

Marko Aleksić, *Mediaeval Swords from Southeastern Europe. Material from 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> Century*, Belgrade 2007.

Medieval swords from Southeastern Europe have never been studied thoroughly to date. The lack of a complete monograph on the subject affected studies on the interrelationships between the ancient, Mediterranean tradition and the Northern European developments in medieval weapon-production. M. Aleksić, in his recently published book successfully bridges this research gap. His text covers 131 pages, with 37 figures and a 10 pages long list of references cited in his work. The second section of the book is a Catalogue of 400 sword- and 12 falchion-finds from the territory of modern Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and countries of the former Yugoslavia. To this are added 12 plates with excellent drawings of selected specimens and 6 more plates with photographs of the swords in colour. The pieces listed in the catalogue are minutely and exhaustively described, including their measurement. Noteworthy are 12 maps included in the text showing the distribution of the finds. The pre-eminent value of this work lies in the fact that it was written in English. Otherwise it would never have been accessible for so many readers from all around the world. In a few instances terminological problems appeared, which were caused by the fact that the translator was not acquainted with specialist "weaponological" vocabulary.<sup>1</sup>

The general impression of the work is that the author made great effort to record every single sword as thoroughly as possible. This painstaking analysis was essential to put all of the collected evidence in order. Nevertheless, it seems that in this approach typological matters have dominated excessively other interesting aspects of medieval sword production and the reader is overwhelmed by the exhaustive morphological analysis.

It is unclear what criteria the author used to make a selection of the archaeological record. For instance why he decided to disregard weapons used in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> c. Kingdom of Cyprus in his catalogue of swords and falchions. The collection of Cypriot swords of which a considerable number is held by the Topkapi Palace Museum in Istanbul, Turkey, is truly remarkable. Originally stored in the Arsenal of Alexandria these swords were taken by the Mameluk, either as war-booty or diplomatic gifts received from the Cypriots. Before they found their way to Istanbul they were engraved with Arabic inscriptions and accurate dates. This makes them quite unique as compared to other European swords. According to Aleksić, most of these weapons had not been produced in Cyprus, but in Italy, Spain or Germany. As such they do not fit the category of swords from Southeastern Europe (p. 9). At the same time, in many

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<sup>1</sup> For instance: *gold-plated cover of a scabbard tip* (p. 13) instead of *scabbard chape*; *metal glove* (p. 13) instead of *gauntlet*; *decorated ivory cover of the hilt* (p. 112) instead of *decorated ivory grip*; *wooden plating* (p. 113) instead of *wooden scales*, etc.

instances, the author seems aware that several of the artifacts are difficult to ascribe to a specific centre of weapon-production (p. 19). Especially that most of the investigated swords do not originate from regular excavation and are chance finds (p. 7). Moreover, even in these rare cases when foreign provenance of the swords could be determined, Aleksić (p. 58, 63) did not exclude them from the catalogue, unlike the Cypriot swords.

The question of context, as we all know<sup>2</sup> is fraught with uncertainties. A sword found at a particular location usually does not tell us anything about its place of origin. Arms could be imported to any medieval state on the continent, even from remote centres of weapon-production. According to recent evidence the discussion on the evolution of swords goes even further. It has been proved, for instance, that many aspects of military technology seen in Eastern, and even, Western Europe originated in the Far East.<sup>3</sup>

Technological or fashionable influence on arms and armour, spreading from one civilisation to the next may be observed, especially during the Crusading Era.<sup>4</sup> An excellent example of similar influence is documented by a mid-13<sup>th</sup> c. limestone effigy of the French crusading knight Jean d'Alluye from the Abbey of Clarté Dieu. The knight depicted, is armed and dressed in Western European manner, yet he has a distinct, Chinese *chen* sword at his sword belt.<sup>5</sup>

To recapitulate, the only criterion which should guide selection of archaeological data is the find-spot. At least we shall know which specific weapons were used — or not — in a given region. Nevertheless, in a few cases Aleksić was successful in ascertaining the Southeastern European provenance of individual artifacts. In his first analytical chapter on the chronology of sword pommels he distinguished type H2, characteristic for the Western Balkans (pp. 47–48, Map 3). Swords mounted with these particular hilt-elements are known from a handful of finds from a limited area. According to their similar characteristics (Type H2, XVIa, 6) they form a consistent, isolated group. One of these swords, excavated in the Western Morava Valley in Serbia (Cat. No. 258), is especially noteworthy. It was discovered in a hoard of medieval edged weapons at Kovačnica, near Kalenički Prnjavor village, in the vicinity of a monastery founded in 1418 (p. 49). Aleksić presents a brilliant interpretation of historical and archaeological data regarding the location. Kovačnica is a Serbian name for a smithy and the word *Prnjavor* denotes a monastic estate. Moreover, monastery smithies are confirmed by Serbian written accounts since the 14<sup>th</sup> c. (p. 49). Therefore, it seems highly probable that the hoard originally came from a blacksmith's workshop on the monastic estate. Adding to this the fact that a unique type of weapon, exclusively encountered in Southern Europe, had been found in such a context, Aleksić draws a reasonable conclusion that swords with H2 pommels must be local products.

The local Byzantine provenance of type I swords had been stressed by the author. These distinct weapons, excavated from archaeological sites in modern Bulgaria, Slovenia, Serbia and Montenegro (pp. 76–77), are dated to the 9<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> c. Curiously enough, their blades (of type I) were not provided with a fuller or a median ridge. In order to support his hypothesis on the Byzantine origin of type I blades Aleksić

<sup>2</sup> E. Oakeshott, *Records of the Medieval Sword*, Woodbridge 2002, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> D. Nicolle, *Arms and Armour of the Crusading Era, Islam, Eastern Europe and Asia*, London 1999, pp. 7–10.

<sup>4</sup> D. Nicolle, *Arms and Armour...*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> H. Nickel, *A Crusader's Sword: Concerning the Effigy of Jean d'Alluye*, Metropolitan Museum Journal 26 (1991), pp. 123–128; H. Nickel, *The Mutual Influence of Europe and Asia in the Field of Arms and Armour*, [in:] D. Nicolle (ed.), *A Companion to Medieval Arms and Armour*, Woodbridge 2002, pp. 107–125, cf. pp. 107–108.

(p. 77) quotes the 9<sup>th</sup> c. Arabian writer Al-Kindi who described Byzantine swords as made of soft iron, slender, simple and without a fuller.

Early disc-shaped pommels of Oakshott's type G are also recognized by the author as most characteristic for the Byzantine Empire (p. 45). Aleksić (p. 44) was aware of rare discoid pommel-finds from Finland and Denmark, dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> c. However, he does not mention the specimen from the Claughton Viking grave.<sup>6</sup>

According to the most recent publications Scandinavian discoid pommels are vernacular forms<sup>7</sup> which might have developed independently from their Byzantine counterparts. In my opinion this seems rather unlikely given that Byzantine culture was a great influence on Scandinavia ever since the trade route "from the Varangians to the Greeks" had been established. Byzantine swords were even imported by the Vikings as we learn from Old Norse literature.<sup>8</sup>

An extremely interesting section of Aleksić's work is devoted to the 'sword families' in Southeastern Europe. These are series of identical swords discovered in a restricted area and produced by local workshops. Weapons classified to category (family) N, O and P are distinguished on the basis of type Z pommel variants, type XIXa and XX blade variants, and cross guards of Oakshott's style 12 and style 13. Generally, they were used in the 15<sup>th</sup> c., although N-family swords could be slightly earlier, and dated to the last decades of the 14<sup>th</sup> c. (pp. 106–108). According to Aleksić in 14<sup>th</sup> c. written accounts N-swords may be recorded as *spade schiavonesche* (p. 108). It is a well established fact that 15<sup>th</sup> c. O-family swords used by Slav mercenaries in the service of Venice were actually known as *spade schiavonesche*. In the latter half of the 15<sup>th</sup> c. they were produced in Venice, possibly Belun, Dubrovnik, Kotor and Split (p. 110). Aleksić addresses an important problem of general character using the example of his sword families — the evolution of edged weapons, extending far beyond the medieval period into modern times. The discussion leads to the assumption, that *schiavona* swords from the 16–18<sup>th</sup> c. originated from O-family. Archaeologists who tend to create artificial divisions between stages of cultural development not always recognize the continuous process of sword evolution.

Apart from the local sword types Aleksić provides much information on the use of foreign weapons in Southeastern Europe. In this respect, the discussion on swords with N type pommels opens a new and fascinating field of research. These forms, represented only by a few specimens, are encountered more frequently on the territory of Transylvania. They were introduced to the area by German settlers at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> c. Aleksić argues (p. 62), as he already has in his earlier publications<sup>9</sup> that the appearance of these swords coincides with the arrival in the region of German crusaders — the Teutonic Knights. Going further into the discussion, nor need we be sceptical of the important role the Teutonic knights played in the distribution of swords with such or similar pommels in Poland and the Baltic region.<sup>10</sup> However, there is a single find from Poland, possibly, not known to Aleksić, that does not coincide with the advent of the Teutonic Knights. The sword from Nasiedle, powiat Głubczyce, probably was lost there by one of the Polish, Czech or Russian warriors participating in the campaign of 1253.<sup>11</sup> Another sword with N-type pommel, turned up at Żukowo,

<sup>6</sup> I. G. Peirce, *Swords of the Viking Age*, Woodbridge 2004, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> I. G. Peirce, *Swords...*, p. 5, 10.

<sup>8</sup> H. R. E. Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, Suffolk 1998, pp. 168–169.

<sup>9</sup> M. Aleksić, *Swords with pommels of type N*, *Slov. Arch.* 54/2 (2006), pp. 363–388, 374.

<sup>10</sup> For further reference see L. Marek, *Broń Biała na Śląsku. XIV–XVI w.*, Wratislavia Antiqua. Studia z dziejów Wrocławia 10, Wrocław 2008, pp. 68–69.

<sup>11</sup> L. Marek, *Broń Biała na Śląsku...*, p. 69, Fig. 82:a.

powiat Płońsk (Muzeum Wojska Polskiego, Warsaw, Inv. No. 172). Nevertheless, we cannot rule out the possibility that it had something to do with the German crusaders. After all, the northern region of Masovia was strongly influenced by the State of the Teutonic Knights since the early 13<sup>th</sup> c.

The only iconographic representation of a sword with N-type pommel known to Aleksić is a mid-13<sup>th</sup> c. statue of Wilhelm von Camburg from the Naumburg Cathedral. I know of at least one more, the grave effigy of Friedrich II der Streitbare († 1246) from the Heiligenkreuz Abbey near Vienna.<sup>12</sup>

Summarizing his evidence Aleksić arrives at a conclusion that swords with N-type pommels most probably were produced in southern Germany and Switzerland (p. 63) where they were also encountered. He argues that early 13<sup>th</sup> c. Transylvania and Slovenia had no specialist workshops capable of obtaining high quality steel for weapons. Therefore, it seems unlikely that swords with N-type pommels were manufactured there (p. 63). As it is, concrete arguments in favour of one or the other hypothesis are lacking and they remain highly speculative.

The scope of Aleksić's work embraces diverse subjects on weapon production reflected by written accounts (pp. 14–17). The value of this approach lies in the excellent comparison of archaeological and historical data from the 14<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> c.

A section on single edged swords is the most disputable. Its focus are 12 specimens which cannot be described as swords (Cat. Nos. 401–412). In fact, they are medieval falchions — weapons which are usually characterised by a single edged blade. Even so, there are a few rare examples of double edged blades mounted with falchion hilts.<sup>13</sup> There is ample literature on the subject<sup>14</sup> but it may be less available than publications of data related to swords. This could explain why Aleksić is not familiar with the more important works on falchion finds from Central and Eastern Europe. Probably, also the research results on medieval combat manuals<sup>15</sup> could have been of assistance in making the correct identification of falchion finds. Aleksić's conclusions on the function of individual sword elements are a matter for dispute. Especially when he discusses the origin of S-shaped cross-guards of Oakeshott's style 12. It seems rather unlikely that the latter developed in Southeastern Europe as a result of military conflict between the Turks and the Christians as Aleksić would have it (pp. 100–102). He argues that S-shaped quillons enabled a person armed with a straight bladed European sword to catch his opponent's curved sabre blade. Putting aside the fact that quillons of style 12 are also encountered in Norway and Sweden<sup>16</sup>, there is sample

<sup>12</sup> L. Marek, *Broń Biała na Śląsku...*, Fig. 82:b.

<sup>13</sup> L. Marek, *Broń Biała na Śląsku...*, Fig. 41.

<sup>14</sup> V. Goš, *Středověká cesta v Mohelnici*, *Vlastivědný Věstník Moravský* 27/3 (1975), pp. 291–294; P. Michá, *Tesák z Janoslavic na Šumpersku*, [in:] *Z pravěku do středověku. Sborník k 70. narozeninám Vladimíra Nekudy*, Brno 1997, pp. 259–268; A. Michalak, *Kord czy nóż bojowy? Uwagi o recepcji pewnej kategorii uzbrojenia plebejskiego na ziemiach polskich na marginesie znaleziska z Żar*, [in:] S. Groblica, A. Jaszewska, S. Górka [eds.] *Odra — przeszkoda czy pomost w ekspansji kulturowej?*, Zielona Góra 2004, pp. 332–346; L. Marek, *Średniowieczne i nowożytne kordy ze Śląska*, *Acta Militaria Mediaevalia* 2 (2006), pp. 189–206; L. Marek, *Broń Biała...*; J. Krejsova, *Dochované fragmenty tesáků z hradu Rokštejn*, *Archeologické Výzkumy na Vysočině* 1 (2007), p. 267–276.

<sup>15</sup> J. Clements, M. Rector, *Medieval Combat*, London 2000, pp. 223–229; G. Żabiński, B. Walczak, *Codex Wallerstein*, Colorado 2002, pp. 124–129.

<sup>16</sup> S. Grieg, *Middelalderske byfund fra Bergen og Oslo*, Oslo 1993, p. 276; H. Seitz, *Blankwaffen*, Braunschweig 1965, vol. I, p. 165, Fig. 103.

evidence, that S-shaped quillons could have been used for additional protection. The latter was essential in medieval sword play in which blows were deflected by the flat of the blade, rather than the edge.<sup>17</sup> Curved, S-shaped quillons prevented the opponent's blade from sliding dangerously down the flat section of the sword, right into the hand of the wielder. In addition, the widespread albeit disputable point of view on the appearance of blades strongly tapering to the point, is presented in the volume. Aleksić like many other authors concludes that swords provided with an acute point were intended to penetrate the joints in the plate armour (p. 88). However, this seems an extremely hazardous combat technique. More arguments support a hypothesis that these swords were used mainly for thrusting in order to destroy mail hauberks or mail elements supplementing plate armour.<sup>18</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> c. author Egidio Romano Colona, for instance, strongly recommends the use of blades with acute points because they are better in penetrating mail and inflict more lethal wounds than slashing swords.<sup>19</sup>

Much can be learned from the final chapter where Aleksić investigates marks and inscriptions on sword blades. An interesting interpretation relates to Latin numerals — V and X — which are impressed upon sword tangs. Formerly they were interpreted as blade-smith's marks.<sup>20</sup> According to Aleksić, they could be digits denoting the number of blades in a bundle prepared by the blacksmith for sale to a swordsmith where after polishing and grinding they were mounted with hilts. Additionally, magical-kabalistic words recognized on swords by the author as well as the inscriptions referring to particular towns in the region, where swords had been produced (p. 123). There is but one possibly incorrect interpretation of the *Benedictus* — inscription. It is more likely to be a reference to Psalm 143<sup>21</sup> rather than Saint Benedict, as Aleksić claims (p. 121).

Despite these and some other debatable issues not discussed here Aleksić's work is an outstanding piece of scholarship. Finally archaeological evidence on these remarkable weapons from Southeastern Europe has been published in a manner worthy of their merit. The Catalogue and illustrations are a very useful reference for scholars to investigate the distinctive features of the sword forms. This is a publication for all serious students of the development of European medieval swords, specialist and amateur enthusiasts. We look forward to seeing equally comprehensive publications on this particular subject.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. G. Żabiński, B. Walczak, *Codex Wallerstein...*, p. 124

<sup>18</sup> Cf. G. Żabiński, B. Walczak, *Codex Wallerstein...*, p. 368–369.

<sup>19</sup> A. Bruhn-Hoffmeyer, *From Mediaeval Sword to Renaissance Rapier* [in:] R. Held (ed.), *Art, Arms and Armour. An International Anthology*, Chiasso 1979/1980, pp. 52–79, cf. p. 58.

<sup>20</sup> M. Głosek, *Miecze środkowoeuropejskie z X–XV wieku*, Warszawa 1984, p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> M. Głosek, L. Kajzer, *Zu den mittelalterlichen Schuwertern der Benedictus-Gruppe*, *Waffen und Kostümkunde* 19/2 (1977), p. 117–128; M. Głosek, *Miecze środkowoeuropejskie...*, p. 107.