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Hypertextuality and Transformation: A Comparison Between the Battle of Ai (Joshua 8:1–22) and the Battle of Hastings (1066)

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Abstract

Military strategies described in historical and religious narratives have often influenced the way battles were planned and fought in later periods. The biblical account of the Battle of Ai (Joshua 8:1–22) describes the use of a classic ambush and feigned retreat method used by Joshua and the Israelites to defeat their enemies. William the Conqueror's victory over Harold Godwinson at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 also adopted a similar strategy. This study explores the similarities between these two battles through Gérard Genette's theory of hypertextuality and transformation. The article applies the concepts of hypotext and hypertext to examine whether the biblical account of the Battle of Ai could have served as an earlier model for the military strategy employed at Hastings. The study adopts a qualitative and comparative textual approach, examining the biblical narrative alongside historical accounts of the Battle of Hastings. The analysis identifies notable similarities between the two battles, particularly in the use of deception, strategic withdrawal, and the manipulation of enemy movements. Although there is no direct historical evidence to establish that William consciously adopted Joshua's strategy, the parallels invite a closer examination of the possible relationship between the two accounts. Through Genette's theory, this study explores how an earlier narrative may be reworked or reflected in a later historical event. By bringing together biblical narratives, medieval military history, and literary theory, the research offers a perspective on how ideas and strategies may travel across historical periods and acquire new forms in different contexts.

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Introduction

While some of the Biblical warfare strategies look like they have been recorded for posterity to ascertain the fact that timely help was derived from God, it is not to be denied that the strategies themselves are invaluable repositories of tactical manoeuvres, supplying ideas of ambush, fear inducement, shock, psychological moves, stealth operations, and topographical exploitation. These manoeuvres have served as operational manuals for many battles waged worldwide.

Feigned Retreats and Ambushes

The incident taken from the Holy Bible is the attack on the city of Ai by Joshua and the Israelites. According to the Revised Standard Version, the Israelites feel high after demolishing the walls of Jericho and winning a great victory. They are so confident that they do not deem it necessary to send the entire army to fight against the city of Ai. They send about three thousand men. The men of Ai kill thirty-six of the Israelites, rout the rest, and chase them from the city gate (Josh. 7.3-5). After this galling failure, the Israelites rally and use a strategy for the first time in their history, and probably in the history of mankind. God relays the strategy to them.

> And the Lord said to Joshua, “Do not fear or be dismayed; take all the fighting men with you, and arise, go up to Ai; see, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, and his people, his city, and his land; and you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king; only its spoil and its cattle you shall take as booty for yourselves; lay an ambush against the city, behind it”. (Revised Standard Version, Josh. 8.1-2)

Joshua 8:3–22 details the instructions Joshua and the Israelites follow as they seek to avenge the people of Ai and destroy the city. Joshua chooses thirty thousand men and sets up an ambush to the west of Ai. The next morning, he advances against Ai with the remaining Israelite force. A ravine lies between Ai and Joshua's encampment. As the men of Ai and the Israelites clash, the latter pretend to be afraid and flee from the battle. This prompts the men of Ai to pursue the Israelites. Joshua and the Israelites let themselves be driven back before the men of Ai. They leave the city open and pursue the seemingly routed army. Then Joshua turns around and points his javelin towards the city of Ai, the signal that the men in ambush have been waiting for. They rise quickly from their position, rush forward, capture the city and set it on fire. The men with Joshua turn back against the pursuers. The men of Ai look back to see smoke rising from their city. With the Israelites on both sides, they are caught in the middle. The Israelites cut them down, leaving no survivors.

This is a brief explanation of a war strategy: setting up an ambush, feigning a retreat, and then rallying together to fight. Joshua and the Israelites follow the instructions, resulting in a resounding victory.

History abounds with generals who employed the same technique: setting up an ambush and then feigning a retreat. The Warriors' Journey mentions the Hungarians' cavalry feigning retreats against the Germanic forces of King Louis the Child in the Battle of Lechfeld around 910 AD, leading to the Germans' defeat. Herodotus, the Greek historian, writes about the feigned retreat of the Spartans that humbled the mighty Persian Immortals at Thermopylae in 480 BC ("The Feigned Retreat").

One striking parallel battle to the one at Ai is the Battle of Hastings in 1066. "The Battle of Hastings (1066) is one of the most widely studied battles in medieval history" (Hewitt 53). According to a BBC article, William the Conqueror's army lined up against Harold Godwinson's tired army at Senlac Hill, seven miles outside Hastings, on 14 October 1066. Historians believe both armies had around 7,000 to 8,000 soldiers each. Though Harold Godwinson's army was tired after winning a war against Harald Hardrada at Stamford Bridge, their shield wall atop Senlac Hill was a tactical strongpoint. William's cavalry, though fresh and ready for battle, could not break through Harold's shield wall up the hill. After repeated attempts, William orders his soldiers to feign a retreat. This proved to be a decisive strategy in the battle, advantageous to William and disastrous to Harold. Seeing the apparently fleeing Normans, Harold's army charges down the hill, and the shield wall effectively collapses. The Normans regroup and charge, resulting in Harold's death and William's victory ("Battle of Hastings").

Scholars such as Charles H. Lemmon and John Beeler challenge the idea that the Normans even attempted a feigned retreat. Lemmon argues that once troops are in the offensive using a specific manoeuvre, commanders could not relay a change of formation to thousands of soldiers and have them change their attack formation while fighting hand-to-hand. And even if that were possible, the Norman army's feint en masse would have been plainly visible to the British. John Beeler bolsters this argument by saying that the feigned retreat was a hoax created by Norman historians. John Marshall Carter adds that the battlefield topography at Senlac Hill would have hampered Norman cavalry from carrying out such a tactic. He also argues that Norman chroniclers coined the feigned retreat to strengthen the Normans' image as skilful warriors. However, Bernard S. Bachrach counters that the feigned retreat was used as a real-time battle strategy by both the Huns and the Visigoths centuries before the Battle of Hastings (Titterton).

Based on the historical instances quoted by Bernard S. Bachrach, rather than the assumptions made by Lemmon, Beeler, and Carter, it becomes clear that the feigned retreat was practised centuries before the Battle of Hastings. It can therefore be argued that the feigned retreat was more likely to have happened and then been chronicled than to have not happened and then been discreetly added to glorify the Normans.

Hypertextuality and Transformation

Palimpsests Literature in the Second Degree by Gerard Genette talks about hypertextuality. Genette makes two points about hypertext and hypothesis. One is

that of a relationship uniting a text B, which is called the hypertext, to an earlier text, which is called the hypotext. The second point, the one pertaining to this research, is that text B does not mention text A but cannot exist without it. This process is called transformation, which results in text B evoking thoughts perceptibly without mentioning or citing text A. The Aeneid and Ulysses are certainly two hypertexts (text B) of the same hypotext (text A), the Odyssey. Many a time, as in the case of the Aeneid, Ulysses, and Odyssey, the hypertexts are considered more literary than the hypotext. The transformation from Odyssey to Ulysses can be termed a simple or direct transformation, one that transposes the action of Odyssey to 20th-century Dublin. The transformation from the Odyssey to the Aeneid, by contrast, is indirect and complex. This is because Virgil does not just change the setting. He draws inspiration from the model set by Homer in the Odyssey and the Iliad, thereby imitating Homer, and tells the story of Aeneas. Rather than transforming a text, Virgil imitates a text, proving that he has some mastery of what he chooses to imitate (Genette 5-6).

The parallel here is the Battle of Ai in the Holy Bible, the hypotext (text A), and the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the hypertext (text B). As with Odyssey to Aeneid, the transformation is not direct. However, it is nigh impossible to miss the inspiration William draws from the Biblical warfare of Ai. Just as Virgil imitates Homer, William chooses to imitate Joshua. And William succeeds because his mastery of warfare is sound. William is a battle-hardened warrior, sculpted in the furnace of internal and external battles and wars. He is no stranger to war strategies, tactics, and wily schemes. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica:

> By 1042, when William reached his 15th year, was knighted, and began to play a personal part in the affairs of his duchy, the worst was over. But his attempts to recover rights lost during the anarchy and to bring disobedient vassals and servants to heel inevitably led to trouble. From 1046 until 1055 he dealt with a series of baronial rebellions, mostly led by his kinsmen. Occasionally, he was in great danger and had to rely on Henry of France for help, but it was during these years that William learned to fight and rule. A decisive moment came in 1047, when Henry and William defeated a coalition of Norman rebels at Val-ès-Dunes, southeast of Caen, a battle in which William first demonstrated his prowess as a warrior. (“William I”)

Another possibility for hypertext and hypotext, as written by Genette and quoted by Graham Allen, appears in *Intertextuality,* penned by the latter. He says people sometimes miss or sideline the hypotext during an era. This can cause the hypotext to fade from people’s memory.

> Intertextuality is central to the production and reception of translations. Yet the possibility of translating most foreign intertexts with any completeness or precision is so limited as to be virtually nonexistent. As a result, they are usually replaced by analogous but ultimately different intertextual relations in the receiving language. The creation of a receiving intertext permits a translation to

> be read with comprehension by translating-language readers. It also results in a disjunction between the foreign and translated texts, a proliferation of linguistic and cultural differences that are at once interpretive and interrogative. Intertextuality enables and complicates translation, preventing it from being an untroubled communication and opening the translated text to interpretive possibilities that vary with cultural constituencies in the receiving situation. (Venuti 157)

Sometimes during a hypertextual continuation, the hypotext ceases to be available. Allen mentions Genette having used Rabelais' *Pantagruel* as an example of a hypotext turning into an autonomous text, or rather, a hypertext. When such an incident happens in a culture or generation, even erudite scholars of posterity tend to treat the text as autonomous, finding no link whatsoever to the text's greatness once enveloped in rich tradition and culture. The once great hypertext becomes an insipid text, with no relation or transformation (Allen 108).

Since scholars such as Lemmon, Beeler, and Carter argue that the feigned retreat may never have been accomplished, it is possible that the hypotext for this paper, the Battle of Ai, was forgotten or sidelined by many. That could have led scholars to believe the hypertext for this paper, the Battle of A, was incredible. In this case, rather than the hypertext becoming detached from the hypotext, the hypertext, the Battle of Hastings, seems to lose its very credibility.

For those scholars who deem that the hypotext, the Battle of Ai, has no connection whatsoever with the hypertext, the Battle of Hastings, there is the possibility that the people could have failed to connect them both, thereby treating the Battle of Hastings as a standalone event, a monotonous text, separate from the culture, tradition, and stratagem of the Battle of Ai.

As for William using Joshua's strategy, his knowledge of the Bible may have helped him. According to contemporary evidence cited by Crouch, William of Normandy attended Mass regularly, followed the Latin readings of the church services he attended, and often joined the daily office of the clergy near where he was staying. He befriended monks who had a good reputation and was close to the much-learned Lanfranc, Abbot of Caen (Crouch).

Based on the above, William learned much about the Bible through regular church attendance, Latin readings, and association with various monks and clergy. It is therefore natural that incidents recounting battles and strategies would have piqued his interest and become firmly etched in his mind. That invariably would have led him to adopt the same stratagems in his own battles.

Conclusion

Though not explicitly stated by William or other historians, through the theory of hypertextuality and transformation presented by Gerard Genette, Graham Allen, and James Titterton, it can be stated that William was inspired by the battle tactics used by Joshua in the Battle of Ai, and that just as Virgil was competent enough to imitate Homer, William was sufficiently battle-hardened to follow the war-steps of Joshua.

The comparison between the Battle of Ai and the Battle of Hastings shows how a military strategy from one period can be adapted to suit the needs of another. Although the two battles took place in different centuries and under different circumstances, both Joshua and William used a feigned retreat to gain an advantage over their enemies. Joshua drew the soldiers of Ai away from their city, allowing the Israelites waiting in ambush to capture it. Similarly, William is believed to have drawn the English soldiers away from their strong position on Senlac Hill, making it easier for the Normans to defeat them. In both battles, the commanders turned what appeared to be a retreat into an opportunity for victory.

This similarity can be understood through Genette's concept of hypertextuality and transformation. A later text need not reproduce an earlier text in every detail to establish a relationship with it. Instead, certain elements may be retained and modified according to the demands of a new situation. Joshua's strategy involved both an ambush and a feigned retreat, whereas William's reported strategy relied mainly on drawing the English soldiers out of their defensive formation. The methods differed, but the basic principle of misleading the enemy remained the same; historians who question the use of the feigned retreat at Hastings cannot be overlooked. Although similar tactics had been used long before William's time, no direct historical evidence proves he borrowed the strategy from Joshua. Nevertheless, William's familiarity with the Bible, his regular attendance at religious services, and his close association with learned members of the clergy suggest that he may have known the account of the Battle of Ai. The biblical narrative may therefore have influenced his understanding of military strategy.

Thus, the research article brings together biblical history, medieval warfare and literary theory to examine how an earlier strategy may find expression in a later historical event. The comparison also shows that military success depends not only on an army's strength but also on a commander's ability to understand the enemy and respond to the circumstances of battle. Whether William consciously followed Joshua's example or arrived at a similar strategy through his own military experience, the resemblance between the two battles remains significant. Viewed through Genette's theory, the Battle of Hastings may therefore be considered a possible transformation of the strategic pattern found in the Battle of Ai. The research article ultimately suggests that ideas and strategies can continue to influence later generations, even when their original sources are not directly acknowledged.

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