

Serpent in the Sword

The "serpent in the sword" is a topic that comes up in connection with pattern welded swords. In particular [Stefan Maeder](#) has devoted many pages of his (German) 330 page opus "Steels, Stones and Snakes" to the topic. There are three reasons for this:

1. A few old pattern welded swords with a wavy line pattern instead of the far more frequent herringbone or torsion [pattern](#) have been found. This wavy line might represent a serpent.
2. Swords in old pictorial representations (typically illuminated manuscripts, wood carvings or stained glass windows) are occasionally shown with a wavy line running down the blade.
3. In a few old writings references to a "serpent in the blade" can be found.

It is thus possible that the wavy line was not just another way to ornament a blade but that the "serpent" symbolized something or did some "magic" like an amulet or something. The guys with pattern welded swords were not necessarily Christians before 800 AD or so, after all.

Let's note right away that even the oldest of all the sources referring to serpents in the blade are not as old as most pattern welded swords. They typically appeared a few hundred years *after* the heydays of pattern welding. Let's only look at point 2 and 3 of the evidence here, point 1 is covered [here](#).

Here is a good "picture" to start with. The wood carving was part of a door of the Hylestad stave church in Setesdal, Norway; built in late 12th to early 13th century.



Sigurd / Siegfried kills Regin / Mime the Smith, his [Forster Father](#). His sword ([Gram](#) / Notung) shows a "serpent in the blade"

Source: "Hammer of the North - Magnus Magnusson, images by Werner Forman"; posted on a Bladesmith's Forum Board in the Net.

The "**Stuttgarter Psalter**" is kept in the Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart, Germany. It is from 825 AD and contains nicely illustrated Bible stuff. It was made in Saint-Germain-des-Prés near to Paris, France. And no, we didn't have to [invade France](#) to get it. We had a common King around then: Charlemagne. The psalter contains a lot of pictures with plenty of swords, severed heads and so on. It does show swords with a wavy line = serpent (?) running down the blades, as [Stefan Maeder](#) pointed out:



Swords with serpents in the blade; Stuttgart Psalter

Source: Internet site of Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart, Germany

- However, as far as I scanned through the volume, there seem to be far more swords *without* a serpent than with one; below is an example. We do encounter serpents in other contexts, however, as shown further down:



A swords with no serpent in the blade; Stuttgart Psalter



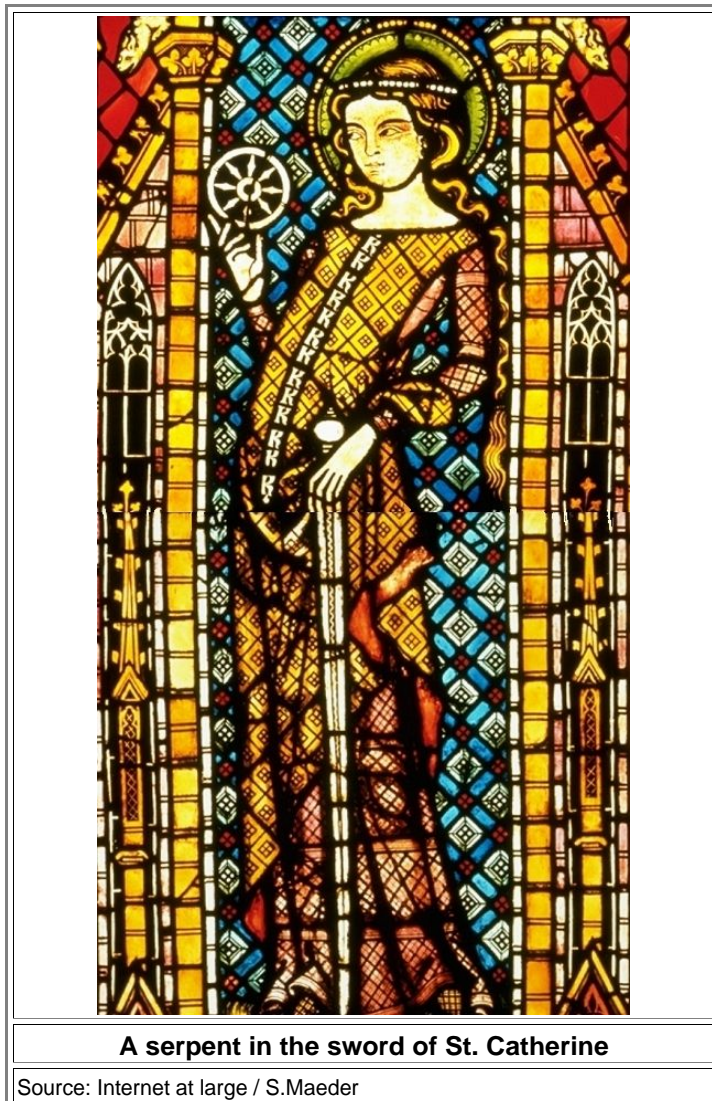
A real serpent with a devil. Read the Bible to find out what, exactly, Jesus is doing. Stuttgart Psalter

- Then we have a sword with a pattern that is definitely *not* a snake but, maybe, symbolizes writing in those good (at least for dogs) old days?

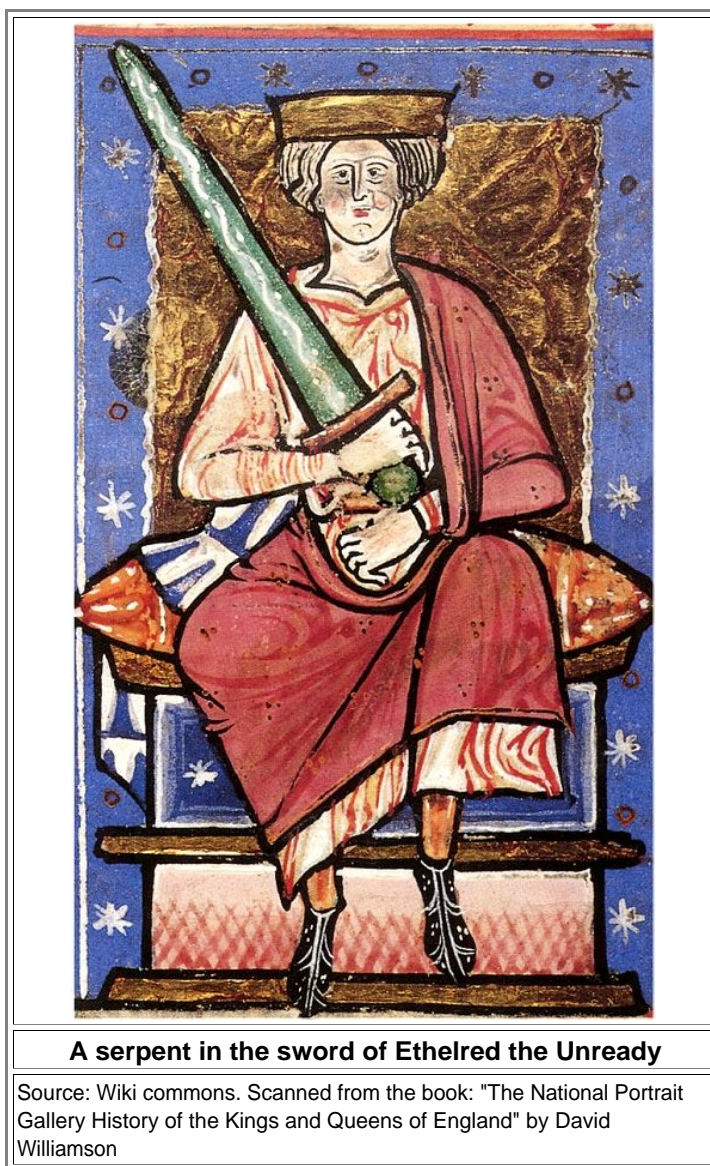


There are plenty more examples. Some of the pictures [in this link](#) "show swords with snakes".

- The stained glass window of the Freiburger Münster; Germany, from around 1330 show many swords with serpents. Here is one:



- Finally, the "Chronicle of Abindon" from ca. 1220 shows Ethelred the Unready (ca. 968 - 1016) with a prominent serpent sword:



▶ **However!** In my experience all that stuff from early times - and there is plenty - mostly shows swords with *nothing* on their blades. The pictures above with patterned blades are rather the exception, not the rule. I can't give you statistics but I'm rather sure about that.

It might well be that a wavy line was the way to illustrate that there is *some* pattern on the blade. If you look at the examples given, the artists, for lack of space, simply could not possibly have produced the normal torsion damask pattern in their works.

▶ Now to the written evidence.

The best known snake tale comes from [Norse sagas](#); it is recounted in [Oakeshott's book](#). The famous (and, needless to say, somehow magic) sword [Sköfnung](#) is reported to do funny things: "Hold up the blade and blow on it; a small snake will creep from under the guard; incline the blade, and make it easy for the snake to creep back again". That may well be practical advice. Nearly invisible patterns on polished surfaces may come to light when you "blow" on them, i.e. making water from your breath condense on the cool surface.

In "[Beowulf](#)" we find a reference to a sword blade "variegated like a snake".

The famous sword [Eckesachs](#) from the [Thidrekssaga](#) might have contained a serpent, and so on and so forth. Just nothing really clear.

- What does it mean? We simply don't know. It's a small way from the serpent to the dragon, and dragons and dragon slayers loom large in the mythology of the Europeans, not to mention the Chinese. Is there a connection? If you believe so, nobody can refute your claim. But you can't prove it either. So let's rest the matter right here.