PAN
AMSTERDAM

MANDARIN MANSION

17th century nimcha with Dutch hilt

Materials: Steel, iron, brass, boxwood
Dating: 17th century
Markings: "Genoa"
Origin: Blade from Europe, guard from Algeria, and wooden grip is Dutch

An interesting sword of a type that was famously used by Barbary corsair pirates who raided European ships and coastal towns in search for slaves for the Arab market.

The blade is marked "GENOA," a town known for assembly and trade rather than large-scale sword production. The blade probably came from Brescia or Milan and it shape can be dated to circa 1590-1600. Such export blades were soon also copied in North Africa and are most commonly associated with Algeria, but here we have the originator.

The sturdy iron hilt is a typical North African nimcha form, with a knuckleguard and three quillons, and suggests the blade once belonged to a classic nimcha set of scabbard and mountings. The gip, however, is Dutch in style, executed in

carved boxwood. It depicts a figure in a scarf and a textile headdress with well-defined, piercing eyes set deep in its sockets. On the "belly" of the figure is a face, called saterkop in Dutch. The ferrule is gilt brass and the peening at the top also uses a gilr brass washer.

Historical background

Dutch merchant ships dominated maritime trade around Europe in the 17th century, but were frequently attacked by Barbary corsairs. These were Muslim pirates who attacked merchant ships for both their cargo and their crews, whom they sold into slavery or sold back to their families for a ransom. Dutch privateers and the Dutch navy frequently clashed with these pirates, sometimes capturing their swords. Among the more famous of those are two nimcha captured from Barbary pirates by Dutch naval hero Michiel de Ruyter, now in the Rijksmuseum, accession numbers NG-NM-10412 and NG-NM-10413.

These pirate crews often had multicultural crews and various Dutch people were known to have joined them. One of the most famous of them is Jan Janszoon van Haarlem, who was abducted in 1618 near Lanzarote. He converted to Islam, and took the name Murad Reis the Younger. He quickly rose through the ranks and in 1619 and founded and headed the pirate Republic of Salé as its "Grand Admiral". Then there was "Simon the Dancer" of Dordrecht, who made a name during the 80-year war as a privateer, taking over many Spanish vessels and eventually joining the Barbary corsairs who had great respect for his exploits. They called him the Devil Captain and he lived in a lavish palace in Algiers, before being betrayed and executed. And then there was Ivan Dirkie de Veenboer, also kown as Sulayman Reis. Like Simon he initially started as a privateer for the Dutch republic, but later became an officer under Simon the Dancer. He converted to Islam and changed his name to Süleyman Reis. In his later years, he commanded the entire pirate fleet of Algiers.

So how did this sword come to being? The blade was likely purchased in Genoa for use among the Barbary corsairs who favored this kind of blade. It was in North Africa where it got its characteristic nimcha style guard and most likely was once fully mounted as a nimcha. At some point it must have ended up in Dutch hands, probably it was captured from a Barbary pirate.