

Theoderic's "Thank You" letter

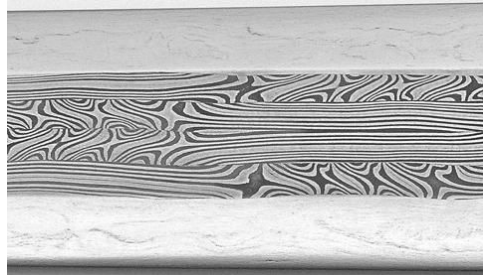
[Theodoric the Great](#), King of the [Ostrogoths](#) and ruler after the [fall of the Roman empire](#), expresses his gratitude for a few gifts including Merovingian swords to [Thrasamond](#), King of the [Vandals](#).

The letter was recorded by [Cassiodorus](#), a sixth century AD chronicler. Here is a translation:

Illustration

"Through your brotherly affection swords that will cut even through armor have been forwarded to us, together with pitch-black drums and foreign pageboys of noble birth and fair complexion. These swords are richer for their iron than for the value of the gold [which embellishes them]: for there flashes out from them such a polished brilliance that they reflect with the utmost fidelity the faces of those who look at them. Their sides approach the edges with such uniformity that you would think that they were not fashioned by files, but cast from fiery furnaces; their centers, hollowed out with beautiful grooves, seem to undulate with worm-like markings; for shadows of such variety you would think the metal was interwoven rather than shining [superficially] with different colors. The metal your whetstone so carefully shapes, this your splendid dust (granted to your country by the bounty of nature) so thoroughly polishes that it makes the gleam of the iron a very mirror of men. Particular opinion has arisen regarding them: that they are swords made by Vulcan - he who apparently perfected the art of the smith with such elegance that whatever was fashioned by his hand was thought to be, not the work of mortals, but divine. Accordingly, in returning to you our kindest regards through your so-and-so ambassador, we declare that we have received your weapons with pleasure, which they have conveyed to us as earnest of a good peace. In consideration of your munificence we are sending you a gift in return; may it be as acceptable to you as yours was pleasing to us. May these auspicious gifts vouchsafe us friendship, so that in making these heartfelt interchanges between us we may unite our nations and in reciprocal concern bind ourselves together for our mutual advantage".

Here are two pictures of modern replicas of pattern-welded blades. [This links](#) leads to a large-size picture of a sword such as the ones referred to in the letter. You will find many more in the Hyperscript if you look around.



Detail of pattern-welded blades with " worm-like markings" or with a (rather unusual) ["serpent in the sword"](#) pattern.

Source: Top: Patrcik Barta (with permission); bottom: Photographed in the [Landesmuseum Stuttgart](#)

- The top one is from around 575 AD; it was made by **Patrick Bárta**, a master-smith who specializes in this kind of work.

The bottom one is displayed in the "Württembergisches Landesmuseum" in Stuttgart, Germany and must also roughly date to around 600 AD.

Interesting, isn't it? The "*foreign pageboys of noble birth and fair complexion*" only rate half a sentence but he goes wild about those swords. What can we learn from the letter?

- The swords will cut even through armor. Obviously they are sharp, remain sharp and don't break.
- The gold embellishments are no match for the value of the iron blades. Those swords were worth their [weight in gold](#), it appears.
- The mirror-like finish was valued; not everybody could do that - one needs "*splendid dust*" for [polishing](#) to such a fine sheen.
- They are so uniform that they appear to be "*cast from firey furnaces*". In other words: they look as if the impossible, casting steel, had been done.
- "*Their centers, hollowed out with beautiful grooves, seem to undulate with worm-like markings*" This can only mean that those swords were **pattern welded**. I wonder if the "worm-like" was properly translated. It might just as well have been "serpent-like" and we have the "[serpent in the sword](#)" once more.
It also indicates that the letter writer thought that the pattern was done by some kind of engraving or inlaying. That could mean that the recipients were not used to pattern welded swords and didn't know how they were made.
- "*They are swords made by Vulcan*". A rumor is started. Swords like these must come from a smith with a magical background: Vulcanos, the Roman version of the Greek [Hephaistos](#) himself. A few centuries later, in [old sagas](#), swords like these might indeed have been remembered as magical.