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Dear Writer,

Interested in fantasy writing? Want to include heroic fights, but a little confused about weaponry? This article may just be the thing you've been looking for.

From

Writer's Quest Team

### Views on Writing:

## A Guide to Medieval Weapons for Fantasy Writers

by Will Kalif © 2008

If you write fantasy or are thinking about writing fantasy you probably are going to have medieval weapons in your created world. Today's reader of fantasy is very savvy when it comes to weapons and armour and you want your writing to be accurate and to make sense when it comes to weapons. They are often a big part of the story. In this article I explain some important things about medieval weapons, how to get them right, and I look at some of the more popular types of weapons.

#### **In sync with the world**

In the world we live in there has been a very distinct path from sticks and stones to the weapons we have now and this is something you really need to consider in your writing. We have progressed roughly from stone, to copper and bronze, then iron, into eventually steel. Now we have composite materials such as Kevlar. The important thing to realise here is that weapons were made according to the skills and knowledge of weapon smiths. If you are going to have sophisticated weapons in your novel or story you have to have the support to back it up. And steel is a good example of this. It takes a high level of knowledge and skill to make steel and if your world is composed of grass and wood huts it doesn't make sense to have these steel weapons just appearing as if from nowhere. In summary the weapons you use in your novel have to fit into the world you have created. Another thing to consider is availability. If you are using iron then there should be iron mines in your world. Availability of materials is also an important factor. Our world went through an extended Iron Age because iron was very readily available and easy to work with.

#### **A medieval arms race**

Weapons, armour and tactics are always in a state of balance with each other. As metal working skills improve, better swords and weapons are

other. As metal working skills improve, better swords and weapons are made, and the other side of the coin of this is that better armour is also made. Keep this in mind: better blacksmithing and forging skills are not just about weapons, it is also about armour and fortifications. Offence and defence benefit equally and there is always a balance. This is a medieval arms race that is always moving forward yet always in balance.

#### **A philosophy of weapons in writing**

One of the biggest pitfalls that fantasy writers can fall into is to make super weapons that have incredible powers. Often these powers are bequeathed on the weapon through magic. It is too easy to have an ancient sword that was forged by a magical Dwarven blacksmith who captured a dragon and used its fire to harden the magical sword like no other sword has ever been hardened. While this can be fun to write and maybe fun to read you should do your best to avoid situations like this. It is too easy to rely on things like this as ways to get you out of difficult situations. Remember, everything has to be in balance, and everything has to make sense. If you do have a weapon that your hero is wielding and it has unusual powers, you should balance this with something. What is the cost of this weapon or sword? Does wielding it bring danger to the wielder? Is there a fatigue factor? Consider this. It also adds dimension and excitement to the story. If our hero is hesitant to use the sword, it will add a dimension of drama to the story. He or she better have a really good reason to use it.

#### **Our development of weapons**

Here is a rough look at how weapons developed in our world and keep in mind that the real development is closely tied to factors such as the development of forges and improvements in furnace technology. Getting the fire hotter with a better furnace and bellows is what really moved metal working forward. Wood working technology also played an important role in the development of weapons. Stronger shafts and hand pieces were critical for mounting axe heads and other types of weapons.

The earliest, and easiest metal working was done with copper because copper is soft, malleable, and easy to work with. But it had limited use in weapons for these same reasons. It was reasonably sufficient for short daggers but could not be drawn out into a sword length. Weapon crafting started to advance with the discovery of bronze, which is a blending of 90% copper and 10% tin (or 10% gold). This development saw a big advance in weapons, and daggers could be made much longer or as long as a short sword. But these short swords were predominantly for stabbing with the point. Bronze was very effective as thrusting weapons, such as dirks, daggers, short swords, and spearheads, but they were not very effective for slashing. Bronze axe heads mounted on wooden handles were very popular. They saw a lot of use and were reasonably effective.

Iron had a dramatic effect on weapons. It was readily available, easy to work with, and it was easy to sharpen. The big impact this had was to make weapons easy to make and more wide spread. The big development in the use of iron was the discovery of cold forging where the metal was heated and hammered rather than melted and cast. This technique made iron stronger, less brittle, and more reliable than bronze weapons. Iron was the metal of choice for many centuries because of these factors and because of its relative abundance.

Steel is a substantially better metal for weapons and armour. It is significantly harder than iron yet it has a certain amount of flexibility and spring back when it is stressed. This spring back makes it much more resilient and durable under use. Steel is simply iron that has carbon added to it during the forging process. This carbon is often in the form of charcoal. And this art of making steel requires a significant amount of skill because the right amount of carbon has to be added and the steel has to be quenched and tempered correctly. (Quenching and tempering is the process of heating with fire and cooling with water). Steel brings weapons to new heights because it can be used to make longer, more durable weapons, and it can hold an edge extremely

make longer, more durable weapons, and it can hold an edge extremely well, even on just one side. One big aspect of steel in combat is the affect it has on the speed of the fight. Weapons that are lighter and stronger mean combatants can move much quicker. This was an important aspect of the arms race.

And the pinnacle of this development might lie in the rapier. It is a weapon that is extremely light yet still very strong. It is thin enough to be used as an effective thrusting weapon yet it still has an edge that can be used for slashing. We may be able to take this a further step to the fencing foil in that it is a thrusting only weapon that can be wielded extremely fast and is used to find even the smallest gaps in an opponent's armour.

### **Types of weapons**

Here is a quick look and explanation of some common medieval weapons.

**Dagger** - The first effective metal weapons. Originally used as just a thrusting weapon, but as metal skills developed they carried an edge and could be used for slashing. Daggers were the ancestors of swords.

**Dirk** - A long dagger that could be used for thrusting and slashing. They were often made from the cut down blades of swords. They ranged in length from 6 inches to 22 inches.

**Sword** - There are tremendous variations of swords, but typically it is a one-handed steel weapon, sharpened on both sides, and effective as both a slashing and thrusting weapon.

**Katana** - Japanese curved sword with an edge on one side. Effective used for both thrusting and slashing.

**Scimitar** - A long curved sword that is sharpened on one side and effective as predominantly a slashing weapon.

**Two-handed Sword** - a large sword that is generally 60 to 70 inches in length. It was heavy and required two hands to wield effectively. It takes a larger than average sized person to wield this kind of sword and it can be a very effective weapon in combat against lines of combatants and in particular against foes wielding pole arms. It had limited use in one-on-one combat although a sword like this often had a wrapped section at the base of the blade so the wielder can choke up and gain more control in tight fighting situations.

**Pole Weapons** - These are exactly what they sound like - weapons mounted on the ends of poles. When used in unison, a group of combatants with pole weapons could form a formidable defence or offence. A pole weapon could also generate tremendous force because of its long swing. They were also often used against combatants on horseback. A halberd is a good example of this. It typically had an axe for slashing, a point for thrusting, and a hook that could be used to pull an opponent down from a top of a horse.

**Mace** - This is a one-handed weapon that has a wooden handle and a steel or iron ball at the end of it. Sometimes this metal ball has spikes. It was effective as a crushing weapon and it could generate enough force to break a foe's armour. The spikes could penetrate the hardest armour.

**Flail** - this is a wooden handled weapon with a length of chain. At the end of the chain was a mace ball either with or without spikes. When swung it generates tremendous force and one of the uses for a flail was its ability to reach up and over an opponent's shield.

**Axe** - were an effective weapon that could be created with moderate metal working skill. This is because the axe head could be bulkier and have less length that needed to keep an edge. This head would normally be mounted on a wooden handle. Axes came in many variations typically one side with an edge and the other with a point. Some axes had edges on both sides and a point at the top end tip of the handle for thrusting.

Even though you are writing fantasy and creating a fantasy world you still have to ground the world in ways that make sense and you have to give your weapons an authentic feel. This means they have to fit the world you are building and they have to follow rules that make sense to the reader who probably has considerable knowledge of medieval weapons, how they are made, and how they are used.

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**About the author:** Will Kalif is the author of two epic fantasy novels and a medieval weapon buff. If you want to learn more about medieval weapons, castles and more visit his website: <http://medieval.stormthecastle.com> or visit his epic fantasy and medieval blog: <http://www.castlefiction.com/heroicdreams/> *Heroic Dreams - Never Give a Sword to a Man Who Can't Dance*. Article Source: <http://www.free-articles-zone.com>

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