



ZUR-ĶĀNA

ZUR-ĶĀNA (lit. house of strength), the traditional gymnasium of urban Persia and adjacent lands. Until the mid-20th century the *zur-ķāna* was associated primarily with wrestling, and it bore great resemblance to the wrestlers' *tekkes* (Pers. *takia*, Ar. *takiya* "lodges, buildings designed for confraternal life) of Ottoman Turkey (Kreiser, pp. 97-103), to the *harkaras* of Afghanistan, and to the *akhārās* (wrestling ground) of India (Alter). This would seem to indicate the existence in the past of an agonistic tradition common to the ethnically diverse populations of a wide region stretching from the Balkans to Bengal.

Descriptions of the *zur-ķāna* often imply a timeless essence, while in fact the institution has constantly evolved and continues to do so. The traditional *zur-ķāna* consisted of a building whose architecture resembled that of a public [bathhouse](#), in whose close proximity it was often located. The *zur-ķāna*'s main room was often sunken slightly below street level to provide constant temperatures and prevent drafts that might harm the perspiring athletes, but its roof contained windows for light. Access to the main room was possible only through a low door, forcing everyone to bow in respect while entering. At the center of the room lay the *gowd*, a hexagonal sunken area about one meter deep in which the exercises took place. To provide a soft surface for wrestling, the bottom of the arena used to be covered first with brushwood, then with ash, and finally with a layer of clay earth, but gradually this was replaced with linoleum or wooden planks. The *gowd* was surrounded by stands for spectators and racks for exercise instruments, and the walls were adorned with pictures of athletes and saints (Partow Bayzā'i, pp. 35-36). Of particular



importance was an elevated and decorated seat, the *sardam*, which was reserved for the man who accompanied the exercises with rhythmic drumming and the chanting of Persian poetry. This included poems by Sa'di, Ḥāfez, Rumi, Ferdowsi, and other great classic poets, as well as a type of *matnawi* specific to the zur-kāna, the *gol-e košti* (flower of wrestling), of which the most famous is that of Mir Najāt Ešfahāni (repr. in Partow Bayzā'i, pp. 379-419). Since the early 20th century, the drummer has been called *moršed* (guide or director), a title previously reserved for the most senior member of the group (Partow Bayzā'i, p. 37).

In the gowd athletes had to be bare-chested and barefoot, symbolizing the irrelevance of outside hierarchies and distinctions (Partow Bayzā'i, pp. 27, 53). Their standard attire was the *long*, a cloth wrapped around the loins and passed between the legs. When they were wrestling, leather breeches (*tonbān*) were worn; these were sometimes embroidered (Baker). As they entered the gowd, athletes showed their respect for the hallowed space by kissing the ground, which in practice took the form of touching the floor with their fingers and then raising these to their lips. Once inside, they had to desist from eating, drinking, smoking, laughing, or chatting. Until the mid-1920s, men went to the zur-kāna in the morning after morning prayers, except during Ramadan, when exercises took place in the evening after breaking the fast (*eftār*). Since then, however, evening sessions have gradually become the norm (Partow Bayzā'i, pp. 52-4).

The exercises took place in a more or less standard order, and were led by the most senior member present, the *miāndār*. After some warming-up calisthenics (*pāzadan*), in the course of which one of the athletes might leave the *gowd*, lie on his back, and lift heavy wooden boards called *sang* with each arm, athletes did push-ups (*šenā*) and then swung *mils* (Indian clubs), both exercises being accompanied by the *moršed*'s drumming and chanting. They would then take turns whirling rapidly (*čark*) about the gowd, after which one or two athletes would in turn step forward to swing a *kabbāda* above their heads, this being a heavy iron bow on the cord of which heavy rings are strung. In the individual exercises (*čark* and *kabbāda*), members came forth in ascending order of seniority, and so, uniquely in Persian social convention, humility was shown by trying to go first. To come forth, an athlete would ask the *miāndār* for permission by saying *rokšat* (permission), to which the answer was *foršat* (chance, opportunity). Until about the 1940s, the crowning event of a zur-kāna session was wrestling (*košti*), which was the original *raison*

d'être of the gymnasium. With the introduction of international freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling, however, wrestling disappeared from the *gowd*. Traditional wrestling survived in a modernized form under the name of *košti-e pahlavāni* (*pahlavāni* wrestling), but lost its organic link with the *zur-kāna*, where it is now rarely taught. The loss of its agonistic component has somewhat contributed to the decline of the institution's popularity among young men.

Traditionally, athletes were divided into a number of grades. These were, in ascending order of seniority, *nowča* (novice), *nowk̄vāsta* (beginner), *pahlavān* (athlete), and finally each establishment's most accomplished member, the *miāndār* (formerly *kohna-savār*), who conducted the proceedings. At each grade, the *long* was wrapped somewhat differently. Beginning in the 1940s, however, these grades gradually fell into disuse and were replaced by the standard international categories "cadet," "junior," and "senior," and, for *pahlavāni* wrestling, weight classes.

The practices and rituals of the *zur-kāna* are permeated with the symbolism of Twelver Shi'ism. Veneration of the first Shi'ite Imam, 'Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb, plays a major role, and the exercises are frequently interrupted by salvos of the invocation of God's blessing upon the Prophet Moḥammad (*ṣalawāt*). Traditionally, a man had to be ritually clean to enter the *gowd*, and admittance to the premises was forbidden to women, non-Muslims, and prepubescent boys. In spite of the institution's Twelver Shi'ite affinities, *zur-kānas* spread to Sunnite Kurdistan in the 18th century (Kamandi), and in the mid-20th century there were even a few Jewish *zur-kānas* in Tehran and Shiraz and a Zoroastrian one in Yazd; their rituals were adapted accordingly (Chehabi, pp. 5-9).

The origin of the *zur-kāna* is shrouded in mystery. Its vocabulary, rituals, ethos, and grades recall those of *fotowwa* (see [JAVĀNMARDI](#)) and Sufism, but a direct affiliation cannot be established at the present stage of knowledge. Since wrestling has an old tradition in west, central, and south Asia, it is possible that sometime in the 14th or 15th centuries wrestlers formed guilds and adopted rituals borrowed from *fotowwa* and Sufism. Wrestlers were mostly entertainers with low social status (Chardin, p. 200), and so perhaps this appropriation of noble ideals was an attempt to acquire greater respectability (Piemontese). The synthesis of wrestling prowess and Sufism is embodied by the 14th-century Pahlavān Mahmud of K̄vārazm, better known in Persia as Puriā-ye Wali, whom *zur-kāna* athletes (as well as wrestlers in Turkey) regard



as a role model.

While references to wrestling and wrestlers can be found in classical Persian literature (see below), the earliest known mention of zur-kāna exercises and practices occurs in a fragment dating from the Safavid era, the *Tumār-e Poriā-ye* (sic) *Wali* (reproduced in Partow Bayzā'i, pp. 350-64). This suggests that zur-kānas appeared first under that dynasty, which would also explain the close connection between them and popular Twelver Shi'ism, which takes the form, for instance, of very active participation of their members in 'āšurā processions.

The first Western traveler to describe a zur-kāna was [John Chardin](#), who observed it in the 1670s: "Wrestling is the Exercise of People in a lower Condition; and generally Speaking, only of People who are Indigent. They call the Place where they Show themselves to *Wrestle*, *Zour Kone*, that is to say, *The House of Force*. They have of'em in all the Houses of their great Lords, and especially of the Governours of Provinces, to Exercise their People. Every Town has besides Companies of those Wrestlers for show ... They perform their Exercises to divert People" (Chardin, pp. 200-1). A century later, Carsten Niebuhr also described a house of strength, and to him we also owe the first graphic representation of one. It shows musicians accompanying the exercises, a practice still common at folk wrestling events throughout west Asia and the Balkans, but one that has disappeared from the Persian zur-kāna, perhaps under the impact of the Shi'ite clergy's distaste for music. The Qajar rulers of Persia were enthusiastic patrons of wrestling, and consequently zur-kānas thrived in the 19th century. They were embedded in the social structure of town quarters and constituted an important part of community life (Arasteh). Some were frequented by craftsmen and tradesmen associated with the [bazaar](#), some had a Sufi membership, and still others were used by the *luṭis* (urban thugs). In 1865 Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's court physician noted that "since a lot of dissolute and merry types frequent [the zur-kāna], young men of good families do not go there" (Polak, p. 189). However, men of higher birth did occasionally participate in the exercises and wrestle in the *gowd* (Drouville, II, p. 58), a development that reached its peak under Nāṣer-al-Din Shah (r. 1848-96), when a number of statesmen built themselves private zur-kānas (Partow Bayzā'i, pp. 9, 154-55).

With the advent of the [Constitutional Revolution](#) in 1905-06, royal patronage ceased. This dealt a severe blow to the zur-kāna, which became once again a feature of urban lower and lower middle class culture only. By the 1920s the

introduction of modern Western sports and physical education further diminished the appeal of zur-kāna exercises among athletically inclined men, while cinemas drew spectators away. At the same time the growing penetration of society by the state, which resulted in better security, diminished the role of the strongmen who used to maintain law and order in neighborhoods and who trained in the zur-kāna. Another function of the zur-kāna that disappeared in the first decades of the 20th century was the training it provided for *šāters*, long distance couriers in the service of the shah and high officials, whose profession became obsolete with the introduction of modern transportation. *Šāters* had their own special exercises (e.g., *šelāng*), which have completely disappeared (Partow Bayzā'i, pp. 28-38). In the troubled times after the end of the Qajar régime, a number of amateur athletes kept the *zur-kāna* alive independently of elite patronage, and in 1924 they founded a *Jam'iyat-e gordān-e Irān* (Society of Iranian heroes) to organize traditional physical education and make it respectable again by a rigorous admission process (Abbāsi, I, pp. 296-303).

The pioneers of modern physical education in Persia had no respect for zur-kāna-type exercises and ignored them in the physical education curricula they drew up for Persia's modern schools. In the 1920s and 1930s numerous articles appeared in the Persian press denouncing the institution. Four criticisms were leveled at it. Firstly, it was implied that members were morally corrupt (e.g., Šamimi, p. 11). This was an oblique reference to the allegation that sodomy was prevalent among some athletes (Šahri, 1968, pp. 204-8; idem, 1990, I, p. 414, V, pp. 247-49). Secondly, zur-kānas were castigated for harboring uncouth ruffians, a reference to the marginal luṭis and their frequent brawling. Thirdly, it was pointed out that the exercises did not satisfy modern expectations in that they contained no team sports and developed the body unevenly. Finally, the gymnasia were criticized for their insufficient ventilation ("Dar zur-kāna," *Eṭṭelā'āt*, 17 Ābān 1317/8 November 1938). The last point was a constant theme, and we find it as late as 1947 in the first empirical study of *zur-kānas* in Tehran, which averred: Zur-kānas "are generally narrow and dark and lack sufficient sun-light. The air is heavy and humid, and constantly poisoned by the smell of the coal of the moršed's brazier and by the petrol of the numerous lamps. Moreover, the stench of the toilets, which are inside the building, and the unwashed longs and dirty rugs, add to the heaviness of the air inside zur-kānas. In addition, the constant pipe and cigarette smoke of the moršed, the spectators, and even the athletes themselves is a health hazard for the athletes' lungs" (Guša, p. 49).



Zur-kānas might have died out completely had it not been for the nationwide millenary celebration of Ferdowsi's birth in the summer of 1934 (see [FERDOWSI iv](#)). Exhibitions of *zur-kāna* exercises featured prominently in them, and thenceforth the state showed more interest in them (Partow Bayzā'i, pp. 138, 211-17). Until about 1938 the term *varzeš-e qadim* (old sport) was used to designate *zur-kāna* exercises, but then gradually the term *varzeš-e bāstāni* (ancient sport) caught on, implying a pre-Islamic origin for the exercises ("Varzešhā-ye bāstāni," *Eṭṭelā'āt*, 10 Šahrivar 1318/1 September 1939). When in 1939 the crown prince married Princess Fawzia of Egypt, the wedding celebrations included exhibitions of "ancient sport" as part of the mass gymnastic displays in Tehran's main stadium, a practice that was continued until the end of the monarchy. In 1941 Radio Iran started broadcasting *zur-kāna* poetry and drumming in the morning, allowing amateurs to swing their Indian clubs at home.

The ideas adumbrated in the late 1930s were given substance beginning in the 1940s. Towards the end of his life, Persia's last poet laureate, [Moḥammad-Taqi Bahār](#), published a number of articles on traditional Persian *javānmardi*, in which he mentioned the ethos of the *zur-kāna* as a contemporary manifestation of this tradition. By this juxtaposition, the early history of popular anti-centralist movements in Persia such as those of the '*ayyārs* (members of medieval brotherhood organizations) was constituted as the early history of the *zur-kāna*. Gradually, as one author uncritically quoted another, it became conventional wisdom that the *zur-kānas* originated in the underground resistance activities of Persian patriots against Arab and later Mongol invaders (Guša, pp. 47-48), which made them acceptable to the elites again by providing them with an aura of patriotism.

There remained the irritating fact that a moral ambiguity attached to the institution in the minds of most Persians, who took the *zur-kāna* *pahlavāns'* protestations of chivalry with a grain of salt. To explain (away) the unseemly behavior of many *zur-kāna* habitués, it was now suggested that the institution had entered a period of moral decline under the Qajars. This fit in well with the official Pahlavi view of that dynasty, which legitimated the usurpation of the throne in 1925 by holding the Qajars responsible for both Persia's economic backwardness and moral degeneration. The idea of a golden age of virtue preceding the degeneration of the late Qajar years is not borne out by evidence, however, as is shown, for instance, in the satirical poetry of 'Obayd of Zākān (d. ca. 1371), who already repeatedly impugns the morality of

pahlavāns.

Another theory about the pre-Islamic origins of the zur-kānawas proposed by the Iranist Mehrdād Bahār. Struck by the similarities between the architecture and rituals of traditional zur-kānas and those of temples dedicated to the Iranian deity Mithra (Mithraeums), he speculated that the gymnasium had a Mithraic origin (Bahār). The fact remains that there is no textual or architectural evidence for the existence of zur-kānas before Safavid times (Elāhi). The idea of a pre-Islamic origin, however, lives on in popular writing.

In 1953, one of the most prominent traditional athletes, Šaʿbān Jaʿfari, was a ringleader of the CIA-financed riots that accompanied the military *coup d'état of 1953* against Prime Minister Moḥammad Moṣaddeq. The shah rewarded Jaʿfari with a modern club, whose facilities were lavish by the humble standards of traditional *zur-kānas*, and he himself opened it on 17 Ābān 1336/8 November 1957 (Behzādi, p. 190; Jaʿfari, pp. 159 ff., 207 ff.). Led by Jaʿfari, zur-kāna athletes performed by the hundreds in Tehran's main stadium on such occasions as the shah's birthday. It was at least partly due to Jaʿfari's good contacts to the court, which allowed him to be the center of a patronage network, that many young men were inducted into the world of ancient sport, and he may yet be credited for having ensured the survival of the tradition.

Jaʿfari's club received competition in the late 1950s, when the influential head of Persia's Planning Organization (Sāzmān-e barnāma wa budja), Abu-al-Ḥasan Ebtehāj, had a luxurious zur-kāna built for the country's main bank, the Bank Melli. The director of this club, Kāžem Kāžemayni, published a number of books and articles on the zur-kāna and on the heroic exploits of Persia's past pahlavāns and heroes, books that stand out by their shrill nationalism shading into xenophobia (Kāžemayni, 1967). The Jaʿfari and the Bank Melli clubs vied for the honor of performing for visiting monarchs, presidents, prime ministers, secretaries general of Communist parties, film stars, and singers, including women.

While in some cities (Isfahan, Kāšān, and Qom) there existed zur-kānas that were pious endowments (*waqfs*; see Partow Bayzā'i, pp. 36), until the 1960s most zur-kānas were owned by private individuals who charged athletes a fee. The numbers of zur-kānas rose until 1961, but remained stagnant in the last years of the monarchy (Tehrānči, p. 11). In the provinces, the state did not much support the zur-kānas, which in many places fell into disrepair (Kamandi, pp. 70-72). Beginning in the 1970s, many private zur-kānas closed



down, since they were no longer profitable. Their place was taken by zur-kānas attached to major private companies, state enterprises, or state organs (Rochard, 2000, p. 77).

After the Revolution of 1978-79, the authorities of the Islamic Republic emphasized the Islamic character of the institution and tried to popularize it again. To attract young people, boys were permitted into the *gowd*, and even though women are once again barred from attending the *zur-kāna*, athletes have been made to wear tee shirts. A plethora of competitions are held with the aim of turning the exercises into modern sport replete with point systems, records, and champions. One result of these efforts has been a certain homogenization of practices, visible, for instance, in the renaming of many provincial *zur-kānas* that now carry the name of Puriā-ye Wali. Older athletes resent this intrusion of an official body into a sector of civic life that had always been self-regulating. Partly as a result of internal quarrels, the center of *zur-kāna* activity shifted to Mashad in the 1990s, where the [Āstān-e Qods-e Rażawi](#) has proven a generous patron.

Outside Persia, *zur-kānas* can be found in the Republic of Azarbaijan, and they were introduced into Iraq in the mid-19th century, where they seem to have existed until the 1980s (Ṭā'i). In the 1990s a *zur-kāna* was founded in London by Persian émigrés.

For a music sample, see [Battle between Rostam and Sohrāb, The](#).

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