

Swords with Names

Illustration

Here is a list of swords with names, what the name means, who owned them, plus some additional information that I found interesting.

I keep adding to that list but can't guarantee that everything is absolutely correct. A lot of the "information" comes from [mythical lore](#) anyway, often second or third hand, and with plenty of contradictions and uncertainties.

Since a lot of heroes and their swords appear in more than one saga, there is often conflicting information and one has to choose which one appears to be more creditable.

I looked at a lot of sources in the Net, in books, and in scientific writings. Nevertheless I probably missed quite a bit of what has been written. I don't think it matters much, however. Dealing with the matter I pretty soon realized that one gets different bits and pieces of essentially the same basic stuff, plus some guesses or hearsay. I tried to put the most relevant information together. My judgement may not agree with yours; it may also simply be wrong on occasion.

Every now and then, and in particular at the end of this module, I propose speculative interpretations of some pertinent facts that you are entitled to consider asinine and outrageous. Just stop reading in this case. But remember that science thrives by looking at issues from different points of view, and that scientists like to fight lustily and tirelessly for their viewpoints, albeit rarely with swords.

Like always, Wikipedia has bits and pieces of good information in a lot of different pages. Here are links to two relevant pages:

http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kategorie:Mythologisches_Schwert

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Mythological_swords

In the upcoming text are lots of links, often to suitable entries in the rather long module [Old Sagas, Heroes and Swords](#). Don't click on every link as it comes up. If you are interested in details, read that module first, then activate a link as you see fit.

[Advanced
Module](#)

[Old Sagas](#)

List of Sword with Names

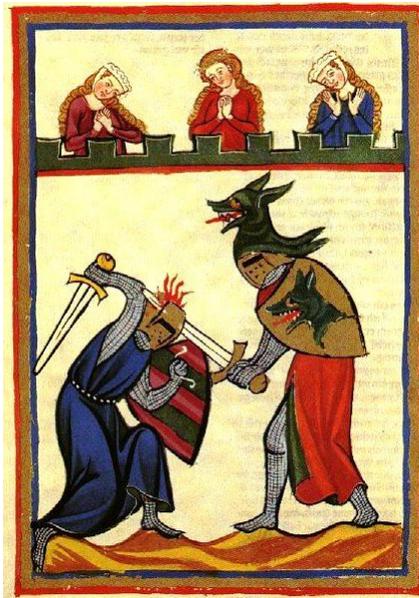
Almace
or Almice,
Almacia

Sword of **Turpin**, Archbishop of Reims.

The meaning of the name is uncertain, possibly from Arabic or from the Old Norse *almusa*, meaning *alms*. That doesn't make much sense to me, however.

Archbishop **Turpin** was one of the last Frankish heroes to die at the Battle of Roncevaux, along with super hero **Roland**, as recorded (unreliably) in the the legendary [Song of Roland](#). Very little is said about Almace in the Song of Roland, in contrast to [Durendal](#), Roland's much more famous sword. However a [Norse saga](#) claims that a sword called "**Kurt**" (better known as [Curtana](#)), famous Durendal *and* Almace were forged by legendary [Wayland the smith](#), and presented to [Charlemagne](#) to secure the release of a Norse prisoner. Charlemagne tested the swords by seeing how far they would cut into a steel mound. **Kurt** penetrated "a hand's breadth" but was notched, **Almace** penetrated a hand's breadth without damage, and **Durendal** penetrated "half the length of a man's foot".

Don't believe that. No sword can cut several cm or inches into solid steel, not to mention that Charlemagne probably did not have those three swords at his disposal. Good swords could cut through armor, however, if the many pictures from the 12th - 14th century can be believed. Charlemagne gave Kurt to Ogier the Dane and Almace to Bishop Turpin, and initially kept Durendal for himself. Later he was told in a dream to give Durendal to his paladin Roland. Another legend claims that on Curtana is written "My name is Curtana, of the same steel and temper as [Joyeuse](#) and **Durendal**", leaving Almace's origins unexplained.



Cutting through armor with a sword

Source: Codex Manesse, or "Große Heidelberger Liederhandschrift", an illuminated manuscript in codex form copied and illustrated between ca. 1304 when the main part was completed, and ca 1340.

Arondight

Sword of **Lancelot**, the famous knight of [King Arthur's](#) round table. The meaning of the word is unclear.

- Note that Lancelot does not appear in the oldest King Arthur "books" but is a later French addition, like the quest for the Holy Grail. My guess is that there was a need to bring more adventures and especially more **Christianity** into the old pagan saga.

Balmung

Sword of the ubiquitous Nordic super hero [Sigfried](#) / Sigurd, who was once upon a time a kind of German national hero.

The meaning of the name is unclear, maybe "**anointing**" (via "balsamieren" (German) = embalming = anointing = impregnating. "**Embalmer**"? That does not make much sense to me. My own interpretation is given [below](#)

- Sigfried figures in many sagas; in some his sword is called "**Gram**". Balmung and Gram are either the same sword or Gram is the original one that eventually breaks and Balmung is the one reforged from the pieces of Gram.

In Wagner's 15 hr opera "[Ring des Nibelungen](#)" (mercifully never played in one fell swoop but on four days) Sigfried's sword is called "**Notung**", a rather well known sword name but freely invented by Wagner. The meaning is something like "came to me when I needed it" ("Not" = need) or "releaser" in short.

However, the word "Nötigung", literally: to put somebody in need, to cause distress; but also "to force yourself on somebody" or simply "sexual assault", might be associated with that name. Notung then would mean rather something like "enforcer". Wagner's Sigfried certainly loses no time to put what Notung [symbolizes](#) in Siglinde's [sheath](#), right after he pulled Notung from the tree.

- The magic sword Balmung or Gram originates in a somewhat unclear way from the Gods, and it has to be [pulled out](#) by the right guy (Sigfried's father) from a tree. It breaks when used against a God, becomes reforged, usually by Sigfried, who uses it then to kill a dragon, [and so on](#).

**Advanced
Module
Swords and
Symbols**



Siegfried using Balmung (in Bremen, Germany)

[Here](#) is another more modern rendering of Siegfried wielding Balmung.

Caladbolg or Caladcholg

Sword of *Fergus mac Róich* an especially potent hero from Irish mythology. Caladbolg means "*Hard sheath*" or "*hard blade*"; but is possibly just a generic word for "great swords" (like "Mercedes" for great cars or "Materials Scientist" for great people).

- It was said to be a two-handed sword that made a circle like an arc of rainbow when swung, to have the power to slice the tops off hills, and to slaughter an entire host. If seen as a [phallus symbol](#), it must have been gigantic to match the tales about the hero's piece.
- Caladbolg may be related linguistically to some guy's ("*Cúchulainn*") spear, the *Gáe Bulg*, and is thought to be a source or analogue of King Arthur's sword *Excalibur*, which in early Welsh is called *Caledfwlch*, a name that combines the elements *caled* ("battle, hard"), and *fwlch* ("breach, gap, notch").

(Don't ask me how you pronounce all this)

Chandrabhas

Sword of *Ravana*, who was a mighty king in what we now would call India. He wasn't quite human. *Chandra* = moon, *Has* = laugh; literally "*the laughter of the moon*". That doesn't make all that much sense to me. Maybe the name refers to the shape of a crescent moon that resembles a smile and could appear to resemble a curved scimitar. Nowadays it would probably be called "smiley".

- When Ravana was on some guilt trip that lasted several years ("performing an intense penance to Brahma, the Creator God"), he chopped off his head 10 times as a sacrifice to appease Brahma. Each time he sliced his head off a new head arose thus enabling him to continue his penance.

Most regular humans would have problems to emulate that feat but the movie "Men in black" shows how it is done.

Claíomh Solais

Sword of *Nuada Airgeadlámh*, legendary king of Ireland
Claíomh Solais means "*Sword of Light*".

- Claíomh Solais was one of the four magical instruments brought to Ireland according to early mythology. The other instruments are a stone, a spear and a cauldron.

No one ever escaped from it once it was drawn from its sheath, and no one could resist it.

Colada

The other and less famous sword of *El Cid*, the Spanish national hero.

The meaning of the name seems to be unclear.

Colada in Spanish means "strained" or "cast" and probably a few other things too. Sebastian de Covarubias, writing in 1611 referred to the "acero colado" process of producing alloyed steel without impurities, and "cast" is clear but can't possibly refer to the making of the blade.

- Colada, like [Tizona](#), appears in the epic poem "*Cantar de mio Cid*" as a sword that frightens unworthy opponents if wielded by a brave warrior. El Cid gave the sword to Martín Antolínez as a present, and he uses it in the duel against the infante Diego González.

Colada might still exist. There are some claims to ownership but no clear evidence that one is correct.

Crocea Mors

Sword of *Julius Caesar*.
Crocea Mors means "*Yellow Death*".

- As far as I know Crocea Mors isn't mentioned in Roman literature or by Caesar himself but by [Geoffrey of Monmouth](#) who wrote the (mostly invented) "Historia Regum Britanniae" (History of the Kings of Britain) around 1130. Julius Caesar's invasion of Britain is covered there, including a story about a British prince names Nennius. He acquired Crocea Mors when, during single combat with Caesar, it got stuck in his shield. It killed everyone Nennius struck with it but was buried with him soon after.
Looks like pure invention to me.

Curtana
or Cortana,
Courtain

The oldest recorded Curtana belonged to the mystical *Ogier the Dane*, a legendary Danish King and hero who lived around 800 AD if he lived at all.

Curtana means "*The shortened*"; from Latin *curtus*, 'shortened', a name later used for a ceremonial type of sword.

- Curtana is supposed to have originally been **Tristan's** (magical) sword (he killed a dragon after all). It was renamed "Cortana" when it was "cut down" to fit Ogier; probably he (or parts of him) weren't to tall.
- Ogier introduced Christianity to Denmark and once saved Carlemagne's life. That earned him Curtana.
It bears the inscription "My name is Cortana, of the same steel and temper as *Joyeuse* and *Durendal*" (see below)
- There are several "curtanas" nowadays. The Queen of England, if she ever knights me, might use [her](#) Curtana for that.

Durendal
or Durandart,
Durindan

Sword of [Roland](#), one of Charlemagne's 12 "paladins" and French national hero.

Durendal means "*The enduring*".

- Durendal was supposedly made by [Wayland "the smith"](#) like *Curtana* above, [Joyeuse](#), [Mimung](#) and God (probably Odin) knows what else.
- In "The [Song of Roland](#)", [Durendal](#) is said to contain within its golden hilt one tooth of Saint Peter, blood of Saint Basil, hair of Saint Denis, and a piece of the raiment of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Olivander from Harry Potter sends his regards.
Durendal has some magic. But this is now of the good *Christian* type and no longer of evil *pagan* variety. The victims (see below) probably did not appreciate this subtle difference.



Roland demonstrates Durendal's power

[Link to larger picture](#)

Source: This detail was taken from a picture supplied in 2010 by Marie Therese Ross as part of "Britain Loves Wikipedia".

- Shown is part of a tapestry woven 1475-1500 in Tournai (Belgium); it is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. It shows the battle of Roncevaux in 778, where Roland fought King Marsile (the guy with the cloven head) of Saragossa for control of Spain.

Excalibur
or Escalibor,
Caliburn,
Caledfwch.

Famous magical sword of [King Arthur](#).

The name Excalibur apparently derives from the Welsh Caledfwch (pronounced sort of "Caledwuch") which combines the elements *caled* ("battle, hard"), and *bwlch* ("breach, gap, notch"). [Geoffrey of Monmouth](#) latinised this to *Caliburnus* (likely influenced by the medieval Latin spelling *calibs* of classical Latin *chalybs* "steel"). Caliburnus or Caliburn became Excalibur when the Arthurian legend entered into French literature.

- Depending on which version one reads, Excalibur is one of those super-magical swords that must be [pulled from a stone](#), a feat that only the right guy will be able to do. More to that in the [link](#).

- Excalibur gives its bearer supernatural strength and its sheath provides invulnerability.

Eckesachs

One of the two more or less magical swords of [Ditrich von Bern](#), a major figure in many Northern sagas.

Eckesachs means "*Ecke's* (a giant from whom Ditrich took the sword) *sachs* or sax, the name for a single edged sword.

- Eckesachs supposedly was forged by the mythical dwarf (King) [Alberich](#), the later *Oberon*.

Gram

Sword of *Siegfried*, hero of many Northern sagas.

"Gram" in modern German means "*Grief*", in old Norse "*Wrath*".

- Also known as "[Balmung](#)". The link gives details.

Hauteclere or Halteclere, Hauteclaire.

Sword of *Olivier*, another French hero depicted in the [Song of Roland](#).

Hauteclere means "*High and neat*" if taken literally.

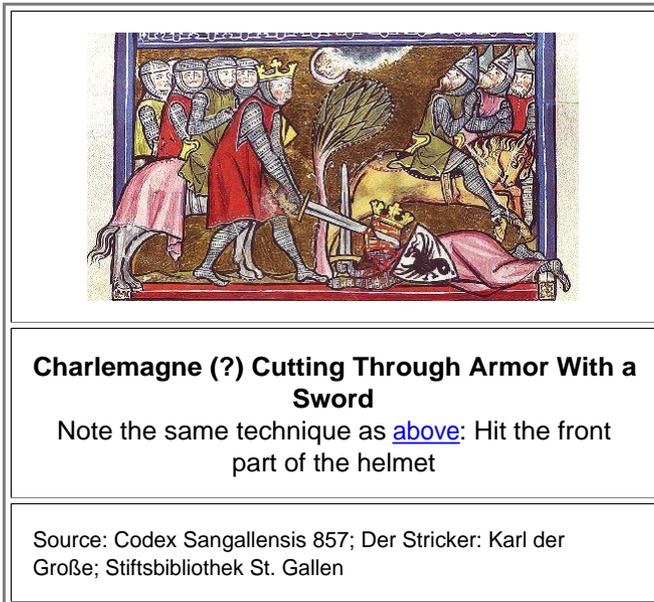
- It is described as being of burnished steel, with a crystal embedded in a golden hilt.

Hrunting

First sword of [Beowulf](#); hero supreme in Anglo-Saxon lore.

Hrunting means "*Thrusting*".

- Hrunting was lend to Beowulf by one Unferth. The iron blade with its "ill-boding patterns" had been tempered in blood. It had never failed the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle. However, it is useless in Beowulf's fight against Grendel's mother. See the link above for details



Joyeuse

Sword of **Charlemagne**

Joyeuse means "*Joyful*".

- Joyeuse, besides "Tizona", seems to be the only other old famous sword that might still exist today; a sword claimed to be Joyeuse is exhibited in the Louvre.

Another supposed Joyeuse is held at the Imperial Treasury in Vienna. It's actually a sabre, likely from the Kiev region in present day Ukraine. Charlemagne may have received it as a gift but it's rather unlikely that it is Joeyuse.

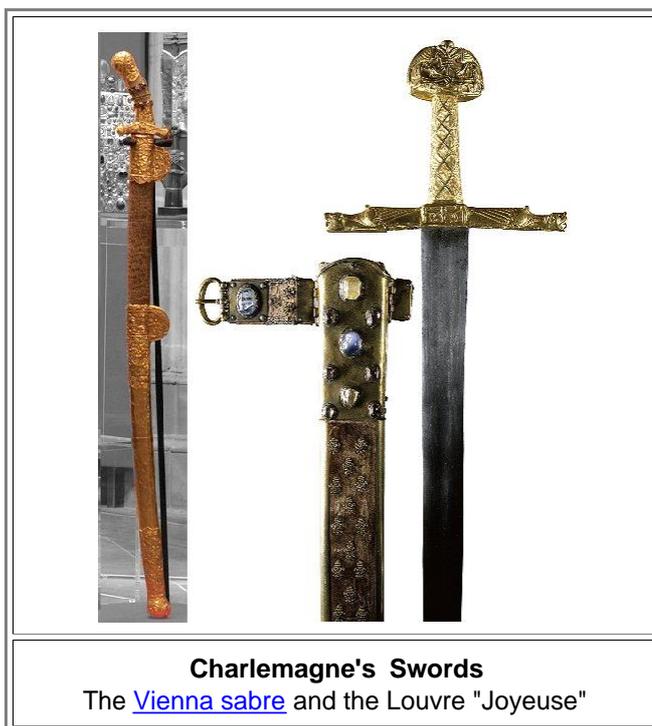
Both swords have been investigated and discussed many times and the verdict is: they are both rather old (at least parts) and may or may not have been in Charlemagne's possession. So much for Science here.

Some legends claim that Joyeuse contains within its pommel (parts?) of the [\(holy\) lance](#), the relique that the Roman soldier *Longinus* used to finally kill Jesus with. The holy lance, actually, is also shown in the Imperial Treasury in Vienna, so it cannot be in the pommel. Joyeuse supposedly was forged from the same materials as [Roland's Durendal](#) and Ogier's [Curtana](#) by [Wayland the Smith](#).

The 11th century [Song of Roland](#) describes the sword: Charlemagne was wearing his fine white coat of mail and his helmet with gold-studded stones; by his side hung Joyeuse, and never was there a sword to match it; its color changed thirty times a day.

So a bit of magic is involved but it is now of the good, Christian kind.

- Joyeuse is alleged to have been interred with Charlemagne's body or, contrarily, to be held by the Saint Denis Basilica, from where it was later retired into the Louvre after being carried at the front of Coronation processions for French kings for centuries. It is, however, doubtful if Charlemagne's grave has ever been found; serious archaeologists are still searching around the Dome in Aachen / Germany



Charlemagne's Swords
The [Vienna sabre](#) and the Louvre "Joyeuse"

Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi

Sword of God *Susano-O*; it's to Japan what Excalibur is to England. It is one of three Imperial Regalia of Japan

Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi means "*Grass cutting sword*". Doesn't make much sense to me except if you interpret "grass" as an euphemism of [something else](#).

- It was originally called Ame-no-Murakumo-no-Tsurugi, "Sword of the Gathering Clouds of Heaven" (not a particular good sword name either in my opinion) but its name was later changed to the more popular Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi.
Susano-O found the sword in the tail of an eight-headed, eight-tailed dragon called Yamata no Orochi that he killed for some reason I'm not aware of.
- The sword is first mentioned in the book "Kojiki" from 711 AD. This book is a collection of Japanese myths and is not considered a historical document. The first reliable historical mention of the sword is in the "Nihonshoki", a book of Japanese history from 720.
Kusanagi was removed from the Imperial palace in 688 and moved to the Atsuta Shrine where it may or may not be today. The Shinto priests refuse to comment. Talk about keeping up a good myth!
The stories about the sword are even wilder than what we are used to from old Northern Europe. I won't attempt to recount them.

Mimung

The most famous sword made (and owned) by [Wayland the Smith](#).

Mimung means something like "*In memory of Mime*" or "*Dedicated to Mime*". [Mime](#) a powerful dwarf, was Wayland's teacher.

- Mimung is made for a contest with the smith Amilias, who, like Wayland, serves the evil King Nidung.
Wayland makes the best sword he is capable of making. Not being satisfied with the sharpness of the blade, he grinds it down to powder and puts the iron filings in the food for the fowl, probably geese. The next day he collects the goose shit, extracts the iron, forges a new sword, is still not satisfied, and repeats the procedure. Finally the sword called Mimung is ready for the contest:

"He puts the blade of Mimung on the helmets crest and presses softly, softly: "do tell me how it rests if you are feeling something". Amilias replies: "Cut down with all your might may wrath and hate you guide. You will need all your power to pierce this helmet of mine". Wayland presses down on Mimung more strongly then before it glides through helmet, head, through mail, stomach, more, continues down through belt and iron trousers, too. Once more asks Wayland: "Tell me, how does it feel to you?" Amilias replies: "I feel as if cold water is dripping down my spine I guess what you are doing is just to waste my time". Wayland replies: "Just shake yourself a little bit. Your last drink you just emptied, vainglorious stupid sh..". The smith Amelias did stir himself, alas! on both sides half a body falls down onto the grass.
(My translation)

- Couldn't resist. So Mimung is supernatural but not magical. Its making did not involve black art and evil pagan deities, but only wholesome (Christian?) goose shit. In the saga, however, it is not explained why goose shit imbues supernatural power to a sword. That was done [later](#).

Naegling

Third sword of [Beowulf](#).

Naegling means "*nailer*", that is it drives like a nail into its enemy.

However, it is also possible that the name just refers to jeweled nails on its hilt. Then there is my interpretation below.

- Naegling is given to Beowulf by King Hroðgar because Beowulf killed both Grendel and Grendel's mother. This fatherless family was a source of major trouble for Hroðgar. But Naegling, described as "gomol ond grægmæl" (old and gray) snaps when Beowulf fights a dragon with it. English literature history makes a big deal of Beowulf's three swords and why two of them ([Hrunting](#) and Naegling) fail him. The third one (with no recorded name), while appearing in the nick of time and allowing him to kill Grendel's mother, "melts" from exposure to her blood.

Nagelring

First famous sword of [Ditrich von Bern](#) (the second one is [Eckesachs](#)).

Nagelring means "*Ring of nails*"; even in modern German. Possibly referring to jeweled nails on its hilt.

- Alfrik (= [Alberich](#)), famous magical dwarf smith, gives Ditrich the (of course) magical Nagelring, plus a special helmet named *Hildegrim* because Ditrich killed the giant *Grim* for him.

Why good helmets were also considered important can be seen in the pictures [below](#).

Shamshir-e Zomorrodnegar

Sword of **King Solomon**

The name means "*The emerald-studded sword*"

- "The emerald-studded sword" appears in the Persian legend "Amir Arsalan". The witch mother of a hideous horned demon called Fulad-zereh used a charm to make Fulad-zereh's body invulnerable to all weapons except the blows of a specific sword called Shamshir-e Zomorrodnegar. This blade originally belonged to King Solomon, and was carefully guarded by Fulad-zereh, not only because it was a valuable weapon, and indeed the only weapon that could harm the demon, but also because wearing it was a charm against magic. A wound inflicted by this sword could only be treated by a special potion made from a number of ingredients, including Fulad-zereh's brains.

So there. Old Persian sagas are just as weird as the Nordic ones.

Sköfnung

Sword of legendary Danish King *Hrólf Kraki*, who also figures in [Beowulf](#)

The meaning of the name is unclear; it might mean "The polished"

- Sköfnung is supposed to be the best of all swords that have been carried in northern lands. It was renowned for supernatural sharpness and hardness, as well as for being imbued with the spirits of the King's 12 faithful berserker bodyguards.

Berserkers (or berserks) were Norse warriors, who are reported in the Old Norse literature to have fought in a nearly uncontrollable, trance-like fury. Most historians believe that berserkers worked themselves into a rage before battle, but some think that they might just have consumed drugged foods. Aha!

- "The sword is not to be drawn in the presence of women, and the sun must never shine on the sword's hilt".

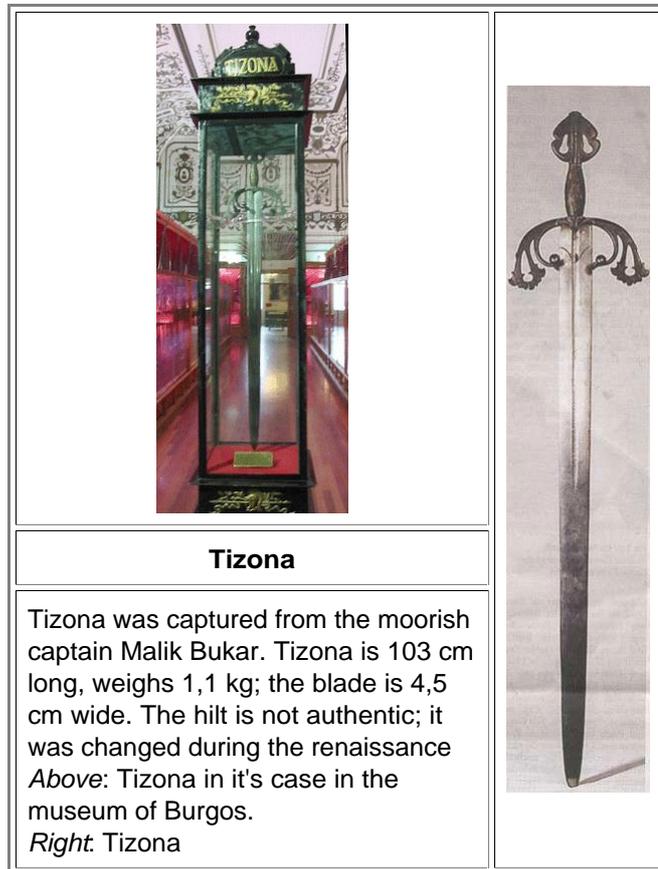
A bit weird, considering one of the many [symbolic meanings](#) of swords. Maybe we have an early allusion to the fact that some men always preferred recreational sword play with other men?

Tizona

Famous and still existing sword of [El Cid](#).

The name comes from Tizón, literally "*Burning stick*", "*Firebrand*".

- There are two inscriptions on the sword:
IO SOI TISONA FUE FECHA EN LA ERA DE MILE QUARENTA
or "I am Tizona, made in the year 1040", meaning 1002 in modern time keeping.
AVE MARIA ~ GRATIA PLENA ~ DOMINUS TECUM
or "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you" (from a Catholic prayer).
- Tizona, with some supernatural powers, was taken from a Moor captain. That; in contrast to having a heathen sorcerer make a magic sword for you, was probably the politically correct thing to do for a good Christian fellow if he needed a magical sword.
Note that the Islamic Moor did not wield a (curved) crucible steel or wootz blade



Thuan Thiên

Mythical sword of the Vietnamese King [Lê Loi](#), who liberated Vietnam from Ming occupation after ten years of fighting from 1418 until 1428.

Thuan Thiên means "*Heavens will*".

- According to legend, the sword possessed magical power, which supposedly made Lê Loi (or just [parts of him?](#)) grow very tall.
When he used the sword it gave him the strength of a thousand men, and the legend is often used to justify Lê Loi's rule over Vietnam..
- A local God, the Dragon King (Vietnamese: Long Vương) decided to lend his sword to Lê Loi. But there was a catch; the sword did not come straight to him in one piece. It was split into two parts: a blade and a sword hilt.
Another long and mysterious story develops that I will not recount.

Tyrfing

Magical sword of [Svafrlami](#), Odin's grandson and the (Northern) King of Gardariki (wherever that might be).

Tyrfing combines [Tyr](#), Norse god of war, and [fingr](#), the Old Norse (and modern) German word for finger; so literally it means "*The finger of the war God*".

- Svafrlami once managed to trap the Dwarves *Dvalinn* and *Durin* (regards from "Lord of the ring") when they had left the rock where they dwelt. He forced them to forge a sword with a golden hilt that would never miss a stroke, would never rust and would cut through stone and iron as easily as through clothes.
The Dwarves made the sword, and it shone and gleamed like fire. However, in revenge they cursed it so that it would kill a man every time it was drawn and that it would be the cause of three great evils. Not yet satisfied, they finally cursed it so that it would also kill Svafrlami himself.

Zulfiqar
or Dhu al-Fiqar,
Dhu l-faqar,
Thulfeqar,
Dhulfiqar, Zoulfikar,
Zülfikar

Sword of *Prophet Muhammad* and later of the Imam *Ali ibn Abu Talib*, the prophet's cousin and son-in-law.

Zulfiqar means "*Bifurcated*" and describes the typical sword shape of the time and place.

- Two swords were captured from the temple of Manat at the legendary *battle of Badr* (624 AD), the outcome of which essentially established Islam. Muhammad gave them to Ali, saying that one of them was *Al-Dhulfiqar*, which became the famous sword of Ali and a symbol of the Shia Islam.

Zulfiqar is so important in the Arabic culture that it has its own sign ()

The name of the sword also appears as common Muslim name; e.g. as first name of the former Pakistani prime minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto or as surname, e.g. of the Turkish artists Ali Zülfikar.

Some museums have managed to present Zulfiqar in a ridiculous way. More about that in [this link](#).



What did We Learn?

What did we learn from all that sword lore around swords with names?
A lot about the need to tell tall stories about special men (and women; there is Grendel's mommy, after all). But not all that much about steel history.
Some points I like to make are:

First: While there are a lot of different (Northern) sagas, there seem to be just a few *original* stories, mostly triggered by some real events in the past, with a limited set of major characters.

- This was to be expected. We know exactly how just *one* real historical event first mutated into many quite different if not outright conflicting legends, and then spawned plenty of secondary stories with rather shaky relations to the historic event. Just look at the Bible, New Testament.
- The link shows how the [gospels](#) in the Bible and other "apocryphal" stories not contained in the bible sprouted and multiplied from just one historical event: *The life and death of Jesus*. We might take this as role model for the development of whole clusters of sagas around some other historical events.

If one accepts as a working hypothesis that whole clusters of sagas revolve around one real event (or possibly several mixed-up real events), we still have the problem to extricate this "hard core" from the sagas. What exactly happened when and where?

Take, for example, the "*Sigfried*" or the "*Dietrich von Bern*" theme. What real historical event started these tales and produced variants and add-ons for hundreds of years?

Historians and experts for old literature have advanced more than one hypothesis for both. There is no consensus, however. That means you can pick your own favorite theory from whatever is suggested.

[Advanced Module](#)
Evolution of Sagas

But let's assume, for the sake of the argument, that we *do know* with some confidence which historic event launched the "Siegfried" sagas. Then we face the really tough question now: How did the highlights of this story come into being? Considering that we know *for sure* that the following things certainly were *not* historical events:

- A magic sword stuck in a stone / tree that can only be pulled out by Mr "Right".
- The slaying of a dragon.
- An impenetrable skin (by dragon-blood curing, except for that little "[Achilles heel](#)" somewhere) or by whatever magic.

All of this needs to be taken symbolically, of course. I won't offer any more ideas to this. Plenty can be found in the Net or my modules, but nothing is really clear.

Second: The heroes are usually super-potent and tough guys, distinguishing themselves more by wielding a sword than by making one.

They certainly were not among the intellectual elite of their times. [Charlemagne](#), for example, was an illiterate like most other Kings, Dukes and so on of his time. They liked to get what they wanted by raw strength, (physical) leadership, charisma or simply by violence. They also liked to name their swords. The more physically minded young males of our enlightened age (not to mention the intellectually minded) do not carry named swords around in public anymore—but they typically like to name what their sword would have symbolized: their penis. Considering that swords might have been potent [phallus symbols](#) even before [Sigmund Freud](#) invented that term, the ancient custom of "*name thy sword*" now acquires a new facet:

Caladbolg = Hard blade	Curtana = Shorty
Hauteclere = High and neat	Hrunting = Thrusting
Joyeuse = Joyful	Naegling = Nailer
Tizona = Burning stick	Tyrfing = Finger of God
Balmung = Impregnator (?)	Notung = Releaser (??) = "Nötiger", Forcerator, Raptor
Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi = "Beaver cleaver" (???)¹	

Those are pretty good names, not only for the sword but also for what it symbolizes. It is interesting in this context that after Wagner's Sigfried pulled out Balmung (Wagner called it "Notung"; something like "Nothelfer" in German, one might see a "releaser" here) from the tree, he immediately sticks Notung's counterpart into Siglinde (his willing sister, by the way), *impregnating* her with Sigfried. Never mind that time was pressing and Sigmund has a life-and death fight coming up. The need (= Not) to release the tension that young men experience when pretty wenches are around was more pressing.

Third: How the *magic* gets into the swords is often quite vague. That is understandable to some degree because the old tale-tellers faced several problems in that respect (not to mention that they simply didn't know; there is no magic, after all).

The first problem was that Northern Gods, like most of their Greek / Roman counterparts, were not big on making things besides babies (just consider [Zeuss](#)). For making hardware the Greeks / Romans had Hephaistos / Vulcanos, God and engineer. [Hephaistos](#) certainly could make magic swords and other [useful items](#)—but there is no good Northern counterpart in Valhalla.

The problem was solved to some extent by invoking **dwarfs** like [Alberich](#) or [Mime](#) and other second-line mystical creatures. Dwarfs (or giants) routinely are employed do the dirty work of the Gods, and sometimes even for mere mortal men. They are usually portrayed as being uncouth, unfashionably dressed, single-minded, not good at small talk, and generally not much fun to be with. They obviously were engineers or nerds in modern terminology. The Gods, who didn't know much about science and technology, nevertheless had the money, the pretty ladies, and the fun. Of course, they usually cheated the dwarfs, giants or other hard-working creatures who worked for them. Could it be that the Gods were **Bankers**?

Dwarfs, of course, are also simply reminiscences of early miners (witness Disney's Snow White). Being short was an advantage when rummaging around in the bowels of the earth. If you weren't all that short when you started mining, you were bend after years of toil in a crouching position.



- In Germany the unconscious collective memory about old mining times and miners still lingers in the form of **lawn gnomes**, often found in suburban gardens. The bright red "Zipfelmütze" (jelly bag cap) wasn't meant to be cute, it was the equivalent of a hard hat. The pointed top was filled with wool and the miner felt the tip contact the rock before he banged his head. Don't forget that it was dark inside the mountain; electric light hadn't been invented yet. It almost goes without saying that dwarves are phallic symbols, too, if you believe Freud or Snow White. In other words: they are perfect for making swords.

Fourth: The "magic" in the sword can be expressed in many ways. In ascending order of magicity we find:

- Just especially good swords, the best swords in the world. They frighten opponents if wielded by a brave warrior: Tizona, Colada, Naegling.
 - Blade blinds / frighten enemies: Excalibur, Tizona.
 - Supernatural hardness and/or sharpness: Skofnung, Mimung.
 - Never rusts, never fails: Tyrfing, Hrunding.
 - Mystic origin and then by definition special: Balmung, Durendal, Joyeuse, Mimung.
 - Cuts easily through (invulnerable) people, anvils, stones: Balmung, Mimung, Tyrfing, Shamshir-e Zomorrodnegar.
 - No one could resist it; always killed when drawn: Claiomh Solais, Tyrfing, Crocea Mors.
 - Cannot be broken; cleaves mountains: Durendal, Caladbolg.
 - Gives supernatural strength (sheath provides invulnerability): Excalibur.
 - Changes colors 30 times a day; makes a circle like an arc of rainbow: Joyeuse, Caladbolg
- If we discount properties like: "being very good" or "frightening enemies", "cuts easily through armor" as hardly magical, and laugh at silly and not very useful properties like "able to cut off mountain tops", Joyeuse, changing color 30 times a day, takes the price for good if rather peaceful magic. Nice Christian magic, not heathen magic like "must always kill when drawn".
 - The pictures below from a Bible painted around the time when the major sagas were finally written, show quite drastically what *normal* swords could do. The winners are, of course the "good guys", just following orders from the Lord. The war cry of the **crusaders** was "Deus vult" (Latin for "God wills it"). What could you do? Those heathen heads just needed to be cloven on general principles; don't take it personally.



Cutting a body in half

Note that the sword slicing through a whole body is a sax like [Eckesachs](#)
[Link to larger picture.](#)

Source: Morgan Bible (Pierpont Morgan Library, New York); a medieval picture bible.



Battle scenes from the "Morgan Bible"

[Link to larger picture](#)

Source: Morgan Bible (Pierpont Morgan Library, New York); a medieval picture bible.

- The pictures are from a medieval picture bible of 44 folios, now at the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. It is also called the Crusader Bible or the Maciejowski Bible. It was created between 1240 - 1250 in France. If the pictures are realistic, we learn that even regular swords cut through armor and whole bodies; no magic was needed.

▲ All in all, it's a bit disappointing. We have all these famous magic swords and the magic they can do is actually a bit thin. It's mostly either a kind of a one-night-stand like picking the right person as owner, being particular good at the job, or simply being pretentious.

Fifth: The complete victory of Christianity between the [5th century](#) (End of Roman Empire or what was left of it) and the 9th century (Northern areas finally christianized with lots of heads rolling), or that of Islam in the 7th century (tied to the [battle of Badre](#)), must have been an embarrassment to story tellers / writers who were completely immersed in the lore of the old Gods and their various intermediaries. But venerating the old Gods and believing in Elves, dwarfs, giants and the like in all these tales just wasn't politically correct for an avowed Christian. And you could not be politically incorrect or a heathen for a long time without loosing your head (to Charlemagne, for example; as the Saxon nobility, the "Saracens" and many others could testify).

- Heads were cloven for getting some brotherly love into those heathens, and Christian lore needed to be woven into the sagas. That was not always easy, witness the torturous back-and-forth between Christianity and the old beliefs in parts of the King Arthur saga. Combining Christianity and superstition was and is fine to this very day but combining Christianity and old-fashioned pagan magic was and still is frowned upon. Especially, to be sure, if it invoked dark swarthy creatures, doing doubtful things in odorous, fire belching smithies. Whenever the Church smelled this kind of sorcery, stakes were erected and pyres lit as recently as the 17th century. Makers of pagan magical swords had better take care.

So what could one do? Essentially, it seems, the following options were taken:

1. Have your Christian hero gain his magical sword from some powerful heathen that he smote. Witness [El Cid](#) and some of the others.
2. Have an intermediary like Wayland the Smith who made the precious objects, and give some recipe for magic that does not incite Christian wrath (like the [goose shit recipe](#)). While Wieland is not a Christian, he is sufficiently removed from the bad old Gods and thus less embarrassing.
3. Invoke some good Christian miracles like the kind done by the Saints instead of magic. Durendal serves as the prime example for this kind of transfiguration from magic to miracle.
4. Change or edit the saga. Tone down the pagan stuff; let the protagonists go to church on occasion. Also add a disclaimer at the beginning (and forget to give your name as author). That's exactly what you find in the 12th century version of the "Song of the Nibelung" - but not in the older versions. The newer versions start with a disclaimer:

Uns ist in alten mæren wunders vil geseit
 von helden lobebæren, von grôzer arebeit,
 von freuden, hôchgezîten, von weinen und von
 klagen,
 von küener recken strîten muget ir nu wunder
 hœren sagen

Full many a wonder is told us in stories old,
 of heroes worthy of praise, of hardships dire,
 of joy and feasting, of weeping and of wailing;
 of the fighting of bold warriors, now ye may hear
 wonders told

- That is the disclaimer of the Song of the Nibelungs, added later as all experts agree. The author separates himself from the story he is telling; it's just an old story he has heard about. He also mentions all the great and pagan deeds of Sigfried, as recounted in other sagas, just in passing. While neither Sigfried nor Brunhild does appear to be Christian in the beginning, one of the big scenes later is a veritable catfight between the two mighty Ladies, Krimhild and Brunhilde, about who has the precedence in entering the cathedral. Nice way to get the church involved.

1) Equate grass = hair, and Beaver = slang for (hairy) female pudenda.