On March 16, 1351, one of the most picturesque combats of the fourteenth century took place in a Breton field near a tree that came to be known as “the Halfway Oak.” That oak was halfway between the French-held castle of Josselin and the English stronghold of Ploermel, and in its presence the commanders of those garrisons met in accordance with an earlier agreement.1

They had sworn that each would bring a company of thirty, and those companies would fight on foot without “reinforcement or help,”2 without “cheating or fraud”3 of any sort, to the finish a outrance.4 This did not necessarily mean “to the death,” but rather until one side was victorious, and the warriors on the other were either dead, disabled, or captured—as in any serious battle. A key part of the agreement was that no one would take advantage of the ultimate expedient of the defeated warrior: none of them, no matter how things went, would run away. In fact, no one did. After a hard-fought contest, the French (or, rather Breton) garrison, led by Sir Jean de Beaumanoir, a Breton knight of some local importance, overcame a motley force of English, Germans, and even a few pro-English Bretons, killing several, including their leader, a man alternately referred to as Bamborough or Brandeburg, who may have been either English or German.5

1 All translations into English are mine, or in the case of Froissart, adapted from Thomas Johnes’s nineteenth-century translation.
4 “A outrance” is often interpreted in modern times as meaning “with sharp weapons;” my reading of fourteenth-century texts is that the phrase indicated the extremities to which an unregulated fight might go. More regulated combats—festive jousts and even individual challenges—might end long before they reached “extremities.”
5 The most recent detailed discussion is in my Deeds of Arms: Formal combats in the late fourteenth century (Highland Village, Texas, 2005), 76–120. See also Jonathon Sumption,
This formal combat—formal in the sense that time, place, numbers, and the specification of what constituted victory were arranged in advance and adhered to—caught the imagination of contemporary observers, even though it was by no means the only or even the first such challenge. Such writers as Jean le Bel, who was perhaps the earliest chronicler to write about the Combat, or Jean Froissart, who later adapted and elaborated on Le Bel’s account, saw it as a pure example of chivalry: LeBel characterized it as “a most marvelous deed of arms that should never be forgotten,”—a contest of Rolands and Oliviers. Froissart echoed this assessment. The two chroniclers lauded the participants as heroes because they took their vocation as warriors with unflinching seriousness, even though most of these men were at the time obscure figures scrabbling at the margins of respectability. In the grubby Breton war, where plundering the weak and avoiding confrontation with the strong was normal behavior for combatants, these men embodied a more honorable type of conflict, one involving men at arms against men at arms, equal numbers against equal numbers, and no retreat. They showed themselves as good as their word. They had said they would fight to the end, and they did.

Because contemporaries—at least some of them—found the Combat of the Thirty against Thirty so admirable, and because it continued to be commented on by writers in later generations, it is an excellent way to access attitudes toward war, courage, and chivalry. What does the combat tell us about how the men who took part in such challenges actually behaved?

We have a pretty fair idea of how chivalrous gentlemen were supposed to act when they challenged their king’s enemies to a fight. Although they were duty bound to oppose one another in war, and although even an arranged fight could lead to death or horrific injury, such matters

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6 Chronique de Jean le Bel, 2:194.

7 Ibid., 2:196.


9 This is one of the many questions about the Combat raised in my book, *Deeds of Arms.*