

# The role of infantry and cavalry in european war: 1300- 1500 essay



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The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed a decisive change in the balance between infantry and cavalry in European armies which went beyond the normal temporary fluctuations which had existed for many years. The total hegemony which the knightly heavy cavalry had enjoyed in previous centuries came under attack from a resurgent infantry with growing skills, the recognition of which saw their promotion from their previous role as a mere auxiliary arm of the great cavalry armies.

While by no means sweeping aside the cavalry, infantry became increasingly important until by the end of the fifteenth century, some countries fought successfully despite using cavalry as a distinctly subordinate branch of their army. The armoured cavalry of the European knights had its strength essentially in the shock value of its charges. This one strength had ensured its general supremacy when set against infantry in the centuries before 1300, and even as late as the Italian Wars, " Heavy cavalry continued to prove itself unequalled for shock tactics. In 1300, infantry was yet to develop the tactics or the weapons which would allow it to stand up to the cavalry charge, a difficulty which had not been widely overcome even by 1494, as suggested by the fact that the first French armies to invade Italy were made up of about two-thirds cavalry. In spite of the development of the offensive capability of the infantry up to this date, and of measures to blunt the effectiveness of cavalry charges, attacks by armoured horsemen remained the ultimate form of attack, capable of breaking up most formations of foot soldiers.

Their social position under the feudal system rested on their role as protectors of their peasants and as soldiers of the king, and the knightly

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military culture of tournaments and the like developed around them, ensuring that every nobleman was a well-trained, disciplined soldier. In 1347, Philip VI explained that, "... in the future he intended to use for war and lead into battle nothing but noblemen.

.. For warfare, the only men of value were the noblemen, who had learned military skill from their youth and were raised for that purpose. " The cavalry not only retained its prominent position in most armies because of its military effectiveness, but also as a result of the high social standing of the knights. To fight as heavy cavalry was the preserve of the noble classes, and as such was a considerable honour.

The commoners in the infantry were looked down upon, and military commanders would much rather have had their fellow nobles in their armies than the despised foot soldiers. This bias can in some cases be said to have artificially preserved the dominance of cavalry in armies in spite of the growing importance of the infantry. Although all of the factors listed above remained more or less constant in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this is not to say that mounted knights did not need to follow some kind of development in order to maintain their importance. Cavalry was not immune to change, and the knights who fought in the Italian Wars at the end of the fifteenth century bore a number of differences from their counterparts in 1300. There was a tendency for the size of cavalry units to increase, in France for example there was a change at the end of the fourteenth century from a unit size of two men, of whom only one actually fought, to one of three mounted men, "..

. no doubt because of changes in tactics on the battlefield. By obliging each knight to enlist the services of more men for the army, one of the effects of this would be to increase the potential size of the cavalry component. There was also a push towards advancements in the quality of cavalry with the specification in contracts of the minimum amounts of armour and equipment each horseman should have, and of minimum values for their horses. The development of armour followed necessity as chainmail proved susceptible to bowshot, an increasingly important factor at this time, and was replaced by plate armour which provided better all-round protection for the knights. Such evolution helped to preserve the importance of cavalry in European armies at a time when infantry was gaining a reputation for once more being a useful part of an army.

Despite all of the advantages which late mediaeval cavalry enjoyed, there remained a number of weaknesses which it found difficult or impossible to overcome. While for a long time cavalry continued to reign supreme in battles in the open field, over difficult terrain horses would always suffer more than men fighting on foot. The Battle of Coutrai in 1302, the first important engagement for centuries in which infantry had played the primary part in the defeat of cavalry, was won as a result of the attacking cavalry getting into difficulties when crossing a stream with marshy banks, the lighter foot soldiers being far better suited to the conditions. It is also no coincidence that the people of the mountainous Swiss cantons developed an infantry tradition rather than one based on cavalry. The cost of cavalry forces was a further limiting factor, the value of a man-at-arms' horses and armour making him an expensive soldier to pay for, and something of a

rarity (there not being an abundance of people able to afford the necessary equipment).

Furthermore, although knights were supposed to bring spare horses with them on campaigns, loss of mounts was a problem since they were difficult to replace, especially when fighting far from home. A cavalryman with no horse is, needless to say, of limited use to a cavalry army. Lastly, it came to be realised that cavalry-dominated armies tended to be somewhat one-dimensional, lacking in the capabilities which the various types of infantry offered. Because of this, auxiliary infantry arms came to be increasingly included. The Battle of Courtrai at the start of the 1300s seemed to show the possibilities which existed with the use of burgher forces armed as spear phalanxes.

The possibility that such militia forces could be used successfully against knightly armies seemed attractive, since militias were easy to recruit and train, and cheap to arm and pay. These levies began to appear in a number of European armies, but the confidence in them produced by such isolated successes as Courtrai proved to be a temporary phenomenon, engagements like the Battle of Rosebeke showing that on a 'level playing field', the knights remained unquestionably superior. While burgher forces were levied as late as the fifteenth century, these tended to be as marksmen rather than as forces armed with close-combat weapons which had seemed so promising at Courtrai. The development of shot weapons was important in the rise of infantry forces between 1300 and 1500, adding a dimension to armies which the cavalry never could. Bows had of course existed for centuries and were

widely used in Europe in their traditional short bow form in the years before 1300.

Beyond that date, however, they seem to have already been superseded by two developments on the bow, the longbow and the crossbow. English armies first encountered the longbow in Wales in the thirteenth century and were so impressed by its capabilities as to use it to replace their traditional short bows. With a range of 400 metres and the ability to pierce chain mail at 200, it offered English armies a weapon with great potential to be effective against the knights. Longbow archers came to be an extremely large part of English armies, frequently outnumbering their cavalry comrades.

Whether the longbow was a decisive weapon, however, remains a debatable point. Longbows were of more use for their ability to madden horses and to disorder enemy forces which could then be defeated by the knights. In this respect, archers were always an auxiliary to the cavalry, incapable themselves of withstanding cavalry charges and therefore of winning battles through their firepower alone. On the continent, the crossbow proved more popular than the longbow, being more accurate, and having sufficient power to pierce even plate armour. These advantages made up for its main weakness, its slow rate of fire, which made cavalry charges easier to carry out against crossbowmen who were even more incapable than longbowmen of firing fast enough to create an impenetrable barrage. Infantry armed with crossbows began to appear in many European armies, especially with the development of mercenary companies specialising in the use of such weapons, but, as with the longbow, it was unable to stand alone in the face

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of cavalry armies, and so remained an auxiliary arm, existing simply to create weaknesses in the enemy's army for the knights to exploit.

By the end of the 1400s, both longbow and crossbow were being replaced by the newly-introduced handguns which possessed even greater hitting power than the crossbow, but shared the crossbow's slow rate of fire and was yet to develop a consistent reliability. Handguns, like the bows, were at this time a mere auxiliary weapon, unable to win battles alone. Varying degrees of success were achieved with attempts to fortify the shot weapons by mixing them with dismounted knights. This conversion of the cavalry into infantry for some battles had both technical and psychological reasons behind it. Firstly, it allowed the marksmen to continue firing for a longer time should they be charged by allowing them to fire until the last moment and then simply stepping back and allowing the men-at-arms to take the full force. Alone, they would have had to have taken cover at an earlier stage, being no match for the attacking enemy in close-quarters combat.

Secondly, by removing the ability of the knights to escape on horseback in case of trouble, leaving the infantry to its fate, it instilled a confidence in the infantry that they would be defended to the last by the nobles. This, however, as the use of large militia levies and large numbers of archers had been, was only a passing phase, not the start of any permanent domination on the part of the infantry. By dismounting, the knights sacrificed what remained their chief weapon, their ability to mount a cavalry charge, and in the open field, such charges were still able to destroy these new infantry formations. While a significant episode, the dismounting of knights was not to form the root of the development of the infantry of early modern times.

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The development of the infantry which finally ended the dominance of the mounted knight took place in the Swiss cantons. The mountainous terrain of Switzerland was always likely to favour the development of infantry rather than cavalry, and there grew a tradition of arming the whole population not only for the defence of their quasi-independence, but for more aggressive adventures against their neighbours.

The method which they adopted which was to change the face of war in Europe was an extension of the ancient spear phalanx, the pike square. These squares combined the defensive virtues of the phalanx with a new offensive capability. The use of a number of ranks of long pikes on the outside of the square formed a barrier which was impenetrable to simple cavalry charges. The offensive would be taken with the charging of these pikes into the enemy ranks, causing disorder, which was then exploited by halberdiers who would emerge from the square formation and fight their way through the disorder.

The effectiveness of the pike squares was further augmented by the use of marksmen who could hide within the formation when it came to hand-to-hand fighting. The success of the Swiss infantry, notably against the Burgundians, both increased the confidence and therefore the bravery of the Swiss themselves, and confirmed their growing reputation for effectiveness and ruthlessness, causing a certain degree of fear in any opponent they met. In this way, success bred success. For the first time in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, an infantry had emerged which had the power to take on the cavalry and win, a fact which resulted in the widespread copying of the Swiss way of fighting, and the hiring of valuable Swiss mercenary forces.

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The development of mercenary forces across Europe was one of the main reasons behind the undermining of the hegemony of cavalry which had existed in previous years. With the decline of true feudalism and the rise of the contract system, there developed companies of soldiers prepared to fight not simply out of loyalty to their king, but for the lure of pay. The result of the development of an international pool of soldiers was that military leaders could choose to hire the best quality soldiers from areas with traditions for effective use of various weapons. Armies could, for example, hire the specialist crossbowmen of Genoa, English longbowmen, or Swiss pikemen, all likely to be of superior quality to native equivalents due to their specialisation.

The availability of quality infantry therefore provided an incentive for its greater use. The years from 1300 to 1500 saw the steady erosion of the dominance of cavalry by a continually developing infantry. Bows proved to be of some use for a time, the victories of the English in the Hundred Years War in particular enhancing their reputation, and the availability of specialist archer companies grew with the growth of mercenaries. However, the bows lacked the effectiveness to be anything more than a supporting arm, while firearms had yet to be fully developed, and suffered similar limitations to the bows as a result. Dismounted knights saw some success and proved popular for a time, but this development was insufficient to stand up to the cavalry charge which remained supreme. It was only in the final years of the Middle Ages that any sort of infantry developed which could stand up alone to the cavalry, and its source was Switzerland.

The acceptance of this change, however, was slow to spread, and it was only after 1500 that European armies in general could be said to have removed their dependence on cavalry, a tribute to the strength that the mounted troops still possessed, a strength which had survived and grown in the face of mounting competition from the infantry.