

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE

MEDIEVAL SWORD



POWER, PIETY AND PLAY

ROBERT W. JONES

A Cultural History of the Medieval Sword

Armour and Weapons

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A Cultural History of the Medieval Sword
Power, Piety, and Play



Robert W. Jones

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Cover Image: Detail from a bible, circa 1300, said to belong to Charles V
(Bibliothèque nationale de France. Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal. Ms-590 réserve, 275r)
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Introduction

I am the sword, deadly against all weapons. Neither spear, nor poleaxe, nor dagger can prevail against me. I can be used at long range or close range, or I can be held in the half sword grip and move to the Narrow Game. I can be used to take away the opponent's sword, or move to grapple. My skill lies in breaking and binding. I am also skilled in covering and striking, with which I seek always to finish the fight. I will crush anyone who opposes me. I am of royal blood. I dispense justice, advance the cause of good and destroy evil. To those who learn my crossings I will grant great fame and renown in the art of armed fighting.

Fiore de'i Liberi, *Flos Duellatorum* (c. 1404)¹

WE HAVE A CONTRADICTIONARY attitude towards the medieval sword. We expect it to be an object of nobility and status, the weapon and emblem of the knight and king. In our popular view of the medieval world, it is a magical object, imbued with power and symbolism. It is Roland's *Durendal*, Aragorn's *Andúril*, Arthur's *Excalibur*, Elric of Melniboné's *Stormbringer* – whether the sword is part of a historical myth or a modern one matters little, the imagined mythic properties are the same. Our modern myths are of magical swords, and so we assume the medieval ones must have been magical too. They are things of beauty. Their blades flash in the sun and their hilts gleam with opulent decoration. Yet they are also objects of violence and brutality. On television and in the movies, they are often depicted as cumbersome weapons, requiring great strength to wield, cleaving armour, flesh, and bone in graceless and vicious fights.

These contradictions have fed into the traditional study of medieval swords. This field has been dominated by the work of Ewart Oakeshott, the leading authority on high medieval swords throughout the twentieth century.² He had an interest in

¹ 'Spada son contro ogni arma mortale, ne Lanza ne Azza ni daga contra mi vale. Longa e curta ma posso fare. e me strengtho e vegno alo zogho stretto, e'vegno allo tor de spada e allo abrazare mia arte si'e roture e ligadure so ben fare de coverte e ferire sempre in quelle voglio finire, chi contra me fara, ben lo faro langure. E son Reale e'mantegno la Justicia, la bonta acresco e destruzo la malicia. Chi me guardera facendo in me crose, de fatto de armizare gli faro fama e vose'. Fiore De'i Libere, *Fior Battaglia*, Getty MS Ludwig XV 13, fol. 25r, trans. Michael Chidester (https://www.wiktenauer.com/wiki/Fiore_de'i_Liberi/Sword_in_Two_Hands/Wide_Play (accessed 1 August 2021)).

² Historical convention divides the Middle Ages into three phases. The 'early medieval' begins in the late fifth century and ends at the start of the eleventh century (it is often referred to as the 'dark ages' but this is a term that is now avoided where possible). The 'high Middle Ages' spans the period 1000 to 1300, and then the 'late Middle Ages' follows, from 1300 to 1500. This is followed in turn by the 'early modern period', which ends around 1800. Histories of swordsmanship will often divide

swords from boyhood and started his own personal collection at a young age.³ He supported this with extensive personal research, which was accompanied by his own drawings (his job, up until he became a full-time researcher, was as an illustrator). Building on the work of Jan Peterson and R.E.M. Wheeler on so-called Viking-era swords, Oakeshott developed a typology of medieval swords of the high Middle Ages.⁴ Whilst Peterson had focused on the pommel and the cross of the swords as being the diagnostic element, Oakeshott followed Wheeler in adding the shape and profile of the blade into his typology. Oakeshott's typology and chronology continue to be the go-to resource for most who are interested in the sword.

Oakeshott focused very much on the taxonomy of swords. The core of his two major works – *The Sword in the Age of Chivalry* and *Records of the Medieval Sword* – is the provision of examples that support his typology and locate them chronologically. However, this was not his sole concern. As a collector he had a genuine passion for his subject. Challenging the commonly held belief that swords were clumsy, heavy lumps of metal, he spoke eloquently about them. The blackened and corroded survivals dug out of the ground, he explained, bore no relation to the 'living examples' of the swordsmith's art, which held 'an austere perfection of line and proportion ... comparable with splendid and majestic pottery' of China. Far from heavy, the average weight of these swords was 'between 2lbs and 3lbs, and they were balanced (according to their purpose) with the same care and skill in the making as a tennis racket or fishing rod'.⁵

The analogies are telling. Whilst Oakeshott was a passionate collector of swords, he was not a swordsman and, whilst he had an affinity for the subject of his collection, and for the chivalric milieu in which they had been used, he still understood them first and foremost as artefacts. His primary approach was to treat swords as *objets d'art*: to be categorised and appreciated as an object, a thing of beauty.

This is not to say that he did not understand its practical use. He could see the development of the sword through the centuries: blades became longer so that they were more effective from horseback, and then stiffer and narrower the better to thrust into the vulnerable areas between the steel plates with which combatants were increasingly protected. Yet, there was rarely any description of their actual use in his

this last into the 'Renaissance', (1500 up to the mid-seventeenth century) when the rapier was the dominant form of sword, and the 'early modern' when the smallsword took its place (approximately mid-seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries). It almost goes without saying that boundaries between each of these periods are arbitrary, and therefore mutable.

³ 'Ewart Oakeshott' (Obituary), *Daily Telegraph* (12 October 2002).

⁴ This typology is most clearly expressed in Oakeshott's book *Records of the Medieval Sword* (Woodbridge, 1991). For Peterson's typology, see *De Norske Vikingesverd* (Kristiania, 1919). For R.E.M. Wheeler, see *London and the Vikings* (London, 1927). James Elmslie has produced a similar typology for the falchion (published in *Das Schwert: Gestalt und Gedanke*, eds. Grotkamp-Schepers, Immel, Johnson, Wetzler (Solingen, 2015)), and A.V.B. Norman has used the same approach for the Renaissance/ early modern rapier and smallsword (*The Rapier and the Smallsword, 1460–1820* (London, 1979)). For a critique of such typologies, see Iason-Eleftherios Tzouriades, "'What is the Riddle of Steel?': Problems of Classification and Terminology in the Study of Late Medieval Swords", *Sword: Form and Thought*, ed. Lisa Deutscher, Mirjam Kaiser and Sixt Wetzler (Woodbridge, 2019), pp. 3–11.

⁵ Ewart Oakeshott, *The Sword in the Age of Chivalry* (Woodbridge, 1994), pp. 11–12.

writings, beyond references to the point of balance. When he talked about his Type XIIIa swords, which he connected with the ‘great’ or ‘war’ sword of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century written sources, he noted that they were ‘admirably adapted for the work they had to do – to deal slow, ponderous slashing blows from the back of a horse at a well-protected adversary some distance away’.⁶ They were, he suggests, a response to the early developments in plate armour, ‘an extension of the age-old idea of smiting an adversary with mighty, shearing blows by providing an even stouter and heavier cutting blade’.⁷ It would seem that Oakeshott could not escape the fallacy of crude medieval swordsmanship, even when he recognised the ‘austere perfection of line and proportion’ that made the sword ‘the very essence of beauty’, as he put it.⁸

A contemporary of Oakeshott’s took a rather different approach to the study of the sword. Hilda Ellis Davidson, a historian specialising in Norse religion and mythology, studied the sword in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian cultures in a holistic manner.⁹ She sought to combine the archaeological evidence with the literary to understand what swords meant to men in the culture of pre-Conquest England and Scandinavia. She talked about the sword’s significance for the warrior elite, recognising that the aesthetic qualities of the sword were intrinsic to its rarity and function in marking the owner as a man of status and power. She saw the magic and mythic properties a sword might have, and examined the practicalities of the sword’s manufacture and carriage as a means of better understanding from where these properties came. She also considered their use, both in terms of the physical wielding of the sword and the contexts in which they were used in combat. Here again, though, the swordsmanship is characterised as powerful but crude. Taking the literary evidence at face value, she says that fights were ‘largely a matter of blow and counter-blow, the helmet and shield acting as a defence against the cutting strokes of the sword, brought down upon the head of the adversary’, with devastating effect, striking off limbs and splitting skulls.¹⁰

Only some aspects of Davidson’s approach to the sword have been taken up in more recent times.¹¹ Most recently, Sue Brunning has looked again at the swords of early medieval northern Europe.¹² Like Davidson, she seeks to understand the

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 42–7. Oakeshott, *Records*, pp. 95–114.

⁷ Oakeshott, *The Sword in the Age of Chivalry*, p. 51.

⁸ Oakeshott, *Records*, p. 1.

⁹ H.R. Ellis Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England: Its Archaeology and Literature* (Woodbridge, 1994).

¹⁰ Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 196–98.

¹¹ On the scholarship surrounding the early medieval sword, see Sue Brunning, *The Sword in Early Medieval Northern Europe: Experience, Identity, Representation* (Woodbridge, 2019), pp. 1–15 and 158. Another key work, alongside that of Davidson and Brunning, is Friedrich Grünzweig’s *Das Schwert bei den “Germanen” Kulturgeschichtliche Studien zu seinem “Wesen” vom Altertum bis ins Hochmittelalte* (Vienna, 2009).

¹² The term ‘early medieval northern Europe’ is carefully selected, over the more succinct, but loaded, ‘Viking age’ or ‘pagan’. We should be aware (and Brunning most certainly is) that many of our sources for the ‘pre-Christian’ attitudes towards the sword in northern Europe are written much later and in a firmly Christian context. However, whilst the Icelandic sagas (some of our most extensive sources for the understanding of swords in the early medieval period) are not themselves products of the ‘Viking age’, but thirteenth-century compositions, it seems to me highly likely that the way in which they depict the sword is an artefact of that earlier cultural understanding (see below, pp. 15ff).

significance that the sword had for that culture through the archaeology, artwork, and literature connected with it. She too identifies the sword as a symbol of power, status, and authority, recognising sword ownership as being the basis of a hierarchy within the warrior elite, with sword-owning warriors ranking more highly than those without, both socially and martially.¹³ She argues that the cultures of early medieval northern Europe saw the sword as a ‘living’ thing, serving as the warrior’s companion. They could be thought of as ‘person-like’, the blade acting like a warrior’s body, the hilt as recognisable as an individual face, the scabbard serving as clothing, ‘dressing’ and protecting the ‘body’ of the weapon.¹⁴ Some of the weapons in art and literature seem to have had a physicality, acting independently of their wielders.¹⁵ She suggests that with the advance of Christianity (but not necessarily because of it) the sword lost much of this anthropomorphised character, but remained, nonetheless, an object of great significance and power.¹⁶

Such work on the symbolism, status, and significance of the early medieval sword is hugely important to the study of weapons in society. It emphasises that it is not our appreciation of the sword, but that of the medieval owner and wielder that counts. It is how *they*, not we, respond to its aesthetic qualities, and to its function as a weapon, that is important. The sword was a tool for war, not just an object to be admired (although it could be that too). Yet the complexity of its manufacture, the expense of the materials of which it was made, and its use in homicide, all raised it up to be far more than just an implement of the warrior, or a thing of beauty. In early medieval society the sword was fetishicised, imbued with a power and agency by its wielder and those who viewed it.

The approach of the scholars of the swords of early medieval England and Scandinavia has not, on the whole, been used for the swords of the high and late Middle Ages. There has been little attempt to apply the same cultural historical and anthropological approaches to the swords of the twelfth century onwards.¹⁷ In part, I think that there has been an assumption that the early medievalists have already done the job. This, of course, presumes that swords throughout the Middle Ages shared the same symbolic significance and were used in the same way. A sword, after all, is still a sword: ‘pointy’ at one end and ‘pretty’ at the other. They were very much symbols of power and authority and can be presumed to be every bit as magical and spiritual as their ‘early medieval’ counterparts. Others might argue that the converse is true, and that the sword in the high and late Middle Ages had become so common as to have

¹³ Brunning, *The Sword*, p. 146.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 132–3.

¹⁷ The two volumes edited by Lisa Deutscher, Mirjam Kaiser and Sixt Wetzler – *Das Schwert. Symbol und Waffe* (Leidorf, 2014) and *Sword: Form and Thought* (Woodbridge, 2019) – each contain submissions that are notable exceptions. Kristen B. Neuschel’s *Living by the Sword: Weapons and Material Culture in France and Britain, 600–1600* (Ithaca, NY, 2020) and Martin Aurell’s *Excalibur, Durendal, Joyeuse: La Force de l’épée* (Paris, 2021) also take an approach which views the sword as more than just an object – I am sorry that both these works appeared too late to incorporate more of their analysis into the appropriate chapters of this work.

lost all significance, or that Christianity had destroyed the notion of a sword having agency and intrinsic power. As a result, there is less cultural significance to analyse, and that which remains, the sword as a symbol of knighthood, of royal authority and power, is all too obvious to provide much to discuss or debate.

The situation is similar in the matter of the sword and women. Indeed, some readers may be surprised that there is not a separate chapter discussing the sword in relation to gender roles within the high Middle Ages. The subject is very much alive in the study of the early Middle Ages, particularly following the genetic identification of the remains in a grave at Birka in Sweden – buried with two horses, axe, knife, spears, arrows, sword, and shield – as female, and not male as had been assumed when the grave was excavated in the late nineteenth century.¹⁸ At around the same time work was done to reconstruct the face of another Scandinavian woman buried with a sword, whose face showed evidence of trauma suggestive of an active military life, from the tenth-century cemetery at Asnes in Norway.¹⁹ These reassessments were quickly picked up by the media, and reinforced in the public consciousness by the depiction of powerful female warrior characters on TV shows such as *Vikings*, *Game of Thrones*, or the film *The Northman*, and by the growing popularity of HEMA amongst all genders, with its widespread culture of inclusivity.²⁰ The discussion around the issue has been a polarising one, entwined with modern debates on gender identity and societal roles.²¹

The debate has not been as fierce for the high Middle Ages. It is far harder to connect a sword directly to a woman. Burials with swords are less common, and are invariably male. There has been no equivalent to the popular image of sword-wielding women to match the character of Lagertha from *The Vikings*, and no high-medieval cultural tradition of women warriors or equivalent to the (oft-misunderstood) Valkyries.

That is not, of course to say that women could not use a sword. Medieval women were as capable as any man of wielding a sword, given the opportunity and training.

¹⁸ Neil Price, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, Torun Zachrisson, Anna Kjellström, Jan Storå, Maja Krzewińska, Torsten Günther, Verónica Sobrado, Mattias Jakobsson, and Anders Götherström, 'A Female Viking Warrior Confirmed by Genomics', *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* (2017), pp. 1–8, and 'Viking Warrior Women? Reassessing Birka Chamber Grave Bj.581', *Antiquity*, 93.367 (February 2019), pp. 181–98.

¹⁹ Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda 1: Heroic Poems* (London, 1969), p. 58. The reconstruction was done for the television program *Viking Warrior Women*, dir. Stuart Strickson (National Geographic, 2019). It revealed a wound on the forehead that could have been caused by a sharp edge. On the difficulties of interpreting trauma evidence, see below, pp. 147–52.

²⁰ *Vikings*, created by Michael Hirst (MGM Television, 2013–2020). *Game of Thrones*, created by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss (HBO, 2011–2019). *The Northman*, dir. Robert Eggers (Regency Enterprises, 2022).

²¹ Challenges to the assumptions made by the team working on the Birka burial included those of Judith Jesch ('Let's debate female viking warriors yet again', *Norse and Viking Ramblings* (9 September 2017) <http://norseandviking.blogspot.com/2017/09/lets-debate-female-viking-warriors-yet/> accessed 1 August 2021) and Howard Williams ('Viking Warrior Women: An Archeodeath Response – Part 1', *Archeodeath*, <https://www.howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2017/09/14/viking-warrior-women-an-archeodeath-response-part-1/> accessed 1 August 2021). See also Brunning, *The Sword*, pp. 8–9, 50–3 and 108–9, M. Fabian-Wittenborn, 'Schwertfrauen' und Schwertadel' in der Urnenfelder- und Hallstattzeit?', *Das Schwert. Symbol und Waffe*, pp. 51–64, and Leszek Gardela, *Women and Weapons in the Viking World: Amazons of the North* (Philadelphia, PA, 2021).

Noblewomen were active participants in chivalric culture.²² They read or listened to the same stories of heroic combat, and they stood in the grandstands watching the tourneys and jousts, wholly involved in the combat, encouraging and urging the knights on. They were active participants in the hunt, whether with hawk or hounds. If Richard Kaeuper is right in that a major element of chivalric culture was to extol violence and physical prowess as a virtue, then one might argue that the female participants were imbued with that same sense and so we should not be surprised if they made the decision to take up swords and fight.²³ Certainly, noblewomen appear in our sources leading men in battle.²⁴ The twelfth-century chronicler Orderic Vitalis tells of the Countess Isabel of Conches riding out in armour amongst her knights, likening her to a number of ‘warlike, Amazon queens’.²⁵ Jeanne de Montfort, Duchess of Brittany, who led the Montfortian faction during the Breton civil war of the fourteenth century, did likewise at the siege of Hennebont, riding out to burn the enemy camp. On another occasion Froissart describes her wielding a rusty sword in her defence during a naval engagement in the Channel.²⁶ Most famous of all, of course, is Jeanne d’Arc, Jeanne *la Pucelle*, who led French troops against the Anglo-Burgundian forces in northern France in the early fifteenth century. Her sword is discussed in this work, but because it informs our understanding of the mysticism (and the lack thereof) attached to swords in the high Middle Ages, not because it was being wielded by a woman.²⁷ Indeed, Joan was at pains to assert, during her trial, that she did not wield her sword in combat, instead placing faith in leading men with her banner. Now this may have been special pleading on her part, as she was trying to refute claims that she had transgressed the limitations of her sex, but the situation does highlight that whilst a woman might well have had the strength and competence to wield a sword it was far from the norm for them to do so.

The other example given by those seeking to assert sword use by women in the high Middle Ages is the appearance of a female figure, identified in the text as ‘Walpurgis’ or ‘Walpurga’, in the fourteenth-century fencing manual I.33 but, as we shall see, this figure’s appearance within the text is not straightforward nor as literal as she might seem.²⁸

²² See Louise J. Wilkinson, ‘Gendered Chivalry’, *A Companion to Chivalry*, ed. Robert W. Jones and Peter Coss (Woodbridge, 2019), pp. 219–40.

²³ Richard Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 1999).

²⁴ For an overview of women as military commanders, see Katrin Sjursen, *Peaceweavers’ Sisters: Medieval Noblewomen as Military Leaders in Northern France* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2011) and Megan McLaughlin, ‘The Woman Warrior: Gender, Warfare and Society in Medieval Europe.’ *Women’s Studies*, 17 (1990), pp. 193–209.

²⁵ *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. M. Chibnall, vol. 4 (Oxford, 1973), pp. 212–14, quoted in Susan Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power in the Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Realm* (Manchester, 2013), p. 14.

²⁶ Jean Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. Siméon Luce et al, vol. 2 (Paris, 1869), pp. 142–46, and vol. 3, pp. 8–10, quoted in Katrin J. Sjursen, ‘The War of the Two Jeannes: Rulership in the Fourteenth Century’, *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 51.1 (2015), pp. 4–40.

²⁷ See below, p. 24.

²⁸ On Walpurgis and I.33, see below, pp. 127ff.

The aspect of swords that has seen the least active consideration by academics since Davidson's work, until very recently, is the *use* of the sword.²⁹ The understanding of the sword as a tool for killing, and an appreciation of the practice of swordsmanship, has been largely ignored until quite recently. However, studies in these areas have developed dramatically since the 1990s. With the growth in 'Historical European Martial Arts' (or HEMA, pronounced *He-Ma*), whose practitioners seek to recreate the swordsmanship of the past by the study of so-called *fechtbücher* – 'fight books' – and apply the techniques they describe in training and sparring using modern weapons analogous to medieval forms, there is an increasing appreciation of how we think medieval swords handled and what they were capable of. Whilst for Oakeshott the medieval sword was every bit as finely balanced as a tennis racket or fishing rod, for the HEMA practitioner the medieval sword is every bit as finely balanced as... well, as a sword.

Whilst the HEMA community is a broad one, the approach of the majority of HEMAists to swords is pragmatic. Oakeshott's work is reviewed almost purely for its typology, to identify the weapons around which the *fechtbücher* were developed, but often this is as far as the interest in the historical swords goes. It is the martial art that is important; the wider cultural and social context of the sword and its use has little of interest because it is not obvious how it serves to inform the recreation of the art. HEMA is a hobby with few roots in academic study. As a result, the publication and dissemination of research tend to be through social media, blogs and internet videos, and although the insights they provide can be sound and should be of wider interest, they have often been overlooked by academics because of the disconnect with formal academic scholarly works, and a sense that HEMA is just 'playing with swords'. There is, however, an increasingly important and well-published community of scholars who combine the practice of HEMA with historical study.³⁰ They look at the wider context of the *fechtbücher*, the masters who produced them, and the schools and the context in which they were understood. For these scholars, the focus is less often on the sword itself as on the society and culture of those teaching swordsmanship, and on gaining an understanding of the pedagogical and codicological issues of the manuscripts produced to 'teach' its use, both for the original medieval audience and the modern HEMA practitioner.

Each of these different approaches helps in the wider understanding of the sword, and its significance for medieval society. Ideally, what is needed is an inclusive approach, one that combines the taxonomic approach of Oakeshott, with the experiential knowledge of the HEMA community, and the cultural and anthropological understanding of the early medieval sword specialists. This would help to reinforce

²⁹ Brunning's approach is typical, in that her section on 'the sword in action' passes very quickly over the use of the sword in combat, to return to its active participation in 'realms beyond the martial', and emotional and personal connection with the warrior (*Ibid.*, pp. 143–5). For a study of weapons' injuries, see S.J. Wenham, 'Anatomical interpretations of Anglo-Saxon weapon injuries', *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. S.C. Hawkes (Oxford, 1989), pp. 123–39.

³⁰ We shall consider some of their writings in the last chapter, but key figures include Matthias Bauer, Eric Burkhart, Michael Chidester, Olivier Dupuis, Jeffrey Forgeng, Daniel Jaquet, Jeff Lord, Roger Norling, and Tilman Wanke.

the connection between the form of the object, its function, and its social and cultural significance, and better illuminate how each aspect informed the others.

In writing this book, it has been my intention to create not a history of the medieval sword, but something that begins to consider the sword in this holistic way. In doing so I wanted also to challenge some of the general preconceptions that modern society has about the medieval sword. Thus, in the following chapters we will consider what really was magical and mystical about the sword, and the way in which it served as a symbol for the powerful. We will look at some of the practicalities of the sword, considering the evidence for when it was worn, how it was used, and how men learnt to use it. We will discover that the sword of the high and late Middle Ages was not solely the preserve of the martial elite, but that others used the medieval sword, especially amongst the burgeoning middle class. Their culture of swordsmanship was distinct, and significant, not only because it is one that is rarely considered, but also because it is *this* culture that is the birthplace of the fencing schools and *fechtbücher* on which the modern sword culture of HEMA is built. The final chapter looks at the modern culture of the medieval sword, at the different ways in which people have sought to interpret and recreate its use, on stage and screen as well as in the form of a martial art, and so have shaped our modern (often imperfect) understanding.

This work is very much focused on the periods known as the high and late Middle Ages; that is to say the period from around 1100 until 1500. I have not wanted to retread the path blazed by Davidson and Brunning, except to compare and contrast their findings with my own. The culture of the sword they analyse is not the same as the one I am looking at, in spite of the inevitable similarities. For much the same reason I have tried not to stray too far beyond the end of the Middle Ages. The development of the rapier, a sword specifically designed to be worn as an accoutrement to everyday wear, heralds a dramatic shift in the culture of the sword. *That* culture of the sword, built around a different paradigm of chivalric behaviour, masculine identity, and personal honour, requires a book in and of itself.

This study also has a definite northern and central European focus in its primary and secondary source material. This is largely because – particularly with regards the fencing schools, fencing masters, and *fechtbücher* – Germany predominates, both in terms of the source material, and (by extension) scholarship. This having been said, and recognising that there will inevitably be regional nuance, the combination of chivalric culture, the Latin Church and universities, and a common framework for the investiture and practice of kingship all help provide a commonality to the culture of the high medieval sword that transcends regional identities.

Within these self-imposed boundaries, I have aimed to range widely in a social and cultural context. This book looks more broadly at the sword of the high and late Middle Ages than previous studies, to show that it was far more than the emblem of the knight or the symbol of royal or imperial power and authority. In later chapters we will see a very different, far less elite culture of swordsmanship, and one which is not, perhaps, truly ‘martial’. However, because it is the most familiar to a modern audience, and links to some of the most iconic and famous of swords, it is the sword as a high-status and totemic artefact where we will begin our exploration.

I

The Mystical Blade

WE ARE CULTURALLY ATTUNED to swords being objects of mysticism and magic. The cruciform shape of the medieval weapon connects it with the cross of Christianity and makes it a spiritual emblem, reinforced by its metaphorical use in religious literature: the Bible itself and later doctrinal works, most notably Bernard of Clairvaux's *De consideratione* and Pope Boniface VIII's Bull *Unam Sanctum*, both of which espoused papal power through the metaphor of there being two swords.¹ The magical sword is a strong image in the popular imagination, thanks in no small part to the *Lord of the Rings*, in which named swords, of power and pedigree almost as strong as the magical rings, are wielded by hero and villain alike.² Whether it be *Narsil*, the sword used by Isildur to cut the ring from the finger of Sauron, and whose fragments were re-forged into *Andúril* to be the sword of Aragorn as Isildur's heir, or *Sting*, the weapon found by Bilbo Baggins, whose blade glows blue in the presence of orcs and goblins, Tolkien's weapons are invariably ancient, forged by elves or dwarves in earlier ages, and imbued with the magical cunning of those eldar people.

Other fantasy writers have followed suit, equipping their characters with swords of power and potency. Tolkien's contemporary, C.S. Lewis, gives a named sword – *Rhindon* – to Peter Pevensie in his *Chronicles of Narnia*.³ In more modern literature their powers can be complex. The sword of Michael Moorcock's anti-hero Elric of Melniboné – *Stormbringer* – is one of a number of demons in sword form, having the ability to drink the soul of any it strikes, feeding the vitality and energy to Elric and imparting a bloodlust that leads the tragic figure to attack friends and lovers against his will.⁴ Terry Brooks' *Sword of Shannara* forces its wielder to face the full truth about

¹ On the Church's use of swords as a metaphor for spiritual power, see below, p. 32.

² *The Lord of the Rings*, dir. Peter Jackson (New Line Cinemas, 2001–2003). Whilst the swords are a feature of Tolkien's trilogy of novels, it is Peter Jackson's realisation of them for cinema that has fired the imagination of the modern audience. The Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds even has a display of weapons used in the movies, with description of their 'history' as well as comments on their relationship to the forms of medieval weapons.

³ The sword is given to Peter by Father Christmas at the end of the Long Winter (C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (London, 2001), pp. 159–60). The series of movies directed by Andrew Adamson make more of this sword than Lewis did in his novels, and invented the Seven Swords for the Seven Lost Lords in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, dir. Michael Apted (Twentieth Century Fox, 2010).

⁴ The weapon first appears in Michael Moorcock's *The Dreaming City* (New York, 1972), and then recurs in another twelve novels featuring Elric.

themselves.⁵ If they can accept their failings, flaws, and shortcomings they are able to wield the weapon. That ability to force people to acknowledge the truth can be used to destroy anyone ‘evil’ enough. Even the Harry Potter series has its magical sword – the Sword of Gryffindor – which is Goblin-made and able to absorb any substance that will make it stronger, such as Basilisk venom.⁶

Of course, all these magical swords draw on ancient myth and legend for their inspiration, on the tales of such magical swords as Arthur’s *Excalibur*, Roland’s *Durendal*, or *Dáinsleif* from the Prose Edda.⁷ These mythical medieval weapons share many of the same traits as those created by the fantasy authors.

Or at least that is our perception. In fact, the swords of medieval stories are rarely as magical as is commonly believed. The swords in the tales of the early Middle Ages can have complex magical or ritualistic elements connected with them, but the swords of the romances of the high Middle Ages, including perhaps the most famous of all – *Excalibur* – are almost commonplace.

Excalibur is an important example because it looms so large in the modern consciousness. If there is one ‘medieval’ sword that everyone knows it is *Excalibur*. It is perhaps the most iconic weapon, at least in the English-speaking world. Ask most people and they can tell you that it was the sword of King Arthur, that he was given it by the mysterious Lady of the Lake, or that he drew it from a stone, thereby indicating his right to become the king of the Britons. Some might know that it was forged on the mystical Isle of Avalon. They will remember that, on Arthur’s death, the sword was flung into the lake and reclaimed by the Lady, possibly remembering that Sir Bedivere, who Arthur had entrusted with this task, failed to follow Arthur’s command the first time. Most will agree that *Excalibur* is magical, and a very few might know that the scabbard was equally magical, ensuring that its wearer should never suffer loss of blood. If pressed, however, very few if any will be able to suggest the specific power with which the sword itself was imbued.

In actuality, none of the different medieval versions of Arthur’s story assign any great magical powers to *Excalibur*. In the earliest version, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* – cribbed from older Welsh traditions such as those encoded within the *Mabinogion*, the sword – *Caliburnus* (derived from the Welsh *Caledfwlch*) – is merely one of the named pieces of war-gear belonging to Arthur, appearing alongside his shield *Pridwen* and his spear *Ron* (again Latinisations of Welsh names from the *Mabinogion*’s telling of the Arthur myth).⁸ The twelfth-century Romance writer Chrétien de Troyes, so important for adding a number of new elements to the tales which would become central to the later versions, puts the sword in the possession of

⁵ Terry Brooks, *The Sword of Shannara Trilogy* (London, 2002).

⁶ The sword appears in several of the novels, and is described in Rowling’s official website, *Pottermore*. J.K. Rowling, ‘The Sword of Gryffindor.’ *Pottermore*, 10 August 2015, <https://www.pottermore.com/writing-by-jk-rowling/the-sword-of-gryffindor> (accessed 1 August 2021).

⁷ *Dáinsleif* was the sword of Hogni in the Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson. It caused wounds that could never be healed and, when drawn, always killed a man. Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, ed. and trans. J.L. Byock (London, 2005), p. 115.

⁸ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London, 1966), p. 217.

Arthur's nephew, the peerless knight Gawain.⁹ In the reworking of that tale, known as the first continuation, written in the late twelfth century, Arthur gives *Excalibur* (*Escalibor*) to Gawain, who uses it to defeat the knight known as 'le Riche Soldoier'.¹⁰ The Vulgate cycle of the first half of the thirteenth century gives *Excalibur* something more of a role; originating the idea of *Excalibur* as the mystical sword in the stone, this branch of the tradition also sees Arthur give Gawain, his nephew, *Excalibur* when the young knight represents him in tournament and adventure. In the romance of *Guiron le Courtois* it is Meliadus, the father of Tristan, who benefits from Arthur's largesse by receiving *Excalibur*.¹¹

In the majority of tales *Excalibur* is not Arthur's only sword, nor indeed his favourite. In the *Vulgate Merlin*, part of the Vulgate cycle, *Excalibur* is literally outshone by the sword of a rival king, Ryons, named *Marmiadoise*.¹² In this iteration Arthur becomes obsessed with this other sword, which he sees glows brighter than his own *Excalibur*, and he is so envious that he attacks its owner in order to possess it. Having won it Arthur is said to prize *Marmiadoise* above *Excalibur* and indeed any other sword.

Although Malory's fifteenth-century reworking has *Excalibur* as the sword which Arthur draws from the stone, in most versions this is not the case, and it is the Lady of the Lake who gives *Excalibur* to the king.¹³ Again, she may be mysterious, even other-worldly, but, like the sword in the stone, she is a way for Arthur to obtain the sword. Its origins and its making seem not to be mysterious. There is nothing to suggest that the Isle of Avalon, from where the sword is said to have come, is a magical place. Geoffrey of Monmouth does not consider it so, merely as remote.¹⁴ This makes it exotic, perhaps, but little more. References to the forging of *Excalibur* in the medieval traditions are rare. Unlike *Marmiadoise*, which the *Vulgate Merlin* tells us was forged by Vulcan in the time of Hercules, there is no mythic property to *Excalibur*'s creation. Indeed, it is modern writers who give the sword its most enchanted origins. Mary Stewart's 1970s *Merlin Trilogy* puts *Excalibur*'s creation in the hands of Weyland, whilst Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon*, published in 1983, is the first retelling of the myth to describe it as being hammered and quenched

⁹ Chrétien de Troyes, 'The Story of the Grail (Perceval)', *Arthurian Romances*, trans. W.W. Kibler (London, 1991), p. 453.

¹⁰ Kathy Toohy, 'The Swords of King Arthur', *The Grail Quest Papers* (Sydney, 2000), p. 6. *The Continuations of the Old French "Perceval" of Chrétien de Troyes, Volume 1: The First Continuation*, ed. William Roach (Philadelphia, PA, 1949), p. 328.

¹¹ Michelle R. Warren, *History on the Edge* (Minneapolis, MN, 2000), p. 202. Toohy, 'The Swords of King Arthur', p. 8.

¹² On *Marmiadoise*, see Warren, *History on the Edge*, pp. 202–11.

¹³ In his retelling of the story, Malory is trying to rationalise the different traditions that have gone before. When it comes to *Excalibur*, he seeks to fit both the swords Arthur is given as a symbol of his right and power – the sword in the stone and the sword given by the Lady of the Lake – into the narrative, by having the former break in a fight against King Pellinore, leaving Arthur in need of a sword, which is duly delivered by the Lady of the Lake. That both swords bear the name *Excalibur* is not easy to explain, unless it is an error on Malory's part.

¹⁴ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, p. 217.