

French chivalry in twelfth-century Britain?

John Gillingham



A depiction of *mêlée* at a tournament in the *Codex Manesse*.

The year 1066 – the one universally remembered date in English history, so well-known that banks advise customers not to choose it as their PIN number – opened the country up to French influence in spectacular fashion. During the ‘long twelfth century’ (up to King John’s death in 1216) that followed the Norman Conquest, English society was transformed while one French dynasty after another came to power: the house of Normandy in 1066, the house of Blois in 1135, and the house of Anjou (the Plantagenets) in 1154. England received a new francophone ruling class and a new culture. The new elite kept their estates in Normandy where their well-established connections across the porous land frontier gave them easy access to the Ile de France, the Loire valley, Flanders and the Rhineland. They sent their sons to be educated on the tournament fields and in the schools of northern France, many of them in Paris, Europe’s leading university. Until John lost Normandy and Anjou in 1204 the king of England, as duke of the Normans and Aquitanians, count of the Angevins, ruled a territory four times the size of that ruled by the king of France. A series of ‘southern’ French queens, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Isabella of Angoulême, Eleanor of Provence, stimulated the royal court to make purchases of sugar, rice and almonds, and of oriental spices such as cumin, cinnamon, cloves, ginger, nutmeg and saffron. Cultural, commercial and political contacts with the Mediterranean world, as well as with France and the Rhineland, were now on a scale not seen since the days, seven centuries earlier, when Britain had been a province of the Roman Empire.

Some of the developments of this period are well known. Castles and cathedrals, still prominent in the landscape today, exhibit design features which reveal the inspiration of continental models, mottes for example, and the shift from Romanesque to

Rochester Castle with its keep, shown from the north-west. The photo clearly shows its proximity to Rochester Cathedral. Photo courtesy of Clem Rutter



Gothic in church architecture. Well-known too, and plainly a result of French influence, is the transformation of English. The new elite, calling their vernacular *romanz* (i.e. roman), initially looked upon English as a barbarous language. French by contrast was, as one author put it, the language *'de gentil home'*. But their grandchildren came to think of themselves as English, and spoke English as well as French. No doubt this was the consequence of ordinary day and night contact between a ruling minority and the English-speaking majority, above all English women as mothers and nurses. But the ability to speak French offered so many advantages that it did not remain exclusive to the ruling class and wannabes. The syntax and vocabulary of English was dramatically altered in a way that is explicable only in terms of widespread bilingualism. In some fields such as law, administration and war a whole new vocabulary was created. The acquisition of over 10,000 French words in the centuries after the Conquest meant not only a doubling of the size of the English lexicon, it also created a language more receptive to further borrowings from French and Latin in subsequent centuries. In this sense one of the victors of the Battle of Hastings was English.

In the shorter run one of the great consequences of the use of French in England was to make an insular society much more open to a Europe-wide aristocratic culture. Before 1066 works had been written in English across an impressively wide range of genres. But they were not read outside England. Literature in Latin and French, by contrast, had a much greater reach. Latin was, and remained until the seventeenth

century, the language of the learned; French the *lingua franca* of the princely courts of Europe, a cosmopolitan world which stretched as far as the crusader states in *Outremer*, 'the land beyond the sea'. Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin *History of the Kings of Britain*, composed at Oxford in the 1130s, established the court of King Arthur as the setting for some of the finest works of European secular literature. It was immediately turned into French verse by Geoffrey Gaimar at the request of Constance fitz Gilbert of Lincolnshire. Gaimar's version was soon overtaken by a better one by Wace, a poet for the royal court, who composed his *Roman de Brut* in the 1150s. Wace not only added the Round Table to the Arthurian mix, he also had Sir Gawain proclaim that 'it's for love and for their beloved that knights do knightly deeds' – words unlike any heard in earlier European literature. The imagined world of rulers such as King Arthur or Mark of Cornwall was the setting for a new kind of literature: the prose romance. The romance, with its emphasis on elegant manners and polished speech, leading to the coining of words such as *courtoisie*, offered models of behaviour for men and women in peace as well as war. The central theme was not the old one of war and conquest, but the individual's search for personal fulfilment through prowess, courtesy, loyalty and love – values which could be, and sometimes were, in tension as in the famous cases of Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Isolde. As the genre in which passionate love became the moving force in the hearts of individuals this was an enormously influential literary genre, the forerunner of the novel.



Tapestry of King Arthur, c. 1385, bearing the coat of arms usually attributed to him: three gold crowns on blue.

Slavery and enslavement

In other ways too, both men and women were to find their lives transformed during the next century. Most fundamentally this was as a consequence of the dying out of slavery. Remarkably this post-1066 social change has been almost entirely forgotten, partly because at the time it went very largely unrecorded, and partly because it was followed by serfdom, a condition which in the eyes of many subsequent historians was almost as bad. But while it is true that serfs could in effect be sold,

it was as a package which included their families and the ground on which they were tenants; slaves could be separated from their families and bought and sold as individual items. Slaves, moreover, unlike serfs, were often acquired as part of the plunder seized during the raids which made up the terrifying bread-and-butter routine of war in almost all early human history. The dying out of this form of total war, a change we might call the rise of 'chivalry', is another of these unnoticed changes. Can these profound social changes also be ascribed to French influence? Or were they home-grown, generated out of internal developments within English society?

Take the case of slavery. Slaves made up about 10% of the population recorded in Domesday Book (1086). Enslavement was the punishment for some offences. At times of famine, the threat of starvation led to parents selling children into slavery. War remained a major source of slaves. Domesday Book records the toll to be paid on each slave sold at Lewes (Sussex) market. In France by contrast slavery, although as such never legislated against, had died out by 1066. The Norman Conquest was the first in the history of Britain that did not result in more slaves for sale. For a while many new French lords retained the slave work-forces they took over from their English predecessors, but it is clear from the Domesday Book entry for Essex which, uniquely, records slave numbers for both 1066 and 1086, that slavery was declining. English-born churchmen had long opposed the export of slaves but it was the foreign archbishop whom William the Conqueror imposed on the English church, Lanfranc of Canterbury, formerly abbot of St Stephen's Caen, who persuaded the king to ban the trade. The last council of the English church to feel the need to prohibit the slave trade met in 1102. For William of Malmesbury, who lived through the change, slavery had been a detestable part of English society on the eve of the Norman Conquest.

The common people were oppressed by the powerful, some were even sold abroad. One particularly unnatural practice was that many of them got their female slaves pregnant and then, having sated their lust, sold them to public prostitution or into slavery abroad.

Slave-owners, especially when contemplating death, continued the ancient charitable practice of freeing their human property, and the decline of the slave trade made it increasingly hard to find replacements. At a time of rising population and increasing labour

supply other forms of labour became a more attractive proposition. Lawrence of Durham, writing in the 1130s, noted slavery's passing in England:

After England was ruled by Norman lords the English no longer suffered from outsiders that which they had endured at their own hands. In this respect they found that foreigners treated them better than they had themselves. Meanwhile in Scotland and Ireland, where the natives are still the lords, the old custom of slavery continues, though on a lesser scale.

Outside England too rulers who wanted to be regarded as modern came under pressure to end enslavement. To all appearances slavery had died out throughout Britain and Ireland by c.1200.

In Ireland and Wales, as on the continent, the process went entirely unrecorded. But for Scotland, one English writer, Richard of Hexham, provides a little evidence. In his description of a Scottish invasion of England in 1138 we read:

They carried off their plunder and the women, both widows and maidens, stripped, bound and roped together they drove them off, goading them with spears on the way. After their captives had been shared out with the rest of the spoil, some Scots were moved to pity and freed some, giving them to the church of St Mary in Carlisle. But the Galwegians and many others took their share away with them. These bestial men think nothing of adultery, incest and other crimes. After they had tired of abusing them in the manner of brute beasts, they either kept them as slave girls or sold them on to other barbarians in exchange for cattle.

The powerful propagandistic strain here makes it tempting to dismiss Richard's account, but evidence from other parts of Europe indicates that for as long as societies found slavery acceptable, so they also accepted the slave raid, and the terrifying military logic of a type of warfare in which human beings were regarded as desirable items of plunder. In Richard's words:

...they killed husbands in front of wives, the sick on their beds, women who were pregnant or in labour, babies in their cradles or at their mothers' breasts, and sometimes they killed the mothers too. They slaughtered worn-out old men, feeble old women, anyone who was disabled.



12th century portrait of Lawrence of Durham as writer.



The Angevin Empire c.1175; solid yellow shows Angevin possessions, checked yellow Angevin hegemony.

In practice if women and children were to be seized and rapidly removed to places where they could be held securely, it was necessary to kill not only everyone who put up a fight, hence the slaughter of men, but also anyone who got in the way – those categories of persons who could not be turned to profit but whose lamenting, clinging presence would have slowed down and endangered the operation.

The English and the Scots, it should be remembered, had been Christian for many hundreds of years before this. Disturbing as the thought may be, it appears that in Britain and Ireland, just as in ancient Greece, people could combine a sense of belonging to a common culture (whether Christian or Hellenic) with a readiness to fight fiercely against different polities within that same culture: adult male captives being killed and women and children dragged off as slaves. The mid twelfth-century biography of the Welsh prince, Gruffudd ap Cynan, praises its hero for ravaging and burning the land of his enemy – another Welsh prince – and for carrying wives and daughters off into captivity. This appears to be the pattern of war characteristic of many early societies, the Iliad and the Old Testament providing the most famous examples. Consider Moses and the Israelites in the land of Canaan.

They warred against the Midianites as the Lord commanded Moses, and they slew all the males; and the children of Israel took all the women of Midian captives, and their little ones, and they took spoil of all their cattle, and all their flocks and all their goods.

(Numbers 31: 7-9).

Whatever happened to these captives later – and some no doubt were assimilated into the society which took them – they had been violently carried off and their families had suffered the slaughter that went hand in hand with enslavement. As recently as the eleventh century the English had themselves been a slave-owning, slave-trading, slave-raiding people, and they had taken this kind of thing for granted. Once they had abandoned slavery, however, they regarded such practices as barbarous and wrote passionately about them.

Richard of Hexham's narrative also reveals one of the pressures being brought to bear on the Scots. The papal legate, a French-born monk named

Alberic, former abbot of the great monastery of Vézelay, met King David and the Scottish magnates at Carlisle. There those who had captured women and children promised that they would free them, and all promised that in future wars they would spare women, children, the infirm and elderly; they would kill only those who fought against them. King David's encouragement of Anglo-Norman immigration and his policy of 'modernising and civilising' Scottish society meant that Alberic's view of right conduct in war was shared by some of the most influential men in Scotland, including the king himself. None the less a French papal legate, especially one prepared, as Alberic was, to prostrate himself at the feet of the king of Scots, was likely to be listened to by many in North Britain who would have objected to being instructed in politically correct behaviour by their English enemies.

William of Malmesbury, surveying the history of the previous 700 years from his vantage point in the 1120s,

believed that the English people of his day were more humane and more civilised than their pre-Conquest ancestors had been. This he ascribed to the influence of Christianity and the example of French models.

Chivalry

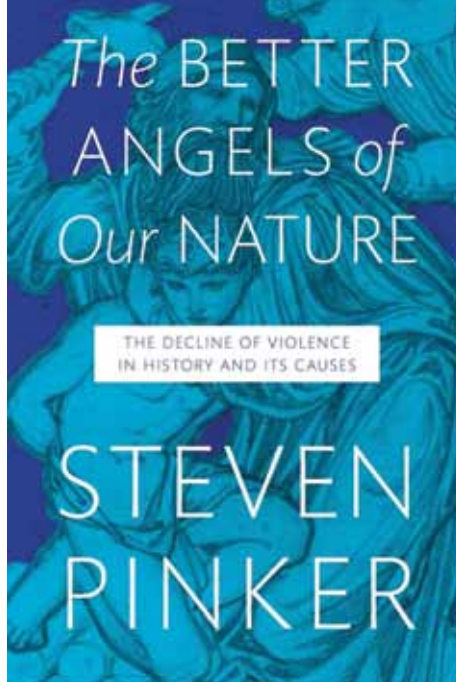
By 1200 slave-raiding in Britain and Ireland had ended. In propagandistic English narratives of later Scottish and Welsh raids, slaving goes unmentioned. After this transition – and for the first time in history – non-combatant immunity existed in the sense that although enemy soldiers might intend to ruin civilians economically by destroying or taking their wealth, they no longer risked going out of their way in order to capture and enslave ordinary people – the sort of people who could not afford to pay a worthwhile ransom. Ordinary soldiers gained little, arguably nothing, from the new conventions of warfare, but women and children old enough to work, the targets of the slave raid – then, in ancient times, and now in parts of



'Pirates normands au IXème siècle' (Norman pirates in the 9th century), as imagined by Evariste-Vital Luminais (1822-1896).

Africa – were the principal beneficiaries of this change. This is at the core of the rise of chivalry, including its much mocked concern for damsels in distress. Of course, violence against women remained, and remains, a phenomenon of war. They continued to be raped, or seized and threatened in order to extort money from their husbands or fathers. But in Europe ever since the age of chivalry that sort of conduct has been regarded as reprehensible, at the least as damaging to military discipline, by those men who wrote about war or who held high military command.

In the days before this new morality of war, battles had been desperate as men fought to save their families as well as themselves. There had been few prepared to surrender. At Hastings in 1066 the victors followed the old convention of mass slaughter. But during the next 200 years very few ‘noble knights’ were killed in the battles which took place on English soil: at the Standard in 1138, at Lincoln in 1141, Alnwick in 1174, Lincoln in 1217, Lewes in 1264. Gerald de Barri (in the 1180s) drew a sharp contrast between what he portrayed as the Irish and Welsh practice of killing their captives and what he called French



afterwards. For the elite, political life in England once more became just as dangerous as it had been before 1066 when men of high rank had risked being killed in battle or of being summarily executed afterwards. Fortunately other forms of chivalry in wars between Christians proved to be more lasting. Historians have tended to regard chivalry rather cynically, seeing it as ‘a sham, a tinsel covering’ which attempted to disguise the brutality of war. But

chapter outlining a rough chronological overview of his subject from pre-history to the twentieth century Pinker dealt with the capture and enslavement of women and children in war under two headings: Homeric Greece and The Hebrew Bible. But once past the world of the Old Testament the subject simply disappears from view, and is replaced by themes such as torture and varying homicide rates in different parts of Europe under headings such as Early Christendom and Medieval Knights. The discontinuance of a mode of war in which adult males were killed in order to carry off their women and children was a process which must have meant that a high proportion of the population of any given region was much less vulnerable to violence than ever before. This is a transition very well suited to bolster Pinker’s argument. Yet, curiously, it falls out of sight. The questions of just how, when, why and where so entrenched a practice fell into disuse are not even broached. Just as remarkable is the fact that this extraordinary gap in his argument is hardly – if at all – mentioned by the many critics of his work who have almost always focused on either his account of the twentieth

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chivalry (*gallica militia*). Where had English knights learned how to fight and how, when defeated, to surrender in the confident expectation that in return for a ransom their lives would be spared? On the tournament fields of France – for in England tournaments were banned until the 1190s. Early *mêlée* tournaments were highly realistic battle games in which the participants learned how to capture other players while keeping them alive so that they could pay ransoms. When some 25 knights of aristocratic birth were killed at the battle of Evesham in 1265 – and Simon de Montfort’s body mutilated – contemporaries were shocked by this deliberate breach of the conventions which had held sway since the Norman Conquest. Robert of Gloucester called it ‘the murder of Evesham, for battle it was not’. Subsequent battles on English soil in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries followed the pattern set at Evesham. Aristocrats on the losing side were in serious danger of being killed in battle, and if not killed there, then of being summarily executed immediately

had they measured the treatment of women, children and the poor in the ‘age of chivalry’ not against some ideal standard, but against the standards that had been regarded as acceptable, indeed honourable, in all previous ages, they might have taken a different view.

The better angels of our nature

Whereas the end of slavery in Europe, the transition from slavery to serfdom, is a subject which has engaged scholars for nearly 200 years, the end of slave-raiding has passed virtually unnoticed by historians. Stephen Neff in *War and the Law of Nations* (2005) noted it, describing the discontinuance of the ancient practice of enslaving prisoners of war in wars between Christians as ‘the most striking innovation’. But he could say little more about it given the absence of scholarly literature on the subject. Had there been any it would no doubt have been cited in *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Steven Pinker’s controversial recent (2011) book on the decline of violence in history. In a first

century or his statistics, or both. In part this reflects that venerable tradition of historians who have liked to move from the Ancient World to what they comically label the Early Modern period without imagining that anything of importance might have occurred in between.

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