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Military Drill and Words of Command. Queen Elizabeth II's Spin-wheel and Emperor Maximilian I's Snail

British sovereigns celebrate their official birthdays with an Honours List, and traditionally with a military parade called The Trooping of the Colour which is held every year on the second Saturday in June.¹ There the sovereign takes the salute of the regiments of guards at a march past on Horse Guards Parade in London. The parade is shown on BBC television every year to millions of viewers world wide, and no doubt there are some who make a point of never missing the spectacle; the bright uniforms, the marching men and prancing horses, the massed military bands. Like a well loved book or piece of music, to some it may seem hardly ever to change. But that is not so. There are years when driving rain soaks the many hundreds of military participants, the honoured guests who are present, and the public viewers. There are other years when dense choking clouds of dust are thrown up by the horses hooves, so that formations of soldiers appear and disappear in front of the cameras as if in a war scene. The show is never twice the same.

One detail of the parade, however, does appear to remain the same. At a certain point in the ceremony the massed military bands, anything from 200-400 men depending on where the Queen's regiments of guards are on active service at a given time, are standing to attention on the parade ground and as a result of earlier movements they are facing, as it were, "the wrong way". The trombonists, twenty men abreast, are at the rear of the formation, while the (bag)pipes and drums are at the front, the reverse of the normal order. But at a word of command the whole formation begins, in slow marching time, to make a massive turning movement which appears to be unique in the annals of military drill. During the movement in a relatively small space the trombonists have to carry their instruments aloft, with the slides pointing vertically upwards.² The detail, however, which never changes is the following: at that point in the proceedings television commentators invariably remark on how complicated the movement is, and how its origins appear to be unknown. Military men who are present to give advice to the TV people and to add comment for the viewers are also at a loss to explain the origins of the drill.

A website dedicated to the Trooping of the Colour affirms that "it is the responsibility of the Garrison Sergeant Major to ensure by rehearsals that it is executed correctly", and moreover, "that it appears in no drill book or manual of ceremonial, but is passed down from memory to each new generation of bandmen".³ This appears, therefore, to be a prime example of oral history. But to anyone who knows how regiments foster their traditions that statement must surely raise other questions. It opens the way, moreover, for investigation into the origins of drill movements in general, and especially this one called the "Spin-wheel" which is performed by the guards at the Queen's birthday parade.

The historiography of military drill goes back to classical antiquity. References to military training and exercises can be found in the writings of Xenophon and of Julius

¹ With one exception. In 1955 a national strike by railway men caused the parade to be cancelled.

² These details in the Trooping-the-Colour ceremony of 2006 can be seen on <http://www.youtube.com/>

³ Website: <http://www.trooping-the-colour.co.uk>

Caesar, to name only two better known authors.⁴ Down to the 16th century in Western Europe, Roman armies served as models for emperors, kings and princes. Frontinus was among the antique authors on military matters who inspired generals in the Early Modern Period, and an edition of his "Stratagems" was printed at Rome in 1487. Other editions appeared at Antwerp and Leiden later in the 16th century.⁵ Machiavelli's admiration for the Roman army, its weapons and its tactics led him to misjudge the importance of gunpowder, fire arms and cannons in the armies of his day. But by the beginning of the 16th century Swiss and German mercenaries (the latter were called "landsknechts"), using new weapons and tactics, had become noted for their discipline, speed and force in attack, and for maintaining their cohesion in withdrawing from combat in the face of enemy pressure. This required them to have been trained in advance.

Historians have drawn attention to Emperor Maximilian I's introduction of military exercises into his regiments of landsknechts. On historic evidence it was proposed that Maximilian (1459-1519) rather than the antique Roman authors was the immediate source of inspiration for military innovations and reforms in late 15th and early 16th century Germany, Austria and the Netherlands.⁶ Three incidents are described here, showing how military drill and words of command were used by Maximilian's forces. The first is an event which surrounded his arrest by citizens of Brugge (Bruges) in 1488, and which arguably provides a link to Queen Elizabeth II's "Spin-wheel".

Following the death of his young wife Mary of Burgundy in 1482, Maximilian (who was not yet emperor at that time⁷) was titular Protector of the Low Countries. He spent the next several years fighting to regain control of his wife's territories for his children and himself as her heirs. Early in February 1488 Maximilian entered the Flemish city of Brugge. On the occasion of this visit his escort of about 150 landsknechts was drawn up on the market place. Each man was armed with a cumbersome pike, some 18 feet in length, which by then, following the example of the Swiss, had become the main weapon of the landsknechts. What happened at a given moment is told by the chronicle writer Jean Molinet (1453-1507), writing in French, as follows: the officer who was in charge of Maximilian's escort wished to impress the citizens and give them a show by having his men perform a drill for them, and he gave an order equivalent to "Make the Snail in the German manner!" ("Faisons le limechon à la mode d'Alemagne!"). The ranks of soldiers obeyed at once, drew themselves up in formation, with their pikes held upright, and made the complicated turning movement which on the battlefield would have brought them round to face the enemy.⁸

⁴ There are many editions of Xenophon's classic *Anabasis or the March of the 10,000*, and of Caesar's *Gallic War*. For Roman literary sources on basic military training see: G. R. Watson, *The Roman Soldier*, Cornell University Press, 1969; pp. 54f. For other surveys of Greek and Roman literature see, for example, H. J. Rose, *A handbook of Greek literature*, and H. J. Rose, *A handbook of Latin literature*, both of which have gone through several editions

⁵ See C. E. Bennet (transl., ed.), *Frontinus, The Stratagems* (London, 1925).

⁶ H. Kleinschmidt, 'Disziplinierung zum Kampf. Neue Forschungen zum Wandel militärischer Verhaltensweisen im 15., 16. und 17. Jahrhundert', *Blätter für deutsche Landesgeschichte*, 132 (1996) 173-200; cf. H. Wiesflecker, *Kaiser Maximilian I: Das Reich, Oesterreich und Europa an der Wende zur Neuzeit* (5 Vols., Munich, 1971-1986); Vol. 5, pp. 501-530, notes on pp. 789-795.

⁷ Maximilian was the son of Emperor Frederick III (1415-1493) and his title in 1488 was King of the Romans, Archduke of Austria, etc. etc. etc.

⁸ G. Doutrepoint and O. Jodogne (eds.), *Chroniques de Jean Molinet* (Vol. 1, Brussels, 1935) pp. 587-589. In 2

A few words of command were enough to make the men perform the complicated manoeuvre correctly. This implies that they had practiced it thoroughly beforehand. In Molinet's chronicle the key early French word is "limechon", meaning "snail", and the imagery is derived from the turning, spiral shell of the snail. It is proposed here that the movement was similar to the "spin-wheel" of the British regiments of guards which is now held on the parade ground at London during the sovereign's birthday parades. Once upon a time the landsknechts, within the restricted space, held their pikes upright at Brugge. Now the British guardsmen of the massed bands hold their trombones upright.

At the next word of command "Lower pikes!" ("Chescun avalle sa picque!") the landsknechts at Brugge lowered their pikes to the angle which they normally had in attack. According to Molinet, all this was just a practice manoeuvre, a military exercise to pass the time and to impress the crowd, not a prelude to attack. There is no reason to doubt this explanation. But when the troops lowered their pikes the crowd scattered and called for help, although nothing further happened. The people of Brugge, who were not used at that time to the sight of professional soldiers exercising, panicked, believing themselves about to be attacked, and they fled from the market place. On their way some of them took Maximilian, who was close by, hostage and held him prisoner for several months.⁹

The fact that the landsknechts then allowed themselves to be disarmed proves that they had no intention of attacking the crowd in the market place that day. If they had attacked, there would have been a massacre. Some years later (in 1498) an engagement took place at Laaxum in Friesland, in which only 1500 of the landsknechts defeated an opposing force of 6000 well armed Frisians in open battle. This battle provides a second example for the efficiency of Maximilian's training and discipline. The reason for the Frisians' defeat was summed up by the chronicle writer Worp van Thabor (died 1538) as lack of leadership and discipline "because they had no captains, subalterns nor sergeants to command them and to keep them in line as was required". As a result the Frisians behaved "like a herd of sheep".¹⁰ It was precisely discipline and orderliness which distinguished Maximilian's landsknechts from other soldiers at that time, and set them apart.

A third example is from a slightly later period again, during the Guelders war, when landsknechts were exercising in Holland. Although Emperor Maximilian I managed to subdue and retake much of the territory which had belonged to his wife and her father Charles the Bold of Burgundy, Gelderland proved the exception. Charles, duke of Guelders, refused to submit to Habsburg domination. The Guelders' wars did not end until 1543 when Maximilian's grandson, Emperor Charles V, finally captured Venlo, Gelderland's last stronghold. Much of the fighting meanwhile occurred in Holland.¹¹

literature the term "snail" (French: limaçon; German: Schnecke) is used in two connections. In an earlier one it was a manoeuvre performed by infantrymen with pikes as here, and in a later version it was performed by cavalry, armed with pistols or carbines, who charged straight at the enemy and then fired at the gallop as the wheeled away.

⁹ For the sequel to Maximilian's arrest at Brugge and his release several months later see e.g. Wiesflecker, *Maximilian*, Vol. I, pp. 207-216.

¹⁰ J. A. Mol, 'Het militaire einde van de Friese vrijheid: de slag bij Laaxum, 10 juni 1498', *Millennium*, 13 (1999) 3-20. This description by Mol, and an illustration, can also be found in a website www.fa.knaw.nl using "Worp van Thabor" as search term.

¹¹ J. D. Tracy, *Holland under Habsburg Rule, 1506-1566. The formation of a body politic* (Berkeley 1990), pp. 64-74; Wiesflecker, *Maximilian*, Vol. 4, pp. 320-329 and pp. 606-609; J. P. Ward, this website at <http://www.james.wardware.com/>

The accounts of the city treasurers at Leiden for 1513 contain a description of troops behaving in an unfamiliar way that caused anxiety to the local population. The incident happened at Alphen, a town near Leiden, on the River Rhine. Shortly beforehand (May 8, 1513) there had been a serious riot at Leiden which involved soldiers. The magistrates had given permission to a regiment of landsknechts to march through the city on their way to the front, and in order to avoid trouble of a kind with which they were familiar they had promised food and drink for the soldiers if they moved on quickly. However, that day there was an important annual festival in Leiden. On the evidence available it is likely that some of the burghers insulted the soldiers when they appeared at the city gates, which were then barred to keep the soldiers out. Near anarchy reigned in the city for several weeks afterwards, fomented probably by social and political differences between parties of citizens. The sequel had serious consequences for the magistrates and burghers of Leiden, because the government threatened them later with charges of insubordination and rebellion.¹²

Against this background, an alderman and the pensionary (i.e. legal representative) of Leiden went to The Hague on May 19, shortly after the public disturbance of May 8, to inform the stadholder and the Council of Holland that the burghers of Alphen were complaining about the way in which soldiers at Alphen were "making tumblers (*tumelaars*) and other military equipment with which they were threatening the people as if they wanted to attack the town". The stadholder was asked to put an end to the threats by moving the men out of Alphen.¹³

The word "tumbler" has several meanings but in the military sense it meant a machine or weapon similar to an antique catapult for throwing or firing large stones or iron balls, and then by association it came to mean a mortar. In a contemporary poem describing the siege of Ysselstein in 1511 there is an expression "tumblers or large mortars".¹⁴ Coming so soon after the disturbance at Leiden on May 8 where soldiers were involved there was some reason for the population at Alphen to be anxious if they were unfamiliar with exercising soldiers. Their unease may be likened to the panic which seized the citizens of Brugge twenty five years earlier when Maximilian's soldiers performed their drill on the market place. But then as also later, no attack on the civilians took place. A conclusion, therefore, is that the soldiers at Alphen like the landsknechts at Brugge were carrying out training exercises.

This military activity in Holland in the early 16th century and the sight of soldiers drilling had an effect on another section of society. In the summer of 1517 gangs of local schoolchildren and youths at Leiden were playing war games. The magistrates reacted strongly when it became known that "many schoolboys and others were daily running through the streets with flags, sticks and staves, imitating the soldiers and throwing stones, hitting each other with sticks". Their parents were ordered under threat of sanctions to control

¹² Events in Holland ca. 1500-1520 are described more fully in my doctoral thesis: J. P. Ward, *The Cities and States of Holland. A participative system of government under strain* (Leiden, 2001), parts of which have been published; see further in this website. For readers interested in 16th century Holland J. D. Tracy's *Holland under Habsburg Rule* and his related works are modern classics. More recent literature is to be found in J. Glete, *War and the State in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York, 2001), especially Ch. 4 entitled 'The Dutch Republic. A bourgeois fiscal-military state', pp. 140-173, with notes and literature on pp. 238-243.

¹³ City Archives Leiden, SA I inv.no. 592, f. 37, 19 May 1513.

¹⁴ J. H. Gallée and S. Muller Fz (eds.), 'Berijmd verhaal van het beleg van IJsselstein door Gelder en Utrecht in 1511', *Bijdragen en Mededeelingen van het Historisch Genootschap te Utrecht*, 4 (1881) 665-703; p. 675.

them.¹⁵ Writing on war as a children's game, and on some of the psychological causes and consequences of war more generally, R. A. Hinde described how war toys "help to create the impression that war is a normal activity in which most adults indulge".¹⁶ Be that as it may, in peacetime there is no denying the attraction which a squad of smartly uniformed soldiers performing their drills to the sound of a military band still has for a broad public.

In conclusion, this article proposes a connection between a contemporary military exercise or drill, the "Spin-wheel" performed by the regiments of guards at the British sovereign's annual birthday parade in London, and the early 16th century drill called the "Snail" which Emperor Maximilian I's landsknechts performed on the battlefield in order to turn and face their enemy. Whether documentary sources support or refute this hypothesis is a matter for future archival research.

¹⁵ City Archives Leiden , SA I inv.no. 387, f. 67, 31 July 1517.

¹⁶ R. A. Hinde, 'War: some psychological causes and consequences, *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 22 (1997) 229-245; especially pp. 234-236.