



SPEAR

SPEAR in Eastern Iran.

Spear (Av. *aršti-* ‘spear,’ OPers. *aršti* ‘throwing weapon’ or ‘javelin’) is mentioned in the Avesta several times (*AirWb.*, col. 205). It also occupies the first place in the list of weapons given in *Vid.* 14.9. Spears are sometimes provided with the epithet “long” (*Yt.* 10.102 and *Yt.* 17.12). In addition to spears being long, the *Mihr-Yašt* contains several other descriptions of spears: “well-made spears with sharp blades” (*Yt.* 10.130); “well-sharpened spears, keen and long-shaft” (*Yt.* 10.39); “well-sharpened spear heads” (*Yt.* 10.24, meaning the spear points: *tīži.arštīm darəya.ārəštaēm*; see Gershevitch, pp. 84-85; Malandra, p. 270; Tafazzoli, p. 187). The spear head (or spear point) was called *šanman-* (Abl. Plur. *šanmaoiō*, *Yt.* 10.24). It is interesting to note that the term *bitaēya-*, used in the Avesta to describe a double-blade object, later came to denote a sharp spear blade in the Middle Persian (Henning, 1964, pp. 41-43). The word used to describe a spear (*aršti-*) was evidently common (in its corresponding forms) in all ancient Iranian languages.

The Old Persian used the same word *aršti-* for denoting both a spear and a javelin. Besides, there were also words *ārštika-* (‘armed with a spear’ according to Kent and ‘fighting with a spear’ according to Mayrhofer) and *arštibara* (‘the one who bears a spear’ according to both Kent and Mayrhofer; see Kent, 1953, s.v.; Brandenstein and Mayrhofer, 1964, p. 106).

Tube-type bronze spearheads were widely spread in Central Asia in the Bronze Age, especially in the second half of the 2nd millennium-early 1st



millennium BCE. They were made in different regions across Central Asia. In Semirech'e, bronze spearheads continued to be in use until the Saka times. Thus, the Issyk treasure yielded a bronze spearhead which has a lancet-shaped blade with a longitudinal rib along it and a cylindrical tube. The spearhead is 34.4 cm long, and its blade is 4 cm wide.

Irons spearheads are rare finds in Central Asian burials, which makes them different from the Scythian burials. One of such finds—a long and narrow spear with a lancet-shaped blade—comes from the Pamirs burial of Tegermansu I, burial mound 31. The blade has a convex rib; the tube narrows toward its upper part and has a vertical longitudinal slit. The analogies and the complex of finds allow to suppose that the spearhead from the Pamirs, which has a narrow lancet-type shape but also a central rib, should most probably be datable to the 6th-5th centuries B.C.E. (Litvinskiĭ, 1972, p. 109).

Iron spearheads of two types have been found in the Ay Khanum ([Āy Kānom](#)) arsenal. Judging by their reproductions (Grenet, Liger, and de Valence, p. 54, pt. XXXVI/b) they are two-blade, tube-type, and have a middle rib going along the blade. The shape of the blade could vary. One of the above spearhead types has a triangular blade (one of the facets is straight, the other slightly convex [Author: what about the third facet?]), which transforms to the cylindrical tube by two slanted concave arcs. Several tube-type spearheads have also been found in the redans of the temple. Two practically intact samples have blades of under-triangular shape with very slightly convex facets and a massive profile rib (Francfort, pts. 24, 33).

Greek sources often mention the use of the spear (called in Greek *aikhmē* or *zuston*) by the peoples of Central Asia and also by peoples from the adjacent regions. The “short spear” (Gk. *aikhmē brakhéa*) was known most of all. The Bactrians had it, and—among the peoples who were armed in the Bactrian manner—so did the Parthians, Choresmians, Sogdians, Areians, peoples who lived behind the Hindukush (the Gandhārians and the Dards), and, besides that, the Hyrkanians as well. Authors of Antiquity obviously had in mind precisely such short spears, when they wrote about the “spear with a throwing belt” (Gk. *mesághulon*) as a weapon used by the Bactrians, Sogdians, and Areians and when they opposed it to the long Macedonian spear. Moreover, Arrian once specifically mentioned the use of projectile spears among the Areians. Of the peoples mentioned above, only those who lived behind the Hindukush (the *Aspásioi*) are reported to have used the “long spear” (Gk. *zuston makrón*, see Arrian, *An.* 4, 23).

The spear was widely used by the Massagetae, who were called “spear-bearers” (Gk. *aikhmophóroi*; Herodotus 1.215). Their spears had copper (Gk. *khalkōi*) tips. Descriptions of the Derbikes that present them as doubles of the Massagetae mention their spears (*hastae*) the front parts of which (*praefixae*) were covered with copper (*aere*) or iron (*ferro*; see Litvinskiĭ and P’yankov, 1966, p. 40).

The reverse of many coins minted by Greco-Bactrian kings contain representations of divine horsemen with a spear. Spears had spearheads and protectors on the butt ends to prevent their splitting in battle. The length of these spears varied from 1.7 to 4.5 m (Curiel and Fussman, 1965, *passim*; Bopearachchi, 1991, *passim*). Spears can be seen on coins of Indo-Scythian rulers as well (Whitehead, 1914/1969, *passim*; Bachhofer, 1943, *passim*).

Judging by the iconography and the finds from the temple of the Oxus, the spear remained an important type of offensive weapons under the Kushans. The temple of the Oxus yielded about 150 iron spearheads, all of them tube-type and double-blade. They were prevailingly laurel-leaf shaped and triangular-leaf shaped with a protruding convex rib going along the blade; their length varied within the limits of 22-32 cm. All spears had cylindrical or conical iron butt tubes usually sharpened at the end. The forms of the tubes varied, some were more elaborated. The tubes were put on the rear end of the spear shaft, and their designation was to protect the shaft against splitting and, when necessary, to be used for striking the enemy. The temple of the Oxus also yielded javelins with iron tips (10 to 20 cm long). These were of tube type or hafted, but their number is noticeably smaller (Litvinskiĭ, 2001, pp. 119-65).

The analysis of the spearheads originating from ancient Eastern Iran and Central Asia leads to the conclusion that they continued the Central Asian tradition of weapons which goes back to the Bronze Age. Yet, the influence of the Achaemenid types of weapons is noticeable in the 6th-4th centuries BCE, and that of the Hellenistic types of weapons in the 5th-2nd centuries BCE (Litvinskiĭ, 2001, pp. 165-200).

Judging by the iconographic materials, in particular those from the Orlat burial ground dated to the early 3rd century CE (Ilyasov and Rusanov, 1997-98, pp. 119-120, pts. IV-V), spears were used in both infantry and cavalry combat.

Later, in the 5th-8th centuries, hafted spears were used together with the tube-type ones, whose striking part had three or four facets (Panjikant). A javelin



head was found in Adjina-tepa as well. Wall paintings and toreutics contain representations of spear-bearers, their tournaments, and battles of groups of mounted spear-bearers (Raspopova, 1980, pp. 74-75).

Written sources testify that in the Islamic times the spear was one of the main types of weapons. Some of the Ghaznavid rulers (see [GHAZNAVIDS](#)) were famous for their skills in spear fighting. Sebuktegin (r. 977-97) was such one, Maḥmud (r. 998-1030) was an excellent spear fighter too, and his son Mas'ud (r. 1030-40) would fight with a short spear whose tip was poisoned (Bosworth, 1973, p. 120). Narrative sources and paintings in manuscripts of the 15th-18th centuries, as well as objects exhibited in museums, testify that spears survived in Eastern Iran up until the modern times.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- L. Bachhofer, "On Greeks und Sakas in India," *JAOS* 61/4, 1941, pp. 247-50.
- O. Bopearachchi and Aman ur Rahman, *Pre-Kushana Coins in Pakistan*, Karachi, 1995.
- C. E. Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids: their Empire in Afghanistan and Eastern Iran 994-1040*, Edinburgh, 1963; 2nd ed., Beirut 1973.
- W. Brandenstein and M. Mayrhofer, *Handbuch des Altpersischen*, Wiesbaden, 1964.
- R. Curiel and G. Fussman, *Le trésor monétaire de Qunduz*, Mémoires de la Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan 20, Paris, 1965.
- H.-P. Francfort, *Le sanctuaire du temple à niches indentées. 2. Les trouvailles (Fouilles à Ai Khanoum, III)*, Mémoires de la Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan 27, Paris, 1984.
- I. Gershevitch, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, Cambridge, 1959; repr. 1967.
- F. Grenet, J. C. Liger, and R. de Valence, "L'arsenal," in "Campagne de fouille

1978 à Aï Khanoum (Afghanistan),” *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient* 68, 1980, ed. P. Bernard *et al.*, pp. 51-63.

W. B. Henning, “A Forgotten Avestan Word,” in *Dr. J. ;M. ;Unvala Memorial Volume*, Bombay, 1964, pp. 41-44; repr. in *Acta Iranica* 14, 1977, pp. 593-96.

J. Ya. Ilyasov and D. O. Rusanov, “A Study on the Bone Plates from Orlat,” in *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 5 (1997/98), Kamakura, 1998, pp. 107-159.

P. G. Kent, *Old Persian Grammar. Texts. Lexicon*, 2nd ed., New Haven, 1953.

B. A. Litvinskiĭ, *Drevnie kochevniki ‘Kryshi Mira’* (Ancient nomads of the “Roof of the World”), Moscow, 1972.

B. A. Litvinskiĭ and I. V. P’yankov, “Voennoe delo u narodov Sredneĭ Azii v VI-IV vv. do n. è.” (Military practice among the peoples of Central Asia in the 6th-4th centuries BCE), *VDI*, 1966, no. 3, pp. 36-52.

B. A. Litvinskiĭ, *Khram Oksa v Baktrii (Yuzhnyĭ Tadzhikistan)* (The Temple of the Oxus in Bactria [Southern Tajikistan]), vol. 2: *Baktriĭskoe vooruzhenie v drevnevostochnom i grecheskom kontekste* (Bactrian weapons in the Ancient Eastern and Greek context), Moscow, 2001.

W. W. Malandra, “A Glossary of Terms for Weapons and Armor in Old Iranian,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 15/4, 1973, pp. 264-89.

V. I. Raspopova, *Metallicheskie izdeliya rannesrednevekovogo Sogda* (Metal objects from early Medieval Sogd), Leningrad, 1980.

A. Tafazzoli, “A List of Terms for Weapons and Armour in Western Middle Iranian,” *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 3, 1993-94, Kamakura, 1994, pp. 187-198.

R. B. Whitehead, *Catalogue of the Coins in the Punjab Museum, Lahore*, vol. I: *Indo-Greek Coins*, Oxford, 1914; repr. Chicago, 1969.