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Unravelling the complex history of chivalry, heraldry and warfare

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Robert W. Jones and Peter Coss, eds, *A companion to chivalry* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2019, 338 p., ill., index); and Philip J. Caudrey, *Military society and the Court of Chivalry in the age of the Hundred Years War*, Warfare in History (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2019, 227 p., index)

Among the rich historiography of nobility studies, no subject can claim to have received the same amount of attention as chivalry. Ideas about chivalry are key to our understanding of the origin of the European nobility in the Middle Ages, and are relevant to a range of specialisms, from military history and the history of violence to heraldry, medieval literature, gender studies, and environmental history. The two books examined here are testimony to the enduring scholarly interest in this fascinating subject. Even though the different formats, an edited volume and a monograph, imply different ways to approach the subject, they are also very similar, for they both focus on connections between chivalry, warfare, and heraldry.

A companion to chivalry aims to give both an overview of the field, and suggest new lines of inquiry. According to the publishers' website it 'will be invaluable to the student and the scholar of chivalry alike'. The volume includes fifteen chapters, aside from an introduction, and covers a wide range of subjects, including warfare, tournaments, heraldry, arms and armour, chivalric orders, landscapes, literature, gender relations, and continued importance of the concept after the Middle Ages. The contributors, many of whom are recognized authorities in the field (e.g. Richard Barber, 'Chivalry in the tournament and *pas d'armes*', Helen J. Nicholson, 'The Military Orders') certainly deserve credit for explaining complicated topics in a limited number of words while also devoting attention to geographical diversity. Aside

from the common emphasis on developments in England and France, the book incorporates references to the Low Countries, Germany, Spain, Italy, Outremer, Austria, Bohemia, Hungary, and even Byzantium.

Taken as a whole, however, the volume feels unbalanced. There is a strong focus on violence in different shapes and forms (warfare, tournaments, feuds) as well as heraldry, with other aspects of chivalry receiving comparatively little attention. In the last decades much research has been done on human-animal relations (horses, dogs, and falcons), emotions, and the history of the body in connection to medieval chivalry. One cannot help but feel that these subjects could have received more attention in an edited volume that claims to provide both a synopsis and develop new insights. It is of course never possible to cover everything, but the editors could at least have given these themes a passing nod.

152 By trying to do two things at once, the editors also risk leaving behind those who would have benefitted most of their work: students and others unfamiliar with the concept of chivalry. It would have been helpful, for instance, if the difference between ‘chivalry’ and ‘knighthood’ was properly explained at the start of the volume. Now the introduction just provides a summary of each contribution, while the first chapter gives an overview of English and French historiography on chivalry. The editors’ reluctance to provide an explicit definition is understandable given the lack of an academic consensus, but a more extensive attempt to clarify distinctions between social status (knighthood) and codes of conduct (chivalry) could have made the book more accessible.

To a certain extent, this absence of a clear theoretical framework can be considered emblematic for a more general lack of interest in socio-economic issues. Notions of chivalry cannot be separated from noble lifestyles and conspicuous consumption, but this volume has relatively little to say about the harsh socio-economic realities underpinning the phenomenon. During the late Middle Ages the number of noblemen who were able to attain knighthood declined significantly, but many of these men would still have carried arms, and considered themselves part of the chivalric community. Chivalry is by its very origin closely connected to knighthood, but that does not mean that only knights were expected to live by its standards, or conversely that all knights exhibited such exemplary behaviour. Many contributions in this volume engage with these issues, but it would have been even better if they had already been mentioned at the start of the book.

Military society and the Court of Chivalry in the age of the Hundred Years War adopts a more focused approach, and contributes to a growing body of literature on the Court of Chivalry, as well as the history of late medieval English gentry. The Court of Chivalry was an English military court, headed by two senior officials, the constable and marshal, and dealt with disputes regarding the law of arms, from treason to conflicts over captives and coats of arms. This monograph examines the only cases (*Scrope v. Grosvenor* (1385-90), *Lovel v. Morley* (1386-7) and *Grey v. Hastings* (1407-10) of which the records have been preserved more or less completely from the perspective of military service, political affinities, local networks, and chivalric memory. The main object of the book is to connect the English gentry’s regular (rather than permanent) military service in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries to their political and marriage alliances in order to demonstrate the existence of regional communities and identities. All three court cases concern conflicts over the right to

carry a particular coat of arms, and participants mobilised their full network of supporters to support their claim. By specifically analysing these three court records, the author can connect regional gentry communities and networks to a more general culture of 'chivalric memory'. The appendix provides valuable overviews of the deponents' collective military records, Lancastrian retainers, and biographies of the main actors.

These three court cases are relatively well known. The *Scrope v. Grosvenor* testimonies were published as early as 1832 and have been a popular source of examples and quotes for scholars of chivalry because the numerous personal statements allow modern readers to get closer to medieval realities. In order to prove their right to carry the disputed arms both parties called upon numerous witnesses who had seen the arms displayed by themselves or their family on military campaigns or in other public spaces, such as churches. The main value of this work lies in the fact that it is the first book-length study of these three very rich court cases. There is still the issue of representativity – the great majority of cases brought before the Court of Chivalry have not been preserved – but the author skilfully avoids that problem by directing his attention to what these three trials reveal about gentry networks and memory culture.

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Unfortunately, the methodological approach leaves much to be desired. The author declares that he adopts an 'eclectic' approach to the subject, but in practice this seems to be merely used as an excuse to throw together some related statements on late medieval English gentry on the basis of these three court records. He claims, for example, to offer a new perspective on military service by focussing on the second phase of the Hundred Years War (1369-89), which supposedly has been neglected by medievalists, but at that point the text does not refer to Adrian R. Bell's *War and the soldier in the fourteenth century* or *The soldier in later medieval England*, written by Adrian R. Bell, Anne Curry, Andy King, and David Simpkin, which look at exactly this period. Similar doubts can be raised about the novelty of considering the interplay between England's regional military and county communities ('Lancastrian affinities') as well as 'vertical' and 'horizontal' networks. Andrew Ayton has published several influential contributions on the concept of 'military community', including recruitment networks, and this book merely confirms his conclusions.

The most original part of the monograph concerns 'chivalric memory' (132-179), a theme that has been largely ignored by scholars of chivalry. The three court cases examined provide particularly rich evidence on this subject. Still, even here the author could have said more about existing scholarship on the importance of oral traditions in witness testimonies as well as the significance of heralds and heraldic memory to chivalric culture. These 'war veterans' after all spoke about their experiences in the specific context of a heraldic dispute. The connection between witness' testimonies on the one hand and chronicles and knightly biographies on the other (136-137) is a sound one, but the author does not take into account that many of these narrative works were also written by heralds. Heralds not only compiled rolls of arms and wrote narrative works, but one actually testified in the *Lovel v. Morley* case.

Another and no less serious concern is the lack of terminological clarity: the first chapter speaks about 'English military society' (27) without properly explaining what this term means. The conclusion uses the alternative 'gentry military society' (185). The generally accepted term among medievalists when referring to military service in the late medieval Eng-

land is ‘military community’ or ‘military communities’. Questioning established concepts is perfectly legitimate, and should be encouraged, but critically assessing established theories is not what this book does. It simply uses a different terminology, without any explanation, and to make matters even more confusing the expression ‘England’s national “military community”’ does appear in a later chapter (157), and here the author seems to indicate that ‘English military society’ encompasses multiple ‘military communities’. Equally problematic is the repeated reference to ‘civilians’, a word that few scholars familiar with medieval warfare would use without at least some explanation. The term ‘civilian’ is only meaningful in opposition to ‘military’, but during the Middle Ages there was no strict dividing line between those serving in armed forces and general society. A real distinction did exist, however, between combatants who received wages (‘soldiers’) and those that did not.

These critical remarks do not diminish the very real contribution these two books make to the study of medieval chivalry. The emphasis on chivalric memory and the interplay between social, cultural, and political-military aspects of the phenomenon of chivalry stimulates further research. *Military society and the Court of Chivalry in the age of the Hundred Years War* and *A companion to chivalry* are well worth reading for anyone interested in the subject, and will undoubtedly encourage others to become involved in this thriving field.

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