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Repair and appropriation. Some considerations on customized Late Bronze Age swords

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Fig. 1 — Main swords groups in 9th century BC Europe.

Swords and cultural groups in Europe

The 9th century BC is characterized by a very large variety of swords types in Europe. There is a clear opposition between Atlantic Europe with typical tripartite-tanged swords and the central part of the Continent where there is a majority of bronze-hilted sword, whose shapes vary according to the considered area (fig. 1). There are of course no clear borders and some swords were scattered outside their main distribution area. Some of these “foreign” swords were customized to fit the visual identity they were supposed to have in the region they were found in, witnessing the reappropriation of these objects by local users. We will here focus on two cases: the customization of Atlantic swords in eastern France and the guard modifications in north-eastern Europe.

Customized Atlantic swords in eastern France

Carp's tongue swords are characteristic of the Atlantic area in the 9th century BC (fig. 1). They are easily identifiable with their parallel edges, their strong *ricasso* and their important central bulge (fig. 2, 2-3). Their hilts were in organic materials, contrasting with the bronze handles found further east. Despite their Atlantic distribution, some carp's tongue swords were found in eastern France. Some of them were adapted to the local tastes and equipped with a bronze hilt inspired by the wing-shaped swords from the Mörigen type (fig. 2, 1).



Fig. 2 — Mörigen and Atlantic carp's tongue swords with customized hilt found in eastern France. 1. Saint-Romain-de-Jalionas (Isère). 2. Ouroux (Saône-et-Loire). 3. Toul (Meurthe-et-Moselle). Pictures: Léonard Dumont. Interpretation of the radiograph after Liéger and Marguet 1974.



Fig. 3 — Comparison between typical wing-shaped guard swords and customized bell-shaped guard swords from north-eastern Europe. 1. Blerik-Tegelen (The Netherlands, © L. Dumont). 2. Ostrowiec Slawienski (Poland, Sprockhoff 1934). 3. Mâcon (France, © L. Dumont). 4. Berlin-Buch (Germany, Seyer and Michas 1994-95 and Wüstemann 1994-95).

Guard modifications in north-eastern Europe

A similar adaptation process happens at the same time in north-eastern Europe, at the junction between the wing and bell-shaped guard swords areas (fig. 1). In this case, wing-shaped guards were transformed to fit the tastes of users used to the bell shape. This transformation was performed by casting bronze over the original hilt (fig. 3, 1-2) or by simply removing and replacing this part with the wanted design (fig. 3, 3-4). These examples give evidence of shapes' cultural significance: swords were supposed to have a certain shape to be used and not another.

Conclusion

These two examples demonstrate the importance of swords visual identity. Sword users seemed to have, according to their origin and their culture, a specific idea of how a sword should look like and did not hesitate to customize them. This can be associated to a form of appropriation through repairs, aiming at giving a sword its functionality back by giving it a “normal” shape.

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