

## Article

# The Art of Southern Arabian Daggers: An Emblem of Pride Masculinity and Identity

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**Abstract:** The long-held tradition of wearing daggers in southern Arabia is in decline. This research examines the rich history of the southern Arabian dagger, outlining its story over time, craftsmanship, and changing use, from a weapon to a ceremonial piece. A significant contribution in the field of visual art is offered, firstly by demonstrating the beauty of this metal artwork form, and secondly by examining the notions of pride, masculinity and identity with regard to southern Arabian dagger wearing. It is argued here that men in this region continue to attach meaning to the dagger. Additionally, existing critical studies, including the various efforts being made to respect and preserve the dagger's cultural significance, are highlighted. It is contended here that for these reasons, the southern Arabian dagger will not be lost to history.

**Keywords:** dagger; *Khanjar*; *Jambiyya*; pride; masculinity; identity; Arabian Peninsula

## 1. Introduction

From the Middle Ages, men of the southern Arabian Peninsula wore daggers in their belts, both as a means of protection and a useful tool (see Figure 1). As the cultures of the region evolved, the design of these daggers came to represent distinct areas, tribal affiliations, and status symbols. Such weapons, which are also known in southern Arabia as *Khanjars* or *Jambiyyas*, along with their hilts, scabbards, belts, and accessories, became an efficient way to tell different classes apart and pay proper respects. Moreover, there was once a time in which no honorable tribesman would be seen in daylight without his dagger (Al Busaidi 2014; Cammann 1977; Gracie 2018).

For most Arabian nations, the tradition of dagger wearing is considered part of the national costume. Today, it is often reserved only for special occasions, like weddings and dignitary events. As it is tradition to hand daggers down from father to son, many families tend to possess a dagger as a treasured heirloom.

To those residing outside of southern Arabian culture, daggers can carry an aura of mystery. Legends for example circulate about their mysterious powers, such as the ability to remove the poison from a snake bite (Blalock 2005).

To southern Arabians, a dagger denotes the wearer's status and occupation. In past centuries, the blades conveyed social class and tribal information (Al Busaidi 2014). This codified system is no longer entirely reliable however, as all social classes are now permitted to wear any dagger they wish (Gracie 2018). Overall, the tradition has also waned with the coming of the modern world (Cammann 1977).

This article examines in detail the southern Arabian dagger, exploring its history and craftsmanship, as well as how it came to represent the status of an important tribal member, symbolizing both masculinity and identity. Finally, it examines the ongoing role of daggers across the Arabian Peninsula, including the efforts made to preserve their cultural significance.



**Citation:** Althagafi, Khadeeja. 2022. The Art of Southern Arabian Daggers: An Emblem of Pride Masculinity and Identity. *Arts* 11: 53. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts11030053>

Academic Editor: Thor J. Mednick

Received: 3 March 2022

Accepted: 17 April 2022

Published: 22 April 2022

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**Figure 1.** *Jambiyya*: Traditional Yemeni (Waddington 2014).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Limited Research

There is a distinct lack of information regarding the *Jambiyya* and *Khanjar* daggers in the weapons history literature. Encyclopedias on weapons, arms, and wars throughout the centuries produced by Dorling Kindersley Limited Publishing Company for instance give barely any reference to them (e.g., David 2009; McNab 2010; Regan 2006). Neither the *Jambiyya* nor the *Khanjar* are listed in David's (2009) *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Warfare*, while the *Jambiyya* is only mentioned as an African weapon of the Sudan in McNab's (2010) *Knives and Swords: A Visual History*. While the *Jambiyya* and *Khanjar* may be listed in Wills' (2012) *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Weaponry*, readers will find no in-depth detail nor context as to their cultural significance. Additionally, while the term *Jambiyya* appears in the glossary of Regan's (2006) book, *Weapons: A Visual History of Arms and Armor*, it is not listed amongst either European or Asian daggers.

### 2.2. Visual Traits

The literature does nevertheless offer some useful information on the main visual traits of such daggers. A detailed description of the *Jambiyya*, for example, is offered by Stone (1934), recognizing how these curved, double-edged weapons are present in all countries which Arabs have lived in, often with only slight variations in the hilt, scabbard, and sometimes shape.

In the Arabian Peninsula, such blades tend to be curved and double-edged with pronounced ribs. They are also often shorter, broader, and more elaborately decorated, with larger scabbards, or sheaths (Stone 1934). They are typically found in the shape of two smooth curves. The shape of the hilts (handles) and pommels (rounded knobs) on the other hand tend to vary to a much greater extent.

### 2.3. Production

The *Jambiyya* and *Khanjar* daggers are sometimes made from silver, with the hilts and scabbards often covered in filigreed (an intricate metalworking technique) or gilded silver (Ransom 2013). The scabbard is fastened to the middle of the belt with a range of silver cords and rings. The blade tends to be made from a high-quality steel, giving it a desirable

level of durability (Williams and Edge 2007; Daum 2016). Additionally, while the handles were once made primarily from rhinoceros' horn, it has become a less common practice today (Vigne and Martin 2001).

#### 2.4. Types of Daggers over Time

Although it is difficult to find reliable data on the evolution of different types of southern Arabian daggers over time, it is possible to make some remarks. The earliest predecessor of the southern Arabian dagger was the sword of Arabian warriors. These weapons were long and curved for improved slashing motion, first appearing in the 8th or 9th centuries AD (Heinze 2013). They were followed shortly thereafter by the *Sabiki*, a short sword resembling the modern day *Jambiyya* (Heinze 2013). The exact emergence of the shorter, curved southern Arabian dagger now known as the *Jambiyya* is not easy to date, but it is not uncommon to find antiques as old as 500 years in the region, meaning it likely emerged at least as far back as the 16th century (Gracie 2018). Stylistic changes from then to now have been minor, with the weapons produced today on the streets of southern Arabia largely resembling their antique counterparts (Gracie 2018; Blalock 2005).

Several variants of the *Jambiyya* currently exist in contemporary southern Arabia, again with only slight stylistic differences. In Yemen, for example, the *Thouma* has a wide blade, the *Abdi* has a finely decorated scabbard, and the *Hadhramiya* has a scabbard with a radical curve. Similar variations can be found in Oman and Saudi Arabia, with the differences changing according to local tastes. The *Abdi* for example is often favored by both Yemeni and Saudi Arabian citizens in the southern part of the Hejaz region, an area that was historically part of the Yemeni Imamate and thus influenced to a degree by Yemeni tastes regarding dagger culture (Gracie 2018).

#### 2.5. Deeper Meanings

Research also shows that such daggers possess a variety of deeper meanings. For instance, Quartararo et al. (2004) recognize their many characteristics, including the ability to sometimes become the subject of myths and symbols bolstering morale, as well as commonplace family names. Additionally, Corstange (2021) found that Yemeni men consider the *Jambiyya* an important communicator of status, masculinity, virility, freedom, tribal affiliation, and willingness to adhere to tribal law. Tribal law includes, for example, tribal customary law in Yemen, a complex arbitration process of mediation and appeals procedures overseen by dagger-wearing tribal elders and sheiks (Al-Dawsari 2012; Corstange 2008). Nuances regarding the style and type of dagger, as well as what these denote about the owner in terms of social status, masculinity, and tribal affiliation, may remain unclear to the outside observer unfamiliar with this specific social and cultural setting. For those within southern Arabian societies however, particularly in mostly tribal dominated areas, such nuances are often important. The value of the dagger's materials, its style, and its accessories all serve as a signalling mechanism to others in communicating socio-economic and other information about the owner (Corstange 2008).

#### 2.6. Heritage and Preservation

Despite significant cultural importance to the region, dagger production has been declining in recent decades. The skill was previously perpetuated via parent-child relationships, whereby adults taught their children the intricacies and skills required by the craft. Now, however, many young adults remain uninterested in learning the technique (Al Busaidi 2014).

Despite the lack of literature and the apparent decline of the trade, there is nevertheless a select group of scholars committed to preserving knowledge of dagger production and maintaining the status of southern Arabian daggers as important cultural items. Al Busaidi (2014), for example, considers the Omani *Khanjar* and its production an important national treasure in Oman. Additionally, Gracie (2018) highlights the importance of studying and documenting the artisan process in Yemen before it becomes extinct.

### 3. The Southern Arabian Dagger: Description, Parts, and Accessories

#### 3.1. What Is the Southern Arabian Dagger?

Daggers in southern Arabia were traditionally designed for close combat, although they were also used as tools for completing everyday tasks, such as cutting wood. Later, they developed a reputation as a weapon of stealth. Furthermore, since they could be kept close to the body and used as tools, their owners often formed a close relationship with them. It is thus natural that daggers came to be named, ornamented, and treated with great care.

The southern Arabian dagger differs from those in other parts of the world due to the curvature of its blade. For instance, the Pugio dagger of the Roman Empire, the dagger axe of ancient China's Eastern and Western Zhou dynasties, the Kidney dagger of Scandinavia, and the Këris dagger of Indonesia, among others, all lack a comparable degree of curvature (Saliola and Casprini 2012; Ma and Scott 2014; Luo et al. 2020; Nøttveit 2007; Hill 1956).

The southern Arabian dagger also differs due to its embellished design and plentiful, often extravagant accessories. Although owners all over the world may share a bond with their weapon, the embellishment of the blade and its accessories is often limited to royalty or those with significant financial resources in regions outside of southern Arabia. For most people in such regions, the dagger is often seen as an instrument for achieving a particular purpose, whether it be for attack, defense, or the completion of everyday tasks (Saliola and Casprini 2012; Ma and Scott 2014; Luo et al. 2020; Nøttveit 2007; Hill 1956).

In southern Arabia, by contrast, such weapons are frequently seen as an extension of one's own identity and, as such, tend to be treated with great care (Chi Cui and Adams 2002). This is exemplified in the attributes and lavish accessories of the southern Arabian dagger, the details of which are explained at greater length in the sections below.

#### 3.2. The *Jambiyya* versus the *Khanjar*

The words *Jambiyya* and *Khanjar* refer to a specific type of dagger seen throughout southern Arabia: a short, wide, curved blade with a central, raised midrib, and a line down the middle of the blade for strength. The dagger has an L-shaped (right-angled) hilt (handle). Western Arabian and Yemeni individuals use the term *Jambiyya*, while eastern and Omani Arabians prefer the term *Khanjar*. *Jambiyya* is also the word for daggers in India, Iran, and Turkey. The curved blade is common for all these countries, presumably due to historical interaction (Malozyomova 2016).

For Wills (2012), *Jambiyya* specifically denotes a curved dagger and "*Khanjar*" is referred to more generally as the Arabic word for dagger. Heinze (2013) further elaborates that while outsiders often use the terms interchangeably, *Jambiyya* is a local term whose conception normally encompasses the belt and scabbard, while "*Khanjar*" is the broader Arabic word for this kind of dagger (Heinze 2013). Gracie (2018) also adds that *Jambiyya* refers to a complete dagger set, including the blade, scabbard, belt, and accessories (Gracie 2018). For the purposes of this article, the term "dagger" is used to denote both *Jambiyyas*, *Khanjars*, and their accessories.

#### 3.3. The Dagger Set

Many southern Arabian men still wear a complete dagger set with the traditional clothing of long, loose-fitting shirts and skirts, with the jacket left open to display the dagger (Cammann 1977). Daggers are not permitted in office or healthcare environments, however. Furthermore, the tendency to wear a dagger is more prominent among the older generation (Al Busaidi 2014).

The dagger set is often worn by all age demographics however, during traditional ceremonies. For example, the Dance of Daggers of Yemen involves partners racing towards one another with their weapons raised before, at the last minute, they suddenly embrace one another with smiles and swirl in unison (Foreign Policy Correspondents 2011). Oman's 60-day monsoon festival involves, among other events, a dagger dance competition that is voted on by a TV audience viewing at home through SMS message, with the winner



receiving a golden dagger award (Haaretz 2017). Or take Saudi Arabia's Ardah, a ceremony combining swords, traditional robes (including a dagger), dancing, drumming, and the chanting of poetry (Levenson and Gray 2017; BBC News 2014).

In addition to traditional ceremonies, the dagger is also worn by some people in everyday situations, as it is seen as a powerful status symbol in the region. Those who understand the characteristics of a blade need only to observe a man's *Jambiyya* belt, hilt, and sheath to know whether they are speaking with an individual of high status or not.

The dagger set is often a beautifully coordinated work of art which in the past denoted social status. In the current era however, following the end of the class system, ease of travel, and the introduction of cheap materials (including plastic instead of horn for the hilts), styles are no longer a reliable indication of one's status.

Wooden scabbards are used to house the dagger blades. An individual wears the scabbard at their midsection with the handle just beneath the breastbone (Cammann 1977). The scabbard is held in place by a leather belt which, along with the handle and scabbard, are often elaborately decorated with intricate patterns in gold or silver thread, colourful strings, and silverwork (Gracie 2018).

### 3.4. The Dagger Blade

The dagger blade is made from steel and polished to a fine patina or mirror sheen. It has a roughly 30-degree curve and is double-edged, sharp on both sides, braced with a thick rib running through the middle, and comes to a sharp point at its tip (Al Busaidi 2014; Cammann 1977). The use of an additional rib for strength is a century-old technique that can even be seen on the daggers of the pharaohs from 2000 BC (Gracie 2018).

The curve was likely copied from its ancestors, the curved swords of the Arabian warriors. Swords and other large, heavy weapons became less important in the region over time however, as Islam's influence spread throughout the world, bringing about a time of relative peace. This in turn allowed individuals to feel safer and facilitated the shortening of long swords, which were incredibly burdensome to carry.

First came the *Sabiki*, a short sword with a straight blade that is still worn today in some parts of the Arabian Peninsula (Heinze 2013, p. 34). It remained too long and heavy to be conveniently worn as an ornament, however (see Figure 2). As time went on, the evolution of such weapons saw the blade shrink before eventually becoming what we now know today as the modern dagger (Blalock 2005).



Figure 2. "The *Sabiki Jambiyya*" (Blalock 2005).

Arabian swords took on their characteristic curve following the discovery that curved blades were more comfortable for riders on horse or camelback (Gracie 2018). They first emerged from the Indo-Persian area during the 8th or 9th centuries AD, with their curved dagger successors coming thereafter. This facilitated an improved slashing motion, resulting in a more deadly use (Gracie 2018).

Most dagger blades, regardless of their price, are in fact quite similar to one another. A few minor differences include the number of ribs, as older blades will occasionally have three rather than one, and the length (Cammann 1977). The real aesthetic differences instead can be found in the other elements of the dagger set.

### 3.5. Accessories

#### 3.5.1. Handle (Hilt)

The handle, or hilt, looking somewhat like a sideways “H”, is usually made from hard, relatively valuable substances, including wood or jade. Some handles are beautiful and made from extraordinarily fine materials, meaning no additional decoration is needed. Others are decorated with silverwork or plating (Cammann 1977; Al Busaidi 2014). It is also common for the hilts to be decorated, with typical designs including either two small disks resembling coins placed at the base and center, or two metal nail heads embellished by pins and extensive granulation (Gracie 2018).

The handle and blade are fixed together with a ferrule, a metal brace securely holding the two pieces together to rest the dagger in the scabbard. This metal bracelet is usually decorated with inscriptions, engravings (Al Busaidi 2014), semi-precious stones, or colored glass. It is normally made from worked silver and can sometimes sport engravings, piercings, scrollwork, or granular beadwork. A ferrule is often larger than strictly necessary so that it can be decorated with several oval carnelians or red glass (Cammann 1977).

#### 3.5.2. The Scabbard

The scabbard is the protective sheath of the dagger and the method by which it is held onto the owner’s belt (DeVries and Smith 2007). It is first carved from a single block of wood with the use of a template before being carefully shaped to the desired specification and cut in half. Each half is then hollowed on one side to allow room for the blade to be fit. The two halves are then fixed together once more, with their hollow sides facing. Following this, the final product is covered with cloth or leather (Cammann 1977; Gracie 2018).

Although the blade maintains a 30-degree curve, the scabbard has one almost of a right angle (Al Busaidi 2014). This pronounced angle fulfils two purposes. Firstly, it serves as a hook for catching the belt and holding the dagger in place; secondly, it prevents the scabbard from coming loose when the blade is withdrawn (Cammann 1977). Artisans sometimes introduce incredible detail onto the scabbards. The designs vary according to the time of production, the region in which the work took place, and the status of the dagger’s owner (DeVries and Smith 2007; Gracie 2018).

The front of the scabbard is often decorated with a with a diverse variety of optional styles. Materials that may be used include colored cloth and metal collars or bands, filigreed silver or gold, scrollwork, engravings and piercings, rings (particularly on Omani daggers), and semi-precious stones and glass ornaments. The back of the scabbard, which fits against the body, is left undecorated and normally covered in brushed velvet (Cammann 1977; Al Busaidi 2014).

The design of the upper cover of the scabbard is that which can be seen above the belt line and tends to be made from silver, thread, or a combination of the two (Al Busaidi 2014). The scabbard’s lower cover is also decorated with patterned embroidery, strips of cloth, silver and gold thread, or silver filigree (Al Busaidi 2014; Gracie 2018).

Sheaths are decorated depending on the subclass of the dagger and the owner’s status. The sheath of an ordinary dagger may be covered only with colorful strips of cloth, while the sheaths of upper-class daggers might be plated with elaborately worked silver. In certain areas, sheaths are decorated with metal cords or chains linked to silver rings (Cammann 1977).

The chape is another opportunity for the artisan to demonstrate beautiful ornamentation and metalwork, which is intended to complement or match the decoration of the scabbard’s upper cover, as well as the ferrule (Al Busaidi 2014). The chapes of daggers can vary tremendously, from simple “caps” to elongated, plated designs made either to match

the scabbard, ferrule, or hilt, or as a separate and relatively elaborate ornament. The chape decoration is at times so elongated that it stands as tall as the hilt, turning the dagger and sheath into a “U” shape (Gracie 2018, p. 128).

### 3.5.3. The Belt

The belt of the dagger is traditionally made from leather with metal eyelets. Wealthier customers could naturally afford finer leathers, with cloth belts often used by the less wealthy (Cammann 1977). It can also be embroidered with the use of gold and silver thread, greatly increasing its value. Common designs include geometric patterns, arabesques, or phrases from the Koran (Cammann 1977). In the absence of Jewish craftsmen following the mid-20th century, Yemeni women handcrafted embroidery onto the belts. At present, cheaper machine-made replicas from India are now starting to replace handmade belts (Gracie 2018).

Buckles are also a part of a belt and therefore a “necessary” item that simply became another display for the wealth implied by fine silver craftsmanship. Ironically, large, false buckles were sometimes added in a purely decorative capacity (Gracie 2018; Daum 2016). Belts can also carry a variety of accessories, such as coin purses (Al Busaidi 2014).

### 3.6. The Production Process

Southern Arabian daggers are still handmade with the use of small metalworking tools, power tools, and blowtorches. Casts or templates create the individual parts. Wooden and metal blocks are then designed to hold the dagger pieces while they are crafted and decorated.

The materials for assembling the parts include glue, resin, and lead. Hammers, nails, and needles are also used to create a plethora of metalworking designs (Al Busaidi 2014). The technique used today is therefore not that dissimilar to that of the 13th century (Daum 2016). The blades are forged individually before being given temporary soft wood handles. Buyers purchase the desired hilt from one vendor, the sheath from another, and the belt from a third (Cammann 1977).

To polish and sharpen a dagger, the artisan fastens a knife to a special board. The blade is then scraped to remove any dirt and rubbed down on both sides with an abrasive surface, such as pumice stone and a mixture of oil and water. Since daggers are now a ceremonial object, dagger smiths only tend to sharpen the points (Cammann 1977).

In the Yemeni capital, Sana’a, the major souq, or street market, has approximately thirty shops offering scabbards. Every step of the process is performed either at home or in a small workshop. Many valuable heirloom and antique daggers are traded in this city (Gracie 2018). Elsewhere, throughout the southern Arabian Peninsula, shops can also be found in city and village souqs where daggers, sheaths, and ornamental belts are produced and sold (Cammann 1977).

## 4. History of the Southern Arabian Dagger

### 4.1. Proof of Early Dagger Use

The history of pre-Islamic daggers dates back to specimens found in Magwalla, near the Yemeni capital Sana’a, as well as art displaying the male form with a straight knife at his waist between the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD. Additionally, a statue found in the ruins of Marib shows a 7th or 6th century AD man with a straight dagger on his belt. Furthermore, a pen drawing by the artist Gentile Bellini, dated between 1479 and 1481, displays an Ottoman Janissary warrior wearing a curved blade (DeVries and Smith 2007).

A major problem when it comes to studying early Islamic daggers however, is the lack of verifiable, dateable samples (Gracie 2018). When considering ancient daggers, we frequently rely on pictures and descriptions, since the specimens themselves are seldom found. Typically, early blades did not last, except those buried with the dead. Silver or brass daggers were too soft to withstand long periods of time, while wood, leather, and

bone components decayed as the years passed. Finding any dagger pieces over 300 years old is therefore extremely rare (Gracie 2018).

Blades were only designed for greater durability once they came to be seen as valuable objects that could be sold for a high price. This change led to the creation of a market which, in turn, permitted them to become a form of Islamic artistic expression (Gracie 2018). By examining production records for metal industries from the late 13th century in Yemen, including brass and silver, Daum (2016) found that a large portion of production took place in Sana'a on behalf of Jewish and Muslim artisans, with evidence of significant trade in the so-called "Arab dagger".

Curved blades gained greater popularity in the 14th century due to increasing Persian and Ottoman influence, with the curved, double-edged dagger likely coming into fashion between 1400 AD and 1600 AD (Gracie 2018). By the late 16th century, a significant number were being ordered by Indian buyers (Gracie 2018). A recently discovered Arabian statue dated sometime prior to 1400 AD however, shows a man sporting a curved blade, suggesting the curved dagger could have become popular even earlier than originally thought (Gracie 2018).

#### 4.2. Islam's Influence on Dagger Culture

Islam has affected the dagger in two ways: firstly, its appearance and secondly, its use. The dagger appears, with local variations in style, in all parts of the Islamic empire. The blade's design remains universal, yet the scabbard and hilt may take on specific traits of the local culture (Quartararo et al. 2004).

The followers of Islam are discouraged from wearing excessively ostentatious clothing and adornments (Gracie 2018). As such, it became desirable to find another method for quickly conveying an individual's class and social status. A dagger and its accessories are considered a tool and are therefore permissible to wear and decorate under Islam. As a result, they became the main way of communicating an individual's status. Jewish craftsmen developed clever new additions to belts, including money purses and chains, decorated with filigreed or granulated precious metals (Gracie 2018).

Arab warriors also carried decorative weapons, both as both social markers and an indication of their nationality (Quartararo et al. 2004). This was subsequently copied in the territories they inhabited, and they soon became embellished with local color and style. Following this, these new styles returned home with their owners, where they were further copied and altered (Malozyomova 2016).

India and Turkey also strongly influenced southern Arabian life and dagger culture. For example, trade with India gave craftsmen access to exotic new materials and decorative styles, such as filigree (Gracie 2018). Additionally, the Ottoman Empire arriving in the region with a significant degree of cultural overlap greatly influenced local dagger craftsmanship (Gracie 2018).

### 5. Examining the Dagger's Materials

Once the dagger was seen as an item of status and value, its production methods were improved considerably. Famous daggers have several things in common. Many are made with Damascus steel and intricately decorated with impressive silverwork. Their handles are made from a variety of rare fine materials. The following section examines the three popular components of the most enduring and impressive daggers—silver, steel, and horn.

#### 5.1. Silver

The ferrule, chape, scabbard cover, belt, and accessories of a dagger can all be decorated with silver metalworking or thread work. A good example of how this works would be the Yemeni silverwork industry.

Because of its rich silver deposits, Yemen, more than any other Arab country, has a long tradition of silver jewelry craft (Ransom 2013). The Ottomans brought modernization with them to the country in the form of, among many other things, improvements in



the manufacture of jewelry (Althagafi 2018). Under Ottoman rule, many silversmiths throughout the empire moved to Yemen, with Jewish silver craftsmen gaining fame for their trade related skills (Gracie 2018; Ransom 2013). These craftsmen quickly learned that since jewelry was discouraged when it came to clothing, greater amounts of money could be made from the decoration of daggers (Daum 2016; Gracie 2018).

Daum (2016) argues that the stylistic traits of Yemeni silver derive from European courts and churches. Here, filigreed gold and silver art forms were common and ripe for replication. Yemen's Jewish artisans frequently achieved celebrity status, either individually or through a long-held family tradition (Althagafi 2018). Well-known names include Al-Assadi, Al-Busani, and Al-Budihi. They also left a method to trace their work via personalized stamps (Blalock 2005). Most silver-decorated daggers however, are dated by their condition and style, as stamping was not typical among artisans (Gracie 2018).

Yemen's silver jewelry is both intricate and accomplished. The classic Yemeni style was produced primarily in Sana'a during the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century, mostly by Jewish craftsmen (Daum 2016). Silversmithing, and by extension silver mining, was the most respected and lucrative profession a Jewish worker could achieve. The upper-class indigenous Yemeni tribesmen who owned land or livestock gladly purchased this work.

Filigreed artwork was used extensively during this "golden age" of dagger craftsmanship. Filigreeing is a precious metalworking technique invented in Mesopotamia circa 3000 BC. This artistic style uses small wires and beads of metal that are twisted and shaped to make beautiful and intricate designs resembling lacework (Daum 2016). In 1872, the Ottomans entered Yemen for a second time, bringing with them the popular method of filigreeing. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 brought an influx of wealthy visitors to the region, many of whom were eager to purchase local adaptations of these expensive filigreed metalworks, including daggers (Daum 2016).

Before the Jewish people had migrated to Israel in 1959, there were an estimated 20,000 Jewish silversmiths in the country. Today, there are none, with only Muslim Yemeni silversmiths remaining. As a result, the artform has suffered a severe downturn (Gracie 2018; Ransom 2013). The Yemeni silver market continues to operate under the governing regulations of the Qanun, a centuries-old treatise intended to ensure the silver trade is conducted fairly and transparently.

## 5.2. Steel

The ancient Middle East was the first region to produce crucible steel, a homogenous metal with a high carbon content from which blades can be constructed. A "crucible" is a ceramic mold that can be subjected to extremely high temperatures without shattering; metals within the crucible melt before being shaped to the crucible's form. After it has had time to cool and harden, the crucible is then broken away.

This was quite different from the various European techniques of the time and unequalled until well into the 18th century (Williams and Edge 2007). European blacksmiths instead heated iron and carbon over burning charcoal before pouring the molten mixture into a mold. This technique would produce rather varied results however in terms of the quality of steel.

Specifically, the difference in quality arose from the fact that crucible steel was made by combining lumps of iron and carbon, or a material with a high carbon content, such as cast iron, before applying extreme heat inside a crucible for enough time so that the carbon was absorbed by the iron. The liquid slag separated from the liquid metal, increasing the purity of the steel. Breaking the crucible open would reveal a cast steel brick from which a sword blade could be formed (Williams and Edge 2007).

The crucible steel technique began in India and subsequently spread throughout Asia. Indian and Arabian swords and daggers were famous for their high quality, often being gifted for political purposes. They were also especially desirable among rich Europeans (Williams and Edge 2007; Gracie 2018).

With the crucible steel technique, Central Asia developed so-called Damascus Steel, a metal with no real link to the city of Damascus. Other names for this high-quality steel include wootz steel and Bulad. It often has a “watered silk” appearance, that is a result of dark lines of carbon within the steel contrasting with the lighter lines of iron carbide (Gracie 2018; Williams and Edge 2007).

Damascus steel is made in the same way as crucible steel but cooled extremely slowly. This produces a higher carbon content and, consequently, a much stronger final product. This particularly solid steel was notoriously difficult to work with. Not only did it have a greater hardness, but it also required careful forging in lower temperatures, as the higher the carbon content, the lower its melting point. In this low heat forging process, the watered silk pattern emerged and was further brought out when etching the blade’s surface (Williams and Edge 2007). Understandably, Damascus steel was extremely expensive. If European blades were ever imported into the Middle East, it was simply a matter of cutting costs (Williams and Edge 2007).

### 5.3. Horn

Dagger handles can be a source of controversy, since rhino horn, one of the most highly valued materials for the construction of hilts, ceased to be legal trade in 1977 due to the endangerment of the African black rhinoceros (Martin et al. 1997). Tradition, however, was slow to relinquish the importance of the rhino horn. Not only is it reputed to have protective and healing powers, but it also ages in a way that is considered by many to be aesthetically pleasing. The colors can change depending on what segment of the horn is used and which techniques are implemented by the craftsman. A hilt made from rhinoceros’ horn has the mysterious attribute of taking on a yellow, green, or sometimes white color (Al-Zaidi 2005).

Rhino horn smuggling subsequently became a lucrative criminal enterprise. Daggers made prior to the regulations are increasingly highly valued, particularly if the rhino horn has aged well or was crafted with great skill (Gracie 2018). Since the 1970s, Yemen has remained the world’s largest importer of such products. Small quantities of the outlawed material were still being smuggled into the country at the turn of the century.

Nowadays, since no new rhino horn can be expected to be obtained through legal means, using antique handles on new knives is a common practice. Rhino-horn handles fetch extremely high prices, the sums of which could even be used to buy a new car (Vigne and Martin 2001). Al-Zaidi (2005), for instance, puts black rhinoceros horn prices at USD 1500 per kg in 2005. The smuggling of this horn has nevertheless continued to decline due to an active campaign throughout southern Arabia to raise awareness of animal endangerment (Vigne and Martin 2001).

## 6. The Purposes of the Dagger

### 6.1. Personal Safety

Regardless of one’s home in the world, for thousands of years carrying a knife was simply a necessity, a habit that likely began with the invention of blades themselves. This was not only a matter of personal protection. In fact, a knife was used far more often as an essential everyday tool than a weapon. The daily needs of cutting wood, plants, materials, or food, as well as butchering, crafting, carving, and fishing, were more prevalent than the possibility of a band of brigands setting upon an innocent tribe. Similarly, the hope that an individual with a knife could effectively drive away a pack of wolves or a hungry jungle cat was also not the main reason for carrying knives (Corstange 2021).

Still, the presence of a knife or sword on one’s belt undoubtedly saved lives and could also serve as an effective deterrent. A knife, sword, or dagger is an extension of physical strength, representing male prowess and superiority. As people came to live closer to one another, violence erupted more frequently. In the heat of a fight, reaching for a small and effective blade could mean the difference between victory and defeat. Furthermore, in battles throughout history (such as for the hardy and stubborn Swiss mercenaries of

the Middle Ages), when the fight moved from the formality of pikes and cavalry to the down-and-dirty activity of close combat, a knife often proved a highly valuable asset.

The presence of knives as part of traditional men's costumes can be seen across the world, from the pointed scissor-like Dirks of the Scottish Highlands to the various lengths of single-edged Seax worn by the English; from the tiny but useful Bunadskniv of Norway and the multi-purposed Puukko of Finland to the Sami knives of the Lappish people. The evidence of knives, daggers, and swords as pieces of traditional male costume throughout history is pervasive. Women's costumes also, at times, involve ceremonial knives. Yet theirs tend to be smaller and more suited to the purpose of crafting (such as in elaborate portable sewing kits).

As time passed however, they became less of a daily necessity and more of a ceremonial symbol. In most cultures, blades themselves, as well as their hilts, scabbards, and belts, thus became increasingly decorated and embellished. They were often carved and crafted from the finest available materials and fixed with precious stones and metalwork. These daggers, knives, and swords are symbolic of tradition, but rarely used for any of their "original" work-like purposes. One would hardly want to dress fish with a silver filigreed ivory hilt blade made from wootz steel that was inherited from one's father.

### 6.2. Social Status and Tribal Affiliation

In centuries past, southern Arabian social structure, based on tribal affiliation, differentiated between two major classes. In the upper class of tribal originals, men had the right to own property, carry weapons, and defend their heritage. Acceptable occupations involved those such as agriculture, high-level commerce (precious stones or metals), and masonry (Gracie 2018). Even as early as the 13th century, the scabbards for upper-class daggers were noticeably more expensive and embellished than others (Daum 2016).

All others were non-tribal, including those such as merchants, craftsmen, butchers, healthcare workers, and general laborers, none of whom owned property and few of whom were permitted to carry weapons. Below these ranks were the slaves who were also not allowed to carry daggers (Gracie 2018). Two interesting twists however were as follows: (1) the Dawshan, a social class barely above slavery, were permitted to wear daggers, and (2) the Jewish population's men, including those who gained fame from their craftsmanship, were not permitted to wear them (Gracie 2018, p. 37).

Within a tribe, wearing a dagger also serves the purpose of signaling to others that one adheres to the tribal system (Corstange 2021). Members of a tribe are invested in each other's good behavior, as various tribe members can be held accountable for the poor decisions of others. This type of behavioral regulation is called peer monitoring, a system which works well in situations for which government regulation is weak and unreliable (Corstange 2021). Peer monitoring extends to the wearing and use of the dagger, since disrespecting the tradition would bring defamation within one's group (Al-Zaidi 2005).

Within cities however, tribal law does not matter nearly as much to younger generations. Additionally, over the course of the 20th century, societies based on social class and tribal affiliations have faded. All social groups are now permitted to wear the dagger, producing a universally-accepted dagger style, independent of social class and tribal affiliation (Gracie 2018).

### 6.3. Pride, Masculinity, and Identity

Although many traditional costumes all over the world incorporate weaponry, it is in the Arabian Peninsula where the tradition of wearing a dagger on one's belt remains a distinctive sign of adulthood and masculinity. On the streets of its celebrated old cities, daggers are a customary part of a man's attire, worn proudly in specially designed belts. Let us examine two of the most pervasively worn and beautifully crafted types of ceremonial daggers in the region—the *Jambiyya* of Yemen and *Khanjar* of Oman, as well as the deeper meaning of these knives to their owners in terms of pride, masculinity, and identity.

### 6.3.1. The Yemeni *Jambiyya*

The Yemeni *Jambiyya* is of great importance in terms of pride, masculinity, and identity. The hilt is used to discern the status of the man who wears it; in fact, the *Jambiyya* is as much a status symbol as the car a man drives or the house in which he lives. Perhaps it is even more important, as it can be seen on a daily basis and at any time on the individual's person, readily apparent for all others to see. One who is acquainted with such blades need only observe a man's *Jambiyya* belt, hilt, and sheath to understand if they are speaking with someone of great importance and status.

This weapon is a sign of cultural status and even a fashion item, as well as a method of upholding the personal identity of the individual wearing it. A *Jambiyya* therefore falls under the jurisdiction of certain tribal and societal laws. In terms of its use as a weapon, it is only allowed to be drawn in cases of dire conflict. In normal circumstances, such beautiful blades are only used only for ceremonial events.

*Jambiyyas* are not normally produced for people especially, but the more valuable ones can be found on men in certain occupations, such as judges, famous merchants, and businessmen. In Yemen, it is a distinctive sign of manhood, often a gift presented from a father to his young son, particularly in the days before the end of Ramadan.

### 6.3.2. The Omani *Khanjar*

The Omani *Khanjar*, similar in many ways to the *Jambiyya*, is another remarkable work symbolizing masculinity and status. To preserve its specific characteristics, the Omani government has mandated guidelines for the crafting of *Khanjars*. The *Khanjar* is worn to represent and honor the sultan, country, and past ancestors; they are now considered a work of art rather than a weapon. The *Khanjar* is such an important part of the Omani culture, it even features on the Omani flag, the country's coat of arms, its money, the former corporate logo of its main airline, and postage stamps. It is clearly a symbol strongly associated with the country's underlying identity.

A *Khanjar* can be custom made according to the owner's chosen motifs, with the buyer typically specifying the design. The belt, hilt, and sheath are all designed with painstaking detail and the use of elaborate decorations halfway between jewelry and embroidery. It therefore represents not merely a symbol of status and masculinity, but also originality, since a self-designed work can make the statement of "This is who I am." In short, the *Khanjar* represents the spirit of Omani men.

Like the Yemeni *Jambiyya*, a man who draws his blade without blooding it (using it as a threat) has committed an act of serious dishonor. Instead, the drawing of the weapon is only permissible for ceremonial purposes, such as a dance or display whereby participants raise their weapons and move to the beat of drums in unison; any man who brandishes his dagger foolishly is subject to the disapproval of (and possibly prosecution by) his group.

Again, as in the case of the Yemeni *Jambiyya*, these daggers are given as gifts from fathers to sons when they reach adolescence, symbolizing both pride in their cultural heritage and growing maturity. Such elaborately crafted ceremonial weapons are also frequently given as gifts to grooms during their weddings. Valuable family *Khanjars* can be passed down through family generations as priceless heirlooms.

### 6.3.3. How Daggers Are Used to Symbolise Pride, Masculinity, and Identity

Weaponry and arms have always been correlated with manhood; the possession of a weapon is an extension of both physical strength and implied prowess, symbolizing a man's duty and desire to protect himself and those around him who he loves and cares for. A knife serves as a physical emblem of the desire for survival and a symbol of virility. Protecting the tribe against enemies developed as an evolutionary need for the male. Through this protection, he can ensure his genetic survival. This desire to show masculinity is especially prevalent in the Arab world today, with Arab men frequently seen as being responsible for taking care of the family, including security needs (Nosseir 2018). The first time a male's manhood and the responsibility to look after the family in this way are symbolized visually

tends to be a coming-of-age ceremony at around the age of 14. During this ceremony, a father gifts his son with a dagger, a sign of his growing maturity (Watson 2008).

A dagger is also a potent symbol of identity. In Yemen, for instance, despite influence from other countries, people have a notable allegiance to local tribes, with separate customs, folklore, dances, and styles of dress. In fact, Yemen is so well-known for its strong culture, it was used in Chi Cui and Adams' (2002) study to assess a national identity assessment. Yemen was deemed to be the most reliable country to test the usefulness of the National Identity Measurement Scale (NATID) in other countries, with the authors even making note of the *Jambiyya* as a symbol of national allegiance and freedom (Chi Cui and Adams 2002).

As the centuries passed, such meanings have also been accompanied by the desire to show wealth and status. Daggers ultimately show the artisanship of a culture, which is beautiful, whether such craftsmanship is simple or elaborate. Today, on the streets of southern Arabian countries, elaborate daggers tend to be worn as a signaling device to demonstrate socio-economic status, with a luxurious Yemeni *Jambiyya* selling for up to USD 1 million (Al-Jazeera News 2013; Watson 2008).

Daggers have long represented masculinity and identity, yet in the last several centuries, they have transitioned from being a necessary tool for survival to a fashion statement. Such fashion statements communicate socio-economic and other status information about the owner, similar to the way in which designer clothes or designer handbags are used to communicate the same aspects in modern consumer culture. Nowhere in the world is this more apparent than in the daily dress of Southern Arabian men, individuals who keep their symbols of pride, status, and homelands close to their hearts and hands, carrying these ubiquitous signs of masculinity, identity, and status as an unmistakable symbol of authority and power.

## 7. The Decline of Dagger Culture

Over the past two centuries, the role of the southern Arabian dagger has undergone a significant change, from a weapon to an ornament. In the modern era, families are more likely to keep daggers on display at home than to wear them in public, except under special circumstances (Gracie 2018).

Although reliable production figures are difficult to obtain, Gracie (2018) illustrates this trend in the observation that the number of Jewish silversmiths in Sana'a, Yemen's capital, was no less than 300 but dropped to below 30 by 1934. With the death of the last imam in 1962, Yemen witnessed the further slow disintegration of *Jambiyya* culture. As the country opened itself up to the world, it began discarding *Jambiyyas* in favor of Western fashion.

A similar decline has been seen in other southern Arabian countries. Al Busaidi (2014) notes how in Oman, wearing a dagger is no longer permitted in certain occupations, such as professional, medical, or technical jobs. Likewise, daggers in Saudi Arabia are now more often limited to traditional displays and special occasions, such as wedding ceremonies, rather than for routine everyday usage (Arab News 2019).

It is contended here that there are two main reasons for this: (1) there is less of a need for personal protection in light of modern state institutions providing safety to the public, and (2) there is less of a desire to maintain the craft among younger individuals who can find more lucrative jobs in the modern economy.

### 7.1. The Declining Need for Personal Protection

Over the course of the last several centuries, the need for personal protection, including close combat weapons such as the dagger, has reduced significantly. A line of literature that is perhaps best exemplified by the work of Pinker (2011) illustrates how violent death among humans, when viewed as a percentage of the population as opposed to overall numbers, has declined dramatically (Pinker 2011; Goldstein 2011). This apparent trend is attributed to several factors, the principle of which includes an increase in human empathy



due to the emergence of the printing press, an invention allowing us to better view the world from the perspective of others.

It is also attributed in large part to the emergence of state-based societies and the role of state institutions, such as the police, in regulating internal violence. In the absence of the state, humans often live in a state of political anarchy that can be highly prone to violence (Hobbes 1651). Chagnon (1988) for instance demonstrates how studies have estimated that 44% of Yanomamö Indian males 25 or older in the Amazonas have killed and that 30% of adult male deaths are due to violence.

In southern Arabia, internal conflict was traditionally regulated by tribes and tribal law, which is in some cases is still true. Al-Dawsari (2012) for example highlights how tribal traditions have implemented justice for centuries in Yemen and Tribal Customary Law is often still used over that of the formal legal system in certain areas. Weir (2007) notes how elaborate procedures and laws, in the form of handwritten contracts and treaties, following dialogue are relied upon to maintain order among the tribes of Razih in northern Yemen. Adra (2011) further illustrates how tribal law makes use of dialogue and deliberation to achieve reconciliation and establish restitutive justice in Yemen's Central Highlands.

Although tribal law can be successful at regulating conflict, capable state institutions often prove far more effective (Pinker 2011). Corstange (2008), for instance, notes how the main reason tribal justice prevails to the extent that it does in Yemen is precisely because effective and capable state institutions are still in the process of evolving. For this reason, the shift in southern Arabia from pre-state to state societies in the 20th century, while still an ongoing process for Yemen in terms of its development of state capacity (particularly given its ongoing civil war), has had significant impact on reducing violence and thus the need to carry weapons for personal protection, including daggers (Corstange 2008).

### 7.2. Modern Economy Jobs

In addition to a reduced demand for such weapons due to increased personal safety, modernization has also decreased their relative supply. Gracie (2018) and Corstange (2021) highlight how, since the mid-20th century, the oil industry has helped to draw much of the younger generation away from traditional dagger smithing towards more lucrative careers in energy extraction. This, coupled with reduced demand due to increased personal safety, has helped to diminish the relative size and importance of the local dagger industry in the region. An example of this would be the oil industry in Saudi Arabia, where many young individuals would now prefer to study at university and enter the more lucrative oil extraction industry than learn dagger smithing.

### 7.3. Efforts to Preserve Dagger Culture

Realizing the danger of losing their heritage, most Gulf State governments now endeavor to keep traditional craft arts alive by bringing skilled craftsmen into Heritage Villages. These serve as a kind of living museum, allowing visitors to observe the craftsmen and document the process so that it may be replicated in the future (Maisel and Shoup 2009). Oman for example has invested in preserving its silverware craft industry by introducing several initiatives for training artisans and has banned the import of replicas, allowing the integrity of the national symbol to be preserved (Al Busaidi 2014).

Furthermore, it is unlikely that dagger culture will disappear altogether in southern Arabia. The dagger may have transitioned from a weapon to an ornament and from everyday to ceremonial use, yet it remains a potent symbol of pride, masculinity, and identity. Furthermore, these weapons are symbolic of the region's culture and tradition, important aspects which will not be entirely lost to modernization. With the help of government support and a place in the hearts of the southern Arabian men who carry them, daggers will likely remain an integral part of the visual landscape in this part of the world for many years to come.

## 8. Conclusions

To conclude, this article has presented the literature on southern Arabian daggers, brought awareness to the study of types of daggers as luxury art works, and discussed various issues balancing both the decline of dagger craftsmanship and its future sustainability. It has done this by (1) detailing the metal artwork of southern Arabian daggers, (2) exploring the underlying values communicated by dagger wearing in southern Arabia, and (3) examining the factors leading to the decline and preservation of dagger production.

A dagger can showcase an individual's acknowledgment of their country's history and traditions, respect for the tribal laws that have regulated their culture for generations, and personal creativity. For no one is this more apparent than those in southern Arabia, who continue to keep their daggers close to their hands and hearts.

Over time, the dagger has transitioned from a weapon to an ornament. Yet it maintains its importance in ceremonies and as a symbol of its owner's masculinity, identity and, social status (Maisel and Shoup 2009). It proclaims that the wearer belongs to a specific social unit and that he is honorable, respectful of tradition, and will welcome the same from those he meets (Daum 2016; Gracie 2018; Watson 2008). In southern Arabia, it is part of the local costume and a piece of heritage, symbolizing the patriotism of the wearer (Al-Asbahy 2002; Blalock 2005).

Critics generally maintain a favorable opinion of dagger culture, differing only in degree. This is often attributable to time, signified by the difference between Cammann's (1977) observations of the commonality of dagger wearing compared to those of Al-Zaidi (2005) or Gracie (2018) decades later. With the care of historians, artists, and the respective governments invested in their significance, southern Arabian daggers can continue to survive the transition from a weapon to an ornament, all the while remaining a traditional symbol of pride, masculinity, and identity for the southern Arabian men who wear them.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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