

Caste, Skill, and Training: The Evolution of Cohesion in European Armies from the Middle Ages to the Sixteenth Century

by SANDRA ALVAREZ posted on JULY 2, 2014



Caste, Skill, and Training: The Evolution of Cohesion in European Armies from the Middle Ages to the Sixteenth Century

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The Journal of Military History: vol. 57 (1993)

Abstract

The Middle Ages were characterized by growing institutional sophistication, and nowhere was this more apparent than the craft of war. The image made familiar by Ferdinand Lot and Sir Charles Oman, of medieval warfare as featuring limited discipline, simple tactics, and no strategy at all, has given way to a growing appreciation of the complexity of military operations between the eighth and the sixteenth centuries.¹ More and more medieval leaders are emerging from the shadows of romance as solid, competent captains. Even Richard the Lion-Hearted is now presented as a strategist comparable to Bernard Law Montgomery—a juxtaposition not necessarily favoring the latter!² The parallel reflects the high cost of medieval armies relative to a given political system's mobilizable resources. Like the twentieth-century British marshal, no medieval commander could afford to lose men heedlessly. Large-scale battles were exceptional because of their risk—a risk enhanced by the high development of the science of fortification. An enemy defeated in the field was likely to escape decisive consequences by withdrawing behind defenses whose reduction involved massive expenses of time and effort.

Medieval warfare therefore tended towards a process of small-scale maneuvers, raids, and skirmishes based on regional networks of fortifications. This attritional model in turn highlighted the familiar limitations of feudal levies: short service and organizational entropy. Warfare had become too complex, too sophisticated, and too low-key to be sustained effectively by temporarily assembled bands of agonistic heroes. High levels of patience, cunning, and discipline were required to achieve even limited ends—not least to prevent operations from degenerating into mutual self-destruction through mutual plundering.³

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Tactical considerations reinforced strategic factors in making high demands on the solidarity and flexibility of field forces. Medieval commanders were by no means indifferent to the problems and opportunities posed by flanks. They were correspondingly concerned with being able to move formed bodies of men from place to place in a hurry. The risks of disorganized pursuit were also frequently demonstrated alike by Magyar and Muslim horsemen, Welsh and Prussian peasants.⁴

Cohesion, in short, became an increasingly important element of medieval armed forces. Yet the techniques for achieving this cohesion have been relatively ignored by military historians more concerned with operational results. This essay proposes to examine the structure of medieval Europe's military systems – and the factors that held medieval armed forces

together in battle and on campaign.

I

Medieval Europe was a society organized for war, whose focal point was the armored horseman, the knight. Expensive technical improvements in armor and in horse breeding, combined with the difficulty of mobilizing capital resources in a subsistence economy, set knights increasingly apart from other fighters. To the price of knightly equipment were added the costs, material and psychological, of knightly professionalism. The horsemanship necessary to manage a stallion in battle; the ability to use sword, mace, or lance effectively, whether mounted or on foot – these skills reflected early training and a lifetime's practice. They were specialized enough to be essentially incompatible with the mundane concerns of earning a living.⁵

Caste position reflected pride of craft. If heavy cavalry increasingly dominated the high-medieval military scene, this reflected its flexibility and adaptability as well as its social pretensions. The knight was not a berserker. Ideally, his belligerence was focused and controlled. He was master of himself as well as of his horse and arms. As early as the Carolingian era, armored horsemen could execute complex tactical maneuvers. They could fight effectively on foot as well as on horseback.⁶ Their successors demonstrated, from the marshes of Ireland to the forests of Prussia to the deserts of Outre-Mer, a significant ability to adjust their tactics to their opposition. This developing sophistication challenged traditional ways of organizing Western Europe's nobility for war. The patterns of military grouping among the German peoples, whose political organizations grew out of the Roman Empire, had been anthropological, based on tribal and clan affinities. Chieftains also increasingly tried to maintain bands of pledged warriors as a personal following, maintaining them from their own resources and the spoils of war. These *Gefolgschaften* increasingly formed the core of auxiliary and federate units in the late Roman army, blending personal oaths to their leader with institutional allegiance to the Empire.⁷

The concept of fealty at two levels endured long after Western Europe's disappearance. But while bonds of blood and oath could generate social cohesion, linkages based on personal loyalty did not always guarantee enough solidarity and self-sacrifice to withstand the shock of a major battle, to say nothing of the stress of long-term campaigning.⁸ The situation was further complicated because an increasing number of men at arms did not belong to the feudality at all. In Spain and Italy, "commoner knights" were a major element of military strength by the eleventh century. In Germany the growth of the *ministeriales*, a class of servile administrators, put even unfree men into armor and on horseback. And everywhere the fully armed horseman was increasingly supplemented by a class of mounted "sergeants." These men, of less exalted birth and less complete equipment than the chivalry proper, often depended for their horses and armor on a wealthier patron or sponsor, whom they logically followed in the field.⁹

The noble man-at-arms, far from being an isolated individual, increasingly became the focal point of a small administrative unit and combat team, the lance. Beginning informally, incorporating the knight and a few personal attendants, the lance evolved in France by the middle of the fifteenth century into a man-at-arms, a squire, a page, two or three mounted archers, and a servant. A Burgundian lance could include as many as nine men, each with a specific operational function. On campaign, lances were grouped into *conroys*, usually of twenty-five to eighty men—more or less permanent bodies.

The size of these varied considerably. They might include only the retainers of a single lord. They might consist of several smaller groups, or even of isolated individuals assembled *ad hoc*.¹⁰ *Conroys* most frequently incorporated men from the same neighborhood, who had exercised together and tested each others' mettle for years. Such units were perfectly capable of following their leader's standard in coherent maneuvers—even in a maneuver as risky as pretended flight, which was an element of Norman warfare as early as the eleventh century.¹¹

Conroys might also be formed into larger units several hundred strong, as in the French army that marched against the Flemish in 1328. At this level, once the limits of personal connections were reached, a logical and familiar next step involved groupings based on language and place of origin. Even the religious military orders, with their direct, principled commitment to the service of a universal God, were unable to submerge regional identities among their members. The resulting risk of intrigue and rivalry, particularly well illustrated in the history of the Teutonic Knights, was considered balanced by administrative and operational considerations.¹²

The importance of these structures must not be overstated. Medieval armies lacked anything like a comprehensive command structure able to evoke general, conditioned responses. Coherence in even the lance, to say nothing of larger formations, depended on mutual loyalties far more than on discipline, drill, or fear of punishment. The heavy cavalry of feudal Europe was nevertheless reasonably successful in developing functional patterns of internal cohesion that combined personal and institutional elements.

This process was significantly influenced by a growing awareness that armored horsemen could be vulnerable even on their home ground: the well-watered, relatively open terrain of northwestern Europe. As early as the twelfth century, the cities of Flanders and northern Italy were beginning to produce foot soldiers able to defeat the best of the mounted chivalry. In 1176, it was the infantry of the Lombard League that broke the charge of Frederick Barbarossa's knights, then counter-attacked to drive the Germans from the field of Legnano. Through the thirteenth century, the footmen of the Low Countries enabled their cities to maintain and enhance their power vis-a-vis the local nobility, a process culminating with the destruction of a French knightly army at Courtrai in 1303.¹³

At their best, however, the civic militias of urban Europe were part-time fighting men. Their tactical skills were correspondingly limited. Their operational effectiveness depended on levels of involvement in war that were contrary to the medieval city's purpose. Unlike the Roman Republic or the city-states of classical Greece, the medieval city was a commercial, not a political, institution. Civic pride and civic identity ultimately depended on the community's successful fostering of prosperity. And medieval wars could be ruinously expensive even for the victors. The Lombard League virtually bankrupted itself checking the pretensions of Barbarossa. The Fourth Crusade cost the Republic of Venice far more than any immediate gains in loot or improved trade networks.

A related internal factor working against the evolution of the medieval townsman into a hoplite was the growing specialization of labor within the commune. If each task had its specific skill, taught and supported by specific guilds and craft brotherhoods, was it not correspondingly reasonable to divide up the labor of military service, and to provide specialists in this craft as in all the others? From a few experienced captains and armorers held on retainer, the permanent armed forces of Europe's cities and city-states tended to increase during the fourteenth century to fairly substantial sizes-and to include correspondingly fewer citizens in their ranks.¹⁴

II

Despite their limitations, the communal infantries achieved enough successes to highlight an increasingly obvious fact. The armored horseman was a generalized weapons system, not a comprehensive one. The knights in general, however, were soldiers enough to recognize their own limitations. This self-knowledge was enhanced as medieval warfare spread to its frontiers. Spain or Palestine, Prussia or the Scottish Marches-each region outside the feudal heartland of northwestern Europe posed its own set of operational challenges. Each also produced fighting men familiar with local conditions. As guides, scouts, and auxiliaries, they were indispensable. For three centuries the Teutonic Knights depended heavily for success, and often for survival, on the native Prussians and Lithuanians who knew their swamps and forests better than any alien from Swabia or Brandenburg.¹⁵ Turcoples, native troops and Europeans using native equipment and local tactics, were equally valuable to Crusader armies as scouts and light cavalry. Secular states and their military commanders were no less willing to adapt to circumstances. The Republic of Venice learned quickly from the fighting in the Morea during the fifteenth century that indigenous light horsemen were far more effective against the Turks than men-at-arms brought in at great effort and expense from the Italian mainland.¹⁶

Regional forces as a rule strongly resembled the knights, both in pride of craft and in being brought up to that craft from childhood. In northern Wales and the border counties of England, boys began learning to use the bow almost as soon as they could walk. The genetours of the Iberian Peninsula and the stradiots of the Balkans might be part-time laborers or farmers, but they drew much of their personal identity, and an increasing amount of their civil status, from their military proficiency. Regional notables able to accept this assertiveness could find their own power considerably enhanced. The Stanleys of England, for example, rose to the peerage from relative obscurity in large part because of their enduring command of the allegiance of the longbowmen of Cheshire and Lancashire.¹⁷

Local military specializations also flourished because certain skills at arms proved consistently resistant to external cultivation. The Scots arguably suffered more than any people in Europe from the longbow, yet the Scottish crown was never able to institutionalize the weapon north of the Tweed. The Valois monarchy during the Hundred Years' War also periodically sought to foster skill with the bow to the point of banning all other public games and sports. Results were soon apparent: in a relatively brief time some French archers could outshoot some English ones. However, fears of social subversion enhanced by the mid-century Jacquerie kept the experiments short-lived. Without constant encouragement and constraint, archery in France rapidly reverted to an arcane craft. When introduced from above or from outside, the spectrum of skills and interests required in specialized military activity commonly failed to develop a cultural matrix strong enough to survive in the absence of a level of social control unsustainable by any medieval state. ¹⁸

The difficulties surrounding systematic skill transference helped generate a logical step, from utilizing regional specialists locally and on a more or less ad hoc basis to engaging them in organized bodies for campaigns waged outside their

homelands. The marches of north Wales provided mercenaries for the English crown from the eleventh century. Welsh footmen were the hard core of the small expeditionary forces that conquered Ireland. Welsh archers set the pattern for English infantry tactics during the Scottish Wars. The spread of the longbow into the north and west of England, which increasingly became the preferred recruiting ground for archers, was facilitated and sustained by prospects of employment and profit on the Celtic Fringe, in France, or increasingly, in England itself.¹⁹ Spanish light infantry, fighting on terrain similar to its home ground, played a major role in the Sicilian Vespers, and contributed much to the military performance of the Catalan mercenary companies in the Aegean basin.²⁰

What were the internal dynamics of these regionally recruited commoner forces? John Keegan suggests that violence in medieval life was sufficiently familiar to make battle less of a shock than in contemporary western societies, which make substantial efforts to isolate their members from physical combat and physical risk. Johann Huizinga makes a similar point, arguing that the later Middle Ages were a period of violent contrasts, of oscillation between extremes of despair and joy, cruelty and tenderness. Huizinga's image of a life lived in primary colors reinforces the concept of soldiering as essentially on a continuum with everyday experiences, as opposed to a drastic departure from the norm.

This approach, both provocative and debatable, is useful for explaining individual pugnacity. Medieval society was also familiar with collective violence at grass-roots levels. Men, both free and servile, could be summoned to war in the feudal levy, or to defend their home areas from organized military formations, bandits, and even marauding wolf packs. Possession of effective weapons, from knives and daggers to bows and billhooks, was widespread even though their primary and normal functions were those of peace, from cutting bread to reaping grain.

Medieval Europe, in short, offered promising when not fertile ground for military recruiters. Young men reaching maturity in deferential, patriarchal societies could find a soldier's career attractive simply because it promised change from the known and the familiar. Pregnant girlfriends, legal disputes, and domestic quarrels drove young men from parental firesides in the twelfth century just as in the twentieth.²¹

Ambition played a certain role as well, particularly as the contractual element of military service increased. M. M. Poston's conclusion that England's village land market remained uninfluenced in the aggregate by the purchases of common soldiers returning from the Hundred Years' War is likely to apply anywhere, and at any time, in the history of medieval and early modern Europe. Yet men tend to think of themselves in terms of exceptions rather than aggregates. Non-noble soldiers were hardly likely to aspire to the wealth of which an aristocratic captain might dream, and even less likely to collect the proceeds if they did manage to capture a rich prisoner. Nevertheless, some commonly born fighting men did enrich themselves relative to their station by loot or ransom. Others did manage to set themselves up as tavern-keepers or smallholders on the proceeds of their campaigns. Such stories lost nothing in the telling. They may have been rendered even more attractive if Huizinga's interpretation of the late-medieval mind-set is accepted. The concept of taking high risks for high gains would presumably appeal to such men, as it did to the Spanish picaros who set so much of the tone in the army of Philip II.²²

To describe forces of regional specialists as including disproportionate numbers of restless young men is not necessarily to affirm contemporary aristocratic descriptions of these bodies as composed of masterless social outcasts. Initially, men from the same geographic district, often related by blood or marriage, fought for obvious reasons. The north country archer taking the field against a Scottish invader, or the Castilian townsman riding a raid into Moorish territory, needed little encouragement to guard each others' backs. Patterns of local recruitment frequently remained the same after the purposes changed. English archers during the Hundred Years' War, for example, were normally enlisted and grouped by counties, and when possible by smaller political divisions as well. Within individual companies they were organized into twenties and hundreds, commanded by the equivalent of Rome's centurions: senior, experienced men from their own ranks. The cohesion generated by this process was a significant factor in the bowmen's long roll of successes under a wide variety of circumstances.²³

III

The developing coherence and complexity of medieval armies reflected a general pattern of professionalization in European warfare during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. More and more armed forces were built around men with long-term commitments to military activities, who drew increasing amounts of their identity from these commitments. At higher social levels the process was closely involved with the nature of knighthood. To some degree this reflected personal choice. Some noblemen, whether from ambition, desire, or necessity, sought wider opportunities to use their swords than the feudal system provided. Others correspondingly preferred domesticity, spiked with occasional local belligerence. Economics also complicated the feudal order. Subinfeudation, dividing a knight's fee of land among three or four people, none of them

specifically obligated to perform personal service, rendered the concept of a fief as a privilege earned and maintained with one's own body increasingly vestigial. At the same time, subinfeudation contributed to the creation of a class of knights lacking the resources to maintain their status. Selling one's sword-and one's skills-was an obvious response.²⁴

The growing number of knights who made war for a living developed new attitudes as well. They internalized less and less of the chivalric code that guided their more sedentary or more prosperous fellows. For such fortunate ones war remained a significant social occasion, sharing many features with tournaments and jousts. Color, pageantry, and ritual were part and parcel of the military experience for some noblemen. For others they were becoming fringe manifestations-pleasant enough but ultimately dispensable for the sake of victory and profit.²⁵

Opportunities for the latter, at least, flourished. Everywhere in Europe, rulers by the end of the twelfth century were considering and allowing exemptions from service in lieu of cash payments. Henry II introduced scutage to England in 1159. Philip Augustus of France adopted similar taxes. The monarchs in turn used the money to hire fighting men. This development was by no means unwelcome from an administrative perspective. Mercenaries from all social levels could reasonably be trusted to be loyal to their paymaster while funds lasted. Mercenaries could reasonably be assumed to have some ability at their chosen craft. And mercenaries were presumably willing to fight more or less when and where they were told-an important point in an era when governments were ultimately incapable of applying sanctions strong enough to compel any kind of behavior outside of very restricted parameters.²⁶

The paid fighting man was no new phenomenon in Europe. William of Normandy had depended heavily for the conquest of England on soldiers engaged for promises of rewards after victory. The Normans initially established themselves in southern Italy as mercenaries in the employment of local lords. Nor were Christian Spaniards averse to enlisting under the banners of Islam. Ummayyids, Almoravids, and Almohads shared a common reputation as reliable paymasters, and a common willingness to hire Christian warriors.²⁷

Early mercenaries were, as a rule, hired singly for a specific operation or campaign. This, however, posed problems for the employer. Individual recruitment involved significant outlays of time and money. Once in the field, moreover, individual fighters did not automatically sort themselves into the smoothly functioning combat teams required by medieval warfare. Mercenary footmen, as individuals, were no more useful than the average feudal levy. Mercenary knights might be formally integrated into the familiar structure of *conroys* and battles, but they were bound to that structure by neither ties of blood nor ties of fealty. Whether an individual's sense of honor and his interpretation of his pledge of service would translate into effective battle discipline was correspondingly questionable.

From the employer's perspective, a sensible response to this situation was to hire already-formed bodies of men. On the other side of the bargain, it was clear that groups of warriors were often better able than isolated individuals to make more profitable arrangements for themselves. The typical mercenary, knight or commoner, desperately needed employment to survive. A famous hero like England's William Marshal might be able to fix his price, but for lesser men prosperity lay in numbers. By the twelfth century, foot soldiers in central Europe were grouping themselves in bands, fifty or a hundred strong, and offering their services to towns increasingly interested in recruiting professional soldiers to supplement or replace their militias. More significant in the long run were the knights who signed agreements of service with a greater lord, covering fixed periods of time. By the end of the thirteenth century, these had evolved into retainer contracts. The party of the second part pledged not only his own presence, but the availability of a specified number of men with specified kinds of equipment.²⁸

Similar contractual relationships did not necessarily produce a community of attitudes in the mercenary community. In principle, the knightly elite still insisted on an essential distinction between itself as a privileged warrior caste and the rest of secular society. Legal restraints on the social rise of baseborn soldiers existed everywhere in feudal Europe. In principle, commoners were not supposed to fight at all. When they did, they were outside the protection of the laws of war.²⁹ In theory, and often in practice as well, commoners who risked their skins on the battlefield could be slaughtered at will-a process facilitated by the fact that no ransoms could be expected from such men.

Pragmatism led to certain modifications of this harsh code. At no time did medieval armies become the bands of brothers celebrated by the King's speech on the eve of Agincourt in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Indeed, at Agincourt the English knights refused to execute their French fellows at the battle's climax, leaving that ignoble task to the archers. Even among crusaders or within mercenary companies, birth and social distinctions persisted. In the military dimension, however, as the thirteenth century waxed, the contract system flourished. The overseas campaigns of England's Angevin monarchs depended essentially on armies raised by captains undertaking to enlist an agreed number and mix of men for a given period. On the other side of Europe, the Teutonic Order relied heavily on mercenary companies, both for campaigns against the heathen

and for internal security against rebellious towns and vassals.³⁰

The mercenary company became a useful model operationally as well as administratively. Well before the Peace of Bretigny, the brunt of the Hundred Years' War was being borne by small combined-arms teams of horse and foot, archers and spearmen, tending to sustain themselves as permanent bodies under the same leader. With the truce, these forces assumed an independent existence as "free companions," held together by a blend of economic and psychological factors. A free company was a business enterprise, pooling its gains and running on shares, with the captain responsible for feeding, arming, employing, and disciplining his subordinates. The companies supported themselves by hiring out to feudal magnates able to afford importing outsiders to settle local disputes. They also sold protection. Open banditry was usually a last recourse rather than a first choice. Free companies were led not by pirates, but by buccaneers whose most common ambition was to earn or purchase respectability. The rank and file also sought legitimacy, if no more than a believable assertion that they were fighting in just and lawful causes. The mercenary companies might skirt the edges of custom and law, but were neither physically nor psychologically strong enough openly to defy them.³¹

The process of relocating Europe's drifting mercenaries began in Italy. A symbiotic relationship between soldiers and employers had begun developing there even before the first northern free companies crossed the Alps. Hiring fighters from outside the system limited strains on local social orders already riven by class and family conflict. The cities and city states of northern Italy found little moral or emotional difficulty in negotiating business contracts with soldiers, as they did with so many outsiders. The companies and their captains in turn found easy entry to societies expecting and demanding no pretense of loyalty or allegiance beyond the terms of the contract.

The adventurers of the fourteenth century evolved into the generals and princes of the fifteenth century. They remained soldiers as well. The condottieri paid much attention to technical progress and tactical innovation. Condottieri battles were by no means the bloodless farces described by Machiavelli. The operational problem faced by condottieri captains involved not mutual unwillingness to fight, but armed forces that were essentially mirror-images of each other. Drawn from similar manpower pools, armed, trained, and commanded in virtually identical patterns, condottieri armies resembled their eighteenth-century successors in that their victories were likely to be either the result of unreckonable chance factors, or the product of close-gripped attritional fighting that could well make success meaningless in terms of both long-term and immediate costs to the ostensibly triumphant employer.³²

The military situation in late-medieval Italy highlighted war's slow pace everywhere in Europe. Strategically, the existence of professional soldiers fighting for pay combined with the growing financial power of the state to foster the extension of campaigning. A government could keep the field as long as its money and its promises held out—even longer if it could carry the fight to its enemy's territory, as the English demonstrated during the Hundred Years' War.³³ Tactically, armies were evolving into defensive instruments by choice and necessity. Taking the fight to the enemy had little to recommend it in a period where armies were not only essentially alike in structure and doctrine, but lacked a generally effective offensive instrument.

Heavy cavalry, long the master of the battlefield, could now be checked as a matter of course. The Hussite Wars demonstrated that even improvised levies could stop a mounted charge in the open. Religious enthusiasm was less a factor in the Taborites' success than their armored wagons, which provided both an organizational framework and a tactical rallying point. The battlefield consequences, however, were the same.³⁴ Further west, the municipal infantry of Italy and Flanders never developed a significant offensive capability. Caught in the open, as at Mons-en-Pevele (1304) and Cassel (1328), Flemish infantry were cut to pieces by French men-at-arms who had learned respect for their enemies at Courtrai. Across the English Channel, Scottish pike masses proved consistently unable to push home a charge against moderately well-supported longbowmen. Close ranges combined with the valor of desperation to give English arrow flights an effect virtually equivalent to machine-gun fire against the lowland schiltrons, setting the vaunted furor scoticus at naught time and again.

In sum, the most potentially dangerous offensive forces on a battlefield, massed armored horsemen and massed infantry armed with shock weapons, had become systematically vulnerable to flexible combined-arms tactics. These tactics were increasingly feasible for the professional soldiers who filled the ranks of the mercenary companies. The English combination of longbowmen and dismounted men-at-arms, which proved so formidable on the defensive against French chivalry and Scots pikemen alike, was only a beginning. Mounted archers, light cavalry, crossbowmen whose quarrels could smash through plate armor, hand gunners in increasing numbers—all found their places in the order of battle. By the middle of the fourteenth century, the up-to-date army was an interrelated structure of different arms, each increasingly possessing its own quirks and its own vulnerabilities. As his armor grew more complex and his horse grew larger, the heavy cavalryman evolved from the all-purpose warrior of the eleventh century into a rough analog of the modern battle tank: an important

element of a balanced army, but dependent on the cooperation of light horsemen and missile-firing infantry to achieve consistent results. On all but the roughest ground, archers needed the protection of either men at arms or heavily armed infantry, pikemen or billmen. These in turn required support to minimize the risks of being shot down or ridden over.

Late-medieval and early Renaissance commanders correspondingly preferred to assemble task forces for specific campaigns: recruiting so many archers, so many hand-gunners, so many light and heavy cavalry. This building-block approach developed in part because its component parts already existed. Organized bodies of men, and contractors with contacts among temporarily unemployed soldiers, were easily found and easily engaged even for service far afield. The ethnic composition of such a formation became less significant than its combination of skills. In 1417, an order of battle submitted for the approval of the Duke of Burgundy prescribed the deployment of a sophisticated combination of dismounted men-at-arms, archers, and crossbowmen to take the brunt of an enemy attack, with mounted men-at-arms and archers securing the flanks and acting as a reserve. Sixty years later, Charles the Bold's Ordinance of Lausanne prescribed an even more complex battle plan, integrating longbowmen and crossbowmen, men-at-arms, pikemen, and gunners into eight "battles," each with its own carefully considered structure, and with systematic provision for liaison and cooperation among the different arms.³⁵

It was no coincidence that these plans both came from Burgundy. Choice among possible combinations of weapons systems and their users to some extent reflected personal taste and professional judgment. It was also a matter of finance. Burgundy, more than any political entity on the continent, depended for its ephemeral existence on an efficient military system. Its dukes were battle captains or they were nothing. But the wealthy communes that formed the state's economic base preferred voting taxes to levying men. The Burgundian administration, among the most efficient in Europe, in turn used the money to hire or retain military experts from everywhere, keeping an increasing number of them permanently in service in its *compagnies d'ordonnance*.³⁶

Armies raised on this basis were skilled, flexible, and at least as loyal as any of their successors before the nineteenth century, when nationalism and modern administration combined to leave deserters and runaways with no place to go. Fifteenth-century Hungary, for example, stood off the Turks and extended its rule over Austria and Bohemia largely because of the mercenary companies from the west who fought for Matthias Corvinus and his successors. The France of Charles VII and his successors is generally credited with a significant military advance in moving towards a permanent standing army during the fifteenth century. This decision, however, was not a response to the unreliability or inefficiency of mercenaries. It reflected instead a need to restore order in a country racked by a century of war, combined with a growing concern for concentrating power at state levels.³⁷

The new French army was a formidable force, whose heavy cavalry in particular enjoyed a high reputation. Nevertheless, French native troops as a whole were considered a cut below units of specialized professionals, whether hired directly or engaged as auxiliaries furnished and financed by an ally. England's Tudor princes as well came increasingly to depend on foreign contingents to sustain their abortive continental policies. This in part reflected England's increasing failure to keep pace with military progress. But it also reflected acceptance of conventional European wisdom on the subject of hiring the best available men with the newest weapons and techniques, whatever their ethnic origins.³⁸

IV

The next development in military coherence began with the evolution of a generally effective offensive force with a regional base. This was the pikemen of the Swiss cantons. Paradoxically, the Swiss initially earned their military reputation in a local context, and with an entirely different weapon. The victory of Morgarten (1315) was won when Leopold of Austria marched into a narrow defile and saw his men mowed down like grain by the halberdiers of the forest cantons. The next step came when the forest cantons formed alliances with the cantons and cities of the Swiss lowlands. Like their counterparts in Flanders and Italy, these areas furnished contingents of spearmen. The superiority of this weapon to the halberd was demonstrated at Laupen in 1339. Unable to keep the Burgundian heavy cavalry from coming to close quarters, the halberdiers of Uri, Unterwalden, and Schwyz were saved from destruction by the lowlanders' pikes.

Such tactical triumphs could not overcome the essential weakness of the evolving Swiss military system. The Swiss economy could not afford to keep masses of men under arms for any length of time. A war of attrition meant corresponding risks of starvation as fields went unsown and crops ungathered. The Swiss, moreover, had little hope of matching their Burgundian rivals in operational sophistication. Swiss infantry, unable to attack in the open field, would have to depend on archers for fire support and heavy cavalry for shock power. These military skills were scarce in the Swiss mountains. Nor could the cantons afford to hire specialists, as did the Burgundians. Pressure to transform the Swiss infantrymen into an offensive weapon was further heightened by a human factor. Unlike soldiers from the rich cities of Lombardy and Flanders,

few Swiss could afford defensive body armor. To survive physically, the Swiss fighting man had to deliver blows.

Through the fourteenth century, Swiss cantons and Swiss captains developed patterns of discipline and training enabling their infantry to attack as well as counterattack. The men of a Swiss pike column knew that life as well as victory depended on an ability to move quickly and in good order. The Swiss soldier was both a free man and enough of a warrior to understand his tactical system and enjoy its implications. This was most frequently manifested in the ferocity generally characterizing Swiss military behavior. Far more than their contemporaries in the mercenary companies, the Swiss tended to see themselves as outside existing feudal and military systems, whether challenging or serving them. Swiss out-of-battle discipline was proverbially bad even by fifteenth-century standards, not least because the Swiss had a tendency to run amok en masse.

At the same time, a reputation for unbridled ferocity was no mean asset to a system depending on aggressive assault tactics. It not only intimidated enemies; it inspired the Swiss themselves. The Swiss first established their reputation as more than a locally formidable force in 1444 at St. Jacob-en-Birs, where less than a thousand pikemen attacked a state-of-the-art French army 15,000 strong. The Swiss died to a man, but took 2,000 foes with them. Military Europe began to take notice – and make offers.

The Swiss responded by improving their specialized skills. They adopted an early version of Schwerpunkt tactics, striking what seemed the most vulnerable point in an enemy position twice, sometimes three times in succession. They increased the length of their pikes to fifteen, then to eighteen feet. They enhanced the fire support of their assault columns with crossbows, and increasingly with handguns. Like the longbow in England, the handgun penetrated Swiss civil society largely because of its perceived utility in war. Firearms, however, remained secondary to pikes. And the pikes' effectiveness depended on battlefield cohesion.

This cohesion survived even after mercenary service replaced home defense as the Swiss military pattern. It survived because the cantons and cities went into the contracting business themselves, partly for profit and partly to keep control of young men otherwise likely to hire out individually as free companions. Organizing what could not be stopped indicated the continued attractiveness of military service when compared to alternative ways of making a living in Switzerland's subsistence economy. Martial behavior was culturally conditioned as well. The Swiss male, socialized in a structure that enforced compulsory military service from 16 to 60, bound to canton and captain by a network of community-sanctioned oaths, found warfare a ready and acceptable rite of passage into adulthood.³⁹

V

Swiss success not only inspired but demanded emulation. The Swiss filled too large a gap in the specialized orders of battle that characterized late-medieval armies to be shrugged off as regionally limited. Swiss pikemen were, however, expensive enough and refractory enough to encourage governments to seek substitutes. Unlike the English longbow, moreover, the basic Swiss weapon did not seem so complex that only conditioning from childhood could develop efficiency in its use. The most familiar Swiss imitators were the Landsknechts. The Hussite Wars generated corresponding interest in new tactical approaches among German professional soldiers. An increasing number of captains in Burgundian or Habsburg service acquired extensive-and painful–direct experience of Swiss methods. In recruiting infantry, they turned increasingly to south Germany, the regions bordering the Swiss cantons from Vorarlberg to the Sundgau.

Not every Swiss mercenary went to war through cantonal contracts. Freelance Swiss often served in the same companies with Germans who borrowed techniques from their neighbors. The Landsknecht, however, was part of a drastically different social matrix. Late-medieval Switzerland was a tightly structured society, able at local levels to exercise a significant level of control over individuals. Southwestern Germany in the fifteenth century was experiencing a population explosion. A typical village with 500 inhabitants in 1490 had doubled its population by 1560. Famine and plague provided only episodic relief. Larger families meant smaller inheritances. Underemployment became endemic in communities already suffering economically from the decline of the regional textile industry. Men moved from village to town and back again, looking not only for work but for opportunity. Their search further undermined traditional structures already weakened from internal conflict generated by the introduction of Roman law. Peasant villages were increasingly able to balance among conflicting claims to their labor and their allegiance. Lords and priests, merchants and magistrates, faced consistent challenges to their social and religious authority.

This generalized breakdown of deference created a climate favorable to the soldiers' trade. Landsknechts emerged from a society where possession of knives and swords was universal, and ownership of armor and heavier weapons was common. Not every Landsknecht, moreover, was a dispossessed craftsman or peasant. Burghers' sons and aristocrats' sons found

places in the ranks. Runaway serfs stood side by side with freeborn men. A recruit's claims to personal status were unlikely to be closely investigated as long as they were not patently ridiculous. As a common denominator, Landsknechts were men perceiving limited opportunities at home, but who felt they were as good as anyone else with weapons in their hands. But no matter how assembled, a Landsknecht company of them was still no more than an aggregation of more or less belligerent individuals—an aggregation, moreover, too small to be tactically useful.

Medieval contractors and captains had thought in hundreds. Landsknecht officers preparing to compete with the Swiss had to think in thousands. Nor could these men merely be warm bodies. The Swiss depended for their success on aggressiveness and cohesion. How could these be introduced in a Landsknecht force whose very size meant that any pre-existing bonds of dialect and culture would be significantly limited. How could they be sustained among men whose choice of a military life was in large part an affirmation of their personal freedom, their right to drink and gamble, to defend their honor in duels, to wear outrageous clothing, and swagger at will among the women?

One answer involved supplanting the community with the regiment. The process began with mustering, where prospective recruits were passed before their officers, read the articles of service and discipline, then ceremonially sworn to their cause and their leaders. A typical Landsknecht regiment consisted of 4,000 men divided into ten companies, each with its own standard as rallying-point and symbol. These companies, or *Fahnlein*, were in turn subdivided into platoons or *Rotten*, each of forty men. Where officers of the larger formations were appointed by the colonel-contractor, the *Rotten* elected their own leaders from among the veterans in their ranks. Other officials, the *Fuhrer*, the *Gemeinwaibel*, the *Furiere*, represented the interests of the common Landsknechts in administrative and operational matters, frequently acting as mediators in disputes with the command structure. Their advice and recommendations were not lightly disregarded by any colonel hoping to exercise effective command over what was essentially a force of free agents.

A Landsknecht regiment was not merely a pirate band. Plunder, while still important for the early modern soldier, was increasingly becoming a kind of incentive bonus. Larger armies meant more competition for available loot. Fewer wealthy noblemen now went to war; an aristocratic prisoner was likely to be relatively as impecunious as his captor. While men continued to serve for booty only, it was usually with the hope of being taken on the paid strength of a formation. At least before the general European rise in prices at mid-sixteenth-century, pay for Swiss or Landsknecht compared favorably with craftsmen's wages, and could be over twice as high as a laborer's pay. Collecting on time and in something like full was so unlikely that riot and mutiny became for all practical purposes institutionalized among the Landsknechts early in their existence. But to claim their wages in the first place, the Landsknechts had to fight well. Victory might generate at least partial payment of money owed, while defeat usually meant empty pockets for everybody. Profitable employment, moreover, depended heavily on past performances. While individual Landsknechts could always find service, terms were likely to be better as part of a formed body. Formations and commanders with bad reputations found it correspondingly difficult to secure contracts.

Discipline was also for the Landsknecht an element of survival. Landsknecht formations, recruited ad hoc, were vulnerable to the pressure of combat, when economic considerations became vague abstractions compared with the visceral desire to survive. Panic, however, meant higher orders of risk for the Landsknechts than almost anyone else. Tactical orders of battle frequently placed them opposite the Swiss, who bitterly despised the imitators of their techniques, and were even less predisposed than usual to show mercy in victory.

Cohesion, then, was both a career facilitator and a survival mechanism for the common Landsknecht. Contrary to later myth, the Landsknechts were not a sworn egalitarian brotherhood. Their complex structure of rights and privileges reflected a correspondingly complex internal hierarchy. Yet if Landsknecht commanders frequently dismounted in battle to fight in the front ranks, this was only in part a reflection of the growing vulnerability of the horse. It was also a significant gesture of solidarity with the footmen, a sign of physical commitment to a common purpose. Should positive incentives fail, Landsknecht regiments incorporated a comprehensive disciplinary structure, including a provost and an executioner—officials feared and detested, treated as pariahs without honor, but regarded as necessary by even the most hardened freebooters.

Landsknecht captains were too wise to trust entirely the power of martial intangibles on one hand and physical compulsion on the other. Landsknecht rank and file might be self-selected, but integration into the organization was reinforced by early forms of individual instruction and collective battle drill. The Landsknechts depended heavily on crossbowmen and arquebusiers to screen and support their pike squares. These "shot" were drawn increasingly from the veteran *Doppelsoldner*, the double-pay men who presumably knew what they were doing. The front ranks of the pike formations were similarly drawn from the oldest and most experienced soldiers. The Landsknecht recruit, however, was not left entirely to his own devices. Unlike the longbow, the handgun, or the sword, the pike was relatively simple in its technical demands. Anyone with reasonable strength, agility, and good will could learn to use it quickly. This did not mean that a coherent force

of pikemen could be formed from an equivalent number of apprentices and farmboys. Weapons training was a major guarantor of morale. A man crowded into a pike square might find it harder to run or shirk than an arquebusier or a light horseman. But even a wavering line of pikes was an open invitation to disaster. Individual fear or even individual clumsiness in those dense masses could generate collective panic more readily than in, for example, a firing line of archers, where every man's attention was absorbed by his personal weapon and where a runaway might correspondingly be disregarded as an exceptional case. The more confidence a man had in himself, his weapon, and his comrades, the less was it likely he would consider flight, and the more probable that he would be able to maneuver successfully. Perhaps the best evidence of the Landsknechts' growing internal solidity is their commanders' relative emphasis on finesse and timing in their attacks, as opposed to the head-down, battering charges favored by the Swiss.⁴⁰

The Landsknechts exemplified and illustrated the patterns of cohesion required by the rapidly expanding armies of the sixteenth century. This process has been described as professionalization.⁴¹ It was that-and something more. Free companions developed into contract forces, then into standing armies. Personal honor gave way to regimental honor in justifying tavern brawls and formal duels alike. The Spanish army of the sixteenth century, the archetype of early modern military effectiveness, depended heavily on discipline patterns and unit rituals established in earlier centuries to cope with a multi-ethnic base and complex combined-arms tactics. The soldiers of the Spanish army consistently demonstrated, moreover, a common sense of identity and a mutual solidarity vis-a-vis both their employers and their senior officers. By no means all of the men in the ranks were commoner outcasts with self-images as misfits. The disrespect of superior officers could contribute as much to one of the frequent mutinies as arrears in pay.⁴²

The Spanish army and its counterparts were developing along lines whose antecedents can be traced as far back as the collapse of the western Roman Empire. For a thousand years the general conditions of European warfare put high premiums not on heroic anarchy, but on coherence and cooperation. Beginning at one end of the socio-military scale with caste identity, and at the other with regional identities based on common military abilities, armies developed integrating structures that increasingly reflected acquired skills, and attitudes whose desirability was defined by the institution rather than its members. From Roncesvalles to Ravenna and beyond, the study of the internal structures of Europe's military systems sustains the relevance of S. L. A. Marshall's often-cited dictum that a soldier known to those around him has the best of reasons to fight well: fear of losing the one thing that he is likely to value more highly than life-his standing as a man among other men committed to a common enterprise.

End Notes

1. The best recent general treatment is Philippe Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, tr. Michael Jones (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).
2. John Gillingham, "Richard I and the Science of War in the Middle Ages," in *War and Government in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honour of J. O. Prestwick*, ed. J. Gillingham and J. C. Holt (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1984), 78-91; and *Richard the Lionheart* (London: Weidenfeld, 1978), *passim*.
3. Theory and practice alike counseled caution in the face of an enemy. See particularly Walter Goffart, "The Date and Purpose of Vegetius' *De Re Militari*," *Traditio* 33 (1977): 65-100; and John Beeler's two volumes, *Warfare in England, 1066-1189* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966); and *Warfare in Feudal Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971).
4. J. F. Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe During the Middle Ages*, tr. S. Willard, S. C. M. Southern (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1977), 82 ff.

5. R. Allen Brown, "The Status of the Norman Knight," in *War and Government in the Middle Ages, 18-32*, is at once convincing in its arguments and comprehensive in its survey of French and British literature. A. Borst, ed., *Das Rittertum im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976), has more of a central European focus. Bernard S. Bachrach, "Charles Martel, Mounted Shock Combat, the Stirrup, and Feudalism," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 7 (1970): 49-75, critiques the assumption of a direct link between military technology and social structure. Cf. also G. Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, tr. A. Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 293 ff.; and Claude Gaier, "La cavalerie lourde en Europe occidentale du XIIe au XIVe siecle: un probleme de mentalite," *Revue Internationale d'Histoire Militaire* 34 (1971): 385-96.

6. Charles R. Bowlus, "Two Carolingian Campaigns Reconsidered," *Military Affairs* 48 (1984): 121-25; and Bernard S. Bachrach, "Charlemagne's Cavalry: Myth and Reality," *ibid.*, 47 (1983): 181-87.

7. Walter Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans, A.D. 418-584: The Techniques of Accommodation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), includes an excellent general survey of the literature on this subject. Cf. also E. A. Thompson, "Early Germanic Warfare," *Past and Present* 14 (1958): 2-29; and C. 11. Hermann, *Deutsche Militrdgeschichte. Eine Einfiihrung*, 2d. rev. (Frankfurt: Bernard and Graefe, 1968), 15 ff.

8. Verbruggen, *Art of Warfare*, 72.

9. J. Bumke, *Studien zum Ritterbegriff im 12. and 13. Jahrhundert* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1964), is a literary-intellectual survey. Cf. also Benjamin Arnold, *German Knighthood, 1050-1300* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); E. Lourie, "Medieval Spain: A Society Organized for War," *Past and Present* 35 (1966): 54-76; and J. F. Powers, "The Origins and Development of Municipal Military Service in the Leonese and Castilian Reconquest, 800-1250," *Traditio* 26 (1970): 91-111.

10. Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, 228 ff., offers an excellent overview of medieval organization and tactics.

11. On this controversial subject, cf. Beeler, *Warfare in Feudal Europe*, 84, 94-95; Verbruggen, *Art of Warfare*, 89-90; and as a case study, Bernard S. Bachrach, "The Feigned Retreat at Hastings," *Medieval Studies* 33 (1971): 264-67.

12. Michael Burleigh, *Prussian Society and the German Order: An Aristocratic Corporation in Crisis c. 1410-1466* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 111 ff.; and E. Mascheke, "Die inneren Wandlungen des Deutschen Ritterordens," in *Geschichte and Gegenwartsbewusstsein. Festschrift fur Hans Rothfels zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. W Besson, F. Frh. Hiller von Gartringen (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck, 1963), 249-77.

13. Verbruggen, *Art of Warfare*, 125 passim, is a brief comprehensive survey of the communal infantries. Detailed studies include Claude Gaier, *Art et organisation militaires dans la principaute de Liege et dans le comte de Looz au Moyen Age* (Brussels: Palais des Academies, 1968); and O. P. Waley, "The Army of the Florentine Republic from the Twelfth to the Fourteenth Century," in *Florentine Studies*, ed. V Rubenstein (Evanston Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 70-108. Waley's *The Italian City Republics* (London: Weidenfeld, 1969), incorporates much general information on respective military systems.

14. R.-H. Bauder, *The Economic Development of Medieval Europe* (London: Thames, 1971), is a useful overview with an excellent bibliography. Cf. also Yves Renouard, *Les hommes d'affaires italiens du Moyen Age* (Paris: Colin, 1968); and Henri Pirenne, *Early Democracies in the Low Countries: Urban Society and Political Conflict in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, tr. J. V. Saunders, Torch ed. (New York: Harper, 1963).

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17. See Carmela Pescador, "La caballeria popular en Leon y Castilla," *Cuadernos de Historia de Espana* 23-24 (1961): 101-238; 35-36 (1962): 56-201; 37-38 (1963): 88-198; J. F. Powers, *A Society Organized for War: The Iberian Municipal Militias in the Central Middle Ages, 1000-1284* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and from a later period, Johann Hellwege, *Zur Geschichte der Spanischen Reitermilizen. Die Caballeria de Cuantia unter Philipp II. and Philipp III. (1562-*

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20. C. Carrere, "Aux origines des grandes compagnies: la compagnie catalane de 1301," in *Recrutement, mentalites, societes. Colloque internationale d'histoire militaire, 1974* (Montpellier: University Paul-Valery, 1975), 1-7; Roger Sablonier, *Krieg and Kriegertum in der Cronica des Ramn Muntaner. Eine Studie zum spatmittelalterlichen Kriegswesen auf grund katalanischer Quellen* (Bern: Lang, 1971).

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23. Morris, *Welsh Wars*, 92-93.

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29. Maurice Keen, *The Laws of War in the Late Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1965), 19 and passim.

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42. Parker, Army of Flanders, 185 ff.

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