

A Crusader's Sword: Concerning the Effigy of Jean d'Alluye

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AMONG THE SCULPTURES in the Gothic Chapel at The Cloisters, the armored gisant of Jean d'Alluye from the Abbey of La Clarté-Dieu, which he founded in 1239 and where he was entombed about 1248, could well serve as the almost perfect illustration of a knight's equipment in the classical age of chivalry (Figure 1).¹ Jean d'Alluye wears a long-sleeved mail shirt with hood and mittens in one piece; the hood, or coif, has been let down to rest on his shoulders. His hands, devoutly joined in prayer, emerge through slits at the wrists of the sleeves, leaving the mittens dangling. Spurs, the distinguishing mark of the knight, are buckled over the mail chausses covering his legs. Over his mail shirt he wears a surcoat, split open in front for an easier seat in the saddle, and belted at the waist with a narrow girdle. A matching wide sword belt is pulled aslant by the weight of the sword and hangs lower at the hips. His triangular shield, large enough to cover a man's entire left side from eyes to knee, rests against his left leg.

All these elements are what would be expected in the equipment of a knight of the first half of the thirteenth century. However, the hilt of his sword, as it shows above the rim of the shield, has a compact guard and a trilobate pommel totally different from the fairly standardized cruciform hilts in use in Western Europe at this period (Figures 2, 3).

The hilt of such a knightly sword consisted of three elements: a slender guard, with long, straight—or, at the most, very gently downcurving—quillons; a tubular wooden grip, covered with leather and sometimes reinforced with straps or wire wound spirally round or in a crisscrossing pattern; and finally a pommel of iron or bronze as a counterweight to balance the long blade. The tip of the tang was hammered down on top of the pommel

to rivet the hilt firmly together. Thirteenth-century pommels mostly had the shape either of a disk or a more or less pointed oval (Figures 4, 5).² If in an exceptional case, such as the sword on the incised tomb slab of Jaquelin de Ferrière, a trilobate pommel can be found, it is clearly only a scalloped variant of the disk-shaped pommel and is invariably associated with a guard of long, straight quillons (Figure 6).

By contrast, Jean d'Alluye's sword has a trilobate pommel, molded in relief almost like a budding flower, with a central bulbous element emerging between two outward-turning scrolls; its grip is wrapped in an intricate pattern of interlooping straps, and instead of true quillons its rather massive guard has sharply sloping shoulders ending in tiny upward-curling finials. Its unusual appearance raises the question whether this sword is of non-European, possibly Oriental, origin.

Of Jean d'Alluye, Seigneur de Châteaux, Chenu, Saint-Christophe, Méon, and Noyant, it is known that he took the cross and went to the Holy Land in 1241. He returned home three years later, in 1244, bringing with him a relic of the True Cross, a present from the bishop of Hiera Petra—a Greek see on Crete—which he devoutly donated to the abbey of La Boissière. About four years later, Jean d'Alluye died and was laid to rest under his effigy in his abbey of La Clarté-Dieu, near Le Mans. It is quite possible that his sword, so carefully represented on his gisant, was also a cherished possession brought back from Outremer.

However, it is not likely that this sword was forged at Damascus or one of the other renowned sword-making centers of the Islamic world. Despite the popular image of the cruciform swords of the knights of the Cross clashing with the crescent-shaped scimitars of the warriors of Islam, in the thirteenth century the Saracens did indeed fight with straight double-edged swords. Nonetheless,

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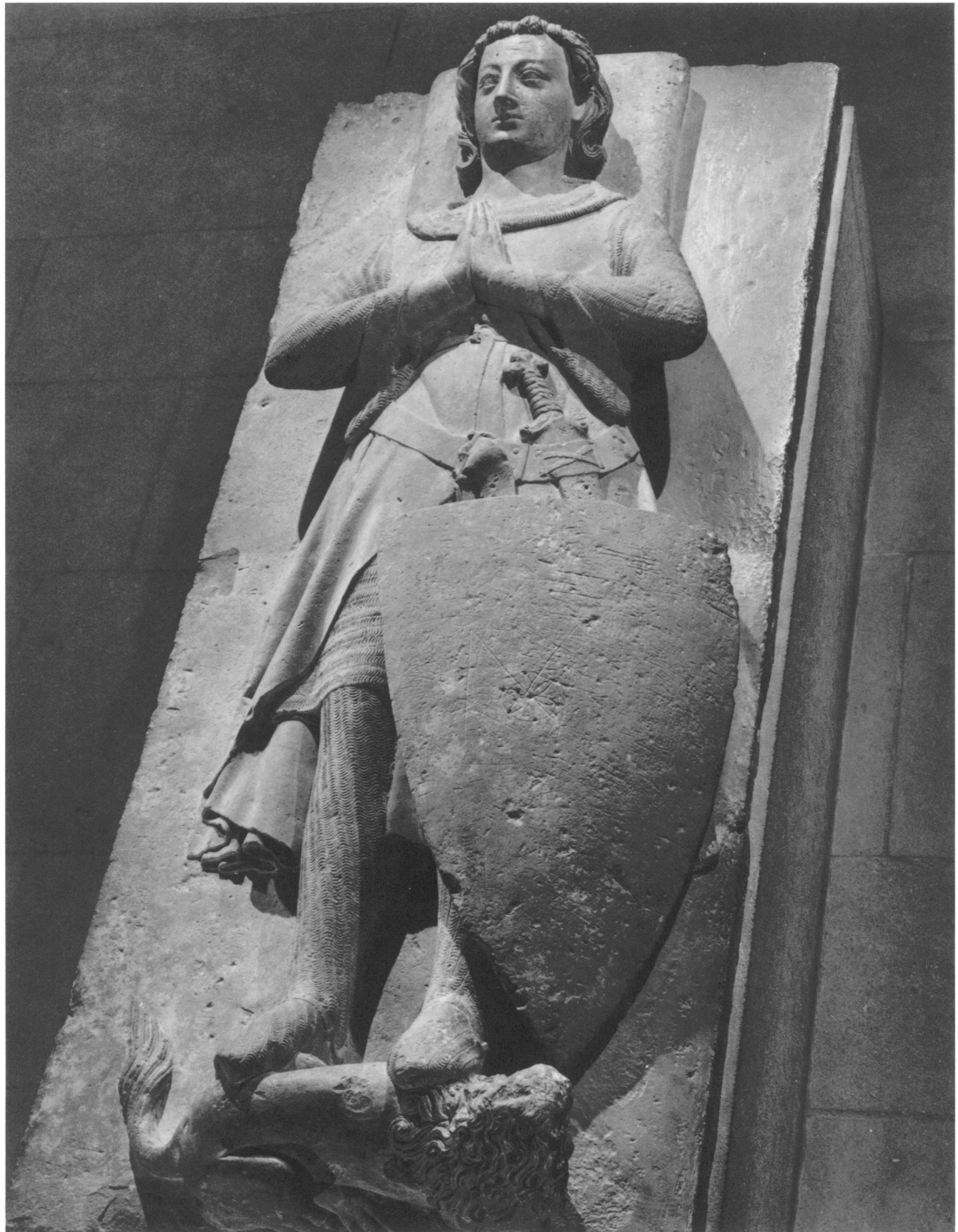
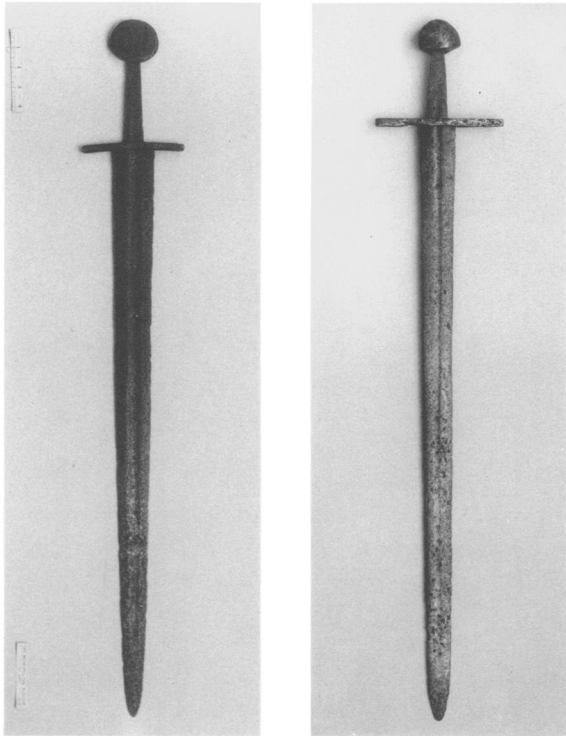


Figure 1. Limestone effigy of Jean d'Alluye (died ca. 1248), from the Abbey of La Clarté-Dieu, near Le Mans. French, mid-13th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, 1925, 25.120.201



Figure 2. Detail of Figure 1 showing Jean d'Alluye's sword hilt

Right: Figure 3. "The Slaughter of the Innocents," fol. 2v (detail), *The Cloisters Apocalypse*. French (Normandy), first quarter of 14th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, 1968, 68.174



Left: Figure 4. Sword with disk-pommel. French, 13th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of George D. Pratt, 1925, 25.188.12

Right: Figure 5. Sword with pointed-oval pommel. German, 13th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1907, 07.53.2

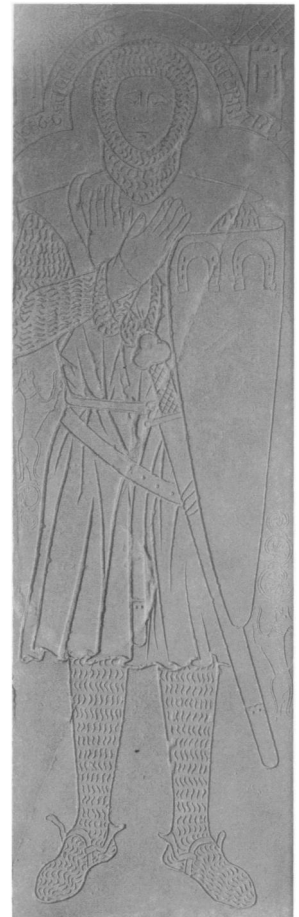


Figure 6. Tomb slab of Jaquelin de Ferrière, from Montargis, near Sens. North French, 13th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bashford Dean Memorial Collection, Funds from various donors, 1929, 29.158.761



Figure 7. Sword bearers in the *Maqamat al-Hariri* manuscript. Arabic, second quarter of 13th century. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, no. 5847 (drawing after A. R. Zaky)

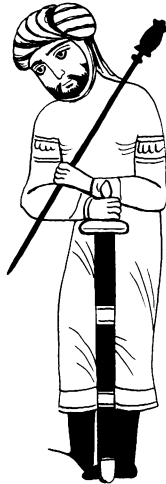


Figure 8. Sword bearer in *The Zoology of al-Jahiz*. Arabic, 14th century (drawing after A. Welch)



Figure 9. Bronze matrix of a sword guard. Seljuk, 12th–13th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Rogers Fund and Anonymous Gift, 1980, 1980.210.1

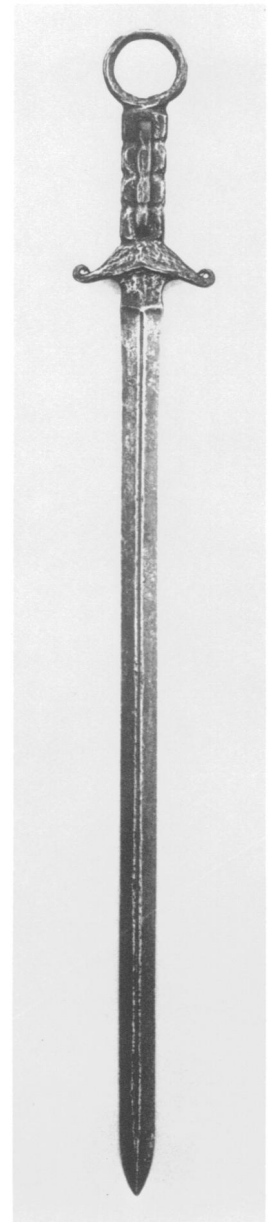


Figure 10. *Chēn*, Chinese sword of archaic form. All-iron. Formerly The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 07.55.3 (deaccessioned, 1956). Location unknown

Jean d'Alluye's sword differs radically from what we know of Islamic swords before 1400. There are very few pictorial representations of swords in Islamic art of this period.³ Most of them are manuscript illustrations, and their often tiny scale makes it difficult to identify details such as the exact shape of a sword hilt, especially when so much of the hilt is hidden by the holding hand. Thirteenth- and early-fourteenth-century miniatures show swords with guards that either are straight bars or have short quillons with tightly scrolled finials; their pommels are small buttons or acorn shapes (Figures 7, 8).⁴ No medieval Islamic swords of this type seem to have survived with their original hilts intact.⁵ An alternative form

of thirteenth-century hilt had a guard block in the shape of an inverted cup. One matrix for the casting of such a guard block is in the Metropolitan Museum's collection (Figure 9). A surviving matrix for a pommel of this type of hilt is of domed-knob shape.⁶

It seems that Jean d'Alluye's sword came from much farther away than Damascus. Its guard with the sloping quillons and upturned finials is practically identical to guards found on archaic Chinese swords, *chēn* (Figure 10).⁷ In their early forms these have ring-pommels, which go back to Bronze Age prototypes.⁸ By the late eighth century trilobate pommels appear that are very close to the one on

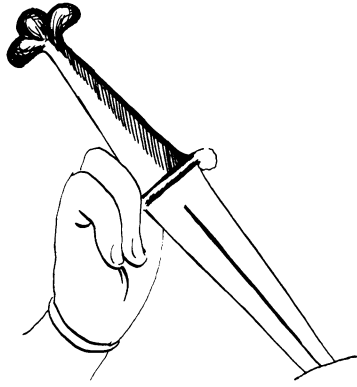
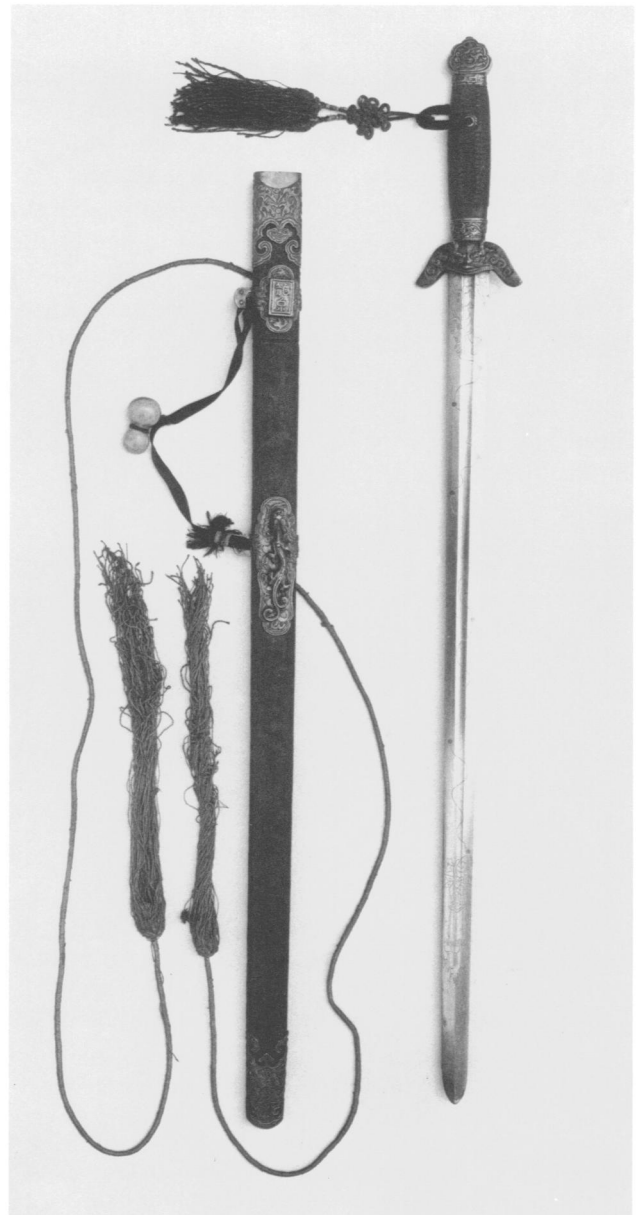


Figure 11. Sword hilt, detail from a wall painting, cave 139A, Tun-huang. Chinese (Kansu), second half of 8th century (drawing after L. Sickman and A. Soper)



Figure 12. Sword bearers of the Chinese envoy, detail of the handscroll *The Story of Lady Wen-chi*. Chinese, probably 14th-century copy of a 12th-century scroll. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of The Dillon Fund, 1973, 1973.120.3

Figure 13. Sword with scabbard, Chinese, 18th–19th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of George C. Stone, 1936, 36.25.248ab



Jean d'Alluye's sword (Figure 11),⁹ and by the twelfth century, triple-scrolled pommels seem to have become the prevalent type in representations in Chinese art (Figure 12). However, no actual examples dating earlier than the eighteenth century have apparently survived. The tradition of the trilobate pommels, once established, was strong enough to ensure that practically all Chinese swords of the *chên* type up to modern times would have scalloped pommels, and even the talismanic swords made from strung-together Chinese copper coins, which can be found in almost any gift shop in Chinatown, invariably have trilobate pommels. Finally, the wrapping of Jean d'Alluye's sword grip

consists of thick straps woven into a double-looping pattern that is much more elaborate than the simple reinforcing binding usually found in European hilts,¹⁰ while sword grips bound in complicated patterns are typical of Far Eastern swords (Figure 13). Some hilts of archaic Chinese swords were of solid metal, either bronze or iron, but even those grips were covered with macramé-like wrappings of braided cords for a firmer hold. In one rare example, a bronze sword from the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), now in the British Museum, these bindings are still preserved.¹¹ The all-iron sword in Figure 10 must have had a similarly pattern-bound hilt, as indicated by the notches on the grip, placed

there to keep the cords from shifting.

Though Jean d'Alluye has for his sword a scabbard and a sword belt in the Western European style (cf. Figure 3), and presumably of European workmanship, the sword itself must have come from the other end of the known world, faraway China.

Whether it was traded peacefully along the ancient Silk Road, or was carried by a raider in the conquering hordes of the Mongols,¹² whether Jean d'Alluye acquired it as an exotic collector's item in the bazaar of some Levantine port, or took it as booty on a Syrian battlefield, we will never know. In any case, though, this extraordinary weapon was important enough for him and his family to have it faithfully portrayed for posterity on his effigy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For generously given information and assistance I would like to thank my friends and colleagues David G. Alexander and James Watt.

NOTES

1. James J. Rorimer, *The Cloisters*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1963) pp. 96–97, fig. 43; Bonnie Young, *A Walk Through the Cloisters* (New York, 1979) pp. 81, 88, 89, ill.; Judith W. Hurtig, "The Armored Gisant before 1400," diss. New York University, 1979, fig. 23; William D. Wixom, "Medieval Sculpture," *MMAB* 46 (1989) pp. 58, 59, ill.

2. Ada Bruhn-Hoffmeyer, *Middelalderens tveæggede svaerd*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen, 1954); Claude Blair, *European and American Arms* (London, 1962) chap. 1, "The Sword," pp. 1–5, ill.; R. Ewart Oakeshott, *The Sword in the Age of Chivalry* (London, 1964); Herbert Seitz, *Blankwaffen* (Braunschweig, 1965) I, pp. 132–155, ill.

3. Two relief carvings on the late-11th-century city gate called the Bab el-Nasr (Gate of Victory) in Cairo seem to be among the earliest such representations. The hilts of these carved swords have short, straight, and rather massive bars as guards, and pommels consisting of a similar bar topped by a semicircular cap. Though it presents a trilobate appearance, this construction resembles that of sword hilts of Northern Europe. This fact, together with the presence among the shields carved alongside these swords of one of the elongated, almond-shaped forms usually called "Norman" (because it is best known from the Tapestry of Bayeux), makes it likely that the weapons decorating the Gate of Victory are actually trophies taken from European enemies. See David Nicolle, "Saladin and the Saracens," *Osprey Man-at-Arms Series* 171 (London, 1986) p. 37.

4. Michael Gorelik, "Oriental armour of the Near and Middle East from the 8th to the 15th centuries as shown in works of art," in *Islamic Arms and Armour*, Roger Elgood, ed. (London, 1979) pp. 30–63, ill.; David Nicolle, "An introduction to arms and warfare in classical Islam," in *Islamic Arms and Armour*, pp. 162–186, ill.; Abdel Rahman Zaky, "Medieval Arab arms," in *Islamic Arms and Armour*, pp. 202–212, ill.; David Geoffrey Alexander, "Dhu l-fakar," diss., New York University, New York, 1984; David G. Alexander, "European Swords in the Collections of Istanbul," *Waffen- und Kostümkunde* (1985) pp. 81–118, figs. 1–4, 64–75; An-

thony Welch, "The Arts of the Book," *Treasures of Islam*, Toby Falk, ed. (London, 1985) pp. 48–52, no. 18, ill.; Nicolle, "Saladin and the Saracens," pp. 10, 13–15, 19, 23, 24, 33, 34, 37; ill.

5. Even the ancient straight blades treasured as the swords of the Prophet, of the first four caliphs, and of other Islamic heroes, in the Topkapi Sarayi Museum, Istanbul, have been re-hilted, probably about 1500. These hilts are in the Turkish scimitar style, with rhomboid guard blocks, straight or down-curved quillons, and prongs extending upward and downward to secure the asymmetrically curved grip and to fit over the scabbard mouth. If there is a pommel at all, it is a small cap following the outline of the grip end. See Zaky, "Medieval Arab arms."

6. David G. Alexander, entry in *Notable Acquisitions 1979–1980* (New York: MMA, 1980) pp. 27, ill.; David Alexander and Howard Ricketts, "Arms and Armour," *Treasures of Islam*, pp. 294–317, nos. 305, 306, ill.

7. The Chinese word *chên* and the Japanese word *ken*, denoting a straight, double-edged sword, seem ultimately derived from the Skythian *akinakes*. From the same root come the Caucasian *kindjal*, the Turkish *khandjar*, and the Hindi *khandā*.

8. Stephen V. Grancsay, "Two Chinese Swords dating about 600 A.D.," *MMAB* 25 (1930–31) p. 194, figs. 1 and 3; William Watson, *Early Civilization in China* (New York, 1966) p. 86, fig. 66; Helmut Nickel, "About the Sword of the Huns and the 'Urepos' of the Steppes," *MMJ* 7 (1973) pp. 131–142, fig. 10; Joseph Needham and Colin A. Ronan, *The Shorter Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge / London / New York / Melbourne, 1978) I, p. 60, fig. 15.

9. Laurence Sickman and Alexander Soper, *The Art and Architecture of China* (London, 1956; rev. ed. 1978) pp. 166–167, fig. 114.

10. To my knowledge there are only two other European examples of representations of sword grips wrapped in a cross-looping pattern: one is on the donor statue of Count Hermann in Naumburg Cathedral, dating from the third quarter of the 13th century; the other is on the tomb effigy of an unidentified knight, in San Lorenzo Maggiore, Naples, of the mid-14th century. Interestingly, the unknown Neapolitan knight has shoulder defenses in the shape of lions' masks, a feature highly unusual in Europe at that time, but common in Chinese parade armor since the T'ang Dynasty (A.D. 618–905). See Erwin Panofsky, *Die deutsche Plastik des 11. bis 13. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1924) pl. 101; Wilhelm Pinder, *Der Naumburger Dom* (Berlin, 1925) pl. 67; Hurtig, *Armored Gisant*, figs. 124, 298; H. Russell Robinson, *Oriental Armour* (London, 1967) p. 138, fig. 70; Suzanne G. Valenstein, "Highlights of Chinese Ceramics," *MMAB* (Autumn 1975), pp. 128, 165, fig. 12.

11. Watson, *Early Civilization*, p. 86, fig. 69.

12. The Mongol armies, who from 1219 on ravaged the Muslim realms in what are now Iran, Iraq, and Eastern Turkey, contained large contingents of Nestorian Christians. This and their attacks on Muslim territories rekindled in Western Europe the belief in a mighty Christian ruler in the East, Prester John. See E. D. Phillips, *The Mongols* (New York / Washington, 1969) pp. 17, 26, 81; Robert Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John* (Garden City, N. Y., 1972) pp. 76–96; Peter Brent, *Genghis Khan: The Rise, Authority and Decline of Mongol Power* (New York, 1976) pp. 92, 105, 133, 139, 182; James Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (New York, 1979) pp. 34–36.