

Feud – JH, MM

JH: Feud is a word that medieval historians use a lot. When it's used in the medieval sources, words like *feide*, just mean dispute or something like that. So what makes a particular sort of dispute a feud in our terms?

MM: One of the key elements is the idea of a tit-for-tat cycle of violence. It could start with a relatively small offence, but the classic idea is of a killing. One party kills someone and the other party retaliates by killing someone else. You get a cycling element of feuding, where each side exchanges hits.

JH: If it involves killing, at least typically, is there a difference between blood feud and a feud?

MM: Some have seen that as a possibility. The idea is that a non-blood feud would be a softer form of perhaps political competition or just attrition, where a lot of the stakes are different and perhaps less extreme, because there is something different about killing.

JH: So one of the key elements is that these must take place over time. If I hit you and you hit me back, that isn't feud. But if I hit you again after two weeks, it's starting to look like a feud. Are there other ways a dispute expands to turn into a feud?

MM: I think one of the key elements would be bringing in other people. You hit me, and perhaps I can't hit you back directly, so I hit someone that you care about. We get this exchange of different people, growing exponentially in terms of the expiators of vengeance. It also extends socially in the sense that I will look to more and more people to help me prosecute my feud against you and you likewise will use your networks to help you prosecute your feud against me.

JH: When we use the word feud casually, it tends to be something that involves passion: a feud between two sets of football supporters or something like that. Is emotion a necessary part of a feud?

MM: That's a tricky question. In the case of blood feud, when we're dealing with killing, it is hard to see how emotion would not be involved. But it is a matter of debate whether feud is primarily driven by emotions and hot-blooded vengeance, or if it's more restrained and calculated. In literary sources from France, one of the distinctions made is between good and bad vengeance when pursuing a feud. The best types of vengeance are those where someone has taken some time to think about what he – and it is always a 'he' – is going to do in this situation and make a very successful hit in the next stage of the feud.

JH: So part of it is that a feud is a narrative; that you're saying that you're carrying out because of some form of calculated but still maintained emotion, which provides justification for it and is the story you tell about it. It's presumably also the story you tell to the people you try to get as participants on your side.

MM: It's a way of legitimating conflict.

JH: So why does everything not just fall apart? Why can feuds come to an end?

MM: There are several potential explanations. In many periods, one explanation is the involvement of third parties, as in courts or legal institutions, which can step in and put an end to a conflict. More importantly, going back to ideas developed by the anthropologist Max Gluckman, is the idea of the peace of the feud. The idea is that within these small-scale communities, such as in the Middle Ages, any given individual would eventually have contacts or inter-personal relationships with people on both sides of the feuding conflict. Because of that, both sides would try to put pressure on the feuding parties to end. It's in the social interest more broadly.

JH: And you bring things to an end with ceremony, compensation payment, and efforts to make sure that the settlement is known, so that it is binding in the future. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.