

Knights in Shining Armor? The Portrayal of Arms and Armor in Medieval Literature

Marina Long

Those who have read *Beowulf* know that it can sometimes be a hard text to understand. This can be especially apparent to a student who knows next to nothing about the time period in which the story was written. Many medieval works, in fact, pose a particular problem for modern students due to the general lack of knowledge about the medieval period and its history, politics, social structure, culture, arts, and craftsmanship. One especially fascinating yet poorly understood area is medieval arms and armor. Most people today, when they think of a medieval knight, picture a “knight in shining armor,” clad from head to toe in plates of steel. In fact, this picture was true for only a very short period of time at the end of the Middle Ages.

During most of the Middle Ages, knights and other elite warriors primarily wore shirts of maille (taken from French, and pronounced in English like “mail”), a fabric woven of tens of thousands of small rings of steel wire. They might also wear leggings, known as chausses (also French, pronounced in English as “chah-ses”), of maille as well. The only piece of armor that consistently had plates of metal throughout the middle ages was the helm, which protected the head. Later, once armoring technology improved, knights began to wear small metal plates or plates made of hardened leather in addition to maille. Periods in which these types of armor -- maille, leather, and smaller plates of steel -- were worn are also the period that produced many great works of medieval literature. *Beowulf* is from the time of maille shirts, while “The Song of Roland”, another long poem, written in French in the twelfth century, is from a period in which warriors wore longer maille shirts, rode horses, and

more often had maille chausses as well. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a long poem about a knight who was a member of King Arthur’s Round Table written in Middle English in the fourteenth century, is from the period in which knights began to wear leather and some plate armor.

To a student who knows nothing about the armor in the time period in which these works were written, the battle scenes contained within them, often with many references to arms and armor, are likely to be confusing. Such confusion may alienate the reader from medieval literature in general. I hope that through the information I present in my study, the benefits of teaching about medieval arms and armor in preparation for reading medieval literature will be apparent and that the connection between historical study and literary study will also become clear.

So: how does familiarity with armor and weapons from the medieval period affect our reading of battle scenes in medieval literature (and therefore, our reading of the literature in general)? I contend that such knowledge will enhance our reading by allowing us to recognize differences between realistic and fantastic portrayals of a battle. Our knowledge of the realism or fantasy of a particular scene can help us discern what the author intended to do with the scene and the effects it would have created in a medieval reader or listener. This, in turn, will influence how it affects modern readers, since we often take our current knowledge and apply it to the text we are reading to come up with our own interpretation of the work.

Although answering this question will be most beneficial for students of medieval literature, it will also be helpful for the casual

reader of medieval literature, though they are likely to benefit less from it than will a person who is deliberately trying to extract meaning from the text rather than simply enjoying it. Additionally, students of medieval arms and armor may find this interesting as a new way to look at this subject--through the eyes of the poets who lived at the time this armor was made and used. More broadly, anyone who has studied one or more of these works and has been confused or frustrated by their lack of knowledge about or understanding of the accoutrements referenced in one or more of these works may find this study helpful.

Theoretical Background

There has been surprisingly little research conducted on the use of armor and weapons in medieval literature, except for the purely symbolic meaning of the weapons and armor presented in the story. For instance, there are articles on the axe the Green Knight carries in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", but they deal with the symbolism of axes in general and not with a comparison of the specific axe used to real axes that were used at the time (Walls 13-18). The type of inquiry that discusses the symbolism of a weapon will tell a reader the meaning (to use the example above) of the inclusion of an axe in the story, while a comparison with real objects of the period will help us discover why specifically that type of axe was used, and what this choice would mean to the intended audience.

The works that I will be drawing from most heavily will be works about historical, and particularly, extant (meaning that there exist physical examples) medieval armor and weaponry. For instance, I am drawing on R. Chartrand's *The Vikings*, which contains a great deal of detailed information about the arms and armor of the people, period, and place about which "Beowulf" was written. This book is a compilation of previously published journal articles, and is therefore very authoritative and accurate. The book also provides photographs of the extant arms and

armor from the time, from which my final study will benefit.

Another text helpful to my study is *Arms and Armour of the Medieval Knight*, by David Edge and John Miles Paddock. Edge and Paddock are highly respected and frequently cited authorities in the field of medieval arms and armor. Their study provides considerable information about armor and weaponry of the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. It gives a period-by-period account of the weapons and armor of the knightly era. Because of the organization and depth of information, this is the book that I would recommend to those who are interested in finding out more about any particular century in armor history.

I also referenced studies by Ewart Oakeshott, one of the more famous and respected authorities in this field. He is most noted for his system of classifying swords, which is used throughout the community of those interested in medieval weapons, from researchers to re-enactors of medieval battles and martial arts. The books I am using are part of a five-book series he wrote about the medieval knight and various aspects of his equipment and training. Specifically, I have consulted the books *A Knight and His Armor* and *A Knight and His Weapons*. These books are most relevant to the topic of my study, and are written in easy-to-understand language that, while being accessible to an everyday reader, also provides a large amount of information. This is a source I would recommend to those wishing to learn more about medieval armor and weaponry in general, because it gives a good overview of the subject.

I am approaching the literature from a "New Historicist" perspective in this study. The New Historicist perspective is a literary theory that argues that the historical background of a work is helpful and even essential to understanding the work itself. New Historicism looks at the culture surrounding the work at the time when it was

written to see what it might have originally meant to the intended audience. This theory stresses the intentions of the author over the ideas the reader brings to the work (Klages 123-125). I value both, but I am using this perspective to look at these works because of the importance of understanding the historical and cultural context surrounding a work. This understanding will in turn influence the ideas of the reader, changing how the reader looks at the work and, quite possibly, more closely aligning the reader's own ideas with the original intentions of the author.

I will define other terms as they occur in the descriptions of the armor and weapons of the warriors in each of the periods I am studying.

Methods

I am designing this study as a comparison of the weapons actually used in the time period of the work of literature against what is actually depicted in the work. I am using well-known and often-used works such as "Beowulf" and "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" as my primary literary sources, while my sources for the armor and weapons used are reputable books on the subject from such experts in the field as Ewart Oakeshott. I look at three major time periods of medieval history as far as armoring technology goes: the Dark Ages (specifically, around 700 A.D. to around 1000 A.D.--the time of the Vikings), the twelfth century (the time of the crusades) and the fourteenth century (when leather and plate armor began to be used). I begin by describing the armor of each period, then I pull passages from the work or works I have selected for that time period. I show the similarities and differences between the historical record of the arms and armor and how the armor is presented in the literature. Finally, I discuss why the author might have chosen to make their battle scenes accurate or inaccurate, and what conclusions we might draw from that choice.

Findings and Discussion

One example of the findings in my final study is the various references to swords in "Beowulf" and how they relate to real swords of the time. The following description of a typical sword of the Dark Ages, when "Beowulf" was written, is followed by a discussion of the ways in which the swords described in "Beowulf" are similar or different to those in reality, and what added meaning this reveals. Swords in the Dark Ages were generally twenty-four to thirty inches long, had broad blades that stayed wide through most of the length before coming to a point in the last few inches.

Swords were used for cutting more than for thrusting, as the point was too blunt to do much damage. Whether this was because the fighting techniques of the time de-emphasized thrusting or because the technology to make swords could not produce a more acute point is up to debate. Dark Age swords tended to have short, thick, stubby crosses (the part of the sword that protects the hand, between the blade and the handle) that were straight on Anglo-Saxon swords and curved toward the blade on Danish swords. "Beowulf" was a story about Danes written by Anglo-Saxons, so the shape of the cross would be historical either way. The pommels of all swords of this period, knobs on the end of the handle of the sword to balance it and keep it from slipping out of one's hand, were oblong and "lobed" rather than round; there were usually either three or five decorative lobes, or small bumps, on the pommel. (Edge 27)

The best Dark Age swords were made of pattern-welded steel, constructed in a very complex and time-consuming process that involved twisting rods of steel with differing carbon content together and forging them into a single rod, from which a sword was then made (Chartrand 136-137). This produced a wave pattern, resembling marbled frosting on a cake, on the sword. Having seen this pattern myself in replica swords, I can say

that not only does it give the blade strength, but also lends it a surprising beauty.

The pattern is noted in the literature of the time as well. In *Beowulf*, when Beowulf is preparing to fight Grendel's mother, he says, "And let Unferth have that ancient heirloom, that well-known man have my wave-patterned sword, hard-edged, splendid." (*Beowulf* 1488-1490). Beowulf's sword was well-made, the best type of sword one could have in that time. That he would leave it to Unferth if he were to die facing Grendel's mother shows that he must have been quite confident that he would survive and return. In contrast, Unferth's sword Hrunting, which he gives to Beowulf to be used in Beowulf's fight against Grendel's mother, is never described as patterned. It is only etched with poison, which although a benefit, does not compare with the strength lent to a blade by making it with patterned steel. Surely, if Hrunting were a sword of patterned steel, that would have been mentioned along with the poisoned edges. Therefore, one can assume Beowulf's sword was of considerably better quality than Hrunting.

The poisoned blades of Unferth's sword are also interesting to consider--they may serve as a way to characterize this somewhat morally ambiguous character. Unferth first scorns Beowulf, engaging him in a battle of insults (commonly known as 'flyting'), then lends him his family's heirloom sword, which would have been incredibly valuable to him. This makes the reader wonder what type of man he really is. Perhaps the poisoned blades are supposed to indicate his real nature to us as readers. Also, during the fight against Grendel's mother, Hrunting fails Beowulf by breaking (again demonstrating its inferiority to Beowulf's sword). Again, is the author of "Beowulf" intending this to be a slight on Unferth? There is no definitive answer, but nonetheless it is an interesting speculation to consider.

Swords were heirlooms, as described in the passage from *Beowulf*, passed down from one generation to the next, father to son. The value of a sword increased as it got older, as was the case with other parts of a warrior's equipment--for example, Beowulf's byrnie, or hip-length maille shirt, which he inherited from his grandfather Hrethel. (*Beowulf* 454) This may have been because they were tested and found to be strong; it may also be because of the sentimental value such items would have acquired over the years. Either way, Beowulf is garbed in expensive, valuable, well-crafted armor and weapons, as a great hero should be. To the audience of the time, it would have been readily apparent just from his armor and weaponry that Beowulf was a powerful hero, wealthy and of noble birth. Modern readers may not be able to fully appreciate these items as status symbols, but through further research and study, we can certainly understand that they signal Beowulf's might and heroic nature.

Conclusion

My provisional conclusions are that through discussions such as the preceding one about the swords in *Beowulf*, one can see that knowledge about the weapons and armor of a time period can be helpful in gleaning more meaning from medieval text. Also, knowing what the objects looked like can help aid the reader to picture the events of the story in his or her mind. This, in turn, creates a more enjoyable reading experience. When readers enjoy the text, they are more likely to approach these and other works of medieval literature with an open mind and a willingness to read them that most readers, unless they are medieval enthusiasts, do not possess. Therefore, I conclude, at this point in my study, that knowledge about the arms and armor of the medieval period helps to make one a better, more informed reader of medieval texts.

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A Knight and His Armor
Orazio Mural (Darmouth College) – Jim T