

## ARE OUR GLADII TOO WIDE?

*By David Hare*

Probably since the beginning in 1972, and certainly for the last 20 years, the Guard has used one particular type of sword for equipping the vast majority of the legionary and auxiliary kits used by the membership, namely the Pompeii pattern.

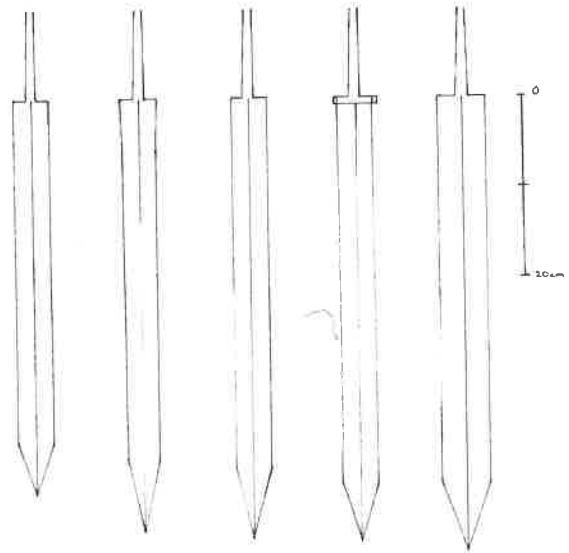
If the average Pompeii pattern sword blade belonging to the Guard is measured, it turns out to be about 2" wide by 20" long (or 50mm x 510mm). Nothing odd about that, surely, you may ask yourself, but where did this standard size come from?

Asking the Centurio, it (vaguely) transpires that it may have come from the fact that 2" wide by 1/2" thick mild steel was the most easily available material to make lots of swords quickly and easily. Presumably there was an original find the size was based on, but it seems that the ESG "standard" blade just falls within the range of dimensions applicable for a Pompeii pattern gladius.

With this in mind, and wishing to replace my "Guard issue" sword and scabbard, I commenced a search for dimensions of Pompeii pattern gladii. Literature suggested that these swords vary from 42-55mm wide and 420-500mm long. Needless to say (and this being the reason for writing this in the first place.), I have not yet found a Pompeii pattern gladius blade exactly 2" wide and 20" long (50mm x 510mm). I have, however, found several other 1st Century AD Pompeii pattern gladii published in various books and publications. The dimensions of the blades may cause a little surprise. (See table below):

<i>Find location</i>	<i>Width (mm)</i>	<i>Length (mm)</i>
Mainz	38-41	484
Hofstade	45	489
Grimbergen	38	486
Klein-Winternheim	39	492
Vindonissa 1	39	465
Vindonissa 2	39	441
Segontium, Caernarfon	39	492
Newstead	50	495
ESG "Standard"	50	510

In many ways the majority of these swords, from Germany (Mainz and Klein-Winternheim), Belgium (Hofstade and Grimbergen), Switzerland (both from Vindonissa), and UK (Segontium and Newstead) seem to have much in common, nearly all are under 50mm in width and all have blades (except for the Vindonissa examples, shorter, and the Newstead example, longer) that are around 485-490mm long. These dimensions do not seem at first hand to be dramatically different to the size of sword that most guard members use, especially the sword from Newstead, Scotland, which is the same width of an "ESG standard" sword but a little shorter. A comparison in the form of line drawings of some of these sword blades may perhaps make the differences clearer to some (see figure 1).



**Figure 1**  
***Pompeii pattern swords all to the same scale***

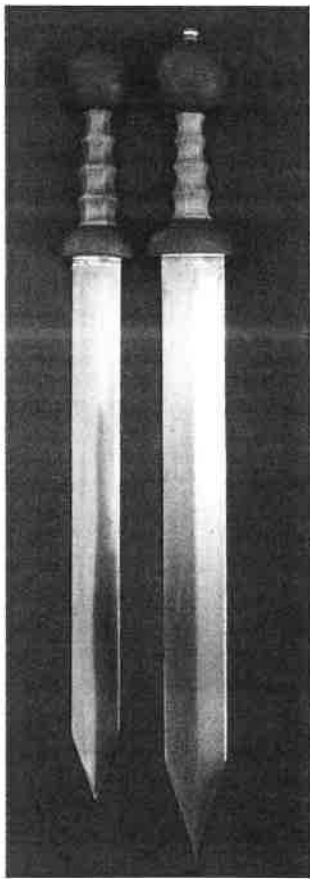
*Left to Right:*  
*Vindonissa, Mainz, Grimbergen, Caernarfon,*  
*"ESG Standard"*

One other oddity to note is the blade from Mainz. It is 41mm at the shoulders of the blade, but quickly tapers down within 60mm of the shoulders down to 38mm in width.

Although most of these swords seem to be of a width perhaps more in common with the width of the Roman cavalry spatha, which varies from 30 to 44mm in width

(we all know the bit in the display commentary about cavalry swords being narrower than infantry swords don't we?), I certainly do not subscribe to a view that these narrower gladii, on the basis of their width, are cut-down cavalry spathae.

Having established that in all probability not all Pompeii pattern gladii are 2" wide by 20" long, I manufactured a new sword from a piece of mild steel 40mm wide, copying the example I have named "Vindonissa 2" in this article, and also using evidence for hilt and pommel size from the same site. When compared "in the flesh" with a standard Guard sword, the difference is very noticeable. (see figure 2).



**Figure 2**  
*Reconstruction of Vindonissa gladius (left)*  
*next to "standard" ESG pattern*

Whilst discussing these swords it also worth noting that the scabbard fittings associated with the Pompeii pattern, especially the elaborately pierced and engraved two-plate type of locket fitting, often have an outside dimension of no more than 50-54mm, which, when an allowance is made for the

wood liner of the scabbard and its leather covering, means that it is highly unlikely that a blade of more than 45mm in width was intended to fit inside. (I do concede that this could also mean they could belong to a cavalry spatha).

Chapes associated with this type of scabbard are also often only 48-50mm wide (from Vindonissa and Mainz, for example), suggesting that the same conclusion could possibly be reached with these as well.

The scabbard fittings for the Long Windsor / Valkenberg type of Pompeii scabbard seem to be wider, however. (The lockets from Long Windsor and Valkenberg are around 60mm wide, whilst a similar one from Vindonissa is over 70mm wide.) A suggestion was once made (M.White, *Exercitus*, Winter 1996) that these fittings precede the more elaborate double plate type, so perhaps many of the wider Pompeii gladius blades of around 50mm or more in width belong to the mid 1st Century a.d. or slightly before, whilst the narrower blades belong to the last half of the 1st Century. There does seem to be perhaps a (general) tendency for the blades to get smaller over perhaps a 40-50 year period.

### **Conclusion**

Whilst I am still not fully at the bottom of why the Guard's Pompeii pattern swords came to be the size that they are (Though the Newstead example is closest), I am sure that somewhere there is quite possibly a sword that matches those dimensions. This article does not itemise all the Pompeii pattern swords discovered, and in particular, the five swords found at Pompeii and Herculaneum were not included. However I am convinced that the evidence is there for Roman infantry swords of the Pompeii pattern to often be narrower than many of us perceive.

It is worthwhile to note that with their swords, as with most other military equipment the Romans used, there was a variety of the same type in service; looking similar, but differing slightly (and considerably) in size and shape, something to be expected in a world without mechanised mass-production. This tendency is also evident when looking at the variety of 1st Century Roman dagger blades that have been found. In time the Guard may possibly also adopt this variety of sword sizes to a greater extent, but at the time of writing there are only three Pompeii pattern swords in Guard use of the narrower width.

I would also be very pleased to be made aware of any Pompeii gladius wider than 50mm to complete the picture.

### Addendum

Since writing the bulk of this article, I have obtained a photocopy of scaled photographs of three Pompeii gladii from Pompeii itself, and a well known locket from Oosterbeek, Holland, which has also retained its sword. I could only estimate lengths of the blades, due to the swords all being in their scabbards, but I could in all cases approximately measure the widths. One exceeds 50mm in width, but is also possibly a surprising 555mm long (estimated). I have also since come across two blades from Colchester (Manning 1985). Their approximate sizes are below:

Weapon	Width (mm)	Length (mm)
Pompeii 1	45	480 (est)
Pompeii 2	45	480 (est)
Pompeii 3	40	400 +
Oosterbeek	44(est)	546 (est)
Colchester 1	38	495
Colchester 2	38	495

The Pompeii, Oosterbeek and Colchester finds seem to support my previous findings in this article, and also reveal that these swords can exceed 510mm in length. The Oosterbeek example is most revealing, however. Here is an approximately 44mm wide sword blade in a scabbard locket 60mm wide (which is around the width of most Guard scabbards), at which point, we are back to the title of this article

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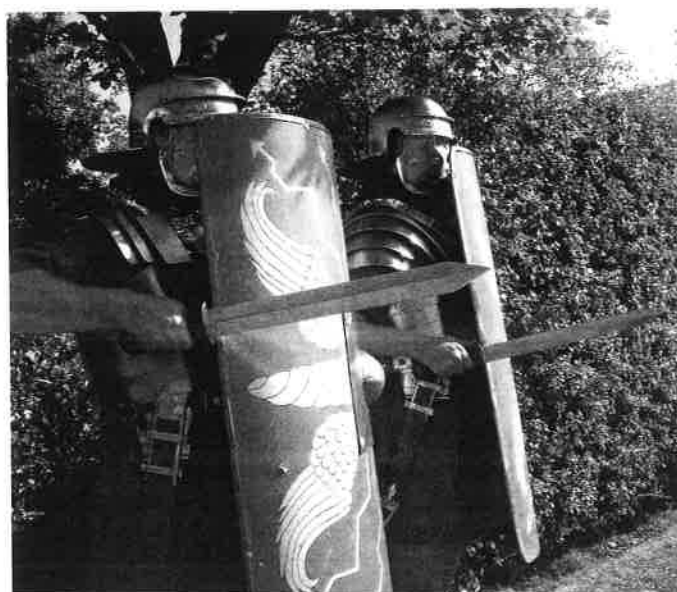
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***Two Pompeii gladii "in use".***

*To front, a "Guard issue" blade. Behind is the smaller blade from Vindonissa*