II

ALBERT THE GREAT AND THOMAS AQUINAS
The understanding of a virtue is in most cases highly dependent upon the cultural context in which it is embedded. This general observation is also borne out by Aristotle’s notion of courage in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “So in the strict sense of the word the courageous man will be one who is fearless in the face of an honourable death, or of some sudden threat of death; and it is in war that such situations chiefly occur” (*EN* 3.6, 1115a32–35). The true nature of courage is revealed in the paradigm case furnished by the citizen who fights bravely in war for his city. Thus, the Aristotelian notion of courage displays a distinctively military tendency which still owes much to the Homeric tradition. In heroic societies, courage in combat is the chief quality of the aristocratic warrior whose social role is ultimately defined by the possession of this virtue in a functional sense.

This understanding of courage is obviously bound to create some difficulties for medieval readers of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. First, the emphasis on civic warfare as the most appropriate context for courage does not sit too well with their religious and theological background. Second, Aristotle portrays courage as one of the numerous specific virtues with a rather limited range and a clear, determinate subject matter; but medieval readers will simultaneously have in mind the well established conception of courage as one of four cardinal virtues with an overarching place in everyday moral life, not only in facing death.

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2 For this idea see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London, 1981), chapter 2. For the general development of the concept of courage in Greek thought and literature up to Aristotle see the comprehensive study by Etienne Smoes, *Le courage chez les Grecs, d’Homère à Aristote* (Brussels, 1995), who at p. 194 notes Aristotle’s tendency towards a military notion of courage.