



## KORSI

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**KORSI**, an Arabic loanword in Persian, originally borrowed from Aramaic (Syriac form *kurseyā*’, connected with Akkadian *kussū* and Sumerian *guza*; Jefferey, p. 249), meaning (i) a throne, chair, seat, stool, bench (of a judge) (Bodrogligeti, pp. 45, 158) of scholars (*ahl-e korsi*), pulpit, firmament or sphere of heavenly bodies, and (ii) a wooden frame (Dehḵodā).

The term *korsi* seems not have been used in Persian prior to the Arab-Muslim conquest, although [Achaemenid](#) (q.v.) and Parthian (see [ARSACIDS](#)) royalty and satraps made use of high-backed chairs that looked like a throne (see [GĀH i. PLACE](#)); dignitaries and women used a low-backed chair (Briant, pp. 97, 253, 345, 347; Curtis and Simpson, pp. 143, 150, 156, 158; Pynt and Higgs, p. 88; Rich, p. 20). The [Sasanians](#) (q.v.) used a bench-like throne (Harper and Meyers, pp. 102-4, 108, 122). However, these chair-thrones were not called *korsi*.



Figure 1. Image of a modern-day korsī.

The word *korsī* occurs in the Qur'an (2:255 and 38:34), in the meaning of "throne," on which God is metaphorically seated and king Solomon's throne, respectively. Because of the anthropomorphic implications, Islamic scholars debated the meaning of the "throne of God" (Wensinck, pp. 67, 90, 93, 115, 148). To this Throne Verse and the word *korsī* in *abjad* (q.v.) numerology, magical powers were ascribed (Donaldson, pp. 111-12, 137-38, 175, 207; for India, see Shurreef, pp. 344, 383). In 687, an extremist Shi'ite group venerated an empty holy chair ("the throne of 'Ali") which rite likely has its origin in *Manichaeism* (q.v.; Wellhausen, p. 85; Glassé p. 289; for possible Buddhist links, see Curtis and Simpson, p. 158).

Allegedly, the prophet towards the end of his life began to use a chair with two steps as a *minbar*. The Omayyads used chair-like thrones, while the 'Abbasids (q.v.) used the Sasanian bench-like throne without a back, which was copied by succeeding dynasties. The fixed seat served to distinguish the ruler from his subjects. They also used chairs, while folding chairs were used, usually for members of the secretarial class serving the ruler (Bloom and Blair, vol. 1, pp. 83, 472; Turner, p. 200; Daniel and Mahdi, p. 80; *A Guide...*, pp. 7, 13, 16). Chairs were hardly used in Iran until the 20th century and then mostly for visiting

Europeans (Peterson).

Until the mid-19th century, according to English-Persian dictionaries, the main word for “chair” in Persian was *korsi*, even as late at 1878 (Gladwin; Clarke; Johnson; Richardson and Wilkins; Sen; Tucker). However, by 1880, *şandali* and *korsi* were mentioned as synonyms (Palmer; Wollaston). This replacement of *korsi* by *şandali* was a gradual process. In 1866, the term *şandali* was still unknown in Kermanshah (Wills, p. 123). A review of Arthur Wollaston’s 1882 dictionary states that, “*kursi* is Indo-Persian, while *sandali* meaning chair is Persian” (p. 601). This is odd, because *şandali* usually denoted a “small stool to place sandals or boots on” (Dehḳodā), while in Mughal India it meant “a footstool” on which the vizier sat next to the ruler’s throne (‘Allāmi, tr., I, [çandali], pp. ix, 306-7). This juxtaposition of throne and footstool is also found between *taḳt* and *korsi* and *pişgāh* and *korsi* in medieval times (Huart and Sadan, p. 509; Ebn al-Balki, p. 97; Dehḳodā), hence the synonym *zirgāh*, a chair, a seat.

II. *Korsi* further denotes a rectangular wooden frame with legs (*pāya*) mainly used for the traditional heating system. Its first mention in Persian and in European languages is around 1630 (Dehḳodā; Olearius, p. 554) although archeological data suggest that it may already have existed during the Sasanian period (Potts et al., p. 359). It was called *şandali* in Afghanistan and Baluchistan (Gray, pp. 252-53, 258, 490; Michaud, p. 249; Baloch, p. 331; Masson, vol. 2, pp. 272-73). The *korsi* is an open-sided wooden frame of varying dimensions (45 cm and even 1 m high and it measured from 0.19 square m to 0.60 square m). This frame was placed in the middle of the main room in the house over a fixed or portable **brazier** (q.v.; Pers. *manḳal*), often merely a simple flat copper chafing dish, or, over a round fire hole (*tandur*, *tanur*, or *čāla*) usually small, although a rather large hole (60 cm deep and 60 cm in diameter) is also mentioned (in summer it was planked over). Depending on the wealth of the family and geographical area the fuel used was charcoal, charcoal dust and firewood, but mostly **dung** (q.v.) cakes. In this hole, which was clayed all around, or brazier there was a basin of ashes in which a fire was kept smoldering. A very small quantity of charcoal would last all day and during winter the *korsi* was in continuous operation. If necessary, the top of the *korsi* was removed and bread or food was baked in this *tandur*; the dough was flattened on top of the *korsi*. Over this frame a thickly-wadded quilt (*lehāf*) or any cover was spread, which extended some 1.5 meters beyond the wooden frame. Wealthy people had a special cover (*ru-korsi*) made to



protect the quilt from being soiled (for a picture of a *ru-korsi*, see *Hali*, p. 126; Tanavoli, p. 17). Around the *korsi*, mattresses or cushions were spread out on which the family sat or laid with their feet through the open sides towards the heat source. The family, only relatives and very close friends (if male, usually only those who were *mahram*, although Col. Sheil was invited), was dressed in warm clothes to keep the rest of the body (arms, shoulders) warm. The quilt was tucked up to the waist or neck. The hands were kept free, because family members gossiped, smoked, played cards and games on the top of the *korsi*, on which also tea and meals were served.

During the long winter nights people told stories and poetry was read out aloud (Šahri, vol. 4, pp. 466-73; Melikian-Chirvani; Sheil, p. 100; Floyer, pp. 398-99, 401, 421; Wills, pp. 137-38, 143; Eastwick vol. 2, p. 72; Rice, pp. 37, 172; Sykes, vol. 2, p. 391; Hume-Griffith, p. 52; Dwight, pp. 104-5, 154, 266-67, 274-75, 278-79; Malcolm, p. 23; Wood, p. 39; Alberts, vol. 1, pp. 165-66; Christensen pp. 105, 114; Moin, p. 17; Yāraḥmadi, p. 234. For an illustration, see Durand, p. 246; Hume-Griffith, p. 55; Christensen fig. 6c; Panāhi Semnāni, p. 56; Yāraḥmadi, p. 235). Therefore, “a *korsi* is commonly referred to as a *tambal-kāna*, or lazy-house” (Rice, p. 172). When people went to sleep they, fully clothed, simply turned around. A visitor might then only see a circle of black hats sticking out from under the *korsi*. Because people seldom washed themselves, the *korsi* was a breeding place for vermin with which they were infested. Often accidents happened; people, especially small children might burn themselves or be overcome by carbon monoxide fumes (Sheil, p. 101; Dwight, p. 154; Adams, vol. 1, p. 166; Rice, pp. 173, 259). Therefore, people were advised not to sleep with their heads under the *korsi* and to ensure that the coals in the brazier were red hot before placing it under the cover (Dānešvar, p. 60).

Although most houses had a *korsi* (Dwight, p. 278), many poor households could not afford the cost of fuel. Therefore, frostbite was not uncommon among the poorest classes (Arnold, p. 276). In some cities, such as in Yazd, the *korsi* was less common (Malcolm, pp. 22, 30). Nomads seem not have used it (e.g., among the [Baktiāris](#) [q.v.], only sedentarized tribal members used the *korsi* for 2-3 months in the *yeylāq*, Digard, p. 178). The *korsi* was also used as a bed. In [Nakjavān](#) (q.v.), [William Ouseley](#) (1767-1842) saw women reclining on “cursis or wooden frames covered with carpets, or felt nemmeds on the flat roof” (Ouseley, III, p. 346). Now, the *korsi* is a thing of the past. Change began in the 1930s, when a large room, or an office, or a hall with a public gathering needed to be heated, “stoves that usually burn coal or simple devices that burn

oil were used” (Koelz, p. 161).

III. Other meanings are derived from the “support” connotation of *korsi*. They include a falcons nest; a triangular mallet; an arrow head support; a bezel; the teeth of the mill wheel; perfectly shaped and spaced letters (in calligraphy) or pearls in a necklace; and in orthography, the *panj korsi*, the supporting characters placed under certain letters (Dehḵodā).

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