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AXE HEAD

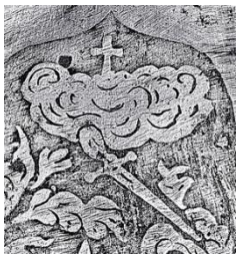
Saxony, dated 1647.
Length: 34 cm.
Length of Edge: 24 cm.
Weight: 2750 g.

Heavy axe head, decorated with etchings on both sides, depicting scroll work, Justicia and the dating 1647 on the left side, the Saxon coat of arms on the blade's right face, a cloud with a Christian cross above and a sword below, and the dating 1647 respectively. Several marks on the left side, unidentifiable due to the etching.

Background and Discussion



The etched depictions suggest that the present axe head was made for a judicial context, pretty obvious by Justicia, but also the cloud, that extends on its underside to a hand holding a sword and the Christian cross above. This symbolizes judgement on behalf of God, an indication for the theocratic model of criminal justice, still common in the 17th century. It is also clear, that the dating of 1647 relates to a particular event in the Saxon history since the corresponding coat of arms is etched on the reverse side.



These aspects raise the question for what purpose the axe head was designed for and which particular event back in 1647 might have been the reason. Various hypotheses are under consideration. From a functional point of view, the axe could be considered as a heading axe

used by an executioner. Beheading as a method to execute the death penalty was preserved for only the most important members of the society. Common criminals could expect to be hanged.

While in England the axe was the instrument of first choice for a beheading, in Germany the sword was preferred, often decorated with engravings or etchings. As late as the early nineteenth century axes generally seemed to have superseded the sword for this undertaking. So, is it reasonable to assume a 17th century Saxon axe being designed for a beheading? First let us have a look at the functionality, one of the most important criteria in judging arms and armour. From the technical point of view, both the executioner's axe and the corresponding sword served as a tool to cut off a human's head. For this purpose, it was necessary that these items had a certain weight. Furthermore, the balance point should lie near the fore end, which is automatically the case regarding an axe, but required specific blades for the sword, differing from those in field use.

Only very few executioner's axes are extant and the majority of these date from the first half of the 19th century. An earlier comparative example is the 16th century heading axe in the Tower of London (object no. XV.1). The weight of it including the helve is 7 lb 15 oz (3600 g). Since our present axe head weighs 2750 g without a helve, the weight seems about the same. Also, the shape is comparable and the length of the cutting edge. The Tower of London's piece measures 26 cm at the cutting edge versus 24 cm at our axe.

A lot more original executioner's swords have survived the centuries. These generally weigh between 1500 and 2500 g. So, regarding the

functionality, the present axe head might very well have served to execute beheadings.

On the other hand, as indicated above, axes were rather uncommon in Germany for decapitations, albeit not unknown. Instead, a sword was used, cutting off the head in a powerful blow from behind the kneeling delinquent. It might therefore be possible that the Saxon axe served for other physical punishments instead, like cutting off single fingers or a hand. For these purposes a sword would have been rather unpractical.



Source: Tengler, U. (1512): Der neü Layenspiegel, CLXXIV r.

Let us turn to the dating 1647. Can it give us a clue, what particular event the axe was made for and for what kind of purpose? 1647 was the penultimate year of the thirty years war, that had devastated large parts of middle Europe. Two historic sources, *Theatrum Europaeum* and *Leipzigisches Geschichtsbuch*, mention an interesting occurrence.[1] The Swedish colonel Wancke, who commanded a dragoon regiment of 500 men under the direction of general Wrangel, had planned to attack Dresden on his own account. Dresden was still an intact city with its tremendous Electoral treasures. Wancke planned a surprise attack with his regiment, murdering the Elector and his family and looting the city. One of his officer cadets, Hoffmann, was ordered to inconspicuously infiltrate the city with 60 men and stay in a house, from where he should open the town gate right at the moment the regiment approaches. The plan was revealed to general Wrangel, who immediately informed the Saxon Elector and sent soldiers in order to capture Wancke, who was then arrested at the Pleißenburg in Leipzig. Elector Johann Georg requested extradiction to Dresden, which Wrangel refused, declaring that this necessarily required discussing the issue in Sweden. So, a lawsuit followed at the Pleißenburg.

Wancke was found guilty of high treason and sentenced to death, encompassing quartering. This horrible punishment was a very rare occurrence, handed out for murdering a king and high treason. Cases are known, were persons were quartered being still alive, but in the majority of these, the body was quartered after the death penalty. The

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[1] Abelinum, I. et al (1663): Theatrum Europaeum, vol. 6, p. 36, digital version available at https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb10807444?page=80
Vogel, J. (1756/1714): Leipzigisches Geschichtsbuch, pp. 629 – 633, digital version available at https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb10003662?page=655

same in the case of Wancke. Before quartering his body, his heart was supposed to be cut out of his body wile still being alive and subsequently hidden on his mouth. Quartering was normally realised with an axe, as it was supposedly also intended in Wanckes case. Vogel mentions: "…dann der Leib lebendig in vier Theile zerhauen…"[2] (..then, his body blown into four parts while still alive). So, it makes perfectly sense assuming the present axe head was manufactured for the quartering of Wancke.

However, the judgement had never been enforced. When Wancke was confronted with the signed death sentence, he declared, that moving towards Dresden with his regiment was well-founded by the fact, his pregnant wife required this undertaking. General Wrangel decided, that he should be allowed to consult a lawyer and defend himself, while Elector Johann Georg requested the execution. Wancke and his lawyer were successfully delaying the whole case and finally the thirty years war ended in 1648, encompassing a general amnesty. Wancke left Leipzig with the Swedish troops and was set free.

Further hypotheses regarding the etched date 1647 are under discussion. It is known that instruments such as swords were sometimes manufactured for symbolizing power at court. This might also be the case with the present axe. The date 1647 could then stand for regaining the power of jurisdiction by the Saxon authorities after the separate peace treaty with Sweden in 1646. Alternatively, the birth of Elector Johann Georg III in 1647 might be related to the axe somehow.[3]

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[2] Vogel, J. (1756/1714): Leipzigisches Geschicht-Buch, S. 633.

[3] We do thank Dr. Maike Günther of the Stadtgeschichtliches Museum Leipzig for her contributions.



CAROLVS GVSTAVVS WRANGEL
Dominus in Schogclos ter Bremer Vorde et
Rosstorp Sac. Regiæ Maiestatis Regnorumq;

Both theses seem implausible to me. If regaining the power of jurisdiction by Saxony was really the reason for etching the axe head, it should be dated 1646, since it was this year, when the peace treaty between Saxony and Sweden was signed in Eilenburg. Furthermore, an axe as a symbol of jurisdiction seems rather uncommon. Normally, a sword was the symbol of first choice in this context. It is also unclear, why an axe with an obvious judiciary context should have been manufactured on the occasion of the birth of Elector Johann Georg III. It would make more sense to date a symbol of Justice with the beginning of his reign, which was back in 1680.

Summary

The present axe head is both of utmost rarity and importance for the Saxon history and the history of adjudication. Only few comparative axes used for beheadings or other punishments are extant and none of these can be related to a quartering. Furthermore, the context of 1647, which was in all probability the planned quartering of colonel Wancke, makes the object a unique one.



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