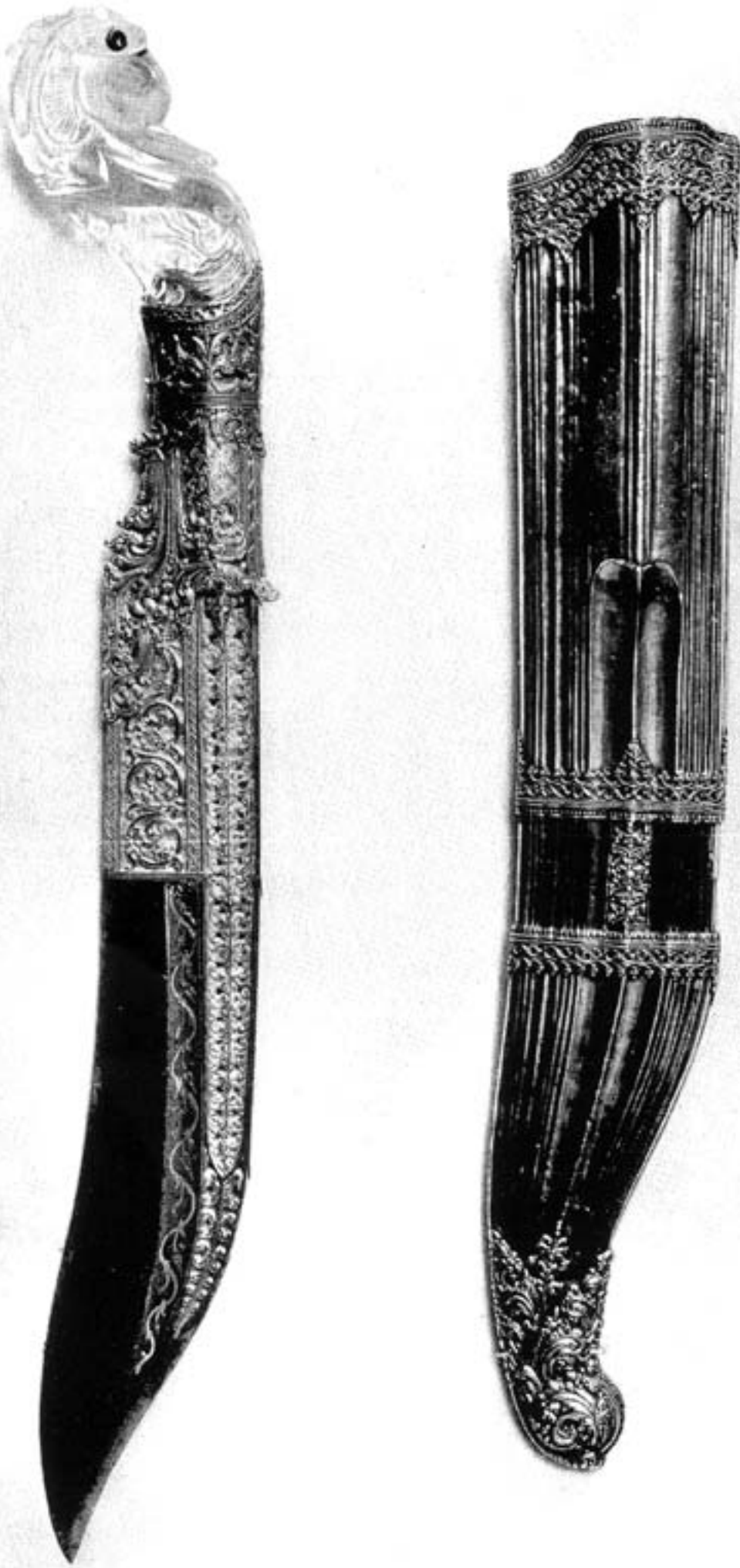


# A ROYAL DAGGER FROM CEYLON

By J. F. PIERIS



THE DAGGER OF THE LAST KING OF KANDY, ORNAMENTED WITH GOLD AND SILVER  
THE HILT OF CARVED CRYSTAL : NOW THE PROPERTY OF MRS. GEORGE D'OYLY

THE ancient industries of iron-smelting and steel-forging are no longer practised in Ceylon, though remains of furnaces and slag heaps may be seen in abundance and the curious visitor may find an occasional villager who for a small gratuity will show him how his ancestors converted the ore into metal. Each lump of iron while still red-hot was given 'a chop with an Ax half thro' in the manner described in 1681 by that observant Englishman, Robert Knox, who for many years lived as a captive among the Sinhalese. This was done to enable a fair estimate to be made of the quality of each ingot; and a hundred years ago Dr. Gygax, in a report to the Government, declared that 'The quality of iron ore found in Ceylon is singularly fine: it is easily smelted and so pure when reduced as to resemble silver. The iron wrought from it requires no puddling, and converted into steel it cuts like a diamond.' The native certainly considered the local metal as good as, and frequently superior to, the foreign article.

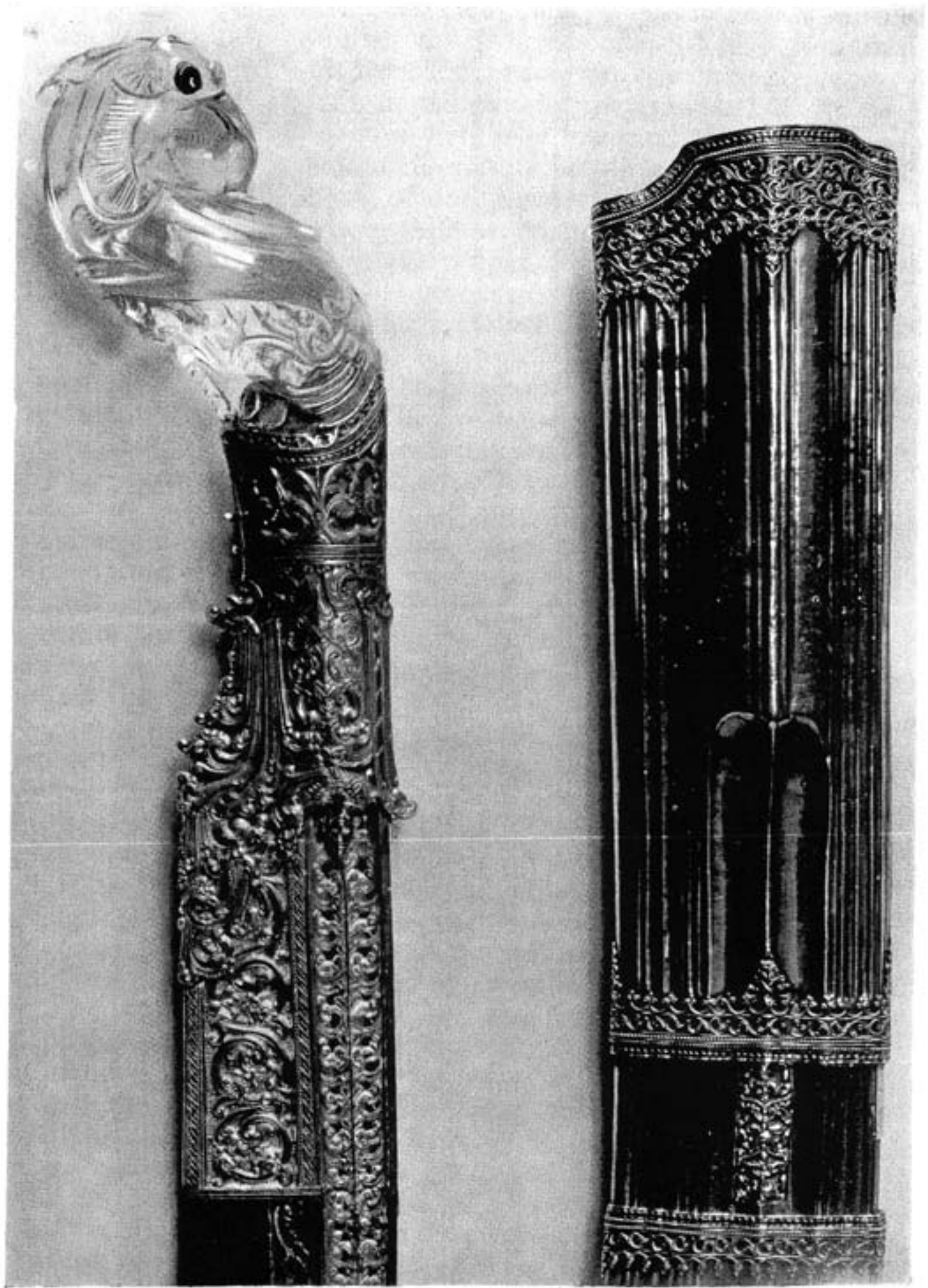
The smelters themselves did not manufacture steel out of their iron, but were content to sell it by weight to the smiths, or *navandanno*, who in turn converted it into steel and, in due course, into weapons, tools and the like. From time immemorial the most skilled smiths, artists and carvers were attached to the Court under four Depart-

ments or *Pattal*, named respectively after the Ran Kadu (Golden Arms), Ābarana (Regalia), Sinhāsana (Lion Throne), and Otunu (Crown), and these were responsible for the production of the superb dagger of Sri Wikrama Rāja Sinha, the last Rajah, the preparation of the blade, the gold and silver decoration and crystal hilt, respectively, being carried out by the first three.

This dagger, which is now in the possession of Mrs. George D'Oyly of 10, South Eaton Place, by whose courtesy the photographs are reproduced, bears a label to the effect that it was 'Worn by the last king of Kandy upon the occasion of his surrender to the late Sir John D'Oyly, Bart., in 1820 and presented to him by the king.' The label is in the writing of Sir John's nephew George D'Oyly (1820-1884), though the date 1820 is an error, as the Rajah was captured five years earlier; but there can be no doubt as to the former royal ownership of the weapon.

The Sinhalese dagger is primarily intended as a cutting rather than a stabbing weapon; it is generally single edged and is usually carried at the waist inserted between the folds of the cloth, or between the waistband and the cloth. Worn thus, the hilt alone would show in the former case, and in the latter both ex-

tremities, which probably accounts for the reason why so many sheaths are only decorated at either end. Much ingenuity and art have been lavished by the Sinhalese craftsman on the adornment of his daggers, but this example, in addition to the extraordinary care with which the various designs have



DETAILS OF THE KING OF KANDY'S DAGGER : THE CRYSTAL HILT IS CARVED IN THE FORM OF A MYTHICAL MONSTER : THE SCABBARD IS OF BUFFALO HORN OVERLAID WITH SHEET-SILVER

been elaborated and carried out, has several noteworthy features which give it a unique position. Its length, 16½ inches, is unusual, whilst its 13½-inch scabbard is of buffalo horn as opposed to the wooden sheaths commonly met with even on elaborately decorated weapons. The horn is heavily overlaid with sheet-silver relieved by fillets ornamented with the usual *suli vel* or vine design executed in filigree work. The second and third fillets are joined by a vertical band, which by way of contrast is in repoussé silver and contains a *sina mal* pattern based on a native flower. (A descendant of one of the members of the *Pattal* disagreed with me in my identification of this motif. In his opinion it is a *geta liya vela*, i.e. knotted vine design.) The lower extremity of the sheath is encased in silver worked into the traditional *suli liyapata*, i.e. design turning in on itself and based on the double curve.

The materials most commonly employed for dagger hilts are metal, horn or ivory, as being easy to manipulate; rarely, as in this case, do we find crystal. This handle is superbly carved into the head of a *Serapendiya*, a mythical creature whose decorative possibilities have been freely exploited by the craftsman. The eyes are set, not with the usual stones cut *en cabochon*, but with faceted jewels which may be rubies. The blade is fitted to the hilt by a circular projection of about half an inch in diameter which is visible where the crystal has not been overlaid with metal ornamentation. The crystal is further attached to the 'grip' of the hilt by a band of gold ornamented with a flowing *vaka deka liya vela* or 'double curve vine' motif in high relief. Issuing from this band, on the edged side of the weapon, is an elaborately worked *liya pata* ornament which extends up to a point where it finally works itself into a complicated and richly worked *liya vela* ornament, known as *makara liya vela* and also containing the flower motif *sina mal* just at the point where the blade joins the hilt, the *liya vela* being continued a few inches on to the blade itself. The sudden transition from the one motif to the other has been carried out with supreme skill and with no break in the continuity of the design. The *liya pata* and adjacent portion are in silver relieved with

gold. A variation of the vine motif is found on the gold band immediately above and adjoining the *liya pata* ornament. This is the traditional *vaka deka liya vela* or double curve vine motif, already mentioned, but the decoration here is in lower relief by way of introducing variety. An unusual feature is the head of the *Kinnara*, half man, half bird, where the low relief *vaka deka liya vela* joins the blade proper. From above the head two parallel grooves extend along the top of the blade and almost through its entire length. A third groove meets the other two half-way down the blade and terminates at the same spot. The two upper grooves are ornamented with a pierced-work *anjanang dalu* ornament overlaid with silver, whilst the third, by way of contrast, contains a bold vine design in damascened silver and gold.

The workmanship throughout is of the highest quality, and only serves to confirm the statement on the label that the dagger was once the property of a King: Sri Wikrama himself with his four consorts was deported to India, where he died at the fortress of Vellore on January 30th, 1832; his representatives still receive small allowances from the revenues of Ceylon.

The re-birth of a national consciousness among the natives of an island, the charm of whose physical features are rivalled by the attraction of her cultural past, is among the most interesting problems of modern colonial development, and the bonds created by the generous extension of political rights have been strengthened by the gracious consideration of the Kings of England in restoring to her the Regalia of her Rajahs. Individuals have not been slow to follow that high example; and the Trustees of the British Museum have recently decided to give practical expression to their sense of sympathy in respect of some of the treasures from Ceylon which are in their charge. Sinhalese art was the fruit of a society organized in terms not of money but of service; and the rich visitor from across the seas has failed to fill adequately the place of the native patron. To-day the metal worker shows but little skill. Perhaps the re-birth of national consciousness will once again kindle the spark of native genius.