

WAR FOUGHT WITH CHAMPIONS

Why so few examples?

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This essay originated in our reading about the 'Battle of the 300 Champions' in ancient times; but we were led to wonder whether there had been other occasions when opposing generals had agreed to limit the action to a select group of champions from each side, instead of waging war with all the forces at their command.

Medieval Christendom

This medieval period in European history, when society was organised for war, seemed most promising. It was said that there were only three 'orders' of men - those who fought, those who prayed and those who worked; and there was little doubt that it was the first who played the most important role. The knights had come to dominate Western Christendom, politically, socially and culturally. Literature and song were more concerned with war than they were with romance, and it was the deeds of the chivalric few which were celebrated. When Jean Froissart and his successor Enguerrand de Monstrelet wrote about the Hundred Years War, they focussed on the feats of arms performed by the knights; and they did so deliberately, to inspire others to follow their example. This was also an age when there was a cult of 'the Worthies' - nine individuals who had most distinguished themselves on the battlefield. These were the three good pagans: Hector, Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar; the three good Jews: Joshua, David and Judas Maccabeus, and three good Christians: King Arthur, Charlemagne and Godfrey de Bouillon. It was every knight's ambition to join this pantheon; and in France it was said that Bertrand du Guesclin (c.1320-1380) had become the Tenth Worthy.

The Worthies all led their armies into battle; but, did their cult ever mean that medieval warriors were prepared to leave the fighting to picked champions - as they did in the tournament? In fact, this happened only rarely; and although there were several occasions when the English monarchs Richard I, Edward III and Henry V challenged their French counterparts to single combat, the challenge was never taken up.

Nearer the mark is the Combat of the Thirty, which took place between English and French knights in Brittany in 1351, during the War of the Breton

Succession (a 'sideshow' or 'proxy war' which was part of the 'Hundred Years War'). The French captain of Josselin and the English captain of Ploermel confronted one another. At first the French captain suggested that three men be chosen from each side, but the Englishman objected that this would be nothing more than a 'game of chance', and suggested that 20 or 30 from each side would be more appropriate. The number 30 was agreed upon, and it was further agreed that there would be referees, refreshment breaks and temporary truces for treatment of wounds. In the event, the French had six men killed but the English lost more (and all their survivors were captured) so the French were declared the winners.

But what was going on here? In *Trial by Fire* (volume II of his monumental history of the Hundred Years War) Jonathan Sumption is unsure. He suggests that the Combat of the Thirty may have been a '*hastilude*', or tournament of some kind – in other words a kind of sporting activity, albeit extreme sport (*à l'outrance*); but he also suggests that it may have been fought to determine some local issue in the Breton civil war – possibly the control of some castles or piece of territory. It is also noteworthy that this episode is not mentioned at all by Froissart, and the standard account of it is drawn from the *Histoire de Bretagne*, where the Combat is presented as a means of limiting the damage arising as a result of a local feud between English and French, which 'ought to have had the permission of their respective Princes' but clearly did not. We also learn from the *Histoire* that there was a last minute attempt to cancel the whole affair; but that 'the nobility of Brittany would not return without having proved by battle who had the fairest mistresses'. It would therefore seem that the combatants on this occasion had mixed motives; but, whatever was at stake here, the Combat of the Thirty became known as a famous 'feat of arms'.

One might even wonder whether there was a literary link of some kind between the Combat of the Thirty, and the Battle of the 300 Champions and the story of the Horatii, via the numbers: 30, 300 and 3 (see below). Is it possible that the number 30 derives not so much from the tactical choice made by the captains in the field in Brittany as from the mind of the chronicler, who may have had some knowledge of the Latin precedent?

We move to the Highlands of Scotland. In 1396 (according to a late 18th century record, based on a lost manuscript of the late 1500s) 30 men from each side decided a limited issue which had arisen regarding precedence, in the Battle of the Clans at Perth. Clan Kay and Clan Chattan had long disputed who should have the most honourable place in the line of battle in their long-standing alliance. At the suggestion of King Robert III, it was decided that the matter should be settled by a combat between champions. This duly took place, and the men of Clan Chattan killed all but one of their opponents (at a cost of 19 deaths on their own side) and were awarded the victory. Needless to say, the result was hardly conducive to harmony within the alliance!

In similar fashion, in 1478, at Tears Abbey, Caithness, a long standing dispute between Clan Gunn and Clan Keith was agreed to be resolved by combat between twelve 'horse' on each side. As we shall see, this term was (arguably) ambiguous.

Twelve men from Clan Gunn arrived first and there being no sign of Clan Keith, decided to pause for prayers in the Abbey. Clan Keith – having interpreted the rules somewhat differently - arrived with twelve horses, but two men were riding each horse. They burst into the Abbey and took Clan Gunn by surprise. Eight of the twelve men of Clan Gunn were killed, but not before heavy casualties were also inflicted on Clan Keith. The result seems to have been no more than a lull in inter-clan rivalry.

Ancient Greece and Rome

Having found so few examples of the sort of limited scale war for which we were seeking, we returned to the ancient period for examples. In the *Histories* of Herodotus (c. 484–425 BC) there is an account of the ‘Battle of the 300 Champions’ Assuming that the ‘Father of History’ was not just re-telling, or inventing a myth, it seems that in 546 BC, 300 Spartans fought 300 Argives over the town and treasure of Thyraea in the Peloponnese. We are not told the total size of the respective armies; but it was clearly agreed that all would accept the verdict of the limited engagement. This agreement may have been because the objective was only of limited value.

Things did not work out as agreed, or expected. The two sides fought until nightfall, when only three men were left: - two Argives and one Spartan, called Othryades. The Argives raced back to Argos to announce their victory, but – unknown to them - Othryades remained on the field of battle and stripped the bodies of the Argive dead as prizes (as was customary). Both sides claimed victory. They could not agree a verdict and there was renewed fighting, this time between the two hosts as a whole.

Then there is the story of the Horatii in Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita Libri*, (‘Books from the Foundation of the City’). Livy’s dates are 59 BC – AD 17 but the incident described occurred some 600 years before, so that it was even more remote for him than the Battle of the 300 Champions was for Herodotus. Be that as it may, the story is that in 672 BC, during a war between Rome and Alba Longa the kings of the opposing sides, Tullus and Mettius, decided that their dispute should be decided in a contest between three men of similar age and ability from each side. These men were supposedly two sets of triplets which would seem to be a huge coincidence! These were the Horatii brothers for Rome and the Curiatti brothers for Alba Longa. The first phase of the contest resulted in all three Curiatti being wounded and two of the Horatii being killed whilst the third, Publius, was unscathed. Publius then feigned flight but in pursuing him the Curiatti became separated and were killed, one at a time. As a result Mettius and his people became subservient to Rome.

To return briefly to more modern times, in April 1578 the battle of the Horatii was even re-enacted between supporters of Henry III of France and Henry I, Duke of Guise, though it would seem that the participants were more than just actors, since four of the six combatants died!

Once we enter the classical period of ancient history, this kind of limited warfare, fought with champions, seems to disappear. The Greek city states and the Roman Republic each knew long wars of attrition, involving the entire population, which were fought to a finish. The Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta lasted almost 30 years (431–404 BC), with annual campaigns exhaustively described by Thucydides, and ended with the ruin and defeat of the Athenians, and the occupation of their city by Spartan troops. Likewise, the three Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage between 264 BC and 146 BC ended with the total destruction of Carthage. It is difficult to see that the combatants would have been interested in setting limits to their wars. There was too much at stake, and in any event, the parties were not evenly matched. Athens was primarily a naval power, Sparta was land-based. Rome had superb infantry. Hannibal had elephants. In addition, the Romans and Carthaginians represented entirely different cultures and civilisations.

Comparison of Examples

There are some parallels between the ancient and medieval examples. The ancient narratives relate to the heroic age which preceded the great days of Greece and Rome, when society was organised on a tribal basis. Moreover, they precede the development of the hoplite phalanx in Greece and the infantry legion in Italy, and the changes in society required to raise, support and train them. The kind of warfare we are looking for belongs to a period when men on each side of a conflict feel a certain kinship and solidarity. They are therefore prepared to entrust the fighting to a select group, confident that this will do as well as the whole 'tribe'. Likewise, there has to be a feeling that there is equality of arms between the two sides, so that the fight is a fair one, and the verdict generally acceptable.

Two of our medieval examples concern the the Highlands of Scotland. This was a very different place from ancient Greece and Rome; but similar in that society was organised on a clan or tribal basis; and this may explain why we find similar events in the 6th BC Peloponnesian and in 15th century Scotland. The tribes and the clans were homogeneous and similarly armed. To the extent that they were trained at all, their training was similar. Trial by champions was both feasible and fair, at least if the objective was clear and limited; and one could hope that the losing side would recognise the verdict achieved by the winners.

The Modern World

Warfare with proxy champions seems to be completely out of place in the modern world. With the Renaissance, there came a military revolution: a large increase in the size of the standing armies deployed by Continental rulers (France and the Hapsburgs in particular); the development of gunpowder weapons; a new

importance for infantry; and a new kind of military architecture. Among the hundreds of battles which have taken place since, we find no example of the sort of battle we have been looking for. Championships are now confined to the track, the playing field and the boxing-ring. Why?

Perhaps Niccolo Machiavelli has the answer. He relates the story of the Horatii in his *Discourses on Livy* (1531), where he criticises the Romans and Alba Longans for allowing the fate of a war come to turn on what was essentially single combat. He also explains that, in a democracy, it is unacceptable to determine the outcome of a war in this way:

Having made the citizens the defenders of their own liberty... why (put the defence)... in the power of the few to lose it? ...No king or people would ever remain satisfied when three of their citizens have left them in servitude.

Machiavelli was not always right – it is widely believed now that he was wrong about many aspects of warfare between mercenaries – but we feel that he was right about warfare by championship. In modern mass societies, the conditions and assumptions prevailing in the heroic age in Greece, and in the medieval Highlands of Scotland, no longer apply. It is rare to find homogeneity within society, or equality of arms between rivals. Each side thinks that it can find some way to beat the other, whether by lightning strike, some new technology, or simply by process of endurance and attrition. So there is no point in entrusting the outcome to champions. Moreover, the objective is rarely limited. There is more at stake than booty, or honour, or the fate of a single town. The struggle involves the whole civilian population and becomes existential. Men fight *en masse* and if necessary with their backs to the wall. The war is fought to a conclusion, usually surrender, either conditional (as with the First World War) or unconditional (as with the Second). If war is too important to be left to the generals, it is also too important to be left to a few picked men.