

PATERNOSTERS

A JOURNAL ABOUT HISTORICAL ROSARIES, PATERNOSTERS AND OTHER FORMS OF PRAYER BEADS, FOCUSING ON THOSE IN USE BEFORE 1600AD.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 09, 2008

The "paternoster blade"

Modern historians of the Middle Ages often don't have very nice things to say about the Victorians.

There are reasons for this. Victorian ideas about medieval history still have a lot of influence on most people's image of what the Middle Ages were like. The Victorians are the source of knights in shining armor, peasants dressed in burlap and wallowing in mudpiles, and ladies in tall pointy cone-shaped hats -- all of these being things that have a grain of truth to them, but that were never as extreme or as common as the movies would have you think.

To be fair, 19th-century scholars were operating on much less information than we have now. More sophisticated archaeology techniques have enabled us to recover a lot more data about life in those times, and many long-neglected documents have been discovered, analyzed and published. As I'm fond of saying, while the Middle Ages are long past and haven't changed, our knowledge about the Middle Ages certainly has.

What brought the Victorians to mind was a query on the Paternosters mailing list a few years ago whether any of us had ever heard of a "paternoster blade." The source was George Cameron Stone's **A Glossary of the Construction, Decoration and Use of Arms and Armor in all Countries and in all times** (NY:NY, Jack Brussel, Publisher, 1961). This was originally published in 1934. It says:

Paternoster Blade. A sword blade pierced with openings so as to answer the purpose of a rosary, and enable the pious owner to count his prayers even in the dark. (Burton Sword 136.)

Now certainly the idea of a pious soldier is not impossible. And while pierced sword blades are not exactly common in history, neither are they that rare; piercing is one of many types of decoration that can be applied to a sword blade, along with grooving and etching.

ABOUT ME




CHRIS LANING
DAVIS, CALIFORNIA,
UNITED STATES

[VIEW MY COMPLETE PROFILE](#)

MY WEBSITE IS:

Paternoster-Row

 Paternoster-row.org
Researching historical rosaries

PREVIOUS POSTS

[A Blessed Christmas](#)

[The Bishop's beads: a terrestrial sphere](#)

[The Bishop's beads: a celestial sphere](#)

[My First Rosary](#)

[Bedes Byddyng](#)

[The beads of Bishop Jakob](#)

[Why Knot?](#)

[Margaret's bead bequests](#)

[What did Margaret mean?](#)

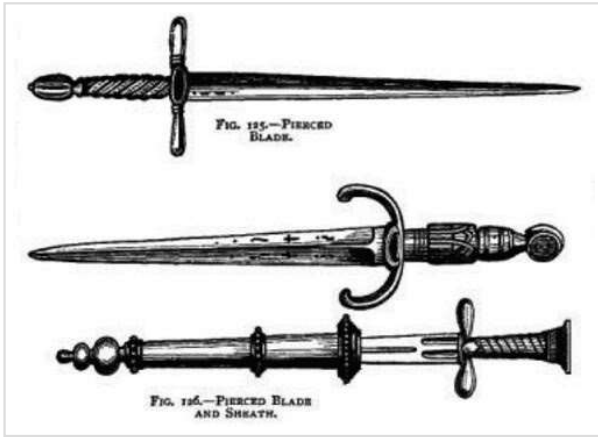
[LOLsaints](#)



Subscribe to
Posts [Atom] [RSS]



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported License.

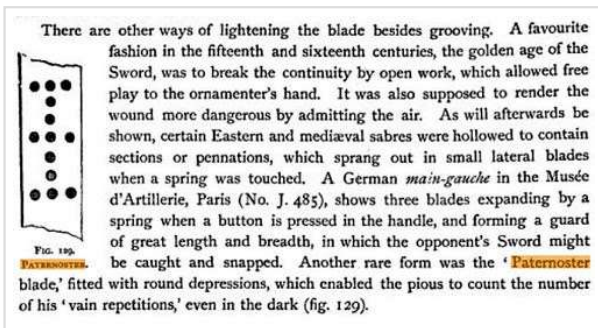


Get cool T-shirts, bags and stuff!



But there are practicalities involved here, one of which is that from a common sense perspective, no competent sword wielder is going to make a habit of putting his fingers all over his blade. Sword blades are made of steel, and they can and do rust. This is why it's important to keep swords clean and polished, giving rust nowhere to take hold. Even the characters in sword-and-sorcery fantasy novels make a point of cleaning their swords frequently (however clueless they may be about history in other respects!). Fingerprints on a blade are a no-no, because they deposit water, salt, and acid on the blade, all of which promote rust and corrosion of the metal.

This makes holes in a sword blade an unlikely form of prayer counter. Stone, to give him full credit, does cite his source, which is Richard F. Burton's *The Book of the Sword*. London, 1884. Since that book is long out of copyright and has been reprinted several times, I was able to find the relevant page online. Here's what it shows:



I'm inclined to think that Burton ran across this somewhere and invented an explanation to suit himself, though it's possible that the blade *could* have even been called a "Paternoster blade" before he saw it. A number of things are called "paternoster" because they're seen as analogous to beads on a string, and certainly the illustration shows rows of dots. To a Victorian observer, it may have seemed likely that the word implied some real connection with prayer.

Here is the key to the basic problem with Victorian scholarship, I think. The Victorian worldview -- especially as embodied in someone like Burton -- was a supremely self-confident one. Victorians expected the world to make sense, and it often didn't occur to them that there could be more than one viewpoint, system of logic, or frame of reference other than their own. Often their educated guesses about the purpose, construction or original form of some artifact are put forward with as much confidence as though they were established fact. Nowadays we would find that unmannerly, or even unscientific. We are much more aware of how little we actually know, and hopefully we're more careful to separate facts that can be observed from opinion and speculation.

The "paternoster blade" is probably an error, at which we can now be amused. But it's also a cautionary tale about scholarship, and as such, is worth remembering.

Labels: 19thc

POSTED BY CHRIS LANING AT 3:49 PM



[<< Home](#)