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BASKET HILT FINISHES

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While in winter quarters I began to wonder about basket hilt designs and their evolution over time. As usually happens, while looking for the answer to one question I stumbled on an even bigger question, specifically what was the evolution of hilt finishes. I know what we mostly see on originals and high quality reproductions are hilts in "white" that is to say no finish at all. I only found one reference to finishes. John Wallace in his excellent little book "Scottish Swords and Dirks, An Illustrated Reference Guide to Scottish Edged Weapons" posits the theory that the 17th century basket hilts were treated with a black varnish and later, with no specific date of the change given, a brown finish was adopted. The question of hilt finishes is of particular importance to those of us who try to accurately portray Scots soldiers, because from a distance, the hilt finish is more obvious than the design. I

know what we mostly see on originals and high quality reproductions are hilts in "white" that is to say no finish at all. Apparently, according to Wallace, the finish was typically removed by later collectors to enhance the appearance of the sword, but in some case fragments of the original finish remain.

If you want to attempt a varnish finish on your hilt, it might be possible to use a black metal paint on scuffed or lightly sanded metal to achieve the varnished look. A brown finish can be applied by using commercially available gun browning. As there is no known transition date from varnish to browning, I would be inclined to brown my hilt because browning or oxidation (rust) is what would happen over time anyway. I would of course be grateful for any references or information on basket hilt finishes.

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(Note: The picture above is of two mid-seventeenth century basket hilts, as shown in Scottish Swords and Dirks by John Wallace. Not how crude the hilt designs are relative to later 18th century patterns – Steve)