

The Sax

by Friedrich Giesler

The Germanic word “*sahsa“ (the “h“ is pronounced like the Scottish “ch“ in “Loch“) or “sax“ is possibly of the same origin as Latin “saxum“, the meaning of which is “rock“, “stone“, “cliff“. The object named “sax“ could thus date back to a Stone Age knife.

In the old Franconian language we find the kenning “skramasahs“ = “wound knife“ for sword. And the name of the Germanic tribe of the Saxons possibly is an abbreviation of “sahsnotas“ = sword companions. This could originally have been an association of warriors who worshipped the war god Thiu or Tiwaz, whom the saxons called “Saxnot“, their companion in battle.

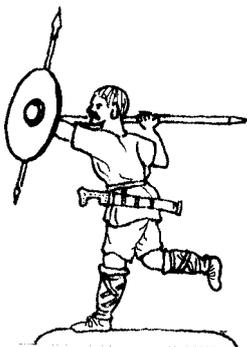
The name “Saxones“ for the tribe was first used by Ptolemaios in the middle of the second century AD for a tribe settling in southern Jutland and at the mouth of the river Elbe. The sax may have been their favourite weapon.

However, the short one-edged sword that was called sax and that could be used for cutting or thrusting, is found throughout the Germanic world.

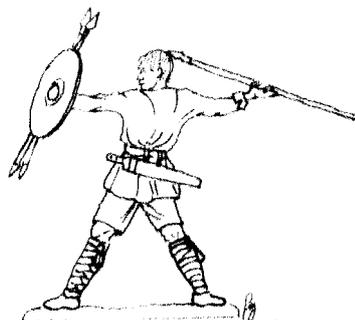
Excavations have brought to light different forms of blades and scabbard decorations. We can reconstruct that the Germanic sword was carried in a leathern or wooden scabbard that in certain periods was richly decorated. From the fittings that have been found we can gather that the weapon hung nearly horizontally at the body. The decorations of scabbards found in situ and dating to the migration period and to the 7th to 10th centuries AD show that the decorated side was on the left, which means that the weapon was carried on the left side of the body. Whether this is also to be assumed for earlier periods when Celtic two-edged swords in metal scabbards were carried on the right side is uncertain. If we imagine how a horizontally carried sword could be drawn, it is plausible that this weapon was carried on the left side of the body – after all it was no Celtic weapon but the typical Germanic sword.

The only depiction of a man with a sax dates to the 7th century. It is on a tombstone found at Niederdollendorf near Bonn. The warrior shown on it, carries his sax left in front of his body. On the scabbard you can identify the typical decorative rivets and a metal reinforcement on the lower edge. The combing of his hair and the oversized sword show that both must have been of outstanding importance for him. The rear side of the stone reveals that he must have been a Christian, though, perhaps still clinging to certain concepts of his pagan beliefs (cf. the Old-Saxon epic “Heliand“).

The drawings show Germanic warriors of the 1st century AD, on the left two warriors of Arminius in 9 AD, the other a Germanic scout of the Roman Army of about 80 AD,.



Cheruscan warriors, 9 AD



Germanic scout, 80 AD