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SHORT SWORD (YATAGHAN) OF STEEL, RHINOCEROS IVORY AND GOLD WITH SCABBARD OF WOOD, TEXTILE, GOLD, AND SILVER

ALGERIA OR TUNISIA; C. 1800

L (SWORD): 74.5; L (TOTAL): 79 CM

The Janissaries – the legendary elite corps of the Ottomans – are often depicted carrying a single-edged sword with a forward-curving blade and a short hilt with no guard. Known as a *yataghan*, the type became widespread throughout the eastern Mediterranean region between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹ This *yataghan* originates from one of the North African ‘Barbary’ States, which in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries engaged in extensive piracy against European ships with the blessing of the Ottomans.

The blade itself is slender, slightly curved and has a clearly visible watered pattern. The transition between blade and grip is decorated with embossed gold sheet, and the grip itself consists of two plaques of rhinoceros ivory separated by a narrow gold band. The hilt thickens towards the upper end, which prevents the sword from slipping out of the wielder’s grasp. Hilts terminating in this manner are characteristic of the *yataghan* and in other cases the thickened section can take the form of round ‘ears’.

The scabbard is made of wood covered in velvet, which in turn is almost completely covered by two gold casings with embossed and engraved decorations. The decorations on the locket include an

arrangement of standards and cannon barrels, while the chape covering the lower part of the scabbard is adorned with seashells and wide-mouthed flower vases. This type of European-inspired ornamentation is known as 'Turkish Rococo' (see 31/1987).

The kings of Europe sent many diplomatic missions to the Barbary States, and *yataghans* embellished with gold were often among the gifts brought back by the diplomats. In the year 1800, the Danish naval commander Georg Albrecht Kofoed (1753–1808) received a similar *yataghan* from the prince of Algiers.²

¹ *Niels Arthur Andersen: Gold and Coral: Presentation Arms from Algiers and Tunis, Copenhagen 2014, pp. 25–29.*

² *Kjeld von Folsach, Joachim Meyer and Peter Wandel: Fighting, Hunting, Impressing Arms and Armour from the Islamic World 1500–1850, The David Collection, Copenhagen 2021, cats. 32 and 148.*

Published in:

Sotheby's, Dubai, 3.-5./12-1985, lot 78;

Niels Arthur Andersen: *Gold and coral. Presentation arms from Algiers and Tunis*, København 2014, pp. 222-225;