

The Royal Fellowship of Death

Five Reasons for the French Defeats at Crecy, Poitiers and Agincourt

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The French defeats at Crecy, (1346) Poitiers, (1356) and Agincourt (1415) have commonly been attributed to "the devastating power of the [English] longbow"¹. However, a careful examination of these battles will reveal that there was more to the defeats than the English "super-weapon". What follows are five additional reasons why the French suffered such terrible losses in the Hundred Years War.

#1. The willingness of the English to learn from their mistakes. At the battle of Bannockburn (1314) the English suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Scots due in large parts to their use of the longbow in conjunction with a series of pits which were dug in order to trip or at the very least slow down the horse of the English cavalry charge. With the English sufficiently slowed the Scots archers could pick off the English like sitting ducks. The English learned from this defeat and employed similar tactics at all three of these battles against the French. The French on the other hand seemed oblivious to the similarities between, and reasons for, their defeats.

#2. French communication problems. The French troops were diverse, being drawn from France, Bohemia, Lorraine, Spain, Genoa, and possibly even Scotland. Each different unit fought under commanders who were of the same nationality. Thus, the language barrier must have been unsurmountable causing units to march on the wrong targets, or attack at the wrong time. On the other hand, the English troops were primarily English with large bodies of Welsh troops serving under Welsh speaking English commanders.

#3. French arrogance. The French to a large extent believed that since they were "the flowers of chivalry" they did not need to concern themselves with the English peasants. They concentrated on gaining ransoms and performing feats of glory. To this end, at the battle of Poitiers, the two marshals of France, Clermont and Audrehem, each seeking to gain glory for himself, split the French forces and attacked the English at two separate points, thus rendering the grand French strategy of the heavy cavalry charge weak and ineffectual.

#4. English strategy. The English, in all three battles, arrived at the field first and made use of the time advantage to occupy the best ground, making use of natural defenses such as hills, marshes and hedge rows. They also used the time to construct defenses that nature did not provide such as trenches, rows of spikes and pits to trip horses.

#5. A change in the nature of warfare. Warfare for the most part up to this time had been a matter of nobles killing peasants and trying to take one another captive. However the English were no longer as interested in ransoming nobles as they were with winning the battles therefore the flowers of the French chivalry were to a large extent killed along side of the French peasants. **It must be remembered that a hail of arrows knows no rank!**

When these three battles were over, the vast majority of the French nobility had been ransomed or killed. Christopher Rothero reports in his book The Armies of Crecy and Poitiers, that at the battle of Crecy, 4,000 French soldiers lay dead including: the Duke of Alencon, Count Louis Nevers of Flanders, the Count of St. Pol, the Count of Sancerre, the Duke of Lorraine, The King of Majorica and Blind King John of Bohemia. At Poitiers, he reports that the King was taken captive, and dead were The Constable of France, Two Marshals of France, the bearer of The Oriflamme, an Archbishop, 13 Counts, 5 Viscounts, 21 Barons and Knights Banneret and 2,000 men-at-arms. Finally, we turn to a somewhat unreliable but highly dramatic source for the figures at Agincourt, Shakespeare's Henry V:

This note doth tell me of ten thousand French
That in the field lie slain; of princes, in this number,
And nobles bearing banners, there lie dead
One hundred twenty-six; added to these,
Of knights, esquires, and gallant gentlemen
Eight thousand and four hundred; of the which,
Five hundred were but yesterday dubb'd knights.
So that in these ten thousand they have lost,
There are but sixteen hundred mercenaries;
The rest are princes, barons, lords, knights, squires,
And gentlemen of blood and quality.
The names of those their nobles that lie dead:

Charles Dalabreth, High constable of France,
Jaques of Chatillion, Admiral of France,
The master of the cross-bows, Lord Rambures,
Great Master of France, The brave Sir Guichard Dolphin,
John Duke of Alanson, Anthony Duke of Brabant,
The brother to the Duke of Burgundy,
And Edward Duke of Bar; of lusty earls,
Grandpré and Roussi, Faulconbridge and Foix,
Beaumont and Marle, Vaudemont and Lestrake.
Here was a royal fellowship of death!