The Galloglass Axe

The axe used by the Irish galloglass was a direct descendant of the old "Danish axe", of the archaeological classification Petersen type M. This is a reflection of the Norse ancestry of the galloglass.

Our best picture of the Irish galloglass axe comes in the 16th century, when it took a limited number of forms, some being peculiarly Irish developments but others showing remarkable continuity with the old "Danish axe". The Irish galloglass axe was called a *sparth* or *spar* in Anglo-Irish documents[1], and was called *tuagh* in Irish[2]. It represents the latest practical employment of an axe that could be classified as Petersen type M.

Ancestry of the Galloglass Axe

The classic Viking axe, the "Danish Axe", emerges in the northern world in the 11th century. Its use spread throughout a broad area of Norse influence, and it is found in the hands of the Varangian guard in Byzantium and the Saxon huscarls in England. Here at last is an axe meant only for fighting and with no woodworking application. It is an exclusively two-handed axe, with a large head and a handle from four to six feet long, precluding the use of a shield.[3] While earlier axes with shorter handles could be wielded with one hand, their heads were more compact and bulky. The "Danish axe" has a much more lightly constructed head, the metal remarkably thin but thickening a little along the welded-on steel edge. In fact, while it might not seem so at first sight, the larger "Danish axe" is much easier to heft and flourish overhead than a modern wood-felling axe.[4] We are told its stroke could take off a horseman's leg and topple his horse. Indeed, it was to counter the mounted Norman knights that the galloglass were first introduced into Ireland, and we will later examine a 16th century Irish example of this special danger posed by axemen to horsemen.

The Western Isles of Scotland—from whence the galloglass migrated to Ireland—were a Norse kingdom for hundreds of years. As we will see, the classic "Danish axe", given the archaeological classification Petersen Type M, had already begun to undergo some local modifications in the Isles before its introduction into Ireland starting c. 1260.

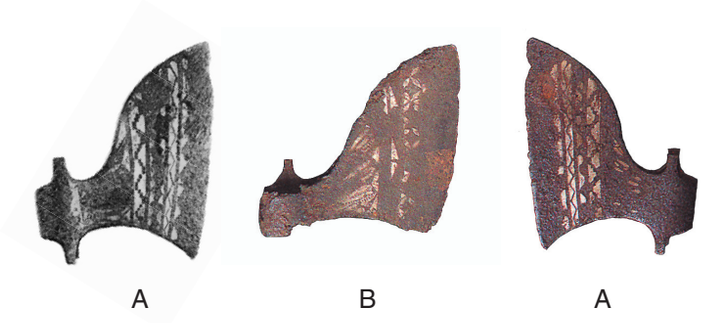

Fig. 1. Two surviving axes. That found at Ballina, Mayo (B) is pictured at center between two views of a better preserved example from Northern Donegal (A). Both now in National Museum, Dublin.

[1] Hunt, John, *Medieval Irish Figure Sculpture*, Vol. I, 1974, p. 83. (Hunt cites 14th and 15th century references to, respectively, a "sperth de Hibernia" and a "Galway-sparth".)
[2] Harbison, Peter, *Native Irish Arms and Armour in Medieval Gaelic Literature 1170-1600*, Irish Sword, 1975, p.278
[3] Britta, Nurmann, et al, *The Vikings Recreated in Colour Photographs*, 1997, p. 16
[4] Oakeshott, Ewart, *A Knight and His Weapons,* 1964, p. 45

Surviving Axe-heads from Mayo and Donegal

G.A. Hayes-McCoy, the pioneer scholar of the galloglass, was of the opinion that the galloglass axe took no standardized form.[5] However, the arms and armour of the galloglass were remarkably standardized, and their form was specified in the contracts under which they served. The archaeological evidence, while slender, also tends to favor standardization.

There are two definite surviving galloglass axes housed in the National Museum of Ireland, both having been found in 1936. (Fig. 1.) They are of precisely the same size and form, though one was found in northern Donegal and the other was found in Mayo. Their identical form—despite significant geographical separation—argues for standardization.[6] They are assigned a 13th century date, but as they were both found without archaeological context, we may reconsider this based on other evidence. I am of the view that they may well date to the 15th or even early 16th century. With such a slender archaeological record, the iconography of the galloglass axe takes on great importance and has largely guided the attempt at classification that follows.

Morphology of the Galloglass Axe

The pictorial record of the 16th century galloglass axe allows us to construct a morphological timeline. What emerges is a consistent form of axe with a man-high handle and a large head with, nearly always, a straight edge. The surviving iconographic evidence suggests that four distinct forms can be identified. These will be named A, B, C and D, and are described in the chronological diagrams and the following text.

Type A

This variety is by far the most widely attested. It is a direct outgrowth of that form of "Danish axe" which had a pronounced fore-tip on the blade's upper edge. The trend for axes of this type was for the neck to thicken, which appears in Scottish examples starting in the 13th century (A-2). The upper edge of the blade of these axes had described a relatively straight line from socket to fore-tip, tending to slightly concave. This changes with the mid-14th century depiction on the MacMillan tomb at Kilmory, Knap (A-3)[7]. Here the upper edge of the blade has a pronounced convex curve, describing a gentle "S". This is the type represented by the only two known surviving galloglass axes, the Donegal and Mayo axes already noted (A-4). Such axe heads are described in a 16th century poem as being broad, narrow-necked, and curve-backed (*cul-croma*).[8]

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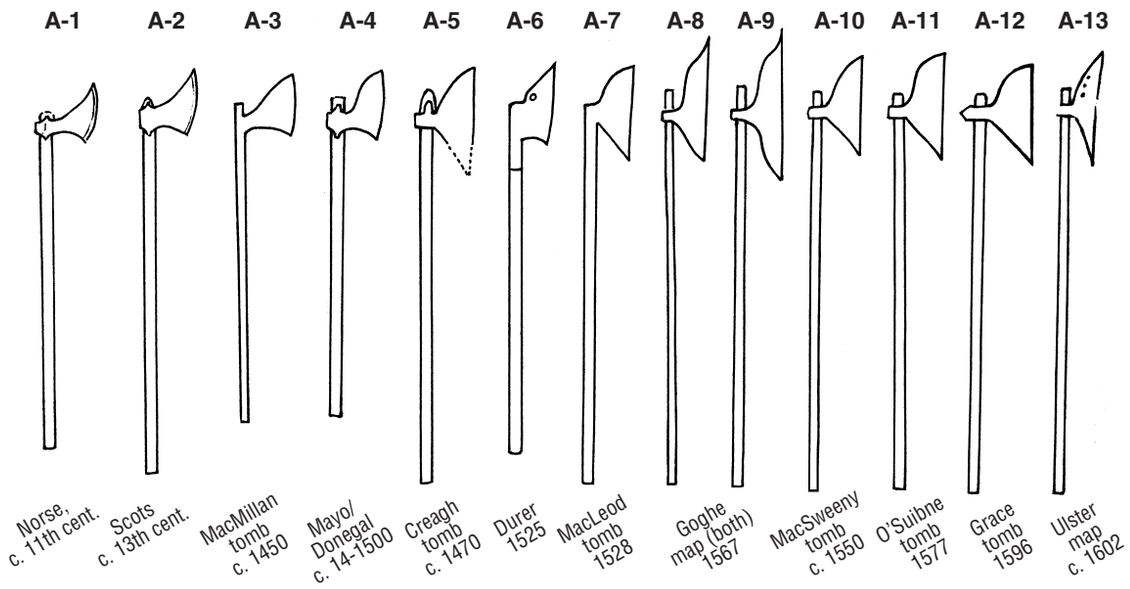
[5] Hayes-McCoy, Gerard A., *The Galloglach Axe,* Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society, Vol. 17, 1937, p. 121

[6] Mahr, Adolph, *The Galloglach Axe,* Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society, Vol. 18, 1938, p. 66

[7] See Appendix for the original images from which the outline drawings have been taken.

[8] Harbison, op. cit., p.279

Type A



The cutting edge of the blade was subsequently widened to about a foot in length by extending it downward in a pointed "beard". The line of the lower edge, extending from socket to lower tip, was straight, in contrast to the gentle curve of the upper edge. This development first appears in the resurrection scene on the Creagh/MacMahon tomb at Ennis, Clare, which is dated to 1470 (A-5). While this sculpture is clearly derived from provincial English prototypes, its details have been localized and the axe-bearing soldiery guarding the tomb are obviously modeled on galloglass.

Fig. 2. "...having every of them his weapon, callyd a sparre, moche like the axe of the towre, and they be called galloglasse." Thus wrote St. Leger to the king in 1543, as preserved in the State Papers of Henry VIII.

The axes carried today by the Yeomen Gaolers of the Tower date to the 16th century. Their shafts, 5'4" in length, are studded with four rows of brass nails. Note the close similarity between this and the inset reproduction of the Donegal galloglass axe. The sockets, with spurs top and bottom, are identical. The Gaoler's axe retains a very pronounced fore-tip, and is a remarkable survival of a Petersen Type M axe.

The next depiction of this type comes from Durer's drawing of 1521, the famous "war men of Ireland" (A-6). This must be treated with caution, for while many of the details of the drawing can be confirmed by other evidence, Durer never visited Ireland and his work was almost certainly based on other drawings he had seen, rather than personal observation. The axe which one of his figures carries over his shoulder must be assigned to our Type A, though due perhaps to this questionable provenance, it is not a perfect fit.

Next, we return to more certain ground with the axe shown in the hands of a warrior on the 1528 MacLeod tomb at Rodel, Harris (A-7), which is nearly identical to that on the Creagh/MacMahon tomb in Ennis, Clare. The series continues with two depictions which occur on a 1567 map of Ireland by John Goghe (A-8, A-9). By the hand of an Englishman who probably had good knowledge of Ireland, the incidental drawings of MacSweeny galloglass which grace the map's Donegal region include two axes of the form we have been discussing. Their slightly flamboyant appearance may be a flourish of the artist's, furthered by the rather loose style of his sketch, but the type is unmistakable.

The next two depictions also hail from the MacSweeny country. A-10 is from the MacSweeny slab at Killybegs, Donegal, dated to the second half of the 16th century, and appears in the hand of a galloglass warrior. A-11 is from the tombstone of Donat O'Suibne at Sligo Abbey, Sligo, dated 1577, where it appears carried over the shoulder of a galloglass. Both are of identical form and proportion to the Rodel and Ennis axes described above.

Also of identical form is the axe shown in the hands of St. Simon in a tomb surround on the monument to Honoria Grace at Kilkenny, Tipperary, dated 1596 (A-12). St. Simon is traditionally represented holding a sparth in Irish iconography, and while this is not a military figure, the axe is clearly of a kind with our Type A. Last is another sketch from an English map of Ulster, probably dating to after 1602. A group of Irishmen is roughly depicted inaugurating O'Neill at Tullahoge, and one of them bears a long axe. It is of our Type A, with straight cutting edge, curved upper edge and straight lower edge. While represented somewhat narrower than others in the series, this again may be due to the crudeness of the drawing. Yet the type is clear.

Type B

The next most frequently met with form in the pictorial record shows remarkable continuity with that type of old "Danish axe" that had a broad, symmetrical blade. It was described thus by an anonymous writer in 1588:
"...the weapon they most use is a batle axe or halberd, six foote longe, the blade wherof is somewhat like a shomakers knyfe, and without pike."[9] As can be seen in the illustrations above (Fig. 3), the traditional shoemaker's knife had a relatively thin neck and a broad, crescentic blade.

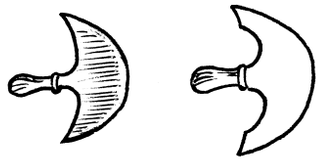


Fig. 3. Shoemaker's knives

[9] Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS. 669, fo., p. 11

Type B

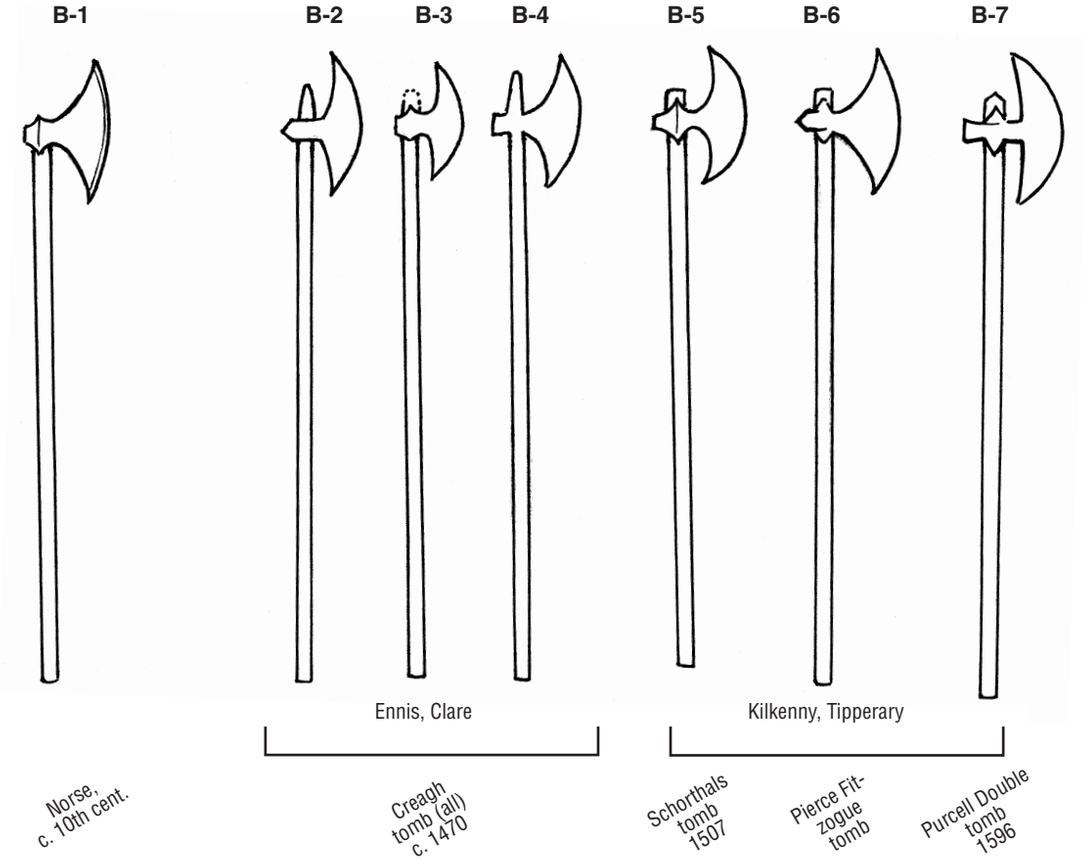


Fig. 4. A *Rindi* of Ivan IV

A second written reference to such an axe in the hands of galloglass occurs in a letter of 1583 from Jerome Bowes, Elizabeth's ambassador at the Court of Ivan IV of Russia. He describes the Czar's personal guards, the *Rindis*, "holding upon their shoulders each of them a broad axe, much like to a galloglass axe of Ireland, thin and very sharp, the 'steal', or handle not past a half yard long."[10] As in Ireland, these Russian axes were a cultural artifact of Norse origin. (Fig. 4)

Bowes noted that the Russian axes had a short "steal" or handle, and while he does not suggest that the galloglass axe shared this characteristic, his words call to mind Spencer's description of the giant Grantorto, often assumed to have been modelled on a galloglass:

[10] Quinn, David Beers, *the Elizabethans and the Irish*, Cornell University Press, 1966, p. 98

All armed in a coat of iron plate,
of great defense to ward the deadly fear,
And on his head a steel cap he did wear
of color rusty brown but sure and strong;
And in his hand an huge poleax did bear,
Whose steel was iron studded but not long,
With which he wont to fight, to justify his wrong.[11]

There is a third possible reference to such a crescentic bladed axe-head in the hands of galloglass. Writing in Latin, Dublin-born Richard Stanihurst described the galloglass in 1577, saying "their weapons are one foot in length, resembling double-headed hatchets, almost sharper than razors, fixed on shafts of more than ordinary length..."[12]. It is possible that the classically educated Stanihurst was thinking of the double headed-axe of the inhabitants of ancient Phrygia, the *bipennis*, which was traditionally represented as of crescentic form. At any rate, *bipennis* is the word he uses. (Fig. 5) Less likely, he may have had in mind the double-headed axes of contemporary Moghul India. (Fig. 6) John Major in his *History* of 1521, writing like Stanihurst in Latin, described the Scottish Leith axe of his day as *bipennis*, strictly a "double-headed axe". It has been suggested, however, that this may have simply been a conventional way of referring to an axe.[13] If, however, we may take Stanihurst and Major at their word, their testimony may be further evidence of the use of crescentic blades.

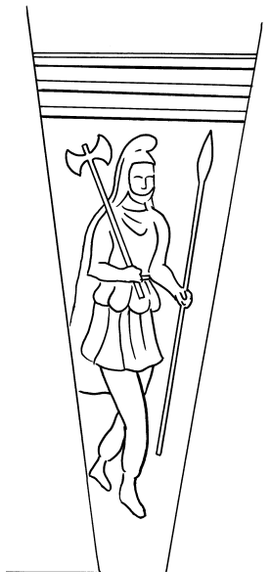


Fig. 5. Cult figure in Phrygian dress carrying a *bipennis*, embossed on the chape of a Roman Sword of Mainz type.

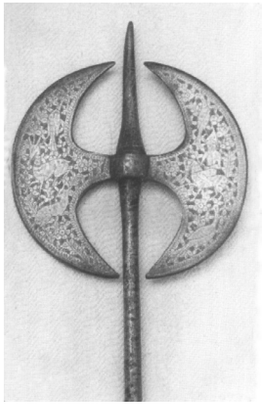


Fig. 6. A Moghul double-headed axe

B-2 to B-4 are from the same Creagh/MacMahon tomb in Ennis, Clare, already noted as a source of a Type A axe. They occur in depictions of Christ's arrest and resurrection which we have said are based on English provincial originals. B-5 through B-7 are all from somewhat conventional sculptures of St. Simon found in tomb surrounds in Kilkenny, the axe being a sign of his martyrdom. The type occurs nowhere else, and if not for the literary notices given above, we might wonder if it was not simply a conventional artistic representation of a battle-axe rather than a form actually used in Ireland.

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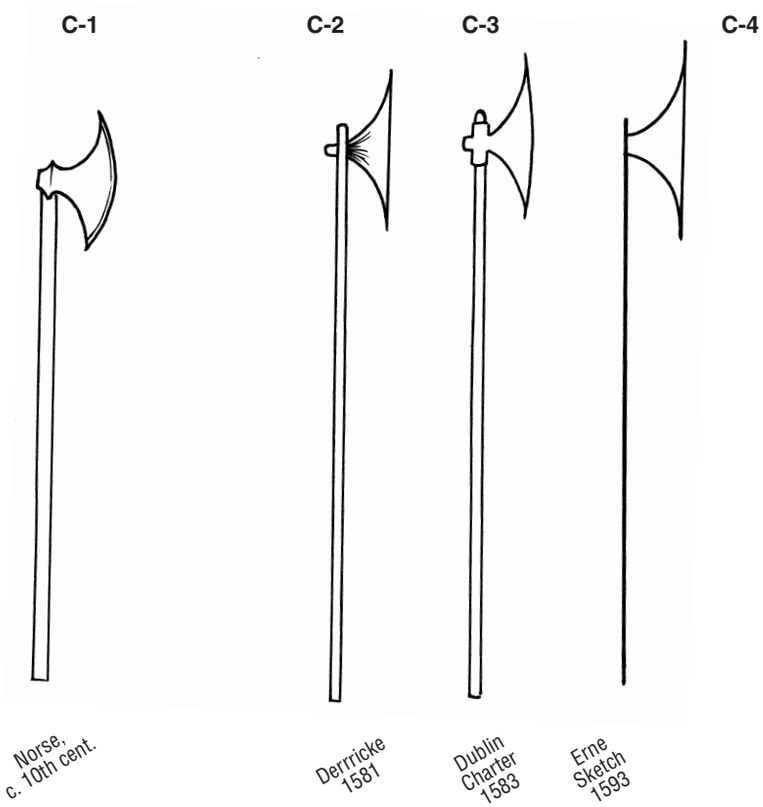
[11] Quinn, op. cit., p. 93. (Note that Spencer also says the "steel", or handle, of Grantorto's axe was "not long". Our references to galloglass axes in the 16th century point overwhelmingly to the handles being man-high, but we must allow the possibility that some shorter handles remained in use, as in former times. Note too that Spencer says this handle was "iron studded", which suggests a decoration similar to that seen on the axe of the Yoeman Goalers of the Tower illustrated in Fig. 2. A galloglass figured on a 15th century tomb front at Roscommon Abbey seen in Fig. 8 shows such an short-handled axe.)

[12] Stanihurst, Richard, *De Rebus Hibern,* 1577, quoted in Hayes-McCoy, G.A., *The Galloglach Axe*, Journal of the Galway Archaeological and and Historical Society, Vol. 17, 1937, p. 105

[13] Blair, Claude, *Scottish Weapons and Fortifications, 1100-1800,* 1981, p. 20

Type C



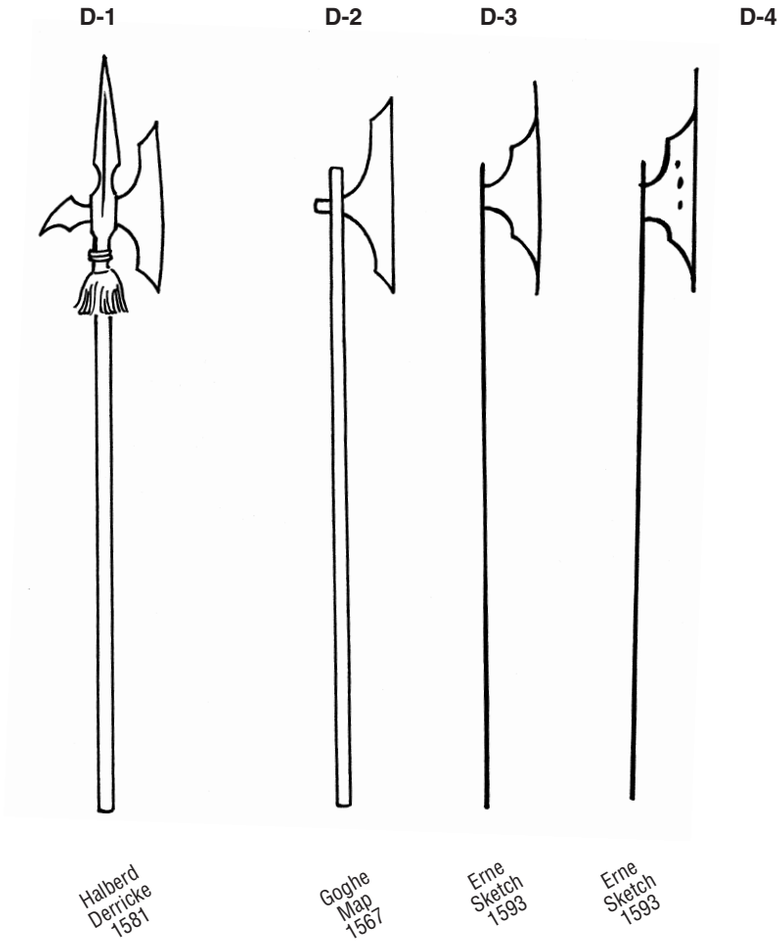
Type C

Type C is not traceable in any written reference. It combines features of the two previously identified forms. Like Type B, it is remarkably similar to the oldest form of "Danish axe", but rather than crescentic, its blade is straight-edged as in Type A. Example C-2 is from the well known series of woodcuts illustrating John Derricke's *Image of Ireland*, printed in 1581. It is shown in the hands of mailed galloglass and unarmoured kern. (Fig. 7)

C-3 is from a charter granted to Dublin in 1583, where it is shown in the hands of a mailed galloglass. And C-4 is from a rough sketch of the 1593 Battle of Erne Fords by the soldier John Thomas. The figures carrying axes are not detailed, but they probably represent galloglass, for Maguire was known to have employed them on this occasion.

Fig. 7. Kern armed with an axe from Derricke's *Image of Ireland*, 1581.

Type D



Type D

This last type has the straight-edged blade found on most galloglass axes, but the blade's extremities are clipped top and bottom very much in the manner of the contemporary halberd. I suggest that the type may have evolved in imitation of the halberds carried by English troops in Ireland. As our starting point therefore, D-1 is an English halberd as represented in Derricke's *Image of Ireland*. It is worth noting that while Anglo-Irish documents use the term "sparth" for the galloglass axe in the early 16th century, by mid-century this gives way to "Irish halberd". By the end of the century the most commonly used term is simply "galloglass axe".

Perhaps it is to axes of this type that Cucogry O'Cleary refers in his *Life of Hugh Roe O'Donnell*, available in several translations. Describing the arms of the opposing armies before the battle of the Yellow Ford (1598), he says the Irish "...had thin polished battle-axes; but devoid of the *flesca* and *ecclanna*, which distinguished the axes of the English." The words *flesca* and *ecclanna* have been translated as "rings and chains", but I feel it more likely that they should be translated "tassels and blades", in clear reference to the English halberds as shown in D-1.

MacBain's Dictionary gives *fleasg* as a sheaf or garland—a good description of the tassels found on the hilts of English halberds. *Ecclanna* incorporates the word *lann*—a blade. Surely this refers to the spear heads and fluke blades found on English halberds, but not Irish axes.

Despite O'Cleary's assertion that Irish axes were without *flesca*, we have a 1538 description of a galloglass axe, "...the hilt therof hanging full of silk", like an English halberd. However this galloglass axe was being used for ceremonial purposes and it is not suggested that silk tassels were typically found on Irish axes. (see below: p. 11)

D-2 is carried by one of the MacSweeny galloglass figures on Goghe's map of 1567. The other two figures on this map carry axes of Type A, which rather suggests that the differing styles of axe could coexist within the same galloglass company. D-3 and D-4 are both from John Thomas' sketch of the battle of the Erne Fords in 1593. These two axes appear alongside others of our Type C, which again serves to temper our evidence, cited earlier, in favor of standardization of galloglass axes.

Discussion of Galloglass Axe Types

Type A is established by 1500 and is well represented in the surviving record right through to 1603. It is geographically weighted to the northwest, appearing most often in West Highland and Donegal locations, although there are a couple of Tipperary depictions. It seems in particular to have MacSweeny connections. Based on the rate of depiction, it is the most commonly found type, and it may be significant that the only two surviving galloglass axes are early versions of this variety. It is a uniquely Gaelic development.

Type B bears a greater resemblance to its Norse prototype. Depictions are limited to Clare and Tipperary, frequently in the hands of conventional representations of St. Simon. Indeed, were it not for several written references to the type, we might suppose the few surviving representations to be international artistic types rather than a reflection of local practice. The few depictions we have of type B are spread over the whole century.

Type C might arguably be lumped together with Type B. They both derive from the same Norse prototype, to which they remain remarkably true. The only difference is the straight-edged blade of Type C. Indeed, the few depictions we have of the type are rather crude, and it is possible the degree of straitness shown for the blade is exaggerated, strengthening the argument for considering it a subset of Type B.

Type D is a late development, the first notice of it being in 1567. I have said that I consider it likely to be an Irish imitation of the English halberd, resulting from increasing contact with the English army. This "anglicized" variation occurs at a time when native weapons were being modernized and firearms and pikes increasingly adopted by the forces of the Irish lordships.

Manufacture of Galloglass Axes

Unlike sword blades, the manufacture of galloglass axes posed no serious challenge to 16th century Irish smiths, and they were made locally in great numbers. In 1589, a letter preserved in the Calendar of State Papers, Ireland, notes that the rebel Burkes had employed the Mayo MacDonalds, a famous galloglass sept. These MacDonalds were said to have "made of late 400 galloglass axes." Another letter in the same source confirms, "daily they are making Galloglass axes, and other weapons."[14]

We also have a reference to the specialized manufacture of wooden handles for galloglass axes. In the 1590's, when Feagh Mac Hugh O'Byrne of Wicklow was modernizing his forces, substituting the pike for the galloglass axe, it was reported that he "set all the axemen to make pikes, and the smiths to make heads for them."[15]

Decoration of Galloglass Axes

Significantly, the two surviving galloglass axes described at the outset of this article were both decorated with applique bands of silver foil, cut in simple patterns of zigzags and stepped pyramid shapes. Mahr suggested "...that ornamented axes were not an everyday rank and file weapon, but a better class of axe used on ceremonial occasions."[16] Perhaps, but if so, it seems odd that the only two surviving examples should both feature such silver ornament. Of course, silver decoration is occasionally found on the "Danish Axe" from which the galloglass axe derives. And similar silver applique adorns an axe head of my Type A found at Loch Leven in Scotland and dated to c. 1470.[17]

It is also noteworthy that when in 1552 the English Court required suitably Irish props for "An Irisshe playe of the State of Ireland", these included "...An Irysshe howlbarte the blade foyled with syluer."[18] Finally, from 1538 there is another reference to a "...galloglasse with a silver spear [i.e. spar[19]] or axe...". While not resolving the question of how common such silver decoration was, this last quote—given in full below—introduces the fascinating subject of the galloglass axe as a ceremonial weapon.

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[14] Hayes-McCoy, op. cit., p. 112

[15] Hayes-McCoy, Gerard A., *The Army of Ulster, 1593-1601,* Irish Sword, Vol. I, 1949-53, p. 115

[16] Mahr, op. cit., p. 67

[17] Blair, op. cit., p. 208-209

[18] Feuillerat, A., *Documents Relating to the Revels at Court in the time of King Edward VI and Queen Mary, 1550-54,* 18, 1938-39, p. 66-68

[19] For "spear" read spar. Holinshed describes the galloglass thus: "He is called a spear, of his weapon or axe so termed..." See: Holinshed, Raphael, *Chronicles* (1577), I, iii, [D4r]; VI (1808), 68

Ceremonial Use of Galloglass Axes

In a note appended to Dr. Mahr's article on the galloglass axe, G.A. Hayes-McCoy described an incident which illustrates the ceremonial role the galloglass axe could play as a sign of a chief's authority.[20] This occurred in 1538 when Lord Deputy Grey received a safe passage through O'Brien's territory. He was later criticized for being so trusting. The passages are of sufficient interest to quote in full:

> 1538, Aug. 22.— *Brabazon, Aylmer, and Alen to Cromwell*.
> O'Brien "sent a galloglasse with him [Grey] for his conducte and salve passage; who, going before him with an axe, conducte [*sic*] him thoroughe Thomonde, wherin they had soche streightes and narrow passages, that if a hundred men had set upon my Lord, they mought have distressed him and all his company."
>
> 1540, October—. *Information lodged against Lord Leonard Grey, late Lord Deputy, by John Darcy (who accompanied him on his western journey in July* 1538).
> Grey is moving from Clare into Galway. Darcy says:—
> "And the said Lord Deputy having O'Brien's promise to have been conducted by him to Ulicke de Burghe, in the end he [O'Brien] deceived him, sending but one galloglasse with a silver spear [spar] or axe, and the hilt thereof hanging full of silk, to be his guide, and so went with them to Gallway. All we the King's subjects that were there sorrowfully bewailed the King's Deputy to put himself so slenderly, at such a dangerous hazard, in the King's enemies' hands..."
>
> Gray camped that night on the border of Clanricarde and on the day following Ulicke de Burghe came to him:—
> "And the said Ulicke, marvelling that my Lord Deputy would come so slenderly in so dangerous a passage, demanded of him how he durst come in that manner; and he pointed, saying, 'Lo! seest thou not yonder standing before me O'Brien's axe for my conduct."

The great student of Irish Folkways, E. Estyn Evans, once cautioned that it was never safe to assume that any custom had entirely died out in Ireland. And indeed it is a remarkable fact that as late as the 1890's, O'Connell of Derrynane—styled the King or *Ri* by the local people—could ensure the safe passage of even an exciseman through his territory by the carrying before him of the "crooked knife", an old pruning hook which was known as the sign of his authority: "A tenant would walk out and give up his holding at the bidding of the bearer of the crooked knife."[21]

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[20] Mahr, op.cit., p. 68. State Papers, Ireland, Henry VIII, Vol. III. p.84. (1538) and Cal. Carew MSS., Vol. 1515-1574, p. 168. (1540).

[21] O Danachair, Caoimhin, *An Ri (The King) An example of Traditional Social Organisation,* JRSAI, Vol. 111, 1981, pp. 14-28. The quote is from O'Connel, Mrs. Morgan John, *The Last Colonel of the Irish Brigade*, 2 vols., London, 1892, I, p. 304-305

Edward Tremayne implied that the galloglass had a higher social standing than other Irish soldiers, saying "The galloglass for the most part being gentlemen, and in time of peace using to live honestly upon their lands."[22] It seems the galloglass, perhaps because of his status as trusted professional, could on occasion serve as his lord's personal attendant or emissary. In the indictment of Brian O'Rourke we find: "In April, 1586, the said Sir Brian O'Rourke sent one Ashernan, his gallyglasse, to Surloghe boy his sonn, called Alexander, to come to hym with such force as he could make...Also Gillaspicke, a galliglasse, was likewyse sent to Alexander McSurloy."[23]

This use of galloglass as trusted personal retainers was apparently adopted by the Office of the Lord Deputy of Ireland. In 1590, Lord Deputy Fitzwilliam had a functionary among his retinue called "the galloglass". The Deputy's accounts show that he was clothed out of State funds.[24] This institution apparently continued, for we are told that in 1600, when Lord Deputy Mountjoy was fired on by Irish marksmen in O'More's country, they killed his dog, his favorite horse, and dented his helmet in the hands of his galloglass.[25]

Writing a century later, in 1704, Martin Martin lists the household of a Hebridean Chief, among whom he notes the "galloglass" as the chief's armour-bearer.[26] This is seconded by the Rev. James Kirkwood, in a less well known MS. of c. 1699, who says, "The Head of ane Family hath commonly ane Armour Bearer who goes in his full Armour before his Master, intervening betwixt him and all Hazard in tyme of Warr. This is called *Gallo-glach*." [27] Kirkwood says that he "goes in his full Armour", and it does in fact seem that the full galloglass panoply was retained by some in the Isles until a rather late date. A military census of Athollmen taken in three Parishes in 1638, on the eve of the Civil War, lists the arms of 523 men, amongst whom 11 had helmets, mail shirts and long axes or halberds.[28] It is interesting to see the apparently out-of-place use of the term "galloglass" in a Scottish context. It may indicate that the function of galloglass as retainer was adopted in the Hebrides after the Irish example.

The gradual transformation of the galloglass into personal retainer coincides with the decline of the galloglass as an effective fighting force as the Irish rushed to adopt modern weapons. This is paralleled by a similar development in contemporary Poland. There the Haiduk, the indispensable mercenary footsoldier of the 16th century, had by the 17th century degenerated into "very faithful domestic servants".[29]

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[22] Quinn, op. cit., p.40
[23] Hayes-McCoy, Gerard A., *Scots Mercenary Forces in Ireland, 1565-1603*, 1937, p.360
[24] Fitzwilliam MSS. at Milton—Analecta Hibernica, IV, p. 307
[25] S.P. Ire., 1600. p. 338 and Carew MSS., 1589-1600. p. 423, Moryson, Fynes, *Itenerary*, Fol. Lond. 1617. pt. II. p. 49
[26] Martin, Martin, *Description of the Western Isles*, 8 vo. London, 1703, p. 104
[27] Kirkwood, James, *A Collection of Highland Rites and Customs,* c. 1699, Ed. J.L. Campbell, 1975, p. 41
[28] Gush, George, *Renaissance Armies*, 1975, p.43-44
[29] Brzezinski, Richard, *Polish Armies, 1569-1696*, 2 Vols., 1987, II, p. 20

Handling the Galloglass Axe—*Sai Galloglaig*

When asked to commence the fight at Knockdoe in 1504, a galloglass captain famously replied, "I am glad. You can do me no more honour, be Gods blode, and took his axe in his hand and begane to floryshe."[30] Would that we knew exactly how this professional handled his weapon. Certainly there was an art to it. Turlough MacDonnell, who died in 1435, is described in the *Annals of Ulster* as being *sai galloglaig*, "a galloglass artist".[31]

In fact it may be possible to glean something from 16th century fighting manuals. In his *Paradoxes of Defence*, the English soldier George Silver mentions the battle-axe among such pole arms as the halberd and bill. He says is should be five or six feet in length and it is possible he is describing the galloglass axe, which he may have encountered in Ireland. More basic training certainly included grappling, as we see on the MacSweeny grave slab from Killybegs, Donegal, which shows two figures engaged in what appears to be the old Irish form of wrestling, or *coraiocht*.

The galloglass were close order infantry, originally hired to counter the power of the mounted Norman knights. It is interesting, therefore, to see them still performing this function in the twilight of their existance. Standish O'Grady, writing of the the Battle of the Curlews in 1599, described how two *battles*, or companies, of galloglass under Brian O'Rourke broke the English horse under Sir Griffin Markham, who is reported by contemporaries to have lost "...all his pennons and guidons."[32] To the end, and well into the age of gunpowder, the "compact array" of galloglass, with its flailing axes, continued to be a daunting foe under the right circumstances.

The Galloglass Harness

In considering whether galloglass axes were of standardized form, it is worth examining the other arms and equipment of the galloglass. These were laid out in an early 16th century manuscript which is said to record an agreement concluded a century earlier between Turlough of the Wine O'Donnell and the MacSweeny galloglass. It was regulated:

> "that for each man equipped with a mail coat (*luirech*) and a pisane collar (*scabal*), another should have a jack (*seaca*) and helmet (*cinnbert*); that there should be no forfeit for a helmet deficient except the galloglass's brain; and no fine for a missing axe except a shilling, nor for a spear except a groat, which shilling and groat the Constable should get..." [33]

This has led some to assume that there are two types of galloglass, one armed in mail without a helmet and the other armed in a jack with a helmet. In fact, I believe this passage may describe how the full armour of a galloglass should be divided between the two

[30] Hayes-McCoy, Gerard A., *Irish Battles, A Military History of Ireland*, 1969, p.60
[31] Walsh, Fr. Paul, *Scots Clann Domhnaill in Ireland*, Irish Ecclesiastical Record, 1937, p. 37
[32] O'Grady, Standish, *The Battle of the Curlew Mountains*, in Treasury of Irish Folklore, Ed. Padraic Colum, 1967, pp. 202-203
[33] Walsh, Fr. Paul, (ed.) *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, 1920, p.44

attendants that "...bear his harneys." For as early as 1429, Donnchad Murtough, King of Leinster, had "8 battles of footmen arrayed in the guise of this country, that is every man in aketon, haubergeon, mail hood and bascinet..." [34] Clearly, these four items together formed the complete galloglass harness. It defies logic to accept that a man clad in expensive mail would forgo the protection of a helmet, and the regulation goes on to indicate that any galloglass foolish enough to present himself for muster without a helmet need not be fined since he would pay for it by having his brain dashed out. And one cannot wear mail without a padded foundation garment. This was called a *cotun*, from the French haqueton, or *seca*, from the word jack or side jack (i.e., long jack) found in Anglo-Irish documents. It was a vertically ridged, knee-length garment seen extending below the hem and elbows of mail shirts in many depictions of 15th and 16th century Irish armours, made of many layers of linen stitched together.

This form of armour is well illustrated in the late 15th century galloglass carvings (right) from Roscommon Abbey. These show absolute uniformity, each man being harnessed in a pointed bascinet, pisane, mail shirt and padded jack or haqueton. The uniformity could extend to the color of the fabric jack or *cotun*, for of the Irish troops sent to the Siege of Rouen in 1419, 18 score were clad in white *cotun*, and 18 score in red *cotun*.[35]

Fig. 8. Roscommon Abbey. The man at right holds a rare shorter Type B axe, called in Irish *gearrsamtac*, or short-handled.

This harness long survived in the Western Isles of Scotland, used into the 17th century by retainers called "galloglass". A military census of Athollmen taken on the eve of the Civil War in 1638 shows that of 523 men, 11 retained helmets, mail shirts and long axes or halberds.[36] And the Woodrow MS., describing the "Highland Host" of 1678, mentions "steel-bonnets raised like pyramids..."[37], obviously the same faceted bacinet seen on the Rocsommon Abbey galloglass (Fig. 8). Around 1699, the notes of Rev. Kirkwood state that "Of old they used ...Mailcoats, Head-pieces...and that which they called *Scapul*, which covered their Shoulders." [38] In fact, a horn carving of about this date shows a "galloglass" servant still wearing the vertically ridged *cotun*. (right, Fig. 9)

Fig. 9. Highland horn carving c. 1700. A vertically ridged *cotun* is still worn by the servant blowing the horn.

[34] Harbison, op. cit., p.183
[35] Heath, Ian, *Armies of the Middle Ages, Vol. I*, 1982, p. 17
[36] Gush, op. cit., p. 43
[37] Drummond, James, *Ancient Scottish Weapons*, 1881, p.15
[38] Kirkwood, op. cit., p. 41

Other Kinds of Axes

Because some of these have from time to time been offered as possible galloglass axes, we will briefly look at other types of axes found in Irish contexts. I am of the opinion that none of the axes illustrated here were of the type used by the galloglass for fighting. But non-military Irish axes of the late middle ages have never been studied, and my conclusions are subject to correction.

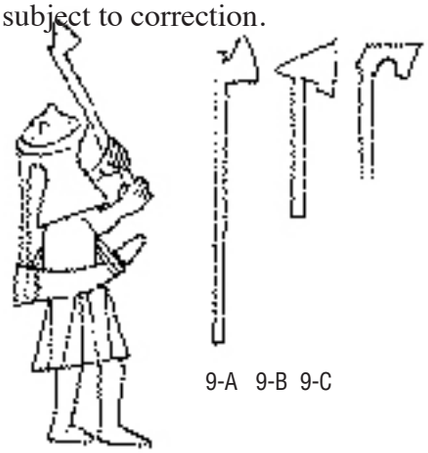


Fig. 9. Huntsman with axe, from 15th century cross at Kilmory, Scotland. The axe is redrawn in 9-A, while 9-B and 9-C, from Inishail and Taynuilt respectively, are other types of (probably) non-military axes depicted in Highland sculptures.

Fig. 10. *Above*. Durer's drawing of 1521. The man at right holds an axe remarkably similar to 9-A, as seen at left. The other man holds an axe of Type A.

Fig. 11. *Above:* An axe found in a dugout canoe, or cott, excavated at Derryhollagh, Antrim. Hayes-McCoy thought this might be a galloglass axe and published it as such in the original edition of his *Irish Battles*, but it is almost certainly a work axe.

Left: A woodworking axe found in the Curlew Mountains of Co. Roscommon. National Musuem, Dublin.

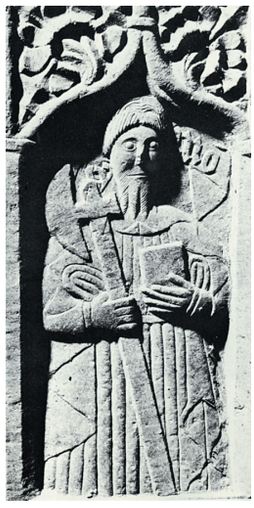
Appendix

Below are given the originals of the images from which the outline drawings in the gallo-glass axe timelines were made. Each image has the number given to it in the morphological timelines presented above, to allow the reader to judge the faithfulness of the drawings.

A-7. MacLeod Tomb, Rodel, Harris, Scotland, 1528.

A-12. Grace Tomb, Kilkenny, 1596.

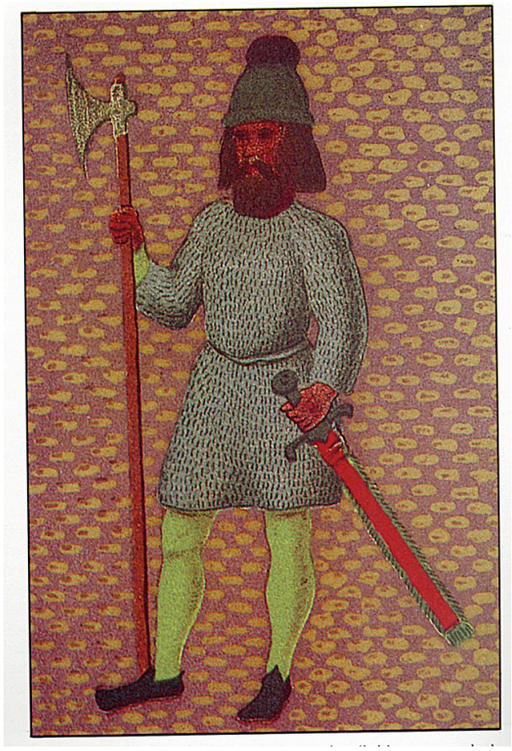
B-5. Schorthals Tomb, St. Canice's, Kilkenny, 1507.



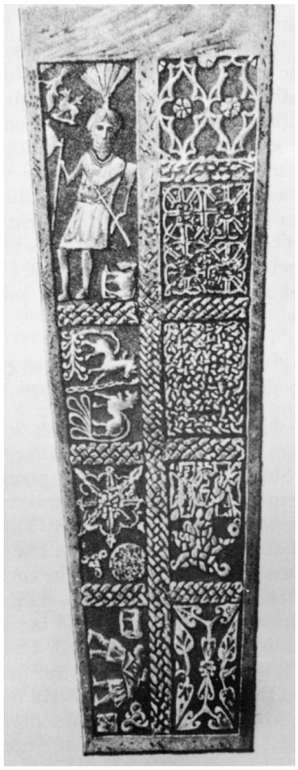
B-7. Purcell Tomb, Kilkenny, 1596.

A-5 (farthest right) and B-2, B-3, B-4. Creagh/MacMahon Tomb, Ennis, Clare, c. 1470.

A-8, A-9 and (middle) D-2. Goghe's Map of Ireland, 1567. The two lower figures appear to have red *cotun*. See p. 14 above.



C-3. Queen Elizabeth's Charter to the City of Dublin, 1583.



A-10. MacSweeny Slab, Killybegs, Donegal, c. 1550. Note figures in the lower left panel who appear to be wrestling in the Irish *coraiocht* style, an interesting side light on the training of the galloglass.

A-11. Donat O'Suibne Tomb, Sligo Abbey, Sligo, 1577. The galloglass at right bears a shouldered axe of Type A.

C-4 and D-3, D-4. John Thomas' picture map of the battle of the Erne Fords, 1593, showing Irish troops running away with abandoned weapons strewn about.

A-13. Picture map of Ulster, showing inauguration of O'Neill at Tullahoge, with one of his followers at left holding a Type A axe, c. 1602.