A 18TH CENTURY POLISH(?) SABER DISCOVERED IN IAȘI

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Abstract:
A random find, with an uncertain finding place in the city of Iași, proved to be a 18th century saber. The analysis revealed possible analogies with similar weapons employed by the hussars in the armies of the Habsburg Empire during the reign of empress Maria-Theresia. Such sabers were also used Grenzer, frontier regiments formed by recruiting from ethnicities located at the periphery of the Empire, as well as borderers and other irregulars. The hypothesis regarding the presence of such item in Moldavia is that it arrived probably a s spoils of war traded off in the aftermath of the Austrian defeat in Wallachia in the 1735-1739 war.
Keywords: *saber; hussar; Grenzer; Maria-Theresia; 1735-1739 Turkish War; Iași; "munition" weapon.*

During the 2018 salvage excavation carried out by a team of archaeologists from the Institute of Archaeology in Iași in the old quarter of Tătărași, in the city of Iași, one of the workers brought us an old, rusted saber, found, as he declared, "tiling the back-garden" at his house, at the outskirts of the town (Pl. 1), close to the "Eternitate" cemetery, not very far from the excavation site (Pl. 2). The vagueness of the finding information, as well as the reluctance to provide any further details, was most probably due to his desire to avoid any archaeological or heritage investigation on his plot of land. The initial assessment was that the find is a late 17th – early 18th century Polish cavalry saber. The subsequent analysis, however, modified this initial evaluation.

The piece is an 18th century saber, preserved almost whole (Pl. 3). Almost a quarter of the blade is missing, from the tip of the saber. The overall preserved length of the weapon is 84 cm. The preserved length of the blade is 73.5 cm. The metal is rusted and pitted, although the integrity of what remains is quite sound. The weapon preserves its cross-guard and knuckle-guard. The organic components of the hilt have perished. The pommel consists of a small iron washer that would have attached the knuckle-guard to the hilt, peened to the end of the tang. There are some traces of wood from the scabbard mouth, heavily mineralized, attached to the upper face of the cross-guard and to the blade.

The blade is curved, with a sagittal depth of 4.2 cm, 3.8 cm wide (at the cross-guard) and 3 cm wide near the distal end. The blade is provided with a shallow, 2.3 cm wide, fuller that covers the entire preserved length of the blade. A very slight widening at the distal end (near the tip) might indicate the presence of a back-edge (Pl. 4). The spine of the blade is square, 0.82 cm thick near the

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cross-guard and 0.3 cm at the distal end. This makes for a slender blade and, therefore, for a light and agile weapon.

The hilt consists of a cross-guard, a knuckle-guard, the tang and a diminutive pommel. The cross-guard continues with the knuckle-guard and is made of iron (Pl. 5). The cross-guard is rectangular in cross-section and diamond-shaped, with a slight flare and a small knob at the free end (opposite the knuckle-guard) (Pl. 6). The cross-guard is 11.5 cm long and 3 cm wide at its center. The widened center of the cross-guard is provided with two langets on each side. The blade-wards arms are shorter (3.2 cm) and pointed, while the hilt-wards one are longer (4 cm) and rounded at the ends. The langets are triangular in cross-section, showing a strong axial ridge. Between the langets and the blade there are traces of mineralized wood and other organic matter still preserved, most probably remains of the scabbard (Pl. 7). The tang is 12 cm long, 1.6 cm wide at the cross-guard, slightly curved and tapered to a point, and rectangular in cross-section (0.86 cm thick). At the tip there is an oval iron washer, peened to the tang, that secured the end of the knuckle-guard (Pl. 8) by means of its turned-under edge. The knuckle-guard is drawn from the end of the cross-guard, with which form a square-angled connection. Is quite thin overall, with a semblance of outward ridge for around 3.5 cm near the cross-guard. It widens towards the pommel, from 0.4 cm at the end of the outward ridge to 2.7 cm near the pommel (Pl. 9). The end is somewhat spatulated and rounded, with a small hook-like appendage turned outwards, which would have secured the end of the knuckle-guard against the pommel, by going under the washer (Pl. 10).

The saber is generally a cavalry weapon, with known samples dated as early as 5th century (Hunnish)[1] and 7th century (Avar)[2]. The more or less curved blade and the angled hilt are common features of the weapons employed by the light cavalry of Magyar and Turkic tribes from the 8th - 9th century onwards[3], who imported this type of warfare and its associated sabers in Europe[4]. The curved saber, in its many forms, becomes a defining element of the cavalry armies of the Medieval Islam[5], reaching its most efficient form and function as the Persian and Ottoman *shamshir* and *kilidj* in the 16th and 17th century and their close cousins, the Polish and Hungarian hussar sabers and the Russian and Caucasian *shaska.* The knuckle-guard, however, is a structural and functional feature pertaining exclusively to the European-type cavalry equipment of the proto-industrial and industrial age (i.e. mid-17th century onwards), mainly the age of regular armies, state arsenals and nation-states (i.e. nineteenth century). However, the overall appearance of the weapon and the complete absence of brass fittings exclude a date later than the Napoleonic Wars (the first decades of the 19th century) with a chronological caveat towards the upward extension of this limit in the mid-19th century due to technological and cultural specifics of Eastern Europe.

The shape and structure of the hilt is the most useful indicator in analyzing the origin and date of this find, as the blade is thoroughly utilitarian in shape and devoid of any particular features, such as inscriptions or punch-marks. First of all, the presence of the knuckle-guard indicates a date closer to the 18th century than an earlier one. Sabers with such hilts are present in illustration of the Balkan warfare, used by Croat and Hungarian auxiliaries in the employ of Venice, as early as 1680.

[1] KENNEDY 2002: 29.

[2] CSIKY 2015: 15.

[3] ZHIROHOV, NICOLLE, HOOK 2019: 16.

[4] HOŠEK, KOŠTA, ŽÁKOVSKÝ 2019: 25.

[5] DEVRIES, SMITH 2007: 140.

The angled tang is more common to the Hungarian sabers that to the Polish ones, although both cultures proudly regard the saber as their national weapon. The Polish and Hungarian 16th and 17th century saber, though, have straight cross-guards, with long, thin arms, and their hilts are secured to the tang by means of a metal pin or rivet. The shape of the cross-guard and lack of the hilt pin would suggest a later date, i.e. after 1700. As the straight cross with long arms and the hilt pin survive longer with the more individualistic and conservative Polish hussars, the specifics of our saber would indicate a Hungarian extraction. One should also take into account that such saber hilts are a feature of the so-called "regimental" cavalry and, therefore, are more likely to be fitted to arsenal, or "munition" weapons. This points out to an origin and date in the Austrian Empire, around or immediately after the 1743 army reform of Maria-Theresa. However, the lack of the metal backing plate of the hilt, which is a feature universally present in the modern (i.e. late 18th and 19th century) "munition" sabers and swords, corroborated with the plain iron guard and fittings, indicate rather a date in the first half of the 18th century. In the Imperial army around 1740, the Hungarian and Austrian hussars[6], as well as the irregular cavalry of the frontier[7] were the only one using curved sabers. The German cavalry of Maria Theresa army, both Cuirassiers[8] and Light Horse[9] were equipped with *pallasches*, one-edged broadswords / straight sabers, with half-basket hilts. The contemporary illustrations, like the paintings David Morier (1705-1770) included in his series 'Pictures of Military Costume' commissioned by William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland, show privates of the royal (Hungarian) hussar regiments brandishing their sabers (Pl. 11; Pl. 12). The actual 18th century hussar sabers that are still extant are mainly officer weapons[10]. However, the hilt configuration and blade shape and cross-section are similar enough between the "munition" weapons of the privates/NCOs and the personal weapons of the officers to extrapolate and make analogies between our find and the extant pieces preserved today in museums in Austria, Hungary and Czechia.

The *Grenztruppen* established by the Empress included all ethnicities apart from the privileged Germans and Hungarians and the established regiments raised the former quasi-bandit irregulars of the Turkish frontier to the status of imperial soldiers. Unlike the regular army, in the Border troops both infantry and cavalry were equipped with sabers, as illustrated by the *Reglemeten*[11]. The sabers of Hungarian Pandurs are fitted in a manner very similar to our saber, while the contemporary engravings of the Croat, Serb and Wallachian *Grenzer* uniforms following the 1754 reform, preserved in the *Albertina Manuscript*[12], are not detailed enough to establish some analogies. However, the contemporary illustrations are consistently depicting *Grenzer* cavalry and infantry armed with hussar-type sabers, in spite of a hodge-podge of uniforms and ethnic clothing. Taking into account the artistic licenses, the various degrees of mastery and the prevalent cultural imagery of the time, one cannot though dismiss the analogy between the *Grenzer* equipment of 1740-1760 and our find. Due to its lack of ornament and plain fittings, the conclusion is that this saber was a troop weapon, a "munition" piece issued to a private.

[6] HAYTHORNTHWAITE, YOUNGHUSBAND 1994: 22.
[7] HOLLINS, PAVLOVIC 2005: 5.
[8] HAYTHORNTHWAITE, YOUNGHUSBAND 1994: 15.
[9] HAYTHORNTHWAITE, YOUNGHUSBAND 1994: 20.
[10] ŠACH, MOUDRÝ 1997: 18, 25.
[11] DUFFY 1977: 85.
[12] DUFFY 1977: 87.

Having established a probable chronology and origin, the question that remains is how such piece of military equipment ended at the outskirts of a town in Moldavia.

The city of Iași endured, in the middle decades of 18th century, several violent episodes involving Imperial armies, and one of the most famous is the 1717 raid of Walloon captain François (Ferentz) Ernaut and his 100 "Austrian" troops. This episode is, however, too early to be of any significance to our find. However, in 14 September 1739, the Russian army led by Field Marshall Munich occupied the town and stayed until October. The episode occurred during the Russian-Ottoman war of 1735-1739 and the Austrian Empire entered the war as a Russian ally in 1737. The main theatre of Austrian Army was, however, Serbia and western Wallachia. The war ended with the Treaty of Belgrade / Treaty of Niš. Although one cannot positively exclude the presence in Moldavia of some Imperial soldiers attached to Munich's army, to link our find to some Imperial private who came with the Russians in Iasi is a far-fetched supposition. The more pertinent hypothesis is that the saber was brought as a form of spoil of war, changing hands repeatedly, after the defeat of the Austrian Army in Wallachia or Serbia. One would suppose that, as a "Christian" weapon, was ill-flavored with a Muslim and traded as soon as was profitably possible.

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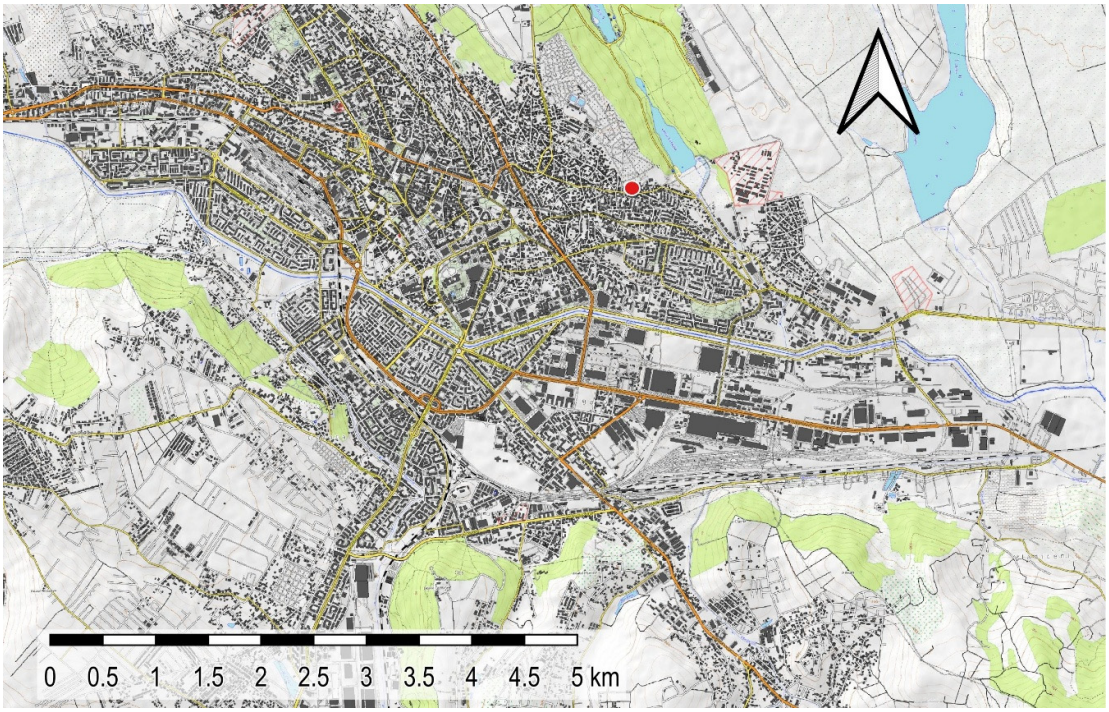
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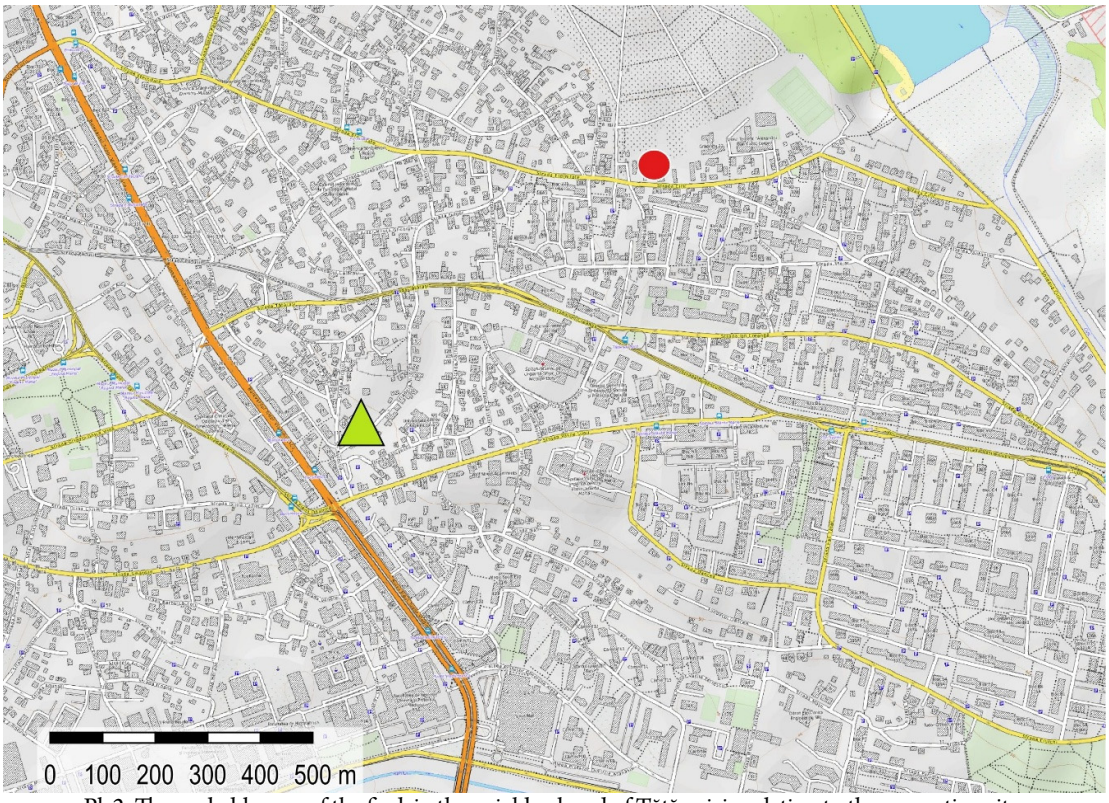
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Pl. 1. The probable area of the find, in the city of Iași.



Pl. 2. The probable area of the find, in the neighborhood of Tătărași, in relation to the excavation site.



Pl. 3. The saber found in Tataraşi.



Pl. 4. The preserved distal end of the blade, showing a very slight widening.



Pl. 5. The hilt with the cross-guard and knuckle-guard.



Pl. 6. Close view of the cross-guard, showing the diamond shape and the knob terminating the free end.



Pl. 7. The langets, showing the remains of mineralized wood and other organic materials.



Pl. 8. The tang and its end, with the peened washer.



Pl. 9. The shape of the knuckle-guard.



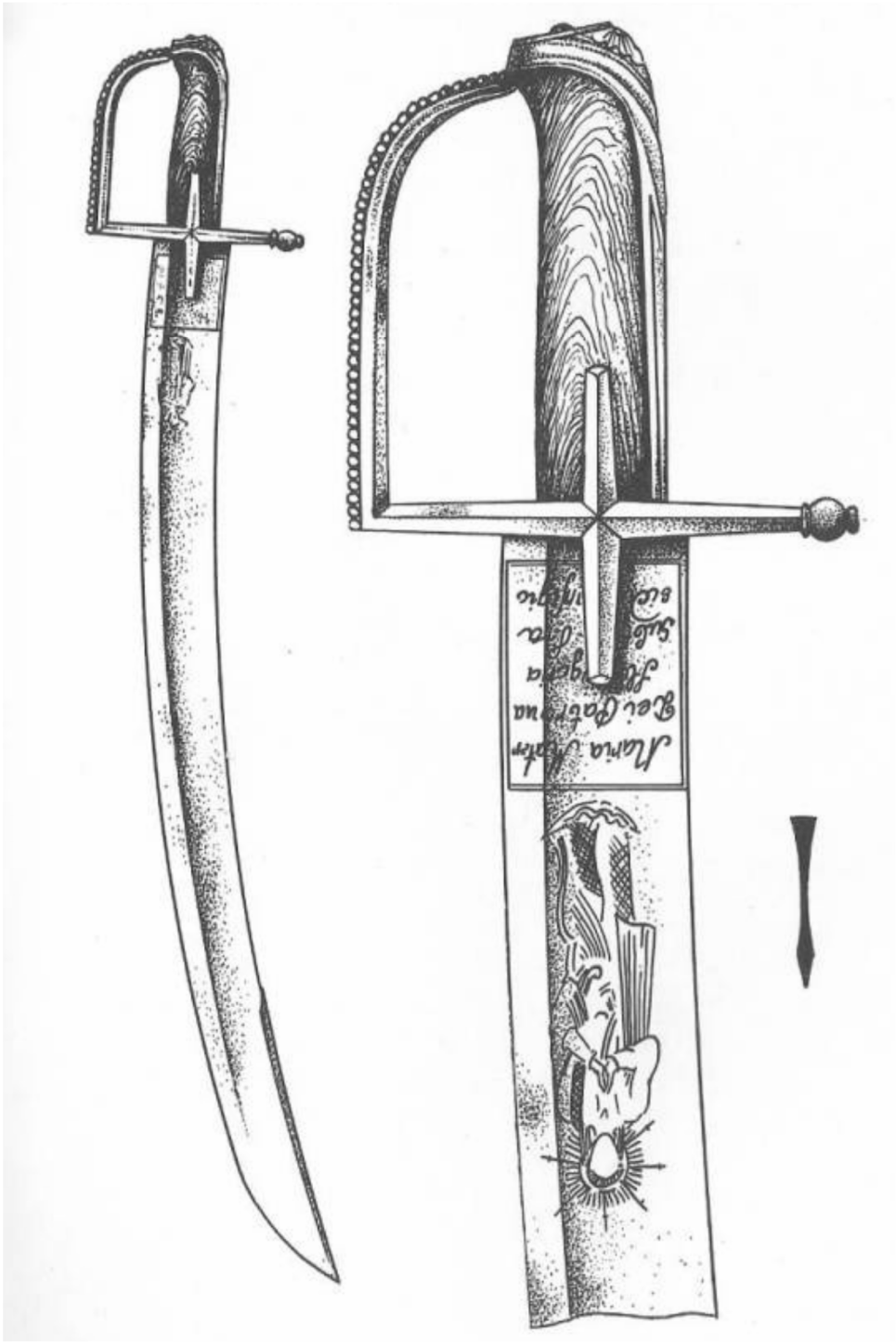
Pl. 10. The hook at the end of the knuckle-guard and the washer of the pommel.



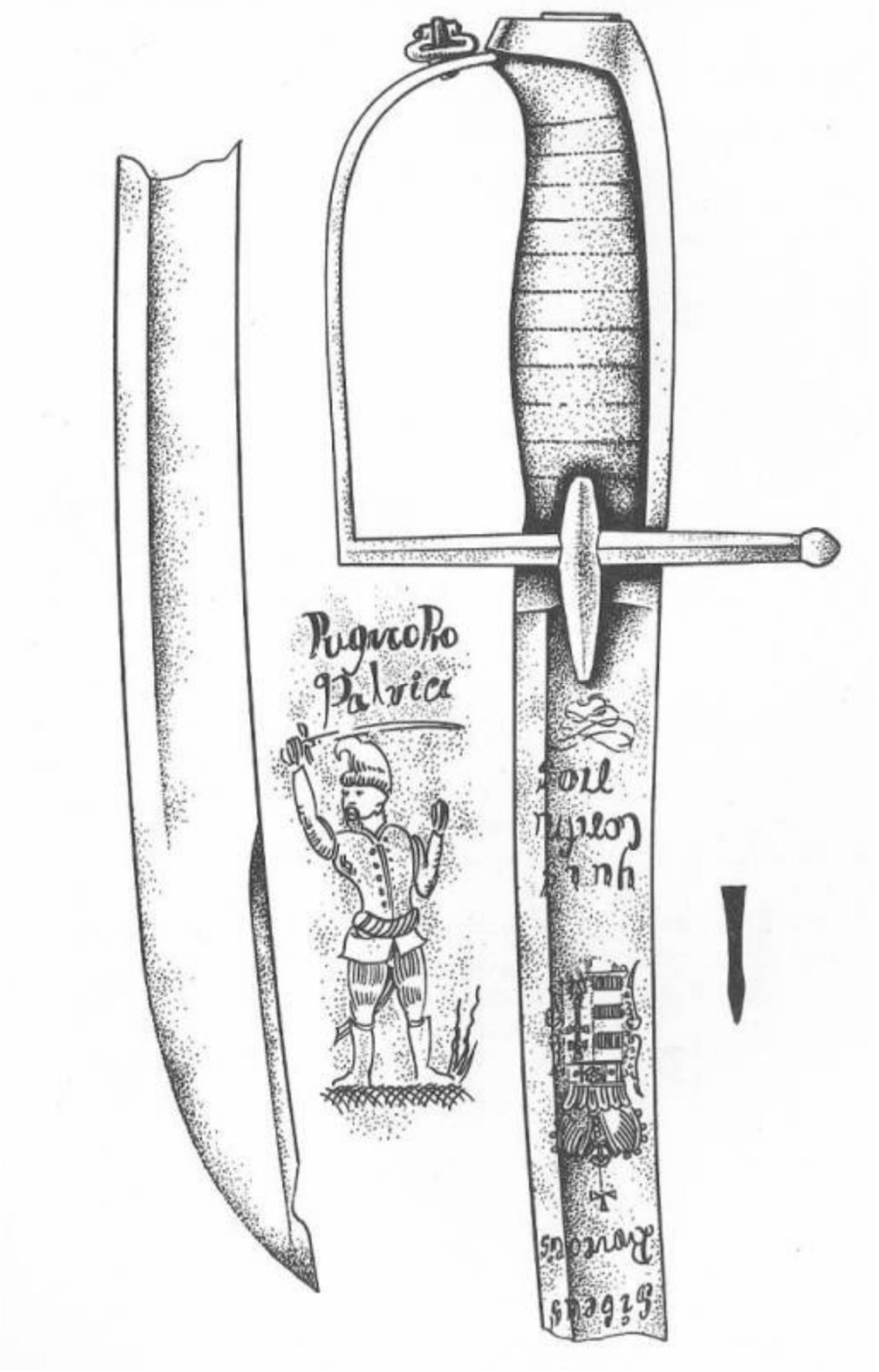
Pl. 11. "Private, Regiment of Hussars 'Karoly'", ~ 1748, by David Morier, in the Royal Collection (https://www.rct.uk/collection/406840/private-regiment-of-hussars-karoly).



Pl. 12. "Private, Regiment of Hussars 'Kalnoky'", c. 1748, by David Morier
(https://www.rct.uk/collection/406850/private-regiment-of-hussars-kalnoky)
(see also HOLLINS, PAVLOVIC 2003: 27).



Pl. 13. Presentation saber of a hussars officer of a Hungarian regiment, c.1750. Brass hilt (ŠACH, MOUDRÝ 1997: 19).



Pl. 14. The saber of a Hungarian Pandur officer, 1747. Brass hilt (ŠACH, MOUDRÝ 1997: 15).