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WHERE DOES THE SEARCH FOR ETHNIC INDICATORS LEAD?

This is a critical review of the article by Allanazar Sopiiev “Traditional Technologies and Artistic Techniques for Finishing Weapons in the Collection of the State Museum of Turkmenistan” published in the Bulletin of IICAS, Issue 29. This peer-reviewed work touches on topical, yet poorly studied, issues concerning decorative techniques on weapons in Central Asia, which were previously raised by researchers more than thirty years ago. The manufactured weapons as presented by Sopiiev which he ascribes to the Turkmen are disputed, and in certain cases, he provides no references to trustworthy sources or archival documents. It also addresses other controversial issues pertaining to the use of weapons by the Turkmen, as well as the particulars surrounding their decoration.

Key words: *bladed weapons and firearms, decor technologies, A. Sopiiev, Yu. Botyakov, V. Yanborisov, Turkmen, 19th century, Khiva, Persia.*

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THE ARTICLE by Allanazar Sopiiev “Traditional Technologies and Artistic Techniques for Finishing Weapons in the Collection of the State Museum of Turkmenistan” published in the *Bulletin of IICAS*, Issue 29 examines bladed weapons and firearms from Persia, Afghanistan, and the Khivan and Bukharan Khanates. According to Sopiiev, these weapons were used by the Turkmen people. In addition, samples of these weapons were made by Turkmen masters and are on display in the State Museum of Turkmenistan in Ashgabat (Sopiiev 2020). The article emphasizes the decorative characteristics of the weapons under examination. This peer-reviewed work touches on topical, yet poorly studied, issues concerning decorating weapons in Central Asia which were previously addressed by researchers over thirty years ago (Botyakov, Yanborisov 1989: 49-60).

In his introduction, the author particularly examines the origins of the weapon collection in the State Museum starting from 1881. He illustrates his research with photographs from the late 19th century and refers to Figure No. 2: “There are rare photographs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which clearly show the entire variety of cold weapons used by the Turkmen.”

However, an attentive reader will certainly be surprised to discover among the weapons “used by the Turkmen” two crossed Russian bayonets at the bot-

tom of the photograph and underneath a horizontally-placed decorative European dagger along with a crossed Chinese sword and saber in the upper part of the photograph.

Sopiiev then moves to his main section considering the types of weapons used by the Turkmen, and this immediately raises a question in relation to the above-stated list of bladed weapons. Central Asian researchers have identified neither a *tulwar*, nor a *khyber*, nor a *khanjar* as Turkmen weapons. And if the *khanjars* have a particular shape, they have only the slightest connection to being a “Turkmen” weapon. If the “officers” who served the Khivan Khan can be considered as Turkmen (presumably the daggers considered to be *khanjars* are present in some photographs among these “officers”), then the use of a *tulwar* and *khyber* by the Turkmen find no confirmation (and the author does not mention it later). Moreover, several writers of the late 19th century quite clearly describe Turkmen sabers. There is no doubt that these are *shamshirs*, often acquired from Persia: “The numerous enemy (*Turkmen*) (reviewer’s emphasis) cavalry included bearded men, armed with heavy, razor-sharp Khorasan blades, which they were handy with” (Military collection 1888: 216). Also of note: “Their crooked sabers of Khorasan origin...” (Military collection 1872: 74). Other authors provide information concerning the uniformity of Turkmen sabers

along with their images (*Botyakov, Yanborisov* 1989: 50-51). No documentary evidence exists concerning the use of “weapons produced in Afghanistan and India” by the Turkmen. Sopiev surprisingly states that the Turkmen’s basic “... arsenal was made up of captured weapons, or those acquired as a result of trade exchange.” None of the well-known authors from the second half of the 19th century mentions such facts. Unfortunately, the article provides no source reference that would confirm such an interesting statement about the “arsenal” of Turkmen soldiers. Further, the author writes that neighboring countries influenced the decoration of Turkmen weapons, however, not one researcher has confirmed this when familiarizing themselves with the Turkmen weapons stored in the museum collections of Russia and Europe. After this, to put it mildly, controversial statement, Sopiev rightly notes that Turkmen products had their own characteristic design, but the statement that “close examination allows one to see the ethnic characteristics” is somewhat obvious because with even a perfunctory acquaintance with Turkmen weapons one can identify them from among other weapons of the region.

Although the author writes that he aims to show “the variety of styles and technologies used in the design of cold weapons and firearms which are presented in the collection of the Ashgabat Museum,” we later ascertain that this is not exactly the case. In the next section, the author proceeds to consider specific types of weapons that are stored in the museum’s collection and, for some unknown reason, decides to ascribe all these weapons as Turkmen. A *shamshir* numbered KEK-1638, in a scabbard decorated with turquoise, can hardly be considered “Turkmen” because the author writes that “This type of sword was used by the Turkmen from the Yomut, Garadashly and Chovdur tribes who lived within the khanate as a military class – the *nuker* (*nöker*)” (reviewer’s emphasis). However, it is a debatable issue as to whether Turkmen weapons used by those who moved to Khiva and changed their way of life (since they became citizens in the khan’s service) should even be considered “Turkmen.” Moreover, the decorative techniques and decor of their weapons did not have any “Turkmen” features since they were produced in Khiva by Khivan craftsmen by order of the khans (*Lansdell* 1885: 287).

Further, the author cites a typical Afghan pulwar (KEK-1775) as an example of a “Turkmen weapon,” and writes: “In the border area apart from traditional *shamshirs*, *Afghan weapons were widespread* among the Turkmen.” (reviewer’s emphasis). This statement is undoubtedly a new discovery in the study of the region’s weapons. But such a revelation requires references to trustworthy sources or archival documents. Meanwhile, the author only informs the readers that “...one well-known person in the re-

gion, Arnageldy-bai Yagmyr-ogly, owned a pulwar, which is now kept in the school museum of the city of Takhtabazar.” Unfortunately, “possession” of a particular item is no reason to consider that item to be common in the region. The author’s assertion that “Afghan pulwars, *kaibers* and Indian *talwars*, which are in private collections and museums in Turkmenistan, mainly come from these places” is also not supported by documentary proof. Significantly, the author cites weapons-related terms according to Turkmen phonetics based on the modern Turkmen alphabet, but it is necessary to understand if these terms were used in the 19th century. This, in turn, requires references to dictionaries or philological works.

Moving on to traditional Turkmen sabers, Sopiev describes them in detail while intermittently paraphrasing a well-known article by Botyakov and Yanborisov (*Botyakov, Yanborisov* 1989: 49-60). Thus, he adds that the wooden base of a scabbard could be “overlaid with thin sheet metal.” He once again does not refer to sources that would describe such a scabbard decoration for Turkmen sabers, reducing an unsubstantiated statement. Having completed his description of examples of long-bladed weapons, he proceeds to short-bladed weapons and examines in detail knives used by Turkmen. However, one not familiar with the region’s weaponry traditions after reading the phrase: “One of the most common types of knife among the Turkmen is the *kard*” could erroneously think that the *kard* knife was a product of Turkmen blacksmiths. In fact, only a few *kards* can be attributed to their work. The overwhelming majority of *kards* used by Turkmen were purchased in Persia or were captured in that region as trophies. Continuing the discussion about the Turkmen knives, Sopiev quotes the aforementioned article by Botyakov and Yanborisov but does not mention that these authors wrote not about *kards*, but about knives of a completely different type. Such an unexpected reversal confuses the inexperienced reader. Then, another ethnographic discovery is presented to the readers. The author writes: “Two bone overlays were installed *on the grip* and fastened together with metal rivets. The diameter of the rivets on one knife could also vary. It was believed that the number and size of rivets were the personal mark of the master artisan.” (reviewer’s emphasis). The article by Botyakov and Yanborisov states that knife handles exist with two or three rivets (*Botyakov, Yanborisov* 1989: 51), which suggests that very few craftsmen made knives among the Turkmen. Sopiev then discusses techniques and methods used by Turkmen craftsmen to decorate weapons. He correctly describes chisel engraving and mentions the chased pattern, however, he describes this latter technique in a rather strange way, as a “more complex type of engraving [known as] *embossing* in which

the background of the pattern was stamped into the blade.” In fact, chasing (chased engraving) is an artistic metal processing technique in which a design is engraved with hammer chisels and graters creating a relief of the background (Semyonov 2010: 249), that is, the background around the pattern is lowered with a chisel while the pattern remains convex. Sopiiev also considers another technique for decorating blades and comes to a strange conclusion: “The technique of notching with gold or silver wires was even more expensive and effective. This design technology first appeared in Persia...” This phrase raises many questions. First, it is not clear why he decided that the technique of gold engraving was more expensive than deep engraving or the chased pattern. It is correct only to speak about specific examples of weapons decorated utilizing one technique or another. Second, stating that gold engraving is more wear resistant than engraving with other metals is undoubtedly erroneous. Many examples of weapons in museums and private collections have partially or completely lost their notching with precious metals (Lyutov 2006: 192, 199, 200), while deep engraving displays only slight wear (Lyutov 2006: 194, 199). Finally, it is completely incomprehensible to determine on what basis from the sources Sopiiev concludes that the technique of gold notching or silver wires first appeared in Persia.

Upon further analysis, it becomes clear that the author, unfortunately, confuses the *koftegari* notch technique (in which the master drives gold or silver onto a shallow *mesh* applied with a stylus on the blade, which can later flake out), with a notch technique involving precious metal being driven into specially cut deep grooves on the plane of the blade. Subsequently, the author writes:

“The most common themes in the design of blades of cold weapons were calligraphic texts in Arabic script. The most frequently used fonts were *naskh*, *suls*, *nastalik*, *talik*, and less often, *kufi*. The content of the texts was usually made up of quotes from the Qu’ran, religious formulas, and also verses. In addition, the design included *islami* floral ornamentation, mythological subjects, and scenes from royal life. Images of various animals and birds were popular.”

Here, again, is a certain dissonance. The beginning of the article leads one to understand that its purpose is to discuss weapons made by the Turkmen or at least used by them. This can lead to the impression that it was the Turkmen masters who decorated these blades with calligraphic texts, mythological plots, scenes from royal life, as well as images of various animals and birds. Yet, all the above refers to Persian weapons and has nothing to do with Turkmen. So far, no images with living creatures have been discovered to date on weapons made by Turkmen craftsmen.

The article also examines a knife from museum collection (KEK-2505) in Figure No. 8. Sopiiev considers this to be Turkmen based on inscriptions on the scabbard and blade. In fact, this is a classic Persian *kard*, decorated with the Turkmen patterns, and according to the author it dates to 1923-1924. The statement that “the knife and scabbard were made by one master” is false. It is a well-known fact that the Turkmen, like all the peoples of Central Asia at the turn of the 20th century, worked according to a clear division of labor. The masters who made knives (*Kirpichnikov* 1897: 130) worked separately from those who made scabbards, as did jewelers who decorated them (*Meyendorff* 1826: 221; *Lansdell* 1885: 287). Sopiiev particularly examines the Turkmen *kards* from the museum’s collection and their scabbard types providing a detailed, accurate, and interesting description. It is not entirely clear why the author retells part of Botyakov and Yanborisov’s article using his own words (*Botiakov, Yanborisov* 1989: 56-57) in which he describes three types of Turkmen knife scabbards although they are apparently not represented in the museum’s collection. In any case, no supporting data exists on such a scabbard in the publication. Meanwhile, once again, the reader faces several categorical statements. First, it appears that “the combat knife known as the *Pesh-kabz* was widespread in... Turkmenistan.” Moreover, the author believes that “After the *kard*, this was the most popular type of knife among the Turkmen.” Where does this data come from, which upends the whole history of the region’s weapons? We have no answer, and probably, the author does not have it either since once again he refers to no source. The reader then learns that “Another type of combat cold weapon which was very rarely found among the Turkmen was the dagger known as a *khanjar*.” Probably, it was so rare since there is no information about it.

To justify the existence of the *khanjars* among the Turkmen, Sopiiev writes that “the *khanjar* is mentioned in the Turkmen heroic epic *Gyor-ogly*” (*Karryev* 1983: 372). A study of this epic, published also in the same year to which the author refers, led to the discovery that the term *khanjar* is mentioned on page 372. However, this edition is interesting because it is bilingual. Thus, a study of the translation in Russian reveals that it was a household knife with a straight blade rather than a curved dagger which modern experts call a “*khanjar*.” The referenced text reads: “The meat was a little cooked, but he was in a hurry and, having taken out a knife (*khanjar*) from his belt (reviewer’s emphasis), he began to get the pieces of meat from the cauldron and put them into his mouth” (*Karryev* 1983: 748). It would be very interesting to see how Sopiiev using a curved *khanjar* (which he displays in Figure No. 13) could take pieces of meat out

of a cauldron. In general, *khanjar* (خنجر) is a Persian word for any dagger, regardless of the shape of the blade (Richardson, Hopkins, Wilkins 1810: 245; Richardson 1829: 630; Johnson 1852: 537). Incidentally, the Turkmen-Russian dictionary also says that *khanzhar* is an archaic word meaning *dagger* (Baskakov, Karyev, Khamzayev 1968: 686). Thus, it is not clear how Sopiev draws analogies between the curved Persian *khanjar* from the museum collection and the *khanjar* referred to in the *Gyor-ogly* epic.

The author also loosely interprets the captions of the figures in the article. For example, the caption for Figure No. 11 reads as follows: "Magtymguly Khan, one of the leaders during the defense of Geok-tepe. Behind the belt is a *pesh-kabz* in a sheath with a thick handle" Considering that when describing a knife of the *pesh-kabz* type, Sopiev notes that it has a "significantly curved S-shaped blade" (here the author should be reminded that the combat part of a bladed weapon is a blade, not an edge). It is not clear why he decided that Magtymguly Khan had the *pesh-kabz* in his belt since the scabbard was at least half hidden by the hollow of his robe. Figure No. 12 shows "Turkmen-yomut with a *khanjar* in the belt. Postcard from the early 20th century." The author easily identifies the type of weapon only from the handle since the blade is completely hidden by a wide belt. To put it bluntly, this is rather bold. Sopiev then discusses firearms without referring directly to the Turkmen origins of the specific firearms from the museum collection. He neatly leads the readers to the idea and examines the various options for decorating the firearm's stock and butt: "The nails with large heads and mother-of-pearl were common in Mary Velayat, a region in Turkmenistan bordering Afghanistan." It is not clear where Sopiev obtained this information. Regardless, he again provides no references to his sources. Indeed, the overall topic of Turkmen firearms raised by the author has not been sufficiently studied. The works by contemporaries during the events in question when the Turkmen actively used flint and matchlock guns contain only general references to their use and there are no specific descriptions. On one hand, this complicates a researcher's work and on the other, it provides an opportunity for a leap of the imagination. In my opinion, it is necessary to be extremely careful with the samples of firearms recorded as "Turkmen" and kept in museum collections. For example, only specimens with unquestionable provenance recorded in museum documentation at the end of the 19th century as guns captured from the Turkmen can be considered "Turkmen" and that only according to their use.

The author's claim that the technology and artistic techniques used by Turkmen by the ornamental design of the firearms is also questionable. He addresses

the fact that well-known examples of the Turkmen firearms, which are kept in museums with known provenance, are completely unadorned. Of course, Sopiev's very description of the decorative techniques for these firearms is quite interesting and detailed, but it has nothing to do with the firearms that the Turkmen actually "adorned."

The gun from Figure No. 14 is undoubtedly of Balkan origin and was decorated in that same location, specifically southeast of Europe. It is quite possible that after the 1917 revolution, this firearm gained a "second life" as a hunting weapon when it fell into a Turkmen's hands having previously come from a noble or merchant house where it was not uncommon for such weapons to hang on a carpet decorating its owner's office. But, the only thing Turkmen in this case is a sewn bag, which, of course, was not put on the trigger guard for gunpowder, referred to by Sopiev as "flint," but served as a decorative element. By the way, it is not "silicon," (an element found in sand), fixed in the lock, but rather the mineral "flint." The shotgun displayed in Figure No. 15 was made in Turkey, not in Persia. The shotgun from Figure No. 16, referred to as a "Turkmen rifled gun," was made in Transcaucasia. Perhaps it is from Iran, but bordering on the Caucasus, which means that it unlikely reached those places raided by Turkmen. As with the first gun, it can be assumed that after 1917 it arrived at the museum from either nobility or merchants' houses, as was the case at that time throughout the USSR. Also, the reference to Masanov's work "Notes on Carving on Bone and Stone Among the Kazakhs" regarding the decor of firearms is unclear. It is not evident what relevance Kazakh carvings made on stone and bone have to do with wooden features of allegedly Turkmen weapons. Of course, seeing references to the sources would help in confirming the information about features of decorative ornamentation found on Persian and Indian matchlock guns are also found on Turkmen guns. Unfortunately, the author does not give the reader such an opportunity.

Sopiev's comparison of various types of weapons from Afghanistan and India with Turkmen weapons and his subsequent conclusion that the weapons of the other locations were more pretentious is not fully accurate. Richly decorated, very simple, and unadorned weapons were common in India and Afghanistan. Again, to conclude that the design of Turkmen weapons "less elaborately designed" is rather unusual since the article contained information about solid-silver, gilded kard-knife scabbards. The conclusion of the article is somewhat pathetic. It is not necessary to state that "the weapons, if they are not ceremonial, but made for combat, do not tolerate decorative excesses." At the same time, it was rightly noted that "weapons, especially cold ones, were a sign of status,

prestige, and they needed artistic embellishment.” His final phrase, “The decoration of weapons required a reasonable balance and the Turkmen masters reached certain heights in this regard” is very patriotic. However, perhaps, it would be worth approaching the issue more critically and refer to the sources that contain the information about the impression of Europeans toward the work of Turkmen jewelers. Here is an example: “Among the Turkmen are blacksmiths, locksmiths, and silversmiths. They usually repair and finish weapons. The works of these crafts reflect an absolutely infantile state, and allegedly a deliberate unwillingness to make them beautiful and distinct” (Voennyi Sbornik 1872: 71). Such a statement indicates a certain primitiveness in the work of the jewelers and gunsmiths.

Sopiev’s article touches upon a little-studied and very interesting topic which is important and significant. However, he, unfortunately, misleads the uninformed reader who may know little of the topic under study since the author diligently leads him or her to the conclusion that the weapons described in the article are of Turkmen origin or, at least, were common among the Turkmen. Sopiev should have either limited himself to considering the genuine Turkmen weapons or, in accordance with the title of the article, simply described the most interesting weapons in the collection of the Ashgabat museum without attempting to attribute them to the Turkmen for their different features. Unfortunately, in his attempt to “harness a horse and a shivering, fallow deer onto one cart,” the author eventually obtained a controversial result.

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