

## Terminology of Arms and Armor used in the *Shahname*: a Comparative Analysis (Part 1: Swords and Maces)

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The monumental epic of the *Shahname*, which was written by Hakim Abolgasem Ferdowsi in the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D., testifies a long warrior tradition in Iran, going back to pre-Islamic times. Originally, Ferdowsi intended to present his epic to a Samanid *emir*, as the Samanids were proud of their Iranian origins and tried to revive the glorious past of Iran. Due to the shift of power in the region when Ghaznavids took power in Khorasan, Ferdowsi presented his glorious epic to Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavid, who as is known did not appreciate the efforts and work of Ferdowsi. One of the magnificent traits of Persian culture throughout history has been its strong influence even on its invaders, who tried and became Iranian kings in the course of time. As is known, the *Shahname* served as a symbol to legitimize the power of the ruler of Iran. Each ruler ordered the best calligraphers and miniaturists to write and paint a corresponding *Shahname* manuscript dedicated to him only. Magnificent examples of these hand-written copies of the *Shahname* are kept in the Iranian museums (see Bagher Najafi, 1997/ 1375), museums abroad or even in the private collections. A tremendous amount of scholarly work has been dedicated to the interpretation of the meaning of the legends and tales of the *Shahname*. The legendary figure of Rostam accompanied many Iranian warriors on the battlefields, and practitioners of *Varzesh Bastani* still train to the songs of *morshed*, which are taken from the *Shahname*. Generations of Iranians have grown up with the stories of the *Shahname*. One of the major problems in understanding the *Shahname* is, of course, based on the difficulty of imagining the different types of weapons mentioned by Ferdowsi. Taking the fact into consideration that Ferdowsi originally was writing this epic for a Samanid ruler, some scholars assumed that Ferdowsi was describing the military practices of the Samanid armies in his time. However, one should note that Ferdows based his tales on the stories recounted by *dehghanan*, the small landowners, who were the successors of the Sassanian dynasty. Even when we take the possibility into consideration that Ferdowsi based his epic on Daghigi's accounts, one is confronted with the possibility that Ferdowsi's epic is based on Sassanian or even earlier dynasties' practices.

One of the weapons mentioned very often in the *Shahname* is *shamshir* (sword). In the West, this term stands for the highly-curved Iranian saber. Many scholars believe that the swords started to have a curve due to the incursions of Turkish steppe tribes from the Asia Minor. The majority of scholars translate the word *shamshir* as "the tail of a lion" (*sham* for tail and *shir* for lion. The Digital Lexicon of Dehkhoda also offers the same translation for the meaning of the word *shamshir* (see the Digital Lexicon of Dehkhoda). Some scholars have provided a wrong translation for the meaning of the word *shamshir* as "the tiger's nail" (see Haidar, 1991:171). This, of course, cannot be the right translation as the Lexicon of Dehkhoda clearly translates this word as "the lion's tail." Some scholars argue that the comparison of the weapon to the tail of the lion is due to the fact that a lion goes into a crouching position, bending its tail before starting an attack, and the curvature of a *shamshir* is compared to the tail of lion in this position. However, this argument cannot hold true and two facts need to be taken into consideration here: first, the very word *shamshir* has its origin in the Pahlavi, going back at least to the Sassanian period. One needs to take the fact into consideration that the Sassanians used double-edged straight swords as evidenced in the Sassanian rock reliefs, depicting straight Sassanian swords with a scabbard slide system. Archeological examples of these early Sassanian swords are kept in the National Museum of Iran in Tehran (see Moshtagh Khorasani, 2006:in print). Even late Sassanian swords with a double-locket system (the

so-called P-shaped scabbard system, see Masia, 2000:205, and Trousdale, 1975:95) also have straight double-edged blades. Although there is some dispute about when and where the curved swords started to originate, the fact is that as early as the Abbasid period, the mounted Khorassaian warriors were proud of their swords with a crooked scabbard as described in the manual written by al-Jahiz (see al-Jahiz's epistle, *Manaqib al-Turk.*), who was an *abna*. There is also a theory that through military altercation with the nomadic tribes in the north, even the Sassanians came into contact with this sword, but never favored it.

Now taking the possibility into consideration that the *Shahname* describes the military practices of the Sassanians, the argument of comparing the curve of a shamshir to a curved tail of a lion becomes irrelevant as the Sassanians used straight double-edged swords. Even taking the possibility into consideration that the *Shahname* describes the military practices and weapons of the Samanid era, the argument does not seem valid as the early curved swords dating from the Samanid period had very slight curves. So obviously the word *shamshir* does not refer to the curved tail of a lion, but only the tail. Additionally, the word *shamshir* has its origins in the Pahlavi language, see MacKenzie (1971). Another important factor to take into consideration is that the word *sher* (lion) in Pahlavi stands for lion. This word has gone through a semantic shift as the word for lion in modern Farsi is *shir*.

As mentioned before, after the incursions of the Turkish tribes, the usage of curved swords became widespread. The manuals of *Nooruzname* attributed to Omar Khayyam Neishaburi (Khayyam Neishaburi, 2003/1382) and *Adab al Harb va Shojae* written by Mobarakeshah Fakr Modabbar (see Mobarakshah Fakhr Modabar, 1967/1346) both report of the existence of a curved sword named *qalachuri*. It is important to note that both manuals were written in Farsi. Mobarakeshah Fakr Modabbar further reports that *qalachuri* was the favorite weapon of the Turks, and specifically differentiates between two types of swords: a) *shamshir* and b) *qalachuri*. Mobarakeshah obviously uses *shamshir* to refer to the straight swords and *qalachuri* to refer to the curved swords. It is important to note that Ferdowsi uses only two words interchangeably to refer to swords: a) *shamshir* and b) *tigh* (literally blade). Although written in the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Ferdowsi does not refer to *qalachuri* for two reasons: a) the intention of Ferdowsi was to keep and revive the national spirit of Iran by using the language of Farsi with its related terms and b) Ferdowsi's *Shahname* was of course based on ancient pre-Islamic Iranian tales. As many manuscripts of the *Shahname* were written and illustrated in later period, we see that the warriors were normally depicted with the period arms and armor. This of course is the reason why the miniatures from the *Shahname* from the Timurid, Safavid, and later periods depict the warriors armed with a curved sword, as in these eras, the curved sword had become highly popular, a fact which was again depicted in the Iranian artwork. The term *shamshir* is very often used in the *Shahname* to refer to sword:

In the *Shahname*, the two terms of *shamshir* and *tigh* are used in combination with other words as well, rendering different collocations. One of the collocations, which appear quite often in the *Shahname* is *tigh-e hendi* (the Indian sword). Since the epic of the *Shahname* is replete with the praise of *tigh-e hendi*, some literary scholars wrongly believed that the Indian swords were considered the best. One needs to be very careful here, as the source of good steel for Iranian swords was India. Steel ingots known as wootz ingots were produced in India, and they were later exported to Iran or Iranian smiths bought their ingots directly from the Indian ironworkers. This tradition continued even in the Qajar period Iran. As evidenced by Iranian swords from the Timurid and Safavid period, the best swords in the region were made in Iran. Iranian swords had a legendary reputation in the region and were sought after by the Arabs, Turks, and later Europeans (see Elgood, 1994:10 and Rawson, 1967:35-36). Taking this into consideration, Ferdowsi was probably referring to Iranian swords made from Indian steel ingots:

*Separ bar sar-o tigh-e hendi be mosht/az an namdaran do bahre bekosht*

With the shield protecting his head and with an Indian sword in his hand

He killed two third of those high-ranking [warriors]

Taken from the Story "The Battle of Kavvus with the King of Hamavaran" (see Yahaghi, 1990/1369:133)

*Be shamshir-e hendi bar aviktand/Hami az ahan atash furu rikhtand*

Using Indian swords they attacked each other, making the iron [referring to the armor] to spark.

Taken from the Story "The Story of Rostam and Sohrab" (see Yahaghi, 1990/1369:133)

Different adjectives are used in combination with the terms *shamshir* and *tigh* to emphasize the toughness and sharpness of blades. One of the adjectives used is *almusgun* (like diamond). Diamond was known for its hardness and sharpness, and is used in combination with *tigh*, rendering the collocation *tigh-e almasgun*:

**Derakhshidan *tigh-e almasgun*/ Shode la'al va ahar dade be khun**

The sword [as hard as] diamond was glittering like ruby and strengthened by blood

Taken from the Story "The Kingdom of Nozar" (see Yahaghi, 1990/1369:65)

The adjective *tiz* (sharp), which is still used to refer to the sharpness of knives in Iran, also appears in combination with both *shamshir* and *tigh*, resulting in the collocations *tigh-e tiz* and *shamshir-e tiz*:

**Be changal-e har yek yeki *tigh-e tiz*/ ze dargah barkhaste rastkhiz**

Each one of them was carrying a sharp blade, coming upright from the castle

Taken from the Story "The Story of Siavosh" (see Yahaghi, 1990/1369:214)

**Ze *shamshir-e tiz* atash afrukhtand / hame shahr yeksar hami sukhtand**

They set ablaze [everything] using a sharp sword

They burnt the whole city

Taken from the Story "Keykavus" (see Yahaghi, 1990/1369:110)

As evidenced by archeological and antique examples a majority of swords were light, as a heavy sword would make the arm tired during the battle. The weight of unsheathed swords range from 700 grams to 1000 grams. There are examples of heavier swords that weigh up to 1400 grams. In any case, the swords were not as heavy as many people think they were: they had an excellent balance, and could be wielded efficiently on the battlefield. In the *Shahname*, Ferdowsi uses the adjective *sabok* to signify the lightness of a blade.

***Sabok tigh ra bar keshid az niyam / kharushid va jushid va bar goft nam***

He drew the light blade from its scabbard

He yelled and was angry and called the name

Taken from the Story "Kamus Koshani" (see Yahaghi, 1990/1369:257)

One of the most effective weapons against armored opponents on the battlefield was the mace. *Gorz* (mace) is mentioned very often in the *Shahname*. The Parthian and the Sassanian heavy cavalry made extensive use of maces. This tradition was set forth after the Muslim conquest of Iran. The Khorassanian troops of Abu Moslem Khorassani prided themselves in the usage of maces. In later periods, we also see an extensive use of the maces during the Safavid, and Afsharid periods. Beautiful maces from the Zand and even Qajar period are also extant. Maces had a double function, both as a war instrument and as a symbol of authority and power. Different types of maces were used on the battlefield, but in general Iranian maces can be divided into three different categories: a) maces with round heads, b) flanged/ studded maces, and c) human or animal-head maces (see Moshtagh Khorasani, 2006:in print). The usage of human or animal-headed maces has a very long tradition in Iran, going back to the Bronze Age. Beautiful examples of bronze maceheads with human faces were excavated in Marlik in northern Iran. Other excavated examples of human-headed maces also exist from the Parthian era. The renowned bull-headed face belongs to this category. This mace was originally used on the battlefield and later examples of it were made to symbolize the power and authority. In the *Shahname*, it is reported that Fereydun used a bull-headed mace to defeat Zahak. The legend has it that Fereydun ordered his smith to make a bull-headed mace since he wanted to revenge the death of the cow, which had fed him as a child, by Zahak. The interesting phenomenon is that the bull-headed mace is still used in the initiation ceremonies of the young Zoroastrians. Ferdowsi uses different terms to refer to the bull-headed mace in the *Shahname*, such as *gorz-e gav-peikar* (mace with the shape like a bull) or *gorz-e gavsar* (bull-headed mace):

***Bar avikht ba namdaran be jang/ yeki gorz-e gav-peikar be chang***

He started to fight against the renowned [warriors], holding a mace with the shape of a bull in each hand

Taken from the Story "The Kingdom of Zavetahmasp" (see Yahaghi, 1990/1369:72)

***To rafti va shamshir-zan sad hezar/ Zerehdar ba gorz-e gavsar***

You went away as if ten thousand swordsmen [went away]

You the armored [one] with a bull-headed mace

Taken from the Story "The End of Keikhosrow" (see Yahaghi, 1990/1369:347)

Maces from the first and second category are also mentioned in the *Shahname* and Ferdowsi refers to this type by using the general term *gorz* (mace). Different adjectives are used in combination with the term *gorz*, resulting in different collocations. One of the adjectives that occur frequently with the word *gorz* (mace) is *geran* (heavy), resulting in the very frequent combination *gorz-e geran* (heavy mace).

***Chegune keshidi be Mazandaran / Kamand kiyani va gorz-e geran?***

How did you carry the Kiyamid lasso and the heavy mace to Mazandaran?

Taken from the Story "Keikavus" (see Yahaghi, 1990/1369:93)

Two other words that are used in the *Shahname* to refer to mace are *gopal* and *amud*. All these terms *gorz*, *gopal*, and *amud* can be used interchangeably to refer to the mace:

***Cho divan bedidand gopal uy / Bedarideshan del ze changal-euy***

When the demons saw his mace, their hearts were torn by his grasp

Taken from the Story "Keikavus" (see Yahaghi, 1990/1369:105)

A very interesting collocation is *amud-e khamide* (literally curved mace). This would only make sense if it described the macehead that is set at 90 degrees to the handle of the mace:

***Amudi khamide bezad bar sarash/ ze niru beyoftad targ az sarash***

He hit him with a curved mace, making him lose his helmet with the force.

Taken from the Story "The Story of Rostam and Sohrab" (see Yahaghi, 1990/1369:154)