

On the effects of the English longbow against armour in the XIVth and XVth century.

by Augusto Boer Bront

Rivers of ink, both physical and digital have been poured over the years when discussing the famed English longbow and its efficacy during the Middle Ages, more specifically during the Hundred Years War. Given that this is a very emotional topic mostly by Anglophones, and British in particular, as in most other countries, the topic is not that heavily emphasized at all, this document is a collection of sources to understand what are the actual historical accounts of arrows defeating armour and in what context that happened. And to understand the actual historical dynamics and expectations on how the longbow was deployed and what it actually did achieve on the battlefield against fully armoured opponents, rather than fitting one rather than another narrative on why and how the English longbow is amazing or is rubbish. This article's aim is not to ridicule or belittle either "camp", but it just tries to gather together the primary sources that explicitly talk about the interaction between longbow shots and heavy armour of the Middle Ages.

To introduce the topic we can start with looking at if and when we do have explicit sources for armour stopping arrows and their wearers suffering no harm whatsoever. It seems that we have at least a few recorded cases where it's indisputable that an English longbow arrow did fail to penetrate and harm the opposing armoured soldiers.

Poitiers, 1354: "For the cavalry, designed to ride down the archers and protect their companions from them, stood beside the other French troops and offered the archers as a target only the forequarters, which were well protected by steel plates and leather shields, so that the arrows aimed at them either shattered or glanced off heavenwards". (Froissart)

Cocherel, 1364: "And when the [English] archers were forward, they shot fiercely together, but the Frenchmen were so well armed and so strongly pavaised that they took but little hurt [...]" (Froissart)

Verneuil, 1424: "the Italian cavalry, who, perfectly protected both man and horse suffered nothing from the strikes of the arrows." (Basin)

Interesting to note how shields, for example in the battle of Azincourt in 1415 as recorded by Wauvrin, "the French began to hold down their heads, especially those who had no shields, because of the violent force of the English arrows", are also explicitly mentioned to stop arrows and preventing them from hurting the soldier carrying them. Froissart also mentions this in his recollection of the battle of Crecy in 1346, talking about the Genoese crossbowmen: "that they were not able to defend against them [the English arrows], because they did not have their armour and

shields". So it seems like at least some shields were arrow proof, or they were expected to be.

Moreover in 1488 in the City of Anvers the armourers were required to proof their cuirasses and brigandines either against bows and hook spanned crossbows, or windlass/cranequin spanned crossbows. So it is quite explicit that hook spanned crossbows were expected to perform as well as longbows "they shall be held to proof with a windlass crossbow and marked with two marks, and the remainder of 18 to 20 pounds (8.8 and 9.8 Kg) in weight shall, as above, be proofed with a hook crossbow and an archer's pull".

And this similarity between "hand crossbows" and longbows seem to be already implicit in earlier sources, where English archers and Genoese crossbowmen do exchange shots and neither seem to "prevail", and they both do damage to each other ("The Frenchmen defended so well the passage at the issuing out of the water, that they had much to do. The Genoways did them great trouble with their crossbows: on the other side the archers of England shot so wholly together, that the Frenchmen were fain to give place to the Englishmen." Battle of Blanche-taque in 1346, Froissart).

Another interesting missile weapon comparison is mentioned in the Italian military treatise "Del governo et exercitio della militia" by Orso Orsini written in 1476. Among other things he talks about army composition and division of units, among which are the sappers. He does state that they should be equipped with either Turkish bows or English longbows ("And that said bows be either wooden long bows in the English fashion [...], or in the Turkish fashion, and that the bows should be good and the sappers be strong so they can shoot well." Orsini) as both require a strong man to be pulled effectively. It is interesting to note how these two are put on the same level, and how local farmers, which Orsini says should be recruited as sappers, would be capable enough to use an English longbow, and thus implying that extensive and specific training isn't required to do so, dispelling the myth that somehow English archers had something better to offer compared to their colleagues from other regions of Europe.

The instances we have of arrows penetrating heavily armoured opponents seems to be always of archers flanking men at arms and shooting from the side or back, like in Crecy in 1346. There the formation

led by the Black Prince flanked the French knights that were busy fighting the dismounted men at arms of the English ("While these things were happening, the English archers were coming down from the hillside among the grain and shooting arrows into the cavalry without end. They held their bows and were shouting, "Strike! Strike! Strike!". Everyone was in danger. The horses were pierced on the left side, so the army was greatly weakened." Froissart). More specifically the flanking Black Prince's archers are said to have "pierced through horses and men with their arrows" (Corpus Chronicurum Flandrensium). Again arrows and lances were "seeking out the entrails of men just as much as those of horses, their armour rarely preventing it" (Murimuth).

Similarly at Poitiers in 1354, with the cavalry charge of the French, where the English were behind hedges and flanking and funnelling the knights, as the two wings of their

whole formation ("They entered ahorseback into the way where the great hedges were on both sides set full of archers. As soon as the men of arms entered, the archers began to shoot on both sides and did slay and hurt horses and knights" Froissart). Here we also have direct mention of arrows piercing armour: "caused their arrows to prevail over the armour of the knights" (Le Baker).

Still at Potiers, the French were stuck in fighting the English men at arms, and when they started to fall back: "[...] they saw a rout of Englishmen coming down a little mountain a-horseback, and many archers with them, who brake in on the side of the duke's battle. True to say, the archers did their company that day great advantage; for they shot so thick that the Frenchmen wist not on what side to take heed, and little and little the Englishmen won ground on them." (Froissart).

In the battle of Aljubarrota in 1385, fought between the kingdom of Portugal and the crown of Castille, a contingent of English archers was also deployed in the same manner on the Portugese side and had defences and obstacles in front of them, and did funnel the Castillan cavalry creating a killing zone ("And at their first coming there was a hard rencounter; for such as desired to assail, to win grace and praise entered into the strait way, where the Englishmen by their policy had fortified them: and because the entry was so narrow, there was great press and great mischief to the assailants, for such English archers as were there shot so wholly together that their arrows pierced men and horse, and when the horses were full of arrows, they fell one upon another." Froissart).

And at the battle of Azincourt the English deploy yet again a very similar tactic, where the archers were deployed in a "U" formation with defensive stakes placed in front of them, with them being divided in three main battles, with dismounted men at arms behind and/or between them. From the same battle there's an account by Lydgate where which states: "Our archers shot full heartily, and quickly made the Frenchmen bleed; their arrows went at great speed, and took down our enemies; through breastplate, haubergeon, and bascinet they went. Eleven thousand were slain there all in a row; you know right well that it was so". Which I think it's a bit exaggerated, given what we know from practical tests about arrows penetrating armour, what other primary sources say, and the clearly exaggerated number of slain men (eleven thousand dead men would mean the whole French armoured troops, by modern estimates). Maybe this account is exaggerated for poetical emphasis and whatnot.

Later on during the English campaign in France, in the battle of Cravant in 1424, the English were fighting against the French which had amongst them Italian mercenaries. In this scenario the English archers were deployed on bank of a river, trying to prevent the opponents to cross a bridge, and thus they were shooting at the French formation on its side: "Their arrows discomfited the Lombards by piercing their leg armour and finding other weaknesses in the side or back of the harness." (Wadge).

There seem to be a common tread among all these battles and engagements where English archers were successful at injuring and incapacitating armoured, both foot and mounted, opponents. The factor that seem to be shared by all of these instances is that either by planning or by surprise, the archers were able to manoeuvre or ambush their opponents and shoot them from the side, where armour doesn't cover

as well as the front and is not as thick. This also explain why shooting from the side is so effective against cavalry, since the side profile of a horse is much broader and much harder to armour up compared to its front, resulting in much more effective killing potential of the massed archery.

It's repeatedly mentioned that at long range, in archers duels, the longbow was quite effective at killing poorly armoured troops, like the Genoese at Crecy ("But the English shot with such speed and in such numbers, that they were not able to defend against them, because they did not have their armour and shields." Froissart), or the Irish ("then the English archers began to shoot so eagerly that the Irishmen could not suffer it, for they are but simply armed, therefore they recused and went back." Froissart)

It's important to note that in no battle the enemy's assault was stopped. Even at Agincourt in 1415, which in this particular context it's the only recorded case of a cavalry charge fully disrupted by the archers, the French knights still manage to reach the archers and the woods, but were severely under strength and

had to retreat ("[the French horses] were forced to fall back under showers of arrow and to flee in the rear-guard, save for the very few who, although not without losses in dead and wounded, rode through between the archers and the woodlands, and save too, of course, for the many who were stopped by the stakes driven into the ground and prevented from fleeing very far by the stinging hail of missiles shot at both horses and riders in their flight" Gesta) ("Sir William de Saveuse, a very brave knight, took the Azincourt side, with about three hundred lances ; and with two others only he advanced before the rest, who all followed, and struck into these English archers, who had their stakes fixed in front of them, but these had little hold in such soft ground. So the said Sir William and his two companions pressed on boldly ; but their horses tumbled among the stakes, and they were speedily slain by the archers, which was a great pity" Wavrin). The failed charge at Azincourt is the most clear case of a cavalry charge not being effective, but the reasons are multiple.

Most importantly is that they were under strength, and vastly outnumbered by the archers to be of any impact. It seems like between 300 to 800 charged in total, so divided in two wings of 150 to 400 horses strong each, which had to charge at least 5000 archers, even though most of the sources do give 10000 archers or more present at the battle. Probably if the cavalry charge had involved twice as much or more cavalry, there would have been enough unit cohesion in the charging formations that the horses and their riders would have been forced to go forwards and not disperse and panic, like it ultimately happened at Azincourt.

Both in Crecy ("the day of the battle certain Frenchmen and Almaines perforce opened the archers of the prince's battle and came and fought with the men of arms hand to hand." Froissart) and Poitiers ("Certain knights and squires that were well horsed passed through the archers and thought to approach to the prince, but they could not." Froissart) is interesting to note that the initial cavalry charge did in fact reach the English frontline and did fight hand to hand with the dismounted English men at arms ("The battle of the marshals [the French] began to disorder by reason of the shot of the archers with the aid of the men of arms, who came in among them and slew of them and did what they list, [...] Froissart).

The mass cavalry charges were “partially successful”, as in they reached the enemy and entered combat with them, but didn't manage to disrupt the English formation right away. Unlike in Verneuil in 1424, where about 500 Italian men at arms, plus their valets, frontally charged the English archers and dismounted men at arms behind their usual wall of wooden stakes, and reached them and broke their ranks, and continued to the baggage train in the rear guard and plundered it. (“in fact at the first onset they charged the English archers and broke their ranks; and, on others coming up, they made a gap through them and passed them on to the booty” Liber Pluscardensis).

In conclusion, the written evidence seems to suggest that longbows did manage to significantly damage the enemy if deployed in the correct position and in enough numbers. Frontal attacks executed by a sufficiently armoured and numerous opponent seem to be able to just ignore the arrow shower, while the attack would be hindered by the archers if these are able to shoot at the sides of the oncoming enemy for a long enough period. Also it seems quite crucial that the archer formation need to be able to redeploy and move around the enemy main formation, to exploit the weaker side and back armour of the enemy. Or at least the archer formation has to be deployed far enough on the sides to be able to do enfilading fire on the incoming opponents. It has to be noted that virtually in every case for this to happen, the enemy had to be first engaged and bogged down by the English men at arms, and only then the archers would have the chance to outmanoeuvre the opposing armoured soldiers and take advantage of the weaker armour on the side and rear.

One big mystery is what was the range at which the archers engaged their target. We do know from multiple sources that there was such a unit of measurement as “an archer's shot” or “at bow shot”, so it seems that they did have some distance at which the bows would be expected to be effective at, and many engagements did start at such range, or its multiples, and it was used to describe the distance between two armies at the beginning of a battle. But unfortunately, I haven't come across any explicit mention of what such distance actually is.

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