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South Indian Punch Daggers



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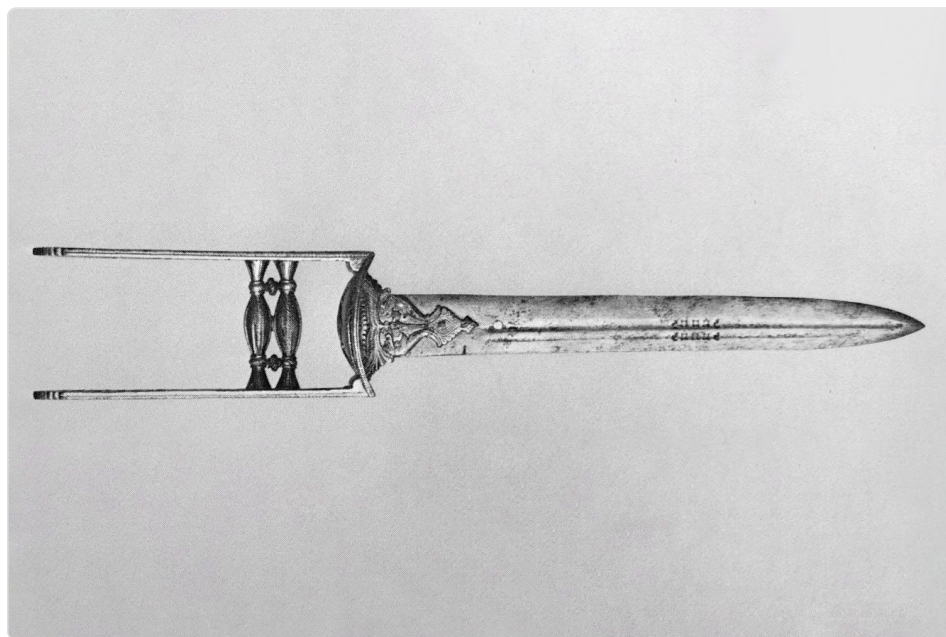
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One of the enduring problems of the study of punch daggers, especially those thought to have been made in South India, which for our purposes is understood as that part of the Indian subcontinent that lies south of the Vindhya Range, is a lack of strong 'anchor' objects. These punch daggers were not inscribed by their makers, and as such epigraphic evidence on the objects themselves, so important for achieving a degree of certainty, is extremely scarce.

Fortunately, epigraphic evidence is not entirely absent. An unknown number of South Indian punch daggers are inscribed with inventory marks for an unlikely armoury: that of Bikaner, deep in the Thar desert of northwestern India. In 1689, Anup Singh, the ruler of Bikaner and a powerful figure at the court of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, captured the fortress of Adoni in South India. He brought a substantial amount of arms and armour back to Bikaner as loot, where, in 1691, they were entered into the royal armoury. Most stayed there until the late twentieth century when a large group was sold on the international art market.

Another 'anchor' point is the armoury of Thanjavur. When the British East India Company seized the Thanjavur kingdom under the doctrine of lapse, its armoury was seized too and its contents were scrapped, sold, or, in some fortunate cases, entered into the new Madras Museum (now Government Museum, Chennai). With solid provenance going back to at least 1855 and Thanjavur's location in the far south of India, the bulk of the contents of the armoury can be attributed to South India during the early modern period with some degree of confidence.

As for specific 'anchor' *objects*, to the best of my knowledge, the sole contender is a punch dagger, unique for its provenance more than its appearance, that is now in the Danish Royal Kunstkammer (inv. no. EDb38), where it was first recorded in an inventory in 1674.



Evidently, tangible evidence is patchy. Where we have a long, documented provenance, such as for the punch dagger now in the Danish Kunstkammer, we have no evidence for its source. Equally, while the punch daggers with Bikaner armoury marks show that they were once in the Bikaner armoury, in the absence of accompanying 'Adavani' (Adoni) marks, it is not a certainty that any individual pieces were looted from Adoni. Perhaps the closest we come to tangible evidence is in the comparison of 'typical' Thanjavur Armoury punch daggers with material from



characterised by a double ball grip, a striated blade, and a lobed arch at the forte, in addition to the famous hood.



Evidence of their existence by the end of the sixteenth century is found in Mughal manuscripts and contemporary South Asian sculpture. In the second stage, the hood trends towards increasing decoration and elaboration, while the use of imported European blades becomes noticeably more frequent.

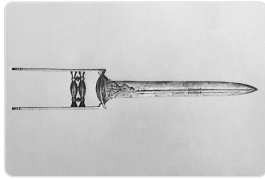


At the third stage, pairs of *yalis*, mythological hybrid creatures with elements of elephants and lions, begin to appear in pierced work on the hood.



While the above basic development is undeniably plausible, hard evidence in the form of dated works and documented provenance remains elusive. With the aid of the **objet.art** database and your contributions to previously undiscovered or underappreciated punch daggers, I hope that we can uncover new evidence and slowly but surely strengthen or, indeed, challenge our understanding of the development of the punch dagger in South India.

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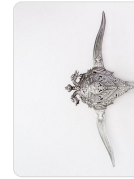
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