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‘FROM THE FIELD OF WATERLOO?’ – The dating of French cavalry sabres

by

Paul Wilcock

One of the fascinations for those who collect edged weapons is being able to locate a sword in a particular historical place. It is a great attraction to hold a cavalry sabre that might have been carried at a famous charge during the Peninsula campaign, the retreat from Moscow, or even perhaps have taken the field of Waterloo. The attraction in the UK, of collecting French swords probably began in earnest after Waterloo from where it has always been assumed that large numbers found their way back to London as part of the spoils of war. Placing British swords in an historical context can prove difficult given that with the exception of some officer's swords British cavalry swords were undated until the 1882 pattern. For the collector of French cavalry sabres the situation appears somewhat easier but is not without its complexities.

From before the French Revolution the manufactory at Klingenthal produced blades bearing both inspection marks (often as many as three) and in many cases inscriptions on the back strap of the sword. The earliest examples of dated inscriptions came as a result of an order in April 1810¹, after which not only could the swords be historically located from the inspection stamps, but now could be even more accurately placed from the dated inscriptions. Production of swords was both regulated and monitored and documentation exists from contemporary sources detailing production figures at Klingenthal². On 26th February 1813 Napoleon detailed in a letter³ his new organisation for the cavalry and as a result the quantity of swords to be manufactured at Klingenthal increased considerably, although the targets set were probably unrealistic, and the nature of the disarray in France in 1813 and 1814 meant that even some of the swords produced did not always reach their destinations with active units.

After the Restoration there was a major revision of arms production in France. By 1816, a new model of sabre for both light and heavy cavalry was proposed along with a variety of amendments to current stock including the spear pointing of

¹ Article 11 of the ‘Bail d’entreprise’ of Klingenthal, dated 29th April 1810. cited in Aries C., *Armes Blanches Militaires Francaise*, Fasc. XXX, Nantes 1990

² Detailed in ‘Archives d’Artillerie, etat General des Armes Blanches, depuis le 23 Septembre 1803 jusqu’en 1821’ Variant statistics are given in Bottet’s 1903 volume about the manufactory at Versailles.

³ Detaille E. & Richard J., *L’Armee Francaise*, Paris 1885

heavy cavalry sword blades and the replacement of scabbards for the heavy cavalry sabres. At around the same time the patronage for the national manufacturing base for sword blades moved much of its patronage from Klingenthal to Chatellerault which began producing the first government orders for the 1816 pattern in 1820⁴ Klingenthal continued in production until the mid 1830's after which it fell into private ownership only finally ceasing the manufacture of blades for farm implements in the 1960's. However, the practice of detailed marking of the back straps of the swords continued to give the collector the added advantage of being able to place the sword in a defined historical context.

As in Britain, French cavalry swords followed regulation patterns, 1816, 1822, 1854 and finally 1882. The advantage in France was that because production was focussed on a national manufacturing base, control and distribution should have been easier to monitor. Figures are available for the period from 1802-1820 at Klingenthal⁵ where detailed accounts are given for the production of specific models issued to the different branches of the cavalry. Volumes such as Petard, Blondieau, L'Hoste & Rezek⁶ give detailed descriptions of the progress of the development of cavalry swords during this period. As improvements were made the new swords were issued but there is a tacit assumption that as one pattern appears, its predecessor relatively quickly disappears and very little is made of the fact that thousands of these sabres actually remained in circulation both with the National Guard and the Reserve. An article in *Gazette des Armes*⁷, points out that at the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War for example there were still 25,000 ANXI - ANXIII (1802-4) heavy cavalry sabres available for distribution. This may not be too surprising because in a volume dated 1845 produced by the Ministry of War the life expectancy of a standard cavalry sabre was described as being 50 years!⁸. There was also no doubt that some units were very reluctant to change from the popular ANXIII straight bladed sabre to the new curved 1822 model and there is anecdotal evidence supporting suggestions that some Cuirassier regiments did all in their power to retain their favoured straight bladed sabres.

During the last century, many French heavy cavalry swords appeared in British auction houses carrying the obligatory tag "picked up on the field of Waterloo". In terms of an attractive context for the collector this was undoubtedly one of the best. But then, after examining more than thirty examples in two private collections and at the Royal Armouries, two curious contradictions were offered.

⁴ L'Hoste J. & Buigne J.J., *Armes Blanches*. Editions Portail, 1999

⁵ 'Archives d'Artillerie etc.'

⁶ Details of these volumes are listed in the references

⁷ *Gazette des Armes*. Hors Serie No 11, *La Guerre Franco-allemande 1870-1871 – L'Armement Francais*. Paris 2001

⁸ *Theorie sur l'administration et la comptabilite de la cavalerie*, Paris 1845

The first may prove to be of great interest for collectors of French cavalry swords. It has become increasingly clear both from the examination of the scabbards of ANXIII sabres in British collections, and the dates on blades of French cavalry swords, that either government instructions were somewhat flexible, or there was a good deal of license at the production base or at regimental level. There is no doubt that for economic reasons some blades were fitted with new replacement hilts, and in some cases to assist uniformity new blades were fitted into older hilts. This is certainly evident from the number of examples of hilts attached to original blades, however there are some examples that fit neither explanation and are more curious.

In private collections in the UK there are a number of examples of sabres where the blade has been manufactured to a much earlier pattern. In one case an ANXIII cavalry sabre, identical in every way to those produced during the Napoleonic Wars has a blade dated 1835 and marked *soie acier* (steel tang). Similarly an 1816 light cavalry sabre of entirely consistent production with those produced before the new 1822 model came into being, but bearing a date of 1833. Both these swords were produced at Klingenthal.

Perhaps the most strange is again an ANXIII heavy cavalry sabre with the correct hilt, basket and style of blade but produced at Chatellerault, and bearing the date 1844! This is particularly remarkable given the fact that this form of blade was apparently discontinued before Chatellerault became a government manufactory.

The second contradiction was provided not by the swords but by the scabbards. French texts and in particular Aries (1966 2nd facsimile) showed that this model of heavy cavalry sword was originally issued in Year XI (1802) with a scabbard that was of iron, .95mm thick, wood lined, broad flat ring bands and a symmetrical drag shoe of the 'lyre' shape. As with its light cavalry counterpart this scabbard was thought to be too flimsy and prone to damage and bending, especially if the horse went down. So a monstrously heavy iron scabbard was introduced, now 2.5mm thick, with a wide mouthpiece, still wood lined and with the lyre shaped drag shoe⁹. The French references also quoted the "1816 modifications" which refer to the spear pointing of the blades, the other modification being the introduction of the '1816' scabbard made from unlined sheet steel, two rounded ring bands and a symmetrical drag shoe of a plainer design than the '*dard de lyre*' type. All but two of the swords examined had this '1816' pattern scabbard and indeed were also spear pointed. This would apparently rule out their recovery prior to 1816 and from the field of Waterloo.

The '1816' scabbards carry their own answer in the form of inspection stamps on either the mouthpiece, the ring lug on the top band or the drag shoe and in some instances in all three places. From the range of samples examined the stamps come from the Chatellerault armoury during a period 1842 to 1864 so it may be a fairly safe assumption, given the scabbard dates and the availability, that the bulk

⁹ Cotty, H., Memoire sur la fabrication des armes portatives de guerre. Paris 1806

of these swords were still in France in 1870 and possibly still available for issue in 1914. It seems probable however that from the inspection marks and inscriptions on the sword blades themselves, production of certain models may have continued in some cases for almost 30 years after new patterns were authorised.

The conclusions to this, perhaps lead to more questions than answers. What is clear is that though the French production system was heavily controlled yet there were still interesting anomalies to make this a fascinating area for the collector of French cavalry swords. It also means that in some cases swords dismissed by inexperienced dealers as fakes or at best having been tampered with might in fact be of significant historical importance. It certainly means that there is more scope for further research into the thinking behind the production, deployment and distribution of some of the finest cavalry swords the world has ever seen.

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