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THE EARLIEST SCOTTISH BASKET-HILTED SWORDS

by Anthony D. Darling

THE TERM "BASKET-HILT" may best be described as a hilt provided with a defence for the swordsman's hand, consisting of narrow vertical bars and/or plates of steel curved into the shape of a basket. Evidence indicates that this hilt evolved in its most rudimentary form — little more than three bars added to the "Katzbalger" hilts of Landsknechts — in Germany during the early part of the second quarter of the 16th century.[1] Precisely when the basket-hilt made its appearance in Britain is unknown. Undoubtedly a simple configuration was in use in England prior to mid-century as mention was made of it in a ballad dealing with Robin Hood which is believed to have been composed around 1550.[2] Apparently this type of sword guard became common in England prior to 1600 as several other references to "basket-hilts" occur, in official records[3] and literature, including Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part II* (1598) and *The Letting of Humour's Blood* (1600) by Samuel Rowlands.

In Scotland, however, the origin of the basket-hilt is more difficult to ascertain. On the other hand, it is relatively easy to trace its development in Scotland from the end of the 17th century to the present day through the use of guild records, contemporary portraits, and known makers. Yet no tangible evidence exists by which we can assign a specific year, let alone a decade, for the introduction of the hilt as a national type in Scotland.

It appears that the true *Scottish* basket-hilt developed after 1550 and the earliest reference that *may* refer to it specifically is contained in the Inverness Burgh record of 1576 where the term "Highland hilt" is noted.[4] Earlier references, John Major's *History of Greater Britain* (1521) and Lindsay of Piscottie's *The Chronicles of Scotland* (1573), use the term "broadsword" but contain no description of the hilt. Regardless, it must have gained popularity quickly with the Scots and its use became widespread in the Highlands, for after 1600 the term "Irish" hilt (the English tended to think of the inhabitants of Ireland and the Scottish Highlands as the same people) was synonomous with basket-hilt.[5]

***(left) Portrait of a Highland Chief* by Michael Wright (c. 1670). The unidentified chief wears a "ribbon" hilt of late form, gilded rather than painted black.**

We do know that the Scottish basket-hilt did not evolve from the Italian *schiavona* as was once thought; the latter, with a fully developed guard, appears to date no earlier than the second half of the 17th century.[6]

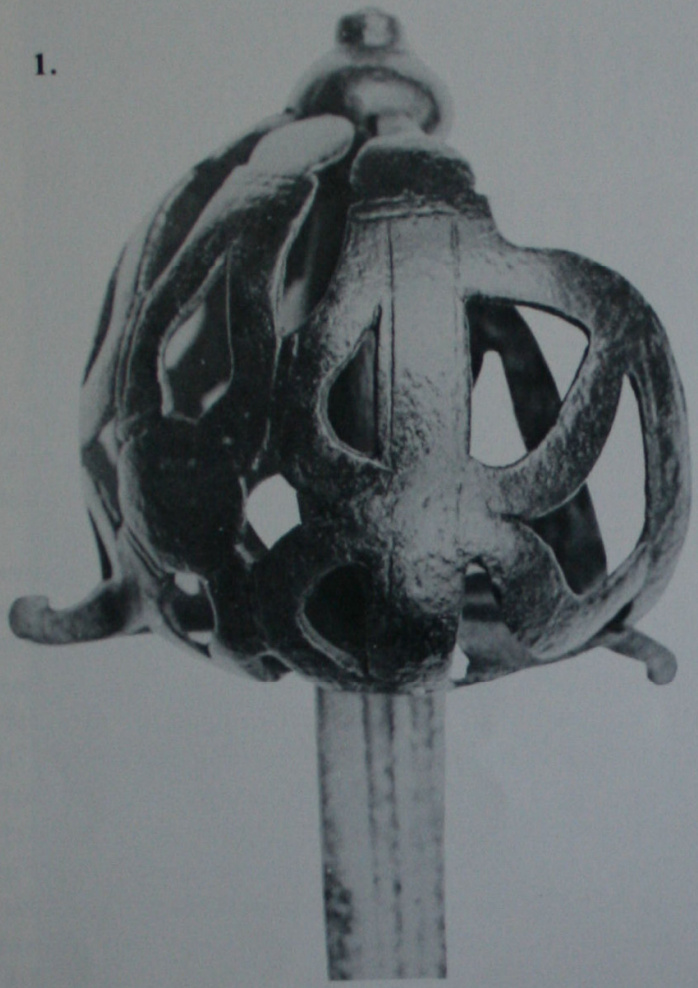
It has also been suggested that the hilt may have come to Scotland directly from England. However, the earliest identifiable Scottish basket-hilts — dating from c. 1600 or slightly earlier and the subject of this article — bear little relationship to the design of English guards of the same period. It was not until the second half of the 17th century that a "conventional" hilt, made up of bars interconnected by rectangular plates and relatively unchanged to the present day, appeared in Scotland (Fig. 11). This later Scottish example, also having looped bars or "pas d'anes," would seem to have been copied from English basket-hilts in use fifty years or more (Fig. 10).[7]

Scandinavia has also been cited as a possible source of inspiration for the Scottish basket-hilt. Certain swords, usually with a guard made up of linked bars or having a large rectangular plate on the right side and accompanied with long quillons, were imported from Germany into Norway in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. These were once associated with a band of Scottish mercenaries who perished in 1612 during an expedition from Norway in the Gudrun Valley of Sweden.[8] Like their English counterparts or the Italian schiavonas, these German-Norwegian examples bear little relationship structurally to the earliest Scottish basket-hilts.

In respect to origin, therefore, we can state that the *concept* of a basket-hilt first developed in Germany and within a short time span, this "concept" was introduced into England and, without evidence to the contrary, later to Scotland with both countries evolving national types.

The first Scottish basket-hilts were crudely fashioned out of thin, flat steel strips welded at the base to the cross-guard or quillon. These strips form five "arms" or branches at the pommel end of the guard. In turn, these branches fit into slots or a groove cut into the pommel. Some modern collectors have utilized the term "ribbon hilt" to describe them, which in respect to their method of fabrication and appearance seems as reasonable as any. This hilt form has also been called "beak-nose" or "hog-snout" (at least the later pattern), perhaps derisively.[9] Two distinct patterns are available for study.

1.



2.

Early Pattern (Figs. 1-4)

It is difficult to date this type as representations of it do not appear in contemporary portraits. Neither can a specimen be attributed to a known maker or to any historic individual. The form probably originated c. 1600, if not before, and on account of certain design elements is considered the earliest known of Scottish basket-hilts.

Two components of the hilt are similar or identical to those on many contemporary Scottish two-handed swords, the so-called "Lowland" type: the pommel is mushroom-shaped (Fig. 3) and two "tongues" or languets extend about an inch along the sides of the blade from the quillon bar (Fig. 2). Three of the five branches of the guard fit into individual slots cut into the pommel (Fig. 4), while the other two are rounded off. The extensions of the quillon bar are elongated and countercurved. At least one specimen, formerly the property of the Duke of Albercorn and now on display at the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, Edinburgh,[10] has quillons about twice the length normally encountered and with terminals similar to those on some English swords of the period.

3.

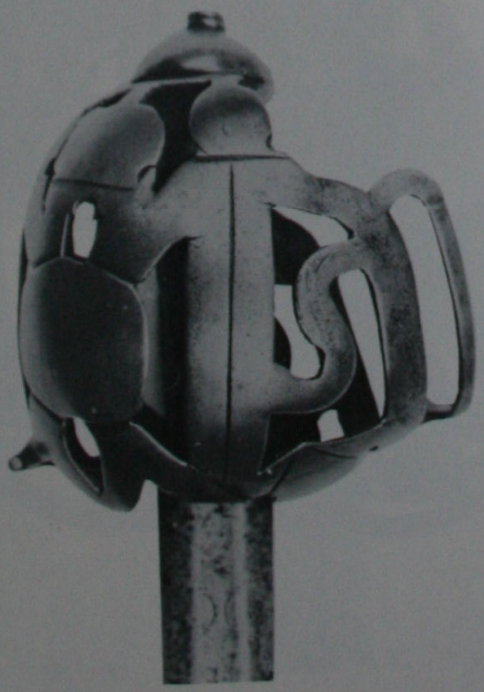
4.

Late Pattern (Figs. 5-7)

This hilt form probably developed around the mid-17th century and is shown in the painting of an unknown Highland chief by Michael Wright.[11] The quillons have been reduced to rudimentary proportions; the front terminal resembles a "snout" or "beak" while the rear measures only around a quarter-inch in length. The "tongues" have been dispensed with. An additional vertical bar has been added to each side of the guard at the rear. Also appearing on either side is the representation of an "S". Several theories have been put forth for its meaning — "Scotland," "Stuart," or "Stirling." Most probably the "S" is nothing more than a decorative method of joining two segments of the guard for strength. The five branches of the guard are now welded to a half-ring which in turn fits into a groove cut half-way around the pommel (Fig. 7). In some specimens this groove is incised completely around the pommel, which may indicate a more advanced — and later — technique. A few guards of this late type are seen with cut-outs of circles and hearts (Figs. 8,9).

At some point during the second half of the 17th century, Scottish sword makers began fabricating guards similar to those on English basket-hilts that had been in existence for many years (Figs. 10, 11). The system of vertical bars with two small junction plates, dating prior to 1600, was adopted, apparently universally by the Scots. Also carried over from the English counterparts were the looped bars or pas d'anes. The Scottish version often has an additional vertical bar on either side, and the three branches of the guard slip into a groove cut around the mid-point of the pommel. English-made hilts have large spherical or ovoid pommels; the central arm or branch of the guard is attached to the pommel by means of a screw.

5.



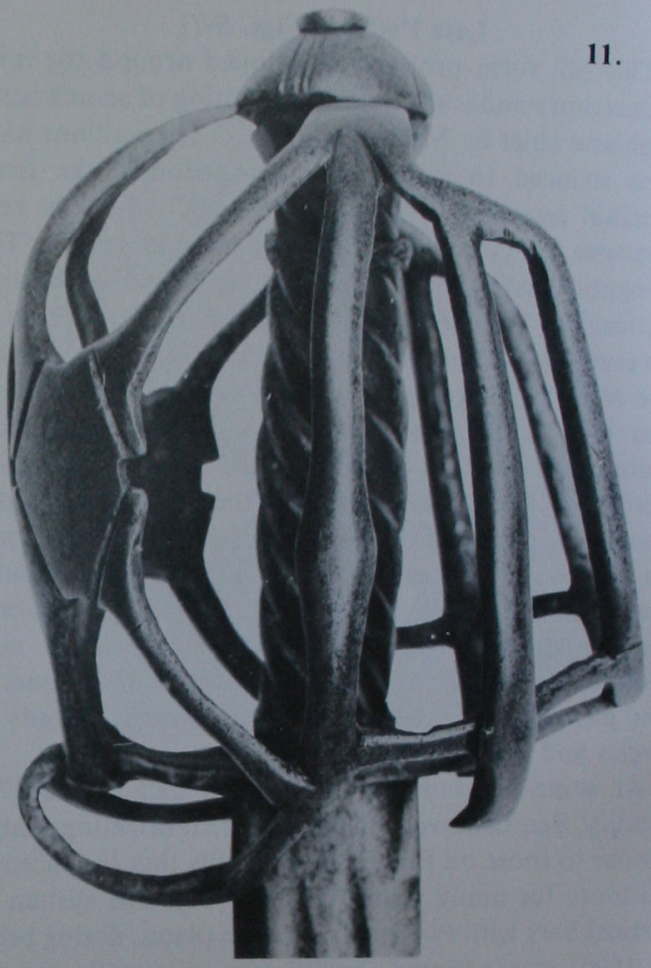
6.

7.

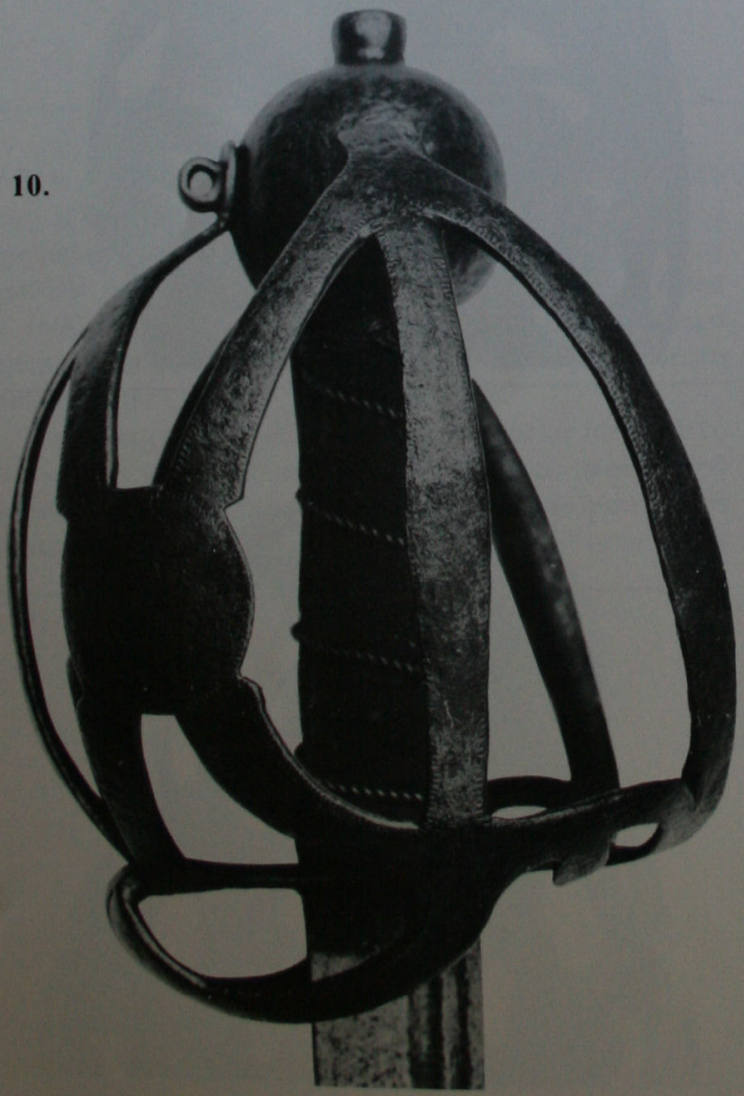
8.

9.

11.



10.

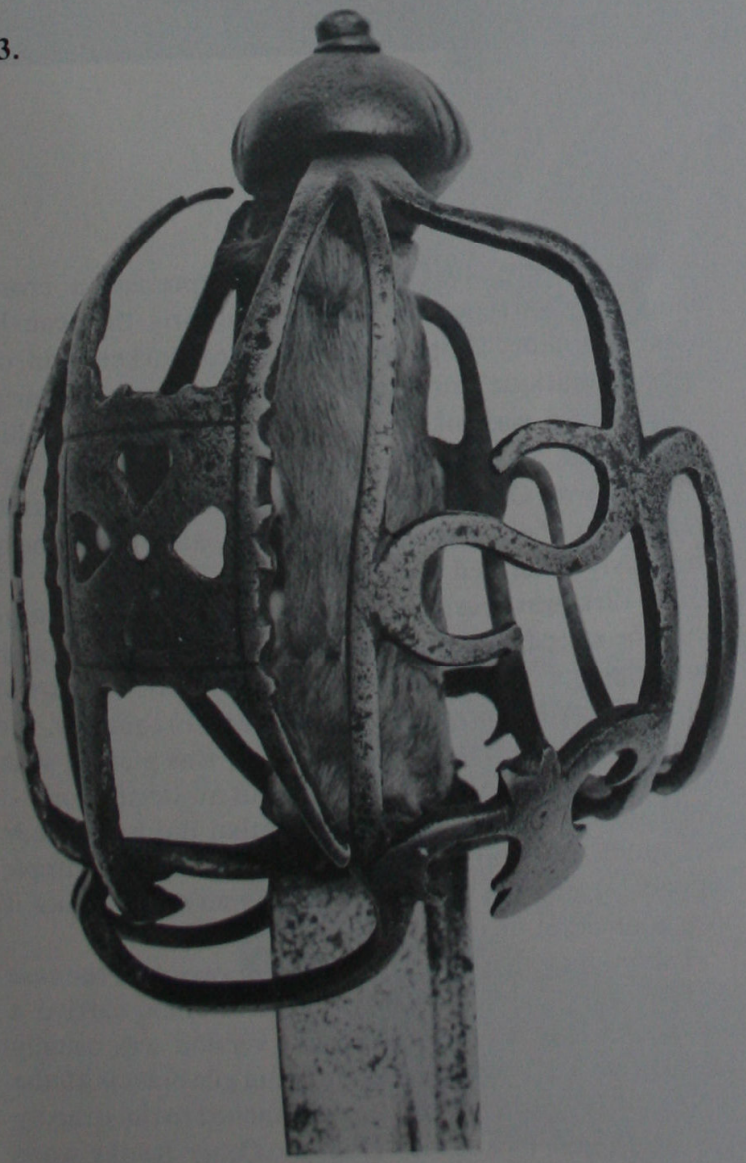


12.

By the first quarter of the 18th century the Scottish asket-hilt had taken on decoration and proportions that ave changed little down to the present day (Fig. 12). The inction plates have been enlarged while the nuckleguard and two side bars are flattened out to form ong rectangular panels. The edges of these plates and anels are usually scalloped and their interiors pierced ith hearts, circles, small rectangles, or triangles. On ome specimens, an "S" figure is substituted for the ideplate (Fig. 13).

The first quarter of the 18th century also ushers in the eriod when many guardmakers began to sign, or at least nitial, much of their work. This, combined with the vailability of many hilt representations in 18th century portraits, affords relative ease in the identification and approximate dating of 18th century basket-hilts. Unfortunately, this is not the case with the early "ribbon" hilts. Until such time as a "skeleton key" or "rosetta stone" is located, these fine old weapons can only suggest the legends of the Highlands, the great clan rivalries, and the splendid, warlike race of men that carried them.

13.



A Note on Blades and Collecting

As a rule, blades for Scottish basket-hilts were imported, usually from Germany. There seems not to have been a blade making center in Scotland as existed in England, first at Hounslow, then Shotley Bridge, and finally in Birmingham. Most blades encountered are double-edged or have had an edge filed down to make a "back-sword." German blades usually are marked with crescents, "cross-and-orbs," or the anchor mark associated with Solingen, the large blade center of Germany. Occasionally a blade-making family's name appears such as Herman Reisser. The Scots apparently considered blades stamped "Andrea Ferrara" (spelled various ways) of good quality; hence most blades of Scottish basket-hilts are so marked.

At least half of the "ribbon" hilts examined by the author have replaced blades. These swords saw much use and were often passed down from one generation to another. As the hilt is usually the only component of the sword indigenous to Scotland, a specimen should not be avoided by a collector if the blade is a replacement. The author has never seen a "ribbon" hilt with the original grip covering and in most cases the grip itself is missing or a replacement. In collecting, the most important factor is the condition of the guard itself, and to a lesser degree the originality of the pommel.

Notes

1 Claude Blair, *European & American Arms,* New York, 1962, #166.
2 Joseph Ritson, edt., *Robin Hood,* V. III, London, 1795, p. 41.
3 John Wallace, *Scottish Swords & Dirks, London, 1970, pp. 21-22.*
4 *ibid,* p. 22.
5 *ibid.*
6 *Blair, op. cit.,* p. 10.
7 A probable English basket-hilt of c. 1570 is shown as Figure 13 in Wallace, *op. cit.,* p. 29.
8 Blair, *op. cit.,* p. 10.
9 Apparently aplied to the late pattern only (see Figs. 5, 6).
10 Illustrated as Fig. 16 in Wallace, *op. cit.*
11 This is the earliest portrait to show a sword and the only one depicting a "ribbon" hilt.

Further Reading

H. F. McClintock, *Old Irish & Highland Dress,* Dundalk, 1950.
Donald William Stewart, Old & Rare Scottish Tartans, Edinburgh, 1893.
C. E. Whitlaw, vice-convener & Professor M. D. Glaister, convener, *Palace Of History,* 2 vs. (Scottish Exhibition of National History, Art, & Industry), Glasgow, Edinburgh & London, 1911.