Medieval Warfare: Myth and Reality

The implements of warfare have changed significantly over the centuries. Weapons have evolved and changed from the atlatl and sling, to the guided missile and GPS. However, the most romantic of all these tools must be those of the kings, knights, and soldiers of medieval battles. From the chain mail and broadsword of Beowulf, to the ax, longbow, and battle steed of Henry the 5th, these weapons have changed both human history and literature. One can easily argue that without the English longbow at the battles of Crecy in 1346, Poitiers in 1356, and Agincourt in 1415, there wouldn’t be a Britten to give us British literature. There is, however, a marked difference between the fiction of “Beowulf” and the stark reality of a medieval battlefield. The facts make clear that if the real world battles of medieval times had been fought in the same manner as their own literature that the outcomes would almost certainly have been far grimmer and that history itself would be vastly altered, perhaps not for the better. Indeed, the medieval warfare would not have been kind to the epic hero Beowulf, for, if Edward the 3rd and Beowulf were to have been exchanged one for the other, then neither would be remembered as much more than a footnote in history or a brief passage in a dusty textbook.

Such would be the case in the epic tale of “Beowulf” when Beowulf fights the evil mass murdering Grendel. In the poem, Beowulf sees fit to fight this terrible creature bare handed. He “began to remove his iron breast-mail, took off the helmet and handed his attendant the
patterned sword” (Beowulf 47). In fiction, this is an excellent way of presenting a heroic fight. However, in reality, the hero, being so great, strong, and chivalrous that he decides to face his or her enemy, on that enemy’s terms, is not only a poor warrior, but is most certainly on his or her way to earning a heroic death. We can take as an example the battle of Crecy on 26 August, 1346. This is a battle in which Beowulf would have perished sooner rather than later. This battle was fought between Edward the 3rd of England and Philip the 6th of France during the 100 Years’ War, and is widely seen as the beginning of the end of chivalry in medieval warfare.

Edward is believed to have had an army of around 9000 men, which included a mix of knights, men at arms, cavalry, and, most importantly, archers. His men were made all the more effective by the terrain he chose for the battle. Edward’s contrast to Beowulf is his refusal to fight fair. His “left flank was protected by a forest and an earthwork he ordered his troops to dig. His right was protected by the river and more pits and earthworks were dug in front of his line to break any French attack. Edward himself withdrew to a windmill on the ridge behind his main force, where he had an overview of the battlefield” (Cawthorne 69). The French are believed to have had a force roughly three times that of Edward, including a contingent of Genoan crossbow mercenaries (Eckerd). These mercenaries would have been wise to have chosen their allies with more care. When they were engaged and slaughtered by the longbows they began to retreat. The problem with this is the overzealous French knights charging up behind them who didn’t see fit to distinguish between the attacking English archers and their own Genoan crossbow allies who were retreating for their lives (Eckerd). These poor, unfortunate souls were trampled by their so called allies and barely escaped at all. The sleep deprived, unorganized, and fragmented French force was bottlenecked into a
murder field by the militarily un-chivalrous Edward the 3rd. It is this use of terrain and superior weaponry is a distinct difference between the “don’t fire until you see the whites of their eyes,” “in your face,” “damn the torpedoes” myth of Beowulf and the military brilliance of Edward the 3rd.

Edward’s selection of terrain is in stark contrast to that of Beowulf, who chose to fight all three of his main enemies on their own terms. Beowulf fought Grendel in the middle of Grendel’s attack on Heorot (Beowulf 745), he fought Grendel’s Mother in her underwater lair (Beowulf 65), and he fought the dragon in its mountain lair (Beowulf 87). The third of these decisions cost him his life. Edward, however, was the undisputed winner of the battle of Crecy. He used his enemy’s love of chivalry and lust for glory as a deadly trap. Philip, his knights, and his soldiers suffered from the same love of glory as did Beowulf and were “forced to advance in the face of his overly zealous troops, even though he was advised to wait until the next day. In fact, he sent the order to delay the attack, but some of the impetuous French knights went ahead regardless and dragged the tired French forces into battle” (Eckerd). The French lust for battle is however understandable. The battle was on French soil, the French did have far superior numbers, and the English were in supposedly unfamiliar territory. What the French were not aware of though was that Edward’s mother was from the area. His forces reached the vicinity of Crecy, “in lands that were his mother's property” (Eckerd), and that Edward knew his battlefield well. It is important to note that had our hero Beowulf been the leader of the English instead of Edward, he would have simply went straight at the French, giving up his advantage of terrain, and eliminating the advantage he would have with his entrenched longbow men.
When the battle came, the French rushed across a muddy field directly at the well entrenched English. The field was well prepared against a French cavalry charge with pits meant to break the horse charge. The battle began with a Genoese crossbow attack. These troops were closely followed by the French cavalry knights. At around 150 yards, these troops were heavily engaged by the English longbows (Eckerd). This attack was cut down as never before in the history of warfare. It was the French’s blind commitment to a militarily outdated concept of chivalry, of which the English no longer took to heart, that lead to their downfall. What the English took to heart was, instead, a concept that may now also be militarily outdated; to the victor go the spoils. But, even though the battle was won, “the arrival of the Black Death in 1348 gave the French a respite from the war, however unwelcome. Still, the Crécy campaign did set the stage for the Treaty of Brétigny, by which Edward gained a third of France to rule in full sovereignty. It also served notice to all of Europe that an "infantry revolution" had overturned the dominance of chivalric cavalry” (Rogers). The appearance of the Black Death was most likely the saving grace of the French king. It may be called his angel of death, for if the black plague had not arrived, the end of France would surely have followed closely behind. The plague marked the end of knightly military chivalry and would have brought the end of our hero Beowulf, if he retained blindly his chivalric qualities of fair play and equal terms.

This battle is known to have happened. It is one of the more documented and studied events in British history. One can draw a clear line between the literature of the time and the fact of the time. With Beowulf, we find a hero devoted to glory at any cost. In most of his battles, he is the glorious victor, and, even in death, he has his glory and honor. When we contrast to a battle that we know happened, that of Crecy for example, we find a marked
difference. Edward landed at St. Vaast, near Cherbourg, on July 12 and marched east toward Paris, and then north to Crecy (Crecy). This long march of nearly 345 miles was easier for the English army due to its smaller size, superior organization, and outstanding leadership. At Crecy, the victor carefully chose his ground; he prepared that ground with traps and snares to slow his enemy. He then rained down hundreds, possibly thousands, of deadly arrows upon his foe, further weakening them, and, then – only after his enemy was tired, snared, scattered, confused and full of arrows – did Edward strike with the terrible ferocity that would have been the end of Beowulf. It is this “all is fair in love and war” attitude that Edward used to win his battles that sets him and Beowulf apart, and it is this trait that would doom Beowulf to a bloody grave had he been unfortunate enough to live in the time of Edward the 3rd.
Works Cited


