

11. Making Swords

11.1. The Early Sword

11.1.1 First Swords

What, exactly, are swords? I asked that question [before](#) *and* I gave first answers. I told you that a sword is first and foremost a tool for killing or wounding "the enemy". The word actually means "to cut, pierce" in its proto-Indo-European root "swer". In German a sword is a "Schwert" coming from the same root from old High German "sweran"=to hurt, and "swertha"=the cutting weapon.

I also told you that a sword can be much more. Swords are for example powerful symbols, objects of art and, most important to me, a sword embodies the status of the metal technology in any given culture.

It is now time to realize that swords were among the very first utensils people made *only* for fighting and warfare.

True, some cave-dwelling stone age guy might have used his stone knife for slashing away at his enemy, and an early hunter might have used his bow and arrow to shoot at his foe. But all these things, including knives of stone or metal, were primarily made for everyday life, agriculture or hunting. They were dual-use or multi-use items, sure, but never for single use in fighting *only*.

A sword has many symbolic functions that do not demand to actually wield it. But you simply cannot use it "mechanically" to butter your bread, to cut your steak, to clean your fingernails or to cut a hiking staff from the next hazelnut bush. In many cultures just the attempt to do something like that would have been frowned upon if not punished. You can *only* use a sword for fighting, with the intent to hurt or kill humans. Even hunting animals with just a sword doesn't make much sense.

People at some point in time might have used bows and arrows that were dedicated to warfare and not used for hunting. The famous [composite bows](#) of the Huns are an example. They allow power-shooting while riding a horse in full gallop. But you could use them for hunting without any problems and they are still very close relatives of the general bow.

Swords, however, are *not* just knives with an especially long blade, just as a knife tied to a sturdy pole is *not* a knife with an especially long hilt but a lance, something new. Your style of fighting with a lance or a sword is quite different from fighting with a knife. Fighting is the *only* thing you do with a sword (if we discount executions). A lance, while certainly also a fighting tool, has at least some use in hunting, especially if you go after boars.

OK - I felt it is necessary to make this kind of fundamentalist black-and-white differentiation between knives and swords at the outset of this chapter. If you, like me, are fascinated by swords, you should consider your reasons for this on occasion.

Now let's be reasonable and realize that in real life there is almost always [some grey in between the black and white](#). There is, after all, a continuous path from your peaceful bread-and-butter knife to your deadly sword. In between is your large farm utility knife, your butchering knives, your pointed hunting knife, your dagger, your long fighting knife with a sharp point.

Of course, swords developed out of knives as soon as the technology was available, and there are manifestations that were neither here nor there - in metal and stone:



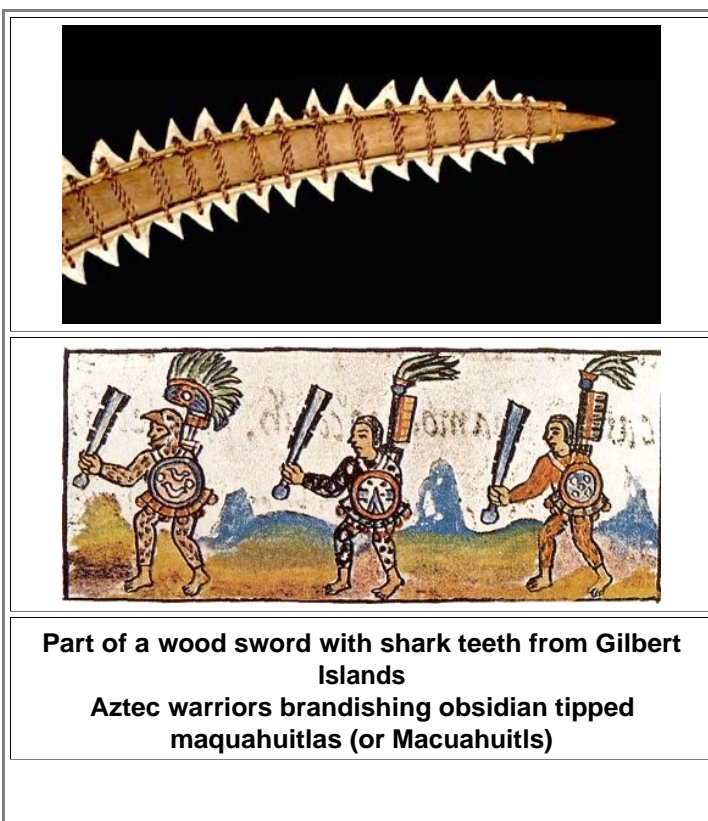
Flint dagger from Denmark, about 1800 BC
Bronze dagger from South-East Asia, around 300 BC
Different scales but comparable sizes; bronze dagger slightly foreshortened for match.

Source: Top Photographed in the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen 2012.
Bottom. Internet at large

- The "fish tail dagger" shown above was not an utility knife; its only use could have been in showing-off and intimidation. Maybe it symbolized the owner's power of stabbing and thus killing you, or just that he could afford to own beautiful but useless items, i.e. that he was rich. It is rather young for a stone age item and might have been modelled after metal knives that already existed but were too hard to come by in 1800 BC. There are many fish tail daggers at least in the North. Here are a few from ["my" museum](#) in Schleswig



- The shape of fish tail daggers is not exactly the same as the shape of contemporary local daggers but [coming close](#). There are actually many stone tools that were modelled after bronze objects. A more spectacular one is [here](#).
- ▶ We don't know if stone age man had stone blades and axes that were made and used primarily for organized warfare. The [Varna guy](#) from around 4500 BC lived right at the beginning of [serious metal usage](#) and had stone *and* copper axes in his grave besides all his gold - but no knife and certainly no sword. We might safely assume that the axes do not signify that he was in the wood working business but that he was a mighty Lord with the power to give the axe to his underlings.
- There is a straight path from your utility stone axe to a war axe or a symbolic / ritual [stone axe](#) and later [metal axe](#). There is no way, however, that a stone-bladed utility knife can evolve into a functional sword. You might try wooden swords, and metal deprived societies actually made some:



- It certainly would be unpleasant to be hit with one of those shark-teeth or obsidian covered things but preferable by far to being hit with a sharp-edged metal sword. You simply can't make a good sword without a metal. Not all metals qualify, however. Gold (Au) and lead (Pb) are out for obvious reasons, and so is half-way pure and thus soft copper. That leaves only bronze for early men, and the first swords were indeed made from bronze around ??? *Let's be careful now !!!*.

▶ I'm about to play our old (and by now somewhat boring) [game](#):

Who made the first swords, when and where?

- Wikipedia comes down in favor of around 1600 BC as the time horizon where practical swords were made that could actually be used for fighting. Earlier stuff, considered from a warrior's point of view, is denounced as long daggers or just decorative or ceremonial junk. Then we have the **R. Ewart Oakeshott** who in his classic "[The Archaeology of Weapons](#)" sees the beginning of the sword in Minoan Crete and Celtic Britain around 1500 BC - 1100 BC. He also makes a point about the first swords being rather pointy because they were used as *thrusting* weapons.
- Some more modern archaeologists beg to disagree. Foremost, perhaps, is **Marcella Frangipane** from the Sapienza University of Rome, Italy. Like her compatriot [Isabella Caneva](#), she digs up old tells or settlement mounds in Turkey. In her case it is [Arslan Tepe](#) (Lion hill), close to [Malatya in East Anatolia](#). In 1996 Marcella unearthed what is now known as "royal tomb" from about **3000 BC**. In it she found "Le prime spade al mondo", the **first swords of the world**, as the (Italian) Arslan Tepe site proudly proclaims. Here they are:



"Le prime spade al mondo" - the first swords of the world

Source: All over the Net

- The longest sword is about 62 cm long and weighs 960 grams. It, like all the others, was made in one piece by casting arsenic copper alloy in a mould. Some swords were inlaid with silver. All are rather flat and remind me of a (far smaller) letter opener I once had in my possession. Next to the swords some spear heads were found, too. All that (and more) was in one place and obviously seen as a valuable treasure.

So, are these things swords? If yes, are they thrusting swords? Many feel that these objects are no good for fighting - no good grip and guard, awkward to hold and not pointy / sleek enough for thrusting - and that one should *not* count them among "real" swords.

One might see these objects as just some curiosity, something that occurred as a kind of singularity in space and time. They were probably just used for some ceremonial / ritual purpose for a short time and only in Arslantepe. After all, nothing else like these things has ever been found?

Well - No! Nothing like these things has been *dug up*, indeed, but in 2011, Thomas Zimmermann and colleagues found and described a quite similar sword¹. They "found" this piece in the private collection of Necdet Dilek, which is associated in some way to the Malatya museum where the Arslantepe swords are displayed. The "Necdet Dilek sword" is about the same size as the silver decorated one from above; it was "found" under unclear circumstances somehow and somewhere and made it to the antique trade. Tracing its history and analyzing the object gives clear hints that it is from the region and the time of the "proper" Arslantepe swords.

Here it is:



- That's interesting but only mildly so. The real impact of this find is that the blade shows signs of impacts from other blades - meaning that this sword was actually used in (sword) fights! That's at least what the authors claim.

▶ The story goes on. Yet another Arslantepe sword has been found. This time (March 2020) in the showcase of an Armenian monastery in Venice, Italy. How it got there nobody knows but we may safely assume that it was before Marcella Frangipane started digging in 1966. The sword was investigated and found to have the proper age and compositions (arsenic copper bronze). Here it is:



▶ It looks to me that we are once more at a point where there are more questions than answers. New finds from some digs may change the present view about the history of swords, only time will tell. However, I do not think that we will have to change our present views in a radical way. We will most likely not find that [Neanderthal men was smelting iron](#), that the [pyramids were built with steel tools](#), or that working swords are as old as knives and daggers.

- So let's not spend more time with the fascinating but not really very rewarding hunt for the "first sword" but go on to the "mainstream" bronze swords.

¹) Thomas Zimmermann, Necdet Dilek, und Tolga Kapan Önder: "Ein neues Schwert vom Typus ‚Arslantepe‘ – frühmetallzeitliche Waffentechnologie zwischen Repräsentation und Ritual" Mit einem archäometrischen Beitrag von Latif Özen und Abdullah Zararsiz. PZ, 86. Band, (2011) p. 1 – 7.