

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY  
OF ISLAMIC ARMS AND ARMOURBy Dr. *A. Rahman Zaky*.

## Types of Islamic Swords

Early Islamic weapons of any archaeological value are comparatively very few. The earlier swords are all straight, mostly double edged. Curved sabres do not become common until circa 1500, nevertheless the Mongol type started to become a fashion in some Moslem provinces during the 13th cent. Here, we mention some known types.

*Flyssa*

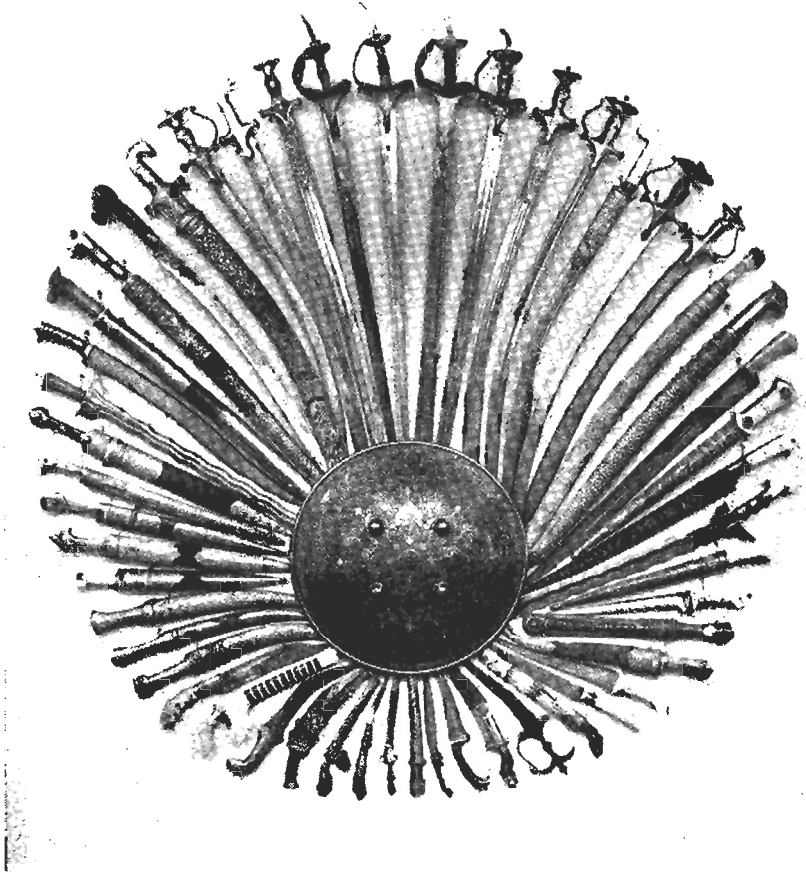
The national sword of the tribes of Morocco. It has a long single-edged blade, straight on the back and with a very long point. It is widest at about the centre of percussion, narrowing in an easy curve to about half this width and then widening again to nearly its maximum at the hilt. The blades are frequently engraved and inlaid with brass. The hilts are small with one sided pommel and have no guards.

*Kaskara*

The sword carried by the Baghirmi (W. A. Sahara). It is straight, two edged blade with a plain cross-guard such as is used in the Sudan. Some Kaskaras have fine old European or Oriental blades which are highly valued. Occasionally; the chapes and hilts are covered with gold.<sup>1)</sup>

*Khanda*

Among the oldest and most typical of Indian swords. It has a broad straight blade, usually widening towards the point. Sometimes it is double-edged; but, it generally has a strengthening plate with ornamental borders on the back for a considerable part of its length. The hilt has a broad plate guard and wide finger guard which joins the large round flat pommel. Sometimes there is a spike on the pommel. The Khanda is the national sword of Orissa, but very generally used by both Rajputs and the Mahrattas in India. (Fig. 1, to the right on top).



*Fig. 1. A selection of Oriental swords and daggers, particularly from Persia and India. Persian shield.  
(Coll. E. A. Christensen, Copenhagen. Andresen fot.).*

#### *Qilij. Kiliç*

It is the typical Turkish sabre. The blade is broader, shorter and less curved than the Persian shamshir, the back has a fair curve nearly parallel to the edge, while in the Turkish, the curve of the back stops eight or ten inches from the point; the blade then widens

out abruptly and extends to the point nearly in a straight line with a sharp edge on the back. The kilij can be used for a thrust, though not very effectively. The shape of the kilij is of Central-Asiatic origin, yet it was extensively used in the 15th/16th cent. (Fig. 2 c).

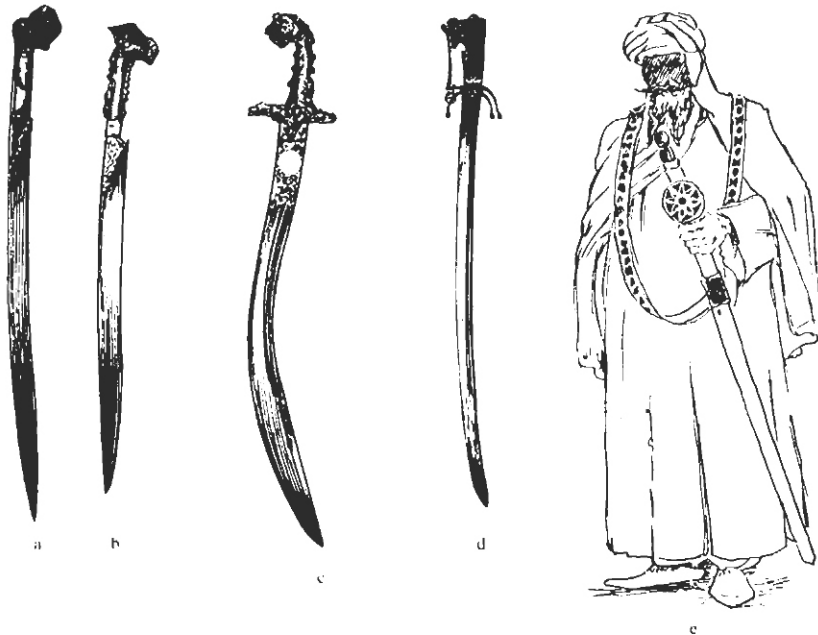


Fig. 2. a-b: yatagans; c: kilij; d: saif from Morocco; e: Arab saif (straight sword).

The hilt is usually pistol-shaped and made of two pieces of horn, bone, ivory or stone, fastened to the flat tang. The guard is straight, slim crossbar with balls or acorns on the ends. The curve of the blade is such that the back of the scabbard at the top must be open in order to admit it. The opening is often closed by a spring or a hinged plate. The sling loops are generally on opposite sides of the scabbard and it is hung in front of the wearer with the edge upwards by cords.

The kilij type with a slighter curve has another name — pallash or palache. It may be the Polish sabre of the 17th cent.

### *Nimsha*

An Arab short sabre with a knuckle guard rectangular at the

base with dropping quillons on the opposite side. It is used in Morocco. (Fig. 3 b).

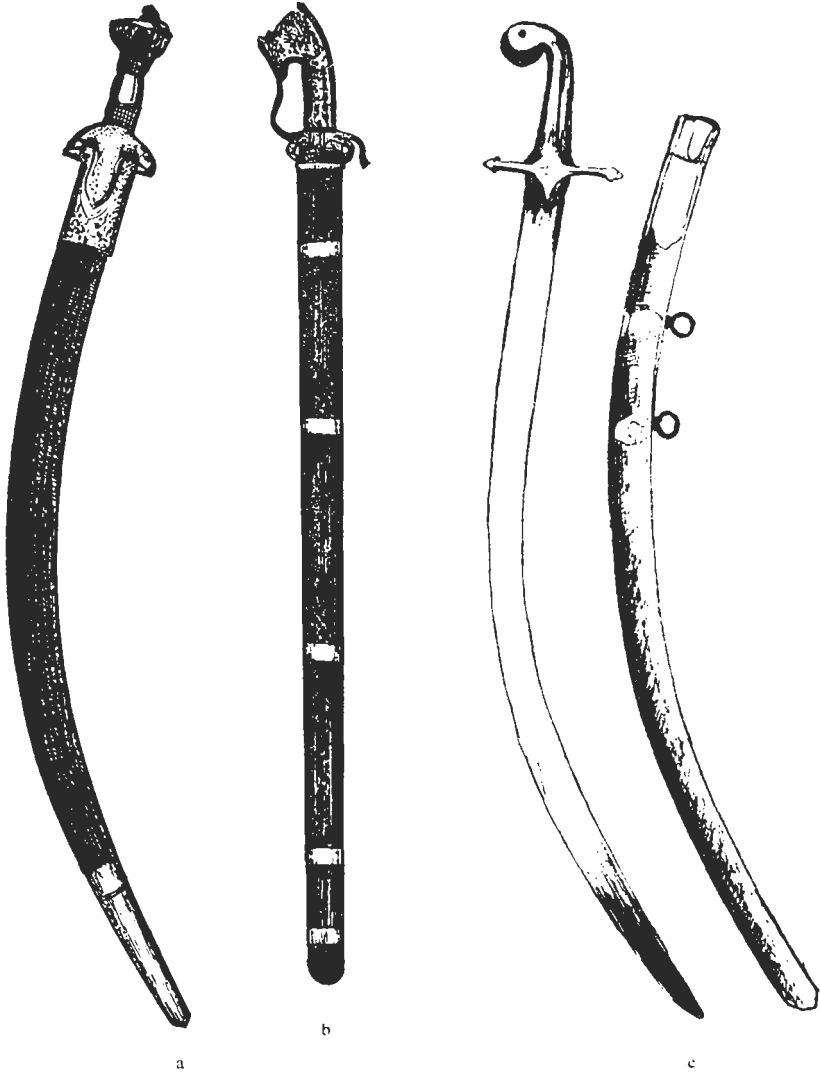


Fig. 3. a: pulouar; b: nimsha; c: scimitar or shamshir.

### *Pulouar*

An Indian sword with a curved blade. The hilt has short quillons curving towards the blade, a hemispherical pommel and no counter guard. It is a variety of the talwar. (Fig. 3 a).

### *Qama. Khama*

The national sword of Moslem Georgia, probably the origin of the Cossack kindjal. Qamas vary in size and length. The hilts are covered with embossed silver, frequently set with coral. (Fig. 1, to the left, almost in the middle).

### *Quaddara*

A Persian broad sword like a long kindjal, which is employed in the Caucas. It has broad, straight double-edged blade, with nearly parallel sides for the greater part of its length, and a very long, sharp, point. The hilts are straight in the grip with broad pommels.

### *Sabre*

A sword sharpened only on one side of the blade which is nearly always slightly curved, the sharpened edge being on the outside. Often the point of the blade is sharpened on both sides, but this does not make the sabre a double-edged weapon. The sabre is intended mainly for cutting, but is also effective for thrusting

### *Saif*

An Arab sword, a rather broad-bladed and sometimes with a peculiarly hooked pommel. The size varies greatly. It is found in most countries in which the Arabs have lived, and each has its own variety. Early Arab chroniclers used to mention two kinds of swords: Saif anith, which was made of iron, and Saif fulath or muzakka, which was made of steel. Mostly the sword »Saif« is an Arab common word of a sword, and it does not refer to a certain type. (Fig. 2 d and e).

### *Scimitar*

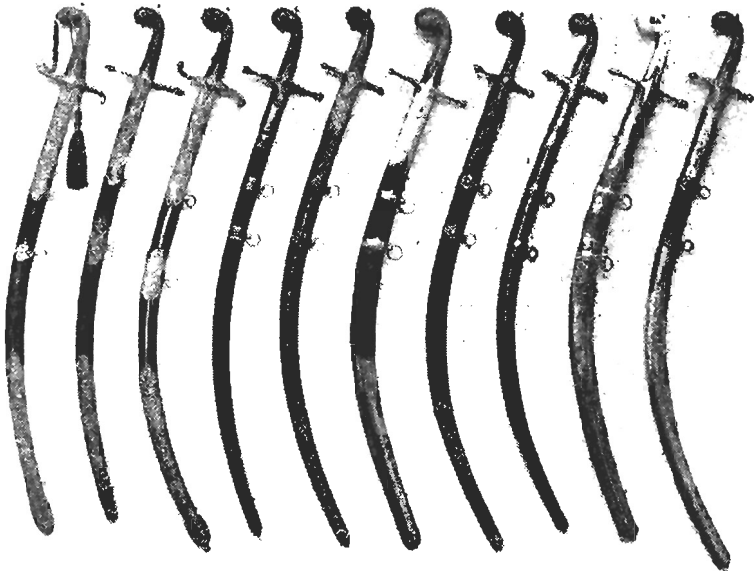
A curved sword, chiefly originated in Asia, but used in Europe after the Crusaders and the Mongols campaigns in Eastern Europe. The same name is applied to »Shamshir«.

### *Shamshir*

The strongly curved Persian sabre. It is purely a cutting weapon, the point being practically useless owing to the extreme curvature. The blades are narrow but rather thick, and are usually inscribed

with the name of the maker or owner and sometimes the date. The shamshir began to exist circa the 15th/16th century in Persia.

The hilt is simple and light with a cross-guard and a pommel projecting at one side. Persian shamshir blades are frequently used in Turkey, Syria, Egypt and India where they are generally re-mounted in the styles characteristic of these countries. Shamshir means the tail of the lion. (Fig. 3 c, fig 4 most of the sabres have shamshir blades).



*Fig. 4. A series of qilijes and shamshirs with pistol-shaped grips. Quillons and mountings of silver.  
(Coll. E. A. Christensen, Copenhagen. Andresen fot.).*

#### *Shashqa; Chachka*

The sword adopted by most of the races of the Caucas. It has a straight blade, or one very slightly curved towards the point, and a hilt without any guard, nearly always of silver niello and sometimes gilded.

#### *Shotel*

It is the Abyssinian sword. It has a double-edged blade of dia-

mond section curved almost in half circle. The blade is about thirty inches in a straight line from hilt to point and about forty around the curve. It has a simple wooden hilt without a guard.

#### *Sword. Damascus*

This is not applied to a certain type, but it was so called, because Damascus was the place where caravans from the East and West met and exchanged their products. Fine swords from Persia or India were brought there to the markets, there they were sold to other Islamic countries or to Europe. The term »Damascus« is also applied to swords or steel blades which have a unique technique of »watering«. The manufacture is said to have started during the tenth century, but there is no proof of this. It certainly originated in India.

This has nothing to deal with »Damascening« which is the technique of decorating a metal by inlaying another.

#### *Takouba*

The Taureg sword of the African Sahara. It is a straight bladed and single-edged sword with no guard. There is a crosspiece below the pommel which gives the cruciform effect.

#### *Talwar. Tulwar. Tulwaur. Tarwar*

The Indian sword of a certain class. It includes practically most of the curved swords used in India; but those of very marked curvature are frequently called by their Persian type named Shamshir.

The Talwar is the commonest sword in India; the blades vary in size, curvature and quality. The hilts generally have short, heavy quillons and disk pommels. (Fig. 1, to the right of the top).

#### *Yatagan*

A kind of sabre with an incurved blade, once very popular in Turkey. The curved line of the blade coincides with the action of the wrist in cutting. The hilt has no guard and the pommel spreads out in large wings. The tang is flat and the two pieces forming the grip are riveted to it. The hilt is often made of silver. The yatagan has become a weapon characteristic of Turkey as the kilij but the type has a distant and ancient origin. (Fig. 1, to the left, in upper half, fig. 2 a - b).

#### Notes

- 1) Stone, G. C.: A glossary of the armour in all countries and use of arms and armour in all countries and in all times. Portland, Maine 1934.  
See also: A. Rahman Zaky: The sword in the Moslim world. (In Arabic). Cairo 1957, with literature. Idem, The sword in Islamic art, Bull. of the College of Arts, Baghdad, Iraq, I, 1959.

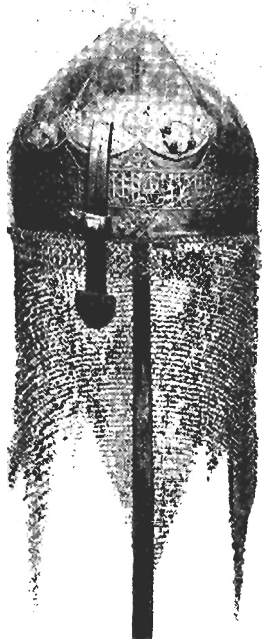
## Types of Islamic Helmets

Islamic helmets exhibited in arms museum collections enable us to determine the development of their shape, at least between the 14th and 17th centuries. In *Egypt, Qalqashandi*, an Arab scholar (1355—1418) distinguished two different types of helmets:

- a) the baida, protecting the head but not the neck or ears, and
- b) the mighfar, offering such protection — in camail.

At the same time there was an older type of helmets in use, covering the ears and the back of the head, but not in mail. This helmet lasted from the eighth to the fourteenth century at least. It is known that the Arabs had a great variety of helmets, the use of which flourished greatly during the crusades; they were ornamented with bosses, plates, crests and visors.

An authentic early specimen of an early Mameluke helmet is exhibited in the Royal Museum of Arms and Armour of Porte de Hal in Bruxelles, which once belonged to Sultan *Mohammad en-Nasser*



*Fig. 5. Egyptian steel helmet of sultan Mohammad en-Nasser. 13th cent. (Porte de Hal, Bruxelles).*



*ibn Qalaoun* (died 1290). It is fairly tall, conical, iron cap, with a camail and two plume sockets, without ear guards or peak and probably originally without a nasal either. (Fig. 5). It is richly decorated with gilt arabesques and an inscriptional band in gilt relief.) It is 19 cms. wide. Its Arabic inscription reads as follows:

»Glory to our Seigneur, the Sultan, King en-Nasser, the learned, the just, the combatant, the conqueror, the victorious, Sultan of Islam and Moslems, the protector of the world and religion, Mohammad, son of Sultan and King al-Mansour, scimitar of the world and religion, Qalaoun. Glory to him and victory.«

The Arabic inscription on the nasal reads as follows:

»The desire of Allah«; another phrase reads: »Victory from Allah . . .«

Those Mamelukes did not use face guards either under the Ayyubide (1171—1250) or the Mameluke dynasties, although they saw such helmets on the heads of Crusaders and Mongols.

Under the Circassian Mamelukes (1382—1517) two main types

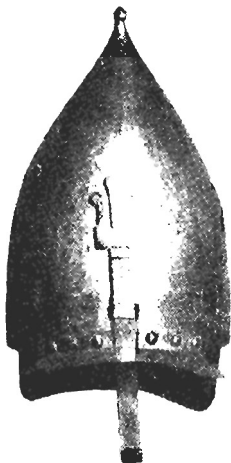


Fig. 6

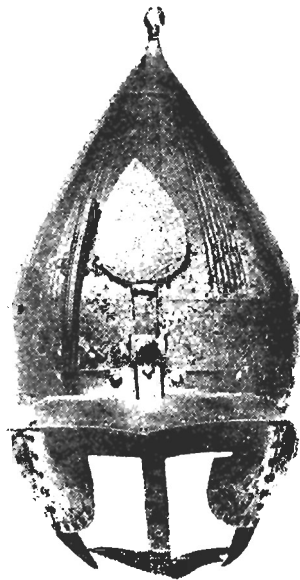


Fig. 7

*Fig. 6. Steel helmet of sultan Barsabây. 15th cent. (Lowre, Paris).*

*Fig. 7. Steel helmet of sultan Qansuah el-Ghori. 16th cent. (Museo Stibbert, Florence).*

ruled the fashion. The type of the helmet of *Mohammad ibn Qalaoun* became much taller; it received ear and neck guards made of one plate of metal each and the nasal, together with the peak, became an essential part of it. That type is best illustrated by a helmet of Sultan *Barsabâý* of Egypt (1422—1438) in the Louvre Museum<sup>2)</sup>. It is 38 cms. high (that is twice as tall as the Brussels helmet of *ibn Qalaoun*, and is decorated with gilt inscriptions and ornaments.<sup>3)</sup> (Fig. 6).

At the Tower collection in London, there is an Egyptian, XVth century steel helmet, it is parcel-gilt and inlaid with silver. Its Arabic inscriptions are benedictory and eulogistic. It is 27.3 cms. high.<sup>4)</sup>

Another type, the so-called turban helmet (worn over turbans) was also used by the Mamelukes, although the only published helmets of this type made before 1517 A. D. (as far as we know), and bearing historical inscriptions are those of the Ottoman Sultan *Bayzid* (1482—1512) and of *Farrukh Yasâr* of Shirvan.<sup>5)</sup>

Towards the end of the Mameluke period, a fairly low or shallow helmet without the conical top (quanas) but with ear and neck guards as well as peak and nasal which often terminated in a fleur-de-lys, became dominant; it is best illustrated by the latest datable Mameluke helmet, that of the emir (general) *Khairbak*, the last Mameluke Governor of Aleppo, who betrayed Egypt to Sultan *Selim I* of the Ottomans. It is there at Topkapu Sarayi Muzesi in Istanbul.

At the Stibbert Museum in Florence, there exists an Egyptian helmet inscribed with the name of Sultan *Qansuah el Ghorî* (died circ. 1516). (Fig. 7). It bears a fine Arabic inscription which reads as follows:

»Sultan el-Malik el-Ashraf Quansuah el Ghorî, glory to him . . .«

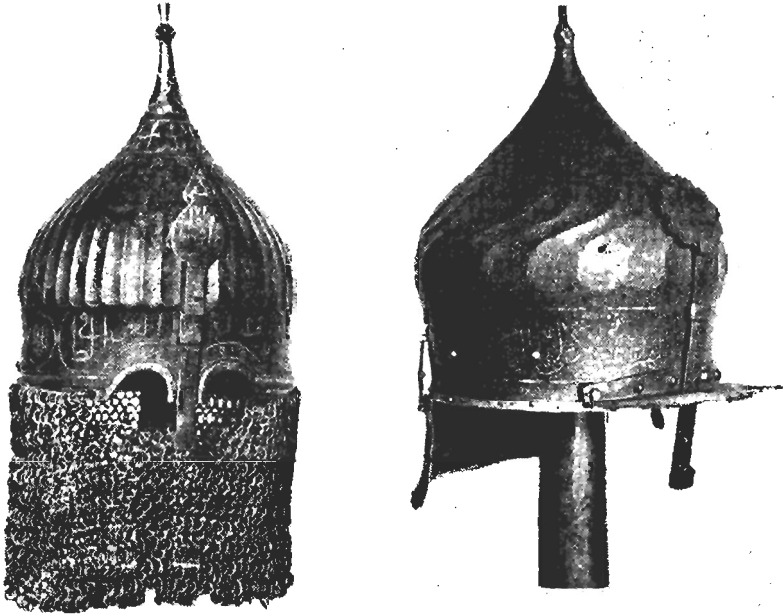
Under those Circassians leather chin straps and buckles were used for fastening.

The helmet and the whole suit of armour of Sultan *Toman-Bay* (1516—1517), the last of the Circassians in Egypt, are in the Hermitage (U.S.S.R.).

In *Turkey*, the earliest helmets were conical with plate, mail or padded neck guards. From the 14th to the 16th century Turkish helmets were often very large and elaborately fluted and decorated. They were worn over turbans, hence were called turban helmets. Overlapping these in time and continuation in use, later were ogival, ogee and conical helmets.

To Sultan *Mohammad II*, the conqueror of Constantinople, is attributed some genuine helmets. Most of these are exhibited in Istanbul museums. In Madrid, at the Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan,

there is a fine helmet inscribed with the name of this Sultan (1430—1481); its weight is about 2.755 kilos.<sup>6)</sup> (Fig. 8).



*Fig. 8. Turkish steel helmet of Mohammad II, 15th cent. (Inst. de Valencia de Don Juan, Madrid).*

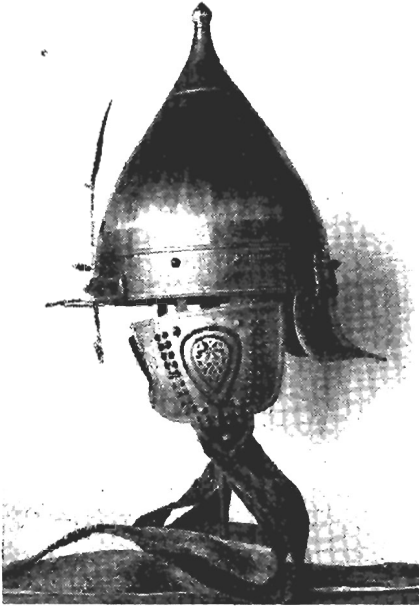
*Fig. 9. Helmet of sultan Bayazid II, 15th cent. (Musée de l'Armée, Paris).*

The Army Museum in Paris possesses five Turkish helmets of different types, among these one which once belonged to Sultan *Bayazid II* (1481—1512) son of Sultan *Mohammad II*. (Fig. 9).

At the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, the helmet of the Turkish minister *Mohammad Sokolowitsch* (died 1579) is exhibited among the Oriental arms<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 10). A splendid fluted Turkish helmet is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. It bears the date A. H. 997. (A. D. 1588/89) and the inscription *Wazir Hasan Pasha* (the Governor of Yemen).<sup>8</sup>

The *Persians* were the best armourers in the East and worked not only in their own country but also in Turkey and India.

The commonest helmet in Persia was the »*Kulah Khud.*« It is



*Fig. 10. Turkish steel helmet of grand minister Mohamad Sokolowitsch, who died 1579. (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).*

bowl-shaped, either low and flat, or high and pointed, usually with a spike on the top and two or three plume holders on the front. It has a sliding nasal with both ends expanded into plates. When not in use the nasal could be fastened up out of the way by a link and hook, or by a screw. The neck guards may be of padded cloth, but are usually of mail, sometimes riveted but generally of open links with patterns in brass and copper links.<sup>9)</sup>

A fine example of later Persian helmets is in the British Museum. It is a hemispherical steel helmet, made for *Shah 'Abbas the Great* (1587—1629) and dated A. H. 1035/1625-6 A. D. It is carved and inlaid with gold, inscribed with the name of the Shah, and decorated superbly with arabesques and gold inlaid religious inscriptions. The spike, sockets and the nasal, all are inscribed.<sup>10)</sup> (Fig. 11).

The Wallace Collection in London possesses a variety of Persian helmets. One of these, has two plume-holders inscribed with the names of *Shah Abbas* and *Shah Ismail*; between them is a sliding nasal with cone-shaped ends. The surface of the helmet is brightened and divided into narrow compartments radiating from the top. The inscriptions at the top are the attributes of Allah and couplets of Persian poetry, as are those round the base. The name of the



*Fig. 11. Persian helmet, inlaid with gold.  
Dated A. H. 1035/1625-6  
A. D.  
(Brit. Mus., London).*

armourer is inscribed round the centre and also the date (A. H. 1062) which corresponds to 1651 (11).

#### Notes

- 1) G. Macoir: *Le Musée royal d'Armes et d'Armures de la Porte de Hal a Bruxelles*, pl. p. 45.
- 2.) G. Migéon: *L'Orient Musulman*. Vol. Armes, etc., p. 17, p. 18.
- 3) A. Mayer: *Saracenic Arms and Armour*. (Ars Islamica. 1943).
- 4) Tower Collection (15-685).
- 5) A short note issued by the Army Museum in Istanbul.
- 6) *Catálogo de las Armas del Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan*. 1927. pp. 13-17.
- 7) August Grosz and Brunc Thomas: *Katalog der Waffensammlung in Der Neuen Burg*. Wien 1936, p. 93.
- 8) Stephen V. Grancsay: *The George C. Stone Bequest*. (Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. 1937. Vol XXXII, pp. 54-58).
- 9) G. C. Stone: *A glossary of the construction, decoration, and use of arms and armour*. 1934, pp. 51-52.
- 10) D. Barrett: *Islamic Metalwork in the British Museum London*. 1949.
- 11) No. 2336. Wallace Collection, London.