

A ROMAN 'MARS-BARB' FROM BURGH CASTLE

by David Sherlock

It is only recently that it has been possible to identify actual examples of a type of Roman spear with a weapon described by classical authors. This is a *martiobarbulus* (literally, a 'mars-barb'), a wooden spear with a barbed and weighted head, also called for short a *plumbata* (a 'leaded' spear). Vegetius, writing in the reign of the Emperor Theodosius I (A.D. 379-395), states that infantry carried five each in the hollow of their shield, that there were men in two legions stationed in Illyricum who could use them so well they themselves were called *Martiobarbuli* and that they were so effective in dealing with both enemy horse and men before engagement at close quarters that they almost took the place of archers.¹

The heads of these sinister weapons (the wooden shafts are not preserved) can now be recognised in past publications of Roman military finds largely as a result of three discoveries in recent excavations at Wroxeter Roman town (*Viroconium*), where they have survived with lead weights and small fragments of wood.² Another example, this time from Burgh Castle (*Gariannonum*), adds not only to the distribution of *martiobarbuli* but also to our knowledge of how they were made and the military history of Burgh in particular.

In 1975 a barbed iron spear-head was found by chance within the walls of the Saxon shore-fort at Burgh Castle (TG/475045).³ Its total length is 15.8cm. It is square in section, tapering to a point with two barbs. There is a slight bulge in the iron about 4.4cm from the other end. Comparison with the heads of the Wroxeter 'mars-barbs' shows that it is almost identical to them in shape. It is however about 25% larger than the best preserved of the Wroxeter examples which measures only 11.8cm from the point to the further end of the lead section, and larger still than those from Richborough (*Rutupiae*) (Bushe-Fox, 1949, 152 and Pl. LIX, nos. 295-6) and Doncaster (*Danum*) (Selkirk, 1972, 275-6) forts, though smaller than a 19th-century find from Wroxeter (Anderson, 1867, 74 and Pl. XII) and a comparable one from Castell Weissenberg on the German *limes* (Fabricius, 1914, 42 and Pl. VIII, No. 88).

Neutron radiographs through the lead showed that the Wroxeter 'mars-barbs' were of 'split socket type, with some wood remaining *in situ*' (Musty and Barker, 1974, 276). And it would also seem to be the type to which another Burgh Castle iron belongs and which can now be identified as a 'mars-barb' (Ives, 1803, 35 and pl. opp. 34).⁴ To this method of joining shaft and head may be added a detail that can be obtained from the illustration of the 19th-century Wroxeter find which is described by the author as follows: '(The weapon) is flat-headed, and about 10 inches long; the nail which formerly held its long wooden shaft still remains' (Anderson, 1867, 74). In contrast, the recent Burgh Castle example, lacking its lead weight and wooden shaft, allows an alternative method of combining the three parts of the weapon to be suggested, as is shown in Fig. 20, *a*. Which of the two methods was the more effective is hard to judge. The Burgh Castle method would be speedier to make but without a nail the shaft might work loose more easily, especially if the surface of the wood was charred by the molten lead. In the Wroxeter method there is less wood exposed to contact with the lead and a nail would have held the wood firmly in the iron socket.

The size of the weight here suggested for the Burgh Castle 'mars-barb' must be regarded with caution because surviving leads vary in size and shape. So too must the wooden part; and a final judgement on the efficiency of the weapon as a whole must await the unlikely finding of a complete shaft. Meanwhile, experiments at the Tower of London Armouries with the making and throwing of replicas based on the Wroxeter heads have suggested an optimum length of about a metre for the weapon which could then be thrown a maximum of about 30 metres. At this distance they could barely have taken the place of archers' arrows, as

Vegetius suggested, but thrown with force at, say, 15–20 metres they could have easily wounded. Because the weight was positioned a little distance from the end, the barbed point was able to penetrate a shield and inflict further harm.

It is clear from classical authors that ‘mars-barbs’ were considered a part of the armoury of the infantry of a legion as opposed to that of auxiliary units though by the 4th century there was no longer such a strong distinction between legionaries and auxiliaries. How far this was actually the case is impossible to say from the few examples that have survived. The six examples from Wroxeter (recovered from several excavations) are only one more than a single soldier was required to carry in his shield, scarcely evidence to suggest the presence

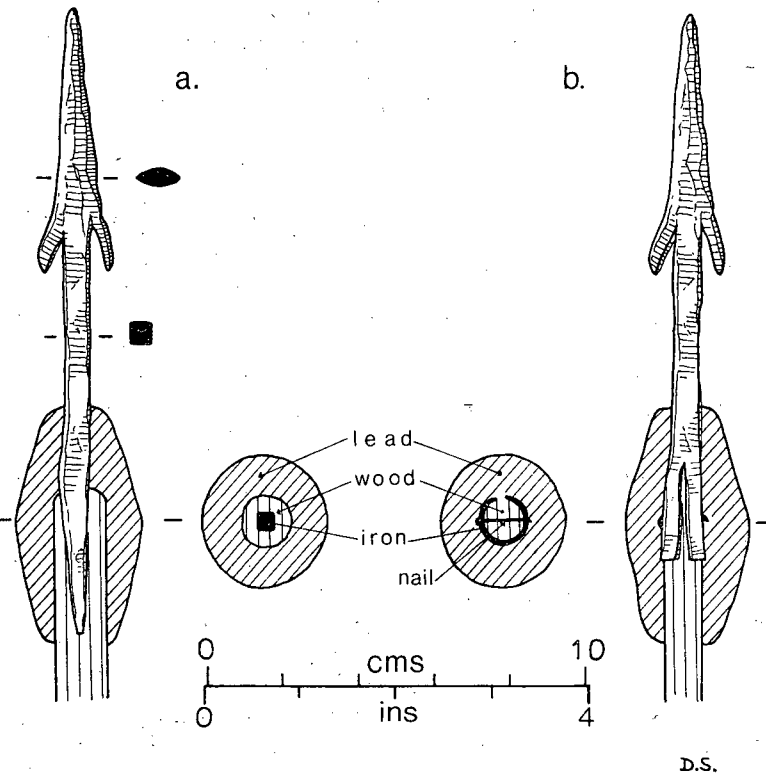


FIG. 20—Two suggested methods of manufacturing ‘mars-barbs’: *a*, the Burgh Castle iron inserted into end of wood; *b*, the same iron adapted with split socket end encasing wood and held with nail, in the manner of the Wroxeter examples.

there of Roman soldiers. Richborough is the only other British site to have yielded more than one. But if the literature is to be believed at all, then a find from Burgh Castle is even more surprising because the only force we know to have been stationed there was a regiment not of infantry, but of auxiliary cavalry, the *Equites Stablesiani Garionnenses*, recorded in the *Notitia dignitatum* (Seeck, 1876). Possible explanations for the presence of *martioarbuli* at Burgh Castle are that these cavalymen knew how to throw them, mounted and on foot, or, alternatively, that there was an unrecorded unit of infantry stationed at the fort. In support of the former explanation is the name *Stablesiani* (literally, ‘stables men’) referring, it has been suggested, to soldiers who were grooms or equerries and who were subsequently promoted

to form their own cavalry unit (Spiedel, 1974). But the possibility of the presence of an earlier unit there is now supported by new evidence from Brancaster (*Branodunum*), the next and last fort on the Saxon Shore. This fort, according to the *Notitia*, had a regiment of Dalmatian cavalry but recently a tile has been found there stamped with the name of the First Cohort of Aquitanians, an infantry unit first raised in Gaul and attested in the north of Britain as early as the reign of Hadrian (A.D. 117-138) (Wright *et al.*, 1975). The cavalry regiments did not arrive at Brancaster (the earlier fort) or Burgh Castle until after 274 (Hassall, 1977, 8-9), that is, after the forts had been built. Both are more likely to have been constructed by infantry units with more experience in Roman military building than the replacement cavalry units which, on the other hand, were better suited to patrolling the coast and estuaries of Norfolk and Suffolk in conjunction with the British fleet which the Count of the Saxon Shore (*Comes Litoris Saxonici*) also commanded.

Notes

- ¹ Vegetius, *Eipitoma rei militaris*, I, 17: 'Plumbatarum quoque exercitatio, quos mattiobarbuli vocant . . .' and III, 14: 'Quartus ordo construitur . . . de his qui . . . mattiobarbulis quas plumbatas nominant dicant . . .'. They are called more correctly *mattiobarbuli* by the later and anonymous author of *De rebus bellicis*.
- ² See Musty and Barker, 1974 and Barker, 1979. I am grateful to Mr Mark Hassall for allowing me to see the latter work before publication, and for helping me with this note.
- ³ I am grateful to Mr Maurice Rosie, D.O.E. Ancient Monuments Branch, for reporting his find to me. It has been conserved by the Ancient Monuments laboratory where it is now stored. X-ray photography shows that it was forged out of one piece of iron and that the barbs have not been squashed against the shank.
- ⁴ It was found in the field adjoining the eastern wall of the fort in the year 1756 in a Saxon cremation urn with 'several fair pieces of Constantine'.

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