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PLEBEIAN WEAPONS IN THE ARMAMENTS OF THE ENLISTED INFANTRY IN THE YEARS 1471-1500

One of the fundamental advantages of the enlisted forces system was the possibility of increasing the number of soldiers by enlisting commoners. This was mainly the case with the infantry, where noblemen served only sporadically and were mostly in the rank of captain. The rest, namely the chiefs of groups of ten soldiers and warriors armed with projectile weapons were almost exclusively common people. Banner review registers make it possible for a researcher to establish the social and national status of a soldier. Of course the registers contain mainly information about the arms and armour of the soldiers enlisted in the army. In the enlistment registers are numerous mentions of weapons which are usually referred to as plebeian. The picture obtained in this way cannot be complete, as only some of the documents, that is the ones prepared in the years 1471, 1477, 1496-1498 and 1500, have survived up to our times¹. The registers do not contain information about all the infantrymen who took part in armed conflicts that the Polish sate was engaged in at that time. Nonetheless, the number of over seven thousand soldiers, which is mentioned in the surviving registers, allows us to express a couple of remarks about the arms and armour of enlisted forces in the period discussed in the article. Moreover, I strongly believe that the results obtained in this way will build up a complete picture of the enlisted army of the last three decades of the fifteenth century.

I would like to begin our discussion on plebeian weapons by presenting the side-arms of the enlisted infantrymen. It should be noted that, with one exception, such weapons are mentioned only in the registers of 1471, which list 2327 soldiers. The commonest type of weapon used by the soldiers was the sword (912 swords are mentioned in the registers). Sabres were a bit less popular (821 specimens). In 1477, among the enlisted soldiers of Piotr Storkowski

there was a Matias Szary armed with *pawezka* (a little shield) *et framea*². According to dictionaries, the word *framea* denoted a pike or a spear³. Sometimes the term meant a sword or a weapon⁴. Here, however, the word *framea* seems to mean a sabre⁵ and it was most probably a sabre that the Matias Szary was equipped with. This conclusion stems from an examination of the registers of 1471, because the enlisted shielded warriors mentioned in those documents did not have any pole arms but side-arms at their disposal. Large, heavy swords with broad pommels called *szarszyny* and swords with narrow pommels used for stabbing known as *koncerze* were mentioned much less frequently. Daggers, such as *tylce* and *burderze*, were referred to only sporadically. Cutlasses are usually classified as a kind of weapon on the borderland between the long and short arm and are normally regarded as typical plebeian side-arms. The registers list eight cutlasses. Four soldiers had at their disposal little cutlasses, a smaller variant of the cutlass. All of them were equipped with projectile weapons. The cutlasses and crossbows were their only weapons. The name *chopper* is not used in the registers (this sort of weapon is also considered as typically plebeian), which might be evidence that in the Middle Ages the terms "cutlass" and "chopper" denoted the same weapon⁶.

² S 85, vol. 1, k. 11v.; see also: H. S a m s o n o w i c z, *Rota Piotra Storkowskiego z 1477 r. (Piotr Storkowski's Unit of 1477)*, Acta Nicolai Copernici, zeszyt humanistyczno-społeczny, z. 240, 1992, p. 159, where the faulty quotation *paveska et framea* can be found.

³ *Słownik łacińsko-polski (The Polish-Latin Dictionary)*, ed. K. K u m a n i e c k i, Warsaw no year of publication, p. 218.

⁴ A. J o u g a n, *Słownik kościelny łacińsko-polski (The Church Latin-Polish Dictionary)*, Warsaw 1992, p. 269.

⁵ J. S z y m c z a k, *Produkcja i koszty uzbrojenia rycerskiego w Polsce średniowiecznej XIII - XV w. (The Production and Cost of Knight Arms and Armour 13th - 15th Centuries)*, Łódź 1989, pp. 72-73.

⁶ *Idem, Cedula na sąd boży z 1511 roku (Schedula for the Judgement of God of 1511)*, Acta Universitatis Lodziensis, Folia Historica 44, 1992, pp. 120-122.

¹ Stored in the Central Archive of Old Acts in Warsaw, in the Crown Treasure Archives, section 85 (further cited as S 85), vols. 1-4, and in *Rachunki Królewskie (The Royal Accounts)*, vol. 16 (further cited as RA k. [leaf] 16).

The registers of enlisted soldiers do not support the supposition that cutlasses were very popular weapons in late medieval Poland. Besides, other arms registers, such as guild and municipal ones, contain no information about cutlasses. Written sources do not contain evidence that they were the most popular type of side-arm⁷. Despite their attractive price, the weapons were much less common than swords and sabres. Contrary to general expectation, the weapons were not as popular as the other two types of arms because they seem to have combined the disadvantages of the sword and the sabre. Thus, in contrast to the sword, the cutlass was a single-blade weapon. The shape of the pommel reduced the accuracy of stabs. Besides, the fast blows so characteristic of the sabre were out of the question in the case of cutlasses because the pommel was straight. All this seems to be the reason why enlisted soldiers were not very willing to use this kind of side-arm.

The registers of enlisted warriors generally do not provide much information about the owners of cutlasses and little cutlasses, who must have been plebeian soldiers. Two of them, Marcin and Miklasz from Ścibor's and Janecki's unit, came from Raciborz⁸. Marcin Rynek⁹ and Paulus Grodek¹⁰ were probably town men. The names of two others, Konik (a soldier of Mikołaj Brożyna's) and Oracz (belonging to Władysław's unit), suggest their peasant origin¹¹. Andrzej Holy¹², one of Ścibor's soldiers, as well as Girzyk, serving in Brożyna's unit¹³, and Blaszek, belonging to Ocharek's unit¹⁴, may have come from Bohemia. However, it is very difficult to establish the origin of a soldier exclusively on the basis of the form of his name. Two soldiers, namely a *Myasthomsky* (*Myasomsky?*)¹⁵ belonging to Grot and Matysz's unit and a *Michistawsky*, a soldier armed with a projectile weapon serving in Łojek's unit¹⁶ bore little cutlasses. It may be assumed that they were both Poles.

The last warrior armed with a little cutlass was Albert Cypurna, a soldier from Marek's unit. He is probably the enlisted private most frequently mentioned in the scientific literature. His popularity stems

from Konstanty Górski's works *Historia piechoty polskiej* (*The History of the Polish Infantry*), containing the register of Marek's unit. According to Górski, Cypurna was equipped with *pizschäl, pawezka a buzdyk* (*a pizschäl, a shield and a mace*)¹⁷. It is thanks to the above-mentioned *buzdyk* that Cypurna is mentioned in every study dealing with crushing weapons. The information proves to be important, as the mention is the only reference to this type of weapon found in written sources dealing with this kind of arm in the Middle Ages. Moreover, the mace is seldom depicted in iconographic sources and the original relics are scarce¹⁸. In Poland the mace became a symbol of the commander. However the question when this weapon started to perform this function has not been answered yet. This must have happened in the sixteenth century at the latest¹⁹. But some of the researchers are of the opinion that the shift might have occurred as early as in the first half of the fifteenth century. It should be added that this type of weapon was used mainly by the cavalry. Thus, the mention found in the registers of the enlisted infantry completely contradicts what we have known about the mace so far. How can we possibly explain the fact that a mace, which was a weapon hardly ever used in the Middle Ages and usually borne by a mounted warrior performing the function of a commander, appeared in the hands of an ordinary enlisted soldier? The answer is glaringly obvious and is to be found in the original text, which reads, "Albertus Cypurna pyszczel paweska a kordzyk" (Albertus Cypurna a pizschäl a shield and a little cutlass)²⁰. Consequently this is a clear instance of a mistake made by a researcher reading a source. It was committed by K. Górski and has circulated in the scientific literature for over a hundred years. Unfortunately, as a result of the above explanation, we lose the only piece of information about this type of arm found in medieval sources. In addition, there is no reason to assume that the mace was used by infantrymen.

⁷ M. Głosek, *Broń biała długa (Long Side-Arms)*, [in:] *Uzbrojenie w Polsce średniowiecznej 1350-1450 (Arms and Armour in Medieval Poland)*, ed. A. Nadolski, Łódź 1989, p. 122.

⁸ RA 16, k. 124.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ RA 16, k. 103.

¹¹ RA 16, k. 16 v., 13v.

¹² RA 16, k. 124 v.

¹³ RA 16, k. 16 v.

¹⁴ RA 16, k. 70 v.

¹⁵ RA 16, k. 5.

¹⁶ RA 16, k. 7 v.

¹⁷ K. Górski, *Historia piechoty polskiej (The History of the Polish Infantry)*, Cracow 1893, p. 212.

¹⁸ Only two maces dated at the period of the Middle Ages have been found by archaeologists, M. Głosek, *Późnośredniowieczna broń obuchowa w zbiorach polskich (Late Medieval Crushing Weapons in Polish Collections)*, Warsaw-Łódź 1996, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59.

¹⁹ A. Nowakowski, *Uzbrojenie indywidualne (Individual Arms and Armour)*, [in:] *Polska technika wojkowa do 1500 roku (Polish War Technology to the Year 1500)*, ed. A. Nadolski, Warsaw 1994, p. 213; M. Głosek, *Broń biała...*, p. 140.

²⁰ RA 16, k. 98.

Crushing arms were the most easily accessible kind of weapon. There were hatchets and flails on almost every farm and consequently flails are the commonest arms of this type mentioned in the registers of the enlisted infantry. We do not know, however, whether they were ordinary flails used for threshing corn or specially prepared battle flails. Five of the soldiers were armed with this sort of weapon. In 1471, in Marek's unit were two *flailmen*. One of them was Kuroploch, who was additionally equipped with a sword, a kettle-hat, a breastplate and a pauldron (*myszka* / a mouse). He was probably of Polish origin. The other soldier who took part in the review was Johannes Szram, whose arms and armour were almost identical to Kuroploch's equipment. The only difference was the helm, as Johannes Szram did not wear a kettle-hat but a sallet²¹. The names of both the soldiers appear in the register of Marek's unit published by K. Górski²². However, a careful reading of the document points to the conclusion that there was yet another soldier armed with a flail in the unit. Górski made a mistake. According to him, the text read, "Jarosch, lepka cysta, plach cirni, myska **cista** a myecz"²³. But the real sentence differs from Górski's interpretation: "Jarosth lepka cystha plach cyrny myska **czepy** (a flail) a miecz"²⁴. The next *flailman* was Jakub Kowal from Karwat's unit²⁵. The interesting thing is that the soldier did not have any other weapon, besides the flail. The last mention of a warrior armed with a flail is to be found in the register of Scibor's unit. This soldier, nicknamed Oager (Ogier? / Stallion?), was equipped with the same arms as the *flailmen* from Marek's unit: that is, *plach myska kapalín* and, of course, *czepy* (a flail)²⁶.

Unfortunately, the origin of those soldiers remains unknown. No village or town names were mentioned in the register. This might suggest that they came from the country, as the names found in the documents are mainly the names of cities.

Because of their defensive arms *flailmen* participated in unit reviews together with shielded warriors. The above-mentioned Jakub Kowal, whose name is mentioned in the register of Karwat's unit among the names of the shielded warriors and soldiers carrying guidons at the beginning of the list of warriors armed with projectile weapons, might be regarded as an exception here. A soldier's place in the ranks depended not only on the offensive arms he bore, but also on his defensive arms. All the soldiers equipped with flails except Jakub Kowal wore breastplates, arm defences and helmets. Thanks to this equipment they could go in front of the shielded warriors and make good use of their flails. Jakub Kowal, who was not protected by armour plates, had to hide behind the shielded warriors. This is why the register lists him together with the soldiers armed with projectile weapons, who had to stand in the back lines too. The task of the *flailmen* placed before the close ranks was identical to that of the spearmen in the units known from the registers of the late fifteenth century: they were to reinforce the defensive strength of their unit. However, if the number of soldiers armed with flails was too small, the task turned out to be unfeasible. This might have been the reason why *flailmen* were eventually replaced with spearmen.

It is clear that enlisted soldiers did not hold flails in high regard. Although they are sporadically mentioned in the registers, it may be assumed that they were not useful enough on the battlefield, especially because of the presence of soldiers armed with projectile weapons in the Polish infantry. A *flailman* was not shielded and therefore could not participate in shielding the ranks of soldiers armed with projectile weapons. He did not have any firearms and could not reinforce the firepower of his unit. Besides, *flailmen* were too scarce to reinforce its defensive strength.

Relatively numerous specimens found by archaeologists lead to the conclusion that the commonest type of plebeian weapon was probably the hatchet. The popularity of hatchets as offensive arms is not, however, reflected in the registers of enlisted forces. The only instance of the use of this weapon found in the registers is *syekira vyelka* belonging to Jan Scham from Scibor and Janecki's unit²⁷. According to the source, the hatchet was the only weapon bore by this infantryman. It might have been because of this untypical equipment that he was listed almost at the end of the unit (he is followed only by three

²¹ RA 16, k. 95.

²² RA 16, k. 95.

²³ K. Górski, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

²⁴ RA 16, k. 95. The mistakes made by K. Górski in his reading of the documents have already been discussed by J. Senkowski, *Materiały archiwalne do historii organizacji polskiej siły zbrojnej w drugiej połowie XV wieku przechowywane w Archiwum Głównym Akt Dawnych w Warszawie (Archive Material for the History of the Organization of the Polish Forces in the Second Half of the 15th Century Stored in the Main Archive of Old Acts in Warsaw)*, "Studia i Materiały do Historii Wojskowości", vol. I, 1954.

²⁵ RA 16, k. 137.

²⁶ RA 16, k. 123 v.

²⁷ RA 16, k. 124.

guidons, an unarmed soldier and a cross-bowman). One does not know today what this great hatchet looked like. If we assume that in the Middle Ages there existed both hatchets and battle axes, the great hatchet, according to M. Głosek's typology, should belong to type IX and subtype IXa²⁸. Jan Scham's *syekira* (hatchet) might have belonged to either of those types. This seems very probable as both the types of hatchet are among the commonest specimens on Polish territory²⁹.

Another kind of plebeian arm is the bow. The registers of enlisted soldiers seem to confirm the fact that the Polish army belonged to the western European military zone. The enlisted infantry of the Polish Kingdom regarded arbalests and, from the 1490s onwards, also firearms as superior to bows. Only two soldiers armed with bows can be found in the registers. The mentions date from 1499 and 1500 and may be considered the first signs of the spreading influence of the eastern art of war, which was to dominate the Polish military science in the sixteenth century. One of the bowmen appeared in the Sterniszczce unit register of 1498. His name, Borys, might suggest his eastern origin³⁰. The register of the unit of Łukasz Luboszwarski, a Hungarian captain, dating from 1500 lists the second Bowman, Jan Czarny³¹. Unfortunately, the origin of this warrior cannot be traced. According to the registers, the bows were the soldiers' only weapons.

In my opinion, the shafted weapons used by the infantry may also be considered plebeian arms. This kind of weapon is only sporadically mentioned in the registers, though it is known to have played a major role in enlisted units. However, pole arms are not present in the registers of 1471 and 1477. It is only in the registers of 1497-1500 that a new category of soldiers, namely spearmen, appears. In the years 1496-1500, they constituted about 15 percent of the units. Unfortunately, their equipment is only briefly described and the notes usually read only: a spearman's suit of armour or a spearman's suit of full armour, etc. Thus we have no information about shafted weapons, with which the spearmen must have been armed. The only explanation seems to be the fact that the registers did not contain any details regarding the elements of arms and armour. Only ten mentions of shafted weapons can be found in the

documents. As many as nine of them come from the Hannusz Szolc unit register of 1497³². In this unit the spearmen armed with pole arms can be classified into three groups: those whose names are mentioned in the register without any shafted weapons, those who had spears (two warriors) and those with *sulica* spears (seven men). Captain Hannusz Szolc himself was armed with a *sulica* spear, besides a spearman's suit of armour³³. Like their commander, the other soldiers armed with *sulica* spears were dressed in spearman's armour. On the basis of the register arrangement, they may all be considered the chiefs of groups of ten soldiers. The last mention of pole arms can be found in the register of Irzyk Buby's unit dating back to the year 1498, where served another Irzyk *sdrzewem* (with a pole)³⁴, which was the soldiers only weapon. No arms with multiple points can be found in the registers.

On the basis of those examples it may be assumed that enlisted spearmen used at least two kinds of pole arms, because two of the terms quoted above could have denoted the same type of shafted weapon. The author of the register clearly differentiated between the *sulica* spear, and the ordinary spear. Let us quote the following example: on the list Jan Pleban of Wodzisław in a spearman's suit of armour with a *sulica* spear is followed by Miklosz of Racibórz in spearman's armour with a spear³⁵. As the heads of particular types of arms did not differ a lot, the main difference may have been the length of the pole. Therefore the weapons listed in the registers are either short throwing spears (javelins) or longer, up to 3 m. in length, *sulica* spears³⁶.

³²S 85, vol. 2, k. 109 - 112; K. G ó r s k i, *op. cit.*, pp. 205-208, also with numerous mistakes. The register of this unit differs a lot from other contemporary registers, made according to the accepted rules. It contains very detailed descriptions of the soldiers' equipment (for instance, "nie miał kul" - "he did not have any balls") and even information about their skills (e.g., "nie umiał nabić rusznicy" - "he could not load a harquebus"), which are not to be found in other documents. Hence, it may be assumed that the arms and armour of H. Szolc's soldiers were described much more exhaustively than the equipment of other infantrymen.

³³K. G ó r s k i, *op. cit.*, p. 205, read wrongly: *Hannusz Rotmistrz w kopijniczej zbroi zupełnej z przyłbicą* (Captain Hannusz in spearman's full armour with a basnet), while the original text read: *Item Hannusz rotmistrz w kopyniczej szbroi zupełnej z schulyczą* (Item Captain Hannusz in spearman's full armour with a *sulica* spear), S 85, vol. 2, k. 109.

³⁴S 85, vol. 3, k. 89.

³⁵S 85, vol. 2, k. 111.

³⁶J. T y s z k i e w i c z, *Ostatnia wojna z Zakonem Krzyżackim 1519-1521* (*The Last War with the Teutonic Order 1519-1521*), Warsaw 1992, pp. 137-138. The register of losses published here lists, among other things, a number of spears, 8 grossi each.

²⁸M. G ł o s e k, *Późnośredniowieczna broń obuchowa...*, pp. 49-53; A. N o w a k o w s k i, *Uzbrojenie indywidualne...*, p. 212.

²⁹M. G ł o s e k, *Późnośredniowieczna broń obuchowa...*, p. 80.

³⁰S 85, vol. 3, k. 69 v.

³¹S 85, vol. 4, k. 124.

There remains the issue of spearmen who appear without any pole arms in the Hannusz Szolc unit register. The problem could be explained in two ways. The soldiers may not have had any shafted weapons at the review, because they had lost them in battle before.

The review registers clearly suggest that enlisted infantrymen, though commoners, were hardly ever armed with so-called plebeian weapons. This was the main difference between enlisted forces and levy in mass soldiers. The latter, who were to leave their farms instantly, would arm themselves with the most handy objects. They did not spend much on arms, because they could not afford this. Besides, a war expedition was only an episode in their lives (though an important one). They did not link their future careers with participation in wars, which was another reason for limiting the expenses connected with military activities.

The problems of arms and armour were treated differently by enlisted soldiers. The important thing for them was to find the optimal solution: that is to say, gather the best equipment at the lowest cost. In my opinion, the limited popularity of plebeian arms resulted from the poor quality of those weapons and consequently their poor effectiveness. This was probably the reason why infantrymen decided to set off on a war expedition with cutlasses only sporadically. Being professionals, they invested in their "tools", i.e. arms. Hence, enlisted soldiers were often equipped with more expensive arms of real quality.

The other and, in my opinion, most important reason for the sporadic use of plebeian weapons was the character of infantry units, which were mostly composed of soldiers armed with projectile weapons.

In accordance with the Latin European custom, the soldiers armed with projectile weapons serving in enlisted units used mainly arbalests, which were replaced with firearms in the late fifteenth century. Bows, which could have been the alternative type of arm, did not catch on in enlisted forces. Another group of soldiers, shielded warriors, could not use any other weapons but shields and a kind of side-arm because of their function. That was also the case with the third group, spearmen, armed with shafted weapons, who appeared in infantry units in the 1490s. The shafted weapons they carried determined their role and position in the ranks.

To sum up, an enlisted infantry unit constituted a compact whole. Its strength depended, to a large extent, on the cooperation of all the soldiers. As long as they stood shoulder to shoulder, they were dangerous for the enemy. In order for a homogenous unit to be formed, each of the soldiers had to do his best to fulfil his tasks. Therefore enlisted infantrymen were not given complete freedom in their choice of arms and armour. A single flail or hatchet was useless in a unit which was to remain in close ranks. The fact that all the soldiers performed concrete functions in the unit made them possess uniform equipment. Thanks to this enlisted soldiers were not a group of several hundred armed men but a homogenous and remarkably effective unit. In addition, the fighting technique of medieval enlisted infantrymen, consisting in firing on the enemy from behind a wall of shields and spears, resulted in the fact that their relatively homogenous arms and armour were not plebeian weapons and equipment.

Translated by Zuzanna Poklewska-Parra

