

# What we've inherited from warriors of the past

by Sabine Eiche

*Richmond News*, January 25, 2013, p. 19

Authors say that when they're writing a story, the characters often take on a life of their own. Every now and then something similar happens to me with a word – suddenly I've written it, unaware of even having thought of it.

Lately the word that has been gatecrashing my writing is obsess. The roots of obsess are in the Latin "obsidere," to sit down before. According to one English definition (now obsolete), we were obsessing when sitting down before a fortress or the enemy, patiently waiting to lay siege – like a cat waiting to pounce on a mouse. Beleaguer and besiege mean the same thing – to sit down before or surround, with the intention of capturing. Invest also belongs to the group – in the 17<sup>th</sup> century it meant to attack.

This is tantalizing. I wonder how many other words we've extracted from their originally military or combative context to use in a transferred or figurative sense. A few, like bastion, bulwark and catapult, spring readily to mind. They lead me to others, some of which are far from obvious.

Bastion and bulwark are features of old fortress architecture. Their purpose was for defense, and we now apply those terms to someone or something that similarly defends or upholds. Catapult, an ancient weapon for hurling missiles, has been used since the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a verb to mean violent and speedy movement. These are all straightforward adoptions, as is berserk, an adjective with which we describe sudden frenzied behaviour. Its origin is Icelandic (composed of the words for bear and coat) and it denoted a raging Norse warrior.

The etymology of greet came as a surprise. I always assumed greeting someone was a harmless, even friendly action. It turns out that greet derives from the Anglo-Saxon “gretan,” which in Middle English (the English that Chaucer spoke) meant to attack, assail or accost someone with hostile intent.

To ban is currently understood in the sense of prohibit. It derives from the Old French “ban,” a proclamation or call to arms. Banal originally referred to compulsory feudal (military) service; it wasn’t until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that it came to signify commonplace. Related to these is the term banish, which formerly meant to proclaim as an outlaw.

Spoil, from the Latin “spoliare” (plunder, rob), has a range of meanings. In Middle English it signified to loot, pillage, or to strip someone of arms and armour. Spoils were the booty of war. We now use spoil most commonly to mean decay, deteriorate, a sense it acquired in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The verb discomfit (and the noun discomfiture), which can be traced to Middle English, developed from the Latin “dis” (negative prefix) and “conficere” (amass, compose, eat, expend, traverse). Its earliest meaning in English was to defeat in battle. Its current sense is to disconcert or thwart.

Should you be spoiling (that is to say, eager) for something to obsess about, try this – when Chaucer said discomfit and discomfiture he was speaking of war, but when he referred to comfit and comfiture he was speaking of sweet preserves and drugs. What labyrinthine linguistic process was responsible for drawing two such disparate concepts out of the same “conficere”?