Chivalry in 14th Century

Chivalry was an important ideology in the 14th Century and how well individual nobles and kings were perceived to comply with its ideals was an important factor in how they were regarded by their contemporaries, and indeed how kind history has been to them.

One of the origins of the ideology can be traced back to the influence of the Church. In an age when the fate of your eternal soul was a universal obsession then breaking the Commandments by killing was an obvious concern. However, the Church needed warriors for crusades and its secular interests. So killing could be justified provided it was to the benefit of the weak or to defend Christianity; this is an early precursor of the very modern idea of a “just war”. However, despite these lofty ideals it seems to have had little effect on how war was actually practised. The battles of the Hundred Years War and other European conflicts are only the tip of the iceberg; the execution of an effective campaign was nearly always to destroy the opponent’s economic support, which in an agrarian economy meant slaughtering and terrorising large numbers of unarmed, innocent peasants. So even nobles lauded for their chivalry, such as the Black Prince, would today probably be considered war criminals.

The Chivalric code also dictated a set of etiquette rules and how “courtly love” should proceed. One advantage to the nobles was to reinforce social divisions at a time that nobles had to accept the increasing influence of a mercantile class. And a cynic might argue “courtly love” (if it ever existed) was a useful cover for the adultery common among courtiers.

In the 14th Century the ideals of chivalry were epitomised by the legends of King Arthur and his court. King Arthur’s tomb had been discovered (conveniently labelled!) in Glastonbury (1190) during the reign of Edward I and over the next hundred years a number of Arthurian artefacts miraculously appeared. Edward III recognised how the legends could be used to enhance the legitimacy and reputation of the monarchy and tried to recreate some of the supposed features of the court at Camelot. For example, the Order of the Garter (1348) can be seen as an attempt to create a new Round Table and also it gave him the power of patronage over the aristocracy.

For us, studying Richard II, it is in tournaments that some understanding of chivalry in the late 1300s may help our comprehension of the trial by combat of Bolingbroke and Mowbray. The trial is conducted under the rules familiar to nobles participating in jousts. What started in the early middle ages as training and practice for battle had become little more than a popular sport. As in all sports, it developed its own set of rules and jargon with accompanying displays. Jousting was fairly poor training for real conflict, as the French had painfully learnt at Crecy and Poitiers. Tournaments were banned by Edward II and Henry III and it is no coincidence that they were perceived as weak kings. Edward III did not make the same mistake. He and the Black Prince had the advantage at being physically strong men, skilled at jousting, and their reputation could only be enhanced by their participation. And again the king was able to use the organisation of tournaments to bind in the nobility to his influence.

King Richard was not an enthusiast for tournaments. Although I cannot find authority for this view, I am fairly sure that stopping the combat between Bolingbroke and Mowbray would have confirmed a perception that he was not a truly “chivalric” monarch. And his vacillation before making the decision would have been another indication of weakness.

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