

SOME REMARKS REGARDING THE SABER OF PRINCE ALEXANDER IPSILANTI IN THE HISTORY MUSEUM OF MOLDAVIA IN IAȘI

BY
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Abstract:

The collections of the History Museum of Moldavia in Iași include a saber attributed to Prince Alexander Ipsilanti, the elected leader of the Greek Secret society Philiki Hetairia, formed with the declared purpose of liberate the Hellenic lands from the Ottoman rule. This saber was transferred from the Romanian Academy to the History Museum in 1967. It originated, most probably, from the collections of the former Museum of Antiquities (founded at the beginning of 20th century). The item is a shamshir-type saber, with the particular feature of flame-shaped blade. This type of weapon is of Persian origin and spread in the 19th century throughout the south and Eastern Mediterranean, and used by both Christian and Muslim warriors. There are several analogies, dated at the end of 18th and the first decades of the 19th century, the most notorious of these being the saber of Greek Hero Niketaras, said to be captured from a Turk during the Siege of Missolonghi, and preserved at present in the collections of the National History Museum in Athens. The Ipsilanti saber is decorated on the cross-guard with gilded reliefs, which are also present on the sheath. However, the blade is inlaid with Islamic texts (a citation on one side and a monogram on the other) made of brass wire. Our investigation points out to the usage of this particular type of weapon as a talisman, as a magical simile to the legendary weapon of Shiite hero Ali, the Dhu'l Faqar / Zulfikar. This hypothesis is based on both the very similitude of the text inscribed on the blade with the double invocation of Ali and Dhu'l Faqar and a certain interpretation of the historic description of Dhu'l Faqar not as forked tip blade, but as a wavy one. The mountings of this saber, with medallions of the Imperial Russian Eagle and Medusa's Head, as well as the particular arrangement of the lanyard, i.e. for a left-handed person, support the attribution to Prince Ipsilanti, who lost his right hand in the Battle of Dresden (1813) and is portrayed with an empty right sleeve and the saber borne on his right side.

Keywords: flame-bladed weapons; Philiki Hetairia; Ipsilanti; amulet sword; Dhu'l Faqar.

To the memory of Sorin Iftimi (1965-2021), formidable scholar and dearest friend

The collections of the History Museum of Moldavia in Iasi preserve an item of special significance, for the history of Balkan Europe at the beginning of the 19th century. It is a saber attributed to Prince Alexander Ipsilanti, one of the heads of the Hellenic Revolution of 1821 and leader of *Philiki Hetairia*.

The item entered the collection of the History Museum of Moldavia in January 1968, with the establishment of the "Moldova" National Museum Complex, by transferring the collections of the Institute of History and Archeology of the Romanian Academy - Iasi Branch to the History Museum of Moldavia. The saber was part of the Museum's main exhibition since the very beginning.

The weapon is an oriental one of the shamshir type (Farsi *šamšīr* / شمشیر - sword), with a wavy flame-shaped blade, with a total length of 93 cm. The *forte* of the blade is decorated on both sides with damascening made of brass thread. This decoration comprises floral motifs and an inscription with Arabic letters in a cartridge (left side), and a calligram and a seal of Solomon (right side). The cross-guard is made of steel, decorated by engraving, with traces of gilding. The quillons are hexagonal in section near the proximal end and rhomboidal in section near the distal end. The finials are in the shape of flower buds. The center of the guard is thickened, with pyramidal ends, which connect the sheath *langet* (tongue) to the grip one. The latter is mounted on a full-width and full-length tang (that includes the pommel), with horn plates fixed with

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two rivets and a metal band that connects the edges of the plates and masks the edge of the tang. The grip has the asymmetrical pommel specific to sabers, making a common body with the handle-plates. The grip is flared towards the pommel, in a transverse plane, and the latter is prominent and rounded.

The scabbard is made of wood covered with steel sheet and is decorated with engraved plant motifs, which retain visible traces of gilding. The mouth of the scabbard is decorated with wire applications, which form the locket. The inner edge of the mouth is split to allow the sharply curved blade to be inserted. The scabbard has no prominent chape, but only an engraved and gilded decoration that emphasizes its tip. The two belt fastening rings are attached to two thickened mounts, with pyramidal tips, similar in shape and decoration to the mound in the center of the guard.

Along with the scabbard, the piece also retains the sword-belt, together with the suspension cords. The entire harness is made of double metal braid (silver) for the belt and single braid for the suspenders, with joints made of flat band clips. The belt and suspenders are decorated with cast silver medallions. The belt buckle is crafted as two medallions depicting heads crowned with laurel wreaths, which mask the hook and ring that close the belt. The hooks that attach the suspenders to the retaining rings of the scabbard are masked by medallions depicting the imperial (two-headed and crowned) eagle of Russia, which wears on its chest the shield with St. George killing the dragon.

The piece shows some interesting features: the most obvious is the way the medallions are placed on the harness, which indicates the carrying of the sword on the right, for a left-handed wearer. Also, the decorations on the blade are inferior in design to those of the hilt and scabbard, which are unitary in style, making a set. Most likely, the entire hilt was gilded, as suggested by the presence of gilding marks on the inner faces of the langets. The inscription on the left side of the blade, inscribed in a cartridge, is retrograde (mirrored). The text is a **very clumsy** reproduction of the talismanic invocation: "There is no [other] sword like Zulfiqar and there is no [other] hero like Ali" (lā sayfa 'illā dū l-faqāri wa-lā fatā 'illā 'alīyun / لا فتى إلا علي لا سيف إلا ذو الفقار).¹ The inscription is canonically structured in two lines, separated by a floral ornament, but the place of the two invocations is reversed, reading (supposedly): "There is no [other] hero like Ali and there is no [other] sword like Zulfiqar", a practice quite common at the time (17th -18th century). The same retrograde writing is found in the calligram, which roughly reproduces the monogram (*tuğrâ*) of Sultan Selim III (1789-1807). Starting with the end of the 18th century, the sultan's monogram began to be used with a purely decorative role, without signifying the sovereign's authority, or at least his name, on various objects, including ceramic and metal tableware, as well as textiles.²

The blade is made of steel, without special characteristic features, and is not sharp. The wavy shape is achieved by grinding/filing, and not by forging. The "cutting edge" show some superficial cracks.

The saber is attributed to Prince Alexander Ipsilanti, and there are several arguments arguing for the veracity of this attribution. It is known that he came to Iasi in February 1821, dressed in the uniform of a Russian general. Ipsilanti had previously been an officer in the Russian army and an aide to Tsar Alexander I. The saber is not an ordnance weapon used by senior officers in the Russian army, but such exceptions are known. The medallions with two-headed eagles, which bear the Imperial coat of arms of Russia: the shield with St. George killing the dragon, are an argument for linking the set (and possibly not also the blade) with a personage connected to the Russian Imperial Court. Another argument that the sword belonged to this dignitary is that the mount is "on the right" for left-handers, and not "on the left" for right-handers. It is known that Alexander Ipsilanti lost his right hand in the battle of Dresden (1813), while fighting in the ranks of the Russian Army, his famous portraits depicting him with his right arm covered by a cloak. This attribution could also be supported by the relative dating of the piece, by analogy with oriental weapons with similar characteristics, as early as the end of the 18th century and as late as the beginning of the 20th century.

¹ Zulfaqar (Arabic: ذُو الْفَقَّارِ, romanized: Dū-l-Faqār), also written Zu al-Faqar, Zulfiqar, Dhu al-Faqar, Dhulfaqar or Dhulfiqar, is the sword of the Prophet Muhammad, which he gave to his son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib, the founding figure of Shiite Islam. Some traditions attribute this gift even to the archangel Gabriel. Historically, it has often been described as a two-pointed sword (like a pair of scissors), appearing frequently on Muslim flags, as well as in the form of jewelry that functions as talismans. Oriental weapons are frequently decorated with this invocation including Ali and his magic sword. The invocation is attributed apocryphally to the Prophet Muhammad, who thus exclaimed in astonishment at Ali's bravery and strength during the battle of Uhud (HEGER 2008: 285-286).

² FAROQHI 2009: 125.

The *shamshir* is included in the large family of Middle-Eastern and Central and Southern Asian saber family, along with the *kilidj*³, the *saij*⁴ and the *tulwar*.⁵ Although of Persian origin, in the Balkans and the Romanian Lands in the 17th-18th centuries and the first half of the 19th it is just as common as the Ottoman *kilidj*. Although the difference in shape of the grip and pommel is quite insignificant between the two species, it is the shape of the blade that makes the difference. The *shamshir* blade has a more pronounced curvature and its width tapers progressively from the guard to the sharp tip, while the *kilidj* blade has a lesser curvature and relatively constant width on the two proximal thirds, widening on the last third, which it is often equipped with a back-edge (*yelman*).⁶ Most known *kilidj* specimens have robust and practical blades, with a triangular section and a reinforced back edge, with two or more longitudinal fullers. These features seldom occur in *shamshir* blades, indicating a preference for this species in the creation of parade or presentation weapons.

Wavy, flame-shaped blades are not uncommon, there are examples from all eras and all Euro-Asian cultural spaces. The foremost example is that of the Javanese *kris*, which is a dagger with a wavy blade, with two edges and an asymmetrical handle. The specific shape of the blade is obtained by forging, and the blade then is richly decorated, this dagger being equally a weapon, ritual object, and item of prestige.⁷ There are examples of wavy blades in the cultural area of *shamshir* (Persia, Afghanistan, India), as there are known specimens of *tulwar* and *pulwar* with wavy blades. In Europe, the foremost example is the so-called *Flammenschwert*, a two-handed sword (*zweihänder*) with a wavy blade, used by German and Swiss mercenaries in the first half of the 16th century. The special shape of the blade, in this case, is an exclusive adaptation of the two-handed sword, for the specialized purpose for which it came to be used in the first half of the sixteenth century: the breaking of infantry formations armed with pikes.⁸

With the exception of the specialized evolution of *Flammenschwert*, there is no clear evidence that a wavy blade showed practical advantages for a fighter in certain situations, compared to an ordinary blade, whether straight or curved. The preference, at a specific time and context, for a weapon with a wavy or flame-shaped blade, must therefore be explained by reasons of cultural nature. The most famous such weapon, universally known in the Christian world, is the sword of fire that guards the Gate of Paradise after the expulsion of Adam and Eve: "So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a **flaming sword which turned every way**, to keep the way of the tree of life." (Gen 3:24). From a somewhat different direction, but with the same cultural end, comes the motif of the aura of flames, which characterizes the hagiographic iconography of Iranian Islam.⁹ This halo is the manifestation of divine grace in a person in the form of light, which, in medieval Persian miniature and its derivatives, is represented as flames. The divine fire has a long history in Persia, the Zoroastrian elements surviving in perennial, pre-Islamic cultural substrata, long after the consolidation of Shiite Islam in Persia. Fire, in the form of the wavy blade of the sword, gives supernatural powers, of divine origin, to this weapon, and to the bearer of the sword blessed strength and bravery in the battle with the enemies of the faith.

Wavy blade *shamshirs* are also known in another context, related to the Hellenic War of Independence and the Hetaireia. Thus, the sword of the hero Niketaras (Nikitas Stamatelopoulos) nicknamed the Turkophage is preserved and exhibited in the National Museum of History in Athens. This is a *shamshir* with a wavy blade, made in a manner similar to the Ipsilanti saber of Iași, but without decorations. The mounting set of the sword is, instead, decorated differently, the main theme being snake scales engraved on the silver sheet that cover the entire scabbard, as well as the entire hilt. The guard is cruciform, with the quillons finished in flower buds, with its entire surface, including the quillins and the langets, covered with decoration of engraved snake scales. The hagiography of the War of Independence preserves some very interesting details about Niketaras and his swords: during the battle of Doliana (1821), where he earned the nickname *The eater of Turks* (Τουρκοφάγος), he fought so hard that his fist remained locked clenching the hilt of the sword, and had to be unwound by a doctor after the battle; during the battle of Dervenakia (1822) it is said that he broke three swords in the heat of battle, and during the third siege of Missolonghi (1825-26), hailed by the besieged compatriots, whom he brought deliverance, with cries about the payroll money, he threw his sword (which he had captured from a Turk) in front

³ *Knives*: 181, 262.

⁴ *Knives*: 268.

⁵ *Knives*: 291.

⁶ *Knives*: 270.

⁷ *Knives*: 211.

⁸ MILLER, EMBLETON 1996: 11.

⁹ RAMEZANMAHI, BOLKHARI GHEHI 2012: 19.

of them saying: "I only have my sword, and this I gladly give to my country!" Is the latter sword the wavy-blade shamshir on display at the Hellenic National Museum of History? This clue could be useful in the anamnesis of the piece in the Museum of Iași.

It is clear, at this stage of the investigation, that the blade, the mounting set and the harness are three separate items, and if the Ipsilanti hypothesis can be upheld, then the assembly of the three items was carried out during his possession, within or after the end of the Moldavian-Wallachian phase of the War of Independence. Of the three components, the harness is the one that, through the combination of medallions (Medusa's head and Russia's imperial weapons) and mounting "on the right", seems to be the most straight link to Prince Ypsilanti, general of the Russian army and leader of Philiki Hetairia. The scabbard-crossguard-grip set is unitary, although does not possess special features. The construction of the grip, flared towards the pommel, which is prominent and rounded, dates it to the 18th-19th centuries, as the shamshirs and kilidj blades hilted in the earlier times (16th-17th century) typically use pistol-type grips, without pommel or with an "L"-shaped slender grip-end (a narrow butt placed at right angles to the grip).

The blade is the most interesting component of the piece, both in shape and decoration. The Zulfiqar-Ali invocation, even mirrored, clearly shows that the blade is the product of a workshop in the Islamic world. It should be noted that this invocation is not specific to Shiism, being present on objects from all corners of the Muslim world, from India to Morocco. However, apart from the two pieces, from Iași and Athens, the known specimens of flame-shaped blades are shamshir and tulwar ones, which indicates a Persian-Mughal origin of these blades. It is interesting to note that at least two such pieces, put up for auction in the last two decades, are blades of shamshir and tulwar with split ends, thus evoking the Zulfiqar sword. In this sense, a certain interpretation of the name is based on the connotation of *faqār* as a less used plural of *fūqrah* - hollow, alveoli, notch, which would describe a blade with repeated notches arranged regularly, i.e. a wavy blade or a saw-toothed one.¹⁰

Persia seems to be, consequently, the most probable source of these blades, which directly or indirectly evoke the magic sword of the hero Ali, acting as a talisman. These flame-shaped blades are mounted in various sets, according to the taste of the owner and the dominant martial culture of the region, the items preserved so far are found in various species, that differ both culturally and geographically: Persian *shamshir*, Indian *tulwar*, Afghan *pulwar*, Arabic *saif* or Moroccan *nimcha*. The fact that Zulfiqar is a universal value in the Islamic world allows the movement of these blades outside the Shiite regions, the talisman value compensating for the lack of martial functionality of the blade.

If one accepts that the saber belonged to Prince Ipsilanti, the only way in which the blade (and the mounting set) would arrive to be assembled with the harness is by war capture. Niketaras' sword would be an example of a similar practice. We know that Metropolitan Veniamin Costachi of Moldavia consecrated the flags of the Etherists and the sword of Prince Alexander Ipsilanti in Iasi, on February 27, 1821. As it is unlikely that the Orthodox hierarchy allowed the consecration of a weapon with Islamic inscriptions, this saber came later into the possession of the prince. The question remains, however, why a personality with the wealth and martial savoir-faire of Alexander Ipsilanti appropriated a weapon with a questionable combat quality. The answer can be given by the inclusion, at the beginning of the 19th century, in the props of the European Masonic Lodges, of swords with a flame-shaped blade. Such sword was the attribute of a particular Lodge Officer, the Tyler (*Couvreur*) who was the Gatekeeper, also known as the "Outer Guard" of the Lodge. His duty is to guard the door (from without) with his sword drawn, and to ensure that only those who are properly qualified are allowed to enter the lodge assembly. In some jurisdictions, it also prepares candidates for admission. This officer is traditionally responsible for preparing the room before the Lodge meeting and for storing and maintaining the regalia and other accoutrements after meetings.¹¹ Alexander Ipsilanti was a member of the Swedish Rite Lodge in St. Petersburg, and one of the hypotheses regarding the origins of Philiki Hetairia involves its establishment in Vienna, by Prince Ipsilanti himself.¹²

How this particular weapon actually came into the possession of Alexandru Ipsilanti and how, after his death, it reached the collection of the Museum of Antiquities in Iasi and then the Institute of History and Archeology of the

¹⁰ HEGER 2008: 288.

¹¹ "In modern times the implement used by the Tiler is a sword of the ordinary form. This is incorrect. Formerly, and indeed up to a comparatively recent period, the Tiler's sword was wavy in shape, and so made in allusion to the "flaming sword which was placed at the east of the garden of Eden, which turned every way to keep the way of the tree of life." It was, of course, without a scabbard, because the Tiler's sword should ever be drawn and ready for the defense of his post." (MACKEY 1916: 751).

¹² TATOMIR 2015: 53.

Romanian Academy - Iasi Branch, remains a topic for future research, as the present note only brings forward a series of aspects regarding the archeology and museography of this particularly interesting item, which concentrates in itself the history of the whole event of 1821, with all its grandeur, tragedy, heroism and cosmopolitanism.

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a



b

Pl. I. The Ipsilanti saber in the History Museum of Moldavia in Iasi. a. General views of the weapon and its scabbard and harness; b. The hilt, the guard and the blade decoration. (photos by Mihai Neagu).



a



b



c

Pl. II. The Ipsilanti saber in the History Museum of Moldavia in Iasi. Details: a. the cartridge with the invocation in Arabic characters; b. Solomon's seal and calligram; c. the crossguard. (photos by Mihai Neagu).



Pl. III. The Ipsilanti saber in the History Museum of Moldavia in Iasi. Details of the grip and pommel.
(photos by Mihai Neagu).



a



b



c

Pl. IV. The Ipsilanti saber in the History Museum of Moldavia in Iasi. Details: a. One of the medallions showing the Imperial Russian Eagle; b. One of the medallions showing a head crowned with laurels; c. The scabbard mouth and the locket. (photos by Mihai Neagu).



a



b

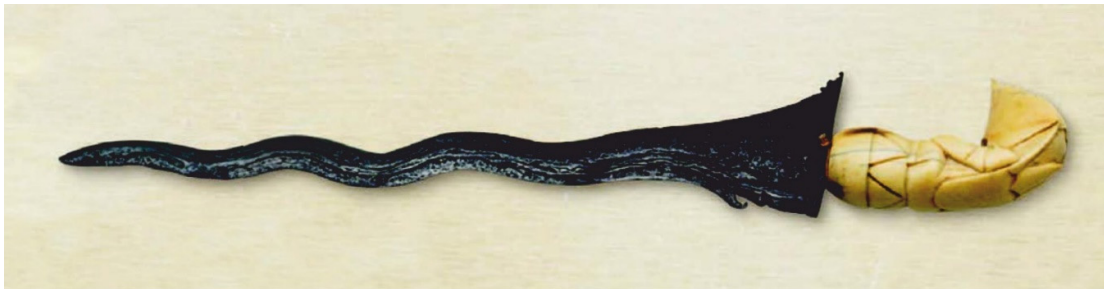
Pl. V. a. Istanbul Arms Bazaar, a 17th century Ottoman miniature (NICOLLE, HOOK 1995: 57); b. Tulwar (India) and shamshir (Persia), 18th century (*Weapon*: 186).



a



b



c

Pl. VI. a. Shamshir and kilidj, Ottoman Empire, early 19th century (*Weapon*: 187); b. Flame-bladed shamshir, Zulfiqar type, Persia, mid 19th century (<https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/19184/lot/9073/> retrieved 1/06/2021); c. Malaysian Kris, 18th Century (*Knives*: 186-187).



a



b

Pl. VI. a. *Doppelsoldner* with *flammeschwert* (MILLER, EMBLETON 1996: 11); b. The saber of Niketaras, in the National Museum of History in Athens (photo by Sorin Iftimi).



a



b

Pl. VII. a. The Archangel and the Sword of Fire, in the *Expulsion from Heaven*, fresco by Eugene Delacroix, at the Palais Bourbon, Paris (source: The Yorck Project (2002) 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei; in public domain: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palais_Bourbon,_Malerei_in_der_Kuppel_der_Theologie,_Szene-_Adam_und_Eva_\(Eug%C3%A8ne_Delacroix\).jpg#file](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palais_Bourbon,_Malerei_in_der_Kuppel_der_Theologie,_Szene-_Adam_und_Eva_(Eug%C3%A8ne_Delacroix).jpg#file)); b. The Masonic Tyler's sword (MACKEY 1916: 751).



Pl. VIII. The flame auras of the Muslim saints, in the scene “The Visit of the Prophet of Islam and the Prophet Adam” in the manuscript *MirajNameh of Mirheydar* (RAMEZANMAHI, BOLKHARI GHEHI 2012: 21).