THE LONGBOW-CROSSBOW SHOOTOUT AT CRÉCY (1346):
HAS THE “RATE OF FIRE COMMONPLACE” BEEN OVERRATED?

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Then the Genoways again the second time made another leap and a fell cry, and stept forward a little, and the Englishmen removed not one foot: thirdly, again they leapt and cried, and went forth till they came within shot; then they shot fiercely with their crossbows. Then the English archers stept forth one pace and let fly their arrows so wholly [together] and so thick, that it seemed snow. When the Genoways felt the arrows piercing through heads, arms and breasts, many of them cast down their crossbows and did cut their strings and returned discomfited. When the French king saw them fly away, he said: “Slay these rascals, for they shall let and trouble us without reason.” Then ye should have seen the men of arms dash in among them and killed a great number of them: and ever still the Englishmen shot whereas they saw thickest press.1

With these words, the foremost chronicler of the fourteenth century, Sir John Froissart, helped establish one of the enduring commonplaces of medieval military history—the supposed “matchup” of Crécy (1346) featuring the longbow and the crossbow. In this first great land battle of the Hundred Years War (1337–1453), the crossbow is said to lose because of its opponent’s superior range and rate of fire.

The commonplace is restated in leading works of the present day; for example, in War, Cruel and Sharp: English Strategy under Edward III 1327–1360, Clifford Rogers posits an explanation for the crossbowmen’s defeat highly reminiscent of Froissart:

[The crossbowmen] began to fire at the English, but quickly discovered that they were completely outmatched by the English longbowmen, who could fire farther and faster with deadly effect. The situation was made doubly worse (emphasis added) by the fact that their large shields, or pavises,

which they normally used to give them cover in the field, were still in the rear, in the baggage.\(^2\)

Note that in Rogers’ description, the lack of *pavises* is mentioned only as an aggravating factor in a situation already assumed to be overwhelmingly unfavorable to the Genoese, because of the widely-known difference in rate of fire between the self bow and the crossbow.

*The “Rate of Fire Commonplace” in Scholarly Literature*

Rogers is by no means alone in his assessment. The “rate of fire commonplace” as the explanation for the fourteenth century victory of the longbow over its competitor pervades much of the literature. Matthew Bennett describes Genoese losses at Crécy as a combination of both inferior numbers and inferior rate of fire.\(^3\) Edouard Perroy notes the “very rapid fire” of the “Welsh archers.”\(^4\) J. F. Verbruggen stresses the difference in rate of fire when discussing the role of the two weapons in England,\(^5\) as does Philippe Contamine.\(^6\) Jonathan Sumption unreservedly engages in technological determinism in his assessment of the longbow’s superiority at the earlier battle of Sluys (1340):

> ...the longbow once again proved to be greatly superior to the crossbow used by the French and their Italian auxiliaries. It was more accurate. It had a longer range. Above all it could be fired at a very rapid rate...\(^7\)

In his *La Guerre de Cent Ans*, Jean Favier notes that while the crossbow is accurate and can “work wonders” in sieges, it suffers from a three-to-one disadvantage in rate of fire compared to what he characterizes as the less accurate, and less powerful longbow.\(^8\) By contrast, Ferdinand Lot


\(^3\) Matthew Bennett, “The Development of Battle Tactics in the Hundred Years’ War,” in *Arms, Armor and Fortifications in the Hundred Years’ War*, ed. Anne Curry (Woodbridge, 1994), 10.

\(^4\) Edouard Perroy, *The Hundred Years War* (Bloomington, Ind., 1962), 119.

\(^5\) J. F. Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe during the Middle Ages: From the Eighth Century to 1340* (Woodbridge, 1997), 118–9.


\(^7\) Jonathan Sumption, *The Hundred Years War I: Trial by Battle* (Philadelphia, 1990), 326.