An Introduction to Medieval Warfare

The ways in which armies fought has always been a function of two things – the skills of the commanders and their troops plus the technology of weaponry. It is perhaps a sad fact of life that so much technological innovation has derived from the search for military superiority. The medieval period saw changes in both of these factors.

Consider the way that battles had been fought over the preceding thousand years. When the Romans left Britain they took with them the most disciplined armed force the western world had yet encountered. Theirs was an army primarily of infantry supported by spearmen, archers, slingshot artillery and some cavalry. For centuries the highly drilled Roman legions had been able to defeat their tribally-based, largely untrained enemies by wearing them down on the battlefield and then by using their cavalry to mop up the fleeing survivors. Towards the end of the Roman period this system had begun to break down in the face of new challenges from tribes such as the Huns who were skilled horsemen using lances and bows. Face to face and on foot the Roman legions were devastating but they were always vulnerable to flanking attacks from the side and from behind. In addition, the Roman’s enemies had learnt from them in terms of armour, weaponry and tactics.

The early medieval period (from 400 AD to 1000 AD) saw a widely divergent use of both infantry and cavalry forces based on the many different traditions and structures of European societies. In Anglo-Saxon Britain the use of cavalry seems to have all but disappeared. Battles again became primarily face-to-face clashes of infantry. Initially such battles were probably a rather disorganised melee but by the 7th century this had been superseded by the development of the shield wall at the front line following an exchange of missiles such as javelins, stones and some archery. The shield wall comprised a line of soldiers protected by interlocking their shields. This tactic had been used by the Romans and others in the past and is still used by modern police forces on anti-riot duty.



*Shield Wall Picture by: WyrdLight.com*

Regrettably there is little by way of reliable written accounts of this period and scholars continue to debate the extent to which horses played a part in battles other than as a means of transport to the battlefield. On continental Europe the tradition developed differently and cavalry played a greater role especially in the Frankish armies of the 8th and 9th centuries assisted by the import of technological advances from the east – most importantly the stirrup which made it much easier to fight on horseback. Even more important in this development was the establishment of effective central control of military forces under Pepin and Charlemagne which lead to the development of a military and social elite which was highly mobile and which fought over much greater distances which was not the case with local levies. However, it was not until the 11th and 12th centuries that we first see the common use of cavalry charges with couched lances. The Normans were masters of this technique.



*Norman knights charging the Anglo-Saxon shield wall – The Bayeux Tapestry*

The age of the mounted knight fighting both on and off of his horse had arrived and with it the dawn of what we call “chivalry”.

“Chivalry” is a difficult term. It has no precise definition and its nature changed over time. Clearly, it derives from the close association of the warrior with his horse. In popular perception it is about knights in shining armour rescuing damsels in distress and undertaking bold quests to find the Holy Grail. In this country that perception derives primarily from the Victorian romanticised literature of such as Sir Walter Scott (Ivanhoe) or Alfred Lord Tennyson (Idylls of the King). In reality it was something more complex and in many ways more practical.

By the high Middle Ages (1000 AD to 1300 AD), the role of knighthood had evolved into a socio-military system. Those who lived and fought in this way were the elite in both areas. Chivalry was the code that united them across national boundaries. Within this code there were certainly notions of honourable behaviour towards those who looked to the knightly class for protection. The cult of the chivalric knight as the epitome of honour, courage and loyalty was celebrated in the literary works of the period across Europe, most particularly in the growing body of tales about King Arthur and his knights. In the chronicles of the period, especially those of Jean Froissart, there is much emphasis on chivalric deeds of arms. Underlying this, however, was the hard military reality. The essence of chivalry was a set of values governing the conduct of war based on the principle of self-preservation among knights. Mutual respect and a system of ransoms were designed to reduce the likelihood of knights being killed in battle. Such considerations did not, of course, apply to the common soldier or, indeed to the ordinary citizen or peasant. There are many examples of the brutality that was meted out to the non-knightly classes such as the great raids of the 14th century by the English in France, the massacre of the citizens of Limoges by The Black Prince and the protection rackets operated by the free companies of knights during gaps in The Hundred Years War. In his book “Knights and Peasants”, Nicholas Wright says “the lines of demarcation between war and brigandage, and between chivalrous knights and highway robbers, were not at all clear in practice”. Yet on the battlefield, for most the Middle Ages, the system of chivalry as understood by members of the knightly elite operated as intended. It greatly reduced the chances of being killed. This, of course, was accompanied by the general view that pitched battles were best avoided and much warfare was in the form of raids, skirmishes and sieges of fortified positions.

In terms of military battle tactics, the medieval period was dominated by the cavalry charge into the opposing infantry, followed by a period of hand-to-hand fighting. The knightly classes were at the centre of both. They were the ones to whom victory or defeat and the honour or shame accrued. The bulk of the casualties were expected to be amongst the common soldiers. Where knights fell this was supposed to be in heroic close combat with others of their class. In the longest military conflict of the medieval period, The Hundred Years War between England and France, fought over the claims of the English kings to the throne of France, there was a divergence in tactics. The French knights remained attached to the heavy cavalry charge. The sight and sound of a unit of knights on heavy horses would have been truly terrifying. The English, however, took a different view. At the battle of Bannockburn (1314) when a larger English force was defeated by the Scots, the English knights learned the benefits of fighting on foot. Over the rest of the 14th century the English refined this technique with their knights on foot with bodies of archers either intermingled or placed at the sides. Various defences were put up against the cavalry charge, most usually pits were dug but at Agincourt Henry V famously had sharpened stakes placed in the ground in front of his men. This was not a new tactic but it was very effective – horses do not charge onto sharp points willingly. Cavalry still had its place but primarily in chasing down the fleeing enemy after defeat. This was termed ‘the rout’ and it was in this phase of a battle that most casualties were sustained. The French considered that this tactic of fighting on foot was not in the proper tradition of warfare and accused the English of not playing by the rules!

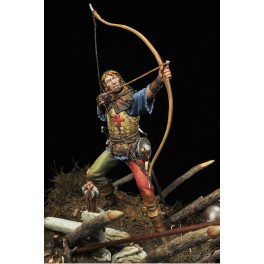
As the Middle Ages progressed the use of ransoms and the sparing of opponents appears to have diminished. It has been suggested that, in the case of domestic conflicts, this mirrored development in the legal basis of warfare. Those who opposed the king were traitors and deserved to die. In international wars the position is more complex. In this case, the laws of chivalric warfare still required that knightly adversaries should not be killed except in the direst of circumstances. Any knight overcome in combat was required to surrender which established an honourable relationship with his captor leading to ransom. This arrangement suited everyone. However, by the later part of the period it seems that the kings were in greater control of their adherents and could override the self-interest of individual knights in pursuit of national goals. On some occasions the system broke down completely in the face of particular circumstances. The most famous example is probably Henry V’s order to kill the prisoners at Agincourt where there was concern that they might join a renewed effort by the French. On top of this was the changing technology of warfare. For the first time we see the future of modern warfare – killing at a distance with projectile weapons. At this time, the longbow began to come into its own.

Over 6ft in length, the longbow was capable of killing a man at over 200 yards. The best bows were made of yew, cut with the heartwood on the inner side. This compressed when the bow was drawn, while the sapwood on the other side stretched. The combination provided immense power. The biggest bows had a draw-weight of up to 150lbs or more, twice that of a modern hunting-bow. The bow needed to be drawn right back to the ear to obtain full power. It required great physical strength to shoot and archers required years of training and practice. The longbow had a great advantage over the more powerful crossbow: the rate at which the archer could shoot. In a minute, a skilled man could shoot half a dozen arrows, while a crossbowman could do little more than discharge a single quarrel. The gravitational pull as an arrow shot with a high trajectory fell towards its target meant that it remained extremely effective even at long range. Specialised arrowheads were used. A narrow bodkin head could penetrate armour; a broader bladed head was capable of inflicting appalling wounds and was especially effective against horses.

Here is a selection of modern replica arrowheads with bodkins on the far right. Archers would ordinarily put arrows into the ground in front of them for easy access and this added to the likely infection of any wounds that they might inflict.



No English longbows survive from the Middle Ages, but the 16th century wreck of the Mary Rose, one of Henry VIII’s warships, yielded a large number of bows, 6ft to 7ft long, which are almost certainly little different from those used earlier.



By the middle of the 14th century the use of the longbow by the English was becoming a key part of battle tactics. At both Crecy (1346) and Poitiers (1356) in the Hundred Years War the use of archers had played a significant role. In both cases the French used their heavy cavalry to charge the English lines. In both cases the longbow was instrumental in reducing the impact of these charges, most especially at Crecy, but in neither case was it only the longbow that contributed to the defeat of the French. In both cases the use of archers was additional to the combat between the men-at-arms and the knights both on horseback and on foot. From the French point of view this was unchivalrous.

It was at the battle of Homildon Hill (1402), near Wooler in Northumberland, this new and unchivalrous mode of battle was to find its fullest expression. At Homildon Hill a large Scottish raiding force was intercepted by a smaller English army while on the way home from Newcastle to the border at Coldstream. This English force was under the command of the son of the Earl of Northumberland, Harry Hotspur. We are told that his initial instinct was to charge uphill into the Scottish defensive position. On the day at Homildon Hill however the council of Earl Dunbar, the Scottish Earl of March, who was fighting with the English, prevailed. The English force contained a large contingent of archers. It was these who would, in effect, fight the whole of the battle. Shooting uphill into the mass of Scottish soldiery they unleashed a storm of more than 250,000 arrows over a period of probably less than ten minutes. Five thousand arrows in the air at any one time, landing on their targets at a rate of 30,00 per minute. Heavy cloth-yard arrows with vicious bodkin heads. (A ‘cloth-yard’ arrow was named because the shaft would have been about three-foot long. The shaft was thick and thus the arrow would have a much greater weight than a modern arrow used in target archery. The ‘quarter pound arrow’ was used in the later Middle Ages to combat thicker plate armour.) The surviving accounts tell us that the Scots were transfixed – in every sense – and for a few minutes they simply stood and received the arrow storm. When some of their knights finally gathered themselves for a charge down the slopes of the hill, the archers simply retreated and continued to shoot as they walked backwards, picking off the knights at close range. The charge came to nothing and the Scots fled the field. The flower of Scottish nobility was dead or captured. At no point did they reach the English lines and Hotspur with the knightly cavalry simply watched the action unfold. For centuries battles had been won or lost in hand-to-hand combat. Face to face. This was something new – a battle won entirely by ranged weapons – killing at a distance. Modern warfare was beginning - warfare that would change completely and finally as the longbow was replaced by the firearm.

Gunpowder-based firearms were used in medieval Europe from the early part of the 14th century. At first these were crude and unreliable. The chances of an explosion killing the user was very high. Cannon were used initially as siege weapons but the English had deployed them against the French at Crecy in 1346. The first cannon used stone balls which did little damage to castle and city walls. The guns were heavy and cumbersome to move, slow to reload and not very accurate. During the 15th century many improvements were made. Stone balls gave way to iron, technical improvements to guns and gunpowder made it possible to be much more accurate and guns became lighter and easier to transport. By the end of the century the cannon had become an essential part of an army’s weaponry and the days of the castle or city wall as an impregnable fortress were numbered.

Handguns were rare before the second half of the 14th century but by the end of that century they were cheaper and more accurate which brought them in to more common use. The technological improvements mentioned above also applied to these smaller weapons and their use grew during the course of the 15th century. Initially these weapons were used primarily as an alternative to the crossbow, a weapon favoured by some European armies but never used in great numbers by the English who relied on the longbow. Eventually however the developing technology and the fact that guns could be produced cheaply and used with only little training, as compared to longbows which required years of practice to master, the handgun replaced both types of bow on the battlefield.

This has been a very brief and compressed introductory view of the changing nature of medieval warfare. For a comprehensive view we would recommend ‘Armies and Warfare in the Middle Ages: The English Experience’ by Professor Michael Prestwich, Emeritus Professor of History, Durham University – Yale University Press 1999 – 0300076630.

Michael Prestwich has made three short videos on the subject of medieval warfare. These are designed for use by teachers, undergraduates and older pupils. They are free for educational use and may be found here:

<http://thefaculties.org/medieval-britain/medieval-warfare-michael-prestwich/>