

Royal Regalia: a sword of the last Sultan of Darfur, Ali Dinar

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Introduction

Ali Dinar, son of Zakariyya, son of Muhammad al-Fadl, son of Abd al-Rahman inherited the throne of the Keira or Fur Sultanate of Darfur in 1893 which he reigned over as Sultan from 1898 to 1916.¹ The Sultanate had come to power in the mid-17th century whereupon it spread westward towards modern Chad from the area of Jebel Marra, then eastward where el-Fashir was established as its capital (1791-1792). Ali Dinar was the last Sultan of the Fur Sultanate. In March 1916, Anglo-Egyptian Condominium troops invaded Darfur and Ali Dinar was killed in November of the same year after exchanging fire with troops pursuing him. Darfur was then annexed into Sudan (Holt and Daly 2000, 110; MacMichael 1954, 94-96; O'Fahey 2008, 297-299).²

Kaskara swords

Swords have played, and still play, an important role in Sudanese culture and traditional sword and knife makers remain to this day in places such as Kassala, in eastern Sudan.³ 'In the central and eastern Sudan, from Chad through Darfur and across to the Red Sea province, the straight, double-edged swords known as *kaskara* were an essential possession of most men' (Spring 1993, 41). The sword was a weapon, notably wielded during the 19th century battles of the Mahdiya. It was also a means of self-defence and protection that is still carried by nomadic pastoralists, such as the Beja, when travelling, accompanying flocks or herds to distant grazing lands as has been observed recently by some of the authors in Nile State and Red Sea State, and similarly observed in northern Darfur by G. Reed in 1984-1985 (Reed 1987, 170). A man carrying a sword 'projects the image that he is ready to settle old disputes and is not afraid to contract new ones if the situation dictates' (Hunley 2010, 36).

¹ For a complete genealogy of the Keira Sultans see O'Fahey 2008, 40, diagram 1.

² For detailed discussions of the reign of Ali Dinar, associated documents and letters, and the history of the period, topics that are beyond the scope of this paper but which place the *kaskara* swords of the period in context, see for example, Gillian 1939; Holt and Daly 2000, 110-111; MacMichael 1934; 1954, especially 91-101; O'Fahey 2007; 2008; O'Fahey and Abu Salim 1983; O'Fahey and Spaulding 1974; Slight 2010; Spaulding and Kapteijns 1994; Theobald 1965; Yusuf Fadl Hasan 2003, 83-98.

³ Observed by J. Anderson in 1991. See further Hunley 2010, appendix 2 for a detailed discussion of sword and knife production in Kassala. See also Hunley 2010, appendix 1 for further discussion of the history and role of the sword and knife in Sudanese culture. Of course, the use of swords in the Nile Valley of various types, not including *kaskara*, can be traced back to ancient times.

Swords are also ritual objects waved along with sticks during modern political rallies, festivals, religious ceremonies including those practiced by various sufi orders, and they are carried and displayed at weddings by bridegrooms. Their use in the latter case is fraught with symbolism. 'Among many families, the father of the groom presents his son with a gift of a sword and a Qu'ran. The Qu'ran symbolizes this Islamic way of life, and the sword connotes the determination to fight for its preservation' (Hunley 2010, 36).

Kaskara swords have a distinctive appearance. They are double-edged broadswords with a cruciform cross-guard and disc-shaped pommel, roughly a metre in length. The edges run parallel to one another until just before the blade's tip (Plate 1). It is thought that the form has changed little since the 16th century (Hunley 2010, 39). They are sheathed in scabbards with a metal chape, consisting of a wood core wrapped in leather, and can be carried in several different ways.⁴ The scabbard is spatulate in shape at the distal end. This shape may help to secure the sword and prevent slippage when a horseman or camel rider carries it attached to a saddle. Typically the scabbard is decorated with impressed decoration, and skins from a variety of animals (i.e. lizards and crocodiles) can be used to create decorative highlights. A leather bandolier attached to the scabbard by two metal rings allows the sword to be worn usually over the shoulder perpendicular to the ground, while two smaller additional cords attached to the strap enable it to be carried across both shoulders parallel to the ground (Reed 1987, 172; Spring 1993, 41).

The source and etymology of the word '*kaskara*', the name by which this type of sword is referred to in literature, are not known. It does not appear to be a Sudanese or Arabic word. The origin of the *kaskara* sword itself is also unclear. Their form appears to be somewhat like that of Crusader swords, but there is little evidence to support a direct relationship and the distance both in time and in space between the *kaskara* and the Crusades is considerable making

Plate 1. British Museum *kaskara* sword (Af1 1932,1014.1) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).



⁴ For diagrams of swords and the names of their component parts in local Fur terminology see Reed 1987.



any connection between the two tenuous at best. A. North has noted that the *kaskara* does not markedly differ in blade and quillon form from Arab blades of the 13th and 14th centuries (North 1989, 30; see also Spring 1993, 42) and it is perhaps here that an origin should be sought.

Many older blades from pre-*Kassalawi* (lit. from Kassala (Reed 1987, 168)) times of manufacture were forged in Europe in places such as Solingen (Germany), Belluno (Italy) and Toledo (Spain) then were 'traded across the Sahara from the Mediterranean ports of Tunis, Tripoli and Alexandria' (Spring 1993, 41; see also Keimer 1950, fn 18; Walz 1978). O'Fahey provides a general impression of the scale of trade between Egypt and Darfur in the late 18th century (c. AD 1796) with exports from Egypt to Darfur numbering 19,765,750 and imports from Darfur to Egypt numbering 50,285,625 (O'Fahey 2008, 257) and one of the major items imported into Darfur from Egypt was metalwork (Walz 1978, 43). The Fur and the Funj Sultanates, especially in the early 19th century, were well-established international trading partners in the Saharan network and located on caravan routes such as the 40 Days Road (*Darb el-Arbein*) and on pilgrimage routes to Mecca (Holt and Daly 2000, 7-10; O'Fahey 2008, 239-259; Reed 1987, 171-172; Yusuf Fadl Hasan 2003). 'The caravan trade was crucial to the maintenance of the life-style of the [Fur] sultanate's ruling elite. In the mid-19th century the sultanate supplied Egypt with 25% of its imports, receiving in return luxury goods such as silk, glassware, books and warhorses' (O'Fahey and Tubiana 2007, 9). Following the arrival of the blades, scabbards, hilts, grips and cross-guards would have been manufactured locally and then fitted to the blades. Normally, the hilts have a wood core, usually covered with another material, into which the blade's tang was mounted. Further, in many cases, additional apotropaic symbols, religious inscriptions or talismans would be added to the blade to protect the bearer.

The sword of Nasir Mohamed, now in the Sudan National Museum (KH 394) (Pearce *et al.* 2004, 245, no. 217; Anderson and Abdelrahman Ali Mohamed 2013, 107) may illustrate this international trade in blades (Plate 2). Nasir Mohamed was a king of the Hamaj and Regent during the Funj Sultanate in the mid-18th century (AD 1787/8-1792/3).^{5,6} The capital of the Funj Sultanate was at Sennar situated approximately 250km south of Khartoum on the Blue Nile although the exact provenance of this particular blade is unknown. The sword has a steel blade and cross-shaped guard with flaring quillons, and a silver handle with disc-shaped pommel. The handle is embellished with twisted silver wire and adorned with a silk tassel through which threads of silver have been woven. The blade has a single shallow central fuller and is 880mm long while the handle reaches nearly 160mm, so



Plate 2. *Sword of King Nasir Mohamed (KH 394)*
(photo: Rocco Ricci © Trustees of the British Museum).

overall the sword is a little over a metre in length.

An acid etched Arabic inscription is present midway down the blade, after the tip of the fuller, on both sides. The inscription on one side reads:

*When he meets the enemies everywhere, my sword will be
the executioner*

The inscription on the other face reads:

A man of glory and dignity is always the leader of his society

Of interest are the stamps on the blade. Marks were stamped into blades by European smiths, particularly during the period before the 19th century, in a fashion not dissimilar from the way in which silver was and still is hallmarked. As such these blades may be identified and dated but with care, as such stamps may also have been added locally, perhaps in an attempt to enhance the perceived value and quality of a blade. Originating perhaps in Genoa Italy in the 16th century, the four half-crescent marks, 'eyelash' or 'sickle' marks found in two pairs in the fuller at the top of Nasir Mohamed's blade near the guard, were often also added to German blades (Atkinson 2016, especially Marks and Stamps) but can also appear on locally produced Sudanese blades (Plate 3). Halfway down the blade, also within the fuller, is a stamped, stylized quadruped which was inlaid with copper. A stamped sun, possibly added for mystical or talismanic reasons, is situated almost halfway down the blade at the tip

⁵ See Walz 1978 for a detailed analysis of this trade.

⁶ Regarding King Nasir Mohamed, the Hamaj and the Funj Sultanate see Holt 1999, 19-20; Holt and Daly 1989, 38-39; O'Fahey and Spaulding 1974, 98-100; Spaulding 1985, 222-237. For a list of Funj Sultans, Regents and their dates see Spaulding 1985, 303, tab. 5.



Plate 3. 'Eyelash' marks on the blade of King Nasir Mohamed (KH 394) (photo: Amani Nureldaim Mohamed).

of the fuller and precedes the Arabic inscription (Plate 4). The stylized quadruped is the running wolf of Passau (Wagner 1967, 109). Assuming the stamp is original, it indicates that this blade comes from Germany, likely from Solingen, and could be dated to the 17th century (Reed 1987, 168; see also Atkinson 2016, Marks and Stamps). By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, blades were (and still are) manufactured locally in places such as Kassala as mentioned above; however, imported blades were preferred because those locally made tended to be brittle and break easily (Hunley 2010, 39).



Plate 4. Stamped marks on the blade of King Nasir Mohamed (KH 394). A sun and the running wolf of Passau (photo: Amani Nureldaim Mohamed).

Ali Dinar's swords and a *kaskara* in the British Museum

Ali Dinar's core troops, the *jibadiyya*, largely were armed with rifles and it was estimated that his rifles numbered approximately 6,000 in 1905 (Gleichen 1905, 189). Many rifles were of French origin and arrived in el-Fasher via the trade route from Kufra Oasis. Ammunition was also traded through Kufra (Spaulding and Kapteijns 1994, 22-24, 44-48). Of note, 'Each one [rifle] was engraved with the name and title of the Sultan' (MacMichael 1934, 126). This implies that all the rifles belonged to the Sultan, regardless of who used them, and that the Sultan was marking his property.

Was the same practice applied to swords? Many are certainly marked as his property but there appear to be far fewer swords than rifles, most blades contain lengthy dated inscriptions, have gilded and/or silver grips and pommels, and the blades themselves cannot be considered as 'munitions' grade. Many appear to be elite items. It is uncertain how

many swords Ali Dinar possessed in his armoury. Before the relationship with the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium deteriorated, gifts were exchanged between the Governor General and Inspector General of Sudan and the Sultan. These gifts often included swords for Ali Dinar's personal use, but the type of sword and presence or absence of inscription is unclear. In 1909, Ali Dinar was the recipient of six swords (Theobald 1965, 79-80). Notably, early in the Mahdiya period swords were uncommon, with spears and knives being preferred weapons. Wooden swords were carried into battle by some soldiers of the Mahdiya and exchanged for metal ones at opportune moments on the battlefield (Hunley 2010, 39). Further, after Ali Dinar left el-Fasher as the Condominium troops advanced on his position, his palace was looted first by the local inhabitants and then by the occupying army. On arrival at el-Fasher in May 1916, Captain Harold MacMichael, the Political Officer attached to the Darfur Expeditionary Force wrote: 'At our entry Fasher appeared almost deserted, but there were a good many people in the houses and much looting went on, especially at the palace, before guards could be put in' (Theobald 1965, 193).⁷

Outside of Sudan in both public and private collections, there are, in so far as the authors have been able to identify, around 10 to 12 swords bearing Ali Dinar's titulary which may have been elite items for the Sultan's personal use (or were 'presentation swords').⁸ One such sword is now in the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha (MW 644). The inscription on one side of the blade begins with the *Shabada* the first pillar of Islamic faith, followed by a magic roundel and square, followed by Ali Dinar's genealogy and the date 1316 AH (AD 1898-1899). Praise is then given to the Sultan and his ancestors.

An inscription on the end of one quillon reads:

Sultan Ali Dinar, son of Sultan Zakariyya 1320 AH
[AD 1902-1903]

while the other is inscribed with his tughra, a stylised calligraphic monogram.⁹ The presence of two different

⁷ Photograph SADA4/59 in the Sudan Archive Durham depicts a number of officers in the Darfur Expeditionary Force inside Ali Dinar's Palace in el-Fasher, including MacMichael.

⁸ It should be noted here that the authors identified these items largely from available literature, catalogues, auctions and museum collections and have not had the opportunity to view all of them.

⁹ The authors are grateful to W. Greenwood, Curator, Museum of Islamic Art, MIA for information concerning this sword. See further Sotheby's Auctions, Arts of the Islamic World 5 October 2011, Lot 317. There are, of course, Ali Dinar swords in the recently renovated Sultan Ali Dinar Palace Museum in el-Fasher (i.e. see <http://allafrica.com/stories/201506080884.html>). For two swords presented by Ali Dinar see North 1985, 30, and Lot-tissimo Auktionsportal, Auctions. The latter being a sword presented by Ali Dinar to Slatin Pasha in 1910, though little other information about this sword is currently available.



dates in different inscriptions found on the same object is interesting, suggesting that the object had maintained and perhaps increased its symbolic importance so as to warrant an additional inscription.

The genesis of this article was founded in the British Museum's International Training Programme (ITP). In 2013 the Museum welcomed two curators from the Sudan National Museum, Amani Nureldaim Mohamed and Elghazafi Yousif Eshag. As part of the ITP program participants were asked to choose an artefact in the British Museum and design an exhibition around it. The artefact was to be presented as an 'Object in Focus' in a fashion similar to the temporary Asahi Shimbun displays currently curated in the British Museum. The object chosen was a Sudanese sword (Afl1932,1014.1) which, as it turned out, was an Ali Dinar sword (Plate 1). This discovery prompted further research on the part of this paper's authors.

operations in 1916 and was mentioned in dispatches in the London Gazette. He was killed on the 3rd April 1917 and is buried in Khartoum War Cemetery.¹⁰ The sword may have been donated by his family.

British Museum sword (Afl1932,1014.1) is a double-edged steel broadsword with a cruciform hilt and a single wide fuller. It reaches a total length of 1.09m, with the blade itself being 934mm long. The blade is of European origin and the third nearest the cross-guard is decorated with a series of foliate patterns, a lion rampart, and finished with a fleur-de-lis type ornament towards the distal end, all created by reverse acid etching (Plates 5 and 6). Both faces contain texts in panels that have been added later, situated roughly halfway down the blade, again using reverse acid etching. These secondary inscriptions complimented the original decoration by duplicating the *fleur-de-lis* type ornament at the distal end of the inscription. This ornament also resembles and may allude



Plate 5. Close-up of reverse acid etched inscriptions on face of the blade of British Museum sword (Afl 1932,1014.1)
(photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).



Plate 6. Close-up of reverse acid etched inscriptions on the reverse face of the blade of British Museum sword (Afl 1932,1014.1)
(photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).

The British Museum acquired the blade in 1932 when it was donated to the collection by a 'Mrs Hutton'. The identity of Mrs Hutton is a mystery. It has been suggested that she was Stella Eleanora Hutton, the first wife of Professor J. H. Hutton, a well-known British anthropologist who specialized in India and donated artefacts to the museum. However, there was also a Captain Ronald Winder Hutton of the Royal Marine Artillery who participated in the Condominium's Darfur

to a *lobr*, the wooden board upon which Qu'ranic verses are written, and this may be the reason for its inclusion.

The width across the hilt from quillon to quillon is 180mm and the quillons flare at the ends. The thickness of the blade at the hilt is 5.85mm. The grip is gilded and chased in a diamond pattern. The cross-guard is also gilded and the knobbed disc-shaped pommel is of silver (Plate 7). It is also decorated with geometric designs. The inscription on one side of the blade provides the title, name and genealogy of Ali Dinar followed by a date (Plate 5). It reads:

Sultan Ali Dinar, son of the Sultan Zakariyya, son of the Sultan Muhammad al-Fadl, in the year of 1324 AH [AD 1906]

For other Ali Dinar swords see for example, Royal Armories Collection, Tower of London UK, Reg. XXVIS.112; Sotheby's Auctions, Arts of the Islamic World including 20th Century Middle Eastern Paintings, 18 October 2001, Lot 164; Alexander 1992, no. 144, Reg no. MTW 1132 and Ricketts and Missillier 1988, 145, 151, 204, nos 256, 257; North 1985, 30, fig. 23b; Bonhams Auctions, Antique Arms and Armour, 23 Jul 2015, Lot 39; Sudan Archive Durham, J. A. Gillan collection, GB 0033 SAD; Christies' Auctions, Art of the Islamic and Indian Worlds 26 April 2012, Lot 366. Please note, items posted on private websites have not been included here.

¹⁰ See Darfur operations 1916, Dispatches, London Gazette 29 May 1917; Sudan Dispatches, London Gazette 5 December 2018; Supplement to the London Gazette, 25 October, 1916.



Plate 7. Cross-guard and pommel of British Museum sword (Afl 1932,1014.1) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).

This inscription is followed by a 3 x 3 magic number square (*wafiq*):

4	9	2
3	5	7
8	1	6

Each of the columns and rows enclosed within the square's cells add up to 15 and no number is repeated. The number 5 in the centre of the square carries significant meaning in Islam such as for example, the five pillars of faith and five daily prayers, and is thus imbued with protective and healing properties; its efficacy being related to the bearer's belief. Magic squares or roundels appear on a number of blades including the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha sword (MW 644) mentioned above.¹¹

Within the ornament beside the magic square, the text reads:

*Praise be to God. Abu Bakr, Omar, Osman, Ali, Hamza,
Al-Abbas, Al-Hassan, Al-Hussein*

These are the first four Caliphs, the rightly guided Caliphs who follow the Prophet Mohamed, along with Al-Abbas, Al-Hassan and Al-Hussein the sons of Ali, and Hamza ibn Abdul-Muttalib, the Prophet's paternal uncle, called the lion of Allah and the lion of his Messenger.¹² In relation to this, the lion rampant etched on the blade may have been regarded as an allusion to such courage and bravery and made this blade particularly valued.

The other side of the blade (Plate 6) begins with several Qu'ranic verses:

¹¹ For extensive discussions of magic squares (*wafiq*) see Al-Saleh 2010; Caanan 2004; Macdonald 1981. In the early 20th century, the use of numeric and alphabetic magic squares for healing in traditional medicine was for example observed in Northern Sudan (Ahmed Abdel Halim and Ahmed Effendi Abdel Halim 1939, 36).

¹² See Muhammad ibn Saad (trans. A. Bewley, 2013, 4).

*Wherever you may be, death will overtake you, even if you should be within towers of lofty construction [Surah 4, 78].
The Death from which you flee will truly overtake you [Surah 62, 8].*

Help from Allah and a speedy victory. So give good tidings to the believers [Surah 61, 13].

Oh Muhammad.

This text is followed by:

*I am Ali. Famous is the son of Zakariyya, titled Dinar.
This sword is my property [lit. 'I have it'].*

As on the reverse side, the ornament contains the names of the Caliphs and the sons of Ali. It is followed by the *Shabada*.

Inscribed on one end of the quillon (Plate 8), the text reads:

*[Blade?] belongs to the Sultan Ali, son of Zakariyya.
Oh Muhammad*



Plate 8. Inscribed quillon end of British Museum sword (Afl 1932,1014.1) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).

This inscription begins with the Arabic letter *nun* that has various mystical recondite meanings. It is possible that the *nun* is an abbreviation for blade, possibly taken from the shape of the letter, as in Jonah's blade (Hava 1951, 810), but this is not certain.

The other end of the quillon (Plate 9) reads:

Abu Bakr. Omar. Osman. Ali. Oh Allah.

These names are inscribed around the edge and surround the tughra of Ali Dinar. The names of the Caliphs are also inscribed on the underside of the cross-guard. The close association of the Sultan with the Caliphs may reflect Ali Dinar's personal piety as well as his religious policy. Of note he made many efforts to promote Islam, including reviving festivals, rebuilding mosques, sending gifts (*mahmal*) by camel caravan to Mecca (1906, 1909, and 1913), and he maintained effective state control over the *fuqara* (O'Fahey 2008, 290-297).¹³

¹³ A photograph of the *mahmal* travelling through Omdurman in 1904



Plate 9. Quillon end of British Museum sword bearing the tughra of Sultan Ali Dinar (Afl 1932,1014.1) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).

Another Ali Dinar sword was acquired by Sir Harold Alfred MacMichael and is still owned by his family (Plates 10 and 11). Sir Harold joined the Sudan Political Service in the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium government in 1905 and remained in Sudan until 1934 whereupon he retired and entered service with the British Foreign Office. As mentioned above, in 1916 he was the Political Officer in the Darfur Expeditionary Force holding at that time the rank of temporary Captain MacMichael published extensively on the Sudan (e.g. MacMichael 1922; 1934; 1954; 1956) and his papers are now in the Sudan Archive, Durham (<https://www.dur.ac.uk/library/asc/sudan/> GB 33), the Middle East Centre Archive, St Anthony's College Oxford (GB 165 0196), the Bodleian Library, Special Collections and Western Manuscripts (GB 161, MacMichael letters to O. G. S. Crawford 1950-1954), the Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Rhodes House (GB 162, MacMichael correspondence and papers 1905-1956), and in the Sudan Collection, University of Khartoum (see further O'Fahey 2008, 315). In addition to its connection with MacMichael, this sword is interesting in a number of ways.

Like the British Museum sword, this is a *kaskara* consisting of a double-edged straight blade with a spatulate tip, but it is a longer, heavier weapon with a total length of 1.15m with the blade length 985mm. The thickness of the blade at the hilt is 8.2mm versus the 5.8mm of the British Museum blade. There are three deep, narrow fullers on either side that extend from beneath the hilt. The two outer fullers extend the length of the ricasso, while the central fuller is longer and extends approximately one-quarter the length of the blade. These fullers may have been added in an attempt to make the blade lighter and more flexible. It is not entirely certain that this is a blade of European manufacture and no European sword marks or stamps are evident. A square stamp impression, bearing the name *Abd Al-Rashid*, is present at the end of the central fuller on both sides of the blade as well as beneath the languet near the hilt on one face (Plate 12).

on its way to Mecca may be found in Gleichen 1905, opp. 189.



Plate 10. Face of Sultan Ali Dinar sword acquired by Sir Harold A. MacMichael (Private collection) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).



Plate 11. Reverse face of Sultan Ali Dinar sword acquired by Sir Harold A. MacMichael (Private collection) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).



Plate 12. Close-up of the square stamp impression with the name *Abd Al-Rashid*, MacMichael sword (Private collection) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).

The discoid pommel is of silver with fine incised bands of decoration. The cylindrical grip is sheathed in silver covered with a raised diamond pattern. The core is wood. The

square-shaped cross-guard is brass with broadly flaring ends. One quillon end (Plate 13) bears the inscription:

Sultan Ali Dinar, son of Sultan Zakariyya



Plate 13. Inscribed quillon end, MacMichael sword (Private collection) (photo: J. Anderson).

The other quillon is incised with the tughra of Sultan Ali Dinar. It appears reversed, mirror-image (Plate 14). There are four inscriptions on the blade, two on either side, separated by the stamp mentioned above. The two closest to the cross-guard are engraved on the ricasso and run beneath the languet of the cross-guard, while the remaining two are reverse acid etched in panels lower down. The acid etched



Plate 14. Inscribed quillon end bearing the reversed tughra of Sultan Ali Dinar, MacMichael sword (Private collection) (photo: J. Anderson).

inscriptions are in a different hand than those engraved and may have been added later. The acid etching does not appear to be cleanly executed and guidelines or template outlines are visible around some of the letters.

The engraved inscription on the first side (Plates 10 and 15) reads:

Workmanship in the city of al-Fashir by order of the Emir of the faithful Sultan Ali Dinar, son of Sultan Zakariyya, Defender of God. Amen [or possibly [and the] faithful]



Plate 15. Engraved inscription on face of the MacMichael blade (Private collection) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).

The etched inscription that follows (Plate 16) provides Ali Dinar's genealogy reinforcing his legitimacy:

Sultan Ali Dinar, son of Sultan Zakariyya, son of Sultan Muhammad al-Fadl, son of Sultan Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid, son of Sultan Ahmad Bakr

Within this inscription, Al-Rashid seems to be written in an abbreviated form (*rsd*), Ahmad looks more like Ahmar, and Bakr is somewhat pressed for space, suggesting the individual making the acid etching was copying from a written text and may have been illiterate or semi-literate. The etched panels are both finished with a magic square (*wafq*). The magic squares are 3 x 3 and contain the numbers from 1 to 9 with the 9 being written somewhat oddly. As with the magic square on the British Museum *kaskara*, each row adds up to 15 and the numeral 5 is situated in the centre.

The two remaining inscriptions on the other face of the blade (Plate 11) are more enigmatic. The engraved inscription is poetic (Plate 17) and appears to read:

Ob Ali. [You] visited the enemies' places and the enemies drink death from your powerfulness. You are the Prince. You protect the war. He who is in the war is very brave and great. 1322 AH. [AD 1904]



Plate 16. Reverse acid etched inscription on face of the MacMichael blade (Private collection) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).



Plate 17. Engraved inscription on the reverse face of the MacMichael blade (Private collection) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).

The acid etched inscription that follows below (Plate 18) appears to read:

You are the Hatim of this age, [this] century. You have no specific name, but all names. Your position is higher than that of the bright sun. However, you are the sun and the sun is one of the planets



Plate 18. Engraved inscription on the reverse face of the MacMichael blade (Private collection) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).

This inscription refers to the time of the *Jabiliyya*, the period of ignorance before Islam. The name ‘Hatim’ is generally used in Sudan to refer to the generosity of an individual.¹⁴ The use of the word ‘planet’ is somewhat enigmatic as the meaning of this word, while appearing in the Qu’ran in several Surahs (Surah 24, 5; Surah 6, 76; Surah 82, 1-2), is not completely understood here and may not directly correspond to the modern sense of the word.¹⁵

The scabbard that accompanies this sword is of red leather with impressed geometric motifs, two brass suspension rings and a silver chape (Plate 19). The remains of a leather suspension strap hang from the rings and it is also decorated with impressed geometric motifs. Two leather cords, used to carry the sword across the shoulders dangle from the lower suspension ring. The cords consist of two ‘s’-wound elements, ‘z’-plied. The suspension ring attachments are wrapped with crocodile skin on the body of the scabbard, as are the tips of the dangling

¹⁴ As was noted by Abdelrahman Ali Mohamed 2016. The origin of this usage likely comes from the poet Hatim ibn Abdallah ibn Sa’ad at-Ta’iy who was reputed to be the greatest and most hospitable man in Saudi Arabia before Islam (Houtsma *et al.* 1993, 290).

¹⁵ Scriptural exegesis of celestial heavenly bodies is beyond the scope of this paper.

leather cords. The tip of the silver chape is a faceted cube containing the name *Abd Al-Rashid* stamped in Arabic (Plate 20). This is the same name and stamp as found on both faces of the blade at the end of the fuller. It is notable that this is also the name of Ali Dinar’s great grandfather and it may be that this is an inherited blade that was reworked in el-Fasher, perhaps with a new guard and/or grip and then appropriately inscribed at the Sultan’s command.

Kaskara are complex, multifaceted artefacts that are not infrequently modified over time. They can consist of an imported or local blade; can contain foreign sword marks (usually European) or local imitations of such; local sword marks; foreign and local engraved or etched inscriptions, and added talismans or magical symbols. As such, though complicated and difficult to fully understand, they provide valuable historical documentation particularly in this instance, for the reign of Sultan Ali Dinar.



Plate 19. Red leather scabbard accompanying the MacMichael sword (Private collection) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).



Plate 20. Silver chape stamped with the name *Abd Al-Rashid*, MacMichael sword (Private collection) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).

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