

# FRENCH LIGHT CAVALRY SABRES

## MODEL AN IX & AN XI

### Designation

The French An IX (Year 9) and An XI (Year 11) light cavalry sabres take their designations from the Revolutionary Calendar used in France from the declaration of the Republic on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1792 (Day 1 of Year 1) until the Gregorian calendar was restored by the Emperor Napoleon I on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1806. Thus An IX ran from 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1800 to 21<sup>st</sup> September 1801 and An XI from 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1802 to 21<sup>st</sup> September 1803. In keeping with common usage, I shall simply refer to the models as the Year 9 and the Year 11.

### Production and distribution

At the time the new sabre was conceived in 1800, the French light cavalry establishment stood at 14 regiments of Hussars and 24 regiments of Chasseurs à Cheval. Additionally, there were 6 regiments of Horse Artillery who were also equipped as light cavalry. By the time of the Grand Armée in 1812, a further 7 regiments of Chasseurs à Cheval had been added and 9 regiments of Cheval-Léger-Lanciers (lancers) had been created (in 1811).

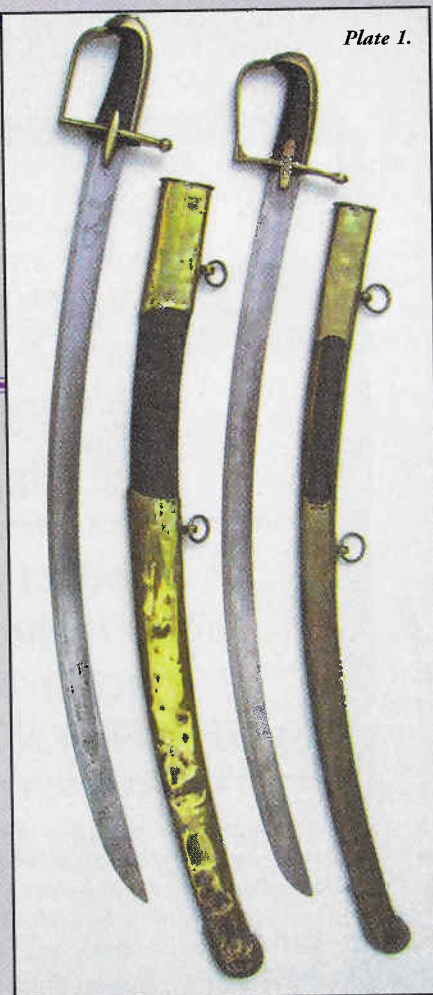
The French army was engaged in almost continuous campaigning between 1800 and 1815 and the demands on ordnance were therefore enormous, in particular after the losses in the Russian campaign of 1812. Production of the Year 9 and Year 11 light cavalry sabres was primarily (but not exclusively) undertaken by the two government manufactories at Klingenthal and Versailles. Production numbers for the Year 9 and Year 11 sabres are given in the following table. It is important to note, however, that although the table shows those sabres produced at Klingenthal and Versailles, all blades were made at Klingenthal (i.e. including those of the Versailles sabres).

Readers should also note the discrepancy between the figures for numbers of sabres produced at Versailles. The figures used are based upon, and use the same sources as production tables given in "La Cavalerie Légère du Premier Empire" by Pétard & Rigo (Edition Histoire & Collections, Paris 1993). The first sets of figures originate from an historical document "État générale des armes blanches" in the archives of the French Military Historical Service (S.H.A.T). This document lists the numbers of "sabres de cavalerie légère"

BY  
RICHARD DELLAR

produced 1802-1805 (which Pétard & Rigo have interpreted as being the Year 9 model) and the numbers of "sabres de cavalerie légère Mod. An 11" produced 1806-1821. It should also be noted that there is no listing prior to 1802. The figures in the two right hand columns relate to the number of sabres produced at Versailles within "La Manufacture d'Armes de Versailles" by Captain Maurice Bottet (1903) and which are taken from the records of Nicholas Boutet, entrepreneur at Versailles from 1800 to 1818. It should be noted that Bottet's work does not split the production between the Year 9 and Year 11 models, rather this division has been taken according to Pétard & Rigo.

There is no firm evidence to determine which of the two sets of figures for Versailles are correct so both sets are thus given.



French hussar sabres. On the left the Type An IV made at Klingenthal around 1795-1798. On the right, a sabre made around 1793-99 by one of the 380 or so private manufacturers operating in France at that time.

Year	Figures from French Military Historical Service (S.H.A.T.) based on the document "État générale des armes blanches"		Figures for Versailles from Bottet "La manufacture d'armes de Versailles"	
	Year 9	Year 11	Year 9	Year 11
	Klingenthal	Versailles	Klingenthal	Versailles
IX	unknown	-	-	438
X	unknown	-	-	2,108
XI	6150	3,243	-	2,807
XII	5,104	5,251	-	4,847
XIII	2,426	3,016	-	2,441
XIV-1806	400	600	1,485	485
1807	-	-	2	415
1808	-	-	4,600	1,175
1809	-	-	5,300	3,888
1810	-	-	6,034	4,350
1811	-	-	9,295	7,295
1812	-	-	11,909	10,960
1813	-	-	31,092	27,099
1814	-	-	8,131	12,938
1815	-	-	2,595	2,599
1816	-	-	3,018	600
1817	-	-	820	-
1818	-	-	-	-
1819	-	-	-	-
1820	-	-	-	-
Totals	13,680	12,110	84,281	71,804
Total no. of blades (Klingenthal)	25,790		156,085	
				12,641
				64,871
				26,321
				149,152

According to the S.H.A.T. figures, Versailles hilted 47% of Year 9 sabres and 46% of Year 11 sabres; according to the Bottet figures, the percentages are 48% and 44% respectively.

The introduction of the Year 9 model sabre was part of a general modernisation and rationalisation of all French armaments undertaken at the end of the eighteenth century and, like the times which spawned it, the design of the Year 9 and Year 11 models was truly revolutionary. Although side bars and folding "attack" hilts had been used in various forms before, this was the first appearance of what has become known as the "three bar" hilt. There was no precedent in France or elsewhere in Europe for this style of hilt. Up to this point, most light cavalry sabres were of a general "hussar" style that had been in use for the greater part of the eighteenth century (see Plate 1) and which had its origins in 17<sup>th</sup> century Hungary.

Distribution of the new model sabres to the various light cavalry units would also have been a relatively slow process so it would probably not have been until around 1807-1808 that many units were fully equipped. Apparently, the new sabres were enthusiastically received by the Chasseurs à Cheval but the Hussar regiments were more attached to their traditional style of sabre and did not complete the transition until around 1812-1813. The Cheveau-Léger-Lanciers were given the new sabres immediately upon their inception in 1811. Given that the sabre was

carried predominantly by Chasseurs à Cheval in the early years, the style of hilt has become known as "à la chasseur".

### Differences and identification – Year 9 and Year 11 troopers' sabres

One of the first matters to consider then is the identification and differentiation of the Year 9 sabre from the Year 11. This is not as easy as one might suppose and is certainly not as straightforward as the difference between the French Year 9 and Year 11 heavy cavalry swords

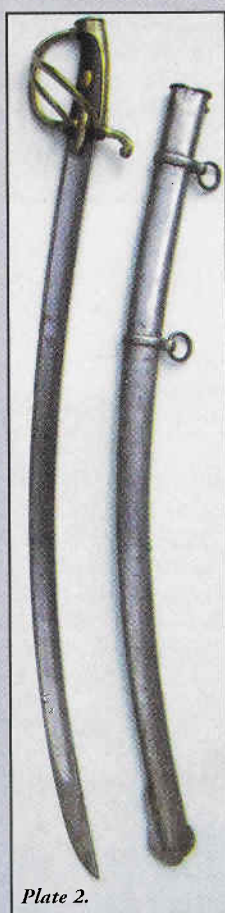


Plate 2.

Year 9 sabre made at Klingenthal in Year 11 (1802-1803); Year 11 scabbard.

(*la sabre de la cavalerie de ligne* – see Classic Arms & Militaria Nov/Dec 1995).

The most authoritative work on French military swords is Christian Aries' *Armes Blanches Militaires Françaises*. Aries tells us that there are few surviving documents which adequately identify the differences between the two models so identification up until now has primarily been made on the basis of two sabres illustrated by Aries and which are now in the museum at the St Etienne manufactory (having been moved from Châtellerault in 1962 when that centre of production closed). Conveniently for modern students, these two sabres have the model designations engraved upon their scabbards: "Modele de Sabre De L'An 9" and "Modele de Sabre De L'An 11" respectively. There are no other markings or inspection stamps but it is almost certain that they must have been manufactured at Klingenthal.

It is accepted, however, that the principal difference between the two models, and indeed the main reason for the introduction of the Year 11 model, relates to the scabbard. The Year 9 scabbard was constructed of sheet iron of 0.95mm thickness which was formed to shape and brazed to form a seam along the inner face. It was lined with two thin slats of wood which were held in position by a mouthpiece which was itself fixed by two rivets to the leading and rear edges of the scabbard. A shoe made of steel was brazed to the bottom and two flat bands with hanging rings were brazed on. Each band was grooved near the top and bottom edges. This construction, however, proved insufficiently robust to meet and survive the demands and hazards of campaigning. The thickness of the metal casing at a mere 0.95mm resulted in it being easily dented or bent thus preventing

the sabre from fully entering the scabbard. Even worse perhaps, such damage could prevent the sabre from being extracted.

The Year 11 scabbard on the other hand is one of the heaviest and most robust scabbards ever carried by light cavalry (see Table of Weights and Dimensions). Rather than being lined with two thin slats of wood, the liner was formed from a solid piece of wood which encased the entire blade. The liner was then itself covered in sheet iron of some 2.5mm in thickness (i.e. more than two and a half times the thickness of the Year 9 scabbard). A steel shoe was brazed on and the mouthpiece was fixed by a single screw to the rear edge of the scabbard. The scabbard bands are probably the most obvious visual difference between the Year 9 and Year 11 scabbards, those on the latter being semi-round instead of flat.

Surviving examples of the Year 9 scabbard are extremely rare, no doubt many having been lost to damage and, as seems likely, having been subject to a policy of deliberate replacement by the more robust Year 11 scabbard.

Let us now turn to the sabre itself where differentiation between the two models is not as easy. According to Aries, both the blades and hilts of Year 9 and Year 11 sabres are virtually identical although the hilt of the Year 11 is said to be slightly larger and heavier than the Year 9. There are visual differences between the two sabres illustrated in Aries (those marked Model of Year 9 and Model of Year 11) but they are very subtle. Most notably, the side bars are somewhat thinner on the Year 9 and curve to a greater degree before connecting at their base with the cross-guard (the side bars of the Year 11 connect almost perpendicular to the cross-guard).

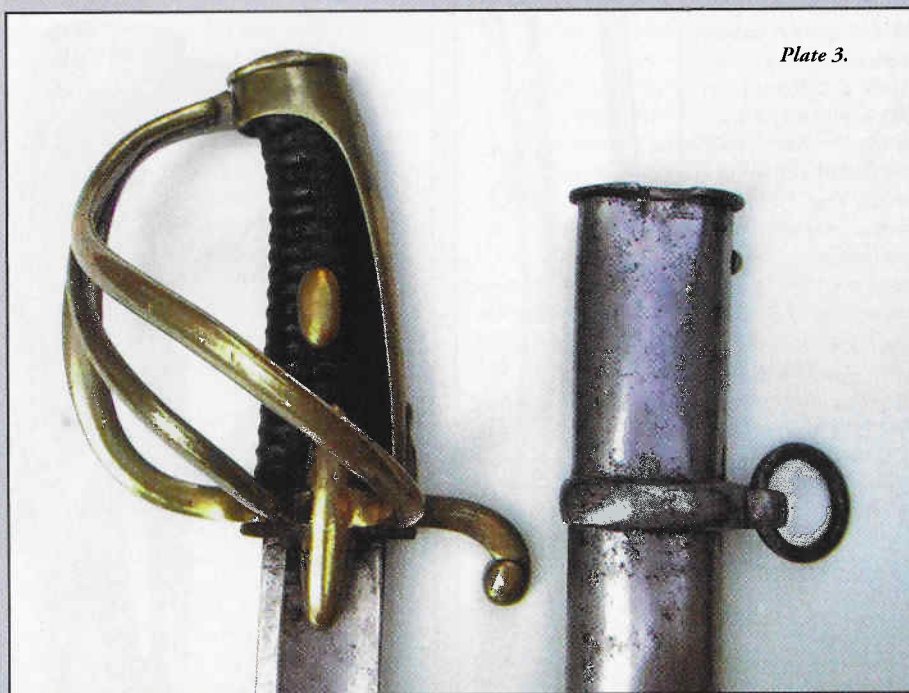


Plate 3.

Year 9 sabre - close-up of hilt showing 5mm gap between side bars and pommel.

There are also in existence various comparative tables of measurements and weights which indicate the differences between the two models including those in the "Journal Militaire" published in June 1806 (see Table of Weights and Dimensions below). However, save for the respective weights of the Year 9 and Year 11 scabbards, the differences in weights and dimensions of the sabres themselves are all relatively minor and can easily be confused or thrown into doubt by manufacturing tolerances or subsequent wear and tear. Some form of firmer evidence is therefore required.

One of the difficulties of visual evidence is that both Aries (in *Armes Blanches Militaires Françaises*) and Pétard (in *Des Sabres et Des Épées*) illustrate Year 9 and Year 11 sabres where the two side-bars of the guard enter into the pommel alongside the knucklebow on both models. At this point, it should be remembered that one of the differences between the French Year 9 and Year 11 heavy cavalry swords is that the side bars of the guard stop short of the pommel on the former whereas they enter the pommel in the latter. So it is therefore that we must consider the first light cavalry sabre illustrated at Plates 2 and 3, on which, as can be seen, the two side-bars stop some 5mm short of the pommel. This sabre, both blade and hilt, was made at Klingenthal in An IX (1802-1803). The back edge of the blade has the inscription "M=fiure nale Du Klingenthal, Coulaux frères Entreprs" and the hilt bears the inspection stamp (*poignon*) of Benjamin Pierre Claude Levasseur, inspector at Klingenthal from March 1798 to September 1803. According to the Tables of Production, it must therefore be a Year 9 model sabre. Thus, contrary to Aries and Pétard (in the works mentioned above), this sabre suggests that side bars on the Year 9 sabre, or at least on some Year 9 sabres, stop short of the pommel in like fashion to the heavy cavalry swords of the same era. It should be noted that the scabbard of this sabre (Plates 2 & 3) is certainly the Year 11 model as would be expected if the unsatisfactory Year 9 scabbards were replaced by the Year 11 model. In fact, it

Year 9 / Year 11 sabre made at Klingenthal c. 1803-04

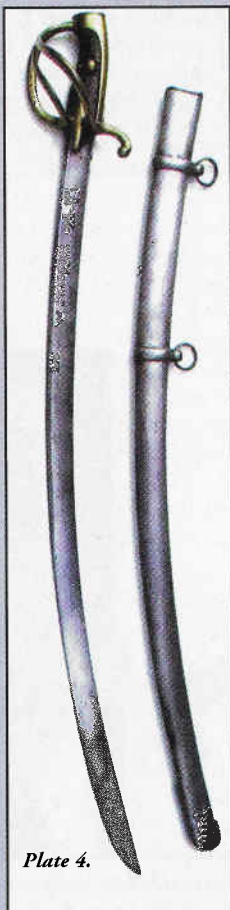


Plate 4.

can be reasonably assumed that any Year 9 scabbards that have survived have only done so by being overlooked. It is further to be noted that the side bars do curve at their base before attaching to the cross-guard although not to the same extent as that Year 9 sabre illustrated in Aries.

A further point must now be made concerning the Tables of Production above. Napoleon Bonaparte was crowned as Emperor on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1804 inaugurating the First Empire. Allowing for a period of transition, the manufactory designation on the back edge of these light cavalry sabres (and all other French swords) would therefore have changed from "Nationale" to "Impériale" from around 1805-06. Given that the Tables of Production indicate that the first Year 11 sabres were not produced until almost exactly that time, the suggestion arises that all sabres with the designation "Nationale" must be Year 9 sabres whereas all with the designation "Impériale" are Model Year 11.

Let us now therefore move to the sabre illustrated at Plates 4 and 5. This sabre is also marked "M=fiure nale du Klingenthal Coulaux freres Entreprs" and has the inspection stamps of Levasseur and Mouton on the blade and Beaumarez and Mouton on the hilt. Like the sabre at Plates 2-3, manufacture of this sabre is again indicated at Klingenthal around 1803-4. However, unlike the sabre at Plates 2-3 and despite the proximity of dates of manufacture, the side bars on the guard of this sabre (Plates 4-5) enter the pommel rather than stopping short. If we believe the Tables of Production and the illustrations of Aries, it must be a Year 9 sabre. However, if we take the view that the Year 9 model has the side bars of the guard stopping short of the

pommel, then it must be a Year 11 model. Once again, the scabbard is certainly the Year 11 model. The side-bars of this sabre also attach to the cross-guard without the curvature seemingly inherent in the Year 9 model. I am inclined to think this sabre is the Year 11 model but since no conclusion can safely be reached either way, I call this a Year 9/11 sabre.

What conclusions are therefore to be drawn? I offer the following:

- Virtually all surviving Year 9 sabres will have Year 11 scabbards so this tells us nothing,
- Sabres with the side bars stopping short of the pommel are most likely to be the Year 9 model,
- Sabres with the manufactory prefix "Nationale" but with side bars going into the pommel could be either Year 9 or Year 11.
- Sabres with the manufactory prefix "Impériale" will almost certainly be the Year 11 model,
- The Tables of Production above should be read with some degree of latitude, not least because of the inherent discrepancies between the Versailles figures and the interpretations made concerning contemporaneous documents.

There is one further point of interest concerning the Year 9/11 sabre at Plates 4 to 5. Engraved upon the guard are the markings "7<sup>me</sup> Ch.: 1807 No. 73" which would seem to indicate that this sabre was issued to a trooper of the 7<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs à Cheval in 1807. It would thus have seen action on such notable occasions as Eylau and Friedland in 1807, Aspern-Essling, Raab and Wagram in 1809, Fuentes D'Oñoro in 1811, Polotsk in 1812, Dresden, Dennewitz and Leipzig in 1813,



Plate 5.

Year 9 / Year 11 sabre - close up of hilt showing side bars entering pommel.

