From supremacy to decadence: historiographical review of medieval cavalry

The idea that during the Later Middle Ages the cavalry lost importance in favor of a "resurgence of the infantry" was first established by Charles Oman in 1885[1]. Oman saw a distinct difference in military tactics between the High and Later Middle Ages, as if the defeat of the French cavalry at the Battle of Crécy in 1346 somehow heralded a radical rupture from prior experience. For Oman, the French dependence on armies that primarily relied on heavy cavalry during the Hundred Years' War was irredeemably outdated, as were the Italian *condottieri* or the Later Medieval Castile I will examine. By contrast, the habit of the English men-at-arms to dismount and fight on foot proved a decisive tactical advantage. They were not alone in challenging old assumptions regarding warfare: Swiss tactics and, to a lesser extent, Flemish and Scottish styles rendered mounted warriors virtually useless, mere relicts from the past. Oman helped to extend the idea that the Castilian armies of the 14th and 15th centuries had failed to adapt to the art of war of the new times, and persisted stubbornly using the heavy cavalry. In the two chapters that he dedicates to the most celebrated battles of the Castilian *trecento* (Nájera, 1367 and Aljubarrota, 1385) he underlines this idea clearly[2].

Later authors, such as Hans Delbrück, have sustained Oman's thesis while the development of the Medieval Military Revolution theory continued to rely on the notion that the infantry regained importance in the Later Middle Ages, thereby foreshadowing standard Early Modern tactics[3]. According to the Revolution thesis, the victories that infantry armies obtained in this period would have a shock-wave effect on military tactics that would progressively promote the role of the infantry to eminence[4].

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[1] Oman, *Art of War*.
[2] Oman, *History*, 179-195. First edition was published in 1924.
[3] Delbrück, *Art of War*. The work was originally published between 1900 and 1936; Parker, *The Military Revolution*. The debate can be followed in Rogers, *The Military Revolution Debate*.
[4] Rogers, *The Military Revolution Debate*, 59.

Nevertheless, since the study of warfare was modernized by J. F. Verbruggen in the mid-20th century, many researchers have attempted to take down the long-standing myths created by what Matthew Bennett termed the "Oman paradigm"[5]. Indeed, some case studies analyzed throughout Western Europe have underlined how important the cavalry continued to be in the Later Middle Ages[6]. Bennett himself challenged the very foundations of this thesis by, in turn, questioning the supremacy of cavalry in the High Middle Ages, thus single-handedly claiming the position of main reference to later analyses of medieval cavalry warfare[7]. In addition, he also disputed the alleged backwardness of French tactics through a thorough analysis of the battles during the Hundred Years' War, revealing that French commanders, far from being helpless, developed new tactics that allowed them to ultimately defeat the English[8]. Michael Mallet also corroborated the continuing importance of heavy cavalry in the Italian *Quattrocento*, which was dominant in terms of numbers and prestige. In his view, there was no reason why Italian commanders would have preferred to dismount their men-at-arms or change their tactics[9].

Despite this battery of studies that insist on the continued importance of the cavalry in the Later Middle Ages, the old paradigms persist due to the insufficient research into Castilian military tactics. Besides García-Fitz's excellent works, which prompted a veritable leap forward in understanding the role of cavalry in High Medieval Castile, there are no comparable studies on Later Medieval Castile[10]. In fact, the few existing ones just reiterate Oman's ideas, with little net contribution and an abundance of clichés[11]. The purpose of this paper is to deal with this historiographical gap by analysing 15th century Castilian battle tactics[12]. For such a purpose, I will examine not only the battlefield role of heavy cavalry, but also the role of light cavalry and infantry. This approximation will present a challenge to myths that are deeply rooted in historiography, such as the tactical

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[5] Verbruggen, *Art of Warfare*. First edition was published in 1954. Bennett, 'Meaning of Medieval Cavalry'. I am grateful to the author for letting me read the text before publication.
[6] Vale, *War&Chivalry*; Contamine, *War*, 126-132; Goodman, *Wars of the Roses*, 174-181.
[7] Bennett, 'The Myth', 304-316. John France also shook Oman's notions by re-visiting the relation between cavalry and infantry between the 11th and 13th centuries. France, 'Changing balance', 153-177.
[8] Bennett, 'The Development', 1-24.
[9] Mallett, *Mercenaries*, 146-180.
[10] García-Fitz, *Castilla y León*; García-Fitz, *Las Navas*.
[11] Fernando Castillo maintains that, despite the evident familiarity of Castilians with warfare, they were still tactically and technically underdeveloped. Castillo, *Un torneo interminable*, 270.
[12] The focus on battles and skirmishes is explained by the very nature of the debate, framed in the evolution of tactics in pitched engagements.

function of light cavalry. Besides, the many examples drawn from other European regions will dispute the idea of Castilian exceptionality or backwardness[13].

Conducting this type of study requires the use of narrative sources since these, unlike administrative documentation -more focused on organizational and financial aspects-, tend to be full of details vividly describing warfare, and thus providing insights into tactics. Nonetheless, chronicles can only be used with caution and after a thorough historical critique. Many of them were written by witnesses and/or veteran warriors. Accounts written by direct witnesses are the most valuable, but they are severely restricted by the limitations imposed by single perspective, and the need to over-dramatize or rationalize the events unfolding[14].

Another problem may arise from the definition of 'cavalry'. In the sources, the word '*caballería*' is mainly reserved, but not always, to the social class or its members (*caballeros*). Often, terms such as '*hombre de armas*' or '*jinete*' name the different types of mounted troops. In the vast majority of occasions, however, the denomination used is '*a caballo*' or '*de caballo*', which simply means 'mounted'. Stephen Morillo believes that 'soldier-words' like 'cavalry' or 'infantry' have 'three major vectors of meaning': functional, organizational and social. Those vectors endow 'soldier-words' with certain connotations variable in time and space[15]. In this work, the definition of cavalry will be functional, i.e. 'those fighting on horseback'. Nonetheless, the social vector will often become relevant as well, as we will see.

A brief bibliographical introduction will reveal the weight that cavalry units, and the concept of nobility, had in Later Medieval Castilian armies. A necessary must before tactics themselves are analysed.

1. Horses and Nobility: Castilian Military Organization

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[13] It is worth mentioning that studies of areas traditionally considered 'peripheral' contributes to the challenge of European models which are considered to be universal.

[14] Medieval chronicles –whether written or not by direct witnesses– are also almost systematically skewed. Thus, literary *topoi* are common, serving the purpose of constructing ideal panegyrics for political purposes. Smail, *Crusading Warfare*, 165-168; Curry, *The Battle of Agincourt*, 9-22; DeVries, 'The use of Chronicles', 1-15.

[15] Morillo, 'Milites, Knights and Samurai', 167-184.

In 1493, after Granada had fallen, Castile established its first standing army. Until that time, only the royal guards had been a purely permanent military force[16]. War, therefore, required prior recruiting by one of two ways: calling upon the service of royal vassals, or the general obligation of all subjects to participate in the defense of the kingdom.

The first way mentioned would be the troops provided by the nobility. The Castilian army was, unlike the English one, not reliant on professional troops[17]. Rather, there coexisted salaried soldiers with feudal obligations. This enabled medieval Castilian kings to wage war by calling upon feudal duties. Nonetheless, in the end most of these soldiers were paid monetary compensation[18]. On the other hand, the second recruitment formula used relied on compulsory military service that all the kingdom's inhabitants were subject to. Nevertheless, as in other parts of Europe, the mobilization of the whole population was extremely uncommon. Usually, the monarchy asked for a certain amount of men, who were either voluntary, or randomly picked[19].

The abundance of administrative records regarding war for the conquest of Granada allow us to tally the exact figures of the armies that participated in some of the campaigns. For those from 1485 through 1487 the standard ratio was one horseman per two to four footmen[20], although this proportion was far from a fixed rule. In 1484 the *cabalgada* (raid) of Malaga had much fewer cavalrymen, one for every five footmen[21]. The difference was due to the nature of these raiding campaigns, when footmen carried out the plunder while the cavalry protected them.

The contingents provided by the nobility held the cavalryman as the bulwark of the army. They equaled, or even surpassed, the accompanying footmen, as they did repeatedly for the campaigns from 1485 to 1487. Indeed, the high proportion of the cavalry in the royal army of 1487 highlights the relevance of aristocratic implication within the

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[16] Quatrefages, *La Revolución Militar Moderna*; Ladero, 'Organización militar', 222-226.

[17] It is hard to define what a 'professional' is in the Castilian military context. For the purpose of this paper, I refer as 'professional' to individuals with certain expertise and experience in warfare, not necessarily living of their arms.

[18] Arias, 'Castile-Leon', 96-101.

[19] Fernández de Larrea, 'Servicio militar', 47-49.

[20] Ladero, *Castilla*, 245-267. These are not very different from the proportions evidenced in the English armies that fought on French soil during the 15th century, although these last ones were never lesser than 1 to 3. Bell, Curry, King and Simpkin, *The Soldier*, 273.

[21] Ladero, *Castilla*, 238-239.

Castilian war effort. Of the total number of footmen, only 28% were provided by feudal obligations. The proportion goes up to three-fourths when doing an inventory of the horsemen[22]. As was customary throughout Europe, the nobility did not just lead the war, but also played a very active role in it. The cavalry came mainly from a social class used to a life of comforts, social exclusivity and legal privilege, which allowed them to invest in high quality combat equipment and regular training[23]. This set them above and beyond all other common footmen. There were some exceptions to this rule, as in the case of the crossbowmen, who benefited from some tax exemptions in exchange for maintaining a crossbow and being trained in it[24]. Also, the persistent Muslim threat and frequent border raids, could lead some of frontier town inhabitants to acquire a certain degree of military expertise[25]. Nevertheless, even in a long and intense conflict such as the War of Granada (1482-1492), a footman who had fought in 1486 may have had then his first experience in combat. He may, indeed, never have been at war again. In spite of this, the presence of volunteers and, above all, substitution services, enabled some non-privileged individuals to make of war a profession[26]. Nonetheless, the backbone of the Castilian army was the noble cavalry. It was, after all, the most trained and prepared fighting force. It is not surprising that the standing army established in 1493 was commanded by the high nobility and manned, exclusively, with cavalry[27].

Castilian aristocratic military service was structured around an administrative unit known as *lanza* ('lance'), which could, like in Portugal, merely be a man-at-arms and his page[28]. As a result of the tactical conditions imposed by the permanent frontier war with the Muslim enemy, Castilians had two types of *lanza*: *a la guisa* and *jineta* (heavy and light cavalry). The Cortes of Guadalajara decreed in 1390 that the king's vassals near the border should arm themselves *jineta* style, a type which would become increasingly common away from the frontier as well[29]. Notwithstanding, this was not a phenomenon

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[22] Ladero, *Castilla*, 245-267.
[23] Ladero, 'Organización militar', 206.
[24] García-Fitz, 'Persiguiendo sombras'. I am grateful to the author for letting me read the text before publication.
[25] J. F. Powers stated this idea for the High Middle Ages and, although it could also be applied to the 15th century, this is a topic that needs to be studied. Powers, *Society organized for war*.
[26] Etxeberria, 'Servicio militar', 20-21.
[27] Fernández de Larrea, 'Servicio militar', 50-51.
[28] Ladero, *Castilla*, 13-14; Monteiro, Martins, Faria, 'Another 1415', 121. Santiago Palacios reached the conclusion that the Castilian *lanza* is difficult to define, since the term is ambiguous and changes depending on the time period and source. Palacios, 'Una aproximación', 297-320.
[29] Ladero, *Castilla*, 14.

unique to the Castilian army. Contemporary Hungarian hussars and Venetian *stradioti* were also highly successful light cavalry. Even France and Burgundy included this type of unit within their more complex 'lance' system under the designation *coutiliers*[30]. On the other hand, the neighboring Aragonese monarchy employed *jinetes* until the beginning of the 15th century. Nevertheless, they developed a French style 'lance' system which also included light cavalry fighters –*pillart*– integrated within each man-at-arms. In this sense, they continued using light cavalry, albeit differently[31].

During the War of Granada, there were ten *jinetes* for every man-at-arms[32]. This favouring of the lighter cavalry contrasts strongly with the actual military capacity of the aristocracy. In 1475 the count of Alba provided *acostamiento* to 646 men-at-arms and 566 *jinetes*, and yet his contribution to the royal host was always significantly lower, and far more numerous in the second type[33]. In the frontier land of Andalusia, Juan Ponce de León 2nd count of Arcos, had 84 men-at-arms and 73 *jinetes* in his household, although like the count of Alba, he also commanded more light than heavy cavalry when fighting for the king[34].

The War of Granada was primarily a sequence of *cabalgadas* and sieges, a type of warfare for which the *jinetes* were well adapted. Likewise, although at first the kingdom of Granada adopted Christian armament, at some time during the 14th century it switched to lighter equipment[35]. The predominance of light cavalry over heavy cavalry during the War of Granada was, therefore, a result of both the type of war waged and the characteristics of the enemy forces. In other 15th century conflicts, such as the various civil wars, chronicles show a greater effort to recruit men-at-arms, although the lack of administrative documentation makes it difficult to corroborate this. When the War of Granada was over, the Muslim enemy in the Iberian Peninsula disappeared; thereafter any future conflict would take place with other Europeans, in particular the French. It is of no surprise, therefore, that the first permanent army of Castile, established in 1493, was heavily biased towards the heavy cavalry: 2,000 men-at-arms and only 500 *jinetes*. This

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[30] Contamine, *War*, 128.
[31] Sáiz, *Caballeros del rey*, 56-60.
[32] Ladero, *Castilla*, 14.
[33] Calderón, 'La hacienda', 148-149.
[34] Rojas, 'Capacidad militar', 519-524.
[35] Jatib, *Historia*, 127; Fancy, *Mercenary Mediterranean*, 35-37.

was, in a way, a reflection of the expectations there were regarding what other European armies would field[36].

Thus, until the end of the Middle Ages the cavalry was important, if not always vital, in the composition of Castilian armies. This was the result of the social composition of the host: the bulk of the cavalry was formed by the troops of the nobility. Host recruitment and quantification was based on the concept of the *lanza*, which was, by definition, organized around a cavalryman. *Jinetes* can hardly be considered a 'Castilian peculiarity': they were present in other European armies. Likewise, their predominance in the Castilian army during the final decades of the 15th century was a consequence of the war of attrition fought against Granada. In addition, below we will explore how the tactical use of the *jinetes* was more complex than commonly assumed. Now that, paraphrasing John Gillingham, the armies are on the field, let us consider what they did once they were there[37].

2. *They put the lances under their arms*: heavy cavalry tactics

The vast majority of pitched engagements that took place in the 15th century involving Castilians –e.g. Higueruela (1431), Olmedo I and II (1445 and 1467) or Toro (1476)– systematically culminated in a clash of cavalries. Castilian tactics were essentially offensive, concurring with a description found in the chronicle of constable Álvaro de Luna (cst. 1423-1453). The author has Luna give a speech, moments before the battle of Higueruela, in which he defends the advantages of rapid aggression[38]. This philosophy is far from uniquely Castilian. Jean de Bueil, in his popular *Le Jouvencel*, urges to charge fiercely if both armies had cavalry[39]. In other words, it was the composition of the army that determined the tactic adopted. Therefore, the importance of cavalry in Castilian armies compelled the recurrence of offensive maneuvers. Horses are useful when charging, but not for defending[40]. Indeed, Castilian warfare heavily relied on the charge of the heavy cavalry: the *mounted shock combat*.

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[36] Fernández de Larrea, 'Servicio militar', 50.
[37] Gillingham, 'Richard I', 194.
[38] Chacón, *Crónica*, 134.
[39] Bueil, *Jouvencel*, II, 158.
[40] Morillo, 'Age of Cavalry', 49.

Cavalry could adopt multiple charging formations, but the truth is that these were barely modified throughout Medieval Castile. The arrangement of 15th century cavalry was almost identical to that recorded by jurists under the reign of Alfonso X (1252-1284) in his *Partidas*. It was also similar to the tactics explained by Don Juan Manuel in his early 14th century *Libro de los Estados*. When there was a clear inferiority in numbers, the wedge formation was necessary[41]. An example of the use of this formation is described during an incursion into Granada in 1455. Similarly, in 1468 a small Castilian contingent confronted a larger Nasrid army. In both instances, the wedge proved to be a vital formation[42]. Interestingly, it was only used in combat against the Muslims when outnumbered, perhaps for moral reasons.

Ever since the campaigns of Alfonso XI, in the mid-14th century, Castile had systematically proved superior to the Muslim neighbors of Granada. The 15th century, in particular, highlights this in the few defeats suffered by the Christians –also possibly a result of a certain bias in the chronicles[43]–, as well as in the confidence which led Castilians to rush into situations of inferiority like the ones mentioned. Castilians had probably developed a 'habit of victory', with a steady stream of triumphs increasing their morale, emboldening them to embrace battle and take tactical initiative even in situations of inferiority. This, in turn, further fueled their confidence and encouraged recklessness. Notwithstanding, it is paramount to carry out a thorough analysis of the narrative and literary sources describing war in order to asses if this mentality was indeed shared among the Castilian nobility.

The usual charging formation was the line (*haces*)[44]. To ensure the shock's effectiveness, the attack had to be simultaneous along the whole formation. For such a purpose, in the battle of Higueruela, Álvaro de Luna advised the other *batallas*[45], to charge when they saw him begin the assault[46]. The goal of this attack is to overwhelm the enemy by benefiting from the kinetic energy of the horse, using the *couched lance* technique. The development of the plate armor during the 15th century prompted the use of the lance rest

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[41] Sánchez-Arcilla, *Siete Partidas*, Segunda Partida, Título XXIII, Ley XVI; Juan Manuel, '*Libro de los estados*, Parte I, LXXIV. For an analysis of High Medieval Castilian tactics, see García-Fitz, *Castilla y León*, 373-403 and García-Fitz, *Las Navas*, 497-536.

[42] Valera, *Memorial*, 13, 151-152; Sánchez-Parra, *Crónica anónima*, 28, 264-265.

[43] This is the case of the battle of Collejares (1406). López, 'Una batalla olvidada', 387-406.

[44] Sánchez-Arcilla, *Siete Partidas*, Segunda Partida, Título XXIII, Ley XVI; Juan Manuel, *Libro de los estados*, Parte I, LXXIV; García-Fitz, *Castilla y León*, 285.

[45] Basic tactical units in which an army was divided, see Gago-Jover, *Vocabulario militar castellano*, 75.

[46] García de Santa María, 'Crónica', 297; Chacón, *Crónica*, 134.

on the breast plate, which facilitated the use of the lance with greater security and stability[47]. Its use, in addition, increased the impact of the blow, as recent research has shown[48]. It is unsurprising, then that 'the lords of battle could rule the field in the fifteenth century as they had rarely done before'[49].

How cavalry charges were carried out exactly is unsure. It is probable that not all knights charged with a couched lance. Some sources indicate that a first line of heavy cavalry 'broke' the enemy lines before most of the horsemen actually arrived. These probably trotted in to the *mêlée*. This is what happened in both battles of Olmedo (1445 and 1467) and Albuera (1479). In all of them, a cavalry line was placed in front of the main *batalla*, so that their charge could break or loosen the enemy lines before the main body entered the fray. The first battle of Olmedo was fought in 1445 between the faction commanded by Álvaro de Luna, and the *Infantes* of Aragón. The former placed 50 men-at-arms in front of his *batalla*, so they could deliver the first assault[50]. Something similar happened at the battle of Albuera, in which Alonso de Cárdenas, grandmaster of the Order of Santiago, confronted the Portuguese. He also chose a vanguard force that would shock the enemy formation into disarray: 'because if they threw [the enemy] into confusion, the grandmaster's *batalla*, which was behind him, could easily destroy the enemy[51]'. The second battle of Olmedo, in 1467, confronted king Enrique IV against his brother prince Alfonso. The description of this confrontation sheds more light onto the actual use of this shock unit. Pedro de Velasco, who commanded the main *batalla* of Enrique's army, ordered a squadron of 80 men-at-arms to meet the enemy first. This vanguard was so successful it cut right through the enemy lines. Velasco followed the charge with the rest of his *batalla*, hoping to force the enemy into a rout. The vanguard, however, believing they had been isolated by their success, instead of charging back decided to flee to avoid being trapped. Meanwhile, the royalist *batalla* led by the marquis of Santillana charged the enemy with such force that, when preparing a second onslaught, he met an enemy in disarray and fleeing[52].

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[47] Vale, *War&Chivalry*, 118.
[48] Williams, Edge and Capwell, 'Couched lance', 2-29.
[49] Vale, *War & Chivalry*, 128.
[50] Chacón, *Crónica*, 167-168; Rosell, 'Crónica', 628.
[51] Pulgar, *Crónica*, I, 371.
[52] Enríquez del Castillo, *Crónica*, 278.

The evidence indicates that placing a cavalry unit in front, for an initial charge, was a recurring tactic in 15th century Castile, at least in large battles -there is no evidence for smaller engagements-. Three of the five main civil confrontations of the time mention this tactic. Perhaps the very size of the armies fielded was key in determining whether this maneuver was used at all. The larger the army, the easier it was to assign specific roles to different units, thus optimizing the shock capability of each one, to disrupt, tear apart or instill fear into the enemy. This was not an exclusively Castilian tactic. Jean de Bueil recommended -perhaps revealing French preference- first letting skirmishers act, then a vanguard shock force, followed by the full weight of the cavalry[53]. This was a similar practice to that of the Italian cavalry, described in the accounts of the Neapolitan Diomede Carafa who, like Bueil, was a veteran warrior. In both cases, the arrangement of the army resembles that of the *batalla* commanded by Álvaro de Luna at the first battle of Olmedo[54].

After the initial charge there came *mêlée* combat. Thereafter the fight became diluted in small groups or individuals who carried out combat themselves. In these circumstances, there was often resulting chaos and confusion. The best account of this phase of the battle is probably the one of the first battle of Olmedo. The *face of the battle*, as described quite graphically in the chronicle of the constable, shows unhorsed knights fighting on foot, doing their best to slay the enemy horses in order to make them more vulnerable[55]. '*Muerto el caballo, perdido el hombre de armas*' or 'dead horse, man-at-arms lost'. This phrase is a sixteenth-century Castilian proverb cited in *the Story of Bayard*. It reveals that the enormous advantage of the heavy cavalry resided in the horse, hence making the beast a priority target[56]. The *condottieri*, thanks to the effectiveness of plate armor, often preferred to aim their attacks at the horse, something which was considered 'bad war' in the early 15th century, but later became an accepted practice[57]. As a result, equine casualties during a battle were often far more numerous than the human death toll. If chronicle figures are to be trusted, the battle of Torote (1441) saw the death

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[53] Bueil, *Jouvencel*, II, 158-159.

[54] In the Italian case, skirmishers were substituted by men-at-arms, light cavalry and mounted crossbowmen, which were then followed by a squadron of chosen heavy cavalry behind which went the rest of the cavalry and the infantry. Pieri, 'Governo et exercitio', 122–123.

[55] Chacón, *Crónica*, 170.

[56] Mailles, *Bayart*, 321.

[57] Mallett, *Mercenaries*, 149.

of more than 20 men-at-arms, and 150 horses[58]. The second battle of Olmedo saw 140 casualties, half as much as the animals killed[59].

Castilians relied on the heavy cavalry, and they placed their trust in mounted shock combat. But this tactic required a very tidy topography: flat and free of obstacles. Thus, the terrain often had to be prepared prior to battle. There is a good example in the battle of Higueruela, at the gates of Granada, in 1431. King Juan II, with his constable Álvaro de Luna, led a large army to the heart of Nasrid territory, seeking to confront the enemy in open battle. The Muslims, however, arranged their units among the vineyards and olive groves, a terrain which thwarted the Castilian aspiration to deliver cavalry charges. Meanwhile, the Christians tried in vain to lure them to the open field, so they began adapting the land to their needs: flattening the irrigation channels and gullies so the cavalry could ride unimpeded[60]. The Granadans tried to stop this by sallying from the city gates and beginning skirmishes. This attempt to stop the Castilian terraforming unintentionally resulted in an open battle which resulted in the Christian victory.

3. Light cavalry: the *Jinetes*

Castilian *jinetes* were not, *stricto sensu*, light cavalry. Their arms and armor were lighter than those of the men-at-arms, but the differences were modest. In a military gathering celebrated in Soria in 1496, many of the *jinetes* mustered by the duke of the Infantado appeared without their mandatory armor. This, apparently, included the cuisse, cuirass, faulds, bevor and *adarga* -a leather shield imported from Muslim warfare[61]. This was, indeed, a cumbersome panoply.

It is unclear what kind of role light cavalry played in pitched battles: there is an understanding of their strategic use, but not the tactic employed in battle. Their non-combat functions included exploration, foraging, sacking and devastation of enemy territory. Nonetheless, did *jinetes* play a role in Castilian battle tactics when these were so reliant on heavy cavalry? There is a recurring answer to this question, which perceives this type of cavalry as a unit that harasses the enemy with throwing spears, and uses the

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[58] Rosell, *Crónica*, 578.
[59] Enríquez del Castillo, *Crónica*, 130.
[60] García de Santa María, 'Crónica' 291; Carrillo de Huete, *Crónica*, 105; Chacón, *Crónica*, 132.
[61] Sánchez, *Casa de Mendoza*, 210.

speed and mobility of their horses to have an effect on the periphery of combat. Charles Oman described this role by analyzing in the fresco describing the battle of Higueruela in the Hall of Battles of the Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial[62]. The idea has become so consolidated on the collective imagery, that even peninsular academic research has merely repeated this canonical vision[63].

A detailed analysis of the sources, however, defies this facile interpretation. Certain 15th century evidence indicates that *jinetes* were just lance and sword *mêlée* troops. The chronicle of Álvaro de Luna describes Gonzalo Chacón who, armed *a la jineta*, mortally pierced with his lance in 1452[64]. In fact, a detailed examination of the fresco mentioned abstains from showing any spear-throwing *jinetes*[65]. Most of them, indeed, appear stabbing enemies, some even holding a couched lance. Had it been a spear designed to be thrown, this type of use would have been meaningless. A later account seems to confirm that the Castilian light cavalry was also accustomed to charging. The Inca Garcilaso de la Vega describes how, in the battle of Salinas in 1538, the Spanish *jinetes* rode with their lances in an improvised couched position[66]. Burgundian *coutiliers*, could also use the couched lance technique with their 'javelin with *arrêt*'[67]. As previously mentioned, many European areas used light cavalry. It should not be surprising, therefore, that its function was also similar.

The narration of the first battle of Olmedo lingers on the role of the *jinetes* in pitched battle. Combat began when both sides unleashed their light cavalry, followed by men-at-arms, in a skirmish aimed at occupying a knoll that dominated the battlefield. The *jinetes* were again important once the enemy was routed, to pursue and harry them[68]. According to this account, light cavalry was essential for the beginning and the end of the battle. Their function was to skirmish, occupy key positions and pursue a defeated enemy. Perhaps another role could be included: the *jinetes* actually fought in mixed squadrons in

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[62] Oman, *History*, II, 180-181. Even though this artwork was painted at the end of the 16th century, it was apparently inspired by information from the time of the engagement. Campos, 'Los frescos', 165-210.

[63] Fernando Castillo had the *jinetes* dealing quick blows, throwing their spears at the enemy ranks and then retreating. Castillo, 'La caballería', 88.

[64] The same source also describes a captain of the *jinetes* stabbing an enemy with his lance. Chacón, *Crónica*, 236, 278-279.

[65] The only example of this type of action is mentioned in a skirmish outside Loja in 1482. There, the marquis of Cádiz threw his spear while mounted, one would imagine, *a la jineta*. Bernáldez, *Memorias*, 124.

[66] When the Castilians confronted the South-American Indians, all they had to do was lance them, what the chronicler called using their lance as if it was a *jineta* lance. Garcilaso de la Vega, *Comentarios*, 158

[67] Contamine, *War*, 128.

[68] Carrillo de Huete, *Crónica*, 464; Rosell, *Crónica*, 629; Chacón, *Crónica*, 169, 174.

order to support men-at-arms. In the second battle of Olmedo, all the *batallas* whose composition is described in the chronicles reveal a mix between heavy and light cavalry, although they were in separate squadrons[69]. This division, however, did not warrant separate actions. Pedro de Velasco sent both his squadrons –light and heavy– together into the *mêlée* against the archbishop of Toledo, once the vanguard had already led the initial charge[70]. In the campaigns against the Muslim enemy mixed formations were also common. In 1407, Pedro García de Herrera, marshal of Castile, confronted a similar-sized Nasrid army, splitting his infantry into two *batallas*, while a third one included all the cavalry, with the men-at-arms in the front ranks[71]. One would presume the latter would lead the initial charge, with the *jinetes* close behind to benefit from the shock effect. The degree of uncertainty regarding the actual function of the *jinetes* in mixed *batallas* is high, but it may be that their role was precisely to pick fights with the enemy's light cavalry in the midst of the *mêlée*. Nonetheless, evidence found in the early 16th century may shed some light. In the battle of Villalar, in 1521, a man-at-arms brought down a *jinete* during a *mêlée*, illustrating how in the fray of the battle both light and heavy cavalry ultimately fought each other[72].

Another tactic that no study of *jinete* warfare can overlook is the feigned retreat, or *tornafuye*. This was practiced also by Balkan *stradioti*, a unit which was similar –both in armament and in *modus operandi*– to the Castilian *jinetes*, as pointed out by Philippe de Commynes[73]. The key is that a retreat was feigned in order to lure an exultant enemy unsuspectingly into an ambush. This was a typical frontier tactic which was improved upon during this period. Diego de Ribera, captain of the frontier, drew some Nasrids to fall into a double ambush near Colomera in 1430. He had sent 80 horsemen as bait, and the first trap added another 120 of these, while the second one had the rest of the cavalry, the infantry and Ribera himself[74]. It is unclear whether these horsemen were heavy or light cavalry, but the speed and maneuverability necessary for the plan to succeed indicates they were *jinetes*. This tactic was used at times also against other Christians, and even fellow Castilians, as in the case of the battle of Torote, in which the *adelantado* (frontier

[69] Enríquez del Castillo, *Crónica*, 276-277; Valera, *Memorial*, 126-128; Sánchez-Parra, *Crónica anónima*, 210-211.
[70] Enríquez del Castillo, *Crónica*, 278.
[71] García, *Crónica*, 65-68.
[72] Sandoval, *Historia*, 436
[73] Szabó, 'Stradiots, Balkan', III, 315-316; Contamine, *War*, 128.
[74] Carrillo de Huete, *Crónica*, 71-73.

governor) of Cazorla sent his light cavalry to lure and then defeat the forces of the soon-to-be marquis of Santillana, whose inferior army would otherwise have avoided any chance of open battle[75].

4. Infantry warfare: dismounted cavalry and footmen

Traditionally, Castilian tactical backwardness was evidenced by the stubborn resistance of their cavalry to dismount. Oman wrote, regarding the battle of Nájera in 1367, that the Castilians 'knew nothing of the new device of fighting on foot, but still charged in mass like their ancestors'[76]. This is, however, patently lacking in evidence as in the very same battle of Najera, the left flank, manned by members of the Order of the Band, fought entirely on foot[77].

Castilian tactics were fundamentally geared towards the cavalry charge, nonetheless they still allowed room for adaptation. The range of possibilities that their commanders employed always contemplated dismounting, although they were loath to do so unless the conditions obliged. When contending armies were of the same size or just about, leaders preferred to take the offensive, thereby benefiting from the horse's power. Nevertheless, they were aware of the advantages inherent in fighting on foot, and made use of them when there was an overwhelming numerical inferiority, which advised dismounting. That was the case in 1429, when the constable Álvaro de Luna engaged a larger army of the combined forces of Navarre and Aragon. Castilian inferiority advised for a defensive tactic, dismounting the men-at-arms, as both Jean de Bueil and the common practice of the English in the Hundred Years' War would have suggested[78]. An additional measure that the constable adopted was to surround his army with carts, in order to protect it from being outflanked, a tactic echoing that of the Hussites in Bohemia and Moravia[79]. The battle was finally averted using diplomacy, and therefore the enemy forces never had to encounter this defensive disposition. Another reason which would make fighting on foot the desired option was if there was a terrain which impeded mounted

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[75] Carrillo de Huete, *Crónica*, 390-392; Rosell, *Crónica*, 577-578.
[76] Oman, *History*, II, 181.
[77] Villalon, Kagay, *To Win and Lose*, 225-226.
[78] Bueil, *Jouvencel*, II, 63.
[79] García de Santa María, 'Crónica', 72.

movement[80]. During the siege of Vélez-Málaga, in 1487, the Castilians behaved aggressively, as was their wont, but they did so on foot because their steeds were useless given the conditions[81]. Nasrid forces attempted to lift the siege by preparing for battle in a nearby hill. Although Castilians dismounted, the hill was so steep that even on foot both armies never actually clashed, and only some distance harassing using *espingardas* (handguns) and crossbows took place[82].

Focusing now on common footmen, there is little doubt that they were the most numerous in the armies, and their utility in ravaging and siege operations was well acknowledged. Nonetheless, their battlefield role is not easy to assess because the chronicles rarely mention them. Some authors have argued that this has to do with the nature of the sources used, as chronicles often overlooked commoners' actions in favor of the deeds of the *bellatores*[83]. Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to simply assume it is the result of nobility-bias, because there could also be administrative reasons behind. The absence of a professional army in 15th century Castile *de facto* rendered the nobles into *quasi*-professionals, since their social function was to fight. After all, they were the only ones able to afford the best equipment and regular training for war. Therefore, the infantry, understanding the word in both the functional and social dimensions, had a secondary or support role, as observed in most of the cases in which they are mentioned.

For this purpose, to analyze the role of the infantry, the information from both large and small battles and skirmishes will be relevant. Infantry is only mentioned in battles when it is either forming the front line, or in reserve at the rear. In those occasions when the infantry was deployed in the first line of combat, it was alongside the cavalry. Nevertheless, this arrangement is mentioned very few times: in Zurgena (1407), Ajofrín and Cerro de las Vigas (both in 1470), as well as the border skirmish of 1455 mentioned before. This begs the question of why the Castilians chose, on those occasions, to place both types of unit next to each other. This parallel formation is unorthodox, but it was probably used because of the peculiar circumstances encountered. At the battle of

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[80] The chronicler of the *Crónica de Juan II* uses a low-intensity, yet reckless, action in 1407 to advise not fight on horseback when fighting against infantry when the terrain offset the advantage that so often horses did provide. García, *Crónica*, 261.

[81] This also happened during the previous stages of the sieges of Zújar and Baza, both in 1489. Castilian commanders dismounted their cavalry in order to skirmish with the Muslims outside the city walls, in a harsh terrain surrounded by orchards, streams and buildings. Pulgar, *Crónica*, II, 367-377.

[82] Pulgar, *Crónica*, II, 270-276.

[83] García-Fitz, *Castilla y León*, 375-379; García-Fitz, *Las Navas,* 500-502; Arias, 'Honor y guerra', 312-319; France, *Victory in the East*, 35-36; Ayton, 'Crecy and the Chroniclers', 343-346.

Zurgena, the infantry was deployed thus in response to the Muslim's own arrangement: hence, both the cavalries and infantries were positioned facing each other[84]. In the other cases mentioned, it was numerical inferiority that prompted this change in tactics: extending their lines to avoid being outflanked. During the 1455 skirmish and the battle of Ajofrín, like in Zurgena, the infantry was used offensively, advancing upon the enemy together with the cavalry[85]. Only in the battle of Cerro de las Vigas, in 1470, do we see this tactic being used defensively. Alonso de Monroy situated his forces behind concealed holes, resembling the battles of Crécy and Aljubarrota[86]. The cavalry stayed in reserve, awaiting the moment when the enemy charge was diminished by the traps to begin their own offensive[87]. In addition, this case reveals another particularity. The chronicle itself indicates that, due to the continuity of war at that time, the footmen employed by Monroy at that time, although of peasant origin, had become experienced and seasoned[88].

Although the position of the footmen is often vague, sources do reveal that the second type of deployment would be in rear. Some accounts of the battles of Guadix (1435) and Albuera (1479) appear to indicate that these units were placed behind the cavalry. At Guadix they are only mentioned because they tried to flee under fire of enemy crossbows[89]. At Albuera, the infantry of the grandmaster of the Order of Santiago fled after seeing the fierceness of the cavalry *mêlée*[90]. In those and other instances the infantry was plausibly situated in the rearguard, in reserve, and thereby completely overlooked[91]. This would account for why they are normally mentioned when standing in the front, playing an active role. This front-line disposition also entailed a much more intense engagement than when located in the back, where they may have served as a protective wall for the cavalry to regroup. The future count of Alba described the battle of Guadix in a letter to Juan II. He pointed out that the initial situation was dangerous, not only because the Muslims were deployed in the midst of their gardens and orchards -a placement that

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[84] García, *Crónica*, 164-167.
[85] Valera, *Memorial*, 12-14, 181-182; Sánchez-Parra, *Crónica anónima*, 320-322; Palencia: *Crónica*, II, 324.
[86] The *Crónica anónima* recalls the evocation Aljubarrota, fought in 1385, 294-295. See Rodríguez, *Alonso de Monroy*, 135-138.
[87] Maldonado, *Vida*, 95-97; Palencia, *Crónica*, II, 302.
[88] Rodríguez, *Alonso de Monroy*, 103-104; Maldonado, *Vida*, 90.
[89] Carrillo de Huete, *Crónica*, 203.
[90] Pulgar, *Crónica*, I, 374; Bernáldez, *Memorias*, 81.
[91] Placing the infantry in the rearguard appears to have been standard procedure in Castile during the High Middle Ages. García-Fitz, *Castilla y León*, 379.

impeded an effective use of the cavalry charge-, but also because their infantry was immediately behind their horsemen, forestalling any attempt to charge the enemy at all[92].

The infantry discussed above were spearmen, but there were also shooters (mainly crossbowmen) whose battlefield role seem significantly more active, since they would have trained in the use of the weapon[93]. Despite the fact that they participated often in the battles of the period, we only know of their disposition in few of such encounters: the battles of Cerro de las Vigas and Toro[94]. However, there is a problem with the second example. Narrative sources mention the use of *espingarderos* by both armies at the battle of Toro, fought in 1476 between Fernando the Catholic and Afonso V of Portugal. Nevertheless, Castilian chroniclers fail to mention their own, and only cite the enemy ones placed on the Portuguese left flank. This was the only Portuguese *batalla* that emerged victorious, something which prompted Castilian chroniclers to merit the Portuguese *espingarderos* with[95]. Portuguese chronicles, however, put *espingarderos* in front of the Castilian main *batalla*, led by Fernando itself[96]. Interestingly, this *batalla* defeated the main body of the Portuguese army. Portuguese chronicler's testimonies, thus, may be trying to justify their defeat, as the Castilians did too. In a way, both sources are admitting the importance and potential of this type of troops.

The initial disposition of the missile troops on the battlefield is, however, never described. In both these battles the sources merely mention that missile discharges occurred against the enemy front. It can be surmised that, given the straight shot of crossbows and *espingardas*, the shooters were deployed in front of the main force. They would shoot the enemy ranks in order to scatter the enemy as much as possible, so as to facilitate the ensuing cavalry charge, just as the Genoese crossbowmen fighting for France at the battle of Crécy intended to do in 1346. The battle of Guadix can, once more, shed some light on the predominant obscurity. There, since the Christians were refusing to charge, the Granadans brought their crossbowmen to the vanguard in order to harry the Christian front ranks. Indeed, the missile shower was nearly definitive because the

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[92] Carrillo de Huete, *Crónica*, 203.
[93] Many could have become familiar with the crossbow simply by hunting, while others could have done some shooting practices. At least that is how it seems to have been in Jaen, where the Constable Miguel Lucas de Iranzo ordered the *ballesteros de nómina* to practice every Sunday with sandbags placed against the city walls. Carriazo, *Hechos*, 117.
[94] Maldonado, *Vida*, 95.
[95] Pulgar, *Crónica*, II, 212; Valera, *Crónica*, 70.
[96] Pina, *Crónica*, 845-846; Encarnação, *Batalha de Toro*, 164-178.

Castilian infantry began to flee and the men-at-arms grew impatient at their helplessness as the darts pierced their armors and, worse yet, hurt or killed their horses[97]. Even though the events at Guadix do not describe the tactic and function of the Castilian shooters, they do explain the use and importance of these units.

Infantry was only capable of winning a pitched engagement on its own on one occasion: the battle of Mungia in 1471. The trees, however, should not conceal the forest, because there are two reasons why the footmen were decisive in this confrontation. First, because the terrain was very difficult, wholly unfit for horsemen. Second, because one of the contenders were the local lesser nobility, the *hidalgos*. These Basque *hidalgos* were accustomed to recruit troops used to mountain warfare for their endemic private wars[98]. In a similar way to the aforementioned case of Cerro de las Vigas, the continuity over time of private conflicts meant that the infantry recruited by the Basque *hidalgos* became semi-professional warriors[99]. On the other hand, like in Wales, the Scottish Highlands, or the Swiss cantons, the mountainous Basque Country was never dominated by mounted elites[100]. Local noblemen, therefore, waged war on foot. Mungia, thus, was a victory obtained by an infantry force composed by noblemen and *quasi*-professional troops, using an advantageous terrain to defeat a mounted enemy[101].

An aggressive spirit... Offensive tactics

This paper illustrates how and why the cavalry -understanding the word in both functional and social senses- dominated 15th century Castilian battlefields. Understanding this as mere tactical backwardness falls within the realm of evolutionary determinism. If, this model goes, infantry warfare eventually emerged triumphant in the 16th and 17th centuries, necessarily 15th century warfare had to tend towards it. Infantry-based tactics of

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[97] Carrillo de Huete, *Crónica*, 200-209.
[98] Fernández de Larrea, 'Las Guerras Privadas', 85-109.
[99] In the absence of a state structure to finance them, these troops were maintained on the basis of depredations and spreading violence and plunder in the surrounding regions. This could have occurred not only in Extremadura or the Basque Country, but also in other peripheral locations of the Crown of Castile, where private wars had a prominent presence, such as Galicia or Asturias. This would explain the fame and effectiveness of the infantry coming from the mountainous territories of the north of the Crown. Etxeberria and Fernández de Larrea, *Guerra Privada*.
[100] Morillo, 'Age of Cavalry', 46. On this occasion, the word 'infantry' loses its social connotations, as it is only guided by the functional vector.
[101] Enríquez del Castillo, *Crónica*, 369; Valera, *Memorial*, 189; Sánchez-Parra, *Crónica anónima*, 334-336; Palencia, *Crónica*, III, 21.

the Later Middle Ages were thus precursors, pioneers, while cavalry-based tactics were relics. This model, however, should not be confused with a dichotomy between innovation and stagnation. Medieval commanders knew well that fighting defensive battles on foot and offensive battles on horseback were options at their disposal[102]. The English armies, however, did strongly favor defensive infantry warfare in order to maximize the number of longbowmen they recruited –though cavalry units were always part of their tactical toolbox–. The alternative to this was presented by the Castilians –together with the French and the Italians[103]–, who continued to maximize their offensive power based on the cavalry charge, to the point that the disposition and organization of the battle units was fine-tuned in order to obtain a swift enemy defeat. In any case, European commanders were well aware of the tactical possibilities at their disposal, and frequently made use of them, although preferences did vary.

Overall, in the 15th century the Castilian tactical model was based on the composition of the army. Like in other parts of Western Christendom, there was a combination of heavy and light cavalry. This model, nonetheless, was not rigid at all: it was flexible and adaptable, and the various battle formations used bear witness to it. If circumstances or the make-up of the army were sub-standard, then commanders quickly responded by altering the deployment and tactics. Chroniclers rarely mention common footmen in battle; and when they appear, their role is secondary to that of the cavalry. This is not only due to the vision of war transmitted by the chronicles, as administrative records show that it has to do with the recruitment and organization mechanisms of the Castilian army. In this sense, the absence of a professional army, similar to those deployed by other European regions -even by Iberian neighbors-, determined the tactics used by Castile. Common footmen, with little margin for professionalization, could not compete in quality with those for whom war was a trade, the primordial social function. It is on rare occasions that men fighting on foot actually lead to victory, as they did in Mungia, in 1471. This last example, however, has a nobility that fights on foot, along with a semi-professional infantry seasoned in many years of private wars.

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[102] One of the challenges that medieval infantry had, as some authors have pointed out, was their lack of training, even professionalism, something necessary to carry out offensive actions. Morillo, 'Age of Cavalry', 53-54; France, 'Changing balance', 172-174.

[103] There are striking similarities between the tactical models proposed by Jean de Bueil, Diomede Carafa and those used by Álvaro de Luna in the first Battle of Olmedo (1445). This comparison highlights the undeniable efficiency and operating capacity of the cavalry in the 15th century. Despite the geographical and political differences, the cavalry was used in the same way.

Castile did not create a permanent army until 1493; and the infantry would not become fully professional infantry until the Italian campaigns of *El Gran Capitán* (1494-1504). Before that moment, the army was composed by an amalgam of rural, urban and aristocratic contingents. Among those, only the nobility had the necessary time and resources to train for war, and therefore they provided the most valuable troops. They were the backbone of the army, so it should not be surprising that they were also the pillar of the tactical system. This bias was not based on exclusively military merits, but also social and political. The army deployed on the battlefield reflected the society it fought for. War was borne on the shoulders of the aristocratic elite, which was also the military elite – whether on foot or mounted–, and in 15th century Castile, war was waged on horseback.

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