

# Development of swords

## 1 Early swords

Between AD 300 and AD 900 a longer sword was developed. This had a two-edged blade and blunt tip and was designed for slashing and cutting at an opponent. These blades were often 'pattern-welded', that is made of steel and iron twisted and hammer-welded together, into the body of the blade. This allowed a more even distribution of strength. The blade was also fullered (grooved) to make it lighter and more flexible. The hilt was made up of a pommel, which balanced the weight of the blade, together with a simple cross-guard to protect the hand and the sword grip.

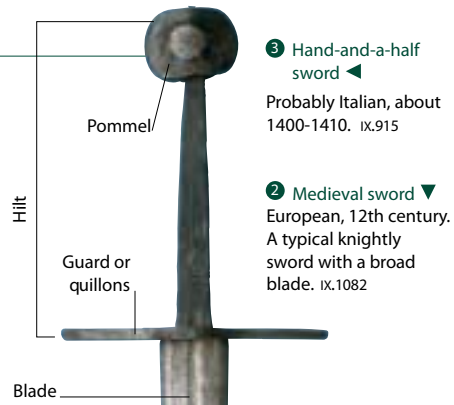
## 2 3 Medieval

Swords were expensive possessions and throughout the Middle Ages the knight came to be identified by his sword. The typical knightly sword had a straight, centrally grooved blade designed for cutting and a simple cross-guard. It symbolised wealth and power, as well as being a first-class fighting weapon.

As body armour developed the two-edged slashing blade became longer and had a stronger, more needle-like point that could penetrate gaps in an opponent's plate armour. The sword-grip was also extended to allow it to be wielded with either one or two hands to enable the user to deliver more powerful blows.

In the 15th century two-handed swords were developed for fighting on foot. Finer control of the blade could be obtained by looping the forefinger over the guard (or quillons) and so, from the 14th century a loop was sometimes added to protect the finger. During the 15th century knuckle-guards and further loops, constructed around the quillon, developed to protect the hand.

1 Early sword ► Possibly Scandinavian, 900-1150. IX.859



3 Hand-and-a-half sword ◀ Probably Italian, about 1400-1410. IX.915

2 Medieval sword ▼ European, 12th century. A typical knightly sword with a broad blade. IX.1082



## 4 5 Renaissance

Renaissance Europe saw the development of the art of fencing and a greater emphasis on the use of the point emerged. Civilian swords, such as the rapier, had long, lighter blades and sharp points, designed primarily for thrusting, and developed complicated guards. The military broadsword retained its cutting edges and by the late 16th century, as the wearing of armour declined, the hand was also often enclosed in a combination of bars and plates to protect against the thrust.

Cavalry and infantry swords also tended to have basket hilts, the latter of less complex construction. Civilian swords however, not requiring robust construction became lighter, and shorter. The 'small sword' became a decorative, though still lethal, component of a gentleman's attire.

## 6 7 Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution in the West brought about the standardization of parts. From about 1700 many countries introduced regulation issue swords, such as the British patterns for the Heavy Cavalry trooper's sword and the Light Cavalry officer's sword, both of 1796. Military swords often had hilts formed of brass or steel and cavalry swords had long curved blades designed for cutting. As the battlefield became increasingly dominated by firepower the sword declined, surviving only as a badge of military rank. Swords remained part of male civilian costume until the late 18th century but are now confined to either being presented by the State in gratitude to successful soldiers or public servants, or for ceremonial purposes and court duties only. (See page 53).

4 Rapier ▼ Italian, about 1600. The whole hilt is damascened in gold. XI.869

5 Small sword ▼ French, Paris, about 1777. The chiselled steel hilt is decorated with four coloured gold. The blade is blued and gilt. IX.936



6 Cavalry sword ◀ Pattern 1796 Light Cavalry officer's sword, dated 1798. Made in Birmingham by a major government contractor, Thomas Gill. IX.835

7 Cavalry sword ► Pattern 1796 Heavy Cavalry trooper's sword, made in Birmingham about 1800. IX.2710

