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**On the Question of Jamdhar Dagger Emergence
in the Weapons Complex of the Mughals¹**

***Abstract:** This article examines the emergence in weapons complex of the Mughals one of the most emblematic Indian weapon – Jamdhar dagger and offers new, different from the preceding, interpretation of its use. The appearance of the original Indian phenomenon in the culture of the conquerors is based on written sources, as well as in the context of understanding the atmospheric interactions of the cultures of conquerors and the vanquished. In analysis the author relies on the translation of the original texts and illustrative sources. The article explains that one of the main assignments of the dagger "jamdhar" was its use in the hunting of large predators, primarily, in self-defense from a wounded beast. As an elite attribute that emphasizes the owner's status as a hunter of tigers and lions, the struggle with the beast, theriomachia, was anciently part of the Royal rituals, a kind of test of the applicant for authority and, at the same time, the procedure of confirming the right to exercise this power, the jamdhar dagger took the place of the status thing of the Indian aristocracy. By the time of the third Emperor of the Mughal Empire Akbar some elements of Indian culture were accepted by the conquerors, though, as a rule, a culture of the defeated a priori has a lower status and as a rule remains unexploited by the new elites. And only in case some prestigious forms of the local culture do not face with competitors in the culture introduced by the conquerors, they will have a chance of being accepted by the elite. In case of the jamdhar dag-*

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ger, this form of the local culture became hunting for tigers and lions, which before the conquest of India was not a Mongol or Turkic tradition. Author also proves that in the decorative elements of decoration of jamdhar daggers in the depiction of predator attacks on prey, these scenes differ in their composition from the well-known "scenes of anguish" in Scythian and Iranian traditions. In Indian tradition there was an allusion that a warrior who had defeated a tiger, became tiger-like himself, and his enemies were similar to victim and prey. The scenes of such kind were analogues to battle scenes, which explain the lack of battle scenes in the ornament of jamdhar daggers. The tight connection to prestigious hunting was one of the reasons jamdhar dagger was established in the role of power insignia and was ensured an honorable place in the Mughal`s weapons complex.

Keywords: *dagger, Indian weapons, jamdhar, katar, hunting, Akbar, Mughals, decorative scene*

In the second half of the 16th century, the Mughals strengthened their power in North India. The policy of religious and cultural tolerance pursued by Akbar brought closer the Mughal and Indian elites, though the Mughals, Turks and Afghans continued to occupy a leading position up to the late 18th century. In this relation, a question of mixing and borrowings between the weapons complex of the victors and that of the vanquished is subject of concern for the researcher of the arms of this region.

It is well known that conquerors bring along their cultural, and military in particular, complex, which takes a high, elitist status. The military complex of the defeated a priori has a lower status and as a rule remains unexploited by the new elites. This fact is very well emphasized in Babur`s memoirs and is expressed in his derogatory attitude towards the Hindustani reality that surrounded him. The culture of the vanquished, however, cannot be completely ignored, while being a society`s foundation and closely tied to the local way of life and natural environment, it will inevitably be searching for the gap in the new context. Indeed, by the time of Akbar`s reign the ruling nobility`s interest in the culture of the conquered country has become increasingly stronger. It is shown in the interest of Akbar himself and is

reflected in the *Ain-i-Akbari* – the book written specially for him and being as a matter of fact an encyclopedia/reference book clarifying to Akbar where he actually is and what he rules. Yet, the culture of the defeated continued to be imposed the lowest status – generally, it could only exist as the culture of the “plain folk”. And only in case some prestigious forms of the local culture do not face with competitors in the culture introduced by the conquerors, they will have a chance of being accepted by the elite. It seems to be interesting to consider such a borrowing through the example of the probably most emblematic Indian weapon – Jamdhar dagger – which made an indigenous Indian object one of the most important attributes of the ruling Mughal elite. It is the review of this process that the present article is devoted to.

Jamdhar, the Indian push dagger with an H-shaped handle, is widely known and raises curiosity both by its construction and usage. It is an established opinion that this type of weapon was mainly intended for piercing the armour. Leaving the question of the armour distribution in Indiaⁱ

beyond the scope of this investigation, we would only remark that the developed weapons complex of the Mughals, including the ones of the Turks and Afghans, who under Babur alone had spent over twenty five years in ceaseless battles before the Mughal invasion in India, had not brought to life a special dagger or device for “piercing the armour”.

It is an acknowledged fact that by the end of the 16th century the Jamdhar daggers were already widely spread in both South and North India and had a completely developed form [Nordlunde, 2013]. The distribution of the Jamdhar daggers in South India raises no questions. Unclear is how this weapon appeared among the invaders of North India – the Mughals.

To begin with, we would like to return to the design features of the dagger. The supporters of the version according to which the dagger`s construction and the manner in which it was held were ideal for a strong thrusting blow lose sight of an additional effect also achieved through this handle construction – the ability to withstand the force applied to the hand and arm when a conditional victim attacks a person who defends himself, and the victim`s weight exceeds the weight of the latter. Indeed, a hand swinging a classical dagger or knife for the blow lacks such an

effect. So what could be the reason for the use of a weapon which has at once an enhanced armour-piercing and “stopping” feature?

The answer lies in the second name of this dagger known in India: the tiger dagger. By its construction, the Jamdhar represents a weapon which is extremely handy for defense in case of attack of a larger sized predator. The Surgeon-Major Thomas H. Hendley wrote in 1883: “... adapted for thrusting, and makes a wide and dangerous wound, which is enlarged in the act of withdrawing the weapon, as both edges are very sharp. Some katars are made to open like scissors blades, others have two small pistols, and in a third variety the open sides reveal a small point within. All these arrangements are devised to make the wound more horrible, and as, in hand to hand conflicts with tigers and other large savage animals, it is essential to produce a considerable effect at once on the beast, this quality of the kattar, which is often used in such sports, is very advantageous.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Jamdhar also provides much more comfort when hitting from top downwards in case a beast attacks the hunter riding a horse or elephant, or the horseman attacks the beast himself.

Of interest would be to look attentively at the decoration details of North-Indian daggers. Considerable part of the objects kept in museum or private collections are decorated with hunting scenes. As a comparative example, the well known and characterized “shamshir shikargarkh” or “talwar shikargarkh” sabres could be given, their hunting purpose being undeniable, which are decorated in a similar style. On the other hand, examples of regular daggers (not Jamdhar ones) featuring a similar ornament, are hard enough to be found.

Now, the construction of early South-Indian daggers, which are also referred to in the literature as jamdhar or katar, needs to be highlighted. Concerned are the objects having a long narrow blade, often of European origin. Such a construction most probably correlates with the early forms of the sword with a gauntlet, the earliest examples of such objects to be acknowledged the ones which employ the blade and the gauntlet aligned on one axis on the outside of the wrist; given that, the blade works like the extension of the outside part of the wrist; the hilt is located underneath similar to a shield handle construction, and the general design is much closer to the construction of a shield with a blade than that of a push dagger [Pant, 1980: 62]. Another famous form of South-Indian daggers is similar in its design to

North-Indian Jamdhar daggers. No wonder that this type of daggers was also used for theriomachia (fig. 1).

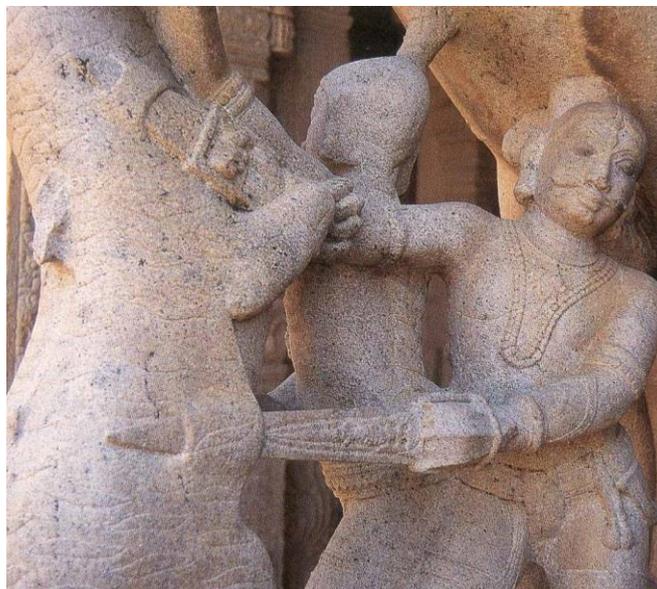


Fig. 1.

Main weapons for tiger and lion hunting were, of course, the bow and arrows, and later firearms. Yet, a number of incidents are described when a wounded animal attacked a foot hunter, rider, or person hunting from elephant. In this case sabres, staffs and even the buttstocks of toradar-musket were used – everything on hand, but still barely suitable for fight in the grasp of a beast [Jahangir, 1999: 117-118]. Under a hail of blows thrown on the animal by the arrived warriors, the hunter attacked sometimes died [Abu-l Fazl Allami, 2009: 328-329]. The toughness of the animal`s skull, skin, and most importantly – strong skeleton muscles left little possibility for defeating such an adversary. The algorithm of the most adequate actions was found, though: a little round shield or left hand wrapped in thick fabric given into the beast`s mouth for tearing, letting it feel that the victim had already been caught and there was no sense in aiming at a new target for its fangs, and the jamdhar dagger kept in the right hand. Judging from the iconography, specially trained hunt assistants were there ready to face the blow of the furious animal, in case the first person had missed.

Analysis of one of the tiger hunting scenes from the Akbarnamaⁱⁱⁱ shows that an archer whom a tiger sprang at was not prepared for a close combat. Having

dropped the bow, he tries to defend himself with a regular dagger, looking away in anguish and striking useless blows onto the tough animal` skull. A hunter who had gone into combat with another predator was obviously specially equipped. He has no ranged or firearm weapons, his left hand is wrapped in fabric, and he throws the blows aimed at the left shoulder blade of the beast. The jamdhar is to be seen in his hand (fig. 2).



Fig. 2.

A South-Indian picture shows a hunting scene, where a shield of special convex shape is used as a defense tool against the beast, and it is this shield that is put into the mouth of the tiger. In this case, apparently, this shield shape comes most handy compared to the usual flat “combat” one. The hunter also holds a jamdhar in the right hand.^{iv}

It does not seem possible to determine the time when jamdhar dagger emerged among the Mughals from artwork sources. They appear in pictures together with the appearance of the very Mughal painting. Also unknown are the pictures of Jamdhar daggers relating to the period preceding the Mughal invasion in India on the territory of Mawarannahr (Transoxiana). From Babur`s descriptions it is to be concluded that the only need for which a dagger was used by warriors was cutting off the heads of knocked down horsemen. Jamdhar was clearly not suitable for this purpose. The types of hunt practiced by the Mughals and Turks were exclusively falconry and battue hunting for medium sized game with the use of a bow and ar-

rows, or firearms. Consequently, a lack of purposes for which a push dagger could be used is to be stated. Concerning the mentions of the jamdhar dagger in written sources, it should be noted that after his victory over Ibrahim Lodi, in the personal palace of the defeated sultan in Agra, Babur was giving out gifts to his courtiers and henchmen. It goes without saying that booty was parted rather than the property brought from Kabul. Among other valuable and richly decorated objects, khandjar, kitareh (katari), kard, and jamdhar are referred to by Babur [Babur, 1921: 252; Babur, 1922: 528]. That is the first and only mention of this type of daggers made by Babur, which were clearly of local origin and gained as booty.

First time (as at least mentioned by him) Babur encountered a big predator already on the Hindustan territory, which was a chance meeting, not a hunt. His first tiger Akbar slashed with a sabre in 1561, by 1570 he had become an experienced hunter. Around this time emerge the pictures of jamdhar daggers on the Mughal miniatures. For Akbar's successor – Jahangir – hunting for tigers and lions became a usual pastime.

It is very likely that jamdhar dagger was an elite attribute emphasizing the status of its owner as a hunter for tigers and lions. Fighting with a beast – theriomachia – has been part of royal rituals from the earliest times, an original trial of the contender for power and, simultaneously, a procedure confirming his right to execute it [Kinzhalov, 2009: 25-28]. It is no mere chance that Akbar was also glorified as the “hunter for tigers”.

Even in the 16-18th centuries the number of hunts in which Indian nobility would take place significantly exceeded the number of battles in which they participated. It would be reasonable to suppose that the dagger which had initially entered the weapons complex of the Mughal noblemen as a conventional Hindustani hunting implement, later started to be carried in everyday life and battles. In this connection, a frequent motif in the jamdhar dagger ornament is worth noting, where not the scenes of people hunting for animals are depicted, but scenes showing a predator attacking its prey (fig. 3, 4). These scenes differ in their composition from the well-known explanation "scenes of anguish" in Scythian and Iranian traditions [Malozemova, 2014: 134-137]. In jamdhar decoration scenes there are, in addition to the victim, other images, in particular moving animals; the image as a victim is

not "sacrificial" deer or stag, but often a wild boar; not "humble" position of the body of the victim, and the image of a cornered animal or resisting, etc. Apparently, an allusion was implied that a warrior, who had defeated a tiger, became tiger-like himself, and his enemies were similar to victim and prey. Probably, the scenes of such kind were analogues to battle scenes, which would explain the lack of battle scenes in the decoration of jamdhar daggers. Being so rich in cultural associations, even if related to the culture of the vanquished, the object stands a very good chance of taking rightful place in the culture of the victors.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

There is no doubt that the tight connection to prestigious hunting was one of the reasons jamdhar dagger was established in the role of power insignia and was ensured an honorable place in the Mughal's weapons complex.

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ⁱ Claude Hugo, who was in India in the second half of the 18th century and observed the Hindu military organization, participant of Maratha-Mysore wars, regards as a rare occurrence: “I saw horsemen with iron armour on; this armour is useful, since it is usually fought with cold weapons in Asia, yet it is very uncomfortable due to the terrible heat and vast distances which have to be covered by cavalry” (Gugo, Claude. The Notes about India. Moscow, 1977, p.73). During this period and later on a hard-lined quilted jacket stuffed with cotton and clinging to the skin became the most commonly used defense of the Indian warriors. This armour was so tough that the British dragoon sabres could neither cut (as was also the case with the turbans on the heads of the Indians), nor pierce it (Blacker, Valentine, Memoirs of the operations of the British Army in India during the Mahratta war of 1817, 1818 and 1819. Black, Kingsbury, London, Parbury, and Allen, 1821, pp. 302-303). Jamdhar was undoubtedly the most comfortable short bladed weapon for thrusting such armour, which was probably the reason for the wide distribution and usage of this type of arm up to the mid 19th century seen not only among the elite.

ⁱⁱ Hendley, Th. H. Memorials of the Jaypore Exhibition, 1883. Cited after Nordlunde, Jens. How old is katar? The Journal of The Royal Armoury in Leeds, Arms & Armour, vol. 10, no 1. 2013

ⁱⁱⁱ Victoria and Albert Museum, IS.2:17-1896

^{iv} National Museum, New-Delhi. No. 72.466