

THE AGE OF WESTERN CHIVALRY: THE INFLUENCE OF MUSLIM CHIVALROUS SARACENS IN SHAPING WESTERN CIVILIZATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents that the age of Western chivalry constitutes a critical and formative time in the European history but the development of Western civilisation cannot be attributed to Western chivalry alone. The Western civilisation was also the result of a long struggle between the Western chivalry and Muslim chivalrous Saracens. This paper attempts to show if the age of Western chivalry is a legitimate title for the period of European history, how the chivalric paradigm has become a perspective to view the development of Western civilisation, and the influence of Muslim chivalrous Saracens into Western chivalry. The encounter between the West and the Muslim world was made possible by Western chivalry during the Crusades. The appearance of Muslim Saracens who were portrayed as chivalrous warriors in medieval literature such as *L'Ordene de Chevalerie* and *La Chanson d'Aspremont* indicates that the Western chivalry was to some extent shaped by the Muslim chivalrous Saracens.

KEYWORDS

chivalry; knights; Saracen; western civilisation

INTRODUCTION

The period from ca. 1000 to ca. 1500 is said as the age of chivalry that constitutes a critical and formative time in the European history. According to Maurice Keen (2005:1-2), the term “chivalry” has its origin from French *chevalier* which means “a man of aristocratic standing and probably of noble ancestry, who is capable, if called upon, of equipping himself with a war horse and the arms of heavy cavalryman, and who has been through certain rituals that make him what he is.”

During the Middle Ages, the term chivalry evolved and had hierarchical meanings from simply a heavily armed horseman to a code of conduct.

The Western age of chivalry was the age of legal and military obligations known as feudalism and the establishment of powerful kingdoms which later became England, France and Spain. Whether feudalism is a useful construct in understanding medieval European society is still being debated among medieval historians (Reynold, 1994). For example, Stephen Morillo (2003: 531) claims that feudalism actually never happened.

It is difficult to imagine how western civilisation would have evolved to hail the age of discovery and the Renaissance without the influence of chivalry. Initially chivalry was defined as a way of life in which three essential aspects merged together, the military, the nobility, and Christianity (Keen, 2005:17), but later chivalry became a secular ethos that contributed in the formative stages of Western civilisation.

Nevertheless, the development of Western civilisation cannot be attributed to Western chivalry alone, it was also the result of a long struggle between the Western chivalry and Muslim chivalry, in the words of Western scholars “the Saracen.” The concept of Saracen represents the European thought of the Middle Ages toward the Muslim world and the East. As a matter of fact, there had been an early reference to Saracens in both Roman and Greek traditions as the tribes that settled in the deserts of the Euphrates. The word *Saraceni* was used by the ancient Romans to call all the savage and barbaric tribes in the east of their empire. The word *Sarakenos* that appeared in old Greek inscriptions probably was derived from the Arabic *sahra* that means the people of the desert. But later, the word Saracens was used to designate all Muslims of many different nations scattered from the Pacific to the Atlantic (Gilman, 1889: iii). The Byzantines also used Saracens to describe all Arabs and Muslims, including Turks and Persians. After the rise of Islam, in particular during the Crusades, the usage of word Saracens was extended to refer to all Muslims, including non-Arab Muslims (Falk, 2010:65-66).

In this paper, I will attempt to view the Western chivalry from the Western point of view and based mainly on Western sources and literature. I will look back in time to consider the age of Western chivalry as a legitimate title for the period of European history, the chivalric paradigm as a perspective to view the development of Western civilisation, and the influence of Muslim chivalry into Western chivalry.

Chivalry before chivalry: the idea of universal noble conduct

There are several important political factors that affected Western Europe before ca. 1000, the fall of Roman Empire in 476, the rise of Islamic caliphate and Muslim invasions to Europe, and the continued barbarian attacks. The latest Encyclopaedia Britannica depicts specifically the time between 476 and 800 as the dark age because there was no Roman emperor in the West. More generally, the period 500-1000 is also regarded in western European history as dark ages filled with intellectual darkness and barbarity in which frequent warfare and

disappearance of urban life were rampant (Encyclopaedia Britannica, s. v. “Dark Ages,” 2014). However, during the so-called period of dark ages, Charles Martel created a cavalry of large horses and heavy armours of the Frankish army that broke the lighter Muslim charges in the Battle of Tours in 732, which eventually halted the Umayyad advance in Europe (Williams, 2005:63). In addition, the Carolingian renaissance (750-800) was another important development in Western European history in the eighth and ninth centuries that showed the enlightenment and political unity of the period before ultimately succumbed to invasion and to the “resurgence of pre-Carolingian localisms” (Contreni, 1984:73)

The rise of noble class during the heyday of Carolingian empire with their dependency upon the possession of land was one of the factors to the downfall of the divided Frankish monarchs after Charlemagne. The nobility received new lands as long as the monarchs continued to conquer. But, when the monarchs became weak and did not have the ability to expand, the nobles were badly affected as there were no more lands. They began to seize the previously given lands and treat them as personal properties which they passed on their eldest sons. This action, in the absence of central power, shattered the remnants of Carolingian empire into hundreds of independent districts, each owned and ruled by a noble man with a small group of fighting men and a castle. The absence of a unified state made western Europe endemic with wars and violence besides the invasions by Muslims, Vikings, and *Magyars* (Nelson, 2014).

Duiker and Spielvogel (2013:331) contend that the period after Carolingian is also known as the world of lord and vassals. As Europe disintegrated into many semi-independent mini-states ruled by the nobles, a new type of relationship appeared between the lords and their subordinates known as vassals. As the result of this relationship, a social class, the new warrior cast emerged for the first time in France during the course of the eleventh century through the integration of two groups: the nobles who claimed as descendants of Carolingian nobility and held large estates, and a group of petty knights whose privileges came from the military service they provided to the lords. By 1100, these great nobles and their vassals identified themselves as *miles* (knight) to acquire more honorific association. The distinction between the two groups became obscure. The leaders and mounted followers began to be drawn together but not economically, formed a single group, a noble order by which Ramon Lull meant the whole order of chivalry (Keen, 2005: 28).

According to Crouch (2005a:27-36), the values that bound the nobles and the warriors together were *preudomme*, a noble conduct before chivalry. Crouch argues that the potential of noble conduct was universal and there was a more centralized ideal of noble conduct before 1200. Saladin was curious about the Christian Knighthood and asked his prisoner, Hugh of Tiberias, to teach him about knighthood. Hugh taught that *preudomme* was wise and not indiscreet. The *preudomme* Hugh was full of bravery (hardiness) and knightliness (chivalry). He was a courtier and courtly man that Saladin respected and admired him so much

because he saw *preudomme* in him. So *preudomme* was a universal conduct which was one way to determine who was or was not noble. And contact with Muslim noble warrior such as Saladin, helped to crystallize the qualities of a nobleman in medieval views.

Crouch (2005a: 53-79) adds that the universal code of conduct prior to codified chivalry is called the noble *habitus*. He argues that the *habitus* on which the “superstructure of chivalry” was built and the *preudomme* was a part, had been existed long before 1100, while the codified medieval noble conduct only began between 1170 and 1220. The noble *habitus* comprise loyalty, forbearance, hardihood, *largesse* (generosity), the Davidic ethic (protection of weak and helpless, and respect for widows and orphans), and honour.

The age of Western chivalry: politics, religion and exploration

After Western chivalry emerged as a distinct code of knighthood conduct derived from the noble *habitus*, chivalry began to shape the Western civilisation from the eleventh century onwards. Chivalry started to unify Europe that was divided into different mini-states after the collapse of the Frankish monarchs by providing a code of conduct that crossed the national and language boundaries. This code helped in establishing alliances and relationships among the aristocracy class in Europe.

The function of tournament as one of chivalric professional activities was among others to develop friendship and alliances between hostile regions of Europe. As described by Crouch (2005b:29), knights used tournament as foreign policy. For example, Baldwin V, count of Hainault, Namur and Flanders, used the tournament to establish himself as a great warrior in his hostile region without actually risking himself and his army in the perils of war and its expenses. The tournament field allowed knights to engage politically and physically with their powerful neighbours who would have dominated their armies in war. Chivalry had the power to frame the European communities by characterizing who are allies that should be fought for and who are enemies that should be fought against.

The rise of Western chivalry from the ruins of Carolingian empire coincided with the spread of Christianity in Europe. Thus, chivalry elaborated some Christian rituals, for instance dubbing (a bath for chivalric purification) as an initiation into knighthood which indicated knighthood as an order of a Christian society. Although chivalry is identical with Christian knights, religion is not necessarily the driving force behind its ethic. As suggested by Keen (2005:252), it is not easy to blend between “the pursuit of worldly honour” with “the pursuit of spiritual merit.” Keen asserts that chivalry essentially was the secular code of honour of a martially oriented aristocracy which its deepest roots stretched back to an origin in the social code of honour of warrior groups of the early middle ages. Chivalry had a strong religious character to the fact that chivalric groups had operated within the setting of a Christian society. Therefore, it is understandable if Europeans regarded the idea of knighthood as a class chosen by God whose task is to protect the poor and defenceless, especially women, children, and the Church (Nicholson, 2001:83).

This was obvious with the formation of religious military orders for that purpose such as the Knights Templar and Knights Hospitaller. Keen (2005:56) asserts that Christianity and church had a modifying influence on the classical concept of heroism and virtue, nowadays identified with the virtues of chivalry. I argue, however, that these military orders were merely the mutual alliance between Western chivalry and the Church. Both of them profited from this alliance as well as influenced each other.

Although Western chivalry in its formative stage, the encounter between the West and the Muslim world was made possible by Western chivalry during the Crusades. The European knights learned about the writings of ancient Greek philosophers and Islamic poetry which later contributed in the development of new arts and courtly love in Europe. This contribution later became the essential foundation of the beginning of the scientific revolution in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The discovery of new world was also linked to the age of chivalry. In her work, Jennifer Goodman (1998) proves the specific connections between chivalric literature and particular exploration narratives. She explains this with the histories of a series of explorers and their connections with chivalry from Marco Polo to Captain John Smith. Her studies suggest that chivalry was a crucial ideal from the Middle Ages that influenced the exploration of the new worlds. Thus, there is no age of discovery without the preceding Age of Chivalry.

Chivalrous Saracens in the Western chivalry: from fiction to reality

Almost all early works of chivalry and medieval chivalric culture contain the story of chivalrous Saracens. The *Song of Aspremont* which was written around 1190 describes an admirable Saracen noble called Gorhan. Knight Gorhan could be regarded as noble because he has two qualities, lack of greed and socially responsible behaviour (Crouch, 2005a:35; Crouch, 2008:21). Palomides is a Saracen knight who along with his brothers, Safyr and Segwarides, serve as knights of the Round Table in the Arthurian legend. According to this story, both Safyr and Segwarides convert to Christianity while Palomides converts later in his life. Palomides initially appears in the early thirteenth century's *Prose Tristan* as an African knight and later in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (Keita, 2012:134).

The most well-known admirable Saracen appears in the anonymous poem *L'Ordene de Chevalerie* (The Order of Knighthood), which is one of the oldest works written on chivalry in Northern French. The work presents a story of Hugh of Tiberias, who was captured in a battle by Saladin, and was promised to be released if he would tell Saladin how a knight was made under the Christian law. Hugh unwillingly agreed to make Saladin a knight through a proper knighting ceremony. The poem then focuses about this ritual, explaining the meanings of each step in the knighting process. This story is interesting due to the depiction that Saladin, a Saracen king, was knighted by a Christian lord using a Christian ritual in the crusading setting. Keen (2005:6-7) sees the making of Saladin as a knight as "an entirely secular rite which has no need for a priest or for the church's

altar for its accomplishment. ” This story also shows how Hughes teaches Saladin the *preudomme* which is wise and not indiscreet. According to Crouch, although the poem then relates the *preudomme* to the the precepts of biblical wisdom, the author of the poem “does have a secular ideal before him” (Crouch, 2005a:35-36).

It is certainly that Knight Gorhan in the *Song of Aspremont* and Knight Palomides are all fictional characters. The story about the knighting of Saladin in *L'Ordene* is also probably a fiction although both Saladin and Hugh of Tiberias are real historical figures. Nevertheless, the knighting process of the Saracen king by a Christian appears again in many of the subsequent manuals of chivalry. Saladin becomes a model of chivalrous Saracen in non-medieval literature *The Talisman* in which Sir Walter Scott makes a fictional picture of Saladin as a noble, honour and chivalrous warrior and he even portrays Saladin in much more positive lights than many of the Christian characters (Balas, 2014).

Despite the fictional sense of the chivalrous Saracens, Crouch (2005a:35) asserts that the contact between the Saracen Muslim warriors and their European counterparts helped in part to solidify in medieval minds the qualities of a noble man. Robert Rouse (2005:84) also emphasizes that the function of Saracens was crucial in the formation of medieval identity especially in the construction of the Anglo-Saxon identity by contrasting the English heroes with the Saracens. The appearance of Saracens who were portrayed as chivalrous warriors in Medieval literature raise some questions: how does the conception of Saracen Muslim warriors come into the minds of the Western chivalric authors? What are the motives that led the Western chivalric authors to portray Saracens as chivalrous warriors in their writings? This paper wants to acknowledge that the fantasy of Muslim chivalrous warriors in medieval chivalric literature - such as *L'Ordene de Chevalerie* and *La Chanson d'Aspremont* - indicates that to some extent the Western chivalry was shaped by the Muslim chivalry.

The decline of Western chivalry?

There was also an era in the age of Western chivalry when Western Europe was struck by calamities and catastrophes including a series of famines, plagues, and wars, which killed much of the population. The greatest known ecological disaster, the Black Death, that occurred between 1347 and 1350 killed about a third of Europeans (Herlihy, 1997:17). Along with this depopulation, there was social unrest and warfare such as the Wars of the Roses and the Hundred Years' war. In addition to demographic collapse and political instabilities, religious upheavals also contribute to the crises.

Some historians saw these years of the later Middle Ages as a long period of Western chivalric decline. Jennifer Wollock (2011: 185) describes that this viewpoint is supported by Johan Huizinga's *Waning of the Middle Ages* with its description of the hypocrisy of the knights who lived in a fantasy world inspired by chivalric romance. She also claims that the attack against chivalry was a serious attempt by humanist scholars to counter the continuing prestige of chivalry with alternative moral and military standards.

Richard Kaeuper (1999:4) sees the decline of chivalry not in belief and practice, but rather an expansion of the negative side of chivalry, the glorification of violence and warfare as an integral part of the chivalric ideal. This is because chivalry, as suggested by Kaeuper, can only be interpreted as a mixture of ideals and practices constantly critiqued by those who wanted to change both. Kaeuper (1999:309) further stresses that chivalry was not dead but it transformed. "The autonomy of chivalry and its private violence gradually disappeared, swallowed up by the growth of state power and public violence, blessed by the church." Crouch defends Western chivalry from Huizinga's attack and other scholars. According to Crouch (2005b:152), knights were seen as "hypocritical" in the nineteenth century due to their violation of chivalric ethics. However, it is not appropriate to blame an ethical system by the wrongdoing of its practitioners.

When Sir Thomas Malory saw chivalry as a tragedy of ideas while he was imagining the chivalric communities in the late Middle Ages, the ideas of chivalry had changed in response to local circumstances (Hodges, 2005:2). This resulted in many models of Western chivalry. Wollock (2011:199) suggests that it is not the decline of Western chivalry, but only "the clash of contrasting models of [Western] chivalry." During this period, the Europeans started their dangerous adventures further in the Muslim world which resulted to the destruction of Muslim civilisation.

CONCLUSION

Sir Edwards Woodville was probably the last knight errant who witnessed the fall of the age of Western chivalry and the rise of modern European warfare. Along with his soldiers who wore the red cross of St. George in the battle of Saint-Aubin-Du-Cormier, they died as knight driven by honour and obligation (Wilkins, 2010:160). The knights fell in the battlefield with their shining armours destroyed by gunpowder defending their chivalric ideals. The age of Western chivalry had transformed to the age of discovery and to the age of technology. Howe (2014) says that "there is still a strong underground chivalric tradition that continues to the present."

The non-conclusive debate around the decline of Western chivalry is one of the evidences that the age of Western chivalry was a legitimate title for the period of European history from ca. 1000 to ca. 1500. Chivalry as a universal ethical system evolved through a long period of time and blossomed in a setting of Christian society, but the influence of chivalrous Muslim Saracens in shaping the Western chivalry cannot be neglected. Western chivalry inspired the people of early Middle Ages who lived in an age of fright, violence and despair with an idealistic concept that provoked the imagination and fuelled the soul. And the ideals of Western chivalry transformed a society of primitive warriors into the culture of courage, respect and grace as presented by a knight in shining armour which eventually established the Western civilisation.

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