

The Nomenclature of Pole Arms

Gary Gygas

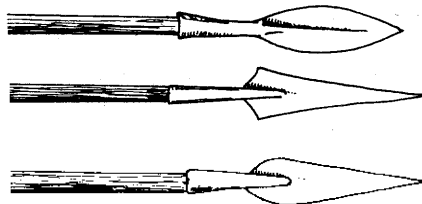
An astonishing number of different types of weapons was employed during the medieval period. What is nearly as surprising is the lack of uniformity of names by which these weapons are called. Seemingly, authors who should be authorities in this regard carelessly brand one sort of weapon under an entirely mistaken classification, thus confusing the uninformed reader and generally making identification difficult and uncertain. An outstanding example of this misnaming of weapons appears in *WARRIORS AND WEAPONS OF EARLY TIMES* by Niels M. Saxtorph, where an obvious morning star is identified as a mace. While the general use of both weapon types is the same, they differed sufficiently to make it rather important to distinguish between the two, viz. a mace is usually a short-hafted weapon with a flanged head, the whole cast in one piece; a morning star is a longer weapon, typically employed by infantry, with a wooden shaft and head, the latter set with radiating spikes. If, aside from swords, there are numbers of such errors in terminology to be found in works which deal with such easily identifiable and classifiable weapons as maces and morning stars and similar hand weapons, readers are cast into a veritable morass of disagreement — possibly out-and-out error — when it comes to studies which treat the scores of pole arms common during the Middle Ages.

Such confusion must be anathema to the serious student of the medieval period, be he historian or historical game enthusiast. Having spent some time doing research on the subject for various reasons, I arrived at a system of classification and nomenclature which seems both reasonable and easy to use. Before going into the details of this nomenclature, let us consider just what medieval weapons were. Most weapons employed during the Middle Ages were either developments of hunting weapons or adaptations of agricultural implements. Arms developed from simple, basic forms into more sophisticated ones as the art of warfare developed during the centuries. Weapons from the late medieval period were either far more specialized than the models from which they sprang or else were combination weapons trying to combine the strengths of the more specialized arms into a single weapon. In fact, it is the classification of the highly specialized weapons and the multi-formed ones which cause so much confusion amongst writers. The differences are important, and they must be made clear in order for the serious student to understand the warfare of the period.

To begin with, a definition of a pole arm should be set. A pole arm is, in simplest terms, a weapon on the end of a stick. Pole arms are infantry weapons. The additional reach the

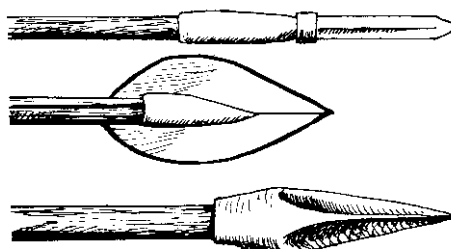
pole gives affords the wielder of the weapon the advantage of striking the enemy — or holding the enemy at a distance — before he himself can be struck. The ultimate pole arm was the 18-21 foot pike, but an axe blade attached to a 5 foot long haft is just as much a pole arm, so it is already evident to the reader just how wide a number of weapons is encompassed by the term. The system presupposes that any weapon considered has a haft or shaft length of not less than 5 feet. The simple and combination forms of each pole arm will be discussed in order, with special forms noted.

Spear



The spear is a dagger set atop a pole. It is so ancient a pole arm that it is not generally mentioned in the class, but the spear is such a weapon. It is principally a thrusting weapon, but if a broad blade is used (such as that often referred to as an ox tongue) it can also have a secondary cutting function, especially when the blade is lengthened considerably. Spears of 12 feet or so are often referred to as *ash spears* in English writings, and when they reach such length, they are often confused with pikes (q.v.).

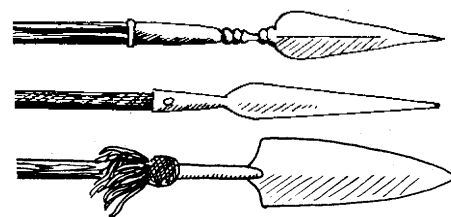
Lance



A lance is a long spear carried by a mounted man. Norman lances were about 12 foot in length, some less, but later in the Middle Ages the weapon grew to an average length of about 14' — thus effectively giving the horseman about 10' of reach beyond the horse's head when charging. Just as with the spear and pike, all sorts of different heads were attached to the end of the lance shaft in order to meet the requirements of varying opponent armor. Austrian knights and men-at-arms used these weapons to considerable ef-

fect against the Swiss, when the Austrians dismounted and fought a Swiss force which did not have the high percentage of pikes which was common to Swiss armies in later years (cf. Battle of Sempach, 1386). For this reason, the lance should be mentioned in a description of pole arms. Generally it was a horseman's weapon and not a true footman's.

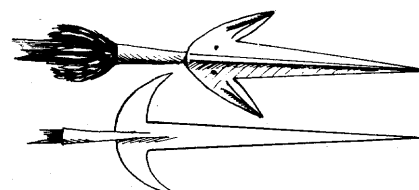
Pike



Although there is no set rule, any spear with a shaft of 15' or longer is considered to be a pike. The pike is designed to deliver a thrusting attack at an opponent at long range, and its great length was used to keep him there, as the weapon was always used in mass. One of the most common form of pike is the *awl pike*, a strictly piercing weapon, although there are many other forms of blades which were used. Swiss and German pikes were fashioned so that metal protected the wooden shaft up to 2 feet from the head, so that enemies could not easily lop the blade off and make the weapons useless.

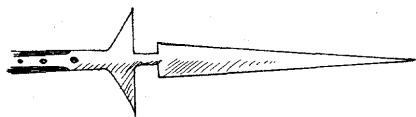
We now come to the many specialized and combination forms of the dagger on a stick. This is not to say that all pole arms equipped with a spear head (dagger) should be considered as spears or variations thereof. To the contrary, this is an error all too common amongst writers treating pole arms, identifying the weapon by a secondary rather than a primary function, and losing all sense of what the weapon was for as will be demonstrated later. The primary function of a spear is thrusting, thus the specialized and combination pole arms belonging in the spear family should be primarily used as thrusting weapons.

Spetum

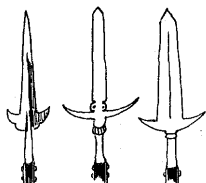


The spetum was probably designed to increase both the offensive and defensive capabilities of a normal spear. To a sharp, tapering point two blades which point forwards at about 45° are added to provide secondary attack modes, deflect opponent weapons, and catch and hold opponents at a distance if penetration with one of the blades is not achieved. Weapons in this same class are the various *corseques* or *korsekes*.

Ranseur



At first glance, a ranseur appears to be a form of spetum, or vice versa, but the purpose of the design of the former weapon is more complex than the latter. A ranseur's secondary blades are backward hooking projection set well below the large central blade. The spearing function of the weapon is apparent, and the deflection includes the trapping of opponent weapons in the space below the main blade, where a twist of the shaft would apply pressure from it or the secondary projections to either break the caught weapon or disarm its wielder. Additionally, the side projections provide both a means of holding an opponent at long range or pulling mounted opponents off their horse. Similar weapons (or synonymous names) are *chauves souris*, *ransom*, *rhonca*, *roncie*, and *runka*.

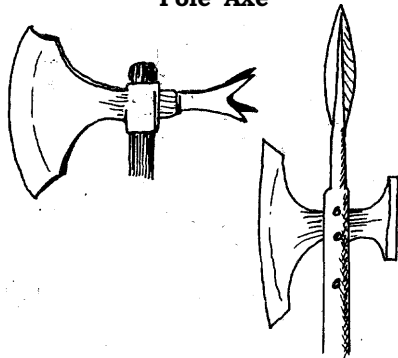


This form of pole arm is basically a spear — often with an ox tongue blade — to which a pair of small axe heads were added below the dagger blade. To the thrusting stab of the spear was added the defensive use of the side axe blades and their cutting/penetrating potential. Later versions of the partisan brought a gradual change in the axe blades so as to become almost unrecognizable as such. Typical of this is the *Bohemian ear spoon*, a form of partisan where the axes have been changed to function as piercing spikes [primarily to be used against plate armor] with a ranseur-like function. It is very common to see confusion between spetums, ranseurs, and partisans. This especially holds true of late period partisans where there are additions to the side blades of spetum-like projections and ranseur-like gaps for trapping opponent weapons.

Thus, the spear family is composed of the spear proper, the long spear, or pike, the spetum, ranseur, and partisan. All weapons in this class are basically daggers atop a sturdy pole, with trimmings added to make the weapon more efficient in one way or another.

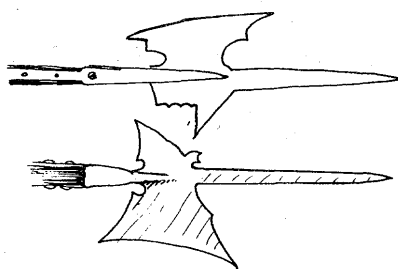
The axe took many forms and was combined with many other basic forms of weapon to make a prolific family, but some of the pole arms bearing the name do not really belong to the genre. The axe has two basic head forms, broad and narrow, the latter form usually being thicker in order to give it the necessary weight. A related form of the axe is the cleaver, a butchering tool which was adapted for military use also. Many polearms in the axe and cleaver families also had spear points to provide some secondary thrusting capability, but again the primary use of the weapons of these families was chopping at one's opponent rather than thrusting toward him.

Pole Axe



Strictly speaking a pole axe is nothing more than an axe head of any sort set upon a long haft in order to deliver an earlier and more forceful blow. It can be double bitted, backed by a spike, and/or topped off with a dagger (spear) point, but it is still recognizable as an axe.

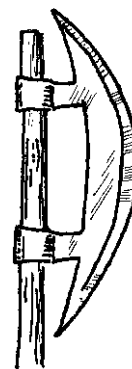
Halberd



This form of a pole axe is seen as a convex headed broad axe in early examples, but the head is set at a convenient angle considering the point it is most likely to impact upon an enemy, so this alone makes it quite distinct from an ordinary long-hafted axe. The whole weapon often reached 8 feet in length. It was also always topped with a fairly long spear point and backed by a spike — often angled or hooked slightly downward. The spear point is, of course, designed to keep opponents at bay and deliver a thrusting attack. This proved quite useless when opposing mounted knights armed with lances (cf. Battle of Arbedo, 1422); the opposing spike for penetration of heavy plate armor, with the secondary function of a hook for dismounting opponents. The halberd was used extensively — particularly by the Swiss and Germans — and considerably modified and developed

over the course of two centuries. Concave blades, some very pronounced, were not uncommon, and some halberd heads were made smaller (as the *piercing axe*) in order to better penetrate armor. Many of these weapons pictured in texts on arms are not battle arms but rather fanciful parade arms. There are examples of *bills* and *voulges* which are called halberds, but the discerning reader will easily note the differences in form, especially when keeping in mind the weapon's possible use. According to C.W.C. Oman, the English *brown bill* was a halberd in all respects save the back spike.

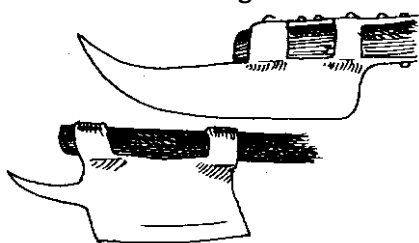
Bardiche



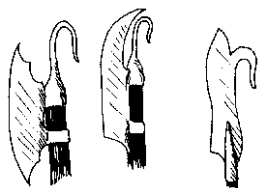
This very broad and heavy axe links the pole axes to the pole cleavers as a sort of transitional step between the two forms, although its only obvious use is as a military arm. A bardiche head ranged from about 2 feet to over 3 feet in length, and it was attached to its haft with two rings or a single one in those examples where the blade is shorter and backed with a hammer head or spike. The bardiche in all of its forms was very heavy and cumbersome — more so by far than a halberd — and was used principally in Eastern Europe.

As stated, the family of axes set on poles for use in war overlaps into many other weapon forms, but its only true members are the pole axe, halberd, (possibly the brown bill) and bardiche. The related cleaver-type weapons are so similar in function, however, that they can almost be treated as pole axes.

It seems quite likely that some outraged peasant fastened his meat cleaver to the end of a staff in order to protect himself and his family, and thereby created a weapon form which was to be widely used in both Europe and the British Isles for several centuries. The same holds true for the majority of the other pole arms which will be discussed; they are simple agricultural tools converted to a war-like use, and their form is easily distinguishable and identifiable until they become so combined and sophisticated as to prove some difficulty in easy classification. Even this latter transition is not too difficult, however, if the reader is well versed in the basic forms of each basic peasant tool cum weapon.

Voulge


Place a hefty cleaver at the end of a long, stout shaft, and the leverage which the pole gives the wielder will enable him to cleave through armor. The voulge has no provision to keep the enemy at a distance in its simple form, but if the top front or back edge is ground down so as to provide a pointed or dagger-like tip, the weapon assumes a more complete form. The voulge was sometimes backed with a spike or hooked spike to make a crude guisarme-voulge, a combination form weapon which will be depicted later.

Lochaber axe


In an earlier article I once mistakenly recommended that readers consider this type of weapon as a halberd. It is quite obviously a voulge-type weapon. In its early crude forms it is exactly the same as a voulge. Development of the Lochaber axe added a hook to the weapon — as a tip or blade backing, and in this form it is nearly identical to the guisarme-voulge. To all intents and purposes the two forms are so nearly the same as the types of voulges they resemble that there can be no real differentiation between them as far as function and form are concerned.

Continental Europe developed the pole cleaver as the voulge, while the Scots in the British Isles developed the same thing and called it the Lochaber axe. Both types of pole arm were developed to deliver a powerful cleaving blow, just as the pole axe family were designed to do. Both forms had secondary functions which were aimed at keeping the enemy at a distance and/or dismounting them.

Fauchard


This weapon is a development of the scythe or sickle. Set upon a long pole, the curving blade of a fauchard could be used for both cut and thrust, although it is to be strongly suspected that it did neither too well. Furthermore, the weapon offered little in the way of

parrying or catching-holding and had no provision for dismounting opponents in its early and more common form. Later models include a back hook to dismount horsemen, but the weapon was still not efficient, and it passed out rather quickly, although its combination form, the fauchard-fork remained.

Having employed just about everything else, there was no reason not to add the single edged knife at the end of a stave also. This family of arms is as small as the fauchards and about as efficient.

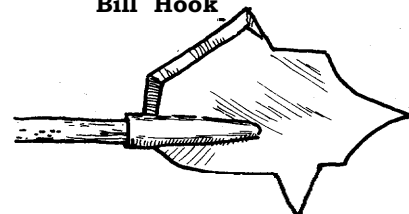
Glaive


The glaive is a knife-bladed spear. It has the thrusting function of the spear and the secondary cutting function of the convex blade of the knife. The weapon was rapidly enlarged in the blade in order to give it a greater cutting function as well as a cleaving attack. As with a spear or fauchard, however, it was not overly effective at holding opponents back, nor did it have any piercing or dismounting capabilities, so modifications produced the glaive-guisarme which is discussed in the combination-arms section. The increase in the size of the blade of these weapons brought some to a point where they nearly merged with cleaver-type weapons.

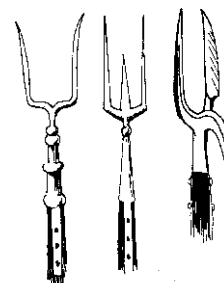
Rather than mankind beating their spears into pruning hooks, medieval peasants discovered that their pruning hooks made reasonably effective pole arms. The provocation which necessitated such development was undoubtedly considerable, but the upshot was likely to have been as unsatisfactory as having no weapons. Pole arms of this sort were soon modified into highly efficient combination weapons. This class includes most *couteaux de breche*, although some identified as such are glaive-guisarmes (q.v.).

Guisarme


This wide-bladed instrument was furnished with a sharp cutting edge along its convex side, probably from reverse spike to hook. The spike, of course, could be used to penetrate armor when the weapon was swung, and the curved hook provided an ample means of pulling horsemen to the ground. Deficiencies in this form of pole arm are apparent — no spear point for thrusting and only one penetrating projection. The guisarme was soon combined with other forms of peasant weapons to make a second generation of highly effective, all-purpose pole arms.

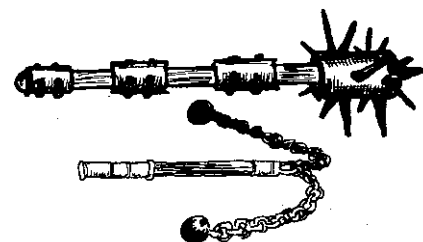
Bill Hook


The English bill hook was almost exactly the same as the French guisarme, but its concave (hook) edge was the sharp one, and rather than a straight back spike it typically had an L-shaped tine projecting forward. This arrangement was slightly more effective than the European guisarme for obvious reasons.

Military Fork


The lowly hay fork was straightened and strengthened to provide a very potent weapon, the military fork. This pole arm had two efficient piercing points, means of holding off an enemy, and sometimes a shorter third tine in the crotch of the fork, so that opponents were channeled into a third attack. The major drawback to this pole arm was its lack of effective penetrating power with respect to heavily armored targets. The fork principle was soon combined with other pole arms to form very efficient tools of war.

In summation, the basic forms of pole arms of the medieval period were dagger (spear/lance/pike/spetum/ranseur/partisan), axe (pole axe/halberd/bardiche), cleaver (voulge/Lochaber axe), scythe (fauchard), heavy knife (glaive), pruning hook (guisarme/bill hook), and hay fork (military fork). A few special cases can also be mentioned here, more or less in passing, as they pertain to weapons which are not true pole arms, but their size is such that they are sometimes considered in the general class. The threshing flail — a wooden handle with another billet of wood attached to it by a swivel or several links of chain was easily adapted and modified to become a ghastly weapon. Horsemen commonly employed a short handled flail with one or more chains ending in smooth or spiked iron balls. The peasant's tool made a

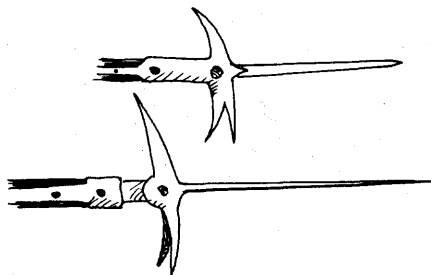


far more effective weapon when swung by a strong man. From a heavy shaft of about 3 to 4 feet in length was hung one or two rods of metal shod and spiked wood or iron. The whole being over 5 feet long and having tremendous penetration and crushing power.

The other weapon which is a borderline case is the morning star. This club adaptation was typically a heavy wooden haft from 3' to 5' or more in length; atop which was set a cylinder, barrel, or truncated cone, also of wood, metal bound, and set with vicious metal spikes. Also called the holy water sprinkler (or *godentag* in the Low countries), it was a favorite of the peasants, for it was easy to make and could lay low the best armored opponent at a blow. For some time it was used extensively by the Swiss, although the halberd eventually replaced it. The weapon was often tipped with a spear point in its longer form, so that some models were long enough to be pole arms. Some military picks were also pole mounted, having shafts of 5 feet or greater length.

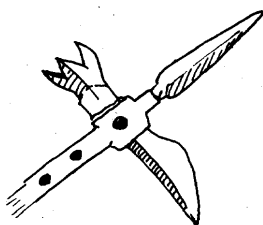
There are also two pole arms which were certainly developed purely as weapons. There is a resemblance between the two, but they are separate and distinct.

Lucern Hammer



This weapon is very similar to the halberd, but the spike on its end was generally longer than that of a halberd, and instead of an axe head the Lucern hammer featured a smaller, hammer-like head with three prongs. Evidently this function was not as efficient against armor as the pole blade, for it was replaced by the halberd amongst the ranks of the Swiss after the 14th Century.

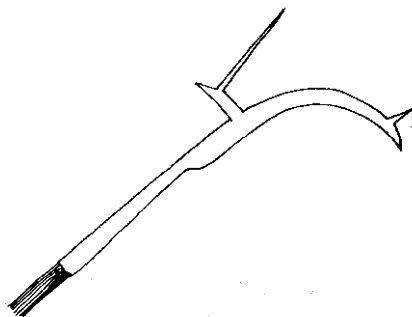
Bec de Corbin



At first glance a bec de corbin might be mistaken for a Lucern hammer, but important functional differences can be noted. The bec de corbin was used late in the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance by knights and nobles, NOT commoners. Its heavy, crow beak was designed to puncture the heavy plate armor common to the upper class warriors. In this weapon the beak is the major feature. This is backed by a flat hammer head, or by a clawed head somewhat similar to a Lucern hammer's, and the end spike is more blade like and far shorter than the awl spike of the Lucern hammer; for the latter weapon was not so specialized. There are engravings and paintings of men in plate armor fighting at the lists with the bec de corbin.

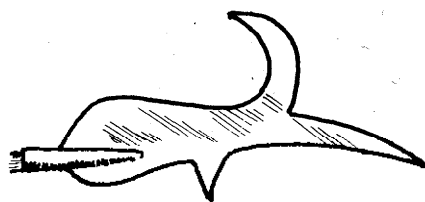
Combination weapons were soon developed to compensate for weakness of simpler weapons or enhance an already powerful one. Technically all pole arms with a secondary spear tip for thrusting can be considered combination weapons. However this was done so often and could be done so easily to most weapons that it is necessary to ignore secondary spear tips when classifying polearms. By the same token a partisan could be considered a combination weapon but since it was primarily used as a thrusting weapon I believe it should be classified as part of the spear family.

Fauchard-Fork



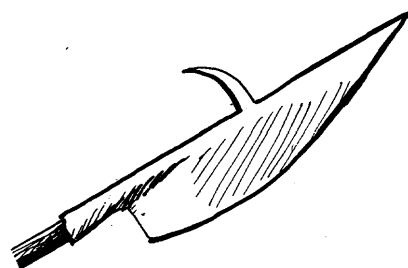
There were two general forms of this combination weapon. The first followed the typical fauchard form, with a single spike set to project from the back of scythe blade. The second reversed the scythe blade so as to have its concave cutting edge face towards the opponent, the blade being more curved and sickle-like, and a spike tipping the pole end (or projecting from the scythe blade).

Fauchard-Guisarme



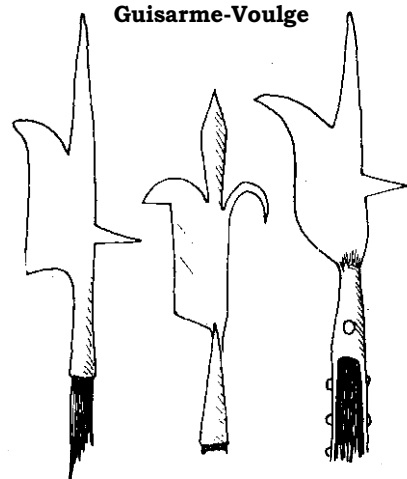
This weapon is nothing more than a scythe blade backed by a heavy hook for dismounting opponents.

Glaive-Guisarme



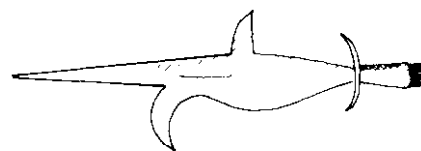
To the heavier and longer glaive heads was added a guisarme hook so as to enable the wielder to jerk horsemen from their seats.

Guisarme-Voulge



This pole arm is similar to the Lochaber axe, but the hook is formed from the blade of the voulge itself, not added separately. Guisarme-voulges featured the pointed tip or spike so as to make the weapon as all-purpose as possible.

Bill-Guisarme



There are quite a number of designs of the bill-guisarme. Each type has the following features: 1) a sharp spear or awl point, 2) a large hook formed from the body of the weapon, 3) a back spike for armor penetration, and 4) several sharpened edges. Some forms of the bill-guisarme have a sufficiently heavy blade and-cutting edges placed so that they are actually voulge-like. This form of pole arm persisted the longest of all save the pike and the halberd, for it was certainly efficient in all functions — piercing, holding off, cutting, penetrating, dismounting, and cleaving. The *scorpion* is a typical form of bill-guisarme.

One final thing needs comment. Sometimes a weapon with an added feature is identified as the added arm rather than as the major weapon. For example, an axe head attached to the end of what is basically a spear, i.e., the partisan, is not called a pole axe, for the length of the shaft and the predominate employment of the point make it rather obviously a thrusting weapon with added secondary functions. A glaring example of misidentification is found in Stone's A GLOSSARY OF THE CONSTRUCTION DECORATION AND USE OF ARMS AND ARMOR. Therein, the author shows a halberd with a fork tip rather than the usual dagger/spear point and identifies it as a military fork. Now, were the shaft of the weapon 8 feet or more in length, this might be proper, but it is a halberd-sized pole, and the weapon is a halberd with an incidental fork atop of it. Confusion regarding certain combination weapons of the fauchard-glaive voulge-guisarme-bill type is certainly understandable, and care must be taken in identifying such weapons. Careful examination of the length of the shaft and the shape of the head will give clues as to its primary uses in combat and hence its identity.

The pole arm was developed in order to put infantry on even terms with cavalry. This it did admirably in the hands of well-trained, disciplined formations such as the Swiss (who mixed pike, halberd/Lucern hammer/morningstar, and crossbow/arquebus in almost equal proportions — 40-40-20 as an average) who could hold the best of European cavalry at bay with laughable ease in pike square. The Germans emulated the Swiss with close to the same success, and most other European armies fielded large bodies of pole armed infantry (with something less than great success in most cases). The reason for the proliferation of the pike was that it proved the most useful for keeping horsemen at a distance. (Swiss pikemen did NOT ground pike butt to accept a cavalry charge, but rather held the rear part of the shaft higher than the front, so the points which glanced off armor would not go uselessly into the air but be forced downward into rider or mount — or at worst into the ground to form a barrier.) Other pole arms gave way to pike and halberd for one or two reasons. Those with massive heads were not as efficient as the pike, and when their shafts were lengthened past a certain point they were too cumbersome to wield. (Spear-type pole arms were lengthened to pikes and were then called just that — there are ox tongued and spetum-like heads, but the pike shaft is too long for useful employment of ranseur or partisan heads.) Those which were shortened for use as cleaving weapons were not as efficient as the halberd — or were changed so that they eventually became almost indistinguishable from the halberd (typically guisarme-voulge forms).

The evolution of the pole arm is of great interest as it reflects the trends in armor and tactics in medieval warfare. It also is of great help in understanding why battles were fought as they were and can help to explain the outcome. My system of nomenclature is derived from early reading of the ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA and Ffoulks book on armor. Further study and careful observation of weapons has brought it to its current state — by no means positively final, complete or unimpeachable, but nonetheless useful and logical for accurate identification and naming of medieval pole arms.

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Cont'd from page 4

The next TD will contain another tale of Niall of the Far Travels, by Gardner Fox, created especially for this magazine. I think it is the best one yet.

Letters To The Editor

Starting with the next issue (*really*) will be our letters page(s), *Out on a Limb*. Before it begins, though, I want to lay down some ground rules. Commentary on anything published in our magazine is welcome, with the following qualifications: 1) It must be typed; 2) It must be of a non-personal nature, i.e., no character assassinations. It must be well founded — no wild and unfounded criticisms will be considered. Any well-argued point of view will be considered, as will be rebuttals and refutations. The operative word is knowledgeable. You don't have to have a degree in Northern European Mythology, for example, to take issue with an article dealing with some aspect of that. You do, however, have to back up your arguments with conflicting sources, etc. By the same token, you don't have to be a game designer to rebut someone's review or analysis of a given game, but you must put forth a well thought out objection, and at least give the impression that you know what it is you're talking about. We also welcome criticisms of ourselves, as well as nice comments. The letters page will not become the scene of longplaying, longwinded bickering back and forth, beating on dead horses. We reserve the right to select and edit all letters submitted, and when we feel a given topic has been exhausted, we will go on to new ground . . . ED.

The classes once again;

MICRO-SCALE (1:200 and smaller)

Micro-Scale Unit

Micro-Scale Diorama

REGULAR (15,20,25, and 30 mm)

Historical

Historical Unit

Historical Diorama

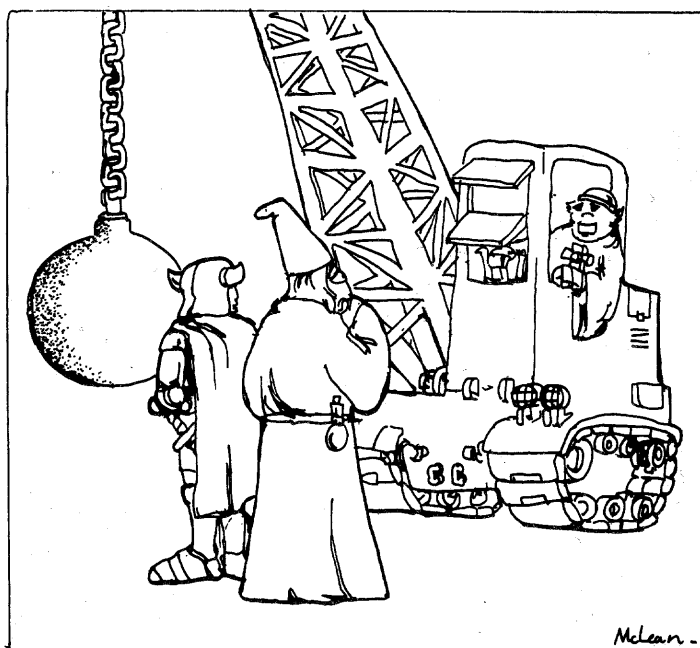
Fantasy & Science Fiction

Fantasy & SF Unit

Fantasy and SF Diorama

Fantasy & SF Monster

Stay posted in *TD* or *LW* for further developments. As the schedule is locked into place, we'll update you. — ED.



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