

COMPTES RENDUS

H. R. Ellis Davidson: *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England. Its Archaeology and Literature.*

Clarendon Press: Oxford University Press, 1962.

237 pages, 4 plates, 116 line drawings. Price in United Kingdom: 55 sh net.

This is an interesting study dealing with the swords from Anglo-Saxon England. The main purpose of the book is a survey of the rich archaeological sword material from the British Isles seen — not only in the light of the important results obtained by modern science, such as X — rays, metallurgical analysis and technical experiments in the service of archaeology but particularly on the lively and variegated background of literary evidence such as heroic poetry and saga telling. Scientists, particularly in Belgium France and Norway, lastly even in England have revealed some of the secrets and legends which surrounded the reputed, outstanding sword blades of Migration time and early Middle Ages and their forgers including the other categories of craftsmen occupied with producing precious hilts and scabbards. The romantic veil of magics bestowed upon the swords of these turbulent days has been taken away. The facts have been revealed. At the same time attention has been drawn to a special category of literary sources in order to let us consider the swords in their proper cultural milieu. Still a certain romantic splendour surrounds this kind of weapons. Dry archaeology and gay literature fit well together.

It is a detailed examination dr. Davidson has undertaken in regard to the Anglo-Saxon swords covering the period from the end of Roman time until the Norman Conquest in 1066. Numerous investigations have been carried out. The author refers to the various opinions put forward by archaeologists in England and abroad, and brings

opinions of her own on various problems. A series of special examinations has had to be carried out in the museums of Great Britain and Ireland, and the author has opened to the reader many museums in her country and exhibited material more or less known or accessible. The book is well illustrated with a series of fine and correct line drawings made by Mr. R. E. Oakeshott, the author of: *The Archaeology of Weapons*, 1960. In her many sections Mrs. Davidson gives detailed examinations of the archaeological objects, not forgetting the difficult and often delicate problems concerning the inscriptions, for instance the runic ones, which certainly often may be just as magic as the later medieval blade inscriptions containing religious invocations. Latin inscriptions are to be found now and then. As to the swords with Ingelrii inscriptions I should like to add one excellent specimen probably unknown to most investigators, a finely preserved and well proportioned sword with brazil—nut pommel, found many years ago in the southern part of Schleswig and now in a private Danish collection. Finely inlaid figures as we know them from medieval blades have their forerunners already in the second century on pattern-welded blades, for instance a blade from the ruins of a Roman fortress in England, another specimen is known from Norway. As to the stamped marks the interpretation of them seems problematic. They may have something to do with the owner or they may possibly belong to his private store of arms, an early kind of arsenal stamp. I should prefer not to put too much symbolism in this kind of marks. One cannot deny the possibility of some kind of symbolism in some other stamps, e. g. the boar stamps.

Besides the archaeological investigations the author has undertaken diligent examinations of the literary sources, not only such sources as the early antiquarians and scholars, the Arab writers and scientists or the Anglo-Saxon wills. But she has drawn attention to quite another field of literature, the field of the poets and story tellers. Here we find a rich and fascinating material. Though an important part of this is dealing with the turbulent and «heroic» days of Migration time or shortly after, much of it has been written down in a relatively late time. It has to be considered with circumspection and criticism. As to the Anglo-Saxon swords of course the long poem of *Beowulf* is important. It has attracted various scholars, some of them from the days before modern science has revealed the technical proceedings of the ancient smiths. (Still the problems of this poem attract investigators, as we see it in e. g. the articles in *Journ. Engl. a Germ. Philol.* LIX, 1960 by T. Culbert and others). New is the extensive use of the Scandinavian sources. The author is just in doing so. During the last centuries of Anglo-Saxon time

the Scandinavian vikings, particularly from Norway and Denmark overflowed the British Isles and Ireland and erected kingdoms of their own. Quite a lot of viking swords have been found in these regions. The abundant evidence of Viking Age archaeology therefore is a great advantage for investigations concerning the appearance and use of the swords in the literature. The songs and poems were executed by scalds and bards—not unlike the Greek rhapsodes in the days of Homer—as entertainment at royal courts and in chieftains halls. Heroes and great kings of the past were praised and glorified together with their heroic achievements. Their precious, outstanding swords, often believed to have an individual and independent soul, played a great part in these songs and poems. The same did the extremely skilful, almost legendary smiths, who were considered masters not only of forging but even of magic power. Heroic poetry of Migration time, though written down centuries later, scaldic poetry by Icelandic poets and Norse sagas unfold a variety of material of the greatest value for investigators. This material gives a far richer and more variegated knowledge and understanding of the sword as do the often dry and short historical records. In this particular literature we get a good deal of knowledge as to the cultural background of the kings and their hirdmen, of life at royal courts, of swords for investiture and other kinds of ceremony, but even of swords in struggles, not least in the particular Scandinavian or rather Icelandic «holmganga». Legislation of the time such as the Norwegian Hirdkrá gives valuable information about the use of the sword at royal court. Still we must be aware of poetic licence. A certain amount of splendour and romanticism has to be strained off. Still much has been left to future investigations in this field, for instance examinations of the Norse versions of the Continental poems, the various problems of the Thidrekssaga, which in the recent years have attracted various investigators, Saxo Grammaticus and his sources for the heroic epochs, treated in the first nine books of his *Res Gesta Danorum*.

The author concludes that archaeology and literary sources fit well together and supplement each other. And that is true. Modern technical science has shown, that famous and precious swords of the heroic age deserved their fame. There were no magics combined with their forging, even if the smiths surrounded themselves and their doings with a magic glare. Miracles and magics were bestowed upon them by poets and scalds. Just as legends arose about kings and chieftains and their achievements, legends arose about the swords of those heroes. The masters of forging the wonderful blades as a matter of fact belonged to the most important persons at king's court.

The author's instructive and learned survey filled with much

knowledge, has shown the supreme importance of the swords in the aristocratic circles of Anglo-Saxon England and thus filled a gap. The book contains a series of interesting problems for detailed discussion, not least as far as concerns the Northern countries during Migration time and Viking Age, which must be considered in connexion with Anglo-Saxon time in the British Isles.

Claude Blair: *European and American Arms c. 1100-1850*.
London B. T. Batsford, 1962.
240 pages, 651 photographic illustrations, 259 line drawings.
Price 7 £ 7 sh.

The skilled and diligent scholar Claude Blair, assistant keeper in the department of metalwork in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, has achieved a most useful handbook or rather a guide in one volume as an introduction to the study of ancient arms. For museum curators, collectors of ancient arms, antiquity dealers and everybody who is interested in this particular branch of cultural history, this book will be a valuable help, whether the objects in question are swords and rapiers, daggers, wheel-lock or flintlock guns or pistols, precious weapons as well as military regulation arms. The book contains six chapters: swords and daggers; staff weapons; projectile weapons such as slings, bows and crossbows; projectile weapons such as the various kinds of firearms; combined weapons and the decoration of arms. Artillery has not been included. In 80 pages the author gives a concise survey of the various categories of arms, their historical and technical development, manufacture and decoration. Sometimes the reader will find terms unfamiliar to him and to most collectors, or he will find terms not used in their current sense. In his preface the author gives the reason why he has introduced this modern practise of nomenclature which to some extent has been based upon English names usually met with in ancient documents and books. In this regard we must mention the term «arms of the hilt», which has been adopted in stead of the current term *pas d'âne*, the French name used since about 1850 to signify the two rings or finger guards below the quillons of the sword's hilt. This may seem logical, because it gives a more clear explanation of the function of these rings than the usual term. But I am afraid that the name *pas d'âne* is so deeply rooted in the current usage that a change may be difficult in countries not speaking English.

The text is illustrated by a rich selection of arms, the composition of which is very instructive. Particularly extensive are the illustrations of rapiers and firearms. Not only weapons from the museums

of Great Britain are well represented, but even a large number of weapons from mayor collections in Europe and U. S. A. are to be found. There are good captions to the illustrations, besides some pages with notes to the more remarkable pieces. But many readers certainly would wish that the editors had paid less attention to the æsthetical regard and put numbers at the photos corresponding to the numbers in the captions. It would facilitate the use of the encyclopedia. Museum curators and collectors surely will appreciate the detailed line drawings, not least of the various regulation swords of which there is an instructive selection, particularly from England, France and U. S. A. But even the most characteristic patterns from Denmark, Spain, Sweden and Prussia are represented. The staff-weapons deserve mention, because we are not used to have too many illustrations of this kind of weapons. They have never been favorites among the collectors, possibly on account of their long staffs, which make them less decorative in a private armoury. Or possibly their origin as more or less descents of tools is the reason. They are not surrounded by the same romanticism as swords or rapiers. Nor do they possess the same technical attraction as the firearms. The various types of gun lock mechanisms are illustrated in 28 plain drawings, accompanied by instructive captions. In addition the book has a select bibliography intended as a guide to readers who are interested in further studies of ancient arms. Here the reader will find the main publications, in general as well as in the shape of more specialized works dealing with the various categories of arms here concerned with. References to museum catalogues and periodicals tell the reader where to go in search for further information. No doubt this encyclopedia will be appreciated by many collectors and find its way to a great number of book-shelves.

A. B. H.