

ARMS, ARMOUR AND TACTICS OF

Sassanian Savārān

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The Sassanian elite cavalry formed the military backbone of the Persian Empire during the Sassanian period. There were three general stages in the tactical development of the Savārān. The first was a 'Parthian' stage in which units of super-heavy cavalry were supported by lightly-armed 'Sagittarii' horse archers. Secondly there was a tactical shift to super-heavy cavalry, which may explain why archery may have declined amongst the Savārān after Šāpur I (Bivar 1972:284). The third stage witnessed the abandonment of super-heavy cavalry in favour of the more universal cavalryman, proficient with both bow and lance. The Sassanian mounted warriors followed the principles of honourable warriors and helped the empire to defend its national borders against foreign invaders. At the same time, the expansionist policies of the Sassanian Empire placed great emphasis on both offensive and defensive warfare, and the technology of warfare played a crucial role during the empire's history. This resulted in constant contact with various kingdoms in the East (Afghanistan, Central Asia, and China) and in the West (Rome, Asia Minor, Armenia, Syria, and Egypt) (Mata 2000:185). The warriors were equipped with different offensive and defensive weapons. The arms and armour used in the Sassanian Empire bear witness to the development of military technology as a result of confrontations with other nations and also reveal traces of the Parthian tradition in warfare.

Summary

The Sassanian Savārān went through three general stages in their tactical development: a 'Parthian' stage that included units of super-heavy cavalry supported by lightly-armed 'Sagittarii' horse archers; a doctrinal shift to super heavy cavalry; and the abandonment of super-heavy cavalry in favour of the more universal cavalryman, proficient with both bow and lance. Not only did tactics change during this time but many types of arms and armour were adapted and changed accordingly, such as helmets, the introduction of stirrups, and a change in the sword suspension system. Based on their shape and suspension system, Sassanian swords can be classified in four different types: swords with crossguards and



Above: An early Sassanian sword with a crossguard. This type of sword was hung via a scabbard slide system in front of the body (Courtesy of the National Museum of Iran)
Right: A Sassanian sword with P-shaped scabbard attachments. The scabbard and handle are covered with a silver sheet without feather pattern

a scabbard slide system; swords with scabbards and P-shaped attachments; Sassanian swords with silver-covered scabbards and handles that are decorated with a feather pattern, without P-shaped attachments on the scabbard; and two-handed Sassanian swords.

The early Savārān (226–300CE)

The debut of the early Sassanian Savārān was made at Fruzabad in the lance-duel battle that took place between them and the Parthians, who they overthrew in 224CE. A key element in the Sassanian victory was their use of armour. The Parthians relied on scale and laminated armour while the Sassanians deployed a wider range of armour including vambraces, greaves (laminated), breastplates and most notably mail. The mail links in their armour afforded both flexibility and excellent protection. The Sassanian ability to efficiently combine quilted armour (for legs and arms), plate armour and mail optimised the battlefield protection of the Savārān, making them far deadlier adversaries to their Roman opponents than the Parthians (Farrokh 2005:217). The Romans proved unable to effectively neutralise the early Savārān on the battlefield, especially during the reigns of Ardešīr and Šāpur.

The primary weapon was the long lance used against mounted opponents and Roman infantry (Brown 1936:446). Despite quivers being depicted in sites such as Naq̄-e-Rostam, there is no portrayal of archery at any of these sites. Archery, however, continued its role as a specialised support arm among both mounted and infantry units. This meant that the early Sassanians had a partly "Parthian appearance" with respect to lancers being supported by horse archers. None of the depictions of the early Savārān at Naq̄-e-Rostam, Naq̄-e-Rajab or Bāšāpur show any of them with shields. This does not mean that shields were totally dispensed with, but rather that the handling of the two-handed lance in battle precluded the simultaneous manual handling of shields (large or small).

The Romans had learnt to offset Parthian horse archery by recruiting auxiliary archers (mounted and foot) (Farrokh 2007:158–161). But the application of these same troops and methods failed against the Sassanian Savārān. One possibility is that at least some