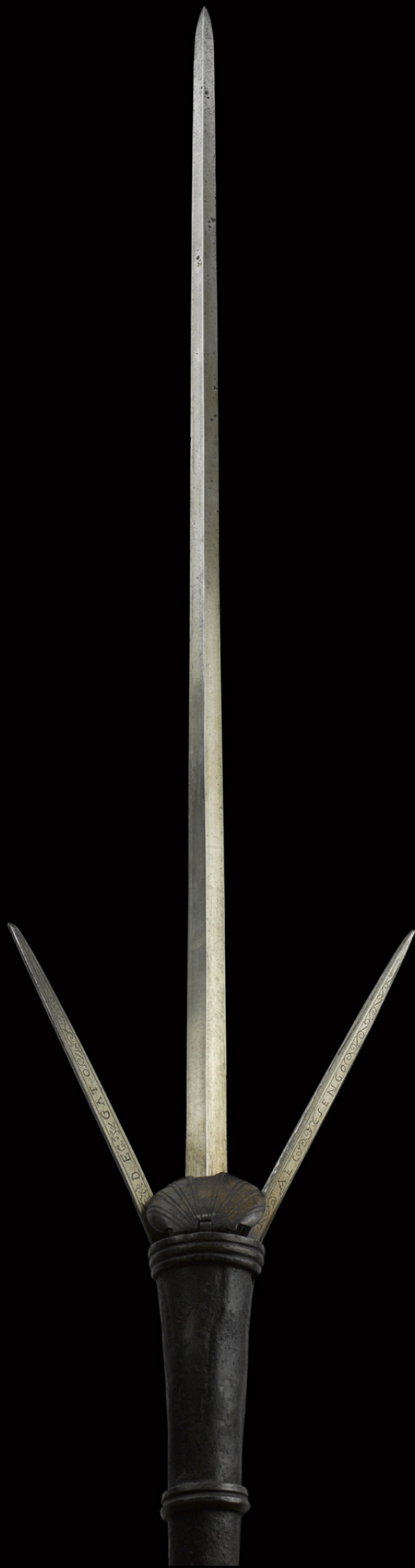


BUTTAFUORI AD ALETTE
CIRCA 1590



A Fine and Rare Buttafuori ad Alette, Milan, about 1590, Signed Al Sengo de Gato.

Total length when extended:	2170 mm (85.43 inches)
Length shaft (without lid):	1300 mm (51.18 inches)
Length central blade (visible part):	870 mm (34.25 inches)
Length parrying blades (visible part):	210 mm (8.27 inches)
Weight:	2740 g (96.65 ounces)
Clear opening length truncated conical part:	112 mm (4.41 inches)
Clear opening length cylindrical part:	930 mm (36.61 inches)
Clear opening length cone point:	213 mm (8.39 inches)

The shaft of this Buttafuori ad Alette is formed by a tube, made of an iron sheet, soldered with copper alongside the overlapping edges. Once the surface was presumably covered with leather that is now lost. This is also the case with all other known examples of this type. However compared to them the condition of the surface is very well preserved since it shows remainings of an old lacquer and has also cultivated a decorative patina. The pole measures 1300 mm and can be divided into three parts. A short truncated conical division at the top is followed by the main cylindrical part that ends in a pointed cone. With its original cone still preserved the present example is unique among the very few existing Buttafuori ad Alette. All other pieces of this type finish at the lower end of the cylindrical part. So even back in 1982 Dondi and Cartesegna raised the question concerning the true length of these objects, because the present Buttafuori was unknown to them, being still preserved at Hever castle at the time of their investigation.¹

To assure a sufficient robustness of the tube there are three iron enforcing rings at the intersection of the parts, described above. With their chamfers on the surface they had also a decorative purpose and visually separated the sections from each other. The upper end of the tube is closed by a strong iron plate which is secured firmly by the first enforcing ring. For the escape of the three blades and an arresting clamp there are corresponding holes in it. In the state of retracted blades these cut-outs are disguised by a lid in the shape of a scallop shell that clicks freely in a hinge which is applied to the tube on the side. It has a notch at the opposite end of the hinge to enclose the arresting clamp and respectively the main blade while it is

¹ Dondi, G., Cartesegna, M. (1982): I buttafuori, alias brandistocchi, dell'Armeria Reale di Torino, pp. 208.

existing. Both the scallop shaped lid and the arresting clamp show remains of the original gilding.

When the *buttafuori* is closed all three blades maintain inside the shaft. The most important feature of this weapon is the long central thrust blade. It has a diamond shaped cross section with slightly concave sides and is tapering to an acute peak, having slightly cutting edges. On the base there is a notch that is caught by the spring loaded arresting clamp when the blade extends completely. Inside the pole remains a part on which the secondary parrying blades are pivotably mounted at their base. So whenever the central blade is thrown out of the tube the two secondary ones accompany it and strut apart to the sides due to the guiding wholes of the strong iron plate that closes the tube. These blades are of trapezoid cross section and are signed *Al Sengo* and *De Gato* respectively with additional scrollwork for decorative purposes. The inscription is etched into the metal and corresponds to the one on the comparative piece in the Musée de l'Armée in Paris (Inv. K PO 507). Since the secondary blades are neither tapering to a very acute peak nor the edges are cutting it is evident that the function of these devices lay exclusively in parrying the opponents attacks in order to protect the hands of the person who held the pole.

So it can be concluded that the impact of this weapon is nearly exclusively caused by the central blade that is optimised for a thrusting attack and would even be effective to penetrate plate armour. The excellent quality of it argues for the thesis that *De Gato* ordered these blades from a specialized sword smith, whereas his Milan based workshop produced the other parts and assembled the weapon.

Background

The *Buttafuori* is a weapon that hides one or three blades inside the shaft in the normal state, in order to camouflage its nature as a weapon. By exerting a powerful and fitful horizontal movement the bearer makes the blades exit suddenly. After extending to their full length they are locked in position so the weapon is ready to be used. The type with three blades is called *Buttafuori ad Alette*, where this particular example belongs to.

Until today in the literature differing hypotheses have been discussed about the question who bore this weapon and for which purposes it was used for. Also the denominations have been quite confusing. Dondi and Cartesegna developed the term *Buttafuori*, after revealing that the Italian notion *Brandistocco*, the corresponding French word *Brindestoc* and the Anglo Saxon *Leading Staff* or rather *Swine's Feather* are misleading. The analyze of Venetian inventories from the early 17th century brings to light, that huge quantities of *Brandistocchi* are listed besides ordinary halberds and pikes. This leads to the conclusion, that *Brandistocco* and respectively *Brindestoc* mean an ordinary Italian pole arm,² rather than the weapon with the immersible blades, which was supposed to be quite expensive to produce.³

In the Anglophone literature the term *Swine's Feather* or *Leading Staff* still predominates and means a light pole arm that was carried by officers.⁴ This conception was presumably developed by Dillon⁵ and is based on a document dating from 1595. It is indicated in this particular source that a high ranking officer had the right to wear a lighter weapon. Misleadingly it was concluded that this officer's weapon must have been the one with the immersible blades. However in so doing it is disregarded that the *Buttafuori* is even heavier than certain pole arms. More recent findings show in contrast that this officer's pole arm was rather a *sponenton* or a middle sized pike.^{6,7}

² Dondi, G., Cartesegna, M. (1982): *I buttafuori*, alias *brandistocchi*, dell'Armeria Reale di Torino, pp. 208.

³ Dondi, G., Cartesegna, M. (1982): *I buttafuori*, alias *brandistocchi*, dell'Armeria Reale di Torino, pp. 205.

⁴ Laking, G. F. (2009): *A Record Of European Armour And Arms Through Seven Centuries*, Vol. III, p. 125.

⁵ Dillon, V. (1910): *Illustrated Guide to the Armouries*, Tower of London, plate 8.

⁶ Dondi, G., Cartesegna, M. (1982): *I buttafuori*, alias *brandistocchi*, dell'Armeria Reale di Torino, p. 207.

⁷ Askgard, F. (1978): "Swine - feather" or "feather staff" with musket rest.



Source: Amman, J., Sachs, H. (1568):
Eygentliche Beschreibung aller Stände [...].

An alternative approach is more convincing. The present Buttafuori ad Alette might have served St. James pilgrims during their journey to Santiago de Compostela as a weapon for self defence against armed robberies. With its two enforcing rings at the upper part the Buttafuori resembles noticeably a pilgrim's staff, especially against the background of the leather coat that once covered the surface. This appearance imitates the typical wooden pilgrim's staff that had two swellings at the upper end, either being grinded from the solid or carved into the wood, and ended in an iron peak at the lower part. The staff was a distinctive mark for the pilgrimage and had already been mentioned in the palmer's guide of the 12th century St. James book. There it is denominated a "third foot" that was to symbolize the holy trinity and let the pilgrim lean on it – not only physically but also in a spiritual way.⁸

From our present-day civilising perception it seems at first fallacious to assume that a pilgrim would have carried a weapon on his journey. However in former times it was a dangerous undertaking to travel since sparsely populated areas and forests offered numerous

⁸ Herbers, K.(1998): Der Jakobsweg, pp. 78.

opportunities for robberies. Albeit there might have existed a certain hesitation to assault a pilgrim it is evident that these instances occurred frequently and that the pilgrims also defended themselves fiercely. An unambiguous depiction of such a fighting scene is shown on an altarpiece at St. Nikolaus in Eibelstadt, dating from about 1490. As another clue the Deutsches Klingmuseum at Solingen exhibits a fragment of a pilgrim's staff that contained a thrusting blade of diamond section. This piece is different from the Buttafuori since the blade is firmly attached to the grip and needs to be pulled out of the shaft below (now missing).

Another feature of the present Buttafuori supports the thesis for its usage as a pilgrim's staff. It is the cover lid that is elaborately forged in the form of a scallop shell. As the emblem of St. James the scallop has served to signal the pilgrimage since early medieval times. These conches were acquired at the northern porch of the church in Compostela to have an evidence for the successful pilgrimage. On the way back home the palmer was able to ask for help and protection when wearing it sewn to his clothes. So in the 12th century people began to sell imitations of the shell as devotional objects, for example made of lead. These items were worn on the hat, the cloak or sewed on the money purse to convey the positive associations of St. James. Possibly these connotations were the motivation to apply a lid in form of the scallop to the Buttafuori. It might have conducted to make potential robbers hesitate, as assaulting the wearer of the conch was believed to be a capital sin.⁹

⁹ Herbers, K.(1998): Der Jakobsweg, pp. 78.



Altarpiece St. Nikolaus, Eibelsstadt,
about 1490.

Comparative pieces

Only very few museums have comparative pieces in their collections:

Royal Armouries Leeds (Inv. XIV. 16 – 18).¹⁰

Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nürnberg (Inv. W. 1616).¹¹

Musée d'Armes, Liège (Inv. MAL 10389).

Musée de l'Armée, Paris (Inv. K PO 507).

Armeria Reale, Turin (Inv. J267).¹²

¹⁰ Dillon, V. (1910): Illustrated Guide to the Armouries, Tower of London, p. 190 and pl. 8.

¹¹ Lewerken, H. (1989): Kombinationswaffen des 15. – 19. Jahrhunderts, p. 278.

¹² Bertolotto, C. et al (1982): L'Armeria Reale Di Torino, p. 372 and fig. 221;
Dondi, G., Cartesegna, M. (1982): I buttafuori, alias brandistocchi, dell'Armeria Reale di Torino, p. 213.

Provenance

The present Buttafuori ad Alette is presumably the last example of this type in private ownership. It was bought by Lord Waldorf Astor of Hever back in about 1900 and remained in this exceptional collection until it was finally offered at auction in 1983 by Sotheby's.¹³ Since then it has been in private ownership.

The private collection of antique arms and armour at Hever Castle was one of the worldwide most important that have ever been assembled.

¹³ Sotheby Parke Bernet & Co (1983): The Hever Castle Collection, p. 122.





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