

# About the Sword of the Huns and the “Urepos” of the Steppes

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THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM'S Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art has in its collection a splendid gold-mounted sword with jeweled scabbard and hilt, reported to have been found in northern Iran and thought to be of the fifth-sixth century A.D. (Figures 1–3). It has a long pommelless grip with two finger rests and a very short quillon bar; its scabbard is in its upper two fifths encased by a pair of large cufflike mounts with irregularly P-shaped flanges.<sup>1</sup> These are fixtures for the two straps—a short one and a long one—that held the sword suspended from the waist belt. The different lengths of the straps caused the sword to hang at a convenient “quick-draw” angle. This way of carrying a sword was particularly practical for a horseman, and is in principle still used for the modern cavalry saber (Figure 4, right). Sasanian representations, especially on the famous silver bowls with reliefs of royal hunters, show cross-hilted swords with round

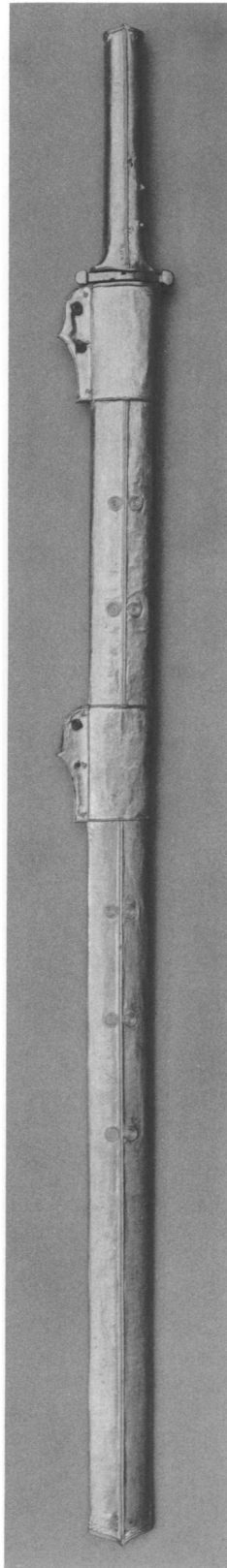
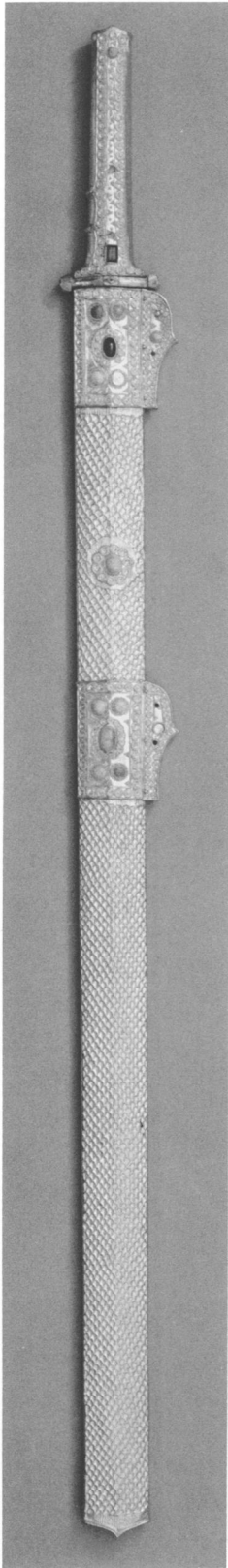
pommels and entirely different means of attachment, resulting in entirely different methods of carrying these swords. They have either a bridgelike mount on the outer side of the scabbard in about the upper third of its length, to slip a bandoleer through, or they have two large buttons near the scabbard mouth, around which loops of the loosely slung belt must have been fixed (Figure 5).<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, representations from the regions to the north of ancient Persia, such as Soghdia and Turfan, show swords belted on at a slant with two suspension mounts. Particularly, a silver bowl in the Hermitage exhibits a sword with P-shaped scabbard mounts and a hilt that is practically identical with the Museum's sword (Figure 6). Ghirshman has suggested that the horseman on this bowl may be the representation of a Turco-Mongol nomad, perhaps an Avar chief, since it is too late to be a Hun proper.<sup>3</sup>

Decorative features on the Museum's sword, such as

1. The total length of the sword is 100.3 cm. Its double-edged iron blade is covered with rusted-on particles of the wooden scabbard core, powdered with remnants of the leather lining under the gold mountings. The scabbard consists of two large pieces embossed with a feather pattern on the obverse side and held together by two large clasps with P-shaped attachments. The hilt has a gilt-bronze quillon, and is riveted to the tang by means of two rivets with large globular silver heads; its decoration consists of a panel filled with triangles composed of gold granulation, framed by a row of dotted circles; it is jeweled with one small semiglobular glass stone at the upper end and a rectangular beveled garnet at the quillon end. The scabbard mountings are decorated en suite with one large cabochon garnet and twelve (two now missing) glass stones. Vaughn Emerson Crawford, Annual Report, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 24 (1965–66) p. 45, ill.; Vaughn Emerson Crawford, Prudence Oliver Harper, Oscar White Muscarella, and Beatrice Elizabeth Bodenstein, *Ancient Near Eastern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Guide to the Collections* (1966) p. 37, fig. 60.

2. Both these ways of attachment were already used in the La Tène period (about 800 B.C.). The bridgelike mount was used by Celtic, Germanic, and Sarmatian tribesmen as well as by Byzantine, Sasanian, and Chinese noble warriors. It seems to have been spread among the latter civilizations through the influence of barbarian mercenaries in their armies. Waldemar Ginters, “Das Schwert der Skythen und Sarmaten in Südrussland,” *Vorgeschichtliche Forschungen* 2, Part 1 (Berlin, 1928); Otto Maenchen-Helfen, “Crenelated Mane and Scabbard Slide,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 3, No. 2, pp. 85–138, ill.

3. Roman Ghirshman “Notes Iranienes XIII: Trois Epées Sassanides,” *Artibus Asiae* 26 (1963) p. 293–311, fig. 11. Interestingly enough, a sword of the type with P-shaped mounts and double suspension straps appears as the sword of Goliath on one of the Metropolitan Museum's Cyprus silver plates (17.190.396). Here the non-Byzantine sword type was intended to indicate the “enemy.” The Huns and Avars were of Turkish stock, though heavily mixed with splinter groups of other tribes and nations by the time they appeared in Europe. The Huns, after the death of



FIGURES 1, 2

Iron sword with gold mountings and jewels, found in north Iran (Deilaman?), fifth–sixth century A.D. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 65.28

FIGURE 3

Detail of the Museum's sword showing decoration of minute triangles formed of gold balls on hilt and clasp



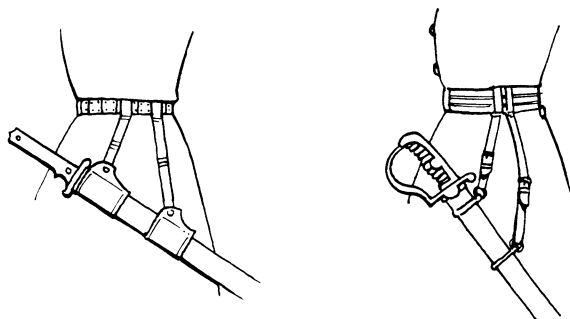


FIGURE 4  
Left: sword attachment with two clasps and two straps. Right: Modern saber attachment with two rings and two straps

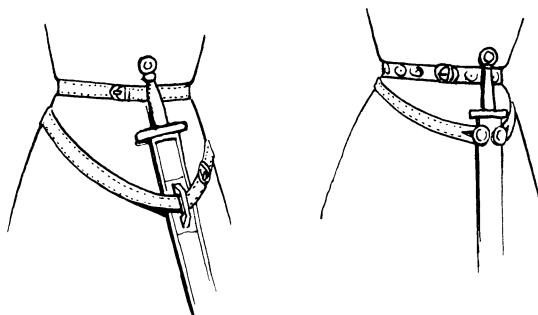


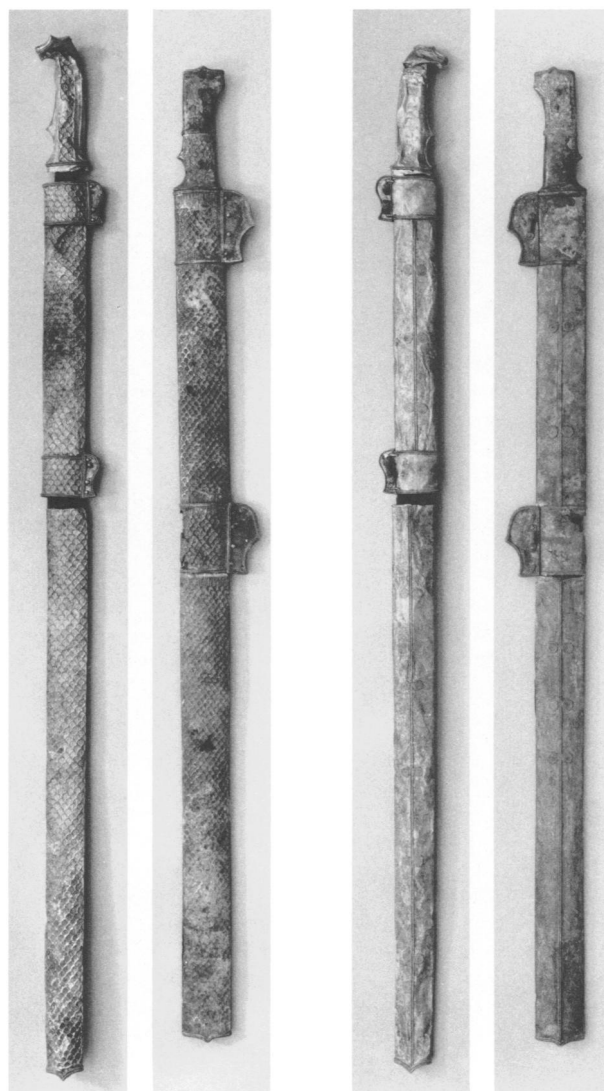
FIGURE 5  
Sasanian sword attachments. Left: bridge-mount or scabbard-slide. Right: double button

FIGURE 6  
Silver bowl, steppe nomad hunting, about 700 A.D. State Hermitage Museum, Leningrad



FIGURE 7  
Iron swords with gold mountings (left) and silver mountings (right), found in north Iran (Deilaman), fifth-sixth century A.D. The hilt of the silver sword has been wrongly assembled in restoration. Private collection

FIGURE 8  
Reverse of the gold and silver swords



the “tooled” appearance of the dense “feather” pattern<sup>4</sup> on the obverse side of the scabbard, and the vestigial seam running down the length of the reverse, indicate clearly that the gold of this scabbard is taking the place of leather, the material normally used. A leather prototype would also account for the strange P-shape of the mounts; here the weight of the sword would have pulled the originally more regularly formed flaps out of shape. Later, this half-accidental form became a stereotype and was deliberately styled.

Seven more swords of this type are known. Apparently all came from the same area and are stylistically and technically closely related, enough so for us to presume that they were made in the same princely workshop. Five of these swords are mounted in gold, two in silver (Figures 7, 8).<sup>5</sup> The Museum’s sword is by far the most elaborate and lavishly decorated one of the group.

Swords with scabbard mountings of this conspicuous P-shape have been found throughout a vast territory

Attila (453 A.D.) withdrew into the steppes and regrouped. The next wave, the Avars (seventh and eighth centuries), probably consisted largely of Huns under another name. It has been pointed out—Ghirshman, “Trois Epées,” p. 308, and Kicharu Horiuchi, *Taq-i-Bustan I* (Tokyo, 1969) pls. 89, 90, 92, 97, 98, 99—that on the hunting panels of Taq-i-Bustan the king is represented with a sword suspended from his belt by two P-shaped mounts. However, this is an isolated case in Sasanian art, and it seems significant that this sword is worn together with a belt with decorative straps (*Riemenzungen*) and with an asymmetrical bow. Both features are considered to be of Turco-nomad origin, Avaric or—in the case of the bow—even Hunnish. Interestingly enough, in the official throne relief the king does not sport Avaric-Hunnish costume, but wears the traditional sword with bridge-mount.

4. Feather and scale patterns were typical for Hunnish jewelry as found in Hungary. These patterns were probably connected with the eagle as a tribal symbol of the Huns. Ghirshman, “Trois Epées,” p. 311. Andreas Alföldi, “Funde aus der Hunnenzeit und ihre ethnische Sonderung,” *Archaeologica Hungarica* 9 (1932) pls. XIII, XX. The Metropolitan Museum has a helmet (*Spangenhelm*) (62.82) with bronze-gilt straps, its iron filling plates overlaid with sheets of silver stamped in the same feather pattern: Stephen V. Grancsay, “A Sasanian Chieftain’s Helmet,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 21 (1962–63), pp. 253–262, ill.

5. Five of the swords are in Swiss private collections; two of the gold swords and one of the silver are in Geneva (Ghirshman, “Trois Epées,” figs. 1–3), the other silver and another of the gold are supposedly in Bern (unpublished). Another of the gold swords is in the Louvre, Pierre Amiet, “Antiquités Parthes et Sassanides,” *La Revue du Louvre et des Musées de France* 17 (1967) nos. 4–5, figs. 1, 15; and the fifth one is in the Tenri Sankokan Museum, Tenri University, Tokyo, *Exhibition of Ancient Asian Art* catalogue (Tokyo, 1966) no. 161.



FIGURE 9  
Fragment of an iron sword with engraved gold mountings, found 1874 in a Langobardic tomb near Chiusi, Italy. Probably Avaric, seventh century A.D. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Administrative Funds, 95.15.88



FIGURE 10  
Iron sword with silver mountings, found in Imperial tomb Pei-Chueu-Shan near Lo-Yang, Honan Province, China. About 600 A.D. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Clarence H. Mackay, 30.65.2

—from central Europe all the way across the Eurasian continental mass to China and Japan (Figures 9, 10)<sup>6</sup>—wherever the steppe nomads of the great migration periods were roaming. Though Europeans usually are aware only of the waves of steppe riders who swept over the West, others flooded the Far East and left their marks there. One of these marks was the introduction of the horseman's sword with two suspension mounts. This survived in Japan into the nineteenth century as the ceremonial *tachi* or slung sword (Figure 11).

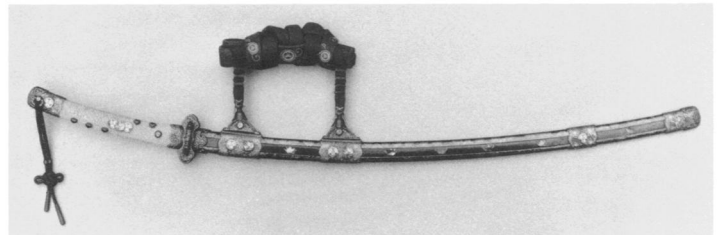
The precursor of the P-shaped sword attachment is to be found in the Scythian *akinakes*, a short sword hung along the right thigh from a loosely slung belt, sometimes strapped to the leg much like the low-slung six-shooter of the Western badman (Figures 12–14).

The shape of the scabbard attachments of Scythian *akinakes* gives a clue as to the purpose of the large P- or B-shaped gold plaques in the Siberian gold hoard found at the time of Peter the Great (Figures 15, 16).<sup>7</sup> These have been called belt buckles, parts of horse trappings, or appliqué for clothes,<sup>8</sup> but their use as decorative mounts on scabbards otherwise of leather appears obvious in the present context. An intriguing feature about them is that they often come in pairs, in design and outline mirrorwise reversed; the two plaques were presumably mounted back to back on a leather or felt background. On the other hand, it is possible that these pairs with mirror images may have been used as mountings for pairs of matching swords, one worn on the right side of the body, the other on the left.

Sasanian noblemen are regularly represented as wearing a long sword on the left side and a dagger on the right thigh (Figure 17). These two Sasanian weapons, however, do not match in decorative and technical

FIGURE 11

Tachi with mountings in gold, silver, and mother-of-pearl and jewels, signed by Harunari Hirata, Yedo, first third of the nineteenth century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of George C. Stone, 36.25.1695a, b



features, and are furthermore not related to the *akinakes*. There is, though, in the collection of Ernest Erickson and at present exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum as a loan, a short north Iranian sword mounted in silver (Figures 18, 19) that has a P-shaped scabbard mounting together with an overall “tooled” feather pattern so closely related in style to the Museum’s sword and the seven others already mentioned that it could well have been once the companion of one of the silver swords. X-ray photos reveal that its badly corroded blade must have been single-edged, a circumstance already suggested by its slightly curved shape and pronouncedly one-sided hilt. The Museum’s sword is double-edged, as, apparently, are the seven others.

The feather pattern and another distinctive decorative feature that appears on the Museum’s sword and on two of the other gold swords—minute triangles formed of tiny gold balls soldered to the surface (Figure 3)—are to be found on scabbard mountings and jewelry from the late Hunnish period in Hungary.<sup>9</sup>

6. S. T. Baxter, “On Some Lombardic Gold Ornaments Found at Chiusi,” *Archaeological Journal* 33 (1876) pp. 103–110, ill. The Chiusi tomb contained fragments of two matching swords to be worn on either side of the body; though always called Langobardic they were probably booty captured from the Avars. In 1874, the year of the discovery at Chiusi, the contemporaneous tomb of Gisulf, son of Grasolf, first Duke of Friuli, was discovered in Cividale, near Udine. Gisulf was killed in battle against the Avars in 611 A.D., according to Paulus Diaconus, *De gestibus langobardorum* IV, chap. 38. For Far Eastern examples see Stephen V. Grancsay, “Two Chinese swords dating about 600 A.D.,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 25 (1930–31) p. 194, figs. 1, 3.

7. S. I. Rudenko, *Die sibirische Sammlung Peters I* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1962) pl. 7.

8. Most scholars—Rostovtzeff, Tamara Talbot Rice, Phillips,

and others—have called them belt buckles; Tolstoi and Kondakow suggest that they were parts of horse trappings; Rudenko regards them as decorative appliqué for robes. Nandor Fettich and Lajos Vargyas identify them as sword mountings. For P-shaped plaques with animal motifs shown in situ attached to a long sword, see Tadeusz Sulimirski, *The Sarmatians* (New York and Washington, 1970) p. 56.

9. Alföldi, “Hunnenzeit,” pl. x; Nandor Fettich, “Archäologische Studien zur Geschichte der späthunnischen Metallkunst,” *Archaeologia Hungarica* 31 (1951) pls. 4, 6–8, 10, 32, 51–52, 55. A golden bow was the badge of rank of a general or prince among the Huns; J. Harmatta, “The Golden Bow of the Huns,” *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungariae* 1 (1951) pp. 107–149. Among the later Avars it was the privilege of a prince to bear a golden saber; Ghirshman “Trois Épées,” p. 309.



**FIGURE 12**  
Tribute-bearing nomad with akinakes, alabaster relief (detail) from Persepolis, Persian, fourth century B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 34.158

**FIGURE 13**  
Gold mounting of an akinakes scabbard, Scythian, late fifth century B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 30.11.12

**FIGURE 14**  
Gold mounting on an akinakes, found in Mound Solokha (Saporoshje district), third or second century B.C. State Hermitage Museum, Leningrad





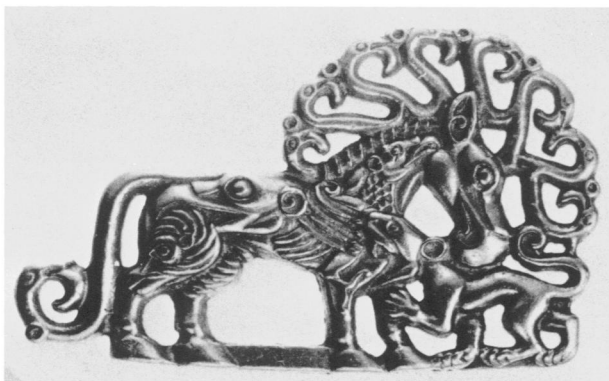


FIGURE 15  
P-shaped gold mounting (one of a pair) with mythical animals, Siberian, from the collection of Peter the Great, third or second century B.C. State Hermitage Museum

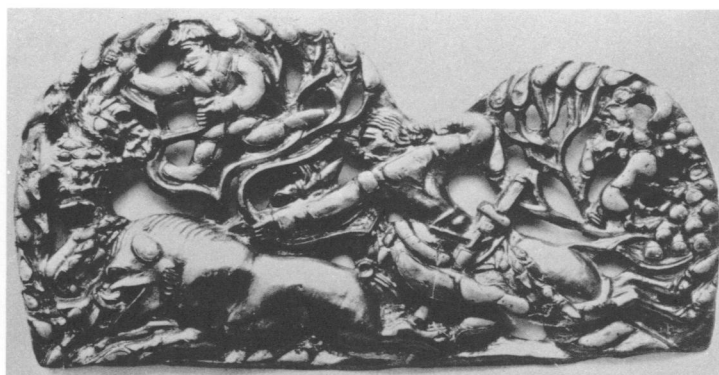
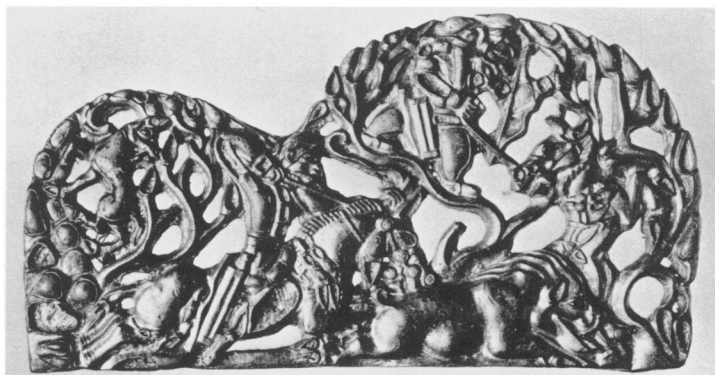


FIGURE 16  
Pair of B-shaped gold mounts, inlaid with turquoises, with representation of a boar hunt, Siberian, from the collection of Peter the Great, third or second century B.C. State Hermitage Museum. The plaques show the same scene from two sides, together approximating a sculpture in the round



FIGURE 17  
Silver bowl, King Peroz hunting; Sasanian, 459–484 A.D. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 34.33



FIGURES 18, 19  
Iron short sword mounted  
in silver, found in north  
Iran, fifth–sixth century  
A.D. Ernest Erickson  
collection, New York

This hint at a possibly Hunnish origin for this type of horsemen's swords is supported by an early literary source that specifically points out that the Huns wore two matching swords, a long double-edged sword at the left side and a single-edged short sword at the right. This literary source is the oldest preserved epic of the Nibelungen cycle, *Waltharius*, also known as the *Waltherlied*, or the Lay of Walther and Hildegund, composed in Latin after lost German prototypes by a monk of St. Gall, Switzerland, during the tenth century.<sup>10</sup>

In this heroic epic Walther of Aquitaine, a Visigothic prince, Hildegund, a Burgundian princess, and

Hagen, a noble youth of the royal house of the Rhenish Franks, are hostages at the court of King Etzel of the Huns, the Attila of history. Hagen manages to flee, and Walther and Hildegund, his betrothed from childhood, escape soon afterward.<sup>11</sup> In preparing for the flight Walther arms himself in Hunnish fashion—"pro ritu Panoniarum"—with a double-edged long sword, *spatha*, belted to his left hip—"et laevum femur ancipiti praecinxerat ense"—and a single-edged half-sword, *semispatha*, at his right—"atque alio dextrum, pro ritu Panoniarum; Is tamen ex una dat vulnera parte."<sup>12</sup> As the fugitives make their way along the Danube

10. Grimm and Schmeller, *Lateinische Gedichte des 10. und 11. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen, 1838). Alwin Schulz (San-Marte), trans., *Walther von Aquitanien* (Magdeburg, 1853). The most popular translations are Victor von Scheffel's appendix to his *Ekkehard* (1855), the first romantic historical novel in German, and Karl Simrock's *Das kleine Heldenbuch* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1874).

11. Though hostages, Walther and Hildegund were entrusted with important offices. Hildegund was the queen's lady-in-waiting and keeper of the stores, and Walther (whose name means "governing the host, the army") was a general, and for a time even commander-in-chief of the Hunnish forces. This is another bit of trustworthy historical information, since this putting of a hostage into a responsible position was exactly according to Hunnish cus-

tom at the time of Attila. Attila's historic "lieutenant" was "Onegesius," a Latinization of the Germanic Hunegisel, a name interpretable either as "the one of the strong shaft" (see Harmatta, "The Golden Bow") or, more fittingly, as "hostage of the Huns." Perhaps a pun was intended: "gisel" "shaft" (Geissel), "gisel" "hostage" (Geisel), and "huni" "strong" (Hüne) and Hun.

12. *Waltharius*, line 336 et seq. See Alwin Schulz (San-Marte), *Zur Waffenkunde des älteren deutschen Mittelalters* (Quedlinburg and Leipzig, 1867) p. 131. In addition to being called "Panonians," the Huns are referred to in *Waltharius* as "Avaranses." Incidentally, up to the seventeenth century Hungarian cavalymen wore two swords: a scimitar on the left hanging from the belt and a mail-piercing *estoc* on the saddle, tucked under the right knee.



Walther snares birds and catches fish for food. When they come to cross the Rhine, Walther pays the ferryman with two fish caught the night before at the headwaters of the Danube, and the ferryman, puzzled by the unfamiliar, non-Rhenish fish, goes to sell them to the king's kitchen, where he tells the tale of the mysterious stranger with the beautiful girl. The young and brash Frankish king, Gunther, decides to waylay the strangers and confiscate the treasures he is sure they must be carrying, though his recently returned kinsman, Hagen, strongly objects. Walther and Hildegund, meantime, have reached the shelter of the Vosges forest. Walther decides to get some sleep at last, after all the days he has been on guard. He asks Hildegund to hold his head in her lap, and to wake him only gently if she sees dust rising in the distance, as if stirred up by horsemen. Soon enough Hildegund sees a group of thirteen riders approaching. She wakes Walther. He dons his armor, which has been hanging in a nearby tree, and takes a few practice strokes with his sword. At this point the maiden clutches his knees and asks him to kill her that she may not fall into the hands of—as she thinks—these Huns. However, Walther recognizes the helmet crest of his old friend Hagen among the knights as they draw near, and he is sure of a friendly reception. Unfortunately, the rash and greedy Gunther forces a fight on Walther. Hagen, refusing to draw against his old brother in arms, watches the battle from a distance, sitting on his shield. Walther herds the horses and Hildegund behind him into a cleft in a rock wall, and in the narrow pass, where the attackers can get to him only singly, each one with a different weapon, he kills eleven. Finally Hagen has to take up arms, since one of the slain was his sister's son. In the final fight, Gunther and Hagen attack Walther treacherously from two sides at once. Gunther soon goes down with a terrible wound in his thigh, but Walther's sword in its next stroke shatters on Hagen's hard helmet. When in disgust Walther hurls away the now useless hilt, Hagen lashes out and lops off Walther's outstretched hand. Undaunted, Walther transfers his shield from his left arm to his right by hooking the stump through the straps, then grips with his left hand the half-sword we remember he has belted to his right hip—"semispatam, qua dextrum cinxisse latus memoravimus illum"—and in a stab at Hagen's face gouges out one eye and breaks six teeth in the slashed cheek.<sup>13</sup>

After that the heroes call it quits. While Hildegund bandages their wounds they renew their old friendship with good-natured banter during which Hagen tells Walther that he from now on will have to belt on his sword to his right, contrary to any chivalrous custom. He is careful to avoid any reference to the half-sword, though.

In this summary we have an interesting complex of elements connected with the problem of the swords of the steppe nomads,<sup>14</sup> and among the Siberian gold plaques mentioned above we have an intriguing iconographical find.

One of the plaques (Figure 20)<sup>15</sup> shows a scene of a woman seated under a tree, holding a sleeping man's head in her lap, and a pair of horses, held by a groom, standing by. The weapons of the warrior, bow and gorytus, hang in the branches of a tree. The scene is skillfully designed to fit smoothly into the stereotyped P-shape of the sword mounts. The ever-present oval eye for the carrying strap is incorporated into the branchwork of the tree, on the level with the horse's ears, on the offside of the tree trunk. This scene is usually described as an illustration of an event from a forgotten Central Asian heroic epic, and other representations of fights and wrestling matches found on Siberian buckles and Soghdian silver bowls are usually presumed to be scenes from the same epic.<sup>16</sup>

It is, of course, not difficult to recognize the scene of Walther's sleep before the fight in the representation on the plaque, and the duel with Hagen, the last of the thirteen opponents, at a point when Walther as well as his attackers have used up the entire catalogue of weapons of the Dark Ages, in the combat scene on one of the Hermitage silver bowls, where two warriors are

13. *Waltharius*, line 1390 et seq.; Schulz, *Waffenkunde*, p. 131. It is interesting that on the figural frieze of the famous electrum vase of Kul Oba (fourth century B.C.) the two wounded Scythians are being treated for a face or mouth wound and a leg wound.

14. W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance* (London, 1931) pp. 84–88 summarizes *Waltharius* as well as the two English fragments of *Waldhere* but omits the scene beneath the tree and the hero's two swords.

15. Rudenko, *Sibirische Sammlung*, pl. 7.

16. M. Rostovtzeff, "The Great Hero of Middle Asia and his Exploits," *Artibus Asiae* 4 (1930–32) pp. 99–117. Tamara Talbot Rice, *Ancient Arts of Central Asia* (New York and Washington, 1965) figs. 27, 28, 31–33. E. D. Phillips, *The Royal Hordes: Nomad Peoples of the Steppes* (London, 1965) figs. 105, 106, 110, 120, 121.

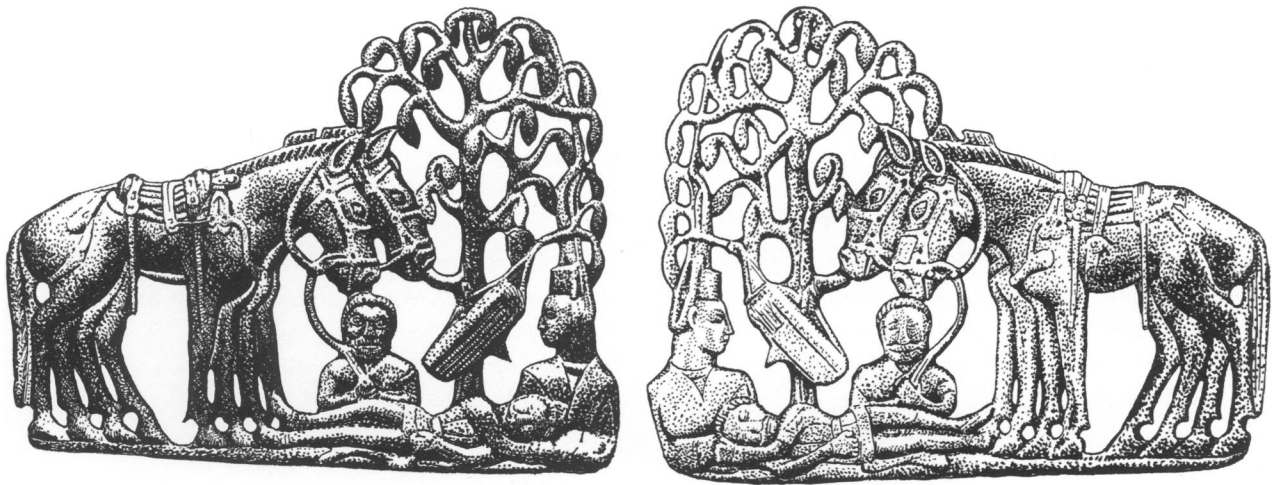


FIGURE 20

Drawings of a pair of gold plaques from the collection of Peter the Great, third or second century B.C. State Hermitage Museum

FIGURE 21

Silver bowl with combat scene; Soghdian, seventh century A.D. State Hermitage Museum



struggling to the bitter end amidst a litter of broken and discarded weapons (Figure 21).<sup>17</sup>

In a study of the survival of narrative motifs from the Middle Ages to the present Lajos Vargyas<sup>18</sup> has shown that the motif of the man with his head in a woman's lap under a tree is central in the fourteenth-century Hungarian folk version of the legend of St. Ladislav, as well as in the still-living folk ballad "Anna Molnár." At the same time Vargyas points out the similarity of this motif to the Siberian plaque.

In the St. Ladislav legend a Hungarian princess is abducted by a warrior of a hostile tribe, the Kumans. While they are resting under a shady tree, the warrior asks the princess to take his head in her lap to look for lice. When he falls asleep, the pursuing knightly saint catches up with them. In the fight between the abductor and the rescuer, while the combatants are locked in a deadly wrestling match after having used up most of their weapons, the girl takes part by hacking the Kuman's leg with a discarded sword. The folk ballad has a soldier persuading Anna, the miller's daughter, to elope with him. They ride on for a long time until they arrive at a shady tree, where they rest and the soldier asks Anna to take his head in her lap to look for lice. He warns her, however, not to look up into the tree. As soon as he falls asleep the girl naturally looks up, and sees eleven hanged girls in the branches. She bursts into tears in her fright. Her tears fall upon the soldier's face and awaken him, whereupon he tells her that she shall be the twelfth victim. The ballad has several differing endings: sometimes the maiden escapes by a trick, managing even to kill the wicked soldier, or else her brother comes to the rescue, sometimes in the nick of time, or else after the hapless girl is already dead.

17. Another recurrent feature in Germanic heroic epics—interestingly, again connected with Huns—is the hero waiting under a tree and being treacherously attacked by two fighters whom he believes to be his friends, such as happens to Walther with Hagen and Gunther, and in *Alpharts Tod* to the hero Alphart, who guards the allied Gothic-Hunnish host in the plain before Verona under a linden tree and is slain by the turncoats Wittich and Heime. Perhaps these scenes are part of the same complex as the representation of two warriors attacking a single horseman, seen on the famous gold comb from Solokha near the Lower Dniepr, Saporoshje District.

18. Lajos Vargyas, "Forschungen zur Geschichte der Volksballade im Mittelalter: II. Das Weiterleben der landnahmezeitlichen Heldenepik," *Acta Ethnographica Academiae Scientiarum Hun-*

In the same article Vargyas quotes surviving tribal ballads from Siberia, where the tree is endowed with magical qualities as an "iron larch tree with nine branches." He points out that the tree on the Siberian plaque has exactly nine branches. In the Siberian ballads the girl sometimes escapes by slipping into a cleft of the hollow tree, which brings to mind Hildegund in the safety of the cleft between the rocks in the Vosges forest.<sup>19</sup> There are many, though less complete and widely differing, versions of this ballad in other European languages. English-speaking connoisseurs of ballads will recognize elements of "Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight" and the "Dublin Murder Ballad." Particularly in German versions, the most conspicuous feature is that the girl is offered three choices: death by hanging in the tree, by drowning in the nearby river, or by beheading with the murderer's sword. Another early version that has not been pointed out yet is Sir Thomas Malory's story of Sir Balan and Sir Balin, the latter the Knight of the Two Swords, in his *Morte d'Arthur*. This story shows, though in garbled form, essential features of the *Waltharius* as well as of the "Anna Molnár" ballad: the two swords and the fight between brothers, the pair of lovers under a tree, and the triple killing of maidens. Here the threefold choice is vaguely recognizable in the circumstance that the woman killed by Sir Balin is the Lady of the Lake, that the lady in love with Sir Lanceor kills herself with a sword, and that the third is slain under a laurel tree. In the *Waltharius* the snaring of the birds, the fishing, and Hildegund's plea to be slain by Walther's sword are parallels to the hanging, drowning, and beheading in the ballads.<sup>20</sup>

One can speculate that the original form, the "Urepos," which must already have existed in the

*garicae* 10 (1961) pp. 242–293, ill.

19. A nine-branched tree with seated woman and rider is also to be seen on a felt tapestry from Pazyryk. A sublimation of the iron tree that opens to give safety to the maiden may exist in the ironclad Hagen (whose name means "Hawthorn"). When his cheek and mouth are slashed open, the fight is over, and Hildegund is called out of hiding.

20. In preparing the drawing for Figure 20 I saw that a ropelike extension (apparently unnoticed before) leads from the woman's head into the tree. Possibly the earliest form of the maiden's death may have been by hanging. The hanging theme is echoed in the fact that the eleventh of the heroes to be slain in *Waltharius*, Drogo of Strasbourg, is first hacked in the leg, then strangled with his own gold necklace.

third or second century B.C., as the gold plaques (Figure 20) show, had a pair of eloping lovers resting under a magical tree with the hero's head in the maiden's lap, when the friend of the hero (the man holding the horses as an Ur-Hagen?) turned against him, and in the ensuing fight the hero preferred to kill his bride instead of letting her fall into his opponent's hands. At the end probably both fighters killed each other.

The story of the sleeping maiden-slayer under a tree seems to be known only in Central Asia and westward in Europe, and noticeably connected with the Hunnish custom of wearing two swords. The story seems to be unknown in the Far East; and it may be significant that the Chinese swords with P-shaped mountings and

the Japanese tachi<sup>21</sup> were worn without a companion piece, and presumably were transmitted by a different group of steppe nomads.

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21. The tachi was used in warfare until the fifteenth century, when the scabbard mounts were changed into a version of the bridgelike mount. There was a short dagger of quite differing design, the *koshigatana*, sometimes worn with the tachi though not as a companion piece, but interestingly enough it was the later long sword with bridge mount, the *katana*, that was worn (as a badge of rank of a samurai) together with a short *wakizashi* as a matching set called *daisho*.