

# Two Aspects of Islamic Arms and Armor

D. G. ALEXANDER

Research Associate, Department of Arms and Armor,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

## I. The Turban Helmet

TURBAN HELMETS, so called because of their oversized bulbous shape, and the armor and shields to which they can be related have long been a problematic group in the study of Islamic arms and armor. They have been described as everything from Mongol to Mamluk,<sup>1</sup> and dated from as early as the fourteenth to as late as the seventeenth century. As a class of objects they differ greatly among themselves, and the group can be divided into a number of subgroups. Nevertheless, the features they share indicate that although they do not have a common provenance they are at least the products of a continuing tradition.

This study of eight such helmets is intended to illustrate the complexity of the problem of their provenance, and to demonstrate that they were produced over a long period of time and in a number of centers. One should regard this study as a first step in solving a problem whose unraveling will be completed only when the hundreds of such objects in Istanbul have been fully analyzed and grouped according to their type and epigraphical content.<sup>2</sup>

The earliest surviving helmet of this type was found in Bursa, where it may have been made. It is inscribed: "Let the government and sovereignty of the Emir Sultan Orhān be permanent" (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> Orhan, the son of the Emir Othman, was born in 1288 and ruled from 1326 to 1360. He is credited with having strengthened and expanded the Ottoman army and with the founding of the Janissary corps. In 1326 he conquered Bursa, which became his capital, and shortly afterwards the ancient city of Nicaea (now Iznik). With the capture of Gallipoli in 1354 he extended Ottoman power into Europe. The inscription on the helmet includes the title "sultan," not gener-

ally used by the Ottomans at this time, and thus provides a reason for assuming that the helmet may have been made as a commemorative piece at a slightly later date. Nevertheless it establishes the fact that helmets of this type were worn in Anatolia during the early Ottoman period.

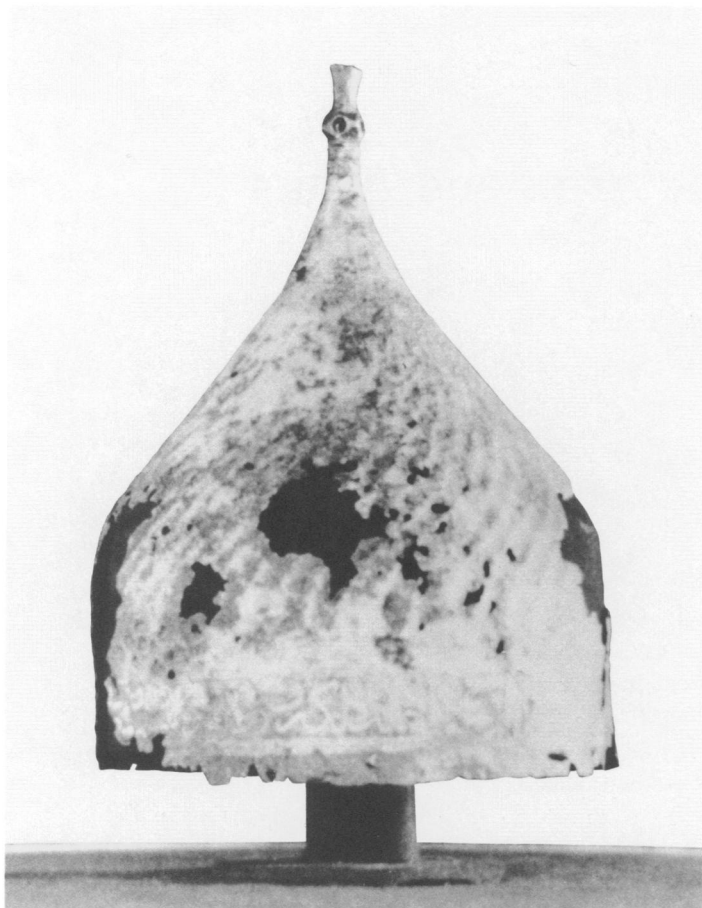
Like almost all turban helmets, the "Orhan helmet" has a fluted bowl and a flattened conical finial, below which is a cubo-octahedral plug drilled with four holes. Although the helmet is badly preserved, one can assume that it was also cusped and reinforced across the brow in order to provide extra protection for the eyes, and that it had a movable nasal guard.<sup>4</sup>

1. M. H. Lavoix, "La Collection Goupil," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 2nd ser., 32 (1885) p. 300, where they are called Mongol; E. Lenz, *Collection d'armes de l'Ermitage impérial* (St. Petersburg, 1908) pl. vi, where they are called Ottoman of the 16th and 17th centuries; H. R. Robinson, *Oriental Armour* (London, 1967) p. 62, where the better-looking examples are called Mamluk. Helmets of a derivative type occur in the Houghton *Shah-nameh* of ca. 1525, e.g., fols. 104r and 204v (MMA acc. nos. 1970.301.15, 1970.301.31). Either these depictions are based on a lost Safavid type, or the artists were copying earlier models.

2. The inscriptions present extraordinary epigraphical problems and are being studied at present by Dr. Ludvik Kalus. Dr. Kalus and the author plan a collaborative work on the weapons, including the helmets, in the Topkapı Sarayı and Askeri Museums in Istanbul.

3. The helmet and inscription are published in the *Guide to the Askeri Müze* (Istanbul, n.d.). For Orhan see F. Babinger, "Orkhan," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* III (London, 1936) pp. 999–1001.

4. The top of the nasal usually functioned as a *tu* or standard. Such emblems were often used atop banners or flags (*alam*). The word *alam* is sometimes used in the sense of badge or standard; see E. W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (London, 1863) bk. 1, pt. 5, p. 2139.



1. Helmet inscribed with the name of Sultan Orhan (ruled 1326–60). Steel, decorated with silver. Istanbul, Askeri Museum, no. 15723 (photo: courtesy Lt. Col. Neçat Erlap)

It is also set, around the base, with a series of hooks from which the aventail was hung.

Its decoration can be divided into a number of zones: the lowest is smooth, rises vertically, and, as on most helmets of this type, is the area containing the main inscription; the central section is fluted and in this instance undecorated; the top section is smooth and tapers sharply towards the apex. Helmets of this type typically contain a subsidiary inscription in the uppermost zone. The treatment of the inscriptions on the Orhan helmet is unique in that they are confined to two horizontal registers framed by narrow borders containing arabesques; most other helmets have inscriptions contained within lobed or knot-pattern frames. The Orhan helmet could also be regarded as an early example of what has been called the “plain style,”<sup>5</sup> as its restrained decoration is in marked con-

trast to the plethora of design elements usually found on turban helmets.

Chronologically, the next datable helmets are from the Ak-Koyunlu period (White Sheep Turkman period). This dynasty was originally a federation of tribes from the region of Diyarbakir in central Anatolia which rose to power in the fourteenth century under Kara Yoluk (Black Leech) Uthman. Under Uzun Hasan (ruled 1466–78) their rule was extended from eastern Anatolia to Herat and Baghdad. The dynasty was crushed by the Safavids at the battle of Sharur in 1502.<sup>6</sup> The helmet illustrated in Figure 2 is inscribed not only with the series of royal titles usually found on these objects, but also with the name of Uzun Hasan’s son Ya’qub (ruled 1478–90). The inscription reads: “Glory to our lord the greatest sultan, the mighty Khaqan, master of the necks of nations, the lord of the kings of the Arabs and Persians, the sultan Ya’qub.”<sup>7</sup> Because of its rather inelegant decoration and clumsy inscription, it was probably not crafted in the capital at Tabriz but rather in a provincial workshop, possibly that at the Ak-Koyunlu military base at Erzerum in Anatolia.<sup>8</sup>

Another helmet (Figure 3) dating from the Ak-Koyunlu period is possibly inscribed with the name

5. The “plain style” refers to the unadorned metalwork popular in the Ottoman empire during the 16th and 17th centuries; see J. Raby and J. Allan, *Tulips, Arabesques and Turbans* (London, 1982).

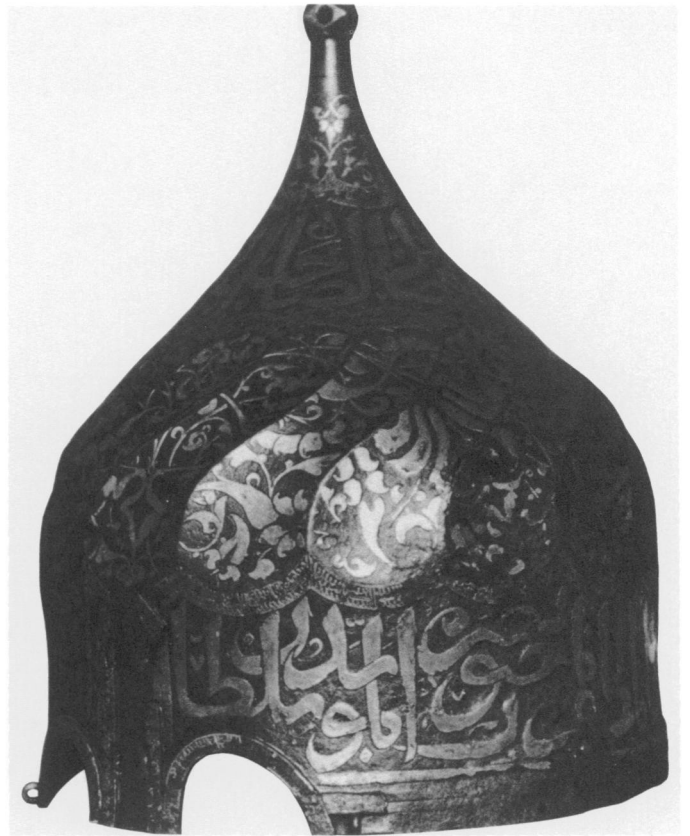
6. See V. Minorsky, “Ak-Koyunlu,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., I (London, 1960) pp. 311–312. A history of the dynasty has been written by J. E. Woods, *The Aqqyunlu Clan, Confederation, Empire* (Chicago, 1976).

7. Ya’qub, which should be written *يعقوب*, appears on the helmet as *يعهو*. This kind of sloppiness is not unusual on turban-helmet inscriptions and also occurs on the lead seal of a mail shirt in Leningrad: Lenz, *Collection d’armes*, pl. lv, no. j. 535, where the *ب* and *و* are joined exactly as on the helmet. The inscription was translated by Florence E. Day in 1954.

8. Erzerum was an important Ak-Koyunlu base, and it was here in 1829 that the Russians captured many helmets of this type; see Lenz, *Collection d’armes*, pl. vi. Many of these helmets and related armors must have been taken as booty by the Ottomans at the battle of Otluk Beli in 1473, when the entire Ak-Koyunlu baggage train was captured and sent to Constantinople along with numerous craftsmen; see F. Babinger, *Mehmet the Conqueror and His Time* (Princeton, 1978) pp. 302–328, esp. p. 315. Many of these objects entered European collections after 1839, when the new sultan, Abdul Mecid, ordered the clearing of the St. Irene Arsenal; see a letter from Robert Curzon, attaché to the British Embassy in Constantinople, quoted by J. Hewitt, *Official Catalogue of the Tower Armouries* (London, 1859) pp. 116–117.



2. Helmet inscribed with the name of Sultan Ya'qub (ruled 1478–90). Steel, decorated with silver, H. 10 in. (25.4 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 04.3.211



3. Helmet inscribed with the name of the Shirvanshah, Farrukh-Siar (ruled 1464–1501). Steel, decorated with silver. Istanbul, Askeri Museum, no. 5911 (photo: courtesy L. Kalus)

of Farrukh-Siar, the ruler of Shirvan (Shirvanshah) from 1464 to 1501.<sup>9</sup> It seems likely that this helmet was produced in a Caucasian workshop, for the Caucasus—and especially such centers as Shamakhi (the capital of Shirvan) and Kubachi—had long been an important metalworking area.<sup>10</sup> The Venetian ambassador to the court of Uzun Hasan, Giosafat Barbaro, noted that the Ak-Koyunlu obtained much of their armor from this region; it was, he said, “of iron

in little squares and wrought with gold and silver, tacked together with small mail,” and was “made in Beshkand,” which, according to Minorsky, is Kubachi.<sup>11</sup>

These two helmets differ in that the former has a more elegant inscription, especially in its upper band, and smaller, more carefully proportioned flutings, whereas the latter has wider, diagonal flutings and is decorated in its central zone with a vegetal design.

9. Shirvan was a client state of the Ak-Koyunlu, with whom it had close and friendly ties. In 1479, for instance, Ya'qub married Farrukh-Siar's daughter. The Shirvanshahs were devout Sunnis, and when Farrukh-Siar was killed in battle by Shah Isma'il Safavi their rule was abolished; see Woods, *Aqquyunlu*, esp. pp. 147 and 279 n. 34. The helmet has been published in the most recent (undated) publicity brochure of the Askeri Museum, Istanbul. However, the inscription on this helmet and similar inscriptions on two others (Askeri Museum, nos. 163, 9488) present an as yet unsolved problem. Dr. Kalus in a letter dated Feb. 28, 1982, provisionally reads the crucial phrase as *فرخ يسار*, “plein de bonheur,” and the name in the related inscriptions as

“Siyar Šâh fils du sultan Halil.” “Siyar Šâh” appears to be an unrecorded ruler; however, the name Sultan Halil is recorded among both the Ak-Koyunlu and the Shirvanshah. Consequently, a general Ak-Koyunlu/Shirvani attribution remains likely.

10. J. Allan, *Persian Metal Technology* (Oxford, 1979) p. 69. Allan notes that Mas'udi and al-Jahiz mention the Caucasus as a center for the manufacture of arms and armor.

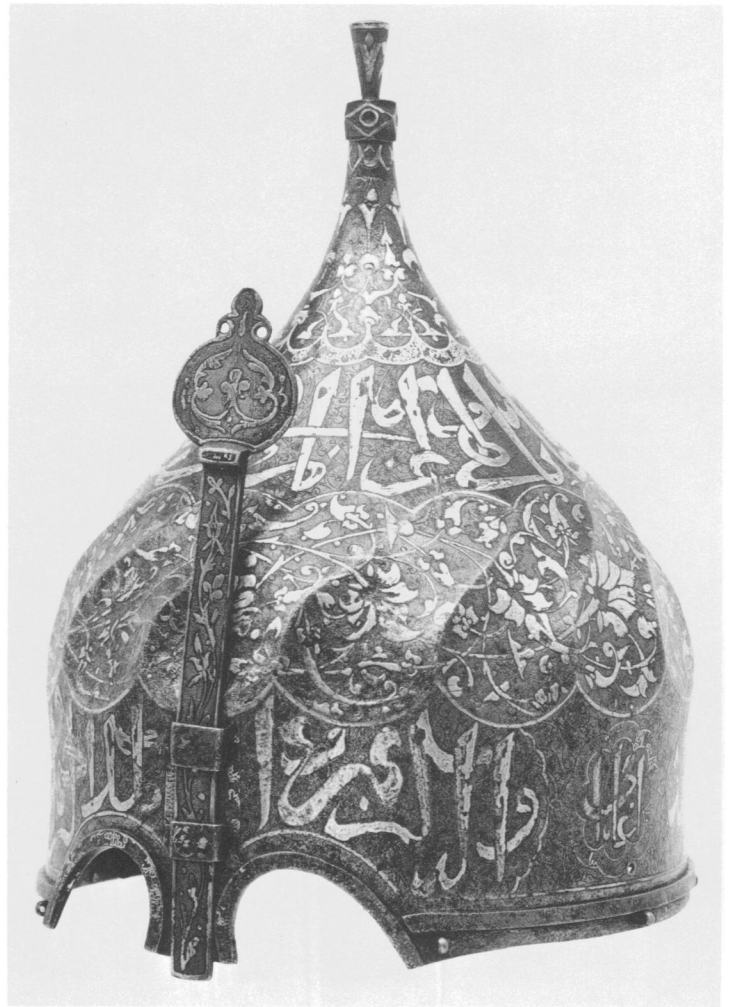
11. Josafa Barbaro and Ambrogio Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, trans. W. Thomas and S. Roy, ed. Lord Stanley of Alderley, Hakluyt Society, 1st ser., XLIX (London, 1873; repr. New York, 1963) with notes by V. Minorsky, p. 66. Barbaro was with the Ak-Koyunlu from 1474 to 1478.



4. Helmet, late 15th century. Steel, decorated with silver. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Kienbusch Collection, no. 207 (photo: Philadelphia Museum)

Both, however, have a bulbous quality which contrasts with the longer finial and the tapering form of the Orhan helmet (Figure 1).

A number of helmets can, on stylistic grounds, be assigned to the Ak-Koyunlu/Shirvani group. One would include here most of the helmets that bulge in their centers—rather than taper as does the early Ottoman example—and are inlaid in their central zones with foliate arabesques characterized by long, wavy floral forms. This type of design, which occurs on the Farrukh-Siar helmet, is also present on a helmet in



5. Helmet, late 15th century. Steel, decorated with silver, H. 12 in. (30.5 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Anonymous Gift, 50.87

the Kienbusch Collection (Figure 4) and on one in the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 5).

The Kienbusch helmet is inscribed with a protocol almost identical to that bearing the name of Ya'qub (Figure 2). It reads: "Made at the order of the greatest sultan, the mightiest khāgān, the master of the necks of nations, the lord of the kings of the Arabs and Persians, the shadow of Allah on the continents and. . ."<sup>12</sup> The inclusion of the title "the shadow of Allah on the continents" indicates a claim to the "caliphate," and it was often used by the Timurids and

12. Kretschmar von Kienbusch, *The Kretschmar von Kienbusch Collection* (Princeton, 1963) pp. 115–116. The inscription was translated by D. S. Rice.



6. Leg guard, probably Timurid, mid-15th century. Steel, decorated with silver on a gilded ground, L. 17 in. (43.2 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of George C. Stone, 1935, 36.25.458

Ak-Koyunlu, and after about 1526 by the Ottomans. It was used only rarely by the Mamluks,<sup>13</sup> and its presence here probably excludes a Mamluk provenance. The decoration on this helmet and on that in the Metropolitan Museum provides, in addition to their shape and their inscriptions, further reason for an Ak-Koyunlu/Shirvani origin.

Foliate designs of similar type are found in Timurid art.<sup>14</sup> They differ, however, in that the Timurid examples are usually more carefully executed and

more regular in design. None of the surviving turban helmets is decorated in this typical Timurid style, although there does exist a leg guard in the Metropolitan Museum that must be either from a Timurid workshop or from one working directly from Timurid prototypes (Figure 6).

A large number of turban helmets are inscribed with a style of writing called Eastern Kufic (see Figure 7).<sup>15</sup> The inscriptions are more ornate and less regular than those found in Korans and in miniature painting, but they were probably based on these models and likewise were probably crafted in an Iranian center. To this group may be added helmets decorated in their central zones with a linear design of interlocking teardrop shapes with trefoil terminals, and also all armor decorated in this style (Figure 8).

If turban helmets of this type are accepted as being of Ak-Koyunlu/Shirvani origin, then it becomes possible not only to classify a large group of armor whose provenance has been misunderstood, but also to make an attribution for an important group of miniature paintings that have been the subject of considerable controversy.<sup>16</sup> These paintings include one (Figure 9)

13. See L. A. Mayer, *Saracenic Heraldry* (Oxford, 1933) pp. 106 and 108, for an inscription taken from the doorway to the fortress at Kerak, where Baybars (1223–77) is referred to as the “restorer of the August Chalifate, God’s shade on earth.” It is, however, the caliph who is referred to as the “Shade of Allah” and not Baybars.

14. Compare the foliate forms in the Timurid Korans illustrated in M. Lings, *The Quaranic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination* (Boulder, Colo., 1978) nos. 81, 82, and esp. no. 83, with the floral forms on the leg guard in Figure 6.

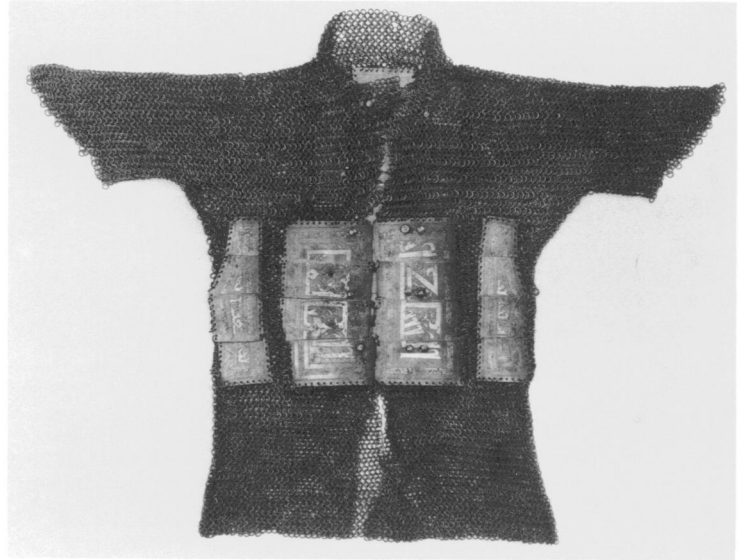
15. Lings, *Quaranic Art*, p. 16, defines this as a style that avoids, except in a few instances, horizontal lines and relies instead on “diagonals and letters of triangular shape.” Eastern Kufic is used in Mamluk, Mongol, and Timurid Korans (see Lings, *Quaranic Art*, chaps. 5 and 6) and is often found in inscriptions in Turkman and Timurid miniature painting; see, e.g., the following articles in *The Arts of the Book in Central Asia*, ed. B. Gray (Boulder, Colo., 1979): B. Gray, “The School of Shiraz from 1392 to 1453,” pl. xxxv, painted in Yazd in 1407; E. Grube and E. Sims, “The School of Herat, 1400–1450,” fig. 96, painted in Herat in 1436; and M. Lukens-Swietochowski, “The School of Herat 1450 to 1506,” pl. LIX, painted in Baghdad in 1461.

16. These paintings are included in the Topkapı Sarayı Albums H. 2153, 2160. They have been published on numerous occasions; see, e.g., Oktay Aslanpa, Max Loehr, and R. Ettinghausen in *Ars Orientalis* 1 (1954) pp. 77–103; E. Grube, *Persian Painting in the Fourteenth Century* (Naples, 1978) sec. 2, esp. pp. 49–52 (the painting in Figure 9 belongs to the group that Grube,



7. Helmet, late 15th century. Steel, decorated with silver, H. 12 in. (30.5 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 04.3.462

8. Mail shirt with steel plates, late 15th century. Steel, decorated with silver, L. 34 in. (86.4 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of George C. Stone, 1935, 36.25.362



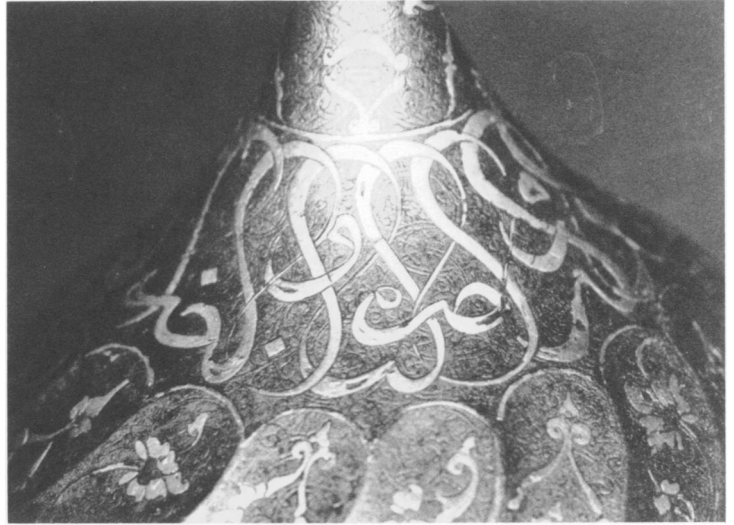
9. Miniature painting of a battle scene. Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Museum, Album H. 2160, fol. 88r (photo: Otto E. Nelson)





10. Helmet inscribed with the name of Sultan Bayezid (ruled 1481–1512). Steel, decorated with gold. Paris, Musée de l'Armée, H. 445 (photo: Musée de L'Armée)

11. Helmet (detail), 16th century, inscribed in the style of Ahmet Karahisari (1469–1556). Steel, decorated with silver. Istanbul, Askeri Museum, no. 13581 (photo: Askeri Museum)

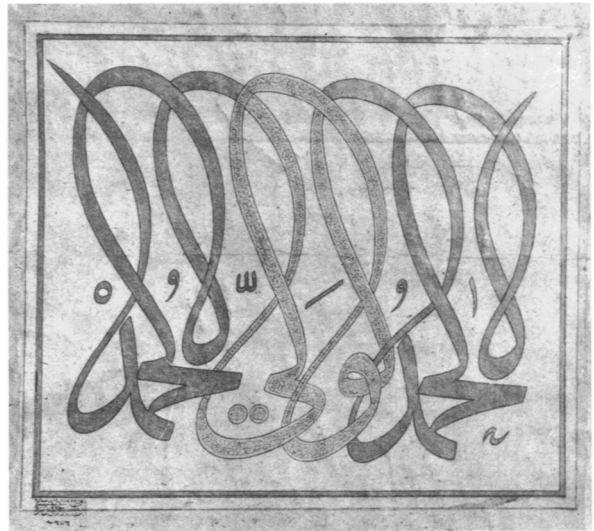


depicting two mounted warriors wearing bulbous turban helmets of the squat variety typified by the Ya'qub helmet (Figure 2). Consequently, it must depict either Ak-Koyunlu or Shirvani warriors and was probably, although not necessarily, painted in an Ak-Koyunlu atelier.

Turban helmets were probably produced throughout the fifteenth century in Ottoman Anatolia. It is not possible at present to separate this production from that of the Ak-Koyunlu and Shirvani workshops, and one is left with a single Ottoman example from the fourteenth century (Figure 1) and another from the last years of the fifteenth or the early sixteenth century. The latter, which was made for the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II (ruled 1481–1512), is one

---

p. 51, says is "the most difficult to place." The most comprehensive publication of these paintings is in E. Grube, Filez Çağman, and Zeren Akalay, *Topkapı Sarayı Collection: Islamic Painting* (Tokyo, 1978).



12. Calligraphic inscription by Ahmet Karahisari, ca. 1540–50. Istanbul, Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, no. 1443 (photo: Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts)

of the most beautiful of the entire group (Figure 10). It is inscribed:

Oh God, I am the head-piece for the head of the valiant imam, the bold sultan, the emperor of the world, giving victory to Islam, possessing God's help and support, al-Malik al-Nāṣir Sultan Bāyazīd son of Sultan Muḥammad Khān, may God make his adherents and his followers glorious.<sup>17</sup>

The helmet differs from all other turban helmets in that its flutings are decorated with a cloud-band design and it is without eye cusps. The use of the term "imam" in the inscription may reflect Bayezid's close connection with the Khalaveti order of Dervishes and probably implies a claim to the "caliphate." In this sense it is a unique historical document.<sup>18</sup>

That helmets of this type continued to be made in the Ottoman empire well into the sixteenth century is shown by the existence of a helmet that bears an inscription (Figure 11) in the style of the Ottoman

calligrapher Ahmet Karahisari (1469–1556) (Figure 12). Calligraphers tend to be the innovators whose scripts are later used in other fields, such as metalwork. Consequently, it is unlikely that this helmet is earlier than the mid-sixteenth century.

In sum, turban helmets do not come from a single workshop but, on the contrary, were produced in both Persia and Turkey. One is dealing here with cross-cultural influences, and in many cases probably with migratory craftsmen, who either gravitated to the imperial center of Constantinople during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries or were captured after one of the Ottoman campaigns in Anatolia or Persia.

17. The inscription is translated in *Arts of Islam*, exh. cat. (London: Hayward Gallery, 1976) no. 299, p. 197.

18. H. J. Kissling, "Aus der Geschichte des Chalvetijji-Ordens," *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 103 (1953) pp. 245–251. For the post-13th-century interpretation of the caliphate see Woods, *Aqquyunlu*, pp. 117–118.

## II. Watered Steel and the Waters of Paradise

THE PERSIAN WORD for water, *āb*, can also refer to watered steel in the sense of the "water of a blade."<sup>1</sup> Water, especially in Islam, connotes life, and in the Koran the incorruptible river Kawthar is used as a key image in describing the beauties of Paradise. To drink from these waters is to enjoy everlasting life. To drink the water of a blade is to die. Persian and Ottoman poets of the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries frequently used the punning ambiguity inherent in the word to create verses that play on the relationship of water to life and death. Verses of this type were often written specifically to be placed upon sword and dagger blades; four such blades are in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum. The verses are either of a religious nature, stressing the nobility of death in the service of God and the concomitant rewards of Paradise; or they are secular, courtly, and sometimes frankly erotic.

The reward of Paradise is promised to all the faithful, and especially to those who die in the service

of Allah. As described in the Koran, Paradise is a beautiful garden, temperate in climate and full of shady trees, luxurious couches, delicious fruit, and bashful virgins, which is watered by flowing springs.

1. Watered steel is produced by combining different types of iron, which are cast in an ingot, slowly cooled, and then hammered out to create an object—usually a blade; see James Allan, *Persian Metal Technology 700–1300 A.D.* (London, 1979) pp. 76–82. Allan uses the term "damascened" instead of "watered" steel, and refers to the patterns that can be made by the process as *jawhar* or *firind*. Many of these patterns were described by al-Kindi in the 9th century; see A. R. Zaki, ed., *Al-suyuf wa ajnasuha* (Cairo, 1952). Al-Kindi uses the word *firind* for the patterns and notes that they are brought out during the quenching, or watering, of the blade. From at least the late 15th century the Persians seem to have used the term "watered" for steel of this kind, perhaps because many of the patterns are reminiscent of water. The term is preferable to "damascened," which has other meanings and further raises an unwarranted association with the city of Damascus. I use "damascened" to describe a surface decoration—in gold or silver—applied to an object, and follow the Persian example in calling the metal watered steel.



These springs are fed by the rivers of Paradise, the primary one of which is Kawthar, itself the subject of a short sura: "We have given you abundance [Kawthar]. Pray to your Lord and sacrifice to him. He that hates you shall remain childless."<sup>2</sup>

This sura has been the subject of numerous theological exegeses and a considerable amount of poetry. Al-Tabari (died A.D. 923), for example, regarded Kawthar as being the quintessence of purity and wrote that its water is "whiter than snow and sweeter than honey."<sup>3</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, in discussing the poetical allusions to the river,<sup>4</sup> quotes, for example, Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–73), the founder of the Mevlevi Dervish sect, who compared divine love to the water of Kawthar;<sup>5</sup> and the Naqshbandi Dervish Abdur Rahim Gihori (died 1778), whose commentary on the sura contains a "Divine address to the Prophet" in which God says:

So much gift did I not give to anyone but you.  
You are the cupbearer of the fountain: carry on now  
its distribution, O brave one!<sup>6</sup>

God continues to laud Muhammad and to describe Kawthar as an ocean of divine love, which brings knowledge, healing, and perfect bliss.

A number of sword blades are inscribed with verses that refer to the waters of Paradise, usually in the context of the jihad, or Holy War, and the sword known as *dhu 'l-fakār*. This sword had belonged to the Prophet and after his death became one of the "Insignia of the Caliphate." It was also intimately associated with the Prophet's son-in-law Ali and acquired various chivalric, magical, and messianic connotations. The actual sword probably perished during the destruction of Baghdad in 1258, but it lived on in countless reproductions as a symbol of authority and victory. In Islamic theology and especially in Shia thought it was regarded as one of the essential attributes of the Mahdi, who will wield it in the final battle between Good and Evil.<sup>7</sup> The Persian inscriptions uniting the imagery of water to that of the *dhu 'l-fakār* usually read:

O sword, may the idolaters be diminished by your  
agency!  
May the Garden of Victory flourish by your water!  
Your comrade will be the breath of the *dhu 'l-fakār*.  
Every day the sun draws a sword around the hearts of  
the faithful.<sup>8</sup>

The pun on water is clearly expressed here and refers both to the watered-steel blade and to the river Kawthar. The reference to the river in this context, while it stresses the military virtue of battling the infidels in the Holy War, also has strong Shia overtones. For although, as noted above, the Prophet Muhammad is sometimes regarded as the cupbearer of the waters of Paradise, in Shia tradition this role is given to Ali, and the association of the *dhu 'l-fakār* with Kawthar would indicate a Shia bias. D. S. Rice, noting Ali's role in this regard,<sup>9</sup> connected the idea of receiving the waters of Paradise with death in battle or martyrdom by quoting from the Persian passion plays, in which the dying Husain is denied water by his killers and given instead watered steel:

I made many supplications to Himar, that ill-starred wretch, begging him to pour a few drops down my throat, but that wicked villain refused, and answered that I must drink water from the edge of the sword.

Husain is then promised by the angel Gabriel that:

After this martyrdom he will enter Paradise, where lovely houris await him, and where his father, Ali, is standing ready to welcome him with a crystal cup full of cool water from the river Kawthar.<sup>10</sup>

2. *The Koran*, trans. N. J. Dawood (Harmondsworth, 1964) sura 108, p. 28.

3. D. S. Rice, "Two Unusual Mamluk Metal Works," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 20 (1957) p. 493.

4. Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York, 1982); idem, "The Celestial Garden in Islam," in *The Islamic Garden*, Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on the History of Landscape Architecture IV, ed. Elisabeth B. MacDougall and Richard Ettinghausen (Washington, D.C., 1976) pp. 11–39, for a discussion of the Garden of Paradise.

5. Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, p. 108.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

7. The *dhu 'l-fakār* and its role in Islamic thought is discussed in the writer's Ph.D. thesis, "The *dhu 'l-fakār*" (New York University, 1984).

8. A large number of blades bearing this inscription have survived. Most are decorated with a dragon and phoenix in combat, and it is likely that there was an identification made between the symbol of the dragon and that of the *dhu 'l-fakār*; this issue is discussed in the writer's thesis, "The *dhu 'l-fakār*," chap. 4.

9. Rice, "Metal Works," pp. 487–500.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 493.



1. Dagger, Ottoman, late 16th century, the guard 19th century. Hilt of green-dyed ivory, blade of steel damascened with gold, L. (blade): 7½ in. (19.1 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of George C. Stone, 1935, 36.25.670

A dagger in the Museum's collection (Figure 1) is inscribed with a couplet written by the Ottoman poet Neçatı (died 1509), which is obviously based on the Shia accounts of the death of Husain. The lines, in Ottoman Turkish, are damascened in gold along one side of the blade:

I besought a drink of water from your trenchant dagger,  
what if but once you should let me drink, what would you lose?

A second couplet in Persian, but possibly also by Neçatı, is in the lower register:

If I thirst his dagger is not laid down [does not descend];  
by my bloody desire no water will pass through his throat.<sup>11</sup>

The clarity found in the Shia version of Husain's death is missing here, and in its place the victim asks not for water to quench his thirst but instead for a drink of water from the dagger. He craves not a drink but death, and perversely the dagger answers that his wish will not be granted. Taken together these lines play with the Shia version of Husain's martyrdom, and in so doing perhaps even subtly question the entire concept that throughout the centuries has had such an important role in the history of the Shia sect.

The verse is typically courtly in its sophistication and can be related to a number of others that describe a victim begging to be stabbed. The best example of this genre is a poem inlaid on a saber blade probably given to Archduke Maximilian, Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights from 1590 to 1618. The hilt and scabbard of this weapon are of gold, studded with rubies and turquoise, and on the hilt is a fish constructed from turquoise chips. The use of this emblem means that the fittings and perhaps the verse originated in the imperial ateliers in Constantinople.<sup>12</sup>

11. The Ottoman inscription also occurs on a 16th-century blade in the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, no. 1890-280, and is translated in *The Arts of Islam*, exh. cat. (London: Hayward Gallery, 1967) p. 199, no. 232. The Persian inscription translated by Cornell Fleischer, 1980.

12. The saber is in the Treasury of the Teutonic Knights in Vienna, no. 179; see B. Dudik, *Kleinodien des deutschen Ritterordens* (Vienna, 1865). The fish mark occurs on a number of Imperial Ottoman sabers including the "sword of the Prophet," now in the Topkapı Sarayı Museum, which was refitted at the order of Sultan Ahmet I (1603-17).

The fish of the water of your saber  
 are on the day of battle like so many crocodile hunters.  
 You draw in anger against me your shining sword;  
 it is not necessary that you threaten me with it, because  
 fear alone already kills me.  
 The bent lines of the water of your saber are not true  
 damascening,  
 they are signs written on the water to kill me.  
 Will it satisfy your sword to kill a man like me?  
 If so, I will accept death with thanks, but then your  
 sword will be stained with my blood.  
 I beg you, kill me not with an arrow, instead show me  
 the grace to kill me with a sword,  
 because then I shall fall to the ground close to you.<sup>13</sup>

The idea of death by the sword is treated with an emotional, almost loverlike overtone. The victim asks to be killed, not with an impersonal arrow, but by the sword, so that the moment of his death becomes an intimate moment for both killer and victim. Unfortunately, the circumstances under which the poem was written are unknown. Was it merely selected from a stock of similar verses, or was it composed especially for the sultan's hereditary enemy Archduke Maximilian?

The union between killer and victim is often expressed in a blatantly erotic fashion. Inscriptions in which this occurs are generally found on dagger blades, many of them beautifully decorated and perhaps made for women.<sup>14</sup> A number of such verses have been translated and published by Anatol Ivanov;<sup>15</sup> frequently encountered in them is the image of a cruel and beautiful woman who, for unknown reasons, inflicts pain and even death with her dagger. The pain, however, while real, is also sometimes described as being delightful, and it is this identification of pain with ecstasy that gives the verses their peculiar erotic cast.

The inscription on a second dagger blade in the Museum's collection (Figure 2) does not reflect the cruel eroticism found in the verses quoted by Ivanov,

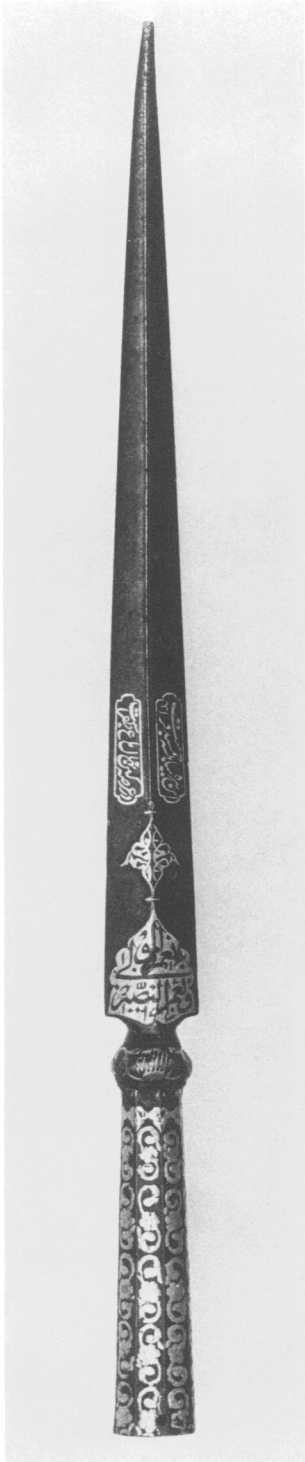


13. Translated from the Persian by Professor Fleischer, in Dudik, *Kleinodien*, p. 48, and from the German by Dörte Alexander.

14. Ottoman women of the 17th century wearing daggers are depicted in Alberto Arbasino, *I turchi* (Parma, 1971) p. 119.

15. A. Ivanov, "A Group of Iranian Daggers of the Period from the Fifteenth Century to the Beginning of the Seventeenth, with Persian Inscriptions," in R. Elgood, ed., *Islamic Arms and Armour* (London, 1979) pp. 74-75.

2. Dagger: hilt, European, 16th century; blade, Ottoman, mid-16th century. Blade of steel damascened with gold, L. overall: 10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (26.4 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Jean Jacques Reubell, in memory of his mother, Julia C. Coster, and of his wife, Adeline E. Post, both of New York City, 26.145.159



3. Spearhead, Persian, 16th century. Steel damascened with gold, L. 15 in. (38.1 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of George C. Stone, 1935, 36.25.2087



4. Dagger: blade, Persian, dated 1732/3; hilt, Indian, 19th century; scabbard, Ottoman, 19th century. Blade of steel, chiseled and inlaid in gold, L.: 18 $\frac{5}{8}$  in. (47.3 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of George C. Stone, 1935, 36.25.994

but it does deal with matters of love, specifically with the fate of an unfaithful lover. The Persian inscription reads:

It is a dagger since it attempted the life of the bloody-livered lover.

My Turk took it (in gold wrapped) and bound it to his sash.<sup>16</sup>

Two final examples demonstrate the variety of uses poets were able to make of the ambiguity inherent in the word for water. One employs the image to make a straightforward comment about the function of a weapon, in this case a spearhead (Figure 3). Although the words “drink, water, fountainhead” evoke, if not the Garden of Paradise, then at least a pleasant

and relaxed ambience, it comes as a shock to realize that the poet is extolling the weapon’s success in killing. The Persian inscription damascened in gold on the spearhead reads: “Constantly it drinks the water from the fountainhead of the heart.”<sup>17</sup>

In the other example, the image of water is used to praise the beauty of the watered-steel blade. This curved, boldly chiseled blade (Figure 4) was made in Shiraz in the year 1732/3 and bears a verse likening it to a crescent moon of frozen water, which will sit in the belt of the sun, that is, the ruler:

In the Time of the (eternally lasting) rule of the ruler  
[*khaqan*] of devotion,

the just Shah, the monarch of Dara’s virtues,  
the world’s soul, the locus of manifestation of Ali’s  
kindness,

the leader of the age, the king [*Khdiv*] of ocean and  
land,

following that model of the skillful.

Like a crescent from the water of licit essence[?]

for the sun a crescent in the belt.

The pride of the master Nasi-i Ardalan  
made a pretty dagger in Shiraz.<sup>18</sup>

16. Trans. Cornell Fleischer, 1980.

17. Trans. Cornell Fleischer, 1980.

18. Trans. Annemarie Schimmel, 1982. Dr. Schimmel notes that the inscription is partly in verse and has rhymes but that the meter and grammar are not always correct. The verse ends with a chronogram which is apparently without sense.