



# HELMET II. IN THE ISLAMIC PERIOD

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## HELMET

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By the time the Muslims conquered the Iranian world (the territory now occupied by Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Azarbaijan), two helmet types were already known: egg-shaped and conical.

The egg-shaped helmet had developed during the Parthian (ca. 247 BCE- 224 CE) and Sasanian (224-651 CE) periods. They were composed of two (*Bandhelm*) or four (*Spangenhelm*) iron plates. The joints were covered with metal bands that, together with the rim and the cap on top, formed the helmet's frame. Extant helmets are decorated with iron details combined with brass or gilt. More sumptuous objects had a silver binding with embossed scaly ornaments. This type of decoration was extremely popular in the middle of the 1st millennium CE within a vast territory stretching from China to the British Isles, and is typical of the Migration Period (4th-9th centuries CE; see [ARMOR](#)). The egg shape narrowed to the top, sometimes flattened at the sides according to the Parthian tradition, or was strictly hemispherical. The lower edge was usually straight. Some helmets have a riveted rectangular plate to protect the forehead, sometimes extended to serve as a nose-guard, or eye cusps with reinforced rims. Eye cusps were an international feature of helmets



dating to the mid-first millennium CE. The nape, neck, and throat were protected by mail (*aventail*). The face was visible, yet in some cases all but the eyes were covered.

The conical helmet, in contrast, emerged at the beginning of the Muslim expansion over the vast stretches of the Eurasian steppes inhabited by Turkic-speaking nomads. A conical bowl was made of four to six plates with a conical finial; a holder for plumes of feathers or horsehair was attached. The plates were joined by narrow vertical metal strips, and often in a symmetrical fashion close to the nearly triangular bulges that marked the places of paired rivets. These helmets had almost always eye cusps or a forehead plate with nasal, while the mail was similar in both helmet types. Surfaces were covered with copper and silver, while gilt ornaments on strips of silver or copper were fixed alongside the vertical joints, and iron details were combined with brass or copper. The 7th- and 8th-century Sogdian paintings in Central Asia and a helmet in the British Museum, which was found in Iraq in the Nineveh ruins and is dated to the 6th or 7th century, indicate the area in which conical helmets were in use. (This helmet caused errors in the history of helmets, because for a long time it was considered an Assyrian artifact.) Conical helmets appeared in Iran because Turks dominated Central Asia between the 6th and 8th centuries and enjoyed considerable military prestige. Both Sasanian and Muslim rulers maintained wide contacts with Turkish military contingents.

There is only sparse archeological and pictorial evidence for the period between the 8th and 12th centuries, yet it indicates the predominance of conical helmets, whose design had remained unchanged. But toward the 12th century, solid-forged helmets became more frequent. Their edges were straight or had eye cusps and nasals. If mail was attached, it covered either nape and neck or only the nape, and sometimes it protected the face. According to the contemporary written sources, helmets were equipped with steel visors. The moveable type was hammered into an anthropomorphic mask. The immovable type was a half mask, which was riveted to the helmet, with a sculptured nasal and mail to protect the lower part of the face.

Numerous representations, but mostly paintings on pottery, document the inventions of the 12th and 13th centuries. Two new distinctive shapes—a low conical bowl that appeared flattened and a hemispherical bowl—were forged or composed of two to four plates. A wide rectangular plate with rounded corners or thick leather riveted to the bowl served as a neck-guard that safely



protected neck, nape, and ears while exposing the throat. The leather neck-guard was a characteristic element of pre-Mongol Iranian helmets. Affluent warriors who wanted more protection and bought mail hoods with a palm-width gorget, which could be worn under helmets as well as independently. They were copied from European crusader armor, whose influence is also documented by the forward-bending conical finials of the conical helmets. Masks and half-masks were widely used. Popular ornaments were two round fittings of nonferrous metal that were symmetrically attached to the front, while little tassels that were vertically or horizontally attached, along the sides or on the mail, were less popular.

The Mongol invasion was a turning point in the development of Iranian helmets. Because of a deliberate employment policy the Central Asian Mongol completely replaced the local helmet tradition (see ARMOR). Rašid-al-Din Fażl-Allāh (ca. 1247-1318) mentioned in his *Compendium of Chronicles (Jāme' al-tawārik)* that the local craftsmen were not allowed to work for the Il-khanid army until they had learned, under the strict supervision of Mongolian instructors, to manufacture Mongolian-style helmets. Yet these helmets preserved with the two round fittings a typical Iranian feature.

When in the 1360s craftsmen abandoned their pre-Mongol traditions, they developed new helmet types. The first type had a low hemispherical bowl to which a high cap band was riveted with figurative heads. On the front were eye cusps, which were sometimes lined with anthropomorphic eyebrows in relief, and a flat nasal bar of steel. The mail usually covered the entire face with the exception of the eyes.

The second type was a low conical helmet. An attached guard of mail or Mongolian-style lamellar protected nape and throat, and often also covered the entire face with the exception of the eyes. A Mongolian innovation was horizontal and vertical visors and rounded earpieces. The face could be protected with visors or a hammered anthropomorphic half-mask or whiskered mask.

Both helmet types were popular until the early 15th century, but hemispherical helmets were falling out of use under the Timurids, and new helmet types emerged by the turn of the 16th century, when the Safavids seized power in Iran. The first type continued the tradition of the conical helmet, but it had a hammered, low bowl. The neck-guard was of mail and sometimes was supplemented with figurative earpieces. It had a moveable



nasal or a moveable visor that was shaped like an anthropomorphic whiskered mask.

The second type was an innovation that came from the Middle East. The Mamluks and Ottomans had been using an elongated conical helmet that was forged from a single piece of steel. The visor was riveted to the bowl, but the nasal was movable. The helmet had a Mongol-style neck-guard with suspended figurative earpieces.

The third helmet type had a very elongated conical bowl with a long finial to which a small pennant was fastened. The cap band was occasionally joined to the bowl in an obtuse angle.

The so-called turban helmet is the fourth type. The Iranian variant is linked to western Iran and its regional center Tabriz, which until the early 16th century had been ruled by the Āq Qoyunlus (q.v.). The bowl was large and pear-shaped, because this helmet had to fit on top of wadded caps and turbans. It had eye cusps as well as moveable nasal and face-guard. Almost all Iranian helmets of the late 15th and the 16th century were surmounted by finials that consisted of faceted balls with cones standing on their vertexes. Plume holders and small steel rods for pennants were attached to the conical helmets of the second and the third type.

The tradition of decorating helmets with ornaments reached its peak in the 15th and 16th centuries. Until the late 15th century, engravings of floral ornaments and inscriptions were much more common than gilt and silver inlays that subsequently came into fashion, especially inlays combined with niello, gilding, and engraving in relief. The decoration consisted still of floral ornaments and inscriptions, but the combination of several techniques allowed for the layering of different elements that produced complex and extremely rich designs. The most typical feature of the Āq Qoyunlu helmets is the use of small pseudo-epigraphic details, invariably inlaid with silver wire, to fill the space between the larger decorative elements.

Between the 17th and 19th centuries, the flattened hemispherical helmet was the only type of forged helmet used in Iran. It had a faceted or ribbed finial ending in a flattened ball. A moveable nasal was held by a horizontal bar, and a plume holder was next to each end. The neck-guard was always of mail, and could be opened at the throat. The finials were forged out of high-grade steel (e.g., Damascus steel), and decorated with ornaments that were carved or



etched, niello or gilt and silver inlay. In the 19th century, animal and human figures dominated the ornaments. Epigraphic ornaments in Kufic, the angular script that is commonly associated with early Islamic art, was employed to antique the helmets. In the second half of the 19th century, the front of helmets was decorated with more exotic elements such as horns and *daiva*-faced mascarons. But, in general, the art of helmet-manufacture began to decline. In the 1860s, helmets were manufactured from low-grade metal and mail, and decorated with crudely executed ornaments to be sold as exotic and antique souvenirs to Europeans, who used them as fashionable decoration of smoking rooms and studies.

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(M. V. Gorelik)

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