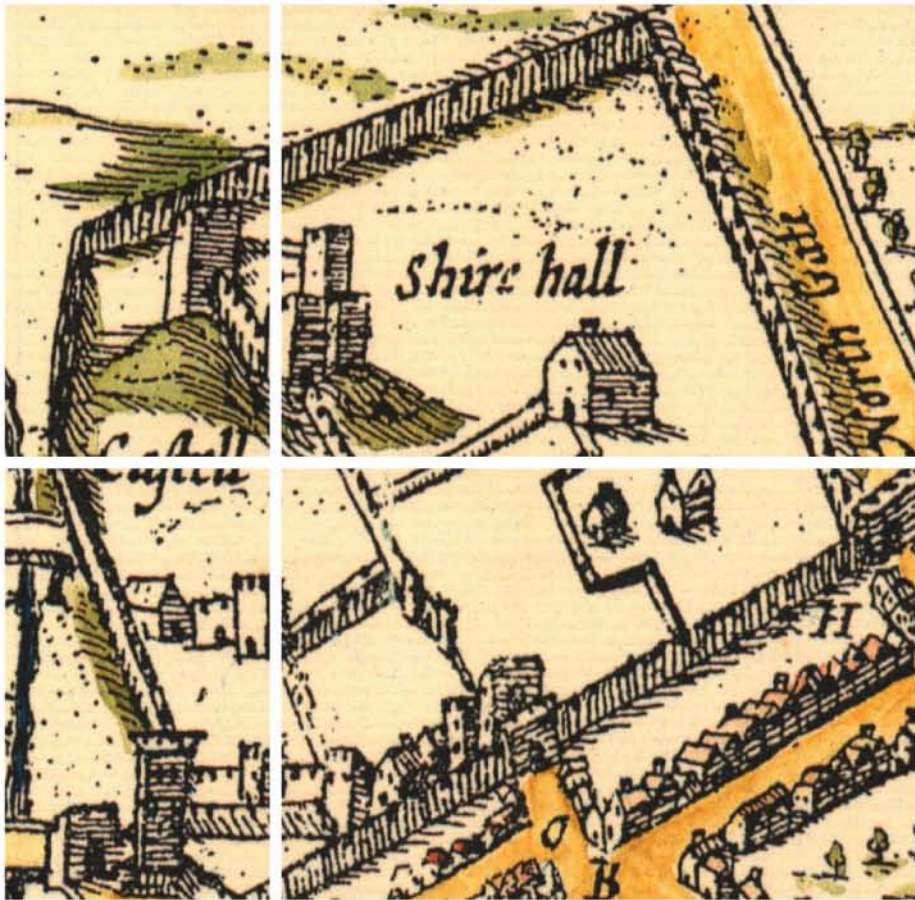# Cardiff Historical Papers

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Re-thinking the origins of the 'Irish' hobelar

The hobelar is something of a sideshow in medieval military history. In the past century there have been only two major studies of this troop type: J.E. Morris' 'Mounted Infantry Warfare' in 1914 and J. Lydon's 'The Hobelar: An Irish Contribution to Medieval Warfare' in 1954.[1] This is perhaps surprising given that Morris saw the hobelar as the precursor to the mounted longbowman, while Lydon called him 'the most effective fighting man of the age', referring to the hobelar as 'an entirely different type of mounted soldier'.[2] Other historians have only considered the hobelar in passing, and have been happy to accept the conclusions of Morris and Lydon.[3] If he is so important to the development of warfare in the High Middle Ages, why has not more work been done on him? This paper looks again at the conclusions of Morris and Lydon, and seeks to re-evaluate the hobelar's origins and legacy.

The origins of the hobelar, say Morris and Lydon, lie in Ireland. Their evidence seems conclusive. The term is first seen in documents relating to the contingent brought by John de Wogan, Justiciar of Ireland, to serve in Edward I's Scottish campaign of 1296, and over the next decade Edward's forces included an increasing number of hobelars in the Irish contingents. The derivation of the term 'hobelar' stems from the *hobby* or *hobin*, the small horse that these troops habitually rode, this name in turn coming from the Gaelic word *obann* meaning 'swift'.[4] According to Morris and Lydon, the hobelar was unlike any cavalry present in England at the

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1 J.E. Morris, 'Mounted Infantry in Medieval Warfare', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 3rd series, no. 8 (1914), pp. 77–102; J. Lydon, 'The Hobelar: An Irish Contribution to Medieval Warfare', *Irish Sword*, 2 (1954) pp. 12–16.
2 Morris, 'Mounted Infantry', p. 101; Lydon, 'The Hobelar', p. 13.
3 See for example D. Nicolle, *Medieval Warfare Sourcebook*, vol. I (London: Arms and Armour, 1996), pp. 165, 173, 180, 204, and 265–6; M. Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare in the Middle Ages* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), *passim*; R. Frame, 'The defence of the English lordships, 1250–1450', in T. Bartlett and K. Jeffrey (eds), *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 80: 'the hobelar or mounted lancer, who rode to war but fought on foot'. P. Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, trans. M. Jones (London: Blackwell, 1985), p. 71, calls the hobelars 'English' and states that they were used in campaigns against Wales. He also discusses other forms of light cavalry, such as the Turcopoles in the Holy Land, mounted Saracen archers in southern Italy and the Catalan *alforrats*.
4 Morris, 'Mounted Infantry', pp. 80–1; Lydon, 'The Hobelar', p. 13.

time, being mounted on a small pony, without the caparison of the 'heavy' cavalryman and equipped with only a mail shirt, a helmet, a sword, and a spear. He was therefore unsuited for 'shock action', the 'only duty of cavalry'.[5] However, he was an excellent scout and raider, perfect for the style of warfare common in Ireland and most effective in the Scottish campaigns of the fourteenth century. The hobelar was to have a short lifespan. His numbers grew rapidly after 1296, 490 serving in the contingent from Ireland for the 1304 campaign, and 1,000 being requested (but not arriving) for that of 1332. By the 1350s his numbers had dwindled, as he was super-seded by the mounted longbowman who, combining the hobelar's mobility with the archer's firepower, became an essential part of English armies for the next two hun-dred years. These then are Morris and Lydon's conclusions. The hobelar comes from Ireland, is a new type of warrior in English warfare, and helps spawn, only to be replaced by, the mounted longbow.

These assertions may be challenged, however. The etymology of the name 'hobelar' does, at first, seem to be correct. Although both French and Latin word lists include a number of variations – *hobeleor*, *hobler* and the like in French and *hobelarius*, *hobelerius*, *hobiliarius* and so forth in Latin – the examples given all stem from the fourteenth century and later. Furthermore, the majority are from documents connected with the deeds or government of Edward the Third, which is of course just what one might expect.[6] However, there are cognate words in French which might be suggestive of a Continental derivation. There is the bird of prey called a hobby, small and swift. In French this is rendered as *hobet*, *houbet*, but also *hobereau*, *hobeler or hober* which according to *Le Grand Robert* derives from the medieval Flemish *hobeleu*, to budge or move oneself (*se bouger* in modern French, but *hober* or *ober* in that of the fourteenth-century according to the *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue Française*).[7] One

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5   Morris, 'Mounted Infantry', p. 78; Lydon, 'The Hobelar', p. 13.

6   For the French occurrences of the word see F. Godefroy (ed.), *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue Française*, vol. V (Paris: F. Vieweg: E. Bouillon, 1885), p. 480, and for the Latin see R.E. Latham, *Revised Medieval Latin Word-list* (London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1965), p. 227.

7   For the bird see Paul Robert, *Le Grand Robert de la langue Française*, ed. A. Rey, vol. V (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1996), p. 211; *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue Française*, p. 481. For the verb *hober* see *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue Française*, p. 480. In the latter part of the sixteenth century *hobereau* also referred to a country gentleman '*de petite noblesse*', a squire

might well conclude that there is an etymological link between the Gaelic *obann* and the Franco-Flemish *(h)ober*, but where that link lies chronologically is not clear.[8] It does however make Morris' assertion of a Gaelic origin for the term hobelar much less certain.

It is also the case that although some scholars have suggested a tradition of mounted combat in Ireland, from which Morris and Lydon claim the hobelar evolved, there is very little evidence for this. Such a view seems to have arisen in part because of Gerald of Wales' *Topographia Hiberniae*. In one chapter he describes, 'the nature, customs and character of the people' of Ireland, including how they treat their babies, their style of clothing, how they ride, and how they fight in battle. These last two paragraphs read:

> When they are riding, they do not use saddles or leggings or spurs. They drive on, and guide their horses by means of a stick with a crook at its upper end, which they hold in their hand. They use reins to serve the purpose both of a bridle and bit. These do not keep the horses, accustomed to feeding on grass, from their food.
>
> Moreover, they go naked and unarmed into battle. They regard weapons as a burden, and they think it brave and honourable to fight unarmed. They use, however, three types of weapon – short spears, two darts (in this they imitate the Basclenses), and big axes…[9]

It seems that many historians have linked these together, to create a javelin-armed horseman riding bareback.[10]

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in the modern English sense of the word, which might be of interest given the conclusions below.

8 Lydon notes the French term for the hobby as *hobin*, and that others have made a link between this and the gaelic *obann*, but he does not cite his sources. Neither does he prove that the former stems directly from the latter. Lydon, 'The Hobelar', p. 13.

9 'Item sellis equitando non utuntur, non ocreis, non calcaribus. Virga tantum, quam manu gestant, in superiori parte camerata, tam equos excitant quam ad cursus invitant. Frenis quidem utuntur, tam chami quam freni vice fungentibus. Quibus et equi, semper herbis assueti, ad pabula nequaquam impediuntur. Praeterea, nudi et inermes ad bella procedunt. Habent enim arma pro onere; inermes vero dimicare pro audacia reputant et honere. Tribus tantum utuntur armorum generibus; lanceis non longis, et jaculis binis, in quibus et Basclensium morem sunt imitati; securibus quoque amplis...' Giraldi Cambrensis, 'Topographia Hibernica', *Opera*, ed. J. Dimock, vol. V (London, 1867), pp. 150–1; Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. J. O'Meara (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 101.

10 See for example, Nicolle, *Medieval Warfare Sourcebook*, vol. I, pp. 77 and 128; A. Hyland, *The Medieval Warhorse* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1994), p. 103.

In truth, the greater part of the evidence for the use of horses in battle by the native Irish comes from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Katharine Simms, writing on Gaelic warfare, describes cavalry as an important part of cattle raids, but the earliest of her examples is from shortly after 1240, nearly a century beyond the first Cambro-Norman incursions; one must consider how far we are seeing the impact of the Anglo-Norman military culture upon the Irish, a factor recognised in other areas of West European expansion during the period.[11] Evidence prior to and at the time of the Conquest of 1170 does not appear to support the argument for widespread use of light cavalry by the Gaelic Irish. Neither Gerald of Wales' *Expugnatio Hibernica* nor the Norman-French chanson *The Song of Dermot and the Earl* make any mention of mounted Irish troops during the early phase of the Conquest that they both cover.[12] In part, this may be ascribed to the fact that the fighting at this point took the form of assaults upon coastal towns or ambushes launched from heavily wooded country, neither actions conducive to the use of cavalry. It is also the case that these were not solely, or even primarily, Gaelic settlements, but consisted of the Ostmen, Scandinavian settlers whose own military tradition was very much infantry based. However, Irish sources are no more forthcoming than the *Expugnatio* or *The Song.* The *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, an eleventh-century poem recording Brian Boruma's war against the Norse, makes no mention of cavalry in combat, even though it concludes with the pitched battle of Clontarf, and whilst the annals do refer to cavalry engagements around the time of the Anglo-Norman conquest, such entries are rare and lack detail, a typical one reading:

> A hosting by Conchobar Ua Briain, and by the men of Mumha into Laighlen, and they took their hostages, and they proceeded from thence into Midhe, and plundered the island of

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11 Katharine Simms, 'Warfare in the Medieval Gaelic Lordships', *Irish Sword*, 12 (1975), pp. 98–108. For the cross-fertilisation of military cultures see R. Bartlett, 'Technique Militaire et Pouvoir Politique, 900-1300', *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, vol. 41 (1980), pp. 1135–59 and *The Making of Europe* (London: Allan Lane, 1993), pp. 60–84.

12 Gerald of Wales, *Expugnatio Hibernica*, trans. A.B. Scott and F.X. Martin (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1978); *The Song of Dermot and the Earl*, ed. and trans. G.H. Orpen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892).

Loch Semdidhe. Their cavalry and the cavalry of Connacht met there, and the cavalry of Connacht were defeated.[13]

The sparcity of evidence in the annals is reinforced in John V. Kelleher's article on the battle of Móin Mhór in 1151. In spite of this being a major engagement between two powerful kings, there is no evidence that either force fought predominantly from horseback.[14]

Whilst there is only a little evidence for the use of horses as battlefield weapons, this is not to say that the Irish made no use of them whatsoever. There is evidence that the Irish nobility were very interested in equestrianism and that, far from being limited to 'hobbies', as Lydon indicates, a twelfth-century *Book of Rights* listing items given by an over-king to his vassals includes a wide variety of horses, such as 'horses for racing', 'steeds of the road', and 'horses used to hosting'.[15] The book also mentions horses imported from Scotland and France, and it is known that Welsh horses were imported for breeding.[16] In Chrétien de Troye's romance *Erec and Enide,* The Haughty Knight of the Heath rides into the melée on an Irish horse, which bears him 'violently forward', and Chrétien refers to it as a 'charger'.[17] This suggests that, to the late twelfth-century mind (*Erec and Enide* was written around 1169), Irish

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13 *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh: The war of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, ed. and trans. James Henthorn Todd (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1867); *Annals of Loch Cé*, ed. and trans. William M. Hennessy, vol. I (London, 1871) for the year 1130. There are similar entries in this annal for the years 1128, 1130, 1236, and 1256, and in the *Annals of Ulster*, vol. II, ed. and trans. B. McCarthy (Dublin, 1893) for the years 1099, 1128, 1131, and 1247.

14 J.V. Kelleher, 'The Battle of Móin Mhór 1151', *Celtica* (1988), pp. 11–27.

15 See M.T. Flanagan, 'Irish and Anglo-Norman Warfare in Twelfth-Century Ireland', in T. Bartlett and K. Jeffrey (eds), *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 64. The items listed in this document make the book seem very like an Anglo-Saxon herriot (see N.P. Brooks, 'Arms and Status in Late Saxon England', in David Hill (ed.), *Ethelred the Unready* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1978), pp. 81–104).

16 N.A. James, 'Horses in Medieval Welsh Court Poetry' and S. Davies, 'Horses in the Mabinogion', in Sioned Davies and Nerys Ann Jones (eds), *The Horse in Celtic Culture* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), pp. 90 and 136.

17 'De l'autre part, encontre lui/ point li Orguelleus de la Lande,/ et sist sor un cheval d'Irlande/ qui le porte de grant ravine./ sor l'escu, devant la pointrine,/ le fiert Erec de tel vertue/ que del destrier l'a abatu'. Chrétien de Troyes, 'Erec et Enide', in *Les romans de Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. Mario Roques, vol. I (Paris, 1953), p. 65; Chrétien de Troyes, 'Erec and Enide' in C.W. Carroll and W.W. Kibler (trans.), *Arthurian Romances* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 64.

horses need not be small and unsuitable for 'heavy cavalry'. Indeed the evidence would appear to indicate that the Irish were using horses of a number of different conformations for a number of different purposes. Horses were expensive, high-status items, and an interest in horseflesh is typical of medieval aristocracies. The Carolingians, Anglo-Saxons and Normans all had highly sophisticated royal stud farms, and it would be surprising if the Irish nobility did not take a similar interest and pride in these status symbols, if perhaps on a smaller scale.[18] What we appear to have in Ireland is not a Gaelic light cavalry culture, with the majority of warriors riding into battle, as suggested by Nicolle, but a nobility similar to that in Anglo-Saxon England or Wales, where as Gerald of Wales tells us, 'Their leaders ride into battle on swift mettlesome horses which are bred locally. Most of the common people prefer to fight on foot, in view of the marshy uneven terrain. The horsemen will often dismount as circumstance and occasion demand, ready to flee or attack.'[19] This is not where we find the light horse of either Morris or Nicolle.[20]

So, if we are no longer certain of the Gaelic derivation of his name, nor of the Gaelic origin of his style of combat, is it possible to suggest that the hobelar is in fact an import and that he came across the Irish Sea, perhaps with the Cambro-Norman settlers in the twelfth century? In the *Expugnatio Hibernica* Gerald of Wales gives his formula for the conquest of the Irish.[21] In this chapter he outlines the shortcomings of the French knight in the type of warfare present in Ireland:

> there is a great difference between warfare in France on the one hand and in Ireland and Wales on the other. In France men choose the open plains for their battles, but in Ireland and Wales rough, wooded country; there heavy armour is a mark of distinction, here it is only a burden; there victory is won by standing firm, here by mobility; there knights are

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18 For royal studs see R.H.C. Davis, 'The Warhorses of the Normans', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 10 (1987), pp. 67–81 and *The Medieval Warhorse* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), pp. 38–42, 74, 81, and 137; Hyland, *Medieval Warhorse*, pp. 62–3 and 83–5.

19 'Equis autem cursoribus et generosis, quos patria gignit, nobiliores ad bella feruntur. Pars autem populi major, propter terras palustres pariter et inaequales, ad praelia pedestres incedunt. Equites autem, pro locorum et temporum opportunitate, seu fugiendo seu fugando facile pedites fiunt.' Giraldi Cambrensis, 'Descriptio Kambriae', *Opera*, vol. VI (London, 1868), p. 181; Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales / the description of Wales*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 234.

20 Nicolle, *Medieval Warfare Sourcebook,* vol. I, pp. 77 and 128.

21 Gerald of Wales, *Expugnatio*, pp. 244–9.

taken prisoner, here they are beheaded; there they are ransomed, here they are butchered. When two armies meet in battle out on the plains, that heavy armour, consisting of several layers of linen or steel, gives soldiers excellent protection and is most becoming. But equally, when the fighting takes place only within a restricted space, or over wooded or boggy ground, where there is scope for foot soldiers rather than horsemen, light armour is far superior. For light arms are quite sufficient for use against enemies who are not armoured. Any battle against these is either won or lost immediately, generally in the very first encounter. In that situation it is inevitable that an enemy who is mobile and in retreat over confined or difficult terrain can only be routed by an equally mobile force pressing hard on them, and only lightly armed. For owing to the weight of that armour with its many layers, and saddles which are high and curved back, men have difficulty in dismounting, even more difficulty in mounting, and find advancing on foot, when the need arises, most difficult of all.[22]

This is almost exactly the same problem that Morris and Lydon argue the English armies were facing on campaign in Scotland during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Gerald also offers a solution to the problem. He advocates the use of 'that breed of men which has been brought up in the Welsh borders and trained in the warfare that goes on in those parts', because 'when the changing conditions of war demand it, they are skilled horsemen at one moment, at another quick moving infantry.'[23] These men, of course, were the Geraldine clan and their adherents, men of south Wales who had been major players in the initial invasion of Ireland and were Gerald's kinsmen. It is possible to argue that Gerald is in fact over-emphasising the role of his relatives; it is certain that in other sections of his narrative

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22 'Gallica tamen milicia multum ab Hibernica, sicut et a Kambrica distare dinoscitur. Ibi namque plana petuntur, hic aspera; ibi campestria, hic silvestria; ibi arma honori, hic oneri; ibistabilitate vincitur, hic agilitate; ibi capiunutur milites, hic decapitantur; ibi redimuntur, hic perimuntur. Sicut igitur ubi militares acies de plano conveniunt, gravis illa et multiplex armatura, atm linea scilicet quam ferrea, milites egregie munit et ornat, sic ubi solum in arto confligitur, seu loco silvestri seu palustri, ubi pedites potius quam equites locum habent, longe levis armatura prestancior. Contra inermes namque viros, quibus semper in primo fere impetu vel parta est statim vel perdita victoria, expediciora satis arma sufficiunt, ubi fugitivam et agilem per arta vel aspera gentem sola necesse est gravi quadam et armata mediocriter agilitate confundi. Cum illa nimirum armatura multiplici, sellisque recurvis et altis difficile descenditur, difficilius ascenditur, difficillime, cum opus est, pedibus itur.' Ibid., pp. 246–7.

23 'In omni igitur expedicione sive Hibernica sive Kambrica, gens in Kambrie marchia nutrita, gens hostilibus parcium illarum conflictibus exercitata, competentissima […] cum alea martis exegerit, nunc quis habilis, nuunc pedibus agilis inventa […].' Ibid., pp. 246–7.

they get more than their fair share of the limelight. However, it is also true that at the time he was writing, there were light-armed, mobile troops serving in the Welsh March.

In his book *Military Institutions on the Welsh Marches*, Suppe describes a type of soldier called a '*muntator*', who is found in the records of the counties of Shropshire and Staffordshire in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries.[24] There are remarkable similarities between this 'horseman armed with a hauberk, an iron helmet, and a lance' and the fourteenth-century hobelar. Suppe suggested that the *muntator*, 'constituted a mobile force of lightly armed cavalry … ideal for pursuit of small bands of Welsh raiders on foot … Patrols of *muntators* would be eminently suited for locating parties of Welsh on foot and forcing them into battle.'[25]

This is much the same role as that performed by Robert le Brut, 'an Irish hobelur [*sic.*], retained to spy the passings and haunts of the enemy by night and day' in July 1299, and of Gerald's ideal soldier for Ireland.[26] In fact their regular employment in the garrisons of the Scottish border towns suggest very similar use to that recognised for the *muntator* by Suppe, taking into account the more intense level of conflict on the Scots border at the time. Morris records that in August 1311 in the castles of Berwick, Roxburgh, Edinburgh, Linlithgow, Stirling, Perth, Dundee and Bothwell there were some 73 hobelars, approximately half the number of archers and one seventh the number of heavy cavalry, which were presumably men-at-arms and sergeants in Morris' understanding of the terms.[27]

Here, then, we have perhaps the strongest evidence for the Anglo-Norman origin of the hobelar. Shropshire and Staffordshire are two counties from which large numbers of the first Cambro-Norman settlers in Ireland originated.[28] It is not inconceivable that these marcher nobles, recognising the success of the *muntator* against the Welsh, introduced them to Ireland to deal with the similar situation there.

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24 F. Suppe, *Military Institutions on the Welsh Marches* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1994), pp. 63–85.

25 Ibid., p. 85.

26 *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland, 1272–1307*, ed. J. Bayne (London, 1881), no. 1084, quoted in Lydon, 'The Hobelar', p. 14.

27 Morris, 'Mounted Infantry', p. 82.

28 Brendan Smith, *Conquest and Colonisation in Medieval Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 38.

Then, around a hundred years later, being asked to serve in wars against an elusive Scottish foe, the lords in Ireland brought the *muntator* back across the Irish Sea, but under a name with a Gaelic origin: 'hobelar'. Even if a direct link with the *muntator* cannot be proven, a Welsh link is suggested by the etymology of the old French verb *hober*, as discussed above. Its Flemish origins might suggest a link with the Flemish settlers in the Geraldine stronghold of Pembrokeshire. If not actually a Shropshire *muntator*, he might well have been a similar Pembroke *hobelier* – not a man who was mounted, but one who shifted himself.

So, if the hobelar can be linked to the *muntator*, what were the origins of the latter? Unlike in Gaelic Ireland, historians have not suggested that the native Welsh fought from horseback, and there is therefore no suggestion that the *muntator* is Celtic in origin. Although Nicolle suggests a possible link with pre-Conquest 'riding men', there would seem to be little evidence for a Saxon origin either.[29] Gerald of Wales' horsemen are not Welsh, but rather Cambro-Normans, who have become accustomed to a different kind of terrain.

Suppe has recognised similarities between the *muntator* and the so-called second-class cavalry, or *equites classis secundae*, which existed under a number of terms such as, in Latin, *loricatus*, *scutiferus*, *serviens equitans*, *eques levis armaturae*, and in French, *serjans*, *damoiseau*, and *ecuyer*.[30] However, both Contamine and Smail agree that this second-class cavalry differed from the knights only in terms of their social rank and the expense and quality of their equipment.[31] Similarly, Morris says that the English heavy cavalry, 'whether the superior knights or the inferior *scutiferi*,' fought in the same way, that is with the couched lance and at the charge.[32] This is not what we have seen to be the primary role of either the *muntator* or the hobelar, and it would seem to suggest that they cannot be tactically related to the non-knightly cavalry of Western Europe.

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29 Nicolle, *Medieval Warfare Sourcebook.* vol. I, p. 114.

30 Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, pp. 69–70; R.C. Smail, *Crusading Warfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 111. Suppe makes the same link (*Military Institutions*, pp. 75–8).

31 Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, p. 70; Smail, *Crusading Warfare*, p. 111.

32 Morris, 'Mounted Infantry', p. 78.

Yet in all other respects they do appear to be very similar. There is even a technical, tenurial link, for the service of two *muntators* was the equivalent to that of one knight, as was that of two sergeants.[33] The equipment of the *muntator* is not all that different from the equipment of the knightly cavalry of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries – a mail shirt, a helmet, a shield, and a lance – and these knightly cavalry were capable of performing a charge at lance-point. The different sizes of horse might be a factor in distinguishing between the two, but I suspect that the small size of the *muntator* and hobelar's mounts has been overplayed. Warhorses of the twelfth century were around fourteen or fifteen hands high, and ponies need not necessarily be smaller than this; the distinction is one of conformation (that is to say, bone structure, musculature, gait and the like) rather than height.[34]

By the thirteenth century the disparity in equipment between the *muntator* and *milites* had grown significantly, the latter now armoured *cap á pied* in mail, sporting arm and leg protections of *cuir bouilli* or iron plates, and wearing full head helms rather than iron caps.[35] However the equipment of the *classis secundae* cavalry remains very similar to that of the *muntator*.

The same cannot be said of the hobelar. In the fourteenth century the difference between the hobelar and the man-at-arms is significant. The latter wore large amounts of plate armour. A sergeant might not be so well equipped, but by the time the hobelar arrived on the scene, even he would be wearing some form of plate defence. The difference between the hobelar and the fourteenth-century 'second class' cavalry is also indicated by the fact that, under Edward I, the hobelar was paid 6d per day, half that of a sergeant (1 shilling), and a quarter of that of the knight (2 shillings).[36] This may suggest a disparity in the equipment of the hobelar and the sergeant, but one should not ignore the fact that pay scales were also set according to social rank, so in part the difference will have been one of 'breeding' – the hobelar coming from a lower social class then either the sergeant or the knight.

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33 Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare*, p. 65.
34 See Hyland, *Medieval Warhorse*, pp. 1–2.
35 For a visual depiction of the thirteenth-century knight see the vivid depictions of battle in the Morgan Crusader Bible (formerly known as the Maciejowski Bible), published as *Old Testament Miniatures: A Medieval Picturebook* (New York: G. Braziller, 1969).
36 Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare*, p. 84.

Having argued that the hobelar is very similar to the *muntator*, and that the *muntator* is effectively a sergeant, it now seems that the hobelar is *not* the equivalent of a sergeant. How can one explain this apparent discrepancy? I would suggest that the *muntator* goes to Ireland as the equivalent of the sergeant, but the hobelar comes back as the sergeant's inferior because of differences in the development of the military cultures of Ireland and the British mainland between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. Once in Ireland, the English troops were involved in a different form of warfare, as described in the writings of Gerald of Wales quoted above. There is a one-hundred-and-twenty-seven year gap between Strongbow's arrival Ireland in 1171 and the first mention of the hobelar in 1298. During that time military technology did not stand still. In England and continental Europe the cavalry became more heavily armoured as it faced increased numbers of bows and crossbows. In Ireland the intensity of warfare was lower, the bow and crossbow were not so prevalent, and the nature of the terrain meant that heavy armour could actually prove an encumbrance. There was therefore no tactical or technological impetus amongst the cavalry of the Anglo-Irish lords to utilise the heavy armour fashionable on the continent. There was, however, a tactical benefit to having lightly-equipped horsemen able to pursue the raiding parties that were endemic. This goes some way to explaining the statute passed in Ireland in 1296, which ordered that all those with land worth twenty pounds a year were to have a barded horse, and those less wealthy were to own a 'hobby' or other unarmoured mount. At about the same time a schedule drawn up for the lord of Trim shows that men worth as little as three pounds, six shillings and eight-pence were expected to have a horse, whilst in England it was only a requirement for those valued at fifteen pounds or more.[37] This might indicate that the financial status of the Irish gentry was insufficient to provide the requisite number of men-at-arms, and that an extra qualification had to be created to make up the shortfall.

When the hobelar crossed from the Irish military culture into that of continental Europe to join Edward I's Scottish campaigns, he was far more lightly equipped than any other horseman, and possibly in a lower social bracket, and therefore due less

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37 Frame, 'Defence of the English lordships', p. 80.

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pay. The hobelar is, to use an evolutionary analogy, a divergent branch, deriving

from the same second-class cavalry root as the sergeant, but then adapting for a dif-

ferent military environment.

Why did Morris fail to see the link between the hobelar and the 'second-class'

cavalry? In part he may have been blinded by the terminology, seeing different terms

as denoting a new type of soldier. This impression would have been reinforced by

the fact that the hobelar came out of Ireland – traditionally seen as having an alien

military culture – and bore a name of apparently Gaelic origin. Lydon's work,

published in a journal on Irish military history and entitled 'an Irish contribution to

medieval warfare', was almost bound to follow this idea of the hobelar as new and

indigenous to Ireland. Subsequent historians also failed to question Morris'

conclusions, in part because of the problems of translating medieval military

terminology, as Stephen Morillo has discussed in his article '*Milites*, Knights and

Samurai: Military terminology, comparative history, and the problem of

translation'.[38] Military terms, or 'soldier-words' as Morillo calls them, have different

emphases and connotations depending on the vector of meaning being used, be it

functional, organisational or social. Thus, the same word can mean diverse things in

documents of different purposes or periods.[39] The misinterpretation of medieval

terms that are still in use today, or the use of modern 'soldier-words' and

categorisations in the process of translation can cause even greater problems. The

latter is inevitable, since medieval military history is a product of the military culture

of nineteenth-century Western Europe. The modern study of military history was

born in the staff colleges of the European powers in the mid-nineteenth century, with

the aim of teaching cadet officers the fundamental and eternal laws of war. In order

to do this, battles and campaigns throughout history were selected to be compared

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38 S. Morillo, '*Milites*, Knights and Samurai: Military terminology, comparative history, and
    the problem of translation', in R. Abels and B. Bachrach (eds), *The Normans and their
    Adversaries at War* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2001), pp. 167–84.

39 'The terminology used for those heavy cavalry who were not knights changed in the
    course of time; under Edward I, there were still sergeants in the royal household, but most
    non-knightly cavalrymen were termed squires (*scutiferi*) or valets (*valetti*), terms which
    might be synonymous. Later all might simply be called men-at-arms (*armigeri*).' M.
    Prestwich, '*Miles in Armis Strenuus:* The Knight at War', *Transactions of the Royal Historical
    Society*, 6th series, no. 5 (1995), p. 202.

and contrasted with each other. The only way in which conclusions could be drawn from these examples was if a common frame of reference was imposed. Because the lessons learned had to be applied on the contemporary battlefield, the most sensible framework to use was that of the modern way of warfare; it was familiar and therefore easily comprehended. But the military culture of nineteenth-century Europe was not the same as that of medieval Europe. Morris recognised this, warning of the dangers of using modern definitions of 'heavy' and 'light' cavalry when dealing with medieval horsemen. One cannot avoid using modern phrases, but one need not think of lifeguards when talking of 'heavy,' or of hussars when talking of 'light' cavalry of the middle ages; medieval 'mounted infantry' were not like seventeenth-century dragoons, nor were they companies of line battalions put on horseback for special purposes.[40] Yet the military culture of the nineteenth century is still superimposed on that of the Middle Ages.

In nineteenth-century military culture, troops are organised by types, with each – heavy cavalry, light cavalry, dragoons, line infantry, light infantry, grenadiers, foot artillery, horse artillery *et cetera ad nauseum* – having a strictly defined role within the prosecution of war, and each soldier receiving specific equipment and training designed solely to fulfil that role. It would be very rare for one type of soldier to be found performing the tasks of another (say, for example heavy cavalry fighting on foot as infantry), and uncommon for troops to move from one branch of service to another, even as officers. The medieval military culture did not have these strict definitions. Although various Assizes of Arms and similar documents outline what a particular individual should have in terms of military equipment, there is no evidence to suggest that this placed any limit upon the functions he could be asked to perform or the weapons and armour he might own. The Assize of Arms was not a sumptuary law seeking to restrict the equipment that an individual should have, but a means of ensuring a minimum level of readiness. Thus, when Morris understands the hobelar as a new troop type, and sees that 'the only duty of cavalry was to charge, not to scout', he is interpreting the evidence according to the nineteenth-

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40 Morris, 'Mounted Infantry', p. 78.

century military culture still so familiar in the armed forces of the twentieth century.[41]

   More recent writers have fallen into the same trap. In her article 'Armour and Military Dress in Thirteenth- and Early Fourteenth-Century England', which describes an entry in the accounts of the royal wardrobe for July 1297, Frédérique Lachaud cites the case of one 'Geoffrey de Creal, a mounted sergeant of the king', who received 'an aketon, a gambeson, a pair of horse trappers, a pair of cuisses, a haubergeon, a bascinet, a *chapel de fer*, a gorger, a pair of gloves of plate, a crossbow, a saddle and a targe' for his services in France.[42] She goes on to say that de Creal, 'clearly fought as heavy cavalry', presumably because of the evidence of the heavy armour – *cuisses*, bascinet, *gorger*, *et cetera* – and horse trappers.[43] If this is the case, what are we to make of the inclusion of the crossbow and targe? This is not, after all, the equipment one expects to be carried by a heavy cavalryman, unless one accepts that roles were not as rigidly defined as has been assumed. Perhaps de Creal was being equipped for a range of challenges he might face in the course of his military duties, which could include not only service on horseback as heavy cavalry but also on foot as a crossbowman. The writer of what is still considered to be the foremost work on the warfare of the Crusades, R. C. Smail, wrote:

> the term *levis armatura* meant only that they were not so well equipped as the wealthier *milites*; it did not mean that they were normally used as light, and the knights as heavy, cavalry, with all the tactical implications which such a contrast would imply to a modern reader. Occasionally the fact that they were lightly equipped was put to some special military purpose; they were sent as '*speculatores*' on reconnaissance, or they were employed as skirmishers. Usually, however, they are not associated in the texts with specialized functions, and they appear to have gone into action with the knights.[44]

Here again the link is made between the *eques classis secundae* and the *milites* and Smail, like Morris, warns against using modern definitions of heavy and light cavalry. However, he then goes on to assign 'special military purposes' to the *levis*

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41 Ibid.

42 F. Lachaud, 'Armour and military dress in thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century England', in M. Strickland (ed.), *Armies, Chivalry and Warfare in Medieval Britain and France* (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1998), p. 352.

43 Ibid., p. 353.

44 Smail, *Crusading Warfare*, p. 111.

armatura that are wholly congruent with the 'modern' roles of light cavalry. In fact, acting as scouts or skirmishers may not have been considered a specialised task by medieval warriors. Those of the knightly class, and even some of the highest aristocracy were quite prepared to perform just such functions. After landing at Pevensey at the start of the Hastings campaign, 'William was quick to investigate the region and its inhabitants with a company of no more than twenty-five knights'.[45] During the siege of Alençon, in the war against Geoffrey Martel, no less a man than William FitzOsbern, the steward of Normandy, was sent ahead of the army on reconnaissance.[46] The evidence is abundantly clear that amongst English knighthood in the twelfth century it was not only acceptable, but also to some extent desirable to fight dismounted. During each of the six main battles that took place during the Anglo-Norman period, that is to say those of Tinchebrai, Alençon, Brémule, Bourgthéroulde, Northallerton and Lincoln, some or all of the Anglo-Norman knights dismounted and fought on foot.[47] Occasionally the knightly classes of other cultures were also willing to dismount. At the battle of Courtrai between the French and Flemish, Guy of Namur and William of Jülich 'sent their horses away, and armed like the rebels, with the visorless helmet of the communal soldiers, they took their place in the front rank, grasping a pike or *goedendag*.'[48]

That the knight was prepared to act as *speculator* reinforces the point that the nineteenth-century concept of troops being particularly equipped for one role is anachronistic when applied to the Middle Ages. Just because a warrior had the

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45 'Guillelmus uero cum uiginti quinque, non amplis militum comitatu promptus ipse loca et incolas explorauit.' William of Poitiers, *Gesta Guillelmi Ducis*, ed. and trans. R.H.C. Davis and M. Chibnall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 114–15. Ever the sycophantic biographer, William of Poitiers notes that the Duke's actions were unusual both in his own time and classically, when even Pompey Magnus and Julius Caesar would send 'exploratores' to scout rather than exposing themselves to personal danger, separated from the whole army.

46 Ibid., pp. 26–7.

47 J. Bradbury, *The Medieval Archer* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1985), pp. 39–57; S. Morillo, *Warfare Under the Anglo-Norman Kings* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1994), pp. 28 and 53.

48 J.F. Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe*, trans. S. Willard and R.W. Southern (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1997), p. 192; J.F. Verbruggen, *The Battle of the Golden Spurs: Courtrai, 11th July 1302*, ed. K. DeVries, trans. D.R. Ferguson (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2002), p. 199. There may be some special pleading here on the part of the Dutch Verbruggen to see the two Flemish leaders as being particularly egalitarian.

equipment expected of a knight, it does not mean that he wore or used it all. In June of 1189, William Marshal and four companions were sent by King Henry II to reconnoitre the advance of King Philip of France and Count Richard on Le Mans. They did so, avoiding skirmishes with the enemy forces because of their greater mobility resulting from not wearing their hauberks. The following morning, when Henry himself went out to scout the enemy positions, he refused to take William because the latter was already fully armoured.[49]

Morris' and Lydon's assertions about the hobelar can be challenged therefore on a number of grounds: he need not have been part of a native Irish military culture; his name need not stem from a Gaelic word; his role is not unique or new in the fourteenth century, having been performed not only by the *muntator* on the Welsh March in the eleventh and twelfth but also, when circumstances demanded it, by those 'heavy cavalrymen' the knight and men-at-arms. Their final claim – that the hobelar had a lasting effect on the English conduct of war in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – must also be examined more closely.

Morris and Lydon both see the hobelar as being an ancestor of the mounted longbowman, born out of the epiphany that putting a lightly equipped man on a horse made him more manoeuvrable and effective. Far from being an innovation in the fourteenth century, mounted archers (that is to say men armed with a bow who rode to battle, as opposed to horse archers, men who shot bows from horseback) are advocated as a vital part of Marcher warfare by Gerald of Wales in the twelfth century, and recorded in some numbers in his chronicle of the conquest of Ireland.[50] They also appear regularly, if not in great numbers, throughout the forces raised in the thirteenth century.[51] The novelty of the mounted longbowman, as with that of the hobelar, lies not in the combination of archers or lightly-armed men with horses, but in the increasing numbers of the same in the field forces of royal campaigns. The innovation is not technological, but tactical, and the result of social and bureaucratic changes during the latter part of the fourteenth century – a point widely recognised

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49 *The History of William Marshal*, ed. A.J. Holden, trans. S. Gregory, vol. I (London, 2002), pp. 426–7 and 432–5.

50 Gerald of Wales, *Expugnatio, passim.* The mounted archers are given the distinctive Latin term of '*arcarii*', whilst those on foot are '*sagitarii pedestris*'.

51 Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare*, pp. 134–5.

for the longbowman per se, but not, it appears when he was mounted, and certainly not for the hobelar.

This article has sought to re-evaluate Morris' conclusions about the hobelar. It has argued that far from being a Gaelic Irish warrior arriving in mainland Britain and fighting in a new way, his origins may lie in the Welsh Marches or Pembrokeshire where, under the guise of the *muntator* or similar, he was just another form of the *equites classis secundae*, that group of non-knightly cavalry that included the sergeants. This warrior was then re-imported into the British mainland under the new name of 'hobelar'. Having adapted to the different circumstances of warfare in Ireland, however, his equipment was lighter than that of the fourteenth-century sergeants and therefore considered differently with regard to matters such as pay. It suggests that the reason Morris believed him to be something new was because he was working within a framework of nineteenth-century military culture and values that served to distort his view of the medieval situation. This framework endures today, primarily because the 'soldier-words' of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries form a convenient shorthand for describing troop types. Unfortunately the rigid definition of troop types that forms part of nineteenth-century military culture does not allow for the flexibility of role and equipment that were found in medieval armies and thus can lead to a misrepresentation of medieval warfare. Far from being a sideshow of medieval military history, the hobelar should now perhaps take centre-stage, as a microcosm of the major pitfalls in this field of study.

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