



David Whetham *Just Wars and Moral Victories: Surprise, Deception and the Normative Framework of European War in the Later Middle Ages* (Brill, 2009) pp. 266

'Surprise the enemy if it is possible. It can be of great profit to a commander to know how to place ambushes wisely and surprise his enemy.'

These words, taken from an early fifteenth century French translation of the Roman military treatise writer Vegetius, are hardly surprising to any student of warfare. Surprise is, after all, a Principle of War, in modern parlance, and accepted as decisive factor in achieving victory. Yet it is commonly believed that, according to the chivalric code, the 'knights of old' were forbidden to engage in any kind of deception, trickery, or underhand behaviour in order to gain advantage in warfare. This reviewer has been trying to point out the error of this interpretation for some thirty years, so it is good to find a convincing ally in David Whetham's well argued thesis.

The volume is structured in order to give the reader first an insight into medieval concepts of the morality of warfare and its proper conduct (Ch. 2). In a world where all outcomes were understood as ordained by the Divine Will it was essential to conform to the requirements of proper Christian behaviour in order to achieve warranted success. This is followed by a powerful piece of analysis (Ch. 3) exploring how war was seen at all levels from local disputes to international conflicts as the conduct of a feud. Lest this seem too alien and uncomfortable an approach to the sensitive audience of the twenty-first century, it must be pointed out that feud should not be construed as a series of brutal vengeance for perceived slights, but actually a form of legal negotiation which enabled the parties engaged to leave the dispute with honour. It is also crucial to understand that in the era being studied, war was seen as the normal state of affairs and not peace. A key text for understanding legal practice in war is the late-fourteenth century Honore Bouvet's *Tree of Battles*, a French language volume (and French is, of course, the pre-eminent language of chivalry); drawing upon a mixture of Canon (Church) Law texts and other case law examples.

Chapters four-through-six examine authors and their texts to provide examples of how war was pursued, and how practitioners were instructed in the proper ways of doing this. Chapter Four focuses on Vegetius, a Late Roman commentator who produced an epitome, literally a One Minute Manager guide which was one of the most copied Ancient texts in the medieval period, hugely popular in translations from its original Latin into the vernaculars of medieval Europe from the mid-thirteenth century onwards, and the first book to be printed in English. Although aimed at advising a fifth century emperor on how to restore the Roman army of his day, Vegetius' timeless precepts helped to form chivalric behaviour. His greatest interpreter was, perhaps surprisingly, an authoress of Italian heritage patronised by the French and Burgundian courts in the early fifteenth century, Christine de Pisan. She was personally affected by events of her day, notably the battle of Agincourt, and her writings are a response to the Anglo-French war.

Chapter Five examines the works of a chivalric hero, Geoffrey de Charny, a French knight who died defending his king at Poitiers, in 1356, but who already had a reputation as a great and noble warrior who set up an Order of Chivalry in response to the Order of the Garter, for the French Crown. Although he enjoins nobility of behaviour in his readers he also understands the need to subterfuge in the effective conduct of warfare. Chapter Six revisits



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the poet and historian Jean Froissart, often represented as a chivalric fantasist, but only by those historians who have not read him properly. Whetham's Conclusion focuses on the Crecy campaign of 1346, and the nature of chevauchée, the devastating raid through enemy territory which was central to the medieval practice of warfare. He also examines whether Edward III had a battle-seeking strategy during the campaign as Clifford Rogers has maintained. Did Edward effectively ambush the French at Crecy as a result of a cunning plan? To my mind, his strategy allowed him greater flexibility than a monomaniac, or one might say, Clausewitzian obsession with the achieving the *Schwerpunkt*. Rather it was a 'maybe-I-will and maybe-I-won't' approach that left his opponent guessing and eventually caught him entirely off-guard enabling a decisive English victory against the odds through both strategic and tactical Surprise. This yielded not just triumph in the field, but in the slightly longer term the capture of Calais, held as a bridgehead into France by the English Crown for over two hundred years.

Today, when the conventional and law-bound forces of the Western world and their allies are engaged in asymmetric warfare against a fanatical and slippery enemy who refuses to 'play by the rules', this book's final words are telling:

'The implications of this work (de Pisan's text) go to the heart of the very nature of war itself. It makes clear that victory is not something that is taken from a defeated opponent; it is something that is given *by* the defeated party. Victory in a meaningful sense cannot simply be coerced from an opponent. That recognition of a moral defeat as well as a physical and legal one is vital for a conflict to be satisfactorily resolved and this requires a mutually accepted framework of rules.' (p. 251)

As Clausewitz tells us, it is crucial to understand the kind of war you are fighting. For example, if we find ourselves engaged in a feud then we need to react appropriately. Perhaps consideration of the wider aspects of warfare will enable us to do that?

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