

Peter Coss, Robert W. Jones, A Companion to Chivalry, Woodbridge (The Boydell Press) 2019, 340 p., 8 col., 18 b/w ill., ISBN 978-1-78327-372-0, GBP 60,00.

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The concept of chivalry has received considerable attention from scholars for well over a century, and from enthusiastic amateurs for much longer than that. However, despite many valiant efforts by historians such as Sidney Painter, Maurice Keen, and Richard W. Kaeuper, there is still no definition of chivalry that satisfies the epistemological requirements of necessity and sufficiency. In large part, this is the case because chivalry was not one thing, but rather was used in many different contexts by many different writers, both medieval and modern, to mean a host of things. The express purpose of this collection of essays, enunciated in the introduction by Robert Jones, one of the two editors, is to illuminate the wide variety of scholarly approaches to the concept(s) of chivalry across several different fields.

The first essay by Peter Coss, the other editor of the volume, is intended to provide readers with a historical introduction to the origin, development, and diffusion of chivalry across Europe. Coss begins by explaining that the lack of a definition for chivalry is due to its evolving meaning over time. He then turns to an explanation of the supposedly military origins of chivalry, which rest on a series of hoary chestnuts long since debunked by specialists in military history. The first of these false premises is the supposed emergence of a mounted warrior elite, date uncertain, brought about by a supposed military revolution in which cavalry forces came to dominate the battlefields of Europe. In this discussion Coss ignores several long-established realities regarding warfare in medieval Europe, including that fact that the majority of men with professional military training and skill, including mounted troops, were never part of the aristocracy, and concomitantly that the majority of aristocratic men never made a profession of military service. In addition, warfare throughout the medieval millennium was dominated by sieges in which mounted troops, of whatever economic and social status, played only limited roles.

Coss points to the half-century between 1180–1220/1230 as the key period in which chivalry attained its maturity, on the basis that »knights« became part of the nobility. This argument is based on the transition in the semantic field of the term *miles* from soldier, and particularly a man who served as a soldier as his primary profession, to »knight« in the modern sense of someone differentiated not only socially and economically, but also legally, from the great mass of the population. This transition is clearest in England during the reign of King Henry II (1154–1189).

However, this transition in the semantic field of a particular word did not represent a change in the underlying social and, particularly, military organization of society. Rather, Henry II



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imposed a series of new legal and financial obligations on men who met a specific set of economic criteria, and used the term *milites* to describe them. Tellingly, the royal government then found it necessary to introduce a new set of terms, including *armigeri*, *scutiferi*, and *servientes*, to denote the mounted and armored fighting men, who fell below this economic level. It was not military service, even military service on horseback, that made one a »knight« but rather economic and concomitant social status.

The next article, by David Simpkin, dealing with the organization of »chivalric society« focuses on the monarchies in western and central Europe and begins with the unobjectionable observation that there existed a commonality of interest between the ruler and his leading subjects. He then adds that the essence of chivalry had always resided in the shared values of the king and aristocracy. These shared values of chivalry, he argues, were focused on a military ethos, and particularly of demonstrating martial prowess. He concludes that successful kings were those who acted within the paradigm of accepted chivalric values, such as leading from the front.

However, the examples that Simpkin offers to support this contention, including the Christian rulers in Iberia and particularly Edward I in England, do not seem to be apropos. As ruler, Edward I, the supposed paradigmatic exemplar of the chivalric king, never led from the front, and preferred to grind down his enemies in Wales and Scotland through the mobilization of vast armies of foot soldiers drawn from the shire militia forces. For their part, the Christian kings in Iberia relied far more on the military forces of the frontier towns, as demonstrated long ago by James Powers, than they did on knights and other aristocrats.

The next two essays by David Green and Helen Nicholson consider, in turn, secular military orders raised by European kings, particularly in the 14th century, and the religious military orders, including the Templars and Hospitallers, who had their origins in the 12th century. Green offers a brief survey of the leading secular orders, including the Knights of the Garter, the Company of the Star, and the Order of the Golden Fleece, and argued that they served an important role in supporting the interests of the ruler. Nicholson begins with a survey of the history of the religious military orders, and then offers a comparison of the differing styles of life and expectations of the »knights« in the military orders and their secular contemporaries. Among the most important differences, identified by Nicholson, was the ostensible sublimation of the innate desire of »knights« in the military orders to demonstrate their individual martial prowess in order to serve the needs of the collective, whereas secular »knights« routinely sought outlets to gain personal renown and prestige. It is questionable, however, whether such a generalization regarding the behavior of mounted fighting men in western armies, whether they were aristocrats or men of low social and economic status, is valid.

In the fifth essay, ostensibly dealing with the organization of the »chivalric elite« for war, Robert Jones begins by asserting that in contrast to the socio-political organization of the »chivalric elite«, we know very little about how they organized themselves



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for military purposes. Jones does not bother to define the term »chivalric elite« in this context, which leaves the reader with the impression that »chivalric« has taken on some of the burden of the now discarded term »feudal« as a stand in for something that is medieval and archaic. Jones, consistent with his earlier work on medieval warfare, tends to rely on entertainment literature, such as romances, to justify the claim that specialists in medieval military history are incorrect to use modern concepts such as training, discipline, and unit structure to describe »chivalric« armies. Contrary to the state of the question among military historians, Jones presents medieval combat as essentially disorganized, and driven by the desire of »chivalrous knights« to gain personal renown. In making this claim, however, Jones does not actually discuss the battles, and much more importantly, the sieges, in which discipline, training, and unit cohesion are manifest.

The next study, by Peter Sposato and Samuel Claussen, focuses on »chivalric violence«, which again is not defined other than as violence committed by men involved in some undetermined way with chivalry. The two authors begin by asserting that the core tenets of chivalry were prowess and honor. They then posit a social hierarchy in which the »chivalrous« looked down on townsmen and peasants as lacking in honor. In this context, however, Sposato and Claussen ignore the central role played by both townsmen and small landed proprietors in the conduct of war throughout the medieval millennium.

They continue by arguing, consistent with several of the other essays in this volume, that warfare was the *raison d'être* for the chivalric elite, again without defining this group, or addressing issues such as the need for medieval rulers to compel their wealthy and socially elevated subject to fight through restraint of knighthood, and to introduce fines, such as scutage, for their failure to serve. Following this general introduction, the authors turn to a more focused treatment of »chivalric violence« in the city-state of Florence and in the kingdom of Castile. They conclude from an analysis of entertainment literature that the views about and practice of violence by the chivalric elite in Florence was fundamentally different from that of other Florentines. Similarly drawing on romances, they emphasize the importance of embracing holy war by Castilian knights.

Richard Barber's essay on chivalry and tournaments offers a respite from the generalizations of the previous two chapters by examining the much more concrete phenomenon of the development of the tournament. He observes that although war games intended for the training of men to serve in battle can be identified in narrative sources from the early Middle Ages, the tournament was a different kind of activity, which emphasized sociability and the opportunity to gain renown as well as basic military skills. Barber argues that the first concrete evidence for tournaments is from the early 12th century.

He points to the biography of William Marshal, composed as an epic poem while the great English baron was on his death bed, as our most important source for this early period. Barber then traces the development of the phenomenon of the tournament, which became an event for wealthy men to gather and compete



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against each other for sport. Barber concludes this chapter by arguing that the tournament was at the heart of chivalry because it represented the material incarnation of concepts about the elite that were presented in the entertainment literature for the elite in society.

The subsequent chapter, the second by Robert Jones, examines the development of the practice of heraldry and the institution of heralds. Jones argues that both heraldry and heralds emerged coterminously with chivalry in the mid-twelfth, and experienced a rapid standardization of a system of visual signs by the end of the 12th century. Jones situates the origins of heraldry on the tournament field, and argues that both the tournament and heraldry grew from the performative nature of chivalric culture. He concludes in this vein that: »For the follower of chivalry, the field of battle was little different from the tournament field. Both were a stage on which deeds of prowess might be performed« (p. 157).

The next two essays by Ralph Moffat and Oliver Creighton turn to a discussion of chivalry as seen through the prism of material culture. Moffat offers a survey of medieval weapons, drawing some information from surviving exemplars as well as administrative documents, but mostly from late medieval manuals of chivalry and handbooks. His assertion that the sword was the chivalrous weapon *par excellence* is consistent with the presentation found in late medieval books on chivalry, but not with the lived reality of medieval warfare. When one takes into account archaeological materials, military ordinances, accounts in narrative histories, references in law codes, as well as inventories of arms, it is clear that the sword was used by men from all social strata. For example, the territorial peace (*Landfrieden*) issued by Emperor Frederick Barbarossa in 1152 specifically states that *rustici* were permitted to carry their swords when traveling outside of their home villages.

Creighton focuses on »chivalric landscapes«, and draws on a variety of sources, including archaeological finds, manuscript illustrations, and descriptions in entertainment literature to describe the variety of topographical features that were created by wealthy individuals around their country estates, including water parks and gardens. Creighton also considers the construction of temporary topographies that were used to host tournaments. Overall, Creighton does a good job of illustrating the wide variety of landscapes created by aristocratic property owners, and observes that given the very fluid contemporary understanding of chivalry, the values associated with this construct at any particular time provided only one of many ingredients in the decision making process of aristocrats when designing the landscapes of their estates.

The one jarring note in Creighton's study was his assertion that there was a type of pre-cartographic medieval way of seeing that did not permit individuals from conceptualizing all of the aspects of their created landscapes at one time. This claim certainly would have come as a surprise to the designers of the famous plan of St. Gall in the early 9th century or to the authors of countless word maps that fill the leaves of charters throughout pre-Crusade Europe.



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The eleventh study in this volume, by Louise Wilkinson, is focused on »Gendered Chivalry«, and seeks to challenge the historiographical consensus that chivalry served to enforce male domination over women by placing the latter in the role of either protected or desired object. She argues instead that women had a central role in chivalric culture. This central role was, in Wilkinson's view, multifaceted and included attendance at tournaments and the wearing of heraldic emblems on their person. She also argues: »The transformation of knighthood into a noble order and marker of elite rank in the twelfth and 13th century served ladies' interests as members of lordly families« (p. 228).

However, this argument is based on a false premise, namely that the men who were compelled to accept the legal status of knighthood, were not already socially and economically superior in the period before the late 12th century. Wilkinson presents the additional argument that the association of virtue with chivalry gave allowed women to participate in the chivalric ethos. However, in this case, Wilkinson does not address the very old tradition of associating virtue with proper feminine behavior, and therefore does not explain how the supposed rise of chivalry in the late 12th century brought any change at all. Overall, the information presented by Wilkinson does not appear to support her contention that women served a role in chivalric society other than as the objects of protection and desire identified by earlier scholars.

The following study by Joanna Bellis and Megan Leitch offers a refreshing view of chivalry by emphasizing that whatever expectations, practices or cultural value systems we associate with this construct, all of these categories drew on literary depictions, whose creators sought to influence an audience of chivalry consumers. Bellis and Megan provide a valuable overview and survey of a range of literary genres that propagated ideas of chivalry, including chronicles, romances, and epics. They also point to the genre of satire, whose practitioners mocked many of the supposed conventions of chivalry, that run through the pages of other genres as well as some of the essays published in this volume.

In the next essay, Matthew Bennett's examination of manuals of warfare and chivalry provides a very useful corrective to the claims by Jones regarding »chivalric forces« in warfare, discussed above. Bennett correctly observes that we do have considerable information about the operations of military forces, including mounted troops, in combat that necessitated a high degree of training and discipline. He points, in this context, to the ongoing production of military manuals in the medieval period, such as Rabanus Maurus' updating of Vegetius' »Epitoma rei militaris« for use in contemporary times. He also observes that Vegetius' text continued to be copied, adapted, and cited throughout the high and late Middle Ages.

In addition to his observations regarding specifically military manuals, such as Vegetius' text, Byzantine treatises, and the »Rule of the Templars«, Bennett also draws attention to associations such as chivalric orders, which he argues provided much of the same content in terms of military instruction to their members. However, specialists in military history likely will not accept Bennett's



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argument the *corpus* of entertainment texts known as »Chansons de Geste« were designed to improve military techniques, and that they had the same didactic impact as military manuals.

The final two essays by Matthew Woodcock and Clare Simmons consider, in turn, the problem of the »end of chivalry«, and conversely the revival of chivalry in modern times. Woodcock, who focuses his attention on Tudor England, observes that authors from the 12th century onward can be read to complain about the current behavior of »chivalric« figures and bemoan the loss of a putative golden age. He points in this context to the complaints by Peter of Blois (1130–1211) that the *milites* of his day enjoy showing off their fancy equipment but have no desire to fight. In light of these ongoing complaints, Woodcock properly asks whether there ever was a golden age of chivalry. He then turns to a discussion of the efforts by the Tudor rulers, including Queen Elizabeth, to revitalize activities, such as tournaments, long associated with chivalry and the concomitant criticism by humanist authors of this martial-centered discussion of virtue.

Simmons brings the discussion of chivalry into the modern age, and points to the revival of interest in chivalric behavior and ideals in the late 18th and early 19th century, with a focus on architectural developments, and particularly literary odes to the chivalric life. Simmons quotes the acidic comment by Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), that it was Sir Walter Scott's depiction of *Ivanhoe* that brought southern gentlemen farmers to adopt a chivalric veneer and thereby led them inexorably into the American civil war. Although Simmons argues that Clemens went too far in making this claim, she does agree that the putative ethos of chivalry did play a large role in the self-conception of the ruling elites in the United States and Britain in this period, and did not really come to an end until the horrors of the First World War. She concludes the essay with observations about the ways in which concepts of medieval chivalry and violence have been adopted in modern popular media, including films and video games.

As the discussion here of the individual essays suggests, the quality of the arguments presented in this volume varies considerably. Those scholars who begin with the false premise that military affairs in medieval Europe were organized around an aristocratic warrior elite or that knighthood was an essential element of the conduct of war inevitably are led astray. By contrast, those scholars who understand that chivalry, in all of its manifestations, has its origin as a series of literary tropes derived from popular entertainment literature, provide useful insights regarding the ways in which some individuals in some places sought to make life resemble art.

Specialists in the history of the late Roman Empire as well as its early medieval successors are well aware that aristocrats fashioned behavioral norms that were intended to exclude others as well as highlight their own superiority. These norms always included a respect for men with significant military accomplishments. These norms of aristocratic behavior co-existed with a reality in which all free men had military obligations, and even unfree men were honored with vassalage and equipped with warhorses, arms, and armor. These realities were no less present in the



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high and late Middle Ages. The time has long since passed when modern devotees of chivalry recognized that this construct(s) was no more part of medieval warfare than »Apocalypse Now« or the »Rambo«films are an accurate portrayal of modern military practice.



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