



UNIONE EUROPEA



REPUBBLICA ITALIANA



REGIONE AUTÒNOMA DE SARDIGNA
REGIONE AUTONOMA DELLA SARDEGNA

Castle of Monreale

Patrimonio culturale
SARDEGNA Virtual Archaeology



■ Weapons and armours of medieval knights

The fortified complex of Monreale is located on top of a hillock in the Municipality of Sardara (southern Sardinia), where it was built, presumably on structures from an earlier period, during the second half of the thirteenth century, to guard the southern border of the District of Arborea, to which it belonged. It held the dual function of border and residential castle and housed a garrison of soldiers which kept watch not only over the region, but also over the Judge and his family who often stayed there. These soldiers were armed according to the standards of medieval times.

The weapons and armours of the medieval knight evolved over the centuries in order to adapt to the transformation of the art of war.

In the middle of the twelfth century the warrior wore a long tunic to his knees, over which he slipped on a leather or canvas chainmail, covered with iron rings tightly connected to each other (fig. 1). The head was protected with a **cone-shaped helmet** in metal (fig. 2 a), with a protective piece for the nose, but which left the face uncovered. The legs were covered with **shin guards**. The defensive armour was completed by a large wood **shield**, circled in iron and almond shaped. His defensive weapons were the **sword** and the **lance**.

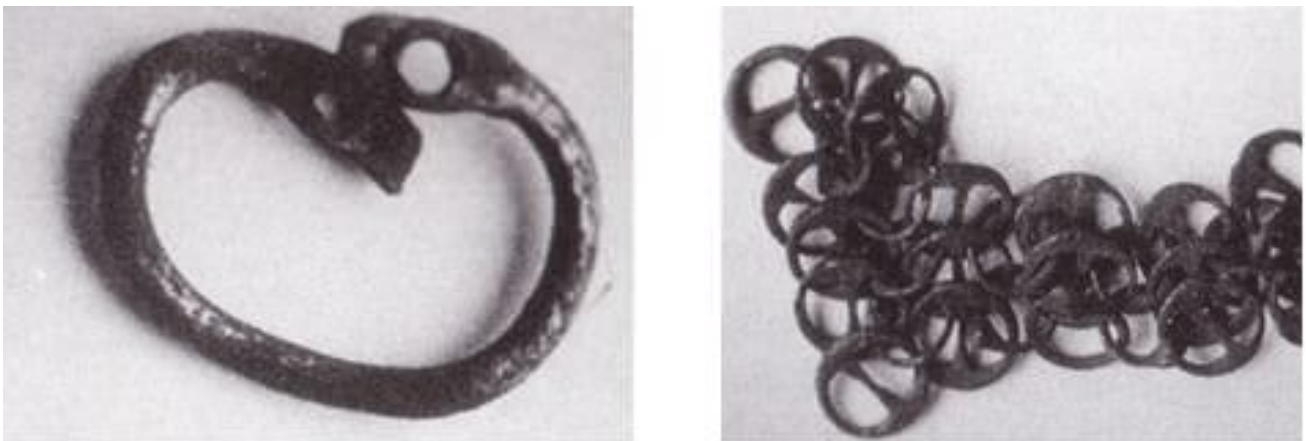


Fig. 1 - The small metal rings which made up the hauberk (from MONTEVERDE, BELLI 2003, p. 66).

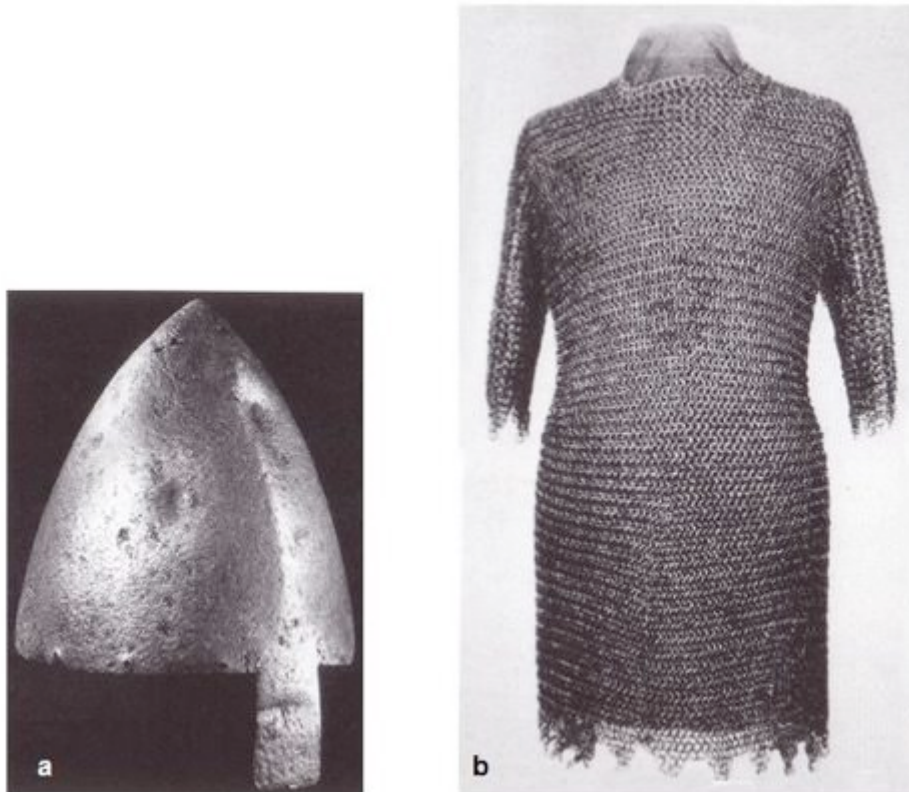


Fig. 2 - Cone helmet (a) and hauberk (b) (from MONTEVERDE, BELLI 2003, p. 66).

In the 13th century, the chainmail surplice was used, known as a "**hauberk**" (fig. 2 b), with an incorporated or separate hood (the so-called **aventail**, fig. 3). The hauberk protected the soldier from blows from the tip of the sword, but was not enough for the more violent ones from a lance or from mauls.

Under the hauberk he wore a padded tunic to cushion the blows and to prevent injuries and over this he wore another fabric tunic (called tabard, fig. 4) which was sleeveless and with splits on the sides, that protected the surplice from the sun and rain. This tabard was fastened by his belt, on which he hung his sword. During this period the conical helmet was replaced by the bassinet helmet of conical-cylindrical shape; this was completely closed but provided with holes to allow breathing and listening with two horizontal openings for the eyes (fig. 5). Subsequently the bassinet helmet evolved into the great helm, similar but considerably heavier, so much so that the knight had to protect his head with a cap of cloth and leather in order to wear it, onto which he added a "cupola" to cover the top of his skull and a camail to protect the throat (fig. 6).



Fig. 3 - Camail (from <http://www.ferrostoria.it/>).

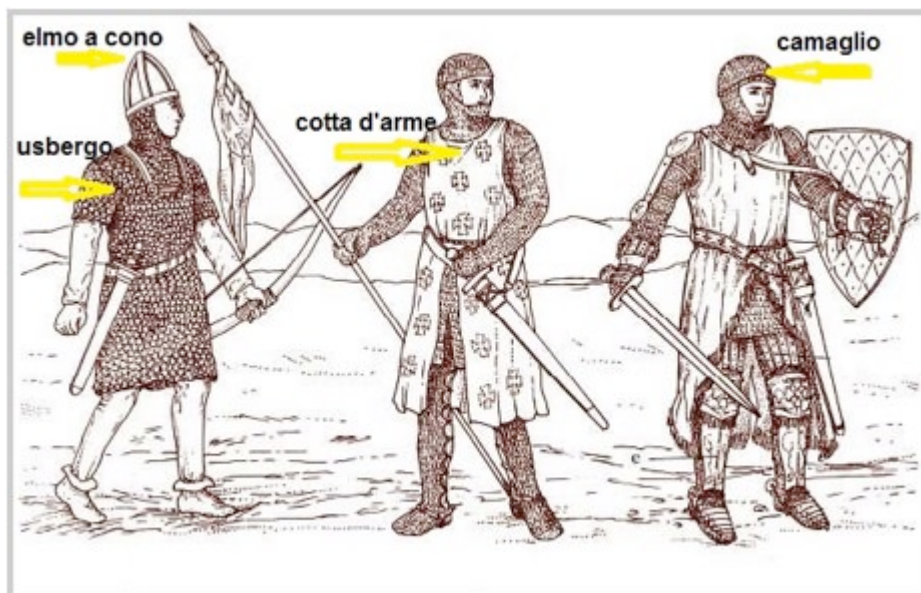


Fig. 4 - Examples of medieval armours (from <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/usbergo/>).



Fig. 5 - Bassinet helmet (from http://bottega.av-alonceltic.com/catalogo/categoria_31_1/medio-evo_armature_elmi_medievali.php).



Fig. 6 - 1-2: cone nasal helmets (XII century); 3-4-5: head protection/cupola and infantry helmets (XII century - first half of XIII century); 6: bassinet helmet (mid-thirteenth century); 7: great helm (late thirteenth century); (from POMPONIO 2005, table 5).

Finally, the soldier's legs were protected with **knee plates** and **boots**. The shield began to evolve, became smaller to make it easier to handle. On horseback, the man-at-arms bore the **lance** (about four metres long) vertically, with the end of the pole secured to the right stirrup; in action, however, he held the pole under his armpit and stood on his stirrups so as to sustain the impact with the enemy.

During the fourteenth century the cavalry was no longer the undisputed master of the battlefield, as the infantry began to assert itself, with its main weapons consisting of the **crossbow** and **bow**.

During the fourteenth century, a cloak of precious cloth (called **surcoat**) began to be used; this was sleeveless, tight and with a padded chest covering the hauberk, which at this stage only reached to mid-thigh. The sword belt was buckled onto it. The shield was small and triangular. The use of iron plates to protect the torso and limbs also spread among

horsemen. Because of the weight and inconvenience of the closed helmet it began to be used solely at the moment of battle, whilst it was replaced by the cervellière, a kind of steel skullcap and, later, with a new type of helmet, the barbut helm at other times (fig. 7). It was also widely used by the infantry. Between the second half of the fourteenth century and the first decade of the fifteenth, the barbut helmet was joined by the bascinet (fig. 8), normally adorned with a small aventail known as a *gorget*.



Fig. 7 - The *barbut helmet* (from MONTEVERDE, BELLI 2003, p. 72).



Fig. 8 - The "hounskull" bascinet (from MONTEVERDE, BELLI 2003, p. 72).

Armours in the fourteenth century were more durable and lighter than those in chain mail and were well suited to the new way of fighting on foot used by the cavalry. In fact, in order to better withstand the sharp and heavy infantry weapons, the horses were left behind and the knights, having shortened their lances, marched against the enemy with the support of the crossbowmen and archers.

During the fifteenth century the men-at-arms were increasingly engaged in ground fighting and needed a durable armour which covered their body completely but left freedom of movement: armourers skilfully modelled the armour on the wearer, creating robust products weighing less than 25 kilos (figs. 9-10).



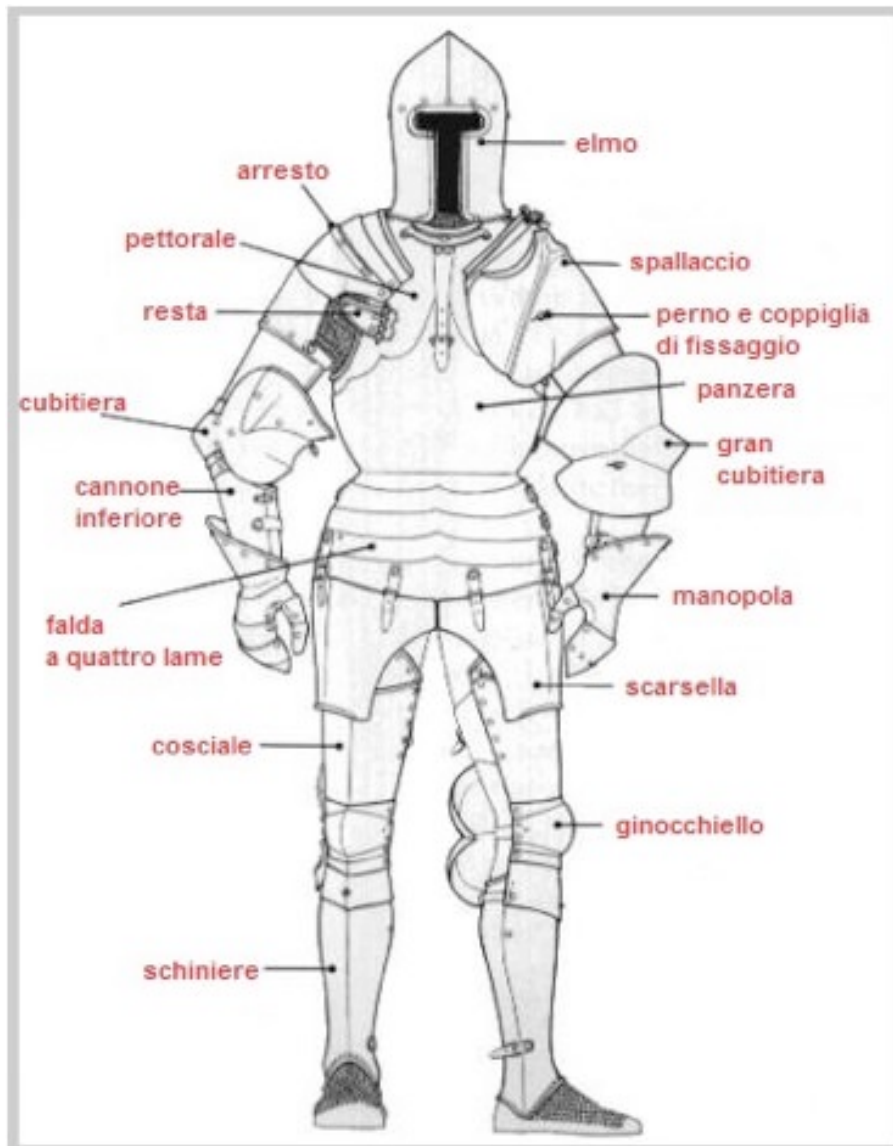


Fig. 9 - Front of a medieval armour (from <http://www.telpe.com/aman/Armature.html>).

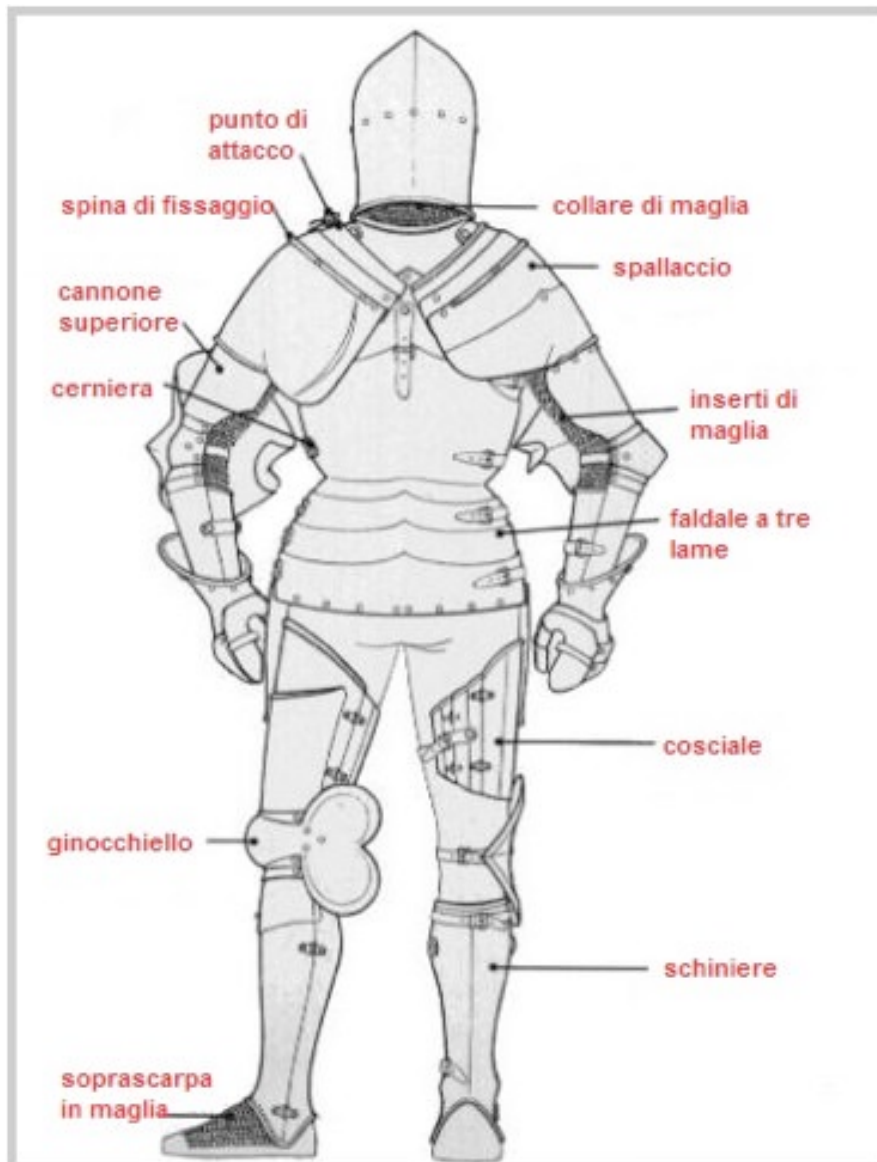


Fig. 10 - Rear of a medieval armour (from <http://www.telpe.com/aman/Armature.html>).

The Italian helmet of the first half of the fifteenth century changed by becoming smaller, lighter and equipped with a mobile visor, which allowed seeing and breathing easily. The helmet visor could be of the "hounskull" or "dog-faced" types. In the fifteenth century the helmet was considered a separate piece and the armour was either completed by the helmet or by a bassinet or a barbut. The habit of only wearing a helmet during battle still persisted during the fifteenth century, whilst cloth caps or hats were used at all other times.

With the introduction of firearms during the second half of the sixteenth century, the art of the armourers rapidly declined.

■ The bard (or horse armour)

Horses were a key element of a knight's equipment. The steed, the war horse, was a solid, strong animal, but agile in movement. It generally wore protective armour on its head, neck and chest, while the rest of the body was covered by a coloured caparison, often decorated with the knight's heraldic stems; this was sometimes padded to soften blows and, in a few cases, was in chainmail (figs. 11-12).



Fig. 11 - Battle scene (from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Destrier>).

et aliquos interreerunt. quia accidit pro nam dei qui preparat pro eis iohanne ut isidoro euerentur. 7
omnes uiri in ea occiderentur. urbsq; ipsa anathema eet. nec ex preda quicquam ab aliquo tange
retur. vnus autem filioz in israhel contra preceptum dei aliquo ex preda auulerat atq; occidit.



Fig. 12 - Battle scene (from https://arcieridelluponero.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/430079_323875247670201_2144209386_n.jpg).

■ Pole-arms

The lance was used throughout the Middle Ages, as it was simple to make and to use. It was used by soldiers as well as by knights. It continued to evolve during the entire Middle Ages and the infantry experts in using this weapon were especially efficient (fig. 13).

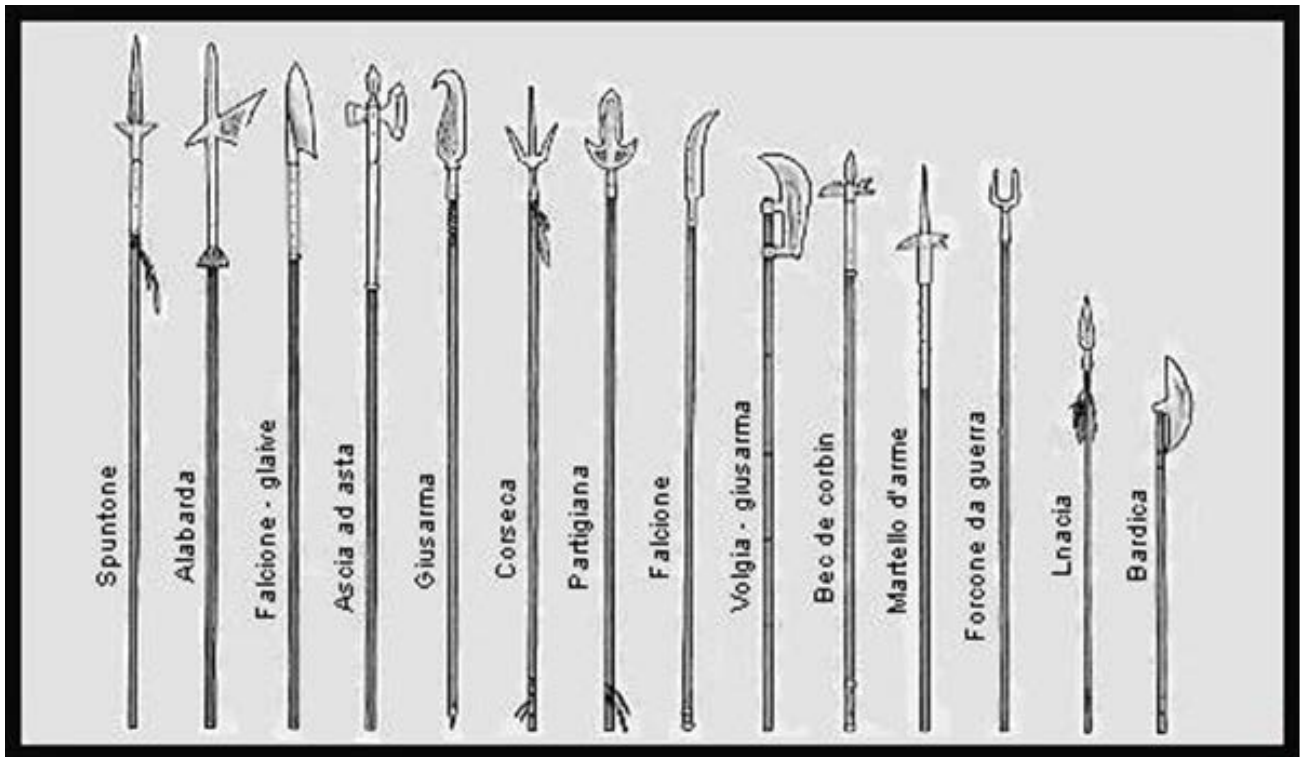


Fig. 13 – Pole-arms (from <http://www.medioevoinumbria.it/home/armi-in-asta/>).

■ Hand weapons

With the development of the heavy cavalry, the **longsword** was adopted, used also in hand to hand combat. The variations of the sword included the two-hand sword, that required a lot of room to be handled (fig. 14). Foot soldiers and horseless warriors however used weapons such as axes, maces and hammers. With the increase in armour as a means of protection against the blows from swords, more barbed weapons were developed with a higher penetration capacity.

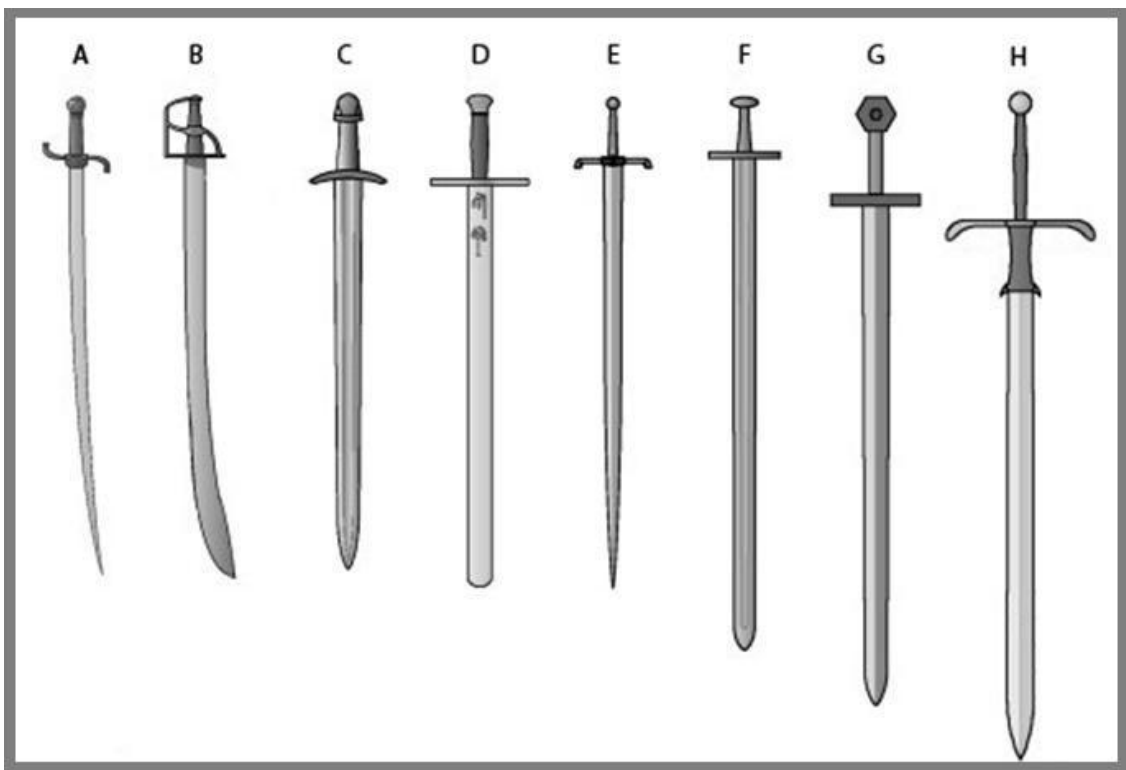


Fig. 14 - A) sabre; B) scimitar; C) single-handed sword; D) wide blade sword; E) pointed sword or rapier; F) long sword; G) hand-and-a-half or bastard sword; H) two-handed sword or claymore (from <http://www.lamescaligere.it/pages/Ricerca%20storica/armi%20nel%20medievo.php>).

■ Ranged weapons

Ranged weapons are those which allowed hitting targets at a distance, such as bows and crossbows, used both on the battlefields and during sieges. The archers were used as light troops to cause losses in the ranks of the enemy and to weaken the opponent's ranks before hand-to-hand combat (fig. 15).



Fig. 15 - Archer (from http://www.ossicella.it/mura/descrizione_mura.htm).

Crossbows threw **bolts** and **heavy arrows**, exploiting the strength of a steel arch placed crosswise on a wooden shaped stock. There were various types, differentiated according to their charging system (fig. 16).



Fig. 16 - Stirrup crossbow (by William Reid, *La scienza delle armi dall'età della pietra ai giorni nostri*, Milan 1979, p.45).

■ Credits

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La Sardegna cresce con l'Europa



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