

The Sudanese Kaskara Sword in Silver Dress

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For the most part, our study of the Sudanese kaskara sword is focused on variations in blades and quillons. This attention allows us to make educated guesses as to a sword's regional, even national, origin and period of manufacture. Blade fullers and cross-guards/quillons have been addressed in two other companion essays. But as we know, the kaskara "sword package" is composed of several components: blade, quillon/cross-guard, grip cover, and scabbard with chape and top band. Each component of varying quality is made by individual craftsmen in the supply chain who may perform their work separated in space and time. The package we hold in our hands today may be original to its initial time and place of manufacture and assembly or may have a history of repairs or upgrades over perhaps hundreds of years and considerable distances. Each component has a story to tell.

I propose that we expand our inquiry and discussions to include silver accessories added to a basic unadorned usually high quality sword. These additions are intended to enhance the sword and its owner. Also, often silver dressed swords (and scabbards) are gifted to high status people as an honor. Other than its bling appeal, silver has a talismanic quality. Both copper and silver are thought to bring protection from knife attack, but silver trumps copper. The silver accessories are grip covers, pommels, and chaps and bands on the scabbard's bottom and mouth. Google search images of "silver kaskara swords" for other examples.

Silversmiths are not affiliated with sword-making enterprises. They are higher-end craftsmen located closer to the center of the market. Their work is performed for the customer after the sword and scabbard have been assembled and is an optional upgrade to enhance the quality of the "sword package" and the prestige of its owner.

The main Grip Covers that I am aware of are:

- Diamond / Harlequin Motif
- Stars and Comets / Dotted Cross Motif
- Silver filigreed ribbon often mixed with reptile skin.
- Other / Unique.

DIAMOND / HARLEQUIN

This is apparently the most common design and would be the easiest to emboss on a sheet of silver. The diamonds are in rows and appear to be aligned at an approximately 60 degree incline. They are sized also to align more or less vertically as well. There is a small incised border at the top and bottom. The format appears to be standardized and only varies slightly in execution as from different skilled hands. None of this or other silver work is "easy". It requires many different types of repousse' and chasing operations and is very time consuming.

This design appears to be most common in Darfur mainly because it is associated with Ali Dinar's regalia swords. Note that some of the diamonds on the examples below are further decorated internally by one to

In some places within this monograph sources are quoted merely by a nickname or with a first name. This reflects that this document began as a thread on the Ethnographic Arms and Armour Forum and those are the user names of contributing members; see the original and or add your comments at <http://www.vikingsword.com/vb/showthread.php?t=24124>

five dots. The dots may have significances or perhaps they are just the craftsman's artistic preference. The amount of extra work involved would tend to negate a craftsman's caprice. Also, the design, in a simplified form was recorded by Reed in Northern Darfur in 1984-85. An exception to the Dafur origin is a sword in the al Shinqiti Collection in Khartoum (Fig. 6). This form may best be described by a series of examples (fig. 1 - 8).



Fig. 1. Sword of Ali Dinar, Sultan of Darfur. He was killed by the British in 1916. He apparently gifted several high-end swords during his 1899-1916 sultancy. Maybe someone can fill in the givers and approximate dates. It seems reasonable that the sword and grip cover would have been fabricated at the location of the giftor rather than the location of the giftee. This work was likely performed in Ali Dinar's workshops in El Fasher. (Photo courtesy of Sotheby's)

<http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2011/arts-of-the-islamic-world/lot.317.html>



Fig. 2. Note that this sword is very similar in quality and design to Ali Dinar's example (to the left). (Photo courtesy of DaveS.)

<http://www.vikingsword.com/vb/showthread.php?t=13142>



Fig. 3. A similar design of dot centered diamonds, but note the unique and exceptional domed pommel.

(Photo courtesy of David/katana)

<http://www.vikingsword.com/vb/showthread.php?t=10557&highlight=kaskara>



Fig. 4. Copper casing, unique as far as I know - but it could be just dirty silver. Also, see domed top of pommel. (Photo courtesy of longfellow)

<http://www.vikingsword.com/vb/showthread.php?t=16357>



Fig. 5. One of the most ornate pommels I've seen. (Photo courtesy of sword-site)

<http://www.sword-site.com/thread/917/sudanese-kaskara-19th-century>



Fig. 6. Judge M.S. al Shinqiti (1896-1966) Collection, University of Khartoum. One of six swords gifted to him c.1956 at the independence of Sudan, as photographed in 1984. Two other of his swords with the Stars & Comets design will be discussed below.
(Author's photograph)

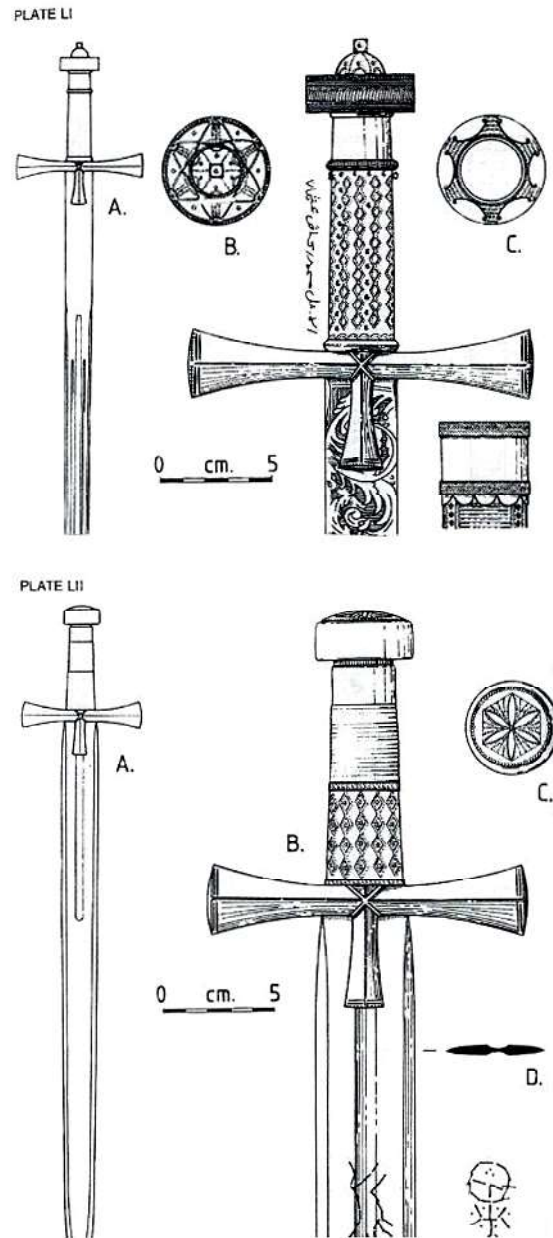


Fig. 7. Graham Reed 1987. His Plates LI & LII (above) have diamonds that are arranged vertically with a line gap between and unlike the Ali Dinar standard. The blades are older European and the quillons are well flared. Each has an interesting and well defined pommel design. My guess is that a local silversmith made the grip covers inspired by the diamonds (symbolism?) of the Ali Dinar examples.

I showed this photo (Fig. 6, above) to the shaykh of the Kassala sword maker's suq. He said it was likely made in the village of Wager about 60 miles north of Kassala. The blade is likely an import (it has the "enigmatic" mark). The quillon may have been forged by a smith there long ago and perhaps a local silversmith made the grip cover. Unfortunately, I didn't ask enough questions at the time so, of course, this is all speculation.



Fig. 8. This cover uses the diamond motif, but strays from the “standard” of Ali Dinar. It is a Beja sword which may explain the difference.
(Photo courtesy of Ashoka Arts)

<http://www.ashokaarts.com/shop/nice-sudanese-north-african-kaskara-or-saif-sword-with-silver-mounted-hilt>

All figures above, except Fig. 6 & 7 and the Ashoka Arts item (fig. 8, above), show remarkable similarity yet are different in subtle ways. Only in Figs. 1, 2 & 4 does the cover extend from the quillon to the top plain band where a tassel usually is tied. All the rest have the gap filled by coils of fine silver wire. I couldn't measure the actual widths, but assume the grips were all virtually the same rather than being of different length, though that is possible. None stray very far from the Ali Dinar grip if it may be considered as the standard.

Questions still remain as to the symbolic meaning, if any, and where, when and by whom the style originated. I bet some old-time silversmith in Omdurman might be able to provide some answers.

STARS and COMETS / DOTTED SQUARE

These examples are intriguing to me. They are relatively common in my experience. The design consists of opposed comet-like head and tail swoops offset by 5-6 pointed stars. At the center front is a diamond shaped box with four small diamonds arranged in a vertical square, a dotted square as circled in fig. 10a (on the following page). I've not considered one of these covers in three dimensions, seen unrolled flat or as a template, so it's difficult to present a full picture.

Stars and comets feature prominently in Islamic cosmology. The appearance of comets are supposed to foretell causes for either celebration or doom. The great comet of 1882 was said to announce the coming of the Sudanese Mahdi; known as the *Nagmet el Mahdi* or the Mahdi's star. It is tempting to attribute the hilt cover style to the Nagmet, but in the absence of supporting evidence it can only be speculation. Also, the accompanying "dotted cross", considered below, may not fit into this narrative.

Most intriguing is that the same basic design is exhibited on the oldest documented example of a kaskara, the sword of Nasir Mohammad, the Funj sultan from 1762-69 (See fig. 9 below), as well as more modern examples. The Nasir hilt cover design also is on three of the six swords in the al-Shinqiti collection as mentioned above. This sword has all the elements of a first quality kaskara. The high-end blade, marked as a German source, has a perfect high taper quillon and a star and comet silver covered grip. Indeed, all quillons produced since this design and method of manufacture have degenerated in style and quality. (A skilled swordsmith in Kassala in 1984 said that no one currently makes quillons of that flared design.) The sword is equal in quality to the Ali Dinar (c.1899-1916) piece shown above, except it doesn't have the rich engraving on the quillons. Its "perfect" condition begs the questions: Where did it come from? What is its stylistic development history? Are there any known examples of precedent designs? In my view the blade may date to the 18th Century, and it was probably been rehilted with an early 20th Century quillon. The silver cover style cannot yet be accurately dated, but is presumed to be from the late 19th Century, perhaps the Mahdist Era. The Nasir sword and a good background is presented by Regihis herein:

<http://www.vikingsword.com/vb/showthread.php?t=16814>



Fig. 9. The silver covered hilt of the sword of Nasir Mohammad, Funj sultan from 1762-69, KH 394 in the Sudan National Museum.
(Photo courtesy of Amani Nureldaim Mohamed)

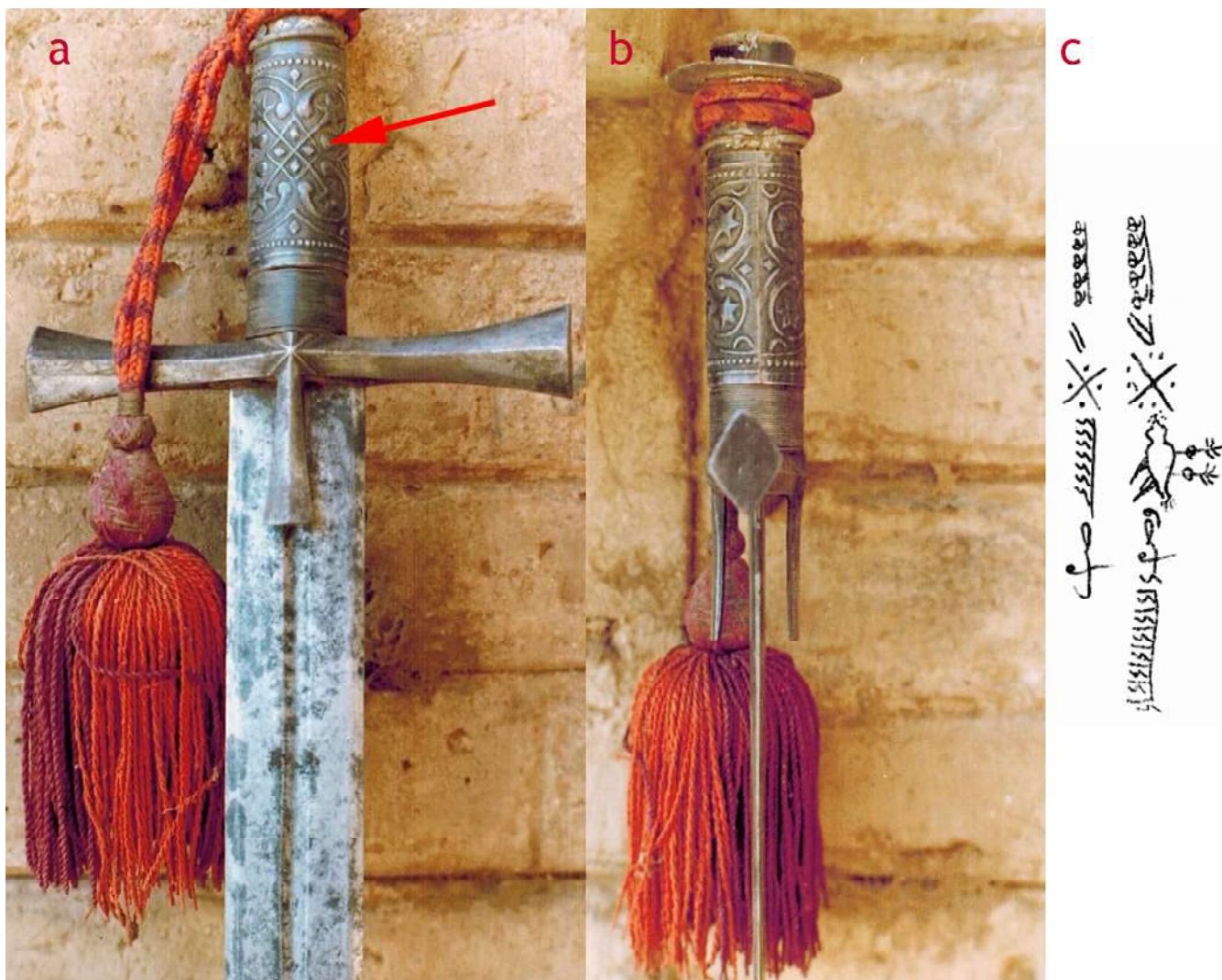


Fig. 10 a. & b. Silver mounted kaskara in the al Shinqiti Collection at the University of Khartoum, Sudan, face on (a) and in profile (b). (Author's photographs, 1984)
Fig 10 c. Examples of dotted square theme in an Ottoman talisman book in the collection of Lloyd Graham.

Figures 10 a. & b. show two views of the same sword in the al Shinqiti Collection. The collection, plus the Nasar example, contains the only swords investigated here that are still in the Sudan. It exhibits the same theme as the hilt shown in fig. 9, but has only one “v” line above top center pair of comets. Note the flared quillon with the end of the quillon’s diamond shape. I wonder if this diamond motif has symbolic relevance like the design on the diamond silver case? It looks to me that if the sword was restored, especially the pommel. It could be a brother to the Nasir Mohammad example.

Fig. 11. (on following page) is also from the al Shinqiti Collection. To my eye the silver work is virtually identical to the 1762 grip cover in fig. 9, although the silver band at the bottom is not there as it is in the sword hilt in fig. 9.

Upon closer inspection of these hilts it is obvious that the “dotted square” is the focal point of these covers. The stars and comets merely form the background. The dotted square represents something of major



Fig. 11. Another silver mounted kaskara in the al Shinqiti Collection at the University of Khartoum, Sudan. (Author's photograph, 1984)

significance, perhaps talismanic. While no definite link has been established, talismanic analysis may provide a clue to its meaning. Lloyd Graham (2011) has researched Islamic talismans related to the Seven Seals and the Pleiades Square. His *Repeat Letter Ciphers in Islamic Talismans* (2011) considers the dotted square's significance, p. e10-e11 (see fig. 10c. on previous page). He observes that it has prehistoric roots, originally serving as a fertility token. In Islamic lore, it may represent a life force for healing the sick and may be related to the Pleiades Square in terms of the seasons of the year, seasonal rains, planting, harvest, etc.

We have no confirmation that Graham's dotted square is the same as or related to our kaskara dotted squares, but his explanation is intriguing. Perhaps our silver covers are a higher level of talismanic appeal than just to be protected in personal combat.

Additionally, and perhaps a perceptive stretch, one could look at the diamond motif covers above as a field of four diamonds that make the quadrants of a dotted square. Likewise, the ends of the Sammaniya quillon family are diamonds as well. Could they all be related?

SILVER FILIGREE

This type of grip treatment consists of filigreed silver tape wrapped around the wooden grip base plus a wrap of reptile skin. The process is, of course, less expensive to execute than the high-end diamond and stars examples. However, this signature style addresses the protective qualities of silver and cultural signatures of lizard skin and the traditional Beja tassel.

I collected the two Hadendowa swords shown in fig. 12 in Kassala in 1984. The one on the left was said to have been made c. 1916. Due to the similarity of its grip cover, I would date the other to the same time. Similarly dressed Beja swords are shown in various Forum threads and web sites.

The hilt of one in Lee Jones' kaskara monograph (example 2) is of superior quality and more embellished than normally encountered. See fig. 13 on next page or online at: <http://www.vikingsword.com/ethsword/kaskara/index.html>. Another is on the Oriental Arms site. This style may be a Kassala signature style. See as fig. 14 on next page or online at: <http://www.oriental-arms.com/photos.php?id=1343>



Fig. 12. Hadendowa swords with silver filigree work collected in Kassala in 1984 and dating to the first quarter of the twentieth century. (Author's photograph)

OTHER / UNIQUE COVERS

Other embossed styles and designs will be encountered. Some may be on-off products of local silversmiths. If we come across other examples that can be typed as stylistically similar, we will have another type to study. Here are a couple of examples (fig. 15 & 16 on page 11)



Fig. 13. A kaskara with a thin silver alloy grip covering that is reinforced by bands of filigree work; the same filigree work also decorates the pommel and ferrule of the sheath. The blade has been cut from flat sheet steel and sharpened around the edges in the same fashion as a modern machete and likely dates to the late 20th century. (Photo courtesy of Lee Jones)



Fig. 14. A kaskara with a silver alloy grip covered by bands of filigree work. (Photo courtesy of Artzi Yarom of Oriental Arms)



Fig. 15. Kind of a diamond design, but not really.
<http://www.oriental-arms.com/photos.php?id=1430>
 (Photo courtesy of Artzi Yarom of Oriental Arms)



Fig. 16. A one-off design on a Beja sword. Also, a good view of its pommel top and the chape are shown as fig. 17 with more available at www.swordsantiqueweapons.com/s587_full.html
 (Photograph courtesy of Gavin Nugent, Swords and Antique Weapons)

POMMELS

Kaskara pommels differ significantly from those of medieval European broadswords. Most medieval blades had a long tang. The cross-guard had a slot cut in it to fit snugly over the blade. The hilt was attached to the tang by peening it through the top of the pommel thereby creating a secure unit. The pommel was usually weighted to provide a balancing weight to the blade. Not so with the kaskara. The blade, cross-guard and hilt are held securely together by the wooden hilt being wedged over the short-tanged blade into the cross-guard. Usually, the hilt and tang are joined with a peened pin.

Thus, the kaskara pommel provides no structural function. It provides a solid stop to prevent the user's hand from slipping off the grip. Its location and size also provides a means for enhanced decorations in silver and rarely in copper alloy or even gold.

The customer buys a kaskara topped with a plain pommel; an approximately 1¾ diameter by ½ inch thick leather covered disk, like a short cylinder. The grip is wrapped with a thin leather strip. This is a purely functional arrangement and will provide years of service. However, since only the hilt is visible above the scabbard, the customer may wish to exhibit some degree of social or political rank and visit a silversmith. The smith will add a silver grip cover and pommel enhancement consistent with the customer's taste and pocketbook and the smith's talent. The thickness may be covered with silver filigree tape and the top will be covered by a flat engraved disc of silver. Apparently the most common design has a domed top with a cube finial with the corners cut off, as shown for example in fig. 8. Some are flat on top with engraved designs like in fig. 17, or may be elaborate as in fig. 5. Reed's (1987) sketches beautifully detail the flat top designs in fig. 7.

David's sword (fig. 3) exhibits an unusual and attractive hollow globular pommel. El Tounsy in his 1851 *Voyage to Wadai* (Darfur's neighbor to the west) observed that similar silver pommels were hollow, containing pebbles that produce a jingling sound. These are called garlic-heads. This is not to say that he had encountered a kaskara as we now know it or that David's sword dates to c. 1851, but that the hollow roundish silver pommel is a design feature that extended over time and space.

The rarest and perhaps most controversial are the double pommels. However, enough examples exist for productive analysis. Perhaps the most famous is the so-called Snake Sword with a double snake fuller on a Persian-made blade and a double pommel (see fig. 17 on the following page). It is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection (accession No. 1977.162.1). It was taken as booty at the Battle of Omdurman. The pommel consists of a hollow biconvex top portion and a flatter hollow disc below. The pommel is copper alloy and not silver, but it is significant enough to make an exception. The museum identifies the hilt as Sudanese perhaps due to the nicely flared kaskara cross-guard. Some investigators suggest that it is stylistically of Ethiopian origin. The excellent 2014 discussion, led by Iain Norman and Jim McDougall, is in the link below. Also included is a supporting engraving of an Ethiopian sword with the same type pommel:

<http://vikingsword.com/vb/showthread.php?t=18691>

In another context Jim McDougall observes that in *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, 1891, p.137 that F.R. Wingate notes "a pommel of twin flattened hollow spheres filled with beans or small pebbles common among mounted nobility in Darfur. During victory celebrations Mahdist cavalry charged toward surrendered



Fig. 17. Sword with a double snake fuller on a blade of Persian origin. (Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Fig. 18. Another variation of a doubled pommel. (XXVIS.166) (Photo courtesy of the Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds)



Fig. 19. Essentially identical grip to that shown in fig. 18, but with a conventional pommel. (XXVIS.165) (Photo courtesy of the Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds)

troops at full gallop, with these swords drawn and shook them to frighten the prisoners.” This was concurred in *Ten Years in the Mahdist Camp 1882-92* by Father Joseph Ohrwalder (1892) who witnessed the 1882 Mahdi’s Comet as well.

The engraving submitted by Martin Lubojacky on post #19 of the above referenced thread has a sword with an apparent trade blade and a pommel like the Snake Sword. The cross-guard is suggestive of a kaskara type, but significantly different. This suggests to me, perhaps a Just So Story, that the Snake Sword was a diplomatic gift to Ethiopia from Iran with unknown hilt dress, but later adorned with an Ethiopian style cross-guard and pommel. (A high end gift with a superbly crafted blade with gold inlays would not be adorned with a copper alloy pommel and no grip cover of precious metal.) It subsequently was likely captured as a trophy following a Mahdist battle with Ethiopia (Battle of Gallabat, 1889). The pommel was retained, but redressed with a kaskara cross-guard and no grip cover before falling into British hands as a battle trophy at Omdurman, 1898. Surely, if the pommel was of Sudanese origin, it would have been made of silver as is the practice there rather than copper alloy. Also, the presumed Ethiopian sword shown in Figure 13b of the Cross-guard Section has a similar pommel but with a cylinder top finial and a thin discoid at the bottom.

Metropolitan Museum of Art sword link for more details:

https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/27262?exhibitionId=%7Bf9335363-16b7-41db-a7d9-6775cdc3e327%7D&oid=27262&pkgids=349&pg=5&rpp=10&pos=42&ft=*

The Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds, UK (RA) has two kaskaras of interest. The first (XXVIS.166) has a double pommel with two superimposed biconvex discs (see fig. 18 on previous page). They are fatter than the Metropolitan Museum of Art's example. (The silver Star & Comet hilt sleeve is described as "cast" by RA, unlike the chased examples described above.) The second (XXVIS.165) has a single cylinder type pommel (see fig. 19). The finials of both pommels are characterized as cubes with cut off corners and appear to be virtually identical. The grip covers (both Stars & Comets), the finials and the cylindrical pommel are definitely Sudanese design elements.

In summary, the cylindrical form is by far the most common. It is found on swords ranging from entry-level bling to the famed Ali Dinar swords. Its profile literally defines the kaskara look. The globular and double forms are artistically very well developed even though they may be the products of individual silversmiths. The globular example shown in fig. 3 is paired with a lozenge grip cover common in Darfur, but it has a Sennariya cross-guard more common in the Nile region. The Royal Armouries double is paired with the Star & Comet hilt cover, as is its cylindrical topped "brother," more common in the Nile region. Hopefully, more globular and double types will surface to place them in more descriptive contexts.

SCABBARD CHAPES AND TOP BANDS

Chapes are the triangular metal pieces at the bottom of scabbards. They are to prevent the sword blade point from penetrating the leather and causing injury. Bands are designed to prevent the blade from cutting the scabbard when being drawn in and out. For the most part, they are made of thin light metal, usually aluminum these days. Even aluminum ones exhibit a designed decoration. On older and higher end swords these items will be made of silver. They are generally well made and most have rather elaborate designs.

Fig. 20 below shows the chapes from my two Kassala swords (see fig. 12 above). The left chape (of better quality) is to the left (better quality) sword above. Another example of a quality chape is on the site with the Swords and Antique Weapons site referenced with fig. 16. There are no apparent design motifs exhibited in either chapes or top bands. While individual items may be stylistically interesting, they have not been investigated due to a relatively small sample size at this time.



Fig. 20. The chapes of the Hadendowa swords shown in fig. 12.
(Author's photograph)

SUMMARY

In this essay I set out to investigate the silver adornments and accessories for the Sudanese kaaskara sword. Limited, but sufficient, examples were examined to establish three stylistic motifs. Grip covers were classified mainly as the diamond, the star & comet, and the filigree. Sword pommels were classified and scabbard caps and bands were investigated. This examination has been informative and the process of discovery was satisfying.

We may presume why the silver was added; personal protection and prestige. Unfortunately, the symbolic qualities, presumably talismanic, and origins of the motifs and designs remain clouded and largely unknown. In these realms I must refer to Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), the Persian mathematician, astronomer and poet. He wrote in his *The Rubaiyat* (1120), Quatrain XXVII the following:

“Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument
About it and about: but evermore
Came out by the same door where in I went.”

Primary References

- Personal on-site research in the Suq al Hadad in Kassala, Sudan in March 1984, associated field notes that were written up in my *Social Economics of Small Craft Production, the Sword and Knife Makers of Kassaka, Eastern Sudan*. (Available online from Ethnographic Arms & Armour's Geographical Index: <http://www.vikingsword.com/ethsword/hunley/kassala.pdf>)
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- Vikingsword.org.'s Ethnographic Arms & Armour Forum Member's threads and posts for discussions and images referenced and used herein.
- Various museum collections, auction sites and personal collection for images and sword descriptions referenced and used herein.
- Lloyd D. Graham, 2011, “In Islamic Talismans, Repeat-Letter Ciphers Representing the ‘Greatest Name’ Relate to an Early Prototype of the Seven Seals and may Link the Seals with the Pleiades” (online at <http://www.academia.edu>)

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This revised version, formatted for printing, was prepared with the assistance of Lee Jones and may be accessed at http://vikingsword.com/ethsword/hunley/kaskara_silver_dress.pdf

The companion monographs may be accessed at the following locations:

http://vikingsword.com/ethsword/hunley/kaskara_fullers.pdf

http://vikingsword.com/ethsword/hunley/kaskara_guards.pdf