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April 08, 2006 (12:00 AM)

The Development of Sword in Iran: a Short Introduction

The making of swords, dirks and daggers has a very long history in Iran. There are examples of blades made of obsidian, which are kept in the National Museum of Iran, excavated in Hasanlu, dating back to 3000-2000 B.C. (Early Dynastic Age) (for an example see, Stöllner, Slotta and Vatandust (2004:656, plate 10). The discovery of metals revolutionized the art of swordmaking in Iran as more durable weapons could be made using the new material. The weaponmakers of Luristan tried making weapons by using copper as an element. Copper weapons proved to be much more durable in comparison to stone weapons. Later on, the weaponmakers found out that by adding tin to the copper, they could make much more durable weapons that could have better edge retention. Different combinations of arsenic, tin and copper were tried to find an optimal combination of copper alloy for casting the best weapons. In the Bronze Age, the weaponmakers of Luristan reached a legendary reputation in the region. The industry of making bronze weapons flourished to an extent that the weaponmakers of Luristan made weapons for Babylonian and Assyrian kings and nobles. A number of bronze daggers, dirks, and swords with Babylonian inscriptions testify that these rulers and nobles used the legendary skills of Luristan's weaponmakers. A bronze dirk, which is kept in the National Museum of Iran in Tehran, carries a Babylonian cuneiform script on its base reading, translated, "It belongs to Nabu, the King of Kiohatti, the King of Babylon, King of Sumer and Akkad." The dirk is dated to 1146 – 1123 B.C. (see Pope, 1938).

The early bronze weapons made in Luristan consisted of a blade with a tang and a perishable handle, usually made of wood. After their death, many males were buried with different objects, among them different types of weapons, such as daggers, dirks, swords, spears, maces, axes and pieces of armor. In the course of time, the perishable handles were exposed to the natural decaying process, and therefore, one can see a number of blades with tangs attributed to Luristan. One of the main steps undertaken by the weaponmakers of Luristan was casting the bronze blade and handle in a one piece ghaleb-e ru baz (open mold) (see Sadegh-Behnam and Koh, unspecified date:26), resulting in sturdier weapons. This type of weapon has hollow parts in the handle area. These parts were filled in with scales made of

horn, wood or stone, and in some cases these handle scales were riveted to the tang via bronze pins to have a more secure grip. The weaponmakers of Luristan made the handle scales skillfully in different shapes, bringing it to an art in itself. One of the typical grip scales was the ear-pommel handle made of bone or stone. A number of these ear pommels in separate pieces can be found in the Klingenmuseum in Solingen, Germany, see Grotkamp-Schepers (2005:43, plate 31). A further technological advance undertaken by weaponmakers of Luristan was making the handle of cast bronze as well, resulting in even sturdier weapons. To do so, the weaponmakers of Luristan developed the cast-on method. This method consisted of casting the bronze handle on the blade *ghaleb-e baste* (closed mold); see Sadegh-Behnam and Koh (unspecified date:26). The interesting feature of some of these weapons is that the weaponmakers made the same shape of ear-pommel handle cast from bronze. A variety of other types of cast-on handles also exist.

Figure 1: A bronze sword with cast-on ear pommel handle from Luristan

During the Iron Age I (c. 1200-1000 B.C.), new experiments were made in making weapons made of iron. In the beginning cast iron weapons did not prove to be as sturdy as their bronze counterparts, but during the course of time, through different trial and error processes, better weapons were made of cast iron, and the subsequent hammering and forging resulted in more durable weapons. It is interesting to see that bronze and iron weapons coexisted for some period of time. This period is exactly where we find the magnificent iron-mask sword from Luristan. Some of these blades were subjected to radiocarbon dating and the results of the radiometric testing placed them around 1000 B.C. (see Slotina, Slotina and Vatandust, 2004:692). These swords are made of 8 to 15 different pieces cast or forged together. All these swords share two human faces placed with the backs of their heads opposite to each other, a handle which is set at 90 degrees to the blade, and two crouching lions/predators placed on the guard close to the blade. There are different opinions regarding the usage and function of these weapons. The majority of scholars opine that these weapons are delicately made and hence they could have not been used as a weapon on the battlefield and served as votive objects or weapons placed into the graves. There are also other scholars who believe that these were indeed used as weapons. One should note that in judging any weapon from a different type, period or culture, different types of weapons were used in different contexts, and one should not fall into the trap of judging a weapon from other cultural perspectives.

Figure 2: An iron-mask sword from Luristan

The northern provinces of Gilan and Mazandaran were inhabited by people who gave rise to a pastoral culture between the 12th and 10th centuries

B.C. An Iranian archeological team led by Dr. Ezat Negahban discovered a royal cemetery from Marlik in Gilan in 1961 A.D. (see Negahban, 1995). Over the period of one year, the team of Dr. Negahban conducted continuous scientific excavations, resulting in the find of 53 tombs (two of which belonged to horses) containing thousands of objects, among them a number of magnificent bronze weapons, and some iron and stone weapons. Many of the daggers, dirks, and swords from this site have cast-on handles. Some of them show unique characteristics, which are peculiar to the northern region. One of the specific features are bronze dirks/swords with

mushroom pommels from this area:

Figure 3: A bronze sword with cast-on hilt from Marlik

Figure 4: A bronze sword with mushroom pommel from northern Iran

With the migration of the Aryan tribes into the mainland of Iran, and with the establishment of the Median and the subsequent Achaemenian dynasty, new types of swords were introduced into the region. The short sword akenakes started to be used. Unfortunately, the Persian name for this type of sword cannot be discerned from the Iranian sources. It is known that the Greeks called this type of sword akenakes. Based on the stone reliefs of Persepolis, two different types of this short sword were used. The Persian nobles who are wearing a robe carry an akenakes, which is tucked under the sash of their robe, and the Medians who are wearing riding pants carry an akenakes which was hung on the right side of their belt via passing a belt/rope through the hole of the scabbard ear. The blade of the akenakes was usually made of iron. Different types of handles were used. Handle scales, made of bone or wood, were used for fitting the handle as is evidenced by an akenakes excavated in Persepolis. Other examples have handle made of bronze or even gold. Examples of akenakes made entirely of gold also exist. Two of these exist, one in the National Museum of Iran in Tehran (see *Muzeye Meli Iran*, 2001/1380:109) and the other in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, see Sekunda (1992:56). These were given by the Achaemenian kings to the nobles who did a special service for the Empire or to their friends.

Figure 5: A golden akenakes from the National Museum of Iran in Tehran

Historical evidence shows that the Parthians were mounted warriors

consisting of two major units, light horse archers and heavy mounted cavalry. The heavy mounted cavalry used long double-edged swords. A joint Japanese-Iranian archeological team excavated some weapons from the Parthian graves in the north of Iran. Four of Parthian swords are kept in the National Museum of Iran. These are the only archeological examples of Parthian swords which have been found to date, and are shown in the upcoming book "Arms and Armor from Iran: the Bronze Age to the End of the Qajar Period" (see Moshtagh Khorasani, 2006:in print).

Figure 6: An excavated Parthian sword

Similar to the Parthians, the Sassanians used long double-edged swords that were hung via a scabbard slide system in front of their body. Examples of early Sassanian swords are kept in the National Museum of

Iran. These excavated Sassanian swords show that contrary to the commonly-held belief deducted from the stone reliefs, Sassanians did not start to use longer swords, as both Parthian and Sassanian swords are more or less the same size. Through the military confrontations with the nomads in the north, Sassanians introduced a new sword suspension system, which allowed them to carry their swords horizontally. This of course was a major improvement in comparison to the earlier scabbard slide system, which only allowed the swords to be hung vertically in front of the body. The new sword suspension system consisted of double-locket system, which is known as P-shaped scabbard system in academic circles.

Figure 7: A Sassanian sword with P-shaped scabbard slide system

Contrary to the popular belief, the Muslim forces who attacked Sassanian Iran did not use curved swords. All early Arab swords were straight double-edged swords, as evidenced by the archeological examples of early Arab swords, which are kept in the Topkapi Saray Museum in Istanbul. A thorough analysis of when curved swords were introduced in Iran shows that al-Jahiz, who was an abna, wrote in his chronicle that the Khorasanian mounted troops during the Abbasid period boasted of their swords with curved scabbards, whereas the Arabs were fond of and swore by their straight double-edged swords. According to al-Sarraf (2002:150), the term abna literally means "sons or descendants" and was originally used to refer to the descendants of the first Khorassanians who brought the Abbasid Caliphate to power. Zakeri (1995:288) suggests that the abna regiments in the Abbasid army were the sons of the dihganan; that is, they were the asbaran or ayyaran who formed distinct social and military groups in Iran. They first participated in the anti-Umayyad revolution and, then, took an active part in the dynastic struggles in the ranks of the Abbasids.

It is a fact that Mobarak Shah Fakhr al Modabbar in his treatise on war *Adab al harb va shojae* (The Customs of War and Bravery), already differentiates between two types of swords: a) shamshir, obviously referring to the straight swords, and b) qalachuri (referring to a curved sword). He further explained that Turkish warriors preferred galachuri. This was probably the reason that many scholars assumed that the curved sword originated in Asia Minor being used by the Turkish tribes, later on adopted by the Mongol warriors. The devastating conquests of the Mongols of many countries, had a sweeping effect on military techniques and tactics, among them the adoption of a curved sword, which could more easily be wielded by the light cavalry. This effect can be observed in Iran clearly where all miniatures of warriors from the Il-Khanid periods are in the majority of cases depicted carrying a curved sword. Many scholars assume that the curve of the sword was in the beginning shallow and this increased in the course of time, reaching its high curve at the time of Shah Abbas Safavid's reign. However, one should note that as evidenced by al-Jahiz's treatise from the Abbasid period, curved swords were already used by the Khorassanians long before the Mongol invasion. Second, the usage of the very word shamshir for referring to a highly curved Iranian sword is not correct as the term shamshir is a general term, which is used to refer to any type of sword. Third, the origins of the word shamshir go back to the Pahlavi language, meaning before the introduction of Islam to Iran. Fourth, examples of highly-curved Iranian shamshirs in the Iranian museums from earlier periods show that the highly curved swords should have existed before the reign of the Shah Abbas Safavid.

Figure 8: A highly curved Iranian shamshir