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The Concept of "Decisive Battles" in World History

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Up until a few decades ago, battles were the historical events *par excellence*, and "decisive battles" served as axes around which many histories of the world revolved. Every educated person in the West was taught, for example, that the fate of Western civilization hung in the balance on the plains of Marathon, Chalons, and Tours. Edward Gibbon famously wrote that if Charles Martel had lost the battle of Tours, in 732, "Perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomat."[1] Not a few attempts were made to narrate the history of the world as a chain of such decisive battles, for example by Edward Creasy's *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World: From Marathon to Waterloo* (1851).[2]

Even today, this battle version of world history is very popular among the general public. People who know little else about the Middle Ages are still familiar with the name of Hastings, whereas urban geography in numerous cities keeps hammering in names such as Waterloo, Trafalgar,

[1] Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, vol. 3, 1185 A.D.–1453 A.D.* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), p. 223.

[2] Edward Shepherd Creasy, *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World: From Marathon to Waterloo* (New York: A. L. Burt, 1851). See also George Bruce Malleson, *The Decisive Battles of India: From 1746 to 1849 Inclusive* (London: Allen & Co., 1883); Thomas W. Knox, *Decisive Battles since Waterloo: The Most Important Events from 1815 to 1887* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1887); Frederick Ernest Whitton, *The Decisive Battles of Modern Times* (London: Constable & Co., 1923); and J. F. C. Fuller, *A Military History of the Western World*, 3 vols. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1954–1956).

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and Austerlitz. "Battle world history" also has a few staunch defenders among professional historians, most notably Victor Davis Hanson in his *The Western Way of War* (1989) and *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (2001).[3]

Yet among the vast majority of world historians, battles are decidedly out of favor. It is extremely unfashionable today to ascribe global or even regional historical developments to the outcome of this or that battle. William H. McNeill's *A World History*, which tends to pay more attention to military and political events than most current world history textbooks, and which discusses in some length the Muslim invasion of Spain and Gaul, nevertheless devotes only a single sentence to the battle of Tours itself, saying merely that "the Franks defeat a Muslim raiding party at the battle of Tours in central Gaul (732 C.E.)."[4] Most other world history textbooks are even less generous to the old "famous victories" of the Western—and non-Western—canons.

Battles suffer from an eclipse even in their home field of military history. Whereas previously it had been very common for military history books to be little more than surveys of major battles and battle tactics,[5] the New Military Historians have increasingly focused on matters such as recruitment, administration, supply systems, society at war, and the culture of war. Even when narrating or analyzing the operational side of war, they have tended to downplay the importance of set-piece battles. Thus in medieval military history it is now the mainstream opinion that medieval war was dominated by sieges, raids, skirmishes,

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[3] Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (New York: Knopf, 1989); and Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: Doubleday, 2001). For other recent battle histories see Joseph Dahmus, *Seven Decisive Battles of the Middle Ages* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983); John MacDonald, *Great Battlefields of the World* (New York: Collier & Macmillan, 1988); and Richard A. Gabriel and Donald W. Boose, *The Great Battles of Antiquity: A Strategic and Tactical Guide to Great Battles that Shaped the Development of War* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1994). For an excellent and thought-provoking overview of the concept of "decisive battles" in Western historiography see Stephen Morillo, ed., *Battle of Hastings: Sources and Interpretations* (New York: Boydell, 1996), pp. xv–xx. See also John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking, 1976), pp. 58–62.

[4] William H. McNeill, *A World History*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 213.

[5] See for example Gustav Köhler, *Die Entwicklung des Kriegswesens und der Kriegführung in der Ritterzeit von der Mitte des 11. Jahrhunderts bis zu den Hussitenkriegen*, 3 vols. (Breslau: Koebner, 1886); Charles W. C. Oman, *A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages*, 2 vols. (1905; London: Greenhill, 1991); Hans Delbrück, *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen des Politischen Geschichte*, 4 vols. (Berlin: G. Stilke, 1907–1920); and Ferdinand Lot, *L'art militaire et les armées au Moyen âge en Europe et dans le Proche Orient*, 2 vols. (Paris: Payot, 1946).

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and ambushes—not by battles.[6] Much the same is true of scholarship on early modern warfare and the Military Revolution debate.[7]

This paper aims to explain both why the concept of "decisive battles" was found so useful by historians from ancient times until a few

[6] R. C. Smail, *Crusading Warfare, 1097–1193*, 2nd ed. (1956; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 12–16; Philippe Contamine, *La guerre au moyen âge*, 4th ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980); Jim Bradbury, "Battles in England and Normandy, 1066–1154," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 6 (1983): 1–12; John Gillingham, "Richard I and the Science of War in the Middle Ages," in *Richard Coeur de Lion: Kingship, Chivalry and War in the Twelfth Century*, ed. John Gillingham (London: Hambledon Press, 1994), pp. 211–226; John Gillingham, "William the Bastard at War," in *Studies in Medieval History: Presented to R. Allen Brown*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill, Christopher J. Holdsworth, and Janet L. Nelson (Wolfeboro, N.H.: Boydell, 1989), pp. 141–158; Christopher Marshall, *Warfare in the Latin East, 1192–1291* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 145–147; Matthew Strickland, "Securing the North: Invasion and the Strategy of Defence in 12th-Century Anglo-Scottish Warfare," in *Anglo-Norman Warfare: Studies in Late Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman Military Organization and Warfare*, ed. Matthew Strickland (Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell, 1992), pp. 208–229; Jim Bradbury, *The Medieval Siege* (Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell, 1992); Sean McGlynn, "The Myths of Medieval Warfare," *History Today* 44, no. 1 (1994): 28–34; John France, *Victory in the East: A Military History of the First Crusade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 65–66; Bernard S. Bachrach, "Medieval Siege Warfare: A Reconnaissance," *Journal of Military History* 58, no. 1 (1994): 119–133; Bernard S. Bachrach, "Medieval Military Historiography," in *Companion to History*, ed. Michael Bentley (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 203–220; Matthew Bennett, "The Myth of the Military Supremacy of Knightly Cavalry," in *Armies, Chivalry and Warfare in Medieval Britain and France: Proceedings of the 1995 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Matthew Strickland (Stamford, U.K.: P. Watkins, 1998), pp. 304–316; Yuval Noah Harari, "Strategy and Supply in Fourteenth-Century Western European Invasion Campaigns," *Journal of Military History* 64, no. 2 (2000): 297–334; John France, "Recent Writing on Medieval Warfare: From the Fall of Rome to c. 1300," *Journal of Military History* 65, no. 2 (2001): 441–473; John A. Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2003), pp. 73–110; and Yuval Noah Harari, *Special Operations in the Age of Chivalry* (Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell, 2007). It should be noted, however, that medieval military historians such as John Gillingham argue that battles were rare precisely because of their decisive potential, which made commanders reluctant to risk them. In the last few years, Clifford Rogers and Stephen Morillo have tried to return battles to their place of honor in medieval military history, but so far they still seem to be fighting an uphill battle. For the most recent exchanges in this debate, see Clifford J. Rogers, *War Cruel and Sharp: English Strategy under Edward III, 1327–1360* (Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell, 2000); Clifford J. Rogers, "The Vegetian 'Science of Warfare' in the Middle Ages," *Journal of Medieval Military History* 1 (2002): 1–19; Stephen Morillo, "Battle Seeking: The Context and Limits of Vegetian Strategy," *Journal of Medieval Military History* 1 (2002): 21–42; and John Gillingham, "'Up With Orthodoxy!': In Defense of Vegetian Warfare," *Journal of Medieval Military History* 2 (2004): 149–158; and J. F. Verbruggen, "The Role of the Cavalry in Medieval Warfare," trans. Kelly DeVries, *Journal of Medieval Military History* 3 (2005): 46–71. Morillo's idea that the decisiveness of battles depended on the cultural understanding and rules of war, and that strategy therefore depended to a large extent on culture, is particularly interesting and enriching. For a critical discussion of battles in medieval military historiography, see Kelly DeVries, *Infantry Warfare in the Early Fourteenth Century: Discipline, Tactics and Technology* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1996), pp. 1–4; Rogers, "Vegetian 'Science of Warfare,'" pp. 1–7; and France, *Victory in the East*, pp. 29–30.

[7] For a recent discussion of decisive battles in early modern Europe, see Jamel Ostwald, "The 'Decisive' Battle of Ramillies, 1706: Prerequisites for Decisiveness in Early Modern

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decades ago, and why the concept was largely abandoned lately. It also tries to evaluate whether this concept may still be of any use to historians in general, and to the writing of world history in particular. In order not to remain in the field of abstract theory, this paper focuses on one exemplary test case, namely the battle of Antioch, which took place on 28 June 1098 between the army of the First Crusade and the army of the atabeg Kerbogah of Mosul. Kerbogah was leading a coalition of Muslim powers from Mesopotamia, Syria, and Asia Minor, and his defeat saved the Crusaders from annihilation and opened the way for their conquest of the Levantine coast.[8]

One reason why battles have traditionally drawn so much attention and were thought to be decisive events is that battles indeed have the potential to exert an enormous impact on the course of history. In pre-1914 battles, sizeable material and cultural resources that had been accumulated in years, decades, and even centuries of hard work were expended within a few hours. In such circumstances, accidental conditions such as the weather, terrain, or qualities of a military leader

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Warfare," *Journal of Military History* 64, no. 3 (2000): 649–677. Ostwald argues that there could be no truly decisive battles in early modern Europe, due to political, strategic, and operational factors. See also Eric A. Lund, *War for the Every Day: Generals, Knowledge, and Warfare in Early Modern Europe, 1680–1740* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1999), p. 14. For recent studies emphasizing the importance of battles, see Russell F. Weigley, *The Age of Battles: The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo* (1991; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); and William P. Guthrie, *Battles of the Thirty Years War: From White Mountain to Nordlingen, 1618–1635* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2002). For a general introduction to the Military Revolution debate, see Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Clifford J. Rogers, ed., *The Military Revolution Debate: Readings on the Military Transformation of Early Modern Europe* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1995).

[8] The best and most detailed modern account of the battle of Antioch and its context is France, *Victory in the East*. Other recent accounts of the battle, its context, and its impact include Bradbury, *Medieval Siege*, pp. 93–114; Randall Rogers, *Latin Siege Warfare in the Twelfth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 25–39; Taef Kamal El-Azhari, *The Saljūqs of Syria: During the Crusades, 463–549 A.D./1070–1154 A.D.* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1997); Bernard H. Bachrach, "The Siege of Antioch: A Study in Military Demography," *War in History* 6 (1999): 127–146; Thomas S. Asbridge, *The Creation of the Principality of Antioch, 1098–1130* (Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell, 2000); John France, "The Fall of Antioch during the First Crusade," in *Dei gesta per Francos: Études sur les Croisades dédiées à Jean Richard*, ed. Michel Balard, Benjamin Z. Kedar, and Jonathan Riley-Smith (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 13–20; Jonathan Riley-Smith, "Casualties and the Number of Knights on the First Crusade," *Crusades* 1 (2002): 13–28; and Thomas Asbridge, *The First Crusade: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 212–240. For a world history approach to the First Crusade, see Christon I. Archer et al., eds., *World History of Warfare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), pp. 163–169. The importance of the battle of Antioch was recognized already by contemporaries, and there are numerous accounts of the battle and its context in European, Byzantine, Eastern Christian, and Muslim sources from throughout Europe, North Africa, and western Asia. For a survey of the primary sources, the best source is France, *Victory in the East*.

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could have caused large discrepancies in resources to be annulled. Consequently, battles that lasted a few hours have occasionally changed the balance of power between opposing polities or even opposing civilizations in a way that was completely disproportional to the time they took and to the number of people actually involved in them.[9]

For example, the battle of Antioch lasted only a few hours. There are no trustworthy sources for the number of troops that were involved and killed in it, but the Crusader army probably did not number far more than twenty thousand combatants, and the Muslim army was perhaps three or four times larger. The Crusaders lost at most a few hundred men, whereas the Muslims lost several thousands.[10] However, each combatant who participated in the battle represented an immense material and cultural iceberg. Consider the Crusader knight for example. The material and cultural cost of that knight included not only the cost of his own equipment, but also the following:

1. The cost of years of training in riding, handling weapons, commanding troops, and so forth, which includes the cost of all the equipment—such as horses—that the knight used up during those years of training.
2. The cost of supporting the knight's family while he was busy training.
3. The cost of transporting our particular knight from, say, northern France to Antioch. This included not only supporting the knight himself on the way, but also supporting the large number of servants and camp followers who took care of the knight and his horses for many months.
4. The enormous costs of building up the knight's martial and feudal values. These costs may have included, for example, the cost of training and supporting that knight's father and grandfather as knights, so that they could bequeath to their heir a family tradition of service and valor. They also may have included the cost of previous battles and campaigns, which built up the knight's military experience and self-confidence. These costs further included supporting generations of storytellers who recounted *chansons de geste*, generations of painters, illuminators, and tapestry mak-

[9] See also Morillo, *Battle of Hastings*, pp. xv–xx.

[10] For numbers at the battle of Antioch, see France, *Victory in the East*, p. 269; Riley-Smith, "Casualties"; and Contamine, *La guerre au moyen âge*, pp. 152–156. Bachrach's estimate of one hundred thousand combatants in the Crusader army at the siege of Antioch is highly controversial, and in any case, refers to the situation prior to the long and costly siege (Bachrach, "Siege of Antioch").

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ers who depicted previous battles in a glorious fashion, and so forth. These enormous costs were essential if, on the battlefield of Antioch, the knight was supposed to continue fighting against great odds instead of running away.

5. The equally enormous costs of building up the knight's Christian values. Without a deep Christian belief, not many knights would have left Western Europe to go to Syria in the first place, and even fewer would have stuck to their banners in the face of all the difficulties encountered by the Crusader army. These costs included both the short-term cost of Crusader propaganda from 1095 onward, and the long-term cost of Christianizing Western Europe and keeping it Christian in the preceding era.
6. In addition to all these costs, we should not ignore the issue of wastage. For every knight that made it to Antioch and participated in the battle, there were several others who died on the way from disease or from enemy action, or who gave up the game and returned home. Without the actions of these other knights, our knight would probably never have made it to Antioch. Hence, the cost of training, feeding, and educating these other knights is part and parcel of the cost of fielding our one knight in the battle of Antioch.
7. Finally, one should not forget the incalculable cost of cajoling or forcing thousands of peasants to toil the fields and pay with their surplus products for all of these other expenses.

Though the Crusader knights who participated in the battle of Antioch were the most expensive troops there, much the same story could be told about the other Crusader combatants as well as about the various Muslim combatants who took part in the battle.[11]

[11] For the material and cultural cost of the Crusader army, see in particular France, *Victory in the East;* John France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades: 1000–1300* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999); Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusaders, 1095–1131* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Smail, *Crusading Warfare*. For the cultural cost of medieval combatants in general, see also Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984); and Matthew Strickland, *War and Chivalry: The Conduct and Perception of War in England and Normandy, 1066–1217* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For the material and cultural costs of Muslim combatants, see France, *Victory in the East*, pp. 200–203; Smail, *Crusading Warfare;* Daniel Pipes, *Slave Soldiers and Islam: The Genesis of a Military System* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981); and Hugh Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs: Military and Society in the Early Islamic State* (London: Routledge, 2001).

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Hence every knight, *faris* (Muslim heavy cavalryman), bowman, or foot soldier who was killed, incapacitated, captured, or disheartened at the battle of Antioch represented an enormous loss of material and cultural resources, which could only slowly be replaced. When in some medieval battles, such as Hattin (1187), the Kephissos (1311), or Agincourt (1415), an entire military elite was decimated, this meant that untold material and cultural resources were wiped out in just two or three hours.

Sometimes, such losses drastically changed the balance of power between the rival sides, at least for a few years. Even though the sources of a polity's material and cultural wealth were not directly harmed by the battle, it took months and years to reorganize armies, rebuild morale, reforge alliances, and train new combatants. These few months or years were a window of opportunity that, if utilized properly by the victors, could lead to much more permanent changes in the balance of power. Thus, thanks to the momentary window of opportunity opened by the battle of Antioch, the army of the First Crusade was able to capture the Holy Land, found four European principalities in the Middle East, and inspire numerous other Crusades to follow it, despite the fact that in 1098 the Middle Eastern Islamic world was considerably stronger than Europe in demographic, economic, and technological terms. (Moreover, it was far easier for the Muslims to deploy their forces in the Middle East than for the Europeans to project their forces to that area, thousands of kilometers from their home bases.)

The pivotal role that a battle such as Antioch could play can best be manifested by the use of counterfactual history. Prior to the battle of Antioch, the Crusaders had failed to make any serious gains in the Middle East. Moreover, at the time, the Crusader army was starving and disintegrating after the long siege of Antioch. When Kerbogah first approached, the Crusaders locked themselves up in Antioch for fear of him, and thousands deserted. Only when all the food in Antioch ran out were they forced to open the gates and march out on what seemed like a suicide mission. Their religious zeal, revitalized at the last moment by the discovery of the Holy Lance, sustained them through the preceding difficulties and played an important part in the forthcoming battle. Yet it was mainly due to Muslim negligence and internal dissension within Kerbogah's army that the zealous Crusaders won their rather unexpected victory. If the Middle Eastern Muslim powers had appreciated the real threat posed by the Crusaders, or if Kerbogah had better control of his forces, the Crusaders' march to Antioch would most probably have ended as another Masada, Roncesvalles, or Al Kasr

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al Kebir (1578)—a glorious tale of chivalric gallantry, religious sacrifice, and military defeat.[12]

If the Crusaders had lost, which was the more likely outcome of this battle, their army would have been completely annihilated, and the First Crusade would have ended in complete failure. It is very likely that no further crusades would have been launched, at least not to the Middle East. When subsequent crusades failed, as happened to the Second Crusade, the example of the First Crusade and the need to succor the existing Crusader principalities nevertheless inspired contemporaries to new efforts. But if that initial expedition had been wiped out without achieving anything, and without establishing a European foothold in the Middle East, it is more than likely that medieval Europeans would have concluded that they had made a mistake and that God simply did not will it. There were no overriding long-term structural conditions that would have forced the people of Germany, France, or England to attempt to conquer Syria in the twelfth century.

Hence, we can safely say that if the Crusaders had lost the battle of Antioch, it is likely that the entire Crusader movement to the Middle East would have ended up like the Viking forays to America: a curious historical anecdote, demonstrating nothing except the doomed projects undertaken from time to time by medieval Europeans in defiance of objective reality. It is certain that if the battle of Antioch was lost and the Crusaders annihilated, twenty-first-century historians would have had an extremely easy job explaining why they did not have a chance to begin with.

Though the Crusader movement to Syria nevertheless ended up in eventual defeat, the two centuries of European conquest campaigns and European presence in the Levant had a considerable impact on the Middle East, on Europe, and on the relations between them. The very identities of Europe and the Middle East, and their inbuilt construction as opposite entities, owe much to the Crusades (for example, the Crusades are the only military operation ever undertaken by "Europe" as a united and self-conscious entity).

It is probably easier to see the decisive and chaotic impact of battles on history not when they lead to permanent changes in world history—which historians then easily dub as inevitable—but rather when they work against the currents of history, giving unexpected breathing

[12] At Al Kasr al Kebir, the Portuguese "crusade" that attempted to conquer Morocco was decisively defeated, and the Portuguese king was killed. Portuguese imperial power never really recovered from the defeat.

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spaces to weaker and ultimately defeated powers. What would have happened, for example, if Hannibal had been defeated at Cannae (216 B.C.E.), so that the Second Punic War would have been a Roman walk-over requiring no particular effort or internal changes on the part of Rome? Or what would have happened if Timur had been defeated at Kandurcha (1391), so that his ephemeral yet influential empire had never existed? Or what would have happened if the powers of reaction had smothered Napoleon's fledgling empire at Austerlitz (1805), before it had time to conquer and transform Europe?[13]

So far, then, the traditional concept of "decisive battles" seems to be vindicated. At least some battles were indeed capable of changing the course of history. However, under close scrutiny it transpires that only few battles really deserve the appellation "decisive." Tours, for example, is generally considered today as little more than an overblown skirmish, albeit of symbolic value.[14] Even the above discussion of Antioch can be criticized. For in fact, there was not one, but at least three different battles around Antioch, not to mention a nine-month-long siege, and it was the outcome of this complex campaign in its entirety rather than of the encounter of 28 June that opened the door to the Middle East to the Crusaders. In addition, even after winning the battle of Antioch, the Crusaders faced difficult tests such as the siege of Jerusalem and the battle of Ascalon (1099). They had to triumph in all these various tests, which implies that their victory must have been due to more than the chance conditions of a particular battle.

Hence, battles must have owed their special place in history to other causes aside from their impact as independent historical factors. A second and opposite reason that has caused battles to dominate historical narratives is that battles have been interpreted as representative tests for the strength and abilities of competing cultures or polities. That is, battles are not seen as a rare opportunity for chance conditions to wipe out huge discrepancies in resources, thereby enabling, for example, a weaker party to overcome wealthier and stronger opponents. Rather, battles are seen as *deterministic* Darwinian tests, or as the just judgments of the God of history, demonstrating who was *really* stronger.

This means that victory in battle does not cause a particular culture

[13] For battles and Chaos theory see Morillo, *Battle of Hastings*, pp. xix–xx.

[14] Pierre Riché, *The Carolingians: A Family Who Forged Europe*, trans. Michael Idomir Allen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 44, 50. See also Bernard S. Bachrach, "Charles Martel, Mounted Shock Combat, the Stirrup, and Feudalism," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 7 (1970): 47–75. Even Hanson reluctantly acknowledges this in the chapter he devotes to this battle (Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, pp. 141, 167).

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or ideology or technology to ascend. Rather, victory only proves its inherent and inevitable superiority. According to this approach, battles are important because they prove in an objective way who was superior. However, if we would then wish to understand the sources of this superiority, we would have to investigate cultural, economic, and environmental factors rather than the vagaries of combat.

This, for example, is the way Hanson attempts to justify his resurrection of the "nineteenth-century genre of Great Battles." He explains that unlike Creasy et al., he does not consider battles as "pivotal hours in history." Rather, they merit attention because "There is . . . a cultural crystallization in battle, in which the insidious and more subtle institutions that heretofore . . . were murky and undefined became stark and unforgiving in the finality of organized killing."[15] Further on Hanson writes that "I have selected these collisions for what they tell us about culture, specifically the core elements of Western civilization. They are 'landmark' for what they reveal about how a society fights, not necessarily because of their historical importance."[16] This is why Hanson includes in his nine "landmark battles" of the rise of the West the tiny skirmish of Rorke's Drift (1879), during which a force of about one hundred British combatants defended itself successfully against the repeated onslaughts of about four thousand Zulu combatants. Their victory contributed very little to British superiority over the Zulu empire. However, it demonstrated in a decisive way the foregone superiority of Western, national, industrial society over African, tribal, agricultural society.[17]

Similarly, some historians have tried to see the battle of Antioch and the First Crusade in general as a demonstration of European superiority over Islam back in 1098.[18] In terms of technological developments, it manifested the superiority of Western crossbows and heavily armored knights over Eastern composite bows and lightly armed cav-

[15] Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, p. 9; see also pp. 6–8, 21–24.

[16] Ibid., p. 11.

[17] Ibid., pp. 279–333. This approach also characterizes to some extent Georges Duby's *Le Dimanche de Bouvines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), and John Lynn's excellent and groundbreaking *Battle*. Yet Duby and Lynn are much more careful in their analysis of battles as cultural tropes, and despite their books' titles, these are really cultural studies of war in general rather than of combat. Lynn in particular downplays the importance of set-piece battles (see for example chapter 3, in which he offers a balanced and critical approach to the place of battles in late medieval warfare).

[18] Though the account of the First Crusade in *World History of Warfare* does not see it as a demonstration of Western superiority over Islam, it does interpret it as an emblematic case study for the respective abilities and weaknesses of Christendom and Islam (Archer et al., *World History of Warfare*, pp. 163–169).

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alrymen.[19] Or, in terms of socioeconomic structure, it manifested the superiority of Western *feudum* over Muslim *iqta'*.[20] Or, in terms of long-term ecological factors, it manifested the superiority of the rich North European heavy soils, newly opened for cultivation thanks to the heavy plow, over the lighter soils of the Middle East, impoverished by millennia of intensive cultivation.[21] These explanations, and in particular the first two, seem to be the figments of historical imagination, especially as at Antioch there were very few mounted Crusader knights. A fourth and more justified claim might be that Antioch manifested the superiority of Western religious fanaticism, which bred unity, over Muslim religious moderation, which bred disunity.

The interpretation of battles as proofs of historical superiority naturally leads to the interpretation of battles as prime conduits for historical diffusion. By proving the superiority of a particular technology or cultural artifact, battles act as a giant advertisement. Thus Lynn White argues that Crusader victories led the Muslims to adopt Crusader technology and military methods,[22] and it might similarly be argued that Antioch and subsequent battles showed the Muslims the military and political advantages of religious fanaticism, and led or forced them

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[19] Lynn White Jr., "The Crusades and the Technological Thrust of the West," in *War, Technology, and Society in the Middle East*, ed. Vernon J. Parry and Malcolm E. Yapp (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 97–101. The argument is largely repeated in Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, pp. 152–153. See also Lynn White Jr., *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962). For a discussion of technological determinism in medieval historiography, see DeVries, *Infantry Warfare*, pp. 5–6; Kelly DeVries, "Catapults Are Not Atomic Bombs: Toward a Redefinition of 'Effectiveness' in Premodern Military Technology," *War in History* 4, no. 4 (1997): 454–470; and Alex Roland, "Once More into the Stirrups: Lynn White Jr., Medieval Technology and Social Change," *Technology and Culture* 44, no. 3 (2003): 574–585.

[20] France, *Victory in the East*, pp. 200–202; C. Cahen, "L'évolution de l'Iqtâ du IXe au XIIIe siècle: Contribution à une histoire comparée des sociétés Médiévales," *Annales de l'Histoire Économique et Sociale* 8 (1953): 25–52; Smail, *Crusading Warfare*, pp. 65–66; C. E. Bosworth, "Recruitment, Muster and Review in Medieval Islamic Armies," in Parry and Yapp, *War, Technology, and Society*, pp. 59–77. For *iqta'* and its comparison to *Feudum* see also Habib Ben-Abdallah, *De l'iqta' étatique à l'iqta' militaire: Translation économique et changements sociaux à Baghdad, 247–447 de l'Hégire, 851–1055 ap. J.* (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University, 1986); R. J. Barendse, "The Feudal Mutation: Military and Economic Transformations of the Ethnosphere in the Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries," *Journal of World History* 14, no. 4 (2003): 514–515; and Stephen Morillo, "A 'Feudal Mutation'? Conceptual Tools and Historical Patterns in World History," *Journal of World History* 14 (2003): 531–550.

[21] Though no scholar to my knowledge makes this argument regarding the battle of Antioch itself, such an argument would be in line with the ecological approach to world history that characterizes, for example, Jared Diamond's masterful *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997). See also White, "Crusades," p. 107.

[22] White, "Crusades," pp. 99–101.

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to imitate the victors. Jihad imitated Crusade, and when Nur al-Din, Saladin, and later the Mameluks built unified empires based on the concept of Jihad, they indeed managed to expel the Crusaders.

This approach then turns the concept of "decisive battles" on its head. It still sees decisive battles as a very useful historical concept, but instead of understanding "decisive" to refer to the decisive impact of battles, it understands "decisive" to refer to the decisive *proofs* battles supply. Battles have dominated history because they supply decisive proofs for people, in the past and present alike, of the superiority one side already had over the other before the battle began, a superiority gained thanks to long-term structural conditions rather than to the chance events of combat.

There is a third option. Whereas the previous section argued that battles have dominated historical narratives because they are a trustworthy test for historical entities and movements, and hence a good representation of them, an opposite explanation argues that, in fact, battles have dominated historical narratives because they are a *bad* representation of historical movements. Antioch and Rorke's Drift have dominated traditional accounts of the Crusades or of the European conquest of Africa thanks to what they hid and distorted more than thanks to what they proved and uncovered.

The problem with most historical movements, such as the Crusades, is that they are too complex—or "murky and undefined" in Hanson's words. This may be good for writing articles, but it is bad for the classroom, the theater stage, the TV screen, and the election speech. There, we need history to be simple. And battles have a wonderful capacity to simplify history, because they are abnormally dichotomous affairs. History is normally so complex and murky because there is very little in human reality that can be reduced to clear-cut dichotomies. But battles, at least prior to 1914, defied this reality, and seem to have arranged human reality in perfect dichotomies. All the dichotomies that elude historians in human reality, and even all the dichotomies that elude military historians in military reality, make a rare and fleeting appearance in battle.

Whereas nothing in history can be reduced to us-versus-them, and whereas no war is really a conflict between two monolithic antagonists, battle seems to be exactly that. In the classical battle spectacle, which is represented in innumerable battle diagrams, there are two monolithic lines facing each other. As in a game of musical chairs, when the battle drums beat, all the complex identities that frenziedly revolve and interact in history take their seats on only two sides of a single dividing line.

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Similarly, whereas no historical conflict ends up with a clear division of winners and losers, battles tend to end with exactly such a division. In the days and years after the battle, victory may turn into defeat, but on the battlefield itself, the dichotomy is absolute. Did Napoleon's 1805 campaign really end in victory? With the hindsight of 1812, Waterloo, the Franco-Prussian war, and the European Union, the answer becomes less and less easy. But the train station of Austerlitz captures that fleeting moment when the answer was an absolute yes.

In a similar fashion, you cannot find in history clearer divisions between beginning and end, attack and defense, front and home, combatants and civilians, or men and women than the ones provided by battle. This is not accidental, but at least partially an intended result of the self-consciously ceremonial and theatric nature of battles. Battles are decisive, among other things, because they are staged to be decisive by their participants.[23]

It should moreover be stressed that this loss of complexity by no means results in a loss of narrative interest. Contrariwise, precisely because of their dichotomous nature, battles conform to the theatrical dictates of drama better than most historical events, especially when we consider that unlike most historical phenomena, battles keep the Aristotelian unities of space, time, and action. Whereas it takes a literary genius to write an interesting book about the long-term economic development of medieval England, it takes a much more limited talent to write an interesting account of the battle of Hastings.[24]

This makes it understandable why not only artists but also historians have focused for centuries upon set-piece battles. The incredibly complex story of the First Crusade becomes very simple yet extremely dramatic when one looks at the battle of Antioch. What one sees is a line of Christian warriors from Europe facing a line of Muslim warriors from the Middle East. The divisions within both camps are momentarily obscured. Many ambiguous factors—such as the role of the Byzantine empire, of the Muslims' Eastern Christian allies, of the Crusaders' Eastern Christian allies, and of the Crusaders' Muslim allies—disap-

[23] This is one of the most important and compelling conclusions of Hanson's *The Western Way of War*. For a discussion of this idea from a very different viewpoint, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 60–157; and Miriam Cooke, *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 1–41. For gender biases and war narratives, see also Joshua Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 1–58.

[24] See also Morillo, *Battle of Hastings*, p. xvii.

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pear. The virtual absence of women from the battlefield itself makes it equally easy to forget about gender.

It is doubly understandable why world historians, who must tell vastly more complex stories than regional historians, have traditionally found decisive battles such an appealing concept. If a history of the First Crusade has space in it for a page or two about the alliance between the Crusaders and the Fatimid sultans of Egypt, a history of the world can hardly spare it a line.

Perhaps the best evidence for these aesthetic and dramatic foundations of the concept of "decisive battles" is the comparative absence of "decisive sieges" from world history. Sieges were far more common in history than battles (unless one considers skirmishes too as battles). Sieges have tended to have a far greater impact on history than battles. And sieges are usually a far better test to a polity's technological, administrative, and political abilities than battles. Yet the concept of "decisive sieges" never caught on, there are no books about the fifteen decisive sieges of the world, and there are no squares and train stations named after them. I believe the main reason for this is that sieges lack the attractive dichotomies of battles. For in sieges, there is time enough for all the murky disunities of history to surface, and there is space enough even for civilians and women to appear on the military stage.[25]

The concept of decisive battles has nevertheless fallen from favor in the last decades due to three main reasons. First, after 1914 there were no more battles, at least on land. The name persists, and people still speak about the Battle of the Somme (1916) or the recent Battle of Fallujah (2004). But these are something entirely different from battles such as Austerlitz, Antioch, or Kadesh (1294 B.C.E.). In particular, with battles such as the Somme dragging on for months on end, they can no longer provide historians with the easy dichotomies of Austerlitz or Antioch. Moreover, when battles last months and not hours, chance becomes statistics, and battles thereby lose their ability to chaotically change the balance of power.

It is interesting to note that when late modern military nomenclature had to come up with a name for the operations on the river

[25] From biblical times, Western historical sources had no qualms recording the participation of women in the defense of fortified places (e.g., the woman who killed King Avimelech at the siege of Tevets [Judges 9:53]). In medieval and Renaissance Europe, auxiliary all-women "regiments" were occasionally raised during sieges (see for example Blaise de Monluc, *Commentaires de Blaise de Monluc, Maréchal de France*, ed. Paul Courteault, 3 vols. [Paris: Alphonse Picard et fils, 1911–1925], 2:106).

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Somme in 1916, around Stalingrad in 1942–1943, or in Fallujah in 2004, it nevertheless preferred to name them battles rather than sieges, though the latter term is arguably far more appropriate (especially when we remember that in numerous sieges throughout history, such as that of Antioch in 1097–1098, the defenders were not effectively surrounded by the attackers, and operations spilled over vast adjacent areas, rather than being concentrated on a single stronghold). This probably resulted from a desire to keep up Clausewitzian appearances, and portray these operations as potentially decisive. For in post-Clausewitzian military nomenclature, "siege" carries the connotation of an indecisive and wasteful operation, which only the bewigged and overly cautious generals of the old regime were fond of. A Napoleon always seeks battle. Calling the Somme or Fallujah a battle gives the impression that it may well prove to be a decisive operation, and that it may well end the war. Calling it a siege would have implied that the end of the war was far away.

Still, at least from the time the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, it was obvious that there were not going to be any more Austerlitzes, and the disappearance of the classical battle spectacle from war contributed much to battles' diminished importance in academia.[26]

A second reason why decisive battles fell from favor is that during the twentieth century, scholars in general and world historians in particular became very fond of explaining historical developments through long-term structural factors. This made them reluctant to acknowledge that battles may be really decisive, that is, that the chance events of battle—such as an arrow hitting King Harold in the eye—can annul decades and centuries of structural developments. By itself, however, this historiographical development was not enough to eliminate the decisive battle from the pages of history books, because even long-term structural explanations had a use for decisive battles as literary tropes and historical emblems.

The coup de grâce was given by literary theory. The increasing use of literary theories to criticize historical narratives has uncovered the literary and ideological factors behind the concept of decisive battles, exposing this concept as an appealing but extremely dangerous literary

[26] See also Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 9. Lynn in particular has argued that the importance of battles in nineteenth-century historiography was directly related to the unique importance of battles in nineteenth-century warfare (Lynn, *Battle*, pp. 129, 180–181, 199–200, 207, 210). This would imply that the disappearance of battles from warfare would cause their historiographical importance to diminish as well.

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trope. For with the help of such a literary approach it is easy to see that battles are the least representative of historical events. Nothing in history is really as simple as two hostile lines of male warriors, facing each other and then clashing till one is decisively defeated by the other.[27]

This article has two opposite conclusions. First, there is some merit in the traditional view of decisive battles. Some battles, such as Antioch, can change the course of history by annulling or at least diminishing the impact of long-term structural factors, thereby creating historical windows of opportunities and enabling apparently weaker historical players to overcome stronger players. This brings an important element of chaos into world history. I would venture to speculate that this has particular relevance to the study of the way in which steppe people repeatedly overcame far wealthier and apparently far stronger agricultural empires. It should be stressed, though, that the vast majority of battles were not decisive in this sense, and that the vast majority of historical changes cannot be attributed to any decisive battle.

Second, there is far less merit in the view of decisive battles as tropes and emblems for long-term historical developments. The problem is that battles perform the literary job assigned to them by historians too well. Instead of making history a little simpler and a little more interesting, they make history far too simple.

Theoretically, painstaking historical research could uncover the discontinuities within battles and show that they are in fact a faithful representation of the larger historical macrocosm, as Hanson and Lynn occasionally do. Thus, one can point out all the divisions in the Muslim and Crusader armies at Antioch; one can locate Christians fighting in the Muslim ranks and Muslims fighting in the Crusader ranks; one might even be able to locate a few women who fought there. But all these nuances are inevitably swamped by the overall impression of battle. For the reality of battle is truly extraordinary, and the abnormally dichotomical nature of battle is not a mere literary device, but rather a real characteristic of battle.

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[27] The literary criticism of military history, and of battle narratives in particular, owes much to Fussell, *Great War;* Keegan, *Face of Battle*, pp. 36–73; and Scarry, *Body in Pain*, pp. 60–157. For a thought-provoking example of such criticism, see Cooke's *Women and the War Story*. See also Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire, and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994); Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850–2000* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000); Yuval Noah Harari, *Renaissance Military Memoirs: War, History and Identity, 1450–1600* (Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell & Brewer, 2004); and Corinne Saunders, Françoise le Saux, and Neil Thomas, eds., *Writing War: Medieval Literary Responses to Warfare* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004).

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