THE FEUDAL SYSTEM AND WARFARE

Medieval hunting was both a metaphor and a preparation for war. It kept horse and rider fit, and, more significantly, it fostered the camaraderie of the warrior band. It was like a training session. The lord and his retainers went out hunting together to network, plot, and rehearse future acquisitions as the twentieth-century corporate raider sets up deals over golf. Between 950 and 1066 England was the most fought-over kingdom in western Europe. Its merchants were trading and its farmers were producing the food that was needed to sustain an expanding population. But this very prosperity made the country prey to leaner, tougher predators. Forget Merrie England. Think gangland Chicago in the 1930s, or the drug gangs of south Los Angeles today.

Power politics in the year 1000 can best be understood by observing how gangs and Mafias operate. Though frightening to outsiders, the structure of the gang offers cohesion, protection, and a sense of belonging to its "family." Its hierarchy is both intimidating and reassuring, and while the leader may operate on the basis of fear, he scares his followers less than the alternatives in a lawless and chaotic environment. The successful Godfather also provides the weak and needy with a form of welfare in exchange for their loyalty — or "fealty" as it was called in the year 1000. The mark of King Athelstan's authority was an oath of allegiance sworn by every boy in tenth-century Engla-lond (slaves excepted) when they reached the age of twelve: "In the first place, all shall swear in the name of the Lord, before whom every holy thing is holy, that they will be faithful to the king."

The fact that this oath was administered by the local sheriff, who rode round the countryside as the embodiment of law and order, conjures up comparisons with the American Wild West — another embryonic society that was anxious to strengthen its fragile laws and to curb the powers of the lawless and over-mighty. In the year 1000, it was the job of the king's shire reeve to visit every community at least once a year and to administer the oath in a ceremony whose religious content was significant. The sheriff's visit frequently took place in October after the harvest had been gathered in, and one can imagine the boys of the village apprehensively assembled for their first taste of adult responsibility.

"Even as it behoves a man to be faithful to his lord," ran the royal instruction, "without dispute or dissention, openly or in secret, favouring what the lord favours and discountenancing what he discountenances, so, from the day on which this oath shall be rendered, no one shall conceal the breach of it on the part of a brother or family relation, any more than in a stranger."

This was the key promise, for it made it your duty as a loyal member of your community to turn in anyone who was not behaving himself — Guardian Angels meet Neighbourhood Watch.

This oath, later known as the "frank pledge," was part of tenth-century England's increasingly organised system of government, by which the shires were subdivided into "hundreds" — groupings of a hundred households, more or less. These hundreds were subdivided in turn into the smaller, local "frank pledge" groups of roughly ten or a dozen households, in which each member was held accountable for the good conduct of his fellows. The essence of the frank pledge system was that it transformed obeying the rules from a matter of impersonal obedience into personal loyalty, which was then extended up the ladder in a series of easily comprehensible steps to the principal lord, whose authority was endorsed by God.

In the Danelaw of northeastern England, the hundreds were generally known as "wapentakes" from the Old Norse *vapnatak*, meaning just what it sounds, "weapon-taking," since this was what loyalty and government all boiled down to in the year 1000 — the rounding up of men and weapons. It is the unmentionable reality of civilisation that it depends on fighting. All the great societies have been based on military success, and in the final analysis, the Anglo-Saxon king was the leader of the war band.

It was as military leader that the king had most need to play the part of the ruthless gang boss, since his principal lieutenants were all gangsters themselves. That was their qualification for the job. The greatest lords were the greatest thugs, for the English aristocracy, like the military elite of every European country in the year 1000, was a cadre that had been trained to kill. To be noble was to wear a sword and throw your weight around, and in 1012, the pious Alphege, archbishop of Canterbury, discovered to his cost what could happen when the war dogs got drunk.

The archbishop had been captured by the Danes the previous year and had been held hostage in conditions of apparent civility. He had got close enough to his captors to convert and baptise at least one of them, until one night at Greenwich when the assembled crowd of noblemen, the cream of the Danish king's generals and courtiers, got started on a consignment of wine which had arrived "from the south" and which evidently called for special celebration. The evening's fun culminated with the Danish aristocracy pelting the unfortunate archbishop with a hail of cattle bones and skulls from the beef on which they had been feasting. Alphege bore up valiantly under this savage horseplay, until he was struck by one blow too many and fell on the floor bleeding — finally succumbing when his skull was crushed by the blunt end of a battle-axe wielded by the very nobleman whom he had converted and blessed the previous day.

These were the ruffians who were idealised by the poems of the time. The warrior was a hero, and the comradely ethos of the warrior fraternity provided the running theme for epic sagas like *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*. This was no Camelot. The chivalry of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table was a fable developed a century and a half later, based on the possible existence of a British chieftain named Arthur who fought in the dark confusion which followed the departure of the Romans, and it is unlikely that the sixth-century Arthur operated on any particularly chivalrous basis.

Trade, law, administration — Ethelred displayed considerable skill and application at the arts of peace. But it was his misfortune to be king of a rich and easygoing country at a time when yet another wave of Viking bandits was coming out of the east. Viking is a word of uncertain origin, meaning sea robber according to some authorities, and sea trader according to others. Both meanings apply. The successive Viking waves of raiding out of Scandinavia in the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries reflected scarcity and disorder at home, while the extraordinary technology of their light and warlike longships enabled them to raid and trade wherever they went.

And the Vikings went everywhere. By the year 1000 they had made themselves the first princes of Russia and Kiev. They raided Spain, and provided the mercenaries who made up the Varangian guard for the Byzantine emperors in Constantinople. In the tenth century, they took over part of northern France, turning themselves from Norsemen into Normans and securing French recognition of the duchy of Normandy. They were the inhabitants of England's Danelaw. The raiders who started harassing the south and west coasts of Ethelred's kingdom in the early 980s were following in the footsteps of the invaders against whom Alfred had fought only a hundred years earlier. In 988 a major fleet of longships sailed up the Bristol Channel, landed men at Watchet, and raided arrogantly down through Somerset into Devon.

The Vikings were the fresher and better organised for being able to anchor their ships in the ports of Normandy, where their kinsfolk now spoke French and practised Christianity. When the Pope reproached Duke Richard of Normandy in the early 990s for providing such comfort to the enemies of his English neighbours, Richard agreed to stop giving shelter to longships destined for England. A treaty was signed between Ethelred and Richard, binding each side not to entertain the other's enemies — the first step in a relationship between England and Normandy that would have huge consequences for both countries. But there was no evidence of the Normans working hard to give effect to the agreement, and over on the northern side of the Channel, the Vikings kept coming.

In the summer of 991 a fleet of ninety-three longships sailed into the Thames estuary and ravaged the ports and villages on the coasts of East Anglia and Kent. Most communities paid large ransoms to be rid of the raiders, but the men of Essex rallied outside the port of Maldon under the leadership of their proud, white-haired leader, Byrhtnoth. The Vikings had landed on an island connected to the mainland by a causeway that was visible only at low tide, and the English could have picked the raiders off as they tried to make the mainland. But the overconfident Byrhtnoth honorably agreed to a Viking request that the visitors might be allowed ashore to line up properly before the fight commenced — and the English lost, with terrible slaughter, the earliest recorded example of English fair play on the battlefield.

It was the first entry in the ledger that includes such gentlemanly blunders as the Charge of the Light Brigade, and Byrhtnoth's fruitless valour was promptly commemorated in similarly heroic verse. "The Battle of Maldon" was the "Top of the Pops" of the year 1000, a melancholy but stirring hit-of-the-moment that was sung by poets and recited at mead benches in long winter evenings, and it made a folk hero of the old general who "shook the slim ash-spear" at the Viking foe:

> *Though I am white with winters, I will not away,*
> *For I think to lodge me alongside my dear one,*
> *Lay me down by my lord's right hand . . .*
> *English silver is not so softly won.*[54]

England's eagerness to mythologise a loser reflected the sad lack of any homegrown winners in the tricky business of fighting off the Vikings in the final years of the first millennium. The raids became a national trauma, particularly for people living near the coast. Every summer brought the prospect of the dragonships snaking their way upriver, each vessel filled with thirty or more rapacious thugs.

Archaeological remains show no evidence of the Vikings wearing their fearsome horned helmets, which seem to be the imaginings of subsequent generations, but the swords, spears, and battle-axes that have been excavated are ferocious and well-crafted weapons. The Vikings were clearly masters of the latest techniques of metal forging, and their tactics were as bloodthirsty as legend. They were after gold, silver, and easily moveable booty, but they were also in search of slaves. Fit young men and nubile young women commanded the highest prices in the slave market at Dublin, and the raiders were ruthless in massacring those who had no saleable value — the old or very young.

It is hardly surprising that so many sports and pastimes related to war in the year 1000. Riding and archery had obvious practical applications, while the strategies of the chessboard provided a metaphor for the manoeuvrings of the battlefield.

The fundamental rule of warfare in the year 1000 was to avoid battle wherever possible. Whole summers could be occupied by armies manoeuvring to avoid each other. The basic mistake of the white-haired Byrhtnoth at the Battle of Maldon had been to seek confrontation. Battle in the first millennium was rather like a deadly rugby scrum — with both sides wearing the same colour shirts. There were none of the distinguishing liveries and coats of arms developed in later centuries, and in the confused melée the warrior probably distinguished friend from foe by looking into their faces. Armies were small — a few thousand men constituted an exceptionally large host — so that most protagonists would have known their own side by sight. In this comparatively intimate environment, you stood less chance of being killed than in modern mechanised warfare, but to be wounded was a more serious matter, since the smallest wounds could prove fatal in the absence of proper medical care.

In the front line stood the youngest, strongest, and most expendable warriors, forming a defensive row with their shields held chest high in front of them, touching or overlapping. Their spears protruded from the chinks in this formation that was known as the "shieldwall" or "war hedge." Behind this front rank were ranged the more lightly armed and mobile second rank, whose job was to plug holes in the shieldwall and act as liaison between the front line and headquarters that lay straight behind them. This was the leader, armed and armoured like the rest of his men, on foot and surrounded by his own personal bodyguard, the "house-carls" or hearth companions who made up his personal retinue. In times of peace, the king's hearth companions were the nearest equivalent to a police force: they administered his laws and enforced his royal authority.

The tactics of engagement were almost ritual. The two sides drew up their forces in opposing "shieldwall" rows, taking advantage of any geographical features such as water or woods to protect their flank. In the case of Harold and the English on 14 October 1066, they occupied the high ground on Caldbeck Hill to the west of Hastings, as the Normans advanced across the saltmarshes and struck inland from the sea.

Hostilities opened with a mutual throwing of spears and a random loosing of arrows, probably accompanied by loud jeering and shouting to get the blood up. English soldiers handled sturdy bows of yew, ash, or elm, which could propel an iron-tipped arrow as far as a hundred yards: excavations have uncovered English arrows with personal markings which suggest that bowmen tried to retrieve their arrows after a battle, since each beaten iron arrow tip represented quite an investment.

The Anglo-Saxon foot soldier also brought his own throwing spears to the field, along with his sword and shield. He was an all-purpose, multifunction warrior, and the Anglo-Saxon army was the last army in western Europe to fight as one homogeneous host. It was not divided into separate divisions of cavalry, infantry, and bowmen — unlike the Normans — and this was one of the reasons why the Normans won at Hastings and the Anglo-Saxons lost.

A mile away, nobody heard a thing. Without gunfire or explosions, early medieval battles were a series of muffled confrontations enlivened only by the metallic clash of sword on sword and by the war cries — "*Dex Aie*" ("God's help") from the Norman side and "Out! Out!" from the English as they repulsed attackers from their shieldwall, probably uttering their call in what we would consider a North Country accent."[11]

Both Harald Hardrade and William of Normandy had landed in England in the autumn month when war was most popular in the years around 1000. No army went campaigning in the winter if it could help it, and during the summer every able-bodied man had work to do on the land. By October, however, your soldiers had finished gathering in the harvest, while the countryside was dotted with barns full of grain — the ideal moment for raiding. From the farmer's point of view, a particular hazard of being raided and having your storerooms ravaged straight after the harvest was that you could not only starve through the winter, you would lose your stock of seed corn as well. One serious autumn raid could mean ruin for generations to come.

Sea battles were always fought within sight of land. Engagements on the open sea required a scouting system that was not attempted until the time of King Henry V, and since medieval ships had no guns or missiles, fighting was a matter of hand-to-hand sword combat in sheltered inshore waters. Part of King Alfred's response to the Viking menace was a levy system whereby certain towns and localities were responsible for building and manning their own warship — the maritime equivalent of the fortified *burhs* — and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* even credited Alfred with designing a new sort of ship to take on the Vikings. If it was anything like the Scandinavian longships that were harrying England in the ninth and tenth centuries, it was probably some eighty feet long by fifteen feet wide — which was slightly narrower, but also slightly longer, than the seventy-five-foot-long *Santa Maria* in which Columbus crossed the Atlantic in 1492.