

A 16th CENTURY “STYRIAN” RIDING SWORD IN THE COLLECTIONS OF THE HISTORY MUSEUM OF MOLDAVIA IN IASI

BY

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Abstract

One of the exhibits of Moldavia's History Museum is an Early Modern/Late Medieval sword that has been until recently known and labeled as “Prince Vasile Lupu's Sword”. Our investigation demonstrates, by means of typology analysis and analogy, that the item is an ordonnance weapon in the category of “riding swords” dated at the end of 16th or the in the beginning of the 17th century, used to equip the light cavalry or to be worn as side-weapon by travelers. The type of weapon is known as Styrian Sword, as the largest group of preserved items is located in the Styrian Arsenal Museum in Graz, Austria.

Keywords: riding sword, Graz Arsenal, Danner family, Nuremberg, the Thirteen Years War.

The Early Modern Module of the History Museum of Moldavia in Iasi has exhibited since 1960 a sword described, at least in one early instance, as having “the pommel in the shape of a two-headed eagle”¹. One understands why with such reference the piece was linked to Prince Vasile Lupu (1634–1653), a voivode with dreams of Imperial restoration, and placed in the exhibition directly beneath the plaster copy of this prince's foundational inscription of the *Trei Ierarhi* Monastery. In fact, the institutional oral wisdom often describes the piece as the “Vasile Lupu's sword”. In an earlier paper we tried to clear as much as possible this connection with the Moldavian prince, or any member of the ruling family, for that matter². Thanks to the more recently published catalogues and the huge amount of data readily available on the Internet, we can clear a bit more the typology, classification and Early Modern origin of a very geographically and chronologically specific type of sword, explaining thus some of the reasons of such of weapon being present in this European “Far-East”.

The registration data (inventory number 1073) indicate neither the origin nor the identification and only a vague indication as inherited from the collections of the Museum of Antiquities, a didactic museum founded in 1925 within the University of Iasi by Orest Tafrali, which was dismembered after WWII, its collections being transferred to various institutions, the largest part representing the core of the actual History Museum of Moldavia.

The data-sheet of the piece do not justify by themselves neither the chronology (the 17th century) nor the attribution of this sword to any real historical character. This paper attempts to bring forth the largest possible amount of accurate historical and typological data in order to fill this void. The research used a large number of web pages and communications with various knowledgeable persons, through forums and emails. The information from these sources was verified by means of published ones, mainly monographs dedicated to Renaissance weaponry, as well as collection and exhibition catalogues.

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¹ Al. Andronic, M. Petrescu-Dîmbovița, *Muzeul de Istorie a Moldovei*, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1966, p. 77.

² C. Hriban, „*Sabia lui Vasile Lupu de la Iași*”, in Ioan Neculce. *Buletinul Muzeului de Istorie a Moldovei* (Serie Nouă), X–XII (2004–2006), pp. 201–210.

A superficial examination reveals that the outlook of the piece is completely different from the edged weapons borne and employed in mid-seventeen century throughout the Eastern Europe. The piece is 109 cm long, with a preserved blade length of 97 cm (Fig. 1, a). The guard consists of two up-curved quillons made of flat bars ending in spirals in plane of the blade, a down-curved half-length knuckle-guard and two small side-rings on the outward side (Fig. 1, b). The grip is lacquered wood, fastened with two iron rings to the tang of the blade (Fig. 1, c–d). The pommel is lenticular in cross-section and disk-shaped, with the flanks perforated by two cylindrical holes, giving it an overall appearance of two back-to-back half-moons (Fig. 2, a–b). On both sides of the pommel the entry point of the tang is marked by a triangular prominence, the left side of the pommel being more prominent (or less eroded). The pommel is crowned by a cylindrical button securing the peened end of the tang. All metallic elements are iron, with visible traces of forging and brazing repair-points.

The visual examination of the piece revealed also that at a certain point the sword underwent restoration, and a quite negligent one, without consideration towards the initial outlook and structure and with no concern for a historically significant configuration and appearance. This restoration occurred probably after the sword was transformed into a wall-hanging martial decoration and perhaps even after its transfer to the emerging History Museum, but certainly before 1954, when it was exhibited in Room 12 of the Museum³.

The blade seems to have been thoroughly polished, grinding out any traces of historical usage, together with some thickness of the blade itself. Although the typology of such swords (see *infra*) includes a rounded tip, the present-day point of the sword cuts through the forging folds visible along the length of the blade (Fig. 2, c). The grinding-out of the blade reveals also the forged structure of the blade, with a lighter shade on the axis, where the fuller supposed to be, even though many blades of this type do not have a fuller proper.

Up until the late eighties the sword was exhibited together with a wooden scabbard that, judging from the photographs, was modern and probably fitted at the same time as the restoration that added the wooden grip secured by iron rings.

14 cm down the blade there is a punched swordsmith's mark, in the shape of thick-headed snake, as much as this can be construed after the grinding of the blade. The cross-section of the blade is now double-lenticular and much flattened, and almost constant in shape and dimensions throughout its length. The blade is very thin and, as such, the piece is very light. The blade preserved its flexibility, even though when we examined it was bent at the middle. The small side-rings are probably the work of the restorer, who repaired in this way a larger single side-ring, unknowledgeable of the historical analogies. This type of guard, with twin-lobed side-ring on the quillon block is quite common in pre-modern Europe, from the third decade of the 16th century and up to the end of the 17th. The two rings were made by bending in the free ends resulting from the break of the original side-ring, without being then soldered or welded to the quillon block. The overall workmanship is poor and one of the rings, which was broken half-through at the base, was repaired by brazing (Fig. 2, d). The hilt was restored with only a simple one-piece grip of lacquered wood, secured badly to the tang by two rings of sheet-iron, with brazed-joined ends. The restoration of the hilt blatantly ignores the usage of the Late-Renaissance-Early Modern period, which is the typology-dating interval of the original piece. Except the grip-rings (modern) and the blade (polished), all metallic elements show light traces of corrosion, and we presume that the restorer removed all the corrosion products together with the historical patina.

The original sword must have appeared, probably, like a sword put on sale by the German auction house Hermann Historica of Munich⁵ in October 2004 (Fig. 3, a–b). This sword, which we will just name Lot 490 provides a comparative dating for our No. 1073, as it was dated by the experts employed by the auction house to the first quarter of the 17th century, by analogy with the group of very similar swords in the collection of the Styrian Armoury of the Museum Joanneum in Graz. The similitude is advanced by the bladesmith's mark punched on the forte of the blade, which is very clear on the auctioned sword (Fig. 3, c), similar but not identical to the one preserved on the blade of No. 1073 (Fig. 3, d). The mark on the blade of Lot 490 was regarded by the experts of the auction house as a crowned snake. The identity between the two marks is frustrated by the grinded-out fuller of the No. 1073 blade and the difference in shape.

³ Al. Andronic, M. Petrescu-Dîmbovița, op. cit. (n. 1), Pl. 27.

⁴ M. D. Coe *et alii*, (Connolly, Harding, Harris, La Rocca, North, Richardson, Spring, Wilkinson), *Swords and Hilt Weapons*, Prion Books, London, 1995, *passim*.

⁵ *** 47. Auktion – Alte Waffen – Antiken – Jagdliches – Varia, Hermann Historica, Munich, 2004, Lot No. 490, stable link: http://www.hermann-historica-archiv.de/auktion/hhm47.pl?f=NR&c=32221&t=temartic_2_GB&db=kat47_2.txt retrieved 5.03.2014.

From a typology point of view, the easiest to frame is the pommel of the hilt, which, due to its very peculiar shape, is easily identified in one work of art that can serve as temporal reference. This type of pommel is classified as Pommel Type 46⁶, and roughly dated to the period between 1600 and 1630, on the basis of both the pieces preserved in the museums and private collection, and the portrait of the Augsburg collector and art-lover Philipp Hainhofer⁷ by Lucas Kilian⁸, dated around 1630, owned by the Stockholm *Nationalmuseum* (Fig. 4, a). The group of five swords in the Styrian Armoury, almost identical to No. 1073 and Lot 490 has a very similar type of pommel, with the difference that the lateral holes do not reach the edge of the disk, being thus dissimilar to both the reference drawing of A.V.B. Norman⁹ and the pommel of No. 1073. All of the known preserved pieces, as well as, obviously, the representation in the Hainhofer portrait, are circumscribed to the South-German and Austrian space.

As easily identifiable as the pommel, is the bladesmith's mark, as it was solely used by the 16th-17th century family of metalworkers and gunsmiths Danner of Nuremberg (Fig. 4, b)¹⁰. The snake-shaped mark is not easily identified, as the reference drawing of Bezdek is stylized to the extremes. The snake seems to wear a crown *à la antique* or, more probably, its head is shaped in the manner of the arms of dukes Visconti of Milan, like a dragon with a spiky “collar”. The shape of the Lot 490 mark is different both from the one of No. 1073 and the reference drawing, which is a reproduction of the one punched on the wheel-lock pistols made by Wolf Danner (mid-16th century) and Peter Danner (end of 16th, beginning of 17th century).

The Danner family of Nuremberg, whose workshops might be the manufacturers of the blade of No. 1073, have several members of continental fame. Brothers Leonhard and Hans Danner were both screw-makers and mechanical geniuses, respectively, and were active in the two decades of the mid-16th century, when they designed and build many ingenious mechanical devices for construction works, door opening, heavy gun handling and many other purposes¹¹. The same Hans Danner was described by contemporary Nuremberg mathematician and calligrapher Johann Neudörfer as “... so artistic that he produced, in iron and brass, spirals so perfect that they might have been made of a single piece of wood.”¹² Leonhard had a medal made with his portrait by engraver known as M.S. in 1561 (Fig. 4, c) and died in 1583, aged 88¹³, while Hans was still alive in 1573, when he had his portrait made at 65 years, with the tools of his trade (Fig. 5, a).

The gunsmith Wolf Danner invented the wheel-lock pistol hair-trigger, had works commissioned by Emperor Charles Quint¹⁴ in 1543 and reached the position of proof-master gunsmith of Nuremberg, in recognition of his metalworking talent. The same Johann Neudörfer speaks of the quality of the mechanisms and barrels made by Wolf Danner as “masterpieces praised by all”¹⁵.

The gunsmith Peter Danner is known by several so-called dress-pistols, fancy small arms used for both personal protection and hunting made between 1580 and his death, in 1602. One cannot but assume that he personally worked only on those commissions requiring high mechanical skill, minute detail and exquisite artistry and craftsmanship, as required by the said fancy side-arms. There are several wheel-lock pistols and petronels preserved, produced towards 1580, bearing the mark of Hans Danner. One cannot but wonder if the mastery metalwork required for such pieces was beyond the now failing abilities of Hans Danner the

⁶ A. V. B. Norman, *The Rapier and Small-sword*, Arno Press, New York, 1980, p. 260.

⁷ The Augsburg banker, diplomat and art collector Philipp Hainhofer (1578–1647) is known for combining the diplomatic activity in the service of the Dukes of Pomerania with the acquisition of works of art and curios for the galleries and cabinets (*Kunstschränke*) of his various protectors.

⁸ Lucas Kilian (1579–1637), painter, print-maker, and draftsman of Augsburg was part of the group of artists with whom Hainhofer worked in hunting and acquiring works of art for his and others collections.

⁹ A. V. B. Norman, op. cit. (n. 6), p. 260.

¹⁰ R. H. Bezdek, *German Swords and Sword Makers: Edged Weapon Makers from the 14th to the 20th Centuries*, Paladin Press, Boulder (CO), 2000, p. 131.

¹¹ L. Beck, *Die Geschichte des Eisens. In technischer und kulturgeschichtlicher Beziehung*. 2nd volume: The 16th and 17th Centuries, Friederich Vieweg & Sons Publishers, Braunschweig, 1893–1895, p. 473, stable link: <https://archive.org/details/diegeschichtede01unkngoog/retrieved/15.03.2014>.

¹² R. Brandl, *Art or Craft? Art and Artistry in Medieval Nuremberg*, in *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg, 1300–1550*, Exhibition Catalogue, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1986, p. 55.

¹³ L. Beck, op. cit. (n. 11), p. 473.

¹⁴ S. V. Grancsay, *A wheel-lock pistol made for Emperor Charles V*, in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Dec., 1947), DOI: 10.2307/3257364, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3257364>, p. 119.

¹⁵ L. Beck, op. cit. (n. 11), p. 444.

“artist screw-maker”, and this gunsmith working around 1580, thus a contemporary of Peter Danner, would not be a second Hans in a “dynasty” of exceptional metalworkers.

However, the products of Danner workshops that are preserved, dating from the end of 16th century and the beginning of the 17th, which is the time-frame suggested by the characteristic features of the hilt of our No. 1073 and its analogues, bear also the initials of the masters flanking the crowned serpent. As there are no known preserved blades bearing such elaborate “Klingenmarke”, one can conclude that swordsmithing was an activity that the late-16th century Danners relegated to the mass-production of their workshops. In fact, a large part of the 16th century mass-produced weapons and armor of Nuremberg found its way in the Arsenal of Graz, both by contract and by less-legitimate means¹⁶.

The corroboration of the period indicated by the Hainhofer’s portrait and the one given by the bladesmith’s mark frames the origin of No. 1073 in the last quarter of the 16th century and the first one of the 17th.

However, the shape of the guard raises several chronology issues. Typology-wise, the upturned flat quillons, ended in flattened, blunt spirals, the twin-lobed side-ring and the half-length knuckle-guard is not defined as a single, clear type of hilt. Structurally, the closest analogy would be Type 21¹⁷, which can be dated, at the earliest, in the first decades of the 16th century, based on its the representations in art, which the earliest is *The Crucifixion* of Ulrich Apt, in 1517¹⁸ (Fig. 5, b). In terms of manner of shaping the quillons, the closest analogy would be Type 7¹⁹, which lacks, though, the side-ring (a Type 7 hilt **with** side-ring is seen on the sword worn by one of the soldiers in the *Massacre of the Pilgrims* in the cycle of *Life of St. Ursula* by Carpaccio – 1493). In fact the Type 7 hilt is widely used throughout the 16th–17th century Europe, being a natural evolution of the Orientalized hilts and swords appearing at the end of 15th century in the Venice-Dalmatia-Austria region²⁰, being the favorite furnishing of the hunting sword and hangers in the 16th and 17th century all over Europe²¹. A hilt with an almost identical guard with a somehow rectangular side-ring is reproduced in one of the *Landesknechte* prints of Urs Graf the Older (1514), as well as in one of the prints in the series *Deutsche Landsknecht* of Jost Amman, portraying a drummer and a fifer (1517). A similar hilt was mounted on a sword auctioned by Hermann Historica in May 2004²², with a date of „around 1670-1680” (Fig. 5, c). Although the guard is very similar to the one of No. 1073, the differences in pommel-type, shape of quillons and knuckle-guard and the blade on which the hilt was mounted do not provide enough point of similarity to make the analogy with our piece, thus making unusable the date given by the experts of the auction house. Moreover, an identical hilt with oval side-plate (probably later) attached, on a “fake Toledo” of German make, preserved in the Wallace Collection, is dated “around 1580” (Fig. 5, d)²³.

The large time-frame provided by the typology of the guard could be managed to more accurate data by taking into account the information provided by the pommel and the bladesmith’s mark.

The typology features preserved after the restoration provide only basic support for an analysis of this sword as a whole. So far, the separate features set an *ante quem* date (1514) and a relatively shaking end-date (1680). If the extremes of the time-frame are off, the interval is limited by ~1580 (the period when gunsmith Peter Danner is a well-known barrel-maker, a metallurgical activity more similar to blade-forging than to the production of firearm mechanisms) and ~1630 (the Hainhofer portrait made by Lucas Kilian). If one can assume that, for certain inherited or captured valuable blades, the owner requested the fitting of a more fashionable hilt, this assumption is off in this case, as proven by the group of nearly identical swords in the Graz Arsenal. This fact indicates that the blades delivered by ironwork contractors were mounted by one or several contract cutlers or by the workers of the arsenal, as usually the ordnance procurement procedure was to purchase and deliver the uncut and un-hilted blades in bulk (a standard procedure for ordnance weapons

¹⁶ J. Willers, *Armour of Nuremberg*, in *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg, 1300–1550*, Exhibition Catalogue, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1986, p. 104.

¹⁷ A. V. B. Norman, op. cit. (n. 6), p. 77.

¹⁸ The central panel of the Rehlinger Altar, preserved in the Staatsgalerie Augsburg.

¹⁹ A. V. B. Norman, op. cit. (n. 6), p. 71.

²⁰ M. D. Coe *et al.*, op. cit. (n. 4), p. 48.

²¹ The hunting hanger of king Henry VIII (~1544) by the famous Diego de Çaias; M. D. Coe *et al.*, op. cit. (n. 4), p. 77.

²² *** 43. *Auktion – Alte Waffen – Antiken – Jagdliches – Varia*, Munchen, Hermann Historica, 2004.

²³ E. E. Oakeshott, *European Weapons and Armour: From the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution*, Boydell Press, Woodridge (UK), 2000, p. 96.

since Early Middle Age and up to the end of Modern Era), thus neatly separating the production and the finishing activities, at least in the case of common (i.e. not individual, custom-made to order) weapons.

Generally, as a whole, the No. 1073 type of sword is very close to the *schiaovona* used by the Dalmatian mercenaries in the employ of the Venetian Republic starting with the Fourth Ottoman-Venetian War (1570–1573) as well as to the so-called Walloon swords, a broad-bladed species of rapier quite common during the Thirty Years War. The typological remoteness between the more elaborated hilts (grid or basket hilts) of the types mentioned above and the simpler, almost medieval, hilt of the Styrian swords²⁴ might be due to the standardization of the proto-industrial manufacture processes, as well as to the specific destination of these weapons, i.e. the quick, uniform and cheap arming of the common soldiers, most probably semi-regular cavalymen²⁵. In this regard, the process can be compared to the cases of similar functionally hilted types, with heavier blades for infantry such is the *katzbalger* of the Swiss and German mercenaries, or with heavier one-edge blades for cavalry such is the *pallasch* used by the Hungarian and Croatian cavalry of the Imperials.

To conclude, the most probable dating achieved by corroborating the data provided by the closest analogies (Lot 490 and the Styrian Arsenal swords), the analysis of the hilt as a whole and of its components, as well as the historical research, is the end of 16th century or the beginning of the 17th. The baseness of the hilt and construction, as well as the existence of the Styrian Arsenal swords point out to an ordnance weapon, cheap and quick to make and replace, meant to equip the semi-regular cavalry in the event of an emergency.

The geographical area of reference for the Styrian swords could be said to be identical to the Middle-Danubian regions in the South-East of the Habsburg Empire mostly affected by the Turkish wars in the second half of the 16th century and first half of the 17th.

As to the manner in which this sword found its way into the Moldavian region, if one leave out the easy solution of a 19th–20th century Romanian purchasing it in a flea-market somewhere in Austria, the origin might be traced to the influx of mercenaries and war-aid cheap weaponry in this area during and following the Thirteen Years War. An interesting avenue of inquiry is the evidence of Nuremberg weaponsmiths in the employ of the Ottomans, as well as a thriving arms trade between Nuremberg and the Polish and Hungarian Kingdoms throughout the 16th century. As any western weapon made for or captured by Ottomans would bear Turkish arsenal marks, the Ottoman connection is excluded in our case. As such, the origins of No. 1073 could only be the Eastern arms trade of Nuremberg or the Thirteen Years War, without excluding the post-1877 flea-market (or auction house, why not?) link.

Historically, No. 1073 type of swords features a very strong connection with the South-German and Austrian space, with the “Turkish Frontier”, in a period of upheaval in both the “defense industry” and military doctrine. The existence of the princely and municipal arsenal of Northern Italy since 1450’s and the growing presence of the professional military companies (of Tuscans, Lombards, Savoyards, Swiss, Venetians or Dalmatians) is an influential reality pressuring increasingly on the political body of the Central Europe in the first half of the 16th century. The Wars of Religion in France and Germany, as well as the crushing defeat of the noble cavalymen of the Hungarian Kingdom at the hands of Sultan’s janissaries, brought savagely into attention the importance of urban militias and rural guerrillas made of “temporary soldiers”. The cultural self-image of European the burgher shifted from an industrious, peace-loving and obedient subject to a proudly armed citizen defending his faith against heretics or papists, his city against marauding Turks or mercenaries, his home and family against robbers and burglars. The militias are a source of armed power, albeit temporary and not always dependable, for the rulers of the threatened fringes of Europe. The arsenal of Graz, on the Turkish Frontier, and its Styrian swords are an important component of this process. One of the tactical components of the process is the confrontation with a highly mobile, almost unarmored adversary, highly skilled in unconventional tactics (including terror).

The emergence of militias and arsenals as factors of significance produce some interesting effects: Following the example of the medieval Italian communes, the 16th century European burgher bears arms, with the dagger a quasi-permanent apparel piece and the sword a readily embraced necessity during travel

²⁴ Lacking an established typology, the reference to the Graz Styrian Arsenal swords should adequately cover both the proximal *genus* and the specific difference required for the definition of a type.

²⁵ In order to clarify the terminology, *riding sword* is an umbrella type covering several related species of straight edged light sword, with relatively short blades and simple hilts, used throughout Europe in the 16th and 17th century. The base meaning is a “travelling sword” used by civilians, less accustomed with the heavier warswords used by nobles and professional soldiers.

and whenever the times became uncertain. The said burgher, when more affluent, poses aristocratically for a “portrait with sword”, as seen in the Hainhofer portrait and many others of the era. The rise in demand for weapons for the “civilian” market is boosted by the pressure generated by the establishment of the arsenals on the Eastern frontiers of Europe. This phenomenon alters in two divergent ways the arms production and trade in the second half of 16th century in Germany and Northern Italy. First of all, the production undergoes a process of standardization, technologically and organizationally, in order to adapt to the alterations of the demand side of the market, one of the results of this adaptation being the lower prices due to more efficient technological processes and reduced material costs of lighter weapons meant more for wearing daily than for bearing into fight. Then, the growth of the “civilian” market caused an increase in demand for customized and artsy components and accessories. The chisellers and the jewelers thrive on this suddenly large demand for chiseled hilts and jeweled scabbards mounts. The sword as an important piece of apparel, a phenomenon best illustrated by the omnipresence of the smallsword between roughly 1650 and the French Revolution, is foretold by the emergence of this light “riding sword” of which the Styrian sword is a soldierly relative born of the necessities of the Turkish Frontier, but supported on the same larger cultural, social and military processes started by the religion wars of the Reformation.



a



b



c



d

Fig. 1. Item No. 1073, general view and details.



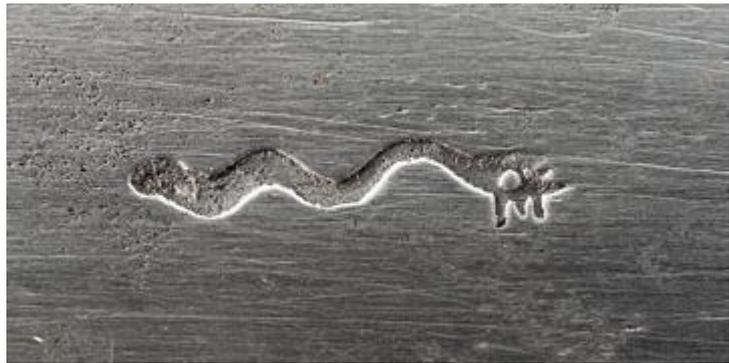
Fig. 2. Item No. 1073, details.



a



b



c



d

Fig. 3. Item Lot 490, general view (a) and the hilt (b). The *klingenmarke* on Lot 490 (c), compared to the one on No. 1073 (d).



a



b



c

Fig. 4. a). Portrait of Philip Hainhofer by Lucas Killian, stable link: [http://www.stadtllexikon-augsburg.de/index.php?id=114&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=4024&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=119&cHash=2f93dcebe1](http://www.stadtllexikon-augsburg.de/index.php?id=114&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4024&tx_ttnews[backPid]=119&cHash=2f93dcebe1) retrieved 5.03.2014;
 b). The bladesmith punchmark of Wolf Danner, reproduced from R. H. Bezdek, *German Swords and Sword Makers...*;
 c). The medal portrait of master metalworker Leonhard Danner of Nuremberg by master M.S. (1561) in the collections of Albert & Victoria Museum, stable link: http://media.vam.ac.uk/media/thira/collection_images/2006AF/2006AF3789_jpg_1.jpg retrieved 5.03.2014.



Fig 5. a). The portrait of Hans Danner, anonymous (1573), stable link: <http://www.bildarchiv.austria.at/Bildarchiv/66/B1713164T1713169.jpg> retrieved 5.03.2014; b). Soldier in the scene of Crucifixion, the central panel of the Rehlinger Altar, by Ulrich Apt the Older (1517), stable link: <http://www.bildindex.de/dokumente/html/obj00071435#0> retrieved 15.03.2014; c). A hilt mounted on a sword auctioned by Hermann Historica in May 2004, with a date of „around 1670-1680”. d) A “fake Toledo” of German make, preserved in the Wallace Collection, dated “around 1580.