‘Indian daggers with idols’ in the early modern constcamer

Collecting, picturing, and imagining ‘exotic’ weaponry in the Netherlands and beyond

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In 1698 Albrecht Herport (1641-1729/30) donated a copy of his 1669 book Eine kurze Ost-Indianische Reiß-Beschreibung (A brief description of travels to the East Indies) to the city library (Burger-Bibliothec) of Bern, together with several mementos from his nine-year-long travels (from 1659 to 1668) in the East Indies.¹ The accompanying items are listed on a handwritten sheet of paper pasted into the still extant copy of his Travels. They included several natural specimens – two pieces of sago bread made by the inhabitants of the Ternate, Banda, and Ambon Islands using the pulp taken from the pith of the trunk of the sago palm tree;² two ‘male nutmegs, which are ordinarily not imported to Europe’; the sword of a swordfish; several spines of a porcupine; a flying fish; and a leaf from a fig tree – as well as two stabbing weapons: ‘a Chinese soldier’s sabre, with an idol mounted on the bayonet’, and ‘a sabre or so-called kris, the murder weapon of the inhabitants of Java’.³ At the time, the city library had recently undergone reorganization and had acquired a spacious new hall, which is represented in Johannes Dünz’s painting of the Bern library committee of 1696; depicted is a space furnished with two globes, an armillary sphere, several antique statues, and a gallery of portraits of mayors and deans displayed along the upper part of the walls (fig. 1).⁴ In addition, there was a ‘chamber of rarities’, or Kunst-Cammer, where antiquities, coins, and medals as well as natural specimens were kept.⁵ Like the book given to the city library, Herport’s kris still survives. Whereas the book has remained in the Burgerbibliothek, the kris is now in the Bernisches Historisches Museum to which it was moved from the Antiquarium, the institution that succeeded the city library (figs. 2, 3).⁶

At the time of the donation Herport was city major of Bern – in charge of the city watchmen – and his adventurous life lay far back in the past. Almost nothing is known of Herport for the decade after the publication of his book, except that he married Maria Müslin, the daughter of a surgeon, in 1671. In 1680 he became a member of the Great Council in Bern, subsequently serving as grand master of the hospital (1683–1689) and city major (1691-1706). At a fairly advanced age and most probably in order to secure for himself an income or honourable retirement, he took up the post of bailiff in Zweisimmen (1706-1712) followed by that of grand bailiff in Biberstein (1716-1722).⁷

By 1700, exotic weapons, among them krisses, had been brought to Europe by the hundreds or, rather, thousands, mostly by employees of the VOC (the Dutch East India Company) or the East India Companies of England and

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¹ Herport 1669
² Herport 1669
³ Herport 1669
⁴ Dünz 1696
⁵ Herport 1669
⁶ Herport 1669
⁷ Herport 1669