

The Zulfiqar

Advanced

When I conceived this module I hoped that the zulfiqar would offer an example of an early wootz sword. It doesn't. The Zulfiqar, also spelled Dhulfaghar, Zolfaaghar, Dhu al-Fiqar, Dhu l-faqar, Thulfeqar, Dhulfiqar, Zoulfika or Zülfikar, is a more or less mystical sword connected to the Prophet Mohammad and his son-in-law and cousin Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib. It seems that the zulfiqar is first mentioned around 800 AD but more prominently in writing that appeared roughly 600 years after Ali might have used it. From whatever it was in antiquity it has mutated to a symbol often encountered in the Islamic world.

[Here](#) is a picture I have used before and here is a new one:



The uninitiated may not see a sword in these symbols. That is partially due to the high level of abstraction but mostly to the curious circumstance that the zulfiqar is generally conceived as being bifurcated, whatever that is supposed to mean.

What is known about the zulfiqar? Not much and a lot. Not much or better nothing from first-hand sources, and a lot from later and partially apocryphal writings. If you want full details, turn to pages 195 - 197 in [Khorasani's opus magnus](#) or to David Alexander's paper [1](#). Here I will only relate a few highlights.

The story going with the sword

The zulfiqar was one of the 7 (or 9) swords of the Prophet. He came into its possession either by taking it from a conquered enemy at the battle of Badr (624 AD) or by receiving it from the archangel Gabriel. Prophet Mohammad gave the sword to Ali in some other battle (like the battle of Uhud 625). Ali used it so effectively that (later) a well-known saying came up: "There is no hero and man like Ali; There is no sword like zulfiqar". This is often found as a kind of talismanic inscription, e.g. on sword blades.

All of this is perfectly possible. The Prophet certainly owned swords, used them, and could have given one to Ali who distinguished himself in some battle.

The name

One can't possibly outdo Wikipedia in this, so here goes:

[Interpretations of the sword's name as found in Islamic theological writings or popular piety fall into four categories:](#)

- reference to the literal vertebrae of the spine, yielding an interpretation in the sense of "the severer of the vertebrae; the spine-splitter"
- reference to the stars of the belt of Orion, emphasizing the celestial provenance of the sword interpretation of faqar as an unfamiliar plural of fuqrah "notch, groove, indentation", interpreted as a reference to a kind of decoration of regularly spaced notches or dents on the sword
- reference to a "notch" formed by the sword's supposed termination in two points

The latter interpretation gives rise to the popular depiction of the sword as a double-pointed scimitar in modern Shia iconography. Heger (2008) considers two additional possibilities,

- the name in origin referred simply to a double-edged sword (i.e. an actual sword rather than a sabre or scimitar), the (something or other in Geek) of the New Testament
- fiqar is a corruption of firaq "distinction, division", and the name originally referred to the metaphorical sword discerning between right and wrong.

Take your pick.

The bifurcation

It is not quite clear why the sword is assumed to have been bifurcated or what, exactly, that means. It is rather quite likely that the sword was not even remotely similar to what was made of that later. Bifurcated, two-pronged or double-bladed swords other than the zulfiqar, to the best of my knowledge, have never been found or were mentioned in ancient sources. The reason for this is simple: It does not make for a better sword.

- The "bifurcation" was interpreted in two major and totally different ways. The first one, now carrying the day, shows a sword with a kind of slotted, two-pronged tip:



Zulfiqar renditions

[Here](#) is a large size picture of the zulfiqar in the Istanbul [Askeri museum](#)

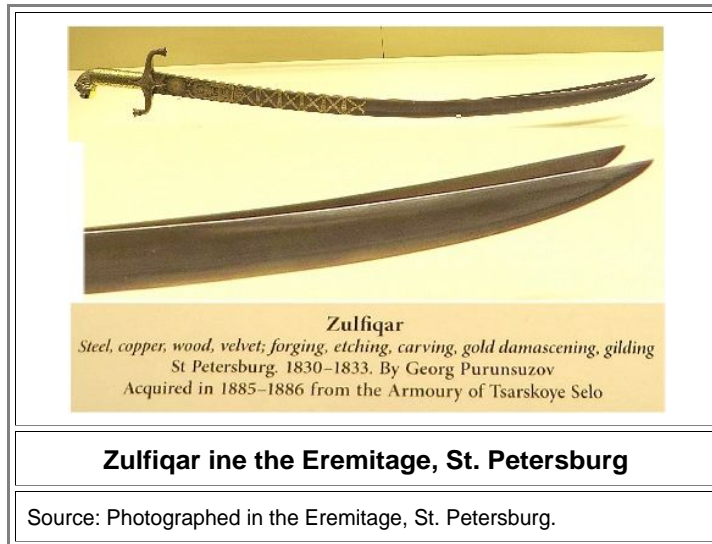
1 and 2: probably 19th century interpretation of the zulfiqar. These sword were on sale by Oriental Arms.

3: The "real" zulfiqar, possibly one of the swords of the Prophet kept in the Topkapi museum. From an Islamic text.

4: Same sword but with a two-pronged tip, obviously made by some picture manipulation. From another Islamic text.

- One might argue that a two pronged tip makes for easier stabbing. If that would be true, one should have seen more swords with a fork-like tip.

There are no arguments at all, however weak, for the second type: a sword with two blades like the one shown on the [Dresden museum](#) or below. On the contrary, it is often stated that a sword like this has no fighting value.



Some articles about the zulfiqar consider it possible that Iranian myths contributed to the "reconstruction" of the sword during the Iranian conversion to Shiism. It also goes almost without saying that Shiite and Sunnite versions of the zulfiqar can be quite different. If you want to dig a bit deeper, I recommend the article of David Alexander [1](#). Be that as it may, I would tend to assume, along with most everybody, that the real zulfiqar was rather not two-bladed. In all probability it wasn't two-pronged either but similar to No 3 shown above. A cleft in the tip could have been a battle scar. "Fractures in the tip were not uncommon in early wootz blades from Arabia" writes Wikipedia, they might even have been seen as a mark of honor. If the real zulfiqar was two-pronged or not is a moot question by now. The zulfiqar dear to many Muslims today *is* two-pronged. Versions of the zulfiqar, often heavily stylized, have become a strong religious symbol in parts of the Islamic world.

● Examples are:

- Many swords from the Islamic empire have a zulfiqar symbol on their blades; you also find it on flags on other articles. See the picture above.
- The zulfiqar is especially popular among the Shiites. The Alevites, often seen as a branch of the Shiia, see the Zulfiqar (or zulfikar) as representing resistance to oppression and often wear a representation on a necklace or in other connections.
- Zulfiqar and its variations are used as name in the Islamic world, witness former Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and many others less prominent.
- Military units or hardware might be named "zulfiqar". For example an Iranian attack boat or a Bosnian special army unit.

To conclude: It becomes quite clear that the zulfiqar is an object that provides for fascinating historical / theological / sociological studies but has nothing to offer for a better understanding of early medieval iron and steel technology in the "East".

¹⁾ David Alexander: "Dhujl-Faqar and the legacy of the Prophet, Mirath Rasul Allah" Gladius XIX (1999), pp. 157 - 185