

'Legitimate' violence and popular protests during the Middle Period, Konrad Hirschler, SOAS

Popular protests that entailed acts of violence were an important and reoccurring feature of premodern society. The protagonists in these events have not produced any normative sources that would give insights into how such acts of violence were evaluated and how they were legitimised. However, the practices of popular protests do show regular patterns of where they took place, how they were organised, and what they were aimed at. It is this paper's contention that these practices indicate that protests were underlain by a set of ideas of what constituted legitimate violence on the popular level. The paper discusses examples of protests in Mamluk Syria and Egypt and considers the question of legitimate practices of popular violence by focusing on the spatial and acoustic dimensions of protests. On this basis it is argued that such violence was not a sudden and unregulated eruption of mass discontent as chroniclers tended to portray it. Rather, the actors resorted to a standardised and regularised set of rituals of violence that were widely spread and easily recognisable. These rituals tapped into elite strategies of legitimising violence and they show the close interplay between the different ('high' and 'popular') cultures of violence within society.