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Arms

Artistic warriors

Iranian swords set the standard of quality

December 14, 2005
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From Manouchehr Moshtagh Khorasani's ["The Development of Arts and Armour in Iran: The Bronze Age to the End of the Qajar Period"](#) (Legat publishers, available May 2006).

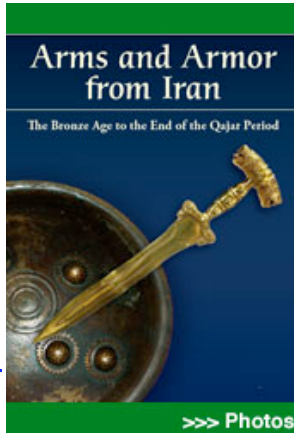
This book is the result of years of research in the field of Iranian arms and armor, illustrating for the first time a selected array of Iranian arms and armor from ten Iranian museums: the Military Museum Tehran, the Military Museum Shiraz, the Military Museum Bandar Anzali, the National Museum of Iran in Tehran, the Museum Reza Abbasi in Tehran, the Niavaran Palace in Tehran, the Melat Museum in Tehran, the Sabz Museum in Tehran, the Pars Museum in Shiraz, and the Naderi Museum in Mashad. One of the important features of these artifacts is that many bronze items come from controlled excavations, yet some are items confiscated from smugglers on illegal excavations. In addition, much of the swords, arms and armor have been handed down from one generation to the next and thus are in excellent condition. [See [brochure](#)]

INTRODUCTION

The art of metalwork in general and weapon-making in particular has a very long tradition in Iran, dating back to pre-historic times. In ancient Persian myths, one finds a number of splendid tales about the study and working of metal. In his epic "Shahname," the great Persian poet Ferdowsi recounts the story of King Jamshid, a forger of iron weapons. Even in the holy book of the "Avesta" (the holy book of the Zoroastrians), four different metals, namely gold, silver, iron, and steel alloy are discussed >>> [Selected armour](#)

Pur Davood [1] (1969/1347:15) states that although the Avesta is a religious book, it contains many accounts of arms and armor testifying to the long warrior tradition in Iran. The consequential long tradition of creating arms and armor enabled Iranian artisans and weapon makers to reach an extremely high level of mastery. They made swords and other edged weapons which became legendary not only in neighboring countries such as Ottoman Turkey[2], Moghul India [3], and the Arab region [4], but in addition, their beauty and legendary efficiency were also known to Russians, Poles, and other Europeans.

The same is true of the reputation of Iranian armor which became legendary in the region. Today Iranian swords and their beauty are highly appreciated by collectors and curators of arms alike, and many hold that the quality of steel is unprecedented. Iranian swords set the standard of quality for other regional sword makers and smiths, a quality standard which many attempted to emulate, although hardly anyone was able to achieve the level of beauty or reach the perfection of Iranian blades. As will be seen later in this book, this led to the establishment of a strong international trade in Iranian blades. Iranian



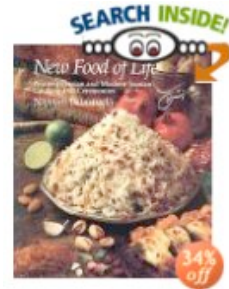
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blades were purchased and mounted in Ottoman, Indian, and Arab mountings. Iranian trade blades were even mounted with Indonesian Piso Pedang and Caucasian sword fittings. [5]

The cartouches "toran" [6] of legendary Iranian swordsmiths, such as "Assadollah" and "Kalbe-Ali" were counterfeited and put on other blades to enhance their value. In spite of the international fame of Iranian blades, research and publications on the subject are scant in Iran. There is hardly any useful published material dedicated to the history and development of edged weapons in Iran. However, by sifting through historical chronicles, one finds useful materials concerning the development of steel and edged weapons, although this must be collected piecemeal from diverse sources. On the other hand, published materials on Iranian arms and armor in the West are either dedicated to the study of bronze weapons from Gilan (Marlik) and Luristan or they appear as a subcategory under the general term of "Islamic arms and armor."

The purpose of this book is to research the development of arms and armor in Iran throughout history. The book investigates the development of arms and armor in Iran throughout the centuries in both the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras. In the past, some researchers and students of arms and armor and, above all, collectors who are not familiar with the cultural background of Middle Eastern and North African countries, have tended to make overgeneralizations about these countries and virtually ignore the cultural element.

The latter group, namely collectors, despite their intense interest and perhaps even obsession with weapons, is apt to make even broader generalizations regarding these weapons and consider these countries "en bloque." Some publications on arms and armor refer to the Iranian poet Ferdowsi as al Ferdowsi and refer to him as an Islamic poet! It is quite astounding to see the name of the Iranian poet, who spent his life penning the great epic of *Shahname* in Farsi, written in the Arabic manner.

Separating the study of arms and armor into the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras often prevents researchers from taking a comprehensive approach towards the study of arms and armor. This approach leads to a one-sided view that ends in amassing all countries of the region into one bloc, thereby attempting to pinpoint similarities while ignoring the peculiarities and individual characteristics of each individual country or culture.

This view can at times go so far as to consider all Muslim countries as parts of *Dar-al Islam*, which were in constant warfare with non-Muslim countries as parts of *Dar-al Harb*. This, of course, leads to a flawed view, ignoring the fact that the countries in the region were in constant warfare with one another; for example following the Arab conquest of Iran, Iranians never ceased to give up their national identity and language and were in constant warfare with the Caliphate powers first in Damascus and, then, in Baghdad to regain their independence.

Later on, some of the dynasties in Iran forged alliances with European powers to fight against other regional powers, such as Safavid kings, who were allies of European powers against the power of the mighty Ottoman Empire. Safavid Iran allied itself with European nations such as Poland to contain the Ottomans' expansion policies. Therefore, any separation of the cultural and historical backgrounds within the study of weapons leads to overgeneralization that frequently result in considering the countries of the region as one bloc.

Authors such as Allan and Gilmour (2000) have collaborated with Iranian scholars and have thus contributed significantly to this field, analyzing the history of Iranian steel over the centuries. Generalizations and misconceptions are not just restricted to the development of arms and armor but also occur within their related martial arts and usage as well. Regrettably, there are some scholars and collectors who appear to be unfamiliar not only with martial arts and swordsmanship traditions but also they

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seem not to understand the military heritage and culture of the respective country.

For example, comments that classical *shamshirs* were only meant for hunting due to their extreme curvature demonstrates exactly how some Western scholars judge the Iranian sword in their own terms. Their argument is either that, due to its extreme curvature, the point of *shamshir* is useless or a one-handed sword does not generate much power to be efficiently used. The first argument shows a lack of knowledge regarding Iranian swords and its function and also reveals how those who neglect the research of individual cultures can fall into the trap of judging a sword by their own terms and standards. The Iranian *shamshir* was never meant to be used as a thrusting or stabbing weapon. Iranian warriors used their spears, lances, *kards*, and *peshqabzs* for that purpose.

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Additionally, since Iranians were wrestlers by tradition, their strategy was to get close in combat and use their *shamshirs* for draw-cutting, meaning that they hit the target with the edge of their *shamshir* first and, then, drew the blade towards themselves. The *shamshir*'s design is unique and excellent for using such a technique. The second argument, being that the *shamshir* was not a useful weapon since it was only used one-handed, is even more outrageous. First, this argument clearly shows how some people believe the fallacy that two-handed (or one-and-a-half-handed) swords were superior in battle. These people do not understand the mechanics of using a sword in combination with a shield, resulting in flexibility and an ability to defend and attack at the same time.[7]

Additionally, one should take into consideration the fact that many Iranian kings, such as Shah Ismail I, Shah Abbas I, Nader Shah, and Karim Khan Zand were excellent swordsmen themselves, and the historical accounts of the efficiency of Iranian *shamshirs* on the battlefield all attest to the capabilities of this type of sword. Bearing this in mind, it is also highly unlikely that Iranian kings who were warriors themselves would be satisfied with a sword which was only meant for show or hunting.

This book endeavors to provide a comprehensive overview of the development of arms and armor in Iran. Thanks to the kind permission of the Iranian Army and Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization, I was granted permission to examine the magnificent inventory of arms and armor in Iranian Military Museums as well as other museums under the auspices of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization, which displays arms and armor. The first part of this book gives an overview of many international publications on Iranian arms and armor as well as the Iranian publications on the subject.

Additionally, I have attempted to use published materials on the analysis of weapons from Parthian and Sassanian rock reliefs as well as, later, on miniatures and other art objects and cross-reference the same. Additionally, I have reviewed the historical biographies of various Iranian kings to find more useful information on this subject. Unfortunately, time was short, and I was unable to fully complete that exercise to my total satisfaction. I hope that another study will follow this book dealing with the topic in more detail.

All pieces of arms and armor illustrated with this book are true pieces of art and masterpieces of Iranian

handicraft. Separating art from handicraft is impossible in Iran, since as Ektiar (1998-9:50) says, for centuries in Iran "art" was considered indistinguishable from handicraft. She continues by stating that an analysis of the four Persian words for art or craft – *san'at*, *fann*, *pisheh* and *honar* – reveal that these terms were used interchangeably from the fifteenth century A.D. (so far as its linguistic use can be traced back) until the second half of the nineteenth century A.D.. This book is dedicated to the memory of all these artists who made these weapons and the warriors who used them.

Manouchehr Moshtagh Khorasani's "The Development of Arts and Armour in Iran: The Bronze Age to the End of the Qajar Period" (Legat publishers, available May 2006)

Notes

[1] Professor Pur Davood was one of the most eminent specialists in Iranian studies and the first person to translate the *Avesta* into modern Persian (Pur Davood, 1969/1347:10).

[2] Already contained in a publication in 1925, Von Le Coq (1977:12) opines that Iran was the foremost weapon maker in Asia and states that more evidence will be found to support this statement in the course of time. The blades produced in Egypt and Damascus long after the defeat of Iran all demonstrate a clear Persian influence. Von Le Croq states that there were also many smiths in India and even in *Shahname* there are many quotations of "Indian" blades. However, these might have been made by Iranian smiths using Indian steel as was the case during the Safavid period.

[3] Rawson (1967:35-36) states that the prestige and reputation of Iranian blades had been very high and the manufacture and export of blades had been very well-developed and organized. Many Moghul Indian swords were mounted with Iranian blades, but as the 17th century progressed, Indian craftsmen became more competent and were able to forge high-quality swords themselves. As a consequence, the trade and purchase of Iranian blades declined.

[4] Elgood (1994:10) states that the reputation of Iranian swords was paramount in the Gulf and Northern Arabia and Iranian blades enjoyed a high reputation in the Near and Middle East. Further, he states that in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, the Arab Bedouins regarded the Iranian blades the best which they called "*Ajami*" (Elgood, 1994:13).

[5] Following Zakey (1961:23), Iranian *shamshir* blades were often remounted in other countries, such as Turkey and India, with local mountings (Zakey, 1961:23).

[6] "Toranj" is the Persian term for cartouche, see Ehsani (2003:200).

[7] Even compared to the Japanese traditions, we see that Miyamoto Musashi, one of the best Samurai if not the best in Japanese history, clearly states that having two weapons is much better than having one. This was exactly the reason why Musashi introduced his own school of swordsmanship "**Nito Ryu**" (The School of Heaven and Earth) in which the use of two swords at the same time is suggested, a katana "long sword" in the right hand and a wakizashi (short sword) in the left hand (see Musashi, 1983:66-68). Further, comparing fighting with a sword and a shield to empty-handed fighting, any experienced martial artist can attest to the efficiency of defending and attacking at the same time, as Sensei Mas Oyama, the founder of Kyokoshinkai attests to its efficiency comparing this technique of the defense to a bridge over a highway and the cars to strikes or physical blows. No matter how many cars (blows) come, you are safe since you are on a bridge (shield) (see Oyama, unspecified date:216-221).

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