



# **The Art of War in the Middle Ages: Military History of Medieval Europe (378-1515): The Transition From Roman to Medieval Forms in War, the Byzantines and ... English and Their Enemies, Feudal Cavalry**

*Charles William Chadwick Oman*

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The Art of War has been very simply defined as 'the art which enables any commander to worst the forces opposed to him.' It is therefore conversant with an enormous variety of subjects: Strategy and Tactics are but two of the more important of its branches. Besides dealing with discipline, organization, and armament, it is bound to investigate every means which can be adapted to increase the physical or moral efficiency of an army.

Contents:

The Transition from Roman to Mediæval Forms in War - A.D. 378–582.

The Early Middle Ages - A.D. 476–1066–81.

The Byzantines and their Enemies - A.D. 582–1071.

The Supremacy of Feudal Cavalry - A.D. 1066–1346.

The Swiss - A.D. 1315–1515.

The English and their Enemies - A.D. 1272–1485.

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### **John says**

Proof that the rating system here is rubbish.

Check this out, this is Sir Oman's FULL book, with the absolutely brilliant chapter on the Swiss, their pikemen and Ascendancy etc., but this gets a 3.8 rating while the INCOMPLETE book without the analysis of rapid light infantry pike and the tactics of Leo and the Strategicon of Maurice scores over a 4.2

Sir Charles Oman writes some of the best English language paragraphs to date, any date. Check this one out:

"The strength of the armies of Philip and John of Valois was composed of a fiery and undisciplined aristocracy, which imagined itself to be the most efficient military force in the world, but was in reality little removed from an armed mob. A system which reproduced on the battlefield the distinctions of feudal society, was considered by the French noble to represent the ideal form of warlike organization. He firmly believed that, since he was infinitely superior to any peasant in the social scale, he must consequently excel, him to the same extent in military value. He was, therefore, prone not only to despise all descriptions of infantry, but to regard their appearance on the field against him as a species of insult to his class-pride. The self-confidence of the French nobility -- shaken for the moment by the result of Courtray -- had reasserted itself after the bloody days of Mons-en-Puelle and Cassel. The fate which had on those occasions befallen the gallant but ill-trained burghers of Flanders, was believed to be only typical of that which awaited any foot-soldier who dared to match himself against the chivalry of the most warlike aristocracy in Christendom. Pride goes before a fall, and the French noble was now to meet infantry of a quality such as he had never supposed to exist."

Whew, an astounding wordsmith, as informative as it is interesting.

This is the sort of war manual I wish I had as a kid, would have answered many of my silly military scenario questions.

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### **Gianluca says**

For the amount of data, battle review, sheer information, this book deserve 5 stars, no doubt. Sir Oman covered many middle age battles in a quite short book, in itself quite an accomplishment. There are also a few battle's illustration, something missing from many military books even today.

But I gave it only 3 stars because I felt throughout it that the author tried not to expose his knowledge on the

matter but to prove his points, namely that the French suck, that cavalry was the main force that decided battles, that the Romans were not as great as the English (really!) and that the people living in Britain during Middle Ages have made more contribution to the art of war than anybody else in Europe. It is a very opinionated book. It is still very interesting for the clear descriptions of many battles and the illustrations in it. But be prepared to be repeated at each chapter how much the French were bad, not only militarily, and that some of his theories have been disproved.

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### **Francescopennesi says**

Interessante resoconto sulle strategie di guerra del medioevo. Purtroppo però si parla troppo di strategia e tattica, tralasciando completamente gli effetti della guerra sulla popolazione e sulle città. Inoltre l'autore sembra eccessivamente ancorato ad idee che, a mio modestissimo parere, sembrano un po' azzardate (i cavalieri medievali ed i loro comandanti erano tutti degli imbecille che caricavano sempre in modo insensato, per dire).

Un buon testo per farsi un'idea sui passaggi fondamentali delle tattiche di guerra durante l'Età Media.

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### **Carl Phillips says**

One of, if not the best, book on medieval military history ever written. The destruction of the widely accepted idea that Europe's knights being just rich kids on horseback is worth the price of the book. The keen analysis of the downfall of the mounted knight and the rise of the longbow and the Swiss pike a glorious bonus.

Buy and read it immediately if you consider yourself even vaguely interested in medieval military history (or medieval military fantasy).

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### **Allen says**

Written 130 years ago, this book is a great handbook for understanding the wars and battles of medieval history as you read about them in other books. The author covers strategy and tactics, weapons and weapon systems, the raising and equipping of armies and the use of mercenaries such as the famed and feared Swiss pikemen. Changing technology results in changing strategy and tactics, with the advent of firearms the most significant of all.

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### **le-trombone says**

Note: Added to my to-read shelf not because this is a recommended history, but because it's not. Apparently he let his pet theories get in the way of the historical record. I'm still interested because he's a source for some science fiction writers who wrote a lot of alternate history.

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## Coyle says

We all know what war was like in the Middle Ages, right? A bunch of rich guys get on horses and run into each other with lances, swords, and axes until one of them can't any more. And... that's pretty much spot on. But! How did the world (or at least the West, but come on, that's the important part of the world, right?) come to that state of affairs? How did we get from the Roman army -one of the most well-trained, well-equipped, and efficient killing machines *ever*- to an "army" consisting of a few hundred individuals trying to run over each other with horses? The answer to that question is the subject of C.W.C. Oman's classic *The Art of War in the Middle Ages*.

And it is deservedly a classic. Despite only being 165 pages long, Oman packs in both a relatively fast-paced narrative (he does cover almost 1200 years, after all) and lots of interesting details. Also impressive: he wrote what has become the definitive text while an *undergrad* at Oxford in 1885. [Sigh] I've wasted my life...

As mentioned, the book covers a 1200-year stretch, ranging from destruction of the last "real" Roman army by heavy cavalry at the Battle of Adrianople (378 A.D.) to the last major victory of heavy cavalry at the battle of Marignano (1515 A.D.). The stretch of time between these two battles saw the rise, dominance, decline, and collapse of armored horsemen on the battlefield. Through these centuries developed not only a style of warfare, but an entire way of life entirely focused around the idea that cavalry was supreme in the art of war.

How did this happen? It began with the size of the Roman Empire and the series of Civil Wars that plagued the Empire at the end of the Third and beginning of the Fourth centuries A.D. For nearly 600 years, the Roman legion (infantry) had been the dominant military force in the world. A series of civil wars (which Oman does not discuss) depleted the Roman legions, forcing each successive Emperor (and their challengers) to rely increasingly on barbarian mercenaries (usually cavalry) to fill out the shrinking ranks. This meant that money and training were flowing at a steady pace from Rome to tribes outside its own borders. When the Civil Wars came to a (temporary) end with the accession of Constantine (303 A.D.), there was so little left of the old legions that Constantine simply reshaped the army around cavalry. This had the dual benefit of utilizing forces already employed by the Empire (though not native Romans) and giving the new army sufficient speed that it could reply to barbarian incursions anywhere in Europe much faster than the old infantry-based legions. On the other hand, it meant that 1) Roman citizens no longer filled the ranks of the military, and the loyalty of the army was now only the loyalty of paid mercenaries; 2) even as the barbarian cavalry became increasingly important and the remaining Roman legions increasingly ignored, ill-trained, and ill-equipped, *tactics did not change*. So when the Emperor Valens led the remnants of the Roman army (~25,000 men) against the Gothic cavalry, he did it as if he were leading the same trim and well-fed legions that Caesar had led against the virtually naked barbarian horsemen of four hundred years earlier. The result was the utter destruction of the Roman Army, the opening of the way for the barbarians into the heart of the Western Empire, and the establishment of cavalry as the force to be reckoned with on the battlefield for over a millennium.

Oman gives three quick surveys of the development of warfare. In the first, he talks about the rise of the military class (knights, chivalry, and all that) and the final destruction of the infantry holdouts in the West

(mostly in England and Viking nations, all of whom eventually "converted" to cavalry). Two of the common assumptions of this time are that 1) war is a matter of hard work and courage, not of any kind of tactics or skill. That is, a single knight with enough boldness can only be stopped by another knight with equal or greater boldness. No foot soldier will ever stand against a charging armored horseman; 2) those who meet the conditions of 1) are *better* (both morally and socially) than those who do not, especially than those who do not even try. So we see in warfare a microcosm of the principles of feudalism (or perhaps vice-versa).

In the second survey he discusses the development of war in the Byzantine Empire (on which he has a whole book). Only in this remnant of the Eastern Roman Empire does war survive as an "art", where it is studied, practiced, and engaged in by professional generals and professional armies. Yet, even here the transition to cavalry is made, though in a more limited and mixed way (the Byzantines keep the old Roman artillery, for example, and even expand on it with the invention of Greek fire...).

In the third survey, Oman explores the centuries of the dominance of heavy cavalry (roughly 1066-1346). In this time in the West, tactics, organization, and cohesion of large armies are virtually unknown. "Battle" consists of two armies of heavily armored nobles (and their feudal hangers-on) smashing into each other until one side quits and goes home. Endurance and courage become the virtues necessary to win battles. Which means that 1) *any* use of even the most rudimentary tactics usually defeats these Medieval "armies"; 2) if there is *any* chance that sheer hard fighting will win the day, these Medieval "armies" will usually overcome. The Crusades -aberrations in Medieval warfare though they are- are remarkable examples of both of these points. Whenever the Muslims had qualified leadership, they won. Whenever it came down to who could fight harder or longer, the Crusaders won.

In the last chapters, Oman discusses how the dominance of cavalry in the Middle Ages came to an end. Namely, through the return of infantry. In Switzerland and England two styles of combat arose which utterly defeated the usefulness of the heavily armoured horse on the battlefield (Bohemia and the Ottoman armies are briefly discussed as well). The use of the pike and halberd in Switzerland and the use of the longbow in England (and the war wagon in Bohemia and gunpowder in the Ottoman army) unhorsed the cavalrymen so severely that he has never made a comeback. Oman then discusses how these innovations were themselves made obsolete by the rise of combined arms and new technologies at the beginning of the Early Modern Era.

Really, this book was just a delight to read. While it may not be for those who aren't interested in military history or the Medieval world, I found it fascinating and worth a second look (the first being in undergrad, where I may have just skimmed it...). In fact, it's good enough that I'm going to keep my eyes open for his longer and more mature two volume edition.

In addition to recommending this to Medievalists and military historians, I'd recommend this to anyone who wants to *write* history. Oman's style is short, full, and readable. He conveys a lot of information in a few words without being boring. If more history books were written like this, we'd have more people interested in history.

Highly recommended.

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### **Andrei says**

The short version, still very interesting view on late Romans and the question on the infantry in late Middle Ages, and surprisingly arrogant towards the French. Worth to have it combined with Hans Delbruck.

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### **Chris says**

An excellent book, I gave it a low ranking because it is dated.

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### **Alexan Martin-Eichner says**

A pleasant and important work in the history of military history; if you're interested in high politics, macro events, wars, and material history, this is an essential book.

Frankly though, I don't care about it any more. It says almost nothing about the social world.

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### **Brent Lambell says**

This is the book that got me into military history. Its a fun and easy read that gives a good survey of military conflict throughout Europe from the dark ages to the renaissance. Its far from the perfect historical document and has been challenged in some circles but all the same, its a fine piece of work worth the read.

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