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# LOCKS AND LOCKSMITHS IN IRAN

**LOCKS** AND LOCKSMITHS IN IRAN**.** Locks have been made in Iran since at least the second millennium BCE. The most ancient lock, dating to the 13th century BCE, was excavated at the ziggurat of Choga Zanbil (see ČOḠĀ ZANBIL) in Khuzestan. This lock consisted of a bolt and a tumbler and was probably used on a wooden door (Wulff, pp. 68-69). Tumbler locks, also known as "Egyptian locks," dating from the second millennium BCE have been found in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Another type of ancient lock, known as the "Greek" or "Homerian lock," is a toothed-bolt lock (Wulff, pp. 66-67). The mechanism of this lock is not controlled by a primitive sickle-shaped key but by an iron key with wards. It is possible that the stone door of the tomb of the Achaemenid Artaxerxes III (r. 359-38 BCE) built into the mountainside at Persepolis was secured by such lock. The doors of the tomb consist of two solid stone slabs about 1.5 m high and 1.5 m wide with upper and lower corner pivots that revolved in round holes: a circular keyhole about 6 cm in diameter is on one panel, and a boxlike catch on the other. It can be assumed that the only mechanism that would work in such circumstances was a toothed-bolt lock, probably made of wood with a metal key (Tanavoli and Wertime, p. 50).

The two above-mentioned locks are fixed locks. Large wooden fixed locks, known in Iran as *kolun*, were and are still used on the entrance doors of houses and gates in villages, bazaar *serais*, and caravanseries, and they are all made of wood with metal or wooden keys.

Fixed locks for chests and small boxes, however, are made of metal. It seems that for such containers Iranians have preferred padlocks (*qofl-e āviz*) rather than fixed locks, since only a few metal fixed locks have come to light so far. Among them is a fish-shape steel padlock of the Timurid period (15th cent.) or earlier in the Tanavoli collection (Allan and Gilmore, pp. 402, 404). Another, also in the Tanavoli collection, is a silver padlock with engravings, dating to the late 18th or early 19th century (Tanavoli and Wertime, pp. 50, 51).

In contrast to the rarity of surviving fixed locks, padlocks have been made in great numbers in Iran. The earliest existing padlocks are from the Sasanian period (224-ca. 651 CE). One from this group, which is now in National Museum of Iran, was unearthed in Rudbār, not far from the Caspian Sea, in 1966. This lock, measuring 20 cm wide and 5.5 cm long, is made of iron with a small segment in the center of the lock body cast in one piece from bronze with a high copper content, and it has a barbed-spring mechanism. The key (16 cm long) resembles a tightly wrapped corpse. It may have had a religious significance, as it was found inside a wooden coffin with the lock on it. (A few more Sasanian locks are illustrated in Tanavoli, forthcoming.)

In addition to the above-mentioned padlocks, the door of the tomb of Esther and Mordechai in Hamadan belonging to the Saljuq period (1040-1194) may have been locked by a padlock. This door, a solid slab of stone (about 1.20 x 90 m), is believed to have been originally from a structure of the time of Xerxes I (r. 486-65 BCE). The present method of securing the door consists of an iron bar that rests inside the wall when the door is open and comes out of the wall when it is locked. To gain entry, the person outside must reach the padlock through a hole in the door (see Tanavoli and Wertime, p. 54, illus. 15, a, b, c, d).

Throughout the Islamic period in Iran, locks were made in all shapes and sizes. In the first centuries after the introduction of Islam (7th-9th cent.) in Iran, locks followed the same style as those of the Sasanians. From the 10th century onward, however, lock making went through major changes. In addition to the previously mentioned shapes, figural locks in the form of animals and birds became popular. Nearly all animals, such as the horse, lion, goat, ram, camel, rabbit, and water buffalo, as well as fish and all kinds of birds, were fashioned in locks (for examples, see Tanavoli and Wertime, pp. 17, 18, 58, 59, 64, 72, 81, and 82). These locks were most often made of bronze and brass (FIGURE 1).

With the rise of the Safavids (1501-1722) to power, there was a major evolution

in lock making. The Safavids' love of steel arms and other steel implements encouraged locksmiths to use this metal for locks, which were previously made of bronze and brass (FIGURE 2, FIGURE 3). In addition to animals, many new shapes for locks made of steel were inspired from objects and vessels such as the cradle, *kaškul* (a bowl in which dervishes put the alms and food given to them), suitcase, and lantern, as well as all kinds of geometric shapes (see Tanavoli and Wertime, nos. 131-251).

Some of the smallest steel locks were also made during the Safavid period. In the mid-16th century, Prince Sām Mirzā described a contemporary master locksmith by the name of Mawlānā Ostād Nuri Qoflgar, who, according to Sām Mirzā, was among the exceptional people of his age. He made twelve locks of steel, [each one of which] with its key, would fit inside a shell of pistachio nut (Sām Mirzā Ṣafawi, *Taḏkera*, p. 365; see also Tanavoli and Wertime, p. 105).

Large locks were also made. Moqaddasi in the late 10th century talks about a lock in Deylamān in the Caspian region which measured seven *ḏerāʿ* (more than 300 cm) in width and one *bāʿ* (about 170 cm) in diameter, with a key as large as the biggest mortar pestle (pp. 363-64). Ebn Ḵordāḏbeh (d. 912-13), describing the same lock with the same specifications, adds that two men could not embrace it (p. 261).

Besides providing security, locks are important for Shiʿite Muslims (FIGURE 4, FIGURE 5). Locks on the doors of holy places such as shrines, public water fountain (*saqqāḵāna*s), and mosques, especially those on the transenna or grillwork (*żariḥ*) enclosing the tomb of Imam Reżā in Mashad, are believed to have special power (FIGURE 6). Pilgrims grasp the tomb lock and make vows and seek help from the Imam. Some pilgrims bring their own locks as a symbolic reminder and fasten them to the grillwork around the tomb. By attaching the locks to the grill, they believe the holy shrine will unlock (resolve) their problems.

Locks also play an important role in popular beliefs. Pregnant women, hoping to prevent miscarriage, wear a small lock on a cord around their waist (Hedāyat, p. 35). Talismanic locks constitute a great number of locks and come in all shapes. These are often small and made of silver or steel inscribed with talismanic writing (FIGURE 7), and they have various functions, such as protecting a child from the evil eye, "locking" an enemy's tongue, and so forth (for more information, see Tanavoli and Wertime, pp. 20-24, nos. 293-305).

Numerous mechanisms are found in Iranian padlocks, including barbed spring, bent spring, helical spring, shackle spring, notched shackle, hook and revolving catch, and notched shackle with rotating discs, as well as combination and multiple mechanisms. There are variations of each of these mechanisms, depending on the shape of the padlock (see Tanavoli and Wertime, figs. 1-31). The oldest mechanism in Iranian padlocks is the barbed spring with a push key, which is found in Sasanian locks and continued to be used up to the 20th century (FIGURE 8, FIGURE 9).

Until not long ago, every bazaar had a section for locksmiths (*bāzār-e qoflsāzhā*), but the importation of machine-made locks from the West drove the locksmiths out of the city bazaars. Those in the villages, however, managed to survive until the 1970s (Tanavoli and Wertime, *Locks from Iran*, pp. 16-20).

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