

ORIENTATIONS

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Jades of Qianlong's Era from the Minneapolis
Institute of Arts
Cheng Ying, Chujiu, and the Assassin Yu Rang
'Fighting, Hunting, Impressing: Arms and Armour
from the Islamic World 1500 – 1850'
The Role of Animals in South Asian
Arms and Armour
Dharmarajika Stele
Eternal Winter: Saitō Kiyoshi's Snowscapes
of Aizu
The Horvitz Collection of Contemporary
Japanese Ceramics



Fighting, Hunting, Impressing: Arms and Armour from the Islamic World, 1500–1850

Joachim Meyer

Located in northern Europe, Denmark is relatively far from the Islamic world. Being Protestant, the Danish kingdom during the 16th and 17th centuries did not join the Catholic powers to the south in their battles against the Ottoman empire, wars that led to the capture of many weapons (*Türkenbeute*), which found their way into central European princely collections. Also, Denmark did not have colonies in northern Africa, and it was an insignificant colonial power in India, where the smaller areas Tranquebar and Serampore were held by the Danes only until 1845. By contrast, France and Britain, which had colonies in northern Africa, were recipients of many Islamic weapons during the 19th century. In spite of these factors, Denmark is now home to a fairly significant stock of Islamic arms and armour, especially from the period between 1500 and 1850. These objects form the basis of an exhibition, with an accompanying catalogue, at the David Collection, scheduled to be on view from 26 March through 26 September 2021.



Fig. 1 *Kay Khusraw and the Persian Army March to Gudarz's Rescue*, illustrated folio from a copy of the *Shahnameh* of Firdawsi (940–1019 or 1025)
Iran, Lahijan, 1493–94
Opaque watercolour, gold, and ink on paper,
34.5 × 24.5 cm
The David Collection (42/2006)
Photograph: Pernille Klemp

The exhibited objects hail from three types of Danish sources, each of which reflects some of the different ways in which Islamic arms and armour have been collected in the West. Some have been lent by the National Museum of Denmark, which houses a large and diverse collection, including objects from the Danish royal collections. After World War II, a number of private collections of arms and armour were built in Denmark, including Islamic objects, and by 1982 it had become possible to arrange the exhibition 'Islamiske våben i dansk privateje'—quite groundbreaking for its time—of selected specimens. As was prosaically highlighted in the exhibition catalogue, an important reason for the quality on display was that at the time of acquisition, twenty or thirty years earlier, Islamic weapons were relatively inexpensive compared to European ones. Market forces have subsequently changed that situation, but fortunately it has still been possible to borrow objects from a significant private collection, which is the second source of the loans. The third contributor is the David Collection; although the museum's stock of arms and armour is not large, a number of weapons have been acquired since the 1960s to support the museum's broad presentation of Islamic art and culture through the display of many different types of objects, side by side.

The ambition behind the exhibition is to show some of the most important types of arms and armour from the Islamic world while describing their contexts, including combat, hunting, and ceremonial purposes. Many of these types are known outside the Islamic world, but the organisers have sought to highlight their roles in this particular context and, more generally, the aspects that especially distinguish Islamic weapons.

In addition to local sources and surviving accounts of visiting Westerners, paintings provide important testimonies on Islamic weapons and their use. This also holds true of illustrations for texts with historical content, such as the popular *Shahnama* about pre-Islamic Persian kings, particularly because it was customary for Islamic painters to portray all figures as if they were contemporaries. For example, an illustration from 1493–94 shows numerous examples of arms and armour typical of Islamic armies, just before firearms had their real breakthrough: lances, bows with arrows, sabres, and a single axe (Fig. 1). The protective equipment consists of helmets, coats of mail, and arm defences; one horse is equipped



Fig. 2 Standard
Ottoman Empire, 2nd half of the 17th century
Gilt copper, dyed horsehair, and wood,
height 112 cm
The National Museum of Denmark (Mb 2)
Photograph: John Lee



Fig. 3 Helmet
 Western Iran or Eastern Anatolia, last quarter of the 15th century
 Steel, iron, gold, and silver, height 32.5 cm
 The David Collection (37/2017)
 Photograph: Pernille Klemp

with a chamfron and caparison. A large red flag is flown at the top, and in the middle is a standard crowned by the legend 'Allah' in reverse and a hanging resembling a horse tail. Such 'tails' are also suspended from the horses' necks. As will be evident from the following examples of objects featured in the exhibition, several of these types of weapons continued to play a role in the Islamic world for a long time, not least in ceremonial contexts, until the structures of Islamic societies began to see major changes under Western influence.

'Horse tail' ornaments were a distinctive trait of the Eurasian mounted nomad peoples, used by Turks and Mongols and their successors. Among the Ottomans, they were a symbol of rank and dignity: standards with 'horse tails' accompanied important military commanders when on the move and would be lined up in front of their tents. A great deal of symbolic significance is associated with the conquest of standards, and 'horse tail' standards were coveted booty in the battles fought against the Ottoman armies in the second half of the 17th century in central Europe. A standard in the National Museum of Denmark undoubtedly hails from there, but how it arrived in Denmark is not known (Fig. 2). It was first registered in the Royal Danish *Kunstammer's* inventory in 1765. Originally mounted on a rod, the standard terminates in a spherical finial of gilt copper (*tombak*). Below this, dyed horsehair of different shapes and lengths is mounted, some sticking up and some trailing downwards. Long braids of horsehair also adorn the piece and, on the central wooden rod, horsehair forms a geometric pattern like a woven fabric.



Fig. 4 Dagger
 Turkey, Istanbul, and perhaps India,
 second half of 16th, and perhaps 17th century
 Steel, gold, and walrus ivory,
 length 34.2 cm
 Private collection
 Photograph: Pernille Klemp



Fig. 5 Dagger
 India, Mughal,
 c. 1620–30
 Steel, rock crystal, gold, rubies, and
 emeralds, length 29.8 cm
 The David Collection (33/1979)
 Photograph: Pernille Klemp

The helmets appearing in the painting in Figure 1, with characteristic arched openings above the eyes, are known as ‘turban helmets’. The term refers partly to their shape and partly to the fact that these relatively large helmets were worn on top of shock-absorbing turbans. Such helmets are thought to have been used especially by Turkmen in western Iran and eastern Anatolia in the 15th century but may also have been worn by the Ottomans a little later. As the painting shows, chain-mail aventails could be attached to the front of the helmets. In more peaceful situations, this covering could be lifted up behind the sliding nasal; during combat, it would be let down to completely protect the face, leaving only holes in front of the eyes. A turban helmet in the David Collection, which also has holes used to attach mail, has a fluted pattern at the transition from the cylindrical lower part (Fig. 3). In addition, it is decorated with two bands of large inscriptions done in overlaid silver and Kufic script, praising an unnamed ruler. A dating and context for this helmet can be established through the closely related inscriptions adorning a turban helmet in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where they are

interpreted as featuring the name of the Turkmen Aq Quyunlu sultan, Yaqub ibn Uzun Hasan (r. 1478–90).

Calligraphic inscriptions play an important role in Islamic art and architecture as well as arms and armour. Here their contents can differ in nature. Some contain information about the object’s date and place of manufacture, its owner, and its maker. Some are passages from the Koran or invocations believed to have protective or auspicious effects. Others are stanzas using the perilous nature of weapons as poetic metaphor.

The blade of one dagger is adorned with a Persian text playing on the parallel between the deadly weapon and the beloved who strikes with all-consuming, all-destroying love (Fig. 4).



Fig. 6 Dagger
 India, Deccan, second half
 of the 16th century
 Steel, gilt bronze, and rubies,
 length 40 cm
 The David Collection (36/1997)
 Photograph: Pernille Klemp



Fig. 7 *Portrait of Sultan Ali Adil Shah I of Bijapur*
India, Bijapur, c. 1570
Miniature painting pasted on an album leaf,
painting 16.5 x 11.8 cm
The David Collection (6/2013)
Photograph: Pernille Klemp

The dagger belongs to a small group of related, exquisitely worked blades, which in addition to gold inlay also feature raised ornamental sections and perforations. A single dagger from this group in the Topkapi Museum formerly belonged to the Ottoman Sultan Selim I (r. 1512–20). Its rock-crystal hilt bears inscriptions that, in addition to the year 1514 for the battle of Chaldiran, read 'conquest of Persia'. This has prompted suggestions that the dagger's blade may be booty from Iran, taken in connection with this important battle, in which the Ottoman army defeated the Safavid, or that the hilt and blade were created in Istanbul to commemorate the battle. In addition to offering a date, Selim I's dagger testifies to how these daggers belonged in princely contexts.

During this period, the Ottoman court was strongly influenced by its Safavid counterpart, and Iranian artists were forcibly relocated to the sultan's workshops in the wake of the victory at Chaldiran. Despite the Persian text, it is therefore likely that the exquisite, dark blade with its gold inlays was made in Turkey, not least because the design includes the feather-like *saz* leaves that became a widespread form of decoration in the Ottoman empire from the 1520s onwards. The hilt of the dagger in Figure 4 may be a later Indian addition.

In Indian contexts especially, the hilts of edged weapons could be decorated with figurative elements, particularly animals. Numerous examples exist of hilts made of jade, and some of rock crystal, that terminate in naturalistic animal heads (Fig. 5). Other Indian hilt types were much more limited in their dissemination.

Seen in Figure 6, the hilt of a dagger in the David Collection is a complex, sculptural masterpiece. On one side, the necks of a phoenix and a dragon are entwined, the creatures locked in a deadly battle; opposite, a fantastic lion with horns holds a small elephant in its outstretched claws. The rest of the dragon's and lion's bodies run along the handle and, upon reaching the guards, merge with two birds, their wings outstretched and heads turned down, towards the blade. The animals' eyes were originally inlaid with rubies, almost all of which are missing today.

The motif of a lion grabbing and overcoming an elephant is an ancient Hindu motif of southern India, which also won favour in a Muslim context in the Deccan, where it appears, for example, in sculptural decorations on the forts of local sultans. The dagger's other battle between a dragon and a phoenix reflects influence from Persian culture; a painting depicts an approximately identical dagger in the belt of Bijapur's ruler, Ali Adil Shah I (r. 1558–80), offering a unique testimony to the dagger's geographical, chronological, and social context (Fig. 7). How the dagger ended up so prominently in his belt is debated. It has been suggested that the dagger was a gift to Ali Adil Shah I from the large neighbouring Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagara to the south, given in connection with an alliance against the other Muslim sultanates in the Deccan. The dagger may also be war booty: Ali Adil Shah I went on to head an alliance of Muslim Deccan sultanates and, after the decisive battle of Talikota in 1565, he conquered Vijayanagara. Finally, it may also have been made in one of these

sultanates, specifically Ahmadnagar, and given to the ruler of Bijapur in connection with the alliance. In any case, the hilt of Figure 6 is one of the very finest examples of a type made only in the Deccan area in the second half of the 16th century.

Since ancient times, the Islamic world had a highly developed system of gift-giving, one in which weapons played an important role. Gifts were exchanged not only between rulers and their subjects but also between rulers themselves, and gifts of arms reached beyond the Islamic world. For example, a *yataghan* arrived in Denmark this way (Fig. 8). Such short swords were typical of the Ottoman territories, where magnificent versions were made for the sultans in the 16th century. However, the type gained its greatest popularity in the 18th and 19th centuries, reaching a wider demographic in the Balkans and around the Mediterranean.

With its hilt and scabbard fittings of gold sheet and rich gold decoration on the blade, this *yataghan* is a good example of the type of weapon used as gifts, both locally and to rulers abroad, in the so-called Barbary states in northern Africa in the 18th century and the first decades of the 19th century. It was a gift from the ruler of Tunisia, Ali I ibn Muhammad, to the Danish king Frederik V, arriving in Copenhagen in 1753, alongside other riches that included two corresponding splendidly decorated saddles as well as horses and exotic animals. The gift sealed a peace treaty between Denmark and Tunisia to end the threat from pirates attacking Danish ships in the Mediterranean, which not only seized cargoes and ships but also took crews captive as slaves who could be ransomed.

While it is unlikely that anyone in Copenhagen was able to read the inscription on the blade, it is nevertheless apposite: it is a verse by the Andalusian poet, Lisan al-Din ibn al-Khatib (1313–74), relating how the blade has slaked its thirst for blood.



Fig. 8 Sword with scabbard
Tunisia, Tunis, first half of the 18th century
Steel, gold, and textile, sword length 69 cm
The National Museum of Denmark (Mb 60a)
Photograph: John Lee



The most widespread type of long-edge weapon in the Islamic world was the single-edge sabre. One Indian sabre in the exhibition has a short, sturdy blade fitted with fifteen loose pearls running inside a long groove, visible at the top of one side of the blade and the bottom of the other (Fig. 9). The blade also bears a gold decoration depicting the heraldic coat of arms of the last viceroy (*nawwab*) of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah (r. 1847–56), who ruled a greatly reduced kingdom on British sufferance. The silver hilt with gemstones set in gold is characteristic of the metalwork of Awadh. On the hilt, the gemstones are set so densely and with such prominent gold settings that it is almost difficult to make out that the design consists of small and large flower heads, complemented by foliate shapes. The decoration is in keeping with the artistic opulence that characterised Wajid Ali Shah's period. It marked a last artistic flourishing before this ruler was deposed in a bloodless manner and Awadh was finally annexed by the British East India Company.

Denmark has a tradition of scientific expeditions to the Islamic world, beginning with Frederik Norden's journey to Egypt in 1737–38. As a result of such expeditions, a number of Islamic weapons have reached Denmark from northern Africa, the Middle East, and central Asia, often accompanied by important testimonies about their uses and detailed information about their original contexts.

An axe in the National Museum of Denmark was collected by the Danish explorer Ole Olufsen on one of his expeditions to central Asia in the second half of the 1890s (Fig. 10). According to Olufsen's records, the axe came from the emir of Bukhara's court. Decorated with a scale-like pattern of turquoises, the axe had been carried by one of the emir's chief

Fig. 9 Sabre
India, Lucknow, mid-19th century
Steel, silver, gold, rubies, emeralds, rock crystal, and pearls,
length 63 cm
Private collection
Photograph: Pernille Klemp



Fig. 10 Axe
 Uzbekistan, Bukhara, 19th century
 Steel, silver, gold, and turquoise,
 length 51.8 cm
 The National Museum of Denmark (Q 292)
 Photograph: Arnold Mikkelsen

officers at the forefront of the procession that accompanied the emir whenever he left his residence.

The use of ceremonial axes appears to have reached the Islamic Middle East by way of inspiration from the Byzantine emperors, who retained fearsome, axe-wielding bodyguards, with Scandinavian guards among the favourites. From here, the tradition spread to the entire Islamic world (Fig. 1). These axe-carrying companions also wore bells so that the procession could be heard moving, and long hats were often part of their ensemble.

By the time Olufsen travelled in central Asia, the Bukhara emirate had become a Russian protectorate, and the Russians had ushered in a process of modernisation. The axe must have been made some decades earlier, and the sale of it to Olufsen reveals how past systems of rule and old customs were being rapidly cleared away.

Joachim Meyer is curator at the The David Collection.

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