



# Medieval Arms and Armor

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Weapons of some type have existed as long as men have walked the earth. What we classify here and for the purposes of this magazine as ARMS are arbitrarily defined as the weapons of Medieval times and forward. Historians have never quite agreed upon the definition of Medieval or Middle Ages. Some say it started as early as the fall of the Roman Empire in 5th Century ACE. For our purposes, however, we will use the more specifically accepted definition-- starting around the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and ending with the death of King Richard III in 1485.

Since our magazine strives to deal with all phases of our Arms Heritage, we feel it is appropriate to initiate this column on the weapons and defenses of the Medieval period and the ensuing Renaissance period-- all of which led us to where we are today.

## Medieval and Renaissance Weapons Of Western and Central Europe

From the beginning of time man has been in conflict with his neighbor which invariably leads to wars, battles and skirmishes with barbaric violence. As a result man has always looked for the fastest, most efficient, least expensive and safest way to defeat his adversary.

Weapons technology, in a relatively short time, has gone from something as basic as clubs or rocks where the personal experience of the results of an assault up-close and personal to something as impersonal as an intercontinental ballistic missile fired from hundreds of miles away and guided by a satellite and computer. Combat veterans will tell you up close hand-to-hand killing has a very powerful and long lasting psychological effect on the winning combatant, one that will be with him or her for their entire life.

The apex for up-close hand-to-hand warfare was the Medieval and the Renaissance period. There were four main reasons for this:

- 1) The Medieval and the Renaissance periods were very violent and turbulent times. Weapons were exceptionally well engineered for maximum efficiency after centuries of careful development, battlefield testing and refinement. Soon the outcome of battles would be dictated by the latest innovations in battlefield weaponry. A perfect example of this was at the battle of Morgarten in 1315. The soldiers of the newly created Swiss Confederation, using a newly introduced halberd, roused the mail-clad superior forces of the Hapsburg.
- 2) Metallurgy and manufacturing systems had advanced to where weapons could be produced more

## Halberd

efficiently. Methods of transforming iron (carburizing) into spring steel by adding a small percentage of carbon had been developed and perfected.

After the fall of the Roman Empire the mining and importation of iron ore came to a sudden stop. As a result, armorers and smiths were forced to recycle steel from previously made items. After the 9th century, mines were opened again and iron ore became much more available, enabling the mass manufacturing of weapons.

3) Combatants, from birth, were trained in the use of the new weapons. Killing ones opponent was the goal of combat and considered a very natural part of ones responsibility.

4) The ruling class had accumulated great wealth which was used to outfit any military campaign with standardized weapons and defensive armor.

During the Medieval and the Renaissance period a multi-array of brutal and highly effective weapons were created and their uses were mastered by soldiers after many years of exercise and training . One of the simplest and most iconic types of weapons are Pole Arms.

## Pole Arms

A pole arm was a very important weapon of the Middle Ages for many reasons. 1) Properly deployed, the pole arm user is out of the reach of other shorter weapons such as swords, daggers, war hammers or maces yet the pole arm user is within reach of his opponent. 2) Polearms were simple and inexpensive to manufacture. 3) Polearms were easy to learn to use. 4) Polearms could be multipurpose weapons. 5) More muscles are used in handling a pole arm so the user will tire less quickly. 6) Since pole arms are long and provide leverage, therefore they generate high impact, deep penetrating strikes.

Since pole arms were usually the first line of weapons in a Medieval battle it's only appropriate that we start our column on Medieval Weapons with a discussion of pole arms. Some will be included in this issue, others will be discussed in a following issue.

The Halberd was a very popular Western European combination weapon. The term halberd originated from the Germanic terms "halm" which translates to staff and "barte" which translates to ax. The original halberd originated during the early Medieval ages (6-9 century) and was nothing more than a small primitive sword called a "scarmasax" attached to a long pole approximately the height of the user.

The first written script regarding the halberd is the poem on the Trojan War by the poet Konrad of Wurzburg who died in 1287. During this period the halberd had evolved into a very simple long blade held by 2 rings called "eyelids". During the battle of Morgarten in 1315 the Franciscan chronicler John of Winterthur wrote of the amazing success of the halberd by Swiss troops.

Eventually the halberd, in the late 15th century, evolved into a design with three functions. It could perform as an ax, a gaff or a spear.

A halberd has a tip which is used to thrust like a spear.

A Halberd has an elongated blade that can swipe like an ax.

A halberd has a hook called a fluke to be used to unseat a cavalry rider from their horse or trip an infantryman.

The halberd head is connected via a socket to a wooded haft and secured by 2 metal straps called langets that originate from the base of the socket and run down the side of the haft for about 24 inches.

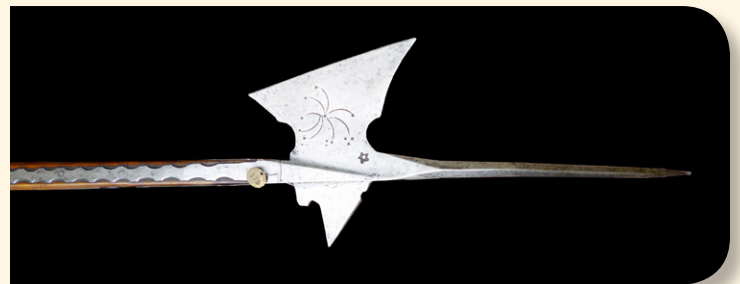


Figure 1 shows a Swiss or possibly German halberd circa 1560. Authors Private Collection.

## Spear

Probably the oldest weapon manufactured by man. It had parallel development in numerous cultures. Spears have existed from the inception of time when man would sharpen the tip of a shaved tree branch with a bone or rock. During the Paleolithic period, 500,000 years ago, man progressed into hardening the tip of the spear by treating it with fire. About 8000 BCE spears evolved into having a bone or stone affixed at the tip. Eventually the spear would evolve into different types of metal polearms.

The use of the spear was primarily for thrusting in battle; however lighter and smaller spears were also used as a throwing weapon. In Medieval and Renaissance western Europe the spear would evolve in the 15th to the 17th century into the "pike" a 15-23 ft long spear with a sharp steel head which was used a line of men (pikeman) to stop cavalry charges.



Figure 2 shows the tip of a pike from about 1540 and is one of the more common evolutions of the spear in Medieval and Renaissance Western Europe. Authors Private Collection.

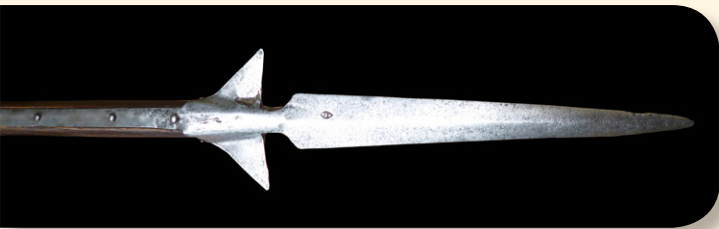


Figure 3 is a Winged Spear also known as the Bohemian Ear Spoon circa 1500. This is yet another variant of the spear used in Medieval and Renaissance Western Europe. Authors Private Collection.

## Partisan

The Partisan is a long straight sword-like blade with a wide pointed tip, tapering vertical medial ridges lengthwise on both sides, tapering sharpened edges on both sides, attached at the base to a haft of approximately 70 inches via a socket and with two protruding lugs at the bottom.

The partisan is another multi-use weapon for both thrusting and slashing (cutting). It originated in the 15th century in both France and Italy. The name is derived by the partisan farmers that first used it. By the 16th century the partisan was in wide use all throughout West Europe and by different classes of people. The large wide blades of the partisan were almost like a painter's canvas with many partisans having elaborate decorations and engravings at the base of the blade.

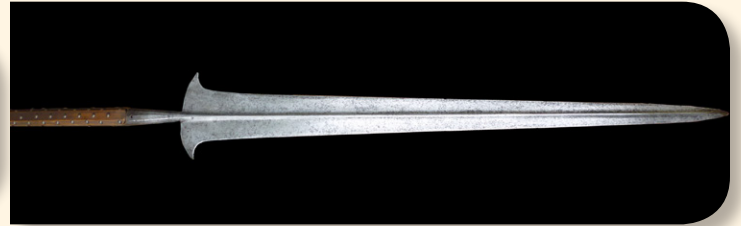


Figure 4 shows a 16th century partisan from the armory of Henry VIII. There are various examples at the Tower of London and the Royal Collections. These types of partisans are etched at the base of the blade. Authors Private Collection.

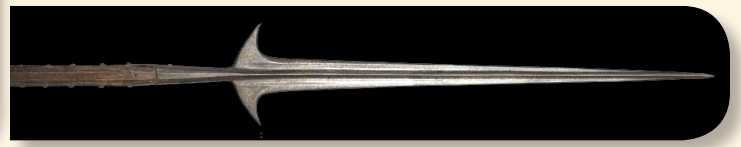


Figure 5 shows a 16th century Italian partisan with a slim blade, deep patina and traces of gold gilding as a decoration at the base of the blade. Authors Private Collection.

*In the next issue we will present Part II of this article where we will review and discuss more sophisticated and the highly evolved pole weapons of Medieval and Renaissance period Western and Central Europe.*