Medieval siege warfare: A reconnaissance

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Abstract

Historians writing during the later nineteenth and the twentieth centuries unambiguously recognized the importance, indeed the central role, played by siege warfare in European military history during the Middle Ages, i.e., from the dissolution of the Roman empire in the West at least until the emergence of high quality gunpowder weapons. Thus, for example, Hans Delbruck observed: “Throughout the entire Middle Ages we find...the exploitation of the defensive in fortified places.”(1) Charles Oman, Delbruck’s contemporary, took much the same position. (2)

Recognition of the importance of siege warfare, however, did not lead historians to the obvious conclusion that the subject merited intensive study as an essential aspect, if not the essential aspect, of medieval military history, and as a key to our understanding of the Middle Ages. Indeed, Henry Guerlac observed in 1943: “nothing is more conspicuously lacking in the field of military studies than a well-illustrated history of the arts of fortification and siegecraft.”(3) Yet, only two years later Ferdinand Lot wrote in the introduction to his classic study, L’Art militaire et les armées au moyen age et dans le proche orient: “il laisse de cote une parti essentielle du sujet, la Guerre de sieges, qui a joue un si grand role dans les siecles qu’on a passes en revue.”(4) In 1980, Philippe Contamine noted: “In its most usual form medieval warfare was made up of a succession of sieges accompanied by skirmishes and devastation.” Indeed, Contamine goes so far as to suggest that medieval warfare was dominated by “fear of the pitched battle” and a “siege mentality.” Like Lot, Contamine did not provide a major change of focus.(5)

The failure of military historians to pursue the study of medieval siege warfare can be rather simply, if not simplistically, explained as a result of “presentism.” During the later nineteenth century and throughout much of the twentieth, military planners cleaved to the doctrine which is often styled “the strategy of overthrow.” This emphasized “the importance of battle to such a degree that they regarded it as the only important act in war.”(6) Indeed, those historians who wrote medieval military history, whether professional scholars or amateurs, not only would appear to have adhered to this doctrine but regarded any other way of conducting warfare as ostensibly unworthy of study.(7) Thus, when scholars such as Delbruck, Oman, and Lot wrote medieval military history they looked for battles to study. Even more importantly, they focused attention upon the so-called “knights” or “heavily armed cavalry.” This element in society putatively dominated the battlefield, and thus they are also thought to have dominated medieval warfare with the shock of their mounted charge. This model is still regarded as the “key” to understanding the military history of the Middle Ages.(8)

Rather jejune and often confused narrative sources, frequently authored by militarily ignorant clerics, were and continue to be easily accessible in poor editions and even poorer translations to modern writers for the study of medieval battles. To use
these texts properly, however, requires an in-depth understanding of medieval historiography. Unfortunately, the “evidence” provided by these sources, most often used without proper critical assessment, traditionally is combined with romantic notions of chivalry and individualism purveyed by epic fantasies such as the Song of Roland to convince military historians that medieval warfare, i.e., the medieval battle, was as “irrational” as the sources from which the information, itself, was obtained. The research strategies pursued by those who wrote the most influential studies of medieval military history ostensibly ignored the documentary material which provided substantial data on such “unmedieval” subjects as logistics, the costs of castle building, and the engineering of siege machines. Indeed, for those military historians who wrote about the Middle Ages, the focus on battles not only led to a grossly misleading depiction of medieval warfare, but by failing to place the focus where it rightly belongs, i.e., on siege warfare, they did a substantial disservice to our understanding of a millennium of European history.

Medievalists with little or no research experience in military history, like military historians who specialize in periods other than the Middle Ages, are wont to use “the art of war” as one important means of distinguishing the medieval from the Roman world. The Roman military is seen to be characterized by the phalanx of heavily armed and rigidly disciplined infantry organized into legions of six thousand effectives and recruited from among the lower classes of the empire. By contrast, the medieval military is seen to be dominated by heavily armed cavalry, i.e., “knights,” who are believed by and large to have been drawn from the upper classes of society and are depicted as fighting much as they pleased in search of wealth, honor, and personal aggrandizement.

This formulation remains popular, in large part, because it provides a deceptively simple way to visualize the difference between ancient and medieval. Thus, the Roman legion represents public power while the medieval knight—the vassal who holds a fief from his lord—represents government as a private possession of the nobility. In addition, the medieval knight putatively provides the key to understanding a highly individualistic “chivalric” mentality which allegedly dominated not only the military but also the social life of the upper classes in the Middle Ages. By contrast, the Roman legionary is seen merely as one more anonymous marker in a highly bureaucratized society. These models are nonsense and should be scrupulously avoided—especially in textbooks and general education courses, not to mention scholarly research.

The ostensible reason for the reconnaissance being undertaken here is the appearance in 1992 of Jim Bradbury’s pathbreaking volume, The Medieval Siege. Bradbury, now retired from the University of London, is well known to specialists in medieval military history for his very useful study, The Medieval Archer, as well as for numerous articles dealing largely with eleventh-and twelfth-century Anglo-Norman and Angevin history. In The Medieval Siege, Bradbury very effectively sustains two major theses of exceptional importance through a millennium of history with a fundamental focus on the activities of western Europeans.

Bradbury begins with the observation that “there was a direct continuity throughout our period” (p. 1) and regards as his “most notable conclusion” the finding of “how similar are the methods and conventions [of siege warfare] applied at the start, and still at the end” (p. 333). This argument for continuity fundamentally is sound, and Bradbury demonstrates his thesis with many hundreds of examples drawn from more than a thousand years of medieval history, broadly defined. The bibliography of sources, as contrasted to modern scholarship, exceeds two hundred entries and, so far as I have been able to ascertain, these works are cited in the numerous footnotes. In short, though The Medieval Siege is well illustrated and has a chatty style, it is a work that must be taken very seriously. A second edition should look to better proofreading.

Bradbury begins with what should be an obvious insight—“siege warfare was Roman rather than barbarian” (p. 2)—and notes that towns and cities rather than “castles” were the usual targets during the early Middle Ages. Many important scholars, however, apparently still believe that the military forces of the Romano-German successor states were comprised ostensibly of “half-naked” barbarians who compensated for their ignorance of the art of war—e.g., logistics, strategy, and tactics—by raw courage and a natural affinity for the battlefield.

Thus, Bradbury would have found it useful to demonstrate the strength of his position by noting the example, one among many, of Flavius Merobaudes (d. before 467), a Roman of at least Frankish origin, who was raised in Spain, owned land in northern Gaul, and likely was a descendant of the famous Franco-Roman general of the same name. The younger Merobaudes won fame and fortune both as general and as a writer. Not unexpectedly, he was also an acute observer of the military scene and noted that the Visigoths, during the two generations following their flight from Gothia, i.e., their trans-Danubian homeland, had learned a great deal regarding the proper conduct of war. Thus, Merobaudes observed that the Visigoths’ military establishment was very different from that of the “Teutons” whom Caesar had fought. These Teutons, according to Merobaudes, had only a “crude command of warfare (ad bella rudem)” and were inexperienced in its developed art. By contrast, the Goths, Merobaudes implies, came to be both sophisticated and experienced in the mature art of warfare (“adulto marte probatum”) after their settlement within the empire.
As Merobaudes saw the situation, the Goths were no longer “a race from a barbarian land” but “enemies equal to the Romans” in war. Among those mature skills in the art of war which the Goths had acquired and which particularly convinced Merobaudes that this seminum barbaricae terrae had learned a great deal, was the ability to defend fortifications, i.e., castae, of the type which dotted the landscape of the Roman empire, and citadels, i.e., arces. The arx was the specially constructed stronghold within each great fortified city (urbs) which served as the civil, military, and ecclesiastical capital of the civitas. Indeed, it might even be argued from Merobaudes’ account that the Visigoths had learned something of the art of constructing fortifications as well.(18)

Bradbury’s argument for continuity is developed by identifying the basic characteristics of siege tactics. He calls attention to a series of steps taken by the offensive force beginning with a call for the surrender of the fortifications to be attacked and followed by the preparation of a blockade. Following the implementation of the blockade, efforts were made to employ one or more of the six S’s upon which siege warfare rested: suborning or subverting key defenders, scaring the garrisons with “propaganda,” sapping the walls, starving the population, storming the defenses, and “shelling” the besieged.

The defenders also had their tactics. These included stripping the countryside to deprive the besiegers of the opportunity to forage, sallying forth in sorties to attack enemy positions and assets, sapping the attackers’ mines and machines, suborning and subverting elements of the besieging forces, and “shelling” enemy positions. The number of S’s employed and the order in which they were employed both by the attackers and the defenders would appear to have depended upon the particular circumstances intrinsic to each situation. Bradbury makes no argument to suggest that in any period during the Middle Ages one pattern of S’s prevailed over any other or that any one commander during the course of his career developed a preference for one pattern over another.

Bradbury’s second major thesis, though pressed less strongly than the argument for continuity, has the potential to be far more revolutionary. By affirming the well-recognized fact that siege warfare dominated medieval warfare, Bradbury demonstrates from the massive body of evidence that he presents, the comparatively dependent and, indeed, the rather minor position played by mounted combat in the investment of fortifications. One may ask rhetorically in support of Bradbury’s position for the list of cities or even of small rural fortifications made of earth and wood which were taken by a cavalry charge. There was no place for the warhorse in the sapper’s mine, the artilleryman’s battery, or the crossbowman’s belfrey. Men fighting on foot, regardless of their social status, were required for the operation of battering rams and the climbing of scaling ladders. Indeed, one may even wonder if the commanders of armies carrying out sieges were accustomed to bring large numbers of very expensive and highly trained but very fragile warhorses with them. These had to be watered, fed, and guarded while waiting for the unlikely chance that they might be used.(19) The heavily armored knight on horseback, so often erroneously highlighted in textbooks as the medieval “tank,” had at best a minor role to play in siege warfare.

The mystique of battle haunts the field of military history and the modern doctrine rather weasely put by Oman—“the combatant who renounces all attempts to take the offensive must almost inevitably fail in the long-run”—requires that an examination of the strategic aspect of siege warfare be developed.(20) Although Bradbury does not deal with strategy in a systematic manner (see below) he does make clear regarding the Hundred Years’ War that “sieges played a greater role than battles in the whole war, apart from occurring in vastly greater numbers” (p. 156). The battles of Crecy, Poitiers, and Agincourt, which highlight most chapters on medieval military history, were of no consequence to France’s ultimate victory in the Hundred Years’ War.(21) Such generalizations can be sustained for almost any medieval war.

Despite the exceptional importance of Bradbury’s major theses, which should force a complete revision of general views regarding medieval military history, there is much about which specialists may complain. For example, Bradbury creates very serious problems through his attempt to periodize medieval siege warfare on the basis of largely implied criteria which are not central to the topic. The problem is irretrievably exacerbated by the coverage of the first five centuries (450-950) of the medieval millennium in less than fifty pages while the second five hundred years gets 400 percent more attention.

The history of medieval siege warfare surely must begin with the recognition that continuity from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages rested upon the “the enduringdominance of imperial military topography and the unchallenged superiority of ancient military science.”(22) While these points are apprehended by Bradbury, they are not satisfactorily pursued. Military topography includes not only the great walled cities (urbes) built during the fourth century, of which, for example, there were almost one hundred in Gaul alone, but also numerous castra, castella, and even less elaborate fortifications along with a magisterial road system, which was not surpassed in Western Europe until well into the eighteenth century and in some places even later, innumerable stone bridges, and an exceptionally elaborate network of ports.
Rogers’s efforts to identify crucial differences in the patterns of siege warfare as practiced in various parts of the Roman transportation system which made possible a very high level of logistic sophistication. Indeed, even in the early Middle Ages the importance of logistics was so thoroughly recognized by military decision makers that Charlemagne devoted considerable human and material resources to building a Rhine-Danube canal which was intended to connect the North Sea to the Black Sea. (23) The proper focus of medieval siege warfare and indeed of medieval warfare in general is the manner in which medieval polities developed their grand strategy or military policy in order to preserve, improve, and often expand these fortifications of Roman and even earlier origin in response to the threats posed by their adversaries.

Bradbury’s extended venture into what he calls “castle warfare” is a diversion which gives far too much weight to a rather minor aspect of siege operations and an even less important phase in the military history of the millennium under discussion. What drives this skewed focus is a very unhealthy attention to the “knights” in the context of medieval warfare. However, if we look, for example, to the great castle builders such as Fulk Nerra, count of the Angevins (987-1040), it is clear that the dozens of strongholds he built were part of a strategic system. These, however, were not all new constructions but in many cases included old Roman urbes and castra. Indeed, Fulk’s major operations and those of his allies were neither in the defense of nor attack on “castles” but on cities and castra of Roman origin such as Nantes, Tours, Poitiers, Sens, Bourges, Melun, and Amboise. (24) Fulk Nerra’s strategic system in Anjou and that of Alfred the Great (d. 899) in Wessex created an effective defense in depth for their respective polities and were based upon notions popularized in antique military science. (25) In this context it is important to note that Vegetius’s De re Militari was known in England at least as early as the time of Bede (d. 735), and a copy of Vegetius’s work was available to the Angevins very early in the history of this comital house. (26)

The major wars of the period 950-1200, which Bradbury sees largely in terms of castle warfare, were, in fact, focussed upon the old Roman cities and lesser fortifications of imperial origin. Although, for example, Bradbury gives a great deal of attention to Geoffrey Plantagenet’s siege of Montreuil Bellay ca. 1150, the series of campaigns by which this Angevin count conquered Normandy and took the title of duke ultimately rested upon his capture of the great Roman cities of Caen and Rouen. (27) Fractious magnates might well usurp control over one or another relatively minor fortification or build an “illegal” stronghold, but the great military operations of this period depended upon taking control of the old Roman cities and lesser fortified population centers. Bradbury’s own account of Frederick Barbarossa’s campaigns in Italy makes this point abundantly clear. Indeed, to highlight “castle warfare” for the millennium of medieval history is tantamount to devoting separate chapters to the Flying Tigers, Tito’s partisans, Skorzeny’s raid, Japanese operations off the North American mainland, and the V-2 in a single-volume history of World War II.

One chapter of The Medieval Siege which does, however, deserve special attention is “The Early Crusades, 1050-1200,” although Bradbury’s account now has been overshadowed by R. Rogers’s Latin Siege Warfare in the Twelfth Century, which deals ostensively with the entire Mediterranean basin from a Western perspective. (28) Indeed, Rogers’s study provides a basic treatment for this period of siege operations not only with respect to the Crusades but also to operations in southern Italy and Sicily, Lombardy, and the Iberian Reconquest. He devotes special attention, as well, to the seaborne siege warfare carried out by the Italian maritime states (the two-year siege of Acre is the focus of this chapter), and provides an especially useful account of the highly controversial historiography concerning medieval artillery.

The major point to emerge from Rogers’s effort is that the investment of cities, most of which were of antique origin, was the focal point of siege operations. Attacks on castles, by comparison, were of little significance except where they served as part of an in-depth defensive system which had been developed in order to control substantial territorial expanses. However, since Rogers generally approaches military operations from the point of view of those carrying out the siege—here the operations of Roger II are archetypal—the grand strategy of a defensive nature developed by the adversaries of those conducting the sieges tends to be seriously neglected. In short, Rogers’s treatment of warfare is ostensibly limited to the battle tactics and occasionally to the campaign strategy of the besieging forces. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Latin siege warfare during the twelfth century is not “castle warfare.”

Like Bradbury, Rogers also emphasizes continuity. This is evident even in regard to the highly controversial area of technology, where previous scholars frequently have looked for and found breakthroughs of epic proportion. Here, for example, the often extravagant claims of Lynn T. White, Jr., are opposed, although in a rather restrained manner. (29) Rogers is properly cautious as, for example, in his observations that “Mobile wall-dominating siege towers stemmed from Roman military practice and were part of a common tradition of medieval European siegework” (p. 244). He would seem to reject the notion that the period from the “fifth to the ninth century” was “an age without artillery” (p. 259), but this is not wholly clear. Gillmor’s article on the traction trebuchet, which resets the state of the question, should not have been ignored in this discussion of early medieval artillery. (30)
Another difficulty with the works of Bradbury and Rogers is the ostensible failure to treat the arms and armor of the troops engaged in siege warfare. The study of arms and armor is a rather specialized field in which there is a plethora of research which tends to focus upon museum collections and manuscript illustrations. There is, in general, very little effort to integrate the information thus generated into the study of warfare at either the strategic or tactical levels—the methods for using this type of information are also in need of methodological development.(31) Although much remains to be done in this area—from the perspective of medieval military history, arms and armor is arguably a virgin field—we now have an encyclopedic guide to the Arms and Armour of the Crusading Era: 1050-1350 by David C. Nicolle.(32)

Nicolle, a specialist in Middle Eastern history, has produced a monumental introduction which provides several thousand line drawings of various types of arms and armor rendered from both illustrations and artifacts (vol. 2). These drawings are exceptionally accurate, or so I have concluded from the several dozen I checked against photographs of the original monuments. However, by and large, Nicolle’s drawings from manuscript illustrations and sculpture take the item out of its context and thus limit our ability, for example, to judge the way in which a weapon is used. Also the line drawings often provide less of the “feeling” for the item which has been depicted than does a photograph. The approach used by Russell H. Robinson, The Armour of Imperial Rome, is much more valuable to the researcher.(33)

Nicolle organizes the drawings by regions or by countries—e.g., “The Eurasian Steppes, West,” “Ireland”—and then chronologically within each section, rather than by the type of artifact, e.g., helmets with nasals, greaves. Some sections, such as “The Empire–Germany,” are rather lengthy while others, such as Arabia, are very short. In volume one, Nicolle provides a commentary on each drawing which gives its location, date, and relevant characteristics. Unfortunately, the commentary is not annotated despite the fact that specialists not only have generated a great deal of disagreement regarding the date and provenance of various items but, even more importantly, concerning the historical value of one or another manuscript illustration for the depiction of a particular piece of equipment.(34)

Despite these criticisms, it is to be made clear that Nicolle has produced a monumental work which not only includes the very valuable drawings and commentaries discussed above, but also an exceptionally important dictionary of technical terms in thirty-three languages or historical dialects(35) and fifty-four pages of bibliography, including unpublished and published primary sources and unpublished and published scholarly works. The bibliography, of course, makes no pretense of being exhaustive, and specialists will undoubtedly find favorite works which have been omitted. It remains to be seen whether military historians will be effective in the exploitation of Nicolle’s “encyclopaedia” for the history of medieval warfare and of siege warfare in particular.

Although Nicolle is not given to broad generalizations, he does observe that “plate armor and its associated technology had, of course, never really dropped out of use where the manufacture of helmets was concerned,” and he contends that “plate body-armour during the late Roman and Early Medieval periods” never really disappeared (1:x). Thus Nicolle, like Bradbury and Rogers, makes a major contribution to our understanding of the military during the Middle Ages by emphasizing continuity with the later Roman empire. In addition, by demonstrating in account after account of sieges that the charge of heavy cavalry, the putative forte of the “feudal knight,” was of no significance in the vast majority of major medieval military operations, Bradbury and Rogers have forced a major reconsideration of the state of the question.

However, much remains to be done, as there are dramatic lacunae in both books. Both authors, for example, are exceptionally weak in dealing with military demography. The blame is placed upon unreliable monkish chroniclers. However, historical techniques are now well enough developed that we can get beyond the vagaries of biased chronicle sources in much the same way that we no longer have to rely uncritically on contemporary partisan accounts of political demonstrations to estimate the order of magnitude of the crowds involved in such activities.(36)

In this context, it is clear that neither Bradbury nor Rogers fully appreciates the thorough militarization of the “civilian” population of Western Europe which developed during the Middle Ages. This militarization took place not only in the cities but also in the countryside.(37) Thus, by calling attention to urban garrison contingents, which were usually rather small by
comparison with the able-bodied, i.e., armsworthy, city and suburban male population between the ages of fifteen and fifty-five (and sometimes even older), an impression is given that the men defending the walls were few in number. (38) A proper appreciation of the order of magnitude of the numbers of defenders in a city under siege also requires that estimates for the size of the attacking force be scaled upward. During the period prior to the first Crusade, for example, it is a fair generalization that a ratio of four attackers to each defender was a minimum if a general storming of the walls was to be carried out in a successful manner. (39)

Although most of the battles in the field during most of the Middle Ages may perhaps not have engaged as many troops as the 80,000 who fought at Catalaunian Plains in 451 or the 35,000-man armies which Charlemagne put into the field for the Avar campaigns. (40) large numbers rather than small numbers characterize medieval siege warfare. For example, the forces of the first Crusade, very conservatively estimated at 35,000, required Byzantine support to take the town of Nicea in 1097.

The dominance of siege warfare highlights the vital importance of strenuous training and high levels of unit cohesion throughout the Middle Ages. (41) A crew of fiftysappers digging a mine only a hundred meters in length at a depth of ten meters beneath the walls of a city surely required levels of expertise, training, and cohesion which rival those of submariners who might some day come under depth charge attack by an enemy destroyer. The combat team operating a battering ram under enemy fire or a catapult crew keeping their weapon in operation day and night certainly had to have obtained training and unit cohesion not inferior to that of modern tank or mortar crews. (42) Even the dozen men who were assigned to carry each fifteen-meter-long scaling ladder across a hundred-meter killing ground, place and secure it against the wall, and then climb it in a prescribed order while under withering enemy fire required far more than "dumb" courage.

The reconnaissance of siege warfare in the Middle Ages undertaken here in response to the stimulating works of Bradbury and Rogers makes clear that an entirely new state of the question must be formulated regarding the military in medieval Europe. Knights, heavy cavalry, isolated motte and bailey towers dominating a lawless countryside, small numbers of effectives, as well as a serious lack of training, discipline, and unit cohesion must be swept away as the dominant themes. Continuity from the later Roman empire through the Middle Ages is the proper focus. The medieval world was dominated by imperial military topography, antique military science, and the militarization of the vast majority of the able-bodied male population.

End Notes

1. Hans Delbruck, Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte, 2d ed. (Berlin, 1923), vols. 2 and 3. For the convenience of the reader, I have cited the English translations, History of the Art of War: Within the Framework of Political History, vol. 2, The Germans, and vol. 3, The Middle Ages, trans. Walter J. Renfroe (Westport, Conn., 1980, 1982). See 3:324 for the quotations. Delbruck's work on medieval military history, magisterial when published, should now be given an honorable burial. It is of no value for the medieval period and often is seriously misleading. These volumes do, however, have considerable value for the history of ideas and the history of historical writing. In this context, particular mention should be made of the fine English translations by Dr. Everett L. Wheeler of the Latin and Greek quotations scattered throughout the English translations of Delbruck's volumes.

2. History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages, 2 vols. (2d ed. 1924; reprint, New York, 1964), 2:52-54. Interestingly, Oman followed Kohler (see below note 5) with regard to siege technology.


Not all writers on the military history of the Middle Ages have ignored siege warfare. The most important and also the most
controversial work is that of G. Kohler, Die Entwickelung des Kriegswesens und der Kriegfuhrung in der Ritterzeit von Mitte des 11 Jahrhunderts bis zu den Hussitenkriegen, 3 vols. (Breslau, 1886-90). Kohler’s work, however, was so thoroughly savaged by contemporary reviewers that it has had very little positive influence. Indeed, much effort has been expended to use Kohler’s work to demonstrate what should not be done. See the general discussion by R. C. Smail, Crusading Warfare, 1097-1193 (Cambridge, 1956), 4-7; and the more specific critique with a good survey of the literature by R. Rogers, Latin Siege Warfare in the Twelfth Century (Oxford, 1992), 254-73.

6. Smail, Crusading Warfare, 14-17, provides a brief but accurate description of the problem along with a perceptive criticism of “presentism.”

7. Smail, crusading Warfare, 15, cites the example of Oman to good effect.

8. One of the four basic characteristics of the so-called “military revolution” whose contours have dominated early modern military history since the late 1950s (Michael Roberts, The Military Revolution 1560-1660 [Belfast, 1956] and reprinted in Michael Roberts, Essays in Swedish History [Minneapolis, 1967], 195-225) putatively took shape between ca. 1560-1660 and concerns the loss of ascendency on the battlefield of the heavy cavalry. Dennis E. Showalter, “Caste, Skill, and Training: The Evolution of Cohesion in European Armies from the Middle Ages to the Sixteenth Century,” Journal of Military History 57 (1993): 407-30, also sees the heavy cavalry as dominating the medieval battlefield. The myth of heavy cavalry dominating the medieval battlefield is severely harried in Bernard S. Bachrach, “The Middle Ages,” in Geoffrey Parker, ed., The Cambridge Illustrated Military History (Cambridge, forthcoming), ch. 4. Put simply, no one type of fighting man dominated the battlefields of Europe for a hundred years much less a thousand years during the Middle Ages.

9. Lot, as contrasted to Delbruck and Oman, was trained as a medievalist but was not a specialist in military history. However, it was not until F. Verbruggen, a military officer who was trained at Ghent as a medievalist by F. L. Ganshof, published his magisterial De Krijgskunst in West-Europa in de Middeleeuwen (Brussels, 1954), that a giant step forward was taken toward a proper understanding of medieval combat as conducted on the battlefield. Unfortunately, Verbruggen did not address his substantial talents and training to siege warfare and concentrated on battles in the field. The English translation of Verbruggen’s work as The Art of War in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, from the eighth Century to 1340, trans. Sumner Willard and S. C. M. Southern (Amsterdam-New York, 1977), makes this study easily accessible and is cited in the present paper for the convenience of the reader. For research purposes, however, the original is required because the author’s valuable notes were omitted from the translation. The translation, however, adds atreatment of the eighth century whereas the original began in the ninth century. Verbruggen, 1-22, and esp. 1-6. Also see Bernard S. Bachrach, “Logistics in Pre-Crusade Europe,” in John A. Lynn, ed., Feeding Mars: Logistics in Western Warfare from the Middle Ages to the Present (Boulder, 1993), 57-78.


11. The observation by Joachim Bumke, Studien zum Ritterbegriff im 12. und 13 Jahrhundert, 2d ed. (Heidelberg, 1976), 147-48, that “the chivalric knight of courtly literature...is an educational ideal...and a phenomenon of intellectual rather than of social history” is particularly apt. I cite here the translation by Stephen Jaeger, The Origins of Courtliness–Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals: 939-1210 (Philadelphia, 1985), 208-9. Note that neither Bumke’s nor Jaeger’s work demonstrates an understanding of medieval military history. Indeed, both scholars indulge the sterotypes under attack here.

12. For a new model, see Bachrach, “The Middle Ages,” forthcoming. For example, the point needs to be made for emphasis that the armies of the later Roman empire, i.e., the two centuries following the reforms of Diocletian, were not very like those of the later Republic and early Empire.


15. See, for example, Contamine, War in the Middle Ages: “Ignorant of proper discipline, easily discouraged, the Barbarians used very rudimentary tactics” (p. 11) and they had “an almost non-existent logistic” (p. 12).
For various details of Merobaudes' life and career, see Ferdinand Lot, "Un diplome de Clovis confirmatif d'une donation de patrice romain," Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire 17 (1938): 906-11; Karl. F. Stroheker, "Spanische Senataoren der spatromischen und westgotischen Zeit," Madrider Mitteilungen 4 (1963), followed by Friedrich Prinz, Fruehes Monachtum im Frankenreich: Kultur und Gesellschaft in Gallien, den Rheinlanden und Bayern am Beispiel der monastischen Entwicklung (4. bis 8 Jahrhundert) (Munich and Vienna, 1965), 70-71; and Frank M. Clover, Flavius Merobaudes: A Translation and Historical Commentary in Transactions of the American Philosophical Society n.s. 61.1 (Philadelphia, 1971): 7-10. Merobaudes' good classical education is well documented through the surviving poems and panegyrics which he authored. His military service is highlighted by campaigns in the Alps during the early 430s, in connection with which he was given the rank of comes rei militari or that of dux, as evidenced by his appointment as a count of the Consistory, and appointment in 443 to the rank of magister utriusque militiae which he exercised in Spain as successor to his father-in-law, Austurius. Merobaudes' honors included the award of the name Flavius for distinguished military service, admission to the Senate of Rome, the title of patricius, and a bronze statue erected in Rome by imperial order.


Panegyricus, II, lines 149-51.

Thanks to the researches of Verbruggen, cited above, and John Gillingham's "War and Chivalry in the History of William the Marshal," in P. R. Cross and S. D. Lloyd, eds., Thirteenth Century England (Woodbridge, 1990), 1-13, military historians generally are aware of the high quality of medieval military operations. There is, however, often some ambivalence as old ideas die hard. For example, Showalter, "Caste, Skill, and Training," asserts that "Medieval armies lacked anything like a comprehensive command structure able to evoke general, conditioned responses….Coherence…depended on mutual loyalties far more than on discipline, drill, or fear of punishment." Bradbury's angry observation (p. 80) has heuristic value: "there are still historians who sneer at medieval commanders as if they were fools or idiots, but in all areas of war commanders, then as since, were quite capable of carefully weighing up the position and coming to sensible and practical decisions."

The Art of War, 2:52.

For a good recent account, see Christopher T. Allmand, The Hundred Years' War: England and France at War, c. 1300-c. 1450 (Cambridge, 1988).


J. Chartrou, L'Anjou de 1109-1151: Foulque de Jerusalem et Geoffroi Plantagenet (Paris, 1928), remains basic but soon will be replaced with regard to the “Conquest of Normandy” by Rob Helmrich's forthcoming doctoral dissertation on Geoffrey Plantagenet (University of California at Santa Barbara).


Indeed, this is a difficult area of research and can easily turn into a disaster as Lynn White’s notorious stirrup


35. There surely will be controversy concerning both the methods by which this dictionary was compiled and the values given to various terms. This type of technical argument, however, is well beyond the scope of this paper.


38. For the later period, see Contamine, War in the Middle Ages, 84, 117, 155.


42. Roberts, “The Military Revolution,” 197, is on the right track when he writes: “One reason why firearms drove out the bow and the lance was precisely this, that they economized on training.”
Medieval Siege Warfare - Negotiation for the Attackers and Defenders

Medieval Siege warfare was fought from the perspective of the Defender and the perspective of the Attacker. The attackers had the upper hand in negotiations as they were in total control of the siege and could withdraw at any time. The defenders involved in siege warfare were aware of the cost of a siege and that a prolonged siege would cause additional problems in terms of the manpower of the attackers. Time

Medieval Siege Warfare

A reasonable and specific amount of time was allowed for truce or surrender conditions to be considered. This ranged from 7 - 40 days. The shorter time period was most commonly allowed because of the problems caused by the Feudal Levy. Medieval Warfare.

Next: The Medieval Siege.
Previous: The Great Household in Late Medieval England.

Have you read this? Please log in to set a read status. Setting a reading intention helps you organise your course reading. It makes it easy to scan through your lists and keep track of progress. Here's an example of what they look like: Your reading intentions are also stored in your profile for future reference. How do I set a reading intention. To set a reading intention, click through to any list item, and look for the panel on the left hand side Medieval Warfare - open battles and castle sieges, armour, weapons and military technology of the Middle Ages. Building siege engines was a time-consuming process, and could seldom be effectively done without preparations before the campaign. Sieges could take months, or even years, to weaken or demoralize the defenders sufficiently. Herstmonceux Castle. Machicolations. Medieval Siege Warfare. In the Medieval period besieging armies used a wide variety of siege engines including: scaling ladders; battering rams; siege towers and various types of catapults such as the mangonel, onager, ballista, and trebuchet. Siege techniques also included mining. Advances in the prosecution of sieges encouraged the de