

*A Late-Medieval Bracer in the British Museum*¹

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THE archer's bracer illustrated in the fig. on p. 209 is of cuir bouilli, the ornament on the outer side consisting of a rose crowned, a design of oak leaves and acorns treated in a conventional manner, and the words **ihc helpe** (Jesus help).²

A tradition, apparently not very ancient, associated this rare and interesting object with certain relics of Henry VI once at Bolton Hall, near Sawley, in Bowland (Bolland), Yorkshire. I have failed to find confirmation of this tradition, and it is contradicted by Mr. W. A. Littledale, F.S.A., whose family was long connected with Bolton Hall; Mr. Littledale informs me that the bracer was never preserved in the house with the objects said to have been left there by Henry VI and now preserved at Liverpool.³

But additional evidence may be derived from the object itself. The crowned rose appears to be a Tudor rose, and the character of the lettering is that of the first decade of the sixteenth century rather than that of 1464, the date of the battle of Hexham, when Henry VI concealed himself in the North after the defeat of his army.⁴

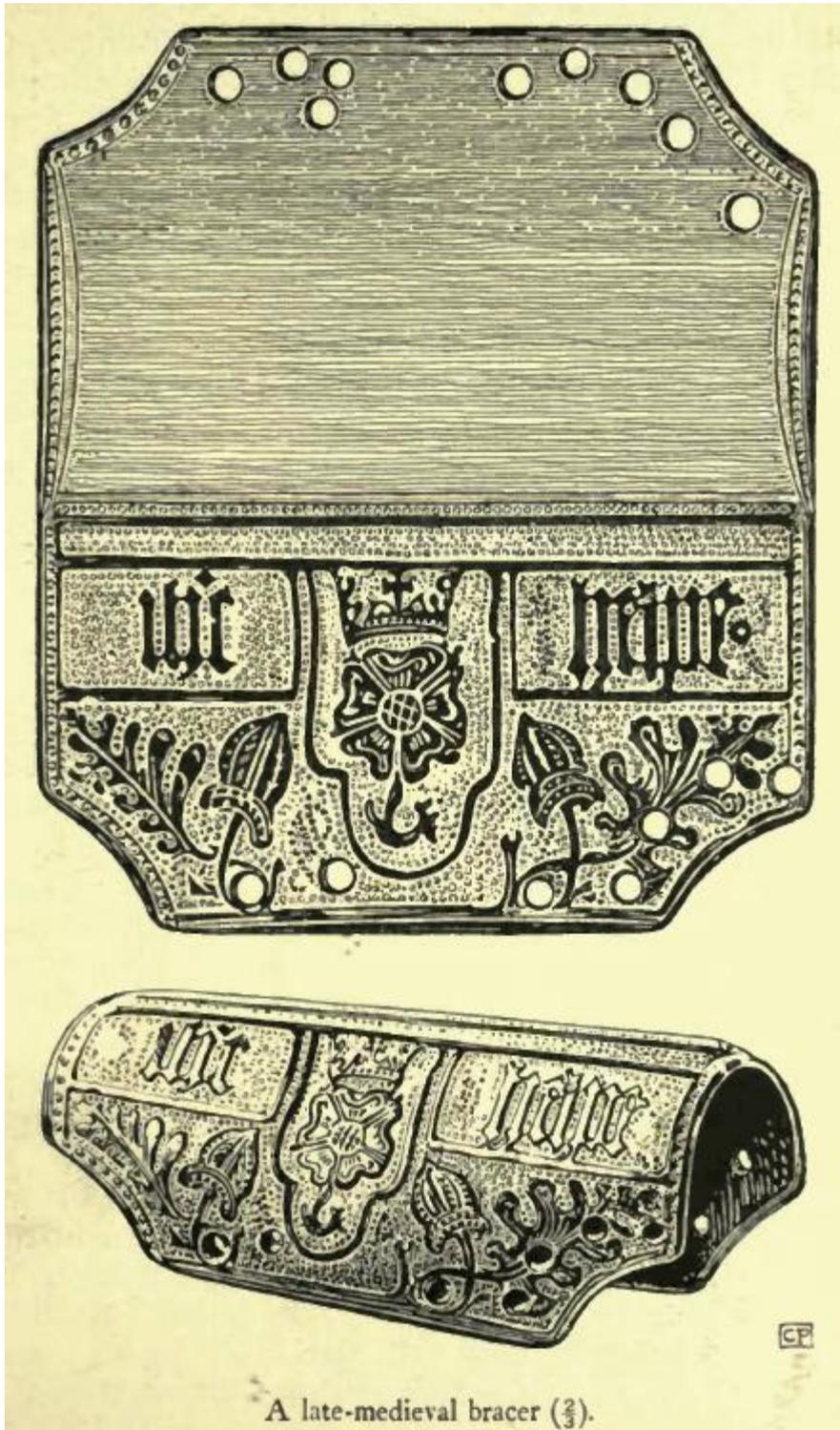
It is to the reign of Henry VII, and to the end of the period when the longbow was used as a military weapon, that the bracer must therefore be ascribed; and, though from the romantic

¹ The use of the bracer was to protect the wrist of the hand grasping the bow from the impact of the string when the arrow was released. During the periods, historical and earlier, from which examples are known various materials have been used, from stone to metal. The present example was laced to the wrist by thongs passing through the holes.

² The bracer is 4.92 in. in length. It was formerly in the possession of Sir Henry Ellis, K.H., Secretary of the Society in 1814, and Principal Librarian of the British Museum, 1817-3, from one of whose descendants it has been acquired for the Museum. It was figured (the design upside down) as a headpiece to a chapter in the *Badminton* volume on Archery, by C. J. Longman and Col. H. Walrond, p. 161, fig. 110. For general remarks on bracers in that volume, see p. 321.

³ These objects, a boot, a glove, and a spoon, are reproduced in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1785, p. 418. The belief that the bracer was also at Bolton Hall was current in the year 1860; for it is held by the writer of an interesting note on an ivory specimen in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* for that year, p. 338.

⁴ This is the opinion of Mr. Mill Stephenson, F.S.A., who submitted the bracer to a careful examination.



A late-medieval bracer (3).

point of view the new association is less welcome than the old, it still allows us to class this wrist-guard among objects of exceptional rarity. There are literary references to leather bracers: Gervase Markham in his *Art of Archerie* printed in 1634, alludes to the use of Spanish leather for the purpose.⁵

If we go back into the Middle Ages we find Chaucer in the prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* giving his yeoman a 'gay bracer', which may well have been of cuir bouilli like that under discussion. For when new, our example was a more brilliant object than it is now. The ground, punched all over with small circles, still shows traces of gilding, and the inscription and other parts in relief may have been coloured. From the badge which it bears and the fine quality of its workmanship we may assume that it was used by some one in the royal service, perhaps by a person of rank.

Actual bracers of the Middle Ages are far to seek. For the sixteenth century and later, ivory examples are known; one is figured by Skelton,⁶ another, carved with the figure of St. Sebastian and dated 1589, was exhibited at a meeting of the British Archaeological Association in 1860.⁷ Perhaps the bracers best known to archaeologists are those of slate-like stone used in the Early Bronze Age, of which the one with gold studs, from a barrow at Kelleythorpe, near Driffield, is an exceptionally fine example.⁸

⁵ Quoted by the writer in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* already mentioned, vol. xvi, 1860, p. 338. Ascham, in his *Toxophilus*, describes the use of the bracer, but does not specify the material.

⁶ J. Skelton, *Antient arms and armour from the collection of ... Sir Samuel Rush Meyrick*, pl. xxxiv, fig. 2.

⁷ *Journal*, xvi, 1860, p. 337.

⁸ Formerly in the Londesborough Collection, now in the British Museum. See *Guide to the Antiquities of the Bronze Age*, 1920, p. 81.