

A Transylvanian Samurai Sword, Saxon Turks and other Entanglements

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This sword can rightly be called a global object (fig. 1–2).¹ An ornamental weapon, whose Japanese blade was provided with a new hilt and crossguard in seventeenth century Transylvania, where it was also decorated with seemingly Ottoman or Persian ornaments. Shortly thereafter it appeared in the “indianische Cammer” (Indian chamber) of the Electoral Collection in Dresden. This object connects a Japanese samurai sword with oriental flower tendrils, and central European court culture.



Fig. 1-2: Thomas Kapustran: Sword with sheath, 1674, Japanese blade, L 91,5 cm (blade 77,1 cm, weight 1775 g. Forged iron, hilt: amethyste and enamel on gold. Sheath: wood encased with ray or shark skin (cf. footnote 1).

The sword reveals itself as a subject of many different stories, based on cross cultural migration and artisanal knowledge of craftsmanship and style. It also reflects issues of diplomatic gift-giving, princely collecting habits, and imagined narratives of triumph. Transylvania and the rest of central eastern Europe have not been explored for their entangled histories,² nor have early modern weapon production and collections been considered in this global frame.³ This short blog suggests how they may be interpreted through these historical lenses.



Fig. 3: Broadsword and scimitar of prince János Kemény, 17th century (cf. footnote 4).

A pair of weapons (fig. 3) from the estate of the Transylvanian prince János Kemény (1607–1662) illustrates how far the connections of the principality reached.⁴ Scimitar and broadsword undoubtedly belong together. That becomes apparent from the similarities of the floral ornaments on the hilts and sheaths as well as from the matching colouring of their respective enamel adornment. The curved handles with their beak-shaped pommel initially recall Ottoman or Persian origins. The arabesques and the crescent-shaped black smith signatures on the blade of the scimitar also point in that direction. Other details, however, firmly demonstrate Transylvanian goldsmithery: the scimitar is not only adorned with Janos Kemény's signature, but the enamel decorations are encased in typical fashion and the grip is entwined with braided silver wire characteristic for the area. This also all applies to the broadsword, the other blade from the pair – though with the difference that the engraved inscription "Genova" suggests an Italian instead of an Ottoman origin of the blade.

Generally, such redesigning of blades manufactured elsewhere were common practice in the early modern age. But it is not always clear if functional or representational aspects – or both – inspired such changes. In the case of one sword, the quality of the steel may have been the reason for reworking it; in the case of another, the adaption of the hilt to the gripping habits of a new owner; and with yet a different one, the remodeling was all about the appropriation of the sword's history or the adoption of notions and ideas associated with the blade's decor.⁵ Be it as it may, in the case of the reworking of

the “Japanese” sword, functional aspects were probably secondary. The opulent amethyst trimmings on the hilt render the use of the weapon unlikely.

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These examples show that blades came to Transylvanian goldsmith workshops from many parts of the world. The exact transfer routes, however, often remain unclear. Whether the Japanese blade came to Transylvania from connections to the Habsburg Empire, relations to Dutch, Italian, Portuguese or Spanish trading centres or even through Persian or Ottoman contacts has to stay unresolved. Following the (re-)isolation of Japan (*sakoku*) in the 1630s, considerably less Japanese goods had been coming to Europe. It can therefore be assumed that the sword, that was signed in 1674, arrived in Transylvania via several intermediate stations.

The gold- and silversmiths themselves also came from different countries.⁶ After the partition of Hungary following the Ottoman victory in the battle of Mohács (1526), Transylvania attained a comparatively independent political position between the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empire. During the 16th and 17th centuries the ruling princes sometimes recognized the Ottoman sultan, sometimes the Habsburg emperor as their overlord. At that time, thanks to the gold and silver deposits in the Carpathians, a gold-working tradition as well as commercial exchange of precious metals with European centres such as Augsburg or Nuremberg, had existed for centuries already. The repressive effects of the Counter-Reformation in the Habsburg Empire, the turmoil of the Thirty Years’ War, and the Ottoman-Habsburg struggles led to an increase in artisans from Bavaria, Bohemia or Saxony settling in religiously-tolerant Transylvania. If goldsmiths from the Turkish heartlands were attracted to Transylvania, too, cannot yet be answered by the current state of research.

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The Reformation, introduced to Transylvania in 1542, and the tribute payments to the Ottoman sultan were important factors for the evolution of the local goldsmiths’ art. Hence the demand for liturgical equipment decreased because of the new confessional order; at the same time, Ottomanised design preferences were increasingly considered in the creation of tribute gifts for the sultan. Besides secular silverware, ornamental weapons were established as important products of Transylvanian goldsmiths. These were valued as diplomatic gifts and princely collectibles both at the court in Istanbul and at the courts of German rulers. The demand for Transylvanian artefacts increased accordingly, as did the confidence of the goldsmiths. This is expressed in the goldsmith signature of Thomas Kapustran (active in Cluj-Napoca/Klausenburg in the 1670s) on the “Japanese” sword. On the upper side of the crossguard, prominently applicated, a small gold plate can be found with the engraving “Tho: Kapusi.No: Transilvan FeCit. 1674” in embossed writing (fig. 2).

The precious decorations suggest that Kapustran’s “Japanese” sword was designed for this market or even commissioned as a court gift. Unfortunately, there are

no known documents concerning commissioners or purchasers. But merely ten years after being newly fitted, the sword resided in the armoury of the Electoral Saxon court in Dresden. 1684 it is listed in the inventory of the so-called “Indianische Cammer” (Indian Chamber), which, together with the “Türkischen Cammer” (Turkish Chamber), served as storage room for weapons and armour from the Near and Far East. The pieces exhibited in the armouries and the collections of arms mainly had a representative function to help visualize power, military force and sphere of influence of the Electoral Prince.

Weapons of Ottoman origin were staged as symbols of victory in the struggle against the Ottoman Empire and were intended to visualize the princely merits. In exhibitions, up to this day, the weapons are primarily used to demonstrate military conflicts. Mostly they were (and still are) staged as if they had come as booty directly from the battlefield into the collections of the ruling houses, oblivious to the fact that many such pieces rather circulated as gifts between princes and were often bought in the Ottoman Empire by diplomats.⁷

Weapons were frequently acquired as late as the 19th and 20th centuries to illustrate the commitment of the ruler from a colonial or nationalist-historical viewpoint as well as to add “missing” pieces and to close “gaps” in the inventories. The weapons in the “Türkische Cammer” in Dresden, for example, intended to demonstrate the strong involvement of Moritz of Saxony (1521–1553) in the Ottoman wars, largely originate from such later acquisitions.⁸ The oriental weapons that figure earliest in the inventories of the collection were added to the armoury during the time of his successor, Elector August of Saxony (1528–1586). During the reign of the latter, however, Saxony was never involved in battle against the Ottoman Empire. Rather, the weapons were given to him as gifts by legations from Istanbul. Christian I (1560–1591), who oversaw the construction of a new building especially for the armoury – the “Neuer Stall” (New Stable) – was provided with orientalia via presents from Northern Italy. Heinrich von Hagen (1619–1664), his envoy to the courts of Florence, Mantua and Turin to herald his accession to the throne in 1586, brought numerous weapons back to Dresden along with other accession gifts. A letter he wrote from Florence suggests that the courts were well aware of the Elector’s interest in Turkish arms. Apologetically he therein informs his master that the Florentine Grand Duke was waiting in vain for a ship “welche[s] ihm von Constantinopel hatt sollen ahnkommen, den er willens gewesen, E. Ch. G. etliche türkischen Sachen zuzuschicken.” (which should have been coming from Constantinople, because he was willing to send his Grace quite a lot of Turkish things). But even though the ship arrived too late, 24 of the 46 listed Florentine gifts were exotic or exoticized weapons of mostly Ottoman origin (fig. 4).⁹

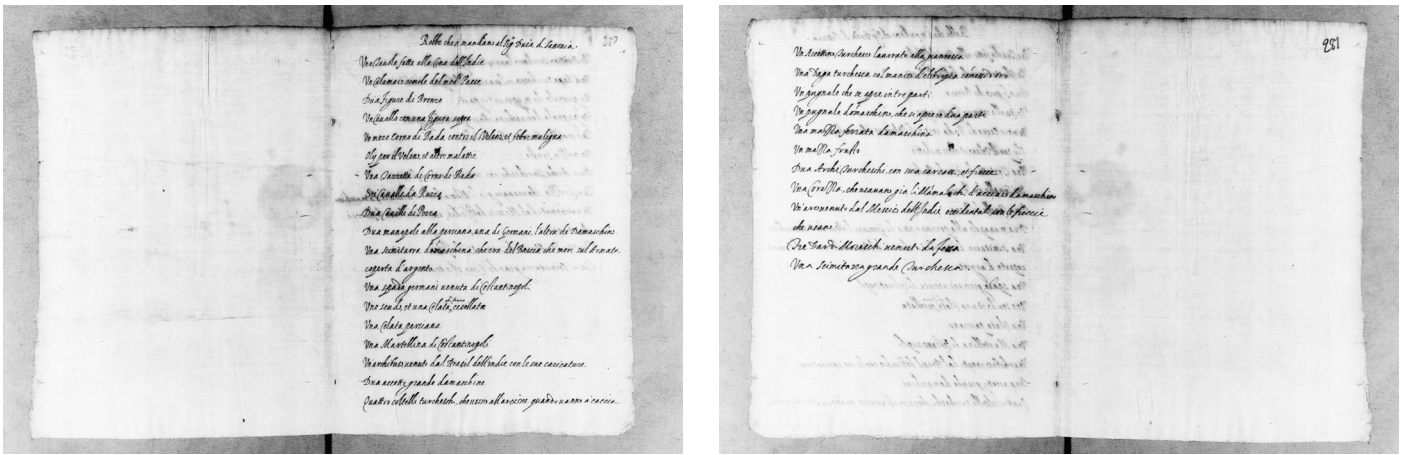


Fig. 4: List of gifts from Francesco I. Medici to Kurfürst Christian I. (Saxony), 1586. Dresden, Sächsisches Staatsarchiv, Bestand 10024 geheimer Rat (Geheimes Archiv), Nr. Loc. 08517/05, Bl. 280.

The most notable piece in this collection was a broadsword whose blade, considering the repeatedly stamped, crowned pi-symbol, was probably originally from Southern Germany, Styria or the region around Milan. The hilt, however, with its strongly bent haft end, funnel-shaped pommel and s-shaped quillon along with additional knuckle bows, probably stems from Morocco. The engraved and etched ornaments with their repetitive floral patterns of blossoms and tendrils point towards the Ottoman cultural area, whilst enwrought therein, a Spanish engraving in cipher-like characters can be seen (fig. 5).¹⁰



Fig. 5: Broadsword, 16th century (cf. footnote 10)

It is likely that diplomatic circles in Istanbul also knew about the collecting interests of the Christian princes and targeted their desires with gifts and sales. But until well into the middle of the 17th century there was little interest on the Ottoman side in enhancing the status of

the “king of Vienna” (as the Habsburg emperor was frequently called in Ottoman letters in the early 17th century) or his representatives by sending really valuable gifts.¹¹ Hence, gifted objects were perceived very differently by the various parties.



Fig. 6: Battle axe of the body guards of Mehmed III. (cf. footnote 12).

In Vienna, for instance, a battle axe belonging to the bodyguards of Mehmed III (1566–1603) has been preserved, which was used in the armoury to illustrate the Ottoman wars (fig. 6).¹² It is decorated with valuable golden writing invoking Mehmed’s predecessors (incompletely listed). The sultan’s own name figures prominently on the axe hammer. Mehmed and his guards never took part in any larger campaigns, so the battle axe can hardly be part of a loot. It is much more probable that being personalized by name, the weapon lost its use and value after the death of the ruler and was therefore sold or gifted and thus found its way into the collection in Vienna. In the eyes of the Habsburgs, however, it was not perceived as a discarded object of representation but as symbol of triumph or a gift of honour.

The princely interest in using weapons to present themselves as successful warriors against the Turks, or to boast about recognition by the Sultan led to North Italian and Southern German workshops specifically catering to that market with replicas and imitations. Karl Emanuel I of Savoy (1562–1630) had a helmet gifted to

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the Spanish King Philipp III (1578–1621) in 1603, which for a long time was regarded as booty from the naval battle of Lepanto (fig. 7).¹³ But despite the tiara-like turban imitation and the holder for once opulent panache, it is a showpiece made in the environment of the Milanese burgonet-forgery. The case of the gilded headdress of a Turkish messenger (“Pejk”) (fig. 8) is similar. Like on the battle axe, nearly all the sultans of the House of Osman figure in the labelling fields. But the awkward characters, the partly faulty inscriptions and various elements of the ornamentation – not least the two Turks’ heads next to the feather socket – are rather reminiscent of workmanship from Southern Germany, probably Augsburg.¹⁴



Fig. 7: Helmet, ca. 1585–1590 (cf. footnote 13).



Fig. 8: Helmet: 2nd half 16th century (cf. footnote 14).

In the gold- and blacksmith workshops of Transylvania many such booty-surrogates will likely also have been made. However, since at the same time weapons were made there which were really intended for the Ottoman court, tracing the provenance of these weapons is particularly difficult. In the case of the “Japanese” sword, despite its Ottoman ornamentation it is rather unlikely, though, that it was used to demonstrate a victory over

the Turkish army. It is however quite possible that it was used in one of the numerous mummeries, masques, banquettes, or inventions at the Dresden court as documented, for instance, in the watercolours by Daniel Bretschneider the older (d. after 1625) showing the carnival parades of 1609 (fig. 9 and 10).¹⁵ Objects from the armoury were often used as part of the costume. Whether the “Japanese” sword was ascribed to a region, used to equip an Indian warrior (fig. 9), or whether, due to its hybrid origin and otherness, it was given to an undefined mythological figure like the horse driver of the mermaids (fig. 10), can no longer be determined today.



Fig. 9-10: Daniel Bretschneider: Abriß und Verzeichnis aller Inventionen und Aufzüge, welche an Fastnachten, Anno 1609 im kurfürstl. Schlosse zu Dresden aufgeführt wurden (cf. footnote 15).

Global objects like the Transylvanian samurai sword are the product of several, distinct historical circumstances. Specific constellations bring a Japanese sword blade, a goldsmith in the Carpathian Basin and Ottoman decoration elements together and condense them in an object. Unfortunately, there is no direct attestable path from such an object back to these historical circumstances. Nevertheless, it is the specifics of such a multifaceted formation history that offers a multitude of connection points for many different stories, value attribution and contexts. Making the object the subject of an anniversary blog for a historian who is vividly interested in such connection points and strategies of appropriation, is certainly not the last.



Empfohlene Zitierweise/Suggested citation

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Abstract

In 1672 the Transylvanian goldsmith Thomas Kapustran produced an astonishing sword, using an original Samurai blade and Ottomanized decor elements. Soon after, the sword came into the armoury of the Electorate of Saxony where it was part of the so-called Indian Chamber. In this blog it is used as a material starting point for a bunch of histories. They tell us about the various and far-reaching connections of early modern Transylvania, the migration of goldsmiths in the 17th century, the use of secondhand blades in the Ottoman and Habsburg Empire and the significance of courtly armouries for princely self-fashioning.



- 1 Thomas Kapustran: Sword with sheath, 1674, Japanese blade, L 91,5 cm (blade 77,1 cm, weight 1775 g. Forged iron, hilt: amethyste und enamel on gold. Sheath: wood encased with ray or shark skin, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, armoury, Inv. Y. 108. Holger Schuckelt: Die Türkische Cammer: Sammlung orientalischer Kunst in der kurfürstlich-sächsischen Rüstammer Dresden. [Katalog; Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden], Dresden 2010, p. 195; Claus Hattler, Schoole Mostafawy (eds.): Kaiser und Sultan: Nachbarn in Europas Mitte 1600–1700, [Katalog, Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe]. München 2019, p. 82.
- 2 A first overview of artisanal production in Transylvania in the 17th century is offered by Markus Lörz: Silber für den Sultan, Seide für Siebenbürgen. Goldschmiedekunst und Textilien in der osmanischen Epoche Siebenbürgens, in: Hattler, Mostafawy (cf. footnote 1), pp. 169–175.
- 3 See for instance David G. Alexander (ed.): Islamic Arms and Armor in the Metropolitan Museum of Art [Katalog; Metropolitan Museum of Art]. New York 2015.
- 4 Broadsword and scimitar of prince János Kemény, 17th century. Broadsword, 105 cm, Scimitar 97 cm, iron, entwined silver wire, enamel: Hungarian National Museum Budapest (armoury), Inv. Nr. 55.3345 and 55.3344. See Ferenc Temesváry: Waffenschätze Prunkwaffen. Budapest 1982, pp. 32f. and 59.
- 5 Cf. Wolfgang Schmale's distinction between a *Kulturem* (an object, where notions and ideas of origin, religious meaning, etc., were preserved in the cultural transfer) and *Strukturem* (an object which was completely absorbed into its new use): Wolfgang Schmale: Einleitung. Das Konzept «Kulturtransfer» und das 16. Jahrhundert. Einige theoretische Grundlagen, in: Wolfgang Schmale (ed.): Kulturtransfer. Kulturelle Praxis im 16. Jahrhundert. Innsbruck 2003, pp. 41–61.
- 6 Lörz (cf. footnote 2), pp. 169–172.
- 7 See Mark Häberlein, Christof Jeggle: Einleitung, in: Häberlein / Jeggle (eds.): Materielle Grundlagen der Diplomatie. Schenken, Sammeln und Verhandeln in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit. Konstanz 2013 (Irseer Schriften Vol. 9), pp. 11–30.
- 8 For the origin of the collection and later supplemental acquisitions see Schuckelt (cf. footnote 1), pp. 23f.
- 9 Ibid., p. 32; cit. letter *ibid.*; the list in Sächsisches Staatsarchiv, Bestand 10024 geheimer Rat (Geheimes Archiv), Nr. Loc. 08517/05, Bl. 280.
- 10 Broadsword, 16th century, length: 107,7 cm (blade 93,9) weight: 1817 g. Forged iron, engraved and etched, hilt: wood and horn, gift from Francesco I Medici to Christian I (Saxony), Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Rüstammer Inv. Y. 0041, <https://skd-online-collection.skd.museum/Details/Index/289063#> [04.11.2021].

- 11 Hedda Reindl-Kiel: Symbolik, Selbstbild und Beschwichtigungsstrategien: Diplomatische Geschenke der Osmanen für den Wiener Hof (17.–18. Jahrhundert), in: Arno Strohmeier, Norbert Spannenberger (eds.): *Frieden und Konfliktmanagement in interkulturellen Räumen. Das Osmanische Reich und die Habsburger-Monarchie in der Frühen Neuzeit*. Stuttgart 2013, pp. 265–283, esp. 268–273.
- 12 Battle axe of the body guards of Mehmed III. Late 16th century. Length: 83 cm, blade width 27 cm. Iron, partly etched and fire gilded, silver chiseled, fire gilded, fish leather. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (Rüstkammer), Inv. Nr. C119, www.khm.at/de/object/804de095ab/ [04.11.2021]. Christian Beaufort-Spontin, Matthias Pfaffenbichler: *Meisterwerke der Hofjagd- und Rüstkammer*. Wien 2005 (Kurzführer durch das Kunsthistorische Museum 3), pp. 210f.; Tobias Roeder: *Die prachtvolle Waffe eines Leibgardisten* [Katalogbeitrag], in: Hattler, Mostafawy (cf. footnote 1), pp. 26f.
- 13 Helmet, ca. 1585–1590, 30 x 20,5 x 35 cm. Iron, bronze, gold, Madrid, Patrimonio Nacional, Palacio Real, Real Armeria, Inv. No. 10000844–846. Fig. from: Henri Forneron: *Historia de Felipe Segundo*. Barcelona 1884, p. 187. Cf. Robert Born, Michal Dziewulski et al.: *L'Empire du Sultan. Le Monde Ottoman dans l'Art de la Renaissance* (Catalogue Palais des Beaux-Arts Brüssel, Nationalmuseum Krakau), p. 263; Nicolai Kölmel: *Verdinglichte Weltmacht. Ein Prunkhelm Sultan Süleymans zwischen Istanbul, Wien und Venedig im 16. Jahrhundert*, in: Babett Edelmann-Singer, Susanne Ehrich (eds.): *Sprechende Objekte. Materielle Kultur und Stadt zwischen Antike und Früher Neuzeit*. Regensburg 2020 (FOMIS 17), pp. 251–274, here p. 268ff.
- 14 Helmet: 2nd half 16th century, height: 31,3 cm copper, embossed, etched, fire gilded, silk lining. Museum Fünf Kontinente München, Inv. Nr. 26-N-89, see also <https://kaiserundsultan.landesmuseum.de/#c3044> [04.11.2021]. Cf. Anahita Mittertrainer: *Helm eines Meldeläufers* (Catalogue entry), in: Melanie Thierbach (ed.): «1521» (Catalogue Fugger-Museum Augsburg). Augsburg 2021, forthcoming. I thank Mrs. Mittertrainer for pointing out the two Turkish heads to me, unfortunately they cannot be distinguished on the picture.
- 15 Daniel Bretschneider: *Abriß und Verzeichnis aller Inventionen und Aufzüge, welche an Fastnachten, Anno 1609 im kurfürstl. Schlosse zu Dresden aufgeführt wurden*, ca. 28,9 cm x 52, 7 cm, covering colour on paper. Sächsische Landesbibliothek — Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek (SLUB) Dresden; Mscr.Dresd.J.18. Ms.