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Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that warfare was central to medieval society. The power and authority of kings rested largely on their ability to wage war successfully; social theorists depicted the warriors as forming one of the three divisions of society, with an essential role within it; and those who recorded the history of the period devoted the bulk of their pages to describing war.

Yet exactly what medieval warfare was can be difficult to define. In modern times, 'war' generally refers to a military conflict between states, but this definition is not very helpful for the period before nation-states were established. In the medieval period, military hostilities carried on by the leader of one military band against another could be 'war', waged in a similar manner and even on a similar scale to military hostilities carried on by one king against another. While military theorists in the later Middle Ages made a distinction between 'public' war fought by the ruler and 'private' war fought by individuals, in fact the two sorts of war could not be so easily separated. Individual conflicts could form part of larger conflicts, and large campaigns were made up of small bands under individual leaders, rather than one large army led by one overall general to whom all owed allegiance. There might be little difference between simple banditry and a rebellious lord waging war against a king. In fact, a history of medieval warfare could very easily become a history of medieval violence. In this study 'war' is taken in the broad sense of 'hostile contention by means of armed forces' (to quote the *Oxford English Dictionary*), and means any form of ongoing armed violence between bands of men. It need not be a conflict between kings or states, and this book is as much a history of medieval military activity as of large-scale warfare.

The difficulty of defining warfare is linked to the problem of why warfare was fought during the Middle Ages: in other words, what the long-term strategy of war was. It is clear that those in authority waged war in order to stay in authority. They had to show that they possessed the

power to force their subjects to obey them. They needed to win land and booty to reward their followers, and prove to them that it was worthwhile remaining in their service rather than going to serve a different lord. They also had to protect their subjects from enemies – this was one of the duties of Christian lordship inherited from the Christian emperors of the later Roman Empire. In the early and central Middle Ages, the king who could not go on campaign each year and win territory and booty to give to his followers would have difficulty in retaining the services of his followers. The campaigns of Charlemagne (king of the Franks 768–800, emperor of the West 800–14), were of this type: defending his core territories, inherited from his father; and attacking and conquering new territory and booty as a means of rewarding his vassals and the Church. This said, Bernard Bachrach has argued that Charlemagne's grandfather, Charles Martel (d. 741), did not go to war to seek booty, and when possible used diplomacy rather than warfare to maintain control of his nobles. But diplomacy did not always work; and then war was necessary.¹

As boundaries of kingdoms became more fixed and society more settled, such annual campaigns of acquisition or suppression were possible or necessary only on the frontiers of Christendom, or in territory involving disputed rights, such as France during the Anglo-French war of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, otherwise known as 'the Hundred Years War'. Nevertheless, a king must be successful in warfare, and one that was not would have problems in retaining his position as king.

There were also individual reasons for waging war. Individual warriors became involved in war partly because they had no choice: their employer or superior demanded that they fight. On the other hand, they also fought in order to win glory and honour and so raise their prestige in society. They might win wealth (land or money or other property), both from booty taken during war and from gifts from their grateful employer or lord. They would win the admiration of others, and might be able thereby to attract the attention of desirable partners, so increasing the possibility of marriage and leaving children to carry on their line. Brave deeds could be recorded in poetry or in written history, ensuring fame after one's death; likewise, a marriage with many children ensured a different sort of continuation after death.

Christian thinking was ambiguous on the subject of war: on the one hand, some of Christ's words set out in the New Testament seemed to condemn war, but on the other, the Old Testament and other passages in the New Testament seemed to permit it.² 'Holy war' was, however, acceptable. In brief, this was war fought to further God's purposes, identified as 'holy' by ecclesiastical or secular authorities.³ Those taking part in such wars would, they believed, win God's approval, and might also hope to win booty and perhaps territory. The crusades to the Holy Land were holy wars, as were the wars between Christians and Moors in the Iberian Peninsula from the eleventh century to the late fifteenth and between

Christians and pagans in north-eastern Europe from the twelfth century to the late fourteenth. Those engaged in such campaigns typically took part in various penitential and devotional exercises during the campaign, which encouraged group loyalty and raised morale. In 791, Charlemagne set out on a campaign against the pagan Avars on his eastern frontier: before engaging battle, the army prayed and fasted for three days. On 8 July 1099, before the final assault on Jerusalem, the army of the First Crusade processed around the base of the city walls, prayed and fasted.⁴

Not all war was long term or large scale. Much 'warfare' was actually short-term raids with the aim of taking booty (particularly livestock) and slaves or prisoners; the booty was immediate wealth, while prisoners could be ransomed and slaves could be sold, put to work to produce wealth, or retained in the captor's household as a symbol of status. Most of the warfare described by Gregory of Tours (d. 594) was of this type, in which rulers would devastate even their own subjects in order to enforce their authority over an area.⁵ Much of early medieval warfare can be characterised as essentially raiding without any long-term aim of permanently acquiring territory or any obvious motivation other than gaining booty and honour. By the eleventh century this sort of warfare was becoming morally questionable in the face of the peace-making efforts of the Catholic Church in western Europe, and John Gillingham has described how the raiding activities of the Irish, Welsh and Scots were depicted by twelfth-century Anglo-Norman writers as barbaric, underpinning their image of these Celtic peoples as barbarians unfit to govern land.⁶ Yet such raiding could have a definite strategic purpose: Scottish raids against northern England in the first three decades of the fourteenth century played a fundamental role in undermining the authority of the English king north of the Trent, and contributed to the downfall of King Edward II (1227). Raids could also force the payment of tribute, providing a valuable income for the conqueror. This was one of the aims of Viking raiding in the ninth and tenth centuries, and arguably of the kings of East Francia against the Slavs in the ninth century.⁷

On the frontier between Christian Spain and Moorish al-Andalus in the Iberian Peninsula from the eleventh to the late fifteenth century, the raid against the enemy was the normal means of keeping up hostilities. It was not that the war was pressed continuously. There were truces, diplomatic contacts, occasional conversions, and Christians and Muslims crossed the border for peaceful as well as martial purposes. But the rulers of neither side wanted long-term peace. War ensured security (by reducing the risk of a raid from the other side); war might gain territory, certainly gained booty; war was a means of revenge; war was a means of winning honour. Moorish frontier raiders who were captured by Christian soldiers were dealt with brutally, and the Christian authorities paid a bounty for their heads. For instance, three Moorish frontier raiders captured in January 1435 by three Christians in the Aledo region were beheaded. The three

brought the heads to the municipal council of Murcia and asked for a reward: they were paid 300 *maravedíes*, in accordance with an old municipal ordinance.⁸ Raiding on this frontier, then, could take two forms: raids into the enemy territory to ravage and take booty and prisoners, and raids throughout one's own territory to catch and destroy enemy raiders.

The campaigns of the military religious Teutonic Order in north-eastern Europe in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries were called *reisen*, literally 'rides' – that is, raids – but were on a much larger scale than the word suggests. These were essentially hostile campaigns into their opponents' territory.⁹ Each year there were two such campaigns, one setting out on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (15 August), and one on the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary (2 February). These dates were originally chosen because they were the principal feast days of the Order's patron, the Virgin. The campaigns were conducted with cavalry and foot soldiers, and included crusaders who came especially from Germany, Britain and France to take part in the crusade against the unbelievers – although after the conversion of Lithuania in 1386 the war was against Christians. The aim of the campaign was to take booty and prisoners, but also to weaken the enemy so that in the long term Lithuanian territory could be taken under the rule of the Order; given the nature of the terrain (forested or marshy) it was difficult to win long-term gains in any one campaign. It is true, however, as Eric Christiansen has noted, that it was unsuccessful as a war of attrition – while the Order grew stronger, so did the Lithuanians.¹⁰ Travel across country was difficult, so river transport was used to carry supplies, reinforcements, siege machines and horses. Having reached enemy territory and set up a base, the Order's forces conducted raids on a daily basis, moving on to a new area after each raid; and then withdrawing before the enemy's army could arrive to engage them.¹¹

This devastation of territory as part of a war of attrition was also a feature of the Hundred Years War. Anne Curry has argued that the devastation, inflicted during a series of *chevauchées* or raids across the kingdom of France, was a deliberate strategy of attrition with the aim of extracting concessions from the enemy. This theory explains why kings of England made a truce and withdrew to England after winning victories in battle: their aim was not to conquer the kingdom of France but to win recognition of their claims to certain territory under the authority of the king of France.¹² After 1356 the French tended to avoid battle, and to concentrate on raiding into the English-dominated areas of the kingdom of France. This weakened their opponents without taking the risk of complete defeat in battle.

The Hundred Years War was ostensibly an inheritance dispute, as Edward III of England (d. 1377) claimed the French throne through his descent from King Philip IV of France (d. 1314). While Curry's arguments indicate that in fact his actual aim was more complex, other wars were certainly fought with the target of claiming an inheritance. The invasion

of England in 1066 by William of Normandy, known as ‘the Bastard’ to his contemporaries, is one of the more famous examples.¹³ The rebellion of Gundovald, which will be considered at the beginning of Chapter 2, had as its basis Gundovald’s claim to be an heir of King Lothar I (d. 561), king of the Franks.

So warfare was fought for different reasons, and varied in scale and effect. How war was fought also varied from one area to another, depending on geography and tradition; and it changed over time. For many years, historians of medieval warfare doubted that there was such a thing as military planning in the Middle Ages. They regarded medieval warfare as a matter of individuals seeking glory, without discipline or battle tactics and without a wider grasp of strategy. This view was based more on the descriptions of battles in the entertainment literature of the Middle Ages, the epics and romances, than on careful study of battles and sieges. The work of J. F. Verbruggen has now established that there was in fact ‘an art of war’ in the Middle Ages, and many modern studies have elaborated on this ‘art of war’ and how it developed.¹⁴

During the period between the break up of the Roman Empire in the West and the beginning of the sixteenth century, military tactics evolved from an emphasis on infantry to an emphasis on cavalry and back to an emphasis on infantry; artillery changed with the development of improved weaponry for killing at a distance, such as the crossbow and the bombard. The use of fortifications developed from walls defining areas (such as the famous Hadrian’s Wall in northern England) and protecting cities (such as Trier in the late Roman period) and temporary refuges such as hill forts, to strongly fortified buildings containing one household and its retainers. These buildings, now called ‘castles’, differed from the hill fort mainly in that they were intended to withstand sieges for long periods of time, but the older types of fortification continued to be constructed and to be used throughout the period covered by this book. Armies themselves changed in nature from being largely paid professionals employed by the state on a permanent basis to being amateurs bound by personal loyalty to a war leader, and then again to being paid professionals.

Yet despite the changes during this period, certain factors remained constant. The Germanic warriors who were employed by the late Western Roman Empire as auxiliaries believed that they were superior to the Romans who employed them because they had energy and drive in battle, unlike their employers. In the fifth and sixth centuries their leaders were delegated or took over the administrative and military structures of the old Western Empire, but these warriors’ organisation and ideology differed somewhat from the Roman army.¹⁵ As is clear from the warriors’ own literature and will be set out in greater detail in later chapters, the warriors’ ties of loyalty to their leader and their code of honour meant that their warfare was personal and victory or defeat was a matter of

concern to every individual, not only to their general. They fought on foot or on horseback, but valued the horse as a status symbol for the warrior. They valued martial skills; and they saw booty as the due reward for their martial exploits. They regarded Christ as a warrior God, fighting against evil; they regarded fighting as the proper activity for an able-bodied man. Ideally, battle should be joined hand-to-hand and attacking one's enemy from a distance with artillery could be regarded as cowardly. Death in battle was glorious, although the amazement and shock expressed by chroniclers and other contemporaries at the deaths in battle of nobles of high status suggest that a well-armed and skilled noble warrior was relatively unlikely to be killed in battle, and if he was, he could be expected to take much of the enemy army with him.¹⁶ Social stratification within the army was important, and those of lower status should not engage those of higher status. The death and suffering of non-combatants, while regrettable, was unavoidable and regarded by the warrior as a natural concomitant of war.¹⁷ These attitudes of mind and expectations were common to the warrior elite throughout the medieval period.

But by the end of the period under consideration here, with the increasing importance of guns, greater professionalism and the effective re-emergence of the standing national army, certain attitudes and expectations were being modified. Improved weaponry meant that even nobles were more likely to be killed on the battlefield; those of lower social status had proven again and again, notably during the Hussite crusades, that they could easily outmanoeuvre and defeat nobles in the field; and, while they were still fighting for their own honour, the honour of their nation (in the case of the Hussites, Bohemia) was of increasing importance for warriors of all classes. This was not 'national identity' in the modern sense, as the nation-state did not exist; but the literature of the later medieval period indicates an awareness of what could be termed 'geographical identity', so that (to give but two examples) in the late eleventh-century or twelfth-century poem glorifying his death the hero Roland was depicted declaring his aim of defending France, indicating that this was a priority also for the audience of French nobles for whom the work was intended, while Thomas Elmham, writing in around 1418 about the Battle of Agincourt (1415), depicted King Henry V of England referring to 'England' as an entity on whose behalf he was fighting.¹⁸ At the same time, as war became more efficient, the demands that non-combatants should not have to suffer at warriors' hands became more strident. Yet the most familiar aspects of medieval warfare were still present in 1500, when this study concludes.

* * *

The greatest hurdle to the study of medieval European warfare over the period 300–1500 is not the vastness of the time scale or the geography, but the sources. Sources for medieval European warfare vary considerably in

type and quality. The period from the dissolution of the Western Empire during the fifth and sixth centuries to 750 is under-represented in the sources, so that scholars are less decided about most aspects of warfare than for the period after 750, when Charlemagne's capitularies (ordinances) and chronicle sources begin to give more information. In particular, evidence for seventh-century Francia is sparse, although Roger Collins has noted that the seventh century was 'not a time of warfare' for Merovingian Francia, so that perhaps we may view the lack of sources in a positive light.¹⁹ Evidence for the tenth century is sketchy. Hence histories of medieval warfare tend to emphasise the period after 1100, when surviving sources are more plentiful, and especially after 1330, when writings on warfare, both actual and theoretical, and biographies of great warriors are so readily available and enjoyable to read that the temptation is to start at 1500 and work backwards.

Some sources are much more useful and straightforward than others. Manuals of advice on military methods survive from the whole of this period, but were mostly based on Vegetius's *De re militari* ('On military matters'). While some writers incorporated material from their own times into their reworking of Vegetius, they also retained sections of Vegetius's work – such as how to deal with an attack by elephants – which were already anachronistic in Vegetius's time, and which the medieval translators seem to have included simply to amuse the medieval reader. This means that to a large extent medieval military manuals reflect classical practice rather than medieval practice.

Documentary sources – such as law codes and, later, records of the raising of troops – give very valuable details when they are available. But until the thirteenth century it was not usual to record in writing details such as the captains of units within an army and how many men each commanded, let alone what equipment they had. This sort of information is non-existent for the earlier centuries. Law codes might mention who was expected to fight for their lord and what happened to people who fought illegally. Such evidence is rather piecemeal and has to be compiled patiently by the researcher, and only applies to the period of a particular law code. What was true for England in the tenth century, for instance, would not necessarily apply to Castile in the eleventh.

Religious literature such as saints' lives and sermons gives some insights to warfare, although usually explaining how to avoid violence rather than taking part in it. These insights are distorted by the intention of the writer, which was generally to condemn warfare or its excesses.

The authors of chronicles, annals and histories claimed to recount actual wars of their day. Technically, annals are accounts of events on a year-by-year basis, while chronicles and histories are continuous narratives. A history should concentrate on a specific subject, as did Archbishop Gregory of Tours's history of the Franks, or, for example, recount a specific war. A chronicle is more wide-ranging and contains a mass of

information on the past and on recent events, usually recited uncritically and in chronological order. The authors of all of these types of writing emphasised the importance of telling the truth and declared this to be their main intention.²⁰ However, the writer was seldom an eyewitness, and what is recorded could be based on hearsay or on the imagination of the writer. The writer might include speeches and descriptions of the generals' intentions, but unless the writer was an eyewitness or quoted a contemporary source, these sorts of details were likely to be inventions of the writer. Battle accounts were usually distorted by the writer's own allegiances.²¹

What was more, rather than basing their account of contemporary battles on what actually happened, writers often preferred to base their account on classical accounts of battles (such as Julius Caesar's campaigns). This practice enabled writers to show off their own classical education and gave their account colour; and also glorified the military leaders of their own day. As a result, medieval accounts of contemporary battles can be very unreliable.²² Medieval writers seldom gave much detail of the nitty-gritty of how war was waged, tending to give a very brief account of events, or concentrating on glorious events such as battles and single combats rather than the organisation of a campaign. What is more, as the majority of medieval writers of history had little or no military experience, they did not properly understand what they were describing.²³

It should also be noted that despite the fact that writers of chronicles, annals and histories claimed to be writing objective truth, their works were also intended to be read and enjoyed. They were, to use the description coined by Nancy Partner, 'serious entertainments'.²⁴ These works were not composed as text books consisting only of absolute truth, if that were possible, but were literature, and as such they must be analysed and subjected to searching criticism like any other sort of literature. The problems of categorising such works as either 'historical fact' or 'fiction' are well illustrated by the chronicle of Jean Froissart (died *c.*1410), the queen of England's secretary. Like most medieval chronicles, this is a mixture of eyewitness material and information derived from other sources that are not always identified. Like all chronicles, it contains errors, but it is very wide-ranging and contains much information not available from other sources. Froissart's own personal viewpoint is of interest in itself, as the view of a well-travelled, well-educated courtier of the fourteenth century, and the 'spin' he put on his material gives modern readers an insight into the expectations of his noble readership. In recent years historians have become far more critical of those chronicles and historical writing which earlier generations of historians accepted at face value,²⁵ and have reassessed works, such as Froissart's chronicle, which earlier generations rejected as unreliable.²⁶

Epic and romance literature presents a similar problem. The epic focused on the history of a family; the romance focused on the develop-

ment of an individual. (A ‘romance’ in the Middle Ages was simply a story written in the vernacular. It did not necessarily involve a love affair.) Both forms of writing provide an attractive overview of medieval warfare for the periods for which they survive, but an exaggerated one. Epic and romance literature was composed for the military classes, those who led and who played a leading role in medieval armies; so it concentrated on members of the military classes and on their deeds, and said very little about the logistics of campaigning, or the role of others in the army. However, because it had to contain a certain level of realism in order to be acceptable to its audience, and because it gives a picture of its intended audience’s expectations, epic and romance literature has enormous value to the historian in depicting the thought-world of those who led armies and who played a leading role in them.

In the first place, because epic and romance literature was written in the vernacular, it used the same vocabulary as the warriors used themselves, giving armour, weapons and divisions of the army (for example) their correct terms. J. F. Verbruggen has emphasised the importance of vernacular sources particularly for this reason, and refers frequently to ‘fictional’ sources as historical evidence.²⁷ Second, the wide distribution of these works and their impact on medieval culture indicates that they were significant to the society which produced them. Some works of romance literature survive in a great many manuscripts and were clearly widely known among the warrior nobility until at least the early sixteenth century, when they were printed. They affected many aspects of cultural activity, from royal ceremonies to children’s names.²⁸ Such works were authored by both clerics and knights: for instance, the compilation of Arthurian romances put together by Rusticien de Pise in the 1270s was not only compiled by a knight – Rusticien – but intended for a renowned warrior – King Edward I of England – although Rusticien expected not only kings, emperors, dukes, counts and knights to hear his work read but also burgesses in the towns.²⁹ Clearly, such works reflected the belief system of the warrior nobility to a certain extent; otherwise they would not have won such lasting popularity.

In his magisterial work *Chivalry*, Maurice Keen argued that the value of the epics of Charlemagne and romances of King Arthur lies ‘with the mirror that the twelfth- and thirteenth-century versions of them held up to life, with what they had to tell the knightly world about itself, its history and values – in other words, how together they came to constitute its distinctive mythology’. He contended that only through studying the so-called fictional literature of the medieval period can the modern historian discover to any meaningful degree the mentality of the medieval warrior.³⁰

This begs the question of how far epic and romance literature are actually ‘fiction’ – in comparison to, for example, medieval chronicles. Both ‘fiction’ and chronicles were written for entertainment, and the authors of both claimed to be basing their work on actual events. Epic tales of

Charlemagne and of classical heroes such as Alexander and the heroes of Troy were regarded in the medieval period as having a sound historical basis.³¹ The Arthurian stories appear to modern readers to be less obviously historical, and during the medieval period were criticised for being partly fantasy. But, at least from the early thirteenth century, no writing could venture far into fantasy without incurring the danger of being accused of heresy.³² Literature therefore had to reflect reality and be inherently probable. It would be unreasonable for modern scholars to reject these sources as totally unrepresentative of the society which produced them, as medieval audiences regarded them as having some veracity.

In short, no such line can be drawn between 'factual' and 'fictional' medieval sources. The chronicles authored by monastic and other ecclesiastical writers, who claimed to be recording only fact, have been shown by modern historical and literary analysis to be often unreliable. The details of everyday life in the vernacular epics and romances, such as the emphasis in romance literature on the beauty of castles, are borne out by the archaeological evidence. While the so-called fictional sources do not recount actual events, they give us valuable information about everyday life that does not appear in ecclesiastical chronicles: such as fashionable underwear for young noble warriors or the problems that a knight might encounter getting into his armour.³³ These are the sort of details which help to bring a period to life in the minds of modern readers, and there is no reason to doubt that the literary depiction of these detailed matters accurately reflects the practices of the period in which these works were written.

Archaeological sources provide material evidence of warfare: for example, examination of fortified buildings, analysis of remains of weapons and armour, excavation of battlefields – showing the wounds of those who died – and other evidence of the impact of warfare. Another form of material culture is art: sculpture, painting and tapestry can provide evidence of what warriors wore and how they fought, with the proviso that (as in the epic and romance) it is an idealised image that is portrayed here. To some degree, historical reconstructions can help to establish how medieval siege machinery actually worked and what its capabilities were (for instance), or how knights actually fought on horseback, but so much practical knowledge and experience which would have been commonplace to the medieval warrior was never written down, and now cannot be recovered, that it is impossible to reconstruct completely the experience of the medieval warrior.

The reader will realise that all forms of evidence present problems of interpretation, so that if I were to analyse every piece of evidence I am using in this book as my discussion develops, the book would never reach an end. It is clear that no single piece of evidence can prove anything; only by combining many pieces of evidence can the modern scholar hope to construct an approximation of past events and experiences. However, as

many scholars have already combined many forms of evidence and attempted to construct such approximations, I will not attempt to duplicate their work here. This study is largely constructed from their conclusions, and references to primary evidence are simply to illustrate those conclusions – not to attempt to prove them again. The examples from primary sources that I will cite have already, so to speak, been ‘vetted’ and analysed and found suitable to appear in this book, and I will not try the patience of my readers by analysing each piece of evidence afresh as I cite it.

Yet even following the conclusions of modern scholars is far from straightforward. Because of the uneven quality of the evidence and the problems of interpreting it, and because there was so much geographical variation in the practice of warfare, historians differ on many aspects of medieval warfare, while other aspects remain mysterious. Even at the most basic level, such as the size of the war-horse that gave the mounted warrior status, there has been much debate.³⁴ Some historians have argued that the medieval use of cavalry has been drastically exaggerated, and that in fact knights very often fought on foot.³⁵ The problem is that the evidence is so diverse and scattered that it is very difficult to reach a firm conclusion that is accurate for the whole of western Europe for a long period.

In recent years some historians have attempted to reach conclusions about the size, range and abilities of medieval armies in terms of how much food and water each person and each animal would require, exactly how much space they would occupy on the road and in accommodation, the precise length of rampart one man should protect or exactly how much space he would require in the battle line. Such precise calculations rely on descriptions such as Vegetius’s *De re militari*, or legal records such as the Burghal Hideage (produced in England in the ninth or tenth century, precise date uncertain). Other historians have tried to calculate the range of medieval ships in terms of how much water and food they could carry, and how much their crews would need.³⁶ These analyses can be extremely illuminating, but can also be misleading. They base the assumed needs of the medieval human and horse on the known requirements for calories and water of a healthy, well-built man from the modern Western world and a fully fit, modern horse. Yet calorific requirements and water requirements vary according to build, level of fitness and what the body is accustomed to receive. As will be explained in Chapter 4, horses can be trained to survive on less water if necessary, and the same applies to a man on campaign: with training, his metabolism will become more efficient in its use of food, and require fewer calories. Hence, while these detailed studies are useful in giving a general guide to the logistical problems of moving an army by land or on water, they cannot give us precise figures.

The question of how people fought is also difficult to establish. How far were warriors trained, and how far did they ‘learn on the job’? Despite Vegetius’s instructions that soldiers should train every day, there are very

few references throughout the Middle Ages to warriors actually being taught how to fight. It has been suggested that the literature of the warrior classes, the epic and romance, provided some instruction to young warriors on how to conduct a campaign and about comradeship and responsibility; but most scholars believe that the martial feats described in such stories cannot have happened in reality. They argue that the 'heroic blow' by which Count Roland slices an enemy warrior in half, and his horse as well, would be impossible because, in raising his right arm for the blow, the knight would expose his right side to the enemy, who could easily slice his arm off. Certainly, the ninth-century writer Archbishop Hrabanus Maurus of Mainz advised warriors against using this blow for this very reason. Yet other scholars believe that these accounts, which also occur in the more (supposedly) 'factual' chronicles and histories, should be taken at face value. Another suggestion is that such a blow could be achieved by a warrior on foot, but not on horseback.³⁷

Sometimes it is possible to suggest solutions to such debates, but as knowledge of medieval warfare is developing very rapidly at the time of writing, such solutions are likely to be only temporary. The aim of this study is therefore to clarify the issues over which scholars disagree rather than to impose answers. There is insufficient space here for a thorough analysis and criticism of the many excellent historians who have worked and are working on medieval warfare. Criticisms and analyses of the historiography can be found in many detailed studies of various aspects of medieval warfare and I refer my readers to these.³⁸ My purpose here is to give an overview and synthesis of recent research into warfare throughout the medieval period, in an attempt to establish trends and changes, and to indicate areas where work is needed, rather than attempting to give the last word on any subject.

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Key: archbp = archbishop of; bp = bishop of; c. = count of; d. = duke of; emp. = emperor; k. = king of

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