



13th Century Falchions

Author: David Tétard

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide a guide to falchion design in the 13th century so that re-enactors of that period understand the weapon and gain a basic knowledge about it, including some aspect of its handling for accurate combat display. It is also intended to be a guide to purchasing and using a falchion that is historically accurate for the 13th century.

History of the Weapon

Time Period

Falchions are one-edged weapons that appear in the 13th century and last until the 15th century. The blade design has varied widely over that period, with a few blade types being present in the 13th century. The design also was dependant on the region of use over these two centuries.

Falchions appear fairly regularly in medieval art, James Elmslie (renowned expert on single-edge medieval weapons) suggests that about 5% of weapons depicted are single-edge weapons. But, whereas there are thousands of extant medieval swords, there is barely 25 extant single-edged swords found in western and central Europe.

The earliest record of the existence of falchion is from the Milanese Porta Romana gate (see Appendix 3). The construction of the gate started between 1167 and 1171, its completion date is not known and consequently, the falchion depicted may date from the late 12th or early 13th century. All other artistic sources of falchions start in from 1230. That date (+/- 10 years) can therefore be considered the most likely real start of the appearance of the falchion.

These weapons are also clearly present in 14th century art but this is beyond the time period of focus here (for example L'estoire del Saint Graal, British Library MS. Additional 10292, e.g. folio 115v, dated 1316, France ; Romance of Alexander, Bodleian Library MS. Bodl. 264, dated to 1338-1344, England). A word of caution was raised by James Elmslie about their depiction in art in particular in relation to a 14th century manuscript, Romance of Alexander, Bodleian Library MS. Bodl. 264, dated to 1338-1344, England but that can also apply to 13th century manuscripts:

"The subject material - Alexander the great - and as such the equipment, though contemporary in style is depicting equipment of antiquity - and, in a similar vein to the depictions of "roman" soldiers



in biblical art, while much can be gathered from the depiction, it is important to have a degree of critical scepticism of its degree of commonality in general use. Single-edged arms appear to be used as a visual metaphor in medieval manuscripts so depiction of single-edged arms can be seen to repeatedly be used to identify the non-christian - be that the Islamic forces in 14-15th Century depictions of the crusades, Romans during the Crucifixion, Goliath and Philistines, or historical figures alla antiqua like Alexander, the falchion is used as a visual metaphor of the un-christian otherness of the subject matter. As such, while we can use some degree of depiction in manuscript to develop a better understanding of these weapons, we must also consider the context in which they are depicted, to fully understand the overall accuracy of the image's subject matter."

Geographical Distribution

The geographical distribution of the depictions of the weapon places its primary use in North Italy or southern France, with only one example appearing in Flemish art in the 1270's (in the Martyrdom of St Peter of Verona, so its depiction in that manuscript may be an intentional attempt to depict southern weapons). The appearance of the falchion in northern Europe must be treated with caution and probably only occurred rarely and from the second half of the 13th century. Contrary to popular beliefs, they do not seem to be inspired by Middle-Eastern weapons ("Brought back from the crusades"). Again, according to James Elmslie:

"... they are not Middle-eastern – it should also be emphasised that the whole "brought back with the crusaders" thing has absolutely no basis in fact and is solely supposition. Amongst the various areas of evidence that demolish that idea, is the fact that, given that mid-13th century date, the crusades had ended before falchions were really in use, and more importantly, the earliest known curved, single-edged Arabic sword is dated to 1297 – well after the crusades ended and also after the falchion is already established in Europe."

Users of the Falchion

Numerous re-enactors and medieval combat enthusiasts claim that the falchion was in fact a weapon for low classes/poor combatants and that swords only were a symbol of higher social ranking. One line of reasoning is that sword had only one purpose, killing people in war whereas falchions, much like axes, could also be used as tools (wood cutting for example), hence making them more attractive to less wealthy combatants (e.g. sergeants at arms, landless knights). However, this hypothesis does not seem to be supported by evidence. The Conyers falchion belonged to a family who owned land. Moreover, some medieval manuscripts show knights with expensive equipment fighting with a falchion in the 14th century (see for example Figure 1 and throughout this document).



Figure 1 - Peers and commoners fighting - The Holkham Bible Picture Book (c.1320-1330), f.40 - BL Add MS 47682.

Use of the Falchion in Combat

Misconception about the design and use of falchion are that it was a “combination of an axe and a sword”, that they were designed to specialise in “chopping”, that they were massively “top heavy”. All these are wrong ideas about falchions.

Falchions were designed to be cutting weapons, not chopping weapons. The analogy James Elmslie suggests thinking of is in terms of filleting knives rather than cleavers. This misconception comes from the analysis of their blade profile in two dimensions rather than in three dimensions ; in particular its distal taper is often ignored. Modern reproductions make the blade thickness constant across its width until the cutting edge where a V shape is created (Figure 2). This is not the way falchions were designed. A study of the blade geometry seems to indicate that the design across all extant weapon is highly consistent, especially the extreme distal taper from the back edge resulting in a very narrow blade cross-section (V-shaped). This results in a weapon that is actually very well balanced and is a powerful cutter (the mis-conception would be that the weapon would be tip heavy and therefore difficult to wield efficiently). This taper allows a lot of mass to be removed from the blade, making them agile weapons.* This taper also allows the blade to be optimised for a cut rather

* Modern replicas do not have this distal taper and are heavy and difficult to wield. This should be kept in mind when describing the weapon to the public.



than for a thrust (although some other designs started to re-introduce thrusting ability, see falchions of Type 1d and 2 below).



Modern Replica



Historical Weapon

Figure 2 - Blade profile of the historical weapon and of badly designed modern replicas.

The focus on cutting in falchion design with no thrusting ability (for earlier design like Type 1a, see below) implies that they were not designed to fight against armoured opponents (maille hauberks in the 13th century, elements of plate armour in the 14th century) but against opponents wearing only clothing or textile-based padded armour (e.g. gambeson). But then this suggestion raises a puzzling question: why would so many knights be depicted fighting their armoured peers with falchions (see Figure 9 and Figure 10 for example) if they were ineffective weapons (see below), why would they chose to bring that unsuitable weapon to the fight against maille armour if they could afford to own a sword with thrusting ability?

Other Expert Opinions

Matt Easton (Schola Gladiatoria) has released several videos capturing his thoughts on the use of falchions:

- [Medieval falchions were not like battle axes](#)
In that video, Matt talks about the Type 1a falchion (prominent in the 13th century but that lasted until the 14th century). He claims that nobody knows exactly how this type of falchion was used, even James Elmslie. Matt however has some hypotheses to suggest. Due to its handling characteristics, the weapon was probably best used in combination with a heater shield (his assertions are not fully supported by the examples of manuscripts below where no heater shield is depicted). It is clearly not a thrusting weapon (swords are better for that) but it is instead a chopping weapon. Because of its ineffectiveness against armoured knights, the most likely targets are unarmoured combatants (e.g. peasant levies). Also, Matt thinks that the weapon was a knightly weapon (this is supported by the manuscript where fully armoured knights are the ones depicted using the falchion).
- [Falchion and shield - cutting and chatting](#)
Using HEMA techniques to try and study the movements and cutting ability of the falchion, with and without a shield.

Shadiversity has also a series of videos about the weapon:

- [The TRUTH about the FALCHION and MESSER, part 1: Introduction](#)
- [The TRUTH about the FALCHION and MESSER, part 2: What's the difference?](#)
Discusses the fact that messers and falchions are one and the same weapon, varying only in the design of the handle and pommel.



- [The TRUTH about the FALCHION and MESSER, part 3: Where do they come from?](#)
In the first few minutes of the video, discusses the origin of the weapons, the fact that they appear to be independent development rather than derived from Seax (NB: The bulk of the video is about the origin of messers that are outside our period of interest).
- [The TRUTH about the FALCHION and MESSER, part 4: The real swords](#)
A discussion on the blade distal taper in relation to the intended cutting ability of the falchion.
- [The TRUTH about the FALCHION and MESSER, part 5: The Elmslie Typology](#)
A description of the different blade designs as classified by James Elmslie but unfortunately no discussion on the time period for these designs.

Roland Warzecha

- [The Falchion: Possible Purpose of its Design](#)
Discussion of the use of a type 2 falchion and how the inward bend at the tip can be used to hook an opponent weapon to control it.

Falchion Types in the 13th Century

Contrary to swords that have been classified according to blade type (e.g. Oakeshott Typology), in-depth classification of single-edged weapons by James Elmslie has not yet been released. Until such a scholarly classification is available, the following guide remains tentative. The typology created by James Elmslie spans the whole of falchion designs and a graphical representation is already available (Figure 3).

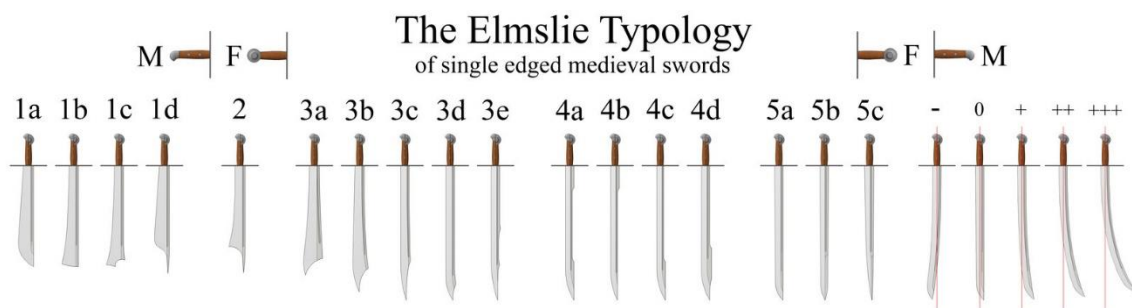


Figure 3 - Elmslie Typology

Three main types of falchion have been identified in the 13th century as classified from their blade[†]: Type 1a, Type 1d/Type 2 and a tentatively assigned Type 5a.

Note: contemporary images of falchions of the three relevant types have been added below for illustration. Further examples can be found here:

http://manuscriptminiatures.com/search/?year=1200&year_end=1350&tags=falchion%2CFalchion&institution=&manuscript=

[†] The exotic-looking so-called “Maciejowski Falchion” with the umbrella handle and spiky blade (Type 1c) is covered in a separate document.



Type 1a

This type has a blade that resembles that of a machete, i.e. the blade flares up at the tip. Several extant falchions of this type dated from the 13th century exist:



Figure 4 – Type 1a falchion exemplified by the Cluny Falchion, dated 13th century.

The Conyers Falchion is held at Durham Cathedral (an in-depth study can be found [here](#) and reproduced in Appendix 2):



Figure 5 – The Conyers Falchion, Durham Cathedral.

Another two examples of 13th century falchions alongside the Conyers falchion are also depicted below, showing sword-like pommels and cross:

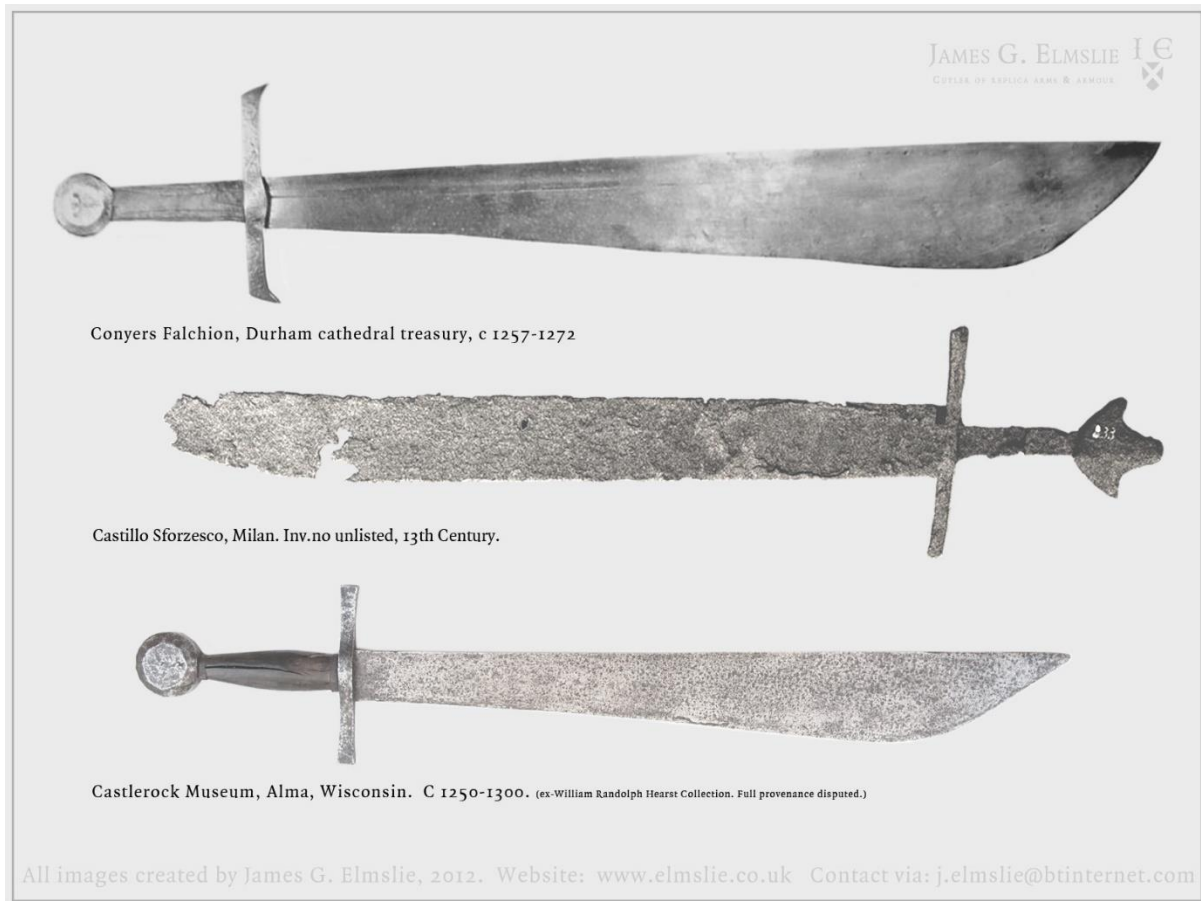


Figure 6 – Three 13th century falchions of type 1a.

Further extant pieces can be found on [Pinterest](https://www.pinterest.com) but their provenance can sometimes be questioned.

Various depictions also exist in manuscripts:



Figure 7 - Beinecke MS.229 Arthurian Romances, Folio 031r, France, 1275-1300



Figure 8 - BNF Français 2630 History of Outremer, Folio 111v, France, 1250.



Figure 9 - BNF Français 2630 History of Outremer, Folio 198v, France, 1250. Note that here, a Type 1a falchion (no thrusting ability) is clearly used against opponents in maille armour. Why would a knight bring a wrong weapon that is known to be ineffective to that fight?



Figure 10 - BNF Français 95 Histoire du Saint Graal / Histoire de Merlin, Folio 270v, dated 1280-1290, Northern France. Note here a two-handed version of a Type 1a falchion used against an opponent wearing maille armour.



Figure 11 - [Boulogne-sur-Mer BM MS.192](#), Folio 293r, Dated 1275-1350, France (exact location unknown).

These weapons fall from popularity in the 1310-1320 period, being replaced by narrower-profiled blades with clipped points (Type 1d, Type 2).

Type 1d and Type 2

This type of blade is characterised by a pronounced point on the back edge creating a greater ability as a thrusting weapon, possibly designed to penetrate maille armour. They seem to have appeared in the last quarter of the 13th century, possibly as an evolution of Type 1a.



Figure 12 - Falchion of type 1d/2. Note that the weapon is shown with the cutting edge at the top and the back edge at the bottom (reverse the usual practice of having the cutting edge bottom).



Figure 13 - Beinecke MS.229 Arthurian Romances, Folio 337v, Dated 1275-1300, France (but exact location unknown).



Figure 14 - BL Harley 2449 Prayers for saints' vigils with a calendar, Folio 019v, Dated 1275-1296, Netherlands (but exact location unknown).



Figure 15 -BNF 95 Histoire du Saint Graal / Histoire de Merlin, Folio 099v, dated 1280-1290, Northern France.



Figure 16 - Boulogne-sur-Mer BM MS.130,t.I, Folio 158r, Dated 1280-1300, France (but exact location unknown).



Figure 17 - Boulogne-sur-Mer BM MS.130,t.I, Folio 174r, Dated 1280-1300, France (but exact location unknown).



Figure 18 - [Reims BM MS.217 Missal](#), Folio 94r, Dated 1275-1325, France (exact location unknown).





Type 5a

This type of falchion has a blade that resembles that of a common knife, i.e. the profile tapers towards the tip of the blade as illustrated in the Maciejowski Bible:



Figure 19 - Type 5a falchion from the Maciejowski Bible. Interestingly, the depiction of the weapon seems to indicate an ability to cut through maille armour!

Because of the rarity of the depiction of that type of blade design in the relevant period, it is difficult to tell how widespread its use was, for how long this blade type was popular and in what region in Europe it was used in.

Recommendations

The recommendation is that the falchion should remain an exotic weapon in 13th century re-enactment groups with a northern European focus. It can be used by any rank from levies (battlefield loom) to wealthy knights. The main blade designs presented herein are all acceptable, type 1a and 1d/2 being the most representative.

Key Elements of Knowledge

- Several main blade designs in the 13th century, pure cutting type and introduction of a clipped point for improve thrusting ability.
- Southern Europe origin.
- Knightly weapon probably designed to fight unarmoured soldiers as an effective cutting weapon.
- The falchion was an agile weapon, designed for cutting and modern replicas do not accurately reproduce their design features.

References



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http://manuscriptminiatures.com/search/?year=1200&year_end=1300&tags=falchion&institution=&manuscript=

<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/davidtetard/falchion/>

<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/davidtetard/weaponsarmour-in-medieval-manuscripts/>

James Elmslie, private communications.



Appendix 1 – Experts

James Elmslie

James (<http://www.elmslie.co.uk/>) is widely regarded as an expert on falchions. Similarly to the Oakeshott Typology of sword blade, James has created a typology of falchion blades that is soon to be published. His input in this document is greatly acknowledged.

Matt Easton

Matt is a renowned HEMA instructor and edge weapon expert with tens of high regarded videos on YouTube in his channel [Schola Gladiatoria](#).

Roland Warzecha

Roland is a renowned expert in one-handed sword historical combat (especially MS I.33) known for his work under the banner Dimicator ([YouTube](#) and [Facebook](#))



Appendix 2 - The Conyers Falchion - Last of its kind?

The Conyers falchion is well known to all students of medieval weaponry. There are countless books that use it as a prime example on the falchion sub-type of swords. As there are just about half a dozen known surviving medieval falchions, most of them seldom depicted (not counting many Renaissance specimens), many think it's how the type looked. Study of period art and surviving falchions indicates otherwise. Still, the Conyers falchion is an important weapon and one with several fascinating aspects. I'm been fortunate to have been able to take a closer look at the famous Conyers falchion in the Treasury of Durham Cathedral in England.

Dragonslayer - the "Jabberwocky" connection

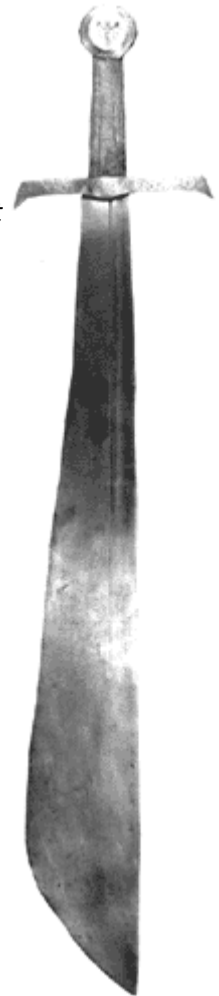
"Sr Jo Conyers of Storkburn Knt who slew ye monstrous venoms and poysons wiverms Ask or worme which overthrew and Devourd many people in fight, for the scent of poyson was soo strong, that no person was able to abide it, yet he by the providence of god overthrew it and lyes buried at Storkburn before the Conquest, but before he did enterprise it (having but one sonne) he went to the Church in compleat armour and offered up his sonne to the holy ghost, which monument is yet to see, and the place where the serpent lay is called Graystone."

(From British Museum MS Harleian No. 2118, fo. 39, circa 1625-49)

There's a legend surrounding the Conyers falchion, where the sword is said to have been wielded by Sir John Conyers when he slew the Sockburn Worm in 1063. The Conyers family probably came from France to England around the time of the Norman Conquest (1066 and all that). They were granted the manor Sockburn-on-Tees (formerly known as Storkburn) in County Durham in the 12th century, according to the legend because of Sir John's slaying of the dragon. The sword was later presented to the Cathedral of Durham and from that day on each new Prince-Bishop of Durham was presented with the sword upon entering their new Bishopric for the first time in the middle of the River Tees. The senior Conyers offered the falchion to the Prince-Bishop as a sign that he recognized the Bishop as his overlord, and then the falchion was returned to him and he was quit of all services. It lapsed after 1771, and wasn't performed in over 200 years. The falchion was kept at Sockburn Hall, but in 1947, it was presented to the Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral by Mr. Arthur Edward Blackett. The ceremony was revived in 1994, when the new bishop took office. It includes the following presentation speech, traditionally made by the Lord of Sockburn:

"My Lord Bishop. I hereby present you with the falchion wherewith the champion Conyers slew the worm, dragon or fiery flying serpent which destroyed man, woman and child; in memory of which the king then reigning gave him the manor of Sockburn, to hold by this tenure, that upon the first entrance of every bishop into the county the falchion should be presented."

The Sockburn Worm itself was almost certainly immortalized by Lewis Carroll in his famous nonsense rhyme, "Jabberwocky", as he lived in Croft on Tees as a boy and it was there he wrote the first verse





of the rhyme. There's a theory that the legend has its roots in the slaying of some marauding Viking chieftain, who made their raids using dragon-headed longships, but that would be a too mundane an explanation...

The falchion

The falchion is kept in the Treasury of Durham Cathedral. It is on display in a case in a dimly lit chamber, which makes close study a bit harder. Fortunately, the case stands in the middle of the floor, making observation from all sides possible. The overall length is 890 mm (35.04"). It weighs 1300 gram (2.86 lbs.).

The hilt

The handsome hilt consists of three parts: pommel, grip and cross. The beveled wheel pommel is made of bronze, featuring heraldic arms on both sides. It has a diameter of 42 mm (1.65") and a thickness of 20 mm (0.79"). On the outward-facing side (assuming the falchion is held in the right hand), there's a black eagle with spread wings, while on the other side the three lions of England are found. The 95 mm (3.74") wooden grip is made from ash. Like the pommel, the 168 mm (6.6") wide cross is also made of bronze. It is decorated with dragon motifs and is slightly asymmetrical.

The blade

The blade is 734 mm long (28.9"). It has a straight, blunt back and a curved edge. There is a shallow fuller close to the back, running about 75% of the blade's length. A narrow groove runs along it, curling slightly upwards by the end. There's some slight pitting and corrosion, as well as signs of wear and sharpening.

The blade is about 39 mm (1.53") wide at the base, widening to a maximum of 109 mm (4.3") about 140 mm (5.5") from the point. One thing that strikes the viewer is how thin the blade is. It is about 6 mm thick at the base, but the distal taper is rather abrupt; at the widest point of the blade, the thickness is just about 1.2 mm (0.047"), tapering to about 1 mm near the point. This makes the edge very thin, making the falchion a wicked cutting sword. When viewed edge-wise, there's a slight but noticeable warp to the left at the broadest part of the blade. This might due to a tempering flaw or something that has been caused by the thinness of the blade combined with hard use. Another flaw is a fracture, c. 50 mm (2") long and about 25 mm (1") from the point.

How old is it?



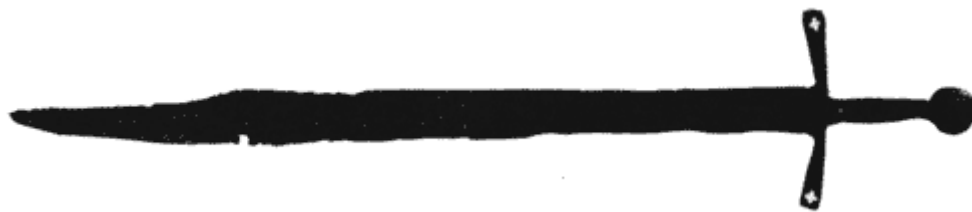


The legend gives no clue to the real age of the falchion, but fortunately the heraldic arms on the pommel gives us some definite hints. The three lions ("leopards") indicate that the pommel was decorated no earlier than 1194, when the three lions in the royal arms of England appeared. A similar falchion could be seen in a wall fresco (destroyed in a fire in the 19th century) dated to the later part of the 13th century in the Painted Chamber in Westminster Cathedral (right). Together with other depictions, it is safe to assume that the falchion was made in the 13th century. Study of the heraldic devices, together with general stylistic evidence, has placed making of the Conyers falchion in the years 1260-70, some 200 years after its alleged use in the slaying of the Worm. It is possible that it is a replacement for an older weapon, which perhaps was more like the Norse single-edged long-sax, but this is just speculation on my part.



The Conyers falchion - one of a kind?

I have made a small survey of about 25 falchions, both surviving specimens and swords found in contemporary art. Based on this, I think the Conyers falchion is not a typical representative for the general type, forming a small sub-class instead. The hilt is very much in the style encountered in other falchions and double-edged swords from that time, but the blade differs quite a bit. The majority of falchions had curved backs where that of the Conyers falchion is straight. The shape is different in other aspects, too. Many falchions had clipped or concave points, but the Conyers falchion has this straight back and very wide forward part, with a deeply curved edge meeting the back in a defined point. I haven't encountered this shape in neither archaeological material nor in medieval art, with a couple of exceptions: a German archaeological find from Hamburg shows a startling similarity to the Conyers falchion, and the falchion in the Painted Chamber (albeit with a slightly curved back). Still, it is apparent that it is of a style not typical for the absolute majority of falchions.



A typical falchion: the Thorpe falchion from Norwich, mid-14th century.



Falchion found in Hamburg.



Author's thanks

I would like to express my thanks to Mr. Roger Norris, M.A., Deputy Chapter Librarian of Durham Cathedral for finding the Durham Archaeological Journal article and the kindness shown me on my visit to Durham. Special thanks to Peter Johnsson and Patrik Djurfeldt for supplying some vital stats. Thanks also to Ulf Karlsson for sharing information on little-known falchion.

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Additional information was found on:

http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/north_east_england_history_page/



Appendix 3 - Porta Romana Frieze, Late 12th Century

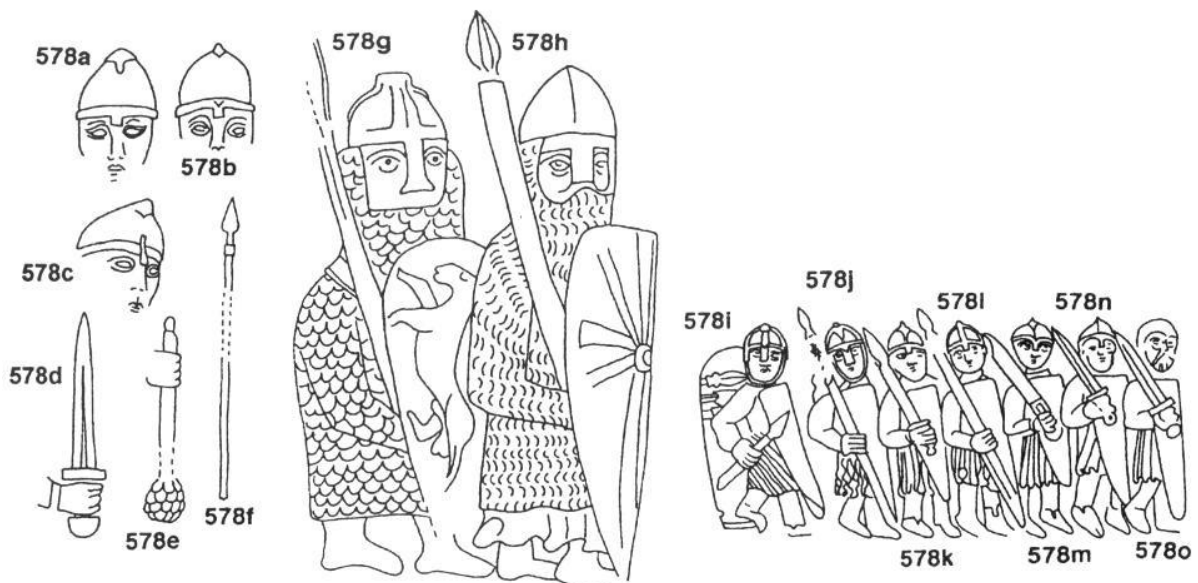
[Click for a detail of the leading figures of the Return of the Milanese on the Porta Romana frieze.](#)



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).