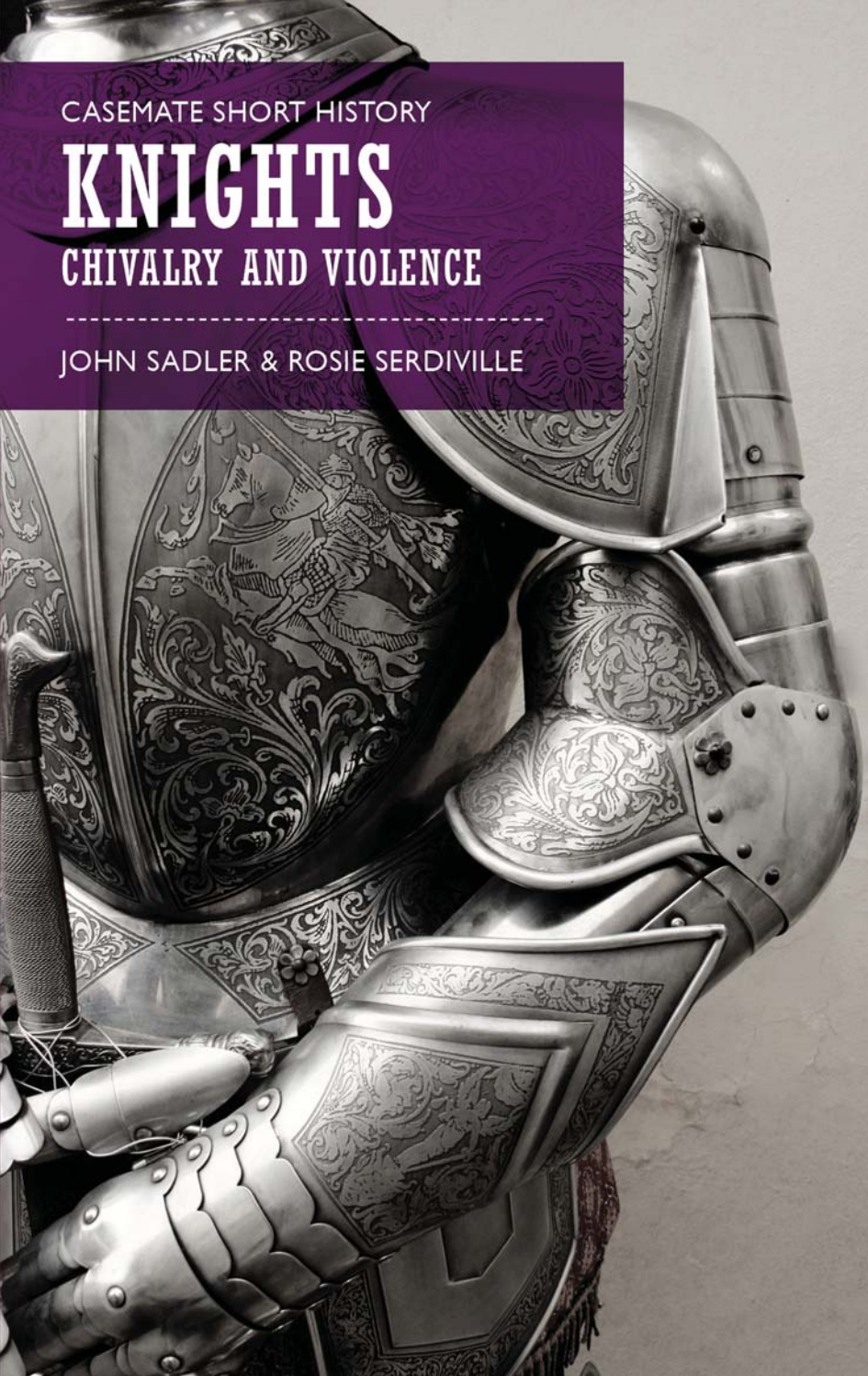
CASEMATE SHORT HISTORY

KNIGHTS

CHIVALRY AND VIOLENCE

JOHN SADLER & ROSIE SERDIVILLE



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INTRODUCTION

OF ARMS AND OF MEN

We have made a covenant with death,
And with hell are we at agreement.

Isaiah 28: 15

On the morning of 26 January 1885, two days before his 52nd birthday, General Charles George Gordon made ready for his last formal engagement as Governor of the Sudan. The circumstances were unfortunate. Khartoum was about to be overrun by the followers of the Mahdi, a charismatic and ruthless visionary who was writing his name in the blood of unbelievers – and there were a lot of unbelievers. 'Chinese' Gordon had sworn to defend the people of Sudan and ultimately, despite an epic defence, had failed. A tardy relief force dispatched by a recalcitrant government would not get through in time. There was a fast steamer ready at the quay which could spirit him to safety.

Gordon was not ready to desert those who had believed in him. There was one last service he could perform; to die a hero's death. Accounts differ but it seems the governor put on his dress uniform, loaded his pistol and died fighting, sword in hand. Lancelot himself could not have stage-managed it better: the act contained echoes of virtuous and unfailing chivalry

combined with righteous martyrdom. Gordon's end carried clear resonances.

The Mahdi died soon after, though his regime would remain in place until 1898. Kitchener decimated it at Omdurman and British artillery obliterated Muhammad Ahmad bin Abd Allah's tomb. Gordon – thanks in no small part to Charlton Heston's lavish 1966 screen interpretation of the general in *Khartoum*) – has remained a legend.

'Knightly' codes stretch far back, may even be detected in Homer. The Trojan Sarpedon explains to his friend Glaucos:

> Why have you and I the seat of honour at home Glaucos? Why do we have the best portions, cups always full, and all treat us like something greater than men? And that fine estate on the banks of Xanthos, orchards and wheatlands of the best? For that we are bound to stand now before our people in the scorching fires of battle…

The historical roots of chivalry lie in a mist-shrouded Teutonic past, sanctioned and effectively annexed by the church. The ritual of knighthood provided a core philosophy and set of values that, while by no means always adhered too, furnished the mystique. This ideology, combined with long years of training and expensive equipment, permitted the mounted knight to maintain his elite and largely unchallenged status as arbiter on the battlefield – at least until those annoying peasants with their pesky longbows turned up.

Knight-service

In the year 1181, Henry II, founder of the Angevin Empire, attempted to regulate military affairs in England by statute. His Assize of Arms specified what arms and armour could be carried by each class, from gentleman to commoner. Henry III, a king totally unschooled in war who was struggling to recruit

sufficient knights, revisited this legislation in 1242. He ordained those whose incomes exceeded £20 per year should be liable for knight service. Anyone who earned £15 was obliged to provide his own horses, and £2 freeholders their own bows. Forty years later, Edward I overhauled the regulations once again.

Knight-service could be commuted upon payment of a fine – or *scutage* – and there was, at this stage, no attempt to standardise kit. The militia, a homeland defence force raised within the separate counties, were also re-organised, and 'commissions of array' were introduced for the first time. The county sheriffs, as 'commissioners', were authorised and charged with reviewing the able-bodied men of each county and selecting a certain number from each settlement, suitably equipped according to their means, to serve in the militia. Their rations were to be funded from the communal purse. This form of conscription was never popular and was much abused – a tendency parodied by Shakespeare in *Henry IV Part 1*:

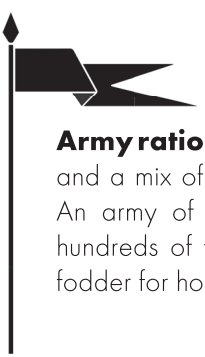
> [Falstaff] If I be not ashamed of my soldiers I am a soused gurnet I have misused the King's purse damnably.

Military service was bound into the mesh of feudalism, the complex obligations that existed between king and great lords as tenants-in-chief, and between lord and vassal. The feudal system has been likened to a pyramid, with the king at its apex and the various orders graded below, from tenants-in-chief through to the labouring classes whose obligation was to work the land rather than wield their swords. Military commitment arose from the act of homage offered by vassals to their lords. Normally, this was for 40 days per annum and the inferior party served without wages. The magnate's corresponding duty to the monarch was expressed as *servitium debitum* (service owed). After the expiry of the contracted period, the vassal was entitled to expect wages. Lords might, however, continue to serve without getting cash, preferring to expect material rewards when the campaign was successfully concluded. Chivalry, after all, was just business.

The king was reliant upon the Wardrobe – which was somewhat like the modern-day Cabinet – to drive and supply his war effort. Senior civil servants, cofferers and controllers kept accurate records of expenditure, and they, or their representatives, frequently accompanied the army to keep an eye on them, bringing their own gaggle of servants, acolytes and baggage. Supply was important – all armies march better on a full belly and the effects of a shortage of provisions married to a dangerous excess of ale could be dire. For example, brawling broke out between the English and Welsh contingents of Edward I's army when they were engaged in the Falkirk campaign. Similar disturbances are recorded by the Hainaulter Jean le Bel who served in Edward III's unsuccessful Weardale campaign, nearly 30 years later.

Evesham

By the mid-13th century, the bulk of fighting in the field was undertaken by mailed and mounted knights. During the Evesham campaign of 1265 (as we'll see in Chapter 3), Prince Edward (later Edward I) faced two baronial armies; that of the older Simon de Montfort, which lay west of the Severn, and that of his son, besieging Pevensey. Edward moved fast, pinning his westerly opponents back behind the formidable river barrier



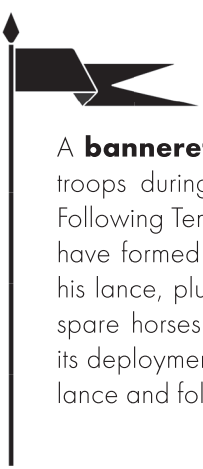
Army rations in the 13th century were usually bread and a mix of beans, peas and oatmeal – 'potage'. An army of several thousand men would require hundreds of tons of supplies per week, as well as fodder for horses and 'small-beer' to drink.

and burning bridges. Gloucester was secured and a rebel fleet at anchor in Bristol dealt with. De Montfort the younger was hurrying westwards to his father's aid, advancing as far as Kenilworth. The Prince, then at Worcester and well-placed to strike a blow at either of his foes, beat up the rebel quarters at Kenilworth in a classic dawn raid before turning back for the decisive fight at Evesham.

It's been suggested that commanders of this era were lacking in strategic flair, but Edward's campaign would indicate otherwise. His dynamism can easily be contrasted with his father's lacklustre performance in the earlier campaign leading to defeat at Lewes. As Sir Charles Oman, something of an admirer of Edward, observes, the essence of the campaign was the Royalists' success in maintaining the barrier of the Severn and in frustrating de Montfort's attempts to cross. The Prince, having kept his enemies apart, then moved decisively first against one and then the other.

Knights on the move

For rapid manoeuvre, mounted troops clearly had a considerable advantage. In the Middle Ages the standard tactical unit for



A **banneret** was a knight who led a company of troops during time of war under his own banner. Following Templar practice, the individual knight may have formed up with one of his attendants to carry his lance, plus a second in reserve at the back with spare horses and kit. As the squadron commenced its deployment, the squire would hand his master the lance and follow on.

cavalry was the ten-man *conroi* (a group of knights who trained and fought together). This was favoured by the infamous Knights Templar, though larger formations were also coming into fashion: 20-man squadrons soon expanded into a unit comprised of 80 squires, 16 knights and four bannerets.

Chivalry might seek to gild the fog of war but, there were always practical matters to consider. Those embarking on knightly service were customarily equipped with letters of protection. These provided immunity from any legal proceedings that might arise while the holder was on active service – like James Bond, knights often had a licence to kill. The Holkham Picture Bible, produced sometime in the early years of the 14th century, contains a pair of very striking images. The uppermost shows a scene of savage combat, mailed knights scrapping. The lower one reveals infantry just as energetically engaged, in a furious if less gentlemanly fracas, swords, bucklers, axes and the fearsome falchion much in evidence.

Numbers could be quite significant. For the first of his Welsh campaigns, Edward I recruited some 15,000 footsoldiers, many of whom were drawn from the southern fringes of the principality; for his later campaign against Wallace in 1298, the king mustered over 20,000 infantrymen. In subsequent expeditions, however, these numbers were significantly reduced. Poor societies couldn't support such large forces who'd strip the land of the food and fuel local people needed to survive. A contemporary chronicler has left us an image of the English army on the march during the Scottish campaign of 1300:

> There were many rich caparisons embroidered on silks and satins; many a beautiful pennon fixed to a lance, many a banner displayed. The neighing of horses was heard from afar; the mountains and valleys were covered with pack-horses, tents and pavilions.

Such a colourful vision, which could come directly from the pen of Scott or Tennyson, is highly idealised. The reality would be rather more mundane. Knights rode light horses, palfreys, on the line of march, saving their precious destriers (war horses)

Sedilia of Edward I at Westminster Abbey, erected during his reign.

for combat. The armies would tramp in a cacophony of noise and dust, vedettes (mounted sentries) front and rear. Mostly harnesses – suits of armour – were stowed, hellishly uncomfortable on the trail, baggage horses throwing up vast clouds of muck. The PBI (poor bloody infantry) tramped in long, straggling columns, ill-fed, ill-accoutred and swallowing the filth-laden dust of their betters.

A vast caravan of livestock; the army took its provisions along on the hoof, wagons laden with small beer, tents, cordage, baggage and miscellaneous gear. In the wake of the fighting men, a horde of sutlers, tapsters, prostitutes and tradesmen. These were essential: armourers, sword-smiths, bowyers, fletchers, coopers, carpenters, surgeons and quack apothecaries, labourers, wheelwrights and herdsmen. Armies were not welcomed anywhere and locals would, with very good cause, fear their passage, whether friend or foe.

People in the countryside lived free from the vast and constant noise of the modern world. This great, resounding tramp of the army, its volume filling and receding like the ebb and suck of the tide across an otherwise quiet landscape, must have seemed like the apocalypse. Quite frequently, it was almost as destructive. Where discipline was lax, rape and pillage could spread like a virus. The Anglo-Scottish wars from 1296 were characterised by a particular savagery that did not distinguish civilian from military: beating up the populace became an accepted tactic of economic warfare.

Into battle

Engaging in battle is, and always has been, a risky business. In the medieval era a commander had limited forces at his disposal, some perhaps of uncertain quality. A single defeat in the field could be catastrophic. Communications were dependent upon gallopers and, where possible, signalling with flags. Supply remained a constant headache. The army was habitually divided into four corps, each led by a great lord. Nobles were notoriously better at giving orders than obeying them. Even a king as famously tough as Edward sometimes had trouble keeping his gentry in order.

When the king commanded his host, he would invariably lead one division, surrounded by his household men. Once battle was joined, the commander-in-chief could do little to influence the final outcome. On the field, forces would deploy in linear formation, opposing divisions aligned; there was little scope for complex manoeuvre before the advance to contact. Any good commander needs an eye for ground, but the medieval general

Print featuring a horse, by Antoine Vérard. (Archivo Iconografico, S.A./ CORBIS-BETTMANN; Wikimedia Commons)

could not afford to have his reserves stationed too far distant lest, in the time it took them to come up, the day might already be lost.

A contemporary writer sums up the chivalric approach to the risks of battle:

> What a joyous thing is war, for many fine deeds are seen in its course, and many good lessons learnt from it. You love your comrade so much in war. When you see that your quarrel is just and your blood is fighting well, tears rise in your eyes. A great sweet feeling of loyalty and pity fills your heart on seeing your friend so valiantly exposing his body to execute and accomplish the command of our Creator. And then you prepare to go and live or die with him, and for love not abandon him. And out of that there arises such delectation, that he who has not tasted it is not fit to say what a delight is. Do you think that a man who does that fears death? Not at all; for he feels strengthened, he is so elated, that he does not know where he is. Truly he is afraid of nothing.

Armour

The mounted knight in Simon de Montfort's day relied mainly upon chain mail for bodily defence, together with a flat-topped helmet with narrow eye slits ('the sights'), cheek pieces perforated for ventilation, with an arming cap and mail hood (or 'coif') worn underneath. His mail would consist of two garments: a long-sleeved, thigh-length shirt called a hauberk, and leg defences or hose (*chausée*). Mail is both flexible and, when compared with plate, quite light. It may not, however, protect the wearer against a crushing blow, which can cause severe contusions or fractures even if the links hold.

That vulnerable area around the neck received extra protection from a stiff, laced collar, possibly reinforced with steel plates. Occasionally a coat of plates (reminiscent of the *lorica squamatae* of the classical age), was worn. Mailed gauntlets or mittens were carried to protect the hands. By the start of the 14th century, a

man's thighs were further protected by tubed defences worn over mail and linking to knee guards, or *poleyns*.

As the need for greater protection increased, it became common, following on from continental fashion, for a horseman to wear additional protection in the form of a poncho-like garment reinforced with steel plates both back and front. Shoulder defences – *ailettes* – were added, often sporting the wearer's heraldry. Shields, shaped like the base of an iron and curved to conform to the contours of the body, still had their uses. The increasing use of the longbow after 1300 spurred the need for yet further improvements. Mail alone could not resist the deadly bodkin point and gutter-shaped plate defences to the arms and legs were introduced, strapped on over the hauberk.

For the knight, aside from harness, his biggest single investment was in his war horse or destrier (*dextrarius*), which would be likely to cost around £40, a hefty expense, equal to twice the basic property qualification for knight service. Good bloodstock came from France, Spain and Hungary. These animals were not as large as modern hunters, typically between 15 and 16 hands but with good, strong legs, deep chest and broad back. Generally, the destrier was reserved for the charge, so on the road a knight would ride his everyday palfrey whilst his men jogged along behind on inexpensive *rounceys* (essentially an all-purpose nag).

With its high bow and cantle, the knight's saddle provided good support with additional protection against slashing cuts. Coupled with the use of stirrups, this gave the knight the necessary platform for effective combat. The valuable war horse was also armoured to a certain degree, with two sections of protective covering, before and behind the saddle. The front part covered the head with openings for nose, eyes and mouth, the longer rear section reached as far as the hocks. This leather and quilted harness was stiffened by the *chanfron*, a plate section shaped to the horse's face, as that was a common target for the footsoldiers. This fusion of man and horse, both heavily protected, was true armoured warfare and the charge was truly frightening.

In terms of its symbolic potency the sword was the very emblem of the gentleman, blades imbued with the legendary lure of Albion and Excalibur. By the early 14th century the knightly sword was a long-bladed, predominantly single handed weapon; double-edged with a broad, straight, full-length fuller (a bevelled groove or slot). Hand and a half swords, 'swords of war', or 'bastard-swords' sported longer blades. There is a record, from Edward's time, of a sword from Cologne with a blade length of 45 inches (114 cm) and a 5-inch (13 cm) hilt. Quillons were long and either straight or turned up toward the point.

As he prepared himself for combat, the knight would keep his **lance** in the upright position. The lighter spear-like weapon of the Conquest era had given way to a stouter, heavier model that was carried in a couched position under the arm, held securely against the rider's flank and angled to the left over the neck of his mount, resting on the shield. The amount of movement was limited; a wider arc could only be created by 'aiming' the horse, but the force would be terrific. When he trotted forward, building to a canter, he'd lift his lance clear of the rest and wedge his behind firmly against the cantle. He'd then lean forward with knees fixed; something like a modern jockey. In this position the shock of impact, which could otherwise result in an ignominious and potentially fatal tumble, was taken mostly by the horse. The position also facilitated using the sword once the lance, essentially a 'one-shot' weapon, was thrust.

Heavily-armoured 16th-century riders and their barded war horses at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Daggers were a preferred accessory, fashioned like miniature swords and intended for stabbing. It was standard practice to dispatch an armoured opponent, once brought down, by the point of a knife, driven in through the sights of the helmet, or into an armpit or groin. Infantry might carry the heavy broad-bladed falchion, a cleaver-like weapon, which could deliver a cut of tremendous force. A very fine example of such a sword, the Conyers Falchion, is housed in Durham Cathedral. This is reputed to have been the weapon Sir John Lambton used to kill off the notorious Lambton Worm.

Then, of course, there was the English yeoman with his bow, arguably one of the most effective missile weapons ever developed. One bowman at Agincourt delivered a 'kill ratio' not seen again until 1914 (see chapter 5). The bow was not a knight's weapon, though all classes practised with the bow for war, hunting and sport. Only later, during the 16th century, did the term 'longbow' come into use. A plainer expression, 'bow' or 'livery bow' was more

The late German sallet combination of Emperor Maximilian I.

common during the 15th and before. Retained or liveried archers normally carried their own bows but, in the long drama of the French wars, the Office of Ordnance began issuing standardised kit on campaign to replace those lost or damaged. Large quantities of bows were manufactured to a standard or government pattern, like the infantry musket of following centuries.

Even as full harness was on the brink of obsolescence, the late 15th century witnessed a final, superlative flowering of the armourer's art; fine plate armours that could resist even the deadly 'arrow storm'. Italian kit of this era was skilfully and beautifully constructed to maximise deflection. Defences for the vulnerable areas at the shoulder, elbow and knees were strengthened and ribs added to vulnerable areas to deflect killing blows. German craftsmen moved this concept toward the angular perfection of the Gothic style, with its emphasis on uncompromising lines, swept by heavy fluting. A harness of this period might weigh around 60 lb (30 kg) and would not greatly inhibit the mobility of a robust man, trained since boyhood to move and fight in plate armour.

Italian and German styles came together in Flanders, a flourishing centre of manufacture where Italian armourers produced a hybrid style featuring the flexible, fluted plates of the Gothic combined with the more rounded pauldrons (shoulder defences) and tassets (thigh guards) of their native style. Such armour was sold in large quantities in England, as evidenced by their regular appearance in funerary monuments.

For head protection, the stylish sallet form of helmet was popular from the mid-15th century onwards. The rear of the elegantly curved

Fifteenth-century plate armour.

brim swept downwards into a pointed tail to provide extra deflection to the back of the head and neck. Usually provided with a fixed or moveable visor, the sallet was accompanied by the bevor, which afforded protection to the throat and lower face. Although knights could move freely, even in full plate, thirst and heat exhaustion were constant threats even in winter campaigning. 'Butcher' Clifford suffered the penalty for unstrapping your bevor in the heat of battle. An opportunist archer shot him down.

At this time the knight's sword reached the apex of its development prior to its eclipse, in the next century, by the rapier. Blades were designed for both cut and thrust. Long and elegantly tapering, with a full grip that could be hefted in one or two hands, in section resembling a flattened diamond; simple quillons, curved or straight, a wheel, pear or kite shaped pommel.

The fight

The armoured knight represented shock and awe on the field. Though it's unlikely a mounted charge ever reached the speeds attained by Hollywood knights on film, the sight of these