Blood Red Roses: The archaeology of a mass grave from the Battle of Towton AD 1461

Edited by Veronica Fiorato, Anthea Boylston and Christopher Knüsel.

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Blood Red Roses is a lavishly produced, large format volume of multi-disciplinary papers covering the excavation, study and analysis of skeletal remains recovered from a mass grave at Towton Hall in 1996. The site and material was also the subject of a channel 4 'Secrets of the Dead' television programme and the interest over the find serves to prove our gruesome fascination with a few dead individuals who met unfortunate and violent ends.

Towton had long been known as the site of a battle of the Wars of the Roses, where on 29th March 1461, Yorkist and Lancastrian armies were reputedly involved in the largest and bloodiest battle ever fought on English soil. The battle allegedly raged for ten hours during blizzard conditions and left a reputed 28,000 slain (Boardman, 1994). Despite the huge number of large-scale violent conflicts fought in England over the last two millennia the discovery was unique, and offered archaeologists a hitherto unavailable opportunity 'to learn about the lives and deaths of the ordinary medieval soldier' (Fiorato, p.13). It is stated that 'in contrast to the studies of weapons and tactics the archaeological and osteological analysis provide the invaluable and poignant evidence of the human consequences of medieval battle' (Burgess, p.35).

Opening chapters by Fiorato and Boardman provide a comprehensive account of the circumstances of discovery of the grave and historical background to the Wars of the Roses. Boardman is an authority on the battle and also the author of the Sutton volume The Battle of Towton (1996). He explains how two English Kings came to raise enormous armies and bring them to battle in a Yorkshire village on Palm Sunday, 1461. Henry VI was the crowned King of England but, in March 1461, Edward Earl of March was also proclaimed king of England. There were now two kings, and each raised an army to rid himself of the other forever. Boardman suggests that the two
armies met on an undulating plateau bounded by steep scarps to the east and west, situated to the south of the present site of the village of Towton. Boardman believes that initially the Lancastrian army, through strength of numbers, forced the Yorkist army southwards and appeared to be victorious. However, apparently, just in the nick of time, the Duke of Norfolk arrived with a large contingent of fresh men and joined the battle. The Lancastrian army broke and the Yorkist army pursued, leaving bodies strewn over an area chronicled as six miles long by three miles and four furlongs wide.

The grave itself was accidentally uncovered during building works at Towton Hall. It is credit to the building contractors and landowner (who called in archaeologists) that any investigation was undertaken at all. At least twenty three skeletons were removed and reburied by the builders prior to the archaeological work. One is left wondering, however, why in a post PPG16 world building work in such an archaeologically sensitive area was not subject to provision for archaeological supervision from the outset. Especially as mass graves had been discovered in the immediate area during the eighteenth century (Boardman 1994, 95-6). Burgess describes the excavation methodology and the finds from the excavation. A hastily assembled team from Bradford University and West Yorkshire Archaeological Service undertook the work, with considerable skill and thoroughness considering the constraints of time and funds imposed on the team. Under the best of circumstances the excavation of human remains is a painstaking, fiddley and uncomfortable process. The excavation of mass graves imposes numerous additional archaeological problems as regards excavation and recording. What appears to be a delicate mass of jumbled bone requires careful excavation and disentanglement so that individuals can be identified, recorded and lifted as complete skeletons - essential for osteological analysis. The bodies appear to have been placed side by side (rather than thrown in randomly) largely aligned in an east-to-west orientation. However it is believed that this may have been to maximise the number of dead men within the pit rather than due to any consideration or respect for the dead. There were remarkably few finds deposited with the bodies. Copper alloy lace tags suggests that at least some of the individuals were buried with underclothing. However, a single small fragment of iron, believed to be an armour attachment, was the only indication of defensive clothing. Were the individuals fortunate enough to have been wearing armour it must have been removed prior to burial. One individual was wearing three silver finger rings that appear to have escaped the eyes of the burial party.
Of interest to most readers and where the volume comes into its own is obviously in the analysis of the bones themselves, and the gruesome details of the individuals lives and deaths. Chapters by Boylston, Holst and Coughlan cover the age, stature and health of the dead. The study focuses on the remains of 37 or 38 individuals ranging in age from 16 - 25 years through to 36 - 50 years (an approximate average age of 30 years old at the time of death). The exact circumstances surrounding the presence of the individuals on the battlefield are obviously unknown but the Commissions of Array allowed each side to recruit by force men aged between the years of 16 and 60. At this point a civil war had been raging for six years and this was to be the battle to end it all, so it is reasonable to suspect that each side recruited everyone that they could. Unsurprisingly all the individuals are believed to be male, ranging in height from 5'4" to 6'0" (1.6m - 1.8m). Interestingly it is the taller individuals that display evidence of healed wounds that may suggest they were professional soldiers or at least veterans of previous violent encounters.

One would expect some evidence of wounds and the causes of death, and the reader will not be disappointed. The chapter on 'battle related trauma' by Shannon Novak is a tour de force of forensic anthropology. A horrifying catalogue of injuries are present on the bones. Not merely the odd sword blow but a multitude of sharp and blunt force trauma injuries, concentrated almost entirely to the forearms and head. The majority of the individuals died of blade wounds to the front and rear of the head. However, many individuals received multiple wounds, any one of which would have proved incapacitating or fatal. The injuries are also detailed in case studies at the rear of the book. 'If the skeletons from this grave attest to at least a facet of the battle, these men died in a frenzied killing that involved numerous blows to the head, often after they were incapacitated and unable to defend themselves' (Novak, p.101). The only downside to the chapter is that for a scientific dunce such as myself the terminology is not always so easy to understand and one finds oneself constantly turning to the glossary of palaeopathological terminology at the rear of the book. This is not a problem in itself so long as the discussion can elucidate what it all really means.

Following chapters cover activity-related skeletal change (Christopher Knüsel), weapons (Graeme Rimer), archery (John Waller) and armour (Thom Richardson). John Waller (chapter 13, Combat Techniques) provides an essential social background to medieval warfare and the status of knight or warrior within his society. To the nobleman preparation for combat was all. It was expected that he would spend a large part of his life training for
knighthood or hunting to hounds, and that the two activities were wholly interrelated. He would be taught by professional tutors and men-at-arms. In battle an army worked on a series of allegiances mirrored from medieval society. Each class was indebted to the class above. Lord and nobleman protected king, and retinues of knights and men at arms protected noblemen. Below these were standing garrisons and raised militia or levies made up of the common soldier. Many of these may have been experienced soldiers but certainly at Towton, with two armies of such enormous size, many must have been inexperienced and ill equipped.

The study has not just stopped at the edge of the grave. Sutherland describes the projects wider aims and how it has worked to locate the site of the most intense fighting and the subsequent grave sites. Topographical, historical and fieldwalking evidence have provided a good basis for the large plateau to the south of Towton being the area where at least part of the initial confrontation may have been fought. Geophysical surveying was largely unsuccessful in locating concentrations of iron artefacts that may have been debris from the battle or additional graves. Not only were the results contaminated by more recent iron objects but also it seems that copper alloy artefacts may be a more accurate indicator of the fighting. A local metal detectorist has recovered a concentration of high quality copper alloy clothing fasteners, buckles and horse furniture that may be 15th century and related to the battle. These appear to be concentrated within the area suggested by Boardman as the site of the fierce fighting - the area known as Bloody Meadow. There are obviously no distribution maps provided for the location of the metal detected finds but one would need to see the extent of the survey area and the density of the detecting before it could be proved to be a genuine distribution. There is a second concentration on the site of an earlier confrontation to the south, although the density allegedly drops off towards the village of Towton to the north.

Sadly it might be expected that the sight of the most dense fighting is also the site of the largest concentration of mass graves. Allegedly the plough regularly uncovered human remains on the battlefield in the eighteenth century. A mass grave was disturbed prior to 1745 and the bodies were reinterred in Saxton churchyard (Fiorato, p. 4). Maps of 1771 and 1804 both depict 'the graves in Towton field' to the south of Towton village. There are three large circular mounds to the south of Towton that were also believed to represent the last resting place of those killed in the battle. The Towton Battlefield Society had previously placed two shallow exploratory trenches into these mounds but found no trace of human remains. Additional geophysical
survey on two of the mounds has failed to locate grave pits and it may be that the mounds are actually prehistoric in date. Despite the alleged number of fatalities from the battle further searching for graves has so far proved fruitless. The excavated mass grave at Towton Hall only had a recorded depth of 0.65m. If other graves were excavated to a similar depth then modern ploughing would have certainly damaged them. Indeed, the concentration of copper alloy artefacts recovered by metal detector may have been disturbed from such graves.

There was allegedly a chapel built for the Towton dead under the patronage of Richard III (reigned 1483-5), to the immediate west of Towton Hall. The site of the chapel, or at least Chapel Hill, was recorded by the Ordnance Survey in 1849. Fabric from the demolished chapel may have been disturbed during building works at the hall in the eighteenth century, although Geophysical surveying and trial excavation have failed to find the site of the building.

The binding point of the volume is the chapter dedicated to 'How has the Towton Project contributed to our knowledge of medieval warfare?' The preceding chapters provide a solid archaeological and historical base for a detailed discussion of the medieval soldier and the consequences of battle.

Firstly the fighting men themselves. It is evident that the men ranged in age and height and appear to have come from 'every walk of medieval life' (Knüsel and Boylston, p.172). The men were of average height and had an average age of 30 years. Some men have well healed wounds that are presumably from previous battles, others simply display the stresses of everyday medieval life. There is, alas, nothing extraordinary about most of these individuals lives, only their deaths.

The men died from multiple wounds in a frenzy of fighting at close quarters. Many of the men have multiple incapacitating or fatal injuries, including an incredible 13 wounds inflicted on one individual. Most of the injuries were inflicted by hand held weapons wielded by a right-handed assailant. It had previously been suggested that these wounds were received in the front line of battle, as their opponents stepped forward men behind continued to rain down blows on the individuals, already fatally wounded and prone (Waller, 149-50). However, and here some contradiction lies, the individuals are buried a mile away from the area believed to be the site of that type of intense fighting. Towton Hall is within the path of the rout. It is suggested that the men were struck down as Lancastrian army broke and retreated (it is taken for granted throughout that the bodies represent the Lancastrian dead and the possibility that these were individuals from the Yorkist army is not raised).
However it is evident that the wounds were received during frantic close quarters fighting and it really does seem unlikely that the individuals simply turned their backs on an enemy at close quarters or were even struck down by mounted knights (e.g. Richardson, 147).

There is of course no reason why the bodies were not brought to the site of the hall for burial from further afield. However, one cannot help feeling that with some 28,000 corpses to bury (even allowing for gross exaggerations of the number killed) moving them long distances was not of primary importance. Although no trace of them survives there are reputed mass grave sites further to the south on the 'battlefield'. If the dead bodies were to be moved then one might expect them to placed in consecrated ground within the vicinity of a church.

Rout or no rout, it does appear that the battle continued to be fought hand-to-hand to the north of the area described as the 'battlefield'. Rather than flee to the west down the steep slope and into a river in flood (Boardman 1994) it appears at least part of the Lancastrian army was still involved in intense fighting on the site of Towton Hall, 2 kilometres from where it had been fighting earlier in the day. Buildings in the village of Towton would be open to sequestration and the Lancastrian baggage train may also have been placed here. It is believed that there was a hall on the site in the fourteenth century (Boardman, 1994) although there is little evidence for it within the fabric of the present building. Such a building would have provided shelter for the Lancastrian nobles and refuge for retreating exhausted or injured soldiers. One might even imagine a siege situation developing around such a building.

It might be suggested that at this stage the battle was not so much fought by neat alignments of rectangular blocks of men (if it ever was) but by desperate bands, both retreating and pursuing. There need be no stepping over injured combatants in the tightly packed 'front line of battle'. This image of order belongs on a modern military parade ground. If the battle truly lasted for ten hours then these final acts of the encounter were fought in fading light and the dark by disorganised, exhausted and terrified men. This may be why a servant of Edward IV chronicled that the battle had actually been fought at night (Boardman, p.25).

Of the injuries themselves, a great deal is made of the fact that so many wounds are to the head but not to the rest of the body (except the forearms). It is suggested that while a jack, mail or armour was protecting the body, suitable head protection was not being worn. The possibilities are that the head was the primary target of attack or simply that men may have removed
their helmets for better visibility (sic!) or during flight. The other possibility is, of course, that many individuals were simply not equipped with adequate armour. These were allegedly two enormous armies, even by the standards of the time, undoubtedly containing many men who had been forced to fight. One must ask weather many could afford expensive pieces of armour or helmets. Interestingly, in one of the many illustrations used to depict men fighting in soft headgear (p.153), there are also four individuals bleeding profusely from deep gashes made in metal helmets. Perhaps the wearing of metal headgear afforded little protection to blows from weapons with great force. Alternatively, such illustrations cannot be used as accurate indicators of the realities of battle. It is noted that at Wisby (the only comparable excavated battle grave) that head wounds are less common in comparison to injuries to the rest of the body, especially the legs. It is suggested that a chainmail head coif may have offered some additional protection to the combatants at Wisby. The chainmail coif was no longer a battle fashion essential by 1461, but one cannot help feeling it would offer little defence against the kind of attack witnessed at Towton.

So what has the excavation taught us about medieval warfare and the 'lives and deaths of the ordinary medieval soldier'? The 'human consequences of medieval battle' are unfortunately all too evident. Anyone who may have thought otherwise prior to the discovery at Towton must surely have been caught up on some Arthurian chivalric trip. When thousands of men armed with swords, pole arms and clubs confront each other it is not only a question of king and country. It is truly a matter of life and death and the realities of such situations are obviously brutal.

I desperately wanted to praise this book as a successful union of archaeological and historical analysis, but one cannot help feeling that archaeology is simply treated as an add-on that has provided confirmation that the battle was gruesome. The volume has a cold, scientific feel to it and never really manages to place flesh on the bones of the medieval soldier. In many places it seems that the square pegs of archaeological evidence are being forced into the round holes of historical documentation. Despite the fact that here are remarkably few contemporary accounts of or documents relating to the Battle of Towton and none of them describe the fighting in any detail. Of the contemporary records that survive they are sometimes contradictory and all of them are obviously written by members of the victorious Yorkist contingent.

For example, a simple thing like the siting of a mass grave (actually three are known from this site) cannot be allowed to interfere with the accepted battle
choreography. Nowhere is it satisfactorily explained why such fierce fighting is taking place a mile away from the battle site. At this location the Lancastrian army is supposed to be in full flight. But not running so fast that they did not turn around and partake in a bit of fierce hand-to-hand combat. It is known that the Lancastrian army was defeated and so it must be that these individuals made up part of the Lancastrian army. Despite the fact that the nature of the fighting would surely have produced fatalities on both sides.

There is remarkably little discussion relating to disposal of the dead, the activities of the burial parties and the treatment and remembrance of those killed in battle. The soldiers appear to have been placed in the grave, and the majority of the bodies have an east-to-west orientation. This is despite the fact that they may have fitted into the pit more easily aligned with a north-to-south orientation. Unlike at Wisbly, the soldiers within this grave appear to have been stripped of their outer clothing. Was this a privilege or a final insult? That the Yorkist king Richard III built a chapel at Towton Hall many years after the battle might also suggest remembrance and a debt to the dead, and an attempt to sanctify that particular area.

Big boys and like-minded scholars with a fascination of all things war-like will be gruesomely compelled by the book. Others may spare a thought for the thousands of men and boys who were pressed and route marched, cold and ill equipped, hundreds of miles towards each other and premature death. As is stated 'the chivalric "code" was in fact a cover-up for members of the English nobility and their followers in the fifteenth century to commit cold-blooded murder' (Boardman, p.19-20). The book is well produced and, bar minor editorial quirks, is eminently readable. It is amply illustrated with many excellent diagrams and plates. However, in terms of insight into the realities of medieval battle one cannot help feeling an opportunity lost.

Reference


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