In what follows I will take as my theme the relationship of the warrior aristocracy of the high Middle Ages to violence. I think this is a topic that, in the European view of history, is connected with rather fixed ideas. For a long time, the development from barbarity to civilisation was examined according to the paradigm of violence. Roughly speaking, this posits that procedures of civilisation were gradually constructed by which people’s otherwise unlimited potential for violence was restricted, made subject to sanctions, suppressed, and regulated by the state’s monopoly of violence. Before these procedures, there existed the “Dark Ages,” a time in which Europe was born from the “spirit of violence,” as a German publisher saw fit to translate the title of a book by Robert Bartlett. In fact there is evidence enough from this period of blind, senseless, uncontrolled, and inhuman violence, whose existence was either simply accepted or not effectively kept in bounds. Nevertheless, while I do not want to gloss over anything, in my opinion this characterisation of the Middle Ages is insufficient, if not misleading. The Middle Ages were not as barbaric as those assumptions suggest, just as our time is not as civilised as we like to think. This has been proven often enough in Europe and other parts of the world during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

I would like to show you a different image of medieval warrior society by demonstrating which rules governed the use of violence, and which strategies were known and used to avoid or contain violence. My comments only claim validity for parts of medieval society. I want to stress that in advance. But these are vital parts—because they include the noble warriors, their vassals, and retainers, who had the monopoly of violence

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1 The work of Norbert Elias has been particularly influential in this respect: Über den Prozess der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen, vol. 2 (1939; repr. with added introduction, Bern & Munich: Francke, 1969).
during the High Middle Ages and who claimed the right to employ force, a right that they used in countless feuds and conflicts. They, however, observed a number of rules during their conflicts, which taken together permit the conclusion that we can observe here a conscious, even cautious use of violence which, in my opinion, requires a revision of that image of the barbarous Middle Ages mentioned above. Such rules, however, only applied to conflicts within these social strata—on the social level of noble warriors and their retainers. Members of the lower classes, serfs, and peasants were frequently victims of unrestricted violence and were slaughtered—as the sources say—like cattle. Moreover, when fighting against pagans and heretics one did not feel bound to adhere to those rules. That too led to atrocities that are in part responsible for the popular image of the violent Middle Ages.

The rules within the warrior society—this must also be stressed from the outset—were never written down during the high medieval period. They were habits according to which this society organised its communal life, agreed upon again and again in council. The fact that they were not written down should not lead one to the conclusion that they did not have a strong claim to validity, and so were not binding. But because they were never in written form, the existence of such rules can only be proven—a further important presupposition of my comments—by collecting and analysing the many cases where the conduct of warriors during conflicts is described, appraised, and criticised; and reconstructing from the descriptions and evaluations the rules that governed this conduct. I will use two sorts of sources for my attempt: first, sources that are supposed by historians to depict reality; second, literary sources, in this case the famous Nibelungenlied, a poem that is famous not least because the reported acts of violence are especially cruel and inhuman.

In what follows, I would now like to depict for you warriors’ conduct that followed the above-mentioned rules during conflicts. I will do this in the light of concrete sources and proceed, so to speak, chronologically by considering conduct that occurs, first, during the outbreak of conflicts and then, during the course of events; finally I will examine techniques of

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