And The True Victor of Agincourt was....?

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Saint Crispin's Day Friday, 25 October 1415: a date of legend.

A small force of English and Welsh soldiers, the majority of them archers under the command of King Henry V faced the numerically superior French army - and inflicted upon them an overwhelming and humiliating defeat. As a result the military prowess of Henry V and the English bowmen have become legends in their own right.

However, it may have been a case of winning the battle but losing the campaign.

On 13 August 1415, King Henry V had landed in northern France with an army of 12,000 men, several thousand horses and supported by a fleet of ships. His aim was to march on Paris and claim the territories of Normandy, Touraine, Anjou, Brittany, Flanders and Aquitaine and even the French crown. The army proceeded to besiege the fortified port town of Harfleur. The town eventually surrendered on 22 September, but the English army did not leave until 8 October (Barker, 2005; Curry 2005). By this time, the army had been reduced to nearly half its original number. While a proportion was due to injuries received in battle, the main reason was the bloody flux" - better known as dysentery.

Bacillary Dysentery, caused by the bacteria *Shigella Dysenteriae,* is passed through contact with human faeces orally: by ingesting contaminated food or water or through oral contact with contaminated objects or hands. It results in frequent watery diarrhoea, accompanied by mucus and blood; individuals complain of nausea, abdominal pain and rectal pain. Vomiting, fever, rapid weight loss, and generalized muscle aches also occur. In extreme cases dysentery victims may pass in excess of one litre of fluid per hour and it can prove fatal. (Kondejewski 2015). Amoebic Dysentery is caused by the amoeba *Entamoeba histolytica and is* most common in developing countries.

Dysentery was always a problem for armies throughout history (Cook 2001). In 1414 it had struck the besieging Armagnac army at Arras Smith and DeVries 2005) and has been responsible for wiping out native populations, (for example the Sadlermiut Eskimos in 1902: Rowley 1994). It had also seen of at least one King of England: King John of England died of dysentery at Newark Castle on 18 October 1216, (Lewis 1991).

At Harfleur, it had perfect breeding conditions:

"*All the conditions for an oubreak of dysentery were present at Harfleur, both within the beleagured town and in the besieging armies. The weather was hot and huimid and the salt marshes and the standing water of the flooded fields in the valley bottom were breeding ground for bacteria and insects…The marshy nature of the land also made it more difficult to dispose safely of human and animal faeces and all the detritus, such as animal carcasses, which was the inevitable consequence of feeding so large a host. Trenches were dug for privies and burial pits for other waste, but these could not be sealed*." (p.191 Barker 2005).

Added to this, the opening of the sluices of the town polluted the freshwater supply (Curry 2005).

It should be noted that at this time, the dominant medical paradigm was Humoural medicine, based upon the four humours (blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile). The resulting stench would be regarded as a "*miasma*" a bad air that would cause a poisoning of the four humours leading to illness: in this case, the "bloody "flux". "Miasma" was also believed to be the cause of the Black Death (Rosenman 2005). Indicative of this is the advice given in the medical treatise *Lilium Medicinae* (1305) (*Lily of Medicine*) by Bernard Gordon (c.1270-c.1330), a copy of which was owned by Henry's physician Nicholas Colnet:

"…if the physician is in an army, then the King's tent and the tents of his physicians and surgeons should be on higher ground , facing a favourable wind; on no account should the tent be at a lower level where all the refuse gathers . Good fresh air without any stench of corpses or any other things should be chosen. In summer, the tent should face south and the physicians should carefully take into account everything that might bring sickness on the army…" (p191, Barker 2005)

In accordance with these instructions the King and his retinue did position their tents on the hillside above Harfleur, away from any miasma.

Henry was forced to send at least 1,500 men who were sick home (Barker 2005), and had to leave a small garrison to guard Harfleur. His army seriously depleted, he had no option but to abandon his march upon Paris, and made the decision to march to the English fortified port of Calais instead. During the march the vastly reduced English army, less than half its original size, faced the numerically superior French Army near the village of Agincourt and a legend was born.

It can be argued that dysentery was responsible for this. Without the depletion of his army, Henry could have pursued his original objectives and the course of history could have been very different.

A growing acknowledgement of the impact of dysentery upon the Agincourt Campaign can be seen in the literature regarding Agincourt. For example, in Burne's

"The Agincourt War" (1956) and Bennett's "*Agincourt 1415: Triumph against the odds*" (1991) dysentery is only given a brief mention. In the works of Anne Curry (2005) and Juliet Barker (2005), while both stop short of acknowledging that dysentery was the reason for the change in plan, at least a page is devoted to the disease. This increase may be the result of the growing interest in the impact of diseases by historians.

An impact which may have resulted from the growth and increasing sophistication of bio-science technology and research: facilitating an appreciation of the way microbes - and diseases - work combined with the growing accessibility of research findings. As Burnham (2005) observes: "*Most of the written history of diseases has consisted of extending and deepening understanding of the ways in which a well known malady has a hidden history or effects and implications that earlier investigators could not or did not perceive* " (p 69).

So while Henry V had won the battle, the bacteria *Shigella Dysenteriae* had forced him to abandon his campaign and significantly alter his plans. It also, figuratively speaking, had the last laugh: at the age of 36, on 31 August 1422 Henry V died suddenly from dysentery which he had contracted at the siege of Meaux (Barker 2005).

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