

POLISH SABRES: THEIR ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The fusion of Hungarian, Turkish and Tartar archetypes into the Polish "national weapon", which passed over into many European military fashions and remained popular well into the present century.

by Jan Ostrowski
with Wojciech Bochnak

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When in the year 1346 Orhan Suleiman, the first great Turkish sovereign to extend his power across the Golden Horn, set foot with his army on European soil, the Western countries and cultures quickly began to feel the Eastern menace. The Turkish victories at Kosovo Polje in 1389, Nicopolis in 1396 and Varna 1444 opened up ever more rich lands to the invaders, and the fall of Constantinople in 1453 only served to crown the new political power structure whose evolution had long been convulsing south-eastern Europe. In the course of the sixteenth century, all the Balkans and nearly all of Hungary found themselves under Turkish rule. The Black Sea became an inland Turkish lake, the entire southern shore of the Mediterranean fell under the authority of the Sultans, and in 1529 Suleiman the Magnificent laid the first of two sieges to Vienna.

Invasions from the East were nothing new for Europe, but this time, instead of raiding waves of Huns, Avars or Tartars, the challenger was a powerful, excellently organized, expansionist state which did not just briefly exploit but permanently annexed conquered areas into an Empire that was to survive until the present century, when its final demise gave rise to an array of new national states. In the fifteenth century, the upheavals and realities of political relations deeply influenced the culture of the countries conquered by, or in immediate contact with, the Turks. The evolution of army tactics and weaponry, too, were of course conditioned by these events. This turn towards the East manifested itself above all in two countries possessing a highly developed medieval culture of West-European type: Hungary and Poland.

POLISH-ISLAMIC CULTURAL INTERCHANGE

Poland first came in contact with the Turks in the first half of the fifteenth century, when many of its knighthood took part in the wars in the Balkans. A great number of Poles fought in 1444 at the battle of Varna, in which the young king of Poland and Hungary, Ladislaus the Jagiellon, was killed. Turkey subjugated Wallachia in the 1450's and Hungary about seventy years later, and thus achieved a contiguous boundary with Poland. But in spite of the constant harassment of south-eastern Polish territories by the Tartars, vassals of Turkey, about a century passed before a confrontation of totally-mobilised Polish-Turkish power occurred. The most violent phases of that clash ebbed and flowed throughout sixty-odd years beginning with the Polish defeat at Cecora in 1620, followed by the victory at Chocim a year later, marked by the partial occupation of Polish territory in the years 1672-94, and culminating in the Polish victories at Chocim II in 1673 and at Vienna in 1683.

War, of course, was not the only basis for Polish-Turkish contact, although it did introduce many Oriental goods to Poland in the form of plunder. During periods of peace a lively trade was carried on, and in many of the minor arts Eastern products enjoyed a near monopoly in Poland. An

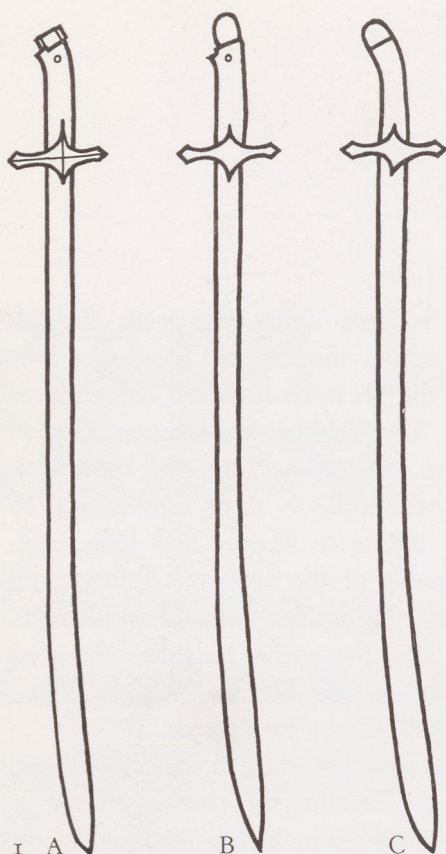


Fig. 1. Schemas of prototypical Perso-Turkish sabres, 15th and 16th centuries, developed after Persian models and introduced into Hungary in and after about 1500. Early sabres had flat, unfullered and only slightly curved blades. Hiltts were of two basic types: one (centre and right) of metal or wood, inclined slightly forward and finished with a metal cap; the other (left) always wood, thick, straight or only slightly curved, leather-covered and ending in a short cylindrical pommel. Drawings after C. Jarnuszkiewicz, *Szabla Wschodnia I Jej Odmiiany Narodowe* London 1973.

Fig. 2. Poles and Tartars in combat – woodcut from Mathias de Miechow, *Tractus de Duabus Sarmatiis*, Cracow 1521. Note Western and Eastern battle array: Poles are equipped with full man- and horse-armor and Western-style swords; Tartars wear Eastern costume, pointed caps (but one warrior in toque), wield Oriental sabres and round shields. Polish commander is un-visored, to be easily recognised by his troops (cf. Scene 5, p. 118). Tartars ride with short stirrups (probably derived from long rides on open steppes), Europeans with long stand-up types made necessary by heavy armour and probably useful for parrying blows.

exceptional role was played in this by Armenians who had begun to settle in Poland in the late Middle Ages and had established a wealthy main colony in Lvov. Both in Poland and Turkey Armenians dominated the reciprocal trade; Armenian workshops in Lvov and other border towns manufactured many species of goods with Oriental methods, and so Eastern in style that it is now often impossible to distinguish one of these from its Eastern-made prototype.

One outgrowth of this *Kulturaustausch* was the adaptation of the sabre as the Polish national weapon. Works on Polish weaponry published in the last few years have thrown much light on this process, despite serious gaps in source materials and great losses sustained by Polish collections. The present essay has as its aim the introduction of a rational typology of sabres used in Poland from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, as well as the addition of new information on their origins and chronology. It is not concerned with the *sword*, the weapon of Western medieval knighthood, nor with the *palasch*, a weapon with a straight, usually single-edged blade and a hilt of sabre type, but only with the true *sabre*, that subtle, beautiful, vibrant weapon of Eastern origin with a curved, single-edged blade and a forward-inclined hilt. We must bear in mind that its development in Poland was characterised above all by improvements of the hilt, and that blades, although manufactured in Poland in large quantities, were always strongly influenced by the East, either directly through Eastern prototypes or indirectly via North-Italian and Styrian manufactories which themselves worked under Eastern influence and, partially, for Eastern markets.

During the Middle Ages, weapons of Western type were used in Poland; the standard weapons of Polish knighthood were the West-European great and small swords.

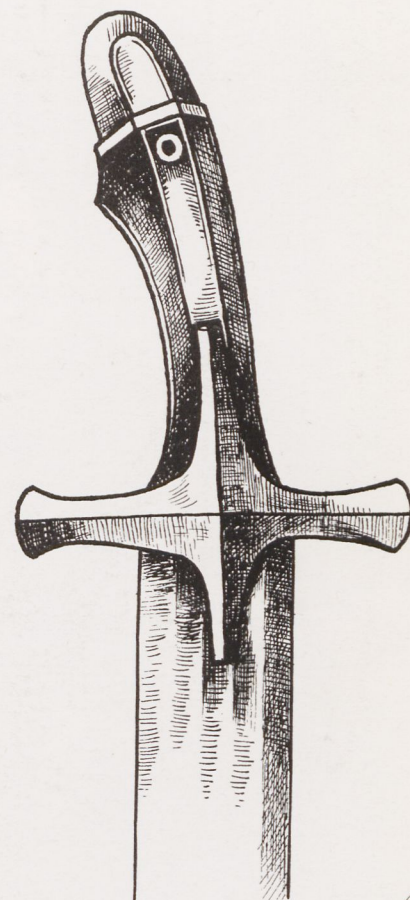


Fig. 3. One of the oldest representations of Eastern sabres in Poland (1502-05); below, maces with wing blades. Detail from the tomb of King John Albert, by Francesco Fiorentino, in Cracow Cathedral.

Fig. 4. Sultan Bajezat II's sabre, late 15th century, drawn after the original in Topkapi Saray, Istanbul. An early hilt with short quillons which, developed for the ride-and-slash battles of the open steppes, offered no hand protection in hand-to-hand fighting.



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THE SABRE ARRIVES VIA HUNGARY

In Hungary the necessity of defence against the Turks' superb cavalry led in about 1400 to the creation of cavalry detachments armed in Eastern style and made up largely of Balkan Slavs. The name of their principal weapon, *sabliya*, soon passed into most European languages: Polish *szabla*, Hungarian *sablya*, German *Säbel*, Italian *sciabola*, French *sabre*, etc. Similar mercenary detachments made their appearance in Poland at the end of the fifteenth century and, with time and gradual changes of armament and uniform, became the famous Polish Hussars [cf. Zdzisław Zygulski, Jr., *The Winged Hussars of Poland*, in *THE ARMS AND ARMOR ANNUAL*, 1973. — *Ed.*] The first examples to find their way to Poland must have been imported Turkish products, or Hungarian ones patterned on the Turkish model, and their appearance in large numbers should be dated from the beginning of the sixteenth century. In 1505 the municipal council of Cracow granted sword-makers the right to mount and furbish sabres.

Having been brought by South Slavonic and Hungarian mercenaries, the new weapon quickly gained popularity, but at first Polish feudal knight-hood, comprising the core of the kingdom's army, clung to traditional Western arms and to the straight war-sword; the contrast between Western and Eastern warriors is well portrayed in the woodcut shown in Figure 2, and in the painting of the battle with the Russians at Orsha [see Z. Zygulski, Jr. in the present publication. — *Ed.*]. Nevertheless, even before mid-century the merits of the sabre had led to its acceptance by the elite as well, in spite of renewed conservative regulations compelling the use of the sword. The favour that the new

weapon was enjoying among the nobility by 1550-60 was probably buoyed by the then-popular theory of the Sarmatian origin of the Poles: fascinated by this myth, Poles sought Eastern models for many of their fashions and artifacts. The wave of Hungarian influence accompanying the reign of Stefan Batory from 1576 to 1586, together with that monarch's military reforms, assured the permanent entrenchment of the new weapon: more than just an efficient military arm, it became an emblematic element of national military and civilian dress, in time inextricably interwoven in Polish custom and mythology.

To the authors' knowledge, no Polish sabres from the first half of the sixteenth century have survived; we know them only from iconographic sources (Figs. 2 & 3) and through conjectures based on coeval Turkish and Hungarian specimens. Turkish examples of about 1500 followed Persian models. In general they had flat, unfullered, only slightly curved blades, and the hilts fell into two basic types: one made either of metal or wood covered with leather, inclined slightly forward and finished at the end with a metal cap (Fig. 1 B & C), the other with a thick grip, straight or slightly curved, made of leather-covered wood and ending in a pommel in the shape of a short cylinder (Fig. 1 A). Older examples of the prior type, such as the sabre of Sultan Bajezat of Topkapi Saray shown in Figure 5, have a shallow notch beside the pommel which later disappeared; it was sabres with hilts of this type that assumed the famous *shamshir* shape in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Persia, with pommels bent at ninety degrees to the grip, and consequently this variety became known also in Turkey in ottomanised versions hardly varying in essentials from the Persian. As the seventeenth century passed, the hilt – which was often completely covered with semi-precious stones or composed of two stone plates – retained this shape, but sometimes

Fig. 5. Archduke Ferdinand of Tirol's sabre, early 16th century, drawn after the original in the Waffensammlung, Vienna. It incorporates improvements on Turko-Persian archetypes, among which are long quillons for greater hand protection; but Oriental back-blade point is unchanged. Scabbard and belt have typical Oriental-influenced decoration. See Fig. 10.

Fig. 6. Archduke Ferdinand of Tirol's sabre, dated 1514, drawn after the original in the Hungarian National Museum, Budapest; another example of Hungarian improvements on Oriental prototypes, with long Western-style quillons. This weapon illustrates a major step in the evolution of sabres traditionally associated with Hungary. Suspension straps are attached to belt.

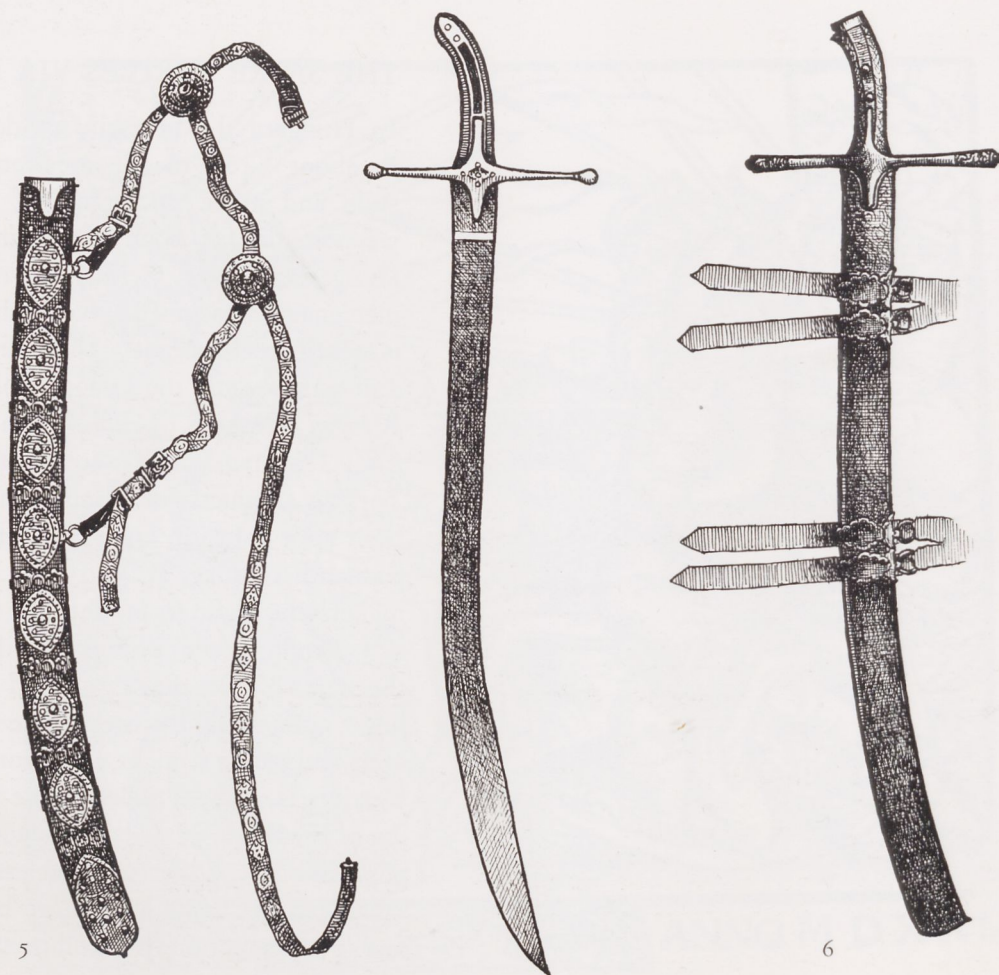




Fig. 7. Polish sabre, 17th century, the only known Polish example of this type of hilt. Quillons are still short; chainlet offers some insurance against accidental loss, but no hand protection. Poinçon «IPZD» is unidentified. Though these hilts are well-known from iconographic sources, to the authors' knowledge this is the only example that has survived. (Polish Army Museum, Warsaw)

Fig. 8. Portrait of Colonel Count Alexandre Jabłonowski, dated 1740, by A. Misiowski. Finely decorated, probably jewelled sabre has a 15th-century form, a curved hilt with a metal pommel and short quillons. Note open gauntlet and vambrace (Polish karwasz) in Eastern bazuband or dastana style. Buzdydan mace is a ceremonial commander's baton. (National Museum, Kielce)



the metal fitting of the pommel was omitted. The quillons, which were very short in the oldest examples but in time became longer, always widened or thickened at the outer ends. Surviving seventeenth-century scabbards are usually covered with velvet, furnished with several oval plates, and have lockets and chapes.

THE EARLY POLISH FORMS

This type of sabre had appeared in Hungary by about 1500. In Hungarian collections and in the Waffensammlung in Vienna, several examples dating from about 1500-25 have been preserved. The only change from the Turkish originals was a considerable extension of the quillons, which insured better protection of the palm (Fig. 5). It is this type of hilt that is depicted in Polish iconographic sources dating from about 1500-25, such as Figure 2, but the authors know of only one example in Polish collections: that in the Polish Army Museum in Warsaw (Fig. 7), which bears the mark «IPZD» on the blade and is of much later date – probably around 1650. As in Turkey, this type survived into the eighteenth century, as is proved by its appearance in many portraits – e.g., the particularly fine example in the 1740 portrait of Alexandre Jabłonowski (Fig. 8). Many eighteenth-century sabres, Polish as well as Turkish, had hilts made of semi-precious stones, without metal pommels. As to native Polish blades and scabbards, the scarcity of securely attributable specimens has thus far limited scholars to the comment that, at least in the early period, these did not vary from Turkish or Hungarian examples.

The second basic type of hilt can be found among the oldest sabres and swords in Topkapi Saray (Fig. 1 A). This type, too, was introduced in Hungary at the beginning of the sixteenth century and is best represented by those of Ferdinand of Tirol, dated 1514, now in the Hungarian National Museum, Budapest, and of Nicolaus Zrinyi, now in the National Arms Collection, Vienna (Fig. 6).

Soon a native type of Hungarian sabre came into being. Its cross-guard was extended to as much as twenty-five and even thirty centimeters (ten to twelve inches); the earliest were still equipped with Turkish-type blades, slightly curved and with a double-edged lower section. The hilts were at first a bit awkwardly formed and did not assure a firm grip, but soon improved. This type assumed its final form in the mid-sixteenth century, and the result was one of the most beautiful and most functional types of side-arms of eastern origin used in Europe. The blade, too, came to be improved: it had become broader and was given a well-balanced curve, two to four fullers, and a wide, double-edged lower part. Hungarian blade production, if it existed at all, must have been very limited, for seventeenth-century records tell of blade purchase in mass from Styrian and Italian manufactories, and the great majority of surviving Hungarian sabres have Styrian or Genoese blades, often marked with crescent moons and the inscription « GENOA », « FRINGIA » or « FRANCIA », probably regarded as indications of quality in the East. The hilt of the basic, simple Hungarian sabre was wood, either grooved in transverse circles or wound with cord and then covered with black leather. The grip was straight or only slightly bent, or else undercut at the almond-shaped pommel, to prevent its slipping out of the hand. Steel cross-guards were the rule, with long, straight quillons; langets usually reached three quarters up the hilt and were often bound with twisted wire. The wooden scabbard was covered with black leather, with a truncated chape often etched in scrollwork on both sides. Usually there was no locket, and the suspension rings most often took the form of two, three and four rings joined together.



Fig. 9. Hungarian-type sabre with Persian blade, traditionally associated with Stefan Batory, King of Poland (1576-86); one of the most beautiful extant examples of this style. Silver-gilt scabbard mountings are chased in Oriental motifs. (Polish Army Museum, Warsaw)

Fig. 10 (opposite). Cardinal Ippolito de' Medici, 1511-35, son of Giuliano II, grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent (Fig. 1, p. 14), nephew of Pope Leo X, a very kind, generous and intelligent man and potentially a great prince — but he died of disease or was poisoned in his twenty-fourth year while on a diplomatic mission to the Emperor Charles V (Fig. 6, p. 192). The sabre he wears in this portrait by Titian is the kind described and shown in Fig. 4 on p. 223. (Pitti Palace, Florence)

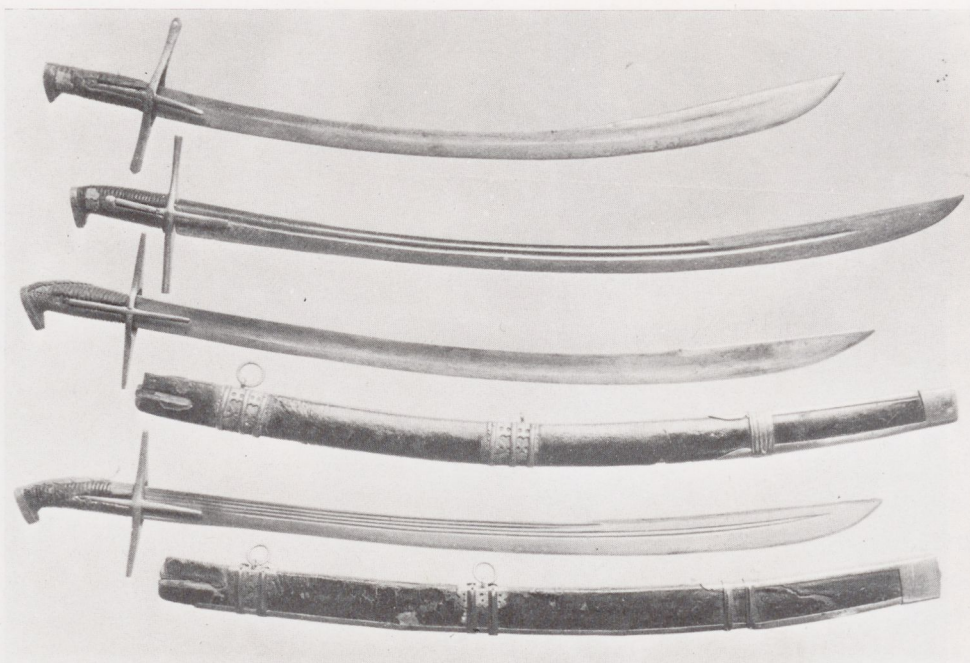
THE EXCELLENCE OF NATIVE HUNGARIAN PRODUCTION

Such sabres surpassed Eastern prototypes in their functional, finely-balanced shape and weight rather than in decoration. The greater elasticity of European steel permitted thinner blades than did damascene steel, which was more brittle and usually required thicker blades. Fullers further reduced blade weight. In a word: Hungarian sabres were better balanced than Eastern ones, while the shape of the hilt and the long cross-guard insured a better grip and protection of the hand. It is not surprising, then, that they were a success in all of East-Central Europe. They probably reached Poland immediately after assuming final form in Hungary, and established themselves solidly during the ten-year reign of Stefan Batory from 1576 to 1586 (in whose many portraits they are prominently shown). Thereafter, in the space of a hundred years, they became widespread in both the cavalry and the infantry and were also used by civilians. Many examples have been preserved in Polish collections, nearly all of them unadorned combat sabres, though sumptuous specimens are known, such as the one in the Polish Army Museum in Warsaw (Fig. 9); traditionally associated with Batory, it is fitted with a beautiful Persian blade. Similar sabres in many Polish portraits suggest that they predominated over other types of side-arms, at least until the third quarter of the seventeenth century, and it seems that they did not go out of



Fig. 11. Four Hungarian-type sabres, possibly Polish-made, 16th-17th centuries, two with their scabbards. One cannot distinguish between Hungarian or Polish manufacture. Blades were probably made in Styria or North Italy. All hilts have developed from a simple cylindrical pommel to a beaked one which assured a firmer grip. Sabre at the top is the most primitive: its hilt is almost straight, beak is only nascent. All have back-blade points. (National Museum, Cracow)

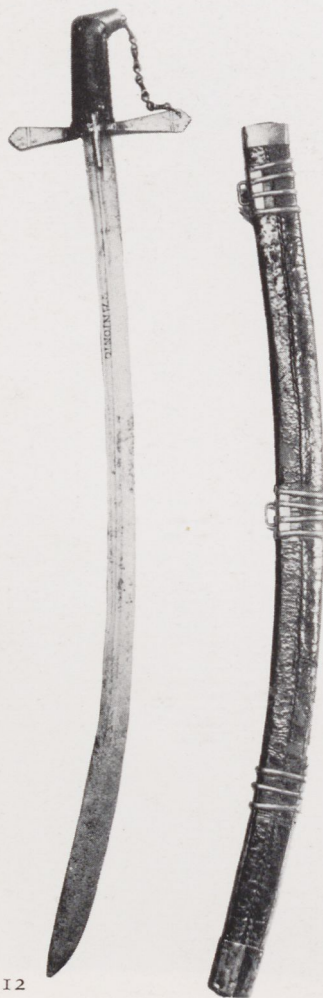
Fig. 12. Simple combat sabre, probably early 1600's. Pommel is still closely related to Oriental prototype, as are dragonfly quillons, though these have become elongated for better hand protection. Scabbard mounts are primitive. Inscription «ANTONIO» in fuller is probably a Lombardy maker's name. (National Museum, Cracow)



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fashion before 1700. Their popularity in Poland would tend to show that they were produced at home, even if the majority of blades were foreign. Records on their importation to Gdansk show that many were mounted there and adorned with portraits of Batory and engraved with appropriate inscriptions in his honor. Through Poland, sabres of the Hungarian type made their way to Moscow (and even to the Tartar Crimea – one is depicted in a beautiful portrait, now in Leningrad's Hermitage, of a Tartar dignitary and his family painted by Daniel Schultz in Poland in 1664).

At the turn of the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, there emerged in Hungary or in Poland (no one can be certain) a hilt with a straight wooden grip covered with leather and topped with a metal pommel set at an obtuse angle to the grip. The long cross-guard had quillons flattened at the ends, reminiscent of dragonfly wings. The pommel is often connected to the quillon tip by a thin chainlet (Fig. 12). These hilts are associated with Styrian and Genovese blades that differ in no way from those found with the other Hungarian hilts already discussed, but the others made much less use of brass for the cross-guards and relative scabbard mounts. Only seventeenth-century specimens, simply decorated with folk art motifs, are known in Hungarian collections today. So far as one can deduce from comparisons of arms, this hilt must have appeared in Poland at just about the same time as in Hungary, but the evidence of the quantities of surviving specimens in Poland suggests that it proliferated there more rapidly and more widely. It has been erroneously considered the oldest type of sabre known in Poland.



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POLISH SABRES SURPASS THEIR ANCESTORS

Since the short cross-guards of the true Eastern prototypical sabre and its earliest Hungarian-Polish offshoots protected the hand poorly and precluded defensive parrying with the grip, and this in turn nearly precluded the development of fine swordsmanship, these weapons were used mainly to inflict single slashes at a gallop, not for *melée* combat. Therefore attempts were soon made in both of the adoptive countries to reconcile the open Eastern hilt with West-European battle techniques, which required a cover for the hand from cross-guard to pommel. This was first endeavoured by means of a chainlet – not, it would seem, a very effective solution, but we



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Fig. 13. Steel guards from hussar sabres, c. 1700, structurally the final stage in hilt development. Enlarged, closed knuckle-bow and addition of side ring offers good hand protection, while thumb-ring permits strong grip and good control in cutting and parrying. (Priv. coll., Poland)

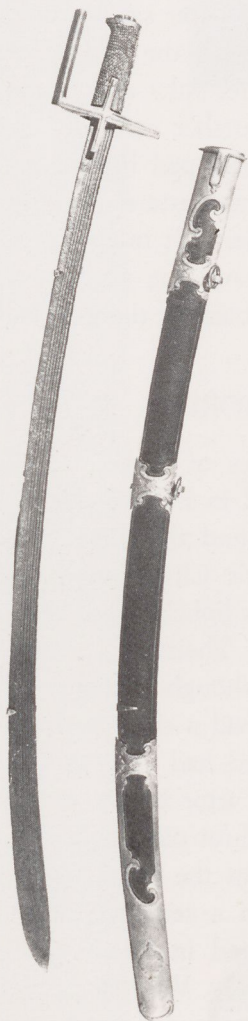
Fig. 14. L-guard sabre, c. 1750, with an older European blade. Grip is covered in sharkskin, silver scabbard mounts are strongly European rococo style. (Polish Army Museum, Warsaw)

Fig. 15. Death and a Polish nobleman — a polychrome stucco decoration in Tarłów Church, c. 1640. Though armed for battle with an L-guard sabre (see Fig. 14), a knife, a war hammer and a horse flail, this was, in fact, everyday costume of seventeenth-century nobility (cf. Fig. 27). Winding key and cartridge box suggest presence of a wheellock pistol, perhaps a pair kept in saddle holsters.

must remember how deeply-rooted was the tradition of the open eastern hilt. Long into the seventeenth century the very concept of "sabre" remained associated with an open hilt, as may be learned from the sets of hussar arms made for Christian II of Saxony in 1670, in the Dresden Historical Museum, and from those of Janos Kemenyi preserved in the Hungarian National Museum, Budapest (among the latter, the sabres resemble the Hungarian type, and the palasches, derived as they were from the European sword, have the Italian-type hilt with one arm of the cross-guard bent upwards; similarly, a whole detachment of Polish hussars depicted in 1605 on the so-called "Stockholm Roll" are shown bearing palasches with half-closed hilts strapped to their saddles alongside Hungarian sabres). But gradually the evident superiority of the European-type hilt overcame tradition, and by about 1625 there had appeared in Poland sabre hilts with the front quillons bent upward at a right angle, and forming a square U or L for the length of the grip. Sometimes a thumb-ring was added to strengthen the grip and hence the force of a thrust.

Several dates can be adduced: one such weapon, now in Stockholm's Royal Swedish Armouries, belonged to Christopher Krainski, who died in 1628; another reliable example can be seen in the stucco decoration of the church at Tarłów, executed in 1640-47 (Fig. 15); and the Polish Army Museum in Warsaw has a further specimen found in the bottom of the Vistula, lost there during the war with Sweden in the years 1655-60. This type of sabre remained in use into the 1750's, as is testified by specimens with rococo decorations in the Polish Army Museum (Fig. 14). Although only a small number of examples have come down to us, we know that a new kind of blade was used for this type of sabre, lighter than the Hungarian

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Fig. 16. An 18th-century Polish sabre with open hilt and thumb-ring, a descendant or parallel relative of the hussar sabre, with which it shares modified cross-mounting, thumb-ring, pronounced beak hilt and elongated quillons; but there is no knuckle-bow. (National Museum, Cracow)



types and grooved by wide fullers. In Poland we find both simple and richly adorned sabre specimens with half-closed hilts. Perhaps this species originated in Poland, for in Hungary it is encountered still more rarely, and published Hungarian specimens are not only exclusively military but must be dated, by various parameters, after 1650.

Next there came about in Poland an improvement unknown in Hungary: the knuckle-bow was bent back to the grip until it almost touched the almond-shaped pommel, which assured good covering of the hand even though guard and pommel remained unconnected. Short langets were riveted to the leather- or shagreen-covered wooden grip that was sometimes further wound with wire or metal bands. There is nearly always a thumb-ring and sometimes additional side rings at the cross-guard (Figs. 13 & 17). Blades are lighter than Hungarian ones and often have two to four fullers. The scabbards also differ from the Hungarian examples: covered as a rule with black leather, they have a locket and separate suspension rings of Turkish or Persian type in oval, often pierced, plates (Figs. 17 & 17a). This species is generally called the "hussar sabre"; the hilt was also used with palasches and estocs. Not only did it excel Eastern and Hungarian sabres in functionalness, but it possessed outstanding esthetic qualities as well. It is difficult to date its appearance precisely. The oldest iconographic sources stem from the 1680's, so its formation can be reckoned at about mid-century or shortly thereafter. Many unadorned combat specimens have been preserved where all of the metal parts are made of steel. In these the hilt grip and scabbard as a rule were covered with black leather, whence the name "black sabre". One also encounters sumptuous examples with carved or enamelled decoration, fitted with silver and gold or even made entirely of precious metal (Fig. 18).

The hussar sabre survived throughout the eighteenth century. Examples made toward the end of this span differ from the earlier, bulky ones in their lighter hilts and blades (Fig. 19). About the middle of the eighteenth century further attempts to protect the hand brought about an even more highly developed hilt than the hussar sabre, representing a complete abandonment of the Eastern tradition. The eighteenth century also marked a return to the open hilt in parade sabres: the bow was eliminated but the shape of the grip and the pommel was retained, the pommel tang extending down over the back of the grip and the cross-guard remaining unchanged (Fig. 16).

THE "HORDE", THE "LEASH" AND THE "LITTLE STURGEON"

But sabres of Turkish or Turkish-Hungarian ancestry were not the only ones used in Poland. There were also those whose origins trace back to the lands around the Black Sea and to the Caucasian steppes, where well into the 1700's Circassian and Tartar tribes used a type similar to excavated specimens linked with the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Their hilts approximated that of the first Turkish ones here described, though the grip was generally straight and the elongated metal pommel had a characteristic angular form (Figs. 20 & 21). The cross-shaped cross-guard had very short arms that barely extended beyond the grip. The original Tartar blades were usually very thin, some having an angular point at the end for piercing armour (Fig. 21); several blades with this characteristic point from the collections of the Oruzhennaya Palata in Moscow were described in a seventeenth-century inventory as Circassian, but in fact some were forged in Persia. Polish examples of this genre usually had normal sabre blades. Very characteristic is the scabbard: like the grip, it is covered with shagreen and lined on the inside with birch bark; in humbler examples

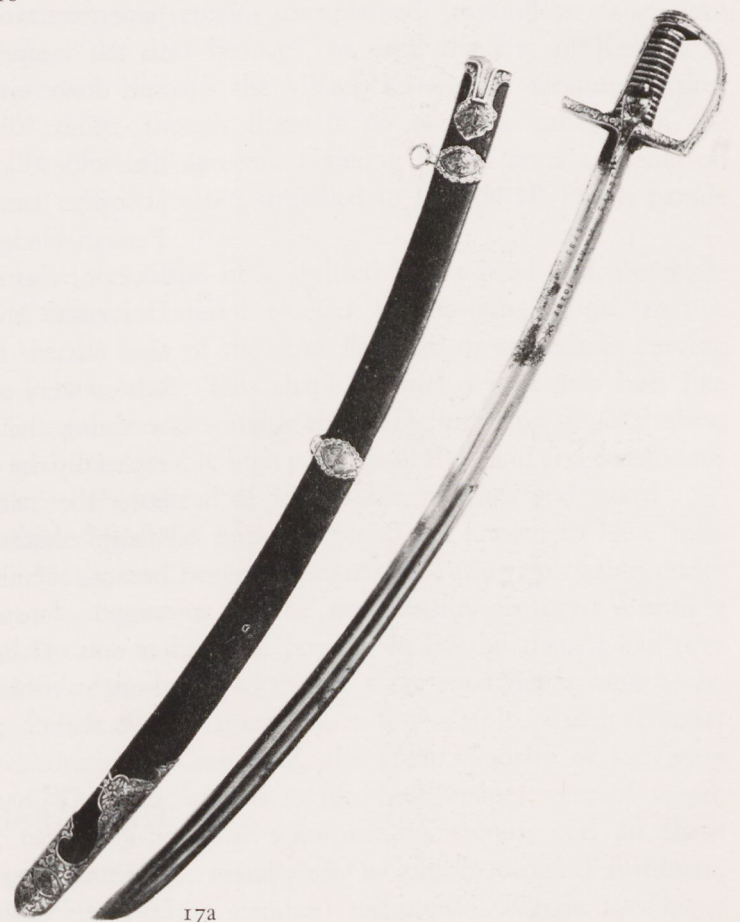
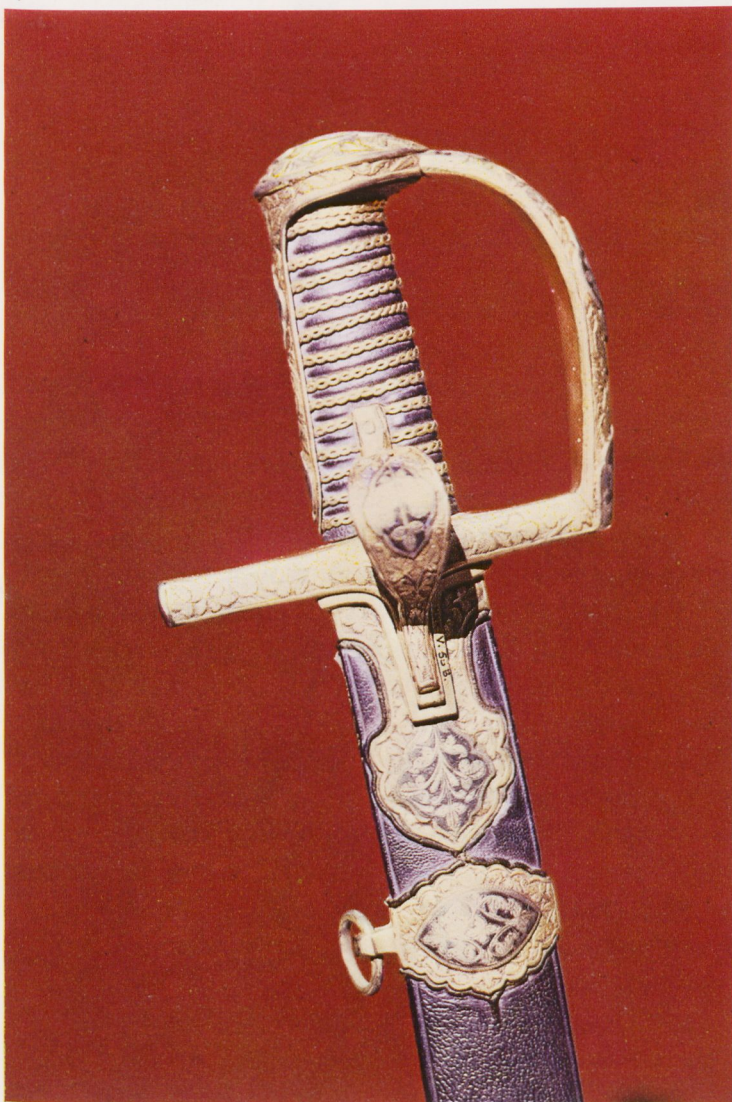
Fig. 17. BELOW, LEFT & RIGHT: Hussar sabre with completely closed knuckle-bow, c. 1700, probably ornamented by Lvovian Armenians with silver and engraved strawberry leaf motifs on hilt and scabbard mounting. Inscription reads « JESUS MARIA JOZEF SPES ». (National Museum, Cracow)

Fig. 18. RIGHT: Polish sabre, first half 17th century. L-guard and beak pommel are fully developed; ornamentation still leans to the East. (National Museum, Cracow)



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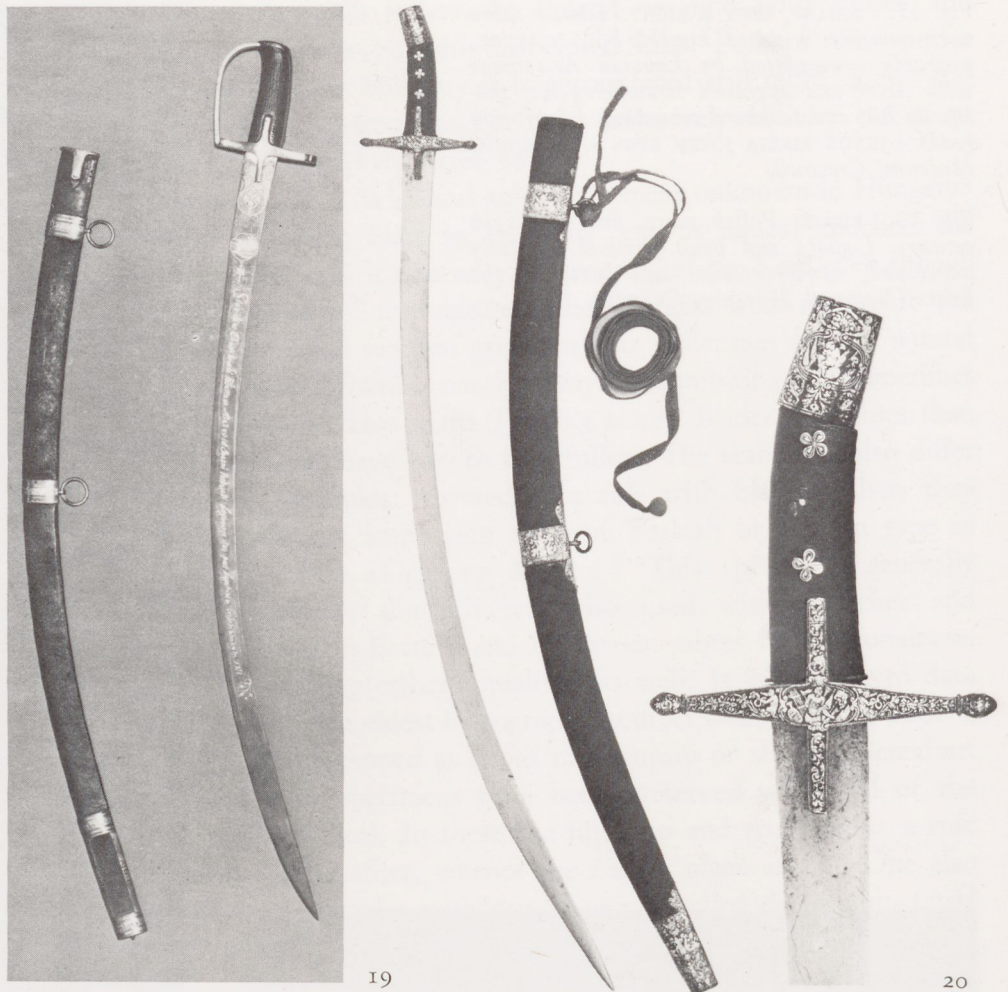


Fig. 19. This Hussar sabre of late 18th century is a typical case of an old Oriental blade refurnished with later mounts. Gold-inlaid Latin inscription, executed in Poland, is dated 1713, though blade may well be a century older. Scabbard mounts and hilt are worked in neo-classical Greek key design dating from late 18th century. Remounting of fine old blades was frequent, resulting sometimes in gaps of two and even three centuries between blade and mounts. (National Museum, Cracow)

Fig. 20. Tartar-type sabre, mid-17th century, traditionally associated with John Casimir Vasa, King of Poland (r. 1648-68). Persian blade, Polish mountings. This is the oldest known example of a Polish-made Tartar-type sabre. Note acorn-ended quillons, leather instead of fishskin-covered grip and scabbard, gold-damascened steel mountings in European mannerist style. (Royal Armouries, Stockholm)

black leather was substituted for shagreen. The suspension rings invariably have extensions in the form of butterfly wings, a motif finding parallels only in the weapons of distant China. The embellishment of grander specimens was done in typical Caucasian niello and filigree techniques.

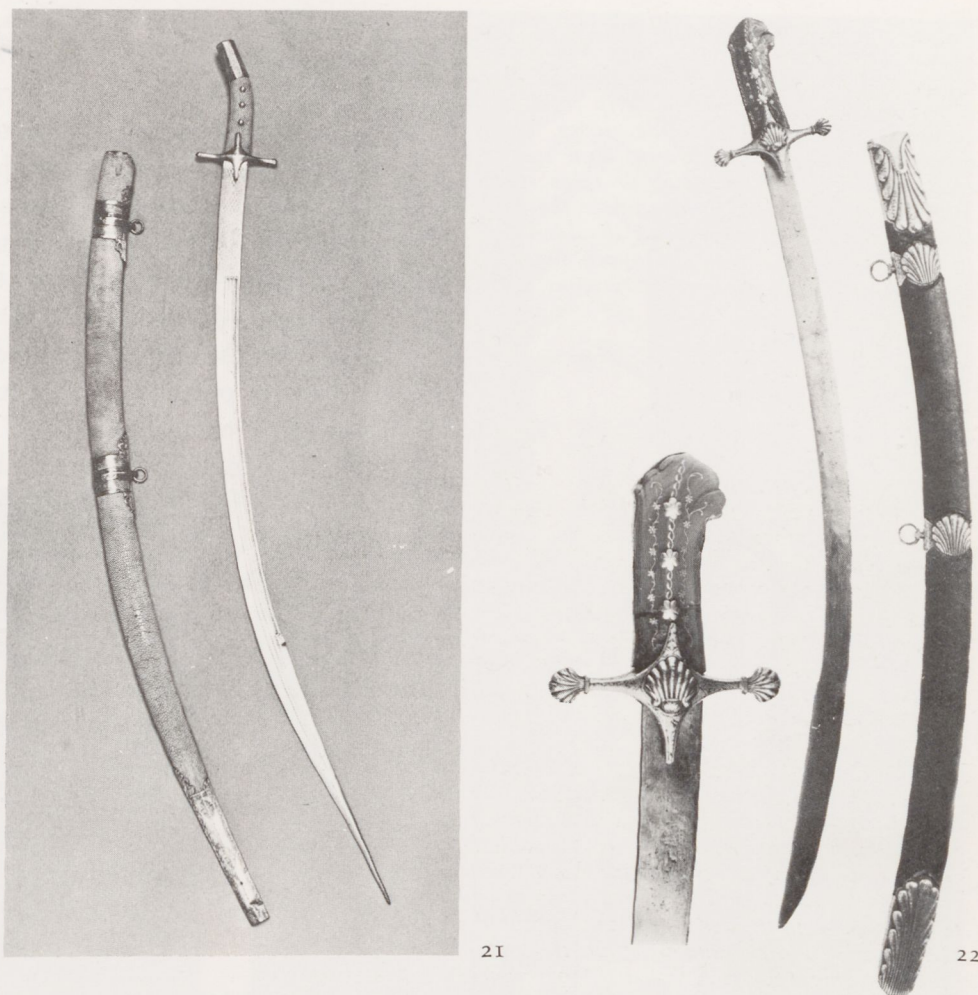
This "Tartar sabre" seems to have appeared in Poland around 1650. The oldest known example is the one associated with King John Casimir (1609-72) now in the Royal Swedish Armouries in Stockholm (Fig. 20); it has a Persian blade and European-type decoration. King John III Sobieski was a lover of Eastern fashion, and in a portrait by Jan Tricius in the Jagiellonian University Museum he is shown armed with a sabre of the sort under discussion (which may be the very one shown in Fig. 21). In any case, Tartar sabres were probably not very numerous in Poland, though this type of hilt, retaining the original shape and decoration, was produced in the country, especially by Armenians in Lvov. In the eighteenth century, these sabres bore the name *ordynka* from the Polish word for "horde", *smyk* i.e. "leash" because of the narrow blade, and *czeczuga* or "small sturgeon" because of the fishskin covering the grip and scabbard. Sometimes these weapons are called "Armenian" sabres because of an Armenian inscription on one of the specimens in Polish collections, but this is a misnomer, for though Armenians manufactured such sabres they neither created nor widely used them.

THE KARABELA

The most popular Eastern type of sabre, which is sometimes identified simply as "the Polish sabre", bears the name of *karabela* in old Polish inventories

Fig. 21. Tartar-type sabre, 1650-1700, probably once belonging to King John III Sobieski (r. 1673-96). The long, narrow, pointed blade (probably Eastern-made), the fishskin-covered hilt and scabbard, the Oriental motifs on blade and mountings and the curved grip with a cylindrical pommel are all in pure Tartar style. (National Museum, Dresden)

Fig. 22. Karabela, 1750-1800. Karabelas, close to early oriental sabres, are characterised by wide, unwieldy bird-head grips of semi-precious stone or similar material, often inlaid with gold wire, and by short quillons (cf. Fig. 23). Ornamentation on this specimen consists of Louis XVI shell-motifs; mixture of Oriental niello techniques with French rococo designs is typical of eclectic taste of 18th-century Polish nobility. (National Museum, Cracow)

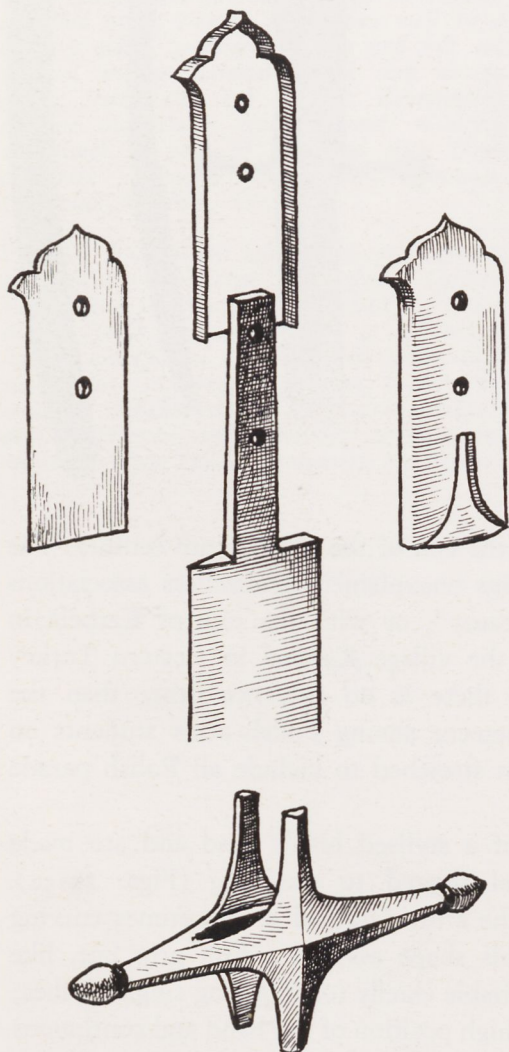


and other references which appear at the end of the seventeenth century. The etymology of this strange name remains unexplained; groundless associations with Italian *cara bella*, "the dear beauty", or with the city of Kerbela in Iraq, have been suggested. Perhaps the village Karabel in western Turkey comes closer to probability, though there is no evidence other than the phonetic similarity. There is no agreement among Polish arms students on the scope of this term, which is often stretched to include all Polish parade sabres having an open hilt.

Karabela hilts have the shape of a stylised bird's head and are made from two plates of various material riveted to the tang (Figs. 22-30). A short cross-guard has the ends of the arms flattened or sometimes curving downwards in Indo-Persian style. This shape assured a firm grip but, like all Eastern sabres, the karabela was suitable chiefly for inflicting single slashes; in a duel it required an uncomfortably high position of the hand and continuous parrying with the blade only instead of with blade, quillons and guard.

The oldest available karabelas now in Poland are known to have been captured at Vienna in 1683, and hence originated in Turkey, probably under Persian influence, at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Within a short time the karabela came to be more popular in Poland than it had ever been in Turkey or Hungary, so much so that in these countries it came to be considered typically Polish. While there are a few simple, sturdy combat specimens without decoration of any kind, the great majority of surviving examples are adorned. The hilts, always in bird-head shape, were of wood, horn, ivory, silver, mother-of-pearl or semi-precious stones, and all these with and without metal furniture; metalwork, including scabbard furniture, could be decorated by the various standard techniques. Parade specimens

Fig. 23. The construction of a karabela hilt. Blades were finished with long, wide tangs that could be filed down to suit the grip-fitter's needs. Metal bird-head grip frame and the grip sides of wood, jade, ivory, ebony or other suitable material were then soundly riveted to the tang with two or three rivets. The cross-guard was slipped up over the blade – not down over the tang and shouldered on the ricasso, as in Central European swords – and glued in place with some resinous putty.



frequently had damascene blades brought from the East, while combat blades do not usually differ from those of hussar sabres. Old blades were frequently remounted, especially those with portraits of Stefan Batory and Sigismund III, or with inscriptions referring to them. Ornate karabelas became an inseparable part of eighteenth-century Polish national dress. Production must have been substantial (the blades and the settings of mounts were separately produced, for entirely different skills were required); a workshop belonging to the Princes Radziwill and producing stone facings for hilt grips existed in Naliboki in Lithuania. A few partially-finished pieces have survived, as seen in the Polish Army Museum. The production centre of embellished weaponry was Lvov and its outskirts, where Armenian craftsmen employed an almost pure Eastern style of decoration.

But if in Poland the karabela was mainly an ornamental weapon, at times it also found practical use. With the threats to Poland's independence in the second half of the eighteenth century, and, upon its loss, the partitions of 1772, 1793 and 1795, the traditional dress became a symbol of patriotism. Particularly under the comparatively liberal regime of the Austrians in Galicia, the wearing of costume and karabela became widespread, and even after independence was regained in 1918 they continued to be used during important celebrations. In the second half of the nineteenth century, karabelas were mostly produced in Cracow (the best-known maker was Ignace Höfelmajer), in Lvov and in Vienna. Generally the patterns of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were repeated, often with additional contemporary ornamentation. Specimens dating from 1875-1900 represent the end of Eastern-style weaponry in Poland (Figs. 29-30).

POLISH ARMS ORNAMENTATION IN GENERAL

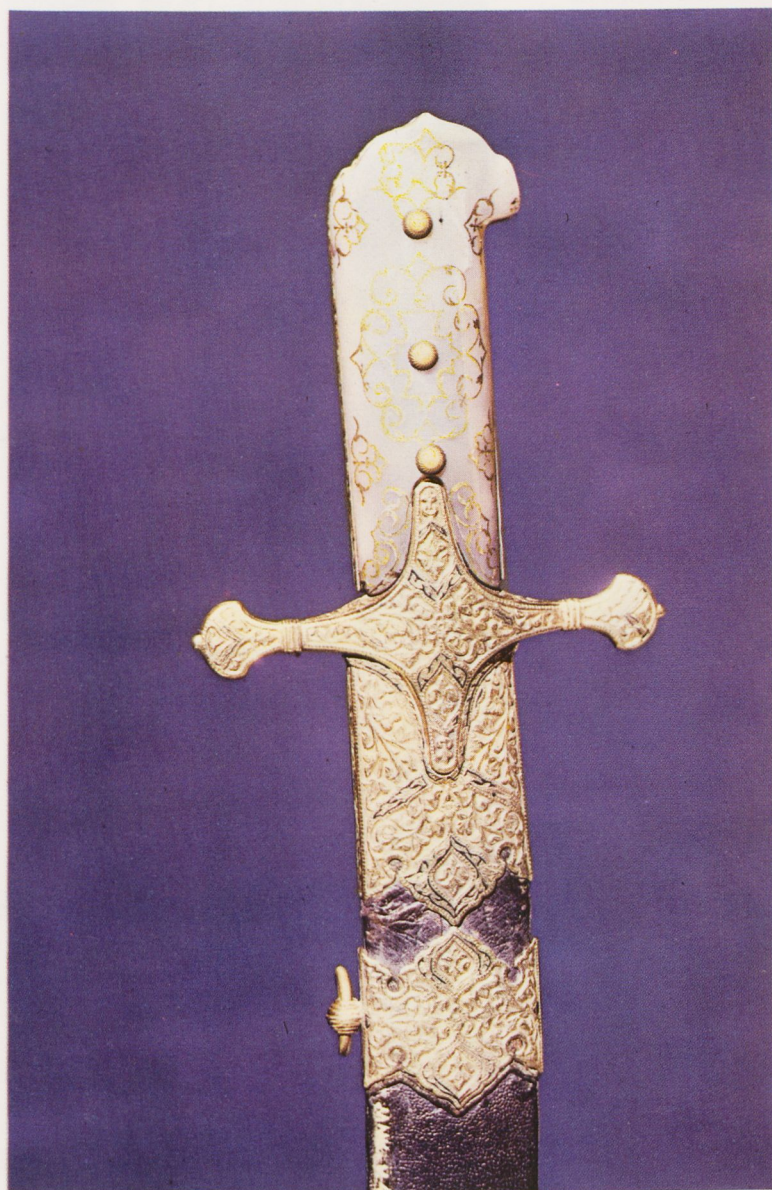
Decoration found on Polish sabres is greatly diversified. That of early combat sabres consisted almost exclusively of shaping the suspension rings in geometric or heart-shaped patterns. Only specimens for great dignitaries were fitted with semi-precious stones (or coloured-glass imitations). The motifs always remained loosely linked with Eastern weaponry, especially Turkish. A remarkable upsurge of the goldsmith's art applied to sabres began in about the mid-seventeenth century; Lvov was the centre, as always, with smaller cities in eastern Poland also contributing. Armenian craftsmen began working out their own decorative style which, mixing European and Oriental strains, was recognized and imitated in the whole country. As a rule, Eastern techniques were employed, such as engraving, niello, filigree or gold and silver inlay; gilded silver was in common use. Carnations, strawberry leaves and cypresses were common motifs, composed in symmetrical runners reminiscent of oriental fabrics and carpets. Armenian workmanship was of such high quality that it is often impossible to distinguish it from its Oriental exemplars. The Turkish decorative style also occurs on articles no longer Turkish in form, such as on Hussar sabres.

One also encounters weapons executed in wholly Eastern techniques but with purely European motifs. Thus, in addition to the particularly popular *Régence* ornament, shells and palmettes are frequently seen as well as many rococo devices (which also made their way to Turkey where, in slightly modified form, they became entirely domesticated).

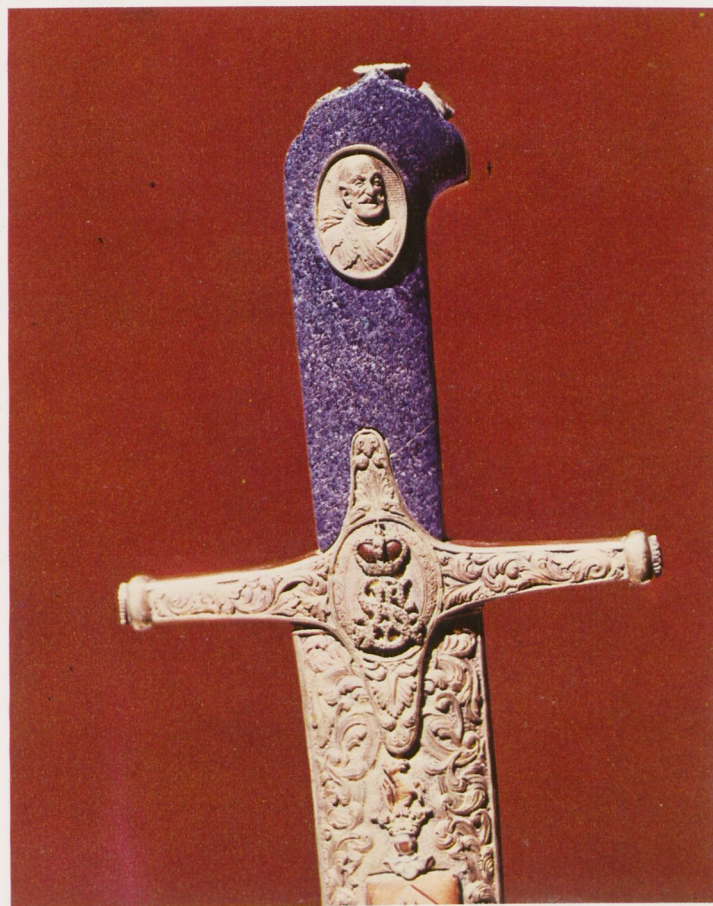
The work of Lvovian Armenians enjoyed especial popularity during the reign of King John III Sobieski (1673-96), who was also their greatest protector. It is known that he employed several Armenian court goldsmiths from Lvov whose task was the embellishment of his personal weapons. On

Figs. 24-26. Three karabelas. (24) 17th or 18th century; the ornamental designs are Oriental. (25) 18th century, Lvov-made. The rococo influence is strong. (26) The karabela of Prince Sapieha, dated Vienna, 1868. (National Museum, Cracow)

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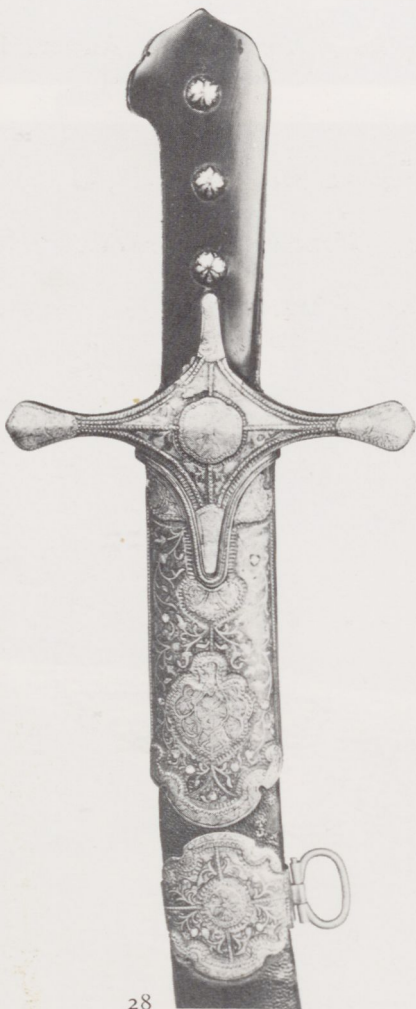
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Fig. 27. Count Stanislaw Tarnowski (1837-1917) in Polish national costume, c. 1885. At this time, the karabela was still part of the dress worn by the upper classes on important occasions; the custom fell into disuse only with advent of World War II.

Figs. 28-30. Three karabelas. (28) 17th or 18th century, probably Lvov-made, a fine example of Polish production in pure Oriental style. Mounts are silvered bronze and gold. (29 & 30) Late 19th century, with agate grips and mounts of silver or silver-bronze; style is pseudo-baroque on one, nearly art-nouveau on other. Pebbled leather scabbard covering, though Western in derivation, recalls earlier fishskin covering. (All: National Museum, Cracow)



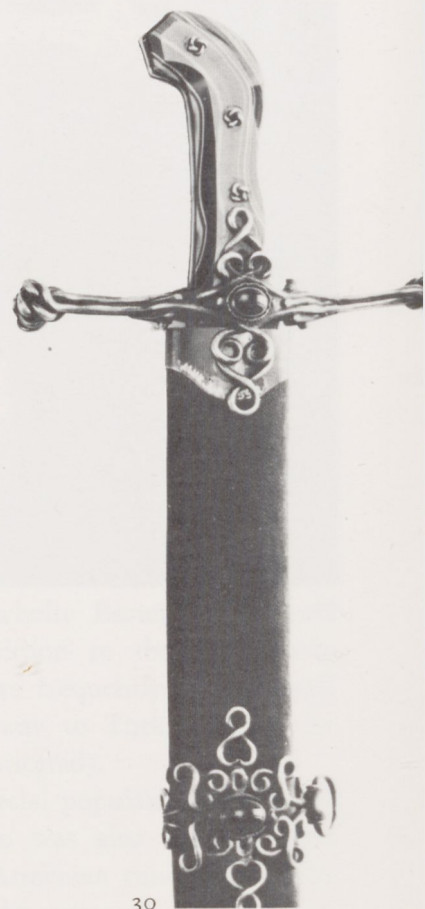
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royal instruction they also reworked weapons of West-European origin after the Eastern fashion.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sabre mountings were not marked or stamped in Poland, so exact attribution is difficult. Only on nineteenth century specimens is it possible to find goldsmiths' marks, mostly those of Cracow and Vienna.

Poland also had a favourite way of adorning blades by etching or gold-inlaying busts of kings, national heroes or the Virgin Mary, as well as maxims, family coats of arms and the initials of owners. It is not rare to find blades commemorating battles in which the sabre had been used.

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