

Marko Simendić<sup>1</sup>

*University of Belgrade  
Faculty of Political Science*

# Righteous murder as a leap of faith: John of Salisbury on tyrannicide

## ABSTRACT

John of Salisbury is the most prominent Medieval author who wrote about one's right to kill a tyrant. Some recent commentators, however, have pointed out that Salisbury is unclear about the conditions that justify tyrannicide. In a sense, they are right. Salisbury indeed cautions his readers that not all wrongdoings make king a tyrant, but he does not offer a list of misconducts that do. Instead, he simply puts forward examples of tyrants dying for their crimes. Here I would like to argue that the lack of clear justificatory criteria does not render Salisbury's theory incomplete. There is a public duty to murder a tyrant but the decision to act on it is purely personal because its rightness can only be established retrospectively. Salisbury's blending of republicanism with Christianity thus paints a picture of an agent almost forgotten in today's politics. This is someone who acts on their beliefs and is prepared to bear any consequence: to be venerated as a hero or despised as a murderer, earn bliss, or suffer damnation.

KEYWORDS: tyrannicide, republicanism, *Policraticus*, tyrant

---

1 Contact: marko.simendic@fpn.bg.ac.rs

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Arts, commerce, culture, and scholarship thrived in twelfth century Western Europe, accompanied with special interest in Ancient Greek and Roman intellectual heritage. Plurality of intellectual pools from which this Medieval Renaissance drew encouraged the learned men of the day to think about ways in which the authority of Ancient Greek and Roman historians, moral and political philosophers could be reconciled with the Scripture and the doctrine of the Christian church. This was no easy task. Ancient sources, often only available to Medieval authors as fragments or translations, cover a long period of more than ten centuries and answer questions relevant to their own historical moment and thus are far from a unified, coherent, and comprehensive body of thought. Justinian the Great faced a similar problem in when he tried to codify Roman law in sixth century. Centuries of political turbulence in Rome, accompanied with legal developments that supported Rome's various constitutional arrangements led to the formation of two major mutually incompatible layers of legal thought – Republican laws that needed to be reconciled with the idea of the emperor's unlimited authority. Justinian's Code, with all its internal inconsistencies, is only one of sources that provoked interest in lawyers and other scholars of the Twelfth-century Renaissance. One of those authors, and one of the most distinguished scholars of his time, was John of Salisbury.

Salisbury wrote *Policraticus*, a treatise loosely built upon the topic of court flattery. *Policraticus*, albeit not a pinnacle of literary coherency, combines Biblical and classical sources to offer advice to magistrates. Salisbury emphasises intemperance as the defining feature of tyrannical behaviour and flattery is particularly dangerous since flatterers inflate opinions people have of themselves and encourage them to disregard ethical, religious, and legal restraints. In this sense we can all become tyrants and Salisbury distinguishes between private and public tyrants. Private tyrants are ordinary people who disregard propriety and break the legal or moral norms. Law is the remedy for improper behaviour since the state can punish the wrongdoers. However, the situation becomes dire when those who are entrusted with keeping peace and making sure that their subjects lead lives of virtue break the very rules they should be enforcing. The princes can thus become "public" tyrants when they "oppress the republic" and court flatterers can play a decisive role in pushing their masters' fragile human nature over the limits of *decorum* (Salisbury 2017, 205). There is no civil law that could punish public tyrants and Salisbury famously argues that one has a duty to kill such tyrants even though they do rule in accordance with God's will. In Salisbury's view, the person who kills a tyrant becomes an instrument of divine justice and thus commits no sin. However, not only that Salisbury does not attempt to reconcile the tension between one having the divine right to rule and ruling tyrannically, but he neither offers guidelines for tyrannicide, nor lists the criteria through which we could distin-

guish a tyrant from a just ruler. Instead, he simply gives historical and biblical examples of tyrants and the ways in which they lost their lives. In contrast to some relatively recent accounts, I argue that these perceived inconsistencies are intentional and that they do not render Salisbury's account incomplete. I aim to show that Salisbury's doctrine is a "theory of tyrant-killing [and not] merely an account of the bad endings that have come to all tyrants" (Bollermann and Nederman 2016). In contrast to Jan van Laarhoven's account, I argue that Salisbury did develop a theory of tyrannicide (van Laarhoven 1994). Finally, I hope to provide an answer to a question Cary Nederman poses in his influential essay on Salisbury's tyrannicide: "how can there be room left for independent human discretion when all legitimate cases of tyrannicide are seen to be directed by and subject to a divine plan?" (Nederman 1988, 375) In my view, Salisbury's theory rests on republican and Christian underpinnings, the two elements bound together via basic premise that the rightness of a particular morally ambiguous act can only be ascertained *ex post facto*. Attainment of earthly glory and eternal life both require a leap of faith: an agent who acts selflessly and is ready to suffer shame or damnation if his moral judgment was wrong.

## 2. WHO IS A TYRANT AND HOW TO OPPOSE HIM?

All rulers are ministers of God and *Policraticus* 8.18 starts by Salisbury claiming: "Yet I do not deny that tyrants are ministers of God, who by His just judgment has willed them to be pre-eminent over both soul and body. By means of tyrants, the evil are punished and the good are corrected and trained. For both the sins of the people cause hypocrites to reign and, as the history of kings witnesses, the defects of priests introduced tyrants into the people of God." (Salisbury 2017, 201) Tyranny is, therefore, simultaneously a consequence of peoples' sinfulness, its divine punishment and a method of correcting it (Bollermann and Nederman 2016). Salisbury quickly goes on to define tyranny. In the broadest sense, "everyone is a tyrant who abuses any power over those subject to him which has been conceded from above" and, more particularly, tyranny is "an abuse of the power conceded to man by God" (Salisbury 2017, 202). A righteous king rules in accordance with divine laws: "the will of the ruler is determined by the law of God and does not injure liberty. By contrast, the will of the tyrant is a slave to desires and, opposing law which supports liberty, it ventures to impose the yoke of servitude upon fellow slaves" (Salisbury 2017, 214). In 8.22 Salisbury moves on to historical *exempla*. His two most notable examples of tyrants are Caligula and Nero, as "[f] or what in human affairs can be recorded by any memory to be more powerful than the Roman Empire? If you reflect upon the sequence of reigns from the foundation of the city, you will discover that bad men have frequently governed it" (Salisbury 2017, 203) Augustine's *City of God* is echoed in Salisbury's choice of examples: even though the Roman

expansion preceded Christianity, the scale of Roman power and glory would be impossible without divine support. And even such a powerful country, evidently supported by God, has had its tyrants.

What made Caligula's and Nero's rule tyrannical was the transgression of legitimate kingly power as the two tyrants stepped outside the bounds of legitimate use of authority. Their rule, as well as their character, was marked by bestial excess. Salisbury reports that Caligula was "ferocious", very aggressive towards the Jews, that he "condemned his sisters, whom he first *wantonly* violated, to exile" and that he conspired to murder a large number of notables (Salisbury 2017, 203; the emphasis is mine). Similarly, Nero "exercised lewdness, lustfulness, extravagance, avarice and cruelty to any extremity of wickedness" and "[h]is cruelty was [...] insanelly *unbridled*" (Salisbury 2017, 203–204; the emphasis is mine). Salisbury lists examples of Nero's vices: "he *would not abstain* from his mother or his sister", "took a man in wedlock and was accepted by the man as his wife", "never wore a garment twice", "inflicted torture and death upon the Christians" and, famously, "made a bonfire out of the city of Rome as an exhibition for his pleasure" (Salisbury 2017, 204–205; the emphasis is mine). Tyrants' acts are "unbridled", "wanton" and they are unable to "abstain" from vice. Flatterers' compliments fuel excessive behaviour and Salisbury's treatise is aimed at helping rulers maintain their virtue. However, there is one notable exception: "From all of these sources it will be readily evident that it has always been permitted to flatter tyrants, it has been permitted to deceive them and it has been honourable to kill them if they could not be otherwise restrained" (Salisbury 2017, 205).

Salisbury writes that "[t]he end of tyrants is confusion: either they are destroyed if they persist in wickedness or they are forgiven if they turn back to God" (Salisbury 2017, 210). Putting faith in God "is the most useful and the safest [method of eradicating tyrants]: those who are oppressed should humbly resort to the protection of God's clemency and, raising up pure hands to the Lord in devoted prayer, the scourge with which they are afflicted will be removed" (Salisbury 2017, 209). Tyrants, however, rarely "turn back to God" and their life of excess is a twofold divine punishment: not only that it disciplines sinful people, but it also punishes the tyrant. The very same act (tyrannical behaviour) is simultaneously punishment and its own remedy: "A fire is prepared for the scourge itself after it has been used by the Father for the correction of his children" (Salisbury 2017, 210). Tyrant's corruption is often irrevocable, and the tyrant cannot easily be nursed back to virtue. The cure for tyranny is "more of the same" and the tyrant needs to be pushed further into excess. Honourable men are thus "permitted to flatter tyrants" (Salisbury 2017, 205), even though the entire Salisbury's argument is aimed against court flatterers.

Flattery, if used for noble purposes, is not a sin. Moreover, the virtuous have a duty to behave sinfully and provoke the tyrant into deadly excess. Salisbury key example, coming from "examples of divine and faithful history",

is nested in the Book of Judith of the Old Testament (Salisbury 2017, 207). It tells the story of virtuous and pious widow Judith who uses her wits and charm to seduce Holofernes, general who is threatening the Jews. His demise comes through Judith, but Judith is only the instrument of God: „Thus Holofernes was laid in his grave by a woman with a sword not on account of the valour of his enemy *but by his own vice*, and he who was a source of terror for men was *vanquished by luxury and drunkenness* and was slain by a woman” (Salisbury 2017, 207; the emphasis is mine). Excess that marks Holofernes’s tyrannical character and behaviour leads to his downfall and he was “laid in his grave [...] by his own vice, and [...] vanquished by luxury and drunkenness” (Salisbury 2017, 207). Judith prayed to God: “‘Lord, bring it to pass’, she said, ‘that *by his own sword* his pride may be cut off and that he may be captured in his own net with his eyes upon me” (Salisbury 2017, 207; the emphasis is mine). Judith stepped far outside the boundaries that propriety sets for widows. Her excess was threefold. First, Salisbury reports that she dressed provocatively, perfumed her body, and adorned her hair. She also flattered Holofernes: “the strength and industry of your mind is proclaimed among all peoples and it is declared to our entire generation that you alone are powerful and good among all in his kingdom and your learning is preached to all peoples” (Salisbury 2017, 208). Finally, Judith appealed to Holofernes’s pride by promising him help in conquering the Israelites. Judith’s excess stimulated Holofernes’s sense of self-importance, eased him into recklessness, and lured him into excessive drinking. Holofernes’s “aroused heart burned with his desire” (Salisbury 2017, 208). This gave Judith the opportunity to kill him and save her people. In the case of Judith, God “use[d] a sort of human sword in the punishment of the impious” (Salisbury 2017, 210). God operated through Judith and thus her impropriety was not truly improper, “[f]or that which maintains the faith and serves charity is not deceitful” (Salisbury 2017, 207).

### 3. JUDITH’S CHOICE

Salisbury never converted the *exemplum* of Judith into advice for virtuous readers, potential murderers of tyrants. Instead, he moved on to discussing the ways in which God directly interfered and punished tyrants “us[ing] His own sword” (Salisbury 2017, 210). One might think that, in contrast to the story of Judith, biblical narratives of direct divine punishments for tyrannical behaviour might relieve the subjects from their duty to stand against the tyrant. However, Salisbury is explicit in claiming that “whoever does not prosecute [the tyrant] transgresses against himself and against the whole body of the earthly republic” (Salisbury 2017, 25). There is, therefore, a duty to kill a tyrant that applies to everybody except for those who are directly bound to him by an oath. This is a heavy burden. The subjects (particularly the nobles) are left to decide on their

own whether their king had turned into a tyrant and act based on their best judgment. There are no strict guidelines: if the king indeed is a tyrant, inaction is a sin; if the king is not a tyrant, acting against him is a sin. Furthermore, there is a chance that the king might indeed be a tyrant but that his tyranny is a form of divine punishment against his subjects. Salisbury quotes Judith 5:24–5:25 and argues that,

Achior [...] gave this most beneficial counsel to Holofernes. 'My Lord', he said, 'examine if there is any iniquity of the people in the sight of their God, and we may surpass them, since their betraying God will deliver them to you and they will be subjugated under the yoke of your power. Yet if there is no such offence of the people before their God, we cannot withstand them, since their God will defend them and we will be in disgrace throughout the entire earth' (Salisbury 2017, 209).

Achior knows that Holofernes could win only if the Israelites had betrayed God. God's plan might simply be to discipline the people through tyranny, and this is another important factor that any potential rebel must take into consideration. Therefore, not only that the subjects have a duty to stay vigilant and constantly review their king's behaviour, but they also need to think about the moral standing of their compatriots.

Anyone who thinks about following Judith and commit tyrannicide might find themselves in quite of a predicament. Judith's prayer was therefore not a simple textual embellishment but an essential part of her endeavour. It shows that Judith, even though she was convinced that Holofernes was a tyrant who needed to be stopped and that "there [was no] iniquity of the [Israelites] in the sight of their God", knew that her tyrannicidal undertaking was uncertain. She took a leap of faith outside the comfort of propriety and put both her life and her soul at risk. Judith's very action was an excess, albeit aimed at stopping the excesses of a tyrannical kind. This kind of political audacity is required by Salisbury's blending of republicanism with Christianity. Let us now briefly sketch out some of the features of this position. Informed by his classical predecessors, Salisbury 1) expects no certainty at the point in time when the decision to conspire against a presumed tyrant is being made. 2) Unjustified murder is a sin and the agent can easily be mistaken, regardless of the goodness of their motives and 3) being wrong has dire consequences for the agent while being right brings great rewards. Finally, 4) the agent realises whether they were right or wrong only after they have acted.

Almost four centuries after Salisbury, Niccolo Machiavelli will read the same classics and allude to the risky business of resorting to immoral actions in hope of yielding good consequences. In *Discourses on Livy* he writes that "[i]t is very suitable that when the deed accuses him, the effect excuses him; and when the effect is good, as was that of Romulus, it will always excuse the deed; for he

who is violent to spoil, not he who is violent to mend, should be reproved. [...] Romulus was of those, that he deserves excuse in the deaths of his brother and of his partner, and what he did was for the common good and not for his own ambition" (Machiavelli 1996, 29). Romulus murdered his brother, but this act laid foundations for incredibly glorious Rome. The effect "excused" Romulus's "deed". Had he failed to establish such a magnificent city, fratricide would be the only reason one might remember Romulus at all. Although both Judith and Romulus took great risks with little guidance except from their own opinions, "the effect [was] good". The final assessment of the goodness of their (otherwise improper) acts came *a posteriori*, by God and through history, respectively.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To a large extent, today's politics is marked by the agents' wish to control the political outcomes. Sophisticated analyses are constantly being conducted so that the political actors would know, with various degrees of certainty, the outcomes of a potential political decision. Similarly to both the government's and the opposition's outcome-based decision-making process, the electorate casts their ballot hoping to find certainty in politics. We want election-day promises fulfilled and those who do not deliver punished. Similarly, contemporary perspective on politics is often legalistic and formal. We are used to thinking about politics in technical terms and prone to believing that detailed regulation can help us combat arbitrary or, simply, deficient governing. Autocrats of today, however, seem to be skilful in finding a way to avoid institutional limitations to their rule and manipulating the election process in a way that makes it hard for the electorate to judge their actions *ex posteriori* – to have a clear picture of their performance on the election day and to reward or punish the party in power accordingly. Uncertainty is gradually being pushed out from the contemporary view of politics.

Salisbury was no stranger to attempts at finding out a system that could guide human actions. Cicero, among other Roman republican writers and moralists, influenced Salisbury through his treatise *On Duties*. Scripture, on the other hand, provided the backbone of Medieval normativity. In parallel to these efforts, however, Salisbury's doctrine of tyrannicide found itself resting on another view of politics, at the crossroads of biblical and republican sources. The hardest decision of all, the decision to transgress the boundaries of propriety, to knowingly commit a sin in order to stop a greater evil needs to remain purely personal. The burden of exception, the weight of an excess aimed at terminating the excesses of a tyrant, has to rest on the agent's shoulders. Salisbury's biblical *exempla* teach a lesson similar to Machiavelli's. The agent who sins and kills the tyrant could be forgiven since they are acting against someone who had usurped their God-given power to rule and forsaken the task

to rule justly. Salisbury's tyrant is a public enemy, the most dangerous sinner among men, someone who sins against the entire republic. The tyrant's misdoings are public, but the remedy for public harm is a private decision to step out of the bounds set by law and morality. Consequences for such a transgression are also private, the agents' responsibility is absolute, and the (personal) outcome ranges from bliss and eternal glory to damnation and everlasting shame.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bollermann, Karen and Nederman, Cary J. 2016. "John of Salisbury". In: Edward N. Zalta (Ed.). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- Machiavelli, Niccolo. 1996. *Discourses on Livy*. trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Nederman, Cary J. 1988. "A Duty to Kill: John of Salisbury's Theory of Tyrannicide". *Review of Politics*, 50: 365–389.
- Salisbury, John. 2017. *Policraticus: Of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers*. Ed. and trans. Cary J. Nederman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- van Laarhoven, Jan. 1994. "Thou shalt *not* slay a tyrant! The so-called theory of John of Salisbury". *Studies in Church History Subsidia*, 3: 319–341.

Marko Simendić

## OPRAVDANO UBISTVO KAO ISKORAK U NEPOZNATO: JOVAN SOLSBERIJSKI O TIRANICIDU

### SAŽETAK

Jovan Solsberijski je najpoznatiji srednjovekovni autor koji je pisao o dužnosti da se ubije tiranin. Ipak, pojedini savremeni autori istakli su da Solsberijski ne navodi jasno uslove pod kojima bi se mogao opravdati tiranucid. U određenom smislu, u pravu su. Solsberijski zaista upozorava svoje čitaoce da kralja tiranom ne čini bilo koji prekršaj ali ne navodi spisak zlodela koja određuju tiranina. Umesto toga, on izlaže primere koji svedoče o tome da tirani stradaju zbog svojih zločina. U ovom radu nastojim da pokažem da nedostatak jasnih kriterijuma kojima bi se opravdao tiranucid ne čini teoriju ovog srednjovekovnog autora nepotpunom. Po njegovom mišljenju, postoji javna dužnost da se ubije



tiranin, ali je odluka o postupanju u skladu s njom sasvim lična. Ispravnost takve odluke može se utvrditi samo retrospektivno. Jovan Solsberijski sjedinjuje klasični republikanizam sa hrišćanstvom i opisuje političkog aktera koji je skoro zaboravljen u današnjem svetu. To je osoba koja postupa u skladu sa svojim verovanjima i spremna je da snosi bilo koju posledicu svog političkog čina: da bude slavljena kao junak ili prezrena kao ubica, da zasluži blaženstvo ili trpi večne muke.

KLJUČNE REČI: tiranucid, republikanizam, *Polikratikus*, tiranin.