



## **A Parade Halberd of the Trabantenleibgarde of the Elector August of Saxony, circa 1580.**

Overall length: 211 cm.

Head without langets: 75,5 cm.

Maximum width: 32,5 cm.

The head is composed of a long spike of diamond section with ornamental cusps near the base and an axe blade, tapering to a down-pointed beak with a reinforced point on one side, which would have served for both penetrating plate armour by delivering a blow and for pulling an enemy off his horse. There are two auxiliary flukes for decorative purposes, a double one on the lower edge, and a single one on the upper, almost encompassing circles as an open work ornament. On the other side the axe blade swings out vertically showing a concave edge, again equipped with two auxiliary flukes. The socket is of square section and has decorative mouldings. Below it extends into four langets that serve to attach the head to the haft by brass capped and fire gild nails. The original wooden haft is of octagonal section.

There are extensive etchings all over the axe and the lower part of the spike in the shape of polished foliate strapwork on a blackened ground. In the center of the blade on either side cartouches comprise the coat of arms of Electoral and Ducal Saxony, respectively. Both depictions are etched and fire gild. This suggests a ceremonial occurrence as a cause for the design of this type of halberd and its use by those *Trabanten* closest to the Elector. The etching of the head is typical for South Germany and probably of Nuremberg manufacture.<sup>1</sup>

### Comparable Examples

- I. Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, Inv. No. W106 and W107.<sup>2</sup>
- II. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Inv. No. 278.<sup>3</sup>
- III. Collezione Odescalchi, Rome, Inv. No. 1665.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (2012): Churfürstliche Guardie, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> Müller, H., Kölling, H. (1990): Europäische Hieb- und Stichwaffen, No. 253, p. 255 and 392.

<sup>3</sup> Haenel, E. (1923): Kostbare Waffen aus der Dresdener Rüstkammer, pl. 69c.,

Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (2012): Churfürstliche Guardie, p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Carpegna, N. d. (1969): Antiche Armi Dal Sec. IX. Al XVIII, p. 67, pl. 403.

## Background

The term halberd, in German called *Helmbarte*, developed from the word *Halm* (staff) and *Barta*, meaning a broad axe blade. At the beginning this staff weapon could be considered a combination of a spear and axe.

Early documents allow tracing back the origins of this arm to the last quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when it first appeared in Switzerland. It became a staff weapon typical for this region especially during the liberation wars of the 14<sup>th</sup> century but also for the following two centuries. It was the battle of Morgarten in 1315 where this deadly instrument proved its effectiveness against the armoured knights of Leopold I. of Austria. So it became the arm of first choice for the Swiss who succeeded both at Sempach in 1386 and Näfels 1388. Due to its success the halberd soon spread all over Europe.

Why was this staff weapon so effective? The construction of it allowed a combatant charging a blow with an enormous amount of energy, a sword could never compete with. Due to the length of the haft its blade attained both a velocity and impact by far greater and could penetrate plate armour. For example, it was an ordinary warrior equipped with a halberd, who deadly hit Charles the Bold of Burgundy by splitting his head albeit being protected by a helmet at the battle of Nancy in 1477.

Besides hacking the halberd could also deliver effective thrusts in order to fight the armoured knight and keep the enemy at a distance. A fluke on the back side of the blade was added at about 1400 and served to pull the opponent off his saddle. It was also useful for concentrating the energy of a blow in an acute point and pierce armour.

In order to provide this functionality a complex construction of the head was necessary that can already be observed at the earliest preserved examples dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Several components were manufactured separately and joined. While the edges, the spike, the fluke and the nozzles that served to attach the head to the haft had to be forged of hardened steel, the axe blade was made of a softer iron. All components were welded together. By this construction it could be avoided that the hardened edges splintered when they hit plate armour.

Like other weapons also the halberd underwent a development in the course of time in order to adjust to improvements of defensive arms and changing fighting techniques.

The earliest type had a long blade and was optimised for delivering strong blows. At the 15th century the smiths started to shape a socket at the lower end where the wooden haft was inserted from now on, instead of the two nozzles which had attached it on the back side of the blade before. Langets extended downward that were riveted to the haft. Their function was mainly to provide additional stability and were not intended to impede cutting off the head, as it is occasionally written in the literature. Until the 15<sup>th</sup> century the axe's outline was straight, sometimes a little bit convex or even shaped like a half moon. The spike was edged on two sides and followed the extension of the back line of the head. During the sixteenth century the shape of the head changed, since the halberd was increasingly used for thrusting. So the spike became longer and was of diamond or square section, while the axe shrunk, its edge getting more and more concave. Also the beak got smaller. This development continued in the seventeenth century, when the blade often fulfilled pure decorative functions. Some examples showed skilfully open-worked designs, others, especially those manufactured for lifeguards like our present examples, were etched with extensive ornaments. The haft often had passaments, was covered by silk and decorated with gilded brass capped rivets. These weapons were not purely functional but also served for representative purposes.<sup>5</sup>

### **Excursus: The Trabantenleibgarde of the Saxon Electors**

It was Elector August of Saxony (1526 – 1586), who established the *Trabantenleibgarde* back in 1553. *Trabant* means satellite and *Leibgarde* Lifeguard. Against the background of increasing confessional tensions within the German-speaking lands it was considered a necessity to secure the regent by an armed guard permanently surrounding him, like a satellite orbits a planet. The Trabanten were the only soldiers constantly employed besides those, who served at the Saxon fortresses Königstein, Dresden and Wittenberg. Since the latter were called *Unterguardie* the lifeguard also was denominated *Oberguardie* to distinguish them.

At the beginning the number of guards was not very high. In 1553 there were only 20 under the command of captain Caspar Zipser and a lieutenant. One member was responsible for the alimentation, another for the maintenance of arms and one playing the trumpet. The guard was located at a room in the first floor of the residence in Dresden, called Oberwache, next to the

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<sup>5</sup> Müller, H., Kölling, H. (1990): Europäische Hieb- und Stichwaffen, pp. 41f. and 81f.  
Seitz, H. (1965): Blankwaffen I, pp. 221f.  
Seitz, H. (1965): Blankwaffen II, pp. 213f.

chamber of the elector. Normally the captain was responsible for supervising the entrance. Visitors had to ascend a tower in the northwest and were led to the chamber of the guards first.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was no lifeguard on horseback at the court in Dresden with the exception of a unit called *Edle Pursch*, whose members were exclusively aristocratic and came from the royal household. They accompanied the Elector during his journeys, like visiting the diet or unions with allies, on compassionate grounds or on the hunt. Besides guarding it was their task to represent the power and wealth of the regent. Accordingly their equipment and weaponry was very elaborate, impressive and expensive. The reason for establishing this additional unit as well as enlarging the number of ordinary guards was a shift in the foreign politics of Elector Christian I. in 1589. While the confession of Saxony was protestant he had previously refused to oppose the catholic emperor and collaborate with the other powers on the reformist side. This changed in 1589 when Christian assumed an alliance with Palatinate, Brandenburg, Hesse, some states in Northern Germany, France, the Netherlands and England, which was considered a provocation on the catholic side.

Increasing confessional tensions dramatically approved the necessity of a good lifeguard in a concrete occurrence, when William I, Prince of Orange, was assassinated by a catholic in 1584. Another specific aspect of importance for the Elector might have been the growing opposition of local aristocratic families in Saxony who did not agree with the centralisation of power by Christian.

Besides the permanent unit at the court and the *Edle Pursch* there was a third one with a civic context. At events like a marriage the number of guards would not have been sufficient for providing security. So there were temporary ones recruited from honourable citizens who served as *Trabanten* during these days.

## **Literatur**

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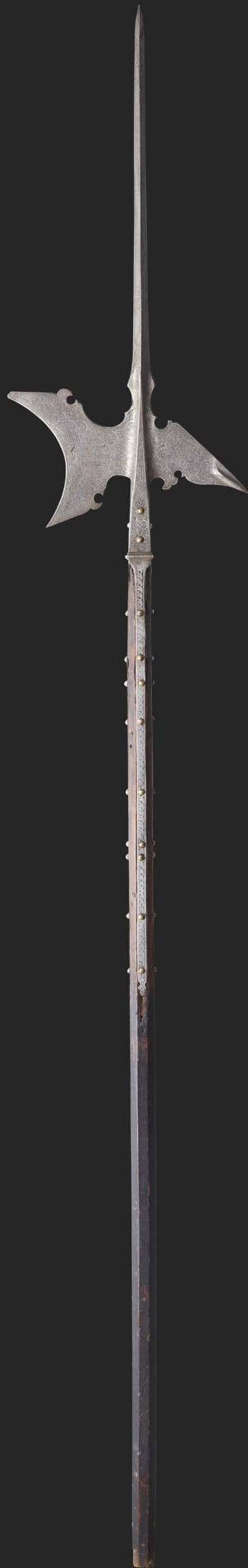
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