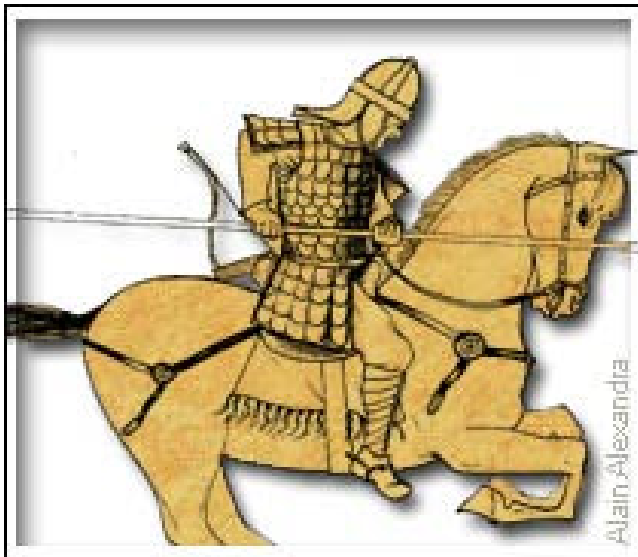


# The History of the ALLEN Surname

By  
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## **1) The Allens of History - 300 BC to 1300 AD**

The Allens, or Alans, or Alani, first enter Western written history through the reports of Roman military commanders and through Roman plays and literature. The "Alani", as the Romans referred to them collectively, were a tribe of nomadic people living near the Aral Sea in what is today the southern Ukraine. Like their neighbours, their life revolved around their flocks and herds, which grazed the rich native grasses of the region. The men and boys spent almost every waking hour on horseback, training to defend their camp from predators of the two-legged or the four-legged variety. Women and small children stayed close to the tribal camp, which consisted of a collection of two-wheeled ox-carts which carried each family's possessions, and in which the family slept during stormy weather. Most of the neighbouring tribes lived in tents of skins, and migrated as a group on horseback, and thus could migrate faster, but were limited in what they could carry; the Alani moved slower, keeping pace with their flocks of sheep and cattle.

While most of their neighbours were short, with dark hair and olive complexions, the Alani stood out as being tall, blond, fair-skinned, and in the eyes of the Roman officers looking for new recruits, a handsome and likely group. The Alani also had a unique fighting style; rather than the short bow and short sword of the typical Steppe fighter, the Alani favoured the long wooded lance for frontal attack, and the very heavy two-handed "Barbarian" sword strapped across his back for "close work". Both the Alan warrior and his horse were heavily armoured against the light darts of their enemies, who fought more in the style of the Sioux in a 1950's Hollywood movie, wildly charging their slow-moving adversary, looking to isolate and destroy individual Alan horseman, while the Alani fought more like a highly disciplined World War II tank corps, destroying everything they could catch. The Alani had the advantage that they rarely lost a battle, but the down side was that they took heavy

casualties in almost every encounter. The penalty for capture was almost certain death or life-long slavery, so the Alani warrior was strongly motivated to win. To make up for their heavy battle casualties, the Alani typically adopted the young boys and fertile women among their captives, killing off the babies, the young females and the old or crippled, and selling the men as slaves. While the Alani could hold their own against the undisciplined tribes of the Steppes, they were no match for the even more highly disciplined Roman Legions, and avoided contact whenever possible, or arranged to sell their services to the Romans as "native shock troops."

About 300 BC, things changed permanently on the Steppes. The tribe of Huns grew to dominate the region, sweeping aside everything in their path. The Alans took them on in a frontal assault, and were soundly trounced! But, as a recognition of the Alan fighting skills, the Huns offered them the choice of annihilation or vassalage; the Alans wisely chose to live under the domination of the Huns, keeping their own leaders and culture, but fighting under Hun direction. The combination of a heavily armored Alan "tank corps" to flush the enemy out of fortified positions, and the faster, more mobile Hun troops to pursue and capture the fleeing enemy worked well, and both groups prospered, at one time even sacking Constantinople together.

As the Roman empire declined, the Alans followed the Roman Legions across the Danube into central Europe, fighting as Roman mercenaries whenever the opportunity arose. It was the Romans who taught the Alans the "feigned retreat", which became their trademark military tactic, and was the key to the two greatest Alan victories; against Attila in 451 at Chalons, France, and against Harold in 1066 at Hastings, England. The feigned retreat is familiar to anyone who has ever played with a puppy; the idea is to pretend to be frightened and run away, enticing your adversary to follow. But as everyone who has played with a puppy knows, this stratagem rarely fools anyone, particularly a trained and disciplined enemy. And when it fails, it fails spectacularly.

The Alans' fighting forces had several characteristics in their favour. They had a reputation for slow, deliberate attacks right into the heart of

the enemy's defences, taking heavy casualties to achieve their objective. So the first part of the manoeuvre would not arouse suspicion. And their heavily armoured horses and men made a tempting target as they struggled to outrun their pursuers. So the end game would be convincing. But the technique required rigid discipline of all the attacking troops; if anyone gave the game away too early, the enemy could simply pull aside, letting the attacking horsemen into their midst where they could be easily isolated and hacked to pieces. And if the attackers seemed to be leaving too soon, before heavy losses, the enemy would 'smell a rat,' and simply watch them go. The Romans, having been taught the finer parts of the technique by Hannibal at great expense to the Roman troops, passed on this knowledge to their Alan allies. The first major test was against the Huns in central France in 451. The Romans badly wanted to be rid of the Huns, who had been terrorizing Europe and making fools of the Roman Legions, but they could not contain the faster, more mobile Hun cavalry. The Roman plan was classic power warfare; the Alan cavalry, led by their King Sangiban, would attack "down the gut" directly into Attila's camp, while the Visigoths and the Romans waited in defensive positions, to the left and right of the attack. If all went well, Attila would leave his fortified camp to punish his former allies, the Alans. When the Hun troops were strung out in hot pursuit, the Visigoths and the Romans would close in from both sides and massacre them, while the Alan cavalry would turn and block off escape from the front. The promised pay-off was also classic Roman tactics; for the Visigoths, gold and safe passage out of France into Spain, where they would be free from Roman control. For the Alans, they could have all the land to the west and north of the battle site. Of course, there were Franks and Goths living there already who were not consulted, but that was a detail; an army that had defeated Attila would have no trouble with a few unorganized Franks. And the Romans would be free of "Attila, The Scourge of God" forever, or so they hoped.

The battle proceeded according to the Roman plan, with one secret change. The Alan horsemen attacked Attila's camp, raised a major riot, and then charged back out with the Hun army in hot pursuit, exactly as they had planned. The Visigoths attacked the undefended flank of the Hun army, with heavy carnage on both sides. But the Romans, in their infinite wisdom, waited quietly until the Visigoths were badly mauled

before joining in the attack and finishing off Attila's trapped and defenceless army. A few apologies and a few more sacks of gold pacified the Visigoths, who licked their wounds and made their way slowly back to Aquitaine or over the Pyrenees into Spain, a lot weaker for their recent encounter. A few casks of mead and local beer, and the Alans departed in peace, to subdue and occupy the land between the Romans and another of their old adversaries, the Normans. The Alans had no intention of displacing the local residents and learning how to grow grain and grapes; instead they occupied the castles and manor houses of the local chiefs and became the local aristocracy. Their life was one of hunting, training for warfare, and collecting taxes, with occasional days off for wenching and sampling the local alcohol supply. It was good to be a noble! The Normans found easier prey elsewhere, the Romans gradually lost power and pulled out of France, the occasional Christian priest was easily satisfied with a few coins and a pat on the head. The Alans adapted quickly to the local customs and religion, sensing any changes in the political wind and being the first to embrace whatever new doctrine was in vogue. But these good times were destined to get even better.

Across the English Channel, the throne of England was up for grabs, and William, Duke of Normandy, had a most audacious plan; grab the kingdom for himself by landing an army in southern England and defeating the indecisive King Harold. The plan had many parts, employing psychological warfare in concert with the Pope against the gullible English clergy, and using a Danish threat to northern England to divide and confuse the enemy. But in the end, William needed seasoned troops on the ground to assure his victory, and was offering a share of the gains for loyal supporters. The Duke of Brittany, the highest-ranking Alan in the region, offered to finance one third of William's forces, under the command of his son, (and William's future son-in-law) Count Alan Fergant (Alan of the Red Hair). These troops are known in the English history books as the Bretton Knights, who twice at Hastings led unsuccessful charges into the English forces, only to withdraw in panic with their enemy in fierce pursuit. Unfortunately for the English army, these panicked Alan horsemen "retreated" right between two ranks of Norman infantry and archers, where their defenceless English pursuers were massacred. The classic Alan "feigned retreat" worked flawlessly twice in

one day, leaving Harold's forces weak and demoralized, easy prey for William's infantry. William left Hastings in command of the whole of England, and he rewarded his loyal Alan allies with Dukedoms, Earldoms, and a collection of minor titles. As in France 600 years earlier, the Allens (as they now spelled their name) simply moved into the castles and manor houses of the losing aristocracy, married the local beauties, adapted to the local customs, and went back to living the good life.

## **2) The Allens of Myth and Legend**

After their spectacular performance at Hastings in 1066, the Allen knights of history had a few more minor military triumphs against the unsophisticated peasant armies of Scotland, Wales and Ireland and then faded into obscurity. Their tactics were no match for the English long-bow, the crossbow and finally the infantry musket. These long-range weapons allowed an untrained amateur with minimum equipment to fight effectively against a highly trained and expensively equipped professional warrior, from a distance and usually from ambush, with virtually no risk of injury. But just as the heavily armoured knight was disappearing in reality, he was coming to dominate the world of myth and fantasy. As the French-speaking writers of the 1300's and 1400's reduced the oral traditions of England and France to written form, they searched their storehouse of Super-Heroes for appropriate characters to populate these stories. And the fiercest, strongest, most fearless examples they could find were the Bretton knights who had been decisive in securing the kingdom for William. With each telling, these Super-Heroes became more fierce, strong and fearless. Had the real Roland, the Count of Brittany, and his contingent of Bretton knights been soundly beaten by the Basques in Spain, leaving Charlemagne's badly mauled army to limp back across the Pyrenees in defeat? Never mind; in the new myth, embodied in 4000 verses of "The Song of Roland", the fearless Roland and his magic barbarian sword will forever defend the mountain pass against the treacherous Infidels single-handedly, and allow his uncle, Charlemagne, to withdraw with his weary army in dignity. Did no real English king before William ever see mounted knights used in battle? Never mind; the mythical King Arthur has his whole fictional court populated with nothing but Allen knights on horseback, jousting with

their long wooden lances. [King Arthur is no myth! -- Eli] From Ivanhoe to Monty Python to Dungeons & Dragons, the Allen knight became the prototype fantasy Super-Hero for the next millennium. Even the tale of Robin Hood, which pits a native-born Wiley-E-Coyote type hero with an authentic English long bow against the wicked Sheriff of Nottingham, prominently features the bumbling Allen knights as the Keystone Kops of fourteenth-century England. Today when we try to convey the image of a past golden age, our most potent imagery is of Camelot and Arthur's Round Table filled with brave, strong and totally honourable Bretton knights.

## Further Reading

[these have been translated to MLA format]

For more details about the early Alans than you will ever want to know, see:

Bachrach, Bernard S. *The History of the Alans in the West*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1973.

For a readable treatment of the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, see:

Howarth, David. *1066 - The Year of The Conquest*. New York: Viking Press, 1978.

For a radical modern treatment of the Alan-Arthur connection, borrow and read a copy of:

Littleton, Scott & Linda Malor. *From Scythia to Camelot. ?*: Garland Press, 1994.

For a typical treatment, based on biased French sources but cleaned up a little, see:

Ferrill, Arther. "Attila the Hun and the Battle of Chalons" *Quarterly Journal of Military History*. published on the World Wide Web).

For a typical inaccurate and biased account of the role of the Alans in history, see the writings of Gothic historian Jordanes (using a modern translation) in "Origins and Deeds of the Goths".

\* My Encyclopaedia Americana, using French historians for its information, reports that the Alans entered Europe in 405, were soundly defeated, and were never heard from again. That tells us a lot more about the quality of French historical scholarship than it tells us about the Alans.

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