The late Thomas Keefe once remarked that the most-cited medieval individual for sheer dependence upon mercenaries or *stipendiarii* is King Henry II of England (1154–1189).¹ The historiographical tradition to which he referred can be traced back at least to the writings of William Stubbs, with other significant studies emerging in the post-war years.² In 1945, Jacques Boussard put forth the argument that Henry virtually transformed English armies by preferring the shield-tax or *scutage* over the still-functioning feudal levy.³ Boussard found large quantities of mercenaries in the *Pipe Rolls*, peaking at just over 6,000 effectives during the Great Revolt of 1173–1174. He therefore concluded that Henry had reshaped feudal armies into paid, professional forces that were faster, better-organized, and more effective in both battle and siege operations.⁴ In 1962, Michael Powicke called attention to the ramifications of Boussard’s study by arguing that Henry’s association with mercenaries was ‘on a scale not perhaps matched again in intensity until the Hundred Years War’; eleven years later, W.L. Warren declared that mercenary footmen were indeed the mainstay of the king’s military power.⁵ A departure from such judgments is Michael Prestwich’s more recent counter: because the overall percentage of hired soldiers was rather low in Henry’s armies, any transformative influence of mercenaries occurred after Henry’s death, perhaps in the reigns of Richard (1189–1199) and John (1199–1216).⁶

Numbers and troop ratios aside, equally important is an analysis of how and why Henry used mercenaries on campaign. We are fortunate to have a contemporary remark on this question, found in Richard fitz Nigel’s *Dialogue of the Exchequer*: ‘the prince prefers to expose mercenaries, rather than natives to the fortunes of war.’⁷ This paternalistic view found ready acceptance in the work of Hans Delbrück and has subsequently survived several decades of historical inquiry.⁸ While accepting that Henry sought to protect his vassals, we might also examine the *Dialogue’s* passage in a qualitative manner. Underneath Richard’s statement lays
a twofold implication. First, the consideration of mortality implies that Henry foresaw combat (e.g. battle, skirmish, or siege) for his army. Second, given that combat was likely, Henry apparently considered his mercenaries worthy substitutes for the native soldiers. Of course, one could argue that neither applies because Henry was either foolish enough to deploy inferior troops or nonchalant about human casualties, but both of these notions are absurd. The king’s overriding concern throughout his reign was the effective defense and maintenance of the vast Angevin Empire through his various military exploits. Therefore, we must assume that Henry felt comfortable employing hired soldiers for potentially dangerous military campaigns, even during times of great peril to his realms. We may push the matter further by dispensing with the headcounts for a moment (the rolls are, in any case, incomplete) and instead examine how Henry employed his mercenary resources on campaign.

During the High Middle Ages, mercenaries served a variety of functions but in Henry II’s armies they were integral to his battle tactics and often operated as independent, coherent units. J.F. Verbruggen has defined the medieval tactical unit thusly: ‘a battle formation in which such discipline prevails that the individuals obey the orders of their commander as one.’

Hired troops under Henry do not fit this definition exactly because he never arranged them into battle formations; instead, he deployed his mercenary units on separate, specific operations within general areas of conflict. Even so, the spirit of Verbruggen’s definition—that each unit obeys commands as one—remains at work here. Today I will offer three examples to illustrate how Henry’s mercenaries were deployed as coherent units of men: the use of Welshmen during the siege of Chaumont in 1167; Brabanter operations at the ‘Battle of Dol’ in 1173; and the relief of Rouen in 1174, which saw Welsh and Brabanter units operating jointly.

My train to Swansea was delayed due to the attacks in London, and I was sad to miss Dr. Rowland’s earlier lecture on ‘Welsh mercenaries in Angevin Service’, which has undoubtedly reacquainted you all with the military skills of the Welsh tribes in the mid-twelfth century. For now I will only recall the oration of Baldwin fitz Gilbert of Clare before the Battle of Lincoln in 1141, in which he calls the Welsh ‘object[s] for our contempt . . . devoid of skill and all knowledge of the art of war, like cattle running upon the hunting-spears.’ Henry II’s notions of Welsh military ability were quite different from Baldwin’s. Not only did skirmishers from Gwynedd nearly dispatch him at Coleshill Wood