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### Conflicting Perspectives: Chivalry in Twelfth-Century Historiography

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## Conflicting Perspectives: Chivalry in Twelfth-Century Historiography

### Abstract

Historians have found the task of defining medieval chivalry to be an elusive task. Chivalry was at the intersection of warrior culture, aristocratic values and religious ideals. By analyzing twelfth-century historians William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, and Orderic Vitalis, I have found that contemporary historians were just as conflicted over these factors as modern historians. Twelfth-century commentators all ascribed different precedence to social and moral factors and the examination of their connections between these values brings the nature of chivalry as a system of interactions between social groups into the open.

### Keywords

chivalry, English chivalry, William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, Orderic Vitalis

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Chivalry was the dominant social structure of the Middle Ages. Its tenets were limited to the ruling class, but it affected all members of medieval society. Despite its overwhelming prevalence, a definition of chivalry has eluded most historians. Twelfth-century sources range from histories and chronicles of events, to epic poetry based on facts but depicting idealized or demonized characters, to manuals of knightly behavior. Modern perceptions of chivalry are shaped by which sources historians choose to include in their analyses; modern historians get most of their arguments from medieval literature and texts that are dedicated specifically to chivalry. While these sources are beneficial and offer their own details about medieval chivalry, a vital source is unfortunately left out of scholarly discussion. A comparative analysis of twelfth-century histories offers a more thorough understanding of the conflicting elements and ideas that made up medieval chivalry; they also show how, while ubiquitous, not everyone practiced or interpreted chivalry in the same way. Twelfth-century histories do this very well, but are often ignored by modern historians in favor of more glamorous sources.

Chivalry in the twelfth century was conceptualized in a series of behaviors and social choices that knights and aristocrats used to define their class and control their behavior. Throughout this paper, I will explore some of these choices as they appear in the narratives of twelfth-century historians. One of the most visible choices that aristocrats made in this period was whether or not they were going to be vicious or merciful. Often throughout twelfth-century texts, there are examples of aristocrats either burning and pillaging, or offering mercy to their victims. These choices are often based on social class, but are also attributed to personal qualities of aristocrats. Some of these choices also relate to loyalty to ones lord, a core pillar of chivalry, or qualities such as courtesy or generosity. Knights and aristocrats could also choose how pious they chose to be in their practice of their duties and responsibilities. Just as much as churchmen

could vary their applications of religious values, aristocrats could also vary their own piety as it related to their secular lives.

The book that has dominated the field of chivalric study for the last generation is Maurice Keen's book, *Chivalry*, a study of chivalry throughout Europe. According to Keen, "chivalry may be described as an ethos in which martial, aristocratic and Christian elements were fused together."<sup>1</sup> Keen rejects the view that chivalry was a veneer to conceal the horrors of war and emphasizes the role of the church in the formation of chivalric ideals. While Keen's work provides a thorough treatment of the many conflicting aspects of chivalry and recognizes the difficulty of coming to a single, formative definition of medieval chivalry, Keen's ability to analyze the topic is hindered because he does not limit himself to a time period or region. Because of this, his book lacks focus and loses major points in a sea of information. Furthermore, Keen realizes his own fatal flaw at the end of his book: "the besetting sin of the biographer... falling in love with his subject."<sup>2</sup> Keen also falls into another trap of identifying a variety of sources, but not maximizing their usefulness; he identifies the relevance of historical documents like chronicles and histories, but then relegates their usage to opening anecdotes and topic sentences. Ultimately, Keen's talent, knowledge and vast array of resources are overwhelmed by the breadth of the topic.

Scholars who approached this topic after Keen focus their interests in more specific areas of chivalric study. Matthew Strickland, a historian with a focus on military history at the University of Glasgow focuses on the development of warrior culture through contact between Anglo-Saxon and Norman forces in military conflict.<sup>3</sup> While Strickland analyzes the topic in

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (1984; repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Strickland, *War and Chivalry: The Conduct and Perception of War in England and Normandy, 1066-1217* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 25.

many ways that are similar to Keen, he is critical of how closely Keen connects chivalry and Christianity, noting that the two are not inextricably linked. Strickland, whose main focus of research is the history of war and military advancements, is naturally more concerned with the militaristic elements of chivalry than the religious connections. Strickland's goal in his study is to prove that expectations for military conduct were not codified.<sup>4</sup> Strickland's conclusions that conduct in war was not universally codified is one supported by twelfth-century historians, a source he explicitly dismisses. Strickland assumes that twelfth-century historians universally applied their religious principles to chivalry

On the opposite end, Richard W. Kaeuper focuses almost exclusively on the ties between religious ideas and chivalric norms. His goal is to explain how chivalry was constructed so that the warlike reality of knightly society would not conflict with the religious ideals that were also influencing the development of chivalry. Kaeuper writes that "dominant values of medieval Christianity stood at odds with dominant values of the warriors."<sup>5</sup> Kaeuper's argument is compelling, but can only realistically account for scholarly perception and not reality as practiced by aristocratic society. Kaeuper's argument is also weakened by the fact that he synthesizes resources from a variety of time periods; Kaeuper's own research interests lie in the thirteenth century, but he often uses resources from over a century apart to illustrate similar points. He lacks a narrative of the development of religious ideas of chivalry.

Nigel Saul devotes his book, *Chivalry in Medieval England*, to creating a history of chivalry specific to England. Saul believes that chivalry was a lifestyle choice for members of the aristocracy, the type of chivalry they subscribed to, and how well they followed it, being a matter of personal preference and social context. He is critical of both Keen and Strickland by

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>5</sup> Richard M. Kaeuper, *Holy Warriors: The Religious Ideology of Chivalry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 9.

pointing out that scholarship on chivalry has not been evenly examined as a topic of scholarship because it is always subject to the professional preferences of historians.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Strickland analyzes chivalry through a military lens because he is a historian of warfare. Saul's approach is to analyze chivalry through a variety of different lenses, and he concludes that chivalry was neither a set of behavioral rules for warriors, nor a method for the church to exert control over the aristocracy. Saul's conclusion about the individuality of chivalry is similar to my own. However, Saul's approach is fundamentally different, as he tends to focus more on the tournament culture and pageantry that often attracts scholars of medieval chivalry, leaning on literature and romances, and using minimal historical accounts.

Many of these historians use sources similarly. Maurice Keen identifies three types of sources that he finds valuable in the study of chivalry: literature, secular manuals of chivalry, and clerical treatises on knightly behavior.<sup>7</sup> Keen, and the historians who followed, make use of twelfth-century historians throughout their analyses, and while histories and chronicles have not been shelved, comparative analysis of twelfth-century histories as an independent genre of sources has been inconsistent in modern scholarship. John Gillingham, an expert on the Angevin Empire, is particularly critical of the ways in which his colleagues use sources in studies of chivalric topics. While Gillingham was specifically criticizing the use of the *History of William the Marshal*, a biographical poem about one of the twelfth century's best-known knights, his criticisms have greatly influenced my approach towards sources and analysis. Gillingham claims that his colleagues have focused too much on the glamorous elements of chivalry, like tournaments and heraldry, while they have ignored the realistic elements that make up much

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<sup>6</sup> Nigel Saul, *Chivalry in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> Keen, *Chivalry*, 3-4.

more of the contemporary literature, particularly real warfare.<sup>8</sup> Similar critiques can be applied to Keen's and Saul's histories of chivalry, which focus much more on the fantasy elements of chivalry, and often fail to do justice to the brutal elements that contemporary writers thought were most important.

In order to depict the dynamic and often contradictory ways in which chivalry was viewed in the twelfth century, I will use three historians from the earlier half of the twelfth century: William of Malmesbury, Orderic Vitalis, and Henry of Huntingdon. These three contemporaries, all living in England and Normandy in the early to mid-twelfth century, wrote histories that devoted many pages to the activities of kings, knights, and aristocrats. As was fashionable for the time, these three histories covered time periods well before the lifetimes of the writers. For the sake of comparing these documents, I have limited my examination to cover the historians' accounts of the Norman Conquest of 1066 through the end of the reign of Henry I in 1135. A close reading of these three texts reveals that the authors did not hold homogeneous views on the nature of knightly behavior that they observed. Before delving into the texts, it is important to examine these scholars within their historical context and their relationships to one another.

William of Malmesbury, a Benedictine monk of Malmesbury Abbey, was among the best-educated men of the twelfth century. It is not clear where William of Malmesbury received his fine education, but throughout his *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, he makes frequent references to Greek and Roman sources as well as English and Welsh sources, from which he derived some of his historical content and style. The *Gesta Regum Anglorum* was not William of Malmesbury's only work, as he also wrote a history of the English church as well as histories of local churches

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<sup>8</sup> John Gillingham, "War and Chivalry in the History of William the Marshal" in *Anglo-Norman Warfare*, ed. Matthew Strickland (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1992), 251-63.

and saints.<sup>9</sup> William of Malmesbury does not directly state for whom his work was written, but he was likely anticipating that his work would be read by other churchmen and scholars. William of Malmesbury's histories are written in Latin and contain many references to sources that were not widely available at the time, indicating that an ecclesiastical and educated audience was something he expected. William of Malmesbury evaluated his own work and ambitions within the *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, showing his own awareness of his purpose and the problems of being a historian:

Most people, I know, will think it unwise to have turned my pen to the history of the kings of my own time; they will say that in works of this character truth is often disastrous and falsehood profitable, for in writing of contemporaries it is dangerous to criticize, while praise is sure of a welcome. Thus it is, they maintain, that with everything nowadays tending to the worse rather than the better, an author will pass over the evils that meet him on every hand, to be on the safe side, and as for good actions, if he cannot find any, he will invent them to secure a good reception. Others, judging my industry by their own lack of it, reckon me unequal to the greatness of my task, and try to poison my enterprise by their insinuations. Moved by the reasoning of one party or the contempt of the other, I had long since retired to a life of leisure, content to remain silent; but after a period of idleness, my old love of study plucked me by the ear and laid its hand on my shoulder, for I was incapable of doing nothing, and knew not how to devote myself to those business cares which are so unworthy of a man of letters.<sup>10</sup>

Orderic Vitalis is most unusual. Born of mixed Anglo-Saxon and Norman parentage, and raised in England, Orderic was given to the monastery of St. Evroult when he was eleven years old, speaking little to no French, and never to see his family again. In his epilogue, Orderic recalls "And so, a boy of ten, I crossed the English Channel and came into Normandy as an exile, unknown to all knowing no one. Like Joseph in Egypt, I heard a language which I did not

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<sup>9</sup> R.M. Thomson, "William of Malmesbury" in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. 36, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 348-51.

<sup>10</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, edited and translated by R.A.B. Mynors, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1:541.



understand.”<sup>11</sup> Following the tradition of the Welsh historian, Bede, Orderic began writing his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, borrowing the title from Bede’s own chronicle, as a history of St. Evroult. However, the project soon grew, and the sheer volume of information contained within the ten books of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* suggests that Orderic had embarked on a much bigger task than he had originally intended. Unfortunately, unlike other prolific historians of the twelfth century, Orderic’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* was not redistributed until the seventeenth century, and even then lacked the popularity of his counterparts.<sup>12</sup> Orderic is perhaps the most enthusiastic among the historians examined in this paper, as he seems to be writing simply for his own enjoyment than for any other reason. It is also evident that he lacks the education that benefits William of Malmesbury. The *Historia Ecclesiastica* lacks structure and often becomes unfocused, but Orderic’s own thoughts and opinions are clearer in the text, perhaps because he can be more candid than his colleagues.

The final historian examined in this paper is Henry of Huntingdon, who was an Archdeacon and not a monk like many of his colleagues. Unlike William of Malmesbury and Orderic Vitalis, Henry of Huntingdon does not tell the audience much about his own life. Henry of Huntingdon’s *Historia Anglorum* was the most widely circulated of the three texts examined in this paper, with about forty known copies surviving today.<sup>13</sup> Henry of Huntingdon’s text is simpler in structure and more concise, which is not necessarily an indication that he was less educated but that he intended his work for a wider audience. This could explain why it was more widely distributed than the histories of his contemporaries. Henry of Huntingdon is more explicit

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<sup>11</sup> Orderic Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, edited and translated by Marjorie Chibnall (London: Oxford University Press, 1975) 6:555.

<sup>12</sup> J.O. Prestwich, “Orderic Vitalis” in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. 41, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 921-2.

<sup>13</sup> D.E. Greenway, “Henry” in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. 26, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 413-5.

regarding violent acts, but often reserves judgment and guards his opinions, another result of his work being meant for a wider, more secular audience.

William of Malmesbury, Orderic Vitalis, and Henry of Huntingdon are all important to the tradition of history-writing in the Middle Ages. They were influenced by similar sources, such as Bede and Geoffrey of Monmouth, and often discuss similar topics. William of Malmesbury and Orderic Vitalis share particular overlaps; both were Benedictine monks, and likely met at some point when doing research for their historical endeavors. Both William of Malmesbury and Orderic Vitalis make reference to the popularity of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and share a great deal of topical overlap in their work. Henry of Huntingdon, being a more secular figure, is a bit of an outlier from his contemporaries. His work is much shorter and more practical, leaving out the copious references to other works and oblique references to Greek and Roman literature. The fact that Henry of Huntingdon is a bit of an outlier from his contemporaries perhaps makes him more interesting, however William of Malmesbury and Orderic Vitalis had more freedom to be candid in their assessments. Given these similarities and differences, these historians represent a variety that is representative of twelfth-century historians.

Chivalry is the intersection of aristocratic values, warrior culture, and religious ideals; without one of these elements, it is not complete. This is evident in the writings of the twelfth-century historians that are at the core of this paper. All of them include all three elements, but not all of them interpret them the same way or prioritize them the same way. The early twelfth century was an exciting time for these men to be writing their histories. The first crusade had just ended and a second one was about to begin. Territorial disputes between English, French and Norman influences created an atmosphere in which chivalric culture was front and center.

## ARISTOCRATIC VALUES

As we might expect from a code as ubiquitous as chivalry, twelfth-century historians had expectations for what qualities and behaviors their subjects displayed. These preferences were not just informed by religious ideals, but by the fulfillment of secular needs and duties. Despite being largely removed from this society, the historians of this period were not ignorant of these expectations and preferences and often evaluated their subjects on their adherence to these standards. An objective of chivalry was to provide the means by which knights and young aristocrats could navigate the social structures in which they were expected to operate while maintaining the integrity of the structure of the aristocracy.

A key element in preserving these ideals was the education of young men. Henry of Huntingdon is even more specific in that he is writing the *Historia Anglorum* specifically for consumption by learned aristocrats so they might learn how to live and thrive in their society.<sup>14</sup> William of Malmesbury and Orderic Vitalis were not writing to a specific, secular audience so they are less prescriptive in their analysis than descriptive. William of Malmesbury described young Henry I's education:

The centre of all men's hopes while still an infant, he received a princely education, for he alone of all of William's [the Conqueror] sons was born a prince, and the throne seemed destined to be his. So he served his apprenticeship to learning in the grammar school... literature, despite his hap-hazard acquaintance with it, was to him a great storehouse of political wisdom, which bears out Plato's opinion that a state would be happy if philosophers were kings, or kings philosophers.<sup>15</sup>

Whether or not education was part of the broader scope of chivalry is highly debatable, as it is not a value directly linked with the exercise of chivalry. However, I believe that it is worth investigating the connection between education and chivalry because of the connection between

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<sup>14</sup> Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, edited and translated by Diana Greenway (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 1:711.

the fulfillment of aristocratic duties and chivalry. People in the twelfth century were educated based on their prospective duties within medieval society. For example, boys who were to become career knights might be taught how to use weapons in mounted combat, but may not be taught history or literature because these topics were not essential to fulfilling their roles in society. It is interesting to note that William of Malmesbury probably wrote this passage after Henry I became king of England after the death of his brother, William Rufus. William is known to have revised the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* as late as 1134,<sup>16</sup> long after Henry I had become king, though he had not been first in line for the throne for most of his life and certainly had not been raised under the assumption that he would become king. Despite the fact that this may clearly be an edit or change made to the text retrospectively, it does demonstrate the value of fulfillment of aristocratic duties.

The depiction of Henry I's scholarly education as evaluated by William of Malmesbury can be contrasted to William's own depiction of William Rufus' education. Of William Rufus, William of Malmesbury writes that, "His boyhood spent, he passed his youth in knightly exercises, riding and shooting, competing with his elders in courtesy, with his contemporaries in courtly duties..."<sup>17</sup> While the difference in their depicted educational credentials may be the result of what types of rulers William Rufus and Henry I ended up being, it also demonstrates the importance that William of Malmesbury, one of the best-educated men of the twelfth century, assigned to education fitting the role of the subject.

Orderic Vitalis and Henry of Huntingdon are conspicuously silent on the subject of education. They do not go into detail about the education of their subjects. In the case of Henry of Huntingdon, who is writing to a broader audience, he has specifically tasked himself with

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<sup>16</sup> R.M. Thomson, "William of Malmesbury."

<sup>17</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 1:543.

providing a resource for kings and nobles to learn from the successes and failures of their ancestors. Despite the absence of a specific discussion on education in Orderic Vitalis and Henry of Huntingdon, the principle of maintenance of the social order remains a central theme to their analysis of their contemporaries.

The social order of the twelfth century was a complex hierarchy of power relationships and both formal and informal associations among the ruling elite. Everyone had a role to fill, whether it was administering swaths of land, or leading troops in battle, and when they failed to execute those roles, it could be considered as unchivalrous as acting impulsively on the battlefield. Chivalry helped form the basis for how aristocrats could navigate lord-vassal relations and conduct themselves within their society. It is when twelfth-century aristocrats strayed outside of these social expectations that conflicts happened, and the twelfth-century historians took notice.

One of the great villains of Orderic Vitalis' *Historia Ecclesiastica* was Robert of Bellême, one of the vassals of the king of England, and a frequent belligerent in regional conflicts. According to Orderic, much of the conflict that Robert of Bellême engages in is out of place and inappropriate:

At that time Robert of Bellême gave vent to the fierce hatred he had fostered by long brooding, and openly came out against the king whom he had previously placated, hiding his venom. He was a powerful and versatile man, extremely grasping and cruel, an implacable persecutor of the Church of God and the poor, and, if the truth were told, unequalled for his iniquity in the whole Christian era. Breaking his oath of fealty, he openly committed perjury, for he deserted his natural lord Henry at a time when foes beset him on all sides, and gave both counsel and military support to help Fulk of Anjou and other public enemies of his lord.<sup>18</sup>

Allegiance to one's lord was a major value in the twelfth century, and it was a vow not easily broken. Stepping outside of these power relationships, while it often could provide a

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<sup>18</sup> Orderic Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6:179.

logical route to wealth, prestige, or power, was unacceptable to the sensibilities espoused by twelfth-century society. Instead, in order to maintain a chivalrous reputation, aristocrats had to learn to gain these qualities by following the rules of their society. Here, Robert of Bellême is violating those rules by assisting an enemy, presumably for personal gain, while allowing his liege lord to believe in his loyalty. From a social perspective, this is one of the worst things a person could do.

Personality was also an important element to the social side of chivalric culture, and it is the element that is best-emphasized by twelfth-century historians as a whole. Evaluation of personality is a weak argument because of its inherent subjectivity and the bias of the authors, but it is still worth acknowledging. Historians of the twelfth century were often subject to biased depictions of kings and nobles because to portray those figures negatively might endanger their own career or risk retribution. Henry of Huntingdon described William the Conqueror for both his good qualities and his negative attributes after his death:

William was stronger than any of the counts of Normandy. He was more powerful than any of the kings of the English. He was more worthy of praise than any of his predecessors. He was wise, but cunning, wealthy but avaricious, glorious but hungry for fame.<sup>19</sup>

Personality is also a quality that is often connected with religion. Many of the attributes that are often framed as personality flaws are also sins of the Church, which makes personality an element of analysis that cannot be confined just to a social context. For example, William of Malmesbury describes Duke Robert of Normandy, William the Conqueror's eldest son:

Nor had the duke any spirit to resist; he reported his brother's offensive action the his lord the king of France, and asked for help. Lazy as he was, and belching up his daily potations, the king was preparing with many a glutton's hiccup to take the field, when his lavish promises of help were forestalled by the coin of the

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<sup>19</sup> Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, 405.

English king. This melted him; he unbuckled his belt, and returned to the pleasures of the table.<sup>20</sup>

In this passage, William of Malmesbury accuses Duke Robert of gluttony and laziness, personality flaws that are also informed by religious values. Here, we can see how the values influencing chivalry intersect and interact.

Aristocratic structures and social values are a large part of chivalry. From the later Middle Ages through the Early Modern Era, chivalry would put greater emphasis on behavior and manners than on warfare and lord-vassal relations. This coincided with the rise of the career courtier in place of the connection between nobility and warfare. This is where the idea of chivalry as a code of conduct comes from, though it was not the norm in the twelfth century, where most nobles were also expected to be warriors by default. In the twelfth century, while social expectations for behavior and personality still existed, it was not the main feature of chivalry.

It is evident from a close reading of these three twelfth century historians that the intricacies of the social hierarchy in which their subjects were involved is not always clear to them. The obligations that bound the aristocracy and had a larger influence over chivalry by the later Middle Ages is a social idea that these historians, being mostly monks and churchmen, were largely removed from. Therefore, while it may seem from this analysis that aristocratic culture played a small role in chivalry, it is merely because of the limitations of the historians to interpret these paradigms. Aristocratic values, because they are so intertwined with both religious values and military obligations, illustrate very well how interconnected the elements of chivalry are, and why it is impossible to leave any element out of an analysis of chivalry.

## **MERCY AND VIOLENCE**

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<sup>20</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 1:549.

Twelfth-century historians writing about the activities of kings and nobles were forced to acknowledge the violent culture in which these figures operated. As is evident in all three histories, northern France was more or less a constant battle ground during this period, and conduct in battle was an integral part of chivalrous society. Warfare was, after all, the professional business of the knightly class, the object of their skillset, and their main source of income and prestige.

William of Malmesbury, though the best-educated of the historians I have examined, stays away from depicting violence in his accounts. While the constant conflict between aristocrats, most notably King Henry I of England and his brother, Duke Robert of Normandy, is the major subject of the later parts of his *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, he often takes the brutality of war for granted, and does not go into detail. This is probably not because William of Malmesbury is unaware of the nature of war, but because William of Malmesbury is writing to an audience that is not interested in violence; he was likely writing his history for consumption by other scholars. His abstention from explicit discussion of violence in the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* also indicates William of Malmesbury's own cynicism towards the connection of chivalry and religious ideals. It is impossible to reconcile religious and moral values with the militaristic nature of medieval knighthood, and it is plausible that William of Malmesbury, aware of this conflict, did not comment on the violent nature of knightly life because it could be taken for granted as reality. In doing this, William of Malmesbury avoids having to discuss the obvious contradiction in behaviors.

This contradiction is one of the main points addressed by Richard Kaeuper in his book, *Holy Warriors: The Religious Ideology of Chivalry*. Kaeuper recognizes the paradox of religious idealism coupled with martial ambitions. Kaeuper also points out that "If clerics willingly



accepted the claim of knighthood to an inherent right to practice violence, they also funneled intense critiques at the warriors along with claims to a directive moral superiority.”<sup>21</sup> Here, Kaeuper makes a good point about the nature of the conflict between Christianity and the violent nature of medieval knighthood. William of Malmesbury definitely represents the unspoken acceptance of violence that was part of the contemporary debate of chivalric violence. It is important to note that Kaeuper’s book, while an excellent study on religious aspects of chivalry, covers a broad time period, synthesizing sources from the twelfth century with sources from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but does not examine how these ideas developed over time. The influence of the Crusades, which led to the creation of religious orders of knights and a deeper connection between Christianity and violence as a religious act, certainly affects Kaeuper’s interpretation, especially considering that the bulk of Kaeuper’s professional research comes from the thirteenth century, the era following the major Crusades, where the relationship between Christianity and violence was more clearly crystallized.

One aspect of warfare that William of Malmesbury does address in detail is the concept of mercy, which was an incredibly important aspect of warfare and a major criterion for chivalrous warriors. Despite the amount of conflict twelfth-century aristocrats participated in, relatively few of them were actually killed on the battlefield. Many of their sworn knights and foot soldiers were killed, but leaders died relatively infrequently. Instead, they were often held for ransom and released when certain demands of the victor were met. It is evident throughout many contemporary texts that, even while at war, a certain level of respect was expected among combatants, which played a large role in the attainment of mercy.

The Battle of Hastings is one example of a conflict in which one of the major combatants was killed. William of Malmesbury describes an incident after the battle in which “One of the

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<sup>21</sup> Kaeuper, *Holy Warriors*, 17.

knights hacked at his [Harold's] thigh with a sword as he lay on the ground; for which he was branded with disgrace by William [the Conqueror] for a dastardly and shameful act and degraded from knighthood.”<sup>22</sup> This shows that, despite being rivals, William the Conqueror still held his rival in enough esteem to preserve his dignity in death. However, this does not purely reflect respect, but could also be attributed to the need to have proof that Harold Godwinson had been killed in the battle, something that was particularly pertinent to conflicts over rival claims and political legitimacy. Another incident recounted by William of Malmesbury depicts the defeated nobles of France paying homage to the king of France, and out of respect, the King provided a funeral for one of their fallen comrades:

Haimo fell in the battle, but won great praise for his valour by unhorsing the king himself, and after the bodyguard had rallied and cut him down, his astonishing courage was rewarded at the king's command with a splendid funeral.<sup>23</sup>

These incidents prove that there was a level of mutual respect expected among the nobility. These are not rare occurrences, as they appear quite frequently in contemporary literature, poetry, and in the other histories of the time period. It is important to keep in mind, when thinking about the relationships among the nobility of the twelfth century, that the world we are discussing was very small. Most of the political figures and aristocrats discussed in contemporary documents had probably met face to face on several occasions, dined together, fought together, and were likely very well-acquainted. Many of them had familial connections and engaged in conflicts that would be unthinkable by today's standards. Knowing this, it is easier to understand why mercy was so important, and why these figures may have been more reluctant to actually kill each other in combat.

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<sup>22</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 1:457.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 451.

Matthew Strickland emphasizes brotherhood in arms as a major contributing factor to chivalry and the conduct of knights on the battlefield. He states that “Notions of honour, of respect for knightly adversaries and of ransom did indeed provide warriors with a degree of security, and generally prevented their outright slaughter in the wake of defeat.”<sup>24</sup> However, he also notes that in many cases, respect for an enemy’s skill on the battlefield did not always translate into leniency, particularly against moral or religious enemies.

Orderic Vitalis also addresses mercy very heavily in his text, though Orderic is less interested in the interactions between belligerents than he is with the interactions between the knights and the local population that are not participating directly in the conflict. The best example Orderic gives of this is an incident that occurred during a conflict between the kings of England and France:

On 17 September Richer of Laigle captured Odo and a great accumulation of booty from Cisai, the same day that King Louis reached Breteuil with many thousands and failed to achieve anything but dishonour and loss. In that expedition young Richer did something that deserves to be remembered for ever. While country people from Gacé and the villages around were following the raiders and were planning to buy back their stock or recover it somehow, the spirited knights wheeled round and charged them, and when they turned tail and fled continued in pursuit. The peasants had no means of defending themselves against a mailed squadron and were not near any stronghold where they could fly for refuge, but they saw a wooden crucifix by the side of the road and all flung themselves down together on the ground in front of it. At the sight Richer was moved by the fear of God, and for sweet love of his Saviour dutifully respected his cross. He commanded his men to spare all the terrified peasants and to turn back to finish their interrupted journey, for fear of being hindered in some way. So the honourable man, in awe of his Creator, spared about a hundred villagers, from whom he might have extorted a great price if he had been so irreverent as to capture them.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, it is possible to understand that a mutual respect existed among members of the nobility, but that it did not extend down to lower echelons of society. Orderic sees no

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<sup>24</sup>Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 158.

<sup>25</sup> Orderic Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6:251.

problem with this, accepting the theft of the livestock as part of knightly culture, while maintaining a standard for martial behavior. This is further evidenced by Orderic's deep concern with what we might call war crimes; he devotes many pages to describing aristocrats, particularly those Orderic is personally aligned against, and their actions, like burning religious houses or killing innocents. While Orderic is obviously biased, a critical audience can read his evaluation of his perceived enemies and extrapolate that these acts probably occurred on both sides of most conflicts. While not graphic, Orderic describes the crimes of the nobility against the church and the commons in more detail than William of Malmesbury or Henry of Huntingdon:

Some of them wished to knock the pious servants of God from their horses and ill-treat them. In the end they attacked the village without reverence for God, violently entered and plundered it, and as I have said, burnt to ashes houses inside the gates. Warfare of this kind, where men took up arms against helpless monks and their tenants and tried to avenge evil oppressors out to commit every kind of crime, rightly brought discredit on the would-be avengers. This was the kind of service that Richer, godson of the monks, gave to his godfathers... this was the kind of offering he made to the church in which he had been baptized!<sup>26</sup>

Orderic Vitalis describes many events like this, in which nobles burn the homes of innocents or churches, killing without discrimination with minimal risk of temporal punishment. Few of them were ever completely stripped of their titles and wealth, and virtually none were executed for their crimes despite the cost of human life that often resulted from the lifestyles of knights and aristocrats. Orderic, therefore, values the role of knights in fighting other knights, including the seizure of land and goods as measures of war. It is when knights shed the blood of religious figures or destroy churches that their violence, in Orderic's view, has gone too far.

The expectations for violence in knightly society and the reality of the violence they committed are even portrayed in the Bayeux Tapestry. Depicted in the tapestry, after the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 6:461.

Normans have landed in England and begin preparing for the upcoming battle, the Normans are shown burning a house, though there is some dispute over the details of this depiction. Whether or not this actually happened at Hastings is irrelevant, but it shows that there was some level of expectation for this kind of behavior among contemporaries. Later in the tapestry, as the battle begins, more conventional forms of warfare, such as archery, mounted combat and infantry, are depicted, albeit in much greater detail and quantity.<sup>27</sup>

What this shows is that, while people living during this period valued and were interested in the conventional military conflicts in which aristocrats engaged, they were not in the dark as to the reality of violence and warfare. Themes of violence, and what level of violence was appropriate, are present in many of the epic poems and literature of the time period. For example, as the Normans are preparing for the Battle of Hastings in 1066, William of Malmesbury reports that the waiting soldiers listened to the *Song of Roland* in order to build themselves up for the upcoming battle.<sup>28</sup> These works did not exist to provide a commentary on events or historical figures, but to provide the audience with a guide as to how to navigate the contradiction-ridden world in which they lived. However, as these types of sources were also meant to provide entertainment value, the violence within them is often more graphic and abundant.

The social position of many of these knights and aristocrats is addressed in detail by Georges Duby, the great social historian of the twentieth century. Duby argues that there was a group of “juventus” who were childless, often unmarried men of aristocratic background who, having no land to inherit, ravaged the countryside of France in search of fame and fortune, leaving conflict in their wake.<sup>29</sup> He argues that this is where a great deal of twelfth-century

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<sup>27</sup> *The Bayeux Tapestry*, Scenes 47-58 .

<sup>28</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 1:455.

<sup>29</sup> Georges Duby, “Youth in Aristocratic Society: Northwestern France in the Twelfth Century” in *The Chivalrous Society*, translated by Cynthia Postan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 113-5.

conflict originated. These men were often seeking fame or patronage on which they could earn income and prestige and make a place for themselves in society. Duby uses Orderic Vitalis as a source for these claims. Indeed, this kind of behavior frustrated the historians of the twelfth century not only because the violence they committed was unholy, but because it disrupted the social balance of the world they lived in. This behavior seems to be a part of what Orderic Vitalis is describing in his passages depicting excessive crimes. However, it cannot be assumed that this behavior was consistent across this part of society based on Orderic's description and while Duby points out an important feature of violence in twelfth-century Normandy, it is only a part of chivalric society. Strickland has an alternative explanation for acts like the burning of churches and monastic houses. Strickland does not attribute this to the actions of a particular group, but as the result of "the need for ready cash to retain the service of ... troops."<sup>30</sup>

The third historian of the twelfth century that I have analyzed, Henry of Huntingdon, takes an approach to violence that is closer to that of literature. Henry of Huntingdon depicts violence much more graphically than other contemporary historians. Unlike his colleagues, Henry of Huntingdon was not a monk; as an archdeacon of the church, he had more of a secular life than William of Malmesbury and Orderic Vitalis. Henry of Huntingdon's account of events is a much thinner narrative and includes fewer details regarding specific conflicts. As his *Historia Anglorum* was written for a broader audience of high-level aristocrats – those at least with an education in Latin – Henry of Huntingdon's text fulfills the dual task of informing the audience while keeping them interested.

Henry of Huntingdon's descriptions of violence are particularly prominent in his description of the events of the First Crusade. This serves not only as propaganda for the crusades themselves, but to describe the bloody nature of warfare:

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<sup>30</sup> Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 82.

With the utmost bravery they clashed with the enemy, and the clamour resounded to the heavens. Showers of spears darkened the day. Every man cut through and was cut through. Then a very great force of Parthians, which had been in the rear, came up and attacked our men so fiercely that little by little they gave way. But Bohemond, the arbiter of wars and the judge of conflicts, sent his squadron, still unbroken, into the midst of the enemy. Then Robert son of Gerard, his best knight and standard-bearer, like a lion among gathered flocks, rushed forward between the Turkish lines, and all the while the tongues of his standard fluttered above the heads of the Turks. When the others saw this, they recovered their spirits, and with one mind charged the enemy. And so with his sword the duke of the Normans split open one man's head, teeth, neck, and shoulders, down to his breast. Then Duke Godfrey cut another man in half, so that one part fell to the ground and his horse bore the other part of its lord among the pagans as they fought, a monstrous sight that so terrified them all that they fled and went away to the wrath of damnation. The heads of many of them were joyfully carried to Antioch.<sup>31</sup>

It is a reasonable assumption that some of this uncensored depiction of violence is due to prejudice against the Turks. Henry of Huntingdon does not depict violence among Christians so graphically. Considering the tactics and weapons that were commonly employed during this time period, the bloody nature that Henry of Huntingdon describes in reference to the Christians fighting the Turks is probably not dissimilar to the nature of warfare among Christians. However, because of the animosity towards Turks that was ubiquitous in medieval Europe, depicting graphic acts against them was more socially acceptable.

Violence was not confined to the battlefield; other gruesome acts that occurred during the crusades were also depicted by Henry of Huntingdon. He writes that “the Lord gave a most famous victory to his people. But the next day, when the citizens had buried their dead, our men dug them up, and taking the gold and silver, and the palls that were about them, hurled their heads into the city. So by now all the citizens' hope and pride had vanished.”<sup>32</sup> This is the type of action that, had it been committed against non-heretical Christians, would be completely unacceptable. This would be the type of behavior that Orderic Vitalis would have condemned.

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<sup>31</sup> Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, 433.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

Henry of Huntingdon's depiction of violent behavior may only be socially permissible when violence is being committed against a sworn enemy, but reflects the violent lifestyle that the aristocratic warrior class was constantly steeped in. This principle of violence being acceptable against a religious enemy also provides the basis for the connection between the role of knights as warriors and the religious values they held.

These three authors, while not in direct conflict with each other, provide unique summations of the role of violence in knightly culture. William of Malmesbury focuses, not on the combat aspect of war, keeping the violent elements of knightly culture from conflicting with the religious structures that dominated medieval life, but on the aspect of mercy. This mercy was fostered not only by the expectation that aristocrats existed in a world of respect and close connections but by the need for aristocratic society to maintain the social order. On the other hand, Orderic Vitalis focuses much less on the relationships between belligerents in a conflict than on the effects of warfare on lower classes. Orderic recognizes the need for the common people to have some kind of protection from the wars of aristocrats, in which they are often collateral damage. Henry of Huntingdon, depicting the realism of violence in the First Crusade, indicates the growing connection between violence and religion that resulted, in which violent acts were acceptable when committed against religious enemies, but not against fellow Christians, which would play a major role in deepening the connection between chivalry and religion.

## **RELIGIOUS IDEAS**

The biggest influence on the historians of the twelfth century was the religious values that shaped their everyday lives. All three of the historians discussed here had careers in the church; Orderic Vitalis and William of Malmesbury were monks, and Henry of Huntingdon was an



archdeacon. It is impossible to separate their religious ideas from their interpretations of events going on around them, which is certainly evident in many of their analyses of events. This is the realm in which the three historians in my analysis differ the most, even though it is the element they have in common.

The major conflict among twelfth-century historians is the connection between chivalry and religion, an argument that persists among historians today. Maurice Keen argues that religious values were an essential component the development of chivalry, stating that “Without clerical learning in the background, chivalry could scarcely have progressed beyond a kind of hereditary military professionalism, occasionally heroic but essentially crude.”<sup>33</sup> Keen goes on to stress that the crusades were vital to the development of the concept of the Christian warrior.<sup>34</sup> Matthew Strickland criticized Keen’s treatment of chivalry, claiming that Keen had assumed that Christianity had been applied universally to chivalry. Strickland argues that this was not at all the case, and that while Christianity was always linked to chivalry, this did not always produce the same results.<sup>35</sup> Richard W. Kaeuper, while studying the same topic from the opposite side as Strickland, comes to a similar conclusion that chivalry was a paradox of religious ideas and warrior culture.<sup>36</sup> The difference in these conclusions is subtle. Strickland argues that Christianity was unevenly applied to chivalry based on the inclinations of knights, while Kaeuper argues for a more socially constructed answer that the balance was negotiated between clerics and warriors before becoming obsolete in the early modern period. Even though Strickland is dismissive of texts written by clerics as part of chivalric history, the historians in my analysis support his ultimate conclusions.

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<sup>33</sup> Keen, *Chivalry*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>35</sup> Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 57.

<sup>36</sup> Kaeuper, *Holy Warriors*, 9.

Whether or not chivalry was an entity through which the church could exert control over the knightly and aristocratic subsets of society is a major point of contention. William of Malmesbury, as I suggested above, understood the inherent contradictions present in the religious and martial aspects of chivalric life. William of Malmesbury respected the separation between the realities of war and the religious expectations by which knights could be judged. This is not necessarily to say that William of Malmesbury believed that actions during war were beyond moral judgment, but that he recognized an obvious contradiction and the need to maintain this contradiction in order to maintain the status quo and keep the warrior class in check.

Given that the church was ubiquitous in twelfth-century society, God was interpreted in everything. It was a common belief that God determined the winners of pitched battles according to the piety and virtue of the combatants. Combatants who had fulfilled their religious obligations were more likely to be chosen by God to win conflicts. There are several examples in twelfth-century histories of military engagements being interpreted as the will of God. William of Malmesbury recounts a battle fought between Henry I of England and his brother, Duke Robert of Normandy:

...Fortune put the finishing touch to the war without bloodshed, and when his brother advanced against him with a far from negligible force... she delivered them without effort into his hand. This battle was fought at Tinchebray... on a Saturday, the eve of Michaelmas. It was on the same day, about forty years before, that William the First landed at Hastings; perhaps it was a judgement of Providence that Normandy should submit to England on the very day on which the Norman host had once arrived to conquer her.<sup>37</sup>

This commonly accepted belief could inspire a great deal of fear in medieval combatants. William of Malmesbury describes how the Normans spent the night praying before the Battle of

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<sup>37</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 1:723-5.

Hastings, William the Conqueror himself “affirming that God would be on their side because their cause was just.”<sup>38</sup>

This issue is also addressed by Orderic Vitalis. Being less skeptical than William of Malmesbury, Orderic is more direct in his interpretation of the connection between God and the outcome of war:

I have been told that in the battle of the two kings, in which about nine hundred knights were engaged, only three were killed. They were all clad in mail and spared each other on both sides, out of fear of God and fellowship in arms; they were more concerned to capture than to kill the fugitives. As Christian soldiers they did not thirst for the blood of their brothers, but rejoiced in a just victory given by God, for the good of holy Church and the peace of the faithful.<sup>39</sup>

Orderic Vitalis’s interpretation here of the connection between religion and war is much more explicit than that given by William of Malmesbury. For Orderic, the result is given directly by God, and the combatants, according to his account, are sufficiently just and virtuous to have earned this result and celebrate it. What this passage implies is that good knights prioritize their religious values over their military goals, and are spared by God as a result. This indicates that Orderic perceives a strong linkage between chivalry and religion. To be chivalrous requires virtue and piety, but does this mean that the medieval church could claim authority over chivalry?

Orderic Vitalis describes an incident that can be interpreted as an attempt of the church to assert authority over warfare, and by extension over chivalry as well. In response to the constant warfare that plagued Normandy during the early decades of the twelfth century, the Pope visited Henry I, demanding that the king take control over the situation and put an end to the constant warfare. The Pope criticizes the materialistic nature of many of these conflicts, as many fights were over land and property. Henry I claims that his wars against his brother Robert, Duke of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 1:455.

<sup>39</sup> Orderic Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6:241.

Normandy, have been in response to the Duke's own disloyalty and provocations.<sup>40</sup> Orderic does not provide his own analysis of this encounter, but it seems that the meeting did not have the desired effect, as the warfare continues as it had before. This indicates that even though the church could claim moral authority over knights and kings, it was not taken completely seriously by combatants at the time and effected little real change.

Christian values are, throughout each of the histories I have chosen to include in this analysis, the preferred means by which these historians criticize knights and aristocrats. Despite the similarities and the religious connections that many twelfth-century historians shared, they were by no means homogeneous in their application of religious values to chivalry. Orderic Vitalis often takes a religious stance in his narrative. He is quick to invoke religious imagery, making heavy use of omens and superstitions to explain phenomena or to depict God's judgment of the warriors who figure into his narrative. For example, Orderic describes an incident of Communion:

Robert of Stuteville, a brave and powerful man, was a strong supporter of the duke.... On Easter Sunday, while a chaplain was giving communion to him and his household knights, one of the knights went reverently up to the altar to receive the Eucharist, and the priest took the host, intending to place it in the man's open mouth, but he was totally unable to lift his hand from above the altar.... This strange occurrence embarrassed the knight and, fearing some future disaster that he could not foresee, he gave away most of his clothes and other possessions to the clergy and the poor. Afterwards he was killed in the first skirmish that took place after Easter....<sup>41</sup>

These types of phenomena are not unusual in Orderic's narrative. Many knights and aristocrats meet their ends after experiencing some sort of similar situation. In 1134, preceding one of the bloodier passages of Orderic's narrative, he includes lengthy descriptions of unusual weather patterns that he perceives as prophetic of what is in store. Orderic describes heavy snows,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 6:283-9.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 6:73.

floods, intense heat, and whirlwinds as punishment for sins and signals of further calamity.<sup>42</sup>

Belief in superstition, miracles, and similar wonders was common in the Middle Ages, and divine intervention was often used to explain unusual circumstances. It is clear that Orderic takes prophecy and superstition very seriously in his interpretation of his faith, and applies these qualities to his analysis of events and his representation of chivalry.

Orderic's contemporary, Henry of Huntingdon, is also very religiously-oriented in his historical narrative. However, unlike Orderic, who approaches prophecy with curiosity and often sympathy, Henry of Huntingdon is much harsher, invoking a much more fire-and-brimstone attitude towards his perceptions of sin. Of the Norman Conquest, Henry of Huntingdon writes that "It has already been made very clear how the Lord deservedly took away from the English race their safety and honour, and commanded that they should no longer exist as a people."<sup>43</sup> Despite the very real dynastic conflicts and economic incentives that led to the Norman Conquest of 1066, Henry of Huntingdon chooses to display this event, the defining moment in Anglo-Norman history, as the specific will of God.

God could also reward, as Henry of Huntingdon depicts in Robert, Duke of Normandy's exploits in the First Crusade. He writes that "they offered the kingdom of Jerusalem to the duke of the Normans. Because he refused it, on account of the labour involved, God was offended against him, and nothing favourable happened to him thereafter."<sup>44</sup> Later, Henry of Huntingdon brings this issue up again, and is even more critical of this choice, which was probably a practical consideration on the part of the Duke of Normandy:

The Lord requited Duke Robert, because when He had allowed him to be glorious in the exploits at Jerusalem, he had refused the kingdom of Jerusalem when it was offered to him. He had chosen rather to devote himself to quietness and inactivity

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 6:435-441.

<sup>43</sup> Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, 413.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 443.

in Normandy than to toil for the Lord of kings in the holy city. So God condemned him to everlasting inactivity and perpetual imprisonment. A sign of this, a comet, had appeared in the same year. There were seen also, on Maundy Thursday, two full moons, one in the east and the other in the west.<sup>45</sup>

Here Henry of Huntingdon uses religion as his main basis for criticism of knightly goals and priorities, and he asserts religious authority over their actions and exploits. He decries perceived defiance and prescribes divine retribution towards the duke of Normandy, who he characterizes as denying his God-given knightly duty to govern and defend the Holy Land.

Where there is no evidence that any wrongdoing worthy of punishment occurred, Henry of Huntingdon makes assumptions. The wreck of the White Ship, in which Henry I's sons and heirs were drowned in the English Channel, was one of the greatest tragedies of that generation. Orderic Vitalis and William of Malmesbury both mourn for the loss of life and instability that it brings to the succession. Henry of Huntingdon, however, interprets the event very differently from his contemporaries:

In the year of grace 1120, when all were subdued and pacified in Gaul, Henry joyfully returned to England. But in the same sea-crossing, two of the king's sons, William and Richard, and the king's daughter and his niece, as well as many of the king's nobles, stewards, chamberlains, and butlers, and Earl Richard of Chester, were shipwrecked. All of them, or nearly all were said to be tainted with sodomy and they were snared and caught. Behold the glittering vengeance of God!<sup>46</sup>

This event does not connect as strongly with chivalry as the other events that Henry of Huntingdon describes, but it clearly depicts his religious views, which I believe to be more conservative than his colleagues based on the harshness of his judgment. However, it may not just be Henry of Huntingdon's personal values that guide his interpretation, but his desire to have an effect on his audience. Invoking such strong religious imagery certainly would influence his audience to be more mindful of the consequences of their actions on their immortal souls.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 455.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 467.

If Henry of Huntingdon can be considered a conservative in his application of religious principles, William of Malmesbury is more liberal in his evaluation of the connection between religion and chivalry. The major difference between William of Malmesbury and his contemporaries is that William of Malmesbury makes a distinction between secular destiny and religious fate or divine providence, a crucial distinction in a discussion of chivalry. For William of Malmesbury a person's ability to achieve temporal success, such as acquisition of titles and land or social advancement, is separate from a person's ability to achieve salvation. This difference in understandings is probably a result of William of Malmesbury's superior education. His sophisticated analytical ability and knowledge give him the philosophical tools to develop these ideas that his colleagues do not have.

This is particularly evident when William of Malmesbury discusses the origins of particularly important historical figures. Perhaps the most important historical figure in the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* is William the Conqueror, to whom William of Malmesbury gives a quality of secular destiny:

The son she bore him was called William after his great-great-grandfather; his future eminence was foretold to his mother by a dream in which she saw her own inward parts extend and spread all over Normandy and England. The child himself too as a new-born baby, when at the very moment of his coming into the world he first touched the ground, filled both his hands with the rushes with which the floor was covered against dirt, and tightly clutched what he had seized. The gossiping women received this as a portent with cries of joy, and the midwife, greeting the good omen, acclaimed a baby born to be king.<sup>47</sup>

This passage is conspicuous for its lack of specific, religious indicators. There is no mention of God, or a divine power giving William the Conqueror the power to conquer England. His ability to achieve such earthly greatness seems to be more attributed to William's own personal qualities as interpreted from birth. Of course, this anecdote is probably not an accurate

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<sup>47</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 1:427.

description of an actual event, but a story that was developed later. It still supports the idea that personal achievement is not necessarily connected to religion. William of Malmesbury, when discussing William's upbringing, does make a connection between God's will and William's destiny to be king of England.<sup>48</sup> William of Malmesbury connects William's *capability* to become king, and his God-given *destiny* to be King in separate passages, indicating that William of Malmesbury sees these as two unique qualities, one being secular, and the other being religious.

This theme continues in William of Malmesbury's evaluation of William the Conqueror's son, William Rufus, who inherited England on William the Conqueror's death. In his discussion of William Rufus's birth and upbringing, William of Malmesbury describes an individual who he believes is destined for greatness:

King William's son, William, was born in Normandy several years before his father came to England. Brought up as he was by his parents with the greatest care, and naturally gifted with a spirit prolific of great ideas, he reached the highest point of supreme power – a prince unquestionably without peer in our own time, had he not been overshadowed by his father's greatness, and had fate not overtaken him at an early age, and thus prevented the faults developed by unlimited power and youthful spirits from being corrected by maturer years.<sup>49</sup>

Compare this to William of Malmesbury's comments on William Rufus' death:

Immensely ambitious, he would have been immensely successful, had he been able to complete his allotted span, or to break through the violence of Fortune and fight his way above it.<sup>50</sup>

Examining these evaluations side by side reveals the difference between a secular destiny and a religiously determined fate. William of Malmesbury makes it very clear that William Rufus had a secular destiny that implied great success in the future, but that this destiny is cut short by divine providence. He describes William Rufus as having signs and omens of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 1:429.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 1:543.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 1: 577.



impending death in a hunting accident. The positive evaluation of William Rufus is likely influenced by the need for medieval historians to evaluate kings and powerful aristocrats favorably in order to guard their own prospects, but the distinction William of Malmesbury makes is still relevant.

The differing religious positions that twelfth-century historians take suggests that the relationship between religion and chivalry was not a codified or consistently applied principle. The era in which these historians were living was a period of change and growth for this relationship. These authors wrote in the wake of the First Crusade, and well before the start of the Second. The Crusades affected the development of chivalry as they redirected violence towards religious enemies. In the early twelfth century, the Church was also in the midst of a series of reforms that sought to unify and establish consistency across the Church. These factors would affect how religion was connected to chivalry as time passed.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

It is evident from this examination that there is value in examining twelfth-century historians as an independently relevant source for contemporary views on Anglo-Norman chivalry. In their treatment of the various elements of chivalry, particularly the relationship between the violent nature of chivalry and the dominant values of Christianity, twelfth-century historians provide variable interpretations that are worthy of analysis. This diversity of values, explanations, and interests presents chivalry as an evolving social institution that can be defined as the intersection among aristocratic values of social order and loyalty, a warrior culture of violence and mercy, and Christianity. People encountered and interpreted these components differently, weighting them uniquely based on their own personal characteristics. In the twelfth

century, chivalry was not a codified set of norms or rules, but an individualized set of values that contained many common features.

In this analysis, I have tried to avoid the pitfalls that befell Maurice Keen and Nigel Saul in their broad histories of chivalry. My analysis builds upon their work by narrowing the topic of study and finding that complexities, similar to the ones described by Saul, Strickland, and Kaeuper, existed in this time period. My analysis of twelfth-century historians is able to bring more specificity to the study of chivalry. I do not demonstrate differences in ideas across multiple centuries but among contemporaries. Strickland is right to point out that Christianity could not be uniformly applied to chivalry, and even though he dismisses the use of ecclesiastical writers, particularly Orderic Vitalis, their interpretations support his argument. Nigel Saul's conclusion is closest to my own, but does not go far enough to emphasize the variable nature of chivalry, and gets sidetracked by fantasy chivalry instead of analyzing what contemporaries found important and relevant.

I contend that twelfth-century histories are valuable in the field of chivalric study because they can be studied comparatively because these sources come from a very narrow time frame, contain stylistic and structural similarities, and are written by men with many career parallels. Comparative study of these sources clearly depicts divergences in religious interpretations of chivalry. William of Malmesbury is willing to accept the paradox of religion and warfare because it is a reality of life. He sees a difference in a person's capacity for achievement and their God-given destiny. Orderic Vitalis and Henry of Huntingdon do not make similar distinctions and draw closer connections between religion and chivalry by depicting God's judgment of knights and by applying moral teaching to their analysis of warriors.

I stress the need for historians of chivalry to be more precise in their choice of region and time period. I have been able to show diverse ideas, many of which stand in conflict with each other, existing in a very small window of time. This indicates that studies of chivalry need to be more specific in regards to time period and locale in order to reflect cultural and social values that vary from region to region and change over time. Current scholarship on chivalry does a poor job of effectively tracing change over time and being specific in regards to time and place. As I have shown in this paper, being more careful and concise would benefit any future study on chivalry.

My approach provides a more clearly delineated examination of the complexities that underpinned Anglo-Norman chivalry from the time of the Norman Conquest through the twelfth century. The next step in my research will be to deepen our understanding of how these sources fit in with other genres of contemporary sources, such as literature, chivalric manuals, and church doctrine. Looking at all of these sources comparatively may be more revealing and form a new basis for research in chivalric studies.

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