

Sir John Fastolf and the Diverse Affinities of the Medieval Lancegay

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The weapon known as the lancegay flourished in England for approximately 100 years, from the third quarter of the fourteenth century, before falling suddenly into obscurity – an obscurity that has resulted in numerous misleading and erroneous statements being made about it. This article examines the linguistic and cultural origins of the lancegay together with the complex network of affinities that link it with a number of cognate words in several European languages. The evolution, patterns of influence and different senses that characterise this complex family of terms are examined, along with the uncertainties and shortcomings that exist in many editions and dictionaries, with the aim of casting fresh light on a number of issues that have previously not been mapped in relation to one another.

Among the myriad items recorded in an inventory of the possessions of the English gentleman-soldier and landowner Sir John Fastolf at Caister Castle, Norfolk, we find that his *magna aula*, or great hall, contained an assortment of weapons, including eleven crossbows, a boar-spear, twenty-one spears, six ‘Wifles’ (probably battle-axes),¹ two shields and a ‘Launce gay’ [*sic*].² Fastolf – whose name is perhaps

¹ See the *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath, S. M. Kuhn et al. (Ann Arbor, 1952–2001; hereafter *MED*), s.v. *wifl* n. The etymological sense of the word (< OE *wifel*, ‘arrow, dart, javelin’) is not apparent in Middle English usage.

² Thomas Amyot, ‘Transcript of Two Rolls, Containing an Inventory of the Effects Formerly Belonging to Sir John Fastolfe’, *Archaeologia* 21 (1827): 232–80 (pp. 272–3). This is one of two inventories made of Fastolf’s belongings in 1448, the other being preserved among the Fastolf Papers in Magdalen College, Oxford. They are discussed by Alasdair Hawkyard, ‘Sir John Fastolf’s “Gret Mansion by me late edified”: Caister Castle, Norfolk’, in *The Fifteenth Century 5*, ed. Linda Clark (Woodbridge, 2005): 39–68 (pp. 55–6).

better known by way of his fictionalised namesake, the irrepressible Falstaff of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* duology and its spin-offs – served with honour in France under both Henry V and his brother, the Duke of Bedford. Fastolf took part in the siege of Harfleur under Henry in 1415, was created a Knight of the Garter in 1426, and continued to serve in France until 1440, when he was over sixty years old. We may reasonably expect that the weapons arrayed in the hall of such a seasoned old warrior might reflect something of his interests and campaigns; otherwise why would Fastolf have displayed them in such a prominent public space? The reason this question is important is that many unhelpful statements have been made about the weapon named *launcegai* / *lancegay* in a number of late-medieval documents and texts, including Fastolf's inventory of Caister Castle. This article aims to throw light on some of the misconceptions that have arisen in relation to the lancegay and at the same time explore a number of related words and concepts in a variety of languages that have a bearing on the matter.

We may begin by observing that perceptions about the word *lancegay* and the weapon it denotes have long been complicated by false etymologies and speculative interpretations, such as the claim that English *lancegay* (Middle English *launcegai* < Anglo-Norman *lancegaie*) represents an adaptation of French *lance-aiguë* 'a sharp, or pointed, lance' – presumably in contrast to a blunt-headed tilting lance.³ The suggestion is ingenious but demonstrably erroneous. Further confusion has arisen from the fact that *lancegay* is often written by both French and English scribes as two words – as in Fastolf's inventory – which has led to the suggestion that a 'lance gay' is a plaything, or even a 'lance joyeux', though what that might be is never explained.⁴ The result is that scholars of both history and literature have not always been sure of what to make of references to lancegays, and nowhere is this more apparent than in comments made in relation to Chaucer's burlesque masterpiece, his *Tale of Sir Thopas*,

³ See, for example, George C. Stone, *A Glossary of the Construction, Decoration and Use of Arms and Armour . . . in all Times* (New York, 1961), p. 410.

⁴ Guillaume de Saint-André, '*Le bon Jehan*' et '*Le jeu des échecs*': *XIV^e siècle Chronique de l'État breton*, ed. Jean-Michel Cauneau and Dominique Philippe (Rennes, 2005), p. 401.

in which the poem's eponymous hero sets out to ride through a forest armed only with sword and 'lancegay'.⁵

The *Tale of Sir Thopas* is a comic tour de force: a literary curiosity in so many respects that any brief account of the poem must perforce be inadequate. The work employs so many different techniques, contains comic elements of so many layers and nuances, and pokes fun (usually of a gentle, tolerant kind) at so many different subjects, that practically every word or phrase in the poem has been considered at one time or another to be hilarious – though not always in a way that makes good sense. A typical case in point is the claim by George Williams that Thopas's 'long swerd' and lancegay are not only phallically suggestive, but also indicative of Thopas's latent or repressed homosexuality (though he fails to say what other shape these weapons could have had to avoid phallic resemblances).⁶ Other critics have found different reasons to laugh at Thopas's lancegay, some claiming that it is an absurd weapon for a hunt (even though Thopas never goes hunting), that it is too light and slender to be taken seriously, or that it is merely a 'costume lance, a prop'.⁷ As I argue elsewhere,⁸ these assertions, and others like them, are all based on two premises: first, that we know exactly what a medieval English lancegay was; and, secondly, that this weapon was not taken seriously at the time. Both premises are mistaken. In the case of the first, because there is no identified archaeological evidence: nothing that can show us exactly how long or heavy a lancegay was, what the diameter of the shaft was, what shape of head it had, or whether it had heads at both ends, as is sometimes claimed.⁹ There is also no detailed

⁵ *Canterbury Tales*, VII.752–3, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford, 1987).

⁶ George G. Williams, *A New View of Chaucer* (Durham, N. C., 1965), pp. 146–50.

⁷ See Laura Hibbard Loomis, 'Sir Thopas', in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and G. Dempster (London, 1958): 508–10; J. M. Manly, 'Sir Thopas: A Satire', *Essays & Studies* 13 (1928): 52–73; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Diminishing Masculinities in Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*', in *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the 'Canterbury Tales' and 'Troilus and Criseyde'*, ed. Peter G. Beidler (Cambridge, 1998): 143–55 (p. 145).

⁸ 'Sir Thopas and his Lancegay', in *Chaucer in Context*, ed. Gerald Morgan (Turnhout, 2011, forthcoming).

⁹ For example, Victor Gay, *Glossaire archéologique du moyen âge et de la renaissance*, 2 vols (Paris, 1882–1928), s.v. lancegay.

description of a lancegay in any known written source; and there is no instance in any of the visual media that can indubitably be identified as a representation of the weapon. As is so often the case with weapons terms in the Middle Ages, writers of literature and other documentary sources assume that one knows what technical words denote, making it unnecessary for them to supply explanations or descriptions. As a result, everything we believe we know about the lancegay has to be *deduced* from what is said about it. We are therefore fortunate that a fairly clear picture does emerge.

What that picture indicates very strongly is that the lancegay was – as its name suggests – a type of spear or lance, but that it was probably considerably lighter than a full-length war lance. We can deduce further that it was carried by mounted men-at-arms in England from the third quarter of the fourteenth century, and that it quickly became immensely popular with them. Further, incontrovertible, evidence reveals that the lancegay was regarded as a dangerous – even a lethal – weapon that was considered such a hazard to the king’s peace that King Richard II passed two separate statutes banning it from the realm.¹⁰ Hence the error of the second premise stated above (that the lancegay was not taken seriously). Even so, a number of questions remain, not least of which is what happened to it. There is a flurry of references to the lancegay that lasts for about a century – from 1383 until *c.* 1470 – after which it ceases to be mentioned in documentary sources. When its name reappears in the sixteenth century, it is clear that the lancegay has long fallen into disuse and that knowledge of the weapon has become very indistinct. So what happened to it? Where did it come from? And was there anything else like it elsewhere in Europe? As I shall show, the lancegay has a prominent place on a fascinating family tree, whose history and connections have never before been set out as here.

To begin with its origins, the genesis and essential attributes of the lancegay may be found encoded in the name itself. It is now generally accepted among philologists that the distant etymon for the English word is Arabic *az zaġāyah*, where *az* represents the definite article *al*

¹⁰ See 7 Ric. II (1383), cap. 13, and 20 Ric. II (1397), cap. 1: *The Statutes of the Realm*, ed. T. E. Tomlins and W. E. Taunton, 12 vols (London, 1810–28): I, 258; II, 92–3.

‘the’, assimilated as *az-* before *z*, and **zaġāyah* (unattested in classical Arabic literature) is a Berber loanword for a light cavalry lance that was capable of being thrown.¹¹ This implement is commonly referred to in English as a ‘javelin’, and it was the quintessential weapon of the Berber horseman. As the military historian David Nicolle explains,

In tactical terms, Berber warfare was based upon *razzia* – raiding – similar to that of the early Arabs Their unarmoured cavalry primarily relied upon javelins and their tactics were a version of the widespread repeated attack and withdrawal.¹²

Evidence for the unattested Arabic word *zaġāyah* survives in a variety of sources, including the *Vocabulista in Arabico*, a thirteenth-century Latin–Arab glossary,¹³ and, more importantly, the Spanish loanword *azagaya* (also *açagaya*), which was in turn borrowed as Portuguese *azagaia*. Both words broadly denote ‘a light spear’, ‘a javelin’, with some slippage of sense apparent between these two closely related concepts. Even so, it is clear that Spanish *azagaya* retained a closer connection with its Berber–Arabic origins in denoting a light cavalry lance that could be used in a variety of ways, including being thrown, whereas Portuguese *azagaia* tended increasingly to denote a light spear of the javelin variety designed specifically to be thrown.¹⁴

The subsequent history and influence of the Portuguese word is of particular interest to Southern Africa as a result of Portuguese maritime expansion in the fifteenth century. For, after capturing the Moroccan city of Ceuta in 1415, the Portuguese explored progressively further down the west coast of Africa until Bartolomeu

¹¹ See F. Corriente, *A Dictionary of Andalusī Arabic* (Leiden, 1997), p. 231, s.v. *{ZĠY}; R. Dozy and W. H. Engelmann, *Glossaire des mots Espagnols et Portugais dérivés de l’Arabe*, 2nd edn (Leiden, 1869), p. 223, s.v. *azagaya*; *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (hereafter *OED*), s.v. *lancegay*.

¹² David Nicolle, *Poitiers AD 732* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 31–2.

¹³ F. Corriente, *El léxico árabe andalusí según el “Vocabulista in Arabico”* (Madrid, 1989), p. 138, s.v. *ZGY.

¹⁴ See Martin Alonso, *Diccionario Medieval Español* (Salamanca, 1986), s.v. *azagaya*, f. s., ‘Lanza o dardo pequeño arrojadizo’ (‘a lance or light dart for throwing’); Federico Corriente, *Dictionary of Arabic and Allied Loanwords: Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, Galician and Kindred Dialects* (Leiden–Boston, 2008), s.v. *atzagaia*.

Dias rounded the Cape in 1488, bringing with him his nation's terms for material objects. One of these was the word *azagaia*, which came to be applied to the light throwing spear employed by the *Mouros* ('Moors') of Africa – *Mouros* being a term used indiscriminately for inhabitants of the continent whatever their ethnic identity, from Moroccan Berbers to the Khoi-San of the South, to East African Arabs.¹⁵ A good example of the use of both words – *Mouros* and *azagaia* – may be found in *The Lusiads* (1572) of Luís de Camões, at the point in the epic when Vasco da Gama and his men are attacked by the duplicitous *Mouros* of Mozambique Island. The Portuguese, Camões tells us, have been lured into coming ashore to collect water and a pilot to guide them to India, only to find the *Mouros* lying in wait:

Mas os Mouros, que andavam pela praia
 Por lhe defender a água desejada,
 Um de escudo embaçado e de azagaia,
 Outro de arco encurvado e seta ervada,
 Esperam que a guerreira gente saia,¹⁶

(‘But the Moors, spread along the shore to deny him the water he desired – one armed with shield and *azagaia*, another with curved bow and poisoned arrows – waited for the noble warriors to land.’)

Interestingly, in Canto II, Camões emphasises how the friendly reception of the *Mouros* of Malindi is marked by the absence of bows and *azagaias*: ‘Em lugar de guerreiras azagaias / E do arco que os cornos arremeda / Da Lũa, trazem ramos de palmeira’ (‘Instead of warlike *azagaias* and bows shaped like horns, they bore palm-branches, signs of peace.’)¹⁷

Continuing to trace this branch of the family tree, we discover that by the early seventeenth century Portuguese *azagaia* had been taken up in Dutch, also to refer to the light throwing spears of African warriors, as in Pieter de Marees’ account of the people of ‘Cabo

¹⁵ For an extended recent discussion of the term ‘Moor’ in Portuguese sources, see Josiah Blackmore, *Moorings: Portuguese Expansion and the Writing of Africa* (Minneapolis, 2009).

¹⁶ Camões, *Os Lusíadas*, ed. Frank Pierce (Oxford, 1973), I. 86.

¹⁷ *Os Lusíadas*, II. 93.

Verde' (modern Cap Vert, Senegal) on the west African coast, when he tells how, '... sy wercken seer fray int yser, ende hier wort menichte van Yser versleten... het selve verwercken sy tot Instrumenten te maken, om mede te visschen, ... oock tot gheweer te maken, als Bogen, Pylen, Arpoenen ende Assegayen' ('... they work a great deal with iron, and here many things are made from iron... they use it to make implements with which to fish, ... and to make weapons, such as bows, arrows, harpoons and assegais').¹⁸ And before long, of course, the Dutch word was brought to Southern Africa, where it took root with such vigour that it is widely, if popularly, thought to be originally a Dutch or Afrikaans word, or else an Afrikaans word of African – especially Zulu – origins. Indeed, so strong is the association of assegais with Southern Africa, and with the Zulus in particular, that it can even be found in reference works, such as *A Standard Swahili–English Dictionary*. In that work, the Swahili word *sagai*, which must derive directly from Arabic rather than from an intermediate European loanword, is defined as 'javelin, short stabbing spear – of the Zulus and kindred tribes'.¹⁹ Unscholarly though this association may be, it is so widely taken for granted that it seems to bear out the otherwise whimsical suggestion by the linguist Ernest Weekley that many Portuguese words 'have an uncanny way of pretending to be African or Indian'.²⁰

¹⁸ P[ieter] de Marees, *Beschryvinghe ende Historische Verhael van het Gout Koninckrijck van Gunea*, ed. S. P. L'Honoré Naber (The Hague, 1912), p. 8. See further *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (accessed online: <<http://gtb.inl.nl>>), s.v. *assagaai*, which shows that early variants include the forms *assagajj*, *asiegaj*, *hassegay*, *hesegey*. An earlier attestation than any cited by this dictionary may be found in the journal of Olivier van Noort, whose entry for 8 January 1600 records an encounter with a group of men of Tierra del Fuego: 'Dese Wilden hebben voor haer gheweer groote sware Cnodsen... ende langhe houten Hasegayen' ('These savages have as their weapons large, heavy clubs... and long wooden assegais': *De Reis om de Wereld door Olivier van Noort*, ed. J. W. Ijzerman (The Hague, 1926), pp. 46–7).

¹⁹ *A Standard Swahili–English Dictionary*, Inter-Territorial Language Committee for the East African Dependencies under the direction of the late Frederick Johnson (London, 1939; repr. 1955), s.v. *sagai* n. Cf. also Ada Bruhn de Hoffmeyer, *Arms & Armour in Spain: A Short Survey*, 2 vols (Madrid, 1972–82), II, 86: 'The true assagay no doubt is of African origin, and it is found even among the tribes south of Sahara.'

²⁰ *The Romance of Words* (London, 1912, repr. 1945), p. 25. Another Afrikaans word that is often thought to be native to that language, but that has its origins in Portuguese is *kraal* < Port. *curral* (cf. English *corral* < Spanish).

Early Modern English followed closely behind, with *assagai* (also *assegai*, the preferred spelling in South African English) first recorded in *Purchas his Pilgrimes*, Samuel Purchas's collection of narratives documenting the history of exploration. In that work, first printed in 1625, is a description of the people inhabiting the area around Cape Lopez in West Africa, which tells how, 'They are better armed for weapons then they of Myna, or the Golden Coast[;] their Armes are Pikes, or Assagaies, Bowes, and Arrowes, long Targets [shields] made of barkes of Trees.'²¹ Later examples, from 1677 onwards, refer predominantly to the weapons of Southern African peoples, as is richly illustrated by the (Oxford) *Dictionary of South African English*, a work that gives Portuguese *azagaia* as the donor word for the English.²² It is therefore curious to observe that the main *OED* gives priority to *azagaie* – an unusual form of sixteenth-century French *zagaie* – as the source of English *assagai*; Portuguese *azagaia* or Dutch *assagaai* are both far more likely given the early contact that these nations had with Africa.²³

While considering English *assegai* and its associations, it should be pointed out that English, and South African English in particular, has complicated matters further by adopting *assegai* in an extended sense to refer to the short-hafted stabbing spear with which Shaka Zulu armed his impis from around 1812.²⁴ Hence the entry in the *Dictionary of South African English*, which reads 'A spear with a pointed, sharpened iron tip, and a wooden shaft which is either short, for stabbing, or long, for throwing'.²⁵ This definition may accurately

²¹ *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgrimes*, 20 vols (Glasgow–New York, 1905), VI, 364 (Book VII, Chap. 2, § 8). See also II, 263, which describes contact with a group of islanders in the vicinity of New Guinea in 1616 '... there came twentie Canoes to our ship, to whom wee shewed all signes of friendship, but one of them with a wooden Assagay (sharp at the point) in his hand, threatened to shoot at one of our men . . .' (Book I, Chap. 2, § 99).

²² *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles*, ed. Penny Silva, Wendy Dore et al. (Oxford, 1996), s.v. *assegai* n.

²³ *OED*, s.v. *assagai*, *assegai* n.

²⁴ For a well-known, but romanticised, account of the forging of Shaka's first stabbing spear, see E. A. Ritter, *Shaka Zulu: The Rise of the Zulu Empire* (London, 1955), p. 31; and, for a more scholarly view, Dan Wylie, *Myth of Iron: Shaka in History* (Scottsville, 2006), p. 217.

²⁵ *Dictionary of South African English*, s.v. *assegai* n.

reflect local usage, but it conflates the etymological sense of the word (a throwing spear) with a later, transferred sense, denoting a weapon that is conceptually distinct and that bears an entirely different name in Zulu itself. In that language, a throwing spear is *umkhonto* whereas the short-hafted, large-bladed stabbing spear, employed like a short sword or *gladius*, is denoted by *i(li)klwa* / *ixwa*.²⁶ Perhaps early settlers did not care to distinguish whether one of their number had been ‘assegaid’²⁷ by a long or a short spear, but a dictionary based on historical principles could usefully have distinguished these two notions and the chronology of their development.²⁸

II

Returning to medieval Europe in order to follow a different branch of the lancegay’s family tree, we can readily see that the Arabic term for a light cavalry spear, *az zaġāyah*, was taken up in Spain, along with the weapon itself and the fighting techniques associated with it, as a result of long conflict between Spanish and Muslim forces. In the following account Richard Vernier describes the tactics of fourteenth-century Spanish light cavalry, but he could just as easily be describing the Islamic fighters from whom such fighting methods were learned:

... south of the Pyrénées the style of military action had been over the centuries much influenced by that of the Moorish adversary. As much as by a succession of planned campaigns, the *Reconquista* ... had been achieved in the field by the kind of endemic border warfare that wears down the energy of the defenders. Quick raids were conducted by lightly armed horsemen, called *jinetes* – hence the English ‘jennet,’ denoting a breed of small, swift mount. Wearing light mail shirts or quilted jackets, riding with short stirrups (in French, *à la jennette*), they were armed with light lances [i.e. *azagayas*] (in Froissart: *archigaies*) as well as bows and arrows. They

²⁶ See *Zulu–English Dictionary*, compiled by C. M. Doke and B. W. Vilakazi (Johannesburg, 1948), s.vv. *-khonto*, *-klwa*.

²⁷ For this verb see *Dictionary of South African English*, s.v. *assegai* v. trans. (first attested 1804).

²⁸ Cf. the Swahili dictionary referred to above, which also conflates these two notions; and see also Charles W. Rechenbach, *Swahili–English Dictionary* (Washington D. C., 1967), s.v. *sagai*, ‘(short) spear, assegai’.

excelled at hit-and-run, shooting from the saddle, then wheeling about and galloping away, but were not altogether enthusiastic about taking on heavily armoured knights . . .²⁹

From Spain, the *azagaya* can be traced into France, where it became known variously as *arcegaie*, *arsgay*, *archigaie* and, the dominant form, *archegaie*, first attested in Guillaume Guiart's chronicle, *Branche des Royaux Lignages*, composed around 1306.³⁰ Then, in the late fourteenth century, this word was combined with native French *lance* – no doubt because of its resemblance to that weapon – to produce a new portmanteau word, *lancegaie*, first recorded in the chronicler Guillaume de Saint-André's history of Jean IV of Brittany.³¹ And from Brittany – allied as it was with England and bordering English-controlled Aquitaine – both the weapon and the name for it crossed the Channel to take up residence in England, whither we too will return presently.³² First it should be observed that the story of *archegaie* in Old French has yet to be comprehensively written and that it is too complex for the present undertaking. Suffice it to say, therefore, that the word eventually underwent yet another adaptation to yield the aphetic reflex *zagaie* (first attested 1556), whence Modern French *sagaie* 'assegai'.

Returning, to the English lancegay of the fifteenth century, we find that Sir John Fastolfe was far from alone in owning such a weapon. Brother Hugh Middleton, commander of the English contingent of the Knights Hospitaller at Rhodes, owned one too,³³ as did John Scrope, who bequeathed his 'launchgay cum uno batillaxe' to his brother in

²⁹ Richard Vernier, *The Flower of Chivalry: Bertrand du Guesclin and the Hundred Years War* (Woodbridge, 2003; repr. 2007), p. 96.

³⁰ Guillaume Guiart, *Branche des Royaux Lignages*, ed. J.-A. Buchon, 2 vols (Paris, 1828), I, 81, lines 1471–2: 'Lances brandir et archegaies / Et baignier armes non pareilles'. See also Frédéric Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes, du IXe au XVe siècle* (Paris, 1880–1902), s.v. *archegaie* s. f.; A. Tobler and E. Lommatzsch, *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch* (Berlin–Stuttgart, 1925–2001), s.v. *archegaie*.

³¹ Guillaume de Saint-André, *Le bon Jehan*, lines 2867–72: 'Dardes, gavelotz, lances gaies, / Savoient getter et faire plaies'.

³² Anglo-Norman *lancegay* / *lancegaie* is first recorded in England in Richard II's statute of 1383 already alluded to.

³³ *A Letter from Brother Hugh Middleton, Knight of the Order of St. John . . . Written about 1448*, ed. E. J. King (London, 1930), p. 10.

1452.³⁴ Even common folk with no military associations seem to have possessed the weapon, as we learn from a legal action brought by John Melburn of Nottingham, a weaver, for the return of a lancegay-shaft, valued at 8 pence, along with various other items by two defendants, named as John Dyrry and William Baxter.³⁵ We can also be sure that such lancegays were employed as more than mere ceremonial or decorative items as a result of the stern edict issued by Henry VI to the sheriff of Worcester in 1457, instructing him to announce publicly and widely that the king would not tolerate a variety of unlawful acts, including riding about armed with lancegays and other weapons:

Rex Vicecomiti Wigorniae salutem. . . . Nos . . . tibi præcipimus . . . publice proclamari facias, Ne quis . . . nec armatus cum lanceis, launcegayes, gleves & aliis armis, contra leges & statuta in casu illo edita & provisiva, eat sive equitet. . . .³⁶

(‘The King to the Sheriff of Worcester, greeting. . . . We instruct you . . . to proclaim in public that no-one . . . ride on horseback armed with lances, lancegays, swords and other weapons, contrary to the laws and statutes promulgated and published on this issue’)

That lancegays were such a cause for concern makes it all the more curious that they disappear from the records, presumably having fallen into disuse, only a few decades later. The changing nature of weaponry in the late fifteenth century, and the rise of hand-held firearms in particular, are probably the reason for this.³⁷

From a linguistic point of view what is most interesting is that when the notion of a lancegay is again mentioned in the late sixteenth century, knowledge of the medieval weapon seems to have been largely lost, for the concept is reintroduced by means of a word that reveals new contact with the Islamic world of North Africa. This is

³⁴ James Raine (ed.), *Testamenta Eboracensia: A Selection of Wills from the Registry at York*, II, Surtees Society, 30 (Durham, 1855), p. 161.

³⁵ *Records of the Borough of Nottingham*, 9 vols (London, 1882–1956), II (1883), item LXXIX, pp. 158–9.

³⁶ *Foedera*, ed. Thomas Rymer, 17 vols (London, 1704–17), XI, 388.

³⁷ For a comprehensive discussion of this topic, see Robert Douglas Smith and Kelly DeVries, *The Artillery of the Dukes of Burgundy 1363–1477* (Woodbridge, 2005), pp. 7–54.

apparent in the military manual published by Sir John Smythe in 1595, when the author describes the arming and training of light horsemen ‘such as in diuers shires of england we doo now vse’. In Smythe’s opinion,

. . . and instead of Launces or speares, I woulde wish them to haue Launces commonlie called *Launcezagayas* of good, tite, and stiff ash, coloured black, with double heads of good and hard temper according to the vse of the Moores of 18. or 20. foot long; to the intent that taking them in the midst, they may strike both forward and backwarde, I mean aswell [*sic*] their enemies that they haue in frunt [*sic*] or in flanks³⁸

We have here come full circle, with Smythe’s neologism *Launcezagayas* representing Middle English *launcegai* (< AN *lancegaie* < OF *archegaie* < Sp. *zagaya* < Ar. *az zaġāyah*) freshly compounded with Arabic *zaġāyah*. And so yet another branch on an already complicated family tree is generated.

³⁸ Sir John Smythe, *Instructions, Obseruations, and Orders Mylitarie* (London, 1595), pp. 198–200

Addendum

In the course of researching this topic I have spoken to scholars in a number of disciplines who have often asked me if there is anything similar to the English lancegay, either in name or military use, in other European cultures from which more information may be gleaned. My answer has invariably been that there is not, as far as we know, but that there is an uncanny correspondence between Spanish *azagaya* and Middle High German *azigêr*, *azgêr*, a word that not only closely resembles *azagaya*, but also concurs in sense. Of course, the final /r/ in the Germanic root precludes any etymological link, but the consonances between these words are worth noting none the less.

Standard authorities on MHG define *azigêr* as ‘Wurfspieß’ (‘a throwing spear’, that is, ‘a javelin’), or ‘eiserne Lanze, Wurfspeer’ (‘iron lance, javelin’), and relate it to a group of cognate words, all Germanic in origin, including Old English *ætgār*, Old Norse *atgeirr*, Old Frisian *etgēr* and the like.³⁹ As the latest etymological dictionary of Old High German explains, ‘Das Wort ist eine Zss. aus *az* (präp. und adv.) “zu, an, in usw.” und *gêr* “Speer”’;⁴⁰ in other words, it comprises a compound of two native Germanic morphemes, both well attested: the noun *gêr* (Modern *Ger*, ‘spear’) preceded by the preposition *az* (< Gothic *at*), suggesting motion towards an object; hence the sense ‘throwing spear’. Other forms of the word occur as *atker*, *athger*, *atigêr* and *atihgêre*, of which the last is perhaps the most intriguing because of the context in which it occurs; namely, the MHG translation of the *Chanson de Roland*, known as the *Rolandslied*, made by Konrad the Clerk (Konrad der Pfaffe) in about 1170. In that work, the *atihgêre* is associated specifically with Islamic forces, who are demonised in predictable terms:

³⁹ Matthias Lexer, *Mittelhochdeutsches Handwörterbuch* (Stuttgart, 1970), s.v. *azigêr*, *ati-gêr*; Albert L. Lloyd and Otto Springer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Althochdeutschen* (Göttingen–Zürich, 1988–), s.v. *azgêr*. Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (London, 1973), s.v. *æt-gār*.

⁴⁰ ‘The word is a compound of *az* (preposition and adverb) “to(wards), at, in etc.” and *gêr* “Speer”’: Lloyd and Springer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *azgêr*.

die fuorten alle atihgêre [*var. ethgere*]
 in ir hanten Machmet zêren. . . .
 si ezzent diu ros.
 si lebent mit grimme.
 der tiuvel wont dar inne.

(‘They all carry “javelins” in the service of Mohammed. . . . They eat horses; they live a wild life; the devil lives with them.’)⁴¹

One of the intriguing features of this passage is that, although it does not occur in the original *Chanson de Roland*, it appears to recall a different part of the French poem, in which the Saracen king Marsile, driven to fury by the traitor Ganelon’s fraudulent message, comes close to striking him with a ceremonial dart, termed *algier* / *algeir*.⁴²

Li reis Marsilies en fut mult esfreéd;
 Un algier tint ki d’or fut enpenét,
 Ferir l’en volt, se n’en fust desturnét.

Li reis Marsilies ad la culur müee,
 De sun algeir ad la hanste crollee.⁴³

(‘The king Marsile was greatly perturbed; he held a dart with vanes of gold, and wanted to strike him [Ganelon] with it, were he not restrained. The king Marsile changed colour, and shook his dart by the shaft.’)

The origin of this term, which is recorded only in the *Chanson de Roland*, has been the topic of inconclusive debate, including the suggestion that it represents a corruption of OHG *atgier*, previously borrowed into French to denote a specifically Moorish weapon.⁴⁴ Whether this means that the forms *atihgêre* / *ethgere* recorded in the *Rolandslied* represent *algier* unwittingly borrowed back into German, or ‘translated’ into what Konrad believed was a native word with the

⁴¹ *Das Rolandslied des Pfaffen Konrad*, ed. Dieter Kartschoke (Stuttgart, 1993), lines 2647–8, 2690–2.

⁴² Godefroy, *Dictionnaire*, s.v. *algier*, *algeir*, s. m., gives ‘sorte de javelot’. I have translated the word as ‘dart’ because it is ‘enpenét’; i.e. it has vanes, or fletches.

⁴³ *La Chanson de Roland*, ed. F. Whitehead (Oxford, 1978), lines 438–42 (strophes 33–34); see also line 2075 (strophe 154).

⁴⁴ See Tobler–Lommatzsch, *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *algier*.

same essential meaning, is impossible to determine with the available evidence. That there is an affinity between these words is, however, unmistakable.

For the purposes of the present enquiry, the main point I wish to make is that authorities are divided on whether the MHG term *atihgêre* / *atigêr* and, by association, *azigêr* denotes a weapon of an Oriental – that is, Moorish – nature. On the one hand, Alwin Schultz declares that ‘Der Atigêr . . . ist wahrscheinlich eine orientalische Abart des gewöhnlichen Gêr’ (‘The Atigêr is apparently an Oriental variant of the familiar Gêr’).⁴⁵ But this does not take account of another text, the romance *Wigalois*, composed about 1220 by Wirnt von Grafenberg, where there is no obvious connection with Islamic forces. In that work, the eponymous hero sets off on a journey with a large body of troops, including mounted knights carrying goshawks and falcons and armed with ‘starkiu sper’ (strong lances), together with other soldiers (‘sergeants’) equipped with two types of throwing-spear, named *gabilôt* and *atigêr*:

die vuorten tœtflîche wer:
 starkiu sper von Angran. . . .
 gabilôt und atigêr
 truogen die sarjande.

(‘They [the nobles] bore deadly weapons: strong lances from Angran [unidentified, but traditionally a source of fine steel]. . . . The “sergeants” carried darts and “javelins”.’)⁴⁶

The issue of whether *atigêr* has Islamic connotations is therefore confused, leading Julius Schwietering – in his definitive work on the

⁴⁵ Alwin Schultz, *Das höfische Leben zur Zeit der Minnesinger*, 2nd edn (Leipzig, 1889), pp. 206 ff. Dieter Kartschoke, editor of the *Rolandslîed* cited above, relies on Schultz for his explanation of this term.

⁴⁶ Wirnt von Grafenberg, *Wigalois*, ed. J. M. N. Kapteyn (Berlin–New York, 2005), lines 10670–5. MHG *gabilôt* (OF *gavelot*, OE *gafeluc*, ME *gaveloc*) denotes a type of javelin, but exactly how this differs from an *atigêr* is obscure. The term *sarjand*, which I have translated as ‘sergeant’, is often glossed as ‘footsoldier, infantryman’, but this is too narrow an interpretation. In a military context, a *sarjand* (French *serjant*) is a vassal, mounted or unmounted, who is more lightly armed than a knight; see Martin H. Jones, ‘The Depiction of Battle in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Willehalm*’, in *The Ideals and Practice of Medieval Knighthood II*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill and Ruth Harvey (Woodbridge, 1988): 46–69 (p. 53 n. 21).

different terms used for spears in twelfth-century German literature – to insist that the appearance of the word *atigêr* (*atihgêre*, *ethgere*) in *Wigalois* and the *Rolandslied*, and the attribution of this weapon to Islamic forces in the latter, does not constitute sufficient evidence to conclude that the word has specific ‘Oriental’ associations.⁴⁷ In other words, for Schwietering, it is doubtful that the ‘atigêr’ was considered a specifically Muslim weapon, although it was clearly not considered a knightly weapon, as is confirmed by the fact that it is carried by the sergeantry in *Wigalois*.

To summarise, the morpheme *-gêr*, common to both *atigêr* and *azigêr*, indicates very strongly a Germanic origin for the word, as Schwietering acknowledges when he states ‘Die Zusammengehörigkeit zu *gêr* ist zweifellos gefühlt’ (‘The connection with *gêr* can undoubtedly be felt’).⁴⁸ Yet there is also the potential influence of Old French *algier* to accommodate, and the, as yet unacknowledged, possible influence of Arabic *az zağāyah* or Spanish *azagaya*. This is not to say that MHG *azigêr* derives from Arabic or Spanish, but that the association of this weapon with Islamic forces in the *Rolandslied* might have been influenced by contact – direct or indirect, heard or distantly remembered – with Muslim Spain. After all, contact between Frankish forces and raiding parties from al-Andalus (Islamic Spain) began early in the eighth century, and reached an important climax in the battle of Poitiers (732) in which Charles Martel, founder of the Carolingian dynasty, defeated a large invading Muslim army.⁴⁹ During this period, as well as later, the Franks would have encountered Berber–Arabic weapons and tactics, which relied to a considerable extent on hit-and-run manoeuvres using the *zağāyah*.

Is it perhaps possible that the widely used Berber–Arabic weapon known as ‘*az zağāyah*’ influenced the semantic development of MHG *azigêr*, and that this word did indeed have an association with

⁴⁷ Julius Schwietering, ‘Zur Geschichte von Speer und Schwert im 12. Jahrhundert’ (1912), reprinted in *Philologische Schriften*, ed. Friedrich Ohly and Max Wehrli (Munich, 1969): 59–111 (p. 96). Further important comments on the different nuances of MHG *gêr*, *sper* and *azigêr* in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries may be found in Karl Kinzel, review of Alwin Schultz, *Das höfische Leben*, in *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie* 13 (1882): 121–7 (p. 122).

⁴⁸ Schwietering, ‘Zur Geschichte’, p. 96.

⁴⁹ David Nicolle, *Poitiers AD 732* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 17–19.

‘Oriental’ weaponry that is preserved in the *Rolandslied*? As Schwietering says, the evidence we possess may be insufficient to come to a definite conclusion, but since these questions have not – as far as I have been able to tell – previously been asked, we may find that there is more evidence that can yet be brought to bear on the matter. The alternative – that MHG *azigêr* / *atigêr* and Arabic *az zaġāyah* / Spanish *azagaya* are merely coincidentally similar – must otherwise be counted a most remarkable fluke.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ I should like to thank Prof. Michael Carter of Sydney University for answering my queries about medieval Arabic, and Prof. Nigel Palmer of St Edmunds Hall, Oxford, for assisting me in my enquiries on Middle High German. I am also grateful to Dr Catherine du Toit, Prof. H. A. (Boelie) Wessels and Dr Rika Cloete for their advice and corrections. Any remaining errors are mine alone.

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