



Maciejowski Falchion

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Introduction

Falchions are established weapons in the 13th century, including extant items and evidence of their existence in manuscripts (a separate document treat the 13th Century Falchion in general). Two distinct blade designs can mainly be found in manuscripts in that period:



Figure 1 – Type 1a Falchion (Elmslie Typology)



Figure 2 – Type 1 or 2 Falchion (Elmslie Typology) (Note: The sharp edge of the Type 1d and Type 2 Falchions is the bottom edge. The initial picture showed the sharp edge up, which is not a conventional way of representing bladed weapons. Therefore, the picture has been flipped upside down for consistency with the Type 1a picture)

The “falchion”[†] that can also be found in the Maciejowski Bible (The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Ms M. 638) however does not have the typical blade shape of these more common designs:

[†] Some weapon experts would be more willing to call it a “proto-messer” due to its closeness to 15th century German messer design.



Figure 3 - Maciejowski Bible, *The Philistines Outfoxed; Samson's Surrender; One against a Thousand*" (Folio 14v).

A different handle (apparently as a two-handed weapon) with the same blade design can also be found in the same manuscript:



A key characteristic of the blade is the presence of several spikes on what is obviously the blunt side of the blade (it has been classed as a Type 1c in the Elmslie Typology). The role of these spikes is not clear, presumably aiming to pierce maille armour or puncture helmets.

The Maciejowski Bible is a manuscript dated ca. 1250, created in France and representing biblical scenes. The author(s) therefore clearly knew they represented scenes from some distant past and from some distant land (the holy land) with clearly dramatic differences in styles for weapons and armour. Interestingly, this blade type appears 23 times[‡] in the manuscript (by comparison, battle

[‡] Folio: 3r, 3v x 2, 10r, 10v, 11r, 14v x 2, 15r, 15v, 16r x 2, 16v, 17r, 24v, 27v, 32v, 33v, 34r, 34v, 35r, 39r, 41r.



axes are depicted 57 times[§] and maces 6 times^{**}), both in the foreground and in the background, suggesting the weapon was considered as being of common use by the author(s). Also of notes is the fact that the weapon appears in two different places:

- the soldier carrying it is hidden and the falchion appears in the background, sometimes only part of the blade sticking out behind the soldiers,
- the falchion is used by a soldier in the foreground.

These two types are depicted on the same image:



When the weapon appears in the foreground, it is never held by a soldier in full maille armour but only by soldiers protected by a gambeson, so presumably of low rank. When the weapon is depicted in the background, it is never clear if the soldier holding it is in full maille armour or not. When depicted in the background, the falchion is often depicted alongside other cheaper weapons such as club, spears and axes. It can be hypothesised that the soldiers holding it in the background is considered by the author(s) of the manuscript as being of lower importance, part of the army and therefore not knights but a low rank foot soldiers. Does this suggest that this falchion was considered by the author(s) as being a weapon for low ranks and not a knightly weapon (contrary to other falchions types clearly depicted as being used by fully armoured knights)?

The questions that arose in relation to this weapon are therefore:

[§] Folio: 3r, 3v, 10r x 2, 10v, 11r, 12r, 13r, 14r, 14v, 15r x 3, 15v, 16r x 2, 16v x 2, 17r x 2, 21r, 22r x 2, 24r, 24v, 25r, 27r, 27v x 3, 30v x 2, 31r x 2, 32v x 2, 33v, 34r x 2, 34v x 3, 35r x 4, 35v, 36v, 37r x 2, 39r x 2, 40r, 41r x 2, 42r x 2,

^{**} Folio: 16r, 23v, 24v, 41r, 45v x 2.



Figure 4 - Cluny Falchion, 13th century.

How sharp were the points on the blunt edge is opened to debate but it is more likely that they would be sharp if they would serve no purpose. Most replicas are designed with sharp spikes. Hence a consensus among blade smiths who created replica seems to exist. This consensus does not seem to have been challenged and therefore also seems accepted by weapon historians and re-enactors.

From the illustrations, an attempt at estimating their dimension can be made (see below), if we assume that the scale between the “falchion” and other items is accurately depicted.

One-handed Weapon



If we assume the visible part of the face of the bearer is 16 cm high (to just above the eye brows, author’s own dimension, height: 1.75 m) to be used as a reference object, we can give the following approximate dimensions for the weapon:

- Blade length: 57 cm (approx.)



- Overall length: 68 cm (approx.)
- Blade width (widest): 9 cm (approx.)

Two-Handed Weapon



If we assume the visible part of the face of the bearer is 19 cm high (to hair line, author's own dimension) to be used as a reference object, we can give the following approximate dimensions for the weapon:

- Blade length: 59 cm (approx.)
- Overall length: 87 cm (approx.)
- Blade width (widest): 14 cm (approx.)

If we assume the relative scales are accurate both between reference object and weapon and within the weapon parts, there are a few interesting observations. Clearly, the two blades are of similar dimensions. Only the handle makes the two-handed weapon much longer. Interestingly, the dimensions of both of the weapon's blade are very similar. This does not really justify going two-handed (going two-handed from a one-handed weapon, e.g. Swords Type XII and XIIa is generally a way to increase the size of the blade, hence its mass, for maximum damage, forcing the user to use two hands to effectively wield it). Maybe the two hands are necessary for effective control of the weapon made with a straight handle without pommel (and therefore with a mass distribution switched towards the tip), compared to only one hand needed when the "umbrella" handle is present.

James Elmslie



James is justifiably regarded by many as a leading expert in Falchion design. He has been contacted about the “Maciejowski Falchion” and he very kindly provided an abstract of his research to be published in the near future (images added by DT):

“While there are multiple depictions of single-edged weapons throughout much of the Morgan picture bible, most are simply “background extras”, poking up above the foreground carnage. However there are three distinct single-edged weapons which are depicted in foreground detail through the book: A two-handed weapon in “Abraham’s Vengeance; A Blessing” (Folio 3.verso) [Figure 5], a large, short-hafted glaive-like weapon used on horseback in “Victory at Ai; A Treaty” (Folio 10.verso) [Figure 6], and a single-handed weapon with umbrella-like grip terminal, in “The Philistines Outfoxed; Samson’s Surrender; One against a Thousand” (Folio 14v) [Figure 3].



Figure 5 – Maciejowski Bible, Abraham’s Vengeance; A Blessing (Folio 3v).



Figure 6 - Maciejowski Bible, "Victory at Ai; A Treaty" (Folio 10v).

Outside these depictions, however, we have several primary image sources:

- In sculpture, in a relief-carvings of the Milanese Porta Romana city gate, now in the collection of the Castello Sforzesco. [Figure 7, see Appendix 1 for further study]



Figure 7 - Porta Romana frieze, late 12th Century.

- In detailed illustration, the sketchbook of Villard de Honnecourt (BNF.Fr.19093, Folio 3v) in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. [Figure 8]



Figure 8 - Villard de Honnecourt, BNF Français 19093 Carnet de Dessins, Folio 2, France, 1230.

- In manuscript illumination, we see the weapon type in a Bolognese “Initial P with the Martyrdom of Saint Peter Martyr” in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Bashford Dean collection (Met Museum Accession Number:23.21.2). [Figure 9]



Figure 9 - "Initial P with the Martyrdom of Saint Peter Martyr" in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Bashford Dean collection (Met Museum Accession Number:23.21.2). Dated second half of 13th century.

- In another "Martyrdom of Saint Peter Martyr" in the Morgan M.72 psalter (MS M.72 folio 140r Belgium, Ghent, 1270-1280).



Figure 10 - Morgan M.72 psalter (MS M.72 folio 140r Belgium, Ghent, 1270-1280).

- Finally, we have a whole host of illustrations in marginalia of an assortment of documents: Avranches - BM - ms. 0150, folio 197v, dates 1260-1280 for example.



Figure 11 - Avranches - BM - ms. 0150, folio 197v.

All these examples are dated from between about 1230 and the 1280's with the exception of The Porta Romana gate sculpture. Its dating is uncertain beyond the fact that construction of Milan's stone wall and gates began in response to assaults on the city by Frederick I Barbarossa 1162, but there is no dating for the carvings, other than they were made as the final part of the construction of the gate. Despite all other evidence in art indicating dating of at least 1225 for these types of weapon, it cannot be dismissed that they do first appear in the closing years of the 12th century and the depiction on the gate is the oldest example.



The illustration by Honnecourt bears an extremely close resemblance to those of the Morgan bible, and is by an artist whose observational abilities are of a high standard. There is no indication that the soldier depicted is in any way fantastical, or anything other than an accurate representation of a normal soldier's equipment.

Initial P, and the Avranches BM Ms.0150 manuscript also depict the same style of weapon with relative accuracy, given their small scale.

And the Morgan M.72 illustration matches it in style, with a slightly different scallop end. What is notable is the geographical origins of these source images: Three from Southern France, one each from Milan and Bologna – just one, Morgan M72, is from north-western Europe. Now turning to the very small body of closely associated archaeological examples, with hafted hilts and the more common smaller types with the “umbrella” style terminal, the archaeological finds are from north Italy. There is a consistency of origin which indicates these weapons originate from the northern Italian or southern French regions of Europe. The depiction of the killing of St Peter Martyr in the Flemish example may be due to the association of the weapon type to his death. Later 14th and 15th century paintings all portray the saint with a weapon with the distinctive hilt shape embedded in his skull.”

“I feel that the Maciejowski style weapons are most likely to have fallen into decline around the second quarter of the 14th century, and are perhaps depicted in the Bodlean Romance of Alexander specifically for both their otherness, in the depiction of the non-Christian, and for their element of the antique. As such, I would be highly cautious to say that the lifespan of the Maciejowski bible style weapons was anything significantly greater than 100 years, from their first appearances in the 1230's, through to a decline and abandonment in the 1330's, with perhaps 10-20 years variation on either side at most.”

Further Research

One more illustration alongside the ones proposed by James was found:



Figure 12 - BNF Latin 1023 Bréviaire de Philippe le Bel, Folio 321v, Dated 1290-1295, Paris, France.



This weapon has fascinated re-enactors, swordsmiths and HEMA enthusiasts for a long time as they try to understand its function, its martial advantages and disadvantages and its historical authenticity. James Elmslie appears to have conducted the most in-depth research work on the topic and possibly uncovered all the relevant evidence that exist. It is therefore unlikely that new evidence will appear in the future (although not entirely impossible).

Recommendations

If the weapon was only represented in the Maciejowski Bible, its pictorial accuracy could be seriously questioned (as discussed about the strange appearance of some items, like “palm” trees). The fact that other manuscripts seem to depict very similar weapons, especially the extremely similar “falchion” in Avranches - BM - ms. 0150, folio 197v [Figure 11], one can safely assume that the weapon actually existed in a shape that is close to the one depicted in the Maciejowski Bible. It is possible that the author(s) of the Avranche – BM – ms. 0150 manuscript have had access to a copy of the Maciejowski Bible - they are dated about 10-30 years apart - and therefore copied the weapon design but that hypothesis does not seem highly likely (the early history of the manuscript is not known). Finally, the geographical location of the sources makes it more likely a weapon of southern Europe.

Our recommendation is therefore that a replica of that weapon could be used in 13th century re-enactment in northern Europe but also not to make it a commonly used weapon (i.e. everybody on the battle field using one). It should remain a rare and exotic weapon.

Key Elements of Knowledge

- Mainly called a falchion by modern re-enactors but this name is dubious.
- No extant piece is known.
- Very rare in manuscripts.
- Martial use largely unknown.



Appendix 1 - Porta Romana Frieze, Late 12th Century

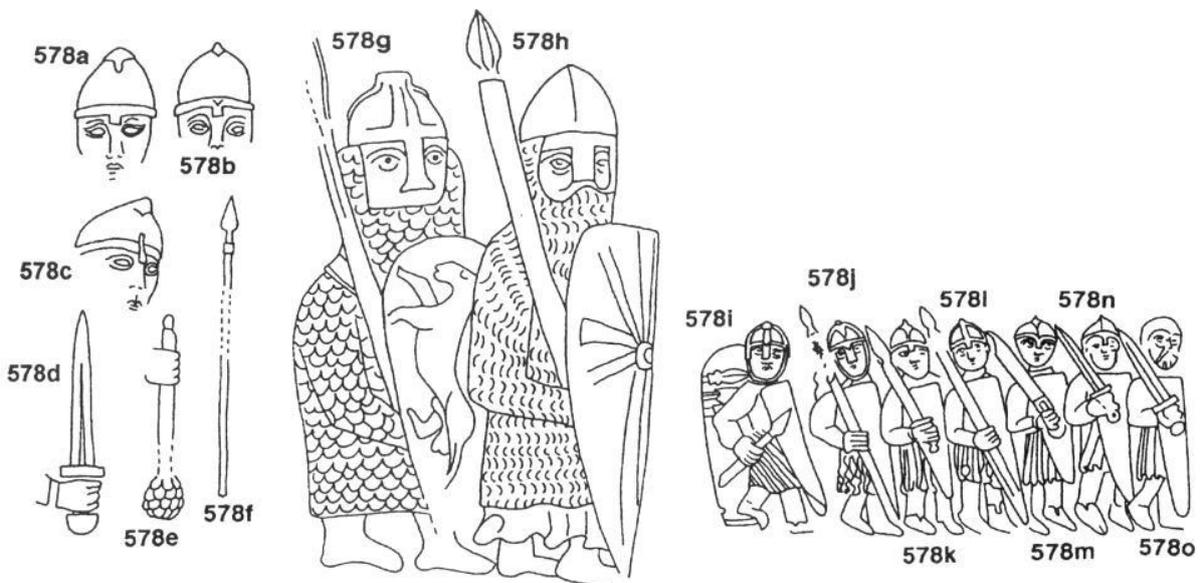
[Click for a detail of the leading figures of the Return of the Milanese on the Porta Romana frieze.](#)



A late-12th century frieze of 9 figures on the Porta Romana once in Milan (now in Castello Sforzesco), depicting the Milanese militia returning to their city in 1166 following their eviction by Frederick I Barbarossa in 1162. Of the 9 militiamen the front 2 are armoured and of the other 7; 4 carry spears, 2 have swords, and the seventh has a falchion.

Frieze of a romanesque capital from the (now demolished) Porta Romana Gate, from the inner circle of the city walls, built in 1171 and demolished in 1793. It portrays the return of the people of Milan to the ruins of their town, which had been demolished by emperor Frederick I, Barbarossa in 1167, and which they rebuilt in 1171. The relief is signed by a sculptor "Anselmus" and now stands in the Museum of Ancient Art in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, Italy, room 6.

Referenced on p219, *Arms and Armour of the Crusading Era, 1050-1350, Western Europe and the Crusader States* by David Nicolle.





578A-F Carved relief from Porta Romana, Lombardy, 1167

(Sforza Castle Museum, Milan, Italy)

The Porta Romana carvings are believed to show the Milanese militia. Most are unarmoured infantry (I-O) but some wear full armour. Two of the latter (G and H) might represent the city's aristocratic cavalry. The differences in their armour probably result from various ways of indicating mail *hauberks*, but the fact that the *coif* of one figure (G) bulges considerably beneath the helmet could indicate a padded garment or even some very unusual form of scale armour. This figure also has a slightly peculiar helmet, perhaps of segmented construction, with a splayed *nasal*. The other mailed man has an ordinary conical helmet with a *nasal*. Both have large kite-shaped shields and spears or lances. The less well-equipped presumed infantry also include interesting features. All save the bearded leading man have helmets with peculiarly small *nasals*. Some are segmented (I, J and L), others clearly not so (A-C, M-N). Most are pointed but a few are round. Most figures have spears and very large flat-topped, and in some cases round based, shields, just as are described in the written sources. Those nearer the head of the column have swords (N and O). One clearly has an early form of *falchion* (M) similar to a weapon on a comparably dated carving from Burgundy. A knobbed mace is also shown (E).