



The Dirk

Dirk is a Scots word for a long dagger; sometimes a cut-down sword blade mounted on a dagger hilt, rather than a knife blade. The word *dirk* could have possibly derived from the Gaelic word *sgian dearg* (*red knife*). In Bronze Age and Iron Age Scotland and Ireland, the dirk was actually considered to be a sword. Its blade length and style varied, but it was generally 7-14 inches. However, the blades of Irish versions often were as much as 21 inches in length.

Daggers and knives have been part of civilian wear and military dress since the first knives were crafted from stone. A few cultures throughout history, though, have taken this utilitarian tool and really turned it into an item of great cultural significance. The dirk, as developed by the Scots, is one of these weapons.

The Scots of the Middle Ages and renaissance spent much of their time in conflict whether warring with England for independence or fighting with other clans for local dominance. As such, the Scots were known to go through their daily lives fully or nearly fully armed, more so than other Europeans of the time. A quote by John Hume perfectly illustrates this: *"Thy [the Highlanders] always appeared like warriors; as if their arms [weapons] had been limbs and members of their bodies they were never seen without them; they traveled, they attended fairs and markets, nay they went to church with their broadswords and dirks."*

Dirks were effective weapons in war as well as a useful tool for everyday tasks, including eating. They were also more affordable than a sword. Taking these things into account, it is easy to see why it was hard to find a Highlander without such a weapon.

What is a dirk? At its most basic a dirk can be defined as a "long dagger with a straight blade." This loose definition of course encompasses many different kinds of knives; in fact, most daggers will fit within this definition. The Scottish dirk, though, has unique features that set it apart from other straight-bladed sidearms.

The Scottish dirk is a direct descendant of the medieval ballock dagger. Looking at the late stylized versions of the dirk, it may be difficult to see a relation to its earlier cousin. The early versions, though, show its lineage more clearly.

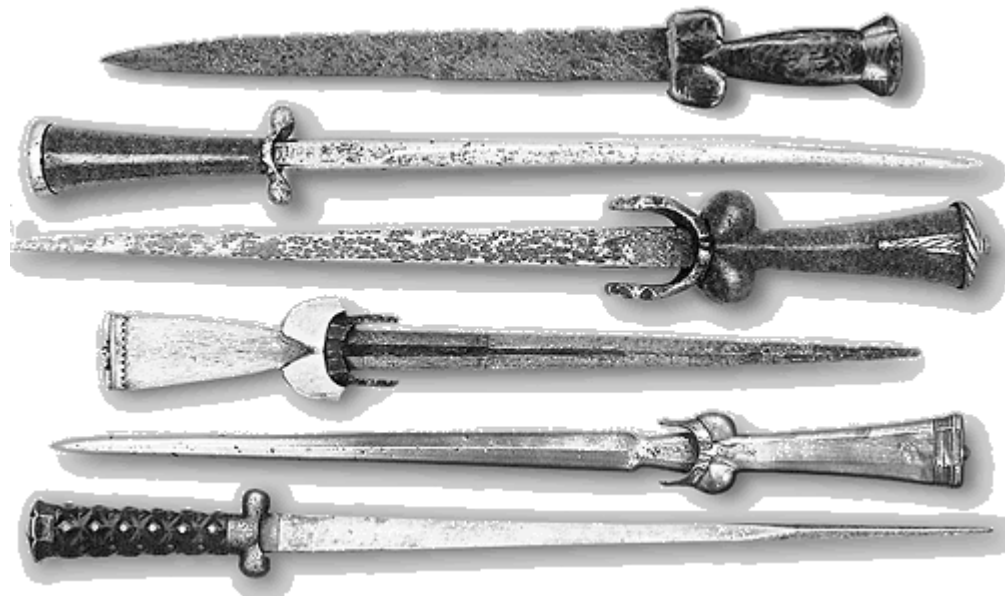
Ballock Daggers

A popular dagger of the high Middle Ages with military men and civilians alike was the ballock dagger. This dagger is named for the rather phallic shape of its hilt: two round protuberances are surmounted by a cylindrical grip. Added to this is the fact that it was often worn front-and-center on the belt, with the grip pointing straight up. It is easy to see why people in more prudish times have preferred to call it a "kidney dagger." These knives began to appear on the continent in the early 14th century; their first appearance in the British Isles on effigial monuments, notably those of Sir William de Aldeburgh and Robert Parys, came within a half century of their continental appearance.

Most ballock daggers were hilted simply with carved wood, though examples hilted with metal, bone, or ivory have been found, along with occasional examples hilted with exotic materials like agate. As they developed and flourished the "pommel" end of the grip began to swell slightly, giving the grip a more conical shape. Reinforcing plates also began to appear on both ends of the grip: as a bolster or reinforcement between blade and grip and as a plate on the butt end of the grip.

These daggers had blades most suitable for "stabbing," according to James D. Forman's book *The Scottish Dirk*. These blades, however, varied greatly in form. Single-edged blades with wedge cross-sections have been found as well as double-edged blades with thick diamond cross-sections. Examples have also been found with blades of triangular or, more rarely, square cross-sections.

Sheaths for ballock daggers were of heavy leather. Later examples were known to have metal fittings and places to store auxiliary knives and other implements.



A selection of ballock daggers

Early Dirks

"Dirks, dorks, durckes are frequently mentioned during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, usually in the Burgh and Court records of towns on or near the Highland Line," according to John Wallace. Some writers consider these references to encompass ballock daggers, dudgeon daggers and dirks. One

account, though, seems to specifically refer to what we think of as a dirk. Richard James (1592-1638) describes a highlander's arms like this in his account of Shetland, Orkney, and the Highlands (as quoted by Wallace): "the weapons which they use are a longe basket hilt sworde, and long kind of dagger broad in the back and sharp at ye pointe which they call a durcke."

Researchers such as Ewart Oakeshott, James Forman, and John Wallace agree on the earliest dateable appearance of the dirk: an effigy dated to 1502 in Ardchattan Priory shows a knight girded with a dagger clearly identifiable as a dirk. It is larger than the average ballock dagger of the time and possesses a blade that is wide at the hilt and tapers to a strong point. Its sheath contains a by-knife.

Wallace groups early dirks into two categories which overlap in date. The first group "is akin to the dudgeon dagger, and to its medieval ancestor the ballock-knife, because of its small, well rounded haunches. It has a wide, flat pommel, and a cylindrical grip, with little or no decoration in the way of carving—perhaps a simple band of interlace at the top and bottom of the grip. The National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland has a specimen of this type inscribed and dated FEAR GOD AND DO NOT KIL 1680. It is unlikely that this type survived the first decade of the eighteenth century, as it was somewhat archaic even then."

The second group "also has a large flat pommel, and a cylindrical grip. But the haunches are parallel-sided, though they have a round-ness which marks them out from the later, fully-developed dirk... This second group could have been manufactured at any time in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century."

Early dirks shared common characteristics, according to Wallace. The lower edge of the hilt was curved and without metal reinforcement. The blades were long and single-edged with the tang peened over "a large burr or button." Some examples show "gimping" of the blade spine, an effect that makes the spine of the blade look like it has dull saw teeth.

The leather sheaths extended upward to cover the haunches and often contained pockets for by-knives and forks. The hilts were normally of wood, though Wallace puts most of the non-wooden-hilted dirks (those hilted with materials such as horn or brass) into this early category.

The early dirks seem to have suffered from basic design flaws. The pommel plate did not offer full protection to the pommel end of the grip. Also unprotected were the wooden haunches. This is most likely why many examples of early dirks show damage to those areas.



A selection of early dirks

Traditional Dirks

The earliest "traditional" dirks seem to appear shortly after the oppression, reign, and life of Oliver Cromwell ended in 1658, according to James Forman. The fully developed dirk seems to address these weaknesses more effectively. Dirks of traditional form featured an evolved pommel; the pommel plate laps over the edges of the wooden pommel, forming a pommel cap. The curve at the bottom of the haunches remained, though it was now reinforced with a plate of metal and sometimes additionally with strips of metal up the sides of the haunches. The haunches, too, underwent development, becoming less rounded with "sides flattened in the same plane as the blade," according to Wallace. The knotwork carving on the grips became more intricate, usually covering the entire grip and extending down onto the haunches. Small studs appeared in the gaps of the knotwork.

Blades of the old single-edge tapered form made solely for dirks still existed, though cut-down sword blades (often imported from the blade-making centers of Solingen and Passau) became increasingly common. This could be an early example of recycling for cost purposes, though most experts agree it was done more because the imported blades were better tempered than those of local manufacture. Disarming acts such as the one issued in 1716 "seems only to have encouraged the cutting down of worn-out sword blades to be remounted as dirks" according to Forman.

The older sheaths of leather were increasingly reinforced with metal as well, though their tops no longer covered the haunches. Instead, the tops of the sheaths were curved to nestle within the curve of the haunches. When present, pockets for by-knives and forks were also metal bound. Rather than being carried side-by-side, the by-knife/fork pair began to be carried one beneath the other, though examples have been found in the old configuration.

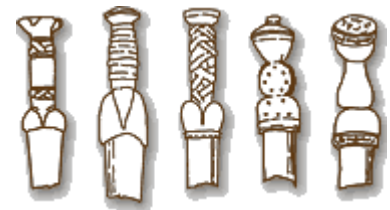
Dirks of this form enjoyed their heyday for less than a century. The disaster at Culloden in 1745 led to prohibitions of wearing highland dress and accoutrements by those not in the army. These conditions caused the dirk to be worn less frequently unless you had connections with authorities willing to look the other way. Dirks up to this point had shown a preference for function over form. The carving, while complex and often beautifully executed, did not detract from the usability of the dirk. In fact, the interlaced knots on the grips (whose origins can be traced to the Celts and the Norse) may have added needed traction in the heat of battle when sweat and blood had made the hands slick.



A selection of traditional dirks

Final Evolution of the Dirk

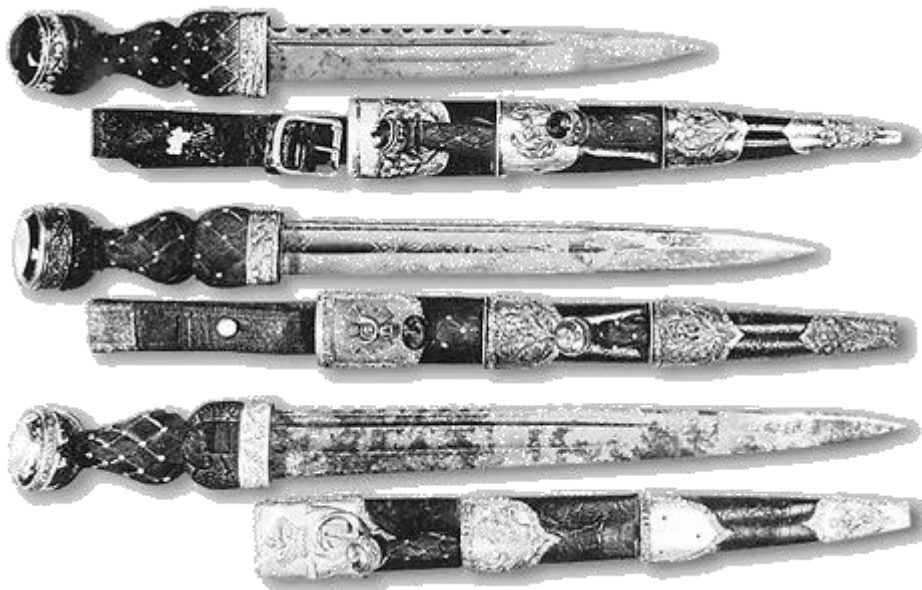
The final stages of the dirk show a marked change from the early weapons becoming, as Oakeshott called it, "a dress accessory." Wallace notes that the grips grew larger while the curve between the haunches grew shallower until it became straight. The shape of the grip changed from the more cylindrical form handed down by the ballock and dudgeon daggers to a shape intended to represent the thistle; thistle-shaped grips became common by the beginning of the nineteenth century. The studs in the knotwork were replaced with more fashionable nails and tacks of brass and silver, sometimes gilt. The carving on the grips also evolved (or degenerated according to some historians), moving from interwoven bands of knotwork to a style looking much like a basket weave.



Fully-developed Scottish dirks, left to right: Circa 1550-1600, Early 17th century, Early 18th century, Circa 1790, Circa 1810-1880

Fancier fittings for both grip and scabbard, often of silver, became even more common after 1800 and the decorations showed direct correlations to silverware of the day. By-knives and forks were similarly decorated. These extra implements began to feature cairngorms and other precious stones on their pommels, a feature that found its way to the pommel of the dirk itself. Late examples have the pommel of the dirk canted forward to better show off the stone.

Dirks of this late form were issued to Highland regiments after the '45. The musket and bayonet grew in popularity in military and circles while many regimental budgets became stretched thin. The dirk was dropped from the gear of the rank and file soldier, though officers still carried them, more as status symbols than weapons of war. Each regiment adopted its own pattern, many which can still be positively linked to a particular unit and time.



A selection of late-period dirks

The dirk is not part of the Omaha Pipes and Drums band uniform and should not be worn during band events.