



Teaching Medieval History: The Age of Light with Dr. Junius Johnson

Lecture 8:
War Stories: Enrichment
Lecture on Medieval
Battles

Outline:

“While I have argued that we should not overstate the violent nature of Medieval life...there were an enormous number of conflicts throughout the period. Territorial lines were constantly being redrawn, dynasties were rising and falling, and things in general continued to be as tumultuous as they had been since the end of the Pax Romana.”

In this lecture, Dr. Johnson describes the iconic battles and conflicts of the Middle Ages that helped shape Europe and its history during this period.

Introduction

- The Medieval period was characterized by numerous conflicts that reshaped Europe.
- Despite the perception of a violent era, not all medieval life was dominated by warfare.
- This discussion can't cover *all* the most important battles, but the following are included on most scholars' lists.

The Battle of Tours (October 10, 732 AD)

- **Context and Background**
 - The Battle of Tours took place on October 10, 732 AD, between the Umayyad Caliphate and the Franks.
 - The Umayyad Caliphate was the top military power in the world, controlling regions such as Persia, North Africa, Syria, Armenia, and the old Iranian empire.



- They invaded Spain in 711 and successfully subdued the peninsula before pressing into Gaul, led by Abd al-Rahman ibn Abd Allah Al-Ghafiqi.
- The Franks, the strongest military power in Europe, opposed them. Their territory included north and eastern France, most of western Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. They were led by Charles Martel.
- **Superpowers in Conflict**
 - The battle represented a conflict between two of the world's superpowers.
 - The Umayyads underestimated the Franks, not recognizing the threat they posed.
 - The Carolingian empire, on the verge of becoming the most technologically advanced army in Europe, fielded new heavy infantry in this battle and would later introduce devastating cavalry.
- **Preparation and Strategy**
 - Charles Martel had been preparing for this battle for a decade, foreseeing the conflict.
 - He convinced the Pope that the Caliphate was an existential threat to Christianity and borrowed money to train and maintain a permanent army of professional infantry.
 - His army campaigned with him for years, becoming a tight-knit and battle-hardened force.
 - The Frankish soldiers were equipped with heavy armor and anti-cavalry weapons, deployed in the ancient phalanx formation, and supported with Spartan military discipline.
 - They were dressed for the cold and familiar with the enemy's strengths and weaknesses.
 - The Umayyads, in contrast, were unprepared for the cold and unfamiliar with the land.
- **Tactics and Battle Conditions**
 - Charles Martel achieved total surprise by marching his army directly over the mountains, avoiding the roads.
 - The Umayyad forces, despite having a numerical advantage, found themselves facing a well-prepared Frankish army.
 - Charles chose a strong defensive position rather than attacking.
 - Although the Umayyad cavalry was considered unbeatable by infantry at the time, the Frankish forces withstood multiple cavalry charges throughout the day.



- The well-trained and disciplined Franks never broke, even when the cavalry broke through their lines.
- **Outcome and Aftermath**
 - Al-Ghafiqi was killed, and the Umayyads retreated.
 - Charles Martel successfully defended against the invasion.
 - The battle is often seen as halting the Muslim advance into Europe.
 - The Umayyads attempted to invade twice more with larger armies but were defeated each time by Charles.
 - These victories earned Charles the surname Martel, meaning "the Hammer."
 - Internal dissension further weakened the Caliphate, but the battle for France and Spain continued until Charles's grandson, Charlemagne, established a lasting Christian presence south of the Pyrenees while leaving the Muslims significant holdings in Spain.

The Battle of Hastings (October 14, 1066 AD)

- The Battle of Hastings took place on October 14, 1066 AD, between these two tribes:
 - **The Normans**
 - Descendants of Vikings who were given Normandy in 911 by Charles the Simple.
 - They had intermarried with Frankish nobility and became a new people.
 - Led by William, Duke of Normandy.
 - **The Anglo-Saxons**
 - Comprised of the four great kingdoms of the Angles and Saxons, which were loosely joined.
 - Likely held together by the continual invasions of Danish Vikings.
 - Led by Harold Godwinson.
- **Background and Succession Crisis**
 - King Edward the Confessor died without issue, leading to a struggle for succession.
 - Edward had strong Norman connections due to his exile in Normandy and the influence of his mother, Emma of Normandy.
 - Edward brought in Norman courtiers, soldiers, and priests, possibly encouraging William of Normandy to consider the throne.



- Harold Godwinson was crowned after Edward's death, prompting King Harald Hardrada of Norway to invade, only to be defeated by the English just two weeks before facing the Normans.
- **Battle Strategies and Tactics**
 - **English Strategy**
 - Deployed a shield wall at the top of a steep slope.
 - Marshy ground in front and woods protecting their flanks.
 - **Norman Strategy**
 - Planned to thin English ranks with archers, then use infantry to open seams in the shield wall, followed by cavalry.
 - Archers were ineffective due to the hillside, with arrows either hitting the shield wall or soaring over. Since the English didn't employ archers, the Normans couldn't get a resupply of arrows from them.
 - Norman infantry and cavalry failed to break the shield wall initially.
- **Battle Progression**
 - The English, despite recently defeating the Norwegians, fought effectively from sunrise to sunset without showing fatigue.
 - A rumor of William's death almost caused a Norman rout.
 - William rallied his troops, calling a halt around midday to allow rest and a strategic review.
 - William survived having 2 or 3 horses killed under him, while Harold's death broke English morale and was the decisive moment.
- **Aftermath**
 - William gained the surname "the Conqueror" and became King of England.
 - His reign muddied succession claims, leading to centuries of warfare between France and England, including the 100 Years' War.
 - The Normans brought profound social changes to England, shaping much of what is considered the Middle Ages.

The Siege of Antioch (1097 - 1098 AD)

- We will focus on two iconic moments from the Crusades: one from the 1st Crusade, and one from the 3rd.



- The Siege of Antioch was from the First Crusade. It took place from October 20, 1097, to June 28, 1098 AD between these groups:
- **The Crusaders**
 - Soldiers and nobles from Toulouse, Lorraine, Italy, and the Flemish regions, numbering around 100,000.
 - Led by Bishop Adhemar of Le Puy and Godfrey of Bouillon, Duke of Lower Lorraine.
- **The Seljuk Muslims**
 - Turkish-Persian Sunni Muslims.
 - Led by Yaghi-Siyan.
- **Background and Context of the First Crusade**
 - Islam's aggressive invasions of Europe in the 8th-9th centuries, resulting in many thousands of Christian deaths.
 - The expansion of Islam into the Byzantine empire and the rise of the Seljuk Turks in the 10th century.
 - Pilgrims' reports of persecution by Islamic rulers in Palestine.
 - The Byzantine emperor's appeal to the Western church for aid of the persecuted Christians.
 - Jerusalem fell to the Seljuks in 1073, and Nicaea and Antioch followed in 1081 and 1086, respectively.
- **Pope Urban II**
 - In 1095, Pope Urban II called on European princes to aid Christians in the east with a powerful sermon.
 - He described the atrocities committed by the Seljuks against Christians, and urged European Christians to reclaim Jerusalem and other holy sites:

“From the confines of Jerusalem and the city of Constantinople a horrible tale has gone forth and very frequently has been brought to our ears, namely, that a race from the kingdom of the Persians, an accursed race, a race utterly alienated from God, a generation forsooth which has not directed its heart and has not entrusted its spirit to God, has invaded the lands of those Christians and has depopulated them by the sword, pillage, and fire; it has led away a part of the captives into its own country, and a part it has destroyed by cruel tortures; it has either entirely destroyed the churches of God or appropriated them for the rites of its own religion. They destroy the altars, after having defiled them with their uncleanness. They circumcise the Christians, and the blood of the circumcision they either spread upon the altars or pour into the vases of the baptismal font. When they wish to torture people by a base death, they perforate their navels, and dragging forth



the extremity of the intestines, bind it to a stake; then with flogging they lead the victim around until the viscera having gushed forth the victim falls prostrate upon the ground. Others they bind to a post and pierce with arrows. Others they compel to extend their necks and then, attacking them with naked swords, attempt to cut through the neck with a single blow. What shall I say of the abominable rape of the women? To speak of it is worse than to be silent. The kingdom of the Greeks is now dismembered by them and deprived of territory so vast in extent that it can not be traversed in a march of two months. On whom therefore is the labor of avenging these wrongs and of recovering this territory incumbent, if not upon you? You, upon whom above other nations God has conferred remarkable glory in arms, great courage, bodily activity, and strength to humble the hairy scalp of those who resist you.

Let the deeds of your ancestors move you and incite your minds to manly achievements; the glory and greatness of king Charles the Great, and of his son Louis, and of your other kings, who have destroyed the kingdoms of the pagans, and have extended in these lands the territory of the holy church. Let the holy sepulchre of the Lord our Saviour, which is possessed by unclean nations, especially incite you, and the holy places which are now treated with ignominy and irreverently polluted with their filthiness. Oh, most valiant soldiers, descendants of invincible ancestors, be not degenerate, but recall the valor of your progenitors.

Let therefore hatred depart from among you, let your quarrels end, let wars cease, and let all dissensions and controversies slumber. Enter upon the road to the Holy Sepulchre; wrest that land from the wicked race, and subject it to yourselves. That land which as the Scripture says "floweth with milk and honey," was given by God into the possession of the children of Israel. Jerusalem is the navel of the world; the land is fruitful above others, like another paradise of delights. This the Redeemer of the human race has made illustrious by His advent, has beautified by residence, has consecrated by his suffering, has redeemed by his death, has glorified by his burial. This royal city, therefore, situated at the centre of the world, is now held captive by His enemies, and is in subjection to those who do not know God, to the worship of the heathens. She seeks therefore and desires to be liberated, and does not cease to implore you to come to her aid. From you especially she asks succor, because, as we have already said, God



has conferred upon you above all nations great glory in arms. Accordingly undertake this journey for the remission of your sins, with the assurance of the imperishable glory of the kingdom of heaven.”

- **Beginning at Antioch**
 - An unprecedented army formed and moved on Antioch.
 - The Seljuks, focused on internal affairs, were unprepared.
 - The Crusaders besieged the city, dividing forces to surround it.
- **Challenges During the Siege**
 - Food scarcity: Crusaders had to scavenge, making them vulnerable to attacks.
 - An army from Damascus attempted to relieve the siege but was repulsed.
 - Natural disasters: An earthquake and heavy rains, followed by a fast ordered by Bishop de Puys for the army's sins.
 - Starvation claimed an estimated 20,000 men along with 700 horses.
- **Relief and Victory**
 - In spring, Edgar Aetheling, an exiled Saxon claimant to the English throne, arrived with provisions from the Byzantines.
 - The Crusaders captured the city of Antioch on June 3 but faced a counter-siege from Mosul.
 - On June 10, a priest named Peter Bartholomew had a vision of St. Andrew telling him where to find the Holy Lance - a spear tip was discovered in the cathedral of St. Peter.
 - Led by the Holy Lance, the Crusaders defeated the besieging army on June 28, 1098.
- **Aftermath**
 - The siege was a severe test of the Crusader armies.
 - Leaders learned to work together despite initial desertions.
 - The victory at Antioch set the stage for the successful siege of Jerusalem the following year.
 - The resulting Crusader state in the Holy Land continued for a number of years.

The Siege of Acre (1189 - 1191 AD)

- **Background and Context of the Third Crusade**
 - Internal dissension and power struggles led to successive losses in the Holy Land.



- The unsuccessful Second Crusade failed to restore the lost territories.
- Jerusalem fell to Saladin (Yusuf ibn Ayyub ibn Shadhi, sultan of Egypt and Syria) on October 2, 1187.
- It is said that the Pope died of shock upon hearing the news of Jerusalem's fall to Saladin (“righteousness of the faith”) on October 2, 1187.
- The newly elected Pope called for the Third Crusade, intended to be the most glorious.
- **Key Figures and Their Roles**
 - Philip II of France
 - One of France’s greatest kings.
 - Frederick Barbarossa (“Red Beard”)
 - Holy Roman Emperor and King of Germany.
 - A tactical genius and one of the greatest Medieval emperors.
 - Richard I Coeur-de-Lion (Richard the Lionheart)
 - One of the biggest personalities of the Middle Ages.
 - Led the English forces in the Crusade.
 - It should have been the “Dream Team” but Barbarossa drowned en route to Acre in a freak accident.
 - Richard took Acre through his brilliance and force but created tensions by throwing the German standard from the walls and backing the wrong king for the kingdom of Jerusalem.
 - Philip II fell severely ill with dysentery and left the Crusade due to political unrest at home, heading to Rome first to protest Richard’s behavior.
- **Challenges and Failures**
 - Twice the Crusaders got within sight of Jerusalem but had to turn back:
 - Once due to weather and fear of a relieving army.
 - Once due to leadership disagreements.
 - The city likely would have surrendered at the sight of the Crusader army the first time and they had the strength to take it the second time.
- **The Massacre at Acre**
 - Richard held 2700 Muslim prisoners as hostages to ensure Saladin honored the terms of Acre's surrender.
 - Saladin tried to negotiate their release, but Richard, feeling spooked, had them all beheaded in view of Saladin’s army.
 - Saladin retaliated by killing all the Christian prisoners he held.



- When Saladin took Jaffa in 1192, his army sought vengeance for Acre. Saladin warned the Christian inhabitants to lock themselves in the citadel until he regained control of his men.
- **Richard's Counter-Attack and Aftermath**
 - Richard counter-attacked Jaffa by sea with only 2000 men and took it back, rescuing the imprisoned Crusader garrison.
 - Saladin counter-counter-attacked with a larger force, but Richard successfully repelled him.
 - Despite his tactical successes, Richard had no allies and a limited number of men.
 - The war ended in failure for both sides:
 - Saladin failed to drive the Christians out of Palestine.
 - Richard failed to retake Jerusalem.

The Hundred Years' War (1337 - 1453 AD)

- **Introduction**
 - The 100 Years' War spanned from 1337 to 1453 AD, lasting 116 years.
 - It was a series of conflicts between the English House of Plantagenet and the French House of Valois over the throne of France.
 - Five generations of kings fought for control of the dominant kingdom of Western Europe.
- **1st Phase: England on the Move**
 - **Battle of Sluys (June 22, 1340)**
 - 120-150 English ships feinted against a superior defensive force of French ships.
 - The English won a resounding victory, capturing 166 French ships and killing 16,000-20,000 men.
 - **Battle of Crécy (August 26, 1346)**
 - The English landed a major invasion force (including captured French ships), surprising the French.
 - English longbowmen decimated the French forces.
 - Thousands of French died, and Edward, the Black Prince of Wales, took Calais in 1347.
 - **Plague: The Black Death (1348)**
 - The pandemic struck Paris, pausing the war until 1355.
 - This was followed by a Blitzkrieg, in which Edward pillaged various French regions, and leading to the Battle



- of Poitiers on September 19, 1356, where the English routed the French.
- **Black Monday (April 14, 1360)**
 - A freak hailstorm struck the English encampment on Easter Day, killing over 1000 men.
 - This forced Edward to negotiate peace, concluded on May 8, 1360, lasting until 1369.
 - **2nd Phase: France Strikes Back**
 - **John of Gaunt's Ride (1373)**
 - Led a large force of men and horses across France but was forced to retreat due to weather and superior French maneuvers.
 - **Internal and External Struggles**
 - French and English faced internal dissension and external threats.
 - Henry Bolingbroke deposed Richard II, becoming Henry IV, and Owain Glyndwr's rebellion caused further problems.
 - French allied with the Welsh and advanced as far as Worcester, while the Spanish raided the coast.
 - Glendwr was not put down until 1415.
 - **3rd Phase: The Return of England**
 - **Henry V and Agincourt (1415)**
 - Henry V took Harfleur in August 1415 and achieved a devastating surprise victory at Agincourt.
 - This, despite the overwhelming French forces.
 - Retook Caen (1417) and Rouen (1419), subduing all of Normandy.
 - Treaty of Troyes (1420): Charles VI gave Henry his daughter in marriage and named their children as the heirs to the throne of France.
 - Dauphin Charles VII refused to accept the treaty, which declared him illegitimate in order to allow Catherine and Henry V's children to inherit the throne.
 - Henry V died in 1422, leaving his heir presumptive, Thomas, Duke of Clarence¹, in command, who was defeated (and killed) at the Battle of Baugé.

¹ Second son of Henry IV and brother to Henry V. [Wikipedia](#)



- Henry returned and attacked the Dauphin's town of Meaux, but he died during the seven month siege on August 31, 1422.
- **Peace? Peace? There is no peace!**
 - **England's Last Gasp**
 - Henry VI was 9 months old when his father died and he became the king of England and France.
 - The English continued the war, fighting well and devastating the Dauphin's army in 1424.
 - The English continued to advance, besieging Orléans from 1428-1429.
 - **Beaten by a Girl: Joan of Arc**
 - Joan of Arc came to the Dauphin in 1429, claiming she'd had a divine message that she would drive out the English.
 - The Dauphin granted her an army and she broke the siege of Orleans in 9 days, defeating the English at Patay, and crowning Charles VII at Rheims.
 - Joan suffered failures at Paris and La Charité, was captured by Burgundians, tried for heresy (for cross-dressing), and burned at the stake on May 30, 1431.
 - In 1456, an inquisitorial court overturned this ruling and Joan was canonized by the Catholic Church in 1920.
 - **Final Defeats**
 - The English nearly turned the tide at Caen in 1450 but were ultimately defeated.
 - Charles VII locked up Normandy, leaving the English only Gascony.
 - Bordeaux surrendered to Charles in 1451, though it was retaken briefly by the English, then lost again at the Battle of Castillon on July 17, 1453.
 - The War of the Roses began in 1455, which would occupy the English attention for the next 32 years, and effectively bringing the Hundred Years' War to an end.

Conclusion

- Medieval conflicts significantly shaped European history, with battles like Tours and Hastings having lasting impacts.
- Warfare was a major aspect of medieval life, but the period also saw significant cultural and intellectual achievements.



- The development of new political and social structures during this time influenced European history for centuries.