Part I

AN APPROACH TO CHIVALRY: WAS IT REAL AND PRACTICAL?

Standing securely upon its spur of rock above the Charente River in south-central France, the castle of Verteuil seemed impregnable. A French force under the duke of Bourbon was besieging the castle in 1385 as part of a campaign to sweep away garrisons of *routiers* who, though formally aligned to the English crown, were simply robbing and devastating the countryside for their own profit.[1] To attack this formidable fortress, the duke relied on two classic siege techniques: he bashed parts of the defenses with stone-throwing machines (leaving several projectiles embedded in the fabric for later discovery by archaeologists), and he cut mines under the walls to topple them (and traces of these, too, have been found). The defenders had to endure the missiles, but knew how to respond more actively to the mines: they dug counter-mines, eventually intersecting the advancing tunnels of the besiegers. Armored men fought in these cramped tunnels as torches cast fantastic shadows of their hacking and thrusting figures on the chiseled rock walls. One chronicler, Jean Cabaret d'Orville (who wrote about the duke of Bourbon under the patronage of the ducal family), tells that the duke himself, wanting a share in the danger and glory, descended into the mine with a few close followers and, gripping ax and sword, battled a defender named Regnaud de Montferrand. The duke's identity remained deliberately hidden until, in the heat of combat, one of his excited followers suddenly

[1] Philippe Contamine provides a guide to various forms of military recruitment in *War in the Middle Ages*, trans. Michael Jones (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 150–165.

shouted out his lord's war cry, "Bourbon! Saint Mary!" Hearing these potent and revealing words, Regnaud, a nobleman who was an unknighted squire, dropped his sword, fell to his knees, and offered to hand over the castle if only the duke would knight him, for this would be the greatest honor that could come to him.[2] At least this is Jean Cabaret's account. Another chronicler, the famous Jean Froissart, says simply that the garrison surrendered after their leader was fatally struck by one of the massive stone projectiles flung at the fortress.

How can modern investigators understand these conflicting narratives of the capture of Verteuil and make sense of the chivalric culture they apparently reflect? Did Regnaud cheerfully surrender a strong base (from which plundering raids had sustained his band) in return for the honor of being knighted by a great lord? The modern conclusion might hold that the colorful narrative is merely an invention or that, if accurate, the actions it described remain puzzlingly impractical. Accustomed to thinking of leaders bent over maps far from the front lines, we may ask if the great duke was eager to risk his own life in a cramped underground passage for the sake of glory and adventure. Yet our sense of possibilities might be stretched by Geoffrey le Baker, a mid-fourteenth-century English chronicler who insisted that during the early phase of the Hundred Years War the duke of Lancaster acted in the very manner attributed to the duke of Bourbon.

> [Lancaster] was often fighting in underground mines, dug to overthrow towers and walls. He met strong counter attacks from the brave defenders and fought hand to hand against the besieged and in these same mines he made both Gascons and Englishmen knights, a thing unheard of before.[3]

Some modern readers will maintain an unshaken belief that Froissart's plain version of events conveys more information about what happened at Verteuil, though he was assuredly capable of recording

[2] For Cabaret's account, see A. M. Chazaud, ed., Jean Cabaret d'Orville, *La Chronique de le bon duc Loys de Bourbon* (Paris, 1976), 149–154; for general information on this castle and the physical results of the siege, see the article by the Marquis de Amodio printed in *Memoires de la Société Archéologique et Historique de la Charente* (1985), available online at andre.j.balout.free.fr/charente(16)_pdf/verteuil_chateau003.pdf.

[3] *The Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker*, David Preest, trans., introduction and notes by Richard Barber (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 68.

colorful stories in his own chronicles.[4] Other modern romantics will be enthralled with accounts by Cabaret and Baker for their seeming irrationality, and will welcome colorful alterity as an antidote to gray modernity. Yet either view trivializes chivalry by declaring it fanciful and divorced from real life with its serious business of war and loot.

The central issue, of course, is not whether such particular combats by a French or an English duke took place but whether hardened medieval warriors in general acted on such chivalric motives (or believed they should do so). To argue the contrary, to make a case for the seriousness and practicality of chivalry, even when possibly embedded in storybook incidents, we need not – indeed, cannot – determine the factual accuracy of many hundreds of incidents, such as the conclusion of the siege of Verteuil, centuries in the past. Obtaining truth quotients from a vast roster of such incidents would be impossible and could, in any case, never calibrate a scale for the importance of chivalry as a historical force. We will come closer to success by seeking to understand why chivalry was so important to influential medieval people; for virtually every medieval voice we can hear accepts a chivalric *mentalité* and seems anxious to advance it (and often to reform it toward some desired goal) as a key buttress to society, even to civilization.

What quickly becomes apparent is the striking compulsion to read the world in chivalric terms; for Cabaret's and Baker's insistence on the presence and power of such motives and gestures is scarcely unique or even unusual. Portrayals of men similarly moved by chivalric ideals on campaign, in battle, and in courtly gatherings appear regularly throughout chronicles, biographies, handbooks, treatises, and the entire corpus of chivalric literature. This overwhelming mass

[4] Though in this instance Froissart's account may seem good factual reporting, his massive chronicle in general famously portrays men animated by chivalric motives to perform colorful gestures through bold feats. For scholarly analysis, see John Bell Henneman, "The Age of Charles V," in *Froissart: Historian*, ed. J. J. N. Palmer (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1981), 46–49; Craig Taylor, *Chivalry and the Ideals of Knighthood in France during the Hundred Years War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); C. T. Allmand, *Society at War: The Experience of England and France during the Hundred Years War* (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 1998), 185: "Froissart, the 'Chronicler of European Chivalry,' who was probably less interested in the military aims of the war than with recording the opportunities which war gave to individuals, especially to those nobly-born, to perform fine deeds, thereby bringing both honour to their ideal and reputation to themselves."

of evidence presents real or fictional incidents like the scene in the tunnel, each described in exuberant language. Moreover, the incidents may not all be invented. Grand chivalric actions are documented by what seems secure evidence. Even the grim battlefield could generate scenes and incidents that seem lifted from the pages of romance. To take only one classic example, the great Castilian knight Don Pero Niño sent to his lady love the twisted and bloodstained sword he had used in combat, its edge toothed like a saw from striking mighty blows.[5] This battle relic would have made a more suitable gift than the severed genitals of Simon de Montfort sent by one of his enemies to that victor's wife after Montfort was killed at the battle of Evesham in 1265.[6] Aspects of tournament from the very real world of the twelfth century made their way into description of that sport in romance literature, where they were splashed with even more color and adorned with symbolism that, in turn, affected historical tournament practice.[7]

The elite military function glorified in chivalry may sometimes have adopted fancy dress and embraced flashy gesture, but it was obviously recognized as crucial within its society; chivalry emerged and matured in a hard world well aware of dangers from enemies, some at a distance, some quite close at hand. The medieval lay aristocracy developed as a warrior caste in response to these conditions and opportunities for advancement. Though never the sole element of military force, and rarely even the most numerous body of fighters, knights were crucial to military success; and they knew that their military performance was likewise crucial to their social success. Any doubts will vanish upon reading the immensely practical

[5] The action took place near the city of Ronda in the kingdom of Granada, and his biographer says, "His sword was like a saw, toothed in great notches, the hilt twisted by dint of striking mighty blows, and all dyed in blood. Later Pero Niño sent this sword by a page to France, with other presents to my Lady of Serifontaine" (Evans, 196). The original language is: Gutierre Díaz de Gamez, *El victorial*, ed. Juan de Mata Carriazo (Madrid, 1940): "e la su espada toda mellada, e sacados grandes pedazos della, e la espiga torzida, de los grandes que avía fecho con ella, e toda bañada en sangre. Esta espada envió él después a Franzia, con otras joyas, por vn donzel, a madama el Almirallap" (292).

[6] *Metrical Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester*, vol. 2, ed. W. A. Wright (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1887), 765.

[7] Larry D. Benson, "Tournament in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes and L'Histoire de Guillaume le Marechal," in *Chivalric Literature*, eds. Benson and John Leyerle (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976).

questions about the division of loot and the profitable matter of ransoming prisoners posed in the *Questions for the Joust, Tournaments and War* composed by the great fourteenth-century knight Geoffroi de Charny for the royal French Order of the Star.[8]

Yet we will need to look beyond combat and see in chivalry a wide and working set of ideals and ideas. Social markers essential to establishing status bore a clear chivalric stamp, a fact well known to all with ambitions to rise in the medieval world. Chivalry in fact provided the *esprit de corps* for the laity in this world; it framed not only war and peace, but status, acquisition and distribution of wealth, the practice of lay piety, the elevated and elevating nature of love, and ideal gender relationships, among much else. Its ideals and practices, in short, performed crucial societal work that was far from fanciful or merely silly, but rather was fundamental. The evidence and the argument of this book are meant to sustain such a case. Of course the color and exuberance of chivalry and even its hyperbolic spoken language and enacted gestures will surely strike us, but they cannot mask the consequential work being accomplished. To say so much is not to admire, nor to condemn; but understanding how chivalry functioned at the core of medieval society for half a millennium remains an important task of analysis. The first chapter of this section seeks to cut a path through the thickets of romanticism to reach authentically medieval chivalry, and then emphasizes the practical role of that chivalry within its society. The second chapter turns to the useful evidence that can be extracted from the careers and writings from several model knights.

[8] Michael Taylor, "A Critical Edition of Geoffroy de Charny's *Livre Charny* and the *Demandes pour la joute, les tournois et la guerre*." (PhD dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1977); Steven Muhlberger, trans., *Charny and the Rules for Chivalric Sport in Fourteenth-Century France* (Union City: Chivalry Bookshelf, 2002).

I

THE REALITY OF MEDIEVAL CHIVALRY

Chivalry may sometimes seem to slip through our fingers and separate into discrete spheres. This quicksilver quality may tempt scholars to jettison use of the term altogether, considering it too fragmented to sustain meaning. This view, emerging from understandable impatience with sweeping generalization, resembles what medieval philosophers would have termed nominalism with its focus on specific phenomena alone as having meaning, while the general, classifying category is granted no genuine existence. Adopting this view, martial or honor culture might be granted existence in particular traits, attitudes, and acts, but an overarching idea of chivalry would be thought to fail to catch anything general for historical analysis.

Yet the very term *chivalry* was continually and confidently spoken and written throughout half a medieval millennium. Not all the terms we employ as modern scholars studying those centuries can make this claim to reality in the society they are meant to describe. Feudalism as an abstract noun is a modern construct intended to encapsulate basic aspects of medieval society; but it was not a word used in the Middle Ages and has caused seemingly unending debate among scholars.[1] Chivalry, however, was a term used reflexively by medieval people from the late eleventh century and the twelfth century through the

[1] See, for example, Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "The Tyranny of a Concept: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe," *American Historical Review* 79, no. 4 (1974), and Thomas Bisson, *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century: Power, Lordship, and the Origins of European Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

remainder of what we consider the medieval period and beyond. It was their term. They thought it could and should convey important meaning. Their reliance on the term sets our goal of understanding what it meant to them and why they used it.

If some scholars imitate nominalists and avoid the term as overly general, other scholars avoid the term for nearly opposite reasons. They would grant that the values we analyze in chivalry were real, but insist that in fact the ideas or behaviors we are observing in certain medieval centuries represented nothing more than the eternal warrior code. In this view, how warriors think and how they act remain at base a constant, and this enduring code represents what is truly important in scholarly analysis: doughboys in the First World War, Greek hoplites, Native American dog soldiers of the Plains, Carolingian *milites*, Japanese samurai, high and late medieval knights – all were a part of the grand procession of warriors whose essence is not dependent on specific social and cultural context of time and space.[2]

It does seem likely, of course, that classes of warriors in all ages necessarily shared certain qualities worth study. One theme of this book, however, builds on the crucial importance of context. We need to understand the fit of medieval European chivalry with other institutions and ideas of that time and to analyze its development as a response to specific problems and opportunities within its centuries. To reduce chivalry merely to one exhibit in the long museum case illustrating men at war is, for the medieval historian, an act of surrender; it gives up the vast importance of a chivalry inextricably interlinked with other formative and motive features of medieval civilization, and closes a wide and essential window on the medieval past. If chivalry can be read as a part of an eternal warrior code, it remains a specific and essential feature of medieval Europe. Analyzing some persistent warrior code over millennia may produce useful results, but it is a very different enterprise from that undertaken in this book.[3]

If the term must be allowed, can we define it? Medieval people who promoted and practiced chivalry did not regularly define it concisely. Apparently they thought it did not require definition.

[2] Steve Morillo discusses the issues in "Milites, Knights, and Samurai: Military Terminology, Comparative History, and the Problem of Translation." Available on the website Academia.edu.

[3] These themes are also discussed in R. W. Kaeuper, *War, Justice and Public Order* (Oxford, 1988) and *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 1999).

Scholars have, however, long recognized three clusters of medieval meaning in surviving sources.[4] Chivalry could, first, denote deeds of great valor performed by arms bearers. The great fighter on some battlefield, historical or imagined, who carved his way through ranks of his foes, cracking helmeted skulls like walnuts, would be breathlessly praised for the chivalry he has *done*. In a second meaning, the collective body of knights present for any action might themselves be termed chivalry. A lord who asked how much chivalry his enemies possessed would likely be inquiring about the number of armored and mounted warriors to be faced, rather than the degree to which they followed some code. Little controversy troubles these meanings of chivalry, though less attention has been paid to them than they deserve.

If these first two meanings are straightforward, the third meaning does turn attention, dauntingly, to formative concepts. A medieval speaker or writer can use the term *chivalry* to convey an accepted or desired set of ideas and practices. All writers assume that elite warriors, wherever their homelands or life spans, are joined in a great community, share common views, and act in ways understood to be appropriate and praiseworthy – or at least have some idea that they should do so. Violating these standards, it is regularly claimed, will bring dreaded shame in all courts.[5] Significantly, such ways of thinking and being are often assumed to be clear, almost as if they were a part of the natural order; at other times principles are spelled out more explicitly in an attempt to encourage thought and behavior that will meet some societal, cultural, or religious imperative. Medieval commentators constantly sought to elevate elite practitioners and, at least among the more thoughtful, to delineate highly desired goals. Being a knight did not imply a military rank such as lieutenant or captain; rather, it – in time – placed an arms bearer within a vast body of men through time and space who were of elite status and admired fighting capacity

[4] Usefully discussed in Jeremy Duquesne Adams, "Modern Views of Medieval Chivalry," in *The Study of Chivalry: Resources and Approaches*, ed. Howell Chickering (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1988).

[5] E.g., *History of William Marshal*, ed. A. J. Holden, S. Gregory, and D. Crouch, trans. S. Gregory (Anglo-Norman Text Society, 2002–2006), 104–105, 130–131; Marjorie Chibnall, ed., trans., *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, bk. X, ch. 10 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969–1980). The deterrent is likewise regularly common in imaginative chivalric literature.

and who (as we will see) shared at least a core of ideals and behaved in an accepted manner.

Discussion, debate, and contention could only be expected to surround such a body of men and ideals. So powerful a social, cultural, and military force inevitably spurred concern and argument then as well as now; reform ideals stirred within their own ranks as well as among outsiders. Idealists and reformers were sufficiently realistic to recognize the need for strong sword arms to create and sustain the social order they ardently desired and that they thought was desired by God. Reform plans to direct and channel knightly force fill treatises and appear in works of imaginative literature that contribute no small part of our surviving evidence. Read carefully, these works can provide priceless evidence on knightly behavior and advice directed to practitioners.[6]

No known suit of armor included an ironclad pocket to accommodate a handy tome laying out "The Code and Settled Rules of Chivalry." We must avoid the notion of a rigid and singular code or detailed list of inalterable practices, set forth once and always and everywhere agreed upon and enacted. Rather, we will analyze a more nuanced social construct. Significant continuity across time and space can indeed be found; as we will see, an important core cluster of common values and agreed practices persisted widely. Yet these core notions were surrounded by cultural discussions and ideals advanced by advocates and reformers reacting to the exigencies of their age. Precisely how chivalric ideals applied to specific and complex situations in life inevitably varied by region, over time, and with pressing particular circumstances. As a formative force in a vibrant society, chivalry can scarcely be captured in a single sentence or paragraph of definition written by some medieval reformer or adept modern scholar; even the most valiant efforts would likely fail to

[6] R. W. Kaeuper, "The Social Meaning of Chivalry in Romance," in *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. R. Krueger (Cambridge University Press, 2000); "Literature as the Key to Chivalric Ideology," *Journal of Medieval Military History* 4 (2006). The argument of these studies emerged from reading of Old and Middle French literature and Middle English literature. A similar case can be made for Middle High German literature, both for the seminal works of Wolfram von Eschenbach and Hartman von Aue and for the Nibelungenlied. As Francis G. Gentry says of all this German literature, "the poet forces his audience into a dialectic confrontation with its own ideals and their inadequacies." "Key Concepts in the Nibelungenlied," in *A Companion to the Nibelungenlied*, ed. Winder McConnell (Rochester, NY: Camden House/Boydell, 1998), 66.