pasha ordered that the Christian be executed, the *gazi* cried out:

Mercy, Great Vezir! I have sworn brotherhood with this captive on the battlefield, we have pledged each other our faith. If you kill him, he will go to paradise with my faith and that will be an injury to me, wretch that I am; and if I die, the faith of this captive with whom I have sworn brotherhood will stay with me, and we will both go to hell, so that again I am the loser.'

He had thrown himself on his prisoner and would not rise from him. When the valiant Pasha asked: 'Hey, *gazis*, what is the matter with this man?' the frontier *gazis* answered: 'When our heroes on this border fall into Christian captivity and then eat and drink at table, they swear brotherhood with the Christian and give an oath to him on their faith. The Christian pledges his faith to the Muslim that he will redeem him from infidel captivity if need be, and the Muslim also [does the same] and says: 'If you fall captive to us, I will redeem you from the Turks'. And then they pledge each other their firm faith [*ahd-ü eman*], having said: 'Your faith is mine, and my faith is also yours'. 'Is it so?' 'It is'. Then they lick each other's blood. This is how a Muslim swears brotherhood with a Christian. And so in this case this infidel is the sworn brother of this *gazi*. He once redeemed this Muslim from captivity. Now, behold, this infidel who is in the hands of these men has become a captive. If [the *gazi*] hides him and if he is saved, then he will have fulfilled his sworn word and faith. Then he could redeem his faith from him, and return [the Christian's] faith to him. But if this Christian is killed now, *he* will go to paradise, and this [Muslim] will go to hell with the faith of the infidel. Although this is written neither in the Muslim nor in the Christian [holy] books, this is nonetheless the custom on this border.'

When they had explained all this to the Pasha, he said: 'I release them both.' And they both prostrated themselves and then disappeared. But we were all astonished at this conversation (Evliya Çelebi 1967, 148-49).¹

It was precisely because he was astonished that Evliya Çelebi – an outsider recording his impressions of border warfare on the military frontier or *krajina* – thought it worthwhile to recount the incident in detail, leaving us an account of the institution of *pobratimstvo* or ritual brotherhood as seen from the Ottoman side.

Evliya's story provides a starting point for a discussion of the institution of frontier *pobratimstvo* across religious and political lines on the three-way frontier between the Venetian Republic, the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire. This frontier is

¹ Evliya Çelebi describes the incident in his "Seyahat-name". There is now a translation into English of extensive sections of this famous travelogue (Evliya Çelebi 2010), but not, unfortunately, this story, though it appears in Evliya Çelebi (1991, 249-50). Here I have used Evliya Çelebi (1967). All translations not otherwise attributed here are my own.

often treated as a major fault-line in Europe, where the forces of Islam and Christianity battled to a standstill, in the process preserving and deepening the already existing cleavage between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, between Eastern and Western cultural and political heritage. The notion of a ‘clash of civilizations’ has long defined the region, in the minds of its imperial rulers as well as in twentieth-century political discourse. How accurate this notion is, and how complete the divisions it assumes, is debatable. The tie of blood-brotherhood between Muslim *gazi* and Christian irregular shows there might be different allegiances and values at work. Evliya's account (along with other, less indulgent sources deploring the custom) can be used to give us an alternative model of the frontier, one that points up a fundamental disjunction between imperial and ecclesiastical projects on the one hand, and popular values and behaviour on the other. But looking more closely at frontier pobratimstvo in action also suggests that things were more complicated.

Ritual brotherhood in the Balkans

The relationship that so surprised Evliya had long been familiar among both Catholic and Orthodox South Slavs (as well as among Vlachs, Albanians, Greeks, and Romanians). Pobratimstvo was one of a variety of forms of fictive kinship (others include co-parenthood or *kumstvo*, cemented by standing witness at a marriage, baptism, circumcision or first haircut) (for studies, see Krauss 1885; Ciszewski 1897; Hammel 1968; Kretzenbacher 1971; Palošija 1975; Stojanović 1977; Kretzenbacher 1979 [with useful bibliography]; Grandits 2008; for the Romanian lands, Berechet 1924 [with a bibliography of Romanian and Bulgarian sources]; Cront 1969). References to blood-brotherhood in the region are found well before the seventeenth century in liturgical texts and frontier correspondence, and have been documented in this area into the twentieth century (for example, Fortis 1774; Lovrich 1776, 1948; Č(avlović) 1847; Bogišić 1874; Gavazzi 1955; Zaninović 1971).² The main features of the custom remained fairly consistent. Pobratimstvo was a deliberate extension of kinship ties created out of mutual assent, entailing reciprocal obligations (aid and protection), and often incurring specific restrictions (creating an obstacle to marriage between sworn brothers' kin, for example). The vernacular verb form *pobratimiti se* highlights both the constructed and the reciprocal character of the action: ‘to make each other brothers’ would be a literal translation. ‘Blood-brotherhood’ is one English equivalent of ‘pobratimstvo’, though it sits slightly oddly with the understanding of ‘blood’ relations as biological kin. I use ‘ritual brotherhood’ and ‘sworn brotherhood’ here as synonyms for pobratimstvo, in order

² In this study I have made use of frontier documents, from a long period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and a large stretch of the frontier, though the greater part come from the Venetian hinterland in Dalmatia; ecclesiastical sources; law codes and customary law; the frontier epics (especially the early eighteenth-century collection known as the Erlangen manuscript (Gesemann 1925); material from later collections of folklore (songs, proverbs, etc.). These sources are generally not intended to explain or define pobratimstvo, but their passing references preserve traces of the institution's meanings in specific social contexts.

to make a link with similar relationships elsewhere in Europe (for instance, Brown 1997; Rapp 1997; and now Rapp 2016).

The ritual cementing relationship between sworn brothers emphasized its reciprocal character: in sources from this border region, this usually involved an exchange of blood (in this context the symbol both of kinship and of honor) and a mutual pledge of faith, as described by Evliya, reinforced by the sharing of food and drink. Evliya describes sworn brothers as also having exchanged their faiths in a quite literal way (“Your faith is mine, and my faith is also yours”). This belief is not recorded elsewhere. Evliya may well have misunderstood the South Slav word *vjera* or *vera*, meaning *both* 'creed' or 'religion' *and* 'oath' or 'bond of honour', mistaking a reciprocal 'pledge of faith' for an exchange of religions. But it is not inconceivable that border fighters could have understood blood-brotherhood across religious boundaries as involving an exchange that needed to be redeemed for spiritual reasons. One historical anthropologist has interpreted this passage by pointing out that in popular belief an act of mercy speeds the charitable to paradise, while a sin sends the perpetrator to hell (Lory 1997, 174-77). Certainly the failure to uphold this pledge of faith was understood as profoundly sinful, with the genre of epic song enumerating sins and their consequences including betrayal of one's sworn brother among the acts punished by the torments of hell including (Brkić 1961, 56-58). Was the sin made weightier in this case by the infidel's unredeemed good deed on the other side of the scale?

The incident described by Evliya was slightly unusual, in that it involved a Muslim and a Christian. Ritual brotherhood was usually contracted between like and like: that is, between members of the same sex or the same religion (thus between man and man; woman and woman; Catholic and Catholic; and so on). But the relationship could cross the boundaries of sex (contracted between a man and a woman) and could also cross the line drawn by a difference in faith (thus between Catholic and Orthodox, or not uncommonly between Christian and Muslim, as in this case). Nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnographers have enumerated a variety of reasons for contracting *pobratimstvo* across religious boundaries: to cement an alliance or friendship; to solicit or return a favour (such as saving someone from misfortune, as in Evliya's account); to restore social equilibrium or mark a reconciliation (to bring a feud or conflict to an end). Similar circumstances operated in our period, and it is possible to find references to all these functions of blood-brotherhood between Christian and Muslim on the frontier.

'Passionate friendship'

The ritual used to cement the relationship often had a religious character when it bound together Christians: it could be celebrated in or in front of church, with a priest officiating, and culminating in the sharing of communion. Evliya's *gazis* were quite

wrong to say that the practice did not appear in the Christian holy books. There are examples of liturgical rites for the ‘making of brothers’ in both Latin and Church Slavonic from the area (as well as Greek versions dating to the tenth century) (Zaninović 1971; Boswell 1994; Rapp 2016). But in spite of the widespread use of religious rites to cement the relationship, both Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiastical authorities were dubious about lending their authority to such practices, and attitudes varied from the acceptance indicated by the appearance of the rite in liturgical manuals, to attempts to restrict its use, to outright condemnation.

The historian John Boswell has suggested that ecclesiastical uneasiness about blood-brotherhood ceremonies stemmed primarily from a concern over homosexuality within such relationships. He asserts that the ritual consecrating such a union had initially been established by the church to solemnize a ‘passionate friendship’ between individuals of the same sex, and was effectively a same-sex marriage. Boswell argues that an increasing revulsion against homosexuality in the West spelled the end of ecclesiastical tolerance for such unions, but claims that the practice survived longer in Eastern Europe ‘with its original meaning’ intact; and he uses ethnographic material from Dalmatia, Montenegro and Albania to assert the institution's fundamentally sexual, homoerotic aspect (Boswell 1994, 265-78).

Boswell’s thesis provoked widespread scholarly debate, though not yet, so far as I know, among Balkan historians or anthropologists (Rapp 1997; 2016). Since at least the eighteenth century commentators from the region have implied that blood-brotherhood might serve as a cloak to conceal sexual relations between men (it is largely this evidence that Boswell draws upon to support his thesis) (Lovrich 1948, 87; Näcke 1908, 313-37; Durham 1928, 158; Tomašić 1948). But this does not show that such relations were accepted as part of the norms of *pobratimstvo*, nor that these were practices that southeast European society treated with equanimity. Those responsible for public morals condemned homosexual acts and prescribed severe penalties, as elsewhere under both Latin and Orthodox canon law (Levin 1989, 199-200). The Statute of Poljica (fifteenth to eighteenth centuries) prescribed burning ‘without any mercy’ for those caught in this ‘unclean sin’ (Junković 1968: 90, art. 84a); in early modern Dubrovnik ‘sodomites’ were to be beheaded and then burnt (though there is no evidence this penalty was ever applied) (Krekić 1987, 337-45). Popular attitudes on the frontier towards same-sex eroticism are harder to trace, but there is little evidence that they were noticeably latitudinarian. It has been claimed that Ottoman society in Bosnia regarded homosexuality more with scorn than with horror, though comments made by the eighteenth-century diarist Mula Mustafa Ševki Bašeskija on Sarajevo’s ‘dilberi’ or ‘beautiful boys’ seem to indicate a tolerant attitude to same-sex eroticism – but Bašeskija was hardly typical, both as an urban Ottoman and as a Sufi (Škarić 1925, 28; cf. Bašeskija 1987). In the Adriatic hinterland, as well as in Western Europe, Islam was popularly believed to license homoeroticism, and the Ottomans were thought responsible for the spread of such practices (Jeremić &

Tadić 1938, 130; Daniel 1960, 164-68). This belief was still current in the nineteenth century: homosexuality “doesn’t exist, except in the villages of central Hercegovina, where it was introduced by the Turks and Greeks”, according to an informant in Bogišić’s survey of South Slav customary law (Bogišić 1874, 630). But pobratimstvo – with or without sexual connotations – never seems to have been associated with Ottoman influence, unlike *šišano kumstvo* (hair-cutting co-parenthood), popularly attributed in the eighteenth century to the influence of Turks and Vlachs (Kadchich 1729, 420).

Regardless of attitudes to homosexual activity, other evidence suggests that in these societies *any* erotic attachments within the sworn brotherhood relationship were seen as illicit, whether hetero- or homosexual. A text from the early eighteenth-century Erlangen collection of frontier songs makes the point vividly. In this song, a girl takes a *hajduk* or bandit as a blood-brother to protect her on the way through a forest (Geesemann 1924, no. 150). She then proposes that he make love to her, but he refuses in horror, since she is his blood-sister. Wherever the girl passes, the green forest withers in shame; wherever the hajduk passes, the dry branches leaf out and the withered grass turns green, in a striking reversal of the way nature usually passes judgment on the evils of banditry according to the conventions of the epic. The song acknowledges that sexual attraction is possible within a heterosexual sworn friendship, but emphasizes that the kinship bond created by pobratimstvo makes this unthinkable. Another song from the same collection (no. 190) includes making love with sworn sisters (and killing sworn brothers) in the catalogue of heinous sins. Both these motifs, specifying the sinfulness of sexual relations within a sworn kinship, are repeated in later variants. (While epic singers were not much interested in homosexual relations, judging by the absence of such motifs in their songs, they were very concerned about sexual transgression between kin. This set of priorities is also reflected in Orthodox Slav canon law. And even the rite of marriage, in early modern Orthodoxy, did not license passionate sexual communion; on the contrary [Levin 1989, 136-59].) Both the suggestion that pobratimstvo served as a means of *concealing* homoerotic attachments and the presumption that pobratimstvo created consanguinity, and therefore an incest taboo, strongly imply that in Balkan frontier society the institution did not have the publicly acknowledged sexual dimension that Boswell claimed – though it is perfectly possible that individuals could have used the rite of pobratimstvo to cement or celebrate a sexual relationship.

Similar points have been made in other contexts, generally leading to the conclusion that Boswell’s work on ritual brotherhood is effectively a dead end. But this is far too harsh a judgment. Not only has his thesis focused welcome attention on the comparative history of ritual brotherhood, it has drawn attention to the role (and history) of emotion in social institutions. Certainly the popular assumption in this area was that the emotional bond between sworn brothers *ought* to be intense, stronger even than that between brothers of the same blood. One epic noted down in the nineteenth century characterizes the affection between the epic hero Marko Kraljević and his blood-brother Miloš in passionately

physical terms: “One kissed the other's white face / because of the tenderness between the two pobratims. / The pobratims caressed each other so much, / their horses exchanged their manes, / and the heroes exchanged their moustaches and whiskers...” (quoted in Stojanović 1977, 30). This is an almost comic exaggeration of a common motif, in which brotherly love is paralleled by animal affection. Other accounts describe the sworn brothers as sharing a common bed following the ceremony, for instance in an account by a Venetian official reporting on a pact between a Habsburg frontiersman of Senj and an Ottoman border commander to regulate the levels of ransoms, confirmed by a ceremony of brotherhood (Archivio di Stato, Venice, Archivio dei baili veneti a Constantinopoli, 305: 13 Jan 1590; Bracewell 1992, 182). These descriptions of physical intimacy and emotional ties do not need to be read as evidence of a socially acceptable homosexuality institutionalized as pobratimstvo. They can better be seen as indicating the conventions of friendship and ritual brotherhood, and as emphasizing the emotional requirements of the relationship (and compare Bray 1990, for similar issues in early modern England). But loving friendship is not the *only* emotional mode found in frontier pobratimstvo. A description of the institution from mid-nineteenth-century Hercegovina put it concisely: the tie was contracted ‘between two people who either love one another very much or hate one another so much that one threatens the life of the other’ (Č(avlović) 1847, 130; a third variant was brotherhood ‘from misfortune’: a request from deep need could not be rejected, even when there were no previous ties between the two parties). Pobratimstvo seems to deal, not just with love, but with extremes of emotion – and with impossible relationships. This is one insight that emerges from the debates John Boswell’s work inspired. Sworn brotherhood on the frontier, but also elsewhere, can ultimately be seen as a device for coping with impossibility. It provided a recognized space and a set of rules for ties that threatened social norms. It made possible formal relationships between individuals, particularly in a patriarchal society where collective interests were paramount, and it borrowed the language of kinship to do so. This is one of the important insights explored by Alan Bray’s history of friendship (2003), itself a response to Boswell’s theses.

However, the point is not to discover what pobratimstvo was ‘really’ about – if indeed this is possible with any social institution. The scattered and fragmentary sources on frontier pobratimstvo make it difficult, in any case, to say much about typicality or change. But each document, however random, does preserve traces of the ways that particular people, in particular contexts, reacted to or were affected by blood brotherhood. And these reactions, in turn, tell us something about the variety of meanings that the custom could have in practice – and why it could be such a source of anxiety.

Ecclesiastical anxieties

The strictures of the churchmen make clear the reasons for ecclesiastical uneasiness about pobratimstvo. This was not usually because of sex. Orthodox authorities in the South

Slav lands appear to have been more or less tolerant of pobratimstvo, at least among laypeople of the same faith, but even so there were repeated objections, explained in terms of the pagan overtones of the exchange of blood; on the grounds that the rite singled out particular relationships as especially privileged, disregarding the injunction to love *all* men as brothers (this appears to have been the reason the rite was forbidden to clergymen); and because it provided the occasion for a variety of sins against others (devotional manuals cite conspiracy, robbery, and murder) (Levin 1989, 149; Kretzenbacher 1971; Stojanović 1977, 295-6).

Catholic clerics had an equally ambiguous attitude towards the custom – whether and under what circumstances it might enjoy ecclesiastical support, and in what form, was a matter for debate, and the custom was often banned, with priests being forbidden to officiate at blood-brotherhood rites. There are a number of such examples from sixteenth-, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dalmatia and Bosnia. What was at issue for the authorities here was not friendship between like and like, however passionate. The more pressing concern was for relationships that bridged important divisions. Thus, for example, in 1579 the Split and Zadar Archepiscopal Synod found it necessary to forbid priests to officiate at ceremonies of blood-brotherhood ‘between men and women, between Catholics and Greek schismatics, and between Turks and Christians’ because the resulting ‘familiarity presents an occasion for many sins’ (Farlati 1775, V, 134). Similarly, in the 1620 code that Archbishop Sforza Ponzoni assembled for the use of priests in Poljica, clerics were forbidden to celebrate masses solemnizing pobratimstvo between men and women so they might ‘have to do with one another freely, without scandal’ (article 54), nor were they permitted to affirm blood-brotherhood ties with infidels (“...s nevirnimi pobratimstvo nima ciniti”) (article 114) (Mošin 1952, 186, 192). ‘A Christian’, advised the Bosnian Franciscan Matija Divković, in his 1611 devotional manual *Nauk Karstianski za narod slovinski*, “should not contract friendship with infidels” (258a). The Catholic Bishop Grga Ilijić’s prohibition of Orthodox-style ceremonies of blood brother- or sisterhood in 1798 characterized the rite as “vain, superstitious and exceedingly criminal”, singling out the fact that it was being contracted between men and women (though not specifically mentioning ties with Orthodox believers) (Džaja 1971, 169-70, 182). None of these prohibitions are specifically concerned with same-sex unions. On the contrary, the ‘many sins’ that preoccupied the ecclesiastical authorities grew overwhelmingly out of blood-brotherhood relationships that broke down the barriers between *difference* – between men and women, Catholics and Orthodox, Christians and Muslims – and brought together people who ought, in the eyes of the church fathers, to be kept apart.

This was not just a post-Tridentine desire to reform popular culture by stamping out popular errors, though that element was certainly present in the condemnation of ‘superstition’. More particularly, clerical resistance to inter-faith pobratimstvo was connected with a growing concern with enforcing confessional discipline. Seventeenth-

and eighteenth-century Catholic clerics on the frontier with Islam were increasingly insistent on confessional differences and intolerant of syncretic practices that might blur such distinctions. This impetus towards confessionalization was not only expressed through restrictions on *pobratimstvo*. In Bosnia between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Franciscans tried to extirpate co-parenthood by hair-cutting (*šišano kumstvo*), often used to link together Christians and Muslims since it did not involve a church rite, unlike co-parenthood by baptism, another popular means of affirming ritual kinship. Such alliances crossing the boundaries of faith and confession were condemned as eroding a distinct Catholic identity and easing the path to apostasy. Nor was it only a matter of relations between Catholics and Muslims. Relations between Catholics and Orthodox were also more closely disciplined by ecclesiastical authorities on both sides from the seventeenth century onwards (Džaja 1984), 215; Roksandić 1997, 62-101; Codarcea 1998, 236-37; cf. Ivetić and Roksandić 2007, who frame the same issues in slightly different terms). Reinforcing religious and jurisdictional boundaries in this way helped develop the sense of civilizational cleavages along the frontier.

As well as the concern for confessional difference, prohibitions against blood-brotherhood also suggest uneasiness over applications of church ritual to social ends. While clerics recognized that God commanded us to love one another (an injunction repeated in the ritual itself), at the same time they were reluctant to countenance relationships that both escaped ecclesiastical control and tested the limits of doctrine. For one thing, brotherhood could be turned as easily to evil as to good – as both Catholic and Orthodox commentators clearly saw, with their references to ‘many sins’. For another, the rite extended the peace of God not just to the community of the faithful but to those who were otherwise excluded – schismatics and infidels. Perhaps this ambivalence explains why Catholic practice attempted to keep the rite at some distance – at the church door, not at the altar; while sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Orthodox handbooks (*trebnici*) sometimes printed both the ritual *and* a note forbidding its use (Kretzenbacher 1979, 180).

But the laity, and sometimes even the lower clergy, did not always respect the will of the ecclesiastical authorities. Octaviani, Archbishop of Zadar, in his visitation report of 1624, was led to condemn ‘the excessive and pernicious familiarity of the Christians with the Turks’ in Dalmatia, and similar strictures recurred over and over (Farlati 1775, V, 159). The rites of brotherhood may have moved increasingly outside the church, since the relationship could be contracted without a formal blessing. But the repeated prohibitions confirm that individuals persisted in seeking religious sanction for these relationships, even across the borders of faith, reflecting a popular conviction that friendship was in some sense a holy thing. It was also a practical statement by those joined in brotherhood that, in spite of their differences, they agreed on some notion of the sacred and its obligations. Evliya Çelebi's account certainly conveys something of this. But the way the border fighters understood the spiritual dimension of brotherhood would certainly have

been seen as pernicious and heretical by Christian clerics, as it was by Melek-Pasha. Even if their pledges did not involve a literal 'exchange of faiths', they still cut across boundaries the religious authorities were concerned to reinforce, eroded down the concept of separate confessional identities, and admitted one's enemy's capacity for faith.

Secular authorities and pobratimstvo

In contrast to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the Venetian and Habsburg civil and military authorities were never so concerned about pobratimstvo as such (nor were the Ottoman authorities, at least according to Evliya). There was no principled opposition to the observance of a customary law without official status, as long as it did not challenge state interests. Indeed, the Venetian authorities were quick to use the institution when it could be adapted to their own political needs, as in a case in 1614 when a Venetian representative negotiating free passage for couriers to Istanbul across Montenegrin territory sealed the official agreement with the mountain chieftains with a payment of cash and a pact of blood brotherhood (*'le ordinarie frattelanze all'usanza del paese'*) or in 1692, when the Provveditore Generale in Dalmatia ended a damaging vendetta between two rival local commanders with what seems to have been a ceremony of blood-brotherhood, consecrated by a mass and a public pledge of mutual aid (Stojanović 1977, 300; Desnica 1950, II, 281). The capacity for friendship illustrated by the custom of pobratimstvo could even be advanced as evidence by Italian observers that the Dalmatians, correctly treated, could be expected to develop a political loyalty to imperial Venice (Wolff 1998-99). Still, military codes were explicit in forbidding fraternization with the enemy, and blood brotherhood between their own subjects and those of a hostile state fell under this ban (for examples, Stefanić 1977, II, 23; Buczynski 1998, I, 347-51; Desnica 1950, I, 74-75).

Occasional cases of blood brotherhood across the frontier are mentioned in official or semi-official reports, particularly when they transgress officially enforced distinctions. Usually what is described is some sort of local accommodation intended to keep frontier conflict to acceptable levels. This might take the form of an individual act of mercy towards a captive, in anticipation that one day the roles might be reversed (as in the custom Evliya reports), but pobratimstvo could also have a collective function – setting a seal on negotiations over the details of ransom payments, for example, or ending a local conflict between two groups. The authorities viewed this sort of arrangement with horror: it flouted the authority of the state, and challenged the assumption that religious and political confrontation defined the frontier. But this sort of opposition was not always in the interests of the frontiersmen themselves. A degree of accommodation with the other side was often desirable, not only for the raiders themselves, but also for local commanders whose own local interests were often at odds with the policies of their superiors directing war from far-off capitals. Thus in the course of the Candian War the Aga of Risan would write to the Captain of Venetian Perast, complaining about a clash

between their troops, saying “you yourself know that this is not what we agreed, but rather to wash clean the bloody shirts, not stain them with more blood. For the more they are bloodied, the more painful it is to wash them” (Butorac 1928), 127-12). Quite so. In such circumstances, sharing blood in brotherhood could be a way to avoid shedding more blood in battle. Frontier epics were sometimes explicit about this desire to put limits to the bloodshed of frontier warfare through such ties: “Meet me where the coast curves and let us make peace and blood-brotherhood. Enough we have fought on our frontiers; heroes enough have died” (from an epic about the Pasha of Udbina, cited in Durham 1928, 158).

The correspondence between Habsburg and Ottoman commanders on opposite sides of the frontier shows how appeals to friendship could mitigate conflict. These letters repeatedly rely on the formula “my friend, and neighbour on the frontier”, particularly when it is a matter of sorting out some mishap. When Osman-aga Beširević wrote about difficulties over a ransom to the Vice-Captain of Ogulin, lamenting that “when you succeeded to the captaincy I did not expect, my pobratim, that you and I would stir up the frontier, but rather I thought that we would do what was just, so the poor captives should not curse us”, was he calling on an existing relationship, or was he resorting to the language of friendship in hope of evoking reciprocity and a sense of obligation in a difficult situation (Rački 1880, 12)? (For similar usages Rački 1880, 6, 8, 17, 20, 25; Rački 1879, 89.) In either case, whether as ritual or rhetoric, blood-brotherhood represented a useful tool for frontier coexistence.

Pobratimstvo shows frontier life to be at least partly about finding ways of getting around the assumptions of unrelenting mutual hostility imposed by warring faiths and empires; of pursuing a minimal amount of peace and security; of escaping the destructive logic of perpetual warfare. This might be contrary to official policy, but it was not easy for the early modern state to enforce decisions taken centrally when communication was slow and local commanders were relatively autonomous. Other frontiers between faiths show similar patterns of coexistence and tolerance, operating together with a culture of religious war periodically rekindled by official campaigns – one well-documented example is the *convivencia* of the late medieval frontier between Granada and Castile. (Bartlett & MacKay 1989; MacKay 1976, 15-33; for other frontiers, Power and Standen 1999; Housley 1995, 104-19). Pobratimstvo across the boundaries of faith might well be interpreted in terms of frontier pragmatism – a reminder that coexistence and warfare are not mutually exclusive.

Enemies, rivals, heroes – and friends?

But what is striking about the institution of frontier blood-brotherhood between Muslim and Christian is that the frontiersmen did not seem to see it as simply a matter of pragmatism and material interest, as the popular emphasis on its emotional and spiritual

dimensions indicates. These ties were often described as *more* binding than those of actual kinship, since they had been entered into voluntarily and involved a pledge of faith. The idea that enemies could make one another into brothers is intriguing to historians, but the people of the frontier also seem to have been fascinated with the notion, judging by the number of frontier epics where the plot hinges on blood-brotherhood between Christian and Muslim. In the earliest known frontier songs, written down in the early eighteenth century, there are tales of heroes of warring faiths contracting blood-brotherhood in recognition of each other's heroism, in response to the other's plight, out of a desire for peace, to gain an advantage, or simply from a desire to show off, as the more magnanimous hero; tales about the 'good friends' that heroes have in the opposite camp, and the accusations from their own side that this leaves them open to; their refusal to betray one another – and also occasions when they did so (with the moral being the enormity of such treachery, even when an infidel was the one betrayed) (Gesemann 1924). The obligations of 'blood', honor and heroism not infrequently outweighed religious and political considerations in these tales, though how far they actually determined the actions of the frontiersmen is open to question. The point I wish to stress here is that the idea of ties across the divisions of faith gripped the popular imagination. When set against the requirements of religious confession or of political loyalty, the competing obligations of blood-brotherhood provided the moral dilemmas that are the very stuff of the frontier epics.

The men who contracted ties of blood-brotherhood with one another may have been driven by pragmatism and a need to coexist with their enemies, but at the same time they operated in a common moral universe, recognized the same principles, accepted the same standards of honor, heroism and manliness, and respected one another in as much as they embodied these ideals. Shared interests and shared culture were what allowed *pobratimstvo* to flourish across religious and political boundaries (Lory 1997). The relationship was not necessarily straightforward, however. As well as shared interests, affection or respect and a sense of reciprocal commitment, *pobratimstvo* could involve coercion, dissimulation, competition, calculation. A letter sent by Mustafa-aga, the Captain of Udbina, to Petar Smiljanić, one of the Venetian local commanders in Ravni Kotari, at beginning of Candian War, allows us to glimpse the relationship between frontier 'brothers and friends' in operation:

From Mustafa-aga, Captain of Udbina and Lika, to harambaša Petar Smiljanić: homage and warm and friendly greetings to our brother and friend.

We wonder at your lordship, that no letter has come from you, you being our father's friend. Do you think us worth nothing in comparison to our father? We pray, if there is to be no settlement, as we wrote asking you to arrange with the Provveditore Generale, if you see that there will be no

peace, we beg you, send us the news secretly, for the sake of our friendship. Our mother greets you and prays you for a Turkish slave-girl, and we will send you what is right. We pray that you will greet your son harambaša Ilija [also a frontier commander] on our behalf. We have heard that he is a hero on the Frontier. God knows that we are pleased by that, for he is one of ours. We are sending a hawk's feather for him to wear before the heroes. And we ask him to send us a gun, which you know we need. On my faith, we will use it honorably. And God make you merry. And we pray that harambaša Ilija send us a bottle of rakija, so that we may drink our fill. Keep merry. Amin (Kreševljaković 1954, 121).

Here the relationship is certainly a pragmatic device meant to cope with a likely future hazard, like that described by Evliya, but it is also presented as more than that. The Muslim commander writes to the Christian as a “brother and friend” and calls on his father's relationship with Smiljanić. Mustafa-aga addresses Smiljanić as an equal (Smiljanić is wrong to “think us worth nothing”), as an ally (one who will negotiate on his behalf with a Venetian Provveditore and who will keep information secret from the Venetians and the Ottoman authorities), and as a trade partner (trafficking in captives). In spite of Mustafa's reference to his faith and supplication of a shared God, the request for a Turkish slave-girl seems to underline the irrelevance of conventional religious loyalties (and at the same time subtly indicates Mustafa-aga's economic standing). The request for a gun does the same with respect to boundaries between opponents facing imminent war.

It is their common status as heroes that over-rides these other differences. Mustafa-aga celebrates his correspondent's heroism and manliness, both as fellows (harambaša Ilija is a hero and “one of ours”) and as worthy opponents, who will be treated “honorably”. The recognition of Christian heroism is what Mustafa-aga has to offer in this exchange, though Mustafa is also affirming his own self-perception in his appreciation of Petar and Ilija (he is a frontier hero to the extent that his opponents are also heroic). Moreover, bestowing an emblem of bravery (the hawk's feather) on Ilija emphasizes his own prior and superior claim to the same quality while it puts Ilija under an obligation to him. The tone is one of jousting comradeship, cemented by the exchange of gifts – tokens of bravery, arms and strong drink – as well as by the title of “brother and friend”.

While not at all homoerotic, this relationship could well be described as homosocial, in that frontier notions of worth are tied up with a specific notion of masculinity, and the emphasis on a common masculine honour overrides other identities. The institution of *pobratimstvo* was not necessarily *about* masculinity and, as we have seen, was not limited to men. However, when contracted between frontier warriors, it could function as a means of recognizing each others' manliness and heroism – or as a means of competing over who was the more manly and heroic. There is a hint of this competitiveness in Mustafa-aga's letter to Petar Smiljanić. The same point is made differently in an early

epic in which a frontier hajduk is captured by an Ottoman pasha, who shares wine with him and asks why he looks so gloomy. Is he sighing for his comrades, his mother, his true love, or for revenge against the Turks? No, the hajduk replies, he is sighing because he has failed to cut off the pasha's head. When his comrades ambush the pair, release the hajduk and seize the pasha, the hajduk refuses the opportunity to cut off his head. He chooses to view the sharing of wine as creating a tie of blood-brotherhood: "since we are blood-brothers, you are released". He goes his way singing, satisfied his insolent magnanimity makes him the better man (Gesemann 1925, no. 119). Even when the tie is contracted between men and women, it is usually depicted as rising from the woman's need for the protection offered by a man (as in the song about the girl asking the hajduk to guide her through the forest, cited above) or involving a more or less illicit female attraction to masculine power (a case in point might be Ivan Lovrić's eighteenth-century biography of Stanislav Sočivica, a frontier hero, which discusses the 'Turkish' girl who wished to become blood-sister with the hajduk Sočivica: 'thinking perhaps that since he was a hero in arms, he must also be a hero in love') (Lovrić 1948, 204). In all these cases, pobratimstvo affirms a vision of potent masculinity rooted in honor and bravery – and as one of the cardinal social values on the frontier.

(It is worth noting that posestrimstvo, or sworn sisterhood, is much less visible in the sources, though it is occasionally noted in passing. Although it was formally symmetrical to blood-brotherhood, linking two women in a relationship of affection and mutual obligation, I have not seen it used in the same way as pobratimstvo to emphasize the blood-sisters' social role as women. The Italian Abbé Fortis emphasized emotion and delicacy of sentiment when describing a rite of posestrimstvo between two girls, but the idea that such qualities were particularly appropriate to women and sworn sisters is not characteristic of South Slav sources [Fortis 1774, 58].)

Still, the manly camaraderie of Mustafa-aga's letter does not altogether mask a certain edginess and sense of dissimulation. After all, the issue here is treachery, though Mustafa's use of the language of friendship adroitly shifts the subject from treason against a state to the faithlessness of a friend. But even so, his requests cannot be made too bluntly. A friend's favours must be offered without compulsion, regardless of the half-hidden expectation of reciprocity – to press too hard would be to risk resentment and refusal, or to reveal too plainly a different, more sordid aspect to their exchange. In spite of his claims of shared values, Mustafa-aga cannot have been sure that Petar Smiljanić would respond with the help and information that he needed. The rights of friendship were not unconditional, even when sanctified by the rites of pobratimstvo. Regardless of the effort that both contemporaries and later historians have put into idealizing these relationships, border heroes could and did betray one another. But, like Evliya's *gazi*, others risked themselves on behalf of their friends. We do not know the outcome of Mustafa-aga's letter but it is worth noting that a few years later the frontier *harambašas* of Šibenik would appeal on behalf of another such a Muslim, captured by Venetian forces

and condemned to the galleys, as a friend and someone ‘who has given many proofs of affectionate service on behalf of our Morlachs of Šibenik, and has promoted their interests with letters of warning ...’ just as Mustafa-aga requested Smiljanić to do (Desnica 1950, I, 62-63). Their plea was adapted to the interests of their Venetian rulers, but it reveals loyalty as well as self-interest.

Cohesion and conflict

The appeal of examples of frontier friendship that cancel out religious and political differences is readily apparent, particularly when many modern commentators have been quick to see the recent bloodshed in this same frontier region as the result of ancient hatreds based on irreconcilable differences in religion or culture. Border blood-brotherhood can be used to make the point that even during wartime, people on this frontier could go to remarkable lengths to bridge the divisions of religion and politics and to make brothers out of enemies. Such tales of blood-brotherhood also fit nicely into a particular interpretation of the relations between the state and society on the frontier. This presents division and conflict as primarily maintained and used by the state and the ecclesiastical authorities to legitimate elite projects and to preserve power; and on the other hand celebrates the capacity of the border population to recognize common values, dilemmas and fates in spite of their rulers' need to keep them apart. From this perspective, the centralizing state and the confessionalized church imposed divisions between faiths, between subjects of different states, between military and civilian populations, on a more tolerant and pluralist social reality, in which people used one another's churches and worshipped each others' holy men, drove their flocks up to pasture regardless of state frontiers, and sent each other hero's feathers to wear on the field of battle. From this perspective, *pobratimstvo* would be not just an institution of accommodation, but also a measure of resistance to the power of the state. Models of history that stressed common 'Yugoslav' ties among the South Slavs promoted such interpretations (and it is worth noting that the Titoist slogan of 'brotherhood and unity' drew as much on home-grown images of *pobratimstvo* as on revolutionary *fraternité*) (examples in Bogdanov 1957, 353-477; Tudman 1970). So have Western works written to debunk the 'ancient ethnic hatreds' model of Balkan history by setting up an opposition between the manipulations of the powerful and the essentially tolerant attitudes of the population as a whole (and which construct a narrative of violence and warfare that puts the blame squarely on outsiders and political elites). (for example Glenny 1999). There clearly was a gap between official projects and the interests and values of the people of the frontier, and acknowledging this does help make sense of some of the complexities and contradictions of frontier life. But mutual respect and the preference for accommodation rather than war is only one aspect of frontier *pobratimstvo* – and gives only a partial picture of social relations on the Military Frontier. Like approaches to the Yugoslav wars that focus only

on top-down pressures, this interpretation provides no explanation for the local dynamics of conflict and violence.

Though pobratimstvo shows that differences could be overcome in the pursuit of common interests, it also suggests that the divisions of frontier society – and especially its religious divisions – were not entirely imposed by outside authorities. Religious identities and religious rhetoric provided a set of referents that could also be adopted and used for local purposes. Claims to defend a Christian *antemurale* against the infidel did legitimate both Habsburg and Venetian power on the frontier; imperial authorities did preserve and promote religious differences partly in order to govern their populations; and vigilance against religious laxity, syncretism or conversion did bolster the authority of all the ecclesiastical hierarchies. But even if they went counter to elite policies, ties of blood-brotherhood between Muslims and Christians did not erase religious differences, and certainly did not prevent Christian or Muslim frontiersmen from using religious rhetoric to justify their raiding across the frontier. *Gazi* rhetoric – justifying raiding against the 'abode of war' that lay beyond Ottoman lands – persisted on the Ottoman side of the frontier even after the 1699 Karlowitz settlement, which formally accepted the frontier as a permanent boundary and no longer an only temporary line of demarcation in the face of the enemy. Even the persistence of the term 'giaour' (or 'kaurin' – unbeliever, infidel) for their Christian neighbours foregrounded the difference of religion as their only identifying characteristic (Heywood 1994, 22-53; Heywood 1999, 228-250). In their turn, the Christian frontiersmen in Habsburg service stressed that they had taken an oath to their rulers to serve “faithfully and honorably, with gun and with sword, against the infidel Turk” (Lopašić 1899, 26), and both Venetian and Habsburg frontiersmen repeatedly argue that they should be permitted to smite the enemies of the faith, even in peacetime and against the strictures of their governments. Whether or not the official elites so wished, ideas of holy war retained potency and legitimacy in the minds and in the deeds of their subjects. In spite of the fact that the Ottoman threat diminished continually after the beginning of the eighteenth century, and the state authorities strove to preserve peace on the borders, the population of Dalmatia remained convinced that killing 'Turks' was not only justified, but also conferred honor and glory on the heroes who so distinguished themselves. This was one of the central points of Ivan Lovrić's life of the hajduk Stanislav Sočivica, whose friendship with individual Muslims (including a Muslim blood-sister and blood-brother) did not modify in any way his hatred of 'the Turk' as a category. Lovrić's assessment was that the persistent frontier *hajdučija* or banditry depended on this popular hatred (in spite of constant official attempts to eradicate such lawlessness), since the population believed that “one can achieve almost total pardon by killing Turks, as though Turks were foul beasts” (Lovrić 1948, 211).

The truth is that it was not just the state and the church, but also the frontier population that maintained and used religious differences for their own purposes. One could argue that they actively needed such divisions: not just because frontier oppositions were the

reason for their existence and their way of life, but also more generally because an ideological framework was needed in order to explain and to legitimate suspicion, competition, and aggression between people who differed only slightly in all other respects – language, way of life and modes of thought. However it was generated, the frontier between faiths on the frontier was real, and it had a profound effect on people's attitudes and lives. The institution of *pobratimstvo* might make individual alliances possible, and might facilitate recognition of your enemy's heroism and even his essential humanity – but religious difference was still one of the fundamental organizing principles on the frontier. Such differences could be bridged, but they could not be ignored. Indeed, one of the salient points about frontier blood-brotherhood is that it was precisely the gulf between the frontier populations that made such an institution necessary. There is no need for bridges where there is no chasm to cross.

Given the human costs exacted by religious, political and ethnic divisions in the wars that have rent the region, whether in the 1990s or earlier, it is hardly surprising that historians have been happy to follow Evliya Çelebi and others who have described *pobratimstvo* in terms of tolerance across the boundaries of difference, or as a device for avoiding conflict and especially the violence of war. Because such friendships gainsay the imperatives of war, we assume that they affirm peace. But stories about sworn brotherhood between Muslim and Christian are often more ambiguous than that. As well as ensuring a minimum of peace and security on a war-torn frontier, blood-brotherhood could also facilitate disorder, plunder and conflict, allowing men of violence to demonstrate their heroism through the use of arms, even when the state proscribed this way of life. This was the case with *hajduks* or brigands – often the term is used to describe those who had started out as frontiersmen and continued living much the same way in peacetime, though in an altered political context. Their activities make an appearance in the records in peace-time, when unauthorized raiding was more likely to be documented – and was more likely to be stigmatized as brigandage. In reality, however, this was not all that different from the animal theft, ransom and extortion that characterized the constant 'little war' of the frontier, and that shaded into the competitive and often violent economy of mountain pastoralism. The end of large-scale official war threw such socio-economic patterns into relief, but it did not change them very much. Frontiersmen continued to live much as they had done, from a combination of pastoralism, animal raiding and small-scale agriculture.

It was not unusual for frontier *hajduks* to have allies and protectors across the border. These were known as *jataks* (Tur. *bed*, refuge; the word has no adequate English equivalent), who sheltered them, supplied them with food, or passed them information. Such *jataks* were often Muslims. The *hajduk* epics recount numerous examples of this relationship, and official reports also document the phenomenon (Popović 1930-1931, I, 153-154; Nazečić 1959, 189-90). Thus we hear of prominent Muslim families in Bosnia and Hercegovina acting as *hajduk* protectors (Popović 1930-31, I, 54) or of the Ottoman

and Habsburg authorities cooperating in measures against Christian hajduks and their Muslim allies (Dabić 1984, 132). The relationship was often formalized through a tie of ritual brotherhood, as in the case of the Muslim blood-brother who aided and eventually was forced to betray the hajduk Stanislav Sočivica, a motif that occurs both in Lovrić's biography and in hajduk epics involving Sočivica (Lovrić 1948, 204; Stojanović 1977, 308). The practical advantages of such a relationship in facilitating hajduk raiding is obvious, but what motivated their Muslim blood-brothers? A share in the plunder, certainly. Fear of hajduk reprisal, perhaps (though this must have been less compelling for the beys and agas who are described as aiding the hajduks). Some commentators have suggested a common cause against the Ottoman state, grounded in a sense of shared ethnic origin. Perhaps it was this sentiment that led Mustafa-aga to call Ilija Smiljanić "one of ours" (Mijatović 1969, 22). Yet on the basis of the preceding discussion, I would suggest that the hajduk and the jatak recognized in each other not so much a common ethnicity, but rather a common code of behaviour and shared values that set them apart – as men and as heroes – from their victims. This shared code could cut across other divisions, both binding together Christian and Muslim and legitimating their acts of plunder and violence in their own eyes. Just as the same socio-economic patterns persisted regardless of the state of war and peace, so too hajduks and their jataks reproduced the pattern of alliances between Christian and Muslim frontiersmen.

Looking at the workings of blood-brotherhood from this perspective raises some questions about 'shared culture' as a force for peace and social cohesion on the frontier – and suggests that we should not idealize either pobratimstvo, or the concepts of masculinity, heroism and honour it affirmed. True, blood-brotherhood could link Christian and Muslim, cutting across the divisions of church and state, but this did not necessarily lead to frontier stability and a diminution of conflict. Hajduks and frontiersmen may have recognized their counterparts as heroes and as men, but in doing so they could deny or ignore other equally valid claims on their loyalties. Brotherhood between Christian and Muslim heroes, and between hajduks and jataks, meant that these men could strive for glory through the use of arms regardless of the state of war or peace, and could flout with impunity the forces of state law (whether Ottoman, Venetian or Habsburg). Even more to the point, every bond contracted between heroes implied an exclusion from this fellowship of brothers. Inclusion and cohesiveness creates in turn exclusion and new boundaries. Frontiersmen and hajduks demonstrated their heroism at the expense of the border population, both Christian and Muslim, who bore the brunt of their raids.

Something of this echoed in Evliya's account when he cited the local Muslim troops' fears that if the Christian captives were not executed they would survive to fight against Ottoman subjects again: "Among the captives there are many evil-doers whose hands are stained with the blood of our black livers. [...] they will return to our frontier to desolate and destroy our land" (Evliya Çelebi 1967, 147). By protecting his Christian blood-

brother from execution the *gazi* was endangering the lives of his fellows in the future. Similarly, Mustafa-aga's promise to use Harambaša Ilija's gun 'honorably' begs the question: against whom? Against Ilija's Christian compatriots, those not protected by the bonds of blood-brotherhood with the enemy. Though underpinned by the same values and ideals as the first set of tales about blood brotherhood, stories of hajduk pobratimstvo fit much less comfortably into a celebration of the tolerance and cohesiveness of border society. Brotherhood between frontier heroes may have bridged divisions between Muslim and Christian, or between Venetian, Habsburg and Ottoman subjects, but it divided frontier society into the strong and the weak, predators and victims, and glorified this division as one between heroic men and those who were less than men.

The eighteenth-century frontier epics contain some pungent assessments of the price others were forced to pay to maintain this sort of brotherhood. In a song exploring conflicts between the demands of political or religious loyalties and the ties between Christian and Muslim heroes, the 'Ban' of Venetian Zadar insults two Christian harambašas by listing their "good friends" in the Ottoman town of Glamoč, and by pointing out that such alliances allow them to betray both 'Turks' and Christians equally: "the [Christian] whore and the [Muslim] brigand met; you sell Turks to Christians, and Christians throughout the Turkish lands". Pointing out the special circumstances of the frontier is not an entirely convincing response: "guarding the Krajina is dreadful work, wiping off hands wet with blood". Harambaša Ivan Šandić finally kills the Ban in fury, preserving his honour and the interests of his blood-brothers in Glamoč – but in effect losing the argument (Geeseman 1924, 80-82). Popular culture may have recognized that a shared code of honour was the basis for ties across boundaries, but at the same time it could also acknowledge its darker side.

Still, popular reactions to such raiders were ambiguous, since observers regularly reported that the frontier population glorified the hajduks to the extent that they embodied heroism and manliness, regardless of whom they attacked and the effects of their raids. Thus, for example, Gregorio Stratico of Zadar, writing in 1785 for the Venetian authorities on Dalmatia's social and economic problems, noted that "among the people, a particular view of this sort of miscreant has struck root; someone who gives such brilliant evidence of his strength, his daring and his fearlessness is considered a man of renown" (Stratico 1785, cited in Grgić 1958, 248). Such attitudes, encouraged by a social and economic system that rewarded aggressive competition for scarce resources and reinforced by a model of masculine honor based on physical prowess and the ability to compel respect, were difficult to extirpate, even after the warfare that had given it official legitimacy had waned. The capacity for violence, dignified as heroism, retained its character as a source of social prestige – and its glamour – long after the authorities found it desirable to proscribe it. (See Ardalić 1899-1910 for an evocative description of the idealization of manly lawlessness in late nineteenth-century Bukovica, despite official prosecution.) But neither the violence, nor the rites that sustained it, went completely unchallenged in

popular culture. When, in one of the many examples of frontier songs that project the traits of humans onto animals, the raven proposes that he and the wolf join in attacking a man lying wounded – “Oh you wolf, dear pobratim of mine ... You shall eat his well-fed flesh, I will drink those dark eyes of his” – each of these sworn brothers is as black as the other (Delorko 1964, 161).

Hajduk brotherhood, as a rite previous to robbery, as well as the cult of heroism and of arms, blood-feud, and an economy revolving around plunder are all familiar touchstones in accounts that interpret conflict in the border regions in terms of an unchanging ‘culture of violence’. A harsh environment, perennial warfare and a world only weakly regulated by the authority of the state created a pastoral economy, a society structured around patriarchal kin groups extended through alliance, and a culture characterized by the aggressive defense of honour, a warrior mentality that disdained manual labour, and the glorification of violence as both an obligation and a proof of manliness (for example, Kaser 1992). Such historical-anthropological perspectives have also informed attempts to explain the character of the wars in the Yugoslav space by positing a specific culture characterized by violence, resistance to democratic political institutions, and blood-and-soil ethnic exclusivism, whether described as undifferentiatedly ‘Balkan’ in journalistic accounts, or more narrowly ‘Dinaric’ – associated with the frontier-defining mountain range running through Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania. How far the violence of local warfare, patron-client power relations in the political sphere or ethnic nationalism can be characterized as somehow peculiar to the region (and therefore non-Western) is doubtful. Equally problematic is the notion that cultural traits are passed down through the generations as immutable rules, unaffected by the transformations wrought by the processes of modernization in the region over the past two centuries, allowing power-hungry and aggressive frontiersmen to descend periodically from their mountain fastnesses to engage in atavistic violence, linked together by archaic forms of kinship (the tribe or clan) and alliance (blood-brotherhood) as well as ethnicity (also seen as only dubiously modern). But even when applied to the pre-modern frontier, the notion that frontier forms of violence sprang from indigenous cultural determinants, were fostered by institutions such as feud and blood-brotherhood, and were embraced without question, is problematic. For one thing, it ignores the roles of the frontier states in promoting, harnessing and institutionalizing frontier forms of violence; for another, it disregards the ways that blood-brotherhood might limit bloodshed, or the fear of vendetta might ward off aggression. It focuses on one set of attitudes (the idealization of heroic violence), while discounting other views that were more critical or skeptical. Worse, by imagining frontiersmen as caught in the iron grip of cultural compulsion, it slides away from issues of choice, strategy and responsibility. (But isn’t that just what Mustafa-aga was doing when he tried to influence Petar Smiljanić by drawing his attention to the duties of friendship?)

Conclusion

Gathering together the scattered references to blood-brotherhood on the frontier and considering the ways that different groups of people described the practice and debated it, as well as how they used it, underlines the conclusion that pobratimstvo was not a single phenomenon. The rites of brotherhood encompassed a range of potentialities. While pobratimstvo might serve to regulate public affairs or private economic interests, this did not mean it could not also in other circumstances consecrate a tie of affectionate friendship – or even, perhaps, erotic love. It could be turned to peace-making, or to plunder; could recognize an equal or fling down a challenge to a rival. Idealizing the practice served some purposes (staking claims to superiority, denigrating the reputations of others, building group solidarity, coercing conformity); unmasking its self-interestedness, hinting at perversity or mocking hypocrisy served others. Claims are sometimes made that the ‘purest’ form of pobratimstvo – altruistic, loyal to the death – belonged to the Dalmatian Morlaks, or to the patriarchal tribes of the Dinaric region, or to the Montenegrin nation, and that deviations from these norms (in time, place or practice) mark a degeneration (compare Fortis 1774; Miljanov 1901; Geseman 1943). But the multiple possibilities that inhere in the relationship should give us pause before such claims.

This assessment of the factors of conflict and cohesion on the frontier, seen through blood-brotherhood between Muslim and Christian, gives us a more complex (if perhaps less emotionally appealing) picture of state and society on the frontier than those that would characterize the frontier either as fatally divided in its loyalties, or as culturally united (whether that culture is understood to breed tolerance or violence). It suggests that frontier society was influenced by at least two different sets of referents. On the one hand religious and political divisions separated the people of the frontier; on the other hand common values and institutions drew them together. Both sets of ideals mattered, shaping the ways people thought, setting their aspirations, guiding their actions. People could be pulled in different ways. The workings of ties of blood-brotherhood across the frontiers of religion demonstrate the ways that two sets of values or ideologies could be in tension with one another, or could result in contradictions – something recognized by the people themselves and debated in their songs. But we should recognize too that the people of the frontier were not just prisoners of their environment. They made their own choices, selecting the rhetoric most useful to the occasion, manipulating the rules or exploiting expectations about how they should behave – in their own interests and to their own advantage. The exact mix of conflict and coexistence, the balance between hostility and accommodation, depended on the needs and possibilities of the moment. Much the same thing could be said about the ways we, as historians, chose to tell our own stories about the frontier, balancing between a desire to celebrate the human capacity to make connections across difference and an awareness that every community of brothers is maintained at the price of excluding others.

Acknowledgments:

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