



## 'ALAM VA 'ALĀMAT

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'ALAM VA 'ALĀMAT (Ar. *'alāma*), banner; more particularly, the banners carried in religious processions. For banners in the pre-Islamic period, see *Derafš*.

*i. History.*

*ii. The Art of Metal 'Alams.*

i. History

In both Arabic and Persian, the word *'alam* (pl. *a'lām*) conveys various senses connected with the general meaning of a distinctive sign or mark. In Persian the word had early carried the meaning of ensign (*nešān*) and of standard or flag (*drafš/derafš*; see Zamaḳṣarī, *Pīšrow-e adab yā moqaddamat al-adab*, ed. M. K. Emām, Tehran, 1963, I, p. 406). The same meanings may also be rendered by the word *'alāma* (pl. *'elām*, *'alā'em*, *'alāmāt*), which derives from the same root. Synonyms in the meaning of standard or flag include Arabic *lewā'* and *rāya*, Turkish *beyraq* (Turkman *beydaq*) and *sanjaq* (Persian *sanjāq*; used mostly in Ottoman controlled areas, it seems to have early designated a standard larger than a *beyraq*, *rāya*, or *'alam*; see J. Deny, "Sandjak," *EI*<sup>1</sup> IV p. 148-50), and Persian *parčam* (introduced recently with this meaning; see 'A. Nayyer-e Nūrī, "Beyraq," p. 953; Dōkā, "Tārīkča," I, p. 14, n. 1). For the Turks, *'alam* (pronounced *alem*) retains about the same meanings, while also designating their national and religious emblem, the crescent (see A. Sakisian, "Le croissant comme emblème national et religieux en Turquie," *Syria* 13, 1941,



pp. 66-80), a symbol that was also used by some rulers of Persia. Tīmūr employed it as an emblem and perhaps as a talisman (Ackerman, "Standards," p. 2778); his huge tents were held up by long poles topped by "an apple of burnished copper above which is a crescent" (see D. N. Wilber, in *Iran* 17, 1979, pp. 131ff., fig. 1, b and c, quoting Le Strange, *Clavijo, Embassy to Tamerlane*, London, 1928, pp. 238ff.; see also Ackerman, loc. cit.). But the chronological evolution of the shape and function of finials is difficult to trace.

Any serious research into the historical development of banners is hindered by the scarcity and heterogeneity of sources (archeological, iconographical, literary, etc.). Problems arise from the identification of both finials and streamers or other pieces of cloth attached to the staffs. Shapes and functions of standards, banners, and badges from pre-Islamic Persia until now undoubtedly show signs of continuity, particularly in the use of astral symbols (Ackerman, "Standards," pp. 2771ff.). Contradictory views have been voiced about the appearance and shape of the *šīr o kūršīd* (lion and sun) motif in iconography and on the cloth or finials of standards (a few hints in Ackerman, "Standards," pp. 2778ff.; 'A. Nayyer-e Nūrī, "Beyraq;" Ḍokā, "Tārīkča;" Ḥ. Nayyer-e Nūrī, "Ḍayl"). Although it became the Iranian national armorial bearings, it was not the most frequent emblem to appear on religious standards or Shi'ite *'alam* banners.

A striking feature of *'alam* banners is the *tūq/towq* (also written *tūḡ*, *toq*, *tūqa*, *ṭūḡ*, and *ṭūq*; Calmard, *Etendards*, pp. 35ff., with a philological appendix by L. Bazin), an apotropaic symbol introduced (or reintroduced?) from the Turco-Mongolian steppes and used as an emblem of military and then civil power. It consists essentially of a pennant or tassel of yak or horse tail attached to a staff or to a helmet crest; the number of tails indicated the rank and place of the amir, pasha, etc., in front of whose tent the *tūq* was placed. Its use probably derives from Mongol shamanism; the same finials and tassels can be seen in Tibetan lamaism and popular religion in Himalayan countries (G. Tucci and W. Heissig, *Les religions du Tibet et de la Mongolie*, Paris, 1973, p. 189, with drawings, and index s.v. *t'ug*). After the advent of the Safavids, the *tūq* apparently retained both military and shamanistic functions in "Moḡolestān" (*Bābor-nāma*; Beveridge's tr. quoted by Ackerman, "Standards," pp. 2776ff.; E. Mano, in *Seinan Asia Kenkyū* [in Japanese] 17, 1966, pp. 29ff.).

Mongol banners and emblems coincide on important points with early Iranian customs (Ackerman, "Standards," pp. 2770ff., 2776). With the arrival of the Mongols, a kind of combination of *tūq* and flag is seen in Persian miniature



paintings (see below, part ii). The metal finials of these banners are made of confronted dragons on either side of a central piece (which may be ovoid, shaped like a spear-head, etc.); shapes and functions of this “*tūq* device” evolved considerably from the Safavid period onwards (see below).

Banners of some kind seem to have been used in Moḥarram ceremonies under the Buyids (Calmard, *Culte*, pp. 103, 257, n. 257). In the popular Persian and Turkish literature relating to the drama of Karbalā drums and banners (*ṭabl va ‘alam*) are an attribute of all the historical or legendary avengers of Ḥosayn’s blood (ibid., pp. 230ff., and below). Drums, banners, and royal ensigns were also distinctive signs of dervish orders (e.g., the Kāzerūnīya had their own *nešāna*, *‘alam*, *va nawbat*; ibid., p. 192). *Tūq* banners were used by religious story tellers (*maddāḥān*; see Kāšefī, *Fotūwat-nāma-ye solṭānī*, ed. M. J. Maḥjūb, Tehran, 1350 Š./1971, pp. 288ff.). Under the Āq Qoyunlū, *‘alam* banners and drums from *Emāmzādas* were carried by *‘olamā’* and *‘alam* banners and *tūqs* by dervishes in a civil and military review in Fārs (Jalāl-al-dīn Davānī, *Arz-nāma*, ed. Ī. Afšār, *MDAT* 3/3, 1335 Š./1956, p. 47). With the advent of the Safavids (907-1145/1501-1732) and the establishment of Twelver Shi’ism as the state religion, banners came to be used extensively in Moḥarram ceremonies and other rituals. Only from the Safavid period onward is it possible to summarize the formal functional evolution of religious *‘alam* banners; first, however, certain preliminary remarks need to be made (FIGURES 22-24).

(1) In its traditional form, a standard is a lance (*derafš*, *neyza*) to which is attached a piece (or pieces) of cloth (e.g. the *tūq* mentioned by Kāšefī, loc. cit.). Religiously it has both a heavenly and a human value; its shape is anthropomorphic: a finial (head), a staff (body), and a pad (foot). Its symbolic function is akin to that of tree. (2) From the Saljuq period onward messianic ideas were revived in Turco-Iranian circles. *Ġāzī* Turks came to be considered the military element able to bring forth the triumph of the Maḥdī (Calmard, *Monde iranien* 1, 1971, p. 67), whose apocalyptic weapon is the celebrated *Ḍu’l-feqār*, ‘Alī’s double-edged or double-bladed sword, imitations of which were introduced as finials, sometimes combined with *tūq* devices, among the sacred emblems kept in *takyas* and carried in Shi’ite ceremonies. *‘Alam* banners are often mentioned in the numerous historico-legendary accounts of Imam Ḥosayn’s martyrdom and his avengers (Calmard, *Culte*, pp. 220ff.). (3) Each emblem carried in procession is linked to the events of Karbalā. Thus the prototype of Moḥarram standards is the *‘alam* carried by ‘Abbās b. ‘Alī, Ḥosayn’s *‘alam-dār* (standard bearer). Various shrines in Iran, India, and



elsewhere claim to possess this relic or other standards connected to various events; the hagiography connected to each needs to be studied individually. Although it may have an older prototype, the spread hand emblem (*panja*) representing the *panj tan* (the “five persons;” see fig. 28) is also linked with Ḥosayn’s cult. (4) Early prototypes of ‘*alam* banners may have been the standards (sometimes provided with staffs of extraordinary lengths) which are a familiar sight on shrines in oriental Iranian lands, including Afghanistan and Central Asia, and in northern India. Their possible Iranian Buddhist (or non-Zoroastrian) origin has been suggested (A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, *Monde iranien* 2, 1974, p. 18). Lances (Av. *drafša*, hence NPer. *derafš*), which may have functioned as banners, are mentioned in the *Avesta* (Yt. 1.11, 13.136; on the parallel function of *derafš* and *sanjāq*, see Deny, *Et*<sup>1</sup> IV, p. 149). (5) It is difficult to know exactly when ‘*alam* or *tūq* banners lost their military function to take on an exclusively religious one. The politico-military connection of the term ‘*alam* was retained in such expressions as *amīr ‘alam/mīr ‘alam*, which became an honorific title (cf. the territorial connotation of *sanjaq* in Turkish; see also H. Bowen, “Bayraqdār,” *Et*<sup>2</sup> I, pp. 1134-35).

The most striking feature of Safavid ‘*alam* banners is the “extraordinary length” of their staffs (Della Valle); their crests were relatively small and mostly made of metal. Besides the *tūq* device and its variants, the *panja* was widely used (see, e.g., Chardin, De Bruijn) and eventually became the equivalent of the Turkish crescent; it figured on standards, religious and civil monuments, “national” flags, etc. Crests included “scissors” (probably a *Du’l-feqār* device), cross-like emblems, rings, lions, two cardboard dragons (variant of the *tūq* device; Oléarius, with drawing), a kind of tower with four scimitars (ibid.), and a horseshoe which allegedly belonged to ‘Abbās (Moḥammad’s uncle according to Oléarius, more probably ‘Abbās b. ‘Alī). There was a tendency toward a shortening of the staff and a lengthening of the spearhead blades of the *tūq* device, which could reach considerable size. There was also a multiplication of the spearhead blades above the ‘*alam* banner’s cross-bar.

In its most common shape, an ‘*alam* banner used in modern Shi‘ite rituals in Iran comprises essentially three parts (Figure 24): (1) a strong wooden staff generally provided with a horizontal metallic bar which gives to the assembly the appearance of a cross; (2) a spearhead blade fixed on top of the central staff flanked by metal dragon heads on either sides, while smaller spearhead blades fixed on the cross-bar usually flank the central one; (3) various metal objects on the cross-bar; these include animal representations (goats,



peacocks, doves, hybrids such as birds with human heads and fish tails, etc.), other metal objects such as models of mosques, and small bells hanging from the spear-heads. Carried in procession, *'alam*s are hardly recognizable, since they are loaded with ex-votos (sing. *nadr*, *daḳīl*) similar to those attached to sacred trees, and ornaments; these include pieces of cloth (cashmere shawls, ribbons, etc.); precious or eye-catching objects such as mirrors, jewels, and watches; large feathers, vases with flowers and greenery, rose water bottles, lamps, lanterns, and candles burning in tulip shaped glasses (*lāla*). The banners are called many names besides *'alam*. The word *tūq*, although said now to be confined to Qom (Faḳīhī, *Tārīk*, p. 277), was used in Qajar times in Azarbaijan (described in Lassy, *Mysteries*, p. 112), Tehran (Van Vloten, "Drapeaux," Mostawfī, *Šarḥ*), and probably elsewhere. *Beyraq* seems still to be used to designate various kinds of religious banners (e.g. Lassy, loc. cit.; Homāyūnī, *Farhang*, pp. 400ff.; here, [Figures 25-27](#)). The Mongol term *kotal* also applied to specific kinds of banners (Calmard, "Etendards," pp. 37ff.), which may be known under other names (e.g. the *'alam e raḳtpūš* formerly used in Qom, Faḳīhī, *Tārīk*, p. 275).

Various kinds of banners and pennants are used in Moḥarram ceremonies; each social group such as *şenf* (guild), *hay'at-e maḏhabī* (religious organization), and *maḥalla* (town or village quarter), owns at least one, symbolizing its own identity as opposed to that of rival factions (a remnant of former *'aşabīyāt*). An *'alam* banner as wide as a street and provided with many staffs and spearheads was exhibited in Tehran at least until recently at the *Ābanbār qahwa-kāna*. Colors used in banners include black, the so-called color of the Prophet, but also that of the Maḥdī and the 'Abbasids: blue or purple, the traditional color of mourning; green, the 'Alid color from Imām Reżā's time and the color of Islam; white (even though it was connected with the Omayyads and the Fatimids; see Van Vloten, "Drapeaux," pl. V); yellow (*ibid.*); and red, which is connected with Mahdist movements and the cult of martyrs and is the color of Imam Ḥosayn's banner. There was a progressive restriction in the use of red, since it is the color of the villain's garments in the *ta'zīya* and was used by the Kharijites on their banners; in India, Shi'ites avoid it because it is the Sunnis' color (Ali, *Observations*, p. 37).

Some *'alam* banners are embodied with a special *barakat* or prophylactic efficiency connected with fertility, children's protection, recovery from disease, etc.; this is enhanced by the inscriptions engraved or cut out in the metallic finials. These range from groups of names such as "Allāh,



Moḥammad, ‘Alī”, to Koranic inscriptions such as that granting victory (Figure 23). Inscriptions may also be cut or engraved in *panjas* (Figure 28) or be written out on the banners themselves.

*Tūq* or ‘*alam* banners are taken out of their respective *takyas* only before noon on the day of ‘Āšūrā (Faḳīhī, *Tārīḳ*, p. 278). Under Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah the ornamentation and departure of the royal ‘*alam* from the *andarūn* to the *takya* was made with great ceremony (Mo‘ayyer-al-mamālek, *Yāddāsthā*, p. 105). Influential preachers (*rawza-kān*) had their emblematic ‘*alam* banners (Mostawfī, *Šarḥ*, I, pp. 282ff.). Heavy banners needed to be carried by strong bearers (‘*alam-keš*, *tūqčī*, *beyraqdār*), generally belonging to a local *zūr-kāna* or “house of strength,” who were surrounded by attendants (*pātūqī*). In Qom, these *pātūqīs* protect the bearer from the pressure of the crowd eager to touch or kiss the spearhead of the *tūq*. Various kinds of banners were used in contests between young men in towns and villages (see, e.g., Calmard, “Etendards”, p. 36). Jugglers of banners (‘*alam-bāzān*, *pātūqī*) exhibited their skills in Moḥarram ceremonies (e.g., Calmard, *Monde iranien* 2, 1974, pp. 80ff., 114ff.).

Both military and ritual uses of ‘*alam* banners have given rise to sayings and proverbs. ‘*Alam be kūn čarb kardan* “to anoint the ‘*alam* with (the enemies’) blood” seems to be connected with old magical practices to obtain victory. ‘*Alam va kotal rāh andāktān* “putting banners on the way” was used to mean disturbing public order by street demonstrations. Many other expressions may be found in Persian literature and folklore (see Dehḳodā and other dictionaries).

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(J. Calmard)

## ii. The Art of Metal 'Alams

Although no depictions of banners appear to survive from pre-Mongol Islamic Iran, there is some evidence of their probable form. The Schefer Ḥarīrī manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale, which was probably produced in Baghdad in 634/1237, shows the use of a broad-bladed probably metal device affixed to the top of a wooden shaft adorned with flags or tassels (R. Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting*, Skira, 1962, pp. 118-19). This form of device continued to be used in Egypt and Syria throughout the Mamlūk period, and many steel examples are known (e.g., L. A. Mayer, "Saracenic Arms and Armor," *Ars Islamica* 10, 1943, pp. 1-12, figs. 12-13). The Turks are known to have introduced the *ṭūḡ* (or *tūḡ*), a bunch of horse-hair tied to the top of a pole, which again functioned as a standard or banner (J. Sauvaget, "Remarques sur les monuments omayyades. II. Argenterie "Sassanides"," *JA*, 1940-41, pp. 19-57; idem, "Une représentation de la citadelle seljoukide de Merv," *Ars Islamica* 15-16, 1951, pp. 128-29).

The first depictions of banners in Persian miniature painting show a *ṭūḡ* or a flag, or a combination of both (e.g., Rašīd-al-dīn, *Jāme' al-tawārīk* MS, Edinburgh University Library). The flag is cut in flames down the free side, a tradition deriving, like the *ṭūḡ*, from Central Asia (Sauvaget, *op. cit.*). To this combination of *ṭūḡ* and flag was added a further device, first illustrated in the second half of the 8th/14th century: a pair of metal dragon heads at either side of a spear-head shaped centerpiece (B. Gray, *Persian Painting*, Skira, 1961, p. 43). This then developed into a variety of forms and became a striking feature of warfare and parades, though almost invariably combined with a flag of some sort. To trace the development of such banners and flags is at present impossible owing to the lack of published examples. A number of them,



probably from the 10th/16th century, exist in the Topkapi museum (Plate XXXII</a>); others are found in museums around the world. They are usually of pierced steel inlaid with gold (e.g. *Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 1433 A & B). The only other source of information for these objects is miniature painting, where they are common in works from the 9th/15th and 10th/16th centuries, but here the depictions do not suggest a specific tendency in terms of design (for examples see Gray, *Persian Painting*, pp. 134-35; I. Stchoukine, *Les peintures des manuscrits timurides*, Paris, 1954, pls. XXII, XXXV, XLVI, XLVII, LXXXIII, etc.). Flame-edged flags continue, at least up to the middle of the 10th/16th century, but there also seems to be a preference for single pennant flags during Safavid times. A piece of cloth, like a scarf or unwrapped turban, tied at its middle round the lance, is also a common form of pennant, and is found from the 7th/13th century through the 10th/16th.

The metal banners made today in Iran are employed only in religious ceremonies, the most important of which are the processions on 'Āšūrā. The banners are often more complex, containing at their center the traditional form but with other smaller banners attached, and sometimes metal peacocks, birds, and lamps. The center piece is invariably ornamented with the names of 'Alī, Fāṭema, Ḥasan and Ḥosayn, in addition to those of God and the Prophet (J. and S. Gluck, *A Survey of Persian Handicraft*, Tehran, 1977, pp. 142-45). Modern banners are usually steel fretwork inlaid with gold, and thus show a continuity of production from much earlier times (H. E. Wulff, *The Traditional Crafts of Persia*, Cambridge, Mass., 1966, pp. 72-73).

Given in the text.