

Glenn Foard and Anne Curry. *Bosworth 1485: A Battlefield Rediscovered*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013. xx + 220 pp. \$65. ISBN: 978-1-78297-173-3.

The battle of Bosworth (fought on 22 August 1485) has an iconic significance in English historiography: it is popularly supposed to have marked the end of the Middle Ages and it heralded the advent of a new era with the victory of Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, over Richard III. It is therefore fitting that the battlefield has been the subject of a recent innovative project that has tested the conceptual and methodological boundaries of the “young discipline” (xv) of battlefield archaeology and offered perceptive new insights into the art of war at the end of the fifteenth century. In 2005 Foard and his team began archaeological excavations to secure the location of the battle itself. Various sites had been advanced over the years by different scholars, but eventually, in March 2009, a single lead cannonball was found, which firmly located the battle in the villages around Upton, Leicestershire, some two miles southwest of Ambion Hill, the place long considered to be the most likely location of the battle.

This book is as important for what it tells us about the new discipline of battlefield archaeology as it is for its revelations on why Henry Tudor prevailed over the last Yorkist king. The methodology employed, which draws on the work of the early twentieth-century military historian Alfred Burne and his concept of “inherent military probability,” involves first collecting and collating the relevant primary sources, followed by a reconstruction of the historical topography of the battlefield, and finally detailed archaeological study. The authors claim this offers the potential to “resolve long standing problems in the military history of medieval Europe” (xv). The book begins with an overview of the historical perspective, surveying the primary and secondary literature on the size and composition of the armies, their deployment, and the course of the battlefield. The authors conclude that the forces assembled were small (perhaps 5,000 in Henry’s army, while Richard’s was a little larger at 7,000–8,000). Drawing on recent research into the spread of gunpowder weapons among English armies in the late Middle Ages, they provide the documentary and historical context for the single most important result of the archaeological excavations: the discovery of 251 individual gunstones and cannonballs ranging from 6 to 97 millimeters in diameter. They argue that guns played an important, if not yet decisive, role in the battle. Richard’s guns may have prompted the Tudor vanguard, under the Earl of Oxford, to join the battle, but Bosworth was still decided largely by the failure of Richard’s charge against Henry himself and the intervention of Sir William Stanley (whose nephew was held hostage by King Richard) on the side of the rebels. Another intriguing possibility, suggested by a close study of the topography, is that the failure of the Earl of Northumberland to engage and destroy Oxford’s vanguard was due to a marsh that acted as a barrier between the opposing forces. As the authors concede, “this is only a hypothesis” (188), but it highlights the possibilities (and limitations) of the battlefield archaeologist’s approach.

The two chapters on the material artifacts (chapter 6 on the various heraldic badges, buckles, and pieces of swords, and chapter 7 on the gunpowder artillery

shot) are methodologically very important, providing an exemplar for future studies of this kind. When set alongside the documentary record, this type of research can shed light on such things as the frontage occupied by medieval armies. Chapter 7 shows, too, how much more work is needed, in the form of both test firing of historically accurate replica pieces and detailed archival study, before we can really appreciate the impact of guns on late medieval battlefields. Indeed, this chapter also underlines the tentative nature of any conclusions on what really happened on a medieval battlefield. The past, especially warfare, cannot be re-created by recourse to “logical methods of modern science” (xvii) alone and needs more-imaginative explorations of the cultural and psychological context of war alongside the approaches outlined in this book. Nevertheless, this is a groundbreaking study and presents a convincing case for a methodology that could doubtless shed light on countless battlefields across medieval and Renaissance Europe and beyond.

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