

'The' Chivalry

We state that we are oft greatly concerned, not with the actual military prowess of fighters on the field of combat, but with their "honour, courtesy and chivalry". To us living in the last decade of the Twentieth Century, these words refer to an essence of honour and knightly virtue associated with the best of the Mallorian ideals. Given that the SCA is such a pastiche of elements taken from every different place and time, we must ask ourselves if this is what was meant by these terms within our chosen SCA period. What were the people we hold up as heroes really like and how were they viewed by those around them?

Let us examine this institution of Chivalry, and some its real and fictional members, more closely. I am mainly looking at the English position, but a similar task is easy to do for other countries. For a start, the word "chivalry" has changed its meaning somewhat since the Middle Ages: "[I]n Chaucer's day (chivalry) was even more commonly used in a purely technical sense to denote cavalry officers or cavalry warfare in general" (Jones, 1984). Thus by referring to "the Chivalry" a period person oft referred only to "a mounted host".

The Pre-Feudal 'Knights'

Through myth and legend the exploits of various successor Roman and pre-feudal household troops have been transmogrified into knightly legend. "King" Arthur's deeds were moved from their true location in the north-east of England to accord with a desire to please a pseudo-historian's patron. Likewise his troops were changed from being either Sarmatian or Byzantine equipped heavy cavalry to the "true" knights of Mallory's time to reflect the undiminished glories of a past golden age and to help convey moral fables. St Gildas, writing almost contemporaneously to the Saxon invasion and Arthur, told the same fables of declining morals from a Legendary Past.

Likewise a sheep stealing raid on the Basques that went wrong was, through the intervention of storytellers, transformed into a valiant and desperate defence of Christendom from the Muslim hordes. The efforts of Charles Martel at halting the Muslim thrust into Europe became a needed boost to a Europe that was conscious of its own failures in this regard and the stories served to show that the great enemy could be beaten. Neither Arthur's nor Charlemagne's cavalry were knights, in any sense of the word. The medieval virtues attributed to this class were unknown (as a group) during the Dark Ages and they behaved (from what we know) no better, nor no worse than other warlords' household guard of the period - although generally they were more successful.

The Original Knights

In transferring the feudal system from Normandy into England, where it was brought to its peak and then re-exported to Europe, William I made "knights" of a motley collection of huscarls and mercenaries. They were farmed out across the countryside in a deliberate attempt to keep a lid on rebellions from the conquered Saxons. They were enfeoffed of small parcels of land, spread all over England, in an effort to minimise the risk of rebellion from these new knights. Their armour was simple and yet effective against the unarmoured and lightly equipped peasants. At this stage usual equipment was a horse (not yet highly specialized, but of good quality), a mail byrnie and a simple nasal helm and a shield. The military system of the unit known as a lance and the large number of required retainers had not yet evolved. The only "higher law" acknowledged by most of these men was superior force.

It was during this period that the Peace of God movement attempted to ban Christians fighting and killing Christians. Failing in this it began to lay down, under pain of anathema, rules of warfare. While these were usually ignored, some of them were taken on board as ideals (never met) of chivalrous conduct.

Most of the knightly exploits we have from this period consist of attempts to gain land and wealth, either at the expense of their neighbours, the Muslims or the Byzantines. Some of these attempts were cloaked in a pious garb, but allowing *gesta non verba* (deeds not words) to speak, their true motivations shine forth. While on Holy War in the Middle East the average Crusader indulged in massacre and rape. Even before they left Europe, their institution of the pogrom tarnished any claims to a special status. Where they gained land, they held on, establishing dynasties not possible in a land-hungry West and treating the conquered land much the same as Saxon England was treated.

The position in the Thirteenth Century

In England, the number of knight's fees (or pieces of land) was probably at no stage more than 6,500 (Denholm-Young, 1969: 84). With the increased cost of outfitting a knight since William I started the system, there is no doubt that this number (probably available soon after 1066) had declined to around 400 military knights. This figure peaked under Edward I (1272-1307) at around 500 due to an increase in the size of the King's Household (ie he carried the increased cost). This decline was so severe that the Counties had great

difficulty assembling Assizes (or Courts) and were forced to knight non-military persons (burgesses, Lord Mayors, Guild Heads, shire reeves and anyone with enough property). Without these measures (which increased the number of knights by around 1,250 - counting those too ill or aged for military employment) it would have been impossible to administer justice or conduct Parliament. Thus in the thirteenth century the noble, and military, knight was more likely to be analogous to a Pelican or Laurel than to those we now call knights. Outside England, there is no grounds to believe that the situation was any different (Contamine 1984). Note that a knight was paid 2s under John. Yet his costs were much higher. The actual knighting would cost around £36/10 (a year's wage), while a *dextrarius* (war-horse) cost £40 - £80 as opposed to the £5 of a sergeant's rouncey. Other equipment consisted of a surcoat, gambeson, mail hose and gloves, helm and, at least, partial plate.

This period marks the culmination of a continual attempt to instil "the Chivalrous virtues" in the Knightly class. The eminently practical reason for this was that a "true" knight was likely to be loyal to his overlord, unlikely to rebel and scrupulous in passing on taxes and in maintaining the privileges of their lord. As violence became gradually monopolised towards the State (in the person of the Crown), so attempts to civilise the military class increased.

Chaucer's Knight: a fourteenth century paragon

Many people hold up the Knight from the *Canterbury Tales* as an ideal model for aspiring people to follow. Jones (a historian before and after he was a comedian) exposes the fallacy of this. In a period when England was suffering invasion and continual threat, when the Kings were banning overseas travel (of any sort) so that they could defend their realm, this mercenary was always abroad, and never fought on the side of his King. His campaigns were in Spain, Turkey, Africa, Lithuania and Russia. He took part, not in the famous battles of the day, but in those notorious for the rapine and pillage associated with them. He worked, for pay, for Christian and Muslim alike (serving the latter sometimes against Christians). He sets out to kill in tournaments (three times) and has oft partaken of raids that make Dili pale into the small scale of massacres. Chaucer's description concentrates on the meaner of the knightly "virtues" (such as *franchise*) and tellingly fails to mention those regarded more nobly, such as *pitie* or *largesse*.

The Knight is a savage period parody on the growing trend to paid employment and the taking of the term 'knight' by those without the technicality of a knighting. The English knights abroad were viewed in the same fashion as today's English football hooligans - the worst of the worst - and it would be obvious to all of his readers that this is the behaviour that Chaucer refers to.

Later period knights

As the feudal period slid into modernity, so did the military knights change into merchant adventurers. Drake, Frobisher and Raleigh were licensed pirates sent out to trade, plunder and to grab land for an absolutist and dictatorial Crown. The individualism of the earlier knights had been tamed to the service of their tyrant. Despite this, rebellions were frequent and Elizabeth I kept her knights on a short leash (executing as needed pour l'exemple etc).

Conclusion

In this brief sketch I have indicated that the romantic visions we often have of knighthood are tarnished if exposed to reality. This does not mean that there were no loyal and true knights (William Marshal springs to mind), or even steady mercenaries (Sir John Hawkwood was just as bloody as Chaucer's Knight - but reliable and well regarded), whom we can hold as exemplars. We live in an age today where people are choosing the lifestyles and the images that they want to live by. We can actively choose to acknowledge the reality of our past and still accept the ideals (ignored and flawed as they are) that were handed on to us by Victorian romanticism and Tolkeinian fantasy. Seeing that the Kingdom of the West may have in it more active knights than Thirteenth Century England, we can choose to find our exemplars from amongst those who we see acting, not to a flawed historical model, but to those ideals we have chosen to endorse as being proper, courteous and right chivalrous within the context of the SCA.

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