

2. Swords, Iron and Steel

2.1 Swords

2.1.1 What, Beyond the Obvious, are Swords?

What, exactly, are swords? Stupid question - don't we all know? Well, we shall see about that.

Just to give you a taste treat of what follows, I make this claim:

**Some swords are pieces of art
and part of your cultural heritage.**

Read on if you do believe me, and in particular if you don't believe me.

Some swords are pieces of art, *not all*. You will find examples of the former on display in major museums. While most of those museum pieces were also perfect weapons for combat, changes are that they have never been used for killing or wounding people.

Be that as it may, it is also absolutely necessary to point out that *most* swords were not primarily pieces of art but just tools for killing or wounding "the enemy". Most of those "utility" swords have rusted away by now or get dusty in attics and minor museums (including army museums).

If you think a bit about that you realize that **killing** or wounding people is pretty much the only *direct use of a sword*.

You could kill or wound people with your knife too, not to mention your car. But in contrast to your knife, you can't use your sword to butter your bread, to cut your steak, to clean your fingernails or to cut a hiking staff from the next hazelnut bush.

I want to be very clear about the following:

**Swords are evil objects if you consider only
their intended or actual use as weapons.**

Of course, you might argue that you are a peace-loving, anti-violence kind of person, and that you only carry your sword so you can defend yourself against being attacked. Many Americans use exactly this argument for carrying guns.

This seems to make some sense. The reality is that 3 people out of 100.000 get killed by guns every year in the USA, while in Germany (guns are strictly illegal) the number is around 0.5, one-sixth of what we have in the USA [1](#).

I fully sympathize with all of you who look a bit askance at weaponry of all kind. Yet, if you stay with me for a while longer, you will find that there is far more to swords than pain and death, and that studying their history and technology can be rewarding.

Whatever swords are, one fact is undisputable. **Men** of all ages are far more fascinated by swords of all kinds than women. Some castle museums have a sword or two around that the men are allowed to handle. The hope is that this will induce them to keep their hands off the exhibition pieces.



Doing the sword bit at Coburg castle, Germany
 The sword, by the way, is "Prince Valiants original singing sword", as the guy explained to his fascinated audience.

**Misc.
 Module
 Swords as
 symbols**

- Women, generally speaking, are not much interested in swords. There must be a reason for this. **Siemund Freud**, if still alive, would mumble something about "swords are phallus symbols" or "swords symbolize power by penetration". Maybe he is not totally wrong for once. Keeping this in mind I've speculated a bit about the [real meaning of sword names](#). The result can be seen as amusing, outrageous, or just plain stupid; take your choice.
 A lot more to the topic "swords as symbols" can be found in the special module.

So let's face it: Swords always were more than just weapons for fighting. Look at cars nowadays. For most men and some women cars are certainly more than pieces of hardware designed to get you from A to B. On a similar note, for most women but very few men, shoes seem to be more than just cases for protecting your feet if you want to walk from A to B.



- I certainly can't tell you what is so fascinating about shoes besides using them for walking around. Your wife or girl friend might be able to tell you about that.
 However, I do have some ideas about what swords were good for besides fighting, and I will share these ideas with you. For starters I state a simple truth:

Swords were and are powerful symbols for something else

Here is my quick list of what swords symbolize. The [link](#) gives more information about swords as symbols.

1. Swords were and are powerful symbols of a state, often found on flags or crests.

- Every queen (not to mention king) has at least one sword of state at her disposal, just like a scepter, a crown, a castle, and a Rolls Royce (or the equivalent thereof). **Queen Elizabeth II** even has three swords of state. One embodies the (former) life-and-death power of the queen, another one, named "**Curtana**", demonstrates mercy.

	
Swords as symbols of state	
Flag of Saudi Arabia	" Curtana ", sword of state of the Queen of England.

- Curtana is actually broken. This symbolizes that royal justice ought to be tempered by mercy. [Curtana](#) also comes with some mythology: it is supposed to be Tristan's sword (it isn't). **Tristan** was one of the more notorious knights from **King Arthur's** round table, a supreme fighter, full of testosterone. He lived (if he lived at all) around the sixth century AD.

In King Arthur's case the "[sword in the stone](#)" (sometimes equated with his "[Excalibur](#)") was a direct and powerful symbol for the rightful king. It actually *made* him King. The possession of a special swords thus announces **power** or a powerful

In King Arthur's case the "[sword in the stone](#)" (sometimes equated with his "[Excalibur](#)") was a direct and powerful symbol for the rightful king. It actually *made* him King. The possession of a special sword thus announces **power** or a powerful **blood line**.

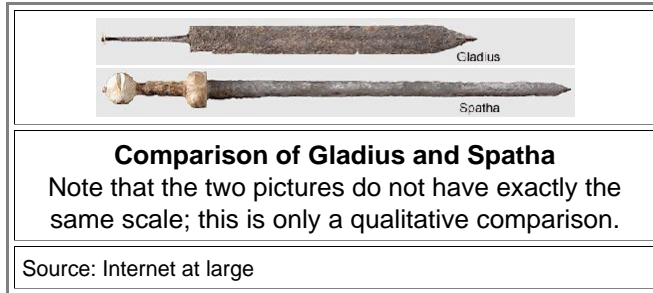
More to King Arthur and other real and saga heroes in the special module.

The Queen, by the way, uses one of her three swords as a **tool** in the only known civilian way: she will touch my shoulders with it when she [knights me](#).

2. A sword advertised rank or **class**. Not everybody was allowed to carry a sword, and the kind of sword you carried often announced your rank.

This is true for many ancient (and not so ancient) societies. The cavalry man in the roman army had a long sword (a "**spatha**"), while the common legionary had a short sword (the "**gladius**") as standard issue. While that may have had practical reason in the beginning, it eventually evolved into a status thing.

Even outside the army proper a sword signified your class. If you weren't allowed to carry a sword in merry old England and pretty much everywhere else, you couldn't challenge a Gentleman for a duel, nor could you be challenged. The gentlemen then just thrashed or killed guys like you and me unceremoniously.

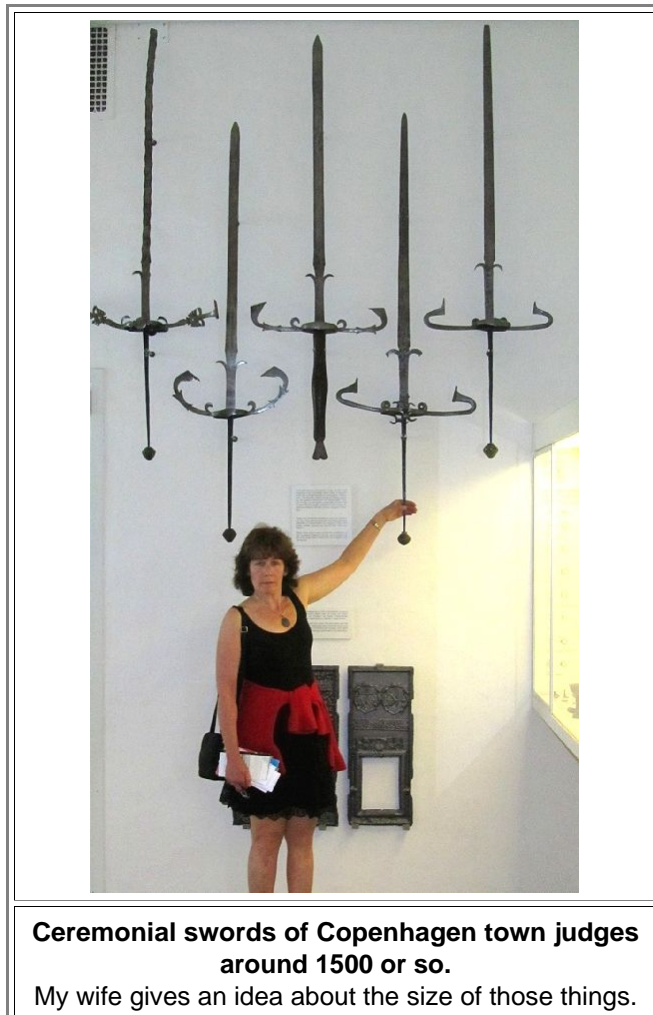


3. A sword was good for **showing off**.

As an officer you could carry a standard-issue sword or an expensive showy damascene sword - if you could afford it. **Manfred Sachse's** wonderful book "[Damascus Steel](#)" gives many examples for this. Most of the elaborately decorated swords in museums were *only* used for showing off or for demonstrating rank.

That is quite fortunate. The world of art (including architecture, and so on) would be indescribably poorer today if most people in power or money did not like to show off.

Of course, all three points might appear mixed up somehow, for example here:



- The Copenhagen judges left no doubt about who had the biggest. We have a symbol for the power of the city, an advertisement for rank and power, and certainly a bit of showing off.

4. Old swords might be **national treasures**, closely guarded and displayed in museums.

- This is quite prominent in Japan but the French also treasure the sword of **Charlemagne** (named "**Joyeuse**"), and Spaniards value **El Cid's** sword "**Tizona**".

More to swords with names in the special module.

El Cid Campeador (1043-1099) lived in what is now Spain. He defeated the "Moors", islamic rulers, who governed the southern part of the Iberian peninsula (when he wasn't fighting for them). His famed sword **Tizona** survived through various Spanish noble houses. When the impoverished present owner tried to sell it in 2003 (asking 6 Mio Euro), the Spanish government interfered. The city of Burgos eventually acquired it (at a bargain prize of 1.6 Mio Euro) and Tizona is now on display in the museum in Burgos, close to the birth place of El Cid.

It is also a safe bet that the Turkish government would not be easily persuaded to part with Mohammad's sword either. It is displayed in the Topkapi museum in Istanbul (it's authenticity, however, is a bit open to doubt).

The Copenhagen swords in the picture above, like most swords in museums, are not national treasures, however, but just curios or tokens of history.

5. Swords, next to rings, were often assigned **magical properties** in many legends, myths, and fairy tales. Looking closely, one can detect two varieties of the magic involved: Old-fashioned black magic because the sword was made by some (now defunct) God, cobold, dwarf, giant and so on, or wholesome Christian magic based on miracles due to having, for example, a small piece of a Saint enclosed in the hilt. And we have mixtures of the two, of course.

- Everybody knows about the magic "**sword in the stone**" from the **King Arthur** saga, and about his "**Excalibur**" (the two, incidentally, were not the same).

North European mythology knows "**Balmung**", **Siegfried's** magical sword that he forged from the parts of "**Notung**", the, needless to say, magical sword that broke in a fight with **Wotan**, the top God of Valhalla. This [link](#) recounts the story of **Richard Wagner's** "Ring des Nibelungen" in a slightly unorthodox way.

Eventually, the despicable heathen magic imbued in swords like Excalibur or Notung gave way to admirable Christian miracle swords like Charlemagne's Joyeuse. Many warriors had some piece of a relic inside the hilt of their swords as late as the 14 th century.

We find a tale similar to Wagner's "Ring" in the modern "**Lord of the Ring**" saga, where "**Anduril**", the sword of the returned King **Aragorn**, was forged by the elves from the remains of "**Narsil**", the magical sword that broke in a fight with evil **Sauron**.

Just to be complete, let's enumerate a few more famous named swords.

We have "**Mimung**", the sword that enabled "**Wieland the smith**", another northern hero of old, to win a contest between smiths. He cut his opponent so neatly in half that said opponent failed to notice this until he made his next move and fell apart. [Here](#) is the full tale (in German).

El Cid had another famous sword, the "Colada", and **Theodoric the Great** owned "**Eckesachs**" and "**Nagelring**". **Roland**, Charlemagne's nephew and paladin (sort of closest ally or personal body guard; I had to look it up, too) who comes with his [own saga](#), fought with "**Durendal**". **Shamshir e Zomorrodnegar** ("the emerald-studded sword") was the sword of **King Solomon**.

Most prominent is also "**Zulfiqar**", the sword that the **Prophet Muhammad** gave to his son-in-law **Ali**. A long list of named swords can be found in the link. Note that all "magical" swords were "lost" in antiquity; famous surviving swords have no particular magical powers.

6. Swords made great (and expensive) **gifts** from king to king or king to vassal.

- We have an [old letter](#) originating from **Theoderic the Great**, expressing his gratitude for a gift of marvellous swords. The most likely *pattern-welded* blades achieved far more gratitude than a number of "foreign pageboys of noble birth and fair complexion".

The famous Japanese *nihonotos* (swords), especially the "**Dai - Sho**" (long - short), the matched pair of a long *katana* and a short *wakizashi* always associated with Samurai, was essentially a gift from the Samurai's boss to assure loyalty etc. It could be used for fighting but that was not the main point.

- Swords still serve as tokens of appreciation in some parts of the world. In Eastern Europe, after the Berlin wall came down in 1989 and one could go there, I have seen swords displayed in offices. Those swords were given, for example, to the "manager of the year" instead of some decadent plaque or goblet. Right now (2018) you can bid at an auction for a magnificent [sword](#) that the Saudi-Arabian princess Hessa al Saud gave to her German doctor as a token of her appreciation some time in the second half of the 20th century.

In Arabic countries, a sword may still be the trophy for the winner of a camel race.

Here is an example from 1833:

**Illustration
Module
Swords with
names**



Trophy sword from 1833

The inscription expresses gratitude to the winner of some tournament

Source: Photographed in Bamberg, Germany,

[Large size](#)

I stop here but there is far more. I have written several long special modules to the points made above (check the [matrix of modules](#)) so you can believe that I do find these topics rather interesting. Nevertheless, the major point about what swords mean *to me* still needs to be made—in the next paragraph.

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- 1) According to "Die Zeit" (a leading German newspaper) from Nov. 2012, almost 15.000 people get shot per year in the USA (about 300 million citizens). In Germany (about 80 million citizens) it's about 700.