

DRAFT

Late Roman Hand and Arm Protection - Draft !

by Stephen Kenwright

Hand protection is often advisable against both the cold and in some craft based tasks, archery and contact sparring. What should they look like? Evidence from the period is scarce but an argument for their use and appearance can be drawn from sources compiled from across the empire and over several centuries.

Literary evidence of gloves from the period includes both *manicae*, (related to the hand), which seem to include protective sleeves which covered the back of the hand (as well as a kind of hand-cuff) and *digitabula*, (related to the fingers), which includes thimbles as well as fingered gloves or protective gauntlets.

Pliny the Younger describes his uncle's secretary wore *manicae* during the winter, which clearly covered at least part of the hand, yet facilitated, rather than impeded, writing. This might describe a sleeve extending over the back of the hand or a fingerless "wrist-over" covering the palm resembling *himantes*, but surely not mittens as such. (Epist. lii.5):

ad latus notarius cum libro et pugillaribus, cuius manus hieme manicis muniebantur, ut ne caeli quidem asperitas ullum studii tempus eriperet

"By his side was a note-taker with a book and writing-tablets; whose hands in winter were protected with sleeves so that not even the harsh weather should take any time away from his studies."

In Varro's, *De Re Rustica* (i.55) he mentions what appear to be protective fingered gloves (*digitabula*) for olive-picking:

Quae manu stricta, melior ea quae digitis nudis, quam illa quae cum digitabulis, durities enim eorum quod non solum stringit bacam, sed etiam ramos glubit ...

"Of those (olives) picked by hand, those (picked) with bare fingers are better than those (picked) with gauntlets, as their hardness not only bruises the berry but also strips bark from the branches... "

Palladius (*De Re Rustica. i. 43*) mentions *ocreas manicasque de pellibus* i.e. leggings/greaves and sleeves made of hides, for use by huntsmen and agricultural labourers. A curse tablet from Bath mentions stolen *manicilia* which can be interpreted as smaller mittens, perhaps without a sleeve over the arm.

Unfortunately, the Swedish Åsle mitten, previously dated to 200 A.D., gave a Carbon 14 date in the late 16th - early 17th century. What appear to be gauntlet-cuffs on the Vachere warrior are more likely to be sleeve-cuffs, as apparently his fingernails can be seen.

DRAFT

Sixth century mosaics in Jordan and Argos show men hunting with birds wearing gloves on their left hand. In his C12th commentary on Homer's *Odyssey* (xxiv. 228, 229) which mentions χειρίδες, mittens worn to protect the hands from briars and thorns, the Byzantine Eustathius of Thessalonica contrasts such mittens used by labourers of his day for hedging and χειρίδες δακτυλανύται i.e. 'fingered mittens' or gloves.

Boxers

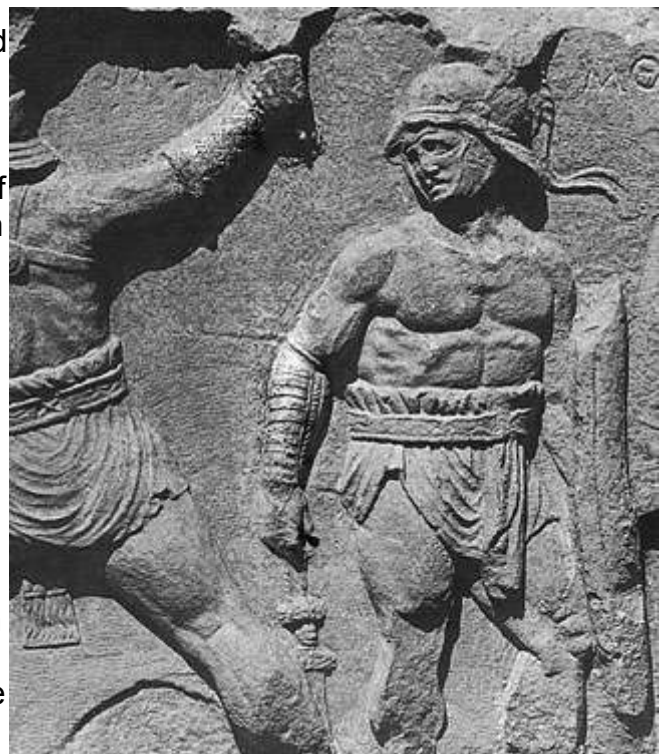
"...binding on hand and arm these well-seasoned thongs of bull hide...seven folds of the hides of bulls so enormous...insewn with lead and with iron..." *The Aeneid*

Ancient Olympic boxers wrapped their hands with *himantes melichai*, strips of relatively soft ox-hide leather three or four yards long, to support the wrists and fingers. By the C4th B.C. a hard striking surface over the knuckles had been added, making them *oxeis himantes*, which should be regarded as specialist boxing equipment. Likewise, the metal re-enforced caestus was effectively a specialist gladiatorial weapon.



Himantes, Oxeis himantes, Caestus

From the C1st A.D., *himantes* developed into sleeved gauntlets padded with wool and secured with thongs, with exposed fingers and thumb. Use by sportsmen does not imply use by soldiers in the field, but these or hand bindings provide a period method of protecting the hand and wrist which one can argue would be familiar to soldiers and which might have been appropriate in the context of training.



Gladiators

Several types of gladiator wore a *manica* on their fighting arm. In the first century B.C. these just cover the forearm and hand in the manner of the boxer's *caestus*.

DRAFT

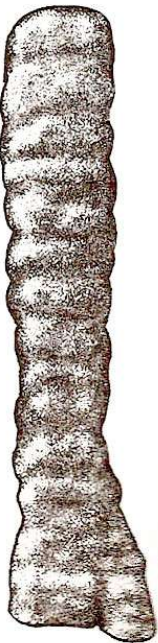
In the early centuries A.D. they could extend over the elbow to cover the whole arm, made from some form of padding held with straps, often reconstructed as coarse linen or leather bound with thongs. By the C4th they are depicted as metal armour of segmented plates, mail or scale. This was again extended to protect the back of the hand, sometimes with a large plate.



Again, there is little reason to assume gladiatorial equipment would be utilised by the legions, however, Vegetius explicitly notes the similarities in training methods which extends to the use of the post and *rudis*. Furthermore, the segmented *manica* certainly was used by the army in the first and second centuries.



Soldiers



An excellent essay by Paul Browne (Caballo) comprehensively covers the military use of *manicae* up to the mid C2nd.

<http://www.romanarmy.net/manica.htm>

The *manica* inscribed on the C1st memorial of Sextus Valerius Severus in Mainz shows clearly banded sections covering the back of the hand, with a separate thumb.

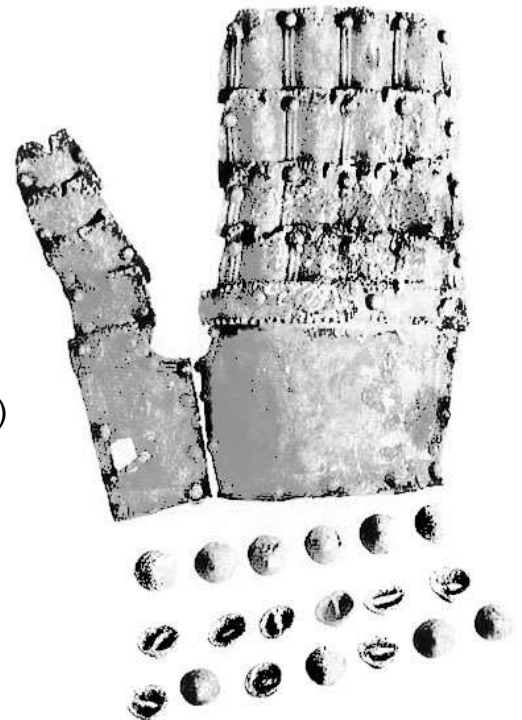
They are shown as apparently standard combat equipment worn by legionaries on the Trajanic monument at Adamclisi, Romania, with mail and scale armour as well as late C2nd-early C3rd reliefs at Alba Iulia in Romania and possibly the Arch of Severus at Leptis Magna, Syria, worn with segmented body armour. British finds have been identified, including both copper alloy (e.g. Carlisle) and iron (e.g. Newstead), the latter with surviving elements of a leather backing.

DRAFT

The mid-C3rd Dura Europos graffiti also shows a heavy cavalryman with banded arm protection. The Synagogue wallpaintings include depictions of soldiers wearing knee length, long sleeved mail coats, which obviously protect the arm well. A relief of two soldiers, probably from the C3rd-4th Arch of Diocletian, both have long sleeves on their mail and scale armour respectively.



Illustrations in the (later) copies of the C4-5th Notitia Dignitatum seem to show segmented limb defences including *manicae*. Similar armour seems to have been carved on the Column of Arcadius circa 400 A.D., now lost but recorded in C18th drawings. Iron plates from a C6th-7th gauntlet were found in Amlash Iran with three strips of iron over the fingers, two over the knuckles and a larger plate over the back of the hand, with a similar structure alongside for the thumb, then studs on the wrist, which may have secured a leather base. This may be very similar to the iron gauntlets that Maurice (Strategikon, i.2 circa 600 A.D.) recommended in his list of equipment for *bucellarii*.



Saxon Period

The Old English word "*glof*" might derive from an ancient common root with similar terms in other Germanic languages such as Gothic and Old Norse, suggesting to Owen-Crocker (2004) that such items were used in at least the early Anglo-Saxon period. The term *hond-scio* or 'hand-shoe', found as the name of a character in Beowulf, is usually translated as 'mitten' just like the Old Norse *hanzki* preserved in the Prose Edda and Poetic Edda.

In the C7th life of Columbanus, Jonas, Abbott of Bobbio, describes gloves for protecting the hands in manual labour. The C8th Bewcastle cross shows a falconer wearing a

DRAFT

gauntlet. Leather gloves have been found in Germany that were lined with soft cloth and laced on the back of the hand. The C8th 'minstrel' from Cologne was wearing a different type of glove on each hand: the left glove was cow leather decorated with strips resembling seams and the right was deer-skin with ridge and groove decoration. In the C9th Eberhard of Friuli bequeathed a *manica* in his will as part of set of armour. A C10th mitten from Arnheiðarstaðir, Iceland was made of naalbinding.

Re-enactment

Proper technique and care from all participants usually protects the hands from serious injury, but grazes, cuts and bruises to the hand are still amongst the most common problems in sparring and close formations, quite often on one's own shield, armour and equipment.

Light protection e.g. from equipment scratches & arrow fletching cuts in archery, can be provided easily by close fitting tan leather gloves, available from garden centres, which can be slipped off when near the public. You must take gloves off to be safe for throwing missile weapons. Unpick any labels from the seams and consider re-stitching by hand with linen thread. Incidentally, most of the unpleasant effects of such minor incidents can also be remedied by very basic treatment: wash cuts and put ice packs on bruises before they end up annoying you for the rest of the weekend.

Authentic protection for the arm can be provided by long sleeved mail over padding, but this adds to the weight you carry significantly and makes archery and safe missile throwing much harder and hotter work. It is largely the padding that protects in light sparring, rather than the mail itself.

Armamentaria is offering a very reasonable *manica* reconstruction with separate plates covering the back of the hand and the upper part of the thumb in mild steel and copper alloy on a leather base, which has been adopted by Victor as part of his C4th heavy cavalry impression and offers surprising freedom of movement. Anyone fairly handy with cutting and riveting sheet metal could make their own relatively cheaply.

Home made impact protection can be provided by thick (e.g. 4- 6mm) leather panels applied to the back of one such glove on the fighting hand. They are a common 're-enactorism' but should be hidden from the public, as they are completely unauthentic. Don't use obviously modern gardening/work gloves as a base. Alternatively, cover a hand guard (e.g. hockey glove insert) with a suitable outer glove, but fix it securely so it cannot come off / apart and look terrible. Mail on the hands is surprisingly heavy, promoting fatigue and over-striking and doesn't give impact protection.

For a much better look, overlay the leather panels to give a banded effect, modelled on the Iranian gauntlet or *manica* – at least you can argue they are a possible interpretation, even if lacking evidence.