

## A NEW SCIMITAR FROM TELL EL-DAB'A

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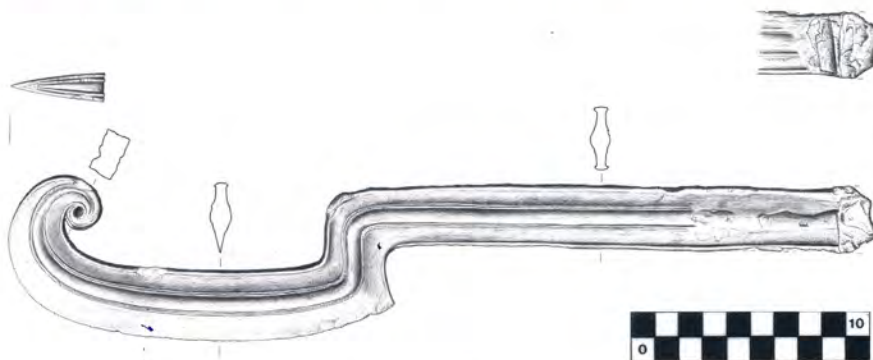
1 Scimitar and sheath from Tell el-Dab'a before restoration.



2 Scimitar from Tell el-Dab'a after restoration.



3 Drawing of the scimitar from Tell el-Dab'a.



As one of the most eminent scholars in the archaeology of the Levant, Jean-Paul Thalmann has always been concerned with the interconnections between Egypt and the Levant. Therefore it is an honour to contribute the following paper to him.

In the spring season 1997, a scimitar was discovered inside a tomb of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (Tomb A/II-p/14- Nr. 18 L468) in the mortuary precinct of Area A/II at Tell el-Dab'a, ancient Avaris, the capital of the Hyksos (figs. 1-3)<sup>1</sup>. It may be considered as a singular object<sup>2</sup>. The owner of the intact tomb was an adult male buried together with his weapons, meat offerings and a varying assemblage of pottery types. In his arms he held the scimitar. This piece consisted of bronze (91.85 % copper and 8.15 % tin)<sup>3</sup>, and was cast in a two-part mould. It stands clearly in the tradition of the Middle Bronze IIA (MB IIA) weapons. The slightly concave middle rib is divided into five concentric parts. This same feature can be found on other daggers of this period<sup>4</sup>. The blade is cast with a riveted

socket, and its point is slightly thicker and voluted. The handle, whose main part was poorly preserved, is made of bone and fixed to the tang by three copper nails. Such a technique is typical for pre-New Kingdom weaponry. From the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty onwards, the handle and blade are cast in one piece. Thus, it seems that a change in the production methods of weaponry must have occurred during the Second Intermediate Period<sup>5</sup>. The scimitar was protected by a sheath which probably consisted of leather<sup>6</sup>.



4 Scimitar from the Egyptian museum in Munich, courtesy Dr. Alfred Grimm.

Parallels are scarce:

Slightly earlier (19<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century BC) examples for the voluted point are known from Mesopotamia (Tello-Girsu) <sup>7</sup> and Iran (Elam-Susa) <sup>8</sup>. Here, however, not only the point but also the bend at the point of transition between the tang and blade is ornamented with a volute. The well known examples from the tombs of the princes of Byblos which date to the late 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> Dynasty are decorated with Egyptian motifs and without any volutes <sup>9</sup>. Perhaps the Tell el-Dab'a piece, although rooted in MB IIA culture, imitates older traditions.

Until now, only few examples are known from Egypt: one from Abydos and another from the Eastern Delta. In both cases, the contexts are not clear. The sword from Abydos <sup>10</sup> was acquired by the Royal Ontario Museum from the personal effects of the excavator J. Garstang. H. W. Müller assumed that it was bought by Garstang from workers during excavations in the Middle Kingdom cemetery, and he connects it to a stela found in the same cemetery with the report of a military campaign of Sesostri III against the Asiatics in which the high official Chusobek participated <sup>11</sup>.

The sword from the Eastern Delta was acquired from the art trade market and is now displayed in the Museum of Egyptian Art in Munich <sup>12</sup>. Here, the new technique of casting the handle together with the blade <sup>13</sup> is applied. The context of its discovery context is dubious. It was dated by H. W. Müller to the Hyksos Period in light of typological considerations <sup>14</sup>, but a date in the Early New Kingdom is possible as well.

A nearly identical piece to the Dab'a scimitar was acquired in 2000 from an art dealer by the Egyptian Museum in Munich (fig. 4) <sup>15</sup>. Like the Dab'a piece, its point is voluted; however, the concave middle rim is parted with a slight variation. Thus, the two scimitars were not cast in the same mould. The shape of the handle is similar, although the material of use is different: bone in case of the Dab'a piece, and wood with a metal sheet originally wrapped around it in case of the Munich one. In both cases, the handle was affixed to the tang by bronze nails. The wooden handle, which is in an excellent condition, gives us a hint as to where to look for a possible origin of the scimitar. For such a state of preservation, an arid climate is necessary, which pretty much excludes the Eastern Delta <sup>16</sup>.

According to one textual source, scimitars existed in Egyptian tombs of the Second Intermediate Period. A scimitar is mentioned as a tomb offering in a royal tomb of the 17<sup>th</sup> Dynasty in Thebes, the Tomb of Sebekemsaf II: *"We found the burial place of the royal wife Nubkhaas, his royal wife in the place. We forced it open also and we found her lying*

*there likewise. We opened their outer coffins and their inner coffins in which they lay. We found this noble mummy of this king equipped with a chepesch, a curved-sword”*<sup>17</sup>.

It is uncertain how this passage is to be interpreted: perhaps the sword was part of the royal equipment, or it may have been booty from the war with the Hyksos.

This type of weapon is associated with gods and elites by the late third millennium BC in western Asia<sup>18</sup>, and obviously played a role in the representation of the Egyptian ruler by the Second Intermediate Period. Generally speaking, scimitars do not appear very often. H. W. Müller in his fundamental study on curved-swords listed only 32 pieces<sup>19</sup>. By adding the scimitars from Munich and from Tell el- Dab ‘a , a total of 34 pieces are presently known.

#### **Abbreviations**

ÄAT

Ägypten und Altes Testament, Wiesbaden.

BAR Int. Series

British Archaeological Reports, International Series.

HÄB

Hildesheimer ägyptologische Beiträge.

Levant

Levant. Journal of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, London.

MAN

Man. A Monthly record of Anthropological Science, London.

MDIK

Mitteilungen des Deutschen archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo, Berlin, Mainz.

UZK

Untersuchungen der Zweigstelle Kairo des Österreichischen Archäologischen Instituts, Wien.

## NOTES

1 For the archaeological context of the cemetery and the tomb see I. Forstner-Müller, 1999; 2001, p. 213ff, fig. 12-19; 2002. For a general overview of the area A/II see M. Bietak, 1991.

2 The bronze object Inv. Nr. 387 which was originally determined as a sickle sword (M. Bietak, 1968, p. 23, 109, fig. 9) is a knife. See also H. W. Müller, 1987, p. 129, Nr. 11.

3 For the results of this analysis, I am indebted to Prof. Manfred Schreiner, Institute of Science and Technology in Art at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna and especially to Mathias Mehofer, VIAS.

4 G. Philip, 1989, type 13, p. 117-118, fig. 81b, p. 435-441; 2006, type 13, p. 42-47.

5 H. W. Müller, 1990, p. 125.

6 An exact determination is not possible, since the sheath was corroded to the core. Therefore, the analysis produced no results.

7 L. Heuzy, 1891, p. 367, fig. E; G. Groz *et al.*, 1910, p. 128f, pl. VIII.5; A. Parrot, 1948, p. 268, fig. 54a; H. Bonnet, 1926, p. 86, Pl. 33; R. Maxwell-Hyslop, 1946, p. 43, pl. IV, "Type 34"; Y. Yadin, 1963, fig. S.172 (links); T. Solyman, 1968, p. 55f, Taf. XIV.144; H. W. Müller, 1990, p. 114f.

8 For the two scimitars from Susa see R. de Mecquenem *et al.*, 1943, p. 29, 60 and 89, fig. 73.6, p. 60-61, fig. 67.36. They are dated into the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century BC. See also J.

Börker-Klähn, 1970, p. 12 ff.

9 P. Montet, 1928, p. 173, Nr. 652, pl. CI, p. 174-177, pl. XCIX and CI, Nr. 653, p. 177, Nr. 654, pl. C, 654.

10 See H. W. Müller, 1990, p. 124-127.

11 J. Garstang, 1901, pl. IV-V; J. H. Breasted, 1906, §§ 676ff; K. Sethe, 1959, p. 83, 8ff; J. Baines, 1987, p. 43-61; R. Gundlach, 1994, p. 171-173, 221; H. Goedicke, 1998, p. 33ff.

12 H. W. Müller, 1990, p. 131f, Nr. 12.

13 See above.

14 H. W. Müller, 1990, p. 131.

15 A. Grimm and S. Schoske, in press. I am deeply indebted to Prof. Alfred Grimm, curator of the Egyptian Department of the Museum, for most kindly allowing me to publish a photo of this sword.

16 According to the art dealer, the piece comes from tombs in the area of Achmim in Middle Egypt. Personal communication (A. Grimm).

17 p. Amherst line 2.4, see T. E. Peet, 1930, p. 48, pl. V, p. Leopoldi II line 2.13, see A. H. Gardiner *et al.*, 1936, p. 169ff.

18 G. Philip, 2006, p. 151, fig. 60a.

19 H. W. Müller, 1990.

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