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*Assdollāh Isfahāni* عمل اسدالله اصفهانی, encompassing different writing styles and dated from different periods. It seems that *Assdollāh* اسدالله was used as a title of mastery in the forging *šamšir* شمشیر blades in Iran.

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اسدالله produced all these blades. The theory that some of these inscriptions were counterfeited to add to the value of a sword may be true of later swords bearing cartouches where one finds poorly executed inlayings or even overlayings, but all examples presented in the table above have inscriptions with finely executed calligraphy and work and exhibit outstanding inlaying techniques.

If one assumes that the name “Assadollāh” اسدالله was the highest title given to an Iranian smith who had attained a very high level of mastery in making swords, the mystery of a variety of handwriting and calligraphy styles over a long period of time appears to be solved. As mentioned by Mayer (1962), a person counterfeiting a fraudulent cartouche would most likely imitate the original as precisely as possible in order to deceive buyers since he attempted to sell his swords under a fake name. Additionally, a counterfeiter would surely have ensured that the date on forged cartouches exactly matched the era of Šāh Abbās Safavid if, in fact, there were only one famous smith named Assadollāh اسدالله during that time. Based on all the facts presented above, it is reasonable to assume that Assadollāh اسدالله was a title of mastery given to the best sword smiths who were consequently allowed to sign their *šamširhā* شمشیرها or products with the prestigious phrase, *Amal-e Assadollāh* عمل اسدالله or *Amal-e Assadollāh Esfahāni* عمل اسدالله اصفهانی. The idea of a standard would make perfect sense as Assadollāh اسدالله (Lion of God) was the title of Imam Ali, and thus a title of great respect in a largely Shiite society, such as Safavid Iran. This would also explain why the name Assadollāh اسدالله was not put on *kārd* کارد (knife) and *xanjar* خنجر (dagger).

The hypothesis is also supported by the strict nature of the guilds during the Safavid period. Reaching the level of mastery in any guild probably required arduous examinations. Allan and Gilmour (2000:387) raise the possibility that mastership in a guild under the Safavids and up to the Qājār period was subject to some sort of qualifying examination, such that a candidate may have been required to submit a fine piece of his work for examination and judgement by the masters of the guild. It could be that achieving the level of the mastery of forging *šamširhā* شمشیرها was rewarded with the title Assadollāh اسدالله (The Lion of God) (for a more detailed discussion of the maker’s mark *Amal-e Assdollah Esfahāni* عمل اسدالله اصفهانی see Moshtagh Khorasani, 2006:156-163).

## 6. CONCLUSION

As it was shown above, the term *šamšir* شمشیر means “lion’s tail” and goes back to the Middle Persian Pahlavi. Further, the term *šamšir* شمشیر does not refer to the curve of the blade and is a generic term, describing all types of sword in Persian. There are different types of damascus steel patterns on Persian *šamšir* شمشیر blades. Generally, they can be divided into: a) striped damask, b) water damask, c) wavy damask, d) woodgrain damask, and e) ladder damask. There is existing terminology describing different parts of a *šamšir* شمشیر in Persian. There are different blades signed with the cartouche *Amal-ē*

as a swordmaker can be found in the manuscript *Ta'id Besārat* written by Mirzā Lotfallāh. The date of completion is contained in the book: if the Yāi hamzatum is counted, as it is usually is in such treatises, a most appropriate year is 1118 hegira (1706-1707 C.E.) and without Yāi it will be 1108 hegira (1696-1697 C.E.). If one takes both dates of completion into consideration, namely 1706-1707 C.E. or 1696-1697 C.E., the manuscript *Ta'id Besārat* was written during the rule of Šāh Soltān Hossein Safavid (1694-1722 C.E.) as well. In the manuscript *Ta'id Besārat*, Mirzā Lotfallāh explains that the Iranian sword is called *ikeri* ایگری by the Turks and is made in Esfahān (Isfahan) especially by Assad اسد, who is like the Sāleh صالح from India, and his son Kalb-e Ali کلب‌علی. The Iranian swords [made by Assad اسد and Kalbeali کلب‌علی] cut *jošan* جوشن armor very well, and Mirzā Lotfallāh explains that if he wants to describe all good qualities of Iranian swords of what he has seen and heard it will be an exaggeration. This again proves that that there was not only was smith called Assadollāh who lived during the reign of Šāh Abbās Safavid who ruled from 1587–1629 C.E. Later in the Qajar-period manuscript *Gogrāfiyā-ye Esfahān*, Tahvildār Esfahāni (1964/1342:107) states that that in the past there were many swordmakers in Esfahān. In the beginning of this eternal government [referring to the period of Nassereldin Šāh Qājār], there was a person [smith] who made better swords as Assad Esfahāni اسد اصفهانی and the works [referring to swords] made in India. However, as he did not have any supporters and clients, his work did not survive. But they can still make good swords if there are clients. But there are not enough demand for buying swords (Tahvildār Esfahāni, 1964/1342:107).

A comparative analysis of 19 *šamširhā* شمشیرها, signed with the name of Assadollāh اسدالله and kept in various Iranian museums and private collections, shows that not only is the calligraphy style different but also the positioning of different words within the phrases. Besides the discrepancies in handwriting and positions of individual words within the phrases, even the content of the cartouches differs. From the preceding analysis, the following alternative signatures of Assadollāh اسدالله exist on these *šamšir* شمشیر blades:

- a) *Amal-e Assadollāh* عمل اسدالله (The work of Assadollāh)
- b) *Amal-e Assadollāh Esfahāni* عمل اسدالله اصفهانی (The work of Assadollāh Isfahāni)
- c) *Amal-e Assad Esfahāni* عمل اسد اصفهانی (The work of Assad Isfahāni)
- d) *Assadollāh Esfahāni* اسدالله اصفهانی

There are seven dated examples that, rather than solving the mystery behind the smith Assadollāh's اسدالله life, only complicate the matter as the time span is too long for a normal human life, let alone the active life of a smith. Among the *šamširhā* شمشیرها discussed above, the earliest date is 992 hegira (1583 A.D.), and the latest is 1135 hegira (1722 A.D.), a time span of 139 years. By taking all these factors into consideration, it seems unlikely or rather fundamentally implausible that a single smith named Assadollāh

Assadollāh اسدالله range from 1408-1409 A.D. until 1808 AD and asserts that the cartouche carry the names of almost all Safavid kings, which he names as Šāh Ismāil, Šāh Tahmāsp, Šāh Abbās, Šāh Safī, Šāh Hossein, Šāh Soleymān, and the Afshārid Nāder Šāh. Mayer further suggests the theory that the name of Assadollāh اسدالله was used in his workshop so that the *šamširhā* شمشیرها could continue to be made under the name of the master. However, he, then, rejects his own idea since two sons of Assadollāh اسدالله signed their blades with their own names. Ultimately, he concludes that the very name of Assadollāh اسدالله was used as a sign and standard of quality and excellence after his death.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, there is certainly evidence to confirm the existence of a sword smith named Assadollāh اسدالله and his son, Kalbali. Allan and Gilmour (2000:102) refer to Mirzā Mohammad Tāher Nasrābādi Esfahāni, who in his book, *Tazakore-ye Nasrābādi*, dedicated to Šāh Soleymān, talks of poets who graced the court of Šāh Abbās I. He also mentions the name of a swordmakers by the name of Kalbeali who recited a special story he had heard from his father, Ostad Assad (the master Assad), and from two other men, named Mulla Mohammad and Haj Hossein. Allan and Gilmour (2000:102) also refer to the same story, which belonged to the oral tradition of the Esfahān bazaar as told by Chardin. The story states that when Šāh Abbās I received a helmet as a present from the Ottoman Sultan, he proposed that anyone who could break it with a sword would receive a sum of money. No one was able to meet the challenge until a certain sword smith named Assadollāh اسدالله appeared and broke the helmet with his sword. Upon completion of this feat, Šāh Abbās exempted the Isfahān swordmakers' guild from paying taxes. After the death of the sword smith Assadollāh اسدالله, the members of the guild began to make annual pilgrimages to his tomb in the cemetery in Sichan. These pilgrimages continued until 1937. Allan and Gilmour (2000:103) further report that the tomb was engraved with a sword and was located in the *Tekiyehe Šamširsāzān* (The place of mourning of sword smiths for Imam Hussein) until it collapsed around 1950. Allan and Gilmour add that the tax exemption of the sword smiths continued throughout the Qājār period and was only reversed in 1921. Therefore, they conclude that both Assadollāh اسدالله and his son, Kalbali existed and became acquainted with Šāh Abbās as a result of their fame.

Actually, in the Safavid-period manuscript *Tazakore-ye Nasrābādi*, Nasrābādi Esfahāni (1941/1317:9) reports about a master swordmaker named *Ostād Kalbeali*, who was talking about his father Assad اسد:

استاد کلبعلی شمشیرگر از والد خود اسد نقل می کرد

*Ostād Kalbeali šamširgar az vāled xod ostād Assad naql mikard*

The master Kableali the swordmaker was talking about his father master Assad. One should note that Mirzā Mohammad Tāher Nasrābādi Esfahāni was born in 1027 hegira (1619 C.E.) and started to write the book *Tazakore-ye Nasrābādi* in 1083 hegira (1672 C.E.) and lived until the end of the rule of Šāh Soleymān Safavid [Šāh Soleymān Safavid ruled from 1052-1077 hegira/1666-1694 C.E.]. Another mention of the name Assad اسد

29) *nāv* ناو or *nāb* ناب (fuller): the blade of few Iranian *šamšir* شمشیر are fullered.

## 5. GOLD-INLAID MAKER'S MARK ON PERSIAN ŠAMŠIR BLADES

Similar to many Japanese *katanas* (Japanese sword), some Persian *šamšir* شمشیر blades are also signed. However, Persian *šamšir* شمشیر blades are not signed on the tang as some *katanas* are, but the majority of them are signed in form of a cartouche on the blade via gold-inlay technique. Nevertheless, there are some *šamšir* شمشیر blades that are also signed with the maker's name chiseled on their tang. As the handle scales of *šamšir* شمشیر are attached via an adhesive material observing the maker's signature is impossible, unless the handle scales are broken (for a chiseled inscription *Amal-ē Assdollāh Isfahāni* عمل اسدالله اصفهانی (the work of ) on the tang of a Persian *šamšir* شمشیر see Moshtagh Khorasani (2006:488-489).

Among Iranian smiths, Assadollāh Isfahāni اسدالله اصفهانی is supposedly the most famous Iranian swordmaker, but although the blades bearing his name are numerous (Mayer, 1962), his history remains mysterious (Kobyliniski, 2000:61). Mir'i contends that Assadollāh اسدالله must have lived during the reign of Šāh Abbās Safavid but provides no historical evidence for this claim. The problem of the existence of a large number of swords signed with the signature of Assadollāh اسدالله, as recognized by Zeller and Rohrer (1955:98-9), is that some of these cartouches are assumed to be added later to the blades to increase their value for sale to the European markets. Kobyliniski (2000:61) is of the opinion that there are more than 200 blades bearing the signature of Assdollāh Esfahāni in larger, private collections and museums. He further states that the same number can presumably be found in smaller collections, asserting that if one assumes that there are 400 to 500 swords carrying his signature, it is highly unlikely that Assadollāh اسدالله made of all these blades. Additionally, according to Kobyliniski (2000:62), many of his blades are dated, the oldest known date being 811 Hegira (1409 A.D.) while the most recent one is 1223 Hegira (1808 A.D.). The resulting time span of over 200 years obviously makes it impossible for one man to have made all these blades himself.

Kobyliniski (2000:62) suggests that the signature of Assadollāh اسدالله may have been used as a sign of a workshop. On the other hand, he quotes Maÿer, who states that there are no signs of such a workshop in Persian chronicles. Mayer also claims no Persian chronicles even mention Assadollāh's اسدالله name. However, Mayer rejects the possibility that these blades are counterfeit since a counterfeiter would have copied the exact cartouche instead of creating new styles. Further, due to the fact that the dates on these blades vary dramatically from one to the other and encompass a wide range, Mayer suggests the interesting point that a counterfeiter would have also included the exact date of the reign of Šāh Abbās rather than inventing different, unrelated dates. It is not even clear which Šāh Abbās is actually referred to since there were three kings by that name: Šāh Abbās I (the Great), Šāh Abbās II (1642-1667 A.D.), and Šāh Abbās III (1732-1736 A.D.). Mayer (1962) also states that the dates on the blades signed with the name of

- 1) *daste* دسته (grip): other terms, such as *qabze* قبضه and *mošte* مشته, are also used for describing the handle of a *šamšir* شمشیر.
- 2) *sar-e daste* سر دسته or *kolāh* کلاه (pommel cap)
- 3) *tah-e šamšir* ته شمشیر (the end of the grip)
- 4) *bolčāq* بلچاق (quillon)
- 5) *mile-ye ettesāl* میله اتصال (rivets, which attach the ivory or horn grip scales to the tang) also called *mix-e daste* میخ دسته (nails/rivets of the grip)
- 6) *tiqe-ye fulādi* تیغه فولادی (steel blade) or *tiqe-ye šamšir* تیغه شمشیر (sword blade)
- 7) *badane* بدنه (literally “body,” referring to the blade)
- 8) *pahnā* پهنا (the width of the blade)
- 9) *labe-ye pošt* لبه پشت (back face) also called *pošt -e tiq* پشت تیغ (back of the blade)
- 10) *labe-ye ru* لبه رو (front of the blade) also called *ruy-e tiqe* روی تیغه (front of the blade)
- 11) *niš* نیش (the tip of the blade) also called *nok* نوک (the tip of the blade) and *sar-e tiq* سر تیغ (the tip of the blade)
- 12) *ketf* کتف (shoulders of the blade at the joint with the tang)
- 13) *yalmān* یلمان or *xuše-ye šamšir* خوشه شمشیر or *pax* پخ: raised back edge; it is not very common on Persian *šamšir* شمشیر but does appear on a number of examples
- 14) *mahal-e zadan zarb* محل زدن ضرب (center of percussion)
- 15) *jōhar-e tiq* جوهر تیغ (watered steel pattern of the blade)
- 16) *qalāf* غلاف (scabbard) also called *niyām* نیام
- 17) *zāj-e sefid* زاج سفید (alum for attaching the quillons to the blade)
- 18) *qabze* قبضه (grip scales or handle)
- 19) *sāqari* ساغری (shagreen leather covering the scabbard)
- 20) *varband* وربند (lens-like-shaped band with attached rings for hanging the saber) or *bast-e qalāf* بست غلاف (scabbard fittings)
- 21) *tah-e qalāf* ته غلاف (chape)
- 22) *band-e šamšir* بند شمشیر (swordbelt) also called *hamāyel* حمایل
- 23) *šamšir gardan* شمشیر گردن (scabbard together with the swordbelt)
- 24) *simduzi* سیمدوزی (wire stitching on the back of some scabbards)
- 25) *rismānbāfi* ریسمان بافی (the end of the scabbard that shows a knitted form of threads normally of two different colors)
- 26) *tazyināt* تزینات (ornamentation on the blade)
- 27) *toranj* ترنج (cartouche)
- 28) *āhanak* آهنک (grips straps of tang bands)

*šamšir* شمشیر with the highly curved saber, it is important to take into consideration that the term *šamšir* شمشیر does not say anything about the curve of the blade. As shown above the term *šamšir* شمشیر has its roots in Pahlavi language and during the Parthian and Sassanian eras all swords were straight and double-edged.

The classical Iranian *šamšir* شمشیر or saber in western literature is described as a sword that does not have fullers, has a wedge-shaped blade, and normally does not exhibit excessive inlays or engravings. Such swords have one or two small cartouches (*toranj*) if any, and these are normally gold inlaid. The blades of these *šamširhā* شمشیرها also taper in width towards the point. However, as described above, the term *šamšir* شمشیر is a generic one, used to refer to any type of sword, including the straight blades. Even in today's Persian/Farsi, the term is used to refer to any type of sword.

### 3. DIFFERENT PATTERNS OF STEEL ON THE BLADE OF ŠAMŠIR

There are different classifications of damascus pattern (crucible steel) on the blades of a *šamšir* شمشیر. Zeller and Rohrer (1955:95) say that there are ten sorts of Persian watered steel, though some of the patterns are not very common. Additionally, they mention that Iranians make this distinction based on the pattern and color. The damascus patterns are also confirmed by Allan and Gilmour (2000:201), who assert that identifying watered steel depended on two qualities, namely pattern and color. Zeller and Rohrer (1955:95) further explain that, for people who are not from the region, a classification of ten different sorts of watered steel is very difficult; thus, they propose a classification based on the pattern only. They also say that their classification is partially in accordance with the Persian classification. They distinguish between a) woodgrain (mottled) damask (woodgrain damask is characterized by irregularity in the patterns that appear both lengthwise and crosswise along the blade.), 2. ladder damask (this pattern is characterized by transversely crossways-oriented patterns), and 3) striped damask (this pattern consists of waves appearing lengthwise along the blade).

Manfred Sachse (1994:72-73) differentiates between the following damask patterns: a) striped damask, b) water damask (straight lines get shorter in this pattern and are combined with curved lines), c) wavy damask (the number of curved lines increases; broken lines and points also appear in this pattern), d) woodgrain damask, e) ladder damask.

### 4. DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE “CLASSICAL ŠAMŠIR”

It is important to know and understand the nomenclature of the different parts of the *šamšir* شمشیر in Persian. The following classification and terminology come from different Iranian sources, such as the findings of the research group of the Military Museum of Tehran (1984/ 1363), Shahidi (1380), Ga'edan (2003/1382), and one German source, namely Zeller und Rohrer (1955). These are also based on the following primary sources *Šāhnāme* by Ferdowsi, *Ta'id Besārat* by Mirzā Lotfallāh (1706-1707:1118 or 1108:1696-1697:[27]), and *Dārābnāme* (Beiqami, 2002/1381:100; vol.1).



## The History of Persian *šamšir* شمشیر

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to give a short overview of *šamšir* شمشیر and describe its etymological meaning. First, I will explain this type of weapon and its origins. Then, I will provide a short description of different types of magnificent Persian watered steel patterns that were produced from steel made in crucibles. Another section of this article deals with different parts of a *šamšir* شمشیر. Lastly, I will provide an analysis of gold-inlaid maker's marks on Persian *šamšir* شمشیر blades.

### KEY WORDS

*āhanak* آهنک, *Amal-ē Assdollāh Isfahāni* عمل اسدالله اصفهانی, *Assadollāh* اسدالله, *badane* بدنه, *band-e šamšir* بند شمشیر, *bast-e qalāf* بست غلاف, *bolčāq* بلچاق, crucible steel, damascus pattern, *daste* دسته, *hamāyel* حمایل, *jōhar-e tiq* تیغ جوهر, *Kalbeali*, *ketf* کتف, *kolāh* کلاه, *labe-ye pošt* لبه پشت, *labe-ye ru* لبه رو, ladder damask, *mahal-e zadan zarb* محل زدن ضرب, *mošte* مشته, *mile-ye ettesāl* میله اتصال, *mix-e daste* میخ دسته, *nāb* ناب, *nāv* ناو, *niš* نیش, *nok* نوک, *pahnā* پهنا, *pošt-e tiq* پشت تیغ, *qabze* قبضه, *qalāf* غلاف, *rismānbāfi* ریسمان بافی, *ruy-e tiqe* روی تیغه, *sāqari* ساغری, *sar-e daste* سر دسته, *sar-e tiq* سر تیغ, *simduzi* سیم دوزی, *sneh*, sword, striped damask, *Šāh Abbās*, *šafšēr*, *šamšir* شمشیر, *šamširhā* شمشیرها, *šamšir gardan* گردن شمشیر, *šufšēr*, *tah-e šamšir* ته شمشیر, *tah-e qalāf* ته غلاف, *tang*, *tazyināt* تزیینات, *tiqe-ye fulādi* تیغه فولادی, *tiqe-ye šamšir* تیغه شمشیر, *toranj* ترنج, *varband* وربند, water damask, wavy damask, woodgrain damask, *xuše-ye šamšir* خوشه شمشیر, *yalmān* یلمان, *zāj-e sefid* زاج سفید.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The famous Persian sword *šamšir* شمشیر has fascinated many people in both the Middle East and Europe for centuries, with its beautiful patterns and shape. In today's world, the Persian *šamšir* شمشیر enjoys a very good reputation among scholars, curators, and collectors due to the beauty and quality of the damascus steel patterns on its blade. The legendary performance of the *šamšir* شمشیر is attributed to Persian watered steel blades. A combination of beauty and excellent performance make Persian *šamšir* شمشیر a formidable instrument. The objective of this article is to give a short overview of the