*The Origins of English Chivalry*

By Nigel Saul

The Chivalric Conquest

Chivalry, however it is defined, is associated first and foremost with the estate of knighthood and with fighting on horseback. The word knight, though Germanic in origin, carries the same meaning as the French chivalier, a knight, and both are connected with cheval, a horse. Chevalerie, the nearest contemporary approximation to `chivalry', carries with it resonances of skill in the art of horsemanship.

The arrival in England of chivalry in the sense of fighting on horseback can be dated very precisely. It was introduced by the Normans in io66. In the period before the Norman invasion the English do not appear to have employed this technique: at the battle of Hastings, as in every other conventional setpiece military encounter, they fought on foot. The difference between the English fighting style and that of the Normans can be seen clearly in the Bayeux Tapestry. The two lines of soldiers in the battle scenes are virtually indistinguishable in terms of attire: they both wear mail hauberks with short sleeves and conical helms with long extensions over the nose. Where the two sides can be told apart is in their deportment and tactics. The English are shown fighting on foot wielding axes, while the Norman on horseback wielding lances and sometimes swords. The sharply contrasting military traditions of the two sides influenced their whole approach to warfare. In battle the English had been accustomed to lining up in a strong defensive formation; at Hastings, therefore, Harold arrayed his men along the full length of a wide south-facing ridge. The Normans, on the other hand, tended to think more in offensive terms. The mobility given to them by the use of mounts allowed them to use shock tactics against their adversaries. At Hastings, after his infantry had failed to dislodge the English, William finally secured victory when his knights lured the English down the hill, using the ruse of the feigned retreat, then turned on their pursuers and destroyed them.

It is not altogether clear why the English had failed to develop the skills of cavalry warfare. Culturally they had close connections with Normandy, and many of the English elite, like Harold himself, would have witnessed Norman knights in action. It is hardly as if the English were not practised in the arts of horsemanship. They regularly used horses for rapid movement on campaign and in Anglo-Saxon society costly mounts were valued as symbols of status. Once on the field of battle, however, it was their practice to dismount. It is possible that this choice of tactic was related to their training in the main battle weapon they was best wielded on foot. However, of greater importance perhaps was the fact that the adversaries they most often encountered, the Danes or Vikings, themselves fought on foot, offering little incentive for the development of new tactics.

If the Norman Conquest brought with it a new way of fighting and an assertive new ruling elite, it also brought a new code of honour, a more humane set of values governing the conduct of war. With the Normans came chivalry in the sense of an aristocratic ethic of restrained behaviour, an assumption on the part of the elite that they would treat one another with respect. In the period to io66 the English had shown themselves exceptionally brutal in their treatment of losers in war and civil strife. Noblemen who found themselves at the mercy of their opponents had to reckon with the prospect of death or mutilation. By the late eleventh century that was not the Norman way of doing things. The Norman revolution involved not only a revolution in military technology; it also involved a revolution in the conduct of war. The English found themselves the beneficiaries of a medieval proto-version of the modern Geneva Convention.

The point can be illustrated by looking at two incidents which occurred soon after the conquest. The first took place at Dover when William was in the process of subduing the port after his victory.' On the arrival of the Norman army at the town the English defenders, demoralised by news of Harold's defeat and death, decided immediately to capitulate, despite the natural strength of the position they were defending. As they were about to yield, however, some Norman troops eager for booty set fire to the town. `The duke,' noted his biographer William of Poitiers, `not wishing those to suffer who had begun negotiations with him for surrender, paid for the rebuilding of their houses and made good their other losses; and he would have severely punished those who had started the fire if their numbers and base condition had not prevented their detection.' Duke William's name is not usually associated with compassionate treatment of the English in the years after the Conquest. In his conduct of hostilities, however, he behaved contrast to the standards which the English themselves had applied before io66. He imprisoned, but he rarely executed, and ensured the security of the non-combatants in his power.

The second incident occurred in io68 when William was subduing the last embers of English resistance in the West Country. The citizens of Exeter had risen in rebellion, rejecting his rule and refusing to give him their fealty. William immediately set off for the south-west, and the citizens, hearing this, sent a delegation to meet him and to offer hostages. As William drew near with his army, they had second thoughts. Worried about possible Norman retribution, they retreated behind the walls and resumed resistance. William, infuriated by this volte-face, ordered one of the hostages to be blinded in view of the defenders. The siege came to its inevitable end not long afterwards. Once William's men began mining the walls, the inhabitants knew that they would have to give in. Accordingly they surrendered, coming out with their books and treasures, and threw themselves on the king's mercy. William pardoned them, `refrained from seizing their goods, and posted a strong and trustworthy guard at the gate, so that the rank and file of the army could not break in and loot the city'.' William was simply applying the rules of war with which he had become familiar in Normandy. Once a formal surrender had been made, the citizens should be accepted into the king's peace and protected from pillage. There was no possibility that the Norman soldiery would be allowed to plunder and take booty.

The Normans' attitude stands in stark contrast to that of the English, who had always been used to taking the lives of those they had defeated in war. When Harold Godwinson had overcome Hardrada and the invading Norwegians at Stamford Bridge in io66, he put the fleeing survivors to the sword without mercy. A century before, his predecessors had acted in the same way towards defeated Vikings: the sequel to a pitched battle had invariably been wholesale slaughter of the survivors; there was no question of the exercise of mercy. The fact that the Vikings were usually pagan doubtless encouraged and, to some extent, legitimised this policy. Yet the English were no less ruthless in their treatment of their fellow nationals on the losing side in domestic disputes. Internal feuding and political competition were invariably accompanied by blood-letting.' In ioi6, when Earl Uhtred of Northumbria submitted to Cnut, offering hostages for good conduct, he was nonetheless executed. Twenty years later, when Alfred fEthling, (Ethelred II's son, was arrested by Godwin, King Harold's father, he was so badly mutilated that he died soon afterwards. In Io41, when Earl Eadwulf approached King Harthacnut under a safe conduct, the king broke the terms of his promise and had the earl killed. The conduct of English queens in their treatment of foes was no better. In Io64 Edith, Edward the Confessor's queen, had Gospatric, an enemy of her brother Tostig, tricked and killed at her husband's court. Brutality was woven into the fabric of Anglo-Saxon political life. Where the notorious King Ethelred had led, early in the century, with the St Brice's Day massacre of the Danes in England, his kinsmen and associates, English or Anglo-Scandinavian, followed. Such behaviour was part of the tradition in which English aristocrats had been brought up. It was their way of doing things.

But it was not the Normans' way. The Normans were no less rough, tough and aggressive than the English, yet they did not routinely resort to savagery in their treatment of well-born opponents. The reason is, in large part, to be found in developments which had occurred in continental warfare in the earlier part of the eleventh century. The nobility and knights were by this time beginning to appreciate the value of treating one another in such a way as to permit mutual self-preservation. The reason for this was, paradoxically perhaps, that on the continent warfare was far more widespread than in England. In northern France and the surrounding areas of Normandy, Brittany and Anjou at the turn of the millennium disorder was endemic. Lords and castellans were constantly fighting one another, jostling for supremacy, position and power. The extensive construction of practice unknown in pre-Conquest to more protracted campaigning as military outcomes were increasingly determined by drawn-out sieges. In circumstances like these it was in everyone's interests to agree a set of conventions which limited the impact of hostilities on participants and their followers. An escape route had to be found from what was rapidly becoming a Hobbesian world in which life was nasty, brutish and short. The informally agreed solution was to trade property, strategic assets or political favour against the grant to a prisoner of his life. Through the offering of something of value in return for mercy, an incentive was given to a captor to spare a prisoner in his grasp, although there was never any prospect of a nobleman thinking twice before thrusting a sword into someone of inferior rank to himself. But for those with assets to trade or favours to grant, the new arrangements had the appeal of combining financial gain with self-preservation.

Against this background, a body of conventions came into existence which limited the barbarism of war while allowing it to go on. Behind this development, however, lay a second change, one perhaps still more far-reaching: the rise of a money economy. A systematic regime of property later became only operate in a cash-rich society. In the early Middle Ages this had not been the situation in Europe. The supply of money was actually contracting, and in some parts of the continent there was a retreat to a barter economy. In the early ninth century, when Charlemagne had gone campaigning in Saxony, his aim had been to enslave captives: to make human beings his marketable commodity. By the late eleventh century, however, Europe had begun to turn the corner; the days of contraction were over and the economy was on the mend. Trade was expanding, new towns were being established, and the bounds of cultivation being pushed forward. People were buying and selling both locally and across long distances. In consequence, Europe was being transformed from a society of gift exchange into a monetised economy centring on market mechanisms. The effects of this seismic shift were felt not only in matters of consumption but in values and social customs. War could be absorbed into the workings of a monetised economy with benefits to all who took part in it. And because those who led in nobles and the social as well as the military elite, the effects were felt more generally across society. A new ethic was called into being which underpinned relations between the members of Europe's upper classes.

And yet, as an ethic, this proto-chivalry was not actually as new as it seemed. There were elements embedded in the code which long predated the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. The qualities of prowess, loyalty, courage and largesse, central to the later definition of chivalry, had been esteemed by Europe's warrior elites for centuries. In a sense they were universal qualities. In all societies which have been dominated by military elites, whether in Europe or Asia, it has been the heroic qualities associated with leadership in war to which the highest respect has been paid. The martial qualities which defined twelfth-century chivalry were precisely the qualities which had been celebrated centuries before in such poems as the Battle of Maldon, written c. iooo. They were not so different in character from the heroic values and brave deeds celebrated in Beowulf and the Scandinavian sagas. A key element in twelfth-century chivalry was the emphasis on a knight's loyalty, the obligation on him to stand by his lord, to fight with him to the death. It is precisely this quality which is captured in the Battle of Maldon. Faced by a Viking onslaught, the ealdorman Byrhtnoth dies surrounded by his military household, all of them preferring death to the ignominy of flight.

What was novel in the years around iioo was the grafting onto this ancient code of a range of qualities which softened and civilised the conduct of war. To the manly qualities of honour, courage and prowess were now added the humane ones of courtesy and magnanimity, mercy and generosity. A commander who in earlier times, having captured a castle, would have promptly despatched the garrison, now granted them their lives. Once a formal surrender agreement had been made he would allow the garrison free egress, release the castellan on condition of good behaviour, and grant the prisoners their freedom., in this way, he would win praise for his actions, enhancing his repute at the same time as encouraging imitation by others and promoting a currency of honourable conduct. The chronicler Orderic Vitalis, a perceptive observer of Anglo-Norman society, praised King William Rufus for going above and beyond the bounds of political prudence in his magnanimity to his enemies. Rufus's release of his enemy Helias of la Fleche in 1099 attracted the widespread admiration of those who wrote about his career.' It was considered a great act of courtesy.

A by-product of England's absorption into the emergent world of chivalry was to heighten the sense of difference between the English, or Anglo-Normans, and the non-English peoples of the British Isles. Before io66, socially and culturally the peoples of the British isles had all belonged to much the same sort of world. They all fought using the same tactics and the same weapons. Their warfare was marked by savagery and brutality. Their forces burned, raped and pillaged in campaigns of devastation. In battle, when they had rounded up their prisoners, they carried them off to slavery back home. Those whom they could not enslave they immediately killed or mutilated. They neither gave quarter, nor did they show mercy or humanity to the defeated or innocent. Internal wars were conducted according to the same rough and ready rules. When one side gained the edge over the other, victory was accompanied by bloodletting and mutilation.

By the twelfth century, when the Normanised English had renounced the inhuman methods of the past, the fighting of war in this way by the non-English peoples of the British isles struck contemporaries as barbaric. Of the conduct of the Scots on their invasion of England in 1138, Orderic Vitalis wrote, A ferocious army of Scots invaded England with the utmost brutality and gave full rein to their brutality, treating the people of the borders with bestial cruelty. They spared no one, killing young and old alike, and even butchered pregnant women by savagely disembowelling them with their swords.'' Another chronicler, Henry of Huntingdon, wrote in a similar vein, accusing the Scots of murdering pregnant women, impaling children on their spears and butchering priests at their altars. The Scots' conduct of war seemed to the English unnaturally cruel and barbaric. Their treatment of non-combatants caught up in hostilities came across as pitiless and scarcely Christian. The English chroniclers of the twelfth century began to articulate a new view of the Celtic peoples as culturally inferior to themselves. William of Malmesbury, a writer exhibiting all the condescension of the literati, saw them as barbarians who lacked the polish and civilisation of the English.

Back in the age of Bede, five centuries before, the Celtic peoples had been admired by the English for their cultural achievements. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries that was no longer the case: culturally and economically, they had fallen behind their neighbours. Wales, Scotland and Ireland lacked towns and cities, fairs and attributes of a developed economy. Its people were poorer and more shaggy-looking, and their houses mere hovels. The English were conscious of their own increase in wealth and material prosperity, and their Celtic neighbours seemed underdeveloped by comparison. In the highlands to the north and west the European monetised economy petered out, and in the non-English parts of the British Isles the infrastructure allowing for the ransoming and exchange of prisoners hardly existed. In England the attitudes and institutions of chivalry could develop; in the Celtic lands they could not.

The Rise of the Mounted Knight

If chivalry in one sense involved a revolution in the rules governing war, in another it involved a revolution in the actual fighting of war. Chivalry and the art of fighting on horseback went together. The words chivalry, cheval and chevalier are cognate, and chevalerie was the collective term which contemporaries used to describe a group of mounted knights. The richly accoutred knight was England's first cavalier. How had the rise of mounted warfare come about? And how did it lead to a social as well as a military revolution?

The earliest references to European cavalry warfare are to be found back in the sixth and seventh centuries in the lands of the Frankish kings. The Franks, unlike most of their fellow Germanic tribesmen, appear to have mastered the technique of fighting on horseback. As early as 507 reference is made to them deploying mounted units on campaign. In that year the Merovingian ruler Clovis published an edict regulating the taking of fodder and water for the use of his men's horses. In the eighth century mounted units were a regular feature of the forces of the Emperor Charlemagne and his father.

The emergence of cavalry encouraged the development of a social elite for one very straightforward reason: it greatly increased the cost of warfare, so that only the rich could then afford it. A mounted warrior needed a specially bred and that was expensive. Ideally, he needed a second horse, lest the first was killed beneath him. He also needed ample numbers of servants, stable boys and esquires to attend to his own necessities and those of his horses. There was a further factor: a warrior needed, above all, the leisure time to devote to regular training and exercise, essential if he were to master the difficult art of fighting on horseback. By the tenth century the knight's need for expensive, full-time training appears to have become so pressing that he was released from the daily grind of tilling the soil and was supported instead either by the grant of a piece of land, tilled by a dependent tenantry, or by the provision of residence in his lord's household.

By itself, however, the rise of this new method of fighting would not have led to the appearance of the body of attitudes we associate with chivalry. The art of fighting on horseback, as we have seen, originated well before the development of chivalry in its mature form. More than cavalry fighting itself, it was developments in combat tactics which provided the stimulus to the growth of a culture which enveloped knights in mystique. In the second half of the 1000s a new way was developed of using the lance as an offensive weapon.' Until this period the lance or spear had been used in any number of ways: it had been carried, gripped at roughly the point of balance, with the right arm extended, so as to deliver an underarm blow; it had been carried high in the air to deliver an overarm thrust, as shown in the Bayeux Tapestry; or it had been used as a projectile, hurled at the enemy from close quarters. To these well-established methods of delivery in the eleventh century was added a fourth: horse, rider and lance all gathered into what has been called a human projectile. Here, the knight, with his lance tucked tightly under his right armpit and his left arm handling the reins, would charge at his opponent to deliver a massive hammer blow at the moment of impact. If this lethal manoeuvre was to be effective, a much heavier lance would be needed; a light wooden lance would simply shatter on impact. The knight would also need a much more solid saddle bow if he were not to be swept from his seat by the shock of contact. All the essential weapon, saddlery and to have come together in the second half of the eleventh century. And when that moment arrived, the mounted warrior acquired an unprecedented level of destructiveness. He had become the Sherman tank of medieval warfare and commanded the marvelling attention of contemporaries.

At the same time, he found himself needing yet more hours of training and exercise. By the early twelfth century he was beginning to find these in tournaments. It is no coincidence that around the time that these developments were occurring we hear the first mention of these events. They were to become one of the central institutions of medieval chivalry, places where knights perfected their technique while simultaneously gaining in repute and developing a collective identity. The origins of tournaments are to be found in continental Europe in the late eleventh century. The earliest such events appear to have been held on the borders of France and the Holy Roman Empire in the area of Valenciennes and Tournai. In 1095, in what may be the first reference to such a gathering, Count Henry III of Brabant is reported to have been killed in a joust before his household and that of the castellan of Tournai, whom he was visiting. Early the next century, Count Charles of Flanders is said by his biographer to have enjoyed travelling to France with his knights to take part in tournaments in order to enhance his reputation and the power and glory of his county.

Tournaments may have come into being as a by-product of the so-called Peace Movement of the eleventh century. At a time when reformist churchmen were struggling to curb the lawlessness of fighters in areas where princely authority was weak, organised fights provided knights with a way of refining their skills while technically remaining within the letter of the law Early tournaments bore little if any resemblance to the carefully choreographed encounters of later centuries. They were serious battles fought between teams of a hundred or more knights on each side who fought until they had driven their opponents from the field. The word tournament, coined to describe such events, meaning `to revolve' or `to whirl around', conveyed exactly what they were like. After the initial change, the knights engaged in a heaving melee, using their swords to unhorse members of the opposing team. The rise of the tournament coincided almost exactly with increased use of the technique of charging with the couched lance. The rough and tumble of the tournament provided ambitious young tyros with precisely the training they needed to master this challenging tactic.

By the 1120s and 1130s tournaments were being held at sites all over mainland Europe and in England. The keenest of the young bachelors, like William Marshal, made their round of the tourneying circuit every year, showing off their prowess while perfecting their fighting techniques. As the men engaged and bonded with one another, so they developed modes of thought and habits of conduct which bound them together as a group. They established a brotherhood in arms which transcended the ties of lordship, family and ethnic identity. Tournaments can thus be seen as a key institution in both nurturing and sustaining the culture and the performance of chivalry. At the same time they introduced young knights to the role which money could play in the regulation of military conduct. Early in the history of tourneying a convention was developed that if a combatant was taken prisoner, he could secure his release by paying a ransom to his captor. It was also accepted that the captor was entitled to claim the armour and horse of his captive as legitimate spoils of battle. In these respects the conventions of tourneying precisely anticipated the conventions which came to apply in the conduct of war more generally.

A minority of those who made the round of the tournament circuit were wealthy aristocrats, the sons of kings or the lords of territories like Count Charles of Flanders. A much larger proportion, however, were men of lesser means who were looking to make a name for themselves. In earlier times, men of this sort would scarcely have been regarded as noble at all. They were considered merely `free', inferior in blood to the better-born aristocrats. Such jobbing soldiers might enjoy a limited distinction because they were skilled in horsemanship, something which raised them above those who fought on foot; however, they hardly warranted mention in the same breath as the grander knights. In the course of the eleventh century this situation began to change. The lesser - that is, the landless - knights rose in status and esteem, attaining a rough equality with their betters. This major social shift proved the precursor to the final stage in the evolution of merging of the greater and the lesser knights to form a single elite group defined by military leadership. When this last development occurred, chivalry in its fully developed form may be said to have arrived.

The gradual rise in status of the lesser knights can be traced in the changing use of fact, just two words, both of them miles meaning `knight', and dominus meaning `lord'. The one travelled down the social scale, while the other travelled up. In the eleventh century dominus moved rapidly down the scale. Originally used to describe members of the elite, by iioo it was being applied more widely, describing first barons and castellans and later mere knights. By the end of the twelfth century quite humble knights were described as witness lists to charters. Miles, on the other hand, travelled in the opposite direction. A classical Latin word meaning `soldier' entirely devoid of connotations of rank, it came to be applied to men who were considered domini. Miles was acquiring honorific associations which in earlier times it had lacked. As the martial values of prowess and courage with which it was associated spread throughout aristocratic society, so the title was applied to those in higher social levels. What this development indicates is that knighthood and social status were fusing together. The greater and the lesser knights were merging into a single group, clothing themselves in an elite identity which marked them from those in lower ranks.

Why the social elevation of the milites occurred is not altogether clear. One possible explanation is that it was linked to the spread of seigneurial castles across northern and central France, which was happening at this time. Castles were of little use to their owners unless they were staffed and defended by permanent and mobile garrisons. When members of the knightly warrior class took on garrison duty, they climbed a step or two up the social ladder. Typically these men were provided with board and lodging in the castle, and perhaps also paid a fee. Living in close proximity to the lord, they found something of that lord's superiority rubbing off onto them. In status, if not in economic means, they acquired a degree of parity with the older nobility.

The outward and visible sign of the formation of a single knightly class was its ceremony of admission. Knighthood, a form of chivalric Freemasonry, was equipped with its own initiation rite. The act of dubbing, or making, a knight is first recorded in the later eleventh century. Outwardly it had much in common with the ancient ritual of the delivery of arms to a young vassal on coming of age. Like the warrior of the early Middle Ages, the apprentice knight was invested by a senior knight or relative with a sword and belt, the symbols of his station. Around I065 a young Norman knight, Robert of Rhuddlan, was girded with a sword by King Edward the Confessor of England, at whose court he was living. In 1086 the future King Henry I, a younger son of the Conqueror, was girded with hauberk, helmet and swordbelt by Archbishop Lanfranc. In 1100 Count Fulk of Anjou was to recall how, at Pentecost forty years before, he had been girded with a sword by his uncle, Count Geoffrey of Anjou.

What distinguished the knighting ceremony from the established giving of arms was the semi-ritualistic character of the later event. It was much more than a coming of age. The most impressive knightings could be occasions of some grandeur. John of Marmoutier gives this account of the knighting in 1128 by King Henry I of a later Geoffrey of Anjou on the eve of his marriage to Matilda, the king's daughter:

On the great day, as required by the custom for making knights, baths were prepared for use. After having cleansed his body, and come from the purification of bathing, the noble offspring of the count of Anjou dressed himself in a linen undershirt, putting on a robe woven with gold and a surcoat of a rich purple hue. His stockings were of silk, and on his feet he wore shoes with little golden lions on them. His companions, who were to be knighted with him, were all clothed in linen and purple. He left his privy chamber and paraded in public, accompanied by his noble retinue. The horses were led, arms carried to be distributed to each in He wore a matching hauberk made of double To his ankles were fastened golden spurs. A shield hung from his neck on which were golden images of he carried a sword from the royal treasure, bearing an ancient inscription over which the superlative Wayland had sweated with much labour and application in the smiths' forge:°

A generation later, the English scholar John of Salisbury gave an idealised description of another knighting in his Policraticus (Statesman's Book). John saw his ceremony beginning in traditional fashion with the girding of the new knight `with the belt of a soldier'. At its climax, however, John introduced a novelty: John's knight was to walk in solemn procession to a church, where he would place his sword on the altar, dedicating both himself and his sword to the service of God."

It can hardly be supposed that all twelfth-century knightings took the elaborate liturgical form which John of Salisbury thought fitting. John's description represented more the aspirations of the ecclesiastical reformers of knighthood than day-to-day reality. For the most part, knightings remained firmly secular in character. On some occasions, however, they could be staged on a grand enough scale. Writing in the 1130s, Geffrei Gaimar was to recall a mass knighting which King William Rufus had carried out at the feast inaugurating the new Westminster Hall at Whitsun 1099. `The knighting was so splendid,' he wrote, `that people will talk of it for evermore. The king dubbed [men] in such style that the whole of London was resplendent with knights. And what am I to say about such a feast? Simply that it was so magnificent that it could not possibly have been more so.'12 By Gaimar's time the knighting ceremony was beginning to mark the knight's entry into a charmed circle, his admission into the company of the blue-blooded. The knight was no longer a jobbing soldier, a mere warrior; he was on his way to becoming a figure of standing and status.

In the mid- to late twelfth century all the elements which were to coalesce in medieval chivalry gradually came together. Nobility, knighthood and courtesy fused to create an aristocratic ethic which surrounded knights with charisma and mystique. In the early 1200S men actually began to talk about in about I22o an anonymous author could write of an `order of chivalry' (L'Ordene de Chevalerie). Chivalry was an aristocratic ethos which had its origins in the broad open landscapes of northern France and the Low Countries. In its embryonic form it was introduced into England by the Normans after io66. It was to attain its full flowering a century or two later in the cosmopolitan world of the Angevin and Plantagenet kings. In later medieval England it was to become one of the decisive influences in the shaping of aristocratic culture.