

Korte bijdragen



CAPTIVES IN THE HEAD OF MONTESQUIEU

SOME RECENT WORK ON MEDIEVAL NOBILITY

In the 47th International Medieval Congress (10-13 May 2012) at Kalamazoo MI, an appropriately-named 'round-table' organised by the research network, Seigneurie, was devoted to 'Recent Perspectives on the Medieval Nobility'. Like most such sessions, it was an intellectually unsatisfying event. The panellists mounted their hobby-horses and rode off into the distance leaving only an obscuring cloud of dust behind them. But there were two trends in the discussion which were in their way revealing. The first was the consensus that the 1990s had brought a major shift in the study of nobility and the second was that the coming debate was about the nature of 'chivalry' as a definition of what nobility was. The 1990s was believed to be important because it saw the collapse of a long-standing perception of what had caused the rise of the medieval nobility. This was the 'feudal mutation' theory embedded in French work on aristocracy identified particularly with the many studies by Georges Duby (1919-96). By that theory, French society suffered an internal collapse around the year 1000, as a result of which the king of France lost power to regional princes. In turn, these princes began to experience problems in the next generation, as their own regional aristocracies erected castles and seized local power. The collapse went even further in some places, as in Duby's chosen study of the Mâconnais, where even local knights became castle-owning potentates, seizing independence and causing jurisdictional anarchy in their region. By this theory the rise of the Capetian monarchy in the thirteenth century was inevitable, as the prestigious monarchy of Philip Augustus had little local opposition to its financial power and prestige in the politically-fragmented regions.

As a theory, this 'descent of the ban' as I have characterised it elsewhere, is satisfyingly neat and comprehensive.¹ It went along with new expressions of noble culture said to emerge around the key date of 1000—ideas of lineage and knightly culture which characterised the new aristocracy of France, and which was soon to dominate all of Christendom. It also accounted for what was perceived to be new levels of violence in eleventh-century society and a French aristocratic diaspora, which it was claimed by Duby motivated the Crusades. It was a totalising 'theory of everything' that seduced much of French and American academia between the 1960s and 1990s. Its collapse was inevitable when it became clear that the assumptions on which it was erected were unsustainable. Duby's theory of the emergence of an idea of primogeniture around 1000, which produced the idea of a noble lineage, was based on nineteenth-century Darwinian ideas of family evolution which sociology had itself abandoned in the 1920s. Scholars like Constance Brittain Bouchard and Pauline Stafford had little difficulty in proving Duby's model to be unsustainable. Dominique Barthélemy could prove that castle-building by aristocrats happened well before 1000 and had nothing much to do with any collapse in society, and that supposed new levels of violence were a product of different forms of documentation and the polemic of an aggressive clergy.

So what did the round-table see as the new theory to account for the transformation in medieval ideas of nobility to replace that identified with Georges Duby? It had none to offer unsurprisingly. This was unsurprising as it had to be said that academics outside France had spent much of the 1980s and 1990s pointing out the yawning gaps in the mutationist theory.

Their role was to be critics not to offer new theories. This present decade is likely however to be a key one in how we study medieval aristocracy, and the first indications are that academia is not up to the task, regrettably. Having demolished Duby's superstructure, what was left was the core around which it had been built. This was the French tradition, going back to Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois* (1748) that what was characteristic about medieval society was its violent usurpation from the king of the power to command others and its consequent privilege in society. Medieval nobles were autonomous and violent, and wherever they took power, anarchy was the result until monarchy rallied and re-established public order. This 'feudal' state of society was therefore transitional between the public commonwealth of Rome and the rise of national monarchies. Strip away Duby's model and this reductionist idea is what it grew from. The older tradition of French scholarship was all about noble privilege and the violence which went with it. So even a historian like Duby's contemporary, Robert Boutruche, who was not a mutationist, focussed his work on the concept of *seigneurie* (lordship). Hardly surprising that with mutationism's disappearance, historians of medieval society are now talking once more about 'lordship'.

This is most clear in the recent book by the American scholar, Thomas Bisson. In the 1990s, Bisson was one of those most vociferous in defending the mutationist theory to the unconvinced Anglophone world. He has since reconsidered his position: a rare and commendable thing in a historian. His attempt to construct a new vision was laid out in his book, *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century* (2009). Its very subtitle is a pithy digest of Montesquieu's concept of *le gouvernement féodal*. Bisson's is no new vision, of course. The book is not an easy read, so it is not at all easy to work out what lies behind his thinking. The language can be as allusive and vague as Duby at his worst. It is also intensely solipsistic, for he takes account of no other theories than his own. But what are they? For all he cites Weber, Bisson is no social theoretician and what ideas can be attributed to him—though adorned by a vast reading of sources across Europe—are in the end simplistic. Like Montesquieu he looks to find the core single operating principle of medieval society. Like Montesquieu he finds it in intimidatory lordship at odds with the public authority of monarchy. So for Bisson when William the Conqueror of England confided public authority over the shire of Kent to his brother Odo, the new Norman earl could do no other than pillage it for the benefit of his feudal dependents and insensibly destroy the communal and official authority that was the inheritance of the old English state.² The resemblance to Montesquieu in this is no accident. For, as I said, strip away mutationism, and this primitive theory is all that is left behind. Bisson's gloss is to erect bureaucratic government as the principle that defeated predatory aristocratic lordship, which is no more than the way Duby understood the end of the mutationist arc in French medieval society.

Is predatory 'lordship' the single operating principle at the heart of what we understand medieval society to be? What is lordship? The word is thrown around in medieval scholarship almost as readily as 'feudalism' once was, and to as little purpose. It is meaningless as a model of how a society could function: a conceptualisation devised for the concept-averse, an absurd reductionism. 'Lordship' is a liquid that can fill a variety of shapes of glass. When someone exerted authority over a realm, a region, a baronial estate, a village, or several houses in a town, it was in Latin *dominium* or in French *seigneurie*. The only commonality to it is that all these diverse social entities looked to one man (or occasionally, woman) for direction and paid for the privilege in one way or other. 'Lordship', as an attempt to explain society, begs so many questions is likely to be fatal to any future discourse, because, like 'feudalism', each historian who uses reads his own meaning into it, and so maroons himself on his own solipsistic island.

As an example of this solipsism, one only has to see how Bisson deals simplistically with the enforcement of lordship. Intimidation might very well have stood behind the exercise of lordship in many cases, particularly when someone wished to extend his lordship, but it was also erected on custom, consent and at least an appearance of legal process. It is this last point on which Bisson has long been criticised. Medieval European society was as disputatious as any other, but

alongside a tendency to argue, sometimes violently, it was also geared to dispute settlement and to the minimalisation of the inconveniences that went along with conflict. Both Dominique Barthélemy and the American legal historian, Stephen D. White oppose this force to Bisson's simple mechanism.³ If violence was the key to medieval society it makes no sense as a society; it would be only the anarchy that Montesquieu implied it was. Physicists cannot make sense of the universe without suggesting the unseen presence of dark matter to explain its complications. Medieval historians cannot make sense of medieval society without taking into account a whole range of forces acting upon it: social, economic, legal, communal and statist. This is the way forward that I suggest in my recent book on the English aristocracy (2011), which deals with a realm for which the medieval sources are vast enough to gain a real insight into its complexity, the way France in general is not.

The session at Kalamazoo of 12 May 2012 threw up one other reflection, in the way it circled round the subject of 'nobility' as an important one. I think that the reflection was justified. The progressively more articulate conceptualisation of what noble status was is an undeniable feature of medieval sources between 1100 and 1300, not least its ideological framework of chivalry. Since the 1980s there has indeed been a good deal of reassessment on the way that the self-conscious aristocratic code which we call 'chivalry' appeared. The most notable contribution was Maurice Keen's *Chivalry* (1984), which established that chivalry was a new phenomenon in society in the first generation of the thirteenth century, and for all that it had antecedents, it appeared quite late in the Middle Ages as a code of conduct which could be taught to aspiring aristocrats. Chivalry was idealistic: it demanded high moral standards and ethical conduct towards the disadvantaged and weak in society. The chivalrous man turned his back on luxury and parade, embraced hardship and pursued high standards of loyalty and honesty. For all that the reality of knighthood was different, and that aristocratic conduct could be decidedly pragmatic (as commentators have been in the habit of observing from the eighteenth century up till Terry Jones's study of Chaucer's knight) the chivalric ideal remained powerful and had a demonstrable impact on male conduct from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries across Western Europe.

The year after Keen's study, the American Germanist, C. Stephen Jaeger, published independently his *Origins of Courtliness*.⁴ The book was interested in patterns of conduct in Imperial Germany in the three centuries before the appearance of chivalry. Following the humanistic tradition of early twentieth-century scholarship, he presented a construct of self-consciously modified behaviour designed to secure favour at the imperial court, as evident amongst senior clerics and aristocrats as early as the reign of Otto III. In his case, Jaeger derived the precepts of this pragmatic code from the world of Classical humanism, most notably from the rediscovery of Cicero's *De officiis*.⁵ The revolutionary nature of Jaeger's discovery was to historicise 'courtliness' (Lat. *curialitas*, Fr. *courtoisie*, Occ/Cat. *cortesía*) as a set of pragmatic social skills appropriate for the great in society before their sovereign. He saw it spreading out from Imperial Germany, into Occitania and then northwards, to become a major contributor to the evolving chivalric code by the end of the twelfth century.

These two influential studies have subsequently shaped debate about what noble conduct was in medieval society, but it might be said that they raised as many questions as they resolved. Maurice Keen (unlike Jaeger) was interested only in the mature code of chivalry and its manifestations. As far as origins went, he offered few reflections other than those nineteenth-century scholarship had thrown up: the academic study of chivalry had been moribund since Léon Gautier's *La Chevalerie* (1884). Jaeger, on the other hand, was looking for origins and concentrated on Germany, drawing his evidence in particular from the genre of ecclesiastical biographies. Subsequent studies (including my own) have discovered early signs of a culture of courtliness in different places, notably in the Anglo-Norman court of the late eleventh and early twelfth century, though this has by no means undermined the value of his model.

The state of play at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century is that social historians of the Middle Ages juggle uneasily with two models of conduct, each with its own validity and difficulties. 'Chivalry' appeared as a didactic model of laudable conduct for the lay aristocrat in the generation on either side of 1200, when the most uncourtly John was king of England (which was one reason why his contemporaries loathed him so). Military historians however persist in calling any behaviour which looks like the way thirteenth-century knights behaved, 'chivalric'. So when warriors withheld their hands from their fellows, even in the pre-chivalric eleventh century, they are said to have been 'chivalrous'.⁶ This anachronism has been the practice since the first historian of chivalry, De la Curne de Sainte-Palaye in the 1740s, so one can hardly complain that it is not unprecedented, however confusing it may be. Indeed, it points up a serious problem in the current analysis of noble conduct. When it appeared, chivalry united in itself numerous strands and traits thought by society to be desirable and each having its own long back-story. Courtliness is one such inheritance from the pre-chivalric past—though the most complex and sophisticated instance of it. How then can we satisfactorily account for the genesis of chivalry and hence the formulation of conscious nobility in medieval society? It is a major historical question. Chivalry is a manifestation of that supra-national movement I have recently suggested produced the characteristic society of the medieval and early modern West sometimes called the *ancien régime*, where one's public espousal of social ideals of nobility was thought sufficient to demand deference from lesser social cadres.⁷ Chivalry encapsulated those ideals.

Again—as with social organisation—when we look at its social ideals we find an extraordinarily complex medieval world. If we are ever to advance in our study of it, historians have to strive to be as subtle in our reconstructions of its ideals, aspirations and structures. Not to do so would be to give into the crudeness of the Marxist explanation for society and social change as explicable by a dominant group's control of economic resources. This itself derived from Adam Smith's eighteenth-century gloss on Montesquieu's social theorising. Contemplating the recent work on medieval aristocracy by a range of scholars based in England, it is clear that the rudderlessness evident at Kalamazoo is just as evident in British universities. A range of recent works are still grimly rooted in traditional English historiography: the feudal model espoused by Sir Frank Stenton, or the bastard feudal one postulated by K. Bruce McFarlane. The British unawareness of wider historiographical issues is quite a contrast to American historiography. Where it deals with France, which British work rarely does, the approach is still rooted in the post-Duby world of the 1990s. The recent tendency amongst some historians to hail Bisson's work as a revelation is deeply depressing, for what it reveals most clearly is the limitations of British postgraduate training. There is this at least about the regretful conclusion of this article that history is not advancing (as Duby says it is). In this case, at least it is countering the pervasive historical myth of progress.⁸

David Crouch

¹ D. Crouch, *The Birth of Nobility. Constructing Aristocracy in England and France 900-1300* (Harlow, 2005) esp. 191-198. For another key critical work, see C.B. Bouchard, *Strong of Body, Brave and Noble. Chivalry and Society in Medieval France* (Ithaca NY, 1998). I would like to thank Richard E. Barton and Colin Veach for allowing me to bounce ideas off them in writing this paper. They are not responsible for any ideas contained within it.

² For the Kentish analysis, T.N. Bisson, *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century. Power, Lordship and the Origins of European Government* (Princeton, 2009) 175-178. For a detailed critique of the problems in the book's conceptualisation and epistemology: H. Hummer, 'Were the Lords really all that bad?' *Historical Methods*, XLIII (2010) 165-170.

³ See the notable debate featuring Timothy Reuter, Dominique Barthélemy and Stephen D. White, 'The Feudal Revolution' *Past and Present*, CLII (1996) 196-223; CLV (1997) 177-195.

⁴ C.S. Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness. Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals, 939-1210* (Philadelphia, 1985). The title acknowledges a debt to Norbert Elias's, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (1939). The start date of 939 was selected to reflect the career of the emperor's brother Brun, an archetypal courtier archbishop.

⁵ Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness*, 115-119.

- ⁶ D. Crouch, 'Chivalry and Courtliness. Colliding Constructs', in: P.R. Coss and C. Tyerman, ed., *Soldiers, Nobles and Gentlemen. Essays in Honour of Maurice Keen* (Woodbridge, 2009) 32-48.
- ⁷ D. Crouch, *The English Aristocracy, 1070-1272. A Social Transformation* (New Haven, 2011) 247-250.
- ⁸ For examples see C. Burt, 'A "Bastard Feudal" Affinity in the Making? The Followings of William and Guy Beauchamp, Earls of Warwick, 1268-1315', *Midland History*, XXXIV (2009) 156-80; C. West, 'Count Hugh of Troyes and the Territorial Principality in Early Twelfth-Century Western Europe,' *English Historical Review*, CXXVII (2012) 523-548.



NEW DEPARTURES IN THE HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL ENGLISH ARISTOCRACY

David Crouch, *The English Aristocracy 1070-1272. A Social Transformation* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2011, xviii + 348 p., ill.); Nigel Saul, *For Honour and Fame. Chivalry in England, 1066-1500* (London: The Bodley Head, 2011, xiv + 416 p., ill.)

For those concerned that medieval history may be devolving into a series of stale sub-disciplines, impenetrable to non-specialists and patrolled by the militias of theory, the two books under review supply cause for optimism. Both are written by prose stylists at the very height of their game. Both are intended to entertain as well as to inform. Both grapple with large and important issues. Neither would claim to be a definitive 'solution' to a series of problems. Rather, they open up their subject to debate. That subject is what David Crouch himself defined, in a groundbreaking monograph published in 1992, as *The Image of Aristocracy*. Both authors agree that, from some time in the second half of the twelfth century, aristocracy was transformed. A new ethos pervaded the lay elite. The category of 'nobleman', 'magnate' or 'prudhomme' was widened to include the more significant of the English knights, previously regarded as subservient mechanicals of the English war machine. At the same time, a barrier was established, severing the upper levels of earls, barons and knights from those of lower status. Knighthood itself became a 'noble' phenomenon, and the number of men in England defined as knights declined from more than two thousand to perhaps as few as four or five hundred. The losers in this process of stratification devolved into that most English of social phenomena, 'the gentry'. The winners were henceforth 'the aristocracy'.

Part of this transformation was acknowledged by an earlier generation of English historians, albeit that its causes and processes were interpreted in rather different ways. As Nigel Saul reminds us, there has long been a debate over the emergence of 'chivalry', accompanied by detailed studies of the arts of war, of the expression of knightly piety, of crusading, and of a supposed upheaval in the relation between landholding and military service. Through to the 1980s, this debate was dominated by ideas of 'feudalism' (a word now banned from polite discourse), in which a 'proto-feudal' tenth and eleventh century yielded place to a 'high' feudal twelfth, and in turn was succeeded, from roughly the 1280s onwards, by something for which Charles Plummer, and later Bruce McFarlane, coined the term 'bastard' feudalism. This tripartite system was of politico-economic construction, heavily influenced by the ideas of Marx and Engels, and in England firmly tethered to those bastions of political history, the Norman Conquest of 1066 (which ushered in knights, castles and the knight's fee, the chief symptoms of 'high' feudalism), and the military revolution of Edward I's reign (geared towards warfare in Wales and Scotland, producing the indentured contract for service, the decoupling of military service from landholding, armies serving for wages rather than honour, and all of the other characteristics of 'bastard' feudalism).

As Crouch and Saul are both aware, the periodisations and categorisations here have long been ripe for revision. The Aristotelian formalism of 'proto', 'high' and 'bastard' feudalisms will not survive detailed frontier inspection, any more than it is possible these days to draw clear and precise distinctions between other such tripartite systems, between the 'Palaeolithic', 'Mesolithic'