



Comparative Study of Two Swords

Attributed to Mokhtar Saqafi and

Amir Tamerlane Gurkani

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Abstract

Throughout the history of human warfare, the sword has always been considered the most effective weapon by warriors. Among these weapons, there have been swords that gained particular fame due to their attribution to renowned historical figures. Nevertheless, over time, the provenance of some of these swords has been forgotten. Two swords attributed to Mokhtar ibn Abi Ubaydah Saqafi and Amir Timur Gurkani, housed in the National Museum of Iran and the Military Museum, are in a similar situation, and due to the passage of time, their background has remained obscure. In addition to documenting the aforementioned swords, the present article seeks answers to the following questions: 1. To what extent are the names inscribed on the swords historically authentic? 2. In which period were these swords manufactured? This research aims to investigate the historical and artistic features and to re-identify the two swords attributed to Mokhtar Saqafi and Amir Timur Gurkani using historical, analytical-descriptive methods, field observation, and museum, documentary, and library sources. In this historical research, after collecting the necessary information, data organization, analysis, and finally inference were carried out. Based on the morphological study of the swords, it was concluded that despite the inscriptions engraved on them, they were manufactured in a period much closer than the claimed era, and most likely belong to the Safavid period.

Keywords: Sword, Mokhtar Saqafi, Amir Timur Gurkani, Safavid, Naser al-Din Shah.

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Introduction

Before the advent and spread of firearms, the sword was the most crucial and efficient weapon in human warfare. Throughout history, certain swords have gained immense fame due to their attribution to religious and historical figures. The importance of such attributed swords has also led to the production of many forgeries over time. For instance, the sword Zolfaqar, attributed to the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) and later gifted to Imam Ali (AS), became a model for many forged swords (Zarvani, 2014). Today, numerous swords attributed to religious figures are preserved in the Sacred Relics section of the Topkapı Museum in Istanbul (Aydin, 2012; Bilirgen, 2014). Similarly, several important weapons attributed to Iranian kings from the Timurid period onward are kept in the Military Museum within the Sa'dabad Palace complex in Tehran, originally part of the Golestan Palace arsenal.

Over time, a large portion of the historical weapons from the Golestan Palace arsenal was transferred to various locations, including the Military Museum and the National Museum of Iran. Among these weapons, two valuable swords had never been fully documented, and there were ambiguous points regarding them. Given the preciousness of these artifacts and the historical inscriptions on their blades, which attribute them to early Islamic historical figures, these two swords were selected for historical investigation. This research aims to document two of the most important weapons in the National Museum of Iran and the Military Museum, relying on historical evidence. The study seeks to clarify, given the names of historical figures on the blades, in which period these swords were manufactured and to what extent the inscribed names are historically authentic.

No independent research has been conducted specifically on these swords. Romanowski Dubencza's earlier works on the general history of cold weapons in Iran do not address these swords (Dubencza, 1967). The booklet *History of Metal and Weapons in Iran* (1984) only provides a brief introduction. Khorasani's (2006) *Arms and Armor from Iran* offers only a superficial description of the sword in the National Museum without historical documentation. Khalili and Alexander's (2008) work focuses on the Khalili collection. Thus, this research fills a significant gap in the study of Iran's military heritage.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a descriptive-analytical method with a historical approach. Data were collected through library research, archival documents, and direct field observation and photography of the two swords in the National Museum of Iran and the Military Museum of the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The research also relied on museum catalogues, historical manuscripts, and Qajar-era court documents, including records from the Malek National Library and Museum (document no. 6144) and the National Archives of Iran (document no. 2958136). Morphological analysis was conducted on the blades, hilts, cross-guards (bolchaq), pommels, and decorative motifs. Epigraphic analysis was performed on the Kufic, Naskh, and Nasta'liq inscriptions. Comparative analysis between the two swords and with known Safavid and early Islamic swords was also undertaken. After collecting sufficient information, the data were organized, analyzed, and finally inferences were drawn regarding the authenticity and dating of the swords.

Discussion

1. The Sword in the Islamic Era and the Evolution of the Curved Blade

To understand the form of early Islamic swords, one can refer to two surviving swords from this period in the Topkapı Museum. One sword bears the name of the Umayyad caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (d. 101 AH/720 CE) and the year 100 AH (719 CE). The second has the name of Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik (d. 125 AH/743 CE) and the year 105 AH (724 CE). The main characteristic of these two swords is that their blades are straight (Zaki, n.d.). Several other swords attributed to the Prophet, the four caliphs, and the Companions in the Topkapı Sacred Relics collection also have straight, uncurved blades (Bilirgen, 2014). This confirms that until this period, swords were straight without curvature.

The first observed curved blades appeared in the early Abbasid period. These blades had a slight curvature. The development of curved swords was due to advances in metalworking and the production of high-resistance armor. Straight swords were designed for cutting but could not pierce new chainmail armor. By curving the blade, smiths increased the sword's ability to pierce armor and harm the opponent (Zaki, n.d.). This became particularly effective for cavalry, as the horse's momentum added to the rider's force. With the rise of Central Asian nomadic cavalries under the Seljuks, Ilkhanids, and Timurids, curved swords evolved further, reaching their zenith in the Safavid period (Zaki, n.d.; Ehsani, 1989).

2. Safavid Sword-Making: The Golden Age

During the Safavid period, due to extensive royal patronage of the steel industry and swordsmithing, this craft reached its peak of prosperity. This support was necessitated by Iran's position between two powerful states, the Ottomans in the west and the Uzbeks in the east. Safavid-era Iranian swords were of very high quality and strength, so much so that European smiths could not compete with them (Chardin, 1995). The reason for this excellence was the use of high-quality steel known as "gol-e-ganda" imported from India (Chardin, 1995). In this period, the swords of high-ranking commanders and officials were specially made according to their status. Often, the owner's name and the maker's name were engraved on the blade's end, written concisely and artistically within a cartouche. Notably, unknown swordsmiths frequently forged the names of famous smiths and personalities. One of the most frequently forged names was "Asadollah Isfahani," whose products were made for the royal family; Iranian, Turkish, and Indian smiths would inscribe his name with false dates on their blades (Ehsani, 1989).

3. Qajar Collecting and the Golestan Palace Arsenal

The tradition of collecting valuable historical swords continued under Aqa Mohammad Khan Qajar and Fath-Ali Shah. A collection of the finest weapons attributed to Safavid and later kings was assembled in the Qajar royal treasury. Naser al-Din Shah built a new arsenal building in 1270 AH (1853 CE) to house "all the weapons of past kings and this blessed reign, all distinguished, gilded, jewel-encrusted, and the work of ancient and modern masters" (Etemad al-Saltaneh, 1987: 1760). After visiting European museums in 1290 AH (1873 CE), he decided to build a museum resembling European museums in the royal citadel, demolishing the old northern building of Golestan Garden (Zoka, 1969). Part of the displayed items in the "Blessed Museum" consisted of weapons transferred from the arsenal and the royal jewel treasury. Many of these weapons were souvenirs of Safavid kings.

Following the fall of the Qajars and the rise of Reza Shah Pahlavi, a large portion of the weapons in the museum hall, arsenal, and Golestan Palace storages was transferred to the Officers' School and the Museum of Ancient Iran. A small portion was moved with the crown jewels to the National Bank. The two swords under study were transferred during this period (circa 1938 CE). One sword, along with other artifacts, was moved to the Officers' School in Bagh-e Shah and later, after the Islamic Revolution, to the Army Museum in the Sa'dabad Palace complex. The other sword was transferred from Golestan Palace to the Museum of Ancient Iran (now the National Museum of Iran).

4. Morphological and Epigraphic Analysis of the Two Swords

Sword 1 (National Museum of Iran, no. 23739): Length 94 cm, curved blade (maximum curvature 12 cm), made of "johardar" (watered or damask) steel. It has seven gold-inlaid cartouches. The inscriptions include: "Amir Abdullah ibn Zubayr," "Abu Ubaydah Saqafi," "Mokhtar ibn Abi Ubaydah Saqafi," "Amir Timur Gurkan 221," "Bandeh-ye Shah-e Velayat Shah Safi 121," and a Persian verse about Zolfaqar. On the reverse side, there is an inscription: "al-Sultan Sahebqeran Naser al-Din Shah Qajar, year 1300" (1882 CE). Archival documents (Malek Museum, doc. 6144) confirm that this sword was donated to Naser al-Din Shah by Tahmasb Mirza Mo'ayed al-Dowleh and that the Qajar inscription was added in 1300 AH.

Sword 2 (Military Museum): Length 93 cm, curved blade (maximum curvature 12.5 cm), also of "johardar" steel. It has six gold-inlaid cartouches with similar inscriptions: "Amir Abdullah ibn Zubayr," "Abu Ubaydah Saqafi," "Mokhtar ibn Abi Ubaydah Saqafi," "Amir Timur Gurkan," and "Bandeh-ye Shah-e Velayat Shah Safi." On the reverse side, an inscription reads: "Aziz Khan Mokri, Sardar-e Kol, 1277" (1860 CE). Archival documents (National Archives, doc. 2958136; Golestan Palace inventory no. 1819/2002) confirm this sword's presence in the Golestan Palace collection before transfer to the Military Museum.

The morphological features of both swords – their curvature, the angle of the pommel (approximately 90 degrees), the use of watered steel, and the style of decoration – are typical of Safavid-period swords, not of the early Islamic or Timurid eras. Early Islamic swords were straight. The 90-degree pommel angle became common only in the Safavid period. Furthermore, the Kufic inscriptions on the blades are dotted (with diacritical marks), whereas early Kufic was undotted until around 50 AH (670 CE) (Iranian, 1967). The slight differences in measurements between the two swords suggest they were likely made by the same master swordsmith. The identical decorative motifs on the hilts, bolchaqs, and pommels further support this conclusion.



Conclusion

Before the advent of firearms, the sword was the primary weapon of warfare. Swords attributed to prominent historical figures have always held special significance due to their symbolic and legitimizing power for later owners. However, the findings of this research demonstrate that some of these attributions were constructed over time for political or cultural purposes.

Morphological analysis of the swords attributed to Mokhtar and Timur reveals that in terms of manufacturing techniques, decorative styles, and epigraphy, these artifacts are considerably later than the claimed era. Specifically, the curvature of the blade, the use of watered steel, and the style of Kufic script do not align with early Islamic sword features. Instead, they closely resemble known Safavid-period examples. Furthermore, the dimensions, motifs, and decorative details suggest that both swords were likely made by the same master smith, reinforcing the conclusion that their attribution is artificial and later. Historical documents confirm that both swords were part of Naser al-Din Shah's royal collection in Golestan Palace and were presented to the Qajar king by two political rivals.

Thus, it can be concluded that the attribution of these swords to early Islamic and Timurid historical figures lacks authentic historical support and is instead a reflection of the political and cultural processes of later periods. This study underscores the necessity of combining documentation, comparative analysis, and archival research in studying historical weapons heritage to distinguish between symbolic and actual historical value.