



NOTES ON A RECONSTRUCTION OF THE HELM FROM LUCERA

“*Studia Ceranea*” volume 12 contained an article regarding a previously neglected barrel helm found in Lucera, Italy in 1980¹. The find was reliably dated to the third quarter of the thirteenth century. The article is a significant contribution to the study of Armour of that period. An element of its superior qualities is the amount of detail provided regarding the physical construction of the item. The usual general description was complemented by precise measurements of all the various components, and photographs of fine quality (Fig. 1). Such rich data provided the present author with an irresistible opportunity. Over that last five years the third quarter of the thirteenth century has become a major focus in mediaeval re-enactment in Britain. That is founded upon a new interest in the civil war that is traditionally referred to as “the second barons’ war”. That event was an attempt to bring into genuine fruition the more egalitarian constitution for England that had been hinted at in the text of the Magna Carta of 1215, but had remained void due to the resistance of the monarchy and those of the elite who were loyal to it. The civil war ended with the battle that became known as “the murder of Evesham” in 1265 where the royal forces prevailed and took ruthless vengeance on surviving rebels. The battle is now commemorated by a major event in early August each year, and other notable battles in that conflict are gaining attention.

Thus, the wealth of data provided in the article found the ideal application in the manufacture of a piece to be used in such re-enactments. The result, however, ought not to be described as a “reproduction of”, but rather as a “replica based upon” the Lucera helm. That is because two areas of change were implemented. One was superficial and self-indulgent. Re-enactments, especially battles, are theatrical productions, and while the dress and equipment used in them are theoretically faithful to historical precedents, the blandishments of theatrical display and the desire for glamour work their magic in ways that sometimes go beyond the evidence. Hence, while the Lucera helm is made of plain functional iron (as, indeed, is true of the great majority of comparable surviving helms), the replica employs polished copper alloy for the externally applied central spine and the reinforcement panel for the eye slits to make an attractive contrast to the

¹ R. D’AMATO, A.E. NEGIN, *A Neglected Medieval Helmet from Lucera in Italy*, *SCer* 12, 2022, p. 351–398.

blued iron of the body (Fig. 1). An omission from the replica initially is the crest holder that runs front to back along the centre of the top plate, although this may be remedied at a later time. The remaining area of change was more significant and practical.

The replica was made to be worn by a man of very average proportions. His brow circumference is sixty centimetres, with the addition of a padded arming cap and coif that then becomes seventy-two centimetres for that portion of the helm, which is just above the eye slits and middle circumferential joint. Making up a cardboard model in accord with the measurements of the original indicated necessary changes. The equivalent circumference at the midline of the original given in the article is eighty centimetres, while base circumference is eighty-seven centimetres. Thus, that aspect of the pattern had to be revised to fit the intended wearer. The greater size of the original can easily be explained by the helm being made for a man with a larger head, or by the use of a greater volume of padding, or a combination of those two factors. The other set of measurements, relating to height, required less adjustment, although were somewhat perplexing in that they needed to be in the opposite direction. The depth of the upper panels had to be increased by about fifteen millimetres in order for the eye slits to be at the correct level for vision. Precisely what the contradiction in those two areas of adjustments implies is unclear. If the original owner had a larger head, one would naturally expect that both areas of measurement would be larger. If the great circumference was a consequence of ample padding, it seems strange that so much would be arranged around the head with so much less above, a direction from which many powerful attacks would come. One possibility is that the wearer has sacrificed some padding in preference for the presence of a *cervelliere*, a closer-fitting dome helm often worn under such great helm, counting on that to reinforce a direction from which many powerful attacks would come.

Finally, a distinctive aspect of the Lucera helm is its various openings. Equally placed on each side near the top the lower back plate there is a pair of horizontally aligned holes. They are logically positioned to be locations for some sort of fastening, but the pairing and the fact that they are open raises the question of what the fastening might have been. Historical evidence for this aspect of helms of this sort is conspicuously lacking. A method used effectively on other varieties of helm might be attempted – a strap attached on each side, one bearing a buckle of some sort. Such straps would be attached by rivets, yet no hint of such remains. Furthermore, a buckle inside the helm would be an awkward thing to thread and pull tight. An alternative hypothesis is to have a leather chin cup held by laces – fixed on one side, longer and looser on the other allowing it to be pulled tight and tied off externally (Fig. 4). Tying off on the right side places it in an area less likely to struck (Fig. 5).

A very common comment from re-enactors wearing barrel hems modelled on other examples is how restricted their vision is. The Lucera helm addresses this in various ways. The eye slits of the helm are notably larger than many comparable survivals – eleven millimetres deep, and on the original extending fourteen centimetres on either side of the central spine, becoming twelve centimetres on the resized replica. That span gives complete peripheral vision. The piercing pattern on the lower faceplate is similarly distinctive. The primary openings are eight slots four millimetres by twenty millimetres arranged in pairs on either side of the spine, with four round holes aligned below them (Fig. 3). Similar arrangements of slots and holes are found on numerous surviving examples. What is surprising and seemingly unique to the Lucera helm, however, are a large number of additional holes. Lines of round holes a little more than two millimetres in diameter spaced about fifteen millimetres apart run horizontally out from the centre below the eye slits, then down beside the joint between the front and rear lower plates, and return to the centre in parallel to the lower edge. These are supplemented by lines of similar holes running diagonally down from just below the eye slits to the outer lower corner of the other small hole lines. It transpires that despite being as small and sparse as these holes are, they are remarkably generous in the additional visibility that they provide. The wearer can see the ground within half a metre of his feet directly in front without moving his head by doing no more than lowering his eyes. In addition to the horizontal peripheral vision given by the eye-slits mentioned above, the array of small holes affords useful lower peripheral vision across a wide arc as well.

This replica reaffirms the authenticity of the helm beyond what was well enough established in the previous study. It is a finely engineered item optimised for a range of uses. It is arguably less well suited than other surviving examples for the artifice of competitive jousting due to the vulnerability resulting from its large eye slits, yet its exceptional vision shows that it is very well suited to melee and battlefield combat, with the unusually generous lower zone vision telling us that the owner foresaw being able to fight effectively on foot, as well as on horseback.

Bibliography

D'AMATO R., NEGIN A.E., *A Neglected Medieval Helmet from Lucera in Italy*, "Studia Ceranea" 12, 2022, p. 351–398, <https://doi.org/10.18778/2084-140X.12.19>

Notes on a Reconstruction of the Helm from Lucera



Fig. 1. The original helm. After R. D'AMATO, A.E. NEGIN, *A Neglected Medieval...*

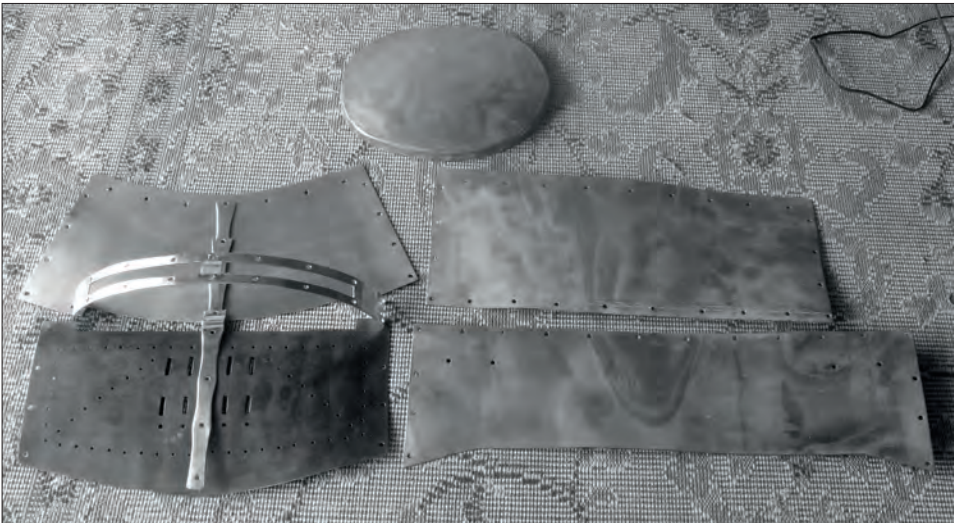


Fig. 2. The components of the helm reproduction, most prior to shaping.



Fig. 3. The author wearing complete late thirteenth-century panoply with the Lucera helm reproduction at the Battle of Evesham re-enactment 2022.



Fig. 4. A view of the interior of the replica showing the laced chin cup and padding ring in the crown.



Fig. 5. Right front view of the replica helm showing the complex arrangement of piercings and the tied off fastening of the chin cup.

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