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The average swordsmith of the Middle Ages was a simple craftsman who earned his living by making undecorated objects for everyday use, sometimes, however, producing decorative articles of great value. In such cases he may be mentioned in a notice of payment, but as this was rare, and as swords and knives were seldom signed, the medieval swordsmith, particularly in northern Europe, remains for the most part anonymous. Therefore, when a mark is found on a sword blade or a record of payment appears in an archive it is usually impossible to relate it to a known craftsman. As a result, most of the groupings of Gothic swords have been made by types or styles rather than by makers.

It is therefore an exceptional occasion when one finds a Gothic sword signed and dated, as in the case with the ceremonial sword of the emperor Maximilian I (1459-1519) in the Weltliche Schatzkammer in Vienna. This magnificent sword is inscribed MAISTER HANNS VON Maximilian’s ceremonial sword, by Hans Sumersperger, 1496. Weltliche Schatzkammer, Vienna.

HALL, 1496. The maker can further be identified from account books in the National Austrian Archives at Innsbruck as the royal knifesmith Hans Sumersperger, to whom payments for this sword and two companion ones were made in 1497. There are also accounts of deliveries of halberds by Hans Sumersperger between 1492 and 1498, and his workshop is mentioned as being in Hall, the old salt-mine city five miles east of Innsbruck, in the Tyrol, the meeting place of North Italian renaissance and South German Gothic styles.

The ceremonial sword, since the nineteenth century known as the “Austrian feudal sword,” is a masterpiece of craftsmanship; it was carried by the Supreme Marshal of the Hereditary Lands when the representatives of the estates paid their oath of fealty to the emperor. The two companion swords are of different types but are closely allied in style. The first is a so-called hunting sword in the Waffensammlung in Vienna, a kind used commonly in battle by foot soldiers or worn by noblemen as a light defense, which was destined to become the typical hunting sword and later the hunting knife. The second is a short sword in the National Museum in Copenhagen, which may have been sent to Stockholm in
1520 as a gift from Charles V to his brother-in-law King Christian II of Denmark, with the insignia of the Hapsburg Order of the Golden Fleece.

The only analogous case of signed swords of the period is that of Ercole de' Fideli, who worked in Ferrara at the Este court between 1487 and 1518. Ercole was a baptised Jew whose real name was Salomone da Sesso. He made a magnificent series of short swords known as cinquefoes and signed his name in full across the blades. His designs reflect the clarity of the southern Renaissance.

The decoration of the three swords by Hans Sumersperger is, on the other hand, typical of the latest, fantastic Gothic of the north. The characteristic features of his designs allow these swords to be associated with a series of hunting knives in Europe and America. These consist of a set of four knives in Kremsmuenster, a hunting knife in the Wallace Collection in London, and a pair of serving knives and a hunting knife in the Metropolitan Museum. All of these knives can be directly connected with the emperor Maximilian, who termed himself the “arch-hunter of the Holy Roman Empire.” They are all either complete sets or parts of hunting sets of the Burgundian type, adopted by Maximilian after his marriage to Mary of Burgundy. Such sets consist of various knives and implements used by an attendant to cut up the game and a carrying case, usually of leather, which was worn on the right side.

The hunting set in the armory of the Benedictine abbey of Kremsmuenster, in Upper Austria, is complete with four knives, of different sizes and types, and a fork, in the original leather sheath. It consists of a serving knife with a thin, tongue-shaped blade for offering choice pieces of meat to the noble huntsmen; two heavy single-edged knives, the larger one for cutting bones and sinews and the narrower for skinning and cutting meat; and, finally, a small, delicate table knife and fork of matching length (25 cm.). The knives are closely related to the three swords mentioned above by the fire-gilt decoration on a blued ground on their blades, the use of brass for their eight-sided handles, and their inlaid grips with a red and white pattern of bone and rosewood.

The figures on the blade of the serving knife are best compared to the Saint Sebastian on the blade of the hunting sword in Vienna. On one side a Holy Roman emperor is seated on a throne, and on the other side an archduke holding the shield of Austria stands in full Gothic armor. Both figures are framed by thin columns, above which vines with thick, limp leaves form Gothic arches. Over the arches are three letters set in a triangle, EGK or GEK, their meaning unknown. The emperor can be identified by his curly, double beard and double eagle as Sigismund (ruled 1410-1437), and the archduke is
Sigmund der Münzreiche ("Rich-in-Coins") (1429-1496), godson of Sigismund, ruler of the Tirol, and owner of the famous silver mines and coining industry at Hall. The identification of Sigmund is further substantiated by one of the mottoes on the larger carving knife from the set, "GOTT WALT SEIN VND SANT SIGMVND ("May God and Saint Sigmund watch over him"), and by a comparison with a silver guilder struck at Hall in 1486, where he is similarly shown standing in Gothic armor with the arms of Austria. As the other motto on the knife refers to one of the patron saints of Maximilian, Saint George, it is likely that the whole set was ordered by Maximilian in 1496 in memory of the death of Archduke Sigmund, his predecessor as ruler of the Tirol.

On this carving knife are also blued representations of hunts intertwined in foliage and inscribed. On one side is a stag hunt, above which is written in Gothic minuscule "Hilf Edler Ritter Sand Jorg aus . . . nodd[urft] ("Help, noble Knight Saint George, out of trouble"), and on the other side a second stag hunt with the inscription to Saint Sigmund quoted above. The character of the script is the same as that in the inscriptions of the three sword blades, and the phrasing is also comparable: "SANDT CATARINA HILLF V AND DAS WALT GOT V ON THE SWORD IN COPENHAGEN; HILLF MARIA MVETER RAIN M AIDT MICH PEHVDT VOR L[EID], HILLF RITER S SAN JORG AND HILLF HEILGER RITTER S SAANDT IOORG HILLF VN[S], MARIA HILLF VNS AVS [NOT] ON THE CEREMONIAL SWORD; AND MARIA HILLF VNS AVS NOTT G AND HILLF SANNDT SEWASTTHIANN ON THE HUNTING SWORD. The invocations to the Virgin and these particular saints, George, Sebastian, and Catherine, show the close relationship with Maximilian, as, with Saint Barbara, they were his special patrons.

The whole set is encased in a splendid sheath of leather (cuir-bouilli), embossed and incised with restless Gothic vines. Similar vines are found on the leather sheath of the hunting sword in Vienna, and the same Gothic minuscule is used in the inscription "maria" on the sword sheath and the "yhs" (Jesus) on the case of the set.

From all these details of decoration and style there can be no doubt that the hunting set in Kremsmünster abbey was made by Hans Sumersperger.

The pair of serving knives in the Metropolitan Museum are also related to the three swords and even more obviously to the serving knife in Kremsmünster, with which they are identical in size (44.5 cm.). The pommels have a late Gothic, fantastic form, with an asymmetric knob on one side. The eight-pointed stars or rosettes pierced in the pommels show the influence of Italy, where they were used as ornaments in the grips of contemporary knives, and are even found in stringed instruments over sound holes. The grips are similarly inlaid in bone and rosewood, perhaps to represent the red and white colors of Austria. They are also inlaid on each side with small plaques of mother-of-pearl, carved with figures of saints. These link the knives closer to the swords in Vienna, on which such figures are found. The original inlays on the ceremonial sword were replaced in 1871, when it was unfortunately restored. The figures on the grips of the Museum’s knives are cut with precision in the hard, shimmering mother-of-
A pair of serving knives assigned to Hans Sumersperger by their similarity to the swords and knives definitely known to be his work. Rogers Fund, 1951.
Details of the knives opposite. The eight-sided brass handles are inlaid with bone, rosewood, and mother-of-pearl, all characteristic of Hans Sumersperger's work. The inlays show Christ on the cross and the Virgin, Saints Sebastian and John, the Virgin and Saint Catherine, Saint Barbara and a male saint.
pearl; they are simply but surely drawn with the sharp, angular movements and drapery folds typical of the period. On the first knife are the Virgin and Child with Saint Catherine, Saint Barbara, and a male saint with a banderole; and on the second knife, Christ on the cross with Mary, Saint John the Evangelist, and Saint Sebastian.

The tongue-shaped blades of the Museum’s knives were ground very thin, and their original outlines are partly lost. One, in fact, was broken and has recently been welded. They may at one time have been decorated with gold on a blued ground and may also have been stamped with the maker’s mark, like the serving knife of the set in Kremsmuenster.

The Museum’s knives are known to have been in the Franz Thill collection in the late nineteenth century and were later in the possession of S. J. Whawell. They were sold at auction at Helbing’s, in Munich, November 10, 1908, where they were listed as Lot 330, “from an English collection.” More recently they may have been in the collection of Count Hartig in Namiest, southern Moravia.

Two other knives that were definitely made by Hans Sumersperger are heavy single-edged knives of the type of the larger carving knife in Kremsmuenster. One is in the Wallace Collection (no. 144), and the other is in the Metropolitan. One might almost be tempted to call them a pair, so close are they in form, decoration, and dimensions (47.5 and 46.5 cm.). But no hunting set is known to have contained two such similar knives, and therefore they must come from separate sets.

The Museum’s knife has the red and white coat of arms of Austria in mother-of-pearl on each side of the grip. The knife in the Wallace Collection is inlaid with figures under wide Gothic arches, like the serving knives in the Metropolitan but done in ivory. On one side are Saint John the Evangelist with the chalice and Saint Barbara with the tower, and on the other a bishop with an ax and Christ blessing, with the orb. These figures are related to the mother-of-pearl inlays on the grips and the invocations on the blades of the other knives and swords.

Along the back of the blade of the knife in the Wallace Collection are traces of the original decoration in fire gilt on a blued ground. The columns on the face of the blade are similar to those on the hunting sword in Vienna and the serving knife in Kremsmuenster. There must also have been a saint under a vine canopy, and the same must be true of the Metropolitan’s knife.

The two hunting knives show the same blade mark, the bolt of a crossbow. It is the third mark that appears, besides the full signature, on the works of Hans Sumersperger, and it is always found in the same position on the thumb side of the blade, not too far from the upper end. This is also true of the knives in the set in Kremsmuenster and is a further proof that all these knives belong together. The ceremonial sword in Vienna and the sword in Copenhagen both have a minuscule Gothic “i.” The companion knives of the hunting sword in Vienna have a scissors mark. The explanation for the different marks seems to be that several assistants were employed by the master of the workshop, and each was permitted to place his mark on undecorated blades. It is far less likely that unfinished blades were imported, since the official title of the master was “knifesmith,” not “goldsmith,” and the uniformity of the manufacture and decoration of this group of blades indicates that they were made in the same shop.

On the front edge of the handle of the knife in the Wallace Collection, where the Metropolitan’s knife has a folded ribbon pattern, is an inscription in capital letters, related to the script on the sword blades, reading ΚΟΝ ΨΡΔ ΡΜ[B] ΔΙΧ. This makes no sense, or at least cannot be interpreted, which is also true of the inscription on the hunting sword in Vienna. The pommels of both knives, like that of the hunting sword, are in the shape of a stylized bird’s head, a form associated with hunting swords for centuries. The brass parts are engraved with branches and rosettes, drawn in a broad, round manner. Over the upper edge of the pommel of the knife in the Wallace Collection runs a rope pattern, which was also beginning to be used on the borders of south German armor at this time. The carved ivory saints have gained breadth, and stand with their legs apart; the handle of the knife has a
Hunting knives by Hans Sumersperger. The one at the left, in the Wallace Collection, is very similar to that in the center, in the Metropolitan. Rogers Fund, 1904. The knife at the right is from the set in Kremsmuenster.
modeled, articulated shoulder. Such small details show that the maker of this knife, a somewhat later work of perhaps 1500–1505, was not unaware of the growing influence of the Renaissance and the new feeling for proportion.

Master Hans Sumersperger, who made these weapons, developed his own individual style, based on the selection and combination of certain materials which he united into a rich and effective whole. The pommels are made of carved brass, except in the case of the ceremonial sword, where richly cut iron was used; the handles are always eight-sided and inlaid with openwork silver castings or plaques of carved ivory, bone, or mother-of-pearl, or bone inlaid in alternate strips with reddish brown hardwood. Heraldic ornaments and religious subjects are as evident on the blades as on the handles. The figures are intermingled with inscriptions, vines, and framing architecture, and the decorations stand out in gleaming gold against the dark blue steel. The blades of the swords are faceted to increase their strength and flexibility to the utmost. The leather sheaths also have in common many decorative motives in their relief work. A greater variety of means and motives is hardly possible, yet all is reduced to a simple unity of form, as only the latest Gothic craftsman could achieve.

Until a few years ago the two swords in Vienna were ascribed to an unknown master, “M. S. von H.,” by misreading the inscription on the ceremonial sword. Now there are three swords, one of which has three companion knives and a sheath, a set of four knives with a sheath, two serving knives, and two hunting knives that can all be recognized as the work of Hans Sumersperger of Hall and that are known to have been used at the residence and court of Maximilian in Innsbruck. One may call a hunting knife a modest and unimportant object, but one can never deny that these Tirolese pieces have an exquisite charm, excellence of taste, nobility of form, and great historical significance of their own.

For the emperor Maximilian’s three swords see B. Thomas and H. D. Schepeleln in Vaabenhistoriske Aarbog, VI (Copenhagen, 1950/51), pp. 156-191.

For the hunting knife in the Metropolitan Museum see B. Dean, Catalogue of European Daggers (New York, 1929), p. 184, no. 323.

For types of hunting implements and the history of their use see A. Neuhaus, “Deutsche Jagdallertümer,” in Germanisches Nationalmuseum (Nuremberg, 1935).