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The Western European kingdoms, 600–1000

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Part 1: *c.*600–800

Change around 600 CE: a military revolution?

Before *c.*600, Western European military forces were recognisably descended from the last western Roman armies, as can quickly be demonstrated. Late Roman troops had sometimes been paid via the delegation of fiscal revenues and, as earlier, received allotments of land on retirement.[1] Their hereditary service,[2] furthermore, exempted them from certain taxes. In the fourth and fifth centuries a series of military identities evolved, based around oppositions to traditional civic Roman ideals. These turned on ideas of barbarism, enhanced by possibly increased recruitment beyond the frontiers and greater opportunities for non-Roman soldiers to rise to higher command.[3] As the territory effectively governed from Ravenna, the imperial capital, shrank during the fifth century, and with it the available taxation and recruiting

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1 Hugh Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe, 350–425* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996); Douglas Lee, 'The Army', in Avril Cameron and Peter Garnsey (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 13:*The Late Empire, A.D. 337–425* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 211–37; Douglas Lee, *War in Late Antiquity: A Social History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002); Pat Southern and Karen Dixon, *The Late Roman Army* (London, Batsford, 1996); R. S. O. Tomlin, 'The Army of the Late Empire', in John Wacher (ed.) *The Roman World* (London, Routledge, 1987), pp. 107–23.

2 See, for example, Sulpicius Severus, *Life of Martin*, 2, Frederick Hoare (trans.), 'Sulpicius Severus: The Life of Saint Martin of Tours', in Thomas Noble and Thomas Head (ed.) *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 1–29.

3 Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 101–10, and references.

bases, the enlistment, and political pre-eminence, of warriors from outside the empire grew further.[4]

Similarly, post-imperial armies were frequently raised from people claiming a non-Roman identity: Franks in the north and Burgundians in the south-east of Gaul, Goths in Spain and Italy. Such warriors seem to have been paid, partly at least, by the delegation of taxation levied on the civic 'Roman' population.[5] Their lands were tax-exempt and their military responsibilities, linked to their ethnic identity, seem to have been hereditary. Service was structured around the life-cycle with young men serving as *pueri* in the households of older warriors, royal officers, or the kings themselves. Successful service led to marriage and the establishment of their own households. At this age, apparently, ethnic identity was formally acquired. Older warriors would then serve when summoned, alongside any of their own young apprentices. Some held posts within the royal administration and others doubtless continued at the palace, training younger *pueri regis*. In some areas, like Aquitaine and possibly southern Italy, military service was apparently based differently, on land-ownership rather than ethnic identity. Quite how this related to taxation is unclear.

Before *c.*600 warriors were raised according to kingdom-wide principles of service, levied by administrative district, commanded by royal officers. The holding of the relevant offices was generally in the king's gift, rather than hereditary. Because, in most regions, the aristocracy relied upon royal favour or patronage, either for its local pre-eminence or position within the 'pecking orders' of the class, a king could raise the army to impose his will within the realm. This is very clear from Merovingian Gaul, but the point appears more generally applicable. Although later fifth- and sixth-century armies were by no means regular forces of the old Roman type, they evidently still functioned as independent coercive forces. Thus, it remains perfectly justified to see these realms as states.

Nevertheless, this situation contained the seeds of change. One was the common ethnic nature of military service. Ethnicity was not fixed and seems frequently to have been acquired at the age where a male established a household. It appears, furthermore, to have been gendered: ethnic identities are ascribed overwhelmingly to men. However, the social and legal

4 Ibid., pp. 242–83 passim.

5 Walter Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans* AD *418–585: The Techniques of Accommodation* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980); Walter Goffart, *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, pp. 422–47.

attractions of non-Roman ethnicity meant that it became steadily more common and, by 600, more or less universal among the aristocracy and free landholding classes in most areas of the West. Simultaneously, it appears to have been more universally assigned (to children and women as well as adult males). Given the frequent tax-exemption of people subject to military service, this development surely meant the spread of liability for military duty, and presumably a concomitant inclusion within their ranks of freemen less able to bear the costs of such service. It probably reduced the amount of land subject to royal taxation and, through the inheritance of 'military lands' by women of non-Roman ethnicity, led to its tenure by people considered incapable of performing military service. These points alone would probably have produced significant change in the raising of armies but they constituted only one group of factors among many, making the decades around 600 a period of intense transformation in Western European society and economy. Another key development in many regions was a growth in aristocratic power, vis-à-vis royal, and thus, during the seventh century, we can detect significant changes in the nature of armies and their levying.

By the mid seventh century it is difficult to see any trace of the post-imperial means of raising armies. Mention of the 'men of Mainz' and the *pagenses* of Saintes in a 639 campaign may be the last allusions to old-style levies based on administrative districts (*civitates* and *pagi*).[6] Instead, references to armies take us in two complementary directions. We begin to encounter 'select' levies – *scarae*. Cognate with the English 'shear' and 'share', the word implies a band, cut (or sheared) off from the mass.[7] The presumed spread of ethnically based liability for military service would make a levy of the free population entirely impractical. In the early medieval social and economic context, armies larger than a few thousand men were unfeasible. The term 'select' is unfortunate, though. The immediately post-imperial 'ethnic' military landowners presumably represented (initially at least) an equally select body and one imagines that during the sixth century, royal officers – counts, dukes, and *centenarii* – had to choose those best suited to serve from steadily increasing numbers of theoretically eligible men. What changed was not

6 *Fredegar* IV.87: *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar, with its Continuations*, trans. John Wallace-Hadrill (London, Greenwood Press, 1960).

7 This sense is crystal clear in its earliest appearance – Fredegar's *Chronicle*, IV.74 (dealing with Dagobert I's 631 Thuringian campaign) – where the Frankish force is described as 'the army of the kingdom of the Austrasians', plus *scarae de electis viris* (*scarae* of chosen men) from Neustria and Burgundy, under counts and dukes.

whether or not warriors were drawn from a select group but the means of selecting them.

How this 'shearing' was carried out is suggested by the other prevailing aspect of seventh-century military organisation: the aristocratic retinue. Military households existed in the sixth century but they seem to have dominated seventh-century army composition. Their precise nature apparently also changed. Seventh-century sources widely acknowledge the existence of freemen dependent upon more powerful fellows, and a class of aristocrats whose power was fundamentally independent of royal service. Evidence of more secure tenure of large estates is more easily found; these lands were used to reward followers. This seems to have meant that, whereas in the sixth century older warriors performed military service according to general systems of obligation, in the seventh, even after leaving the age-group of the *pueri*, the warrior still served in his lord's retinue. Across Western Europe such nobles interposed themselves between the king and the remainder of the free population. Around 600 the last vestiges of Roman taxation disappeared, largely because these imposts had passed to estate owners. Legislation appears concerning the frequent intrusion of magnates into the operation of royal justice, protecting their 'satellites' from sentencing by judges. Simultaneously, aristocratic dynasties become more visible, frequently monopolising administrative offices. We are some way from hereditary counties or duchies but the detectable sequences of counts from the same families in particular areas strongly suggest that, although such titles had little value without the legitimation of royal appointment, these kin-groups clearly expected that the king would appoint one of their number to a vacancy.

During the seventh century, therefore, the magnates were seemingly able to insert themselves into the means of levying the army. When military forces were required, even if legitimised by royal summons and nominally employing old ideas of military liability, in practice the local counts would select or 'shear off', from all those theoretically liable for military service, the most politically and socially important landholders, their allies, and dependents. As the army was a kingdom's most important political assembly, the choice of whom to summon and whom to leave behind was a significant source of power and patronage. What happened in the seventh-century West might, then, not unreasonably be termed a 'privatisation' of the army. I have distinguished the different means of levying an army by the terms 'horizontal' (levied according to a kingdom-wide 'flat rate' by royal agents working within specific royal administrative districts: the sixth-century model) and

'vertical' (raised down chains of dependence within aristocratic estates and dependencies as in the seventh century); this may yet suffice as a short-hand.

This is very significant in determining how we classify polities in this period. After *c.*600, the mustering of armies was increasingly (with temporal and geographical exceptions) a matter of negotiation between the royal court and local or regional aristocracies. This in turn made it correspondingly difficult for a monarch to summon an army to resolve internal difficulties such as recalcitrant or rebellious noblemen. The army ceased to be an independent governmental coercive force, profoundly affecting kings' ability to harness the surplus of their realms beyond their own private estates. This emphatically does not imply that these polities were not cohesive or that kings did not wield considerable authority. Dynastic legitimacy and other ideological strategies could maintain the royal court as the essential focus of politics. Nevertheless, without the ability to raise armed forces independently of regional and local magnates in order to impose their will upon the diverse localities of their realms, it is unhelpful (against recent historiographical fashion) to call these kingdoms states.

A significant change in armament occurred at this time. The practice of burying weapons in graves provides, by early medieval standards, an enormous sample (many thousands of items) of contemporary weaponry, although unevenly distributed geographically and temporally. Between *c.*575 and *c.*625, several hitherto common items disappear from this record. In *Francia* especially, these include the throwing axe (*francisca*) and the heavy, iron-shafted barbed javelin (*ango*). One-handed battle axes and, in England, certain types of javelin cease to be found. Simultaneously, a change in defensive weaponry occurs. Fifth- and sixth-century shields were quite small, their bosses frequently ending in a disc, probably used for catching an opponent's blade in a 'fencing' style of warfare. In the seventh century these 'bucklers' are replaced by larger shields with longer, heavier bosses, perhaps more suited simply to shoving or punching. The one-edged dagger (*scramasax*) becomes longer, broader, and weightier, resembling a machete. This perhaps parallels developments in spearheads, which likewise become larger and heavier. It is risky to deduce a tactical shift from a change in weaponry but the transformation of armament between *c.*575 and *c.*625 seems to point in one general direction: from possibly faster, more open, fighting towards combat centred on close-packed hand-to-hand fighting. Larger, heavier shields and spears seem adapted to this type of warfare as does the broad, chopping, single-edged *scramasax*. Indeed, the *scramasax* combines the best features of the sword and battle axe, the latter of which disappears from

the record until the Viking era. Surviving evidence unfortunately provides no real clues as to whether defensive armour became more common, as one might expect. Helmets and armour are proportionately more frequent in the seventh century than the sixth but the interment of armour was geographically very restricted, in a way that cannot reflect its actual frequency, and thus probably more affected by ritual demands than the burial of other items. Furthermore, outside southern Germany most examples come from entirely untypical burials (such as the ship burials at Sutton Hoo in East Anglia and at Vendel and Valsgärde in Sweden).[8]

Relating developments in armament and the putative tactical change deduced from them to the transformation in the raising of armies is difficult. Some weaponry which dropped out of use – especially the *francisca* – required specialist training to use effectively, whereas one might wonder whether close-fighting 'shield-wall' tactics were more suitable to larger, comparatively less well-trained forces. However, as noted, seventh-century armies were not necessarily more select than sixth-century. Further, and perhaps crucially, close-fighting techniques probably required more expensive protection, notably helmets and body armour, which could have restricted participation in it to those with the economic wherewithal to so furnish themselves and their followers. This would tally with a growth in aristocratic power. The coherent employment of close-fighting techniques possibly required the elements of a 'shield-wall' to have more frequent training as a body. This might be more feasible within an aristocratic retinue than in an irregularly assembled conglomeration of landowners. Without more evidence, however, this can only remain a suggestion.

In much of North-Western Europe, the period after *c.*600 was one of economic expansion, possibly enabling slightly larger armies to be mobilised, at least for large-scale conflict. Economic growth and local aristocrats' increased private resources might have made it more feasible for aristocrats to equip larger followings with metal armour and probably the most expensive item of a warrior's equipment, his horse. However likely this might seem, and although there are some indications of this in the data, a rise in the proportion of mounted troops is as impossible to confirm from our evidence as a growth in the frequency of armour and helmets. As with the other

8 Vendel and Valsgärde: *Statens Historiska Museum, Studies 2: Vendel Period*, ed. Jan Lamm and H. A. Nordstrom (Stockholm, Museum of National Antiquities, 1983). Sutton Hoo: Martin Carver, *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?* (London, British Museum Press, 1998).

suggestions linking social and military developments after *c.*600, it might nevertheless be retained as a working hypothesis.

*The evolution of systems of military service and the rise of the Carolingians (*c.*650–*c.*800)*

Just as sixth-century military forces can be seen as the last, shadowy, incarnations of a Roman type of army, seventh-century armed forces might be seen as the first manifestations of a type of army familiar for most of the remainder of the 'medieval millennium'. The methods of raising armies during the remainder of the period covered by this chapter, and beyond, might be viewed as developments of the seventh-century 'template'. The late seventh and early eighth centuries saw further important developments making armies even more recognisable to students of the central Middle Ages.

In traditional accounts, the early eighth century saw the introduction of 'feudalism': military service performed to a lord in return for land, confirmed by the swearing of oaths of allegiance or 'fealty'. Service was performed as armoured cavalry, the increased cost of which required the warrior to be given the estates necessary to support himself and bear the cost of his weaponry. This allegedly involved Frankish rulers, in particular, confiscating Church lands to support their horse-borne warriors, but sweetening the pill by having the soldier only 'hold' the land, renting it from the relevant church. Thus, we have the tenure of estates, whose ownership remained ultimately in the hands of a greater lord, secular or ecclesiastical, in return for rent or the performance of usually military service, the arrangement being solidified by oath-swearing. Thus were established the principal elements of the 'feudal system'.[9]

Recent scholarship has called into doubt almost all of this reading.[10] Nevertheless, even if its precise details are incorrect, in its general outlines there may yet be something to be said for the old interpretation. Something important happened around 700, something indeed related to landholding, the relationships between warriors and their lords, and those between powerful aristocrats and the king. The major early seventh-century changes described above centred on the creation of a powerful aristocratic stratum

9 The best traditional view of 'the feudal system' is François-Louis Ganshof, *Feudalism*, 3rd edn (London, Harper, 1964). Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 2 vols. (London, Routledge, 1962), more subtle than most of his contemporaries' and successors' discussions of 'feudalism', is not really concerned with 'system' at all.

10 Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994); Paul Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000).

with other freemen dependent upon them. However, from the surviving evidence, outright gifts of land or other resources seemingly remained the aristocratic means of rewarding followers. Although ties of dependence or allegiance doubtless persisted, such gifts had the effect of reducing an aristocrat's resources. Partible inheritance, requiring all sons (at least) to be bequeathed more-or-less equal shares of the patrimony, the requirements of land-grants for dower and dowry, and other gifts further meant the repeated break-up of aristocratic estates.

This was probably one important reason why politics remained focused on the royal courts in spite of, in *Francia*, the usual minority of the Merovingian kings and, in Visigothic Spain, serious dynastic instability. Aristocrats had to return to court to acquire new lands to replace those bestowed upon followers and to have titles, the other key support of local and regional pre-eminence, confirmed and legitimised. Aristocratic families tried many means of combating this situation. Testamentary disposition (by will) was one way by which a greater share of the estate could be left in the hands of one son. Other documents begin to survive or be alluded to, through which customary law could be circumvented. Across Europe, aristocratic rural 'family monasteries' begin to be attested more frequently. By bestowing lands upon a monastic foundation, over which control was retained, resources could also be kept intact. Monastic lands were not subject to partible inheritance but could be loaned, by the abbot (usually a family member or protégé), to one member of the dynasty.

However, in factional politics, such as dominated Spain and, from the middle of the century, *Francia*, the situation described above spelled serious problems for aristocrats excluded from the royal court. Such individuals found themselves unable to receive royal grants to replace lands given to followers and barred from the essential royal legitimation of titles. Most means of circumventing partible inheritance and other aspects of customary law were of only limited utility. In factional civil war, moreover, the winners showed themselves only too ready to depose the abbots of family monasteries and replace them with their own adherents, thus acquiring the institution's lands. It is therefore probably not surprising that aristocratic families evolved new means of dealing with the dangers of this situation. These evolved from the previous state of affairs.

Precaria and *beneficium* are both encountered in Roman law to describe situations where a gift was not regarded as necessarily permanent, and could be revoked later. In early medieval terms, there appears to have been little real difference between lands held as *precaria* or *beneficium*, the distinction

simply relating, on the one hand, to the way in which the gift had been obtained (through a plea or *precaria*) and, on the other, to the nature of the grant (as a benefit, or *beneficium*). In the post-imperial world, *precaria* were means of giving ecclesiastical servants land as a stipend, lending it to them, as *precaria*. As Church lands grew and became too large to manage directly, similar *precaria* were granted to laymen, in return for rent.[11]

From *c.*700 – crucially – these types of grant were seemingly extended to secular estates. References begin to lands held by lesser freemen from more powerful secular aristocrats, as *precaria* or *beneficium*.[12] This importantly meant that noble families could reward followers while not actually diminishing their patrimony, the land ultimately remaining (theoretically) under the grantor's control. Such aristocrats' power could thus be independent of the royal court. No longer was access to court patronage necessary to maintain the extent of their landholdings. Even the loss of control over bishoprics and monasteries might be survived without implying a diminution in the ability to reward or maintain followers. This was decisive in the relationships between central, royal government and local or regional power. The Merovingian royal house became obsolete from this point. Regions like Aquitaine and Provence drifted away into effective semi-detachment. Thus, the traditional view of the creation of 'feudalism' had correctly identified a vital period of change but its understanding and explanation of those transformations were flawed. The aristocratic retinue's importance was further underlined and the links that bound such followings were reinforced.

As Charles Martel secured control over *Francia*, the use of Church lands to reward followers became more widespread. By the middle of the eighth century something like a regulated system was introduced, setting out rents and some checks and balances to avoid abuse. This earned Charles Martel ecclesiastical opprobrium but provided solid support for his well-equipped and successful armies.

From the early eighth century, the term *vassus* ('vassal') was frequently used to describe warriors in the service of a lord.[13] It appears to have been old,

11 *Precaria*: Ian Wood, 'Tetsind, Witlaic and the History of Merovingian *Precaria*', in Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre (eds.), *Property and Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 31–52; Fouracre, *Age of Charles Martel*, pp. 137–45.

12 For example, two charters of the Abbey of Wissembourg, Alsace, issued in 735/6 and 739: *Traditiones Wizenburgenses: Die Urkunden des Klosters Weissenburg, 661–864*, ed. Karl Glöckner and Anton Doll (Darmstadt, Arbieten der Hessischen Historischen Kommission, 1979), nos. 9–10.

13 Elisabeth Magnou-Nortier, *Foi et fidelité: récherches sur l'evolution des liens personnels chez les Francs du VIIe au IXe siècle* (Toulouse, Publications de l'Université de Toulouse-le-Mirail, 1976).

possibly of Celtic origin, but its pre-eminence may have stemmed from a need for new terminology in a novel political situation. Former words for these sorts of links, such as *antrustio*, had too many connections with the Merovingian dynasty so a replacement was needed. It must, however, be stressed that as yet these relationships by no means represented any sort of 'system'. Precarial estate-ownership, existed, as did oaths of vassalage but the extent to which the one was *directly* linked to the other is unclear. There is even less evidence of the specification of the type or amount of service expected.

The Franks' successful eighth-century wars of aggression were based on this type of army. These campaigns' frequency produced a class of very experienced warriors; with experience grew military competence and the increased chance of battlefield success and survival. This in turn gave rise to ever greater confidence and high morale. In these circumstances it is unsurprising that the various Frankish aristocratic factions gradually lost out to the victorious Carolingians as warriors joined Charles Martel, or that, under Martel, his sons, and grandsons, the Franks' opponents so rarely put up effective battlefield opposition.

Spain and England

The pattern of developments sketched above is based squarely upon evidence from Gaul, or *Francia* as it came to be called. Nevertheless, the general outlines pertain to most of Western Europe, even if the precise explanations must differ. Visigothic Spain witnessed a similar overall shift from a royal army raised from administrative units and commanded by the king's officials towards one centred around aristocratic personal followings. Kings legislated to reserve the control of these retinues to themselves. Some dynamics of this change might have been analogous to those in *Francia*. A distinctive Visigothic feature, however, was the military service of *servi* (slaves). The slaves that landlord-warriors were ordered to bring to the army were possibly intended to serve as baggage attendants and guards rather than fulfil a formal battlefield function. However, Egica called up all former slaves freed by the king on pain of their return to servility. This was possibly an attempt to create a force directly dependent upon the kings, as might Egica's predecessor Ervig's summoning of *servi fiscals* (fiscal slaves).[14] Troops raised from royal

14 Visigothic Laws, 9.2.8–9:*Monumenta Germaniae Historica Legum Sectio I*, vol. 1: *Leges Visigothorum*, ed. Karl Zeumer (Hanover, 1902). S. P. Scott's early twentieth-century translation is online at http://libro.uca.edu/vcode/visigoths.htm; the numbering of clauses sometimes differs from that in the *MGH* edition.

estates might form the nucleus of an independent royal coercive force. Indeed there seems to be something of an early medieval Iberian tradition of slave-soldiers, beginning with the sixth-century king Theudis's levying of a force of 2,000 slaves from his Hispano-Roman wife's estates through to the use of slave-soldiers by the tenth-century caliphs of Cordoba.[15] However, the 'problem' of Visigothic 'slave soldiers' may be more apparent than real; more recent studies have suggested that Spanish *servi* were tenants of aristocratic estates rather than slaves.[16]

Even Anglo-Saxon England, so often considered in isolation from the European mainland, reveals the same general outlines. Fifth- and sixth-century archaeological burial data suggest that military service, as elsewhere, might have been linked to ethnicity. When written records begin to survive, although their scarcity permits alternative readings, a development can nevertheless be proposed that would be recognisable from the Frankish account. Earlier in the seventh century it seems that lands were granted to warriors who had successfully served an apprenticeship in a retinue. They were granted in perpetuity but subject to partible inheritance and other customary demands, leading to the fragmentation of estates each generation. During that century, therefore, we can detect the same strategies employed to circumvent this situation as we encountered in *Francia*: the creation of aristocratic religious foundations and so on. Around 700, as in Visigothic Spain, kings legislated to ensure that retinues based around lines of dependence were still ultimately under royal command.[17] Such laws are often assumed to reflect long-standing traditions but it is surely more plausible that they were active attempts to *create* norms in periods of change. Kings began to specify, when they granted land to their nobles, that they were still expected to perform military service and this might reflect lesser aristocratic concerns to clarify what ultimately remained their property in gifts to their followers. In the raising of armies, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms do not seem dramatically different from those of the Franks.

15 Procopius, Wars 5.12.50–4:*Procopius: History of the Wars and Buildings*, vol. 3, *History of the Wars*, ed. and trans. Henry Dewing (London, Heinemann, 1919); Cordoban slave soldiers: Richard Fletcher, *Moorish Spain* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993), p. 61; Hugh Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal: A Political History of al-Andalus* (London, Longman, 1996), pp. 85–7.

16 Christopher Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005; rev. edn, 2006), p. 231.

17 Ine's Laws 5, 51:*English Historical Documents*, vol. 1: *c.500–1042*, ed. and trans. Dorothy Whitelock, 2nd edn (London, Eyre Methuen, 1979), document 32.

The Lombard exception

The principal exception to the general pattern just established, of the gradual evolution of armies from royally controlled coercive forces into conglomerates of aristocratic retinues, whose service was not entirely reliably assured by the monarchs, comes not from England but from Italy. Evidence about military service from seventh-century Lombard Italy is not very forthcoming. Historians have often assumed that the picture of the Lombard kingdom in the eighth century is applicable in the seventh but this is a shaky assumption. If anything, the archaeological and other data from the seventh century might suggest a weaker central authority and greater power held by the regional dukes. What little information one can glean about the seventh-century army suggests one not very different from its contemporaries in *Francia*, Spain, and Britain, based around aristocratic retinues.

This, however, appears to change in the eighth century when, especially in the long reign of Liutprand (712–44), royal power grew significantly, alongside military expansion and the absorption of hitherto independent territories. The eighth-century Lombard army shows some similarities with those of the sixth century in other kingdoms. Through various mechanisms, the king established a link with the lesser free landholder, making sociopolitical advancement dependent upon royal patronage.[18] In this he may have been helped by the fact that Lombard nobles were apparently not as wealthy and powerful as their Frankish counterparts.[19] Free status became commensurate with the title of *exercitalis* or *arimannus* (army-man), a social group that, by the eighth century appears to have included Romans and Lombards, and the king instituted annual Marchfields at which laws were promulgated and other political business enacted.[20] A general oath of loyalty was sworn by the *arimanni* to the king and the slightly later legal requirements that lesser landowners serve in the army might be an attempt to maintain direct links between the king and this social stratum, ensuring that the army did not become an agglomeration of aristocratic retinues. As in sixth-century *Francia*, the army seemingly served as an independent royal coercive force. The eighth-century Lombard royal army was successful within Italy, absorbing

18 Christopher Wickham, 'Aristocratic Power in Eighth-Century Lombard Italy', in Alexander Callander Murray (ed.), *After Rome's Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History: Essays Presented to Walter Goffart* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1998), pp. 153–70.

19 Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 203–19.

20 All fourteen dated legal pronouncements of Liutprand are dated 1 March, as are the laws of Ratchis and both codes of Ratchis' brother Aistulf. *The Lombard Laws*, trans. Katherine Drew (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1973).

most of the remaining East Roman (Byzantine) and independent Lombard enclaves. This success of course posed a threat to the pope who, when the inability of the Eastern emperor to provide effective military support became clear, turned to the Franks for help. The latter eventually conquered the Lombard realm in 774.[21]

The period after Liutprand's death saw internal dissension within the Lombard kingdom and, unsurprisingly, almost all of the legislation referring to military service comes from this period of usurpation. Often assumed to represent age-old, traditional military organisation, it is better viewed in context, as attempts by insecure rulers to ensure the service of their aristocrats and maintain links with more humble *arimanni*. The Lombards were unable to put up very serious resistance to the Frankish invasions under Pippin I or his son Charlemagne, which has sometimes been seen as symptomatic of various structural weaknesses. A crisis in morale has been proposed on the basis of the fact that some Lombards made their wills before setting out to join the army, but this seems a little hasty.[22] One of the will-makers was a bishop (Walprand of Lucca) and wills or similar arrangements for inheritance are known to have been made in armies across the early medieval West, including Charlemagne's at the height of his success. Wickham suggests more interestingly that Lombard military weakness derived from the relative poverty of the aristocracy.[23] Yet, the law codes (like the seventh-century cemetery evidence) suggest that the wealthier rungs of the *arimanni* were as well equipped as their Frankish opponents. It is possible that they were outnumbered by their Frankish opposite numbers, and that they were less able to raise large, well-equipped retinues, but the principle reason for their military failures would seem to be a difference in military experience. The Frankish armies were involved in annual, successful campaigning since the second decade of the century ensuring a continuous stream of battle-hardened warriors through the ranks, training their juniors. By contrast, the last decades of the Lombard realm, especially in Desiderius's reign, were generally peaceful. The comparatively inexperienced Lombard army eventually collapsed before the attack of a well-equipped, battle-hardened force

21 Royal Frankish Annals, s.a. 773–4; Revised Annals, s.a. 773–4.*Charlemagne: Translated Sources*, trans. Preston King (Lancaster, P. D. King, 1986).

22 Christopher Wickham, *Early Medieval Italy: Local Society and Central Power, 400–1000* (London, Macmillan, 1981), p. 46; *Codice Diplomatico Longobardo*, ed. L. Schiaparelli, 2 vols., Fonti per la Storia d'Italia 62–63 (Rome, Istituto Italiano per il Medio Evo, 1929, 1933), nos. 114 (Lucca, July 754) and 117 (August 755).

23 Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, p. 218.

commanded by one of the most strategically adept commanders of the Middle Ages.

Part 2: Intermission: early medieval warfare, politics, and identity in theory and practice

War and kingship

Kingship remained intimately bound up with military success.[24] This was nothing new. Roman emperors, particularly in the later imperial period, had had to be successful soldiers. What seems to have changed around 600, as part of the general readjustment discussed above, was how martial rulership was discussed. Even if the ideals remained, there seems to have been a shift of emphasis away from classical towards Old Testament exemplars.[25] The reasons for the shift might stem from a combination of increasing self-confidence on the part of the kings of Western Europe and a growing unease in proclaiming Roman-ness after Emperor Justinian's attempts to reconquer the Roman Empire's western territories. This military effort, which destroyed two kingdoms and helped plunge a third into crisis, was associated with an ideological offensive, propagating the idea that the western kingdoms were ruled not by legitimate kings who (as they had tended to claim in the fifth century) represented the old empire under new management, but by barbarians who had conquered these territories. In this climate, even if the fundamental ideals of good rulership (piety, justice, generosity, and military prowess) remained the same, new touchstones were needed. Thus, Solomon and David began to edge out Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, and even Constantine as model kings.

Nor was it only a question of ideas. The penalties for military failure were high. Indeed, a mark of the Merovingian kings' success is that they retained the throne in spite of rarely taking the field after the earlier seventh century. The powerful kings of the dynasty had not often participated in military campaigns in the third quarter of the sixth century but from the 590s, possibly as a response to the changes discussed earlier, the Merovingians returned to leading their armies in person up until the 630s. Nevertheless, Sigibert III's

24 Michael McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium and the Early Medieval West*, paperback edn (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990). John Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971); Janet Nelson, *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London, Hambledon Press, 1986).

25 Yitzhak Hen, 'The Uses of the Bible and the Perception of Kingship in Merovingian Gaul', *Early Medieval Europe* 7 (1998), 277–89, and references.

defeat by Radulf, *dux* of the Thuringians resulted in the Franks losing their earlier hegemony over the peoples east of the Rhine. A defeat at the hands of the West Saxons at Burford (752) may have caused crisis in Mercia. Its king, Æthelbald, briefly lost his hegemony over southern England and a few years later was done to death by his own bodyguard. Towards the end of our period, the downfall of Emperor Charles III 'the Fat' resulted in no small part from his enemies' ability to exploit perceived military failures against the Vikings. Examples can be multiplied from across the early medieval West of kings whose regimes were called into crisis by their failure to perform the role of military leader with adequate success. Not surprisingly, therefore, leading a campaign was one of the first tasks of any new king.

Concomitant with military kingship was the army's dominance of politics. Early Frankish Gaul and eighth-century Lombard Italy held annual military gatherings on 1 March (the 'Marchfield'). In eighth-century *Francia* this muster was pushed back to 1 May to ensure better availability of fodder for the warriors' horses. This was not the only time that armies were mustered; campaigns took place through much of the year. Nevertheless, these were politically important gatherings. In the last decade of the sixth century, Childebert II of Austrasia (575–96) held three such Marchfields at which he promulgated edicts.[26] The many edicts of the Lombard king Liutprand and his successors are all dated to 1 March.[27] Thus, between the seventh and tenth centuries the army, as a gathering of the powerful, remained the principal political assembly, at which a ruler established and underlined the (however fictive) consensus within his kingdom. Laws are often said to have been issued with the approval of the army. Royal charters, too, are found being issued while the king was on campaign.[28] In the sixth century, gatherings of the army were important fora at which the king subjected the army to his ideology, rewarded warriors who had done well, and punished those who had not. Even in the Carolingian empire, when the nature of the army and its precise relationship to the king had changed considerably, these assemblies remained enormously important in establishing dynastic legitimacy.

26 *Childebert II's Decrees*: *The Laws of the Salian Franks*, trans. Katherine Drew (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp. 156–9.

27 See above, n. 22.

28 For example, the charter issued by King Ecgberht of Wessex on 19 August 825, when the king 'moved against the Britons' (whom he defeated at the battle of Galford): *Cartularium Saxonicum*, ed. Walter de Gray Birch, 3 vols. (London, Whiting & Co.,1885–93), no. 389. See *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, s.a. 825: *English Historical Documents*, vol. 1, doc. no. 1.

War and masculinity

Closely related to the army's political dominance is another constant of early medieval Western European history: the linkage between warfare and masculinity. Throughout the Roman period, a civic model of masculinity had managed to hold sway even when loyal service to the state in its armies was a component of that ideal. At the end of the imperial era, however, a rival martial model began to appear, its existence being one means by which the inhabitants of Roman Europe were able to negotiate the end of the empire.[29] By *c.*600, this model had become completely dominant. The last traces of a secular civic model of masculinity disappeared during the sixth century. What had earlier been parallel career patterns and lifestyles – even if the civic model was coming to be valued less – had evolved into a situation where the martial model was the only one available within free, secular life; the other had sunk to equivalence with unfree status. The Church offered the only alternative form of masculinity and repeated ecclesiastical concern with banning clergy from carrying arms illustrates how, even among churchmen, this removal from the usual construction of manliness could create serious anxieties. The association of masculinity with warfare can be seen in a wide array of evidence. Archaeologically, throughout much of seventh-century Europe, weapons remained the masculine grave-goods *par excellence*. This seems to have continued in parts of Scandinavia and elsewhere through the Viking Age. That these weapons do not simply symbolise a right to participate in violence can be argued from the changing, but nevertheless comparatively restricted, distribution of these items, whereas the written sources suggest that legitimate participation in low-level violence was not limited to particular ethnic identities or classes, or either sex, or even necessarily restricted to the free. Involvement in warfare was, however, a much more regulated matter. Partly this was because raising the army was a formal, even ritualised business. The army's political importance served to limit participation further. Thus weaponry, I suggest, represents the right to participate in that more limited form of violence. Such rights could be jealously guarded; in 859 the Frankish aristocracy took up arms and cut down peasants and other lowly folk who had presumed to form armed associations to defend their regions from Viking depredations (something the 'elite' was signally failing to do).[30] Charles II 'the Bald' even legislated to ensure that poorer freemen,

29 Guy Halsall, 'Gender and the End of Empire', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34.1 (2004), 17–39.

30 Annals of St-Bertin, s.a. 859: *The Annals of St-Bertin: Ninth-Century Histories*, trans. Janet Nelson, 2 vols. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1991), vol. 1.

whom he encouraged to join the army, could do so without fear of attack by their betters.[31]

The practice of war

It is often thought that the early medieval era was a 'heroic age'.[32] It is difficult to see this in the period's more prosaic records, although seventh- to tenth-century sources are hardly rich in strategic and tactical detail. What is noticeable is how frequently depictions of heroic warfare relate to eras before the composition of the, usually poetic, sources. For example, the early Welsh poetry purporting to describe the northern British kings' wars against 'Saxon' invaders[33] includes characters and events supposedly belonging to the period around 600 CE, but these poems were composed long afterwards. The earliest recently proposed dating of this corpus of material sees them as mid-seventh-century products.[34] This has not commanded consent but even were the date accepted it is significant that we would nevertheless have to see these poems as being divided from the events described by the 'military revolution' around 600. It was suggested that this 'revolution' made warfare more of a close-packed, shield-wall 'slogging match', with little scope for heroic individuals. Perhaps the poets were creating a 'golden age', one which had conceivably never existed. The same could be true *a fortiori* for the warfare described in the Irish sagas' accounts of the conflicts between the long-gone realms of Leinster and Ulster, and Carolingian epics about the warriors of the migration period, such as *Waltharius*.[35] Nor is it impossible, given the location of these works' composition and transmission and the sometimes absurd feats described, that they represent monkish satire on secular martial boasting. To suggest that post-imperial Europeans held martial valour or heroism in little regard is clearly erroneous, but epic or poetic depictions of heroic warfare do not seem to have much of a basis in reality.

31 *Edict of Pîtres* (25 June, 864), ch. 26: *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Legum Sectio 2: Capitularia Regum Francorum 1–2*, ed. Alfredus Boretius and Victor Krause, 2 vols. (Hanover, Berolini, 1883, 1895–7), no. 273.

32 Henry Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1912).

33 *The Gododdin: Text and Context from Dark-Age North Britain*, ed. and trans. John Koch (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1997). *The Taliesin Poems: New Translations*, ed. and trans. Meirion Pennar (Llanerch, 1988).

34 *The Gododdin*.

35 *Walthari: A Verse Translation of the Medieval Latin Waltharius*, trans. Brian Murdoch (Glasgow, Scottish Papers in Germanic Studies, 1989); *The Tain*, trans. Thomas Kinsella (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969).

Leaving aside this 'heroic' notion, what can be said about the practice of early medieval warfare? We must note that in scale it varied not only through time and place but also according to its type; there seems to have been a gradation of scales of warfare. Most appears to have been comparatively small-scale, reasonably described as endemic and even, given its apparent government by norms, as ritual. Given the dominance in early medieval Western society and politics of identities closely bound up with participation in military activities, this should not be surprising. A reasonably frequent summoning of the army was necessary to underpin these identities. Yet such warfare could not be carried out with such regularity on a large scale without risking the fatal undermining of the social, political, and economic system. Thus, particular norms and codes, enshrined by repeated observation rather than through any actual codification, apparently restricted the scale of conflict. The frequency of small-scale warfare can be seen in areas such as eighth-century *Francia*, where we have unusually detailed narrative sources (which nevertheless do not record all military campaigns!) and also in the concern of some legislation, seemingly drawn up as part of a peace-making process, to limit cross-border raiding.[36]

However, frequent small-scale endemic fighting could cause tensions to build up. If military supremacy was established, raids could turn into simple tribute takings and the domination of weaker realms. This situation might be challenged by an outbreak of more serious war in which the usual norms were ignored. This dual pattern – a background of small-scale conflict punctuated by periodic outbursts of major warfare – can be observed in several areas. In Anglo-Saxon England, many sources make clear that war was endemic and vital to social structure. Yet the great, if limited, narrative sources for the 'middle Saxon' period (*c.*600–*c.*800) only record wars between the island's major kingdoms about once per generation. Given that these narratives tend to be written later, it seems clear that only the major outbursts of warfare have been remembered. The usual small-scale raiding and counter-raiding, though its existence is acknowledged by these narratives, has simply not been recorded. Although the sources are much fuller, making the different types of conflict more difficult to distinguish, Frankish warfare seemingly followed similar patterns. The eighth-century campaigns in

36 The frequency of later eighth-century Frankish Warfare: *The Royal Frankish Annals* and *The Revised Annals*. A sample from an earlier period: Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West*, Appendix, pp. 231–3. Peace treaties between the Frankish rulers of Italy and the Doges of Venice: *Capitularia Regum Francorum 1–2*, nos. 233–4 (840), 235 (856), 237 (883), 238 (888) and 239 (891).

Aquitaine, for instance, were composed largely of raids or the insertion of garrisons into strategic points, with only a few major, set-piece encounters. An analogous pattern can be observed in Charlemagne's Saxon campaigns. Around the start of the era covered by this chapter, the stylised, limited warfare conducted between rival members of the Merovingian dynasty led to a build-up of tensions that resulted in two very serious outbreaks of 'no holds barred' warfare, in 574–5 and 612–13. Other such crises were averted in 587–8 and 625–6 by the intervention of bishops and the creation of peace treaties and new law codes.

This conclusion permits us to circumnavigate some controversies about early medieval warfare. One such debate has concerned the size and composition of armies and has frequently been characterised by the participants' desire to see their interpretation apply 'across the board'. Some sources suggest that armies could be quite small, numbered in hundreds (the extreme 'thirty-six-man army' point of view cannot be maintained); yet others seem reliably to discuss armies numbering several thousand men. Equally, while some evidence apparently attests to participation in the army being tightly restricted to the powerful, other data seem to show involvement by poorer freemen. Another debate concerns whether warfare was conducted primarily on foot or on horseback. In Anglo-Saxon military history these debates have often been marred by the selection of sources from diverse points in time, regardless of context. However, if we accept that war occurred on different scales, we can resolve many of these evident contradictions. Low-level warfare could have been conducted with small armies of noblemen, fighting on horseback and perhaps using particular tactics. By contrast, major conflicts would see the recruitment of larger forces, including warriors from further down the social scale. In addition to the possibility that such inclusive forces would not be composed entirely of horsemen and that the 'rank and file' might (as is attested) need stiffening by front ranks of dismounted aristocrats, the fact that such warfare aimed to produce decisive results might further plead for the conduct of such 'set pieces' on foot.

Warfare's scale was also determined by time and place. In the immediately post-imperial period, with economic contraction and decline, it is unlikely that armies ever numbered more than 4,000–5,000 men even in major outbursts. However, as noted, the opening of our period saw an important economic change leading to the revival of North-Western Europe (northern Gaul, Anglo-Saxon England, and other territories bordering the North Sea), even as more southerly, Mediterranean (and, in Britain, western) areas stagnated. This may have been important in enabling the

general military pre-eminence of those areas throughout the centuries that concern us. Further, steady economic growth took place during the period, surely permitting concomitant increases in warfare's scale. In particular the ninth and, especially, the tenth centuries witnessed significant economic expansion and a growth in the size of settlements. This might well have changed the nature of campaigning; it also meant that whereas between *c.*600 and *c.*800 large armies were probably usually numbered in the region of 5,000 men, perhaps more on occasion, after 800 armies of 10,000 and, by the end of our period, more were feasible (at least occasionally and for short periods). These statements, however, relate principally to the major Western realms. In areas such as Ireland, the north of Great Britain, Scandinavia, and the Breton and Basque edges of the Frankish world, armies could rarely if ever be of this magnitude. Even when the socio-political sophistication of such areas is rightly acknowledged, the economic (or even ecological) bases for warfare would be unlikely to enable warfare involving more than a few thousand men, even when conducted on a major scale at the end of our period.

Unsurprisingly, campaign objectives varied with the nature of warfare. Endemic war, perhaps surprisingly, seems generally to have been aimed at maintaining the status quo. Participation in the activities of the army was the underpinning of much of the period's social and political structures, reinforced by small-scale warfare. Loot from raids was redistributed to followers, reaffirming ties of dependence; warriors had the opportunity to impress their superiors and receive other forms of patronage, promotion, or titles. When, as was often the case, the other side retaliated by launching a counter-raid, the same factors would apply. Material recently taken as booty would be taken back, in its turn reinforcing social and political ties and identities within *that* kingdom. The complete destruction of the enemy would, in this type of war, be counter-productive.

Early medieval Western European strategy seems to have been quite distinctive, differing in important ways from that in other parts of the Middle Ages. Battle appears to have been an object of campaigns to a much greater degree than it was to be after *c.*1000. Most campaigns appear to have focused upon looting enemy territory, which, while important in oiling the cogs of politics within the realm, simultaneously hit the opposing ruler's claim to be a good lord, war-leader, and protector of his people. Raids could be, and were, bought off or ignored from behind the shelter of walls until the attackers went home or succumbed to disease, but a failure actively to confront invaders or, at the very least, conduct a successful punitive raid

produced internal tensions. Even kings who successfully faced down invaders from within fortified centres were overthrown by disgruntled nobles.[37]

Thus, set-piece encounters (even if small) were comparatively frequent. Battles, furthermore, were risky so that even minor engagements could have serious political results, when leading political figures were slain; many early medieval kings, princes, and high nobles died in battle. Why forces should have been committed to battle so readily, when the outcome, as contemporaries well knew, was so uncertain might be understood by reference to the importance of warfare in underpinning of social and political identities in an era when social hierarchies were potentially quite fluid. This, it can be suggested, led to a need for frequent battle. The comparative regularity of battlefield engagement might also be explained by consideration of the economy and settlement pattern. As mentioned, even if the centuries between 600 and 1000 saw steady economic growth, for most of the period towns were small, with inhabitants, even late in the period, numbering only a few thousand. Estimates of the populations of major seventh- to ninth-century trading centres have placed them only in the region of 1,000 souls. These sites were not sources of enormous wealth until quite late within our period. Simultaneously, wealthy high-status fortified settlements, such as would later be represented by castles, were absent. The principal exceptions to this general rule were monasteries – one reason for their frequent targeting by Viking attacks and for the outrage this produced. Furthermore, fortification and siege warfare were fairly rudimentary. Thus, high-ranking secular noblemen tended to carry their wealth with them, including when on campaign. For this reason, in warfare significant economic benefits were most likely to accrue from defeating the enemy in the field and plundering their baggage, rather than through besieging settlements. This began to change by the tenth century, however, and by 1000 we have entered the world of knights and castles, with different strategic practices.

Nevertheless, we must not overemphasise booty's importance in early medieval warfare. It has frequently been argued that the acquisition of loot was the principal motor for campaigning, with the inability to continue to take rich pickings producing stress within realms.[38] However, although booty

37 For example, the Slavic *dux* Liudewit: *Royal Frankish Annals*, *s.a.* 822.

38 Timothy Reuter, 'Plunder and Tribute in the Carolingian Empire', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Series 5, 35 (1985), 75–94; Timothy Reuter, 'The End of Carolingian Military Expansion', in *Charlemagne's Heir: Annales Regni Francorum: New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious*, ed. Peter Godman and Roger Collins (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 391–405.

was important, it was not the overriding object of warfare. Given that this was, comparatively, not a period of great economic prosperity this should not surprise us. Warfare yielded other, possibly more important benefits, many of quite intangible form. War offered opportunities for warriors to come to their superiors' attention and receive their patronage as a result. Lands, titles, involvement at the heart of politics, and the management of a patronage network of one's own might ensue. Even if one did not move far up the social ladder, the backing of an important noble or royal figure could be enormously important within local politics. Sometimes, booty taken on campaign was passed on to more powerful figures, precisely to obtain these forms of backing and promotion. In sum, warfare was vital to the machinery of early medieval politics in many ways; the acquisition of loot was only one, and probably not the most important.

The evidence for early medieval tactics is notoriously thin. In the first part of this period, as discussed, we are largely reduced to using the forms of weaponry to suggest how battles were conducted, with all the inherent methodological risks. One problem is a simple shortage of actual descriptions of battles; another is the enormously stylised nature of those that do survive. From most accounts we cannot definitively conclude even whether the participants fought on foot or on horseback. The evidential filter is so capricious that we cannot know what weight to place on those snippets of information that *do* make it down to us. Some tentative suggestions can be made nevertheless. Perhaps the most important is that tactics do not appear to have differed much whether the opposing armies were mounted or dismounted. The two sides seem to have formed large, close-packed blocks, which advanced slowly, paying careful attention to order and cohesion. Contact was preceded by volleys of missiles and rear ranks continued to shoot or lob missiles over the heads of the forward ranks into the enemy rear.[39] Usually, one side would eventually break and be pursued and cut down; these were the stages of battle that produced most casualties. Alternatively, it appears that the two sides would, if neither side broke, draw apart, and a lull would ensue while the armies tended wounds and attempted to recover sufficient energy and nerve to rejoin battle. Battles could, therefore, be long, bloody, and indecisive. On the fringes of Western Europe there were exceptions. Breton, Basque, and Irish warfare might have

39 Note the similarity between *Waltharius*'s account of a battle between two mounted forces and Anglo-Saxon poetic accounts of the conflicts between shield-walls. Note also, however, that Anglo-Saxon armies are very rarely actually specified as being entirely dismounted.

involved a more open, skirmishing kind of fighting more suited to the local terrain. Frankish accounts of the defeat at Roncesvalles bemoan the fact that the Basques 'unfairly' refused to stand and engage in the usual slogging match.

Part 3: *c.*800–*c.*1000

The end of Carolingian expansion

That little legislation about military service survives from eighth-century *Francia* is in many ways unsurprising. The Carolingians' successful campaigns brought enormous wealth to their warriors, making participation in warfare attractive to the land-owning classes. Ensuring that people performed their military service rarely if ever concerned the early Carolingians. By contrast, after Charlemagne's imperial coronation in 800 considerably more legislation was issued on the subject than during the whole eighth century. This clearly indicates change and illustrates graphically the problems caused by the end of Frankish expansion. Indeed, the increase in royal or imperial pronouncements about military service – by whom, in what form, and with what equipment – is matched by a contemporary rise in the number of legal enactments about people *failing* to carry out such obligations.

The dominant explanation for this shift has been provided by two important articles by the late Timothy Reuter, arguing that the end of the opportunity to take booty produced stress within the Frankish empire.[40] This was possibly associated with a shift from offensive warfare to defensive campaigns against invaders like the Vikings. Although Reuter's explanation is preferable to earlier analyses, it is not entirely satisfactory. Crucial are the empire's size and the lack of royal or imperial foci for campaigning as Charlemagne grew old and two of his three sons (all of whom were apparently able commanders) predeceased him. Warfare was important for political advancement and the acquisition of patronage. With the imperial court, the focus of politics, remaining at the geographical core of the kingdom there was little incentive to campaign on the frontiers. Charlemagne's legislation reveals that offensive campaigns were as difficult to recruit for as defensive ones, a decisive objection to complete acceptance of Reuter's thesis. Ever more distant from the Frankish imperial heartlands, the frontiers were more costly to reach, reducing the profit margin even of successful warfare. More importantly, perhaps, if the army were not accompanied by the emperor or one of his sons, campaigning on the frontier

40 Above, n. 40

represented removal from the political centre, a sort of exile. The first crisis of the reign of Charlemagne's heir, Louis I 'the Pious', was indeed produced by his despatch to the Spanish march of two important noblemen from one palace faction, focused on Louis's troublesome eldest son, Lothar, while he brought their rival, Bernard of Septimania, from that frontier to the court. The opportunities to take part in aggressive warfare had not ceased but did not determine willing participation in military activity.

The appearance of Vikings, a new wave of Muslim raiders, and, later, Magyar (or Hungarian) attackers, meant that defensive warfare became more of a concern of ninth-century rulers. These attacks were also qualitatively different. Defensive wars were less popular amongst the military elite, presenting far less opportunity for rewards in loot, political advancement, or prestige. For these and other reasons, then, the ninth century saw, across Christian Europe, a constant concern with military obligation.

The raising of armies apparently differed between defensive wars and other conflicts, such as the warfare between the various Frankish kingdoms. In the latter, as in the offensive wars that continued to take place on the eastern frontier of the empire at least, the basic seventh- and eighth-century template remained; armies were raised from the retinues of those of social classes generally held liable for military service. The precise choice of who served and who remained at home could be moderated by specific local social relationships and patronage networks but it should be remembered that general notions of wealth- or status-based liability for military service persisted. Ninth-century legislation and exemptions from military service make that abundantly clear.

The Carolingians' ultimate reliance upon their nobles' military followings presented a major problem. It posed a real threat to effective royal government in the localities and increased the extent to which royal action was circumscribed by the need for negotiation with the magnates. Many of the upper aristocratic stratum had relatives, and often held lands and honours in more than one kingdom, frequently making it simple to transfer allegiance from one king to another. Haemorrhages of political authority, with dramatic results, were not unknown. In the winter of 858 Charles 'the Bald' of West Francia was driven out of his realm when his nobles sided with his half-brother Louis 'the German'.[41] Charles's father, Louis 'the Pious', had once been deposed when his men deserted him for his sons, Lothar, Pippin, and Louis.[42] The various

41 *Annals of St-Bertin*, s.a. 858.

42 Ibid., s.a. 833; Thegan, 'Life of Louis the Pious', *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*, trans. Paul Dutton (Peterborough, Ontario, 1996), pp. 141–55; The 'Astronomer', 'Life of

Carolingians therefore attempted to create armies which they could use as coercive forces without having to rely on their nobles' good-will. Probably the most effective method was the continuing use of Church land. Churches and monasteries held large estates and, by the appointment of abbots or bishops, kings could ensure that warriors supported by benefices on ecclesiastical lands were available to royal armies. During his 866 Lotharingian campaign, Charles the Bald's army was described as 'mostly composed of the bishops' contingents'.[43] Through the ninth century, few churches were exempted from the military obligations (Charles the Bald apparently granted only one such immunity; his nephew Louis II of Italy none; the much-maligned Charles III 'the Fat' even altered the privileges of the great abbey of Korvei so that it furnished troops in cases of emergency).

The ninth-century Carolingians also attempted to ensure that troops were available for defensive wars through a system first established by Charlemagne, called the *adiutorium* (a system of 'assistance'). This envisaged a 'flat rate' whereby each unit of land of a particular size (or, possibly, estimate of productivity) furnished one warrior. Charlemagne initially envisaged this unit as three *mansi* (roughly, farms) but soon adopted a lighter obligation of one warrior from four *mansi* (context is provided by the fact that Charlemagne only expected a holder of twelve *mansi* to serve in full mail). Each owner of four *mansi* was required to provide a warrior (holders of multiples of this figure would provide one for each group of four). Those owning less land were grouped together to provide one warrior. Charlemagne and his successors legislated to ensure that those not serving in person provided supplies and other logistical equipment (such as carts) for those who were. Large monastic foundations were crucial. Fines were regularly (and the death penalty occasionally) envisaged for failure to attend the muster.[44] Whether all this legislation was especially effective is doubtful; descriptive accounts of campaigns still stress the usual type of army, raised from royal and aristocratic retinues. Nevertheless, these attempts to impose general 'cadastral' systems of military obligation are important.

Otherwise the Frankish rulers seem, pragmatically, to have focused their efforts upon ensuring that aristocratic retinues were available when armies

Louis', in *Son of Charlemagne: A Contemporary Life of Louis the Pious*, trans. Allen Cabaniss (Syracuse NY, Syracuse University Press, 1961).

43 *Annals of St-Bertin*, s.a. 866.

44 Italian Capitulary of 801, ch. 2, 3; Capitulary on Mobilisation for the use of the *missi* (808), ch. 2; Aachen Capitulary (810), ch. 12, 13: *Capitularia Regum Francorum*, nos. 98, 50, 64.

were needed, whether for defensive or offensive operations. This was especially the case in Italy, where, by 866 at least, it was envisaged that anyone with less than half of the wherewithal to provide a warrior (the *bharigild* as it was called) was left behind.[45] Although Louis II of Italy never exempted any churches from military service, he did exempt individual laymen.[46] The Italian Carolingians seem to have lost interest in a general levy in favour of an army based around the greater royal vassals and churches. At the end of his reign, Charles II 'the Bald', having apparently failed to create a royal army by other means, fell back on the same sort of system. The king ordered all great landlords to draw up lists of their own *honores* and vassals, and how many *mansi* they held. These retinues, thus declared, were envisaged to be at royal disposal.[47]

The army's core was provided by the royal bodyguard and, as throughout the Early Middle Ages, made up of two groups: young warriors serving full-time in the palace guard and older warriors who had received their lands as a reward for service and who now attended the guard more intermittently or as the officers and trainers of younger warriors. The different grades of guard are described in the later ninth century in Hincmar of Reims's *On the Governance of the Palace*.[48]

The developments in the Frankish realms (now of course including Germany and Italy as well as much of the Christian territory in Spain) can be paralleled in England. Anglo-Saxon kings also began to establish a cadastral system of military service. The vague indications are that the rate was envisaged as one man from five (or possibly six) *hides* (a unit of land or productivity similar to the *mansus*). The one-man-to-five-*hides* rate seems to have been of general application by the time of *Domesday Book*. Around the mid ninth century, the West Saxon king Æthelwulf was apparently concerned to provide lands for the upkeep of his warriors (*thegns*) from royal estates and made a generous donation of one-tenth of his lands to the Church which, some claimed, was exempt from all, including military, duties. No self-respecting Carolingian would have done this.

Responses to the Vikings

The stimulus for much of the development in the ninth-century systems of raising armies was provided by attacks on Christian Europe by Scandinavian, Muslim, and Magyar raiders. Viking armies themselves are dealt with

45 *Capitularia Regum Francorum*, no. 218.
46 *Ludovici II Diplomata*, ed. Konrad Wanner (Rome, MGH, 1994), nos. 20, 47, and 35.
47 *Annals of St-Bertin*, s.a., 869. 48 *Carolingian Civilization*, pp. 485–99.

elsewhere in this volume. In many important regards, the Vikings were no different from any other early medieval Western military forces. Yet, there does seem to have been something qualitatively different about them. Religious differences meant that they and their Christian enemies frequently had different understandings and expectations of the conduct of warfare. Without shared beliefs, oaths were difficult to underpin with shared supernatural sanctions. While Christian armies were certainly not above attacking ecclesiastical establishments, accepted norms of behaviour regarding such churches and monasteries did not apply to the Vikings. Other features made the Vikings 'difficult'. Their armies campaigned all year round (even in winter) and employed surprise and the exploitation of the Christian calendar. A further novel and disturbing feature of Viking warfare was its commodification. Between the fifth century and the ninth, mercenaries are generally conspicuous by their absence in Western Europe. This is unsurprising in a largely non-monetary economy where soldiers were rewarded in land. In these circumstances, the true mercenary, serving for monetary payment for a defined period and with no necessary ties with his employer after the termination of the contract, simply could not exist. Alongside ninth-century economic expansion (in which Viking armies may have played a part) and the concomitant growth in the use of money, the Scandinavians seem to have been happy to sell their loyalty and their services to the highest bidder. This must have shocked Christian contemporaries.

These dangerous, mobile, and unorthodox foes required specific responses, which we can see on both sides of the Channel. Although the popular image of the Vikings is of coastal raiders, the great Viking armies very often travelled, frequently mounted, overland. If not left at the coast, their accompanying fleets plied the great European river systems. One important anti-Viking strategy, therefore, was to limit this mobility and this was especially effectively done by fortifying river-crossings. These not only barred the rivers to Viking fleets (as barriers, these river crossings are best envisaged as pontoon bridges), they also denied crossing points to Viking armies travelling overland. Charles the Bald tried, with mixed success, to create fortified bridges barring the Loire and the Seine. After finally defeating the Great Army in 878–9, Alfred of Wessex put into operation a more extensive and more effective defensive scheme, a network of forts or *burhs*. Stationed so that no one in his kingdom lived more than a day's journey from such a fort, they were sited to control the nodes of riverine and road communication networks. When the Viking Great Army returned from *Francia* in the 890s, following a defeat by King Arnulf of East Francia, these

forts proved their worth. The Danes were rapidly compelled to leave Alfred's kingdom, hounded by the West Saxon field army.

The other component of Alfred's defensive scheme was indeed to create a permanent armed force, using the cadastral system of raising the army that, as we have seen, was emerging in the ninth century. In England that scheme seems to have been one warrior from every five *hides* of land. Alfred arranged his levy so that they served in two, or perhaps more probably three, rotations. One contingent would serve with the king, while another stayed at home. It seems that the third contingent manned the *burhs*. This scheme makes sense as a demand on the time of the land-owning classes. After their time on their estates, they would man the forts, remaining close to their lands and able to manage them if necessary, before leaving the *burh* and marching as a contingent to the royal army when the next contingent arrived to relieve them. After their spell in the field force, they were stood down for a third of the year, as the next rotation arrived from the *burhs* to replace them. This armed force was the basis for the tenth-century West Saxon conquest of the midlands and the north of England. The successful aggressive warfare added to the rotating, cadastral basis of military service, bringing all sorts of landholders – not just the most powerful – into the king's presence and offering them chances to earn rewards in land, office, and patronage, in making the late ninth- and tenth-century English army the type of royal coercive force not seen in Western Europe since the sixth century. The *burh* system was expanded as the realm grew, these forts being visible marks of royal government on the local landscape and foci for the performance of the military obligations that underpinned it.

Across the Channel, analogous attempts to strengthen royal power through responses to the Viking threat were less successful. Charles the Bald's fortified bridges were left incomplete and soon abandoned. Charles also attempted to use cadastral military obligation to create a royal army.[49] Poorer landholders were encouraged to attend the muster and their more powerful fellows prevented from molesting them when they did so. Yet these efforts too failed and by the end of his reign Charles had adopted the solution of his Italian nephew Louis II and acted simply to ensure that aristocratic and ecclesiastical armed followings were ultimately at his disposal. In another imaginative attempt to bolster his rule, Charles tried to employ one of the Viking armies themselves. He would take the fiscal levy raised from across the realm to pay off the Danes (such as would be known in England as

49 *The Edict of Pîtres* (above, n. 31).

Danegeld) but pay it to the Vikings, not to go away but to act in his service, creating a mercenary force independent of Frankish aristocratic involvement. Other magnates, Frankish and Breton, had already enlisted the support of Viking contingents.[50] Unfortunately for Charles, the Viking leader he selected, Weland, was killed by one of his fellow commanders in a personal duel not long afterwards[51] and the plan fizzled out, to be replaced first by his Edict of Pîtres (Charles's most elaborate attempt to employ a cadastral system) and eventually by his move to control military followings.

Tenth-century change

The novel features of Viking warfare and the late ninth-century Christian responses to it point the way towards developments during the tenth century: the employment of foreign mercenaries, the greater use of fortifications and attempts at cadastrally organised military service. The principal outlines of tenth-century English military service have already been mentioned. One important document is the *Burghal Hidage* of *c.*918, which sets down a possibly more systematised version of the reforms established by Alfred in Wessex. This document tells us that there were 27,000 *hides* assessed for military service and the maintenance of the *burhs*. It envisages one man from each such *hide* for service in the fortresses (upkeep and repair and probably defence in times of attack). The usual ratio of one man per five *hides* suggests that this kingdom could furnish a standing army of about 5,500 men. Up until the 950s the English army, like that of the eighth-century Carolingians was repeatedly in action in successful expansionist warfare, which made it a difficult foe to beat, as shown by an almost unbroken record of success. Thereafter, prolonged peace, broken only by smaller-scale punitive raids, appears (as with the later eighth-century Lombards) to have meant a decline in the army's quality and possibly even a tendency to abandon body armour. These had drastic effects when the kingdom was attacked by the new royal Danish armies of Swein and Cnut.

As far as the more ambitious attempts to employ external threats as a basis for increasing royal power was concerned, the baton was taken up by the new rulers of the East Frankish kingdom, the Ottonians (who revived the Western Empire when Otto I was crowned emperor in 962). The principal strategy of the Ottonians, like that of the later ninth-century Carolingians, was to ensure their control of armed retinues. A document, the *indiculus loricatorum* of 981, represents the Ottonians' attempt to register the greater

50 See, for example, *Annals of St-Bertin*, s.a., 862. 51 Ibid., s.a. 863.

landholdings of the realm and how many armoured horsemen (*loricati*) they could furnish. This shows that the German rulers could, in theory, call upon about 20,000 men. It is extremely unlikely for logistical reasons that this sort of number was ever raised – indeed throughout the Middle Ages these sorts of lists have a tendency to give inflated views of the numbers of troops available to royal rulers. Nevertheless, it suggests that when the need arose the Ottonians ought to have had little difficulty – even if the constraints of logistics and 'consensual politics' cut the numbers to a quarter of all those theoretically available – in levying a force of armoured horsemen that at least matched the maximum size of the West Saxon field army envisaged in the *Burghal Hidage*. That said, one story suggests that East Frankish armies were not large. When, in 955, a contingent of fifty horsemen was slaughtered by the Slavs it was felt that the army had suffered a colossal setback.[52]

Earlier in the century, the Ottonians had attempted to parallel the Alfredian response to Viking attack (although the East Franks were much more concerned with the raids of the Magyars). Henry I 'the Fowler' had tried to create border fortifications in newly cleared lands. Farmers attached to these works were divided into groups of ten, one of whom was always present in its garrison.[53]

However, although the Ottonian kings fought numerous successful foreign wars (and some not so successful, such as Otto II's catastrophic defeat by the Italian Saracens at Cap Colonne in Italy, in 982), proportionately most of their military activity during the century was concerned with internal revolt, by rivals in Franconia, Bavaria, or Lotharingia or by disgruntled members of their own family (such as Otto I's brothers Thankmar and Henry, or his son Liudolf).[54] When Otto I's brother Henry became Duke of Bavaria, the two problems combined! As elsewhere, in this sort of fighting, royal decrees about military service were of little value and armies were composed of the retinues of different factions, in the old way. Another strategy of the Ottonians, therefore, parallels earlier Carolingian efforts and that is the much-debated imperial 'church system', whereby members of the ruling dynasty were appointed to particularly powerful bishoprics. Whether this was really a 'system' has rightly been doubted; it could only be an ad hoc response and it was far from universally successful. Nevertheless, the aim was clear

52 Karl Leyser, 'The Battle at the Lech, 955: A Study in Tenth Century Warfare', *History* 50 (1965), 58.

53 Timothy Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, 800–1056* (London, Longman, 1991), p. 143.

54 Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 70–180.

enough. In controlling the great bishoprics (and eventually archbishoprics) the kings would have access to powerful contingents of warriors maintained from ecclesiastical estates.

What one might term the Alfredian model – the combination of royal fortress and permanent army – was probably most successfully emulated at the very end of our period in the newly reunified kingdom of Denmark. Here King Swein and his son Cnut constructed a series of famous circular, geometric fortresses which housed permanent garrisons (including women and children). These are to be found outside the political heartlands of the dynasty and serve a similar purpose to the English *burhs* as visible marks of royal presence. Attempts to create a cadastrally organised army are also visible, which eventually culminated in the *Leidang* or levy. On another fringe of Christian Europe, the north of Spain, one can also trace attempts to impose general military obligations, all the more necessary in the context of almost perpetual warfare against the amirate, now caliphate, of Cordoba (in the ninety-two years between 791 and 883, for example, forty wars are recorded). In the Kingdom of the Asturias this obligation was called *fosato* or *fonsado*. Yet, like the Carolingians, the Asturian kings still granted exemptions to certain churches, forbidding their military officials – who continued to be known by the old Gothic term *saiones* – from entering such estates to levy troops.

Tenth-century France witnessed no such attempts. Although the once sharp and teleological outlines of the story have been much nuanced in recent decades, the history of western *Francia* in this period can nevertheless still be characterised by dynastic conflict, especially but by no means exclusively between the Robertians (later the Capetians) and the last Carolingians, and a steady weakening of effective royal control throughout the kingdom. At the same time took place the growth of what Dhondt called the territorial principalities (such as Anjou, Aquitaine, and Normandy) under their own ruling dynasties.[55] The last Western Carolingians were no ciphers and the story of gradual fragmentation of political power was far from inevitable. Nevertheless, however one explains them, the outlines of that tale remain the same with the effective political fragmentation first of the West Frankish kingdom and then of the territorial principalities themselves. The resulting 'Feudal Revolution' of the decades around 1000 has been endlessly debated and its very existence called into question but, fortunately for us, we can

55 Jean Dunbabin, *France in the Making, 843–1180* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985).

skirt these tricky issues to some extent by looking at the nature of armies and warfare, and indeed these can quickly be sketched. The general unit of military analysis remained, perhaps more than ever before, the aristocratic retinue, composed of armoured mounted warriors. Fortifications were also important but in different ways from those in England and Denmark. Whatever their origins in defence against marauders, 'small forts' (*castella* in Latin, whence – obviously – our word castle) fairly quickly became in practice hereditary, in much the same way as the *honores* of which they were the physical *foci* had become understood as familial possessions, even if originating in, and sometimes still legitimised by, royally bestowed titles. These made the negotiation between local military elites and central authorities (royal or ducal), so necessary for the summoning of armies even in the earlier era, that bit more difficult still. Without doubt, just as the Carolingians had (in many ways very effectively) countered these issues through the employment of royal ritual and ideology, the fluidity of these relations was countered by the growing social and cultural (if not legal) concentration on oaths of vassalage and concepts of fealty. Here we are fully in the world of knights and castles that characterises the central Middle Ages.

Conclusion

This survey of warfare and military service across four centuries of Western European history has necessarily had to exclude much, and with it a great deal of the nuance and variety (I have said nothing of the distinctive warfare in the so-called 'Celtic fringe', for example). Nevertheless, it can still be seen that this period was neither one of simple continuity from Rome, nor of the triumph of (probably mythical) 'Germanic' warrior cultures. Nor can it be seen as a half-hearted precursor to the 'fully formed' feudalism of the central Middle Ages. There is a dynamic to be seen in the development of armed forces between *c.*600 and *c.*1000, one which lies in the relationships between central powers and local, increasingly militarised, elites. The use of military service to explore this dynamic contributes greatly to the understanding of early medieval politics. But just as this suggests how military history has an important place in the comprehension of early medieval politics, this chapter illustrates clearly, too, how warfare and armies can only be understood in the broader context of contemporary social and economic

structures. The warfare of this period also has its own distinctive characteristics, with a greater emphasis on battle and (at least before the tenth century) less attention to sieges than in later eras. These characteristics can only really be explained by study of the economy and settlement pattern of the period and of the central place – indeed one that almost excluded alternatives – of military activity in early medieval society.