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## KASKARA FROM NORTHERN DARFUR, SUDAN

By GRAHAM REED

*Kaskara*: Straight double edged swords from Northern Africa often with blades produced in Europe between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries but with hilts usually of local manufacture.

Some examples of crosshilt swords recorded in their natural environment, between April 1984 and March 1985.

### Darfur—A brief historical outline

Although known as the "land of the Fur" (*Dar-fur*), many different tribes have inhabited this area of the Sudan at various times. When Sultan Amed Bukr (c. 1682-1722) succeeded his father, Sultan Musa, he finally secured the western border of Darfur by ridding the area of Gimr control. The Gimr people had invaded from the west under the leadership of Arus Sultan of Wadai. They were defeated finally "in a pass between the hills west of Kebkebiya".<sup>1</sup> Kebkebiya derives its name from this event, translated from the Fur language, meaning "they threw away their shields" (*Kebi-Kebia*).

Even without major conflicts, Schweinfurth said in 1870 that "Darfur was so lawless as to be quite unsafe for any traveller without a strong escort, and perhaps not even then". Later in the same publication he described Darfur and the neighbouring province of Kordofan as ". . . the hiding place of every murderer and malefactor in central Africa and at present it is still impossible to get a single illustration of that region".<sup>2</sup>

During the early 1880s the Mahdi launched a recruiting campaign for his armies which stripped the area of its men-folk, of all tribes. Those who did not want to fight, predominantly the Fur people themselves, retreated from the plains to the nearby mountain ranges of Jebel Si and Jebel Marra to the north east and south respectively. This newly vacated fertile area must have seemed very inviting to one Faqui Senin and his followers freshly returned from campaigning for Darfur in what is now Chad. Faqi Senin was of the Tama tribe, as were many of his band but also included were Arranga, Massalit and some Fur. They decided to settle in what is now the area of Kebkebiya on the banks of Wadi Borgo. A wadi is a usually dry river bed down which water flows during the storms of the rainy season.

It is relevant to mention here that, at about this time, in 1883, during the Mahdist campaigns going on far to the east of this area, near the Nile, a slave called Osman (sometimes called Uthman) Dignas was created Amir of the Beja tribes by the Mahdi and made a provincial Governor. This is important because the British Museum, Ethnographic Department has in its collection a sword inscribed "the property of Amir Osman Digna" (No. Af1 3017). Although this sword does not have a European blade, it is a positive dating of the type of heavily etched inscriptions found on some *kaskara* blades. Osman Digna was captured in 1900 and died in 1926.

Back in Kebkebiya, Faqi Senin and his followers had been farming their new-found land and all seemed relatively peaceful until 1899. But with the defeat of the last of the Dervishes by British forces, a Tama leader called Ali Dinar was created British Agent for Darfur. For many and various reasons Faqi Senin refused to submit to the court of Ali Dinar, in his capital of El Fasher, and conflict ensued. Kebkebiya was fortified with ditches and a large *zariha* (thorn wall) as used by the Mahdists against the British at the battle of Atbara in 1898. The siege lasted until 1912 when the town with all its inhabitants were overwhelmed by an all-out attack by Ali Dinar's forces with Faqi Senin's head returning to El Fasher. The grave containing his body is still visible today just west of the police station in Kebkebiya.

After this event and others like it Ali Dinar himself was pursued by Her Majesty's forces and finally killed in the nearby hills of Jebel Marra, to quote Arkell once more, "for threatening the security of the rest of the Sudan with his slave army which was by this time well armed with rifles".

Examples of Ali Dinar's personal swords exist in the Royal Armouries, H.M. Tower of London (Inv. No. XXVI.112s), the Victoria and Albert Museum (Dodd Loan) and possibly in the British Museum, Ethnographic Department (No. 1932, 10-14, 1). The last item is supposedly from the battle of Omdurman, but seems to conform more to the somewhat later Ali Dinar type of design and decoration.

### Description of Examples

#### Sword (Plate LI)

This sword is owned by the Omda of the Tama people in Kebkebiya and bears the name of his father, which is engraved down the length of the grip.

In Islam a man's name is made up of his own first name followed by the first names of his father and grand-father. The inscription reads Mohamed (his father) Ishag Osman so in fact we have the names of the three previous generations. So it appears that Mohamed, the Omda's father, had this made. Regarding date, all that can be said is that the decoration and quillon shapes are consistent with all the swords of the highest quality, made for, and in the time of Ali Dinar (1899-1916). Both Faqi Senin and Ali Dinar were of the Tama tribe and so perhaps this man's family had some direct link with them in the past. If so, he did not want to disclose this information to me for some reason as we spoke on many subjects including local history and the types of arms and armour used during past conflicts.

The hilt consists of a domed silver end-cap and button with stamped designs in the consistent manner of six sided geometric designs. These sit on a pommel of silver with stamped patterns on the top and underside, with filigree work around the edge. Below the pommel is a plain silver band followed by a course of coiled silver wire. The main part of the grip consists

of a silver casing decorated in repoussé style in a harlequin-type check design.

Between the grip and blade sits a large cross guard with wide flared quillons and langets, with evidence of silver gilt over the whole.

The blade is very fine, European, probably Italian and of the nineteenth century. The hilt end of the blade has no edge until roughly level with the beginning of the fullers. This part of the blade has slightly convex surfaces with square edges. Both sides of the blade here have a fine etched floral design. The fullers are similar to those on an example belonging to the collection of the British Museum, Ethnographic Department, (No. BM Afl 3019). A wide central fuller is flanked by two much more narrow ones.

Unfortunately the example in the British Museum collection is in rather a sorry state having been poorly treated in its life. The blade is quite short, 88cm., compared with the 103.5cm. of this sword, all of which seems to have been removed from the hilt-end. The blade itself has also completely snapped in two, in the middle, and been repaired with a plate of steel brazed across the break. It is worth mentioning that the blade on the Sudanese example was very flexible indeed, easily bent over at 90° with no defect.

The scabbard is of traditional Sudanese design, widening near the end before coming to a point at the tip. The mouthpiece is decorated with a silver casing complementing the filigree work visible on the pommel of the sword. The decorated mouthpiece and chape are of similar design to those which accompany the British Museum example already mentioned. The body of the scabbard is richly covered with engraved and punched designs in a series of linear or diamond shaped combinations.

There is one single shoulder strap (Plate LVI) with associated leather cords usually attributed to swords that demand good quality scabbards. The strap is again liberally covered with designs, on the outside face only. Whilst talking to one of the leather workers in the market, he implied that over the years scabbard straps have decreased in width and that this example being 6cm. was large and must be very old. Unfortunately in a place such as this where the passing of time means very little, people find it so difficult to judge. I asked him how old "old" was, and he answered, "Oh, twenty five years at least". That is where the difficulty lies when trying to date artefacts from areas where basic crafts and techniques have remained unchanged for centuries, especially without written records or comparative material.

### **Sword (Plate LII)**

A second sword owned by the Tama Omda. The pommel and top half of the grip are of leather, the pommel being capped with a decorated silver disc. This had been made from an old English shilling, which had been hammered out then engraved with a typical six sided design. The rest of the grip, down to the guard, has a silver casing decorated in the repoussé style, with designs similar to those in Plate LI.

The large flared quillons are again present on the hilt but these do not have the notch decoration visible on those of Plate LI. The cross design is present at the junction with the langets.

Below the guard is a very solid blade with one large fuller running for approximately half its length from the hilt. The section shows the blade to be convex with a different motif stamped on each side. They have been formed with a chisel edged stamp to form on one side the running wolf and on the other the "orb and cross" of the Solingen and Passau works of Germany, of between the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, if original. The Wallace collection has marks similar to these on items A537, A576 and A725 which date from this period.

Adam, the Omda, thought the "running wolf" to be a hippopotamus and the "orb and cross" a tree. A last comment from him was that the blade was from before the time of Kasalla, which is where and when most of these swords are attributed, hence the local name for them of *Kasallawi*. This literally means "from Kasalla".

The scabbard is of red/brown stained goat skin as most of the scabbards are, again with a wide section before the tip. There are two straps this time, one wide, with a more narrow one lying inside it. The wider of the two is nicely decorated with engraved and punched patterns arranged around two central motifs (see Plate LVIIb). This example has twelve cords attached, along with what is known locally as "agrab" decoration, *agrab* meaning scorpion (Plate LVIC).

### Sword (Plate LIII)

Of the swords described so far this is by far the most common example to be found both in collections and in the Sudan today. I think that most, if not all, *kaskara* have a wooden core to their grips except maybe swords used by the Tuareg, but I am not sure whether to consider these as true *kaskara* even though some do possess European blades.

The hilt of this sword has a pommel of leather windings forming a flat disc, similar width bindings being used to cover the grip. The guard is also of probably the most typical design to be found, the quillons being just slightly flared towards the end, and the langets with a double notch design completing the "T" shape.

The blade is basically flat in section with the edge running from the hilt to the tip. There are three fullers of roughly equal width, in this case 3mm. I say this as many examples of blades with bi-convex section seem to have, consistently, a central fuller of 4mm. flanked by two 3mm. fullers. Both sides of the blade have nice floral, etched motifs, one side having additional stars and crescent moon whilst the other has a snake.

Since my return I have seen two other examples of this blade, one belonging to the Worshipful Company of Armourers and Brasiers (No. W126), the other in the Horniman Collection (No. 22.4.59/3, 47A7 Af33).

The owner of this sword, when asked, said that the blade had been cut down at both ends. This would account for the central fuller running up to the tip, but the three examples I have seen have had the floral designs in the same position on the blades. If the decoration already existed on the blades, then they have all been cut down uniformly or not at all. Finally the blade is of probably German, Spanish or Italian manufacture, dating from the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries.

### **Scabbard (Plate LIV)**

The leather work is slightly more elaborate than the usual sort of scabbard found on *kaskara* as it has no metal fittings other than the two loops which secure the shoulder strap to the scabbard body. There are two straps, in fact, a more narrow one laying within the broader outer strap. Where a scabbard has two straps the sword is carried on the shoulder by the inner strap, the more decorated wider strap being allowed to hang down over the scabbard purely for decorative effect. This outer strap also has a cord arrangement which allows four lengths of leather cording to hang free. There are also two lengths of cord looped through the attaching rings of the strap producing another four ends, eight in total. It was explained to me that these could be used as additional fixings when carrying the sword on a horse or camel saddle.

### **Details from other examples not recorded in their entirety. Plate LV**

- a) Sometimes, during the time I was observing craft techniques, the leather workers would receive swords for repair, this being one. In fact all that was available was the blade with an etched geometric design on both sides, which I had not seen before or since. Accompanying this was the silver casing from the grip, decorated in a similar style to that seen on the grip in Plate LI and the Ali Dinar swords.
- b) This was another example due for repair, this time simply to have the grip rebound with leather. Pushing the casing on the grip up to the pommel, the method of hilt construction was clearly visible. The blade located into slots on the underside of the guard, the tang passing through the guard and wooden grip, then secured with a button, and end cap. The wooden grip is located securely to the guard with tangs which stand up on the hilt on each side above the langets.

Both pommel and grip-casing are of silver, the top surface of the pommel having incised decoration in the form of a six sided design. The edge and underside have some courses of filigree silver work as do the top and bottom edges of the grip.

The blade seems to be a locally made item but does possess motifs which may have been copied from an original earlier blade. The present features have been produced crudely, the face on the central crescent moon being almost unrecognisable. There are also two maker's stamp marks, but again they are crude and I believe were etched on to the blade.

- c) Having a leather disc pommel and a leather bound grip, this is a more common variety of *kaskara*. The cross design is visible above the langets, the quillons being slightly flared towards the ends. The blade is of quite good quality, with three fairly straight fullers, unlike some examples which tend to meander considerably. The two outer fullers are preceded, approximately halfway down the blade, by two crisp crescent moon stamps.
- d) Of all the examples seen at the leather workers' shop this was probably the nicest sword of all. The owner, requiring a complete new scabbard, was a well-to-do member of the Zaghawa tribe, many of whom had now migrated to the southern parts of Darfur from the area around Um Boro because of persistent years of drought over the last decade or so.

The well maintained blade, having a wide single fuller running its whole length, was etched on both sides with a snake and stars combination and a *lohr*. A *Lohr* is a wooden board, used by religious scribes, on which texts from the Koran are written. The *Lohr* on the blade also had a text reading in translation:

Alla give me blessing  
to bring swift victory.  
Let me receive good news,  
but to wait patiently for it.  
Alla is above all,  
and we thank him. . . .

Much of the text was faint and illegible even to the local people but, I expect, continued in the same vein. The only other piece of the text recognised was the name of one, Khalid ibn Wallid, who was a great general and campaigner in the name of Islam during the first half of the seventh century.

It will be noticed that the *Lohr* is headed by a crescent moon within a circle. This may be an accurate representation of an astronomical event known quaintly as the "old moon in the new moon's arms", where the dark side of the moon becomes faintly visible due to reflected light from the earth at the time of a new moon.

- e) Recorded during a break, on a lorry trip, between Kebkebiya and the Jebel Si area to the North East. The owner, an old man, was pleased that I should take an interest in his sword. Most men who dwell in the countryside especially the older ones still carry their *kaskara* when travelling. The hilt is similar to that belonging to item c) with leather disc pommel and a grip bound with thin twisted thonging. Variation only occurs in the fact that the guard has no cross decoration at the junction of quillons and langets.

A central fuller runs almost to the tip of the blade, with the two outer fullers finishing about halfway down, followed by two marks. These

appear to be more like incomplete circles rather than crescents and have some indiscernible features within them, which may or may not be facial.

These and the crescent moon marks in item c) are generally thought to be Toledo marks, but were widely copied in Germany.<sup>3</sup> Other blades marked with crescent moons include Berlin, Zeughaus Nos. S203 and S204; and Museo Stibbert, Florence, Nos. 3928, 3585 and 2697, all of which probably date from the sixteenth century.

### Local Terminology

Here I have listed words used in this particular area of Darfur and are generally understood by all the predominant tribes there. Most are traditional Arabic or Arabic corrupted by local dialects, and in a few cases in purely tribal language, usually Fur.

Cross-hilt sword ( <i>kaskara</i> )	<i>Seif Kasallawi</i>
Button	<i>Moutamana</i>
End cap	<i>Guntara</i>
Grip	<i>Yed</i>
Hilt	<i>Bersm</i>
Blade	<i>Suth</i>
Edge	<i>Hafa or Taraf</i>
Point	<i>Ras</i>
Metal	<i>Ma-adum</i>
Gold	<i>Dahab</i>
Silver	<i>Fad-ha</i>
Brass	<i>Nahas asfa</i>
Copper	<i>Nahas</i>
Steel	<i>Bildi</i>
Iron	<i>Hadid</i>
Skin	<i>Jilid</i>
Goat	<i>Khanam</i>
Cow	<i>Baggar</i>
Crocodile	<i>Timsa</i>
Python	<i>Assalla</i>
Decoration	<i>Tugmeil</i>

### Conclusion

On the appearance of European sword blades in North East Africa, with regard to trade with Europe (see Map Plate LVII).

Since the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there were extensive links between North Africa and countries in Europe which had ports on the Mediterranean Sea. Cities such as Barcelona, Genoa and Venice had direct links with Alexandria. From there goods passed into Moslem hands, and



were then transported by sea along the western coast of the Red Sea to ports such as Aydhab, which was almost directly east of where Aswan is today. From here goods were transported into the interiors of Sudan and Ethiopia via the caravan routes.

From Alexandria goods also went to Cairo, from which the major caravan routes to the west and south operated. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries routes from here existed to Aujila, in the west, via Silva (Sioua). From Aujila, in Libya, a route existed directly south to El Fasher, the provincial capital of Darfur. This route was met here by another from the east, this time Suakin on the Red Sea, via Sennar on the Blue Nile, to El Fasher then on to the area around Lake Chad. This area was yet another junction with a route south from Tripoli via Murzuk and Bilma. Because of the importance of El Fasher with regard to trade from outside Africa, the ancient capital of Sudan, Meroe, was supplied from here.

So from this we can see that the area of Darfur was crossed North-South and East-West by main trading arteries.

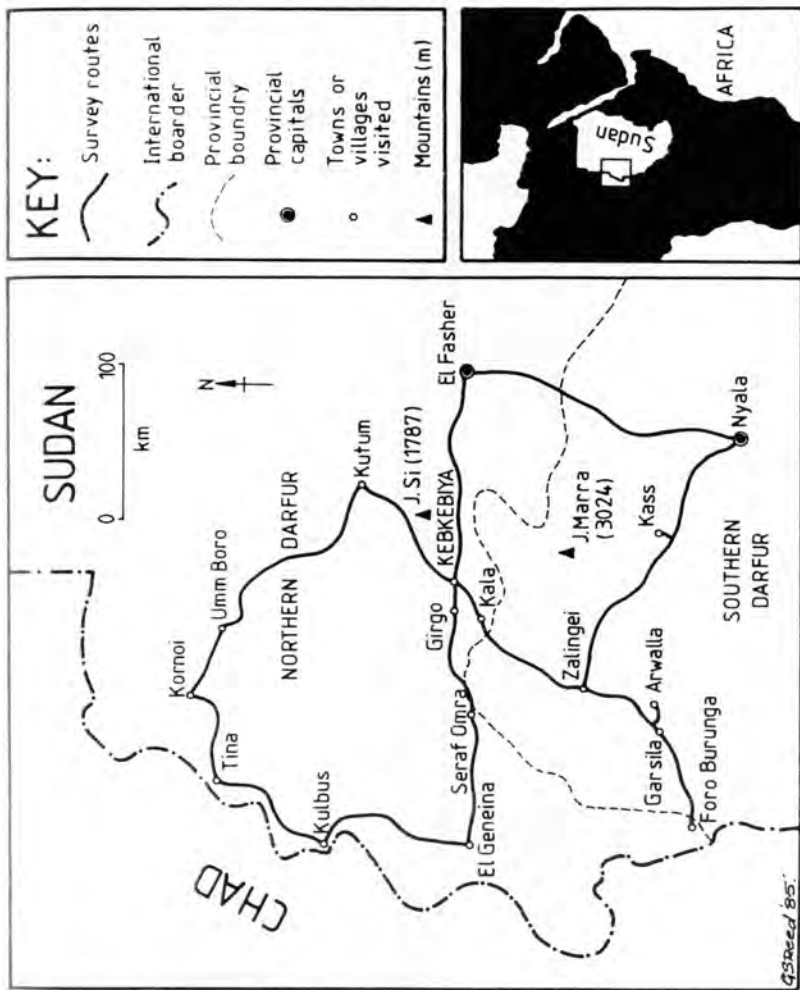
Though somewhat to the east of Darfur I would like to quote a description of items found in Shendy Market by the traveller Burckhardt in 1814.

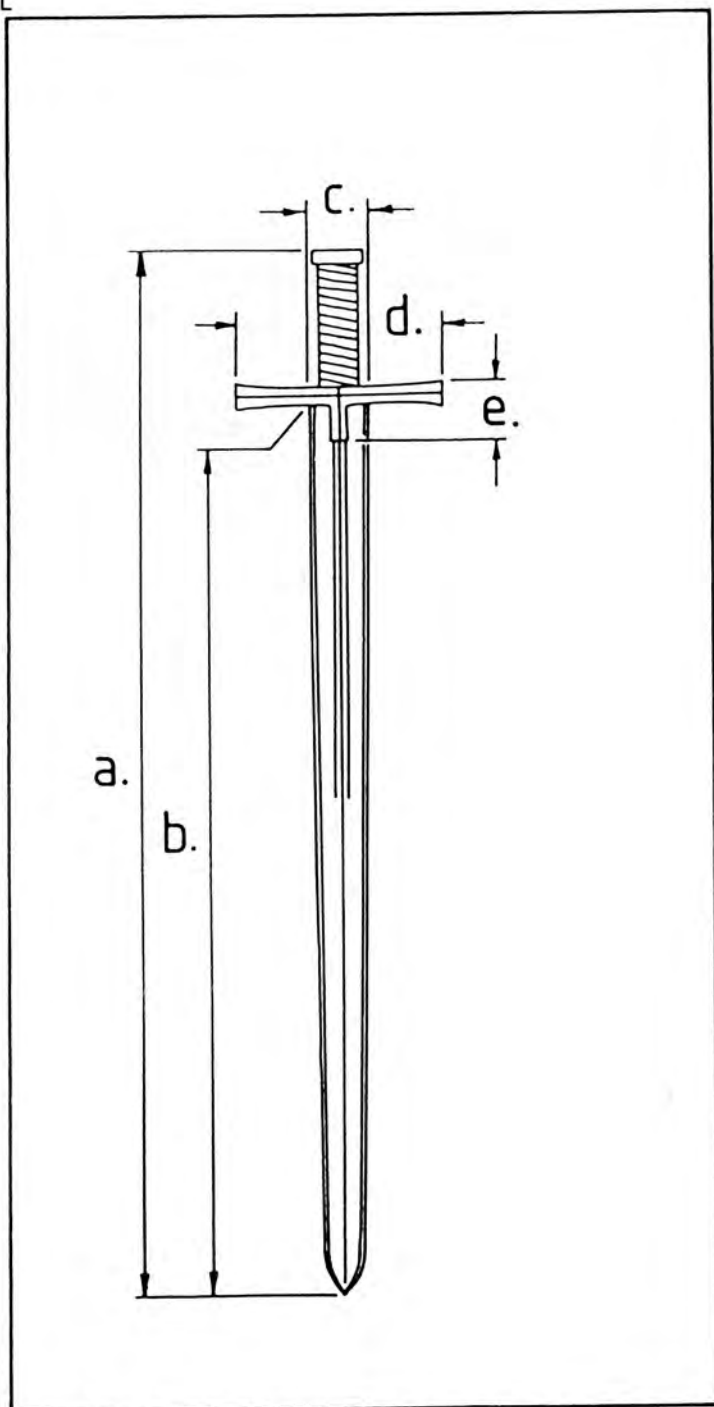
“... you could buy such things as spices and sandal wood from India, antimony to blacken the eyelids, medicines, German swords and razors, saddles and leather goods from Kordofan, writing paper and beads from Genoa and Venice, cloth, pottery and basketware of every kind, soap from Egypt, cotton, salt and Ethiopian gold.”<sup>4</sup>

As mentioned in the text already, *kaskara* were traditionally carried on the left shoulder by the strap. Those scabbards which have one strap have only one function, to go over the shoulder, but those with two straps another element comes into play. After a lengthy discussion with some local men it was indicated to me that if a scabbard has two straps, the usually smaller minor, less-decorated one goes on the shoulder while the larger more decorated one is allowed to hang down over the scabbard.

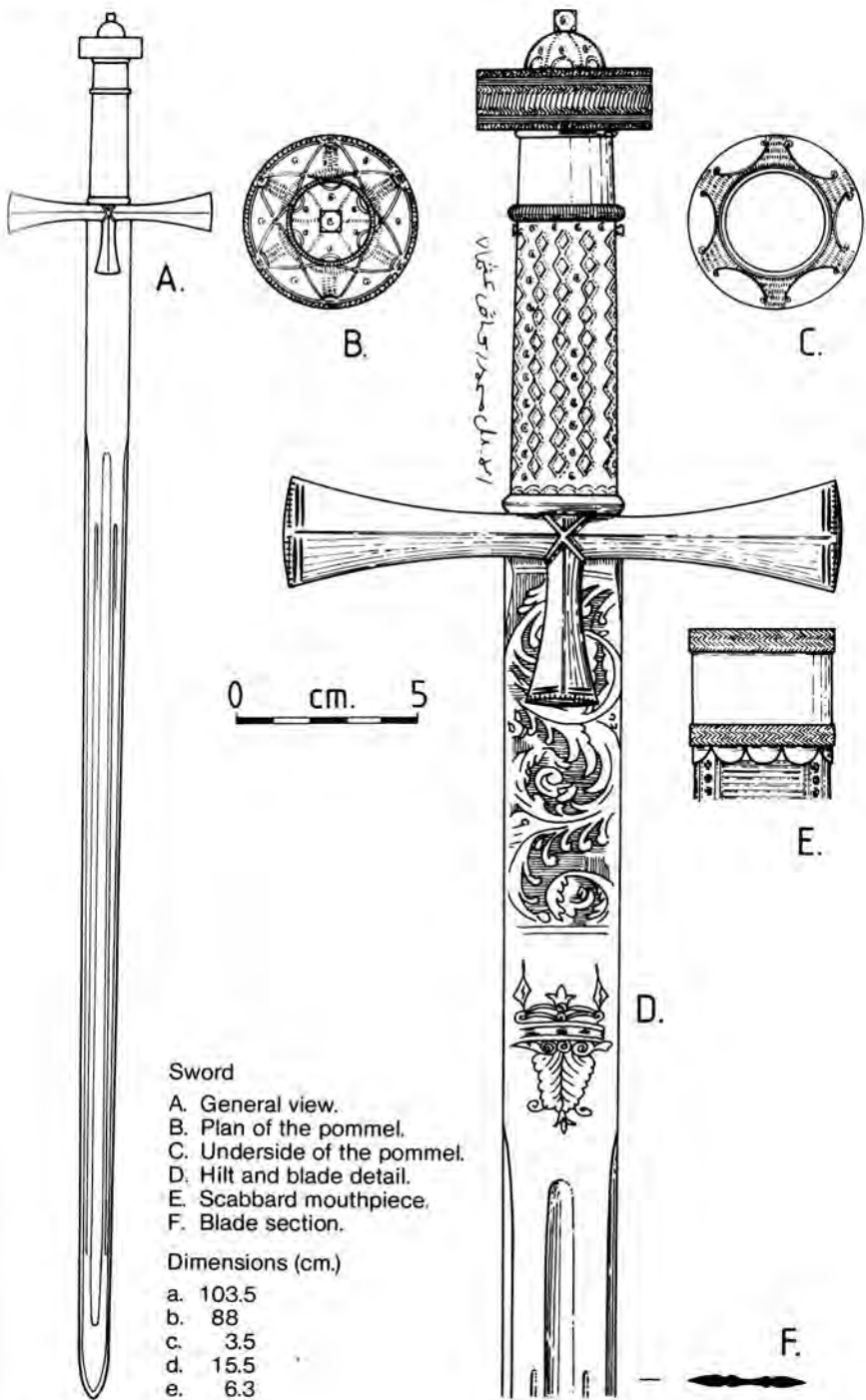
At this time I am not sure whether it is the type of sword or the status of the owner of the sword which demands a certain degree of embellishment upon the scabbard. But scabbards do tend to fall into three categories:

1. Those with a single strap, usually decorated.
2. Those with double straps, the outer one decorated, the minor one sometimes decorated.
3. Those with a double strap, the outer strap decorated with the usual incised and stamped designs, along with the cord arrangements producing between eight and twelve loose ends. A strap of really high quality may also have included within the design the Agrab pattern as illustrated in Plate LVIC producing a continuous figure-of-eight design. This particular example also has three toggles mounted above the Agrab work.





Key to dimensions referred to on Plates LI, LII and LIII.



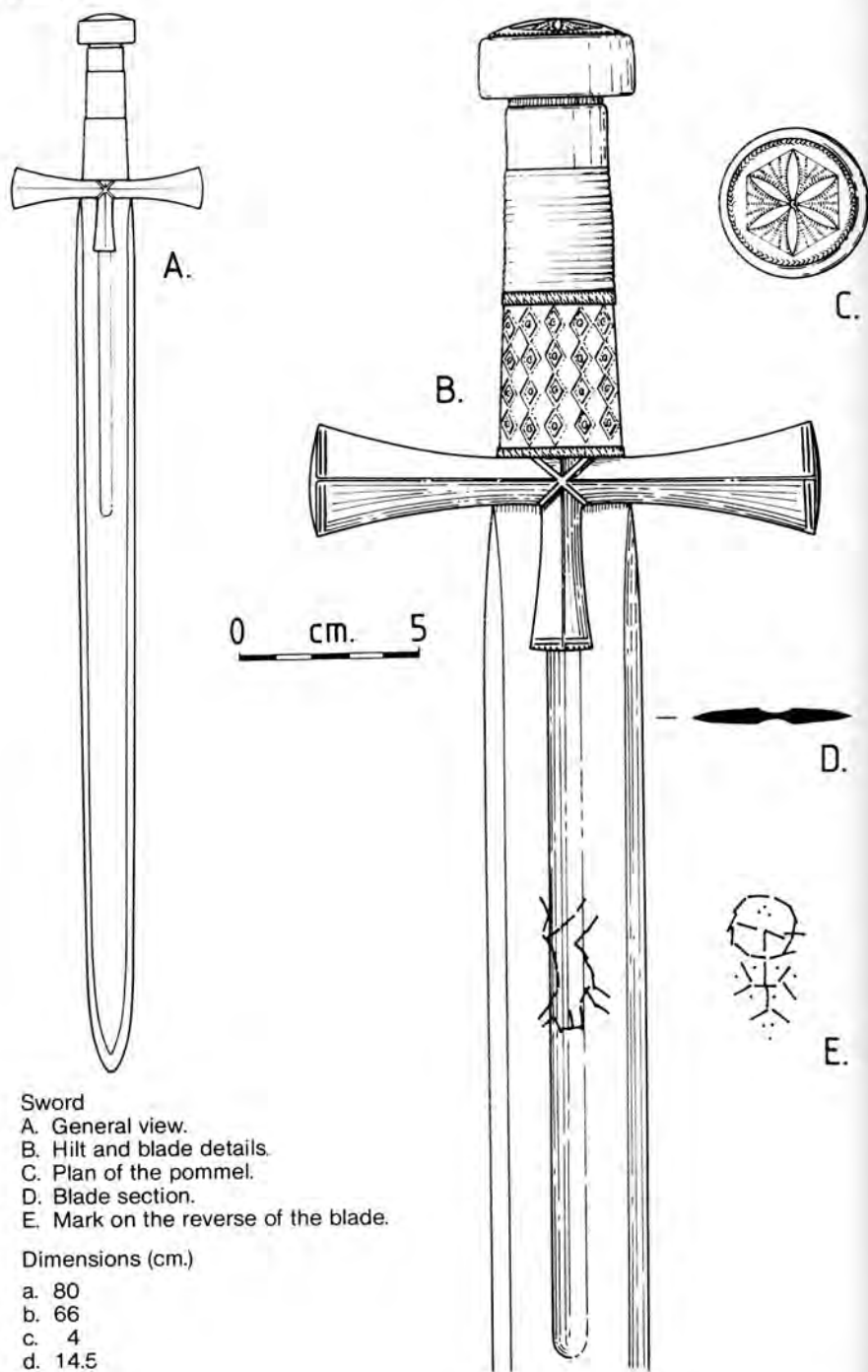
Sword

- A. General view.
- B. Plan of the pommel.
- C. Underside of the pommel.
- D. Hilt and blade detail.
- E. Scabbard mouthpiece.
- F. Blade section.

Dimensions (cm.)

- a. 103.5
- b. 88
- c. 3.5
- d. 15.5
- e. 6.3

PLATE LII

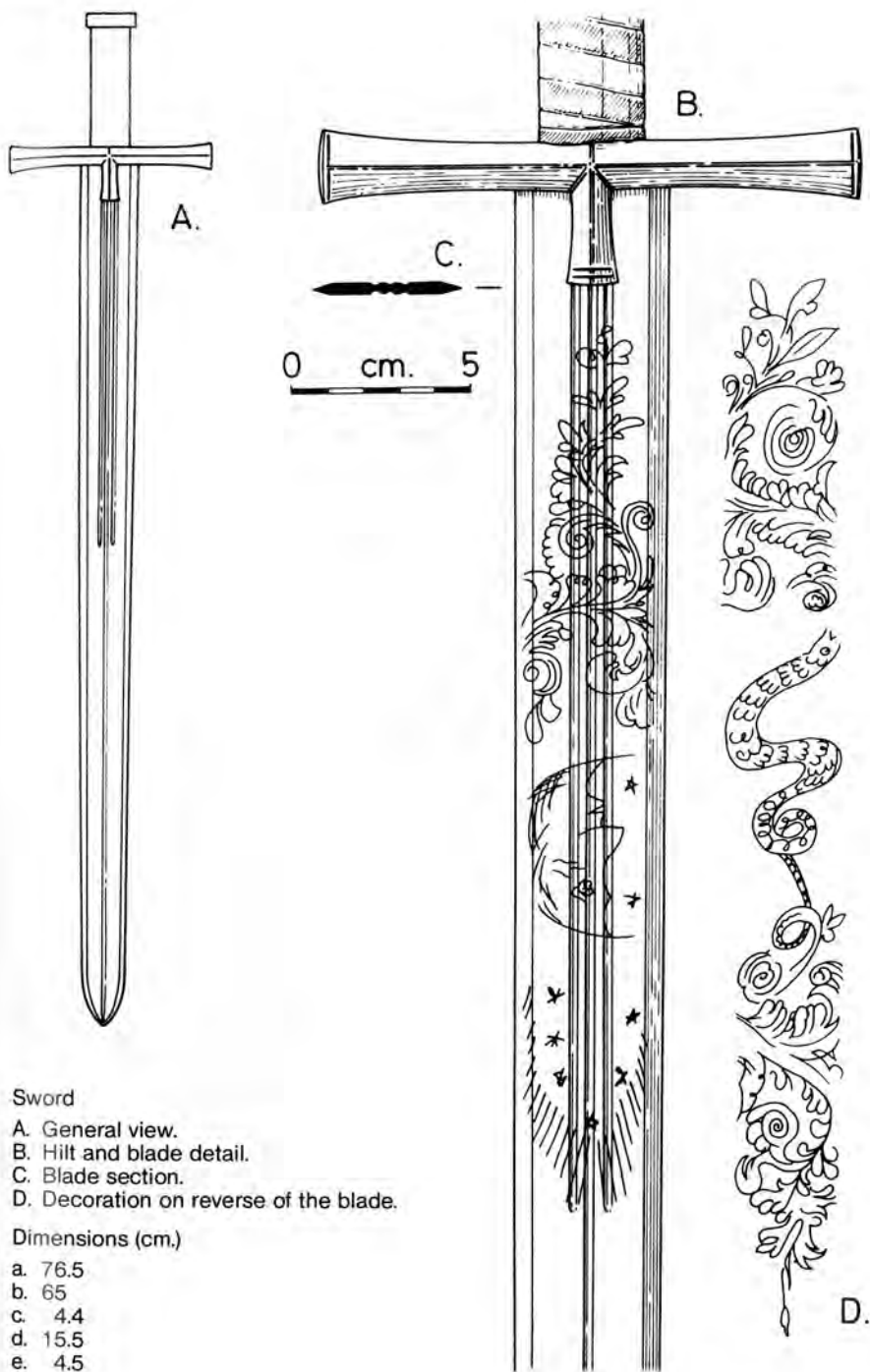


Sword

- A. General view.
- B. Hilt and blade details.
- C. Plan of the pommel.
- D. Blade section.
- E. Mark on the reverse of the blade.

Dimensions (cm.)

- a. 80
- b. 66
- c. 4
- d. 14.5
- e. 6.5

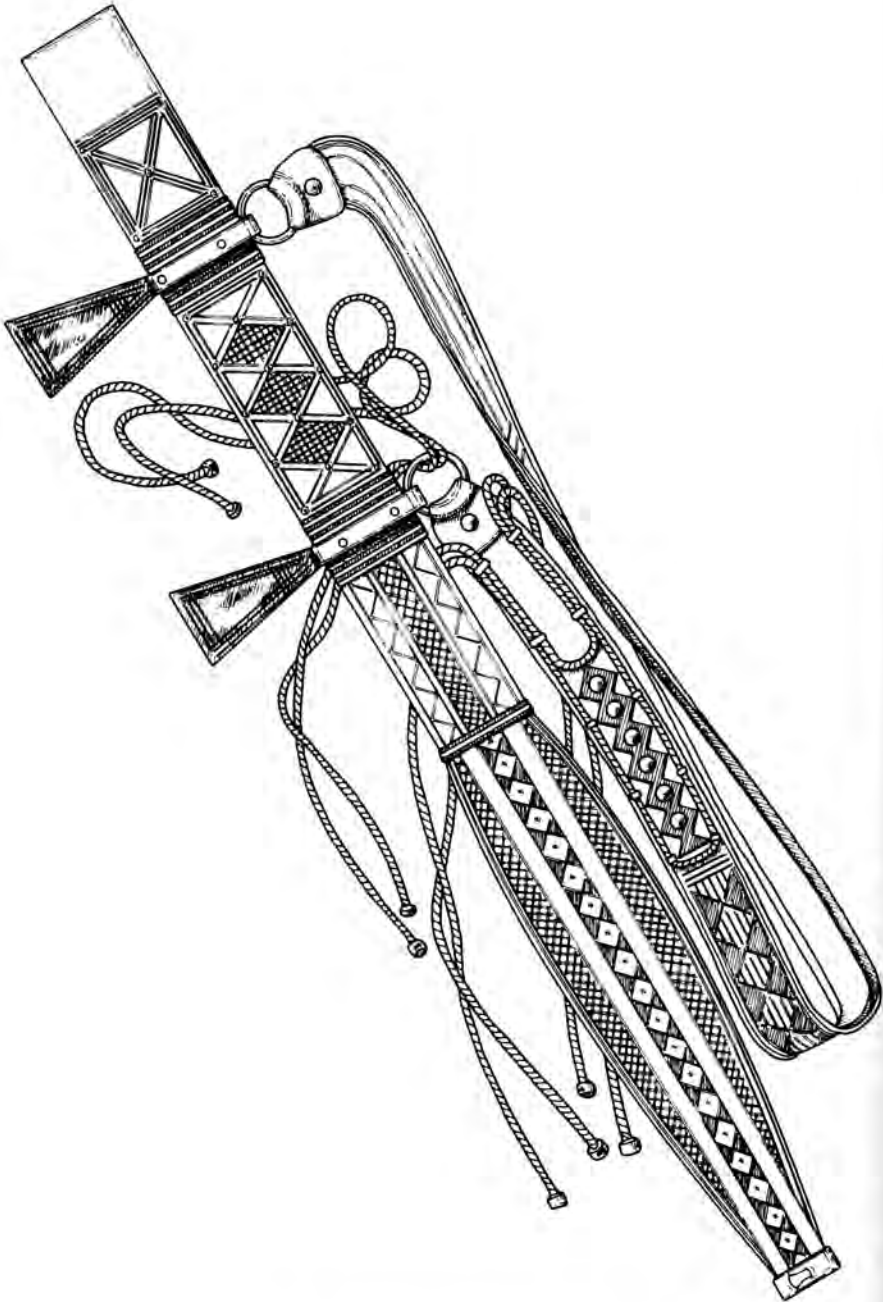


Sword

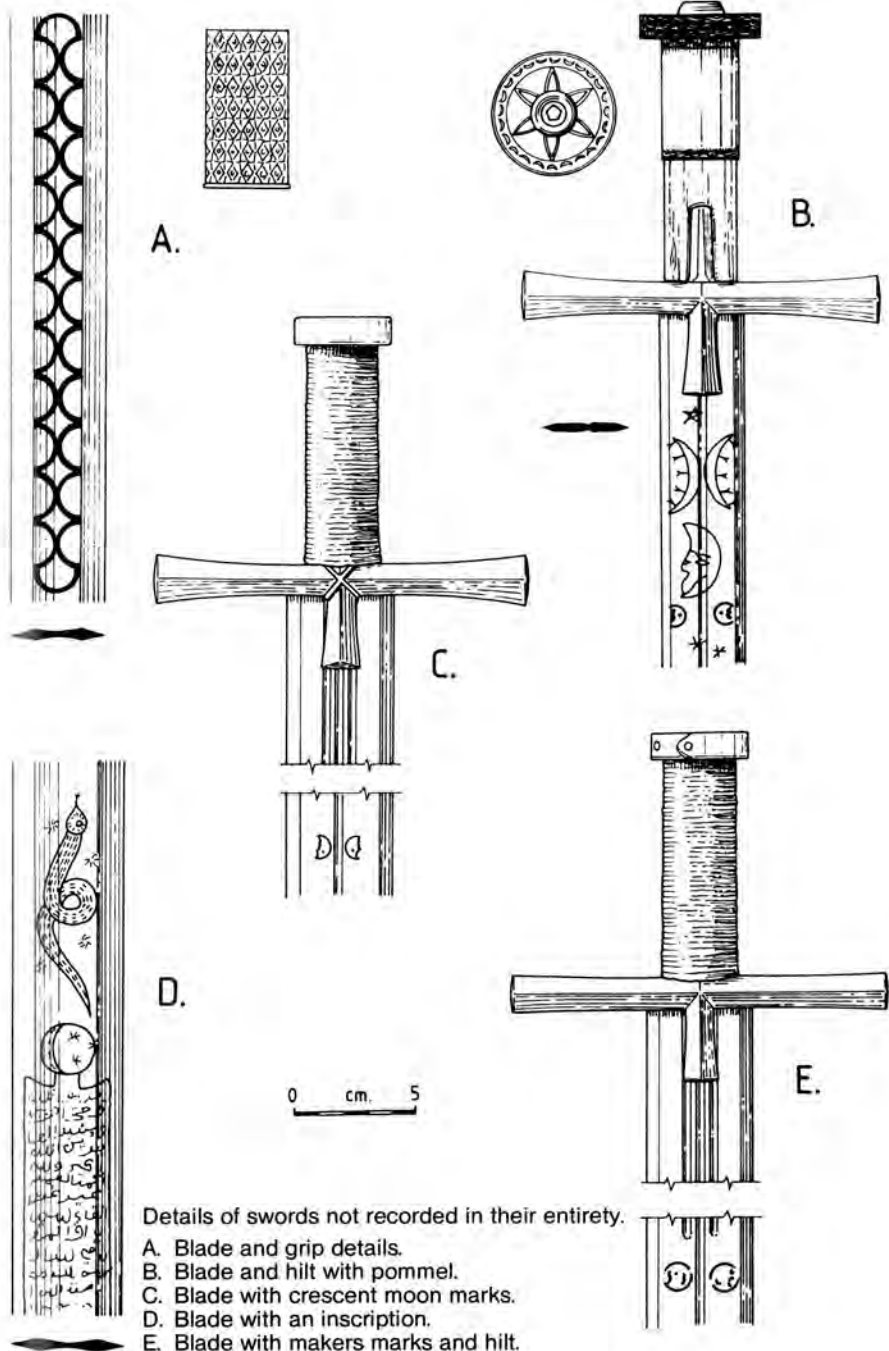
- A. General view.
- B. Hilt and blade detail.
- C. Blade section.
- D. Decoration on reverse of the blade.

Dimensions (cm.)

- a. 76.5
- b. 65
- c. 4.4
- d. 15.5
- e. 4.5



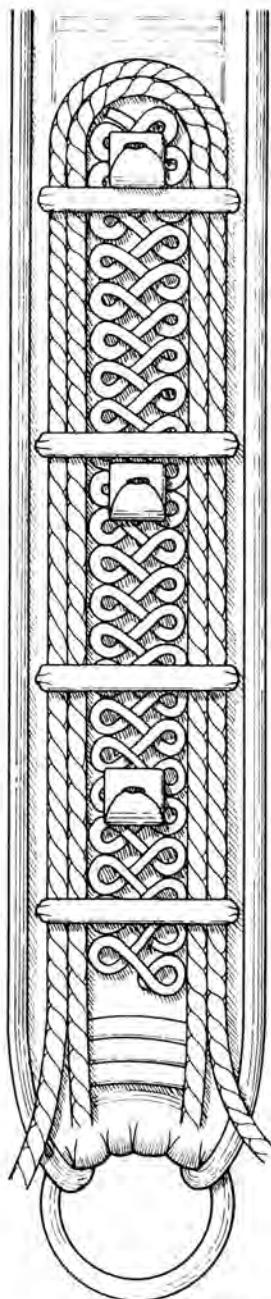
Scabbard accompanying the sword in Plate LIII.



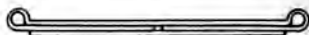
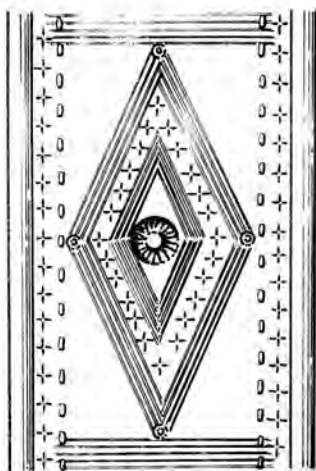
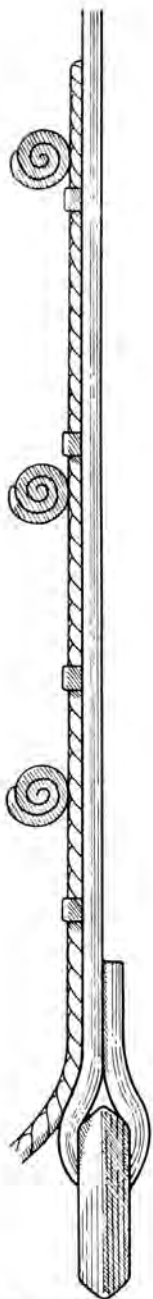
Details of swords not recorded in their entirety.

- A. Blade and grip details.
- B. Blade and hilt with pommel.
- C. Blade with crescent moon marks.
- D. Blade with an inscription.
- E. Blade with makers marks and hilt.





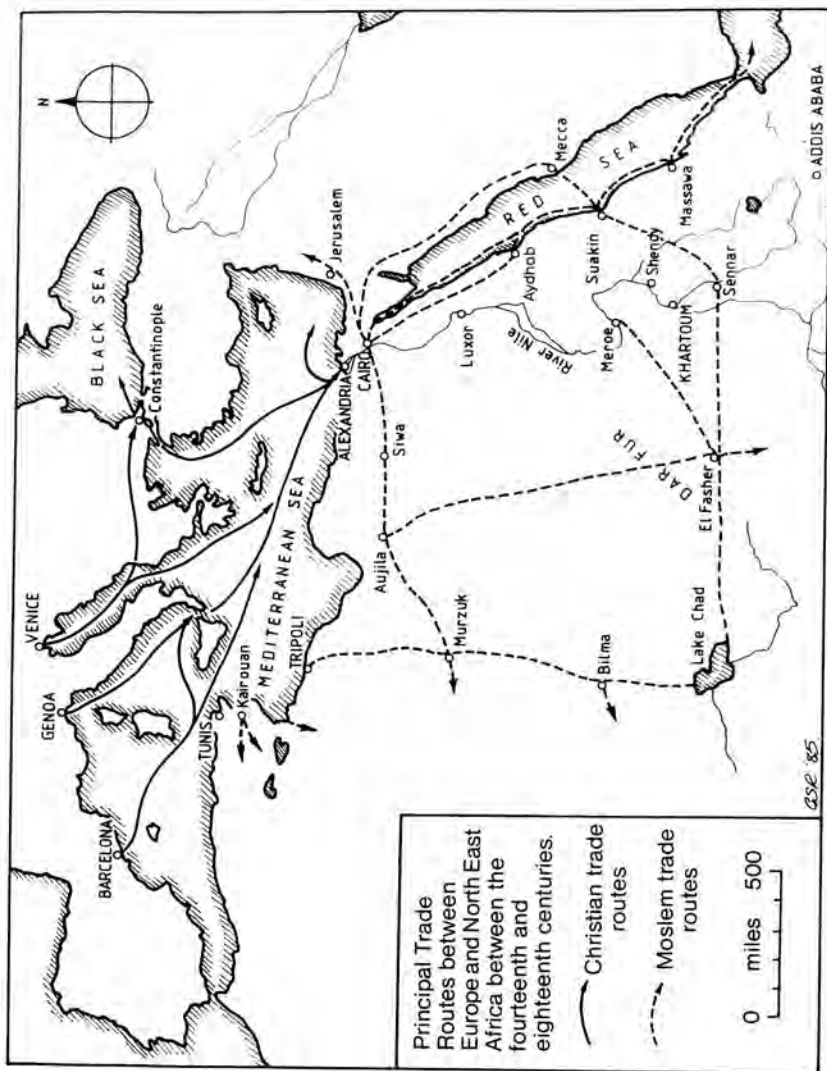
C. Agrab design with cords.



A. Main design on the strap from the sword in Plate LI.



B. Main design on the strap from the sword in Plate LII.



The shape of scabbards is also an interesting feature of these swords. After hearing various suggestions the best I can offer is that the widening of the scabbard imitates a crocodile's head. This would make the large button on the end its nostrils, and the tags which often occur attached to the strap mounts its feet, on one side at least.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank David Edge of the Wallace Collection for first explaining the significance of *kaskara* to me. Antony North of the Victoria and Albert Museum for his encouragement and advice. Especially to Thom Richardson of the Royal Armouries, H.M. Tower of London, for continual advice and information regarding the items described and many other examples at which I am presently engaged in recording.

I must also thank the many people of Kebkebiya who helped in so many ways including Ahmed whose house we lived in for nearly a year and the craftsmen, Adam, Ahmed and Abduli.

Finally to Natalie Tobert who gave me the opportunity to work and travel in the Sudan and whose support was endless especially in the early months while I struggled with my poor knowledge of the Arabic language.

... to these was added an enormous broadsword in a red scabbard and upon the pommel hung two thick gloves, not divided into fingers like ours, but like hedgers gloves, their fingers in one poke.

J. Bruce, *Sennar*, 1771

### NOTES

1. A. J. Arkell, *A History of Sudan*, London, 1961, pp. 214-5.
2. G. Schweinfurth, *The Heart of Africa*, London, 1873.
3. See Sir James Mann, *Wallace Collection Catalogues. Arms and Armour*, Volume II, *Arms*, London, 1962, Nos. A545, A582, A675; and A. Werfersburg, *Solingen Schwertschmeide der 16 und 17 jahrhunderts*, Solingen, 1926.
4. From J. L. Burchhardt, *Travels in Nubia*, London, 1822, cited by A. Moorehead, *The Blue Nile*, London, 1962, p. 158.