

# The Austrian lift-hammer—its probable Walloon origin

Brian G Awty

*ABSTRACT: In 1937, Pirchegger suggested that great, or 'Welsh', hammers, were introduced from the 1420s onwards at forges in the mountains which separate Austria from Styria. Since then most historians have followed him in seeing northern Italy as their source. But the first known forge designated 'Welsh' was built around 1460 in the parish of Weyer in the Enns Valley of Austria. Smaller Brescian, or north Italian hammers, did not appear in Austria until the 1590s, some 130 years later; this occurred close to the Carinthian border with Italy, a country regarded as 'Welsh' by German speakers. However, rather than being of Italian origin, it is suggested here that the 15th-century hammers were Walloon in origin; that the 'grand marteau', or drome-beam hammer (first mentioned in 1395 in the Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse of Namur) was introduced into Austria during the 1420s, to support the manufacture of weapons for Duke Albert V of Austria. He needed them to help his patron and father-in-law, Emperor Sigismund of the House of Luxembourg, in his war against the Hussites*

## Introduction

By 1583 lift-hammers, or belly-helves, were well established in Austria and totalled 47; there were 19 in Styria, 23 in Upper Austria and five in Lower Austria (Tremel 1974, 294). They were locally termed *wälsch*, a German word equivalent to the English 'Welsh', which could apply to anything whose origin was French, Italian, or indeed Roman or Latin. I shall argue that the place of origin of these hammers was in the Low Countries, in Wallonia (that they were actually *wallonisch*). The basis of argument will be three-fold; first, the period during which they originated was when Walloon drome-beam hammers were spreading southwards and eastwards; second, their earliest appearance was not in southern Styria, Carinthia and Carniola, which were not far from Brescia in Italy, but in Austria and northern Styria, a rather long way from Brescia; third, but decisively, the weight of these distinctly heavy hammers.

Currently, the general consensus favours the idea that these lift-hammers were of Italian origin. This was the view espoused by Hans Pirchegger (1937), the historian of Styrian iron. It was repeated by Sprandel (1968), though in a footnote Sprandel did record the dissenting

view of another Styrian author, Bittner (1901). Their Italian origin was reiterated by Dinklage (1974) at the Cologne Symposium of 1967, with special reference to Carinthia; however, Tremel (1974), dealing with the Tyrol and Styria at the same symposium, maintained silence as to their origin. The Brescian view was endorsed by Schuster (1969), and again by Belhoste (2001); however, it is from Baraldi's 2001 glossary that one of my own principal arguments against this view can be found - the relatively light weight of Italian hammers.

Bittner had considered any connection with Brescian smithies unlikely (1901, 507, n. 1), a view derived from his own research, which he buttressed with the opinion of Beck, that steel production in Carinthia by the Brescian method could have commenced only after the introduction of the *Flossofen* there, late in the 16th, or more probably in the 17th century (Beck 1891–1903, II, 255). Baraldi's evidence makes an Italian origin even less likely; the lift-hammer was characterized by its beat, which was heavy (between 200 and 300kg) and steady (from 80 to 90 strokes a minute), whereas, even as late as the 16th and 17th centuries, Italian Alpine forge hammers did not much exceed 100kg in weight