

RED OCTOBERS:

What Won the Battles of Hastings and Agincourt

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The period in European history labeled "Medieval" is known by a few other terms which evoke some negative images in the mind. Time has come to know this period, which can run anywhere from A.D. 400 to about 1400 (depending upon the sources) as the "Middle Ages" or the "Dark Ages," neither of which sound terribly progressive. Indeed, this period has been studied, or rather skimmed over, with the belief that progress had been put on pause while time moved forward. To make this claim is not only cynical, but invalid. Many technological developments did, in fact, rise from this time frame. Revolutionary agricultural processes erupted making harvest time much more plentiful. The development of larger castles fabricated from stone have provided future generations with everlasting symbols of a highly productive age. Sometimes overlooked, as technological contributions, are the weapons and armory of Medieval Europe. Being an essential ingredient to the success of a kingdom, weapons and armor needed to be not only effective, but continuously effective. Indeed, Medieval Europe had its own version of an arms race.

This technological development of Medieval Europe's weapons is illustrated when two major battles of equal significance are compared. One battle, The Battle of Hastings, occurred in October 1066, the other, The Battle of Agincourt in the same month 1415. Both were fought between the inhabitants of modern day France and England and, surprisingly, both victors possessed a smaller army. This paper will illustrate that the technological developments of armor and of certain weapons resulted in victory for the army which took advantage of Medieval Europe's productivity. However, knowledge concerning the tactics, strategies, and actual events of both battles must be presented in order to achieve this goal. Before that assignment is approached, it is necessary to outline the causes of these two battles and explain their significance.

The Battle of Hastings centered on two highly

popular characters, Harold Godwinson, Earl of the West Saxons and William II, seventh Duke of Normandy. The year was 1066 and Edward the Confessor, King of England, lay at his deathbed without a child and therefore no direct heir to the throne. Harold, who was the Queen's brother, felt he should rightfully succeed the ailing King; he was, after all, the King's brother-in-law. William too could lay claim. His grandfather was Edward's mother's brother. In other words, William was Edward's first cousin once removed. Ultimately, Harold beat William to the throne, which infuriated the Duke. William thus set out on an invasion of England to rightfully take the crown from Harold.

The Battle of Agincourt took place beneath the larger heading of The Hundred Years War between England and France. Ever since Hastings, the two nations had been constantly involved in disputes. England had settlements in France as did France in England, which resulted in discrepancies over who controlled what. These territorial disagreements led to armed conflicts. Richard II, King of England until 1399, nearly resolved the conflicts but, as often happens in monarchies, he was deposed. His cousin, Henry IV, took up the crown in the midst of controversy and once again armed territorial conflicts began. Henry IV died, however, shortly after formally taking the crown and was succeeded by his son, Henry V. Engaged in a civil war between the Orleanist and Burgundian Factions, France sat vulnerable to any invasion. Henry V took advantage of this French division as well as the weak leadership of France's King Charles VI, and decided to invade the mainland. His timing was just a bit off, for when he landed in Normandy, the warring factions of France were making peace. The Battle of Hastings occurred during the dawn of a new century. Men fought with ancient weapons and the battle would test the efficiency and effectiveness of ancient technology. In addition, had the outcome of the clash been different, there might not have been any conflicts between England and France such as those

that sparked the Hundred Years War and the Battle of Agincourt. The Battle of Agincourt broke any possibilities of reconciling the conflicts, such as Richard II's efforts, between England and France. In both battles, it is possible to see that the winners achieved victory by utilizing the most technologically advanced weapons and armor.

Bright and early on 14 October 1066, two great armies prepared to engage. William and his Norman army, after successfully landing on the English Isle and sacking the coastal town of Hastings, began marching toward London. In his way stood Harold, strategically placed atop the hill which the Normans must overcome if they were to follow the trail out of Hastings and on to London. The Norman army, which included French and Bretons as well as Normans, consisted of approximately seven or eight thousand men—"three thousand horsemen, one thousand archers and the rest as infantry."¹ William's forces were divided up into three divisions: Normans (representing the middle division), French (representing the eastern wing), and Bretons (representing the western wing). William, himself a Norman, commanded the center flank possibly due to the amount of loyalty he would get from this division. Each division was subsequently divided into three separate arms: archers in front, foot soldiers (infantry) directly behind the archers and mounted soldiers (calvary) bringing up the rear. With this highly calculated, highly organized force staring Harold in the face, William decided to hold his ground and let Harold initiate the inevitable battle.

Harold, too, wished for a defensive battle. His goal was to simply halt the Norman progress. His army, which had "slightly more [men than William],"² proved themselves against the fierce Vikings only weeks earlier at the Battle of Stamford Bridge.³ Though experience and victory were on their side, so too were fatigue and loss of men. In addition, Harold's defensive strategy did not come equipped with an efficient organization such as William's. Essentially a homogeneous group of Englishmen, the divisions of this army consisted almost entirely of infantry. What few horses Harold possessed he distributed to his housecarls and his brothers. The infantry contained a vast number of individual fighters, many of whom preferred to fight alone rather than as a unit. Thus, among the infantry, there seemed to be no real sign of organization within the English army.

William's forces armed themselves with quite an array of battle provisions. His archers held short bows and, leather garments aside, went unarmored. Some archers equipped themselves with crossbows that used heavier bolts, but there were too few of them to produce any remarkable difference in the

outcome of Hastings. The Norman infantry wore chain mail (a complex iron "shirt" made of interconnected rings that could stop the cutting or slashing effect of most weapons) and carried either a sword or a pike (similar to a spear). Calvary weapons consisted of swords, spears or lances, and iron maces (a club topped off with a spiked metal ball). These men wore metal helmets, chain mail that extended to their knees and rode on unprotected horses.

The weapon of choice for the English happened to be the two-handed battle axe, an extremely vile instrument whose pre-war function was the slaughtering of animals. In addition to the battle-axe, the English infantry carried swords, spears, javelins (lightweight throwing spears), and small axes which could be hurled at one's enemy. The primary weapon of the poorer soldiers consisted of a stone tied onto a stick which could be thrown quite a long distance. Those fortunate enough to possess a horse utilized essentially the same weapons as the infantry. English armor included, along with the universal chain mail "shirt," giant shields. These shields had a triangular shape to them and protected a soldier's thighs and stomach as well as the chest region.

As mentioned above, both William and Harold wished to pursue a defensive battle. However, "a battle cannot be won without attack—and the English needed to win, not merely hold that ridge."⁴ This concept never entered into Harold's mind and consequently William's army made the first advance. Due to the ferocity of their fighting, the English managed to thwart the initial attack and actually forced the Normans to retreat. What they lacked, however, was an orchestrated attack plan since Harold still insisted on a defensive battle. Thus, while Harold's forces (at least those who did not chase after the fleeing Normans) remained on the hill, the Normans were able to regroup and lead a second charge. On their first charge, the Normans tried to run through the English lines, which led to disaster at the hands of the devastating battle-axe. So, learning a vital lesson, their second charge began around one hundred yards away from the English. The English javelin could not travel the distance between them and their enemy. The Normans, with a fairly large archer corps, sat back and rained arrows upon the English. This "arrow-storm" tactic weakened the English emotionally as well as physically. It was only a matter of time before William (henceforth nicknamed "the Conqueror") and his Normans could successfully overtake their opponents. The English crown now rested on a foreign head.

The roles of the French and the English were reversed for the Battle of Agincourt: in this episode, the English were invading, and the French were

defending. Henry V planned to take France by establishing a base and then attacking in successive bursts from that base. That base became the coastal town of Harfleur. On 8 October 1415, Henry set out for the town of Calais, 180 miles from Harfleur. The French received word of the English move and hence pursued the English, finally passing them on 24 October. The massive French force then set up for battle just outside of the town of Agincourt.⁵ After losing men to various unfortunate circumstances over the long journey to Calais, "[Henry's army] now numbered about ten thousand in all, eight thousand archers and two thousand men-at-arms."⁶ Henry spread his troops along a clearing between two dense forests, alternating the differing soldiers. On either wing were a group of archers, farther in stood two bunches of men-at-arms, or infantry, inside these two groups were two more "wedges" of archers and, finally, a third group of men-at-arms in the center. Henry, much like Harold and William in the Battle of Hastings, wished to be on the defensive. He tried to provoke the French into initiating an attack by launching a series of arrows into the French lines.

The French army (the French king, Charles VI did not participate in this battle) severely outnumbered Henry's forces nearly two to one, with an estimate of about 25,000 men. The bulk of the French army consisted of men-at-arms, which totaled nearly 24,000, leaving only 1,000 or so mounted soldiers. The tremendous number of men-at-arms were broken into two separate lines, one in front of the other. Calvary formed the wings on either side of these two lines as well as a third line behind the rest of the infantry. With their advantage in numbers, the French could easily attack. However, they too wanted the English to instigate the unavoidable contest.

The English army, with their infamous archers, chose the bow and arrow as their primary weapon. These bows were drastically different from those used in 1066. The bow itself increased in length (hence the name "longbow") which in turn increased the distance the arrows could travel. Each archer carried with him one or two bundles of approximately twenty-four arrows. In addition to their precious bows and arrows, the archers carried with them swords, axes, or mallets in the event they must fight hand to hand. One other "weapon" the archer's utilized were giant stakes which they pounded into the ground at about a forty-five degree angle (their grisly purpose will be revealed later). The men-at-arms carried essentially the same weapons as soldiers of the past: swords, lances, battle-axes, spears, perhaps a dagger. The crucial difference between the past and 1415 lay in the armor. Chain mail served exclusively as mobile armor covering the

joints (e.g., shoulders and elbows) while plated steel armor covered the rest of the body. This new body armor eliminated the use of a cumbersome shield, a bare necessity for any soldier four hundred years earlier.

The French calvary dressed themselves in much the same way as the English men-at-arms. Their horses too were shielded on their faces and chests and a padded cloth was draped over the sides of the horse. Thus, the horses of Agincourt were much more battle-ready than those of Hastings. These mounted soldiers had cut their lances down since they knew they would not be fighting other mounted soldiers, but foot soldiers. The French men-at-arms equipped themselves with swords, maces, battle-axes, or bills (spears with a hook extending from the point of the spear). The helmets of both calvary and infantry ranged from bassinets, which were open-faced, to helmets with nasal slits extending from the forehead.

The Battle of Agincourt took place the morning of 25 October 1415 but, much as the Battle of Hastings, it began more or less as a stand-off between two armies wanting to fight on the defensive. However, the consistent barrage of English arrows upon the French effectively provoked them into engaging. The first to charge were the calvary from the wings. Riding at full gallop through a curtain of arrows, some of which bounced off the steel armor and some piercing the chain mail joints with their bodkinlike tips, the French charged into the English lines. As mentioned earlier, the archers had pounded giant stakes into the ground at forty-five degree angles. Though the horses were armored, the combination of the speed of their approach and the sharpness of the stakes resulted in a ghastly scene. At the sight of so many horses and men falling, a call for retreat rose amongst the French. As they sped away from the English lines, however, they ran smack into the first line of French infantry. This collision halted the second French charge for some time until they could gather themselves and proceed; all of this while the storm of arrows continued.

Torrential rains had soaked the battlefield the night before the actual battle. The calvary charge had created a virtual mud pit for their comrades to cross. In addition, the English archers on the wings funneled the French so that the English would be attacking a smaller front of French infantry. The clash between the English and French men-at-arms went on for quite some time, at which point many of the archers put down their bows and picked up their swords, axes, or daggers to aid their infantry. The archers attacked with great ferocity, which the French did not return. That is, they were somewhat

reluctant to attack any of the archers. To fight an archer would not produce the same amount of respect for a soldier as fighting another soldier. This resulted in several archers ganging up on one or two French infantrymen. Thus began what John Keegan calls the "tumbling effect." The French foot soldiers were falling on top of one another, some as a result of injury or death, some from slipping in the muddy field. Previously, the French believed they could simply roll over the English with their superior numbers. The "tumbling effect," however, prevented much of their infantry from even coming into contact with the English army. Eventually, both armies retreated and another waiting period began.

The English numbers were falling as well. Thus when Henry received word that the French planned on another attack with the second line of infantry and a third calvary charge, he ordered the execution of all French prisoners. This drastic measure, though cruel, placed enough fear into the French army to cause them to retreat from the battlefield; the English soon did the same. The Battle of Agincourt demoralized and humiliated the French. After all, they outnumbered the English by more than two to one and they were fighting on their own ground. For the English, the victory increased their interest in a conquest of France which only hardened the relations between the two nations. The Hundred Years War was only in mid-stride in 1415; the fighting went on for another forty to fifty years.

Many theories have been proposed concerning the outcomes of both the Battle of Hastings and the Battle of Agincourt. Hastings' result has been linked to such things as Harold's "indecision, stubbornness in a prepared plan, caution or sheer inability to inspire"⁷ and the Norman usage of calvary since "Englishmen had never met horsemen in battle."⁸ The French loss at the Battle of Agincourt has been attributed to the rain-soaked battlefield as well as the lack of a dominating leader to successfully coordinate the massive French force.⁹ However, the use and alterations of the bow and arrow as well as the development in armor stick out as the most pervading explanation for the results of the two battles.

There is nothing beautiful about war. It is bloody; it is vicious; it is ghastly. Despite the glory or valor one might receive for any brave actions performed in the heat of battle, there is one simple, one basic fact that cannot be ignored: no one wishes to die. Becoming a martyr is a special honor, but the prospects of remaining alive to receive the rewards of valor seem more appealing. Comparing the Battle of Hastings with the Battle of Agincourt, one can see, beneath the developments in weapon technology, the fear of death amongst the soldiers. Most notably

this is exemplified in the changes in armor from vulnerable chain mail to durable steel-plated armor. These steel plates covered the vital regions of the body, while chain mail was used only near the joints for mobility. It is true that chain mail could lessen the cutting effect of swords and, although not as effectively, could reduce the effect of arrows. However, the force behind the blow of a sword was not thwarted. Thus, one could escape decapitation yet still get knocked unconscious. Similarly, as the strength behind an archer's arrows increased, the interconnected chain mail could not repel an onslaught of arrows.

In addition, the increasing distance between the armies illustrates how they feared death. In 1066, initial contact was hand to hand, but as the battle progressed, the distance between the two opponents increased. The same holds true for 1415; the difference occurring only in the distance between the English and the French. To be sure, many deaths resulted from hand to hand combat in both Hastings and Agincourt, but the fact remains that from 1066 to 1415 the desire to keep the distance between one's enemy as great as possible pervaded military strategy. The logic in this is quite simple, especially if one's army is outnumbered. To even out the odds, one needs to cut the opposing army down before engaging. This tactic persevered and survived between Hastings and Agincourt and even beyond. To prove this, one only needs to look at present-day military weaponry.

Comparing the weapons used during the Battle of Hastings and the Battle of Agincourt allows one to see the technological advancement that took place within this four hundred year time span. It is essential to observe primarily the weapons utilized by the victors of each battle, for their weapons proved to be the most effective. The Battle of Hastings would have progressed differently had it not been for the bow and arrow of the Normans. They could sit back far enough out of the range of the English javelins yet within the range of their own projectiles.

It is true that the battle-axe performed brilliantly when caught in hand to hand combat, however the lack of such combat reduced its potency; a battle-axe obviously would be useless in the hands of someone who was over one hundred yards away from his enemy. This concept grew in popularity over the years, as the development of the longbow illustrates. This magnificent weapon possessed the ability to launch an arrow up to four hundred yards. By altering the trajectory of their weapons toward the sky, archers could increase the force with which their arrows landed. The combination of the force behind the bow and the earth's gravity generated a weapon

that could pierce even the revolutionary steel-plated armor. The horrific stakes employed by the English archers during the Battle of Agincourt, as indispensable as they have been made out to be, seem trivial in comparison to the effect the continual showers of arrows had on the French men-at-arms. Indeed, as the French infantry marched ahead toward the mass of English archers, the piercing effect of the arrows increased. Though they did not kill as many Frenchmen as they wished, they archers did achieve two goals. First, they demoralized the French. It is hard to keep high spirits when arrows are coming "in sheets of five thousand at ten-second intervals."¹⁰ Second, as mentioned earlier, the archers were able to funnel the French soldiers providing a narrower front of attack.

The information presented above illustrates how the bow and arrow achieved victory for the Normans during the Battle of Hastings and for the English at the Battle of Agincourt. This might cause one to wonder why the English did not utilize the bow and arrow at Hastings or why the French did not possess longbows at Agincourt. In order to achieve victory in battle, an army must possess some kind of advantage (e.g. number of troops, strategic placement of troops, etc.). The key to victory lies in holding that advantage and keeping the enemy from gaining it as

well. "Englishmen had never met horsemen in battle"¹¹ before Hastings, yet they were able to combat that Norman advantage with the battle-axe. The bow and arrow, for the English, was a hunting tool, much as the axe was to the French. It just so happens that the bow and arrow proved to be more effective than the axe.

This concept can be further illustrated in the Battle of Agincourt. The French possessed bows and arrows, but they were certainly not as deadly as the English longbow nor were they as influential. Furthermore, the English possessed the same steel-plated armor as the French. The French arrows merely bounced off the English while the arrows from the powerful English longbows could penetrate the French soldiers. The French just did not know how effective a longbow could be. They were deprived of Medieval technology. This can even happen in modern-day war, as illustrated in the United States' possession of nuclear weaponry during World War II. The U.S. had something no other nation possessed. This devastating weapon was kept secret in a time when one nation could contact another nation in a matter of seconds via a telephone call. Imagine how easy it was to keep a revolutionary weapon secret in Medieval Europe!

Endnotes

¹ David Howarth, *1066: The Year of the Conquest* (New York: The Viking Press, 1979), 169. DA1 95.H69

² *Ibid.*, 169-70.

³ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁵ Anne Curry, *The Hundred Years War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 97-8. DC96.C87

⁶ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 81. D25.K43

⁷ Frank Barlow, *William I and the Norman Conquest* (London: The English Universities Press Ltd, 1965), 78. DA197.B33

⁸ Howarth, 175.

⁹ Keegan, 113-14.

¹⁰ Keegan, 98.

¹¹ Howarth, 175.

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