

A comparison of battles in the Hundred Years War

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Introduction

In seeking to investigate the features that decided the outcome of a number of battles the task is simplified if one can find a series of battles where the circumstances were similar. The Hundred Years War (1337-1453) provides some twenty seven examples for analysis (see Table), after stripping out sea battles, sieges and skirmishes. The discussion is therefore restricted to what might be termed "pitched battles on land".

This is not to deny the importance of these other conflicts. For example, the English naval victories at Sluys in 1340 and Espagnols sur Mer in 1350 gave the English mastery of the Channel during the first phase of the war. Without this mastery the supply and reinforcement of English forces in France would have been hugely difficult. In contrast, the maritime defeat at La Rochelle in 1372 led to greater English vulnerability. Without success at the siege of Calais in 1346, England would have lacked what became her most secure base. The English conquest of Normandy in 1417-19 was essentially a series of sieges, since the main French field army had been decimated at Agincourt in 1415. Later, the relief of the siege of Orléans in 1428-9 was key to French resurgence and the French reconquest of Normandy in 1449-1450 was also dominated by siege warfare. Skirmishes, often man on man when two relatively small opposing groups clashed, I take to have small overall strategic significance although the consequences, for example when the leading English commander Sir John Chandos was mortally wounded at Lussac in 1370, could be significant.

In simplistic terms the pitched battles on land of the Hundred Years War were between "English" and "French" armies, although during the first part the English were allied with Flemings and Gascons and later on with Burgundians. The French were all along allied with the Scots and later on were reinforced by whole armies from Scotland. For brevity, however, I shall refer to the opponents as "England" and "France".

In the great majority of cases the battles in the Table were fought on French soil between English expeditionary armies and French armies when the latter might be expected (and nearly always were) larger and better supplied- France being

considerably the larger country in terms of population and wealth. The populations before the Black Death have been estimated as approx. 5-6 million in England and as about three times that in France.

During the first phase of the War the English strategy was often to mount a raid or "chevauchée" where the point was to cause devastation rather than to occupy territory. A leading authority states for example that there were twenty three such expeditions between 1337 and 1389. Usually, it was not the English objective to seek a major battle –though this was not flinched from when conditions were right. At the start of the war, England held a relatively small area in the old Duchy of Aquitaine (known to the English interchangeably as Guienne or Gascony); and a small area in the north at Ponthieu on the Somme. Major increases in territories controlled by the English came about on two occasions. Firstly, the treaty of Calais/Brétigny in 1360 saw the creation of a new principality in the South West so that the old Duchy of Aquitaine became a new statelet which Edward III conferred on his son. However, France recovered most of Aquitaine by 1372. Secondly, in 1417-19 Henry V conquered Normandy and this (together with dramatic domestic events in France which need not detain us) led to the treaty of Troyes, where the French King Charles VII recognised Henry as both his regent and heir to the entire French kingdom, That changed the rules of the game, and the course of the War entirely, especially when the Dauphin rejected the terms and the English were left to conquer the large part of France where Dauphinist forces were still in control, and fighting – something which it proved beyond the capacity of any English army to do.

For much of the period France was less united than England which meant that the French found it difficult to bring together and finance an army. Even so, on the day of each of the battles that we are considering, her army was usually larger than the English, often by 2:1 and a defeat in such conditions must strike us as remarkable. This political disunity often meant however that command was divided and the various components of the French army could on occasion act largely independently of one another.

English longbow victories

Throughout the War, the English had some striking successes against larger opposition. Two factors of English strategy stand out- a significant force of (longbow) archers and the taking of a defensive position. This positioning was sometimes enhanced in two ways. Firstly, pits were sometimes dug in front of the archers or later (apparently the first use was by the Ottomans in the battle of

Nicopolis in 1396) pointed stakes were placed there to disrupt frontal cavalry attacks. Secondly, where the topography was favourable, commanders sought natural obstacles such as woodland to guard their flanks.

Faced with such a posture by their English opposition what were the options for French commanders, bearing in mind that they often had larger forces? Well, if the English had yet to set up their position, a quick attack against unprotected archers could be decisive-as at Pontvallon (1370), Patay (1429) and Gerberoy (1435).

If the English had already set up their position, one course of action used by the French on several occasions was to assume that numerical superiority was enough and to go "bull headed" at the enemy. There are many examples of this course of action and of its outcome being disastrous (Auberoche 1345, Crécy1346, Mauron 1352, Poitiers 1356, Auray 1364, Nájera 1367, Agincourt 1415, Verneuil 1424, Battle of the Herrings 1429). In some of these cases, such as Agincourt, the attack seems to have come about in an uncoordinated manner, resulting in French units getting in one another's way. Verneuil offers an interesting comparison with Agincourt. In both battles the English archers had stakes to protect them, although the ground was harder at Verneuil and hence the stakes could not be so firmly placed .Whereas at Agincourt the French cavalry could not penetrate this barrier and many fell to the arrow storm, at Verneuil the cavalry consisted of better protected Milanese horsemen who were able to ride through the archers. However they then occupied themselves looting the English baggage while the English regrouped and, with their archers engaging at close quarters as at Agincourt, went on to victory. A curious feature of Agincourt is that the French had previously drawn up a general plan for overcoming the English archery. This plan postulated a wide front and the ability to outflank the archers and so on the day of Agincourt was inapplicable.

In some cases as at Agincourt the attackers did for a time delay their charge but a rain of English arrows goaded them into an attack. At Auray and again at Nájera in Castile, du Guesclin advised against attacking the well defended English position but was overruled. In one case (Laroche-Derrien 1347) the French were so preoccupied with avoiding an archery attack that some of them remained in separated defensive positions which could be eliminated in turn.

At both Blanchetaque (1346, one of the few occasions where the English had more troops) and Cravant (1423), archery was used in a rather different way. The two sides faced one another across a fordable river, neither wanting to attempt an attack. The English broke the stalemate with a barrage from the archers (it must have

become a “creeping” barrage) under cover of which the river was forded and a beachhead established. Although some of their opponents fled, others – many of them Scots in the case of Cravant - remained and were badly beaten.

Examples where English archery tactics were outwitted

At Cocherel (1364) du Guesclin feigned a retreat and when the English archers rushed out in pursuit his troops turned to face them leading to a rout. At Formigny (1450), the English and their archers were set up in a defensive position to ward off a frontal attack but the later arrival of cavalry on their flank led to a heavy defeat.

Examples of rash English tactics leading to defeat

There are also examples of where the English, though outnumbered, did not adopt a defensive strategy and made rash attacks, leading to defeat such as at Champtoceaux (1341, though this was solely a Breton force which was hugely outnumbered), Baugé (1421 where, without waiting for their own archers, the English charged a larger French/Scots force and suffered heavily under the fire from Scots archers) and Castillon (1453). On the latter occasion – as we shall come to - Talbot charged a prepared French position well set up with artillery which resulted in a heavy English defeat.

There are also cases where the outnumbered English were surrounded and defeated as at Ardres (1351) and La Brossinière (1423). The latter makes an interesting contrast with the Battle of the Herrings. In the latter case the attack was on a wagon train of supplies whilst at La Brossinière it was a baggage train of loot that was attacked. In both cases the wagons provided some cover and archers were present, but the outcomes were different. Perhaps the attack at La Brossinière was less rash than at the Battle of the Herrings, thereby conserving French forces?

New weaponry –guns- a major factor?

Guns made their appearance in the Hundred Years War as early as 1340 at the naval battle of Sluys and there were some at Crecy six years later. Thereafter their main use on land was at sieges until very late in the war. There were two French cannon at Formigny which caused some devastation but these were captured by the English before their flank was turned so do not seem to have been the prime cause of the English defeat. On the other hand there were a large number of well entrenched guns –sometimes estimated at 300 - at Castillon. To attack these head on, as Talbot did, and –because of a promise given as part of an earlier ransom – without wearing

any armour seems to show poor judgment. To the modern mind a retreat seems a better option but this example is perhaps a salutary lesson that medieval soldiers may not always have thought or acted as we might.

Ambushes

At Cadzand (1337) and Fresnay (1420) the English lay in wait for larger French forces and surprised them, inflicting a heavy defeat.

Summary

Twenty seven pitched battles on land have been considered here. Of the twenty two battles which took place before 1428, the English won thirteen despite often being outnumbered 4:3 or 2:1. The common features of these victories were the effectiveness of the English archers and good generalship. The latter factor is demonstrated by the care usually shown by selecting a good defensive position and waiting for the enemy to attack. Discipline also played its part - the English forces on several occasions overcame initial setbacks (such as at Verneuil; Poitiers was also close run) or managed an orderly withdrawal if things went badly (such as at St Omer (1340), Morlaix(1342) and Lunalonge (1349)). The relatively few English losses can usually be attributed to one (or more) of these factors being missing- such as their making a rash attack at the outset or prematurely leaving their position.

It seems worth commenting that examples of victories of smaller over larger forces were certainly known at the time, for example from the works of Vegetius and Frontinus, and that there was an appreciation that discipline and training could be more important than mere numbers.

After 1428, there are five battles of which the English won only one, that sole victory being the smallest of the engagements, the Battle of the Herrings. By this time France was overcoming its internal dissensions and had created a well-equipped professional army. Artillery too made a difference late on, being used on a smallish scale at Formigny (1450) and on a much larger scale at Castillon (1453), battles which ended the English presence in Normandy and Gascony for once and all.