

## Medieval Weapons

**Directions:** Read the following information. Then answer the questions that follow.

Weapons in medieval times ranged from expensive swords to daggers and knives. Before the fifteenth century, cavalry was the dominant form of soldiering in Europe. The weapons that were used reflected the skill of the mounted knight. Swords, lances, maces, and battle stars were used until they were rendered obsolete by the development of cannon and the use of gunpowder at the end of the fifteenth century.

Swords were the most important weapon in early medieval times. Important ones, like King Arthur's Excalibur, were named. Swords were used only to kill other human beings in combat. They were not used for hunting or any other task. They were expensive and were difficult to produce. A skilled sword-maker could become very wealthy. Thin strips of metal had to be heated, welded together, and pounded into shape. Edges of hard steel had to be added. The best swords were made by Arab craftsmen in the city of Toledo in Spain. Swords were constructed for individual use, so there were different styles, lengths, and weights. Double-edged swords were made for maximum killing efficiency, and they could cut through chain mail and armor. They were also so heavy that the swordsman had to use both hands to lift one. Swinging them in battle was awkward, and in the hands of an unskilled knight, dangerous.

Lances were constructed of wood. The simple wooden poles were ten to twelve feet long and had steel points. The lance was most effective when used by the mounted knight because it was easily broken and could not be replaced in the heat of battle. Eventually, a modified form of the lance, the pike, became the common weapon of the ordinary foot soldier. Throwing axes and handheld weapons such as flails, battle stars, and axes were often used by infantrymen. Slings were often used to throw rocks and other projectiles at the enemy.

By the middle of the fourteenth century, the infantry was transformed by the use of the longbow, particularly in England. Welsh longbowmen used two types of bows proficiently. Selfbows, or longbows, were constructed out of wood, usually yew, and bent over steaming kettles of water. They were often as long as six feet in length. A longbowman shooting a broad-head arrow could penetrate chain mail or plate armor at a distance of 150 yards. Crossbows were forerunners of modern rifles. Developed by the Romans, the crossbow did not become a weapon of choice for the infantry until late in the eleventh century. Combining metal and wooden parts, the crossbow used a weighted arrow or bolt and was preloaded. It used a gear system to pull the bolt and string into place. There were advantages to the crossbow. Small men, who were not strong enough to pull a longbow, could use a crossbow in close quarters. The bolts of a crossbow could penetrate even the thickest armor, but only at close range. The main disadvantage was that the crossbow took a long time to reload. A longbowman could shoot six arrows in the time it took a crossbowman to reload. Armies used large shields to protect crossbowmen as they reloaded their weapons in battle. The Church tried, but failed, to ban the use of the crossbow, claiming that it gave the user an unfair advantage.

By the end of medieval times, the use of cannon and gunpowder changed the face of warfare forever. Gunpowder was placed at the base of besieged castle walls in a process called "sapping," which aimed to reduce the wall to an easily

breached pile of rubble. Even today, the British army refers to experts in explosives as "sappers." The invention and refinement of cannons created an efficient way to lay siege to castle and city walls. Soon cities and castles acquired their own cannon to return fire, and modern warfare was born.

1. What types of weapons were used before the fifteenth century?
2. What was the most important weapon in early medieval times?
3. Why were swords expensive?
4. What type of weapon did the infantry use?
5. What transformed the infantry in the fourteenth century?
6. What were the advantages to using a crossbow? the disadvantages?
7. Why did the Church try to ban the crossbow?
8. What was "sapping"?
9. How did cannons change warfare?

## The Battle of Crécy: Primary vs. Secondary Sources

### Part A.

**Directions:** The battle of Crécy was fought in France during the Hundred Years' War between an English army, under the leadership of King Edward III, and a French army and their allies. The use of English longbowmen to defeat the French marked the beginning of a change in the way battles would be fought. Read the following eyewitness account. Take notes, and be prepared for class discussion.

#### The Battle of Crécy, France, 26 September 1346

... [With the French there] were about 15,000 Genoese crossbowmen; but they were quite fatigued, having marched on foot that day six leagues, completely armed and carrying their crossbows, and accordingly they told the Constable they were not in a condition to do any great thing in battle. The Earl of Alençon hearing this, said, "This is what one gets by employing such scoundrels, who fall off when there is any need for them." During this time a heavy rain fell, accompanied by thunder and a very terrible eclipse of the sun; ... shortly afterward it cleared up, and the sun shone very bright; but the French had it in their faces, and the English on their backs. When the Genoese were somewhat in order they approached the English and set up a loud shout, in order to frighten them; but the English remained quite quiet and did not seem to attend to it. They [the Genoese] then set up a second shout, and advanced a little forward; the English never moved. Still they hooted a third time, advancing with their crossbows presented, and began to shoot. The English archers then advanced one step forward, and shot their arrows with such force and quickness, that it seemed as if it snowed. When the Genoese felt these arrows, which pierced through their armour, some of them cut the strings of their crossbows, others flung them to the ground, and all turned about and retreated quite discomfited.

The French had a large body of men-at-arms on horseback to support the Genoese, and the King [of France], seeing them thus fall back, cried out, "Kill me those scoundrels, for they stop up our road without any reason." The English continued shooting, and some of their arrows falling among the horsemen, drove them upon the Genoese, so that they were in such confusion, they could never rally again. . . .

... This Saturday the English never quitted their ranks in pursuit of anyone, but remained on the field guarding their position and defending themselves against all who attacked them. . . .

... When [King] Edward was assured that there was no appearance of the French collecting another army, he sent to have the number and rank of the dead examined. This business was entrusted to Lord Reginald Cobham and Lord Stafford, assisted by three heralds to examine the arms, and two secretaries to write down the names. They passed the whole day upon the field of battle, and made a very circumstantial account of all they saw: according to their report it appeared that 80 banners, the bodies of 11 princes, 1,200 knights, and about 30,000 common men were found dead on the field.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sir John Froissart, *Chronicles of England, France, and Spain*, in *The Mammoth Book of Eyewitness History*, ed. Jon E. Lewis (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, Inc., 1998), 80-81, 84.

**Part B.**

Directions: Examine this painting from the time of the Battle of Crecy. Using the information contained in the eyewitness account in part A, analyze the accuracy of the painting in the battle.



Fig. 3.1 Battle of Crecy, Hundred Years' War, 24 August 1346. Miniature from Froissart's *Chronicle*, late fifteenth century. MS fr. 2643, f. 165v. Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, France. Photo Credit: Snark/Art Resource, NY.

### Part C.

**Directions:** The following are two fictional accounts of the battle of Crécy. Read each excerpt, and compare it with the eyewitness account in part A. Write a short paragraph evaluating the accuracy of the two fictional accounts.

#### The Archer's Tale

The Genoese were within bow range now, but not an arrow flew, and the red-and-green coated crossbowmen still came, bending forward slightly as they trudged up the hill. They were not coming straight at the English, but at a slight angle, which meant that the right of the English line, where Thomas was, would be struck first. It was also the place where the slope was most gradual and Thomas, with a sinking heart, understood he was likely to be in the heart of the fight. Then the Genoese stopped, shuffled into line and began to shout their war cry.

"Too soon," the Earl muttered.

The crossbows went into the shooting position. They were angled steeply upward as the Genoese hoped to drop a thick rain of death on the English line.

"Draw!" [Will] Skeat said, and Thomas could feel his heart thumping as he pulled the coarse string back to his right ear. He chose a man in the enemy line, placed the arrow tip directly between that man and his right eye, edged the bow to the right because that would compensate for the bias in the weapon's aim, then lifted his left hand and shifted it back to the left because the wind was coming from that direction. Not much wind. He had not thought about aiming the arrow, it was all instinct, but he was still nervous and a muscle was twitching in his right leg. The English line was utterly silent, the crossbowmen were shouting and the French drums and trumpets deafening. The Genoese line looked like green and red statues.

"Let go, you bastards," a man muttered and the Genoese obeyed him. Six thousand crossbow bolts arced into the sky.

"Now," Will said, surprisingly softly.

And the arrows flew. . . .

Thomas's second arrow was in the air before his first had reached its greatest height and begun to fall. He reached for a third, then realized he had shot the second in panic and so he paused and stared at the clouded sky that was strangely thick with flickering black shafts that were as dense as starlings and deadlier than hawks. He could see no crossbow bolts, then he laid the third arrow on his left hand and picked a man in the Genoese line. There was an odd pattering noise that startled him and he looked to see it was the hail of Genoese bolts striking the turf around the horse pits.

And a heartbeat later the first English arrow flight slammed home. Scores of crossbowmen were snatched backward, including the one Thomas had picked out for his third arrow and so he changed his aim to another man, hauled the cord back to his ear and let the shaft fly.

"They're falling short!" the Earl of Northampton shouted exultantly, and some of the archers swore, thinking he spoke of their own arrows, but it was the Genoese bows that had been enfeebled by the rain and not one of their quarrels had reached the English archers who, seeing the chance for slaughter, gave a howling cheer and ran a few paces down the slope.



"Kill them!" Will Skeat shouted.

They killed them. The great bows were drawn again and again, and the white-feathered arrows slashed down the slope to pierce mail and cloth, and turn the lower hill into a field of death.<sup>2</sup>

### **Kemp: The Road to Crécy**

They were advancing in skirmishing order, their crossbows presented. They crossed the bottom of the valley, three hundred yards away. A great shout suddenly went up from their ranks, doubtless some kind of war-cry intended to intimidate their opponents. Martin and his companions were unperturbed. He idly wondered if it meant anything in Genoese; to him it sounded like a meaningless, animalistic bellow, but that could happen to any word or phrase roared by hundreds of men simultaneously.

Another shout rose from the Genoese as they continued their inexorable advance up the slope towards the English battle lines. The sun was already setting behind the ridge, shining in the eyes of the crossbowmen. Martin recalled what Preston had said on the first day of training about not attacking with the sun in your eyes. It was somehow reassuring, as if the French did not know the first thing about war. Norwich had been right when he said that it would be wiser for the French to postpone their attack until morning, when the sun would be shining in the eyes of the English. Martin smiled to himself, thinking that it was just as well that Valois [the king of France] had not been trained by Wat Preston.

A third shout rose from the Genoese ranks, and at that moment they loosed their first volley.

All the bolts fell short.

Stupid whoresons, thought Martin.

"Steady, lads. Don't loose yet," cautioned Preston, lest the Genoese volley provoke any of his men into retaliating. He need not have bothered: his men were well-drilled, and knew what was expected of them. "Remember, sixty yards short!"

The Genoese paused to reload their crossbows. They did not have their large shields strapped to their backs, but they instinctively turned their backs on the English nevertheless. They could not march and reload at the same time anyway. Reloading a crossbow seemed like an awkward and time-consuming process to Martin, and he decided that he was much happier using his longbow. The Genoese resumed their advance. They were only two hundred and fifty yards away now, and Martin knew that at that range he could pick off any one of them; but he also knew better than to disobey orders.

The Genoese were still advancing, loosing the occasional shot towards the English ranks, but they were shooting up-hill, and practically into the sun.

Preston was watching Holland. "Steady, lads," he told his men.

Holland drew his broadsword from its scabbard, holding it aloft so it caught the sun's last rays, glinting in the twilight.

"Step up and nock," ordered Preston. The archers each took one pace forward, nocking their arrows to their bows. "Mark—sixty yards short, remember! Draw!"

<sup>2</sup>Bernard Cornwell, *The Archer's Tale* (New York: Harper Collins, Inc., 2001), 327-28, 330.

Martin raised his bow, pushing away the bowstave with his left arm, aiming sixty yards short of the advancing Genoese. He reckoned he could easily hit one of them, but if Preston wanted him to shoot short. . . .

Holland brought down his sword with a sharp, chopping motion.

"Loose!"

Martin let fly. Suddenly the sky seemed to grow darker as a cloud of arrows filled the air, soughing with eerie menace as they whirred towards their targets. He had never seen anything like it. The arrows—literally thousands of them—seemed to arc downwards as one, like a swarm of bees or a flight of birds flying in formation.

They all fell short of the Genoese, just as had been ordered. To Martin it seemed like a waste of good arrows.

But now the Genoese were running forward, stopping just short of where the English arrows were embedded in the ground. Now Martin could see the reason for shooting short: the Genoese had assumed that was the maximum range of the English archers, and that they would be safe provided they went no further.

"Nock," ordered Preston. "Mark to kill this time."

Martin selected his mark, a crossbowman who was pausing to reload his weapon. The Genoese were targets, just like any other.

"Draw!" ordered Preston, waiting for Holland to give the signal once more. "And . . . loose!"

Once again the sky was darkened with arrows. They curved down, this time raining amongst the ranks of the Genoese.

The effect was devastating. The crossbowmen were falling dead or wounded on all sides. Martin saw the man he had aimed at go down, and smiled with satisfaction. He was so pleased with the result, so astounded by the impact of the English volley, that for a few moments he forgot to nock another arrow to his bow. Then he remembered where he was and why he was there, and he realized that for every Genoese who had been killed or seriously injured, another ten were still standing.

That's no problem, thought Martin; we'll just have to shoot ten more volleys.

After five more volleys, the Genoese were already beginning to waver. The English and Welsh archers were positioned in wedge-shaped formations on the wings of the prince's division, so that the Genoese found themselves caught in the crossfire as they advanced to attack the men-at-arms in the center.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Daniel Hall, *Kemp: The Road to Crécy* (London: Orion Books, Ltd., 1996), 378-80.