

# THE EVOLUTION OF THE BASKET HILTED SWORD FROM THE 16TH TO 18TH CENTURIES

by Jeffrey Ross

## Introducing the Sword

The sword is one of the most important weapons in human history. Its period of use transcended multiple millennia and played a significant role in shaping mankind's history along the way. It was a weapon that almost simultaneously represented honour and nobility as well as war and savagery. It is a weapon so well designed for its purpose that it ultimately changed very little throughout the thousands of years of its history. In fact, from the very early iron age, hundreds of years prior to the birth of Christ we see sword forms that are considered pre-cursors to the well-known cruciform swords of the Middle Ages ca. 1100 – 1500 AD (Figures 1 & 2).<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1. Celtic Bronze Age Swords; La Tene, 450 BC.

Sword blades evolved and adjusted to battlefield and martial tactics for centuries. They could be varied in many ways. Variable lengths, tapers, edges, curvatures and cross sections were employed to effectively execute whatever tasks they were designed to achieve. Some blades were for cutting, some for thrusting, but most were for varying degrees of both actions combined. There were blades designed to pierce armour, for fighting on foot, horseback and on the decks of ships. There were even blades designed strictly for the civilian duel or to be part of civic ceremony and procession. The best blades were forged and tempered to be both rigid as well as pliant, bend, but not break and hold a cutting edge that remained lethal despite repeated use. The blade smiths throughout the sword's long martial history were very good at achieving these goals. The craft was revered and could be passed down through multiple generations in one family or firm. Blades were very commonly signed, regardless of their countries of origin and were

not merely functional tools, but often wondrous works of art and a testament to a highly skilled trade and art form.



Figure 2. Medieval Cruciform Swords; 14th and 15th Centuries



Figure 3. Three 16th century long swords. In these swords the link to the earlier cruciform sword is obvious as well as the growing complexity of the hilt.

## The Evolving Hilts of the 15th to 17th Centuries

A great blade was critical to achieving a great sword, but so was a well-balanced and functional hilt. Throughout the Middle Ages, for five hundred years or more, sword hilts remained simple, generally comprised of a cross guard and pommel (Figure 2). It was not until the second half of the 15th century that we start to see the



Figure 4. On the top is a sword of war and wears a large broadsword blade designed for cutting as well as thrusting. On the bottom is a civilian weapon, an early rapier with a blade designed primarily for thrusting. Both swords are ca. 1550 – 1580.



Figure 5. This is a fine example of a North Italian rapier, a civilian weapon that displays further evolution from figure 4, via the growing complexity of its hilt. ca. 1590.



Figure 6. This is an example of a fine Pappenheimer Rapier, a civilian weapon that has evolved to incorporate pierced plates as well as a more complex system of guard bars. Dated 1627.

beginnings of change from the medieval cruciform swords to the seemingly limitless variety of hilt styles that would really bloom in the 16th and 17th centuries (Figures 3 – 7). After centuries of austerity, the art and design of the Renaissance period had a definitive impact on the evolving designs of the swords people carried; but while the artistic flare was a factor, the greatest driving force was still the sword's functionality in battle, and the duel. It was during this period of great change a new hilt form emerged that, like its medieval predecessor, would endure for centuries helping to shape human history. The basket hilted sword was born on the battlefields of 16th century Europe and the British Isles.

#### The Basket Hilted Swords of the 16th to 18th Centuries

The basket hilted sword evolved into its fully developed form throughout the course of the 16th and 17th centuries. Although this hilt style can rise to the level of the very best hilts ever produced in any genre (Figure 8, left), it was more commonly produced to achieve a military purpose rather than define a civilian or officer's rank and status. As such, most surviving examples are largely unadorned and though professionally manufactured, are generally more functional than ornamental (Figure 8, right). It is likely for this reason, that as a subject for historical study, it has fallen short of the work focused on the rapier or the arming swords of the medieval and renaissance periods. Yet like the cruciform swords of old, its capability on the battlefield ensured a long and enduring tenure in the ongoing and often violent saga of human history.

The swords that we will be focusing on encapsulate the user's hand in both symmetrical as well as asymmetrical formations. Their baskets incorporate often complex systems of rounded and flattened bars, as well as pierced plates and shell guards that were interlinked with each other to provide maximum protection to the hand (Figures 9 and 10). The added weight of the complex guards and pommels required the skill of craftsmen that fully understood the lethal purpose for which these weapons were designed. It was critical that the guard did not become an impediment to the movement of the user's hand and wrist, it had to be light enough to wield for extended periods of time on the battlefield, and still be effective at repelling the blows of an enemy. This was no easy task and is a testament to the skill of armourers and sword slippers of the past that consistently built swords that were both fast and functional.



Figure 7. On the left is a Swiss Sabre with an early asymmetrical basket guard. ca.1560 – 1580. On the right is an English or Scottish asymmetrical basket hilt of very early form and a progenitor for most later generations of basket guards in the British Isles. ca.1550.



Figure 8. This fine Scottish sword on the left by Walter Allan of Stirling is an example of the level to which a basket hilted sword can rise. ca. 1750. On the right, the typical English sword is an example of a standard grade hilt, designed more for practicality than for show. ca. 1625.



Figure 9. This is an example of a late 16th century Schiavona, with views of both the inside as well as outside of the guard, demonstrating the asymmetry of this hilt. ca.1590.



The eminent practicality of the basket hilted sword meant that it was not only adopted in multiple battle-hardened cultures, but it was also well suited to multiple blade types and multiple martial

disciplines. For example, In the British Isles of the 17th and 18th centuries a basket guard was as often carried by a mounted dragoon, as it was by an infantryman charging into battle.



Figure 10. This is an example of a late 16th century Scottish sword, that is symmetrical on both sides of the guard and utilizes pierced plates interlinked with rounded bar construction: ca. 1590.

The evolution of the basket hilt seems to have taken place contemporaneously in multiple distinct regions in Europe and the British Isles. Despite their geographic isolation they were linked by common purpose and similar geo-political settings. The basket hilted sword was developed and rose to prominence in the cauldrons of war. It went on to become a defining weapon in human martial conflict and history.

### Three Distinct Sword Groups Linked by a Common Purpose

The following paper will focus on three key areas of basket development. The first will be the Germanic hilts from the second half of the 16th century, commonly known as the Dussage or Tessak, names that will be used interchangeably throughout this document. The enormous variety of hilt forms that fall into this grouping have led some historians to refer to them as experimental in nature.<sup>2</sup> The second will be the Slavonic hilts of Venice, known as the Schiavona. This hilt form evolved under the same turbulent circumstances as their Germanic cousins, but were ultimately elevated to a level of art representative of the late Italian Renaissance. The third group we will examine will be the hilts of the British Isles. The basket hilts of the British Isles, although often considered as evolving from their European counterparts, are quite distinct and may have appeared at earlier dates than their European cousins. Our ultimate focus will be on the hilts of Scotland, which like the Schiavona of Venice achieved superior levels of design quality and reached a pinnacle of manufacture in the late 17th and early 18th centuries.

### The Basket Hilts of Southern Germany and Styria

We start our journey in Southern Germany and Styria. Styria originated as a borderland and along with several other such lands formed a protective belt that from the 10th century onward protected the Germanic peoples and their culture against attacks from the East. While Styria to the north is protected by the Alps, the rest of the land is comprised of Alpine foothills that drop off toward the east and offers no natural protection. For a thousand years the

favourable living conditions of the eastern approach to Styria, the 'Pannonian Plain', attracted the aggressive horse cultures from the steppes of Eurasia.<sup>3</sup>

In 1180, Styria became a Duchy and in 1282 it belonged to the Habsburgs. The Habsburgs ancestral region lay in Northern Switzerland on the upper Rhine. In the second half of the 13th century under the Dynasty's first German King, Rudolph the 1st (1273 – 1291) they shifted their residence to Vienna, the chief city of the Eastern Empire. The Duchies of Austria, Styria, Carinthia and Carniola (Slovenia) became the consolidated base from which they built their future position as the most powerful dynasty in Europe. It is precisely these Crown Lands that would need to be defended against the Ottoman Turks, who began a push northward into the Balkans in the 14th century.<sup>4</sup> The most powerful Ottoman ruler Suleyman the Magnificent (reigned 1520 – 1566) led his armies on numerous campaigns into Habsburg lands in the first half of the 16th century. He captured Belgrade in 1521, Mohacs in 1526 and tried to conquer Vienna in 1529 and 1532.<sup>5</sup> Suleyman was unable to capture Vienna, but he did incorporate most of Hungary into his Empire and made Transylvania his vassal state. The Ottomans ruled these lands near Styria for more than 150 years and for Inner Austria the enemy was now their neighbour.<sup>6</sup>

### The Evolution of the Dussage or Tessak

It is in this turbulent region that we can study one phase of the basket hilt's evolution, with the Styrian and South German swords that emerged in the second half of the 16th century and were coined by Ewart Oakeshott simply as the "Experimental Basket Hilts".<sup>7</sup> There are multiple contemporary names that describe these weapons, but perhaps the most common are the Dussage and the Tessak. In response to the Ottoman's aggression in the 16th century the Landeszeughaus or Styrian Armoury in Graz was founded and is recorded to have purchased 700 'Dussagen' blades from local blades smiths as well as 40 'Dussaws' from Passau. In 1594, there is mention of 1,370 swords, likely Dussagen, in the Graz armoury. The swords from Passau are identified by the typical inlaid running wolf (Figure 11). While the swords produced by the local Styrian smiths showed no evidence of the same mark.<sup>8</sup> This gives us a strong indication that the Dussage was being developed and proliferated in the southeastern border regions of the Habsburg Empire.

While the origins of these weapons are likely Southern Germany and the borderlands of the Habsburg Empire, most surviving specimens were discovered in Norway and now reside in Norwegian Museums. Although the Norwegians refer to these swords by their more accurate name, the 'Tessak', another term commonly used by English speaking collectors is the 'Sinclair Sabre'. There are over 500 specimens preserved today in Norwegian museums and there is a very good reason for how this came to be. In 1604, King Christian IV updated Norwegian laws, and part of these laws required all farmers to own weapons in accordance with the size of their properties. Starting in the late 1580s King Christian IV had already been importing swords from Germany to supply to his Norwegian subjects and with this new law, the importation was widely expanded from 1604 onwards. The most popular weapon purchased was the Tessak.<sup>9,10</sup> In all, many thousands of Tessaks were bought and distributed to the Norwegian peasant militias from about 1589 to 1617.<sup>11</sup>

Some of these swords were of fine quality, but many in the



Norwegian museums appear to be refurbished composites that may have been surplus weapons from an earlier time. There are weapons that are clearly of Passau manufacture as well as swords that are more “provincial” in nature and may fit the description of the Dussage produced in Graz. Weapons that were surplus by the late 16th and early 17th centuries indicates that the original dates of manufacture for many of these swords were potentially many decades earlier. The Norwegian collections have been classified into eight categories or types, types A to H (Figure 12). However, within these classifications there is enormous variability and there are swords that were so distinct that type H became the catch all for undefined specimens. Examples of type D and F hilts may be seen in Figures 13 and 14, respectively.



Figure 11. A South German Dussage (Tessak of type B) with the Passau Running Wolf Inlaid in Latten on the blade (bottom). ca.1570 – 1590.

The Tessak, described by Ewart Oakeschott as “Experimental”, was in many ways just that. It was a new form of sword that emerged in Europe in the 16th century, and its wide range of styles and execution indicates the armourer’s creativity in trying to produce the most appealing as well as effective type of basket guard. The fact that they emerged in the battle-hardened regions of the South Germany and the Habsburg borderlands, and then continued their lives as practical weapons for the farmers of Norway, is a testament to the simple effectiveness and usability of this new sword form.

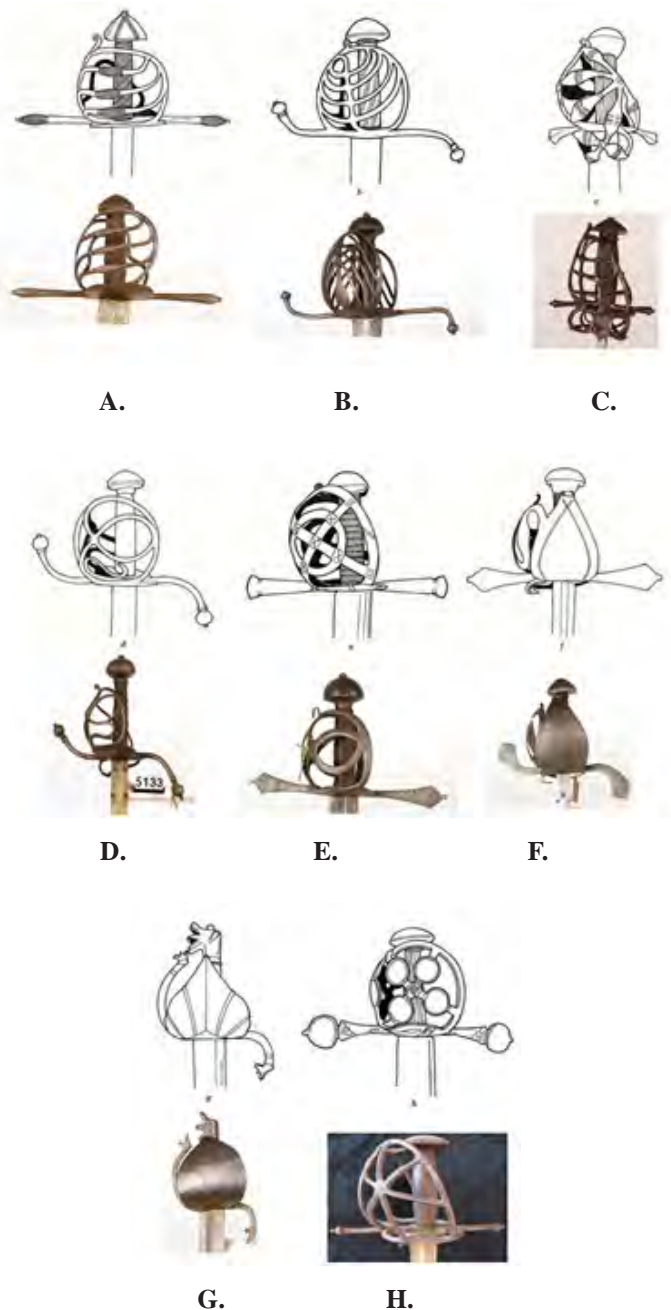
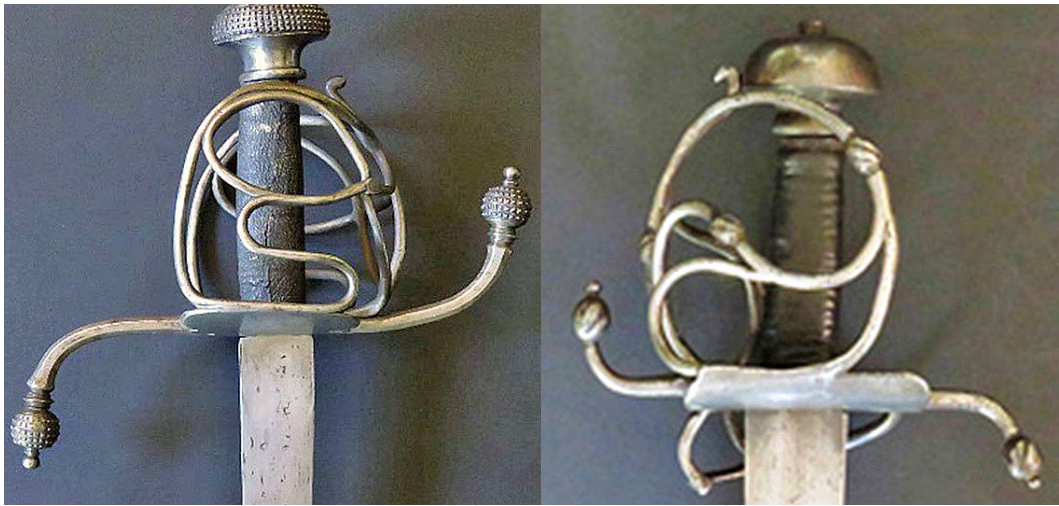


Figure 12. The eight categories of Tessak, A to H and actual examples of their types.

### The Basket Hilt for the Mercenaries of Venice

For the second group of swords to be examined we will turn to another regional powerhouse, the Republic of Venice, and their basket hilt, the Venetian Schiavona. The name Schiavona is associated with a fascinating and distinct line of swords that originated and were produced in Venice from at least the last quarter of the 16th century to the final quarter of the 18th century. They were carried by Slavonian, Dalmatian and Croatian mercenaries, often known collectively as the ‘Schiavoni’. These battle-hardened men were employed as guards to the Doges of Venice and essentially comprised the standing army for the Venetian Republic.

The warriors of Slovenia, Croatia and Dalmatia were from countries in the Balkan region that fell under the influence of the Venetians, the Habsburgs and the Ottomans. Like the Styrians in the previous section, they were battle hardened by centuries of war



Figures 13. Two Tessaks of Type D. The first is ca. 1560 – 1580 (left) and the second is ca. 1580 – 1600 (right).



Figure 14. Tessak of Type F. ca. 1600.

and occupation. International conflicts between the Ottomans and Venetians, as well as the Ottomans and the Habsburgs saw the fighting men of these countries align themselves for both money and the common religion of Catholicism, with the Venetians and the Habsburgs. Being countries that experienced conflict and occupation for centuries they were breeding grounds for soldiers that

were driven by need and practicality. It is no wonder that here like many other fringe societies the basket hilt became prevalent as their sword of choice. The majority were of working man's quality, which meant the baskets and pommels were relatively simple and unadorned, but when mounted were well balanced, functional, and almost invariably paired with a high-quality blade.

The Venetian Republic was a cultural powerhouse of Renaissance art and architecture and had a definitive influence on the development of this sword. The basket of the Schiavona developed into both a striking as well as intricate basket. It is not surprising that of all the basket guards in Europe at the time, this is one of the most beautiful and iconic to emerge.

### The Evolution of the Venetian Schiavona

A precise evolution for the Schiavona, like most other sword forms of the period is challenging, but there are plausible connections in design with some of the early South German, Spanish and Hungarian swords (Figures 15).<sup>12</sup> The Schiavona can be linked to the Hungarian medieval sword particularly via the "cats head pommel" and by the astounding number of Hungarian medieval swords that have survived in the armoury of the Palazzo Ducale in Venice (Figure 16).

Like most other 16th century sword forms, the evolution of the Schiavona can be measured by the number of bars and the growing complexity of its construction (Figure 17). However, unlike

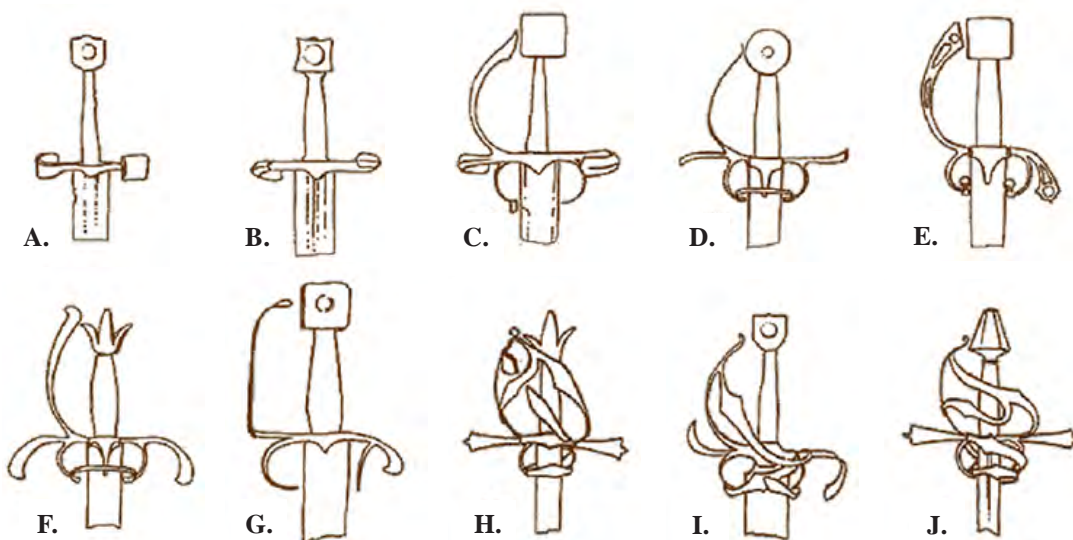


Figure 15. The first two examples, A and B are Hungarian late-medieval ca. 1450. Examples C, D, E, F & G show further development with the addition of a knuckle-bow, arms of the hilt and ring guards, late 15th, early 16th centuries. Examples H, I & J are likely South German and are early forms of the basket guard. Mid 16th century.<sup>12</sup>



the other two groups of swords discussed in this paper, there was little obvious experimentation. The Schiavona seems to achieve its enduring and beautiful form almost immediately. The earliest obvious example of a Schiavona is forged in its signature ovoid form right from the beginning and is comprised of interlinked bars in asymmetric fashion. Like all developing basket guards,



Figure 16. Photo from the Palazzo Ducale in Venice. The fans in the foreground are Hungarian Medieval Swords ca. 1450.

the armourer's initial focus was to provide the most coverage to the outside of the guard and less protection to inside of the hand (Figure 18).

The evolution of the sword continues to show limited protection to the inside of the guard but growing complexity to the outside of the basket as can be seen in Figure 19. This sword is interesting in that it bears the remnants of what is almost certainly the mark of the armoury at the Doge's Palace in Venice as well as the Coat of Arms for the Scottish Fergusson's of Glenshellish in Argyll, which is dated 1611. This sword is an example of the early interconnect- edness of two distant nations, it is also a testament to the basket guard as a favoured form in two battle-hardened regions of 16th and 17th century Europe and the British Isles.

By the mid 17th century, the distinct "ladder" pattern of the outside of the guard is obvious and continues to evolve through the late 17th and into the 18th century to include a second and eventually a third tier. The sword shown in Figure 20 is an example of the level the sword achieved as an art form. The fiercely mustachioed face of cast brass, the deeply fluted and fire gault guard is representative of a very high-quality manufacture. The basket, blade combination is an example of an early hilt that was re-bladed at a

Figure 17. The evolution of the Schiavona's elegant basket hilt from ca. 1580 (on the left) to ca. 1750 (on the right).



Figure 18. A very early Schiavona, with classic ovoid form, constructed with fewer bars than its later ancestors. ca. 1580 – 1590.





later date. The guard is typical of the mid 17th century while the spectacular blade, which pays tribute to Charles IV, Holy Roman Emperor, can date no earlier than 1711.

By the middle of the 18th century the Schiavona has reached its pinnacle of design with the fully developed three “ladder” guard (Figure 21). Unlike the “experimental” South German hilts first discussed, the Schiavona would withstand the test of time and survive for over 200 years. It developed as one of the most beautiful

and enduring basket hilt designs and only fades out with the end of the Venetian Republic in 1797.

The Venetian Schiavona, like the Germanic Dussage (Tessak) evolved in the crucible of war that was southeastern Europe. While the Tessak was replaced by other more standardized hilts, the Schiavona continued to flourish and achieved heights of design quality only matched by the basket hilts of Scotland.

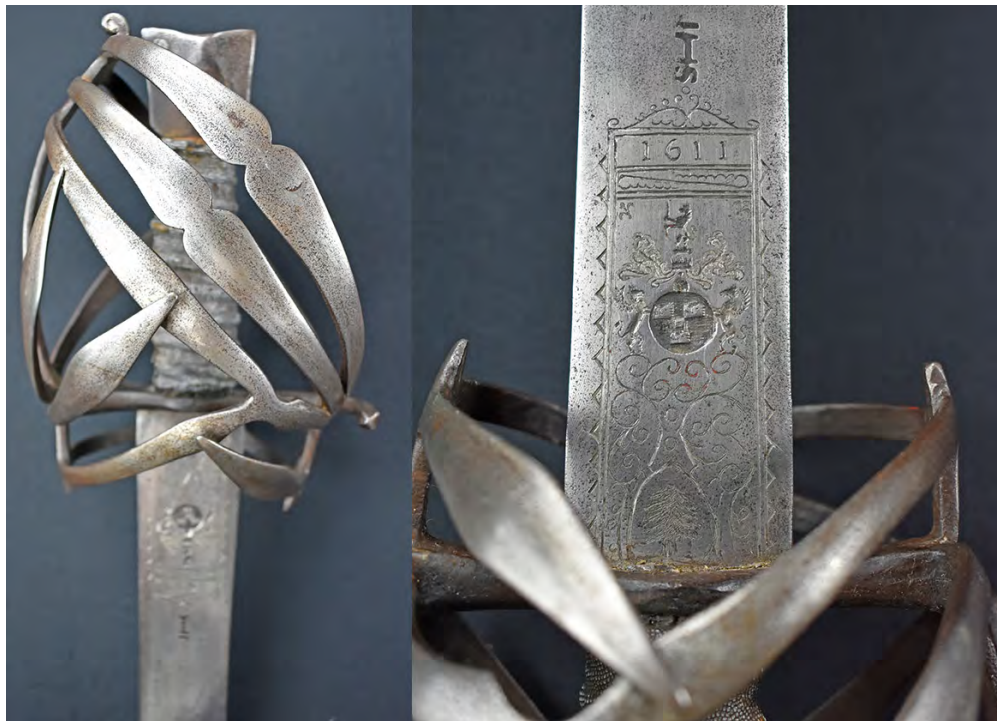


Figure 19. Another early Schiavona that has evolved from Figure 18. This is a hilt that was common in the armoury of the Doges palace and bears both the mark of the armoury as well as the later coat of arms of a Scottish Clan Chief dated 1611. The sword is ca. 1600.



Figure 20. Mid 17th century Schiavona single ladder guard. ca. 1650. Later blade ca. 1715. The blade in this beautiful sword represents Charles IV, Holy Roman Emperor, Monarch of the Habsburg Empire from 1711 – 1740. Clearly demonstrating the use and allegiance of the Schiavoni Mercenaries by the Habsburgs.



Figure 21. A mid 18th century Schiavona with triple ladder guard. ca. 1750. A fully developed, elegant and intricately wrought hilt that has been embellished with a solid gilded silver pommel, rosette, grip and ferrules. ca. 1750.



### The Basket Hilt of Scotland

The last group of swords to be discussed are forever associated with the Highlands of Scotland and although not completely accurate, evoke romantic images of the kilted Scottish warrior engaged in the famous Highland charge. Not that the kilted highlander did not carry this magnificent weapon, they obviously did, but they were not the only ones. Like their European counterparts the swords of Scotland were forged in the fires of conflict. Inter clan conflict was commonplace in Scotland for centuries as the clans fought for reputation, over feuds, wealth, land, and resources. The rich farmlands of the south were replaced by the more rugged and inhospitable terrain of the highlands and western isles. As a result, one of the main industries in the highlands was war, and the warriors they provided for hire to multiple other countries.

From as early as the 15th through the 17th century Scottish mercenaries, known as Redshanks, were contracted from the clans of west highlands and islands to fight in greater Ireland.<sup>13</sup> These highlanders, along with their cousins in the east highlands were also mainstays in Europe, fighting for the Danish, Spanish, Dutch, Swedish and French armies.<sup>14</sup> Suffice it to say, the Scots provided a steady supply of warriors from their war machine in the near lawless highlands.

From the 17th century onwards, the British establishment also understood the value of the highland warrior culture and the need for highlanders to police highlanders. A fact that can be seen in the formation of the Black Watch. Lowland and Highland regiments

began to flourish and proliferate throughout the 18th and on into the 19th centuries. They gained a fearsome reputation as they very often fought with distinction throughout the British Empire. To be fair, these regiments did not recruit solely from the highlands, but the designation as a highland regiment carried its own culture and sense of warrior pride commensurate with this rugged culture. Along with this sense of identity came the basket hilted sword. It is within many of these regiments that the style of the 18th century Scottish sword would be preserved, well beyond their original production sources in Scotland.

### The Evolution of the Scottish Sword

The basket hilt in Scotland in its earliest days seem to be inextricably tied to the hilts of England (Figure 22) and seem to have evolved contemporaneously with their European cousins already discussed, if not decades earlier. Of the very earliest baskets to evolve in England and Scotland, only a few have survived. The early progenitors are surmised to be asymmetrical in design and may date back as early as ca. 1520.<sup>15</sup> As the 16th century progresses it is believed that a shift into symmetry for these simple hilts indicates a new level of maturity for these early British Basket Hilts and is estimated to have occurred in the second half of the 16th century.<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that this symmetrical guard form of the second half of the 16th century would then endure with only minor variations for well over 100 years, from about 1550 – 1680, and is likely to be the sword known to its English contemporaries as the “Irish Hilt” (Figure 23).<sup>17</sup>

The supposition that the earliest baskets of the British Isles were of English origin, although potentially accurate, seems largely based on where many of the existing examples now reside or were discovered. This hypothesis may be challenged by two observations. The first is the contemporary reference to “Irish Hilts”, “Irish” being a reference to Gaelic speakers and “Irish Hilt” therefore likely a reference to a Scottish style of hilt.<sup>18</sup> The second, is that while a number do reside in English collections or were out of early English armouries and excavations, there are also multiple swords that turned up in Scotland as well as various locations around the world, such as Holland, Norway, Ireland, North America and even Australia.<sup>19</sup> The practise of using Scottish mercenaries around the world, coupled with the typical displacement of the highlanders to places such as the colonies of North America may lend credence to the idea that these hilts were as much Scottish

as they may have been English in origin. What is clear is that this form of hilt was carried frequently on both sides of the English, Scottish border.

While the “Irish Hilts” flourished and achieved remarkable design stability, hilt experimentation continued in a second group of Scottish swords believed to be lowland and/or borderlands in origin. The results were a range of hilts almost as varied as the Tessaks of Europe. Also, like the Tessak, many of these lines of experimentation seem to have extinguished themselves and went extinct. In Figure 24 we see examples of the Scottish versions of the “Experimental Hilts”.

Another group that was being experimented with, seemingly in both England and Scotland, resulted in the Ribbon Hilts of the West Highlands. The Highland Ribbon Hilt was part of another



Figure 22. The hilt on the left is symmetrical and presumed to be Scottish. The hilt on the right is asymmetrical and presumed to be English. These two swords clearly indicate the close design ties between the baskets of the British Isles. Both swords are ca. 1540 – 1560.



Figure 23. The hilt on the left is English (possibly Scottish) ca. 1625 while the hilt on the right is of Scottish manufacture ca. 1650. You can clearly see the connection between the two guards as well as their evolution from Figure 22. Growing complexity like the hilts of Europe is a general indicator of age and development.



Figure 24. These are excellent examples of the Scottish version of “experimental hilts”. Both guards effectively use a combination of rounded or flattened bars interlinked with pierced plates in varying degrees of complexity to form their baskets. Both swords are ca. 1590 – 1620.



group of complex guards that were evolving contemporaneously with the swords previously described, and like all these sword groups their exact origins are uncertain. However, the flattened “Ribbon” bar construction of this sub-set has a generally agreed place of manufacture in the West Highlands. The earliest form of Ribbon Hilt (Figure 25, left) would evolve in the early 17th century to become the more common later style known as the “beaked neb” (Figure 25, right).

The Irish Hilt in combination with some design elements from the “beaked neb” appears to be the progenitor for the later hilts of the 17th century, which would go on to include the fully developed baskets of Glasgow. The evolution of hilt design in Figures 26 show an obvious progression in the development of the hilt from the earlier “Irish Hilt” style to the growing complexity and quality of the classic Glasgow style hilt. The Glasgow hilt, when forged by the master armourers of the trade, rise to a level of distinction that is almost unrivalled and not surprisingly go on

to inspire a form that will be copied by their British counterparts in one form or another for over two centuries. As a weapon, a fine Scottish basket hilt stands amongst the finest swords of any era and country of origin.

From the armourers of Glasgow spawn the armourers of Stirling and in particular the Allan family. John Allan Sr. was cited as journeyman to John Simpson of Glasgow in 1702, and as such his hilts remained largely true to the Glasgow form (Figure 27), with two clear distinctions.<sup>20</sup> One was the rounded bar construction rather than the flattened fluted bars of Glasgow, and the second, a use of non-ferrous inlays to embellish the hilt.

The final step represents the ultimate evolution of the Scottish sword and was reserved for Walter Allan, the second son of John Allan, who took the art to a stunning new level of creativity. Walter Allan’s swords were every bit as elegant and lethal as the swords of his forebears, where they differed was in their design. Walter

Figure 25. The hilt on the left is the earliest version of the West Highland Ribbon Hilt and is generally ascribed a date range of about 1570 – 1610. The hilt on the right is known as a “beaked neb” and would date to ca. 1630 – 1660.







Figure 26. The hilt on the left is Scottish ca. 1640 – 1680 and is a prototypical “Irish Hilt”. The next evolutionary design progression (center) is Scottish ca. 1660 – 1690 and represents a clear link between the “Irish Hilt” and the “Glasgow Hilt”. Both these hilts have been signed by the same maker (maker unknown), indicating the two are contemporaneous or at least within a short time window of one another. On the right is a fabulous example of the fully developed Glasgow Hilt and

began his career producing more traditional style hilts, but then broke boundaries by innovating and designing the most beautiful and intricate hilt designs of the time (Figure 27, right).

Culloden marked the end of the already fading Highland culture, and coupled with English industry, the demise of the sword trade in Glasgow. Stirling would endure a few decades longer, but it would also succumb to the industrial production levels of places such as London, Birmingham and Sheffield. But where the sword making industry in Scotland and its unrivalled quality would end, it had a clear impact on the swords adopted by many future Highland and British Cavalry Regiments. In Figure 28 (left) we have

a sword that is dated 1761 and was manufactured in Birmingham by the firm of Samuel Harvey Sr. This is a high-quality example of an English Basket hilted sword and was made for use by a mounted dragoon. The sword in Figure 28 (center) shows a substantial drop in production quality but is an excellent example of the mass production capabilities of industrialized England. This sword was made by Drury, who along with Nathaniel Jeffries Sr was known to have provided M1757 basket hilts to the highland regiments of Colonial North America.<sup>21</sup> The sword on the right in Figure 28 is an 1828 pattern basket hilted sword for the highland regiments of the Victorian period. This specimen was owned by the 74th Regiment of Foot. Again, a big step down from the hilts of the golden



Figure 27. On the left is another superior example of a Glasgow hilt signed by John Simpson Sr. ca. 1710. Although unsigned, the hilt in the center is similar in both style and quality to those produced in the Allan workshop and attributed to them, likely to John Allan Sr. ca. 1720. The hilt on the right is a wonderful, signed example of the work of Walter Allan ca. 1750.



Figure 28. The hilt on the left is a British Dragoon's Basket Hilted sword, dated 1761. In the center is a British M1757 basket hilt common in the North American Colonies ca. 1760 – 1770. On the right is a pattern 1828 basket hilt owned by the 74th Regiment of Foot ca. 1830 – 1860.



age in Glasgow, but another testament to their enduring legacy.

Gone, but not forgotten. As mentioned above, the spirit of the highland warrior and his weapons were often immortalized in the cultures of the highland regiments and the revival periods that would follow in the late 18th and early the 19th centuries. The basket hilts of Scotland would endure, in one form or another, for more than four centuries. In some, they reached the highest standard of quality both in design and functionality, placing themselves in line with some of the finest swords mankind ever produced.

## Conclusion

The fate of the basket hilt, like all swords, was sealed by the advent and advancement of the firearm. Just as this new form of hilt was being born in the 16th century, it marked the beginning of the end for the relevance of the sword in war. But it would still be centuries before the sword is ultimately rendered obsolete and in this time the basket hilt would influence warfare in ways commensurate to other leaps in the evolution of weapons technology. To fully understand its importance to the warriors of the Early Modern Period, one need to look no further than the three sword groups discussed in this paper and their attachment to the battle-hardened

cultures in which they flourished. For the Dussage of Southern Germany and Schiavona of Venice it was to help repel and endure the incursion and occupation of the Ottoman Turks; whereby shaping the outcome of many European and Middle Eastern cultures for centuries to come. For the Scots, it was to endure a way of life and culture within the highlands and to ply their warrior trade in many of their neighbouring nations. The Scottish warrior culture helped to shape and forge the British Isles and the vast expanse of its global Empire.

The basket hilted sword is a weapon that only within the last century has become a focus for the students, scholars and collectors of arms and armour. There is still much work and research yet to be done, but what seems clear at this point, is that the evolution of the basket hilt took place contemporaneously in multiple distinct regions both in Europe as well as the British Isles. Despite their geographic isolation they were linked by common purpose and similar geo-political settings. The basket hilted sword was developed and rose to prominence in the cauldrons of war and went on to become a defining weapon in human martial conflict and history.

## Bibliography

- Batty, John. Culloden, *The Swords and the Sorrows*. The National Trust for Scotland Trading Company Ltd, 1996.
- Blair, Claude. *European and American Arms*. Bonanza Books, New York, 1963.
- Boccia, Lionello G., Coehlo, Eduardo T. *Armi Bianche Italiane*. Bramante Editrice, 1975.
- Coe, Michael D., Connolly, Peter, et al. *Swords and Hilt Weapons*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson London, 1989.
- KulturIT., Digitalt Museum. Arts Council Norway, 2020. <https://digitaltmuseum.no/search/?q=tessak&o=0&n=128>
- Mazansky, Cyril. *British Basket Hilted Swords*. The Boydell Press, 2005.
- Oruzje, Hladno. *Ubojite Ostrice*. Gornja Stubica, 2003.
- Wallace, John. *Scottish Swords and Dirks*. Stackpole Books, 1970.
- Wikipedia; (March 26, 2021). Redshank (Soldier). Wikimedia Foundation Inc. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Redshank\\_\(soldier\)#:~:text=Redshank%20was%20a%20nickname%20for,rivers%20in%20the%20coldest%20weather](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Redshank_(soldier)#:~:text=Redshank%20was%20a%20nickname%20for,rivers%20in%20the%20coldest%20weather).
- Wikipedia; (May 17, 2021). History of Dalmatia. Wikimedia Foundation Inc. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Dalmatia#Republic\\_of\\_Venice\\_\(1420\\_-\\_1796\)\\_and\\_the\\_Dalmatian\\_language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Dalmatia#Republic_of_Venice_(1420_-_1796)_and_the_Dalmatian_language)

## Acknowledgments

Special thanks to:

- Alban Arms & Armour Ltd. and Mr. Tony Willis for providing figures: 8 left, 13, 14, 22 left, 25 right, 26 right, 27 right and 28 right.
- John Kirk Collection for providing figure: 8 right, 23 left.
- The Ross Collection for providing remaining figures.

## Endnotes

- 1 Oakeshott, Ewart. *Records of the Medieval Sword*. Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1991. p 19-21.
- 2 Oakeshott, Ewart. *European Weapons and Armour From the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution*. The Lutterworth Press, 1980. p156-157.
- 3 Krenn, Peter; Karcheski Jr, Walter J. *Imperial Austria Treasures Of Art, Arms & Armor From The State Of Styria*. The Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Prestel, 1992. p3.
- 4 Krenn, Peter; Karcheski Jr, Walter J. Ibid. p 4-5.
- 5 Krenn, Peter; Karcheski Jr, Walter J. Ibid, p 6.
- 6 Krenn, Peter; Karcheski Jr, Walter J. Ibid p 6.
- 7 Oakeshott, Ewart. 1980. Ibid p 156-157.
- 8 Meier, Jurg A. Waffensammlung Carl Beck – Sursee. The Sankturbanhof Sursee Foundation, ?. <http://www.waffensammlung-beck.ch/waffe2.html>
- 9 Oakeshott, Ewart. 1980. Ibid p156-157.
- 10 Cotter-Reilly, Keith; (August 10, 2018). “The Tessak of Norway”. The Atlanta Historical Fencing Academy. (<https://fencingatl.com/blog/2018/8/9/the-tessak-of-norway>)
- 11 Tordenskiold1721; (December 2015). “A late 16th century Dussack for comment”. Vikingsword.com <http://www.vikingsword.com/vb/showpost.php?p=209195&postcount=24>
- 12 Robinson, Nathan; “The Schiavona and its Influences.” myArmoury.com [http://myarmoury.com/feature\\_spot\\_schia.html](http://myarmoury.com/feature_spot_schia.html)
- 13 Wikipedia; (March 26, 2021). Redshank (Soldier). Wikimedia Foundation Inc. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Redshank\\_\(soldier\)#:~:text=Redshank%20was%20a%20nickname%20for,rivers%20in%20the%20coldest%20weather](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Redshank_(soldier)#:~:text=Redshank%20was%20a%20nickname%20for,rivers%20in%20the%20coldest%20weather).
- 14 McKenzie, Steven; (March 28, 2013). Game of Thrones: Scots’ role in foreign power struggles. British Broadcasting Corporation. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-21682548#:~:text=During%20the%2016th%20and%2017th,in%20the%20early%2017th%20Century>.
- 15 The Baron of Earlshall. *The Scottish Basket Hilted Sword Volume 1 c. 1450 – 1600*. Earlshall Publications, 2016. p75-84.
- 16 The Baron of Earlshall. Ibid p 125-145.
- 17 Mowbray, Stuart C. *British Military Swords, Volume One: 1600 – 1660*. Mowbray Publishing, 2013. p 110-125
- 18 Mowbray, Stuart C. Ibid p 110.
- 19 The Baron of Earlshall. Ibid p 125-145 .
- 20 Whitelaw, Charles E. *Scottish Arms Makers*. Arms and Armour Press, 1977. p 215.
- 21 Bezdek, Richard H. *Swords and Sword Makers of England and Scotland*. Paladin Pres, 2003. p 70, 104.

