



May 2016

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More than One Way to Measure: Masculinity in *Zurkhaneh* of Safavid Iran

Winner, 2016 Graduate Humanities Conference

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The *zurkhaneh* is a uniquely Iranian institution that claims a social history extending at least back to the time of the Safavid Empire. The closest modern corollary is the gym where wrestlers trained and competed, though the activity of the *zurkhaneh* was much more highly structured than modern gyms. While the *zurkhaneh* has undergone a substantial amount of change from then until now, the ethos of the *zurkhaneh* has remained relatively untouched. Indeed, Lloyd Ridgeon (2007) writes of the *zurkhaneh* as caught “between tradition and change” describing that the modern perception of the *zurkhaneh* is of “an old Iranian institution where “ancient sports” are performed in an environment of ideal masculinity and ethical behavior in which normal social structures are transcended through processes of social leveling (p. 243).

This ethos of manliness and manners, I suggest, is a vestige of the *zurkhaneh*'s history, embedded in the structure and encoded in the logic of the institution. As such, it provides a window into the lives of its members through a physical culture of early modern Safavid Iran, making it possible to gain insights about the subjectivity of non-elite males as well as understand their position in the social economy of Safavid society.

This paper will offer a sketch of the *zurkhaneh*, paying special attention to the physicality and materiality of its culture and construction as well as to the significance of its embodied practices and the authority it derives from textual practices.¹ Through this sketch, I hope to suggest that the athletic rituals of the *zurkhaneh*, together with the recitations of the *Shahnameh*, and the valorization of Rostam, Ali, and Purya-ye Vali constitute what might be called a cultural liturgy, a ritualized way of the formation of the whole self. As a cultural liturgy, the practices of the *zurkhaneh* operated as pedagogies for the formation of both the ethical self and the body of the *zurkhaneh* athlete, known as a *pahlavan*.

By showing how the *zurkhaneh* operated as a public site for the cultivation of the self this paper attempts to theorize the *zurkhaneh* as a site of the construction of a subaltern masculinity in Safavid Iran. To accomplish this, this paper will combine the themes of publicity, the social utility of the body, and the authority of textuality with an examination of the physical culture of the *zurkhaneh* to theorize the utility, representation, and experience of

¹ There is a dearth of texts and images of the early modern *zurkhaneh*, when considering literature available in English. Because of this, the sketch of the *zurkhaneh* I am working with relies heavily on more recent descriptions offered by scholars. While these descriptions are of the more modern *zurkhaneh*, it does not seem unreasonable to assume some level of continuity with those of the early modern institution, especially an institution so invested in tradition. Further, Luijendijk (2011) notes the continuity between Francklin's description from 1786 and his own modern experiences. So while this is a less than ideal way of pursuing history, I believe there is value in attempting to reconstruct some of this history, even if imperfectly, to try and tease out some of the implications of the *zurkhaneh* as a rich site of physical and material culture for non-elite males in the time of Safavid Iran.

non-elite male bodies in early modern Safavid Iran. Insights gleaned from this will be applied to theories about the subjectivity of male commoners in early modern Indo-Persianate society and juxtaposed against scholars like O'Hanlon (1999) who take masculine modes of comportment as a construction of the imperial court for managing the nobility.

I will argue that though situated on the fringes of society (Rochard, 2002), the *pahlavans* were able to participate in the social economy of *javanmardi* or "young manliness" and masculine comportment through the cultural liturgy of the *zurkhaneh*. Extending this analysis further, it will be suggested that the physical strength of the *pahlavans* publicly marked their masculinity in a way that connoted the strong man with the ideal of "young manliness," and this combination inscribed and invested authority into and upon the bodies of the *pahlavans*. Observing the political utility of the *pahlavans* and the participation of certain nobles in the practice of the *zurkhaneh* it is possible to show at least one way that the construction of Persian masculinity occurred non-hierarchically.

Situating an Indo-Persianate Masculinity

In her article on Mughal masculinity, O'Hanlon (1999) notes that studies of Indian history—following trends in the humanities and social sciences more broadly—have realized the significance of gender as a field through which to analyze society (p. 47). However as is often the case, "gender" tends to refer to identities that are other than masculine (O'Hanlon, 1999, p. 47). This is significant, because as O'Hanlon indicates, it has lead researchers to ignore "men as gendered beings and gendered bodies" despite the fact that masculinity defined many of the social ideals of early modern society (1999, p. 48).

O'Hanlon's suggestion is that there were specific "modes of comportment" for men in Mughal India. That is, there were specific ways of being masculine, ways that were embodied, lived, and engendered. Necessarily, masculinity is enacted against a social backdrop; it is a fundamentally gendered way of social being and relating, and thus of being and relating to others. O'Hanlon's work is concerned with the Indo-Persian discourses on masculinity, and she adeptly shows how these discourses featured in the religious and political economy of Mughal India. Ideal manhood is constructed in terms of kingship, imperial service, and statecraft and O'Hanlon makes clear that the Mughal state played an active role in shaping masculinity after the "ideal imperial servant" (1999, pp. 84-85). "These codes," O'Hanlon argues, "emerged in the context of a court culture which consumption and display were important indicators of authority" (1999, p. 84). Of course, masculine modes of comportment were composed of many complex factors, all clamoring to claim authority over the male body. These codes were not strict, and were negotiated individually according to personal tastes. Eventually, according to O'Hanlon, the result was that men from different classes and stations attempted to usurp the masculine social convention to try and act like individuals of high culture (1999, p. 84). This became problematic as these individuals misinterpreted the codes and behaved according to unorthodox convention. Such men were seen as imposters, and they were often accused of dressing like women. Clothes and accessories as a function of material culture marked these men as women, or non-men, much as physical barriers and materiality were used to mark of the harem as the property of the emperor. Matthee (1994; 2014) make similar observations, writing of the norms of Safavid male nobility in their navigation of taverns and coffee houses and theorizing the significance of the two establishments and their associated beverages in terms of their level of publicity and social status.

While analyses of these different social institutions and the modes of comportment expected of imperial servants offer a rich picture of male life in early modern Indo-Persia, it is a picture restricted to males that were explicitly associated with imperial courtly life. This paper is an attempt to critique this position by offering a subaltern construction of

masculinity, showing that non-elite male “negotiation” of masculinity was a complex process and one that was not exclusive to courtly constructions. Not only were subaltern males able to participate in the social economy of masculinity, they were able to contribute to it.

The Zurkhaneh

The history surrounding the Iranian *zurkhaneh* and the *pahlavans* who frequented it is fraught with ambiguity. Some scholars have advanced the notion that the *zurkhaneh* and its rituals originated out of Aryan Mithraic “religion” but this evidence seems circumstantial until the archeological record establishes otherwise.² More recently this argument has suffered severe criticism, causing at least one prominent scholar to claim that the Mithraic thesis has been thoroughly debunked (Ilahi, 1994; Cited by Rochard, 2002). The nature of the *pahlavans* (also known occasionally as *lutis*) is similarly ambiguous as these members of the *zurkhaneh* are frequently associated with a range of character assumptions and activities from chivalry to thuggery, sometimes also taking on explicit sexual connotations of homo-erotic or pederastic activity (Floor, 1971).

Luijendijk (2011) suggests that the *zurkhaneh* is an Iranian institution, especially with the symbolic belt tying practices, which are reminiscent of Zoroastrian rituals (see also Zakeri, 2009). A number of scholars find the *zurkhaneh* originating out of the *futuwwas*, especially those that were active under the Abbasids (Hanaway, 1989; Zakeri, 2009; Luijendijk, 2011). Chehabi (2006) acknowledges the tradition of the *futuwwa* in the *zurkhaneh*, however, he finds the *zurkhaneh* to be a unique institutional development under the Safavids. Phillippe Rochard (2002) notes this controversy, and follows the history of wrestling as a “profession” in order to elucidate the origins of the *zurkhaneh*. Rochard (2002) indicates that wrestling obtained its “letters of nobility” sometime between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, and makes mention of several chapters on wrestling dating from the fourteenth century, including sections of the *Badayi al-Waqayi* (1349/1970) and the *Futuwwat-namah Sultani* (1350/1971). Rochard (2002) takes the existence of these two texts and the “professionalization” of wrestling at this time to infer that it seems likely that the *zurkhaneh* was formalized as an institution around this time—though this is somewhat speculative since the earliest known mention of the *zurkhaneh* in Persian texts does not occur until the late seventeenth century (p. 321).

What is uncontested is that the *zurkhanehs* were a place of physical training, and that this was a distinctly male public space frequented primarily (though not exclusively) by the lower classes (Chardin, 1686/1988; Francklin, 1811). Taking these three seemingly obvious aspects of the *zurkhaneh* and situating them within the unique milieu of early modern Safavid Iran, it is possible to offer a reading of the *zurkhaneh* as a unique public site of cultural pedagogy for early modern Persian masculinity.

The Zurkhaneh as a Public

John Hardin, in what is to date the earliest European account the *zurkhaneh*, writes during the Safavid period. Hardin writes that, “wrestling [is] the exercise of people in a lower condition; and generally speaking, only of people who are indigent” (Chardin, 1686/1988, pp. 200-201). From this, we gather that unlike the coffee houses, *madrasas*, and many of the other public institutions that are available thanks to European travelogues like Chardin’s, the *zurkhaneh* was a public space primarily frequented by the lower or non-elite classes. This is not to suggest that the nobles had nothing to do with the *zurkhaneh*. Chardin (1686/1988, pp. 200-201) notes that it was common for noblemen to patronize a *zurkhaneh* with the purpose of

² See Amirtash (2008) and Rochard (2002, p. 3) for a brief overview of these positions.

“training his people,” and nineteenth century traveler Gaspard Drouville suggests that nobles participated in the activities of the *zurkhaneh* (Cited by Chehabi, 2006).

This is an interesting phenomenon, because it would have violated the norms of noble or courtly sociability. Theorizing the *zurkhaneh* as an alternative public, similar to the kind that Hasan (2005) discusses in the context of Mughal India, the voluntary association of a noble with and in a specifically lower class institution stands out. Interestingly, as Ridgeon (2007) points out, it seems possible that some nobles associated themselves with the *zurkhaneh* as a matter of social or political utility, possibly trying to associate themselves with the ideals of *javanmardi*. In this way the *zurkhaneh* acted as a site of social leveling, and the rituals and construction of the *zurkhaneh* reinforced this. Ridgeon (2007) describes the logic of the rituals of the *zurkhaneh* as engendering a “loss of status, class, race...” (p. 245). As the athletes status is checked at the door (literally, as he strips, performs ritual ablutions, and dons the uniform apparel of the *zurkhaneh*) this creates the possibility of establishing a new social order inside of the *zurkhaneh*, where social status is achieved through the merits of physical ability and moral comportment (Ridgeon, 2007). As an alternative public, the *zurkhaneh* enabled its participants a means through which to exercise their own subjectivity, even in the presence of nobility while also allowing them to demarcate the boundaries of their discursive community.

The power of the *zurkhaneh* as an alternative public and social institution in its own right can be observed in its patronage. Local officials and even kings patronized the *zurkhaneh*, and used them as a means by which to maintain order in the neighborhoods of the city (Luijendijk, 2011). Local wrestling heroes could be viewed as Robin Hoods or local mobsters, depending on their affiliation and activity. Significantly, such affiliation was varied—Luijendijk (2011) notes that along with merchants and artisans, both Sufis and “ruffians” frequented the *zurkhaneh*.

Schools of Bodies, Schools of Virtues

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the *zurkhaneh* is its ideal of *javanmardi*, or ethos of young manliness, closely associated with what might be conceived as a kind of “chivalry.” As O’Hanlon (1999) notes, the notion of *javanmardi* would have been widely known and circulated during the Safavid empire, and implied a wide range of both physical, material, social, and spiritual affectations.

Daud Ali (2004) offers a similar analysis of courtly culture in early medieval India writing that, “moral action was not simply a matter of following rules and ethical norms, but also in developing an ethical *sensibility*” (p. 91). Ali borrows from Foucault to develop this ethical sensibility as it is expressed in early medieval Indian treatises, suggesting that these treatises operated in a “‘subjectivising’ manner... enjoining individuals to constitute themselves as ‘subjects’ of ethical conduct” (2004, p. 92). Significantly, much of the remainder of Ali’s book presents the ways in which physical and material cultures contributed to the formation of this ethical sensibility in the courtly life of early medieval India.

Though the Safavid Empire was several centuries and some geographical distance from the time in which Ali’s work is set, he introduces Foucault’s theoretical framework in a redolent way by coupling it with explorations of physical and material cultures. These tools can be put to further use when coupled with Foucault’s (1979) observations in *Discipline and Punish* as to how bodies become sites of knowledge and power through political “technologies of the body.” It is important to note that while Foucault focuses on the disciplining of the public through the spectacle of public punishment and the corporeal forms of capital punishment and torture, these technologies may also involve non-violent yet nonetheless strategic technologies of the body. In describing the “political technology of the body” as a strategy, Foucault’s work is not only relevant to studying the penal system but can

also be applied to other institutional deployments of these technologies. This is possible because these “technologies” or “strategies” are not specific to any institution or state; instead, each institution “select or impose certain of its methods” (Foucault, 1979, p. 26).

Hasan has written that, “We are . . . ignorant about the complex mechanisms through which discursive sites, communities and identities were established and destroyed, and their significance in the overall organization of socioeconomic life” (2005, p. 84). But by adopting Foucault’s conceptual toolset, it is possible to theorize the *zurkhaneh* in terms of a technology of ethical selfhood, which sought not only to form ideal bodies but also to impart virtuous character and even a more general ethical sensibility. In doing so, it is possible to contribute to the picture of discursive and communal identity formation that Hasan refers to, even if only in one small way. As an alternative public, it is possible to view the *zurkhaneh* as a place of place of non-elite male subjectivity through which the ideal of young manliness operated as a social leveler, enabling nobles and peasant men alike the opportunity to seek the ideal of *javanmardi* and participate in the social economy. To support this idea, this paper will only briefly consider the architecture, geographical location, and interior design of the physical structure of the *zurkhaneh* as well as the textuality and musicality lead by the *morshed*, and how these interact with the physical and embodied practices of the athletes.

The Construction of Space

The *zurkhaneh* seems to have been a common feature of the bazaar, located alongside of coffee houses, taverns, and *madrasas* in the center of the city (Rochard, 2002). Such a location reflects that the *zurkhaneh* was both a popular and central structure to urban life in early modern Safavid Iran, and bolsters the notion that it operated within the mainstream of the public sphere. Babi Rahimi’s work on early modern publics supports this idea, and he specifically mentions the *zurkhaneh* along with public baths, the bazaar, and coffee houses when he writes that “this ritual spatialization identified a type of public characterized as an informal sphere of civic cultures and cognitive networks of relations” (2012, p. 13).

The actual structure of the *zurkhaneh* possesses a number of features reminiscent of a sacred space, and the features work together to act upon and physically orient the body of the *pahlavan*. The first feature evident is that there is one single entrance to the *zurkhaneh*, purposefully built so that anyone entering is obliged to duck down, and with a set of racks for shoes (Luijendijk, 2011). No one is allowed to enter with shoes on, reinforcing an aura of awe in the *zurkhaneh*. By forcing a prostrated position upon entrance the subject is compelled into a posture of humility, and thus forced to embody—or at least enact—the virtues of humility and respect (Chehabi, 2006; Luijendijk, 2011).

Another feature is the interior organization and decoration of the space. Situated near the entrance is the *sardam*, which an elevated platform where an individual known as the *morshed* leads the exercises from (Luijendijk, 2011). The *sardam* carries the same symbolic meaning as a lectern or pulpit in a modern church, a space that serves to set apart the *morshed* from the participants as well as to focus their attention both on him and on the texts which he is reading. Subtly, the *sardam* reinforces the centrality and authority of these texts by elevating the platform from which they emanate.

At the center of the space is the *gowd*, which is octagonal and is recessed into the floor (Luijendijk, 2011). This is the area where the exercises take place, the central stage of the *zurkhaneh*. Significantly, the athletes arrange themselves around a senior practitioner called the *miandar* who stands in the center of the *gowd* and leads the exercises in conjunction with the *morshed* (Luijendijk, 2011). This arrangement reinforces hierarchical notions of authority and invests the *miandar* with a sort of power as the rest of the athletes revolve around his center.

The walls of the *zurkhaneh* are covered with pictures and photos of past athletes and saints, taken to be exemplars both in terms of physical and moral prowess (Partow Bayzā'i, pp. 35-3; Luijendijk, 2011). Portraits of Rustam, Ali, and Purya-ye Vali are quite common, and these photos function as icons of ideal young manliness, fit of body and capable of superhuman feats of strength while also possessing superior moral virtue. Rustam is considered a hero, the equivalent of the Greek Odysseus of Homer's *Iliad*, and functions as a mythical hero of Persian culture. Purya-ye Vali is also often recognized as a hero tied to the founding of the *zurkhaneh*, and poetry attributed to him essentially problematizes hierarchical understandings of masculinity—the lines of one quatrain attributed to him read, "... Study baseness when in search of grace. Since the water you drink from the ground is never high up" (N. Tabor, personal communication, December 22, 2016). The figures represent the ideal that all the members of the *zurkhaneh* aspire to, and give faces to the heroes in the epic poetry that the *morshed* recites during the exercises. These portraits and pictures help to anchor the members of the *zurkhaneh* in the history and tradition of young manliness, providing them with role models as well as offering something to attain and aspire to in their own practice.

Authority, Textuality, and Embodiment in Practice

Bashir writes that "the body as an artifact [is] constructed at the conjunction of ideological and material factors... in various socio-historical contexts" (2010, p. 73). Fusing together the idea of textuality and body, we can thus look at the body as a text, or as Bashir offers, as a kind of tool that is "implicated in... human attempts to construct knowledge" (2010, p. 73). Through the reading of bodies we can come to understand better the ways that these texts interact with bodies. We can observe what types of "tools" bodies are posed as and can in turn interpret the ways that they are used. Thus it is possible to "read" how texts enact themselves on bodies, or even, as Bashir suggests, the way that certain doctrinal elements of texts "encode" the body of the subject (2010, p. 72).

Within the *zurkhaneh*, the *morshed* is the individual who guides the overall ethos and direction of the practice. The *morshed* does this by reading or reciting texts from the *shanameh* as well as other hero and epic poems, some steeped in tradition like the *shanameh* and others of more modern origin. Chehabi (2006) cites poems by Sa'adi, Hafez, Rumi, and Ferdowsi and also notes that there was "a type of *mathnawi* specific to the *zurkhaneh*, the *gol-e koshti* ('flower of wrestling'), of which the most famous is that of Mir Najat Esfahani." According to Luijendijk (2011), the lyrics serve an "educational purpose... as a guide and motivation to accomplish the path of the *javanmardi*" (p. 105). Others have noted that the one of the most common recitations is of the section of the *Shahnameh*, which features Rustam's heroic exploits (Bahmanesh, 1993).

Rustam is often viewed as the father of the *zurkhaneh*, just as he is one of the fathers of Iran. The story of Rustam grounds the practice of the *zurkhaneh* in Iranian history and roots its practices in a kind of "hero practice." The content of the lyrics serve to provide the *zurkhaneh* with a history and a culture as well as operates as an "authority," as texts often do, for the practice of the *zurkhaneh*.³

Musicality: Bridging body and text

Significantly, these lyrics are accompanied with music. Musically, the *morshed* plays a drum and bells accompanying the poetry (Kiani & Faraji, 2011). The drumming serves to set the

³ Lloyd Ridgeon looks at the Shia, Sufi, and Iranian symbolism in detail and notes how stories about these heroes reinforce different ideologies. For example, he suggests that references and veneration of Ali take on a strong nationalistic Shia flavor.

tempo of the exercises, thus creating a motivational frame for the exercises as well as helping to push the athletes harder than they would train on their own (Luijendijk, 2011). As the athletes reach a state of what Csikszentmihályi (1996; Jackson & Csikszentmihályi, 1999) and modern sports psychologists refer to as “flow”—a liminal state sometimes referred to as “being in the zone”—practitioners were supposed to achieve a temporary state of mental and emotional purity. And while it is the *morshed* actually performing this music, the tempo is actually dictated by the *miandar*, standing in the center of the *gowd* and the other athletes.

The connection here between body, text, and music is striking and multi-directional, working together to create what Henning Eichburg (2014) calls a palpable “energy.” This energy is physical and physiological as well as social and psychological. Eichburg (2014) notes that studies of body cultures tend to focus on bodies constituted in space and time; but he suggests that this is too limiting and posits that attending to the “energy” of bodies and between bodies can help to illuminate important features in the theory of movement science and bodily cultures by looking at “a field outside narrow space-time rationality” (p. 244). In this way body, music, and text work in concert to create the ethos and energy of the *zurkhaneh*. The *morshed* performs the music and poetry, but relies on the *miandar*, an athlete and the trainer of athlete bodies to dictate the pace of play. Working in the other direction, the text and music work together not only to frame the “ethos” of the *zurkhaneh*, but also to frame the bodies of the athletes.⁴

The *zurkhaneh* provided a way for men, both nobles and peasants alike, to pursue the goal of *javanmardi*, which was an ideal that transcended class or status categories. Such an egalitarian ideal pervaded the entire ethos of the *zurkhaneh* creating the possibility for a subjectivity of non-elite male practitioners and establishing the *zurkhaneh* as a place of social leveling. Islamic understandings of the virtues and the body contributed to this possibility as the ideal of *javanmardi* was something that was cultivated through practice and the discipline of the body and soul, marking the *zurkhaneh* as a technology of the body and of the self. Taken together the physical and textual practices of the *zurkhaneh* aimed as they are at the formation of the complete ethical and even spiritual self constitute a collection of ritual activities that can be referred to as a what James Smith (2012) has termed a cultural liturgy.

The liturgy of the *zurkhaneh* reflected early modern Islamic understandings of the body as a microcosm, and these musical and textual practices combined with the physical exercises of the athletes to shape and form the fullness of their physical, moral, and ethical selves in the fashion of young manliness. The progress of the athletes towards this ideal was marked and recognizable through the development of the bodily physique, and physical strength became a marker of the masculinity of the men who participated in the exercises of the *zurkhaneh*—in a similar way as O’Hanlon suggests clothes and other physical and material markers did for the men of the Indo-Persian courts. These ideal bodies of the athletes then became invested with power as they were assumed to also possess the moral and ethical aspects attributed to the *javanmardi*. This may partially explain the conscription of *zurkhaneh* athletes by political leaders as well as the role of *pahlavans* as leaders in local neighborhoods. The authority gained through physical prowess would have caused respect and the assumptions about the virtues of *javanmardi* would have inspired trust in the *pahlavans* as moral and virtuous individuals.

Significance and Conclusion

This argument acknowledges that the origins of the *zurkhaneh* are unknown and ambiguous. Far from advancing the *raison d’etre* of the *zurkhaneh*, this essay seeks to

⁴ See Eichburg (2014, p. 246) for an overview of recent research which shows tangible ways that drumming not only affects, but constitutes the body.

understand the bodily practices of the *zurkhaneh* athletes and the ways in which they operated as pedagogies of the self, forming the physical attributes of the *pahlavan*'s body as well as shaping the moral and ethical self, in turn contributing to the formation of the social self and subject. This thesis expands on both the work done on early modern conceptions of masculinity and embodiment and offers a critique of O'Hanlon's hierarchal notion of a courtly Indo-Persian masculinity by suggesting the *zurkhaneh* as a site for the construction of a subaltern masculinity. Acknowledging the sociopolitical import of the *zurkhaneh* inscribed into the bodies of the *pahlavans* counters the idea of a strictly top-down flow of "true" masculinity by showing one case where masculinity was constructed from the bottom up.

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