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LONG-BLADED WEAPON IN KAZAKH HEROIC EPIC*

This article examines the long-bladed weapons of the Turkic nomads of Eurasia during the Medieval and Early Modern periods with particular attention paid to swords, sabers, and shashkas as reflected in Kazakh heroic epics. The study is based on a comprehensive analysis of written, material, and visual sources, supplemented by folklore materials that have not previously been introduced into scholarly discourse or translated into foreign languages. The research identifies original designations of long-bladed weapons attributed to warrior-*batīrs* in the Kazakh heroic epics. Evidence indicates that during the Medieval and Early Modern periods, the Turkic nomadic warriors of Kazakhstan and adjacent territories employed weapons such as the standard sword (*semser*), the saber (*qīlīsh*), and the shashka (*sapī*). The investigation further reveals a range of specific names of weapons used by the Kazakh military-political elite, including *aldaspan*, *isfahan* (also attested as *asfahan*, *asbaqan*), *narkesken*, *zu al-faqar*, and the distinguished *beren*. Terminological variations were also associated with material — *bolat*, *almas*, color — *qara bolat*, and decorative features — *baldağī aq beren, aq baldaqtī kök beren*, *aq almas*. In epic narratives, the saber *zu al-faqar* was poetically characterized as "a saber like the tongue of a dragon." Furthermore, epic sources testify that the hilts of sabers — *shamshir* — which became widespread in Kazakh weaponry during the late Medieval and Early Modern periods were made of white bone — an observation fully corroborated by both material and written evidence.

Key words: long-bladed weapon, swords, sabers, Kazakh heroic epics, Ulus of Jochi, the history of Kazakhstan.

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ДЛИННОКЛИНКОВОЕ ОРУЖИЕ В КАЗАХСКОМ ГЕРОИЧЕСКОМ ЭПОСЕ

В статье на основе комплексного анализа письменных, вещественных и изобразительных источников исследуются элементы длиннкоклинкового оружия, в частности мечи, сабли и шашки тюркских кочевников Евразии эпохи Средневековья и Нового времени, встречающиеся в материалах казахских героических эпосов. Привлечённые данные казахского фольклора ранее не вводились в научный оборот и не переводились на иностранные языки. В ходе комплексного исследования были выявлены оригинальные наименования длинноклинкового оружия, воинов-батыров, представленных в казахских героических эпосах. В частности, установлено, что в период Средневековья и Нового времени тюркские воины-кочевники Казахстана и сопредельных территорий использовали длинноклинковые оружия меч

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семсер, саблю *қылыш*, шашку *сапы*. В ходе исследования были выявлены названия длинноклинкового оружия, использовавшегося казахской военно-политической элитой и воинами, в том числе мечей и сабель, таких как *алдаспан*, *исфахан (асфахан*, *асбақан*), *наркескен*, *зульфикар*, а также — по превосходству — *берен*; по материалу изготовления *болат*, *алмас*; по цвету — *қара болат*; по деталям оформления — *балдағы ақ берен*, *ақ балдақты көк берен*, *ақ алмас*. Например, саблю *зульфикар* сказители в эпосах образно описывали как «саблю, подобную языку дракона». Кроме того, материалы героических эпосов свидетельствуют, что у сабель-шамширов, бытовавших в позднем Средневековье и Новое время в составе традиционного вооружения казахов, рукояти изготавливались из белой кости, что полностью подтверждается данными вещественных и письменных источников.

Ключевые слова: длинноклинковое оружие, меч, сабля, казахский героический эпос, Улус Джучи, история Казахстана.

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Introduction. The study of warfare and weaponry among the Eurasian nomads of the Medieval and Early Modern periods has long occupied a central place in ethnographic, archaeological, and arms research. Increasingly, the comprehensive integration of folklore with other categories of sources — particularly material (archaeological, ethnographic), written, and iconographic evidence — has become a matter of scholarly relevance. Folklore materials often clarify the original terminology of offensive and defensive arms, their specific modes of combat application, the means by which they were used during campaigns, as well as their material, ethno-cultural, and ethno-functional significance within the culture of the Turkic and Mongolian peoples of the Great Steppe. Among the various genres of folklore, heroic epics are of particular importance as they preserve extensive information concerning the weaponry of the nomads of Eurasia.

Nevertheless, Kazakh heroic epics — like folklore sources more broadly — have generally been treated in historical and historiographical scholarship as secondary or auxiliary, serving primarily to support already established facts. In many cases, they have remained entirely outside the purview of historians, confined instead to the domains of folkloristics, philology, and linguistics. In this regard, the present article sets out to examine Kazakh heroic epics as a primary source for the study of arms and armor, particularly the long-bladed weapons of the nomads of Kazakhstan and adjacent territories during the Medieval and Early Modern periods, correlating them with other types of sources.

The long-bladed weapons of the nomads of Kazakhstan during the Medieval and Early Modern periods have repeatedly attracted the attention of both local and foreign scholars. Among recent works, one could highlight the monographs and articles of K.S. Ahmetzhan, L.A. Bobrov, A.K. Kushkumbaev, V.R. Novoselov, D.A. Sheremetev, A.O. Pronin, D. Ismailov, and others (Akhmetzhan 2007; Bobrov, Pronin 2012; Bobrov, Sheremetev 2013; Bobrov, Ismailov 2016; Bobrov, Ismailov 2019; Bobrov et al. 2020; Bobrov, Novoselov 2020). These studies are based on the analysis of material, visual, and written sources. Their high scholarly quality, as well as the dating and attributions of weaponry proposed by the authors, is credible; however, arms-historical research can be further enriched through the inclusion of materials from the Kazakh epic tradition.

Materials and methods. The present study is primarily based on materials from Kazakh heroic epics, namely: *Qarasay, Qazy* (Seyt's version) (Babalar sözi 42); *Janqozha Batīr* (Babalar sözi 62); *Rayīmbek* (Babalar sözi 59); *Eŋsegey boylī er Esim* (Babalar sözi 56); *Batīr Jänibektiŋ öleŋi* (Babalar sözi 56); *Er Qosay* (Babalar sözi 44); *Alpamīs Batīr* (Babalar sözi 34); *Qarasay, Qazy* (Shayakhmet Karibaev's version) (Babalar sözi 41); *Ertedegi Shora Batīr* (Babalar sözi 45); *Er Qosaj* (Asayīn Khangeldyn's version) (Babalar sözi 44); *Ötegen Batīr* (Babalar sözi 59). The written sources consulted in this research include: John of Plano Carpini's report on the Mongols (Beazley 1903); *The Book of Marco Polo* 1956); M.I. Ivanin's notes *On the Art of War and the Conquests of the Mongol-Tatars and Central Asian Peoples under Chinggis Khan and Tamerlane* (Ivanin 1875); the dictionaries of V.V. Radlov (Radlov 1911a; 1911b); the work of Qing authors of the second half of the XVIII century, *Qinding Huangyu Xiyu Tuzhi* (Bobrov, Pastukhov 2021); the works of Ch.Ch. Valikhanov (Valikhanov 1985). Material sources comprise the results of archaeological research by Yu.S. Khudyakov (Khudyakov 1986; Khudyakov 1997) and G.A. Fedorov-Davydov (Fedorov-Davydov 1966); a Mongol-period saber from the collection of the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (inv.no. QRŪM nq 802); *zu al-faqar* sabers from a private collection and the Central State Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (inv.no. CMK KP 1918); Kazakh and Central Asian sabers and shashkas from the collections of the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (inv.no. QRŪM 101; inv.no. QRŪM 10758; inv.no. QRŪM 10757; inv.no. QRŪM 10470; inv.no. QRŪM 10761; inv.no. QRŪM 42523; inv.no. QRŪM 658; inv.no. QRŪM 10762; inv.no. QRŪM 10769). As regards iconographic sources, the study employs Late Medieval Persian miniatures from the *Shah-nama* and *Zafar-nama*, a print by John Castle, and depictions of sabers on gravestones and other cultic monuments of Western Kazakhstan (Samashev, Zhetibayev 2005).

Research methods. In the present study, typological and comparative-descriptive methods were employed, alongside methods of verification and correlation of the obtained results, as well as approaches to the translation and analysis of folklore sources (Agatay et al. 2023; Agatay et al. 2024). In the course of the comparative analysis of long-bladed weapons, a comprehensive method was applied, based on the juxtaposition of folklore, written, material, and visual sources. The research also makes use of classifications, typologies, and the terminological framework developed by arms scholars K.S. Ahmetzhan, Yu.S. Khudyakov, and L.A. Bobrov (Ahmetzhan 2007; Bobrov, Khudyakov 2008).

Results of the study. In the Turkic-Mongolian heroic epics, special attention is devoted to arms and armor. Weapons and protective equipment appear as some of the most frequently mentioned elements in the depiction of the warrior-*batīr*, alongside the description of the figure's warhorse. Emphasis is consistently placed on the superior quality and value of weapons, which underscores their significance within the narrative structure and episodes of the epics. Thus, a comprehensive study of these traditional material elements, and an assessment of their historical realism, represents an important scholarly task of this article.

In the epics, the hero's armament is typically described in two key contexts: first, at the moment when he acquires his personal weapons and armor prior to a campaign (a static description); and second, in the course of single combat with an enemy *batīr* when these weapons are employed in action (a dynamic description) (Lipec 1984: 63). For instance, in episodes of duels, warriors often insult each other before combat, demanding surrender and the forfeiture of property — including weapons, horses, and clothing — which provokes rage and defiance from their opponents. The heroic epics also show that nobles and *batīrs* placed great importance on their weaponry which was commonly inherited by sons and, thereby, became a legacy passed down from generation to generation.

Long-bladed weapons, intended for striking opponents in close combat, are referred to in Kazakh heroic epics under three principal terms: *semser*, *qīlīsh*, and *sapī*. In addition, epic texts record other designations for long-bladed arms, including *aldaspan*, *isfahan*, *narkesken*, and *zu al-faqar*. In Kazakh arms studies, bladed weapons are classified as cutting weapons for close combat, subdivided according to blade length into long-bladed and short-bladed types. The former type includes swords, sabers, and shashkas, while the latter — typically used as auxiliary weapons in battle — comprises daggers, selebe, and knives (Ahmetzhan 2007: 98).

Sword and backsword. The first type of long-bladed weapon is the double-edged, cut-and-thrust weapon with a straight blade — the sword — which in Kazakh traditional military terminology is referred to as *semser*. In Kazakh arms studies, swords are generally classified according to the shape of the hilt. Thus, the arms scholar, K.S. Ahmetzhan, drawing on iconographic evidence from the 14th—17th centuries, distinguishes two principal types of swords used by the nomadic tribes of Kazakhstan and Central Asia: (1) swords with a straight hilt continuing the line of the blade; and (2) swords with a hilt slightly curved toward the edge. The first type, employed from antiquity through the Early Modern period, was primarily intended for cut-and-thrusting blows in close combat, whereas the second type developed in response to the need for delivering chopping and cutting strikes (Ahmetzhan 2007: 100).

The term *semser* under consideration has a Persian origin — شمشیر *shamshir* (Rustemov 1989: 258), which translates as "curved, like a lion's claw", and is used in reference to both swords and sabers. However, in Iran, as well as among the armies of other Muslim states of Western and Central Asia, this term was generally employed to designate single-edged curved sabers.

According to archaeological evidence and depictions on Old Turkic stone sculptures, the double-edged sword with straight blade became widespread among the nomads of the Great Steppe during the period of the First Turkic Khaganate; the single-edged backsword appeared in the 2nd half of the 1st millennium; while the extensive use of slightly curved, single-edged sabers among steppe nomads began in the 7th—10th centuries. Nevertheless, the use of swords by warriors of the Uighur and Kyrgyz Khaganates in Central Asia continued until the 8th—10th centuries. Archaeological research has also shown that the armament array of the Kimak Khaganate warriors included the sword, backsword, and saber (Khudyakov 1986: 153—156, 190—195, 198).

Based on the references to the sword in the notes of Marco Polo, it may be inferred that Turkic-Mongolian warriors employed this weapon during the period of the Mongol Empire. However, it should be taken into consideration that European travelers and envoys, as well as later translators, often used the term "sword" to designate all varieties of long-bladed weapons. Thus, Marco Polo after the visit the Mongol Empire and Yuan-Dynasty China in the 2nd half of the 13th century, wrote: "Their armament consists of the bow, the sword, and the mace; above all, they use the bow, because they are skillful archers; and on their backs they wear a cuirass made of buffalo or some other kind of boiled and very strong leather. They fight excellently and with great bravery" (Kniga Marko Polo 1955: 90). Archaeological materials discovered in the territory of Karakorum, the capital of Chinggis Khan's empire, indicate that in the early 13th century the Turkic-Mongolian warriors employed two principal types of swords: (1) a straight double-edged sword with a blunt-angled tip and a lenticular blade cross-section; and (2) a straight single-edged sword with an elongated triangular cross-section, which may most plausibly be classified as a backsword (Drevnemongol'skie goroda 1965: 203, 204).

According to written sources, in the 12th-century and the 1st quarter of the 13th-century steppe, Turkic and Mongol warriors appear to have made wide use of the single-edged backsword. Thus, in the 1240s, the Italian Franciscan, Friar Plano Carpini, who traveled through the Ulus of Jochi to the Mongol Empire, noted in his account of Turkic-Mongolian armament: "Moreouer they are enioined to haue these weapons following. Two long bowes or one good one at the least, three quiuers full of arrowes, & one axe, and ropes to draw engines withal. But the richer sort haue single edged swords, with sharpe points, and somewhat crooked. They haue also armed horses with their shoulders and breasts defenced, they haue helmets and brigandines" (Beazley 1903: 124).

In the 7th—8th centuries, in Southern Siberia and Central Asia, alongside the spread of new forms of stirrups and saddles across the Great Steppe, the single-edged curved bladed weapon — the saber — emerged and gained a wide distribution in terms of its usage. Whereas combat with the sword demanded considerable agility from a mounted warrior, the practical design of the stirrup and saddle made it possible to deliver effective chopping and cutting blows against the enemy while riding at full speed (Allaniyazov 1998: 29). This, in turn, enhanced the mobility of the Eurasian nomads' light cavalry and secured its superiority over the armies of settled agricultural states.

According to archaeological research, despite the rarity of such finds in burial monuments, the saber was the most widespread type of close combat weapon among the medieval Qipchaks. This is confirmed by archaeological materials discovered in burials across Eastern Europe, the Ural region, and Kazakhstan. For example, at the Korolevka site (Zhambyl Region, Republic of Kazakhstan), a saber with a slightly curved blade and a boat-shaped crossguard was unearthed. Its dimensions are as follows: length — 100 cm, width — 5 cm, and hilt height — 12 cm (Khudyakov 1997: 114, Fig. 75: 1).

Presently, one of the same sabers discovered in Karaganda region is exhibited in the National museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan.The total length of the saber is 73.0 cm, the blade length is 66.3 cm, and the blade width at the hilt is 3.4 cm (Bobrov etc. 2020: 249). (Fig. 1: 1—2). Considering that this saber was discovered in the territory of Central Kazakhstan, it may be assumed that it formed part of the weaponry of the Great Steppe warriors during the period of the Mongol Empire and the Ulus of Jochi in the 13th—14th centuries. As evidenced by visual sources, these types of sabers appear in representations of Turkic-Mongolian warriors from Ilkhanid Iran (Fig. 2). It may be assumed that specimens of this type of saber evolved from the straight double-edged sword, gradually acquiring a slightly curved blade form.

Written, archaeological, and iconographic sources suggest that long-bladed weapons (including the sword, backsword, and saber) constituted an essential component of the armaments of the multi-ethnic army of the Golden Horde. It also appears plausible that Russian and Bulgar warriors incorporated into the Golden Horde forces employed both straight-edged swords and sabers in military practice (Kushkumbaev 2013: 55). As noted by the archaeologist and specialist in the military history of the Golden Horde, I. L. Izmailov, archaeological evidence suggests that within the range of armaments of the Ulus of Jochi, the saber constituted the principal type of long-bladed close combat weapon. Over time, this weapon gradually supplanted both the sword and the backsword, becoming the dominant form of edged armament across the region (Izmailov 2020: 287). At the same time, according to archaeological evidence, G.A. Fedorov-Davydov earlier wrote: “Although the straight single-edged backsword may indeed be regarded as the starting point in the evolution of the sword, for a long period these two types of weapons coexisted within the European steppes” (Fedorov-Davydov 1966: 24).

Unfortunately, the body of Kazakh heroic epics lacks cycles referring to the early period of the Mongol Empire and the Ulus Jochi (the Golden Horde) in which the double-edged straight sword, widely employed at that time, is mentioned. Therefore, based solely on folkloric materials, it is impossible to assert with sufficient reliability that the Turkic-Mongolian ancestors of the Kazakhs actually used the *semser* sword. Nevertheless, there are grounds to assume that this type of weapon was known within the Kazakh military tradition of the Early Modern period and was familiar to epic storytellers. In particular, such evidence is reflected in the Kazakh heroic epic of the Noghai cycle. For instance, in the epic, *Qarasay, Qazy*, in the storyteller Seit’s version, it is noted that the Noghai Mamai and the Kalmyk Qanibek fought using both swords and sabers.

They fought with swords,
They clashed with sabers.[1]

(Throughout the footnotes, the original text is cited alongside the corresponding bibliographic references. All translations from Kazakh into English in this article have been prepared by Ayagoz Sultanova).

An analysis of the epic’s narrative demonstrates that one of the warriors employed both a sword and a saber in the course of a single episode of close combat. However, it cannot be ruled out that such a description represents a poetic device employed by the storyteller himself. Nevertheless, attention should be drawn to the records of M.I. Ivanin, based on Chagatai and Persian sources, in

[1] *Семсерменен серместі,*
Қылышпенен қағысты (Babalar sözi 42: 121).

which he notes that the warriors of Emir Timur carried a sword on the right side and a saber on the left (Ivanin 1875: 150). In our view, however, this assertion is most likely erroneous, since Ivanin relied on a 17th-century source, and, moreover, the translation from the original may have been inaccurate (Bobrov at al. 2024).

In virtually all Kazakh heroic epics, the term *semser* is used in parallel with the term *qīlīsh*, that is, in reference to the single-edged curved saber. At the same time, certain versions of the epics contain instances in which this term denotes a double-edged sword. For example, in the epic *Janqozha Batīr*, the word *semser* is employed to designate a long-bladed weapon with two edges:

Till from the double-edged blade
Naught but the hilt remains within the hand.[2]

If we take into account that this epic was sung in the 2nd half of the 19th century, it is hardly likely that Kazakh warriors of that period made use of the sword. Among the long-bladed weapons included in the armaments of the Kazakhs at that time, the most widespread were the *shamshir* sabers, *shashkas*, and Russian sabers. Overall, apart from this single reference in the epic, we do not possess concrete evidence from material, written, or visual sources attesting to the use of double-edged swords by Kazakh warriors of the Late Medieval and Early Modern periods.

According to the Kazakh arms specialist, K.S. Akhmetzhan, until the 18th century nomadic warriors employed both the sword and the saber as equivalent types of weaponry. Some representatives of the nobility could carry both simultaneously, thereby making use of each in battle. However, by the turn of the 18th to 19th centuries, the sword had disappeared from the military armament of the Kazakhs (Ahmetzhan 2007: 99, 100). Based on a comprehensive analysis of material, visual, and written sources, researchers have concluded that during the Late Medieval and Early Modern periods, among the nomadic populations of Kazakhstan, the primary type of long-bladed close combat weapon — unlike in earlier epochs — became the single-edged saber, the *qīlīsh* (Bobrov, Pronin 2012: 572—580; Bobrov, Sheremetev 2013: 243).

Saber and shashka. In Kazakh traditional military terminology, the saber (*qīlīsh*) represents the second type of long-bladed chopping and cutting weapon for close combat. It is characterized by a single-edged curved blade made of iron or steel. A variety of saber types are known, classified according to the shape and degree of curvature of the blade. Thus, based on museum collections and iconographic data, K.S. Ahmetzhan classifies Kazakh sabers into five groups according to the degree of blade curvature: (1) sabers with a slightly curved blade; (2) sabers with a moderately curved blade; (3) sabers with a dramatically curved blade; (4) *zu al-faqar* sabers with a bifurcated blade; and (5) heavy *aldaspan* sabers with an yelman (false edge) at the end of the blade (Ahmetzhan 2007: 100—102). Weapons specialists L.A. Bobrov and O.A. Pronin, based on the study of 98 Kazakh sabers dating from the 16th to the mid-19th centuries, classify them according to the degree of blade curvature into three groups: (1) slightly curved blades up to 16°, (2) moderately curved blades up to 20°, and (3) strongly curved blades exceeding 20° (Bobrov, Pronin 2012: 573, 575, 577, Fig. 1, 2).

The term *qīlīsh* originates from Old Turkic in the form *qïlïč* and is frequently attested in Old Turkic and Old Uighur written monuments (Drevnetyurkskii slovar' 1969: 442, 443) where, within the military system of the corresponding historical period, it was used to denote swords. In Kazakh heroic epics, the saber, along with the bow and arrow, belongs to the most frequently mentioned types of weapons employed by warriors.

As outlined above, Kazakh heroic epics feature a variety of terms for the saber, as well as numerous expressions associated with it. One such weapon frequently mentioned in the epic tradition is the *aldaspan* saber. For instance, in the historical epic of *Rayīmbek*, reference to the

[2] *Екі жүздi семсердің,*
Балдағы қолда қалғанша (Babalar sözi 62: 39).

aldaspan appears in the farewell words spoken on the occasion of Rayīmbek-*batyr's* departure for a military campaign:

To Abīlay Khan always
You helped with counsel,
The Aq Orda headquarters
You guarded with the aldaspan.[3]

The description of the *aldaspan* saber varies across different sources. Thus, philologist T.B. Baizhanov defines it as a "curved double-edged sword" (Baizhanov 1993: 17), while in Kazakh language dictionaries, it is described simply as a "curved saber" (Asqarov 1974: 215). However, according to the classification of arms specialists, the *aldaspan* represents a type of heavy saber with a slightly curved blade, the distinctive feature of which is the widening towards the tip, known as the "yelman." Due to its considerable weight, both carrying and wielding this weapon in battle required significant physical strength (Ahmetzhan 2007: 102).

In many Persian miniatures of the Late Medieval period, depictions can be found of a Turkic warrior holding an *aldaspan* saber resting on his shoulder (Fig. 3). Furthermore, in the nomenclature of weapons presented by M.V. Gorelik, based on archaeological finds from the 13th—14th centuries associated with the Golden Horde and its army, as well as on representations in Persian iconography, one can also identify sabers of the *aldaspan* type (Gorelik 2002: 64, Fig. 16, 19, 24).

In our view, the *aldaspan* saber among the Eurasian nomadic warriors emerged during the period of the Golden Horde and was widely used within the military-political elite of the Ulus of Jochi. As I.L. Izmailov provides a concise characterization of such a saber: "Modern analyses of Golden Horde blades attest to their often exceptionally high quality: they were manufactured from 'Damascus' — welded steel, and even from cast bulat. Over time, Golden Horde saber blades became increasingly curved. In the 2nd half of the 14th century, they acquired a distinctly pronounced yelman — a widening in the lower third to quarter of the blade. In the vast majority of cases, sabers of the Golden Horde period featured cross-shaped, narrow-rhombic guards with downward-drawn ends" (Izmailov 2020: 287). It appears that the saber *aldaspan* possessed such characteristics. Similar sabers could also have been employed in the post-Golden Horde Muslim world, including in the eastern Dasht-i Qipchaq, particularly within the Kazakh Khanate, where they served as the weapons of khans, sultans, and the military aristocracy.

The next type of chopping and cutting melee weapon in heroic epics is the *isfahan* saber. In Kazakh oral tradition, it also occurs under the variant forms *asfahan* and *asbaqan*. For instance, in the epic *Eŋsegey boylī er Esim*, it is related how Khan Tawakkul, in preparation for war against the Tashkent Khan Tursun, who had seized Turkistan, commands that his saber be brought to him:

Open the treasure and take
The Isfahan saber.[4]

The saber is associated with the name of the city of Isfahan in Iran. In the 16th and 17th centuries, a craftsman named Asadullah lived in this city, producing in his workshop exceptionally refined and high-quality curved sabers, which he marked with the stamp: اسد اله اصفهانی — *Asad Allah Isfahani*, meaning "Asad Allah from Isfahan." In the Islamic world, particularly in Arab and Persian regions, personal names were often derived from the names of native cities, and for this reason, these sabers became known throughout the Muslim world as "Isfahan", after the hometown

[3] *Абылай ханға әрдайым,*
Ақыл қосып тұрып ең,
Ақ орданың ауласын,
Алдаспанмен қорғап жүріп ең (Babalar sözi 59: 129).
[4] *Қазынаның аш ауызын,*
Испаһанлы қылыш ал (Babalar sözi 56: 122).

of the master. Ch.Ch. Valikhanov noted that these Persian sabers, *isfahan*, were highly valued among the Kazakhs and became known as *narkesken* (Valikhanov 1985: 36). (Fig. 4).

In this case, we would like to support these statements with data from folkloric sources. For instance, in the historical epic *Batīr Jänibektiŋ öleŋi*, the following lines are encountered:

Having said this, Jänibek
Flashed a white sword,
And struck down upon the head.
The bulat narkesken — the white saber —
Split his skull as though it were wood.[5]

A close analysis of the epic verses reveals that the storyteller refers to the same weapon using two different terms — sword (*semser*) and saber (*qīlīsh*). In our view, this may indicate either a stylistic distinction or a functional differentiation. It cannot be excluded that both terms designate the same weapon. The name of this saber suggests a more pronounced curvature of the blade, as well as an enhanced cutting capacity that enabled the wielder to strike targets inaccessible to ordinary sabers. It was most likely these qualities that gave rise to the designation of *narkesken* within the Kazakh military tradition, a term which literally translates as "camel-cutter" and underscores the exceptional sharpness and slashing power of the weapon. This saber enjoyed such widespread popularity among the Kazakh military elite and warrior class that in the 18th and 19th centuries it was frequently depicted on gravestones and other cultic monuments (Samashev, Zhetibayev 2005: 32, 34, 36, 38, 39, 42, 44, Fig. 30, 32, 34, 38, 39, 43, 46).

The next designation of a saber in the Kazakh epic tradition is *zu al-faqar*. In the epic, *Er Qosay*, it is related how the batyr Er Kökshe, when confronted with five thousand Kalmyks, enumerates all of his weapons, including a reference to the legendary saber, *zu al-faqar:*

From my grandfather a zu al-faqar was passed down to me,
From my ancestors a zu al-faqar was passed down to me —
Beneath a span of black earth it rests,
And within it lie the life and honor of forty thousand batīrs.[6]

The name of this saber derives from the Arabic term ذو الْفَقَار — zū-l-faqār "the grooved", "with wavy blades." According to Islamic tradition, this saber was received by the Prophet Muhammad as a trophy following the Battle of Badr, and after his death it passed to his relative and companion, Caliph ʿAlī. It is assumed that the saber itself may have been known to the Arabs even before the emergence of Islam; however, it was only after it came into the possession of the Prophet Muhammad and his companion ʿAlī that it acquired sacred significance. Legend holds that *zu al-faqar* was endowed with magical properties, enabling it to lengthen or shorten at will (Islam: entsiklopedicheskiy slovar' 1991: 79).

Naturally, the emergence of a saber with this name in the range of armaments of the Muslims of Central Asia is associated with the spread of Islam during the medieval period. It may be assumed that the Great Steppe *batīrs* attributed to this weapon a particular sacred significance, which explains why popular storytellers endowed the sabers of their epic heroes with this name. According to iconographic and material evidence, the classical type of this saber featured a

[5] *Осыны айтып Жәнібек,*
Ақ семсерді бұлғалап,
Жіберді салып басына.
Наркескен болат ақ қылыш,
Қақ бөліп басын жарады (Babalar sözi 56: 58).
[6] *Атамнан қалған зұлпықар,*
Бабамнан қалған зұлпықар,
Қарыс қара жерінде,
Қырық мың ердің құны бар (Babalar sözi 44: 106).

bifurcated blade extending approximately to the midpoint of a moderately curved edge (Żygulski 1979: 225, fig. 231, 232) (Fig. 5), whereas later specimens were distinguished by a "wavy" blade profile with festooned decoration terminating in a split tip (Ahmetzhan 2007: 101, 105, Fig. 75: 8; Bobrov, Pronin 2012: 576, Fig. 2: 16). (Fig. 6).

In the Kazakh heroic epic, this saber is mentioned not so much by its direct name but rather through a descriptive form — by reference to the characteristics of its construction and appearance. For example, in the epic, *Alpamīs Batīr*, the hero's saber is described as follows:

Like the dragon tongue,
Its thrust is unseen,
Drawing it from the scabbard,
He took the saber-beren in his hand.[7]

In the cited excerpt, the narrator does not explicitly name the saber as *zu al-faqar*. Therefore, it cannot be asserted with certainty that Alpamīs Batīr possessed this specific weapon. However, considering that in the mythological imagery of East Asian cultures the dragon — conceived as a great serpent — has a forked tongue, one may cautiously assume that the storyteller intended to emphasize that Alpamīs Batīr indeed wielded the saber, *zu al-faqar*. The name of this saber, beyond its role in the Kazakh poetic tradition, also influenced anthroponymic practice as Kazakh families to this day continue to name their sons *Zulpīqar*.

In this part of the epic, another term merits attention — *beren*, used as an epithet associated with the saber. It is likely that this term was borrowed into Kazakh from Chagatai. In V.V. Radlov's dictionary, it is recorded with the following meanings: "the finest velvet" (from Chagatai) and "the finest steel" (from Kyrgyz) (Radlov 1911b: 1596). However, in Kazakh folklore, this term was widely used to describe both animate and inanimate objects distinguished by their beauty, durability, and uniqueness (Kaydarov 1973: 30). For example: *beren sunqar* ("the best falcon"), *beren qīlīsh* ("an excellent saber"), *beren mīltīq* ("a select rifle"), *beren jigit* ("a distinguished young warrior"), *beren sadaq* ("a superior bow"), and others. It is likely for this reason that the storyteller emphasizes the exceptional quality of Alpamīs Batīr's *zu al-faqar*. Considering the evidence presented and drawing on these parallels, it can be posited with a reasonable degree of confidence that military leaders and warriors of the Golden Horde, post-Horde khanates, and late Medieval and Early Modern Eurasian *hordes* employed *zu al-faqar* saber.

In the heroic epics, sabers are often referred to by the general term *bolat*, derived from the name of the material from which they were made. For example, in the epic *Qarasay, Qazy* in the Shayakhmet Karibaev's version, the Noghai batīr Qarasay attacks the Safavid Qīzīlbas with a saber forged of steel:

He will take in his hands the saber-almas,
Forged from pure bolat,
Dipped into scarlet blood,
Its past no one knows.
Had it not touched blood,
It would not have fit into the scabbard.[8]

[7] *Айдаһардың тіліндей,*
Салса кеткен білінбей,
Қынабынан суырып,
Қолына алды береңді (Babalar sözi 34: 87).
[8] *Қолға алмас алады,*
Шын болаттан соқтырған,
Қызыл қанға суарған,
Өткенін адам білмеген,
Егер де қанға тимесе,
Қынабына сыймаған (Babalar sözi 41: 386).

In this passage, the storyteller describes the saber using the terms *almas* and *bolat*. Both terms denote steel — the material from which sabers are forged. However, the first term, *almas*, is an indigenous word of the Kazakh language (Radlov 1911a: 438), whereas the second, *bolat*, was borrowed into Kazakh from the Persian word پولاد, meaning "steel" (Rustemov 1989: 72). It appears that in this case, the storyteller sought to emphasize that the saber of Qarasay Batyr was forged from high-quality steel. At the same time, the storyteller attempts to present the saber not merely as a weapon, but as a magical substance endowed with its own "secret." If the saber does not fulfill its primary function — namely performing a dynamic act by shedding blood — it cannot return to its scabbard.

In their works, storytellers often designate the saber not by its general appellation, but rather by individual elements of its construction or by the color of the material: *qara bolat* ("black saber"), *baldağī aq beren* ("saber with a white guard"), *aq baldaqtī kök beren* ("blue saber with a white guard"), *aq almas* ("white saber"), and others. However, these names do not denote separate types of sabers; instead, they constitute euphemistic designations that arose in the process of the weapon's sacralization, when the name of one of its parts was metonymically transferred to the entire object (Ahmetzhan 2007: 102).

The epithets of epic storytellers about swords and sabers can be traced back to archaic conceptions. The warrior's weapon, beyond its immediate combat function, was believed to possess the capacity to act independently of its owner's will. Moreover, in the early epic tradition of the nomads, weapons were often depicted as animate beings, endowed with personal names and capable of autonomous action (Lipec 1984: 79; Urmanche 2015: 289). It is likely for this very reason that written sources, alongside folkloric evidence, contain references to weapons bearing proper names which belonged to various historical figures — khans, sultans, warrior-batīrs, and others (Ivanics, Usmanov 2002: 59, 60).

In Kazakh heroic epics, in addition to references to sabers classified by the material of their manufacture, there are also descriptions with the names of individual structural elements of the weapon, for example, *baldaq* — translated as "guard" or "quillon of the hilt." Thus, in the epic, *Ertedegi Shora Batīr*, in the storyteller Musabay's version, the saber of the main character is described as follows:

With a saber, with a white hilt at his belt,
Following the many infidels,
Shouting a cry, he attacks.[9]

Overall, the quillon of the saber guard is one of its most important structural elements, designed to protect the hand from an opponent's strikes. The protective function of this element is particularly emphasized in epic works. For instance, in the epic *Er Qosay*, in the Asayīn Khangeldyn's version, the main character extols:

If you cannot withstand a saber blow,
The quillon will break — and your flaw will be revealed.[10]

Within these passages in Kazakh heroic epics, the storytellers mention not only the quillon of the saber guard, but also the entire hilt as a whole, that is, the term quillon is understood to denote the entire handle of the weapon. In these two passages, it is most likely that the most widespread Kazakh sabers of the *shamshir* type are being referenced. Structurally, shamshir sabers generally consist of three main components: the blade, the L-shaped hilt, and the guard, and they belong to the group of sabers with a strongly curved blade. On average, such sabers measure about 90 cm in overall length, with the blade

[9] *Ақбалдақ қылыш белінде,*
Көп кәуірдің соңында,
Айғайлап жауға тиеді (Babalar sözi 45: 64).
[10] *Шапқаныма шыдамай,*
Балдақтан кетсең, саған серт (Babalar sözi 44: 136).

width at the guard being approximately 3 cm. Weapons of this type were widely used among the Kazakhs in the 17th to 19th centuries, as evidenced by several original specimens preserved in the collections of Kazakhstani museums. In particular, the exhibition of the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan features six examples of such sabers (Fig. 7). One of the distinctive features of Kazakh and Central Asian shamshir sabers, compared to classical Iranian shamshirs, is the use of wooden "scales" attached to both sides of the hilt core (Bobrov, Ismailov 2019).

The classical form of the shamshir emerged in Iran in the 14th century, reaching its peak popularity between the 15th and 17th centuries across the Islamic world, including the Great Steppe and Central Asia (Bobrov, Pronin 2012: 574).

In Kazakh heroic epics, in addition to references to the structural elements of sabers, there are also descriptions of their color and manufacturing techniques. For example: *baldağī altīn almas* — a saber with a gilded guard; *kümis appaq baldaq* — a white saber with a silver guard; *aq baldaq* — a white guard. The comprehensive study has shown that the hilts and scabbards of shamshirs belonging to Kazakh and Central Asian noble warriors (the military-political elite) were often made with elements of precious metals, particularly gold and silver. Some blades were further embellished with gold-inlaid engraving, which corresponds to the descriptions of long-bladed weapons in the heroic epics. Mentions of "golden sabers" in the epics are not mere exaggerations: Russian museum collections preserve sabers from Khiva and Kokand adorned with silver plates covered in gilding (Bobrov, Sheremetev 2013: 240; Bobrov, Pronin 2012: 578—580). In addition, the grip scales of certain examples were crafted from walrus tusk or ivory in the style of classical Iranian shamshirs. One such shamshir is currently on exhibition at the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Fig. 7: 1).

Written sources also provide evidence of the use of rare and exotic materials in the manufacture of sabers among the Kazakhs and the peoples of Eastern Turkestan. Thus, the Chinese chronicle *Qinding Huangyu Xiyu tuzhi*, compiled in the 2nd half of the 18th century, contains the following description of a saber: "*Kelinci* (克凌齊). *Saber (Chinese: dao 刀). Its material is pure copper (Chinese: chundong 純銅). The blade is curved, and especially so near the tip. The hilt is made of the bone of a large fish (Chinese: dayugu 大魚骨) and of hardwood (Chinese: yingmu 硬木). The scabbard is fashioned from fish skin (Chinese: yupi 魚皮) and decorated with ivory (Chinese: xiangya 象牙) and tortoiseshell (Chinese: daima 玳瑁). At the end of the hilt there is a copper ring, to which a leather cord is attached*" (Bobrov, Pastukhov 2021: 192).

Another type of long-bladed chopping and cutting weapon mentioned in the Kazakh heroic epic is the *sapī*, known in arms studies as the shashka. For instance, in the epic, *Ötegen Batīr*, there is a description of the hero's attempt to make use of his weapon:

Snatching the saber from his belt, he froze,
His steady gaze already marking out the strike.
He raised the sapī — already set to slash,
But suddenly grew still, gathering his thoughts.[11]

In V.V. Radlov's dictionary, the word *sapī* in the Kazakh language is explained as "a type of dagger, shashka — eine Art Dolch, Sabel" (Radlov 1911a: 404). In the works of Ch.Ch. Valikhanov, it is noted that in the 19th century, the Kazakhs used a straight long-bladed chopping and cutting weapon called *sapī* or *shapī*, which resembled the shashka that was widespread in Central Asia (Valikhanov 1985: 36). The origin of the name of this type of weapon is apparently connected with the influence of Islamic culture among the Turks of Central Asia. It is assumed that the Arabic word *saif* ("sword" —

[11] *Сапысын жанындағы суырып ап,*
Ойланды кесуге енді оңтайланып.
Сапысын шабайын деп көтергенде,
Сабыр қып біраз тұрды ой ойланып (Babalar sözi 59: 170—171).

O.A.) in Qipchak dialects of the Turkic languages transformed into the form *šap* (Loseva-Bakhtiyarova 2005: 115—116), which later evolved in the Kazakh language into the variants *sapī* or *shapī*.

Structurally, the shashka *sapī* represents a slightly curved or nearly straight single-edged blade with a hilt lacking a quillon. According to K.S. Ahmetzhan, the Central Asian and Kazakh shashka without a quillon developed from the long knife and eventually supplanted the saber as firearms became widespread, at a time when hand-to-hand combat with sabers (equipped with a quillon) had already fallen out of military practice, with the weapon being specialized exclusively for chopping and cutting functions (Ahmetzhan 2007: 103).

As noted above, this type of weapon was widely used among Kazakh warriors in the 18th and 19th centuries, a fact corroborated by material evidence. In particular, three well-preserved authentic specimens of Central Asian and Kazakh shashkas *sapī* are presented in the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan. On average, their total length is approximately 85—90 cm, while the blade width at the base of the hilt measures about 3 cm (Fig. 8).

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the long-bladed weapons mentioned in Kazakh heroic epics demonstrate a high degree of correspondence with the material, visual, and written sources that reflect the armaments of the nomads of Kazakhstan and adjacent territories. Swords and sabers occupied an important place in the military equipment of Eurasian nomads from the earliest times through the ethnographic period. Within traditional Kazakh culture, these types of weapons became the focus of numerous rituals, beliefs, and symbolic representations. Moreover, in the medieval nomadic states of Eurasia, they often served as political instruments, particularly in the investiture of power.

To summarize the present study, it may be concluded that in Kazakh heroic epics long-bladed weapons are denoted by the following terms: *semser*, *qīlīsh*, and *sapī*. In addition, various collocations referring to these weapons have been identified, including *aldaspan, isfahan (asfahan, asbaqan), narkesken*, *zu al-faqar*; terms denoting uniqueness such as *beren*; material-based descriptors such as *bolat, almas*; and color- or form-based designations such as *qara bolat, baldağī aq beren, aq baldaqtī kök beren,* and *aq almas.*

Works of oral folk tradition are characterized by inherent features of hyperbole and amplification, exaggeration of events and plots, solemnity, and expressive vividness. These qualities, without doubt, constitute common traits of the folk heritage of peoples worldwide. However, it is not difficult to observe that specific elements of material culture — particularly items of weaponry — described in epics reflect the realities of the ethnocultural life of the society that produced these heroic narratives. Moreover, Kazakh heroic epic has gained recognition among both domestic and international folklorists precisely due to its high degree of historical realism.

In this regard, we maintain that the names and descriptions of long-bladed weapons recorded in the Kazakh heroic epics under consideration, in terms of their morphological origins, can be traced at least as far back as the medieval era of the Turkic-Mongolian tribes who established the Ulus of Jochi — the Golden Horde — as well as to the state formations that subsequently emerged on its territory, particularly the Kazakh Khanate. Overall, the terminology, forms, and types of these specimens of long-bladed weaponry derive from ancient traditions of Kazakh weaponry, shaped through processes of cultural exchange among the peoples of the Great Steppe. An analysis of sabers preserved in the museum collections of Kazakhstan indicates that this type of weapon continued to be used by Kazakh warriors up to the early 20th century.

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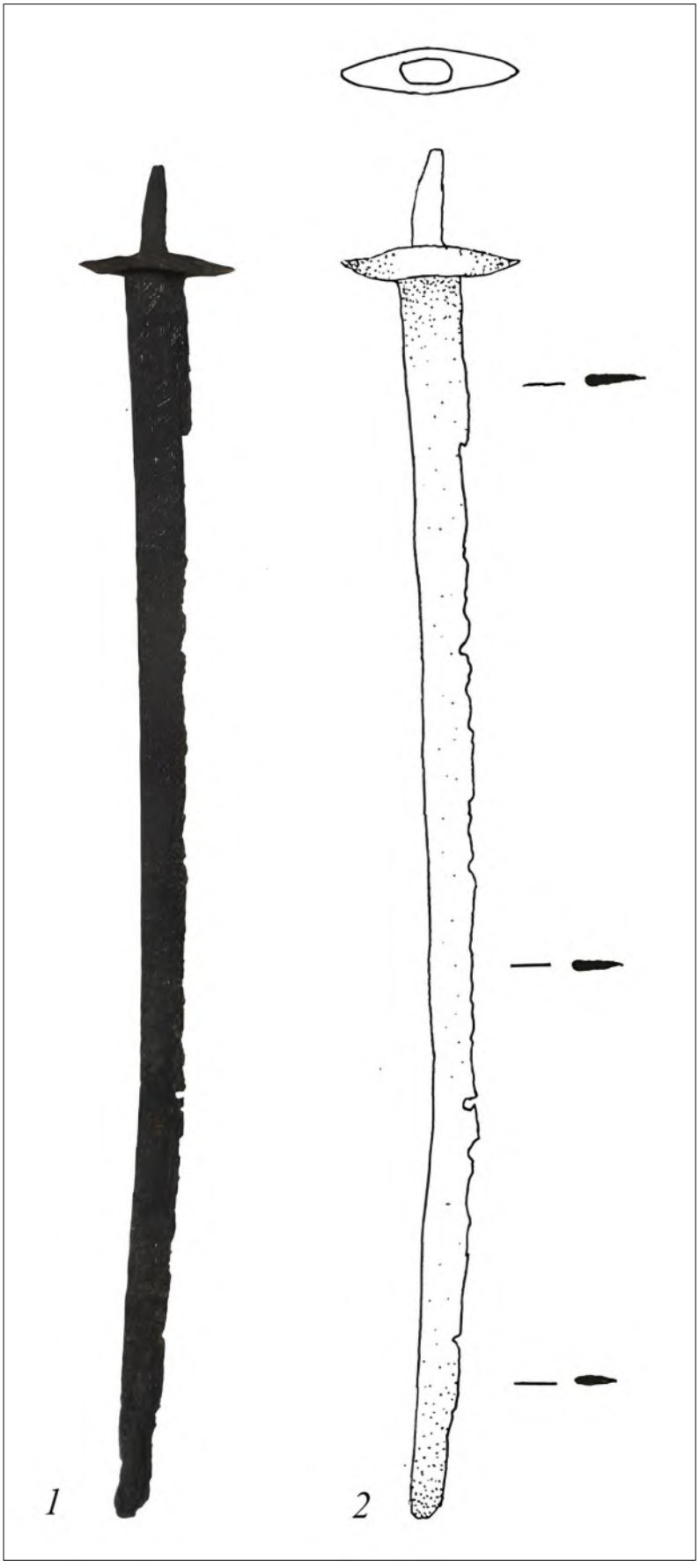

Fig. 1. Saber, inv. no. QRŪM 802, dating to the Mongol period, from the collections of the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (photo by K.K. Musin): *1* — general view; *2* — drawing of the saber (illustration by A.B. Smailova).



Fig. 2. Images of Turkic-Mongolian warriors with sabers. *Shah-nama (Great Mongol)*, Iran, Tabriz, 1330s. Collection des Musées d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva.



Fig. 3. Turkic military commander with an *aldaspan* saber. Battle scene from a *Zafar-nama* by Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi, Herat, 1485—1486, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 4. Kazakh batīr with a *narkesken* (?) saber. Private collection. 1736. John Castle. (after Bobrov, Sheremetev 2013).



Fig. 5. *Zu al-faqar* saber: *1* — general view; *2* — bifurcated blade. Private collection (after armantik.ru: 1).



Fig. 6. *Zu al-faqar* saber, inv. no. CMK KP 1918, from the collections of the Central State Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (photo by K.K. Musin): *1* — general view; *2* — bifurcated blade tip.



Fig. 7. *Shamshir* sabers from the collections of the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (photo by K.K. Musin): *1* — inv. no. QRŪM nq 42523; *2* — inv. no. QRŪM nq 10470; *3* — inv. no. QRŪM nq 10757; *4* — inv. no. QRŪM nq 10761; *5* — inv. no. QRŪM nq 101; *6* — inv. no. QRŪM nq 10757.



Fig. 8. *Sapī* shashkas from the collections of the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (photo by K.K. Musin): *1* — inv. no. QRŪM nq 10762; *2* — inv. no. QRŪM nq 10769; *3* — inv. no. QRŪM nq 658.