

SOME HAFTED WEAPONS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

By MARTIN R. HOLMES

We are all of us familiar with the generality of medieval hafted weapons—bill, glaive, partisan and so on—and most of us must have wondered, at one time or another, whether these were ever of much practical use in battle, or whether they were only ornamental weapons of parade. A head of elaborate outline, on a long shaft, looks at once more unwieldy and less efficient than a plain spear, and at first glance there seems little justification for the various hooks, blades and spikes with which these weapons are furnished.

The first thing to remember, however, in this connection is that a good many of the surviving examples *are* weapons of parade, and were constructed as such. If we turn to the true medieval hafted fighting-weapon, as depicted in sculpture and illumination, we shall see a few important differences between this and the processional weapon of the sixteenth or seventeenth century, and may learn, moreover, the way in which bill and glaive were used in actual practice. We shall find, for one thing, that none of them depended absolutely on the use of the point. Even the spear of the Anglo-Saxon soldier, as represented in many an illuminated manuscript, is noticeable for the presence of one or more cross-bars below the spear-head. Generally they are indicated by transverse lines, but in one or two cases the cross-bar is seen to be horizontal on its upper edge, while the lower edge widens to the middle, making it in effect a pair of lugs or wings, such as are found on the spear-heads called Carolingian.

What is the purpose of these cross-bars? It has been said that they are intended to prevent the blade from going right into the body, or the weight of a transfixed body from coming down to the hand; but if that were the case, as it was with the boar-spear,

one would expect to find the bar immediately below the spear-head, and definitely longer than the breadth of the blade. As it is, the cross-piece of the Carolingian spear-head comes a good way down, and in some cases is no broader than the blade of the spear itself. If a body had come far enough down the shaft to reach the cross-piece, the spear would be put out of action, and the function of the cross-bar quite unavailing. The true function of the cross-piece or pair of side wings is rather that of a defence, albeit a slight one. The Saxons do not seem to have used cavalry, so these spears are intended, not for use by or against horsemen, but for battles fought out on foot, and in all such contests the natural instinct is to use a weapon that can defend as well as attack. To be able to thrust at a man with a spear is all very well, but one must be able to dash the opposing weapon aside if required. Before heavy defensive armour came into use, there must have been a certain amount of scientific self-defence with the weapons commonly carried, and that would naturally have its influence on the shape of the weapons themselves.

A natural, obvious stroke in a hand-to-hand fight is the sideways blow with the spear held in both hands, to avert a stroke from another spear or from a sword. In dealing such a stroke, the presence of a cross-piece, or of wings, however slight, upon the socket, makes all the difference, as it checks one of the elementary instincts of the fighter—to push straight on along an opposing edge. Fencers realise to the full the possibilities of attacking with a graze when the blades are touching, slipping right down the opponent's blade, pressing against his pressure, and striking him over his hand. A weapon being struck aside with a spear would make the same attempt, and slide down the spear-shaft as the shortest way to the adversary's hand and body, and it is just such a motion that the small cross-bar prevents, making as it does an angle that can stop and hold the cutting blade for just the fraction of a second necessary to make it go round or back, out of line, instead of pushing on the shortest way.

It may be noted in this connection that a spear-head fitted with these small side-lugs is almost invariably made with a stout polygonal stem above them, eminently suited to parrying and receiving strokes. Some emphasis is laid on this use of the weapon, for reasons which will, it is hoped, be apparent later on. The two pictures we have, at this juncture, to bear in mind are that of the sword-stroke checked and hindered by the cross-piece and of the fighter using his weapon almost as much for sideways striking as for direct thrusting.

After the Norman Conquest we find a change in methods of warfare. It becomes an affair of cavalry encounters and of sieges, and hafted weapons, for the most part, are of little or no importance, save for the long lance of the horseman. Accordingly, in reproductions of warfare of this period the spears, with one important exception, are nearly all horsemen's lances. The exception is the figure of Goliath in Biblical illustrations. He is represented as carrying a foot-soldier's spear of the old pattern, with a cross-bar, in the famous thirteenth-century manuscript now in the Pierpont Morgan library in New York. In his note, for the Roxburgh Club, on the Arms and Armour of this manuscript, Major ffoulkes says of this cross-bar that 'it appears in representations of the giant from the twelfth century onwards, as for example in Harl. MS. 603 at the British Museum.' It indicates no more and no less than that Goliath was a foot-soldier, and equipped as such. There is no suggestion that the Philistine giant had a gigantic horse, so the artist arms him, not with the horseman's lance, but with what we may call the parrying-spear of the foot-soldier. Nor can it be explained away as an archaism, for in the Pierpont-Morgan manuscript Goliath's armour, contrary to the usual habit in pictures of the pagan enemies of Israel, is rather more advanced in pattern than that of the other figures. It seems likely, then, that the use of the parrying-spear by a footman was not entirely forgotten.

But Goliath is, of course, an exception. The spearman on foot who made all the difference at Falkirk

and subsequent battles was a dismounted cavalryman carrying his lance. The regular infantry—what there was of it—had bows, swords and axes or clubs, probably to suit the individual tastes. The sword lies at the moment outside our province, and to deal in detail with the development of the axe would take more time and space than are at present available, but one or two other hafted weapons may now be studied in their origin and development.

First of all we may take the bill. It is well represented in the Pierpont-Morgan manuscript in the hands of a man chopping at a tent-pole, in the episode of the rescue of Lot and his family. In this picture it is little more than the axe which its name signifies in Anglo-Saxon. It is also the bill-hook of to-day—an agricultural implement useful for crude pruning or miscellaneous chopping, and forming quite a useful weapon of war in its ordinary shape. The first stage in the change from the peasant's tool to the weapon of war is generally a lengthening of haft and blade. The bill-hook of this picture is rather longer than the bill-hook one uses nowadays, but the general outline is the same, and the proportions are very like those of certain axes from Nepal, exhibited in the Indian section of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

It must have been quite obvious that the bill-hook was a very good substitute for the battle-axe, and so we may not be surprised to find it in the hands of a horseman in the famous early fourteenth-century manuscript that goes by the name of Queen Mary's Psalter. Here it has been made still more useful for close quarters by the addition of a spike at the top, but the picture fortunately shows it for us in action as well as at rest, and we can see that the 'business' part of it was the cutting edge just inside the curve—just where it is, in fact, in the ordinary bill-hook. It will be observed that there is as yet no spike at the back of the blade, which is broad and heavy. Another bill of about the same period is preserved to us in one of Stothard's drawings of the lost frescoes of the Painted Chamber at Westminster. The original axe-blade is being elongated into a heavy chopping-knife

with its tip turned forward and the back of the blade extended into a point. A bill-head in the London Museum is of almost exactly these proportions, and may be ascribed to this period. (See Fig. 1, B 1-3).

There is another form of bill which the Pierpont-Morgan manuscript also illustrates for us several times. Generally no more than the peculiar blade is seen, above the heads and shoulders of the fighters, but in the scene of Lot's children being led into captivity it appears in its full length on the shoulder of one of the captors. It has a broad blade, and the sharp edge curves forward as in the other bill, but instead of narrowing towards the tip the blade broadens into two or three small points. This figure shows the weapon as used in battle, but comparison with some of the banquet-scenes in the same manuscript shows that it has been lengthened, like the bill-hook, but from the table-knife of the time. It is shown in its original form in the hands of a figure cutting bread; a simple elongation of blade and haft produces the weapon carried by the soldier, and if we carry the development a stage further, as in the bill, and prolong the back of the blade into a spike, we see the transition into an early form of halberd—the type which took its name from the battle of Sempach, in which the halberd did such good service. (See Fig. 1, H 1-3).

The hafts of these weapons have been shown to us as conveniently long for use with both hands. The glaive, which is also illustrated for us in this manuscript, is shown with this fairly short two-hand haft, being used by a horseman very much in the way of the bill in Queen Mary's Psalter: and with a longer haft, like a broomstick, for use by a foot-soldier. It is obviously a single-edged weapon, used for chopping, not thrusting, and in the form carried by the foot-soldier it is differentiated only by the length of its blade from the hedging-bill of to-day.

This foot-soldier is an exception to the general rule in having a glaive; most of his fellows seem to be carrying axes. In fact, bills and glaives do not seem to feature as regular official pieces of military equipment till the fifteenth century. Like battle-axes, they

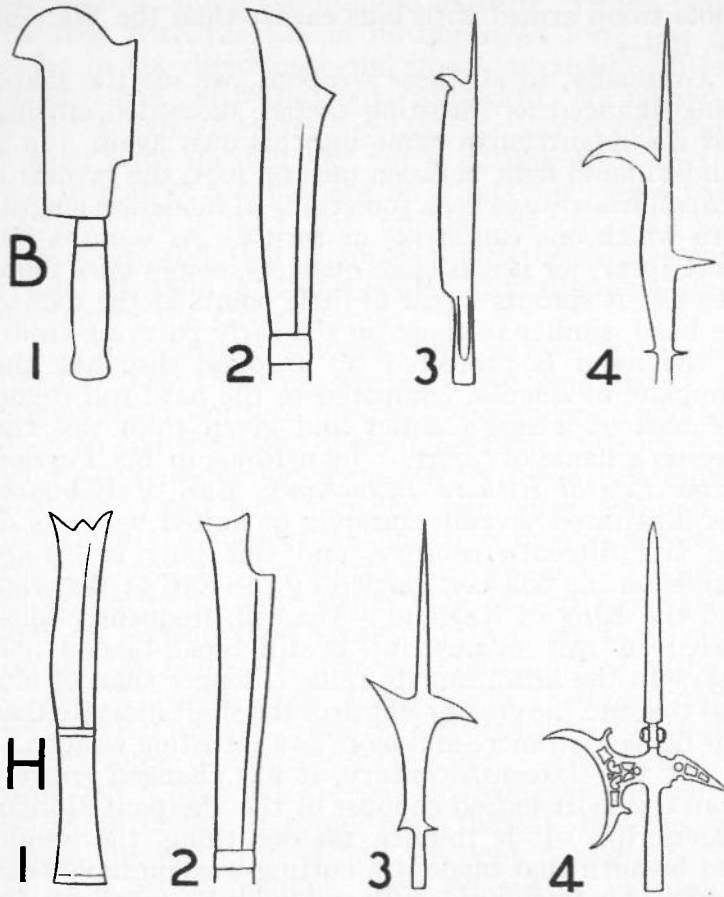


FIG. 1

PARALLEL DEVELOPMENT OF THE BILL AND HALBERD

1. The original implement.
2. Blade and hilt elongated to make a two-handed weapon.
3. Introduction of the thrusting element, in the form of a spike on the end of the blade.
4. The final transition from knife or axe to spear-form.

might be carried by some individuals who preferred them to swords, but I can think of no reference to a whole troop armed with bills earlier than the Wars of the Roses.

Gradually, in all these weapons, we see the shape being changed as thrusting tactics succeeded cutting and the infantryman came into his own again. In a hand-to-hand fight between men on foot, the favourite weapon has always been something of moderate length, with which one can strike or thrust. As soon as the short spear, for use at close quarters, comes once more into use, it sprouts a pair of little points at the root of the head, similar to those on the early parrying-spear, or the hand is protected by a round disc like the vamplate of a lance, compared to the hard roll round the root of a stag's antler and given from this the forester's name of 'burr.' John Rous, in his *Pageant of the Life of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick*, has illustrated several examples of hafted weapons of the late fifteenth century, and this burr is plainly visible on the poleaxes carried by the Earl of Warwick and the King of England. The bill, frequently illustrated in this manuscript, is still broad-bladed and heavy in the head, but its spike is longer than of old, and this and the greater length of the shaft indicate that it is being used more and more as a thrusting weapon.

By the sixteenth century, it has changed entirely from the short-hafted chopper of the Pierpont-Morgan manuscript. It is thinner, for one thing, the weight and breadth that made it a cutting-weapon have been sacrificed in favour of length and lightness for thrusting. The spike has been elongated, and so has the hook, which is now meant to be used *as* a hook, and is no longer just a concave cutting-edge. Further, the two parrying-lugs of the older spear can now be seen down at the root of the blade. The hook can be used to get a mounted man off his horse, and there is a spike at the back, to do damage in a scuffle with a back-handed blow. A good deal of useful information on this shape of bill is to be found in Grassi's *True Arte of Defence*. This is a book published originally in 1560, and translated into English at the end of the sixteenth century.

It is a treatise on fencing, but besides dealing with the sword and dagger it gives instruction on the management of other weapons still in use in hand-to-hand fighting, including the bill and halberd. Grassi points out that with the bill in its improved form one can strike in six directions—up, down, to right and left, forward and, with the hook, backward. In regard to the back-handed stroke he says that some people may wonder why the bill has not a cutting edge on that side instead of a spike, but he points out that a back-handed blow cannot give an efficient cut with such a weapon, and that a spike, which needs less force behind it than a cutting-edge, can do much more damage in the circumstances.

If the cutting-weapons are, as we have seen, turning into thrusting-weapons, we can expect the original spear-form to make its appearance ; and so it does, in the Partisan. This is best known to us in its later and more useless forms, when it was a decorative arm associated with parades, but when we look up Grassi on the subject we find him paying tribute to the efficiency of the weapons when he says, ' Therefore, these Partesans were made bigg and of great paize, and of perfect good steele, to the end they might breake the maile and deuyde the iron. And that this is true, it is to be seene in the auncient weapons of this sort, which are great and so well tempered, that they are of force to cut any other iron. Afterwardes, as men had considered, that as this weapon was only to strike, it might in some, part thereof, have as well something to warde withall, whereby it might be said to be a perfect weapon, they deuised to add unto it two crookes or forkes, by the which, that blow might be warded which parting from the point and continuuing downe along the staffe, would come to hurt the person. And these forkes, or (I may saie) these defences were by some men placed on that part of the iron which next adioyneth to the staffe, making them crooked and sharp, and a handfull long, and for the most part, with the pointes toward the enimie, to the end they might seeme not only to defend, but also to strike.'

In the partisan proper, these side points are always

fairly small, but, of course, they are found greatly exaggerated in the various trident-like developments of the shape—a host of weapons with different names and different outlines, in which, as Grassi says, the side points are intended to be offensive as well as defensive, and probably become more cumbrous and inefficient by doing so.

By Grassi's time the halberd was going out of practical use, and he describes it as being 'rather for lightnes, aptnes and brauerie, then for that it carrieth any great profit with it: for the edge is not apt to strike, and the point thereof is so weake, that hitting any hard thing, either it boweth or breaketh: neither is it much regarded in the warres, the Harquebush and the Pike being nowadaies the strength of all armyes.' A hundred years before, however, it had been a serviceable weapon, especially in the hands of the Swiss, and we are told that Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, was killed with a blow from a halberd that caught him on the side of the head and split it open down to the teeth (See Fig. 1, H3 and 4).

The edge was still used in the sixteenth century, as well as the point. Grassi teaches the use of both, and gives an illustration of how to hold the bill. His plate shows the weapon held with one hand immediately below the head (which is furnished with a small lug on the false edge) and the other in the middle of the staff, and the bill represented has a fairly broad blade—he mentions its ability to cut through a pike-shaft held crosswise—very like one still preserved at Canterbury in the time of Grose, who illustrated it in his *Antiquities of England and Wales*.

The real abandonment of cutting for thrusting is to be seen in the long, narrow blades of the gisarme, which is just the agricultural bill of the hedger, with its upturned setting-hook at the back; but with blade and hook narrowed and elongated to the extreme to form a weapon that, unwieldy as it seems, was denounced as brutal and unchristian, owing to the terrible injuries it could inflict.¹

¹ It appears to have undergone the usual transition from a chopping to a thrusting weapon, as in the early four-

teenth century we find the gisarme described as a kind of *axe* (*Eyre of Kent*, pub. by Selden Soc. i, 132).

The partisan, as the simplest form, seems to have been that in most general use. It appears in the fifteenth-century *Life of Richard Beauchamp*. Shakespeare puts it into the hand of the sentry at Elsinore, and it is mentioned as a weapon of practical use as late as 1678, in the Sieur de Gaya's *Traité des Armes*. The reference is rather an interesting one, as it treats of a short, double-edged knife with a plain hilt, which was at that time becoming popular among the soldiery. 'When they have fired their discharges,' says the writer, 'and want powder and shot, they put the haft of it into the mouth of the barrel of their pieces, and defend themselves therewith, as well as with a partisan.' So long as men fight on foot hand-to-hand, some such weapon will appear and do good service, as it has done from the parrying-spear of the tenth century to the fixed bayonet of the twentieth.