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LIFE STONES AND STONE POMMELS: MEDIEVAL SWORD AMULETS. A LEGACY OF THE CLASSICAL AGE¹

Abstract:

Marek L. 2019, Life Stones and stone pommels: medieval sword amulets. A legacy of the Classical Age, AMM XV: 109-121

This contribution deals with the amuletic nature of stones related to swords. The author's main objectives are to analyse such objects in their original cultural context, to make an attempt at investigating the mentality of medieval people and to learn about sources of their behaviours. Few of the analysed objects come from well-defined archaeological contexts. The archaeological method was used to compare the existing artefacts with literary and pictorial sources and learn about their role in the sphere of common medieval beliefs as well as in the context of the official Christian doctrine.

Keywords: medieval sword pommels, jasper, rock crystal, amulets

Received: 31.03.2019; Accepted: 10.06.2019, Revised: 12.10.2019

Belief in the magical virtues of glass and stones

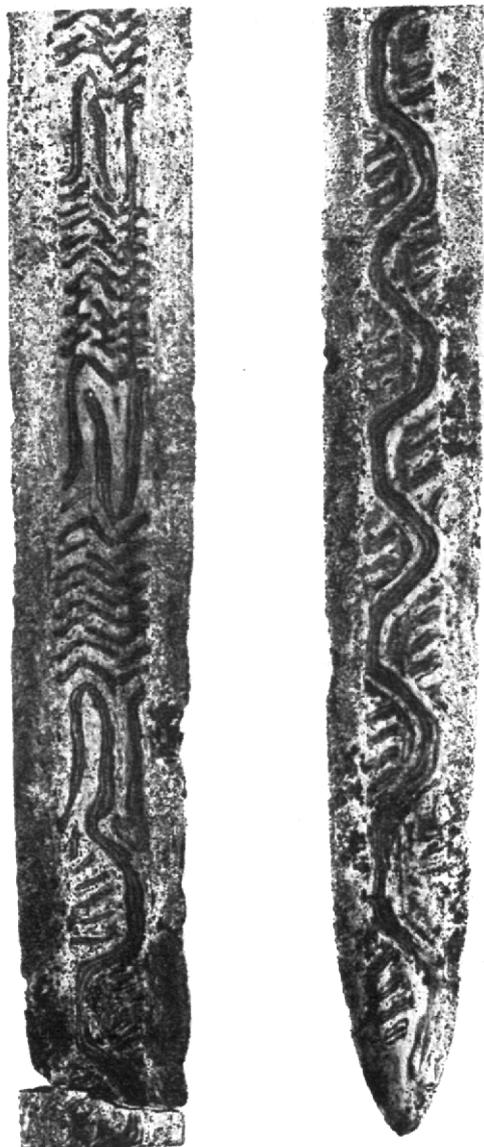
During the Migration and the Merovingian Periods, there was a belief in the supernatural virtues of stone and glass amulets attached to swords. Such finds are most frequently encountered in warrior graves of the 5th and 6th centuries. They were often placed under the upper part of the sword blade.² Archaeologists suspect that they might have been worn in special leather bags attached to the sword's scabbard (Menghin 1983, 142). The amulets themselves are formed in the shape of enlarged beads, very much like their smaller counterparts found in contemporary graves as elements of beaded necklaces.³ Sword beads were chiefly made of amber, faceted glass or faceted rock crystal, sepiolite, chalk and chalcedony. In a few instances, examples cut out of amethyst, steatite and magnesite (*ibidem*) were recorded. Scholars are convinced, that the custom of carrying such stone and glass amulets with swords originated

in the East (*ibidem*). The earliest archaeologically documented examples come from Sarmatian graves in southern Russia and are dated to the 1st century BC (Evison 1967, 64). The custom spread further west, mostly thanks to the westward expansion of the Huns (Evison 1967, 64; Menghin 1983, 142). In the territory of Poland, there is one well-documented sword bead made of amber and surmounted by a garnet stone in the gold setting. It was accompanying a sword in the grave of a Hunnic warrior found in Jakuszowice, Kazimierza Wielka district (Fig. 1:1) (Behmer 1939, Pl. XIII:2a-b). The role of such amulets has been discussed frequently in the literature in the context of old Norse literature. We learn from the sagas, that such magical objects were called "life stones" and were believed to be the only antidote for wounds inflicted by the weapon to which they belonged (see Davidson 1998, 181-182 – on the sword "Skofnung" known from "Kormak's Saga"). It was believed that even a superficial wound caused by a peculiar enchanted sword might be

¹ This paper which is based on my research published in the book (Marek 2017) was delivered to the conference: "Ways of Seeing, Ways Of Reading II: The Anthropology And Aesthetics Of Arms And Armor", Columbia University, New York Schermerhorn Hall, 612 (dates: 19.10-20.10.2018). Further research on this project was possible thanks to the Polish American Fulbright Commission and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

² A sword with the amulet fastened to the upper part of its scabbard by means of a leather strap was excavated from a grave at the cemetery of Kleinhüningen in Switzerland (Evison 1967, 64).

³ In the German literature such amulets are also called sword-beads ("Schwertperlen").



lethal. “Tyrffing”, f.e. – the sword of the fierce berserker Angantyr known from “Hervararsaga”, was regarded as a cursed weapon. Every man who had been wounded by its fiery edge was to die on the same day before dusk (Behmer 1939, 13). Rubbing the wound with a life stone which belonged to the sword was the only way to start the healing process (Oakeshott 1991, 7). The notion of venomous swords was also based on the observation of pattern-welded blades, with their patterns often deliberately formed by smiths to resemble a serpent motif visible on the surface of the blade. A good example of such a design is the sword blade find from Vehmaa Lahdinko Huolila, Finland (Fig. 1:2) (Leppäaho 1964, 66-69). Moreover, pattern-welding was made visible by etching the sword with organic acids, described generally as venom in the contemporary literature. An allusion to the process of etching a pattern-welded blade can be found in the passage on Beowulf’s sword “Hrunting” which *gleamed with twigs of venom* (Davidson 1998, 129). A belief that a serpent lived in the sword blade was expressed in the description of the mentioned sword “Skofnung” (Oakeshott 1991, 5). The sword of Sygarsholm, known from the “Elder Edda” (*Edda poetycka* 1986, 201), and given to Helgi son of Hjörward by a Valkyrie had a “serpent of blood” visible along its edge.

In my opinion, the mythology of venomous swords was based on the inability of mediaeval people to recognise, address and prevent blood contamination, which may result even from superficial wounds. Bacterial contamination must have been treated by them as the result of magic which they endeavoured to fight with magical countermeasures such as stone or glass amulets. The obvious preferences in the choice of stones for the production of the amulets were most probably related to the belief in their healing virtues. Sword amulets are known in Latin Europe mainly from archaeological contexts dated to the 5th – early 7th centuries (Menghin 1983, 144). It is interesting to note that old Norse literature is highly retrospective in mentioning such sword amulets, as compared with archaeological evidence in this respect.

Fig. 1. Lifestone and a „venomous” sword-blade: 1 – amulet from the grave of a Hun warrior, Jakuszowice, Kazimierza Wielka District, Poland, amber, gold, almandine, 1st half of the 5th century; 2 – pattern-welded sword blade, layers arranged to form a serpent motif, Vehmaa Lahdinko Huolila, Finland, ca 800 AD (1-2 – after Marek 2017).

Ryc. 1. Kamień życia i „jadowita” głownia miecza: 1 – amulet z grobu huńskiego wojownika, Jakuszowice, pow. kazimierski, Polska, bursztyn, złoto, almandyn, pierwsza połowa V w.; 2 – głownia miecza z dziwerowanym motywem węzowym, Vehmaa Lahdinko Huolila, Finlandia, ok. 800 r. (1-2 – wg Marek 2017).

Stone pommels

According to the present state of the art, it still remains an open question whether there is a link between the mentioned life stones and stone pommels mounted on swords from the High and Late Middle Ages. The apotropaic and symbolic meaning of such pommels is well confirmed, however, the choice of materials used for their manufacture differs considerably from the selection of stones for early medieval sword amulets. One can hardly find a pommel from the high- and late-medieval periods that is made of different stone than jasper or rock crystal. Previously detached and living a life of its own, the stone amulet in later swords has also become a functional element of the weapon. On the other hand, the use of medieval stone pommels as integral elements of sword-hilts, as well as the choice of material to produce them, might have originated from the ancient Mediterranean cultures independently of the old nomadic “life-stone” tradition.⁴ As confirmed by quotes from the Arthurian legends, it was often believed, however, that the magical power and the apotropaic qualities of the sword resided in its pommel (see: Malory 1925, 77: *And anon after Balin was dead, Merlin took his sword, and took off the pommel and set on another pommel. So Merlin bade a knight that stood afore him handle that sword, and he assayed, and he might not handle it. Then Merlin laughed. Why laugh ye? Said the knight. This is the cause, said Merlin: there shall never man handle this sword but the best knight of the world, and that shall be Sir Lancelot or else Galahad his son, and Lancelot with this sword shall slay the man that in the world he loved best, that shall be Sir Gawaine*).

Stone pommels on later medieval swords are in most cases disc-shaped. On the basis of their typological features, they are generally dated to the 13th-14th centuries (Scalini 2007, 204), albeit some examples are of a well-confirmed 15th century chronology (Laking 1920b, 260; Fritz 1982, 279; Bravermanová 2007, 112).

Due to the hardness of raw material to be used for this purpose, the manufacture of rock crystal pommels posed a challenge for craftsmen. It required special skill and a high level of expertise achieved first by south Italian and Catalan masters in the 12th century, and in the 13th by Venetian and Parisian craftsmen. Eventually, in the 14th century, the technique was mastered by central European manufacturers (Bravermanová 2007, 113). Early mentions of crystal pommels are present in the

“Song of Roland” (*Pieśń o Rolandzie* 1931, 46 /CVI/, 96 /CCXLVIII/), of which the earliest surviving version – the so-called “Oxford manuscript” comes from the 12th century (ibidem, 7). According to the description, the sword “Hauteclaire”, which belonged to Oliver – one of Roland’s companions had a golden hilt and a rock crystal pommel (ibidem, 46 /CVI/):

*In such a fight, there is little strength in wood,
Iron and steel should here their valour prove.
Where is your sword, that Halteclere I knew?
Golden its hilt, whereon a crystal (pommel–LM)
grew.*

*En tel bataille n’ai cure de bastun:
Fers e acers i deit avoir valor.
U est vostre espee, ki Halteclere ad num ?
D’or est li helz e de cristal li punz.*

Roland lui dit : « Compagnon, que faites-vous? En une telle bataille je n’ai cure d’un bâton. Il n’y a que le fer qui vaille, et l’acier. Où donc est votre épée, qui a nom Hauteclaire? La garde en est d’or, le pommeau de cristal.

(French quotes after *La chanson de Roland* 1938).

Sword pommels made of rock crystal are treated in the Song of Roland as an emblem of rank, not necessarily exclusive to Christian knights as we learn from the following excerpt on the sword of the Saracen king Canabeus (*Pieśń o Rolandzie*, 96 /CCXLVIII/):

*King Canabeus, brother of the admiral (emir–LM)
Has pricked his horse with spurs in either flank;
He’s drawn his sword, whose pommel is of crystal*

*Canabeus, le frère a l’amiraill,
Des esporuns ben brochet sun cheval ;
Trait ad l’espee, le punt est de cristal,
Si fiert Naimun en l’elme principal.*

Le roi Canabeu, le frère de l’émir, pique fortement des éperons son cheval. Il a tiré son épée : le pommeau en est de cristal.

The demand for rock-crystal pommels must have originated not exclusively in the love of the commissioners for a lavish display. Apart from their aesthetic quality, it seems that the pommels

⁴ A pommel fashioned out of rock-crystal used to adorn a Minoan sword is known from the temple in Malia (Castleden 2002, 4). A fine rock-crystal sword pommel belonging to a Roman spatha was found in the context dated to 256-257 AD, amidst bodies of the fallen Roman soldiers in the Tower 19 countermine at Dura Europos (James 2004, 141-142).



Fig. 2. Late medieval sword pommels made of rock crystal: 1 – 14th century, smoky quartz, Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (Inv. No A 2074); 2 – ca. 1400, Italian, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Inv. No. 42.50.159). Fot. L. Marek.

Ryc. 2. Późnośredniowieczne główki mieczy wykonane z kryształu: 1 – XIV w., kwarc dymny, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wiedeń (nr inw. A 2074); 2 – ok. 1400 r., Włochy, The Metropolitan Museum of Art w Nowym Jorku (nr inw. 42.50.159). Photo by L. Marek.

must have had deep religious and symbolic significance. The mere process of rock crystal cutting was often regarded as supernatural. According to Theophilus (Teofil Prezbiter 1998, 165) – a 12th-century Benedictine monk and author of the book on diverse arts, rock crystal could be softened for cutting only by the blood of a Buck. The custom of setting rock crystal sword pommels, after their service life had ended, into reliquaries or other consecrated votive objects is well confirmed by the existing late medieval artefacts (Hahnloser, Brugger-Koch 1985, 69, 238, Pl. 428). A 15th century Italian crucifix-reliquary with a rock-crystal pommel of a 13th-14th century date set into its base is kept in the Museo diocesano di Rieti (Inv. No 12/10316) (Scalini 2007, 136-137).⁵ According to M. Scalini, there is a pilgrim's staff surmounted by a rock-crystal sword pommel kept in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence (ibidem, 204). Rock crystal was the most common material to be used for the manufacture of reliquary capsules. Some of the

latter were set into sword pommels as in the case of the 14th century French sword kept in the Musée de l'Armée – allegedly found in a grave in Toulouse (Reverseau 1982, 23)⁶ and a similarly hilted sword from a private collection, recently published by D. Jaquet (2016, 140, Fig. 140).⁷ Apart from the quoted examples, medieval rock-crystal sword pommels are found in the most important collections of medieval arms and armour as detached hilt-elements. There is one fine pommel of smoky quartz kept at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (Fig. 2:1) (Inv. No A 2074), one at the Royal Armouries, Leeds (see: Dufty 1974, 18, Pl. 23), and one at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Fig. 2:2) (Inv. No. 42.50.159). Such pommels were manufactured and used in the 13th or 14th centuries, which may be testified to by their typological features. Unfortunately, we have neither precise information on their exact provenance nor on their original, archaeological context.⁸

⁵ Apart from the pommel the crucifix was decorated with rock-crystal recycled rosary beads (Hahnloser, Brugger-Koch 1985, 66)

⁶ The hilt elements of this sword, currently kept at the Musée de l'Armée, Paris, are decorated with silver-gilt foil. In its fuller, one can read the inscription: *NULLA DE VIRTUTIBUS TUIS MAJOR CLEMENTIA EST* (*None of your virtues could surpass clemency*). E. Oakeshott (2000, 124) believed that encapsulated in the pommel-reliquary there was a piece of fabric cut into the shape of a cross. It is difficult, however, to positively verify this opinion.

⁷ This reliquary-sword has hollow-cast silver-gilt mountings. The pommel bears an unattributed coat of arms on one side and is provided with a rock-crystal capsule containing a piece of fabric-relic on the other side. Unique in this case are also the grip – entirely cut out of rock-crystal and the blade – decorated with openwork (Jaquet 2016, 140).

⁸ I have examined personally all of the three mentioned objects and they seem genuine to me. In every case of an object's unknown provenance one needs to remain cautious, however, until hard scientific evidence resulting from specialist analysis proves its authenticity beyond any doubt.



Fig. 3. 15th century swords with pommels made of rock crystal: 1 – Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich (Inv. no. W 871); 2 – the sword of Sigismund of Luxembourg, who bequeathed it later in 1423 or 1425 to Frederick I the Belligerent, Prince-electoral of Saxony and Margrave of Meissen, Zwinger in Dresden (Inv. No. VI 361) (1 – photo by *L. Marek*; 2 – after *von Bloh 2007*).

Ryc. 3. XV-wieczne miecze z głowicami wykonanymi z kryształu: 1 – Bayerisches Nationalmuseum w Monachium (nr inw. W 871); 2 – miecz Zygmunta Luksemburskiego, który później został подарowany Fryderykowi I Kłótnikowi, elektorowi saskiemu i margrabiemu miśnieńskiemu w 1423 lub 1425 r., Zwinger, Drezno (nr inw. VI 361) (1 – fot. *L. Marek*; 2 – wg *von Bloh 2007*).

The situation is only slightly better in the case of sword relics with rock-crystal pommels, which were attributed to warrior saints and kept in church treasuries. Such objects attracted the attention of medieval scribes, hence they had a chance to be recorded in the written sources. The most obvious problem with the dating of such finds is that they have been altered by centuries of repolishing and restoration. According to the most recent

conservation report, the sword kept in the treasury of the cathedral in Seville, attributed to St Ferdinand III of Castile, is a 13th-century weapon which might have been restored to its final form in the latter half of the 14th century⁹ (Herráez Martín 2002, 38-340). Its crystal pommel consists of two carefully fitted halves unlike its contemporary parallels – usually only drilled through to take a narrow tang.

⁹ Later additions occurred but were limited to very few elements which seem to be irrelevant for our discussion.

Another crystal pommel – of a 13th- or 14th-century date – is found on the sword relic attributed to St Wenceslaus of Bohemia and kept in the treasury of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Saints Vitus, Wenceslaus and Adalbert in Prague (see: Bravermanová 2007).

The custom of mounting rock crystal pommels on swords must have survived at least until the 15th century as proven by the existing swords of this date kept at the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich (W 871) and at the Zwinger in Dresden (VI 361) (Fig. 3:1-2). The latter is probably the most emblematic weapon with a stone pommel known to date. According to the most recent state of the art the sword had been commissioned by Sigismund of Luxembourg, who bequeathed it later in 1423 or 1425 to Frederick I the Belligerent, Prince-elector of Saxony and Margrave of Meissen (von Bloh 2007, 160). The disc-shaped pommel of this sword is cut out of rock crystal and additionally decorated with an enamelled escutcheon charged with the eagle of the Holy Roman Empire on the obverse and the arms of Hungary and Bohemia on the reverse. The sword has become an official insignia of power used by the Prince-electors of Saxony from the Wettin family, however the exact point in time when it had happened remains unknown (ibidem). It seems that in the possession of Sigismund of Luxembourg this sword must have been his personal weapon. Despite the lavishness of decoration it seems to be a well-balanced, well-proportioned and serviceable weapon. Judging by the mystical and religious character of its decoration which was meant to highlight its role as the attribute of the Christian knight it was also treated as the symbol of judicial power granted by God to an earthly lord. Christological symbolism is obvious in the shape of the silver gilt quillons which resemble twisted, gnarled branches so characteristic for the arms of contemporary devotional crucifixes. The gnarled decoration was the allusion to the tree of life – the symbol of Christ's triumph over death – identified with the Holy Cross. According to the Fathers of the Church *the Lord came in the flesh and allowed the fruit of the tree of life, that is, the bread and wine of the Passover, to relieve eternal famine* (Forstner 2001, 154). The tree of life in the Revelation (22:14) is the ultimate reward and the symbol of triumph for those blessed by God. Scholars are of the opinion that the decoration of the scabbard consisting of enamelled blossoming red and white flowers on scrolling tendrils also conforms to the Paradise symbolism (von Bloh 2007, 162). The hypothesis might be true regarding the emblematic character of the sword's decoration

in general. More evidence, however, might be required to support it during future research.

Apart from the crossguard, Christological symbolism manifests itself in the choice of material used to manufacture the pommel.

According to the Christian beliefs, rock crystal was identified with light which was the emanation of omnipresent God. It was associated with the Immaculate Conception (Kobielus 2012, 117-118). In medieval art, it also symbolised the purifying character of baptism and the incarnation of Christ (Kirschbaum 2004a, 579). Medieval Bible interpreters and philosophers claimed that rock crystal symbolised the purest, most transparent and flawless body of the Saviour (Kobielus 2012, 118-119).

The emblematic sword of the electors of Saxony seems to correspond well to the symbolic meaning of the weapon painted by Dirk Bouts on the Altarpiece of the Holy Sacrament ca. 1464 (Fig. 4). The latter is worn by Abraham at his side in a scene depicting the Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek. Melchizedek, king of Salem is shown as the archpriest greeting Abraham returning from his victorious battle with bread and wine. The patriarch's sword is equipped with a transparent rock-crystal pommel. In Christian iconography, according to the New Testament Melchizedek was chiefly depicted in scenes of the Eucharist, where he might be identified with Christ himself as archpriest (Kirschbaum 2004b, 241-242). In the scene of the Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek by Dirk Bouts, the depicted rock crystal sword pommel is not merely a result of the artist's fancy. Identified with the body of Christ it must have been painted there as a symbol of the Eucharist. This emblematic detail, in my opinion, might have been added by the artist after the advice of two professors in theology who the artist was obliged to consult during his work on the masterpiece. It has the same mystical meaning as the pommel found on the sword of the Prince-electors of Saxony. Peter Cellensis, a Benedictine monk living in the 12th century wrote that *the Lord has sent the rock crystal of his blameless body, as if it was bread for those who suffer from famine to be fed, for those who are ill to be cured, and those healthy to be supported and strengthened* (Kobielus 2012, 119). The Christian religious and mystical attributes of rock crystal are most prominent in the emblematic meaning of the sword of Sigismund of Luxembourg. Nevertheless, we cannot underestimate the role of older pagan beliefs in the choice of such a material for the manufacture of its pommel. In the Classical Age, rock crystal was believed to bring luck and possess



Fig. 4. Rock crystal sword pommel as the symbol of the body of Christ, Altarpiece of the Holy Sacrament, Dirk Bouts, ca. 1464 (after https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dieric_Bouts_-_The_Meeting_of_Abraham_and_Melchizedek_-_WGA03010.jpg –access 29.03.2019).

Ryc. 4. Kryształowa głowica miecza jako symbol ciała Chrystusa, Ołtarz Eucharystii, Dirk Bouts, ok. 1464 (wg https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dieric_Bouts_-_The_Meeting_of_Abraham_and_Melchizedek_-_WGA03010.jpg – dostęp 29.03.2019).

healing and apotropaic qualities (von Bloh 2007, 162). In treasury inventories from the German-speaking lands, there are descriptions of amulets of rock crystal which, according to the contemporaries, served to cool down the body heat or to stop fever (Syndram 2007, 49). In a list of personal belongings of Frederick I the Belligerent – the owner of the sword – one can find a pendant of rock crystal kept in a special case and described as a *Heil – und Schutzkugel* (healing and protective ball) (ibidem, 49). The latter most probably resembled similar ball- (F 4808, F 502) or hand-shaped amulets (F 12771) still preserved in the collection of the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin. The medieval beliefs related to the cooling properties of rock crystal originated in Antiquity. Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* (Plinius 1845, 429) described rock crystal as fossilised ice, which still retained its cooling virtues. This opinion has been copied since then by Christian philosophers (Kobielus 2012, 121).



Fig.5. Eschatological and judicial symbolism of the rock crystal sword pommel, The Dresden Triptych, Jan van Eyck, ca. 1437 (after Heath 2008).

Ryc.5. Eschatologiczna i sądowa symbolika kryształowej głowicy miecza, Tryptyk Drezdeński, Jan van Eyck, około 1437 r. (wg Heath 2008).

A crystal sword pommel could be also associated with the fairness of the judges, according to the passage from the book of Ezekiel (I:22), where there is a mention on a vault sparkling like crystal spread out above the heads of the living creatures. According to medieval Bible exegetes, the latter symbolised the clemency of Christ towards those who are just, and his severity for those who fell (Kobielus 2012, 120). It is interesting to note that on the so-called Dresden Triptych by Jan van Eyck, a rock crystal-pommeled sword is the attribute of Archangel Michael, highlighting his expected judicial role in the Last Judgement (Fig. 5) (see: Heath 2008, 112-113 for further discussion on the ideal of the biblical Just Judge – an important context in which one should view the Dresden Triptych and its donor). Christ as the ruler of the world and the supreme judge was often depicted in Gothic altar painting with the imperial orb made of rock-crystal (von Bloh 2007, 162). The decoration of pommels was often used to express the emblematic role of a sword as an instrument of justice. For example, on the pommel of the 13th-century coronation sword of the Polish kings, f. e. one can read *Haec figura valet ad*

amorem regum et principum, iras iudicum (This sign rouses the love of kings and princes and the wrath of judges) (Żygulski 2008, 318).

The sword of Sigismundus of Luxembourg is of key importance for the understanding of the emblematic character of rock-crystal pommel swords of the Middle Ages.

It combines the qualities of a sword and a cross of victory – the tree of life (von Bloh 2007, 162). It is worth stressing that its first commissioner and owner – Sigismund of Luxembourg – was involved in anti-Hussite crusades. This had an impact on the ideological contents of the sword's emblematics. Christological and crusader motifs in its decoration highlighted its role as the weapon of the true *Militis Christi* – the sword of the rightful judge used to bring chaos into order in his war-torn kingdom.

The rock crystal pommel was a sign of divine blessing of the judicial power. It symbolised the sacrifice of Christ, which well explains why such elements after the service life of a sword were set into reliquaries, thus securing them from desecration. The emblematic character of rock crystal pommels had been influenced by older beliefs according to which such elements had apotropaic, healing and cooling virtues. Reminiscences of such beliefs can be found in the description of the finest sword known from the 13th century Vulgate Lancelot cycle. The story tells that it could be wielded only by the best knight, who as we learn from the further passages, was Sir Galahad, the one to meet the spiritual standards of the Quest for the Holy Grail. The precious weapon was *the sword of King David, the richest and most marvellous sword ever forged, and the sharpest ever found or wielded by a knight's hand*. Its blade was mounted with a hilt by his son Solomon, *he who knew more than anyone else about the properties of stones and the power of herbs took his father's sword, which he treasured as much as he would a reliquary, from the temple. Then (...) he put a single stone in the pommel, but it was of all the colours one could find or speak of. And every colour had its own specific property (...). Then he made the rich and beautiful pommel, as the story has already told, putting great thought into it* (Boulenger 1987, 97). From another part of the text, we learn that *this sword was very unusual, for the pommel was made out of a stone that had in it all the colours found on earth. The stone was of all these colours, and it had other unusual characteristics, for each of the colors had a quality that the story will certainly tell about when it speaks more of its power and strength than here. Next, the story says that the hilt of the sword was made of two ribs that came from different animals.*

The first was from a kind of serpent that lives in Caledonia more than in any other land and is called Papagustes. The power of this serpent is such that if any man holds one of its ribs or any of its other bones, he has no fear of feeling the great heat, either from the sun's strength or from the heat of work; rather, as long as he holds it, he is always moderately warm. The first rib is like this and it has this power. The other rib is from a fish that is not very large, and that lives in the Euphrates River and no other waters. This fish is called Cortenans. Its ribs possess such power that if any man takes one, as long as he holds it, he will not remember any of the joys or sorrows he has had except the one thing that caused him to take the rib. The cooling properties of one of the hilt's components seem particularly interesting in the context of the mentioned beliefs on the magical qualities of rock-crystal. Moreover it seems to magically counterbalance the often fiery character of the sword blade. It is interesting to note that in the written sources, and among them particularly in the knightly literature, one can find numerous comparisons of swords to flaming torches (Huther 2014, 12). E.g., the name of the famous sword "Tizón" which belonged to El Cid, is translated explicitly as „the flaming torch" (ibidem, 13). In Polish the term for the sword-blade – "głownia" derives directly from the word: torch.

Apotropaism and crusader symbolism are related to jasper – the other most popular stone material used in the Middle Ages to manufacture sword-pommels. In comparison with rock crystal, its meaning was not that strongly related to Christology (see: Kobielius 2012, 67). Amulets of jasper were believed to protect the wearer against poison, wild animals and illness already in the Mediterranean, in pre-Christian times (Forstner 2001, 139). Jasper, thus worn, according to classical lapidaries, was so powerful that it would cure fertility problems or improve oratory skills. It symbolised the power of true faith, according to medieval Christian beliefs (Kirschbaum 2004a, 579). Jasper was mentioned in the Bible as the foundation stone of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:18). In the Revelation of St John (21:11) it is written that *Heavenly Jerusalem shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal*. According to the prophecy of Isaiah, the towers of the eschatological Jerusalem will be built of jasper (54:12) (*and I shall build thy towers out of jasper, and thy gates out of firestones, and all thy boundary stones shall be jewels*) (Kobielius 2012, 67). Jasper also symbolises St Peter as the foundation stone of the Church – according to the first words of the

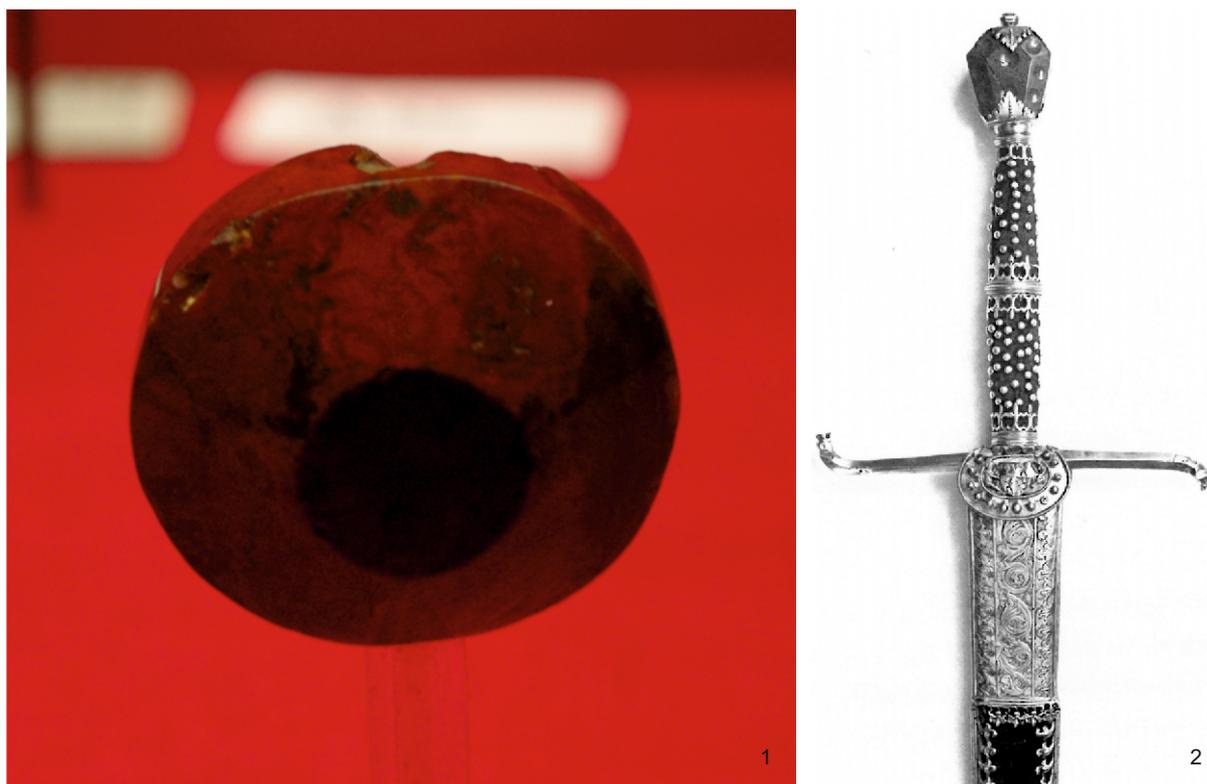


Fig.6. Late medieval sword pommels made of jasper: 1 – 14th century, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Inv. no. A 2073); 2 – on the sword of the bishops of Würzburg, Germany. Originally commissioned by bishop John III of Grumbach (1455-1466) (1 – *photo by L. Marek*; 2 – after *Fritz 1982*).

Ryc.6. Późnośredniowieczne głowice mieczy wykonane z jaspisu: 1 – XIV w., Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wiedeń (nr inw. A 2073); 2 – na mieczu biskupów Würzburga, Niemcy. Pierwotnie zamówiony przez biskupa Jana III z Grumbach (1455-1466) (1 – *fot. L. Marek*; 2 – wg *Fritz 1982*).

Christian “Credo” (ibidem, 69). Marbod of Rennes wrote, that jasper protected its wearer against thunderstorms and hallucinations (ibidem, 67-68). According to Konrad Gesner, a 16th-century Swiss naturalist, jasper was a strong amulet against illness and all enemies (Morgan 2008, 105). Even more relevant for our discussion is the opinion of the early modern Jesuit and exegete – Cornelius a Lapide, according to whom the stone had the ability to teach those philosophers who were not aware of the existence of the Holy Trinity the truth about the only God – the Creator of the Universe (Kobielius 2012, 69). Therefore, jasper would have had the magical virtue of converting Pagans into Christians.

On the basis of the morphological analysis, most of the existing sword pommels made of jasper could be dated to the 13th/14th centuries. There is at least one example of such a pommel kept in the Royal Armouries, Leeds (Dufty 1974, 18, Fig. 23), one in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (No. A 2073) (Fig. 6:1) and two in the British Museum (Laking 1920a, 138, Fig. 171:a-b). Unfortunately, as in the case of the majority of

existing sword pommels made of stone, their chronology may be based only on typological comparisons. We do not have any information on their original archaeological context. There is, however, one better documented, but considerably later sword with a jasper pommel. Since the 15th century it has been used by the bishops of Würzburg in Germany (Fig. 6:2). Originally it must have been commissioned by Bishop John III of Grumbach (1455-1466), as indicated by his coat of arms on the sword’s cross-guard (Fritz 1982, 279). The emblematic sword – insignia of rank used by the bishops of Würzburg was kept in the treasury of the cathedral in Bamberg.¹⁰ The jasper pommel might be regarded here as an emblematic allusion to the quoted passages from the New Testament. Just like the jasper walls of the eschatological Jerusalem, the jasper-pommeled sword was meant to stand in firm defence of the Christian faith. The stone pommel of the described sword strengthened its ideological meaning as the official and ceremonial insignia of the bishop. The latter was treated in the medieval period as a spiritual and a secular lord at the same time. He was also a person vested with

¹⁰ Currently kept at the Residenz Museum, Munich.

judicial power who had the right of bearing a sword as an emblem of his judicial rank (see: Sanke 2012, 396-400).

More difficult to interpret is the exact meaning of the anonymous, detached jasper pommels from the 13th/14th centuries. Most probably they were treated as amulets against dangers of battle and during travel, according to medieval folk beliefs which were still deeply rooted in the classical pagan tradition. At the same time, a jasper pommel symbolised hope for resurrection and eternal life inside the walls of the New Jerusalem. In the latter case, the emblematics of jasper pommels might have been related to crusader ideology.

In the writings of Christian philosophers one can find mentions on the green type of jasper (see: Kobieliński 2012, 68), whereas all of the existing sword pommels are made of the red type of jasper. "As green as grass" is also the jasper pommel of Sigfried's sword in the "Song of the Nibelungs" (*Pieśń o Nibelungach* 1995, 246, verses 1783-1784).¹¹ The weapon was recognised by Krimhilda in the hands of Hagen of Tronege, a mischievous and fierce warrior and the assassin of her beloved husband. Thus, as we learn from the knightly literature jasper was used to manufacture the pommels of most luxurious weapons attributed to the greatest heroes of the middle ages.¹² It is interesting that for a medieval eye the noted difference between the red and green types of jasper was not as obvious as to us today. As pointed out by Michel Pastoureaux – a French historian who devoted his numerous studies to the subject of colour perception in the Middle Ages – red and green were not recognised as contrasting colours by medieval people (Pastoureaux 2006, 135). The latter was the result of a different mediaeval order of colours – different than the one based on the later discovery of the spectrum (ibidem, 138).

Conclusions

Stone amulets carried with ancient and early medieval swords found in Europe were believed to possess magical healing powers, to be a remedy for wounds, while some kinds of them were supposed to protect against heat. The knowledge on such

properties of stones was a derivative of local folk beliefs and of information from lapidaries compiled by erudites of the Classical world. In the High and Late Middle Ages, such amulets were replaced with sword pommels – chiefly made of jasper and rock crystal. The sphere of pagan symbolism related to these stones – a clear reminiscence of ancient Mediterranean tradition – was enriched with a Christian mystical dimension, making use of relevant quotations from the Bible. Rock crystal was identified with the body of Christ and jasper with the foundation rock on which the walls of heavenly Jerusalem were built. Swords with stone pommels were attributes of those who met the highest mystical standards of the Order of Chivalry. Attributed to sovereigns and high ranking knights, such weapons might have been regarded *par excellence* as Biblical swords of secular justice. The stone pommel was a sign of divine blessing of the judicial power bestowed by God on an earthly lord. Such swords were mainly meant for ceremonial purposes, which does not rule out their use as a personal weapon. Stone, however, was not the best choice of material for a sword pommel. It was extremely susceptible to mechanical stress as shown by the damaged rock-crystal example mounted on the mentioned fighting sword from the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. This leads to a conclusion that the symbolic and apotropaic meaning of such stone pommels overshadowed their practical role as hilt elements.

The main conclusion is that the knowledge of ancient amulets possessed by copyists who worked in medieval scriptoria was disseminated by learned scholars of the Church. Old Mediterranean and local pagan folk magic were integrated with the Christian doctrine instead of being instantly rejected and condemned. This was a well-known peaceful strategy of the Church based on the adoption of selected folk beliefs which did not threaten Christian dogmas.

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¹¹ *Hagene der starke der leit über bein
Ein vil liehtez wäfen, üz des knopfe erschein
Ein vil liehter jaspes, grüener danne ein gras:
Wol erkandez Kriemhilt, daz ez ê Sivrides was* (after *Das Nibelungenlied* 1871, 272, verses: 1783-1784).

(The overweening Hagen across his knees laid down
A bare and shining weapon, upon whose pommel shone
A very brilliant jasper, greener than grass.
Kriemhilda well remembered that it was Siegfried's sword)

¹² It is interesting to note that the description of Siegfried's sword is not retrospective in this case and must have been inspired by an existing weapon contemporary to the 12th/13th-century author of the *Nibelungenlied* manuscript.

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Lech Marek

KAMIENIE ŻYCIA I KAMIENNE GŁOWICE JAKO AMULETY PRZY ŚREDNIOWIECZNYCH MIECZACH. DZIEDZICTWO STAROŻYTNOŚCI KLASYCZNEJ

Streszczenie

Kamiennym amuletom noszonym w komplecie z mieczami starożytnymi i wczesnośredniowiecznymi znajduwanymi na terenie Europy przypisywano w czasach ich użytkowania właściwości lecznicze. Uważano, że są one jedynym remedium na rany zadane mieczem, a niektóre z nich miały chronić właściciela miecza przed gorącem. Wiedza o takich własnościach kamieni była pochodną barbarzyńskich wierzeń ludowych oraz informacji z lapidariów stworzonych przez erudyty świata klasycznego. W późnym średniowieczu zastąpiono

omawiane amulety głowicami mieczowymi wykonanymi głównie z dwóch gatunków kamienia: jaspisu i kryształu górskiego. Sferę symboliki pogańskiej, związanej z tymi kamieniami, wzbogacono o wymiar mistyczny, wykorzystując stosowne cytaty z Pisma Świętego. Kryształ górski utożsamiano z ciałem Chrystusa, a jaspis z opoką, na której wzniesiono mury niebiańskiej Jerozolimy. Na podstawie średniowiecznej literatury możemy sądzić, że miecze z kamiennymi głowicami postrzegano jako atrybut jedynie tych, którzy spełniali

surowe standardy „zakonu rycerstwa”. Przynależne suwerenom oraz elicie rycerstwa, broń taką traktowano *par excellence* jako biblijne miecze sprawiedliwości doczesnej. Kamienna głowica była w tym przypadku traktowana jako symbol błogosławieństwa prawa do sądenia ludzi na ziemi, które, jak wierzone, sam Bóg przyznawał świeckiemu władcy. Omawiana broń miała przede wszystkim charakter ceremonialny, choć istnieją także przykłady montowania kryształowych i jaspisowych głowic na mieczach *stricte* bojowych. Kamień, z uwagi na swoją kruchość, nie był najlepszym materiałem do produkcji elementów oprawy miecza, co uświadamiają nam najlepiej uszkodzenia kryształowej głowicy wspomnianego bojowego miecza z Bayerisches Nationalmuseum w Monachium. Możemy więc sądzić, że przede wszystkim symbo-

liczne, a nie praktyczne względy decydowały o wykorzystaniu kamienia do oprawiania mieczy w późnym średniowieczu.

Wiedza o starożytnych amuletach przetrwała do średniowiecza dzięki kopistom pracującym w skryptoriach oraz myślicielom chrześcijańskim korzystającym z kulturowego dorobku świata starożytnego. Krzewiciele chrześcijaństwa starali się tam, gdzie to tylko było możliwe, unikać otwarcie konfrontacyjnej postawy wobec dawnych wierzeń. Stosowali oni metodę akomodacji. Elementy pogańskiej magii ludowej i wiary w moc kamieni zostały więc włączone do oficjalnej doktryny kościoła. Przydając dawnym amuletom wymiaru mistycznego poprzez wykorzystanie odpowiednich cytatów z Biblii, stworzono z nich symbole odpowiednie do ozdobienia miecza należącego do chrześcijańskiego rycerza.