

Clad In Mail

The movies have left all of us with a strong visual impression of Middle-Earth, its protagonists and their armaments. But what did Tolkien actually have in mind when writing of Narsil, of Imrahil and Boromir, of the last Alliance, and of the Ride of the Rohirrim? Of course, no one can retroactively read/determine the thoughts of the good professor. Nonetheless, I think that choice of words and combinations of equipment in the books and parallels therein to texts the knowledge of which we can either take for granted –such as with Beowulf, on which he published- or assume with good justification to be known to him, because they were accessible and within his area of interest, or parallels to actual items left through the ages can give us hints what might have been on his mind. For this issue, I want to focus, not the least for space reasons, on the tradition of the Edain, the Númenóreans and their successor states.

One piece of equipment which Tolkien describes in particular detail is the Dragon-Helm of Dor-Lomin. I'd like to start with one of the pieces of equipment among the most detailed in description in Tolkien's works. While not originally made by and for humans, it is in their use and as one of their heirlooms that it becomes known. ~~The Dragon-Helm of Dor-Lomin.~~ „That This helm was wrought of grey steel, adorned with gold, and on it were graven runes of victory. ...It had a visor (after the manner of those the Dwarves used in their forges for the shielding of the eyes), and the face of anyone that-who wore it struck fear into the hearts of all beholders ... Upon its crest was set in defiance a gilded image of Glaurung the dragon“.
[„Narn I Chîn Húrin“, *Unfinished Tales*.] First of all, this description reminds us of the other helmets of the dwarves, said to have “battle-masks” as well. Such battle-masks, however, are also found repeatedly and explicitly in Beowulf, where they –like many helms in Germanic and Celtic tradition- have additionally been adorned with the likeness of boars. Not the least, however, we find such a helmet also in the treasure of the ship-grave of Sutton Hoo, excavated in 1939, and as an archaeological sensation surely known to Tolkien, an aficionado friend of Anglo-Saxon history. ~~Tolkien.~~

Let us turn to Húrin next, of whom we read “Last of all Hurin stood alone. Then he cast aside his shield and wielded an axe two-handed;” ~~“~~ [Silmarillion: Chapter 20: Of the Fifth Battle: Nirnaeth Arnoediad] This suggests two things: Firstly, that ~~he~~ Húrin had previously used a combination of a single-handed weapon and a shield, and secondly, that he abandoned these in favour of a two-handed axe. In this fashion, Tolkien describes a combat style fitting extremely well into the Anglo-Saxon/Scandinavian axis. In fact, on the Bayeux tapestry, a figure can be found, a shield at his field, a sword-sheath at his side, wielding the infamous two-handed “Danish axe” in battle. And indeed, the elite troops of King Harold Godwinson, defeated at Hastings by William the Conqueror, the “Huscarls”, while known for the use of this axe, their founder, Canute the Great, during his rule over England, had decreed that only those were to be Huscarls who could already bring a sword.

Incidentally, a similarity to writings set in much later a time is remarkable: The men of Lossarnach, found in “Return of the King”, „Leading the line there came walking a big thick-limbed horse, and on it sat a man of wide shoulders and huge girth, but old and grey-bearded, yet mail-clad and black-helmed and bearing a long heavy spear. Behind him marched proudly a dusty line of men, well-armed and bearing great battle-axes; grim-faced they were, and shorter and somewhat swarthier than any men that Pippin had yet seen in Gondor” [RotK: Chapter 1: Minas Tirith] Here, too, we seem to see the long, two-handed axe. Has so little changed in all those years?

Let us look at another comparison: Anduril and Boromir's sword. Of the latter, it is said "Boromir had a long sword, in fashion like Anduril but of lesser lineage and he bore also a shield and his war-horn". [FotR:Chapter 3: The Ring goes South] While Anduril isn't Narsil proper, it still seems that Narsil, too, was meant to be used in combination with a shield, just like Boromir's. But Narsil had already been used by Elendil, thousands of years earlier, but in fact thousands of years again after the First Age, when it had allegedly been made by Telchar of Nogrod. In key points, warfare thus seems to be described in LotR just like in the First Age. But we need not be surprised at this: In the reproduction of legends, sagas and fairy-tales, we often find a retro-dated technological level which the illustrator or author knows from daily life and uses to allow his contemporaries to better relate to the events. Thus, in medieval Psalters and Bibles, we find illustrations depicting Romans or Israelites as medieval knights, and even in Mallory's Morte d'Arthur, the author's-clads his characters in the armours of his own time. Tolkien, as someone claiming to be reproducing third-party material, might be imitating this stylistic device using not his own time, but one that he finds artistically fitting for the stories. While this would make information on the First and Second Age questionable for a "real" technology level, realistic level of technological advancement, as given that the texts found in the Silmarillion and related stories would be but back-projections, it gives us all the more information on what technology level Tolkien saw fitting for his stories and give us an end point for the technological development within Tolkien's universe.—

On a related note, One more topic I'd like to look at in this context. Repeatedly, time and again Tolkien explicitly describes swords worn by some characters explicitly as "long swords,"—they Such swords are used in combination with shields. It should be noted on the one hand, that historically, the term "long" was often used in context with swords as a synonym for "mighty" or "fell". William Appulus, for example, described the swords of German mercenaries at Civitate in 1053 also as "long swords", but we know that at the time, only one-handed weapons were used. Conversely, what has historically been known as "longsword" used in the movies for Glamdring, Anduril and others, is a weapon from the high to late middle-ages. This type of weapons, like that of the Witch King—which on Weathertop ~~however~~—was used in combination with the Morgul-knife—was traditionally used almost exclusively as a two-handed weapon. The only reason one hand would leave the elongated grip was to address the need for certain Solely for some wrestling or disarmament techniques ~~did one hand leave the elongated grip.~~ We know this as from that time,— unlike the early middle-ages—, several manuals survive ~~serviing~~ and serve as a theoretical basis for learning to fence with the longsword. They also show us that in those days, the term "long sword" was merely a description of length. It was a sword, and longer than what had until then be the usual length.

Thus we have two possible reasons to call a sword "long": An actual comparison in length or a metaphorical use. Which of these was on Tolkien's mind? To solve this riddle, I want to look at two pieces of text. At fFirst, let us look at Pippin presenting Denethor with the blade he got from the barrow-grave. While For example, while in the published text of LotR, indeed only uses the word "blade" is found, in contrast, "History of Middle-Earth", we find ~~that~~ actually, at one point in the development, the actual scene went like this a different description:

"Denethor says of Pippin's sword: 'Surely it is a sax wrought by our own folk in the North in the deep past?', where RK has 'blade' and 'kindred'. The word sax (Old English seax, dagger, short sword) was the final choice in the draft after rejection of 'blade', 'knife' and 'dagger'." [HoME Vol. 8: The War of the Ring: Part Three: III. Minas Tirith Note 16]

Now, the description of the barrow-blades as leaf-shaped definitely doesn't match that of the seax or sax, blade of the Saxons, which traditionally was asymmetrical and one-edged. But it is interesting to see that, at least at one point, this was what Tolkien had in mind.

Let us look now at the second piece of text, "The Disaster of the Gladden Fields" in "*Unfinished Tales*" which we will look at in more detail in a moment. Here, it is said of a blade that Isildur had still with him ~~and~~ during his doomed escape:

"This was of a kind called eket: a short stabbing sword with a broad blade, pointed and two-edged, from a foot to one and a half feet long."

Here, too, we clearly are not dealing with a seax. I would assume, though, that we are in fact dealing with the same kind of blade we were talking about just before, the one which Pippin presented to Denethor. But the true question is: Why did Isildur have this kind of sword with him to begin with? Why, if, as we read in the very same text, the Numenoreans had long swords, longer than those of the orcs, which they used in battle. It is useful to note in this context that historically, short stabbing blades were often used for the combat in tight infantry formations, as they were used by not only the Greeks, and the Romans, but also by some of the successor realms of the Roman Empire. These short blades, such as the Roman gladius, stand in contrast of the "spatha" which the Romans used originally as a cavalry weapon, but later ~~expanded to the use by infantry~~ became used by the infantry as well.

Do we here find precedents for the texts by Tolkien? I can think of two: On the one hand, we can find such combinations with the Carolingians. While these again reduced the "spatha" to cavalry use (thus making it the ~~weapon of the ancestor of the~~ weapon of the medieval knight) and used shorter blades for infantry combat, they also required their mounted warriors to be ready to dismount and fight on foot in formation at any time this was tactically ~~indicated~~ necessary. Thus, it was demanded of knights: "Ita ut unusquisque cabalarius habeat scutum et lanceam et spatam et semispatum" (Letter by Charlemagne to the abbot Fulrad, „Karoli ad Fulradum abbatem epistola“, April 806) ~~i.e. That is, aside from lance and shield, these warriors were required to be equipped both with spatha and "semispatum"; literally: a half-sword, literally. We know that, This shorter blade we know for the Carolingians to the shorter blade was generally either a~~ often have been a seax or sometimes a leftover gladius. The spatha thus was the long blade, and both were, the seax the short blade worn simultaneously, and used depending on the situation.

Does this mean that the Numenoreans fought like Carolingians? Most definitely not. The military history of the Carolingians has only been under closer scrutiny in the past few decades and differs drastically ~~off~~ from what people had assumed of the so-called "Dark Ages". As is told in "The Disaster of the Gladden Fields", the Numenoreans were largely an infantry army which used mounted warriors mostly as auxiliary troops, scouts and couriers, recruited—much like ~~the~~ Roman auxiliaries—from subjugated people. They also were infamous for a massive use of archers. Not only did they use shield walls, much like any people using a shield in organised battle, but they actually used aggressive wedge formations for breaking opposing shield walls and formations. This, for example, is also known from the Vikings, where such a formation was called "svinfylka," or—"the pig formation." The Carolingians, on the other hand, had a successful combined-arms approach, using cavalry and infantry as mutual reinforcement. ~~On the other hand, they but on the other hand~~ rarely used archers, focussing more on thrown missiles instead.

~~Continuing to look for~~ ~~But having looked at~~ parallels in the Roman Empire, we find ~~some yet~~ more: While there, at first, the gladius was used in combination with a dagger, the pugio, the actual length of these weapons varied significantly: In the first century AD, both blades were worn with 52 and 23 cm of length respectively. In the second century, only the longer blade remained. In the third century, both blades were back – but now with measured 75 and 30 cm! In the 4th century, finally, another type of blade appears in the records—called semispatha—of 30-40 cm of fin length. So here, too, we have in later days, the use of a longer and a shorter blade, of which the length matches the shorter end of the span Tolkien describes for the Numenorean Eket. Much like in Europe, the Numenoreans used two blades, of which the longer one, in the “real” world the sSpatha, prevailed.

One remark, though, is also necessary: Let’s not forget that LotR is told ~~us~~ from the perspective of the Hobbits, and thus we have to keep in mind that any reference to size and length might just be the personal impression of a tiny fellow from under a hill who found a relatively short blade in a barrow-mound.

Nonetheless, let’s look at some more historical parallels: ~~While we just said that~~ Although the Numenoreans did not use cavalry, we know that Gondor did at the time of LotR. When did that start? An obvious choice would be the time of Romendacil II. In the tale of Cirion and Eorl, it is said that during his reign, some of the Northmen, ancestors of the Rohirrim, were integrated into the armies of Gondor, including in important positions. It is quite conceivable that the task of these important officers was to create a Gondorian cavalry.

Having talked about weapons now for quite some time, I’d like to close by taking a look at armour. The title of this text alludes to a statement by Gandalf that among the people he was talking to were names worth more than a thousand knights clad in mail. The word “mail” comes from French “maille”, indicating a mesh. In contrast to quite common mistakes of translation and interpretation, “mail” thus historically refers only to chain armour. Gandalf uses the reference here as an indication of extreme power in battle. He would hardly use it, if “clad in mail” could easily be trumped by “clad in plate”. “Mail” as armour is quite consistently used by Tolkien all over, often as a “coat of mail”. These are found quite obviously in pictures all the way up to the first crusade, being mostly covered by other clothing or armour at later dates. Most famous, of course, is their depiction on the Bayeux tapestry, which Tolkien also uses as an indication of the Rohirrim equipment in a letter. On the other hand, many like to point to Imrahil’s vambraces as an indication for a rather late medieval level form of armament. This, however, is mistaken. Metallurgically-advanced people, especially those with extra-European influences, like the Khasars and their vassals, the Magyars, knew of such armour ~~prior to already before~~ the turn of the first millennium. And right where they lived, on the plains of the Dnieper river, lived Goths and Huns, separated by an area called “Mirkwood” in the Hervarar saga ~~or~~ Heidreks, which Christopher Tolkien translated into English and wrote his bachelor thesis on. ~~There is not the space in~~ It is beyond the scope of this text to elaborate the many parallels between the relationship of the historical Ostrogoths, and Huns, and the, Northmen, and the Easterlings, and they doing so would only lead us astray here. It is more productive to turn our attention back to the vambraces.

Vambraces ~~Returning to the vambraces, they~~ were mostly used with short-sleeved chain armour or a lamellar (a corslet of overlapping brazen plates), to prevent providing the enemy with an unarmoured target. It has been suggested //by whom?// that the Haradrim, for example, used ~~Some form of lamellar. This being the case, (a corslet of overlapping brazen plates) being suggested at least for the Haradrim~~ we should not be surprised ~~of~~ by seeing vambraces in Gondor. While historically, we also find armour for the lower arms described in

Carolingian records, none are left, and so we cannot tell what they looked like. It is safe to assume that at the least, the type of splint armour seen in Sutton Hoo was known.

In a way, even the title *of LotR Lord of the Rings* seems to indicate we're looking at the age of chain armour: In Beowulf, "lord of the rings", "hringa thengel", is used to describe Beowulf as the bearer of a coat of mail. Where Tolkien wants to describe advanced technology, he usually does not describe anything significantly more modern than the legends he draws from, from Beowulf to the Edda and the Chanson de Roland, but moves within the time frame set by these and their contemporary sources. Instead, he uses the levels within that time frame, and occasionally uses more advanced materials for items they were not used for historically that were not, historically, used. For example, Tolkien often describes, such as his liking to describe blades as damascened steel when their historical counterpart was of lesser material. Similarly, in the Hobbit, he describes how the Dwarves expanded the concept of mail armour to hose, historically also a another development which occurred much later than the introduction of coats of mail.

Thus, I believe that while Tolkien did not plant people 1:1 from our world to Middle-Earth, mixing even the very Anglo-Saxon Rohirrim with Ostrogoths and consequentially putting them on horseback, he did use within the framework of his sources, and described weapons and armour from a time frame that we could spans from the mythical time of Beowulf in the 5th ~~if or~~ 6th century to the Bayeux tapestry and the first crusade in the late 11th century.

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