

CERVELLIERE

European, circa 1250 to 1350.

Height: 14,5 cm.

Width: ca. 20 cm.

Length: 21,7 cm.

Circumference: 65 cm.

Weight: 1069 g.

Close fitting skull cap of hemispherical shape, forged in one piece, several riveted old repairs from the time of use, a large damage to the upper front side caused by a lethal weapon impact, 10 circular wholes near the lower border, the one at the front side of larger diameter, more than 27 marks and a number of single dashes, the majority of them highlighted by a red color at a later date. Old collection label on the inner face.

Background, Type and Dating

The cervelliere was a helmet type introduced in the late 12th century and worn over a longer period of time, even in the early 16th century - however with stylistic variations. What we do present here is a very early version, dating from 1250 to 1350 circa. Since there are hardly any comparative pieces of suchlike early helmets it is necessary to discuss this example predominantly on the grounds of pictorial and sculptural evidence, what we do provide in the following.

The wholes at the lower border of our example served to attach a lining on the inner face. There are two of these on each side placed at a shorter

distance, appearing like a pair. While one secured the lining, the other held a chin strap which was necessary to fasten the helmet to the head.



Fig. 1 Fresco, Italy, early 14th cent.¹

In this manner the cervelliere was often worn as a single helmet only, without any additional protection for the neck, the face or the shoulders, like the Fresco at the Rocca di Angera illustrates (fig. 1.).

However, there were various ways of carrying it. Often this type was used together with a detachable aventail. Fig. 3 shows in a very realistic and detailed manner how this was mounted to the helmet. Its wide leather strap shows wholes that are passed through by vervelles, which extend from the helmet's surface. Through their pierced ends a leather

¹ Fresco in the Hall of Justice of Angera Castle (Varese), Italy. Early 14th century. It depicts the victory of the Visconti against the Torriani in the Battle of Desio back in 1277.

cord or wire is strung which firmly fixes both elements to each other. Mail and Leather strap are joined by sewing. So, by removing the cord aventail and helmet could be separated easily.

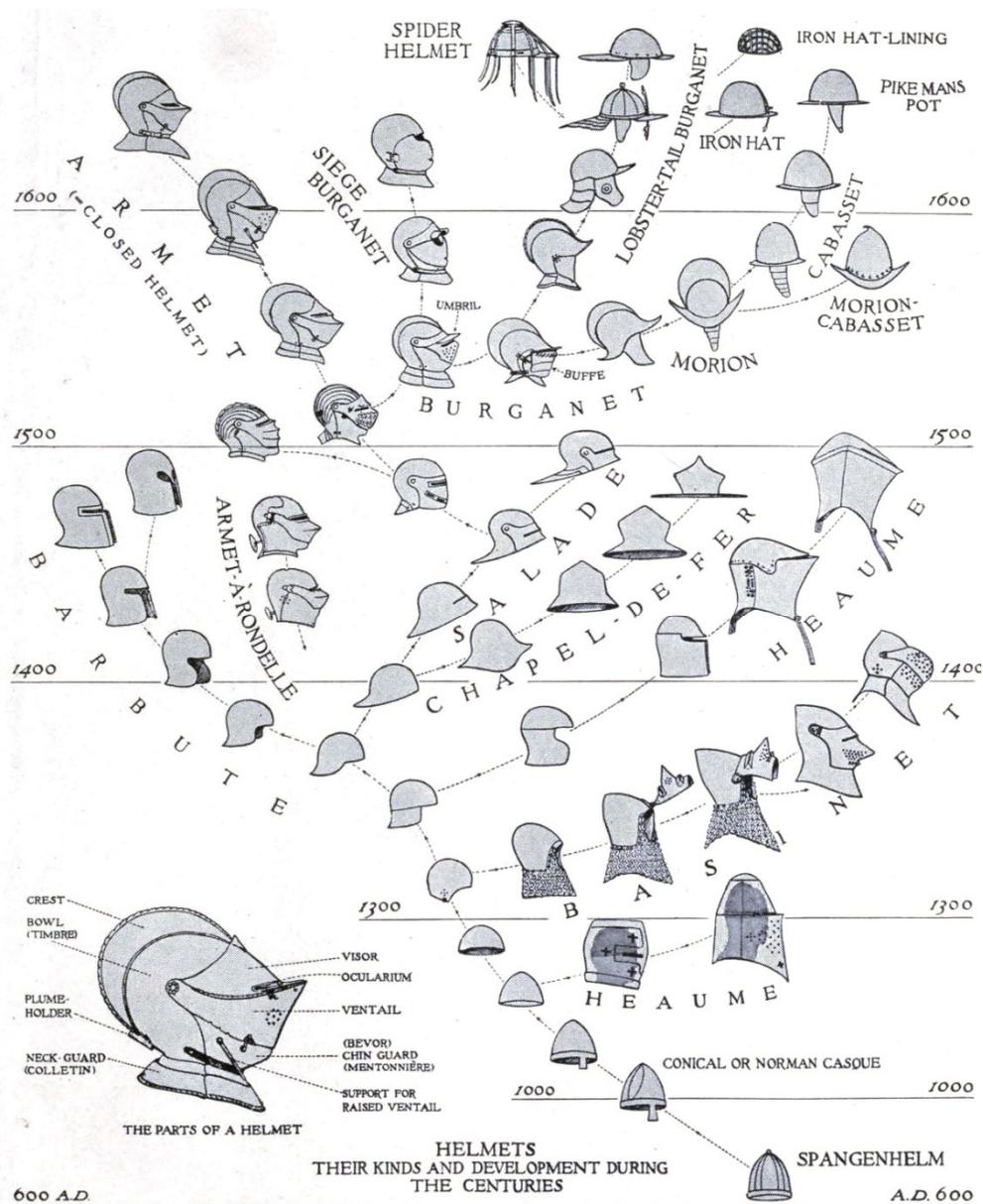


Fig. 2. Helmets and their developmental sequence.²

² Dean, B. (1920): Helmets and Body Armor, fig. 8.



Fig. 3. Carved Capital at the Doge's Palace, Venice, circa 1309.

An interesting feature is the cross shaped hook on the forehead. This corresponds to an eye on the end of an extension of the aventail near the chin. Hanging this into the hook would provide for an additional protection in a combat situation, a feature found on other depictions as well, but not always.

Our cervelliere shows a whole on the front face which is slightly larger than the others. This suggests that there was a similar device riveted here, allowing for hanging in an aventail.

Another highly interesting pictorial source for the equipment of medieval warriors is the so called Crusader, Maciejowski or Morgan

picture Bible, dating from circa 1250. There are depictions that show the cervelliere worn below a coif as on fig. 4.



Fig. 4 Warrior.³

Other images suggest this helmet was also placed either on top of a coif or the mail being attached to the helmet. The latter would possible have been accomplished as described above, the details being neglected by the illustrators.

³ Crusader Bible (circa 1250): The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Ms.M.638, fol. 10 v.



Fig. 5. Warrior shooting a crossbow.⁴

Last but not least, the cervelliere was also worn beneath the great helmet by knights on horseback.

Comparative Pieces

As mentioned above medieval helmets are of utmost rarity. The reason is rather simple. Ordinary helmets were considered as functional equipment. So, whenever the technology developed further, older pieces were recycled and the costly iron reused. Consequently, the few comparative examples do still exist for one of two reasons. Either they got lost in battle and have been excavated as archaeological ground finds or an object has survived because it was kept, since there was a

⁴ Crusader Bible (circa 1250): The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Ms.M.638, fol. 10 v.

certain event or important owner related to it. We will discuss this below.

First let us turn to the comparative pieces of the early cervelliere. I know two of them in public collections:

I. Musee de l'Armee, Paris.



Fig. 6. Cervelliere.⁵

This helmet is obviously a ground found. Unfortunately, it has been heavily cleaned.

⁵Musee de l'Armee, Paris, inv. H PO 650.

II. Armeria della Rocca, Mondavio, Italy. Exhibition.



Fig. 7. Cervelliere, early sallet⁶

This piece is very interesting, as it illustrates how items were reused during their lifetime. By riveting additional plates to the cervelliere it was changed to an early sallet, possibly at circa 1350 to 1400. Also, this helmet is an excavation and has been heavily overcleaned, as it was common practice in the 19th and early 20th century. Today there would be advanced conservational methods in order to preserve its patina.⁷

⁶ Mauro, M. (1989): *Armeria della Rocca*, p. 55, no. 8.

⁷ Scalini, M. (2014): *From Helmets to Buckets*, pp. 43 – 53, in Rocca, D.: *The Armorer's Art*.

III. Private collection.

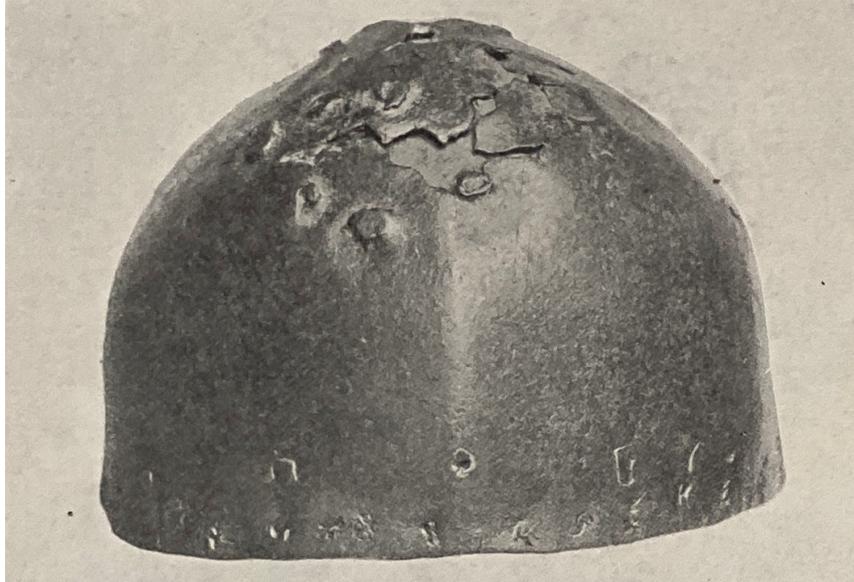


Fig. 8. Cervelliere, 15th century.⁸

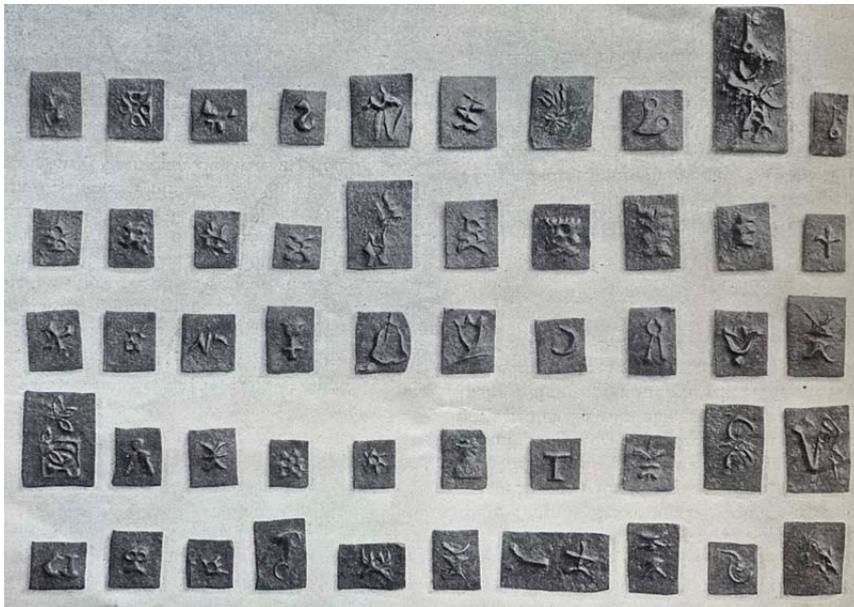


Fig. 9. Marks.⁹

⁸ Engel (1909): Schmiedemarkenproben auf einem mittelalterlichen Helm, in: Zeitschrift für Historische Waffenkunde, vol. V, no. 6, p. 188.

⁹ Engel (1909): Schmiedemarkenproben auf einem mittelalterlichen Helm, in: Zeitschrift für Historische Waffenkunde, vol. V, no. 6, p. 187.

This helmet shows a slight comb, which suggests a later dating, the 15th century. Still it shall be taken as a comparative example due to the high number of marks on it and the large repaired damage, both to be discussed in the following.

Back in 1909 this cervelliere was in a private collection at Gnesen, Poland. Its current whereabouts are unknown. It might have gotten lost in the second world war.

A lethal Wound, over 27 Marks, and an incredible Condition

Now it is time to discuss the most attractive aspects of the present cervelliere. We have seen how rare examples of suchlike early helmets are and it has become clear that the existing comparative ones are ground founds. Now, our helmet shows a surface patina that suggests it has never been in the earth, being conserved in very favorable conditions within the last 700 years. The question is, why this was done over such a long time period of time, before people started to collect antiques in the 19th century. There must have happened something very important 700 years ago, why it was decided that this particular helmet should be treasured and kept.

It is obvious that the large damage at the front is probably an indication for the answer.

At a closer look you can observe, that the whole must have been the result of a massive combat impact that was able to penetrate the metal in such a manner. The wound was surely a deadly one.





So, this cervelliere must have been kept by persons who had a strong relationship to the warrior, who died wearing it. It was either taken as a war booty on the event of a successful defense or in memory of an important comrade in arms who died during an attack.

Approaching this idea, it becomes interesting to have a closer look at the lower border of this object again. You can observe more than 27 marks, stamped around the helmet, the majority highlighted by a red color at a later date. What was the function of these? Normally, you would only expect an armourer's mark and one of the guild, if any at all.

An interesting thesis can be found in an article published at the *Zeitschrift für historische Waffenkunde* back in 1909.¹⁰ The author presents a cervelliere from his own collection, which is described above as comparative piece III. He suggests that the marks on his helmet might have been stamped in by the members of a metal-working guild, who had taken the helmet as a war booty. Subsequently it would have been stored at the guild house in memory of the successful defense of the city walls. As a comparative case he refers to the butcher's guild of the city Thorn in Poland which at that date still kept a plate armour and coat of mail from the early 16th century. These items were verifiably taken as a war booty by the butchers.

This seems a plausible explanation. In medieval times the defense of a city was organized by the guilds, who obliged their members to perform military service and acquire arms and armour on their own expense.¹¹

¹⁰ Gnesen, E. (1909): Schmiedemarkenproben auf einem mittelalterlichen Helm, in: *Zeitschrift für Historische Waffenkunde*, vol. V, no. 6, pp. 186 – 188.

¹¹ Marin, P. (1975): Wehr-, Waffen- und Harnischpflicht der Straßburger Zünfte im 14. Jahrhundert, in: *Waffen- und Kostümkunde*, vol. XVII, no. 2, pp. 102 – 108.

Maybe the identification of one or more marks will one day help to shed light on this question.

Besides this it might also have been the wearer of this helmet, who was honored by treasuring the object. It seems very well possible that guild members dignified a fellow who died in combat.

On the other hand, there are certainly further potential explanations, for example the arrangement in the context of a funeral achievement in a church. This was common practice and the best preserved medieval arms and armour have survived the centuries in suchlike places.

Since we are discussing a cervelliere from the crusader's era, it might have been taken home by fellow combatants upon their return for the installation in a funeral achievement. The marks could be personal signs of them in order to confirm their loyalty and honor towards the person who died.

AVENTAIL

European, 14th century.

Rings: 11 mm outer diameter, 8 mm inner diameter.

Length upper border: 74 cm.

Weight: 2710 g.

Wedge riveted rings in a 4 to 1 pattern, of circular cross section, formerly probably attached to a leather band that in turn would have been connected to the skull of a helmet by a leather cord passing through a series of pierced rivets, called vervelles.

The style of this mail compares closely to the aventail of Churburg No. 13¹² and another one at the Royal Armouries Museum, which is of Churburg provenance also.¹³

Albeit we do offer both the cervelliere and the aventail together, the shape of the latter suggests that it once belonged to a different helmet.

When we acquired both pieces, they were arranged together. This might have happened centuries ago since the patina on both objects argues for being stored in comparable conditions for a long time - maybe still in its context at a guild house or in a Renaissance chamber of curiosity. They could also have been unified by an important 19th century collector.

¹² Mann, J. G. (1929): The Armoury of the Castl of Churburg, pl. XIV.

¹³ Dufty, A. R. (1968): European Armour in the Tower of London, pl. LXXII.

This is in itself an interesting aspect so we decided not to separate both pieces, albeit each of them is individually highly rare and important.

We are still conducting provenance research and do hope that the old label on the inner side of the cervelliere might help shedding light at least on the younger collection history.

INSTITUTIONAL CLIENTS

In the last years, we have welcomed several museums of international significance among the circle of our valued clients. We are grateful for the confidence these institutions have placed in our services.

2019

The *European Hansemuseum* in Lübeck loaned our 15th century breech-loading swivel gun for their special exhibition *Störtebeker and Company*.

2017

Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna from Malta purchases a group of rare antiquarian books on artillery and fortification, dating from the 17th to 19th centuries.

2016

The *Bayerisches Nationalmuseum* in Munich enhances its collection with an important hunting hanger.

2015

Schloss Moritzburg near Dresden acquires from us a partizan of the lifeguard of Elector Friedrich August I., Saxony 1694 – 1697.

2015

We sold the drawing of an unknown bronze barrel by Albert Benningk to the *Deutsches Historisches Museum* in Berlin.

2013

The *Cleveland Museum of Art* secures a savoyard helmet, dating from the early 17th century. We were able to trace back its provenance to the collection of Rutherford Stuyvesant.



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