

Bretonnian Weapons

Contributed by Earl Cadfael
 Wednesday, 12 October 2005
 Last Updated Tuesday, 22 November 2005

Bretonnian models look great. They seem based on a commonly accepted idea of how medieval knights looked, although slightly exaggerated in some respects. Most of their armour and weapons look like they were manufactured in Europe in the 13th century. The so called "fluff" concerning Bretonnia is a healthy mix of historical fact and Arthurian legends (with some other fairy tale stuff thrown in for good measure).

The weapons used by Bretonnian models look adapted from several different historical epochs. How close are they to the historical impression they give? Let's look at a few of their weapons from a historical perspective.

Missile Weapons

Fifth and sixth edition Bretonnians are sadly lacking in missile weapons, apart from the longbow. This is due to the knightly code that forbids the use of ranged weapons. The Unofficial Bretonnian Army Book (available at the old site, will be transferred here) on the other hand takes a slightly different approach and allows both the longbow and the crossbow (albeit only to commoners).

The Longbow: The longbow apparently originated in Wales and found widespread favour with the English during the 12th through 15th centuries. In 1242 Henry II decreed that that all with annual incomes of 2 to 5 pounds should be armed with longbows. The longbow was most often made from yew, but also witch-hazel, ash or elm could be used. The longbow measured about six feet in length and had a pull of between 80 and 150 lbs. Arrows were made of ash or birch, were three feet long and had goose-feather flights. The maximum range was about 400 yards, but actual "killing" range was probably only half of that. Rate of fire was about ten to twelve arrows per minute and at close range (perhaps out to 50 yards) the arrows penetrated any armour of the time. In England continual practice with the longbow on Sundays and holidays was compulsory. This made the English longbowmen deadly. Also note that very few other personal missile weapons could measure up to the performance of the longbow until the 19th century.

The Crossbow: Crossbows are not allowed in Bretonnian armies unless you use the Unofficial Bretonnian Army Book.

Historically the crossbow was probably invented in Han dynasty China and brought to Europe at the time of the Roman Empire. The Romans used the large ballista version of the crossbow as a war machine. Hand held crossbows seem to appear in Europe in the 8th century. They were widespread by the 12th century (contrary to popular belief, crossbows were used on a fair scale in England also). As a military weapon the crossbow declined by the end of the 15th century, but was used later in some countries. Early crossbows had wooden bows and were never as powerful as the longbow. Later constructions used composite materials and had to have some kind of spanning aid. By the 15th century the crossbow bows were made of steel and had to use even more devious devices for spanning. The bow was about three feet in length and fired one to one and a half feet long bolts with leather, wood or metal flights. Most composite or metal bow crossbows had a range of 400 yards, could be fired on a flat trajectory or as falling fire to penetrate helmets and shoulder armour. At short range the bolts were unstoppable. Rate of fire was two to three bolts per minute.

Longbows and crossbows were about equally common during the 12th through 15th centuries, but used more or less frequent in different countries.

The construction of a crossbow might look complex, but I've actually seen one made (complete with trigger mechanism) from fallen trees in a few hours, using just an ordinary hunting knife as a tool. I myself made a bow-less crossbow with metal mechanism using modern tools in about two days.

By these facts we can draw the conclusion that longbows and crossbows had about equal range and penetrataion. They could both be used from front and rear ranks. The crossbowman needed less training to be accurate with his weapon, but the longbowman could loose five arrows in the same time span as the crossbowman shot one.

This means that these two weapons are slightly misinterpreted in Warhammer terms and should probably have been given different game mechanics to account for their historical uses. {mospagebreak title=Melee Weapons}

Many different types of close combat weapons are available to Bretonnian knights and men-at-arms. **Melee Weapons**

Spear: The spear was probably one of man's earliest inventions. Used extensively in all armies throughout history this is

the basic infantryman's weapon. Some spears were fitted with a crossbar to prevent excessive penetration. Spears can be used by Men-at-arms and Mounted Yeomen. In the game spears allow footmen to fight in an additional rank and cavalry a +1 strength bonus on the charge.

Halberd: The halberd is one version of several staff weapons derived from the spear. A classic halberd has a spear point, an axe blade and a spike or hook on the backside. Halberds found widespread use in Europe in the 15th century. Most of the weapons carried by 5th edition Bretonnian halberdier models should probably be classed as glaives rather than halberds, while 6th edition polearms could be bardiches. This means that the Bretonnian halberdiers are slightly off in the otherwise 13th century looking army. Halberds can be used by Men-at-arms and in the game they give them a +1 strength bonus but require two hands.

Lance: The lance is a long and heavy version of the spear that is used from horseback. Special rebated (blunted) lances were used for knightly tournaments. All knights and mounted Lords and Paladins can use the lance. In the game a lance gives its user a +2 strength bonus on the charge.

Axe: Axes were used both as tools and weapons and were very popular with Danes and Saxons. Small axes could be used from horseback. In the game axes fall under the general "hand weapon" category and can be used by most models.

Great Axe: Great axes were used by footmen and could be as long as 6'. Realistically they would not be useable from horseback. In the game great axes fall under the "great weapon" category, can be used by models with the Questing Vow and confer a +2 strength bonus, require two hands and strike last.

Sword: A sword is the classic knightly weapon. Sword design was fairly constant during the 12th and 13th centuries and the swords of this era could be used both for cutting and thrusting. In the game swords fall under the general "hand weapon" category and can be used by most models.

Two-Handed Sword: The two-handed sword is a later invention (13th-14th century) that was developed in answer to combat better armour. It would probably be very hard indeed to use such a weapon from horseback. In the game two-handed swords fall under the "great weapon" category, can be used by models with the Questing Vow and confer a +2 strength bonus, require two hands and strike last.

Mace: The mace evolved from the club and had a flanged head that could penetrate armour. In the game maces fall under the general "hand weapon" category and can be used by most models.

Hammer: The warhammer historically also evolved from the club and was used one handed from horseback. It had a hammer head and a back spike and was also equipped with a top spike. Strangely enough there are no references to hammers in the army book (besides the two-handed great hammers used by the imperial Knights of the White Wolf), but they would probably also fall under the "hand weapon" category.

Morning Star: The morning star is a spiked club for piercing enemy armour. Some versions had their head fastened to a chain. Morning stars may be used by Lords and Paladins. In the game it confers a +1 strength bonus on the first round of combat.

Flail: A flail is a further variation from the club in that its head is attached to the pole with a chain. Flails are not allowed Bretonnians unless you use the UBAB. In the game it confers a +2 strength bonus on the first round of combat and requires two hands.

{mospagebreak title=War Machines} War Machines

War machines were widely used by medieval armies. The Trebuchet can be used by Bretonnians in both Warhammer and Warmaster.

Trebuchet: The techniques required to manufacture a trebuchet were known in Europe in the 12th century. The trebuchet was a war machine that hurled large stones (probably weighing from 100 to 600 lbs) with tremendous power over several hundred yards. Not to be confused with a catapult (which was torsion powered) the Trebuchet used a heavy counter-weight to power its gigantic sling, had a rate of fire of about one stone every 15 seconds and was crewed by a large host (some had several hundred crew).

Ballista: Ballistae are not allowed Bretonnian armies under the current rules. The Ballista was a smaller piece of machinery than the Trebuchet and relied on torsion power provided by a horizontal bow or by tightly strung ropes to propel its spear like missile. It was powerful enough to send its missile through several ranks of men.

{mos_fb_discuss:2}