

DOI: 10.17746/1563-0110.2019.47.1.113-118

L.A. Bobrov and D.M. Ismailov*Novosibirsk State University,
Pirogova 1, Novosibirsk, 630090, Russia
E-mail: spsml@mail.ru; ismailov_dm@mail.ru*

A Central Asian Helmet from the Northern Kazakhstan Regional Museum

We describe a richly decorated iron helmet owned by the Northern Kazakhstan Regional Museum in Petropavlovsk. It consists of a low solid hemispherical crown, a slightly convex plate, made of copper alloy, with an opening for a (missing) tube in which the plume was inserted, a wide iron hoop, and a bipartite visor of the box type. The two last-named elements are covered with Arabic inscriptions inlaid in gold. Those on the hoop are verses from the Quran 2, 255–257, Al-Baqarah—The Cow. That on the “shield” of the visor is a prayer for protection, known as the “message of peace” read before a long journey or a difficult and dangerous enterprise, such as a battle. Such helmets were common in Central Asia between the late 16th and the mid-18th centuries. This specimen was likely manufactured in Mawarannahr, Xinjiang, or some town on the Syr Darya, for a high-ranking Uzbek, Uyghur, or Kazakh warrior. This accounts for the combination of a solid crown and a hoop with Arabic inscriptions with a box-type visor typical of helmets worn by Mongolian and Turkic nomads during the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age. The closest parallels are found in the museums of Kazakhstan. Judging by the traces of repair and reconstruction, this helmet was used for a long time.

Keywords: *Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Mawarannahr, armor, helmet.*

Introduction

The Northern Kazakhstan Regional Museum (NCRM, Petropavlovsk) owns an iron helmet decorated with gold inlay (Inv. No. NCRM No. 455). Its construction and decoration pattern are quite original. The helmet is of interest to Russian and foreign archaeologists, ethnologists, and weaponologists.

The helmet was described for the first time in 2015 by S.O. Baitenova (2015), the Head of the Ethnology Department of the Northern Kazakhstan Regional Museum, who provided information on the date and circumstances of the helmet's acquisition by the Museum, as well as a brief

description. It was established that the helmet was among the first exhibits acquired by the Museum in the 1930s. Baitenova supposed that the helmet was submitted to the ethnological collection of NCRM together with a set of items “relating to the Kazakh material culture” (Ibid.: 79). Unfortunately, the formalities for the museum pieces acquired in the 1920–1940s were not properly completed; thus, the first record concerning the helmet is dated to the 25th of July 1950. Kazakh scholars dated the helmet to the 15th century, and correlated it with the Eastern Desht-i Qipchaq nomad armor-set of the relevant period. The Arabic inscription was decoded by Zeinulla Kamallitdinov, an imam of the Din-Muhammad Mosque in Petropavlovsk.

According to him, verses of four ayats from the two Quran surahs and the name of the warrior Akhmed Yakub-uly were inscribed on the hoop. The inscription on the helmet visor is “The Prophet Muhammad is with you” (Ibid). Baitenova also cited the attribution of the helmet by T. Rustemov, a resident of Chimkent, who “came to the conclusion that the name of Akhmed Yakub-uly was inscribed later, and the inscription was related to the son of Zhakyp Abulais, the Khan of the Western Fergana Khaganate... T. Rustemov believed that father of Yakub (Zhakyp) was born and grew up in Samarkand, and wrote several books explaining surahs of the Quran” (Ibid.: 80).

This article gives a description of the helmet’s construction and decoration, as well as a more accurate estimate of its age and attribution.

Description of the helmet’s construction and decoration

The helmet is made of iron, with a solid crown, and its dome is hemispherical (Fig. 1). It is 23.5 cm

high (without the missing plume-tube) and 21.0 cm in diameter. Its characteristic feature is a low, solid hemispherical crown. The signs of damage are insignificant; these are mainly scratches and shallow depressions. A wide (4.5 cm) iron hoop with even edges is riveted to the lower part of the crown. Rivets with copper or gold-coated heads were pinned along the hoop’s upper edge. The central part of the hoop is decorated with ornamentation inlaid in gold. The pattern consists of a row of subrectangular horizontal “cartouches”, framing Arabic inscriptions and images of miniature two-petaled stems. The cartouches’ lateral sides are decorated with semicircular scallops with double gold edging; their backgrounds bear a dotted gold design; and the space between them is filled with motifs of flourishing five-petaled flowers, surrounded by twisting vegetative shoots. The main pattern on the hoop is bordered above with a chain of open rings, surrounded by gold “sparkles”, and below with a string of S-shaped curls. The inscriptions on the hoop are quite well preserved as compared to the upper and lower decorative bands, which are badly worn, and the gilding is mostly missing (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Helmet from NKRM (Inv. No. NKRM No. 455).



Fig. 2. Visor and fragment of hoop of the helmet from NKRM.

A thick box-type visor, consisting of a horizontal “ledge” 1.7 cm wide and a vertical “shield” 2.3 cm wide, is riveted to the forehead part of the helmet. The pentagonal “ledge” is decorated with vegetative motifs, surrounding the “cartouche” with Arabic inscriptions in the center. The “shield” has a vertical stiffener and a weakly defined rim along its lower edge. The lateral blades of the visor show two pairs of rivets connecting the visor to the crown (Fig. 1, 2). Almost the entire “shield” surface is covered with gold inscriptions in Arabic; the lower border is decorated with a row of “pearls” inlaid in gold (Fig. 2). The manufacturing technique and style of the motifs on the hoop and the visor are identical, suggesting that the ornamentation was executed by a single artisan.

The helmet is topped with a slightly convex plate made of copper alloy, serving as a base for the decorative top. The plate’s border is slightly thickened. The plate is fixed to the crown with rivets with copper heads. In the center of the plate, there is an opening for a (missing) tube in which the plume was inserted. The material and working-technique of the plate differ considerably from those of the helmet’s other elements, suggesting that the plate was added to the helmet later. Probably, the copper plate replaced the original iron plate, damaged in a battle, which would have been consistent with the ornamentation on the hoop and visor.

The lower edge of the hoop shows 14 openings, into which loops of copper alloy were inserted. These loops served for attaching an aventail (only a few loops have survived). Most likely, the aventail was made of mail. It was attached to the iron rod passing through the loops at the lower edge of the hoop.

Of great interest are the inscriptions, which were read and attributed by V.N. Nastich, Head of the Oriental Manuscripts Department of the Institute of Oriental Studies RAS*. It has been established that the forehead part of the helmet hoop contains verses from the Quran 2, 255–257, Al-Baqarah—The Cow. The inscription on the “shield” is a popular prayer for protection, known as the “message of peace”, which was read before a long journey or a difficult and dangerous enterprise, such as a battle.

Dating and attribution

The helmet can be dated and attributed on the basis of analysis of its construction, and the decoration of the crown, visor, and hoop. Solid helmets with hemispherical crowns were already used by the warriors of Western Asia during the early and

*The authors highly appreciate V.N. Nastich’s contribution in the reading and interpretation of the inscriptions.



Fig. 3. Fragments of helmets from NKRM (a) and NMRK (b).

middle medieval period (The Arts..., 2008: 314, 316; Gorelik, 1983: 262, pl. VIII, fig. 11, 12; p. 264, pl. IX, fig. 2; 2002: 75, fig. 24, 26). During the late medieval period, such helmets were worn by the Siberian Tatars, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Oirats, Tibetans, Bhutanese, and other nations (LaRocca, 2006: 7, 99, 134, 135; Bobrov, Hudiakov, 2008: 458, fig. 189; Bobrov, 2009). However, the main dating characteristic of the helmet is the box-type visor consisting of a “ledge” and a “shield”. It is the typical element of helmets of the 15th to mid-19th centuries from Central Asia and continental East Asia (Akhmetzhan, 2007: 153; Bobrov, Hudiakov, 2008: 418, 426, 432, 440–444, 446, 447, 450–452; Anisimova, 2013: 276, 277; LaRocca, 2006: 7, 73–75, 77–79, 82, 85, 86, 91, 99; Bobrov, Anisimova, 2013). Pentagonal bipartite visors with wide “shields” and distinctive stiffeners are typical of this period. For instance, the Oirat helmets of the late 16th to early 18th centuries were provided with such visors (Bobrov, Hudiakov, 2008: 440, 441, 443, 444).

The combination of the solid hemispherical crown and the box-type visor is most often found on battle and festive headgears from the Bhutan and Tibet of the 18th and 19th centuries (LaRocca, 2006: 7, 99, 134, 135). However, the presence of Arabic inscriptions on the hoop excludes the possibility that this helmet was manufactured by the Tibetan or Bhutanese artisans, who professed Buddhism.

Ottoman, Mamluk, and Iranian headgears with solid hemispherical crowns decorated with gold inlay are also known (Robinson, 2006: Pl. VIIa, IXc; The Arts..., 2008: 316). Some Ottoman and Iranian

helmets of the 16th–19th centuries are decorated with horizontal subrectangular “cartouches” with scalloped edges (Gosudareva Oruzheinaya palata, 2002: 60–62, 64; Khorasani, 2006: 716). Their interiors are covered with Arabic inscriptions or vegetative ornamentation. Some helmets have “cartouches” alternating with four-petaled flower images (Gosudareva Oruzheinaya palata, 2002: 60–62; Khorasani, 2006: 716). Such decoration of the helmet from NKRM is similar to that of the pieces of armor from Western Asia. But riveted hoops and, especially, bipartite box-type visors are not typical of Ottoman or Iranian helmets. This observation hampers attribution of the specimen under study to the Western Asian products.

The noted combination of the solid crown with Arabic inscriptions and the Mongolian-Turkic box-type visor suggests that the helmet was produced by the Muslim artisans of Central Asia or Kazakhstan. Its closest parallels can be found in the collections of the Central State Museum of Kazakhstan (CSMK) and the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (NMRK). Unlike the hemispherical helmet under study, the solid crown of the helmet from CSMK (KP 2070/7) has a sphero-conical shape*, but on the forehead part of the helmet, the same typical box-type visor is attached, though with slightly different decoration. The lower part of this helmet is decorated with a “pseudo-hoop” of the Arabic inscriptions inlaid in gold. The “ledge” and

*It cannot be excluded that prior to installation of the copper plate, the helmet from NKRM also had a sphero-conical shape, formed by the conical or hemispherical plate and the plume-tube.

“shield” of the visor are covered with vegetative ornamentation (Akhmetzhan, 2007: 153, fig. 17). The helmet from CSMK was manufactured by Central Asian or Kazakh artisans. This suggests that the combination of the box-type visor and solid crown, bearing Muslim symbols, was not something exceptional for the products of local armorers.

The peculiar motif in the form of a chain of open rings on the hoop is important for attribution of the helmet from NKRM. In our opinion, this design, inlaid in gold, imitates the technique of decoration of weapons with rows of small round “chases” for precious and semiprecious stones or pieces of colored glass, traditional in Central Asia during the late medieval period (Khudozhestvennoye oruzhiye..., 2010: 96–99, fig. 161, 163, 165, 167, 168, 172, 173; Anisimova, 2013: 261, 267, 270, 271, 273, 276–277). The pattern of gold “pearls” on the visor of the helmet from NKRM also occurs on the battle and festive headgears produced in Central Asia and Iran: “Kuchum’s cap” from the Kremlin Armory (OP-164), the “Kula-khud” helmet from the Russian Museum of Ethnography (No. 3806-1), a lobster-tailed pot helmet from the Military Historical Museum of Artillery, Engineers and Signal Corps (No. 0138/95), and others (Gosudareva Oruzheinaya palata, 2002: 50–52; Bobrov, Anisimova, 2013; Bobrov, 2014).

Our hypothesis on the Central Asian origin of the headgear from NKRM is also supported by the famous gilded helmet (ПМО УК 8228) from the collection of NMRK. Certain elements in the decoration of this helmet are nearly identical to the relevant features on the headgear under study. For instance, the dome of this helmet is decorated with gold “cartouches” with scalloped edges framing the Arabic inscriptions; the “cartouche” background is covered with the same dotted design, and the edging is decorated with a row of typical S-shaped curls (Fig. 3).

Conclusions

The typological analysis makes it possible to specify the time of manufacture, and also the attribution, of the helmet (Inv. No. NKRM No. 455) from the collection of the Northern Kazakhstan Regional Museum. Most likely the helmet was forged by armorers from Central Asia

or Southern Kazakhstan from the second half of the 16th century to the middle of 18th century. The helmet could also have been manufactured by artisans from Mawarannahr, Xinjiang, or the cities in the Syr-Darya region, for a high-ranking Uzbek or Kazakh warrior, which would have influenced the construction and decoration of the headgear. It is noteworthy that the three helmets mentioned above, and demonstrating similar decoration, were found in Kazakhstan. Judging by the traces of repair and reconstruction, the helmet under study might have been used as a battle or festive headgear for a long time, until the mid-19th century.

Acknowledgement

This study was performed under Public Contract for scientific work (Project No. 33.5677.2017/8.9).

References

- Akhmetzhan K.S. 2007**
Etnografiya traditsionnogo vooruzheniya kazakhov. Almaty: Almatykitap.
- Anisimova M.A. 2013**
Oruzhiye Vostoka XV–pervoy poloviny XX veka: Iz sobraniya Voenno-istoricheskogo muzeya artillerii, inzhenernykh voisk i voisk svyazi. St. Petersburg: Atlant.
- Baitenova S.O. 2015**
Tainy starinnogo shlema. In *Muzeiniye raritety v proyektssii istorii kazakhskoy gosudarstvennosti: Sbornik st. nauch.-prakt. konf. v ramkakh mezhtsebnogo muzeynogo festivalya, posvyashchennogo 550-letiyu Kazakhskogo khanstva*. Kokshetau: pp. 78–80.
- Bobrov L.A. 2009**
“Tatarskiy” shlem s kombinirovannoy barmitsey iz Tobolskogo gosudarstvennogo istoriko-arkhitekturnogo muzeya-zapovednika. *Vestnik Novosibirskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*. Ser.: Istoriya, filologiya, vol. 8 (3): 251–254.
- Bobrov L.A. 2014**
Shlem “kula-khud” iz “Arsenala khana Dzhangira”. *Vestnik Novosibirskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*. Ser.: Istoriya, filologiya, vol. 13 (5): 263–270.
- Bobrov L.A., Anisimova M.A. 2013**
Tsentralnoaziatskiye shlemy pozdnego Srednevekoviya i rannego Novogo vremeni iz Voenno-istoricheskogo muzeya artillerii, inzhenernykh voisk i voisk svyazi. *Vestnik Novosibirskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*. Ser.: Istoriya, filologiya, vol. 12 (3): 196–207.
- Bobrov L.A., Hudiakov Y.S. 2008**
Vooruzheniye i taktika kochevnikov Tsentralnoy Azii i Yuzhnoy Sibiri v epokhu pozdnego Srednevekoviya i Novogo vremeni (XV–pervaya polovina XVIII v.). St. Petersburg: Filologicheskiy fakultet SPbGU.

Gorelik M.V. 1983

Mongolo-tatarskoye oboronitelnoye vooruzheniye vtoroy poloviny XIV–nachala XV v. In *Kulikovskaya bitva v istorii i kulture nashey Rodiny*. Moscow: Izd. Mosk. Gos. Univ., pp. 244–269.

Gorelik M.V. 2002

Armii mongolo-tatar X–XIV vv.: Voinskoye iskusstvo, snaryazheniye, oruzhiye. Moscow: Vost. gorizont.

Gosudareva Oruzheinaya palata. 2002

St. Petersburg: Atlant.

Khorasani M.M. 2006

Arms and Armor from Iran: The Bronze Age to the End of the Qajar Period. Tübingen: Legat.

Khudozhestvennoye oruzhiye iz sobraniya**Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha: Katalog vystavki. 2010**

St. Petersburg: Slaviya.

LaRocca D. 2006

Warriors of the Himalayas. Rediscovering the Arms and Armor of Tibet. New York: Yale Univ. Press.

Robinson R. 2006

Dospekhi narodov Vostoka: Istoriya oboronitelnogo vooruzheniya. Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf.

The Arts of the Muslim Knight: The Furusiyya Art Foundation Collection. 2008

Milan: Skira.

Received November 16, 2017.