



Dr. Manouchehr Moshtagh Khorasani

Lexicon of Arms and Armor from Iran

A Study of Symbols and Terminology



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PUBLISHER

Production Management and Art Direction:

Alexander Frank

Graphic Design:

Alexander Frank

Heike Frank-Ostarhild

Typesetting:

Alexander Frank

Heike Frank-Ostarhild

Martin Baumann

Picture Editing:

Alexander Frank

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Prepress:

Alexander Frank

Heike Frank-Ostarhild

Print:

Buch- und Offsetdruckerei

Paul Schürle GmbH & Co. KG.

Website:

www.legat-publishers.com

www.arms-and-armor-from-iran.de



ISBN-13 978-3-932942-31-0

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Legat-Verlag GmbH & Co. KG and Author

Printed in Germany

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Doing Research on Persian Martial Arts

The martial arts present a fascinating field of study that attracts all kinds of researchers from philosophers and historians to experts and biomechanicians. Based on the definition given by the North American anthropologist Thomas A. Green (2001:16), one could consider the martial arts as "systems that blend the physical components of combat with strategy, philosophy, tradition, or other features, thereby distinguishing them from pure physical reaction". Going by this definition, it is therefore apparent that the martial arts are the products of culture and that they contain features that are practically universal. In their idiosyncrasies, one characterizes and differentiates - always based on the subjectivity of the observer - diverse and complex spatial and time coordinates that appear to be unique to specific created cultures and which are their products, lending themselves to further research in the scientific community.

From a historical perspective, the present popular interest in the study of martial arts is the result of the impact that the Japanese martial arts - and later those from other Far Eastern countries such as China and Korea - have had in western societies from the middle of the 20th century onwards. It is not surprising that these martial arts have accumulated a major scientific corpus of research over the course of time. However, during the last two decades, research in this field has experienced a considerable increase on a global level, extending to martial traditions that are still less researched. The most interesting of these areas of research stem from the Persian world and the local martial traditions of medieval and Renaissance Europe. One can easily attribute a great part of the impulse for the study of the martial traditions of places other than the Far East - still hegemonious and representative of a particular process of globalization - to the indigenous movements that are an identical reinforcement to that represented by the proliferation of Far Eastern martial arts, and that exist at a global level. This could be understood as a similar reaction against a cultural uniformitarianism that at present seems to be imposed as a dominant tendency of social evolution.

As a nation with a great warrior tradition, the Persian culture accumulated vast knowledge about

the martial arts, possessing an understanding of methods of manufacture as well as the principles and techniques of the use of arms in different contexts, whether they served as real or symbolic weapons. A good demonstration of this is the enormous legacy of arms and armor that the author of the present book has already shown, at least partially, and classified in his magnificent work *Arms and Armor from Iran: The Bronze Age to the End of the Qajar Period* (Legat, 2006) that has become automatically an indispensable reference for all types and evolution of Persian armament. Thanks to this heritage of arms and armor, today's researchers are not limited to merely enjoying the beauty of Persian arms - many of them real pieces of art - but can also investigate their possible uses and applications, meaning that the forms, lengths, weights, designs, inscriptions or reliefs of arms and armor provide a clear indication of their probable application on the battlefield or in other fields such as the religion and ritual.

However, the reconstruction of the material culture, and especially of the intangible culture, in the case of Persian martial arts remains a complicated process because of the fact that the majority of classical Persian martial arts (e.g. shooting with the bow, swordsmanship, fighting with a lance, a mace or an axe, etc.) have become obsolete and in any case one cannot ensure that the existing Persian martial arts of today, such as the wrestling style *kašti pahlavāni* maintains a broad similarity with other historical forms of indigenous wrestling styles of the region. This is where the texts and iconographic materials seem to be essential sources for validating and expanding the information that the arms and armor themselves suggest. The work on Persian manuscripts undertaken by the author in realizing this task is, in this sense, exhaustive and praiseworthy and it is backed by his education as a linguist and as a native speaker of Persian language, something that few people can show in this field of study.

Logically, the manuscripts also present their own limitations as sources of information, as they are derived from contexts, cultural assumptions and limitations that can be totally or partially unknown to the researcher. As Manouchehr Moshtagh Khorasani mentions correctly in his introduction, there are

identical terms that were used in different periods for designating rather different objects, and in the same manner sometimes different terms were used for designating the same object. The subjectivity of the narrators in such a sensitive field, given the exaggeration and hyperbole that sometimes surrounds the description of all aspects of warfare including combat between armies, duels and prominent actors in the field of war, and kings and nobility, is of utmost importance. There is also an inherent limitation in the deconstruction of such accounts that needs to be evaluated carefully as well, and the proper authority of those manuscript authors to write competently about elements relating to the martial culture of the relevant period should also be taken into consideration. For example the tremendous impact forces described by some Persian manuscripts regarding war maces can only be interpreted as poetic exaggerations meant to lend weight to the written accounts. Among the more specific works with overt martial themes, such as the treatises about archery and swords, one might speculate, based on homology, what happens in the martial treatises of other cultures, if no concealment could exist, or at least a masking of martial knowledge. The production of the famed crucible steel could be a good example of this - the practice of concealment, derived from the necessity to hide the mentioned knowledge from possible or real enemies.

Similarly, one can ask up to what point ancient Persian warriors respected - especially in times of war - the warrior codex or *javānmardī* to which the manuscripts refer. To make a comparison, this time respecting *bushido*, the famed codex of Japanese warriors, the North American historian G. Cameron Hurst (1990: 517) points out that "*In fact, one of the most troubling problems of the premodern era is the apparent discrepancy between the numerous house laws and codes exhorting the samurai to practice loyalty and the all-too-common incidents of disloyalty which racked medieval Japanese warrior life. [...] This is a classic mistake of assuming that a system of normative ethics describes an actual field of behaviour*". The deconstruction of the illustrations that accompany the texts of the manuscripts is an exercise that carries a fair number of the limitations mentioned previously. Up to what point does the illustrator reflect authentically the execution of a certain lance technique (for example, to hit with the lance and dismount the rival), and to what extent does it consist of an exaggeration (reproducing a warrior "flying pierced" over the head of the attacker) designed to elicit a sensation of surprise in the reader, and the subsequent adoration or mystification of the hero or the described deeds? Should one

modify the size or the form of the arms or should one invent arms as a means to test the expressive force described in the illustrated accounts or narrations? What were the artistic conventions of the period that led, for example, to the avoidance of representing combat in which two rivals were fighting on the ground?

As Poliakov (1987: 33) mentions relating to the classical Greek paintings alluding to unarmed combat, the lack of combat scenes depicting the fighting on the ground can to a great extent be attributed to the aesthetic conventions and the representation of the period. He describes this convention clearly: "The overwhelming majority of the wrestling scenes in Greek art depict the standing parts of the bout, primarily because on the conventional nature of the base painting, which makes the largest body of the visual evidence. Ground wrestling scenes require solid masses of coloring, fill the space less efficiently, and pose problems in perspective. (Significantly, they are less common for pankration that we might expect, given the importance of ground action in that sport.). The aesthetics of the sport may also underline this preference for depicting the wrestlers upright. Standing wrestling probably represented the purest form of the art, the execution of a clean, decisive throw without recourse to scrambling on the ground - this was the element that so obviously impressed Plato (see chap. 6)"

A similar consideration might have been present in the case of the illustrations in Persian manuscripts.

Therefore, the researcher needs to use a typology of various and complementary sources with which one could ascertain and verify the data obtained in his investigations. In the course of this exercise, the fact that the author has worked with primary sources, analyzing diverse types of textual and graphical documents (epic stories, period history books, popular stories, anthologies, journey accounts, military treatises, etc.), and at the same time, contrasting them with arms and armor existing in museums and private collections represents an improvement in the overall level of research on the traditional Persian martial arts. Manouchehr Moshtagh Khorasani has realized this reliably and effectively. This crucial work in the form of a lexicon situates and classifies a very extensive vocabulary regarding the Persian martial culture, facilitating its understanding and establishing a base for opening new lines of research and development. Among the new lines of research that it makes possible is that of the proper revival and recreation of traditional Persian martial arts.

Because martial activity has been a central element of Persian culture, a research of martial arts re-

veals findings that transcend the partial history, such as the social position of warriors, the interrelation of warriors and martial culture with other classes and cultural spheres and the significance of arms as symbolic objects representing the political power. I am convinced that this new work by Manouchehr Moshtagh Khorasani will be established as a classic reference for the study of the Persian martial culture as well as Persian culture in general. I would like to congratulate the author and thank him for this excellent work that has been realized in the field of intercultural knowledge.

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100 Años de Artes Marciales: Repertorio Bibliográfico de Monografías Publicadas en España (1906-2006) (together with Mikel Pérez Gutiérrez, Universidad de León, León, 2008)

Introducción y desarrollo del judo en España (de principios del siglo XX a 1965): el proceso de implantación de un método educativo y de combate importado de Japón (Universidad de León, León, 2004)

and the following articles:

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