

AMIR MOHTASHEMI



Royal Gold Ayda Katti Knife

Coorg, India, Early 19th century

Steel, gold

52 cm long. Pommel 13 cm long, 6cm wide

Stock no.: A6122

Provenance: Gifted by Ling Rajender Wadeer II, Raja of Coorg, in 1815 to Sir William Hay Macnaghten (1793-1841); then by descent until 2018.

A fine Ayda Katti with typical crescent-shaped blade, edged on the concave face, and stamped with a gold-edged seal. This mark has often been called the seal of the Rajasthan of Coorg, however, it is a stylised representation of the letter *Om*, the most sacred symbol in Hinduism.¹ The gold hilt is decorated with bands of gold wire at the grip, and has a flat, pear-shaped pommel which is engraved with the cipher of Ling Rajender Wadeer II alongside the Hijri date 1230 (1814–15 CE). Ling Rajender Wadeer II ruled Coorg from 1810–1820, initially as regent for his niece, before assuming power for himself in 1811.²

The Ayda Katti is the national sword of the Kodava people (formerly Coorg) in Karnataka, appearing on the Kodava flag. The unusual crescent-shaped blade, edged on its concave face, likely derives from agricultural knives designed to clear jungle. However, this example would only have been used for display. Indeed, some sources suggest that the flat, egg-shape pommel is only present on ceremonial Ayda Katti.³ When worn as a ceremonial sword, the Ayda Katti was hung on a belt or chain at the small of the back, within an openwork cage rather than a scabbard.

There are relatively few Ayda katti knives in existence. Following riots near Malappuram in 1884, the British seized some 17,295 Coorg weapons. The finest examples were taken by the Madras Museum (now the Government Museum, Chennai), and the rest were dumped into the sea.⁴ The few examples in UK museums arrived in the country before 1884. These mostly have wooden, horn, or ivory hilts, such as those in the Victoria & Albert Museum ([2824&A\(IS\)](#), [2803\(IS\)](#), [2796\(IS\)](#)), Powis Castle ([NT 1180585](#) and [NT 1180586](#)). It is therefore exceptionally rare both for an example to appear on the market and to have such a fine gold hilt and connection to the Rajah.

This Ayda Katti comes from the collection of Sir William Macnaghten (1793–1841), who entered the East India Company as a cadet at the age of sixteen. He was sent to India in 1809 and joined the Bengal Civil Service in 1816.⁵ During his time in India, he acquired knowledge of several Indian languages as well as Hindu and Islamic law.⁶

Writing in *The Scots Magazine*, Macnaghten recounted the occasion on which he received this Ayda Katti from the Rajah of Coorg:

On taking leave of him, he presented me, among other things, with a knife – it is made at Coorg, and of remarkably well-tempered steel, as the Rajah proved to me, by causing several small rods of iron to be cut through with it, at the time he presented it to me. Though called knife, it is in fact a scymetar, and every man in Coorg is armed with one; all are of the same construction in the blade, but the handle varies according to the rank of those wearing them – this being ornamented with pure gold is for men of the highest 'caste'. It is astonishing how dexterous the Coorg people are in the use of this knife; it is said that they can cut off a man's head with one blow of it – and this I can readily believe, from having seen both the Rajah and his Dewan (or prime minister) repeatedly cut down, at one blow, a tree thicker than my leg.⁷

Macnaghten continued to rise up the Bengal Civil Service, being appointed Governor General of India's envoy to Afghanistan in 1836. In this role, he advocated British intervention in Afghanistan, leading to the First Anglo-Afghan War. He was shot and killed by Wazir Akbar Khan, son of the Afghan ruler, near Kabul in 1841.

[1] Elgood, Robert. *Hindu Arms and Ritual: Arms and Armour from India, 1400-1865*. Delft: Eburon, 2004, p. 234.

[2] *Coorg and its Rajahs. By an Officer Formerly in the Service of His Highness Veer Rajunder Wadeer, Rajah of Coorg*. London: John Bumpus, 1858, p. 31.

[3] MacGregor, Arthur. *The India Museum Revisited*. London: Victoria and Albert Museum / UCL Press, 2023, p. 221.

[4] Elgood, Robert. *Firearms of the Islamic World in the Tareq Rajab Museum, Kuwait*. London: I. B. Tauris, 1995, p. 185.

[5] National Army Museum, 'The Late Sir W H MacNaughton [sic] BT, Political service', NAM.1950-11-55-10, retrieved via <https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1950-11-55-10> on 01/12/2025.

[6] Britannica Editors, 'Sir William Hay Macnaghten, Baronet', Encyclopaedia Britannica online, retrieved online via <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sir-William-Hay-Macnaghten-Baronet> on 01/12/2025.

[7] Macnaghten, William. 'Short Notices of the Rajah of Coorg, being an Extract of a Letter from Bangalore, 1815', *The Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany*, 1816, vol. 78, pp. 207–208, retrieved online via https://archive.org/details/sim_edinburgh-magazine-and-literary-miscellany_the-scots-magazine-and-e_1816-03_78/page/206/mode/2up on 02/12/2025.