



## **Rare Naval Commando Axe, Venetian, 2nd Half 16th Century.**

Length: 11,8 cm.

Weight: 270 g.

Open-worked, elaborately ornamented with grotesques by steel cutting and chiselling.

### **Background**

This object served as a commanding staff that was used by admirals of the Venetian fleet in the sixteenth century. In order to understand this function it is helpful to study the corresponding development of the knights and lansquenets fighting in the field. Here the mace developed to a sign of leadership that was raised to heaven as a signal for the troops to start the attack. The mace as a commando staff developed from a thrusting weapon. Since late gothic times and during the 16th century it had been a knightly weapon that was used to penetrate the opponent's armour. As a sign of rank and leadership it finally transformed to the truncheon that remained to be used until the 20th century. This development parallels the disappearance of the mace on the battle field.

A very similar role model was played by the typical weapon of the men on Venetian battle ships. In boarding combats the axe was the weapon of first choice as there were no opponents equipped with considerable plate armour. The space for manoeuvrability was limited and the rigging impeded the usage of swords. Hence the captains wore parade hatchets as a sign of leadership. This seems weird at a first glance since from our modern point of view axes are knee-jerk associated with the function as tools for wood cutting or as a simple rural weapon. However the present axe blade was manufactured by steel cutting and chiselling which is a very demanding craft. The steel was handled with small burins and hammers to cut the sculptures out of the hard iron. As this craft was very time consuming and required highly developed skills such blades were very expensive and could only be procured by high ranking and wealthy officers as a status symbol.

For the history of Venice as a wealthy centre of international trade that secured its power by a tremendous fleet, this axe blade is an important reference example.<sup>1</sup>

## **Provenance**

I. Frederik Muller & Cie, Amsterdam, auction on July 3rd, 1899: Catalogue des collections d'antiquites au Château de Heeswijk Musée Baron van den Bogaerde, lot Nr. 998 (sold on a later wooden haft that is now removed)

II. Collection Luigi Nessi, Lugano. This axe was shown at the special exhibition "Preziosen der Handwerkskunst. Ein Raritätenkabinett edler Arbeitsgeräte" at the Museum der Kulturen, Basel, Switzerland (20.4.2002 - 10.11.2002). It is published in the accompanying book: Wunderlin, D. et al (2002): Preziosen der Handwerkskunst, page 72 and picture on page 73.

The axe head is also published in **Nessi, L. (2004): Antique tools and instruments, pl. 66.**

## **Comparative Pieces**

1. Collection Rothschild, Waddesdon Manor.<sup>2</sup>
2. Musée de l'Armée, Paris (Inv. Nr. K 72 und K 73).
3. Real Armeria, Madrid (Nr. H.7)
4. Castello Ursino, Catania (Sicily).
5. Collection Marcello Terenzi, Rom.
6. Musée de la Porte de Hal, Brussels (Inv. Nr.VI.18).

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<sup>1</sup> Daenhardt, R. (1985): A naval commando axe, in: Boletim do Instituto Histórico da Ilha Terceira Angra do Heroísmo, Vol. XLII, pp. 147 f.

<sup>2</sup> Blair, C. (1974): Arms, Armour and Base Metalwork, pp. 225.





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