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News and Media

• Review from Mr. Andreas Volk on Mr. Moshtagh's book "Arms and Armor from Iran; The bronze Age to the End of the Qajar Period"

Review from Mr. Andreas Volk

Arms and Armor from Iran

A brief review

First of all I'd like to express my heartfelt thanks to the author Mr. Manouchehr Moshtagh Khorasani for sharing his work of more than eight years of research with us. Eight years is a significant part of a life and even browsing through the book will immediately show that not only time, but also a lot of love and passion went into its creation.

I need to point out that I'm not a specialist on Iranian / Persian history or its culture. So I can't comment on the "correctness" of the data given in the book. So my review will focus on the structure and how the material is presented.

The approach of the book is a "complete analysis". With complete analysis I refer to an examination that includes all aspects that influence the form and design of a weapon – and vice versa. It is not only the culture that defines the form and function of arms and armor, but arms (especially when exported) also influence culture in return.

Mr. Moshtagh Khorasani follows this approach exactly. In his book he not only covers a huge time line (Bronze Age to early 20th century) but considers history, culture, religion and techniques of warfare (martial arts).

This information is presented in two parts. First the text that covers history, development and weapon types and second the catalogue – presenting superb pictures of the weapons discussed together with short concise facts about origin and measures.

This nearly impossible task was brilliantly mastered by the author and his editors. Looking at the list of editors alone shows that the author used subject matter specialists from all over the world to not only verify the information but also to provide a more "neutral view", as most of his editors are not of Iranian descent. This is the first time I see such an interaction of scholars spread all over the world and I need to thank the author again for pulling all these specialists together.

Yet I think it important that the author is Iranian. As a collector and researcher of Nepalese kukris myself, I often struggle with the available sources. Research on the kukri requires a closer look on weapons from India, which were – in regards to specific regions –strongly influenced by Persian arms (and vice versa) over a significant period of time.

Yet most of the available literature on all these subjects is written by "western researchers" – going back to the Victorian age.

I think it extremely important that any researcher should have a deep understanding of the local culture and its language. With Mr. Moshtagh Khorasani being Iranian himself, but also being a cosmopolitan who is fluent in German, English, Spanish, and French this book offers a unique opportunity. With the author having a deep understanding of western as well of Iranian culture, he becomes a "bridge" between the two, offering "native" insights into the arms and armor of Iran, presented in way that makes these insights accessible to "Westerners" – please forgive this rough generalization but the author lived in the US as well as in Europe, so I think this generalization to be valid.

I can only hope that other scholars take this as an example and that

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we'll see more of these publications in the future, where scholars native to a culture research its history and arms. Even though the book is written in a very clear way, that is easy to understand even if one is not a specialist on arms, Art History or Persian culture it is not easy to read. This may sound like a contradiction, but as the author is following the "complete examination" I strongly advise using books marks in order to have all important time tables and key sections on history easily accessible – those will be needed all the time while reading. The author does provide all these overviews in a clear way, diagrammed where possible and put into tables, but when going into analysis of a weapon one should be aware of the religious, historical and cultural background of the period in which the weapon was made to grasp the full and deeper understanding of its nature.

I therefore strongly recommend reading all of the first 7 chapters, even if bronze weapons are not the prime interest of the reader. A lot of historically-important connections are covered in these chapters. The Chapter No 7 "Swords in Iran after the Muslim conquest" is highly recommended to everybody interested in swords in general (not necessarily Iranian), their make, and variants of steel. By using the latest archaeological insights into the historical productions of Steel (e.g. the publications by Dr. Ann Feuerbach) the author examines different methods of manufacture, quality and use of steel, as well as comparisons between different regions of steel production. Regarding the cultural interchange in the region when it comes to steel production this chapter is of interest to anybody focusing on weapons from the middle east, the subcontinent, and even China.

I also advise to add chapter 22 and 23 to the general reading – those provide excellent insight into symbolism and warfare strategies.

It needs a special mention that the whole publication contains over 1000 footnotes. A proof of the huge amount of secondary literature and the findings of other researchers that the author considered in compiling his work.

The other chapters focus on the different types of weapons: the shamshir, daggers, armour, etc. It is essential that the author uses the names of rulers and historical persons, dynasties and historical events that were introduced in the earlier chapters. So again – bookmarks do help as you may find yourself skimming back and forth– and skimming isn't that easy in a book 9 pounds heavy. As I stated – clearly written but no easy read, as all the aspects create a multifaceted view, showing that weapons are not "only steel", but mirrors in which we see captured images from a culture in a given time period.

The footnotes are directly given at the bottom of each page providing a wealth of information and including the findings of other researchers and scholars. It also needs a mention that the author labels his own findings as "observations" not as definite truths.

All text provided (over 380 pages) will take me months to work through. The book is not a "one time read." It provides such a broad spectrum of ideas that the true value is revealed when one starts to "work" with it. Even though – as stated before – I'm not a specialist on Iranian history, with all the secondary and primary sources used I feel extremely comfortable. The additional literature used shows clearly that the author did everything he could to provide a view on the different subjects that is as broad as possible -- an approach that not only requires a lot of research, but also some personal distance from one's own findings and opinions.

The second part of the book – the catalogue-- is simply breathtaking. I don't have another word for that. It can't be described, one really needs to see it.

If my count is right it features:

- 28 bronze and iron daggers and swords from Luristan
- 19 bronze daggers and swords from northern Iran
- 1 iron sword from northern Iran
- 3 akenakes from the Achaemenian period
- 4 iron swords from the Parthian Period
- 5 iron daggers from the Parthian Period

- 7 swords from the Sassanian period
- 107 shamshirs from Timurid period to Qajar
- 4 straight swords from Qajar period
- 11 military swords from the Qajar period
- 8 qaddare
- 15 qame
- 24 khanjar
- 24 kard
- 7 pishqabz
- 50 spearheads
- 24 gorz (maces)
- 14 axes
- 23 shields
- 27 pieces of body armor
- 10 helmets
- 3 suits of chain mail
- 14 bows
- 4 quivers
- arrows beyond count
- 3 thumb rings (archery)

All presented in a quality of picture and detail that rivals those of the finest nihonto books available. The catalogue alone is worth the price of the book. Most of the weapons in the catalogue are referred to in the text. I think it was the right decision "not" to have the detailed pictures in the text. Thus, one piece can be referred several times (e.g. when discussing blade form and again when discussing decoration and symbolism). Showing it together with similar items also gives the reader the chance to directly compare it, as well as having a catalogue that as a whole shows the full picture of variety, development and "evolution". As a summary I need to stress that the author made the nearly-impossible happen. He combines the aspects and inter-linking several cultural aspects to provide one picture on the colorful history of arms and armor in Iran. It is a book well worth its price, but it will not reveal its full potential when "just being read". It demands time to read carefully – follow the links provided, think about them, and work on from there.

I'm looking forward to several months of wonderful work and interesting revelations.

Thanks a lot Mr. Khorasani.
Andreas Volk

Mr. Andreas Volk is a specialist on historical weapons of Nepal and Japan. He is a published IT technical consultant and lives in Southern Germany. He is practitioner of Japanese swordsmanship (Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu).

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