

Sword Types

Basics

Giving a short list of sword types seems to be easy. Well - it isn't. For one thing, it will never end because every culture / civilization or language group had and has plenty of sword types and words for them, most of them unknown outside that culture / civilization or language group, thank God. But some of these words made it to other groups already in the past, and more and more outlandish denominations make it into English or German right now. Unfortunately, the precise meaning, if it was known at all, may get lost in the process.

Contrariwise, one and the same word might have different meanings here or there or then and now. Not to mention that there is no 1 : 1 correlation between translations from language to language. The English "broadsword" translates properly to a German "Korbschwert" (=basket sword). The direct translation would be "Breitschwert". This term does exist in German - but it denotes something quite different from a "broadsword".

Only one thing seems to be certain: any short definition of some term, no matter which one, will bring in protests from some camp of believers out there. So let me state on the outset: whatever I write further down, my heart isn't in it. Correct me if you like. I'll go along with you - until the next correction comes in.

My own interest is not so much about the name associated with a particular type of sword but about its metallography. Since correlating sword types to metallography is mostly not a sensible thing to do, my next question is why some particular kind of sword existed at all? The user had always access to or at least some knowledge of some other types. Why did the crusaders not switch from their long straight swords to the curved ones of their opponents and vice versa? Why was the Greek kopis / falcata not used by the Romans but by their Hispanic adversaries?

I know that form often follows function, and that you have to consider stabbing / thrusting vs. slashing / cutting and so on. Fighting on foot or from horseback demands different kinds of weapons, and so does the kind of armor in use during a particular era. But that does not not explain half of it. What is the advantage of a Yatagan (concave curved) relative to a scimitar (convex curved)? Blades with rather similar shapes often have quite different hilts. Why? What function was optimized?



Form follows function but there are often quite different forms for the same function (like attracting members of the opposite sex; fashion in clothing relies on that but differs mightily). The hilts shown above would all go with one and the same blade, and one might ask which one is "best". One just won't get a clear answer. I'm not saying that there aren't any answers to some of these questions. There are - but not to all questions. And keep in mind that some of these answers might be wrong. Worse, there might be several and possibly conflicting answers.

Quite frustrating - and quite interesting! If the present fascination with old swords and old ways of fighting with swords continues, we will get more answers and in parallel more insights into our history.

In what follows I just share with you what I found out about the topic without actually doing much research. Wikipedia was very helpful but I neither claim completeness nor accuracy.

I start with a table containing major sword types plus some types occurring somewhere in the Hyperscript. The links in the left column of the table lead to some more involved description further down, other links lead to modules in the bulk of the Hyperscript. Some terms highlighted in *red and italics* you find explained either somewhere in this module or in the [glossary](#).

English	Deutsch	Short Description
Akinaka	Acinaces. Akinanka, etc.	At best a short sword or rather dagger. Used mainly in the first millennium BC in the eastern Mediterranean region, especially by the Medes, Scythians and Persians, then by the Greeks.
Arming sword	Ritterschwert, Kampfschwert Breitschwert	The high-medieval knightly sword. Together with the <i>long sword</i> , we have the kind of sword that all and sundry in Europe associate with the general term "sword".
Backsword	Pallasch	A backsword has a straight blade with one sharp edge only. Typically a relatively modern (17th - 19th century) European weapon.
Billhook	Hippe	I have added the lowly billhook here even so nobody would count it among swords. Read the description and you see why.
Broadsword	Korbschwert	Also known as " basket-hilted sword ". Refers to a group of early modern sword types (popular the 17th and 18th century), characterized by a basket-shaped guard and a broad blade.
Claymore	Claymore	The word is an English corruption of the Scottish "claidheamh-mòr", meaning "great sword". Scottish variant of the late medieval two-handed <i>longsword</i> , in use from the 15th - 17th century. In later years the word began to refer to the claidheamh cuil, the Scottish basket-hilted <i>broadsword</i> .
Cutlass	Entermesser Entersäbel also Hänger, Messer	A cutlass is a 17th century descendent of an single-edge short sword like the medieval <i>falchion</i> . Typically associated with pirates and sailors.
Epée	Degen	Straight thin blade with e.g. triangular cross-section for thrusting only. Not a weapon of war but part of a dress code and for duelling.
Executioners sword	Richtschwert	A broad, heavy and pointless sword used around the 17th century± in Europe.
Falcata	Falcata	A really evil-looking single-edged sword with a heavy forward-curving, i.e. concave blade. Used by the Spanish against the Romans and later. A falcata is not just similar but more or less identical to the kopis , a sword used by the ancient Greeks around 500 BC.
Falchion	Malchus	A falchion (from Latin: falx=sickle) has a one-handed, single-edged heavy and rather short blade, often getting broader towards the tip, not unlike a <i>machete</i> . The weapon combined the weight and power of an axe with the versatility of a sword. Falchions are found in different forms from around the 11th century up to and including the 16th century. Don't mix up the falchion with the <i>falcata</i> .
Fencing sword Foil Epée Sabre	Fechtschwert Florett Degen Säbel	The modern, well, swords for fencing as sport. The relation to everything else in this table is still recognizable but so is the relation to a toothpick.
Firangi	Firangi	Indian kind of sword (typically long, relatively straight and often double edged) with a Western European blade. The word derived from the Arabic term for a Western European ("Frank") kind of sword. Brought to the East by the Portuguese, or made locally in imitation of European blades. Interesting because the Indian wootz swords were supposed to be far superior to Western swords: Why then the Firangi?
Gladius	Gladius	Short standard-issue sword of the Roman army. Kept for centuries with little variation.

Katana	Katana	Sometimes used as the generic word for "curved Japanese sword" in Japanese. More specific it denotes the bigger one of the two typical Samurai swords; the shorter one is the Wakizashi . The katana evolved in the 15th century from the longer " Tachi " (=long sword), which resembles the Chinese " Miao Dao ".
Katzbalger	Katzbalger	A short Renaissance arming sword, notable for its sturdy build and a distinctive S-shaped or figure-8 shaped guard. Measuring 70–75 cm in length and weighing 1–2 kg, it was the signature blade of the Landsknecht (mercenary). The name refers either to the "balgen" (tussle, brawling) of "Katzen" (cats) as a metaphor for intense, close-quarter combat or to the soft cat-skin (Katzenbalg) scabbard used instead of a solid wooden one.
Kilij	Kilidsch	A kilij (from Turkish kılıç, literally "sword") is a type of one-handed, single edged and moderately curved saber used by the Turks and others after the 15th century. It is similar to shamshir, saif and tulwar but less curved and a bit heavier.
Khopesh	Chepesch Sichelschwert	The Egyptian "sickle sword" , possible related to the (later) Greek <i>kopis</i> .
Kopis	Kopis	5th century BC or so Greek sword , identical to the <i>falcat</i> . Both were weapons but also tools for cutting underbrush etc.
Kukri Khukuri Khukri	Khukuri	More a knife than a sword, with a heavy, inwardly curved edge, used as both a tool and a weapon in Nepal and neighboring countries of South Asia. Similar to a <i>machete</i> in that respect
Long sword	Langschwert	The late medieval knightly sword. Together with the <i>arming sword</i> , we have the kind of sword that all and sundry in Europe associates with the general term "sword".
Machete	Machete	The word means a small macho (=male, strong) and indicates that it might be more than just a large utility tool for cutting underbrush and vegetables A machete is a large, cleaver-like knife, similar to a <i>kukri</i> .
Makheira	Makhaira	Greek sword type; possibly coming from the Persians and related to the <i>kopis</i> . Some think that it was used only as weapon while the kopis was also a tool.
Messer	Messer	A "messer" is just the German word for knife. However, the term also designates a sword used in late middle age by all and sundry since they were simple and cheap. Typically single-edged, rather straight, and with a wide tang that only needed two pieces of wood slapped on to the sides to produce a hilt
(Miao) Dao Changdao		Included here, like the <i>katana</i> , as a representative of many Chinese sword types that all look a lot like Japanese ones or vice versa.
Migration period sword	Alemanni Vendel Merovian Schwert	Migration period swords were popular during the migration period (4th - 7th century), particularly among the Germanic people. There is just no German name for this kind. These swords are usually pattern welded ; take it from there.
Nihonto	Nihonto	Nihonto just means "Japanese sword" of the single-edge curved variety, i.e. most swords made after, say, 1.000 AD. There are all kinds like the early and long <i>tachi</i> , the later and somewhat shorter <i>katana</i> and its companion, the short <i>wakizashi</i> , and so on.
Nimcha	Nimcha	North African sword (especially Morocco), <i>sabre</i> / <i>scimitar</i> type, defined only by its very distinctive hilt
Pulwar	Pulwa	A pulwar is an Afghan version of the Indo-Pakistani <i>tulwar</i> , with a tendency to more elaborately fullered blades than those of the tulwar and a rather different hilt.

Rapier	Rapier Stoßdegen	A rapier is a slender, sharply pointed sword, best suited for thrusting attacks, and mainly used in early modern Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries.
Sabre Saber	Säbel	Relatively light sword with a curved, single-edged blade and often a rather large hand guard. A kind of generic name for most of the curved "Western" swords, just as <i>scimitar</i> addresses most curved Eastern swords.
Samshir	Samshir	The Persian version of the <i>scimitar</i> ; possibly a bit more curved than the <i>kilij</i> , its close relative, and rather like a <i>tulwar</i> but with a different kind of hilt. Pretty much always made from wootz steel; better ones sport complex patterns..
(Sarass ???)	Sarass	The Hungarian / Croation version of the <i>kilij</i> in the 17th century; ancestor of the sabre.
Saif	Saif	The arabic word for "sword"; possibly with roots in the Greek <i>Xiphos</i> . Another and not particularly well-defined member of the <i>scimitar</i> family.
Scimitar	Scimitar Krummschwert Krummsäbel"	The term "scimitar" sounds rather oriental but is European, possibly a corruption if the Persian <i>shamshir</i> . It is a general term for all curved "oriental" swords..
Seax (Sax, Seaxe, Scramaseax, Scramsax)	Sax Scramasax	The word in most languages meant "knife". Nowadays the term is used for the straight single-edged blade that was the kind of cheaper and smaller companion of the <i>spathae</i> and <i>migrations period swords</i> that had to do the dirty work. A backsword is a sax, up to a point.
Smallsword Court sword	Offiziersdegen, Uniformsdegen, Galadegen, Paradedegen, Galanteriedegen	The German terms tell it all: the smallsword is part of your outfit, sort of what one nowadays would call "sword wear". Popular during the 17th and late 18th century, a kind of shrunken version of the rapier and the predecessor of the <i>épée</i> (German "Degen), the duelling sword . Small swords were also used as status symbols and fashion accessories. For most of the 18th century anyone, civilian or military, with pretensions to gentlemanly status would have worn a small sword on a daily basis.
Spatha	Spatha	The Roman / Latin word for sword (loaned from the Greek). Always straight, long and double edged but without pronounced crossguard. More generally the word for all swords in what once belonged to or was close to the Roman empire up to about 800 AD. The fancy pattern welded swords dug out of Danish bogs are spathae. Modern terms for "sword" in many languages go back to the spatha, like the span. espada; ital. spada, or fr. épée .
Tulwar Talwar	Talwar	The Indian version of the <i>samshir</i> or <i>kilij</i> , coming in many variations and often with a wootz blade and / or distinctive hilt.
Two-hand sword	Zweihandschwerter	Only used with two hands, correspondingly long and heavy. In contrast, "bastard" swords are for mostly two-handed use but with a one-hand option; while hand-and-a-half swords were for one-hand use with a two-hand option.
Viking sword	Wikingerschwert	Not a sword made by Vikings but the sword popular during the Viking age (800 - 1050) and mostly made omewhere along the Rhine in central Europe. A straight, double-edged sword that evolved from the <i>spatha</i> . It is somewhat heavier and longer than a spatha, spans the range from pattern welded to laminated all-steel blades, has a more pronounced cross guard and pommel, and sometimes sports inscriptions like " VLFBERT " .
Wakizashi	Wakizashi	The small brother of the <i>katana</i>
Yatagan	Yatagan	A unique sword type, one-handed, with a concave (or recurved) blade), a unique hilt and no cross guard. Popular in the Osmanic empire from around 1500 - 1900, peaking in the 19th century.
Xiphos	Xiphos	The straight double-edged ancient Greek sword, leaf-shaped and quite similar to bronze swords and early Celtic (" Hallstatt ") swords.

▲ **Akinaka** (Acinaces, Akinakes,; Plural: Akinakai)

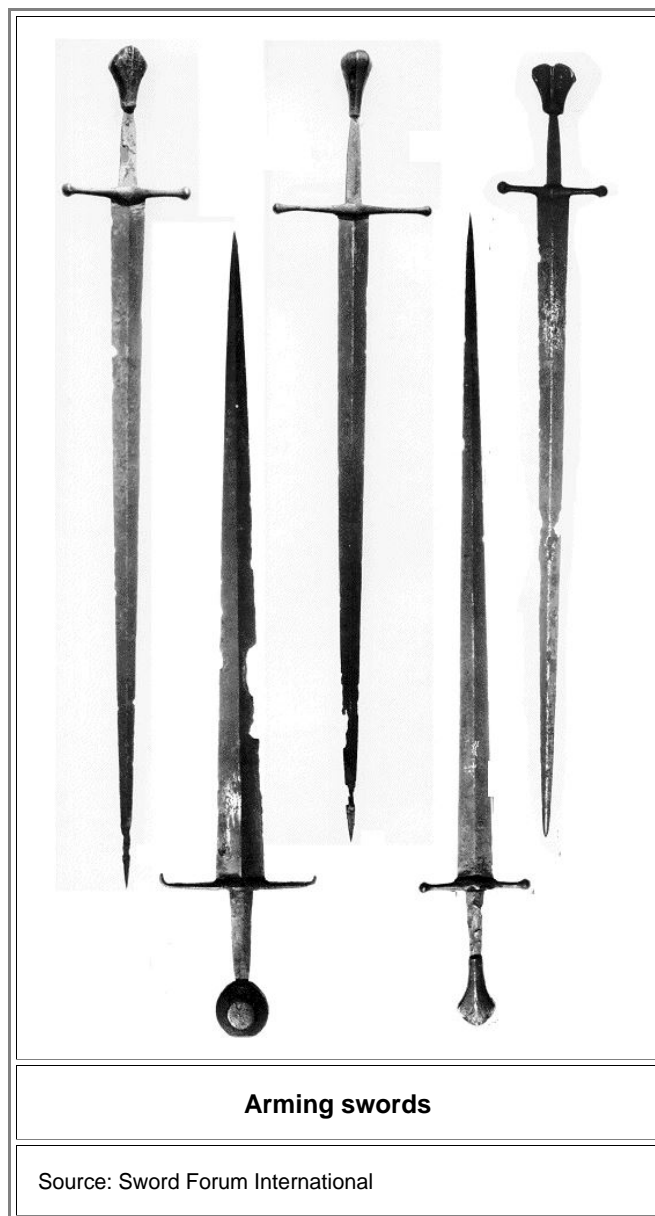
- Type of dagger or short sword that was made from bronze or iron (and occasionally gold) in more or less the same shape / fashion. It was used mainly in the first millennium BC in the eastern Mediterranean region by all and sundry. The "[bollocks type](#)" as shown below is often associated with the Scythians and found in their "Kurgans" - substantial burial mounds found all over Eurasia. The stuff in there is often heavily corroded but with luck could also be perfectly preserved as we see below.
In the ancient literature akinakai are rarely mentioned as such but are usually referred to to as "Persian sword". It can be seen in ancient art, however; where the King's bodyguards and important nobles wear an akinaka - [here](#) is an example.



- The technology of iron akinakes and their influence on the development on iron an steel technology in the west is not known. For unclear reasons no akinaka has ever been metallurgically examined (with one [accidental exception](#))
A bit more to Akinaka can be found [here](#); including a picture of the famous golden one.
A hell of a lot more to Akinakai can be found [here](#)

▲ **Arming sword** (Ritterschwert = knight's sword; Kampfschwert = fighting sword; Breitschwert = literally broadsword)

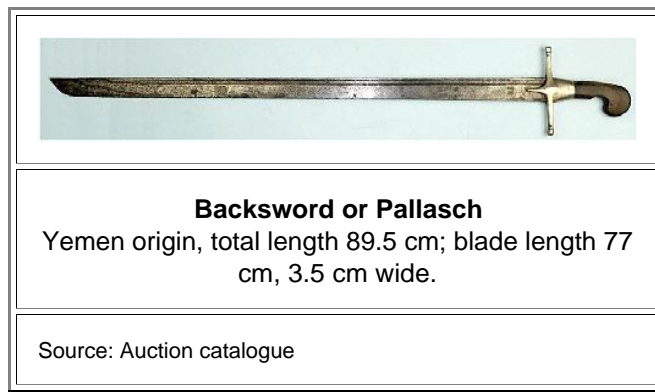
- The term is not very popular but describes "the" quintessential European sword; the basic kind of sword most people would describe if asked "what is a sword"?
"The arming sword (also sometimes called a **knight's or knightly sword**) is a type of European sword with a single-handed cruciform hilt and straight double-edged blade of around **70 cm - 80 cm**, in common use from the 11th to 16th centuries." says Wikipedia.
It's the kind of older sword you see in many museums and castles. They are so common that, funny enough, nobody seems to have taken a picture. There is practically nothing in the Net!
Well - here are a few from the always reliable Sword Forum International:



- Details can be found in [Oakeshott's book](#). The German terminology tends to be a bit more descriptive and differentiated. Note that the German "Breitschwert" (=broad sword if transcribed literally) is an arming sword! Arming swords belong to the "high medieval" (Hochmittelalter) era (about 1050 - 1250), the related *longsword* appeared after that in the late medieval (Spätmittelalter) era (about 1250 - 1500). For comparison: The [crusades](#) took place essentially from 1095 - 1272. After 1272 the holy fighting spirit flared up occasionally again, and the very last crusade ended with the **ignominious battle of Nicopolis** (Bulgaria) in 1396, where the 10 000 or so allied knights of Hungary, Bulgaria, Croatia, Wallachia, France, Burgundy and Germany first lost the battle to the Ottoman forces under Sultan Bayezid and then their heads to the sword. Bayezid, majorly pissed about the whole crusade thing, had all but a handful of survivors put to the sword (probably of the scimitar type).

Backsword (Pallasch)

- A backsword is a type of European sword characterized by having a straight single-edged blade and a hilt with a single-handed grip. Later examples often have a "false edge" on the back near the tip, which was in many cases sharpened to make an actual edge and facilitate thrusting attacks.



- Backswords originated with a slightly curved blade and a kind of basket hilt in Hungary as the sword of the heavy noblemen cavalry. The German word "Pallasch" is simply a transcription of the Hungarian pallos=sword. We have a first case where the name in some language, here German, is simply the general word for sword in the original language. We have in parallel the case that the word in English describes some property: "backsword" means a sword with a flat "back" or "spine" opposite the cutting edge.
- Backswords were used all over the world it seems. First by the cavalry but later also by the infantry. Backswords are simple, easy to make and thus cheap. They also were easy to use. Soldiers who had a sword not as primary weapon but as a kind of last resort could not make very good use of a long double-edged blade since that needed considerable skill if it was to be used to full advantage.

Billhook (Hippe)

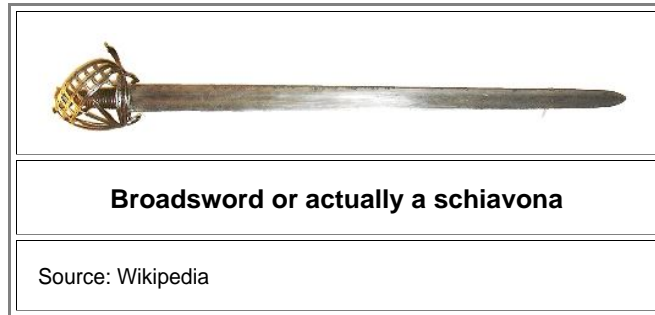
- The billhook is an absolutely essential farming tool that you will find in one form or another all over the world.



- As far as I'm concerned, it is about the only farming tool with a potential for killing people that has not been turned into a weapon every now and then like [scythes](#), axes, hatchets or [machetes](#). While shorter, it does have some relation to falcatas, machetes, kukris and whatnot.

Broadsword (Korbschwert)

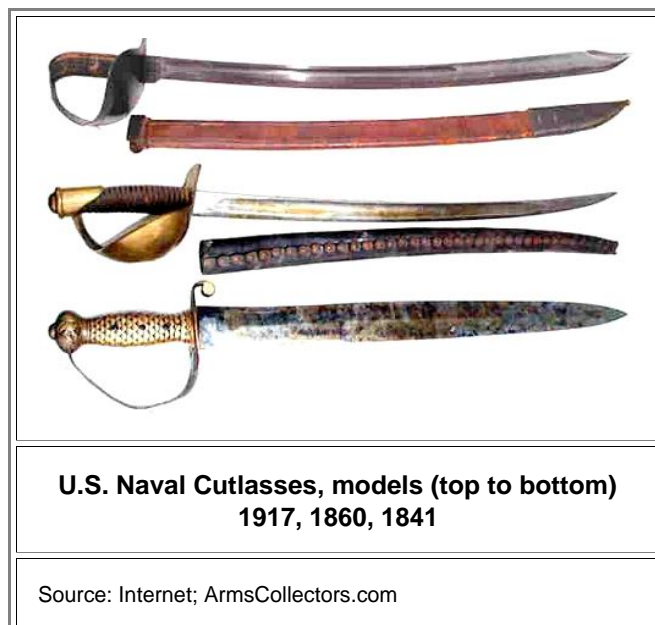
- In English a broadsword is more or less the same as a basket hilted sword with a *broad* blade in contrast to the (also often basket hilted) *rapier*, the slim dueling sword of civilians, a kind of toy from the viewpoint of a soldier.



- Broadswords are also known as (Italian) **Schiavona** or (Scottish) **claidheamh cuil** (meaning "backsword"). I refer to this to illustrate the easy confusion inherent in all these words and types. A broadsword, if single edged, *is* a backsword or Pallasch if you like. To make things worse, the direct translation to German yields "**Breitschwert**", and this is something else. The schiavona, by the way, was popular in Italy during the 16th and 17th centuries. It goes back to the sword of the 16th-century Balkan mercenaries of Istrian and Dalmatian Slavs, *Schiavoni* in Old Italian, who formed the bodyguards of the Doge of Venice.
- A German "Breitschwert", also known as "Ritterschwert" (=knight's sword) or Kampfschwert (=fighting sword), is your typical straight double-edged sword with a long cross-guard (so it imitates the Christian cross) that could be used with one hand in contrast to the "Langschwert", the long sword. It is thus the basic sword of the medieval fighting noblemen, say 10 th - 15th century.
- To make the confusion complete you just need to google the pictures for "broadsword" and you get none of the above but a lot of modern phantasy stuff.

Cutlass (Entermesser, Entersäbel)

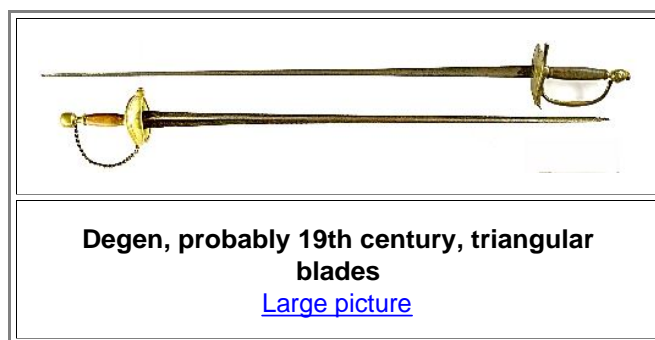
- A cutlass is a short, broad sabre or slashing sword, with a straight or slightly curved blade sharpened on the cutting edge, and a hilt often featuring a solid cupped or basket-shaped guard. It was a common naval weapon.



- The word "cutlass" has a history of its own. It goes back to a 17th-century English variation of "coutelas", which in turn is 16th-century French word for a big knife. In modern French a knife is a couteau. Ultimately, the couteau / coutelas or coltello in Italian goes back to the Latin "cultellus"=small knife. The cutlass is a 17th century descendent of the edged short sword exemplified by the medieval *falchion*. It was a kind of low prestige weapon, used by woodsmen, simple soldiers, and in particular by sailors, including pirates, from the 17th century and up. "It was not only robust enough to hack through heavy ropes, canvas, and wood, but short enough to use in relatively close quarters, such as during boarding actions, in the rigging, or below decks. Another advantage to the cutlass was its simplicity of use. Employing it effectively required less training than that required to master a rapier or small sword, and it was more effective as a close-combat weapon than a full-sized sword would be on a cramped ship." says Wikipedia. I might mention that it was probably cheap and easy to fix yourself. Its roots might go back to the low prestige but non-nonsense *sax* or seax of antiquity and the "dark ages" in Europe if not to the even older *falcata* and the [Greek kopis](#).
- Cutlasses made it to the standard sword of many navies; see the picture above. Being sturdy and short, it was good for close-range combat on board of ships and, not to forget, rather cheap. In order to confuse things a bit, in the English-speaking Caribbean, the term "cutlass" is used as a word for *machete*. That might well be so because the machete might have the cutlass as its ancestor.

Épée (Degen)

- The épée needs to be seen with a bit of care. Not only is it the usual [French corruption](#) of the good word (e)spatha and simply means sword, the English tend to see the word as more or less synonymous with the modern [fencing foil](#). The German "Degen" in some of its subclasses comes closer to what the term shall mean here. The word "Degen" is related to the English "dagger" but the root of "daga" relating to both is not all that clear.
- A "Degen" has some overlap with the rapier, a term not all that common in Germany. Not only is it a French word, worse, the French do not even know where it comes from. If we exclude the "Haudegen" (literally the hitting Degen), a Degen usually comes with a triangular cross-section (in contrast to the *rapier* with a flat blade) and then is a "Stoßdegen" (thrusting Degen).



- A Degen, again in contrast to a rapier, is extremely bendable. It was used for duelling but essentially was a part of proper dress in the 18th and 19th century and came in many forms.

Executioners sword (Richtschwert)

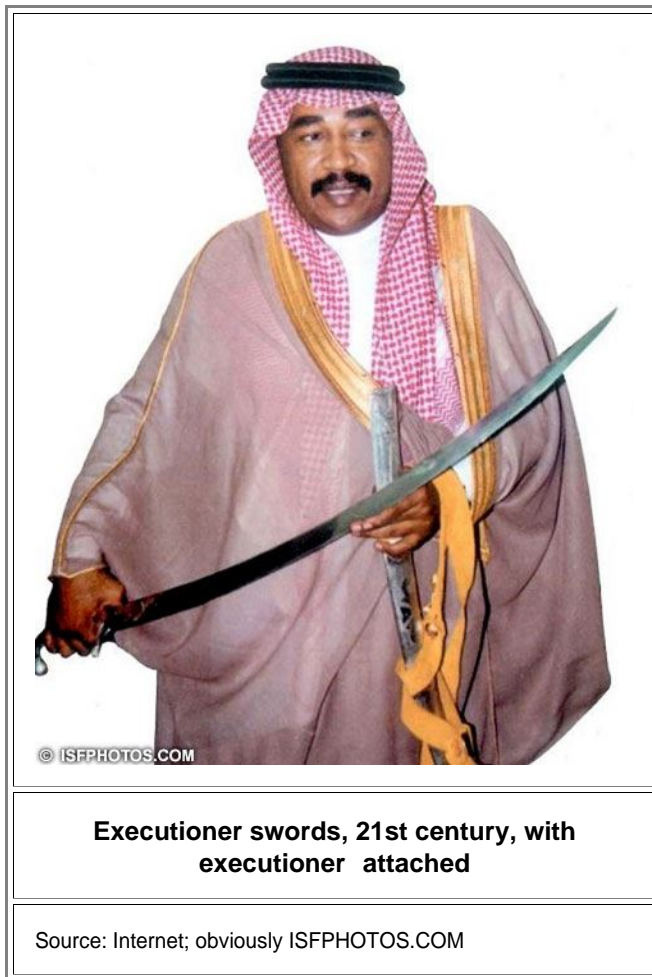
- An executioner's sword is a kind of Medieval European specialty; the earliest known one is from 1540. They were in wide use in 17th-century Europe, but fell out of use quite suddenly in the early 18th century, before the guillotine came into use around 1790. The last executions by sword in Europe were carried out in Switzerland in 1867 and 1868. An Executioners sword is for two-handed use, rather broad and heavy, and without a pointed tip. Not only was a tip not needed but this kind of sword was "unclean" (just like the executioner) and must never be used in battle or to harm a honest person.
- The religious undertones of the times often manifested themselves in little pious wishes engraved into the blade. The middle sword below, for example, say:
[Wan Ich Das Schwert thue Auffheben - So Wünsche Ich Dem Sünder Das Ewige Leben](#)
("When this sword I do lift - I wish the sinner the eternal life as gift.")
The spirit of both persons involved in a decapitation must have been quite uplifted by this.



Executioners swords (used), 17 th century

Source: Photographed on Coburg Castle, South Germany

- Of course, before special executioners swords became the fashion, regular sword were used and still are. Watching a public beheading is still an item on the short list of allowed weekend fun activities in present-day Saudi Arabia. You might have an intimate if brief date with the guy and his sword shown below if you were convicted, among other things, of apostasy (renunciation of Islam), blasphemy, sodomy, homosexuality or lesbianism, idolatry (worship of an idol or a physical object), sorcery or witchcraft, whatever the difference, and waging war on God. In addition, Saudi Arabia has recently passed a law recommending the death penalty for anyone caught carrying or smuggling a bible into the country.



▀ Falcata (Falcata)

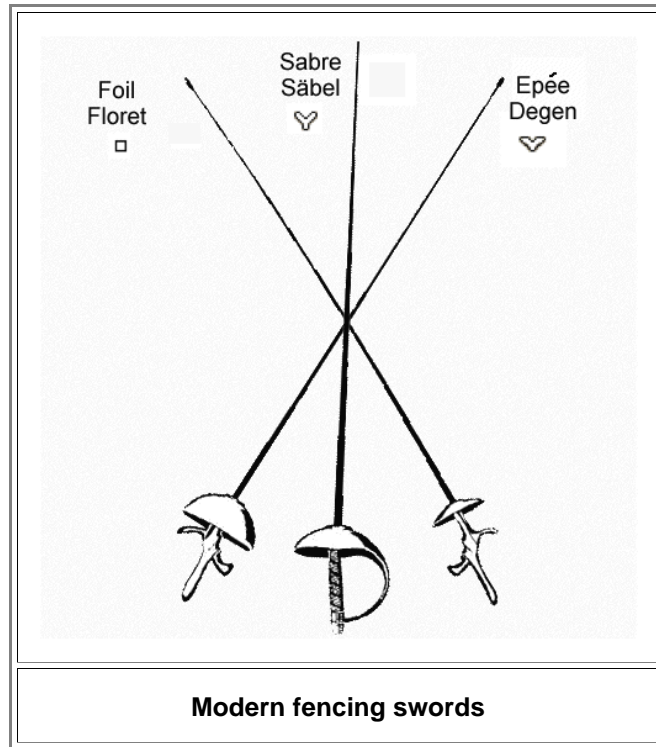
- The name falcata is "recent", introduced by one Fernando Fulgoso in 1872, and supposed to mean "sickle-shaped".



- "This shape distributes the weight in such a way that the falcata is capable of delivering a blow with the momentum of an *axe*, while maintaining the longer cutting edge of a sword" says Wikipedia. Falcata were used by the ancient Greeks in the 4th - 5th century BC and the old Spaniards until 100 AD or maybe longer. [Alexander the Great](#) and his troops may have brought it to India where it mutates into the kukri.
- A lot about the falcata is rather unclear. Some believe that the [Celts](#) introduced it to the Iberian Peninsula, together with iron working in general, and that it developed independently of the Greek *kopis*. The only difference, however, are details of the grip. The *kopis* is usually depicted with a straight grip, whereas the end of the falcata's grip curves around to form a semi-enclosed hilt. This may or may not be true. We certainly need more data and more detailed investigations.

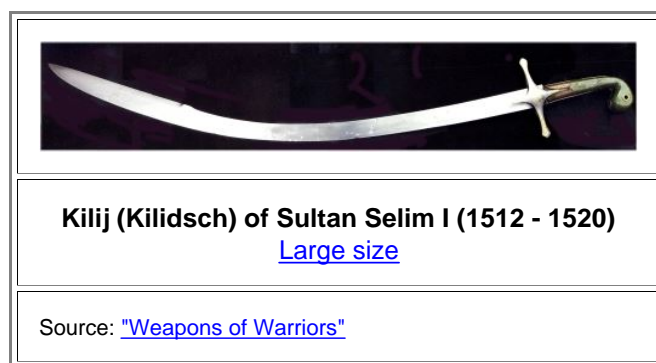
Fencing swords; modern

- We have the **Foil** (Florett), the *épée* (Degen) and the *sabre* (Säbel). All three look rather similar and not much like most of the other sword types shown here. Details matter very much in this case - but not to us here. While I have no doubts that a modern fencing master would be able to kill any old-fashioned opponent rather quickly with his "tooth pick" or "needle", the metallurgy of his sword is not of much interest for us. You find it (indirectly) in the section about [modern steel](#).



Kilij (Kilidsch)

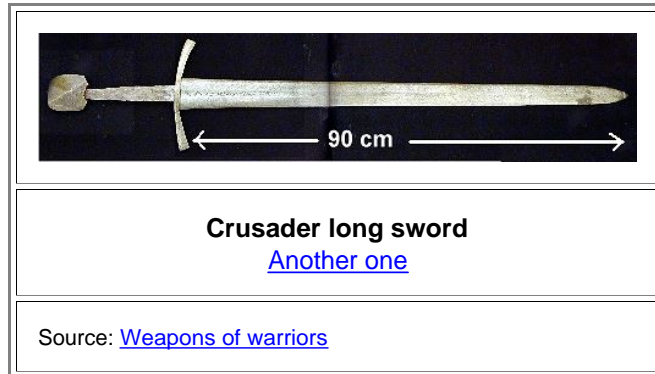
- The Turkish root verb "kir-" means "to kill", "to slaughter", "to slay". With the suffix "-inç" it mutates to "kir-inç" (=instrument of slaughter) from which derives "kiliç" meaning sword. The term is now predominantly used for the one-handed, single edged and moderately curved saber, often with a "yelman" (see below) that was used not only by the Turks but by all and sundry in the general region of Turkey and the Ottoman Empire (whatever that implies) after the 15th century.



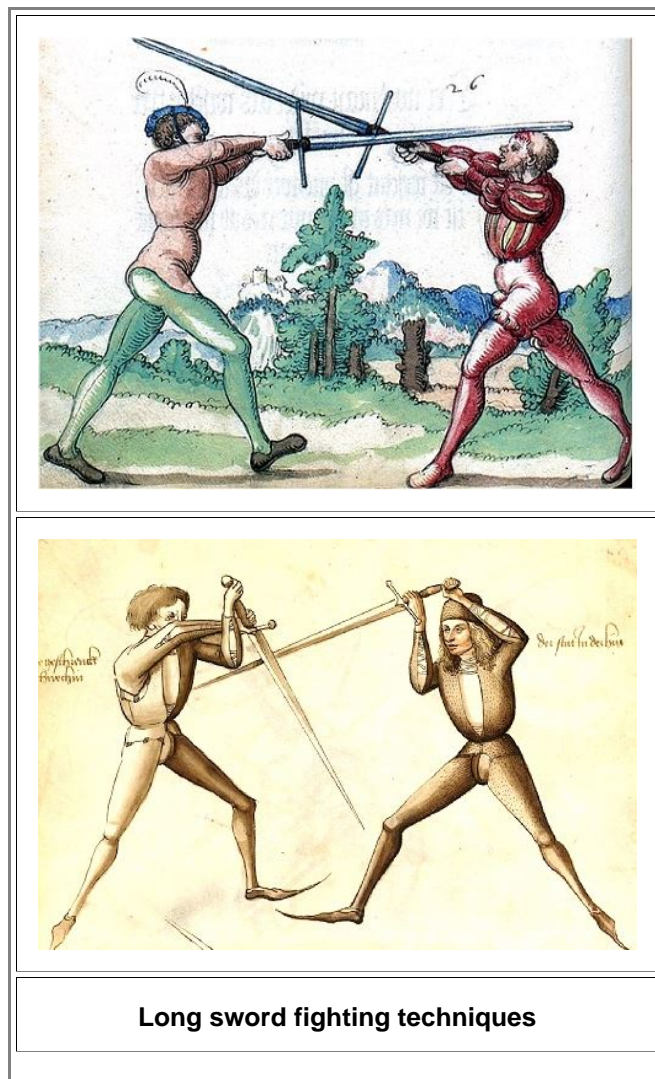
- A kilij is not all that different from the *Shamshir*, typically associated with Persia / Iran, the Arabian *saif* or the *tulwar*. They are all scimitars, if you like. A kilij is typically a bit more massive and a bit less curved than a samshir / tulwar. Its blade may curve slightly from the hilt and more strongly in the distal half, and the width of the blade stays narrow (with a slight taper) up until the last 30% of its length, at which point it flares out and becomes wider. This distinctive flaring tip is called a "yalman" or yelman (false edge) that adds to the cutting power of the sword and in particular to its thrusting capabilities.
- It goes without saying that a kilij was typically made from wootz steel.

Longsword (Langschwert)

- A longsword (also spelled long sword, long-sword) is to some extent just a longer version of the *arming sword*. That necessitates to make the blade a bit smaller in order not to gain too much weight and to fine-tune the geometry for proper handling. Just like the arming sword, it is the kind of sword that all and sundry in Europe associate with the general term "sword". It certainly advertised for its owner that he had a [long one](#). The blade of long swords measures *90 cm - 110 cm* and it was popular during the late medieval and Renaissance periods (about 1350 to 1550) but also before and after that time period. The sword shown below, while technically a long sword, is a kind of in-between showing its relation to the arming sword. A Mamluck warrior took it from a crusader in 1263. It was used for a number of years and acquired an inventory stamp of the armory in Alexandria, Egypt. Eventually it made it into the [Askeri museum in Istanbul](#).



- Between the one-handed arming sword and a fully two-handed long sword are all kinds of in-betweens like the "**bastard sword**" or "**hand-and-a-half sword**" (*Anderthalbhänder*). There is far more to the longsword and its cousins (like the [claymore](#)). Suffice it to add that the really long blades are found later, 15th century say, when the rapier and the épée took over. Fighting with the long sword, however, remained in fashion as a kind of sports among civilians and sword-fight schools appeared, some of which issued "manuals":

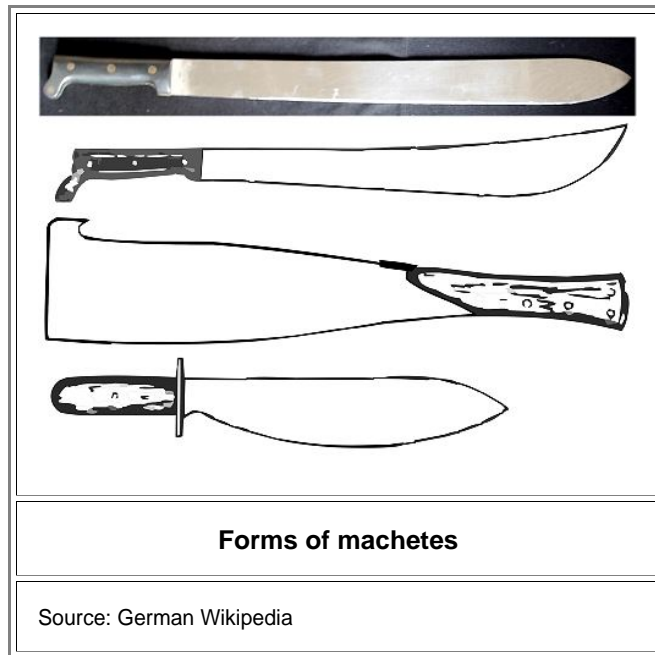


➤ Machete (Machete)

- The word comes from the Spanish "macho"=male, strong; it means "little macho" or "little man" and indicates not only that the machete was always a bit more than just a tool to cut underbrush and sugar canes with but also goes well with my personal view of [how swords acquire names](#).

The locals in the Caribbean and around may also call a machete a "[cutlass](#)", providing for some confusion but also giving a strong hint as to the ancestry of the machete.

A machete is a large cleaver-like knife or "sword" (how long does a knife have to be to qualify as sword?) that comes in many shapes and sizes (see the picture below). A common denominator might be that it is "top heavy", giving it axe-like properties like a falcata or kukri.

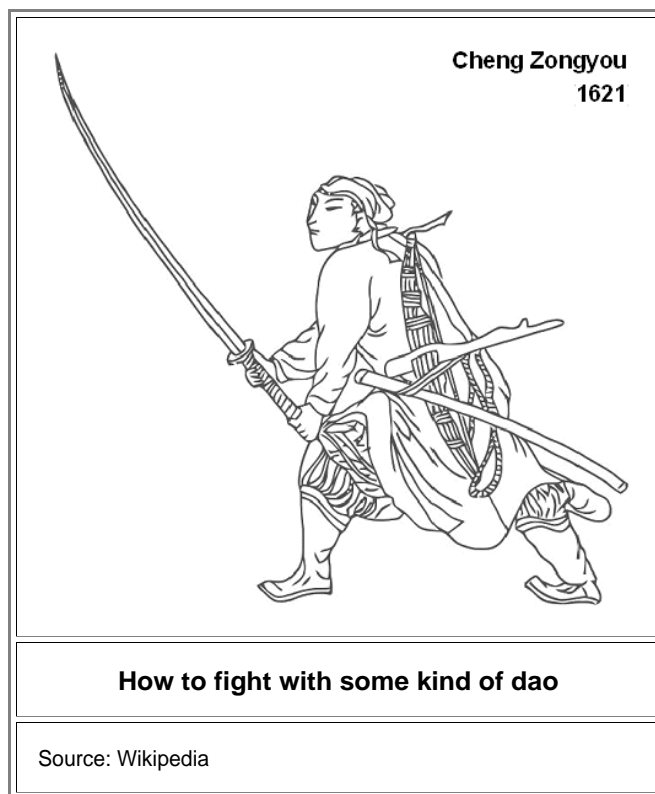


- There seem to be not much inward curvature, however (in contrast to a falcata or kukri) and if there is a hook. it is not from the cutting edge downwards as in a [billhook](#) but on the other side.
- The machete was used quite a lot for fighting, in particular in all the uprisings in the sugar cane fields in the 17th - 19th century. The machete thus is a dual-use object, like the kopis, the falcata, the kukri and probably lots of other longish steel objects.

➤ Miao Dao, Changdao, and so on.

I just give you a succession of quotes from some Internet sources:

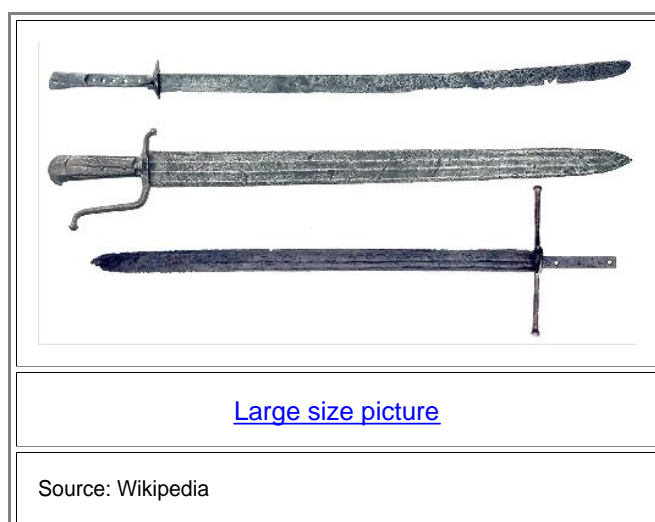
"The *miao Dao* is a Chinese two-handed dao or saber of the Republican era, with a narrow blade of up to 1.2 metres (47 in) or more and a long hilt". It is actually a *changdao* because "in 1828 ... , in order to obscure its Japanese origin, the *chando* was renamed *miao Dao*". The *changdao* (literally: "long knife") was a two-handed, single-edged Chinese sword. The weapon may have developed from the earlier *zhanmadao* (horse beheading sword). Tang dynasty sources describe the *changdao* as being identical to the *modao*. This sword was described as having an overall length of seven feet, with a three foot long blade and four foot long grip. ... The Japanese *odachi* very much resembles this blade.



- You get the point. If the Chinese adopted sword design from the Japanese, or if it was the other way around, or if some other cultures were also involved
I don't know and neither care at this point in time. What would interest me is the development and possible interaction of the respective iron / steel / forging technologies, considering that the [Chinese way of steel making](#) was very different from that of the Japanese and large parts of the rest of the world.

▣ A "messer" is a kind of long knife. Typically single-edged, rather straight, and with a wide tang that only needed two pieces of wood slapped on to the sides to produce a hilt

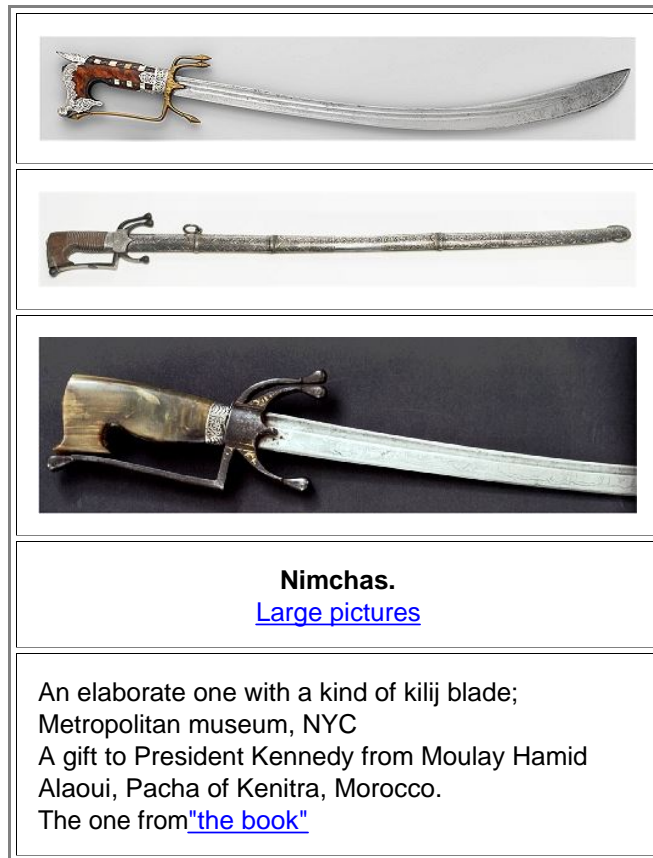
- Here are a few examples from the book:



Nimcha Nimcha

- I included the nimcha because it is a well-know single-handed curved-blade sword type that appeared in the 18th century and was prominent in the 19th century and beyond. It is unique to some extent because it is *only* defined by its hilt. The blade is typically from somewhere else and might have originated from a Turkish kilij or from an European sabre.

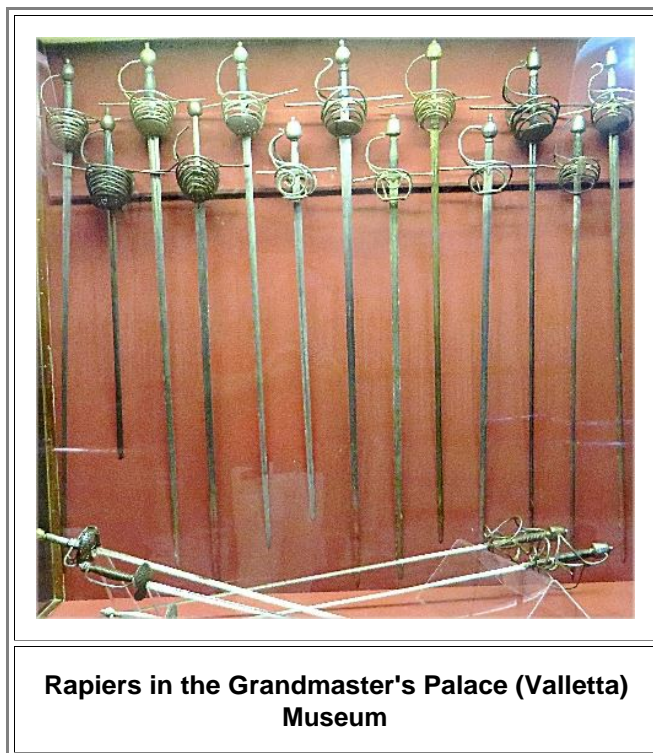
I own the nimcha shown in [this book](#); it was certainly the best appreciation I've ever received for a scientific article! It sports a 19th century pattern welded or "[damascus](#)" blade of definitely European origin (see below)



- The grip is made from wood or (rhino) horn with squared off "hooked" pommel. There are always two forward pointing [quillons](#) on the upper side and a knuckle guard on the lower. I could not find out so far if the two upper quillons have a function besides just providing some kind of symmetry.

Rapier (Rapier)

- The word "rapier" comes from medieval French and means "long pointy sword" Aha. A rapier is perhaps the earliest manifestation of the new custom to sport swords as (still lethal) male toys that were no longer used as tools for warfare but for demonstrating rank and to establish who has [the biggest](#). In Spanish, a rapier is an "espada ropera", a dress sword. Rapiers came up into the early 16th century (if we discount the [enigmatic Celtic ones](#)) and blossomed into all kinds of "dress" swords.



Rapiers in the Grandmaster's Palace (Valletta) Museum

- The rapier evolved from the "**side-sword**" ([Seitschwert](#)), a slender kind of a one-hand regular straight double-edged sword. popular during the late 16th century.
The rapier still has a flat if rather slender and long blade with two sharp edges. While primarily a thrusting weapon, it does not bend easily and thus can still be used for slashing, if not very effectively. That distinguishes it from the similar looking but shorter and lighter épée or Degen (with a triangular, square or round cross-section).
- In the 16th century a rapier was the sword of a nobleman. Before that a sword was an important tool for all men in the military who needed it and could afford it. The nobility eventually didn't like to do the killing themselves anymore, running the risk of getting killed themselves. They now had paid specialists for that (just like today). They just needed some kind of sword as status symbol, and to kill you and me on the side if we got uppity. The occasional duels added spice to life.
Swords, in short, became [fashion items](#) once more.
Fencing with the rapier evolved as a kind of art with the endless exchange of blows we all know from watching TV. To be sure, wielding a spatha of any kind in a real battle also demanded considerable skill but you would not be standing there, engaging your enemy for 20 minutes or longer "as seen on TV" or in innumerable movies. You or your enemy typically went down within minutes if not seconds.
All that new stuff became possible because the quality of steel had increased to the point where these kind of swords could be made without risking early breakage of the slender blade.

▀ **Sabre (Säbel)**

- Relatively light sword with a curved, single-edged blade and often a rather large hand guard.
So what's the difference to a scimitar, tulwar, katana, and so on? If we disregard the hilt and other small details, there isn't much besides the metallurgy for many sabres. You just call all curved blades in Europe "sabre" now. Sabres were prominent in Europe rather late - 18th century to now - and thus were made from more or less uniform steel. Tulwars and so on are considerably older and were often made from [wootz steel](#), and [katanas](#) from trickily piled and edge-hardened steel.
- "The English word sabre derives from the French sabre which is akin to the Hungarian szablya, Polish szabla, and Russian sablya. The word is believed to originate from the Kipchak Turkic selebe, with contamination from the Hungarian verb szab, which means 'to cut'", says Wikipedia. Same thing for the German word "Säbel".



**Guarding the Danish Queen in Copenhagen
with a sabre (and a machine gun)**

- Medieval men did encounter curved blades early on. Perhaps as early as the [battle of Poitiers](#) and Tours around 735 but certainly during the crusades.



Sabres, late 19th century, French army



Sabres. French Navy (top; 19th century), US Cavalry (bottom, 1862)

Source: Wikipedis "sabre" in various languages

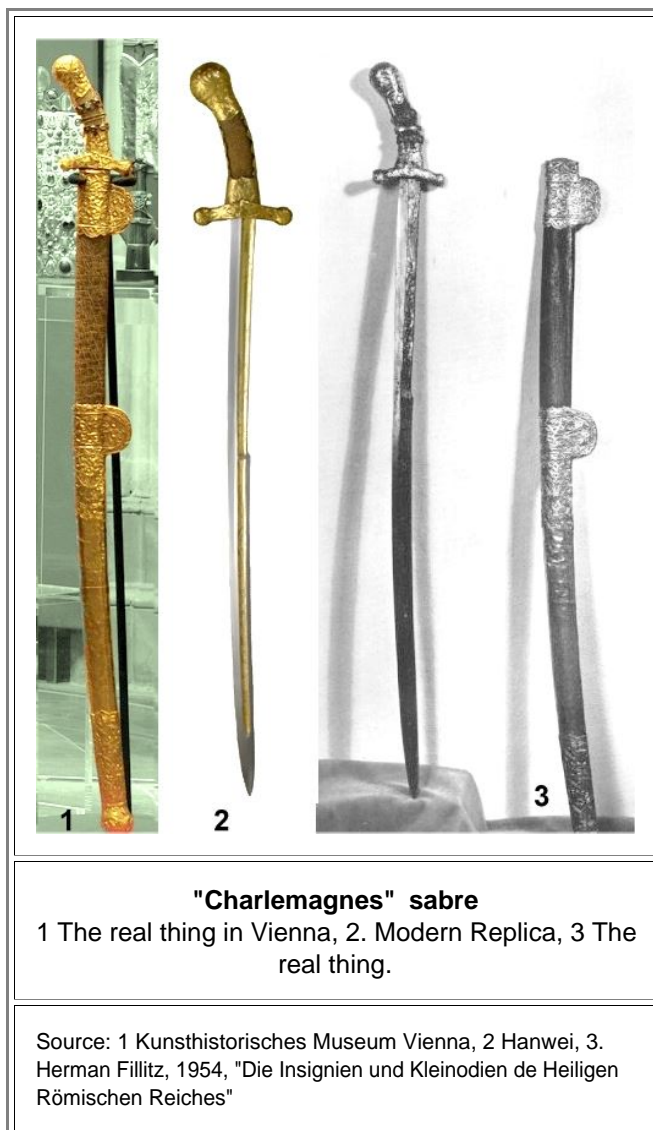
- However, sabres came in many forms and sizes, from almost straight to substantially curved and generalizations are dangerous. Of course, you might use the term "sabre" to denote *any* sword with some curvature (including almost none) and with a cutting edge on one side only (but allowing parts of a sharpened backside, too). Backsword, cutlasses and so on then would be special kinds of sabres. Whatever, most of the European military carried some kind of sabre (or the related backsword / cutlass) at the latest in the 19th century

Why the sabre completely replaced the time-honored straight European sword is easy to see. In the words of the German Wikipedia (translated by me):

"With a curved blade substantially larger wounds could be inflicted on the opponent compared to a straight sword - provided one knew the drill otherwise hardly any damage was done. Moreover, with a sufficiently curved blade it didn't matter much if you hit the opponent with the middle part of the blade, in contrast to the straight sword where it was important to hit with the front part only. That's why a straight blade is rather counterproductive in close combat, at least for only averagely skilled fighters."

Of course, as always, the specific design depended on the intended use. Only slashing: go for substantial curvature. Mostly stabbing: Keep it pretty much straight and sharpen at least parts of the backside. Both: compromise.
- The history of curved single-edged blades or "sabre" in Central Europe is complex. Very generally speaking, sabres were of little consequence in Western Europe before the 30-year war (1618 - 1648). During this war, the Croatian Cavalry used sabres in an obviously convincing manner, and the sabres of the Hussar's (originally the Hungarian cavalry, later a term for light cavalry in general) became feared until modern times. "The sabre then gained widespread use in the early 19th century, to some extent inspired by the "Mameluke sword", a type of Middle Eastern *scimitar* " says Wikipedia, and I would guess that this inspirations was in parts due to the [lively interest in "wootz" steel](#) in England and the Continent that started in the early 19th century.

- **However!** While sabres might well have been of little consequence in Western Europe before the 17th century, they were nevertheless known, particularly in the East - look up the [Sarass](#) below. [Charlemagne](#) (ca. 745 – 814) was rumored to own a sabre and this weapon can still be seen as part of the Regalia of the Holy Roman Empire. Here it is:



- "The sabre is of a Hungarian type and formed part of the Aachen (Germany) regalia of the "Holy Roman Empire" (in central Europe; essentially Germany, from the 12th to the 19th century). During the coronation of the (more or less German) King, the new king belted the sword to his person. Until 1794 it was kept in Aachen. When [French](#) troops approached Aachen in 1794 the Imperial regalia located there were taken to the Capuchin abbey at Paderborn (Germany), then to Hildesheim (Germany) in 1798 and finally to Vienna (Austria) in 1801. The sabre was stored in the Treasury of the Hofburg Palace in Vienna." states the English Wikipedia.

That's what happens to your regalia if you fail to [to invade Gaul](#) every now and then.

Before you get all excited now: Charlemagne did certainly **not** own this sabre. It dates either to the 10th or early 11th century (German Wikipedia) or to the second half of the 9th century (English Wikipedia). Whatever, it is a rather early sabre and it came from the East. It is only slightly curved and probably comes from the [Avar sphere of influence](#).

Anyway, "Charlemagne's sabre" was obviously kept in high regard by the mighty and influential in the 11th century and later - but they did not emulate it.

In between "Charlemagne's sabre" and the sabre in the 30-year-war and beyond, was the [sarass](#), see below.

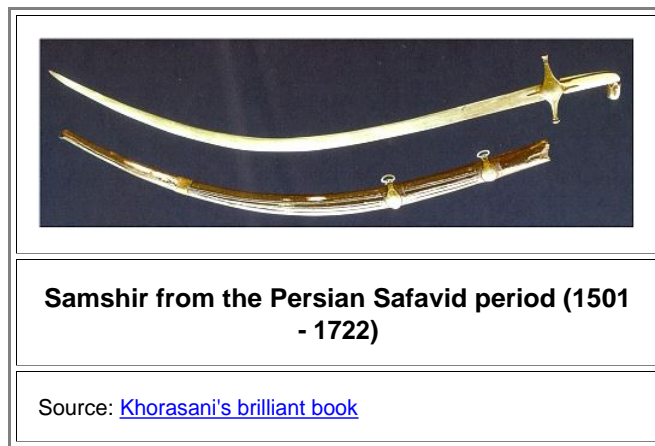
- My personal feeling is that up to about 1500 a straight doubled-edged sword was the sword of Central Europe, use by all involved in warfare. In the same general time period (give or take a century), the iron and steel industry switched from running small-scale [bloonerries](#) producing wrought iron to larger-scale blast furnaces producing cast iron. That in turn necessitated new technologies for making steel and allowed to make guns, changing warfare. In consequence, swords branched into two basically different kinds: those employed to kill people with on the battle field, and those needed to display your status and for ritual fighting, like duels. The former evolved into the sabre, the latter into rapiers and épées.

Saif

- Saif, first of all, simply means "sword" in Arabic. Since Arabic swords from not too distant times are of the general *scimitar* or *sabre* type there seems to be no clear and unambiguous distinction from the kilj, shamshir or tulwar. In some views, a saif might be a bit less curved than a kilj and it might contain one or more fullers. [This guy](#) may be wielding a saif.
In a simple interpretation, a saif is just about any curved sword that originated from "Arabia" (and I leave open exactly what that is). Many saifs have wootz blades imported from India / Persia, and in this context it is perhaps useful to realize that there could not have been a prominent iron and steel smelting activity in much of "Arabia" (and Egypt, and ...) since this requires a lot of wood that simply [wasn't there](#) then or now.
- The word "saif", however, is more than just the term for sword since the sword is an important symbol in Arab cultures and [on occasion](#) more than a symbol. "Saif" and "Saif al Din" (=sword of the religion) are also common masculine (and male) Islamic names.

Samshir (Samshir)

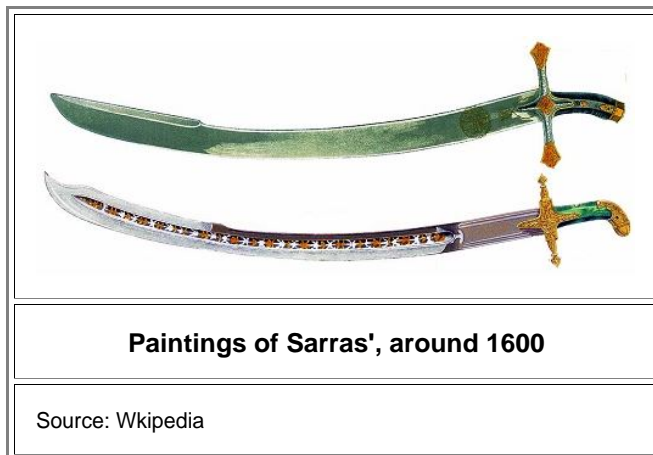
- Shamshir essentially means "sword" in Persian and thus is a term for all kinds of blades. [Khorasani](#), who should know, shows all kinds of samshirs in his "Arms and Armor from Iran" book, including rather straight blades. However, the present general usage of the term (in the "West") can perhaps be best described as follows. A samshir is:
 - A strongly curved single-edged blade without a yelman and a hilt type as shown below.
 - The typical sword (from the 15th century onward) one associates with Persia / Iran



- The samshir is a member of the scimitar family that includes the tulwar, saif and kilij as the more prominent members. They all are curved and often made from [wootz steel](#). While the blades might be similar, hilts and scabbards typically differ substantially.
Granted, the average samshir might be more strongly curved than your average tulwar or kilij. You can certainly go on and define more fine points of difference but as far as I'm concerned the decisive feature of the samshir is its association with the Persians. It appears that the Seljuq dynasty had introduced the curved shamshir to Persia in the 12th century, when they took over (they eventually became today's Turks)
- It is not surprising that all the swords mentioned above are related. They all made it to prominence around the middle of the 16th century and they are supposed to have a common ancestor. To quote Wikipedia: "Originally Persian swords were straight and double edged, just as the Indian khanda. The curved *scimitar* blades were *Central Asian* in origin. The earliest evidence of curved swords, or scimitars, is from the 9th century, when these weapons were used by soldiers in the Khurasan region of Central Asia. The sword now called "*shamshir*" was introduced to Iran by Turkic Seljuk Khanate in *12th century* and was later popularized in Persia by the early 16th century, and had "relatives" in Turkey (the *kilij*), the Mughal Empire (the *talwar*), and the adjoining Arabian world (the *saif*").
Khorasani has a lot to say about the origin of the samshir. He details all the instances where curved blades have been encountered rather early but also makes clear that science so far as not reached a general agreement on details. The view given above, if oversimplified, is not entirely without merits.
- Be that as it may. From a metallurgical point of view (my view, remember?), it is far more interesting when, where and how the [crucible steel](#) used for a samshir and his brethren was developed, and how [wootz blades](#) eventually developed from that. I have given you many modules for that; go find them

Sarass

- I include the Sarass here because it demonstrates nicely how tangled the connections between sword types can be. To start with, a sarass has a heavy curved blade, sometimes with an edge on parts of the backside, too. It often comes with a fuller but is nevertheless rather heavy and sometimes for use with two hands. A sarass might also have a kind of ["yalman"](#), an enforced tip region. In short, it is rather similar to the Kilij; just look at the picture:



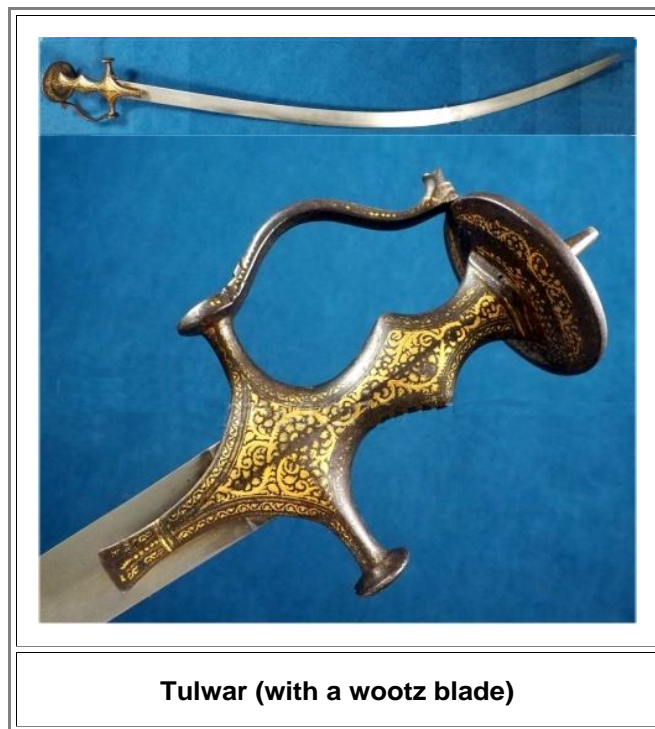
- The sarass is the "classical" sword of the originally Hungarian **Hussars**. After Hussars and the related Croatian horsemen took it into Western Europe, it mutated to the **sabre** discussed above. The pictures above make it quite clear that the ancestors of the sarass are swords from the **scimitar** family, e.g. the kilij. That is not surprising. After the Turkish victory at [Nicopolis](#), some driven-out local yokels became a kind of "Gastarbeiter" ¹⁾ for the Hungarian army, forming a light cavalry equipped with sarass, lance and shield. They became known and feared as "hussars". The first mentioning of that term (with unclear etymology) is from 1481. By then the hussars had evolved to heavy cavalry, armed with the sarass and other heavy stuff that showed clear Osmanic influence. Read on under "sabre".
- Why does the Sarass nicely demonstrates how tangled the connections between sword types can be? Consider:
 - The **sarass** goes back to the "**Turks**", and **Croatians** brought it into **Hungary**
 - Croatians and Hungarian **Hussars** used it for devastating **Germany** during the 30 year war, fighting for the **Austrians**.
 - The name is actually **Polish** (za raz "for slash, strike").
 - And thus Germany (and other countries) acquired the **sabre**

Scimitar (Scimitar)

- Let's make it short: The word **scimitar** is only used in Europe and simply denotes any kind of curved single edged "oriental" sword. The term first appeared in the 15th century in Italy as "scimitar" or "scimeterra" and might ultimately go back to the Persian "shimshir" or "shamshir". The word seems to be unknown in Turkish or Arabic.
- To say it with the German Wikipedia: Nobody remotely familiar with swords uses the term for any given sword because it is too general. It is better to use the proper name for the particular manifestation of the "scimitar" you are describing; names like **kilij**, **saif**, **shamshir** or **tulwar**, to give just the more prominent ones. I use the word on occasion as the "family" name for oriental curved blades; "sabre" then denotes the Western varieties

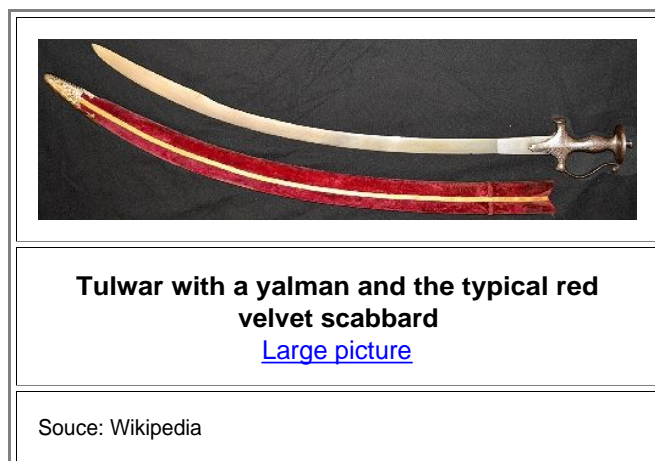
Tulwar (Tulwar)

- Tulwar or talwar means "sword" in Hindi and some other languages in the general area; at least at present. It is a member of the scimitar family and comes in a variety of shapes. Here is my tulwar (and [here](#) is a close-up of the blade)



Tulwar (with a wootz blade)

- Put an "Iranian" hilt on a tulwar and you have a samshir. Some argue that a tulwar has a broader blade than a samshir (more like a kilij) but does not have a [yalman](#) like the kilij. I don't know but would bet all your money that others oppose this view. The "Wikipedia tulwar" actually does have a kind of yalman; the picture also shows the typical scabbard also quite distinct from that of the tulwar brethren:



Tulwar with a yalman and the typical red velvet scabbard

[Large picture](#)

Source: Wikipedia

Yatagan Yatagan (pronounced Yata-an, by the way)

- A real stand-alone sword; nothing quite similar seems to be around. It features an inwardly curved or concave blade (also called curved forward or recurved) and a hilt with no crossguard and "ears". That makes it rather unique:



Yatagans from the [Askeri Museum, Istanbul](#)
Left to right: from 1864, 1855, 1808)

Source: From Gözde Yasar's book: : "Askeri Müze Yatagan Koleksiyonu"; 2009

- Yatagans have their name either from the Turkish town Yatagan in southwest Turkey that was famous for its yataghan smithing, from the Uzbek tribe of Kataghan, or because it was carried "lying down" (=yatagan in Turkish) in the belt. It's remote ancestors might have been the Greek [kopis](#) and in particular the [falcatia](#). But these swords haven't been around much for more than 1000 years before the yatagan became prominent in Turkey and surrounding Balkanese regions around 1500 - 1900, peaking in the 19th century.
- I have not found any reference to the advantage of a recurved blade for fighting. And the yatagan was used for honest fighting, it was not just a dress sword like the European [smallsword](#). However, it certainly did have that function, too, together with advertising the status of its owner. It was not worn hanging from a belt or baldric but was pushed inside the belt. **Mustafa Kemal Atatürk**, the famous founder of the modern Turkish Republic, shows how:



Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, sporting a Yatagan in 1914

[Large \(different\) picture of Yatagan wearers](#)

Source: From Gözde Yasar's book: : "Askeri Müze Yatagan Koleksiyonu"; 2009

- Note that Atatürk's headwear is not so much a fashion statement but the Turkish version of armor. Try to cut through all this stuff with a sword stroke!
- From a metallurgical point of view, a yatagan could be made from [wootz steel](#), plain steel (typically with a softer spine and a hard edge) and even pattern welded ones are known (e.g. in [Manfred Sachse's book](#)).

¹⁾ Gastarbeiter ("guest worker") was the official term for the Italian, Greek, Spanish, Turkish, and so on citizens (mostly men) who were induced to come to Germany from about 1961 to 1971 by treaties of the German government and the respective guest worker government. They were supposed to return to their homeland after a few years but many didn't. As a result about 3 Mio people with Turkish roots lived 2013 in Germany, about 1.5 Mio of which are still Turkish citizens only. The respective numbers for the other nationalities are considerably smaller. The resulting "[multiculti](#)" has done much for the quality of life in Germany, not to mention the quality of food, but also generated problems.