

THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR DAGGER

By Richard W. Van Doren, Ed.D.

The large oak display cabinet was hanging on the outside wall of the Boston Commandery #2 Amory in the Grand Lodge building. My nose was almost pressed against the glass as I looked at the beautiful collection of swords, many of them belonging to past Grand Commanders. As I looked to the lower sides of the cabinet, I was surprised by what I saw.



[Fig. 1]

“What is that,” I asked my guide?

“A dagger”, was the reply.

“How do Knights Templar use them? What are they for?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” he said. “We haven’t used them for as long as I have been around.”

How curious, I thought. If they didn’t use them, why were they here? Obviously, they had to be of some use or why else would they be made in the first place? They certainly looked serviceable; well made, and very sharp pointed. They had no scabbards. This was quite different from the swords, which had elaborate scabbards and which I had seen being worn by the Knights. I asked to see one.

My guide opened the locked case and handed me the closest example. It had a beautiful hilt and ivory handle with special scrimshaw etching with the Knights initials on one side and a cross and crown motif of the Order on the other. On the blade was the name of the Knight, Robert G. Wilson. I asked and was told that he had been a Commander of Boston Commandery and had also served as Grand Commander of Massachusetts and Rhode Island. The dagger matched the gold sword above it. It was beautifully made by the Ames Sword Company. I was aware of that company as they were manufacturers of military swords for cadets of the United States Military Academies.



[Fig. 2]



Fig. 3]

I continued my tour of the armory and then the Asylum where Boston Commandery met, one flight down on the fifth floor of the building. Later, on the drive home, I was still wondering

about the daggers that I had seen. There had to be a reason for making them. I resolved to search further. Someone had to know the answer.

Some weeks went by until, by chance, I was speaking to a member of the Knights Templar who had served as Grand Commander. He also was a former librarian of the York Rite in Massachusetts. If anyone would know the answer to my question about the daggers, this was the man. Imagine my surprise, then, when he said that he really didn't know, either. Although he had actively bought and sold Masonic antiquities for years, including swords and daggers, he said he really didn't know how or when they had actually been used by Knights Templar. In fact, he said, he had not ever seen pictures or heard stories of their use in his entire Masonic career. Far from being dissuaded, this only served to pique my interest further. Now I was committed to finding the answer.

"Who might know the answer", I asked?

"Perhaps the Grand Encampment", he answered.

I knew someone who might know, in that case. One of my closest Masonic brothers was a man who was an Honorary Past Grand Master of the Grand Encampment. He certainly might know more about it. My call found him away from his New Jersey home on a trip. I decided to approach the Grand Encampment directly and ask the question. If I didn't get an answer, I would call my friend back.

The person answering the phone took my call and took the question. Unfortunately, he did not know the answer but would ask around. "Check back in a few days", he said. When I did call back, he said that no one knew about how or even if the daggers had ever been used officially. This seemed strange to me. I just could not get it out of my head that something that was as expensively made as the daggers I had seen simply had to have been part of the ritual or practice of the Order.

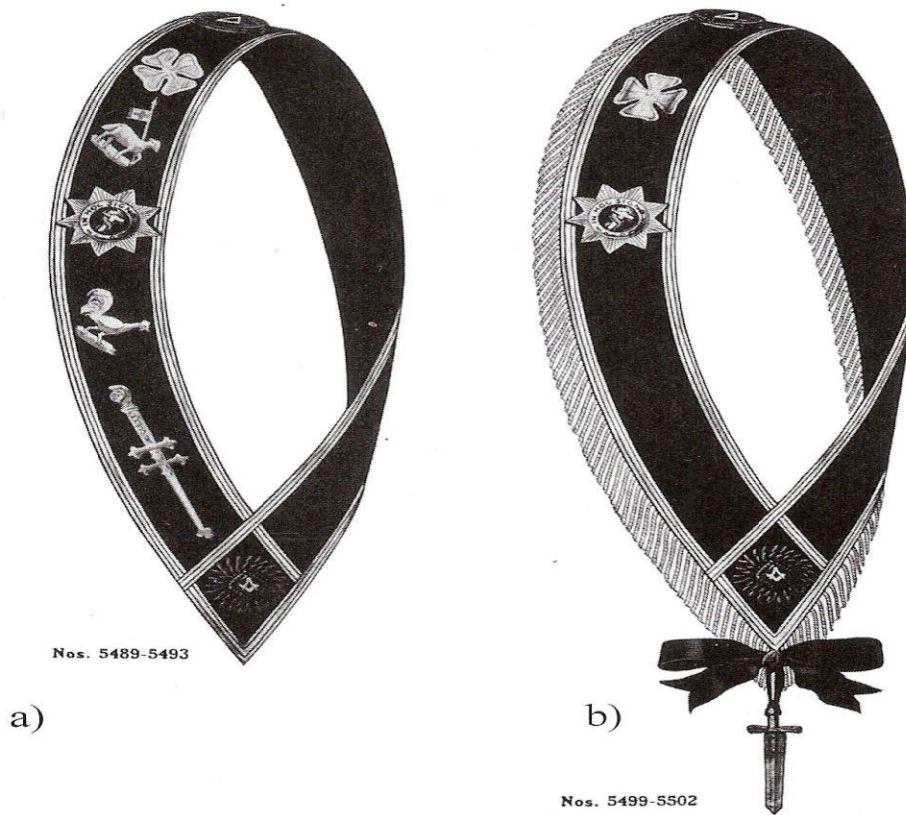
The thought came to me to see if I could find out something from the manufacturer of the daggers, the Ames Sword Company. They had now located in Ohio and a phone call put me in contact with them. I explained what I was trying to find out. They acknowledged that several manufacturers of Masonic swords had also made daggers, their company included. But as to how they were used, there was no one there who knew the answer. I asked if they had any old pictures used to advertise their daggers to see if that could give me a clue as to their use. Unfortunately, they did not have any former advertising copy.

By this time, my mentor in New Jersey had returned. He told me that the baldric which used to be worn sometimes had a very small dagger at the bottom; silver for Knights and gold for Commanders. He was not sure, but he thought that some of the oldest baldrics had had a

rectangular slotted ring sewn to the bottom of them from which a dagger could be suspended, though not with a scabbard upon it. This seemed like a possible solution, though somewhat still problematic.

It was about this time, that a copy of the Wigan Ritual of Knights Templar, ca. 1801-1830, came into my possession. On the very first page of my copy was a description of what Knights should wear. It included the following statement: “Each Knight [should have] a broad ribbon across the breast, hanging down the left side, tied with a ribbon in a bow knot, with the Star of the Order on the left breast. At the bottom of the ribbon or scarf, hangs a short sword or dagger, ...”

Certainly, this was a possibility, but the Wigan Ritual was English, not American, and therefore was suspect as authority for what American Knights would officially wear.



[Fig. 4]

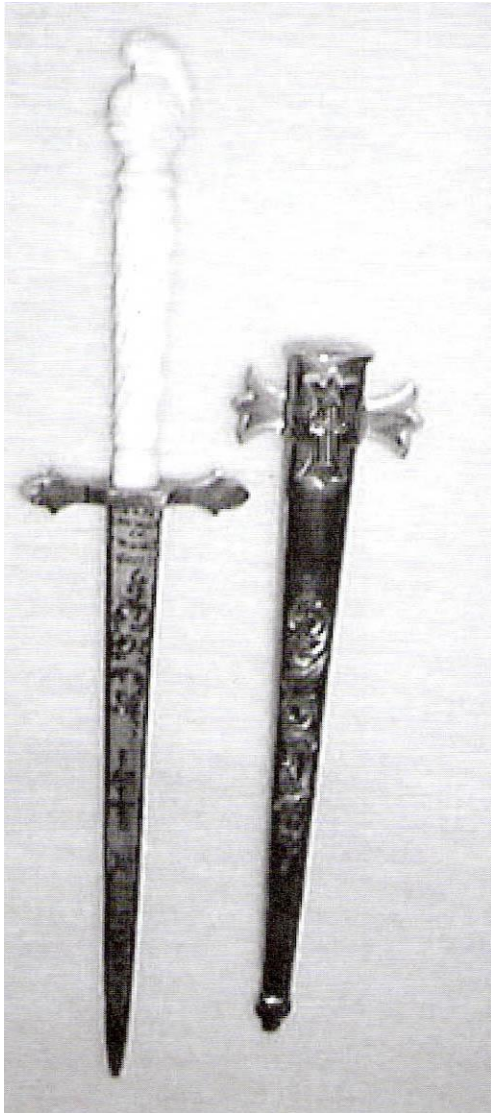
For a number of months, I gave up the search. Other matters were more pressing, but the thought was in the back of my mind that I still should pursue trying to get an answer. How were the Masonic Daggers used, if at all?

An announcement and a book review revitalized my search and the answer was finally to come to hand. A new book was being sold over the internet on E-Bay. It had to do with Knights Templar and their regalia and was written by a Michael MacDonald. I took a look at the advertising and thought the book might be something I would find interesting. About the same time, a friend of mine who was working for a National Masonic organization in the Washington D.C. area wrote a review about Brother MacDonald's book. He thought it was excellent.

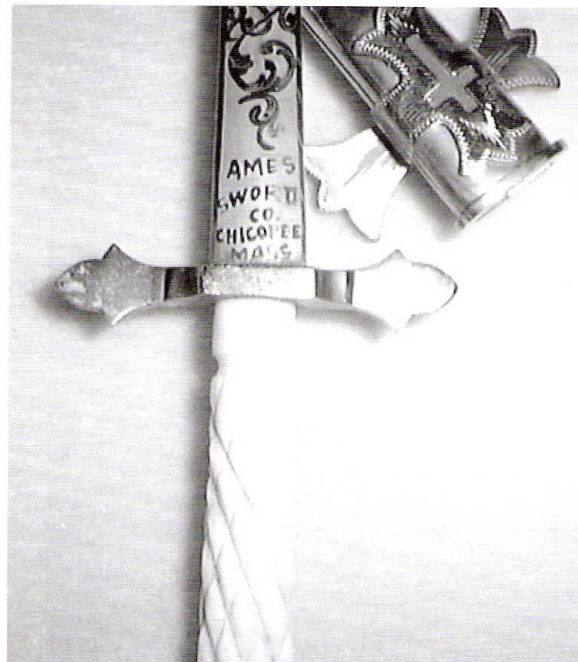
The review pushed me over the edge and I purchased a copy. When it arrived, not only did I enjoy looking at the book and learning about some things that I had previously not known, but there, on page 80, was the answer to all of my questions. It was an picture of a Knight Templar in regalia and the dagger was firmly attached to the baldric. It could easily be reached and handled if required. However, there was nothing to suggest that it had more than decorative properties as far as the modern era Knight was concerned. But at least, they actually had worn them at one time.



[Fig. 5]



[Fig. 6]



[Fig.7]

As to the question of why Knights would carry both sword and dagger, that was far easier to answer. It went back to the ancient traditions of swordsmen of war. They would often carry a long sword and a shorter sword or dagger. During hand to hand combat, long swords could either be at a disadvantage or, in some circumstances, could become implanted and not usable in the immediate struggle. At that time, a second blade could be used for parrying the thrusts of an opponent or used to slay an enemy warrior. Even as late as the 19th century, Japanese followers of Bushido – the Samurai Warriors – carried multiple bladed weapons. Swordsmen of earlier periods around the world would have well understood the advantages of a second, shorter weapon to augment the long sword.

It is not a stretch of the imagination to assume that modern day Knights Templar would know of this tradition and add the Masonic dagger to their costume. As I looked at the picture of the Brother in his full regalia, I thought that it was a dashing addition to elaborate regalia of days gone by. Part of me was saddened to realize that we no longer wear such beautiful uniforms. The daggers of old are now relegated to the display cases in armories around the country or perhaps on a desk in a Knight's study. At least, we now have a better idea of why they had been made and how they had been used.

Notes:

Figures 4,6, &7 are courtesy of Michael C. MacDonald; *Fraternal Regalia 1: Knights Templar*, pp.79,82; New Columbia Publishing, Boulder Creek, CA; 2008

Figure 5 courtesy of Phoenixmasonry Masonic Museum and Library at <http://www.phoenixmasonry.org>

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