

Controlling the populace by controlling weapons is not a novel idea. Examining archeological evidence from gravesites in ancient Britain, the author details the link between individual freedom and ownership of weapons. This article was originally published in the April-May 1995 issue of Handgunner, a bi-monthly British firearm magazine, and an outstanding source of information regarding historic and modern weapons control in Britain. Subscriptions in the United States are available for \$30 surface mail, \$60 airmail. Handgunner is published by Piedmont Publishing, Ltd., Seychelles House, Brightlingsea, Essex CO7 0NN, United Kingdom. Telephone 01206-305204.

The Rite to Bear Arms

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The ancestor cult has, in modern times, been replaced by history, but the function remains the same: legitimization of the powers that be. Even in our fast-paced and future-oriented times, the past still provides some of the most powerful arguments for or against political actions and social attitudes.

Thus, arguments against the private ownership of certain weapons have frequently pretended to draw on history: that the unregulated possession of such weapons may have been acceptable under the uncertain conditions of the distant past, when upright men had to defend their farms and homesteads against robbers and vagrants, but that the spread of civilization and of benevolent state power had obviated the need for this; indeed, that in a largely urban and industrial society, the rule of law and the imperatives of order even require the state to remove this anachronistic right of individuals to bear arms because it poses a danger to society. This is the point at which the “civilization” argument against private ownership of weapons merges with the “inherent danger” argument.

That the latter is a myth, has been demonstrated time and again on the basis of criminal statistics and international comparisons. That the former argument is a myth as well, is harder to prove because the degree of “civilization” cannot be quantitatively tested. But it is the aim here to show that social attitudes to weapons have not been altered by the civilizing influence of “progress,” but by changes in the make-up and structure of society, and by the changing interests of those who run society.

The best way to demonstrate this may be to go right back to the beginnings of European Christian civilization—that civilization which is supposed to have removed the practical need for, and moral right to, individual ownership of weapons. If there is a test case, the post-Roman Dark Ages should provide it. And at a superficial glance, the evidence appears to support the argument. After the collapse of Roman rule in Western Europe around A.D. 400, the mostly pagan Germanic tribes taking control of what is now Germany, Belgium, France and England buried their men with weapons. However, after their conversion to Christianity, they gave up that habit at the same time as their rulers laid the foundations of Christian states with institutions of government, law and religion. Does not his process show the transition from Dark Age lawlessness to Christian civilization in which the newly emergent state organization imposed peace and order, and individuals no longer needed to be armed to protect their families, their freedom and their possessions?

Actually, no, it does not. This interpretation is about as logically coherent as seeing smoke from a distance and telling your child: “See, this happens when you play with matches.” On closer inspection, the “Dark Age-to-Civilization” case tells a rather different story. Let us, therefore, go back to the actual evidence and give it a second, critical inspection. We shall concentrate on England because this is where some of the most relevant research has been undertaken; but comparisons with other areas of Western Europe will be made where necessary and useful.

The Romans who had conquered most of Britain in the first century A.D., had suppressed the warlike inclinations of the Celtic natives and imposed the *pax Romana*—in other words: they

imposed and enforced a state monopoly of force much in the way that we know it today. When Britain, and indeed all of Western Europe, slipped from their control in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., the incoming Germanic tribes from across the Rhine and the North Sea replaced the Roman state with a different type of society: that of the tribal kingdom based not on territoriality, taxation and laws, but on kinship and personal loyalty. And whereas the Roman Empire had maintained a professional army, the post-Roman kingdoms used tribal levies of free men, led by members of the nobility, although some of the latter also kept professional bodyguards.

Initially, most of the Germanic tribes settling on formerly Roman soil, like the Franks in Germany and France and the Anglo-Saxons in England, were pagans and practiced burial with grave-goods. Individuals would be buried or cremated fully dressed, and whilst additional household items (like knives, pots or spindle whorls) were deposited in female burials, about 50% of the males were buried with weapons: swords, seaxes (single-edged battle knives), axes, spears, shields, and occasionally body armour. There never seemed to be any doubt about how to explain this: Germanic warriors were buried here with the tools of their Dark Age trade making sure that (according to their pagan religion) they would be able to ply it in the hereafter.

However, a detailed analysis suggest that this explanation of the weapon burial is much too simplistic and may, in fact, obscure the key point.¹ For a start, a quarter of all weapon sets deposited in Anglo-Saxon graves were incomplete (e.g. shields without offensive weapons, throwing axes or javelins on their own, etc.). Also, there was absolutely no connection between the frequency of weapon burials and the level of military activity as reported in contemporary texts. But it is the bones which provide the most intriguing information. Many of the individuals buried with weapons were too young or too old to have wielded them effectively. The youngest was a mere 12 months old. Furthermore, individuals buried with weapons were exactly as healthy or unhealthy, and as fit or unfit to fight, as those without

weapons. Not even severe disabilities barred a man from burial with weapons. But perhaps most significantly, unambiguous cases of wounds, usually in the form of cut marks on skulls or long bones, occur in both groups. This demonstrates that even men who had clearly been in a fight could be buried without weapons.

The decisive factors which determined who was buried with weapons, seem to have been kinship and ethnicity. In a number of cemeteries where there is enough detailed evidence, it can be shown on the basis of inherited traits that weapon burial was tied to certain families, whereas other families did not participate in this rite. The evidence points to the weapon-burying families as being Germanic: men with weapons were, on average, between 2 and 5 cm (1 to 2") taller than the men without weapons in the same cemeteries. This is exactly the average difference between the immigrant Anglo-Saxons of Germanic origin and the native Britons of Celtic stock. Alternative explanations of the stature differential, like differential quality of the diet, can be excluded on the basis of other skeletal evidence.

Thus, burial with weapons had nothing to do with warriors. It was purely symbolic—it was the “family badge” of the immigrants, a way of expressing their ethnicity, their being different from the natives who were buried without weapons.

The immigrant Germanic did that not just in England, but in most areas where they lived alongside Romanized natives of other ethnic groups. However, there is a significance in this conclusion which goes well beyond the observation of ethnic differences. Law codes and other written sources of this period inform us that once England had come under the control of the Anglo-Saxons, the vast majority of the surviving natives (called “Welsh,” meaning “foreigners” in the Old English tongue) lost their freedom: they became semi-free tenants or even serfs.² In other words: the “family badge” of weapon burial was the mark of the free—the men of the unfree families were buried without weapons.

This link between weapons and freedom seems to be an ancient tradition in Germanic society. It certainly goes back to,

at least, the first century A.D. The Roman writer Tacitus observed that a Germanic youth, on achieving adulthood, would be accepted into the assembly of free men by being given a shield and a spear in a public ceremony. Tacitus leaves us in no doubt as to the meaning of this ceremony:

*These (i.e. shield and spear), among the Germans, are the equivalent of the man's toga with us—the first distinction publicly conferred upon a youth, who now ceases to rank merely as a member of a household and becomes a citizen.*³

Why, then, did that symbolic link disappear, and with it the rite of burying with weapons? During the seventh century, weapon burials became less frequent and by the mid-eighth century, the rite had disappeared both in England and in Continental Western Europe. At a superficial glance, that may well look like the result of Christianization and civilization. The conversion of the pagan Anglo-Saxons began with the mission of St. Augustine who arrived at Canterbury in A.D. 596. Over the following century, Christianity spread throughout England, and the weapon burial rite declined steadily until it ceased altogether. However, this is mere coincidence. The Church never prohibited the deposition of grave-goods, in general, nor of weapons, in particular. And on the Continent, the Franks were Christianized around A.D. 500, but they continued to bury large numbers of their men with weapons for another two centuries. There are even cases of Frankish aristocrats buried in *churches* with full sets of weapons or (in the case of women) other possessions and offerings.

So, the reasons for the disappearance of the weapon burial rite must lie elsewhere, and they are suggested by the historical context. During the seventh and eighth centuries A.D., the “Dark Age,” tribal kingdoms of Western Europe were being transformed by a gradual, but fundamental political and social change. The more aggressive kingdoms gobbled up their neighbors, creating a smaller number of larger, more powerful polities. Their greater size and complexity required the creation of more permanent administrative structures, weakening the traditional reliance on kinship ties and personal loyalty, and

replacing them with formalized rights and obligations. Militarily, the new rulers relied increasingly on professional warriors who owed allegiance only to their employers, but not to their kin and tribe. This, in turn, reduced the military importance of the tribal levies of free men. The arrival of the stirrup in Western Europe in the eighth century led to the introduction of mounted shock combat and the rise of the heavy cavalryman with his expensive equipment, totally overshadowing the lightly armed tribesman on foot.⁴ At the same time, the political status of the free man was further undermined by the increasing wealth and power of the local aristocracy which acquired more and more land, usually as a royal fief in return for military service. The extent of communally held land shrank, and the number of free farmers decreased while the proportion of tenant farmers and serfs increased.

In other words: the social hierarchies were accentuated, the rich became richer, the powerful became even more powerful, while the political weight of the ordinary free man declined. It is in this period that we see the beginnings of feudal society, with its rigid social order, its sharp class distinctions and minimal social mobility. We also see the beginnings of state organization, with a centralized administration run by full-time court officials and an incipient bureaucracy. The ideological support for this was supplied by the Christian Church which—in contrast to pagan Germanic religion—was strictly hierarchical and centralized, and preached obedience to the powers that be: *Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are Gods's.*⁵ In return, it was rewarded with a large share of the power. This process reached its first climax in Charlemagne's Frankish Empire of the late eighth and early ninth centuries, and England lagged not far behind.

It is not surprising then, that throughout this process, the weapon burial rite—the mark of the free man—declined and eventually disappeared.⁶ It is also significant that among the last to be buried with weapons were the aristocrats themselves. The famous royal grave mound at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk where, in all probability, King Raedwald of East Anglia was interred in the

seventh century, with the most spectacular Anglo-Saxon armory ever found, is a case in point.

In the Frankish kingdom, the last burials with weapons date in the eighth century, and they are believed to be the graves of the local aristocracy. Thus, the first to lose the “rite to bear arms” in the grave were the men of ordinary, free families, was curtailed more and more by the land-owning aristocracy and increasingly centralized state and church structures. When all power was concentrated in the hands of the royal and noble allies, they could easily renounce this expression of their status: they, too, stopped burying with weapons, and switched from displaying symbols of freedom with the dead, to displaying symbols of power among the living.

Thus, far from being the result of “civilization,” the disappearance of weapons from Dark Age graves was the consequence of social change induced and controlled by the political elite. The declining importance of weapons in the rituals of early medieval society signaled not increasing law and order, but increasing social divisions, increasing ideological manipulation, and decreasing personal freedom for the majority of the population.

Key parts of this pattern can be observed in other historical situations right up to the present day. Ruling élites of one description or other, from kings to dictators to “democratic” parties, have exploited social change and engendered changes in public opinion to enhance their own positions and deprive their subjects or potential opponents of what they feared could be the means of actively resisting the power of the increasingly centralized state. Only details have changed over time. Today, the social process exploited is not the rise of a military aristocracy, but the large-scale urbanization of society and the emergence of a rapidly growing underclass. And the rôle of the church in advertising the aims of the élite has been taken over by the mass media, which allow the manipulation of public opinion on a large enough scale to achieve by “democratic” means what can no longer be imposed by simple order and coercion. One of the

prime examples of disenfranchisement by “democratic” process behind a smoke screen of false arguments must be the first British Firearms Act of 1920, which was introduced ostensibly to curb crime, but in reality to forestall a feared popular uprising.⁷

The gradual implementation of the hidden agenda of the political and social élites of our time has resulted in the strange dichotomy of unarmed, and indeed disarmed, citizens in a heavily armed state. Whatever arguments are presented to legitimize this situation, there is no way that it can be justified by reference to higher standards of “civilization.” Two examples may suffice to highlight how morally dubious and indefensible this dichotomy is. In Germany, stringent firearms laws were enacted by the Nazis who militarized the nation, but were wary of weapons in the hands of potential enemies within.⁸ Today we are witnessing the systematic vilification of the idea of private firearms ownership, whilst being subjected to unparalleled propaganda about the state-sanctioned use of violence in international relations, most recently during the Gulf War. And at the same time as the state is claiming ever more urgently and oppressively the monopoly of access to, and use of, weapons, we see the political rôle of ordinary citizens downgraded more and more to what the Germans have aptly called *Stimmvieh* (“ballot fodder”).

Perhaps that ancient Germanic link between ownership of weapons and individual freedom was never severed—and the ideologically supported and legally enforced removal of weapons from private ownership in our Western societies may carry a message about what is happening to civil liberties and individual freedom.

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