



BREECH-LOADING SWIVEL GUN

European, 15th to 16th century.

Length: 93 cm.

Composed of forged iron parts.

Remains of a line ornament, probably a manufacturer's mark.

The present swivel gun is a rare example for early breech-loading cannons used in the 15th and 16th century. Since it was not necessary to pull them back for loading, these arms could be placed in close quarters. On the one hand this was an advantage on ships, on the other hand these cannons were also installed on the walls of castles and strongholds.¹

Our swivel gun corresponds in its forged construction to the early European types. It has a rest with a trunnion, which was inserted into a vessel's side or the wall of a castle. The antenna at the end, which is preserved in parts, served to turn the barrel and adjust the vertical angle. There is a rectangular opening at the back end where you can see a vessel with a touch whole. This is a powder chamber, which was firmly fastened inside the barrel by a wedge. A couple of these were prepared with black powder in advance and could be exchanged quickly during a combat situation. So the great advantage of this principle is the high rate of firing compared to muzzle loaded cannons.² Having said that, the connection between the powder chamber and the barrel did not close completely gas-proof. Hand crafted components do not fit with the necessary precision, which was not accomplished before the 19th century. Consequently the operating distance was limited and these breech loading cannons were rather dangerous for the gunner.

Being a light cannon which could be easily angled and reloaded quickly, the main purpose of the swivel gun was fighting against combatants. This weapon had a disastrous effect by firing

¹ Atzbach, R., Lüken, S., Ottomeyer, H. (2010): Burg und Herrschaft, p. 260.

² Ortenburg, G. (1984): Waffe und Waffengebrauch im Zeitalter der Landsknechte, p. 65.

langrages, a type of projectile consisting of a bag made of cloth and filled with pieces of lead or iron.³⁴

Since late medieval cannons were still imprecise and very expensive in both manufacturing and employment, the overall number of existing pieces was small even during their time of use. Iron was costly, so in the course of history those cannons that became obsolete were recycled. This is the reason for the rarity of comparable cannons. Nearly all present-day known swivel guns have been recovered as water finds.

Condition

Corrosion has affected our present example in the course of centuries. The antenna at the breech got lost in great parts except remains of about 12 centimetres in length. It is very positive that the rest with its trunnion is still there and also the powder chamber (handle lost, except a small part of 2,5 cm length). Comparable examples do often miss the latter.

Comparable examples

- I. Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, Inv. No. W431.⁵
- II. Musée de l'Armée, Paris.
- III. Armouries of the Tower of London, heute Royal Armouries Museum.⁶

³ Fritze, K., Krause, G. (1997): Seekriege der Hanse, p. 59.

⁴ Müller, H. (1957): Historische Waffen, p. 133.

⁵ Müller, K. (1977): Alte Geschütze, p. 20.

⁶ Ffoulkes, C. J., Oxon, B. L. (1915): Inventory and Survey of the Armouries of the Tower of London, Vol. II, p. 449.

Literature

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