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Scott Manning
American Public University System

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Historiography of Falkirk (1298) as the Predecessor to Infantry Dominance

Scott Manning

For more than a century, historians have identified the Battle of Falkirk (1298) as a turning point in infantry tactics, not only for the Scots but also for warfare in the Western World. In his seminal work on military history, Hans Delbrück (1848-1929) wrote that Falkirk was unique, concluding “nowhere else in the Middle Ages do we find such great masses of foot soldiers who do not immediately break ranks when attacked by knights.”¹ Delbrück was referring to the spearmen organized by Scottish Guardian William Wallace (d. 1305) in a battle that he lost against English King Edward I (r. 1272-1307). Delbrück is not alone in his assertion that Falkirk initiated, or at least preceded some revolutionary method for using foot soldiers, as the claim persists in numerous modern works. Remarkably, there was nothing new about the Scots’ tactics, but Falkirk remains popular in modern memory, predominately due to high profile participants such as Wallace and Edward, the former a national hero, as well as a dense library of contemporary and modern histories. In an attempt to neatly categorize transitions and trends in warfare, historians have erroneously identified Falkirk as the beginning of an era where infantry alone won battles, or at least stood up to cavalry, but in reality such infantry-centric achievements were occurring more than a century prior in the Western World.

The Battle of Falkirk

Before reviewing the influence of Falkirk in the medieval world along with the last 120 years of interpretation, it is necessary to reconstruct the battle, or at least the formations of the Scottish spearmen “who do not immediately break ranks when attacked by knights.” There are several challenges though. First, there is no archeological evidence for its location. However, historians can be certain it was at or near Falkirk, as all the chronicles and administrative records are unanimous on this point. Second, the chronicles only agree that the battle occurred on July 22, 1298, as it was the religious holiday of Mary Magdalene. After these points the chronicles diverge in tactics, participants, and even the victor. Third, none of the authors of the surviving medieval chronicles was an eyewitness to the battle.

Still, most modern historians rely on the *Chronicle of Walter of Guisborough*, as it was written shortly after the battle. It also provides the most details on tactics employed by both the Scots and the

English, which is enticing to modern-day historians.² Although the exact author is unknown, the location—the Yorkshire priory of Guisborough—is well known. The chronicle is invaluable concerning Anglo-Scottish affairs during 1291-1300, as no other chronicle provides as much detail and analysis. Finally, the author likely had access to participants.³

Guisborough tells us the Scots had an army comprised of archers, cavalry, and spearmen. The English had cavalry, archers, and slingers. Guisborough describes the English army preparing to leave Scotland after a lengthy campaign without a battle. However, upon learning the location of Wallace and his army, Edward moved quickly to confront the Scots. On a hill, Wallace deployed his troops in a defensive position and awaited the English. Here, Guisborough introduces the *schiltron* formation, circles of spearmen with their spears “held up at an angle” and “their faces were turned to the circumference of the circles.”⁴

Wallace deployed four of these *schiltrons*, which Guisborough describes as “like a thick wood.” Wallace’s “mounted men” were “on the flank, behind” while the archers were in between the *schiltrons*. As for the battlefield, Guisborough describes “a little stream” between the armies, as well as “a muddy loch,” which the English only discovered after they began their attack. When the English cavalry attacked, the Scottish cavalry fled the field “without striking a blow.” The Scottish archers fled, moved into the *schiltrons*, or died. Yet, upon this first cavalry charge, the English “could not enter because of the multitude of lances.” Next, the English archers and slingers moved forward and attacked the spearmen with arrows and rocks. This broke up the *schiltron* formations, after which the English horsemen attacked, “laying waste to everything.”⁵

The “Infantry Revolution” of Falkirk

Although the Scots lost the battle, Guisborough’s description of how the *schiltrons* repelled the initial cavalry charge has captured the attention of historians. By Falkirk’s mere position on the historical timeline (1298), it appears to be a foreshadowing of new infantry tactics in the Western World. At the Battle of Courtaai (1302), Flemish infantry were able to select their field of battle, set up obstacles, and form a defensive line, which held firm against French cavalry. The next year, Flemish infantry again repelled French cavalry charges at the Battle of Arques (1303). In 1307, Scottish King Robert the Bruce (r. 1306-1329) was able to select his field of battle, set up obstacles, and filter English cavalry into his infantry lines at Loudon Hill. Finally, the battle that historians often mention in the same breath with Falkirk is Bannockburn (1314) where Bruce was able to use his infantry for defense against English cavalry charges and then use the same infantry for offense in a decisive victory.⁶

Yet, even with this seemingly strong evidence for Falkirk as a

foreshadower of new, effective infantry tactics, no historian thoroughly makes the case for an infantry revolution beginning at Falkirk, at least not as strongly as other theses on shifts and trends in warfare. Michael Roberts, Geoffrey Parker and Clifford J. Rogers have all written extensively on military revolutions, changes in military practices that affected societies, debating when and how they began in Medieval and Modern Europe.⁷ These “revolutions” have lengthy papers and books arguing over their validity, allowing historians to refer to the concepts by name and author when analyzing them. The infantry “revolution” of Falkirk lacks any such deep analysis or support. Instead, brief statements have crept into military history works for more than 100 years without any direct challenge.

Reviewing these statements on Falkirk chronologically is revealing, as it demonstrates how one historian influenced another in a timeline more than a century old. In 1893, T. F. Tout (1855-1929) described Wallace’s tactics at Falkirk as “novel” and as “a system which within a generation was to revolutionize the art of war.”⁸ Although Tout’s book is an older work, it was popular, as it saw reprinting eight times over the next 40 years.⁹ In 1895, Hereford B. George (1838-1910) wrote that Wallace’s “most undoubted title to fame, if not his highest glory” was that “he was the first to organise plebeian spearmen afresh, not indeed for victory, but with success as against mailed horsemen only.”¹⁰ George’s work was also popular, seeing reprint five times over the next 15 years.¹¹ In 1898, A. F. Murison (1847-1934) referred to the *schiltron* tactics as “universally acknowledged” to be “admirable” today and “even original.”¹² Although reprinted less than the previous titles, Murison’s work saw a 2003 reprinting, no doubt to support the continuing popularity of Wallace biographies. In 1907, Delbrück first published his statement on Falkirk in German, “Nowhere else in the Middle Ages do we find such great masses of foot soldiers who do not immediately break ranks when attacked by knights.”¹³

Thus, in the course of less than 15 years, there were at least four different historians espousing the concept that the Scottish foot soldiers at Falkirk used “novel” and “even original” tactics while Wallace “was the first” to organize spearmen and “nowhere else” do we find spearmen standing up to mailed knights. Remarkably, the claims of Wallace’s “infantry revolution” seemingly dissipate from the historiography of Falkirk until the 1980s. Up until then, historians paid closer attention to what appeared to be the first use of the longbow by Edward.

However, the publication of an English translation of Delbrück’s work in 1982 with an affordable paperback version in 1990 appears to have created a watershed of reaffirmation for Falkirk’s influence.¹⁴ For example, Archer Jones stated in 1987 that Falkirk “showed that even elaborately armored elite men, mounted with stirrups on picked horses, could not prevail against densely formed heavy infantry with long pikes.”¹⁵ Two years later (1989), Richard Humble referred to

Wallace as “one of the most intelligent as well as the most inspiring resistance leaders of all time,” crediting him with “evolving the infantry formation known to the Scots as the *schiltron*.”¹⁶ In 1991, nearly 100 years after Hereford B. George penned his history, D. J. Gray cited him in agreement that “Wallace’s *schiltrons* were an important advance in the art of war.”¹⁷ In 1996, Ronald McNair Scott stated that Wallace “shattered for ever the accepted principle that the foot man was always at the mercy of the mounted knight.”¹⁸ In 1998, an article in *The Scotsman* entitled “Glorious Even in Defeat” claimed, “Wallace’s invention of the schiltrom [sic] tactics revolutionised warfare.”¹⁹

More recently, in his *Warfare in the Medieval World* (2006), Brian Todd Carey identified Falkirk as the “harbinger of battles to come in the fourteenth century, where heavy infantry alone in a defensive posture held its own against the mounted aristocracy and other infantry formations.”²⁰ In 2007, Michael Prestwich, renowned historian of Edward I, stated, “Wallace’s tactics presaged the infantry successes of the future” and “he made a major innovation by using the formation of the *schiltrons*.”²¹ The next year (2008), Paul Cowan claimed the Scots’ use of spears “to ward off the charge was a battlefield innovation ahead of its time.”²² That same year, Martin J. Dougherty claimed the *schiltron* “was a uniquely Scottish invention.”²³ Finally, in 2012, Matthew J. Strickland stated “Wallace’s innovation” was “in drilling his spearmen to stand fast in effective formations against Edward I’s cavalry.”²⁴

In isolation, some of these quotes do not go too far, such as Jones and even Carey. However, it is clear that in the past three decades, historians have gone further than those of the twentieth-century in pushing Falkirk as some sort of revolution. Consolidating these statements, the reader may conclude, “Wallace was one of the most intelligent and inspiring resistance leaders of all time who evolved his innovative *schiltron* formation, which was a major innovation ahead of its time that revolutionized warfare and shattered forever the dominance of cavalry, making Wallace glorious even in defeat.” This theme is worth challenging.

Predecessors to Falkirk

Unfortunately, these modern-day statements are mere afterthoughts, providing very little analysis. Yet, these afterthoughts appear in some of the most prominent works on medieval warfare. These statements do have indirect refutations though, and the reality is that when the average historian gives analytical thought to the concept of Falkirk as a turning point in infantry tactics, he or she concludes that it was nothing new. In 1996, Peter Reese recognized that Wallace’s tactics at Falkirk were “not only a proven solution for infantry against superior cavalry but also an effective formation for relatively raw soldiers who could take heart from the closeness of

their comrades and the encouragement and commands of their sergeants.”²⁵ In 1999, John France similarly stated “there was nothing new about the tactics of the Scots. It was almost instinctive for infantry to gather in mass, and very effective.”²⁶

Along with these indirect refutations, there are tangible examples from the medieval world preceding 1298. The following examples of infantry withstanding the onslaught of cavalry are provided in descending chronological order, remaining within 200 years of Falkirk. In addition, they focus entirely on battles in the Western World. Finally, it is important to remember that the argument is whether infantry withstood charges from cavalry. In some of these battles, infantry withstood such charges, but did not provide the final push toward victory.

Welsh at Maes Moydog (1295)

Three years prior to Falkirk, at the Battle of Maes Moydog, the Welsh employed *schiltrons*. Although the contemporary description by Nicholas Trivet (c. 1257-1334) does not use the word, he describes the Welsh “planting the butts of their spears on the ground” and turning “the points against charging cavalry so as to defend themselves.”²⁷ However, like the Scots, the Welsh were vulnerable to projectiles. The English used crossbowmen to break up the formations and then followed up with cavalry charges.²⁸ This demonstrates that the concept of organizing spearmen against cavalry was not unique to Wallace or Scotland.

In 2012, David H. Caldwell theorized that Wallace might be the same person documented in a 1296 roll who consorted with English military minds. If that were the case, then “he might also have picked up information on the English campaigns in Wales in the preceding few years, particularly how Madog ap Llewelyn with a force of spearmen had been trapped at Maes Moydog in Powys in 1295 and had had his army destroyed by English cavalry in combination with crossbowmen and archers. Wallace would at least have known what to expect.”²⁹ Regardless, there is always the potential that Wallace heard of the battle through other avenues, but there is no direct evidence.

Lithuanians at Karuse (1270)

The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle (c. 1290) provided inspiration for the knights of the Livonian Order, but it also provides another example of infantry standing up to cavalry. On the frozen Baltic Sea, Lithuanians set up a defensive position behind their sleds. Livonian knights charged ahead of their own army. The chronicle reveals that when the knights “came dashing toward them, the heathen went behind the defensive line of their sleds, and the foremost Brothers, the flag-bearers, smashed into it. The heathens rejoiced and stabbed their horses to death. Some of the Brothers were slain, but the others

put up a good fight.”³⁰ The rest of the Livonian army arrived and a lengthy battle ensued on the ice. However, the Livonian army eventually retreated, “and the heathens rejoiced, for they had held the ice and thus won the victory.”³¹ Although a unique battlefield, infantry again stood up to cavalry.

Crusaders at Jaffa (1192)

At the Battle of Jaffa, English King Richard I (r. 1189-1199) found his force outnumbered outside the city’s walls against Egyptian Sultan Saladin (r. 1174-1193) and his Muslim army. Crusader and Muslim chronicles convey similar stories of how Richard’s troops carried kite-shaped shields, which they used to create a shield wall by ramming the points of them into the ground. Those with lances took a knee behind the wall and held their weapons outward. Crossbowmen worked in pairs to load and fire.³² Saladin’s cavalry charged toward Richard’s position. As the crossbowmen fired, the Muslims would discharge their own flurry of arrows, but turned away before reaching the crusaders’ position. After several attempts, the Muslims refused to charge anymore. Frustrated, Saladin left the field.³³ The battle was over.

Delbrück did not believe that Richard’s defensive position was formidable enough to withstand so much disciplined cavalry and instead “the fighting spirit of the infidels was very dull.”³⁴ While there were likely morale issues in Saladin’s army, the Crusader formation should not be discredited. Medieval military historian John France makes a direct correlation between the tactics at Jaffa and Falkirk. To him, “the *schiltron* is very like the formation that Richard I formed with spearmen when he was surprised by Saladin outside Jaffa.”³⁵ France denotes the tactical differences between the two approaches (e.g., the presence of a shield wall at Jaffa), but he makes no mention of the morale factor. Still, regardless of Delbrück’s assessment, there is no doubt that the Muslim cavalry would have pressed their charges against poorly deployed infantry or infantry that broke ranks. That being the case, Richard’s approach at Jaffa was another predecessor to infantry withstanding a cavalry charge.

Anglo-Normans at Bourghérolde (1124), Brémule (1119), and Tinchebrai (1106)

Long before Wallace’s spearmen held firm at Falkirk, the Anglo-Normans demonstrated the capability of infantry to fight against cavalry. In three of their battles, knights opted to dismount and fight on foot against cavalry charges. While it may be easy to argue that one or two instances came about due to favorable circumstances such as terrain, three examples demonstrate a trend. At the Battle of Bourghérolde, cavalry charges could not break infantry lines.³⁶ At the Battle of Brémule, English King Henry I (r. 1100-1135) dismount-

ed roughly 400 of his knights on a hill. French cavalry attacked the dismounted knights twice, suffering heavy casualties.³⁷ As one medieval chronicle of the battle states, “He who charges rashly often fails.”³⁸ Henry dismounted his cavalry at the Battle of Tinchebrai as well, again to victory.³⁹

Falkirk’s Influence

Falkirk receives a lot of attention in modern works mainly due to its protagonist, Wallace. There are countless biographies on the Scottish figure. Traditionally, the Welsh leader at Maes Moydog—Madog ap Llewelyn—has had none.⁴⁰ However, the focus on Falkirk comes about for other reasons as well. Guisborough’s detailed description of the Scottish tactics is thorough and convincing, providing plenty of fodder for the military historian who hopes to extract maxims or demonstrate shifts and trends in warfare. It is clear that the Scots did indeed establish a formidable position. Still, other groups of infantry, even lowly spearmen, had accomplished the same feat elsewhere. The Welsh were just as poorly equipped as the Scots and they used the same formations three years prior.

Still, the robust description of Falkirk by Guisborough is not a sufficient explanation as to why modern-day historians misidentify Falkirk as a harbinger of new infantry tactics. If that were simply the case, then it is plausible that a medieval chronicler providing a more robust description for Maes Moydog would lead historians to identify that battle as the harbinger. This will not do. Although shorter, the medieval description of Maes Moydog explicitly describes spearmen with spear butts in the ground to defend against cavalry charges. Instead, the answer lies in the modern-day imbalanced focus on the Scottish wars and Welsh wars found in English-Anglo-American historiography. Hereford B. George’s 1895 book makes no mention of Maes Moydog. However, he incorrectly identified Wallace as “the first to organise plebeian spearmen afresh, not indeed for victory, but with success as against mailed horsemen only.”⁴¹ Brian Todd Carey’s 2006 work makes no mention of the Welsh battle or other battles in this paper, but identifies Falkirk as a “harbinger of battles to come.”⁴² By excluding Welsh wars, it is easy to misidentify the Scottish tactics as the beginning of some sort of revolution in infantry.

The larger question as to why Wallace receives so much attention is worth examining. He is obviously a national hero in Scotland, but he also became a hero in England in the nineteenth-century. In order to raise funds and maintain support to build the massive Wallace Monument at Stirling in the 1860s (see fig. 1), supporters had to use creative responses to some practical objections. Namely, how can Wallace, a man who clearly wanted anything but unification with the English, earn such a giant monument in an age where Scotland and England were striving toward solidifying their unification? Supporters of the monument argued that Wallace’s rebellion put Scotland on

an equal footing with England, setting the stage for a negotiated unification 500 years later. Wallace was not just a supporter of Scottish independence, but also the harbinger of unification.⁴³ As such, Englishmen such as Hereford B. George could describe Wallace as a



Figure 1: Wallace Monument in 2011. Photo courtesy of Dawn Manning.

“born soldier” in a war where “neither party was entirely in the wrong,” but somehow unification was “inevitable sooner or later.”⁴⁴

Regardless, Falkirk presented nothing new in the realm of infantry tactics. The statements in support of an innovation or revolution of sorts at Falkirk are scattered afterthoughts, as are the implicit refutations. Still, a thread of regurgitated, unsubstantiated statements exists in modern works that carry a tradition more than a century old. Some are explicit, as shown with the direct citation by D. J. Gray of Hereford B. George’s 1895 book. Yet, as shown, armies in the Western World had demonstrated that infantry could withstand cavalry charges for at least the preceding 200 years. Historians often make clean breaks in their narratives. However, these breaks can be subjective and in the case of Falkirk come about due to a detailed contemporary account, an imbalanced focus in modern histories, and the presence of a hero who transcends nationality. As such, historians must challenge these breaks. Falkirk was not the harbinger; it was just another battle reusing infantry tactics.

Notes

¹ Hans Delbrück, *Medieval Warfare*, trans. Walter J. Renfroe, Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1990), 393.

² For example, Michael Prestwich states that Guisborough “provides the fullest account of the battle” in *Edward I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 481; G. W. S. Barrow goes further, calling it “the fullest account evidently composed by an eyewitness or from information supplied by one” in *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 449n65; and Peter

Armstrong states that Guisborough's account "is the most detailed and accurate contemporary one we have" in *Stirling Bridge & Falkirk, 1297-98: William Wallace's Rebellion* (Oxford: Osprey, 2003), 66.

³ Analysis of Guisborough in Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England, c.550 - c.1307* (London: Routledge, 2000), 440, 472-474.

⁴ "Chronicle of Walter of Guisborough," 65. This translation comes from the A. A. M. Duncan (Edinburgh: Scottish Centre for Social Subjects, 1983).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

⁶ See Kelly DeVries, *Infantry Warfare in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1996), 22, 31, 56-57, 84-85.

⁷ The basic theses of Roberts, Parker, and Rogers available in Clifford J. Rogers, "The Military Revolutions of the Hundred Years' War," *The Journal of Military History* 57, no. 2 (April 1993): 241-244.

⁸ T. F. Tout, *Edward the First* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1893), 207, 208.

⁹ Reprinted in 1896, 1903, 1906, 1909, 1913, 1920, 1924, and 1932.

¹⁰ Hereford B. George, *Battles of English History* (London: Methuen, 1895), 45.

¹¹ Reprinted in 1895, 1896, 1904, 1905, and 1911.

¹² A. F. Murison, *Sir William Wallace* (Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, 1898), 155.

¹³ "Jo große Massen Fußvoljs, die vor den Rittern nicht jofort ausein anderstieben, find im Mittelalter jonjt nicht zu finden." Hans Delbrück, *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte* (Berlin: Berlag von Georg Stilke, 1907), 409.

¹⁴ Delbrück, *Medieval Warfare*, 393.

¹⁵ Although Jones does not explicitly state that Falkirk was the first of such battles in the period, he does not provide the same description for any battles prior to Falkirk. Archer Jones, *The Art of War in the Western World* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 158.

¹⁶ Richard Humble, *Warfare in the Middle Ages* (London: Bison Group, 1989), 125.

¹⁷ D. J. Gray, *William Wallace: The King's Enemy* (London: Robert Hale, 1991), 113.

¹⁸ Ronald McNair Scott, *Robert the Bruce: King of Scots* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2000), 51.

¹⁹ "Glorious Even in Defeat: The Big Date," *The Scotsman* (July 18, 1998): 15.

²⁰ Brian Todd Carey, *Warfare in the Medieval World* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2006), 154.

²¹ Michael Prestwich, "The Battle of Stirling Bridge: An English Perspective," in *The Wallace Book*, edited by Edward J. Cowan, 64-76 (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2007), 69.

²² Paul Cowan, *Scottish Military Disasters* (Glasgow: Neil Wilson Publishing, 2008), 11.

²³ Martin J. Dougherty, *Weapons & Fighting Techniques of the Medieval Warrior 1000-1500 AD* (New York: Amber Books, 2008), 113.

²⁴ Matthew J. Strickland, "The Kings of Scots at War, c. 1093-1286." In *A Military History of Scotland*, edited by Edward M. Spiers, Jeremy A. Crang, and Matthew J. Strickland, 94-132 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 114.

²⁵ Peter Reese, *Wallace: A Biography* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1996), 76.

²⁶ John France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades, 1000-1300* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 175.

²⁷ English translation of the entire battle account by Nicholas Trivet available in John E. Morris, *The Welsh Wars of Edward I* (Conshohocken: Combined Books, 1996), 256.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ David Caldwell, "Scottish Spearmen, 1298-1314: An Answer to Cavalry," *War in History* 19, no. 3 (2012): 276, 272-273.

³⁰ *The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle*, translated by Jerry C. Smith and William L. Urban (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2003), 96-97.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Ambroise, *The History of the Holy War*, 11,378-11,620. This translation comes from the Marianne Ailes translation (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006).

³³ *Bahā' al-Dīn Ibn Shaddād, The Rare and Excellent History of Saladin*, 229. This translation comes from the D. S. Richards (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

³⁴ Delbrück, *Medieval Warfare*, 411.

³⁵ France, *Western Warfare*, 175.

³⁶ Robert Helmerichs, "Bourghérolde, Battle of," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Medieval Warfare and Military Technology*, 1:163.

³⁷ *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, 243. This translation comes from the Marjorie Chibnall translation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

³⁸ *The Hyde Chronicle*, translated in Morillo 1997, 173.

³⁹ Stephen Morillo, *Warfare Under the Anglo-Norman Kings, 1066-1135* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1997), 169-170.

⁴⁰ That changed in 2008 with the publication of Craig Owen Jones, *Compact History of Welsh Heroes: The Revolt of Madog ap Llywelyn* (Llygad Gwalch, 2008).

⁴¹ George, *Battles of English History*, 45.

⁴² Carey, *Warfare in the Medieval World*, 154.

⁴³ See Colin Kidd, "The English Cult of Wallace and the Blending of Nineteenth-Century Britain," in *The Wallace Book* edited by Edward J. Cowan, 136-150 (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2007), 136-137.

⁴⁴ George, *Battles of English History*, 42, 40, 50.

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- Tout, T. F. *Edward the First*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1893.
- Scott Manning earned his bachelor's in military history from AMU in 2013 and he is currently working on a master's in ancient and classical history.*