

Boar Hunting Weapons of the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance

Doug Strong

When one thinks of weapons for hunting, two similar devices leap to mind, the bow and the crossbow. While it is true that these were used extensively by hunters in the middle ages and the renaissance they were supplemented by other weapons which provided a greater challenge. What follows is an examination of the specialized tools used in boar hunting, from about 1350-1650 CE. It is not my intention to discuss the elaborate system of snares, pits, nets, and missile weapons used by those who **needed** to hunt but rather the weapons used by those who **wanted** to hunt as a sport. Sport weapons allowed the hunters to be in close proximity to their prey when it was killed. They also allowed the hunters themselves to pit their own strength against the strength of a wild boar and even place their lives in thrilling danger at the prospect of being overwhelmed by these wild animals.

Since the dawn of time mankind has engaged in hunting his prey. At first this was for survival but later it evolved into a sport. By the middle ages it had become a favorite pastime of the nobility. It was considered a fitting pastime for knights, lords, princes and kings (and later in this period, for ladies as well!) While these people did not need to provide the game for their tables by their own hand, they had the desire to participate in an exciting, violent, and even dangerous sport!

For most hunters two weapons were favored for boar hunting; the spear and the sword. Many of these were the simple military form of each of these weapons. However as time progressed specialized shapes of swords and spears developed specifically for hunting wild boars and other dangerous animals.

Spears are logical close range hunting weapons. They allow the animal to be stabbed from a relatively safe distance while still allowing a physical contest of strength with the boar. Apparently however the safety of this weapon was not always guaranteed by its length. It seems that hunters from at least the mid-fourteenth century onward found it necessary to put a cross guard like that on a sword at the base of the spear head in order to prevent the maddened, dying boar from running the spear **through itself** and progressing further up the shaft and mauling the hunter who held the spear. At first this crossguard was simply a piece of wood tied to the shaft at the base of the spear head, (fig. 1) but later it became integral with the head. (fig 2) As with all weapons these boar spears became increasingly more elaborate in their decoration as time progressed. (fig. 4) Gaston Phoebus' fourteenth century hunting manual (illustrated in the early fifteenth century) shows hunters using boar spears with cross guards of wood and metal in the same picture.

Swords for boar hunting must certainly have been only used by the most daring of hunters. With a sword a hunter's reach is only slightly greater than that of a boar, and the slightest error could result in the sword wielder's demise. (fig. 3) The previously mentioned hunting manual shows boar spears of advanced form being used along side of ordinary swords of the period. It seems that at this time a specialized form of boar sword had not yet developed. By the sixteenth century the boar sword had developed along the same lines as the boar spear. The blade of the sword had become narrow for the first two thirds of its length until at the end of the sword it widened out to normal width. They were usually fitted with cross guards at the end of the wide

portion of the blade and these were often spring loaded to pop out into place when necessary. (fig. 5) Some of these boar swords had the final blade part made in the manner of a flamberge (fig. 6)

One cannot speak of boar hunting without speaking of hunting dogs. These well trained animals were integral to the sport. It was the dog's job to track the boar and harry it until it was exhausted when the hunter would step in for the kill. Some boar hunting dogs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were outfitted with suits of armour to protect them from the tusks and claws of the boar. These suits followed contemporary styles of armouring for humans and were either made of plates or in the manner of a jack, made of many layers of linen reinforced by hundreds of tiny eyelets. An armoured dog is painted in Alaert do Hameel's late fifteenth century work, The Finding of the True Cross. Sixteenth century plate armour for a dog survives in the John Woodman Higgins Armoury in Worcester Mass. It consists of a helmet, a breast plate and a backplate. A seventeenth century jack type of armour for a boar hound is illustrated in the book The Lore of Arms, by William Reid. It is preserved in the Wartburg in Eisenach, Germany.

As we can see these are certainly not the most efficient methods of killing game for food, but they allow the hunter to have the satisfaction of taking the life of the animal with a weapon in their own hands, not one flying from a bow at 60 yards, not by trapping them in a net or capturing them in a snare or driving them into a pit. Rather, they pit the hunter's skill, cunning, strength and even his life, against a dangerous animal. A wild boar has the ability to eviscerate a man who falls prey to it in a matter of seconds, therefore much of the thrill of this type of hunting must have been based on the adrenalin rush of the hunter who knows that he may not return home from this hunting expedition. While certainly there was a risk for the hunters, the risk for the boar was far greater. The hunters were in large groups, protecting each other; they possessed long weapons to kill at a relatively safe distance; and they were usually mounted on horseback which allowed them quick escape if they found themselves outmatched by pack of wild boars. All of these safety measures went a long way toward making this sport relatively safe, but through it all many people lost their lives, and many more returned home from their hunting trips with glorious scars to show off to their friends while telling the story of how they were mauled by a wild boar.

Bibliography

Bise, Gabriel. Medieval Hunting Scenes, Miller Graphics, 1979.

Blair, Claude. European Armour. London: B.T. Bastford Ltd., 1958.

Granscay, Stephen V. Catalog of Armor: The John Woodman Higgins Armory, Worcester: The John Woodman Higgins Armory, 1961.

Ried, William. The Lore of Arms, London: Mitchel Beazley, 1976.

* Figures 1 through 3 are from Gaston Phoebus' The Hunting Book

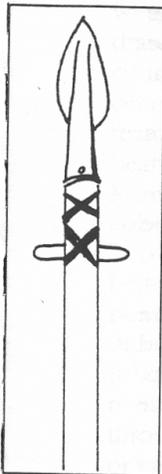


Figure 1

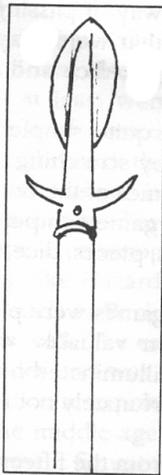


Figure 2

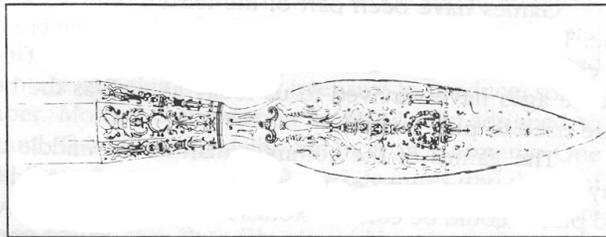


Figure 4 16th century boar spear. After Ried.

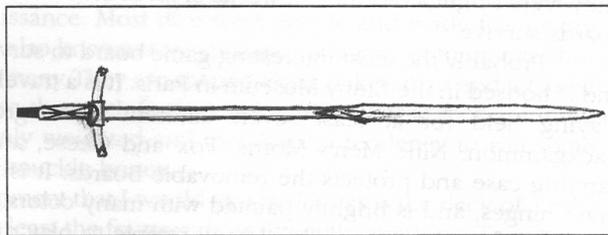


Figure 5 16th century boar sword. After Ried.

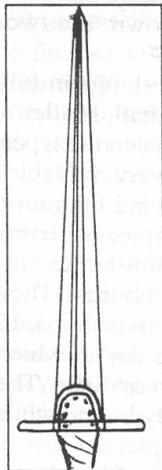


Figure 3

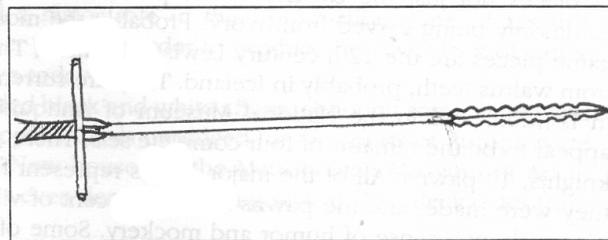


Figure 6 16th century boar sword. After Ried.

