

# A note on lead projectiles (*glandes, molybdides*) in support of sling bullets: a reply to T. Rihll

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The article by T. Rihll (*JRA* 22 [2009] 146-69) on lead bullets (*glandes, molybdides*) belongs to a recent increase in scholarly interest in this type of object.<sup>1</sup> Its contribution is to begin to place their study on a scientific, archaeological basis, and it can be considered fundamental and ground-breaking. While Rihll clearly establishes that lead projectiles were used by engines (App., *Mithr.* 34), her claim that such lead bullets may have been invented specifically as catapult ammunition — indeed, that they were mostly used for catapults, rather than as ammunition for hand slingers (as has usually been assumed) — should be disputed. Rihll marshalls a number of points, insights and arguments. Here I would like to make three rejoinders in support of “sling bullets”:

1. To the roster of evidence discussed by Rihll, two passages may be added. The first is Vergil, *Aen.* 9.586-89, where Mezentius uses a sling, and a lead projectile, to dispatch an enemy (the lead bullet is described as melting in flight — an ancient belief):<sup>2</sup>

stridentem fundam positis Mezentius hastis  
ipse ter adducta circum caput egit habena  
et media adversi liquefacto tempora plumbo  
diffidit ac multa porrectum extendit harena.

Mezentius lays down his spears, and thrice around his head drives the whistling sling with taut thong, and with molten lead he splits down the middle the forehead of his foe, and lays him low, prostrate over a vast stretch of sand.

The second passage (Ov., *Met.* 2.726-29) describes Mercury’s mid-flight sighting of the lovely Herse:

obstipuit forma Iove natus, et aethere pendens  
non secus exarsit, quam cum Balearica plumbum  
funda iacit: volat illud et incandescit eundo  
et quos non habuit, sub nubibus invenit ignes.

The son of Jupiter was stunned by her beauty, and suspended in the air he burned, as when a Balearic sling projects the lead: it flies and burns as it goes, and finds under the clouds fires which it did not have.

As Rihll notes, lead was certainly used for “hand slingers”. In both of the above passages, what is important is that the use of lead slung by hand is taken for normal: in the case of Vergil, it is retrojected into epic time — quite anachronistically, but the very anachronism indicates that a Roman poet of the late 1st c. B.C. did not consider the lead bullet as ammunition exclusively designed for engines. In the case of Ovid, the mention of lead appears in a simile, where it is explicitly said that a lead bullet is thrown by a Balearic slinger: since it refers to the famous specialty of the Balearic islanders (see Strabo, below), this excludes any reference to an engine. The adjective designates the speed of a projectile thrown by a highly-skilled hand slinger. These two passages argue against Rihll’s hypothesis that lead bullets were primarily used by engines, and only as an afterthought by slingers.

1 This note draws on two forthcoming papers in *Chiron*: the first by P. Weiss and N. Draskowski, the second by the present author.

2 Discussed, e.g., by G. Fougères, *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines, s.v. glans*: Aris-totle, *De caelo* 2.7; Lucr. 6.177; Ov., *Met.* 14.826; Lucan 7.513; Stat. 10.533.