

Armor Made in Basel: A Fifteenth-Century Sallet Attributed to Hans Blarer the Younger

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ARMOR WAS MADE in hundreds of locations throughout Europe during the fifteenth century. Although this is substantiated by contemporary documents, very little armor surviving today can be attributed to a specific place of origin other than a handful of large, well-researched production centers. Most of the many smaller and less prominent sites have been overlooked. This article attempts to attribute a fifteenth-century German sallet (helmet) to an armorer active in Basel, thereby identifying a previously unknown maker in a city whose armor-manufacturing capacity has long been forgotten.

The majority of extant German armor cannot be ascribed to specific makers. Among the obstacles to identification is insufficient scholarly attention to the documentation of armorers and manufacturing sites. A few cities have been studied in detail, notably Augsburg, Nuremberg, and Landshut in southern Germany, and Innsbruck/Mühlau and Vienna in Austria, but other centers in the German-speaking core of the former Holy Roman Empire remain largely unresearched. The problem is compounded by the frequent absence of maker's marks or the inability to associate existing marks with known craftsmen or workshops. As a result, attributions of German armor are often based on subjective stylistic comparison with the few examples that bear identified makers' or town marks.

Armorers' marks stamped into the steel surface of helmets and other armor are clues essential to ascertaining their origin, provided that the marks can be securely linked to a specific craftsman or his workshop. For example, marks have provided indisputable grounds for ascribing sallets to no fewer than ten different master armorers active in Innsbruck and neighboring Mühlau in the years 1450–1500.¹ This was made possible by the extensive surviving records of these makers in the Innsbruck archives, and their

voluminous publication under the auspices of the former Austro-Hungarian monarchy.² Given the lack of comparable published material for most of the former Holy Roman Empire, few other makers active during the same period have been identified to date.

The subject of this article is a late-fifteenth-century sallet stamped with a hitherto unidentified maker's mark (Figures 1, 2). Preserved in the Metropolitan Museum, the sallet was included in a recent exhibition of European helmets at the Museum.³ It is first recorded in the collection of Count Hans Wilczek (d. 1922) at Kreuzenstein Castle, near Vienna.⁴ It was acquired from Kreuzenstein in 1927 by Bashford Dean (1867–1928), curator of arms and armor at the Metropolitan Museum, for his private collection, and it was purchased by the Museum in 1929.⁵ No details are known about its provenance before it was acquired by Count Wilczek.

The form of the sallet suggests a south German origin and a date in the 1470s or the mid-1480s. Notable features are the slightly crested bowl, the moderately extended tail, and the pivoting visor that locks by a spring pin located on the right side. The flukelike conformation of the visor's upper edges, although infrequently encountered on preserved examples, is well documented in contemporary funeral effigies.⁶

The armorer's mark stamped on the right side of the sallet's tail depicts a rooster (cock) facing to the sinister in a shield (Figure 2). This mark corresponds to the heraldic emblem used by the Blarers (also spelled Blarrer, Blaerer, Plorer), a family of armorers documented at Basel throughout the fifteenth century.⁷ Their existence was accidentally discovered in the Basel Staatsarchiv while the author of this paper was researching the armor production of early modern Europe.

The earliest member of the Blarer family was Hans, an armorer ("harnascher") from Constance who became a burgher of Basel on *Martinstag* (November 11) 1409.⁸ Little is known of Hans Blarer's life and career other than the fact that he eventually became influential in

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Figure 1. Visored sallet, attributed to Hans Blarer the Younger (documented Basel, 1453–83), ca. 1470–85. Steel. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bashford Dean Memorial Collection, Funds from various donors, 1929 (29.158.11)



Figure 2. Maker's mark stamped on the tail of the sallet in Figure 1

the smiths' guild to which he belonged. In 1432 he was first appointed *Sechser*, a member of the committee of six masters overseeing the guild's normal business. In 1434 he became a *Kieser*, a position that probably conferred a say in specific guild or municipal matters (*kiesen*, archaic = to select, choose, elect).⁹ Members honored with such positions were identified in a special volume compiled by the guild in the seventeenth century and now preserved in the Historisches Museum Basel. Their coat of arms, their name, and the date of their first appointment were carefully recorded; the thirty-first entry reads: "M[eister] Hans Plorer / Sechser 1432."¹⁰ The master's coat of arms—Argent, a cock gules facing to the sinister—appears above the inscription (Figure 3).¹¹ The similarities

between this coat of arms and the mark on the Metropolitan's sallet are obvious, although Hans Blarer himself cannot have been the sallet's maker. He was active in the first half of the fifteenth century and therefore was unlikely to have made armor as late as the date of this sallet, about 1470–85.

Another possible candidate is Heinrich Blarer, who became a burgher of Basel in 1425. Heinrich was probably a relative of Hans Blarer, but he also appears to have been active too early in the century to qualify as the maker of the sallet.

The most likely owner of this mark is another Hans Blarer, documented from 1453 to 1483 and quite certainly related to the older armorer of the same name. This Hans Blarer's membership in the smiths' guild indicates that he had burgher status. Since he cannot be found in the burgher books recording the admission of new citizens, he was evidently born into the family of a Basel burgher of the same name. A master armorer in 1453, he could not have been born later than about 1437, when the elder Hans Blarer, probably his father, was still alive. His use of the heraldic emblem of a rooster, which appears on his personal seal on a 1482 document preserved in the Basel archives, conclusively demonstrates that he was directly related to the elder Hans Blarer (Figure 4).¹²

The identification of the younger Hans Blarer as the owner of this armorer's mark remains unequivocal despite a minor variation between his emblem and



Figure 3. Coat of arms of Hans Blarer the Elder, in entry 31 in a volume compiled in the 17th century by the smiths' guild of Basel. Historisches Museum Basel, 1882.169 (photo: Peter Portner, Historisches Museum Basel)

that of his elder relative. In the former, the rooster is facing to the dexter, thus appearing reversed when compared to the elder Blarer's coat of arms and to the mark stamped on the Metropolitan's sallet. However, German and Swiss heraldry often permitted the reversal of positions, and such changes were sometimes dictated by mere aesthetic reasons and *courtoisie*. In any case, such reversals were not seen as significant alterations and should not be given undue weight when considering the identity of the arms' owner. The younger Blarer's wax seal depicting a rooster facing to the dexter actually follows the conventional position for animal charges, perhaps because seal engravers may have been more familiar than others with heraldic rules and conventions. It was also a common mistake to forget to reverse the emblem's position when cutting a seal or a punch—which wore out quickly and frequently had to be replaced—and all too often the emblem turned out to be reversed when stamped. As Helmut Nickel points out, a well-known inspection mark stamped on firearms, the hen of the town of Suhl (canting arms of the county of Henneberg), shows that a reversed position was not regarded as a matter of great importance. Although this was an official mark, hundreds of examples of the Suhl mark reveal that the hen could be facing either way.¹³

Deriving from the Blarer family coat of arms, the rooster mark securely identifies the younger Hans Blarer as the likely author of the Metropolitan's sallet.



Figure 4. Wax seal of Hans Blarer the Younger, from a charter dated August 20, 1482. Staatsarchiv des Kantons Basel-Stadt, Urkunden, 21 16 (photo: Staatsarchiv des Kantons Basel-Stadt)

For his maker's mark, he could certainly have used the family emblem in the same position as that of his ancestor, as it appears on the Metropolitan's sallet (Figure 2). No other contemporary armorer is known to have employed a similar device. Furthermore, there is no evidence that armorers of the Blarer family were active at places other than Basel during the fifteenth century, not even at Constance, where the elder Hans Blarer originated.¹⁴

Like his elder relative, Hans Blarer was a prominent craftsman who held several prestigious offices at the smiths' guild. He was *Sechser* from 1453 to 1467, then *Kieser* from 1468 to 1473.¹⁵ Blarer seems to have obtained municipal offices as well. A document of 1459, in which he is referred to as an armor maker ("harnescher"), reveals that he was also a rent master ("der reten ze Basel zinsmeister"), that is, a collector of revenues on behalf of the city council.¹⁶ These many responsibilities suffice to indicate that Hans Blarer had a reputation beyond the guild. A married man, Blarer had several children who were still minors when he was last mentioned in 1483; nothing else is known of them.¹⁷

In his book on Swiss arms makers, *Schweizer Waffenschmiede*, Hugo Schneider identified two distinct master armorers named Hans Blarer, probably father and son, active in Basel during the second half of the fifteenth century. According to Schneider, one is documented from 1456 to about 1460, the other from

1469 to 1479.¹⁸ No evidence has been found in Basel archives, however, to confirm this distinction.

The attribution of the Metropolitan's sallet to Hans Blarer the Younger identifies a surviving armorer's work from Basel. During the fifteenth century, Basel was an important staple market on the busy trade routes connecting northern Italy to the Low Countries. This capacity promoted a flourishing trade in armor, enabling domestic armorers, in turn, to achieve considerable wealth.¹⁹ In the early fifteenth century, for example, a mail maker, Heinrich Kupfernagel, acknowledged a fortune of some 2,000 florins.²⁰ During the younger Blarer's active years, Basel was an armor-making center esteemed by foreign princes. Although the duke of Lorraine employed several armorers at his court, he commissioned an armor for his personal use at Basel in 1493.²¹ At that time, Basel was still an imperial city; it became part of the Swiss Confederation in 1501.

Hans Blarer's influential position in the smiths' guild must have reflected, beyond his social status, a relative material success as well. Further archival research would certainly uncover more details on his career as a master armorer. No other armor pieces bearing his mark have been identified to date, but some may be found in the future.²² Hans Blarer's sallet serves as a reminder of the existence of notable armor-manufacturing cities whose history still needs investigation.²³

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NOTES

1. The Innsbruck/Mühlau masters in question are: Konrad, Jörg, Adrian the Elder, and Christian Treytz; Hans Vetterlein; Christian Schreiner the Elder; Kaspar Rieder(er); Christian Spor; Jörg Wagner; and Hans Prunner.

2. This literature is listed in Bruno Thomas and Ortwin Gamber, *Die Innsbrucker Plattnerkunst*, exh. cat. (Innsbruck, 1954), pp. 49–50.
3. Stuart W. Pyhrr, *European Helmets, 1450–1650: Treasures from the Reserve Collection*, exh. cat., MMA (New York, 2000), no. 12, ill.
4. The construction of Kreuzenstein Castle from existing ruins began in 1879. See Alfred Ritter von Walcher, *Burg Kreuzenstein an der Donau* (Vienna, [1914]). On Count Wilczek and his arms and armor collection, see Graf Wilczek, *Erinnerungen eines Waffensammlers* (Vienna, 1908), pp. 9, 21–24; “Mittelalterliche Helme aus dem Besitz Sr. Exz. des Grafen Hans Wilczek: Sammlung Schloss Kreuzenstein,” *Zeitschrift für historische Waffen- und Kostümkunde* 6, no. 2 (1912–14), pp. 41–47. A brief obituary is in *Zeitschrift für historische Waffen- und Kostümkunde* 9, no. 4 (1922), p. 148.
5. Acc. no. 29.58.11, Bashford Dean Memorial Collection, Funds from various donors; Pyhrr, *European Helmets, 1450–1650*, no. 12; Stephen V. Grancsay and Carl Otto von Kienbusch, *The Bashford Dean Collection of Arms and Armor in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Portland, Maine, 1933), no. 39, pls. 1 no. 39 and iv no. 39.
6. A comparable cut of the visor's upper edges can be found on a sallet in the Historisches Museum der Stadt, Vienna, inv. no. 126.014; another sallet in the Armeria Reale, Turin, inv. no. E 4; and on many funeral effigies in southern Germany, for example, those of Ulrich Staufer zu Ernfeld, Pfarrkirche, Sünching; of Heinrich von Nothaft (d. 1471), Karmeliterkirche, Straubing; of Heinrich von Staudach (d. 1483), Sankt Jodokskirche, Lands-hut. Illustrated in Philipp Maria Halm, *Studien zur süddeutschen Plastik*, vol. 1, *Altbayern und Schwaben* (Augsburg, 1926).
7. The rooster in the Blarer family coat of arms seems to be “cant-ing,” i.e., forming some sort of wordplay with the owner's arms. *Blarerer* refers to one that crows, or makes strident noises, which would describe the cry of a rooster (*plärren* = to crow, blubber, bawl, cry). Helmut Nickel suggested this possibility to Stuart Pyhrr, later directly to the author of this article in a letter of May 27, 2000.
8. Staatsarchiv des Kantons Basel-Stadt, Ratsbücher P 7, 1, Chron. Verz. der Bürgerannahmen I: Vor 1530. In southwestern Germany, *Harnischer*, a contraction of armor maker (*Harnischmacher*), was a label commonly used for the makers of plate armor until the mid-16th century, when they became increasingly referred to as *Plattner*. In Basel this equivalence is explicitly indicated in records of the smiths' guild, with the following entry: “Hans Saur, the armor maker or plate armorer . . .” (Hans Saur der harnister oder plattener hat ein Ehrer Zunfft zue den Schmieden empfangen. . . . Actum Sonntag Trinitatis A[nn]o etc. 1551); Staatsarchiv des Kantons Basel-Stadt, Zunftakten, Schmiedezunft 28, fol. 119v.
9. Staatsarchiv des Kantons Basel-Stadt, Zunftakten, Schmiedezunft 22.
10. Historisches Museum Basel, inv. no. 1882.169, entry no. 31.
11. The description in heraldic language was kindly provided by Helmut Nickel in a letter to the author, May 27, 2000.
12. Staatsarchiv des Kantons Basel-Stadt, Urkunden, no. 2116, August 20, 1482; cited in Rudolf Thommen, ed., *Urkundenbuch der Stadt Basel*, vol. 8 (Basel, 1901), no. 633.
13. Letter to the author, May 27, 2000.
14. The name and coat of arms of the Blarer armorers of Basel, together with the geographical origin of the elder Hans Blarer, suggest the possibility that they were indirectly related to the Blarer patrician family of Constance. See, for instance, the portrait of Heinrich Blarer of Constance, dated 1460, with his coat

of arms (Argent, a cock gules facing to the sinister), preserved at the Rosengartenmuseum Konstanz, inv. no. M 15; Bernd Konrad, *Rosengartenmuseum Konstanz: Die Kunstwerke des Mittelalters* (Constance, 1993), no. 1.05, pl. 4.

The Constance Blarers belonged to the social elite of the city—the patricians—and some of them sat in the city council. While a few, like Heinrich Blarer, collected memberships in knightly orders and participated in jousts, others took a very different path in the 16th century—for example, as abbot of Saint Gall, or as religious reformers.

The nature of the relationship between the elder Hans Blarer and the Blarers of Constance remains unclear. Precedents allow us to speculate that he belonged to an ancient line of armorers whose most distinguished members entered the ranks of the Constance patriciate in the 14th century or even earlier. The case of the Brun(lin) mail makers at Strasbourg demonstrates well the potential of the armorer's profession for considerable social advancement in the 14th century. See Martin Alioth, *Gruppen an der Macht. Zünfte und Patriziat in Strassburg in 14. und 15. Jahrhundert: Untersuchungen zur Verfassung, Wirtschaftsgefüge und Sozialstruktur* (Basel and Frankfurt am Main, 1988), vol. 1, p. 293. Members of the patrician Blarers also lived in Augsburg. See Eduard Zimmermann, *Augsburger Zeichen und Wappen* (Augsburg, 1970), no. 5638, ill.

15. Staatsarchiv des Kantons Basel-Stadt, Zunftakten, Schmiedezunft 22.
16. *Urkundenbuch der Stadt Basel*, vol. 8, no. 117.
17. Staatsarchiv des Kantons Basel-Stadt, Gerichtsarchiv A 34, fol. 362v.
18. Hugo Schneider, *Schweizer Waffenschmiede: Vom 15. bis 20. Jh.* (Zurich, 1976), p. 61.
19. On a Basel merchant importing armor from Milan in 1473,

see Emilio Motta, "Armaioli milanesi nel periodo visconteo-sforzesco," *Archivio Storico Lombardo* 41, no. 5 (1914), entry no. 113. For a reference to Basel's role in the importation of foreign armor in France, see Jean-Pierre Reverseau, "The Classification of French Armour by Workshop Styles, 1500–1600," in Robert Held, ed., *Art, Arms, and Armour: An International Anthology*, vol. 1, 1979–80 (Chiasso, 1979), p. 203.

20. See on this topic Katharina Simon-Muscheid, *Basler Handwerkszünfte im Spätmittelalter: Zunftinterne Strukturen und Innerstädtische Konflikte*, Ph.D. diss., University of Basel, 1986; Europäische Hochschulschriften, Bd. 348 (Bern, 1988).
21. Archives Départementales de Meurthe-et-Moselle, Nancy, B 8339: Compte de Claude d'Ainvaux, receveur de Raon.
22. Personal communication from Stuart W. Pyhrr to the author, February 1, 2000. I am also grateful to Thom Richardson for checking records of armorers' marks compiled by Baron Charles Alexander de Cosson (1846–1929) and later by Royal Armouries staff after the so-called de Cosson dictionary entered the collections of the Tower of London. This investigation did not reveal the existence of another piece with Hans Blarer's mark. Personal communication to the author, February 24, 2000.
- For an example of subsequent discoveries of medieval plate armor with marks of Innsbruck and Mühlaus masters, see Bruno Thomas, "Die Innsbrucker Plattnerkunst—Ein Nachtrag," *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien* 70 (1974), pp. 179–220.
23. Medieval mail shirts signed by Basel mail makers have survived. One is in the Schweizerisches Landesmuseum, Zurich (signed FRANZ KLUSEMAN); the other was in the armory of Churburg Castle, ex T1 (signed BTL: STADLER V BASEL). See Schneider, *Schweizer Waffenschmiede*, p. 162; and Thom Richardson, "The Archibald hauberk," *Royal Armouries Yearbook* 4 (1999), p. 30.