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THE WRESTLER'S STRENGTH AND HUMILITY*

On Gholamreza Takhti, Masculinity,
and the Search for Authenticity
in a ›West-Infested‹ Iran

›Suicide of a Champion‹ was the title of the evening edition of the Iranian Newspaper *Ettela'at* (Information) on 8 January 1968. It continued: ›In a letter that Takhti left behind, he did not hold anyone responsible for his death. The death of Takhti resulted from the ingestion of poison.‹¹ It almost seems as if the regime-aligned newspaper wanted to provide evidence of suicide; as if it had predicted the public bewilderment, which refused to accept the possibility that the sport idol and national hero Gholamreza Takhti (1930–1968) had committed suicide. To the Iranian public it was difficult to imagine that the universally adored Olympic champion of 1956 and two-time freestyle wrestling champion should have taken his life; this champion who was valued as a morally exemplary sportsman and a politically engaged, humble and down-to-earth man from Tehran, advocating for the needs of the weak while being so strong himself.

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1 Khod-koshi-ye qahreman [Suicide of a Champion], in: *Ettela'at [Information]*, 18 Dey 1346 (8 January 1968), p. 1. Here and in the following: All translations from the Persian are by the author. Note on transcription: For the sake of readability and to take account of the pronunciation of New Persian, this article largely refrains from using a standardised transliteration and instead consistently pays attention to the rendering of spoken Persian. In direct quotations from secondary literature, however, the transcription used there is reproduced.



An explanation that seemed much more plausible in Iran at the time was found elsewhere, at least as a rumour: SAVAK, the shah's secret service was responsible.² A rumour of a state-commissioned murder had also spread in 1967, half a year before Takhti's death, after the body of the leftist author Samad Behrangi (1939–1967) had been found in a river in north-western Iran. Shortly before, Behrangi had published his call to resistance against oppression disguised as a children's book (*The Little Black Fish*).³ Similar rumours circulated after the death of the wrestler Takhti, whose sympathy with the opposition, the National Front of the also recently deceased Mohammad Mosaddeq (1882–1967) was not a secret.⁴ The former prime minister, as Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's biggest political adversary, had been placed under house arrest since the latter's coup d'état on 19 August 1953, and Takhti belonged to the few mourners at Mosaddeq's funeral. A few months later, the wrestler was found dead in a hotel room in Tehran.

Mosaddeq and Takhti are linked not only by the proximity in time of their respective deaths, but also by the fact that they are probably the two most admired Iranian figures of the 20th century in terms of a secular and democratically imagined Iranian nation. »[T]he men are arguably two, if not *the* two, most popular national figures in modern Iranian history«⁵ states a recent essay by Arash Davari and Naghmeh Sohrabi about the signalling effect that Takhti's death had on Iranian students in the context of the global protests of 1968. At the same time, the two historical protagonists represent two completely opposite concepts of masculinity.

Even during his term as prime minister at the beginning of the 1950s, at the same time as Takhti's athletic rise to fame, Mosaddeq presented himself as a strong spirit in a weak body. He allegedly received journalists, members of parliament and state guests in a sickbed and did not shy away from showing emotion publicly; a style of politics that yielded him great admiration within Iran. This image of Mosaddeq as a statesman devotedly and self-sacrificingly steering the fate of the country from his sickbed, who ultimately managed to nationalise Iranian oil – meaning both the nationalisation of previously private resources and the politically autonomous access of the Iranian State to these resources – is a widespread motif in Iran to this day. During Mosaddeq's lifetime, however, the Anglo-American public used the prime minister's performative physical weakness to discredit him in gendered language along orientalist stereotypes, a central tool of which is effeminacy as a central marker of the »oriental« man. When *TIME Magazine* nominated Mosaddeq as »Man of the Year« in 1951, the journal gave

2 Cf. Houchang E. Chehabi, Sport and Politics in Iran. The Legend of Gholamreza Takhti, in: *International Journal of the History of Sport* 12 (1995) Issue 3, pp. 48-60, here pp. 55-56.

3 On the meaning of *Mahi-ye Siyah Kuchulu* (*The Little Black Fish*) see: Kaveh Bassiri, Whatever Happened to *The Little Black Fish*?, in: *Iranian Studies* 51 (2018), pp. 693-716.

4 Cf. Chehabi, Sport and Politics in Iran (fn 2), pp. 52-53.

5 Arash Davari/Naghmeh Sohrabi, »A Sky Drowning in Stars«. Global '68, the Death of Takhti, and the Birth of the Iranian Revolution, in: Arang Keshavarzian/Ali Mirsepassi (eds), *Global 1979. Geographies and Histories of the Iranian Revolution*, Cambridge, UK 2021, pp. 213-244, here p. 213.



The wrestler Gholamreza Takhti, presumably in the early 1950s (Photo: Mir Abolghasem Farsi, n.d.; <<http://museum.olympic.ir/en/photos/gallery/worldchampiongholamreza-takhti>>)

him the nickname ›Weepy Mossy‹ and described him as a ›fainting leader of a helpless country‹.⁶ Just how much influence the perception of Mosaddeq's supposedly lacking masculinity had on policymakers in the west is vividly demonstrated by Mary Ann Heiss in her essay ›Real Men Don't Wear Pajamas‹.⁷

Mosaddeq's political supporter Gholamreza Takhti, on the other hand, seems to represent the personified antithesis. The wrestler embodied a notion of masculinity that presented the male body as a resource for preserving ›Iranian authenticity‹ in the face of foreign influence and, at the same time, referred to certain idealised character

6 Man of the Year: Challenge of the East, in: *TIME Magazine*, 7 January 1952, URL: <<http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,815775-1,00.html>>. See also the cover (with the caption ›He oiled the wheels of chaos‹): <<http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19520107,00.html>>. I am grateful to Houchang Chehabi for the important point that Mosaddeq's performative weakness also contributed to his popularity in Iran because it was opposed to the ›brute strength‹ that had largely characterised Reza Shah Pahlavi's authoritarian style of politics (reigned 1925–1941).

7 Mary Ann Heiss, Real Men Don't Wear Pajamas. Anglo-American Cultural Perceptions of Mohammed Mossadeq and the Iranian Oil Nationalization Dispute, in: Peter L. Hahn/Mary Ann Heiss (eds), *Empire and Revolution. The United States and the Third World since 1945*, Columbus 2001, pp. 178-194.

traits that manifested themselves in the wrestler's shy, humble manner. These qualities, understood as masculine virtues, are condensed in the Persian term *javanmardi* (literally ›young manliness‹, often translated as ›chivalry‹⁸), but are closely tied to the male body in general and wrestling in particular, as I will explain in this article. It is therefore no coincidence that the collective search for a representative of ›Iranian authenticity‹ led to a wrestler. Wrestling occupies a central place in Iran, and although it is not (any longer) the most popular sport, it is still perceived as a national sport today. A large part of this is due to the view that wrestling, as an essential cultural heritage of the pre-Islamic Parthian Empire (around the birth of Christ), has an almost unbroken tradition that connects today's Iran both with its long history and with Persian mythology.⁹ Through references to supposedly distinct Iranian-Persian and Iranian-Islamic traditions, the male body acquires its political dimensions in the heroisation of the sports idol in the face of foreign influence and the ›effeminisation‹ strategies that accompany it.

1. The Intellectual Jalal Al-e Ahmad and the Search for Iran

In 1968, no one seemed to want to believe in Gholamreza Takhti's suicide, writes Houchang Chehabi in his article ›Sport and Politics in Iran‹ (1995): ›Those who doubt the official story point out that he was far too much of a fighter, too pious, and had endured too much hardship in his life to give up and commit the sin of suicide.‹¹⁰ Only a higher power, namely the power of the state, could have brought down this champion – this was also the insinuation of the then extremely influential Iranian intellectual Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969) in an essay.¹¹ Under the title ›Samad va afsaneh-ye 'avamm‹ (›Samad and the Folk Legend‹, with the not unimportant connotation of ›common‹ or even ›simple‹ people of humble backgrounds in Persian), he dealt with the deaths of the aforementioned writer Samad Behrangi and the sports idol Gholamreza Takhti, respectively. Just after pondering the mysterious circumstances of Behrangi's death, Al-e Ahmad recalls a poem that circulated at the funeral procession in honour

8 Cf. Lloyd Ridgeon, *The Felon, the Faithful and the Fighter. The Protean Face of the Chivalric Man (Javanmard) in the Medieval Persianate and Modern Iranian Worlds*, in: Ridgeon (ed.), *Javanmardi. The Ethics and Practice of Persianate Perfection*, London 2018, pp. 1-27.

9 Cf. Houchang E. Chehabi, *Wrestling in the Shahnameh and Later Persian Epics*, in: Ali A. Seyed-Gohrab (ed.), *The Layered Heart. Essays on Persian Poetry, a Celebration in Honor of Dick Davis*, Washington, DC 2019, pp. 237-282, here pp. 276, 281.

10 Chehabi, *Sport and Politics in Iran* (fn 2), p. 55. See also Davari/Sohrabi, ›A Sky Drowning in Stars‹ (fn 5), pp. 222-223.

11 After Al-e Ahmad's death the rumor of his assassination by the hands of SAVAK circulated again. Cf. Hamid Dabashi, *The Last Muslim Intellectual. The Life and Legacy of Jalal Al-e Ahmad*, Edinburgh 2021, p. 43.

of Takhti. It is said to have contained the following verse about the wrestler: ›Powerless were the world's champions in your fist / A shame that fate has now cast you in the dust.‹¹² Al-e Ahmad left no doubt that ›fate‹ came in the form of the Shah's regime.

He witnessed a mass event himself when he attended the wrestler's funeral in the small town of Rey, south of Tehran. After he and his two companions parked their car near the bazaar at the Shah Abdol-Azim shrine, according to his report they were pulled into the crowd: ›And what a crowd! The poor, workers, the simple man of the street [*mard tu-ye kuche*, literally ›the man in the alley‹, OG] and here and there bazaar traders and office workers. And all young!‹¹³ The exact number of mourners cannot be determined with certainty today. Estimates range up to 400,000 people who attended the funeral of *Jahan Pahlevan*, the ›hero of the world‹ as Takhti was called in Iran during his lifetime.¹⁴ Al-e Ahmad writes in his famously complicated style about the relationship of the crowd to the deceased: ›In this crowd, no one thought of the possibility of suicide, not even for a moment. Becoming *Jahan Pahlevan*, compensating through your own existence for the individual and social ›non-existences‹ of others – and then suicide? How could a simple, powerless, and frightened man, who saw his mundane every-day existence compensated in the knowledge of such a meaningful existence, the strength of the body and the glory of this down-to-earth man from Khani Abad [i.e., Takhti] – who had never turned his back on his own class, this essence of physical strength, who said ›no‹ to the most powerful of his time [...] – how could the simple and humble man believe that he would have committed suicide?‹¹⁵

The suggestive question not only left a lasting impression on contemporaries and subsequent generations in Iran – only recently did Takhti's son feel compelled to counter the persistently circulating rumour of the national hero's assassination – but also contains numerous catchwords that encourage the reflection on this process of Takhti's heroisation and the significance of body-related masculinities in Iran. Al-e Ahmad refers to Takhti's representative role, on the one hand, for the ›simple man of the street‹ who is looking for his footing in a present in which he no longer has a place. On the other hand, Al-e Ahmad expands the perspective to what he identifies as a collective self-perception, which has lost sight of ›itself‹ and has filled this void by turning to Takhti, a humble figure, heroic precisely for this reason, who has come from society's own midst. The author repeatedly refers to the significance of the body in the face of powerlessness; to sheer physical strength – Al-e Ahmad speaks of ›essence‹ – which also lends the moral strength to confront the ›most powerful of the time‹. It is the heroisation of the ›simple man‹ and his supposed last two refuges – his own body and his humble, down-to-earth character. This heroisation cannot be separated from the experience of increasing foreign influence in Iran during the 20th century. And it

12 Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Samad va afsaneh-ye 'avamm* [Samad and the Folk Legend], in: *Arash – Darbareh-ye Samad Behrangī* [Arash – On Samad Behrangī], 18 Azar 1347 (Nov./Dec. 1968), pp. 5-12, here p. 10.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

14 Abbas Milani, Gholamreza Takhti, in: Milani, *Eminent Persians. The Men and Women who Made Modern Iran, 1941–1979*, Vol. 2, Syracuse 2008, pp. 1069-1073, here p. 1073.

15 Al-e Ahmad, *Samad va afsaneh-ye 'avamm* (fn 12), p. 11.

is this heroisation that presents a possible answer for men to the dominant question in those years of how Iranian individuals – men and women – can ›find themselves‹ in the face of Western hegemony.

It is not unimportant here that Al-e Ahmad wrote those lines about Takhti, as it was he, who prominently dedicated himself to this search for an ›authentic‹ Iranian identity, in times when such an identity seemed to have been lost through the uncritical adoption and adaptation of Western achievements, including cultural achievements. In 1962, Al-e Ahmad published a book that became one of the most influential texts leading up to the 1978/79 revolution in Iran: *Gharbzadegi*.¹⁶ The title cannot easily be translated adequately and is best rendered as ›Infested by the West‹ – in English, the slightly nebulous terms Westoxication and Weststruckness have become established. Analogous to the division of the world into a Global North and a Global South that is common in today's scientific discourse, *gharbzadegi* stands for a critique that takes a dichotomous division of the world into Occident and Orient as its starting point and diagnoses that the West (Pers. *gharb*) has infected the East through the consumption of Western products and forms of culture as if with a plague.¹⁷

Al-e Ahmad focussed his critique less on the West (as Edward W. Said did 16 years later in *Orientalism*¹⁸) but rather on Iranian society itself and its cultural dependence on the West. *Gharbzadegi* describes the feeling of being obsolete, the feeling of one's own inferiority and backwardness that plagues the ›infected individuals‹ and in the face of which the conditions of Western modernity are submissively accepted.¹⁹ It describes that feeling of ›non-existence‹²⁰ to which Al-e Ahmad also referred in his essay on Takhti. Ultimately, however, it was not the achievements of modernity and their appropriation in his country as well as others that Al-e Ahmad criticised – he did not advocate for the abolition of cars and machines – but the loss of cultural authenticity in dealing with these achievements. Al-e Ahmad criticised that people had degenerated into consumers of Western technologies and had lost themselves in them.²¹ ›The West-infested human being has no character. They are something without authenticity,‹ reads *Gharbzadegi*.²² The Persian term *esalat*, translated here as ›authenticity,‹ has many connotations: it refers to genuineness and originality, but at the same time also to durability and permanence, even strength of character. In Al-e Ahmad's case, all these connotations are invoked. He was concerned with an Iranian cultural authenticity (the concept of authenticity used here and in the following is thus an empirical one) and autonomy

16 Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*, Qom 1389 (2010).

17 Cf. Adib-Moghaddam, *What is Iran? Domestic Politics and International Relations in Five Musical Pieces*, Cambridge, UK 2021, pp. 35, 51.

18 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978.

19 Brad Hanson, The »Westoxication« of Iran. Depictions and Reactions of Behrangi, Al-e Ahmad, and Shariati, in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 15 (1983), pp. 1-23, here p. 9.

20 Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi* (fn 16), pp. 122-125.

21 Ibid., p. 97.

22 Ibid., p. 124.

that, according to his diagnosis, had been lost.²³ In the end, according to Al-e Ahmad, there is the internalised experience of the subordination of all Iranian individuals to a Western hegemony. And more than that: ›The West-infested man is effete. *Zan-sefat (effimine) ast* [sic].‹ He is effeminate and has ›the character traits of a woman‹.²⁴ The ›man‹ addressed here is the Iranian man who, in the face of the West, has lost not only his authenticity but also his masculinity. The coloniality of power is gendered.

In ›Samad va afsaneh-ye 'avamm‹, Al-e Ahmad describes the wrestler Takhti as an authentic Iranian and *masculine* response to these feelings. Takhti appears as a quasi-saviour figure in the search for the Iranian ›self‹, in the face of the gendered experiences of subordination, which on the one hand relate to the nation as a whole and on the other would affect every individual due to foreign permeation in the 20th century. Al-e Ahmad thus offers an interpretation on the meaning of body-related masculinity in modern Iran: according to this reading, the heroisation of the male body is a resource of empowerment against the background of supposed experiences of emasculation in the face of Western hegemony.

In a historical perspective starting with the biography of the wrestler himself, the gendered dimensions of collective experiences of subordination in a colonial and postcolonial context will be discussed below, and the Iranian fascination with Takhti will be placed in relation to this. On the one hand, Takhti's heroisation can be read as an effect of the discourses surrounding Iran's penetration by foreign powers; on the other hand, his example itself also contributed to the perpetuation of notions of heroic masculinity. This is followed by a discussion of the interweaving of historical experiences with the development of gender studies on Iran. While doing so, the functions that prototypical notions of the heroic have in gender and masculinity studies on modern Iran will be laid out.

2. The Rise of Takhti and the History of Iran

Gholamreza Takhti was born in Tehran on 27 August 1930, the youngest son of an ice-maker. The profession of ice-making was not a very lucrative business. In winter, a deep pit was filled with water and protected from the sun by a wall. In the heat of summer, the stored ice could be sold, but it never turned into gold. Tehran's drastic transformation, triggered by Reza Shah's modernisation measures in the 1930s, also took its toll on Takhti's father, whose pit had to make way for a new railway line.²⁵ The father's bankruptcy drove the family into poverty. This could be the starting point for a narrative that focuses on the possibilities of sporting success as a way out of poverty

23 See the foreword by Hamid Algar in his English translation of *Gharbzadegi*: Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis. A Plague from the West*, Berkeley 1984, pp. 13, 17.

24 Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi* (fn 16), p. 125.

25 Milani, Gholamreza Takhti (fn 14), p. 1070.

and lack of prospects. This article, however, will take a different direction and will not present sport as a biographical opportunity in the face of hopelessness due to class-related origins. Instead, it will focus on the political dimension and the historical implications of the heroisation of the ›simple man‹ in modern Iran.

His childhood in the simple Tehran neighbourhood of Khani Abad was an important reference point for the heroisation of Gholamreza Takhti and found a dramaturgical climax in the family's three-day homelessness in the mid-1930s. In 1959, while Takhti was still alive, the Iranian sports newspaper *Keyhan-e Varzeshi* (World of Sport) published some autobiographical notes,²⁶ on the basis of which two biographies published in the Islamic Republic were later compiled.²⁷ Takhti's memories of his father's bankruptcy found their way into these biographies: ›One day, the bill collectors came to our house and threw us out the door along with the household goods. We were forced to sleep in the alley for two nights. Then on the third night we took our household goods to neighbours and were able to rent two rooms.‹²⁸ Later, this episode was linked to Takhti's supposed opposition to the Pahlavi regime and interpreted to mean that this attitude had been motivated by frustration at his father's unfair treatment.²⁹ His opposition, however, was not as clear-cut as it was constructed after Takhti's passing³⁰ – Takhti himself never equated sympathy with Mosaddeq and the National Front with a rejection of monarchy.

Nonetheless, the publishing house *Shahid Ebrahim Hadi* has made it its task in recent years to compile biographies of heroic figures significant for the Islamic Republic, and such an interpretation fits into the narrative. What is more important here, though, is that the book they published depicts a pious Muslim family life marked by poverty and deprivation. It is hardly surprising that the biography, which was written as part of the strategic presentation of a canon of heroes of the Islamic Republic of Iran, refers to the exemplary Islamic lifestyle of the family.³¹ The importance attached to the aspect of poverty in the heroisation of Takhti, on the other hand, is remarkable when it comes to the question of the supposed essence of an authentic Iranian masculinity – after all, the Islamic Republic sees itself as the revolutionary product of the ›simple men‹, the *mostazafin* (›oppressed‹), rebelling against oppression and exploitation.³²

26 Milani, Gholamreza Takhti (fn 14), p. 1070.

27 Goruh-e farangi-ye shahid Ebrahim Hadi, *Gholamreza. Zendeginameh va khaterati az Jahan Pahlevan-e Gholamreza Takhti* [*Gholamreza. Biography and Memories of Jahan Pahlevan Gholamreza Takhti*], 5th ed. Tehran 1395 (2016/17); Mohammad Ali Safari, *Hamase-ye Jahan Pahlevan Takhti* [*The Epos of Jahan Pahlevan Takhti*], Tehran 1380 (2000/01).

28 Gholamreza Takhti in *Keyhan-e Varzeshi*; referenced in: Goruh-e farangi-ye shahid Ebrahim Hadi, *Gholamreza* (fn 27), p. 18; Safari, *Hamase-ye Jahan Pahlevan Takhti* (fn 27), pp. 40-41.

29 Milani, Gholamreza Takhti (fn 14), p. 1070; cf. Safari, *Hamase-ye Jahan Pahlevan Takhti* (fn 27), p. 122.

30 On the oppositional appropriation of Takhti by leftist and student groups immediately after his death see Arash Davari, *Indeterminate Governmentality. Neoliberal Politics in Revolutionary Iran, 1968–1979*, Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles 2016; Davari/Sohrabi, ›A Sky Drowning in Stars‹ (fn 5).

31 Goruh-e farangi-ye shahid Ebrahim Hadi, *Gholamreza* (fn 27), p. 16.

32 Siavash Saffari, Two Pro-Mostazafin Discourses in the 1979 Iranian Revolution, in: *Contemporary Islam* 11 (2017), pp. 287-301.

For contextualisation, a somewhat broader view of the history of a country that was drawn into the turmoil of the Second World War in the early 1940s is thus necessary. On 25 August 1941, Soviet troops marched in from the north and British units from Iraq. Reza Shah had been able to rely on good relations with Nazi Germany early on and had intensified economic relations between the two countries in the years before the war. Great Britain, on the other hand, had overthrown Iraqi prime minister Rashid al-Kilani in April 1941, who had come into office as a result of a pro-German military coup, and who then fled into exile in Tehran. The fact that the Allies did not want to tolerate another government in the region that openly sympathised with Germany and might even enter into a military alliance was, however, only one of several reasons for the invasion of Iran.³³ From the British point of view, the strategic importance of the country lay above all in the oil deposits in the south, where the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company maintained the lucrative refinery of Abadan. From the Soviet point of view, the supply route for American support within the framework of the Lend-Lease Act would be secured.³⁴

The Iranian army could not hold out on any front. As early as the evening of 27 August 1941, Reza Shah agreed to a ceasefire, which took another two days to implement.³⁵ The invasion resulted in the forced abdication of Reza Shah Pahlavi in favour of his son Mohammad Reza Shah. At the same time, the country was divided into a British zone in the south and a Soviet zone in the north. Both this division and the humiliating ease with which the Allies were able to conquer the country were ominously reminiscent of the conditions of the *Great Game* between the United Kingdom and Russia in the late 19th century, when Qajar Iran was reduced to a pawn of the Great Powers without ever being formally colonised. The impression of powerlessness in the face of foreign influence intensified in the years that followed, when Iran became one of the early theatres of the Cold War: The Soviet Union only left the occupied region of Azerbaijan in Iran in the spring of 1946 under pressure from the US.³⁶

During these turbulent years, the young Gholamreza Takhti took up wrestling. Towards the end of the Second World War, at the age of 15, he dropped out of school and initially began training in the traditional strength sports of the *zurkhaneh*.³⁷ There is more politics behind this statement than it may seem at first. The *zurkhaneh* (literally ›house of strength‹) refers to a training arena that is said to have originated from a Persian martial arts tradition. Lloyd Ridgeon has described the *zurkhaneh* basically as a late 19th century invention of tradition, but at the same time identified it as ›one

33 Cf. Steven R. Ward, *Immortal. A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, Washington, DC 2009, pp. 151-152.

34 For a detailed analysis of the reasons for the invasion and its implementation see Ashley Jackson, *Persian Gulf Command. A History of the Second World War in Iran and Iraq*, New Haven 2018, pp. 150-208.

35 Ward, *Immortal* (fn 33), pp. 167-168.

36 Jamil Hasanli, *At the Dawn of the Cold War. The Soviet-American Crisis over Iranian Azerbaijan, 1941-1946*, Lanham 2006, p. 255.

37 Houchang E. Chehabi, Art. ›TAKṬI, Ğolām-Rezā‹, in: *Encyclopædia Iranica (Online)*, 20.7.2005, Update 9.8.2012, URL: <<https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/takti-golam-reza>>.

of Iran's distinctive, indigenous institutions.³⁸ The *zurkhaneh* has acquired this status not only through a series of ritualised strength exercises that are said to refer to a mythologised ancient period of Persian high culture and are called *varzesh-e bastani* (>classical [or ancient] sport<),³⁹ but also through the political relevance of the *zurkhaneh* milieu in the first half of the 20th century.

This milieu is closely associated with the prominent and ambivalent figure of the *luti*. In Iran, the term *luti* refers to certain representatives of the urban subaltern milieu of young men. The concept of *lutigari* (i.e., >lutism<) defines this specific masculinity. It idealises strength, honour, drive and the ability to protect territories, families, or followers – in short, the ability to assert oneself. It is a configuration of masculinity that, until the Islamic Revolution, was located outside of state structures and was often even in opposition to them.⁴⁰

The concept of *lutigari* first developed political relevance during the Constitutional Revolution of Iran (1906–1911), when the bricklayer Baqer Khan (1861–1916) and the horse trader Sattar Khan (1868–1914), two *lutis* with criminal pasts, kept the cause of the revolution alive by organising the defence of the city of Tabriz in north-western Iran against the forces of the then Qajar shah. Eventually, they personally spearheaded the march of a >socially insignificant group of men<⁴¹ to Tehran that led to the success of the constitutional movement and the abdication of Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar in July 1909. The constitutional phase, moreover, came to an end with a British-Russian occupation of the country during World War I and led to a previously decided division of Iran into a British and a Russian zone of influence. In this respect, the 1941 occupation described above was thus a repeat act. The episode of 1909, however, had an impact on the history of masculinities in modern Iran that can hardly be overestimated, as I have shown elsewhere.⁴² At a time when most of the intellectual masterminds of the constitutional movement had fled the country, the success story of the two *luti* revolutionary leaders contributed to the formation of an ethos of masculinity that also declared political action to be a matter of physical strength and performative masculinity. The heroisation of Sattar Khan and Baqer Khan was not only significant for mobilisation during the processes framing the coup d'état of 1953, but was also reactivated during the Islamic Revolution, when the discourse around the *mostazafin*, the

38 Lloyd Ridgeon, The Zūrkhāna between Tradition and Change, in: *Iran. Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 45 (2007), pp. 243-265, here p. 262.

39 See Philippe Rochard, The Identities of the Iranian Zūrkhānah, in: *Iranian Studies* 35 (2002), pp. 313-340; Ridgeon, The Zūrkhāna between Tradition and Change (fn 38).

40 See Olmo Gözl, The Dangerous Classes and the 1953 Coup in Iran. On the Decline of *lutigari* Masculinities, in: Stephanie Cronin (ed.), *Crime, Poverty and Survival in the Middle East and North Africa. The >Dangerous Classes< since 1800*, London 2019, pp. 177-190, here pp. 179-181.

41 Asghar Fathi, The Role of the >Rebels< in the Constitutional Movement in Iran, in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10 (1979), pp. 55-66, here p. 56.

42 Olmo Gözl, Racketeers in Politics. Theoretical Reflections on Strong-man Performances in Late Qajar Iran, in: Ramazan Hakki Öztan/Alp Yenen (eds), *Age of Rogues. Rebels, Revolutionaries and Racketeers at the Frontiers of Empires*, Edinburgh 2021, pp. 120-147; Gözl, The Dangerous Classes (fn 40).

oppressed, unfolded its mobilising potential. It is the idealisation of the ›simple man‹ who – even if he has nothing else at his disposal – takes fate into his own hands, trusts in his fortitude, will and physical strength and takes action.⁴³

When Takhti began his strength training in the *zurkhaneh*, he could have taken the path of a *luti* – but he did not, switching instead to freestyle wrestling in 1948, which was less closely tied to Iran's urban subaltern milieu. However, his background and environment played an important role in transferring key elements of the increasingly discredited *luti* ethos into idealised body-based masculinities during the second half of the 20th century. After the war, Takhti first left the capital Tehran to work for the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in the oil town of Masjed Soleiman for a year, after which he was drafted into military service. The captain of his unit also happened to be the secretary of the Iranian Wrestling Federation. The success that resulted from this meeting did not take long to materialise – as early as 1950 Takhti won his first national championship, then in 1951 the silver medal at the World Championships in Helsinki, and in 1952 the same medal at the same venue, but now at the Olympics.⁴⁴

The rise of Takhti the wrestler took place in another politically turbulent phase, which was marked by the confrontation with foreign influence in Iran again. For one, after the abdication of Reza Shah, a strong communist movement was able to establish itself, which in the guise of the *Tudeh* Party was able to exert lasting influence on politics and society. For another, the prominent politician Mohammad Mosaddeq, who was particularly popular among the middle class, founded his *Jebhe-ye Melli* (National Front) in 1949, a coalition of influential politicians and parties whose lowest common denominator was the demand for the nationalisation of British-controlled oil resources. After the National Front's electoral success and Mosaddeq's assumption of the post of prime minister in 1951, the young Mohammad Reza Shah signed the bill for the nationalisation of Iran's oil resources. In this atmosphere of national awakening and the impression of political self-determination, Takhti showed himself to be a sympathiser of Mosaddeq and the democratic project of his National Front.

However, all democratic hopes were once again dashed by foreign influence when the coup d'état of 1953 led to Mosaddeq's ousting. The putsch of 19 August represents a turning point in Iranian history in several respects. It overthrew the popular prime minister and ensured the safe return of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who had previously fled abroad. Moreover, the coup, largely orchestrated by the CIA and the British SIS, transformed Iran into a client state of the United States.⁴⁵ The Islamic Revolution of 1979, which was mainly directed against the Shah and the perceived foreign domination by the US, would not have been conceivable without the 1953 coup. As a direct consequence for Iranian politics, it should be noted that the putsch ended the democratic dreams of the secular Iranian nationalists and at the same time led to the crushing of the previously strong communist movement in Iran.

43 Gözl, *Racketeers in Politics* (fn 42), pp. 121-122.

44 Chehabi, *Sport and Politics in Iran* (fn 2), p. 53.

45 Mark J. Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah. Building a Client State in Iran*, Ithaca 1991.



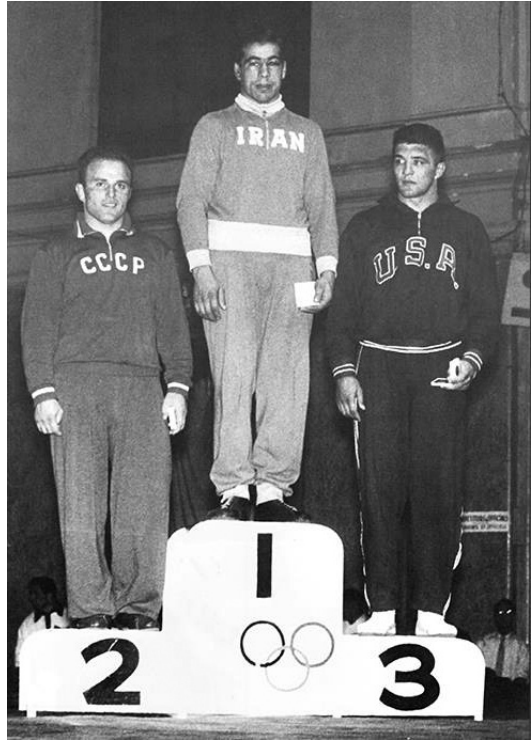
Takhti in front of the entrance to the Olympic Village in Melbourne, 1956
(Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The coup was also crucial from the perspective of a history of masculinities in Iran. After a first attempted coup on the night of 15-16 August had been unsuccessful, on the morning of 19 August numerous local giants of the subaltern Tehran milieu mobilised groups of supporters for the Shah's cause. These *lutis*, recruited mainly from the local *zurkhanehs*, thus interfered in politics again for different motives.⁴⁶ The reasons cannot be explored here;⁴⁷ what is crucial, however, is that these men from the world of strength sports paved the way for the intervention of the military in favour of the Shah. The fact of their active intervention led to the subsequent discrediting or marginalisation of the *zurkhaneh* milieu and the *luti* ethos in Iranian perception, either because this milieu was blamed for the failure of the democratic phase or because efforts were made on the royalist side to curtail its political influence so as not to become its victim.⁴⁸

46 On the ambivalent role of heavy athletes in Iranian society see Houchang E. Chehabi, Gender Anxieties in the Iranian Zūrkhānah, in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51 (2019), pp. 395-421.

47 I discussed this in Olmo Gözl, *Gewaltakteure in Iran. Rackets, Racketeers und der Kampf um das Gewaltmonopol in Teheran 1941–1963*, phil. Diss. Freiburg im Breisgau 2016.

48 See Gözl, *The Dangerous Classes* (fn 40).



Awards Ceremony, Melbourne 1956
 (Photo: Mir Abolghasem Farsi;
 <<http://museum.olympic.ir/en/photos/gallery/worldchampiongholamrezatakhti>>)

Takhti, however, had left the *zurkhaneh* in time and was thus seen not as corruptible, not as a stooge of the West, but as a herald of the very virtues that the other strong men had shamefully betrayed when they supposedly allowed themselves to be corrupted by foreign powers. This is how the passage quoted above from Al-e Ahmad's essay can be read, which states that Takhti never turned his back on his class, »that essence of physical strength who said »no« to the most powerful of his time» – followed by the addition: »who had not become a Namju, a Shaban [Jafari; one of the *luti* leaders] or a Habibi;⁴⁹ all of them well-known men who, in Al-e Ahmad's view, had betrayed their class, their origin, their country, and had not lived up to the responsibility of their masculinity, their physical strength.

The appeal of Takhti's sporting success and the scope of the veneration can only be understood in the light of the political dimensions of foreign influence and Iranian reactions to it highlighted here. Accordingly, the symbolic impact of Takhti's sporting success over the representatives of the superpowers – the Soviet Union (which was still actively intervening in Iranian politics through the communist *Tudeh* in the 1950s) and the USA – at the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne can hardly be overestimated.

49 Al-e Ahmad, Samad va afsaneh-ye 'avamm (fn 12), p. 11.

In the discipline of freestyle wrestling, Takhti won the light heavyweight division after competing without any counterpoints. In the final round, he beat the Soviet silver medallist Boris Kulayev (1929–2008) by win by fall and the third-placed American Peter Blair (1932–1994) on points.

The coach of the Iranian Olympic team, Habibolah Bolour (1913–1982), told an anecdote about the award ceremony at the 1956 Olympics, when he wanted to draw Takhti's attention to what great names he had defeated, but Takhti referred to the national significance of his victories: »When Takhti stood on the winner's rostrum for the first time in the Olympics over the champions from America and the Soviet Union, I came closer and told him: »Look left and right! Look who is standing there!« Then, when the Iranian national anthem was played, Takhti pointed to the Iranian flag above his head, which was also hoisted higher [than the Soviet and US flags], reminding me of the special significance, namely that the news of it will bring joy and satisfaction to a whole nation.«⁵⁰ The central connection between masculinities and nation that is suggested here is also discussed in gender studies focussing on Iran.

3. Theoretical Framework: Gender and Masculinity Research on Iran

Current research on masculinities in Iran is shaped by two premises: on the one hand, by a historical perspective that refers primarily to the experience of foreign influence; on the other hand, by the Islamic Revolution and the social order associated with it, identified by authors of gender studies as »hypermasculine«. ⁵¹ The revolution itself brought about an examination of gender issues – but especially through a public fixation on the role of women in Iranian society. The changes resulting from the revolution had already been preceded by the project of authoritarian reorganisation of gendered norms by the regime of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi since the 1950s. On the one hand, an attempt was made to redefine the place of women in society according to the supposed demands of modernity; on the other hand, a redefinition of idealised masculinities was sought, which was to be oriented towards Western ideas. ⁵² From a historical perspective, it is the resulting tense process that ultimately also condenses in the representations of the wrestler Gholamreza Takhti.

50 Referenced in Mohsen Ahmadi, Art. »Takhti«, in: *Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia* (CGIE), 1389 (2011), URL: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20220922040653/https://www.cgie.org.ir/fa/article/239624/%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%AA%DB%8C>> (in Persian).

51 Shahin Gerami, Mullahs, Martyrs, and Men. Conceptualizing Masculinity in the Islamic Republic of Iran, in: *Men and Masculinities* 5 (2003), pp. 257-274, here p. 261.

52 Cf. e.g. Houchang E. Chehabi, A Cosmopolitan Dandy. Amir Abbas Hoveyda, in: Roham Alvandi (ed.), *The Age of Aryamer. Late Pahlavi Iran and Its Global Entanglements*, London 2018, pp. 147-167.

In her influential ›foundational text‹ for the recent tradition of feminist masculinity studies entitled ›Mullahs, Martyrs, and Men. Conceptualizing Masculinity in the Islamic Republic of Iran‹ from 2003, Shahin Gerami notes that although the Iranian women's movement openly addresses injustice, exploitation and dehumanisation of women in the name of tradition, religion or authenticity, it tends to miss masculinity as a dominant aspect structuring the gender hierarchy: ›My native culture has infinite notions of maleness as good, brave, loyal, and benevolent. Masculinity is so standardized that most Iranians do not see it as a category. Ayatollah Khomeini's manhood is taken-for-granted knowledge in the national consciousness. He may be analyzed as a revolutionary leader, an Imam, a politician, or even a dictator, but not as a man.‹⁵³

Gerami therefore calls for an examination of the ›prototypes‹ of idealised masculinities propagated by the revolutionary ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran in order to deconstruct the country's gender order – and from the perspective of this article, it can be added: such a research agenda must also include the representatives of those masculinities it identifies as prototypical.⁵⁴ Gerami's concept of the hypermasculine social order, however, already has a relational dimension woven into it that might not initially be suspected through the focus on ›prototypes‹: ›This misogynistic order was hard on women, but it also harmed men. The state's imposition of Sharia, its harsh implementation of sex segregation and condoning of vigilantism, hurt men as it did women.‹⁵⁵ The author is therefore interested in the question of how men and women (can) relate to prototypical masculinities.

Following Gerami, all major feminist studies on Iran have also explored the significance of the hypermasculine social order she diagnosed for men, so that in addition to numerous essays on masculinities in the Iranian context of the 20th and 21st centuries,⁵⁶

53 Gerami, *Mullahs, Martyrs, and Men* (fn 51), p. 258.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 260: ›Exploring masculinity constructs imposed by the clergy can shed light on the current political climate in Iran. As Western feminists have debunked the heroes and villains of Christianity by making their private affairs public, Eastern feminists need to do the same with Islamic mythical figures.‹

55 *Ibid.*, p. 260.

56 Cf. Joanna de Groot, ›Brothers of the Iranian Race‹. Manhood, Nationhood, and Modernity in Iran c. 1870–1914, in: Stefan Dudink/Karen Hagemann/John Tosh (eds), *Masculinities in Politics and War. Gendering Modern History*, Manchester 2004, pp. 137-156; Azam Torab, Rites of Masculinity. Tropes of Regeneration in Contexts of Death, in: Torab, *Performing Islam. Gender and Ritual in Iran*, Leiden 2007, pp. 139-168; Mehri Honarbin-Holliday, Emerging Forms of Masculinity in the Islamic Republic of Iran, in: Annabelle Sreberny/Massoumeh Torfeh (eds), *Cultural Revolution in Iran. Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic*, London 2013, pp. 59-77; Sivan Balslev, Dressed for Success. Hegemonic Masculinity, Elite Men and Westernisation in Iran, c. 1900–40, in: *Gender & History* 26 (2014), pp. 545-564; Nacim Pak-Shiraz, Shooting the Isolation and Marginality of Masculinities in Iranian Cinema, in: *Iranian Studies* 50 (2017), pp. 945-967; Nacim Pak-Shiraz, Constructing Masculinities through *Javanmards* in Pre-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema, in: Ridgeon, *Javanmardi* (fn 8), pp. 297-318; Olmo Gözl, Martyrdom and Masculinity in Warring Iran. The Karbala Paradigm, the Heroic, and the Personal Dimensions of War, in: *Behemoth* 12 (2019) Issue 1, pp. 35-51; Gözl, The Dangerous Classes (fn 40); Rassa Ghaffari, Beyond Martyrs and Mullahs. Transformations of Gender Roles and Identities Among Tehran Middle-Class's Men, in: *MENAS Online Journal* 1 (2020), pp. 3-19.

Janet Afary's *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*⁵⁷ and Afsaneh Najmabadi's *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards*⁵⁸ are excellent monographs on the gender order in Iran, which do not disregard men and masculinities. With Sivan Balslev's *Iranian Masculinities*⁵⁹ and Wendy DeSouza's *Unveiling Men*,⁶⁰ two studies have recently been published that deal specifically with masculinity research in modern Iran. It is striking that in these studies Gerami's idea of prototypical masculinities is expanded by several concepts. Just as Gerami explains that ›the mullah‹ or ›the martyr‹ in Iranian society can be defined almost ideal-typically in Max Weber's sense of the term, numerous works are devoted to the term *javanmardi*, which is prominent in Iran and becomes instructive in relation to Takhti.⁶¹

Any accusation that such a research agenda, which scrutinises prototypes, is a re-activation of a now outdated gender role theory for the Iranian case, would not be easy to refute. Raewyn Connell, the pioneer in the sociology of masculinities, has criticised that in focusing on gender roles, oppression only exists ›as a constricting pressure placed by the role upon the self, but that power relations between and within sexes are not taken into account.⁶² In fact, especially those studies that deal with the history of the concept of *javanmardi* tend not to examine its significance for the gender hierarchy in Iran, but use it solely for the description of male roles. This way, power relations, which both Connell is concerned with in her critique of role theory and Gerami in her reflection on the Iranian gender order, are no longer discussed.

In the field of Iranian studies, however, the concept of *javanmardi* is perceived as belonging to Iran's cultural repertoire and its long history in such a prominent way that it seems particularly suited to marking Iranian identity. In her widely acclaimed 1999 work *Being Modern in Iran*, the anthropologist Fariba Adelhah had already identified the concept and its associated notion as omnipresent in everyday language and as a ›working programme for political action in modern Iran.⁶³ Subsequently, numerous

57 Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, New York 2009.

58 Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards. Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, Berkeley 2005. See also Najmabadi, *Professing Selves. Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran*, Durham 2014.

59 Sivan Balslev, *Iranian Masculinities. Gender and Sexuality in Late Qajar and Early Pahlavi Iran*, Cambridge, UK 2019.

60 Wendy DeSouza, *Unveiling Men. Modern Masculinities in Twentieth-Century Iran*, Syracuse 2019.

61 Mary Catherine Bateson et al., Şafā-yi Bātin. A Study of the Interrelations of a Set of Iranian Ideal Character Types, in: Leon Carl Brown/Norman Itzkowitz (eds), *Psychological Dimensions of Near Eastern Studies*, Princeton 1977, pp. 257-273; Julian Baldick, The Iranian Origin of the *futuwwa*, in: *Annali – Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli* 50 (1990), pp. 345-361; Willem M. Floor, The lūtīs – A Social Phenomenon in Qājār Persia. A Reappraisal, in: *Die Welt des Islams* 13 (1971), pp. 103-120; Willem M. Floor, The Political Role of the Lutis in Iran, in: Michael E. Bonine/Nikki R. Keddie (eds), *Modern Iran. The Dialectics of Continuity and Change*, Albany 1981, pp. 83-95; Mohsen Zakeri, Art. ›javānmardī‹, in: *Encyclopædia Iranica (Online)*, 15 December 2008, Update 13 April 2012, URL: <<https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/javanmardi>>.

62 Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. Cambridge 2005, p. 25.

63 Fariba Adelhah, *Being Modern in Iran*, London 1999, p. 46.

studies have dealt with the *javanmardi* phenomenon, on the one hand acknowledging the gender role aspect it stands for, but on the other hand setting themselves apart from earlier studies by making Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity⁶⁴ bear fruit and thus looking more closely at the relational dimensions of masculinities.⁶⁵ Takhti, too, is seemingly naturally associated with *javanmardi* in both sources and research, and is also regularly presented as an explanandum for the concept itself – particularly his humble, unassuming nature has since been instrumental in shaping notions of *javanmardi*.⁶⁶

In addition to the goal of deconstructing today's gender order in Iran, including via feminist motivated masculinity studies, some analyses also recognised early on the political dimensions of masculinities in a country that saw itself constantly under foreign influence. This is based on the observation that a discourse had already established itself in Iran during the Constitutional Revolution around 1905 to 1911 that framed the nation in gendered terms and presented the homeland as an entity threatened by foreign powers that was dependent on protection by the patriotic male.⁶⁷ The trope of the homeland as a woman – and often even explicitly as an abused woman – is by no means limited to the Iranian case. On the contrary, it is just as widespread a phenomenon of constructing nationalisms as its intertwining with connotations of male honour.⁶⁸ Afsaneh Najmabadi, however, has researched this entanglement specifically for the Iranian case and found that in modern Iran, until the first decades of the 20th century, a discourse prevailed in which the homeland (Pers. *vatan*) had a feminine connotation, the nation (Pers. *mellat*; the same term can also be translated as ›people‹) had a masculine connotation. The female homeland and the male nation are thereby connected by the concept of honour (Pers. *nāmūs*): ›Rooted in Islamic thought, *nāmūs* was delinked from its religious affiliation [*nāmūs-i Islām*] and reclaimed as a national concern [*nāmūs-i Irān*], as *millat* itself changed from a religious to a national community. Slipping between the idea of purity of woman [*'iṣmat*] and integrity of Iran, *nāmūs* constituted purity of woman and Iran as subjects both of male possession and protection: sexual and national honour intimately constructed each other.⁶⁹

64 Connell, *Masculinities* (fn 62); Raewyn Connell/James W. Messerschmidt, Hegemonic Masculinity. Rethinking the Concept, in: *Gender & Society* 19 (2005), pp. 829-859.

65 Cf. Balslev, *Iranian Masculinities* (fn 59), pp. 23-53; Honarbin-Holliday, Emerging Forms of Masculinity (fn 56); Minoo Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister. Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran*, Berkeley 2005; Pak-Shiraz, Shooting the Isolation and Marginality (fn 56); Pak-Shiraz, Constructing Masculinities (fn 56).

66 Adelhkhan, *Being Modern in Iran* (fn 63), pp. 4, 35; Babak Rahimi, Digital *Javanmardi*. Chivalric Ethics and Imagined Iran on the Internet, in: Ridgeon, *Javanmardi* (fn 8), pp. 281-296, here pp. 284-290.

67 Balslev, *Iranian Masculinities* (fn 59), p. 91; Groot, ›Brothers of the Iranian Race‹ (fn 56), pp. 141-143.

68 Cf. Andrew Parker et al., Introduction, in: Parker et al. (eds), *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, New York 1992, pp. 1-18, here p. 6; Karen Hagemann, ›Männlicher Muth und Teutsche Ehre‹. Nation, Militär und Geschlecht zur Zeit der Antinapoleonischen Kriege Preußens, Paderborn 2002.

69 Afsaneh Najmabadi, The Erotic *Vaṭān* [Homeland] as Beloved and Mother. To Love, To Possess, and To Protect, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39 (1997), pp. 442-467, here p. 444.

Recent gender studies on Iran can hardly escape Najmabadi's fundamental observation that in the course of the 19th century, numerous concepts with gendered connotations entered into a field of tension with each other in the imagination of the Iranian nation. These had a lasting impact on the ideas of both a binary-structured society and the associated gender designs for men and women. The juxtaposition of a female connoted ›geo-body‹ (*vatan*, homeland) and a male collective of national brotherhood (*mellat*, people/nation), which is obliged to protect the beloved – here not only ›the beloved homeland‹, but very literally to be understood as ›the beloved‹, Iran that is – had a great influence on the understanding of ›proper‹ or ›authentic‹ nationalism or patriotism in the context of the confrontation with and penetration by foreign influence.⁷⁰ Through the concept of honour, which elevated the protection of the female body to the duty of men, nationalism and love of the homeland were directly linked to masculinities.⁷¹ How sustainable these ideas, which slowly established themselves in the 19th century, were and what mobilisation potentials they were able to unfold, is shown by those processes of the 20th century in Iran, when the address of the ›simple man‹ was able to have its effect in the context of foreign threat and later penetration. This applies to the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911, the events surrounding the nationalisation of oil in 1951/52, the coup d'état in 1953 and the Islamic Revolution of 1978/79.⁷²

It is in the light of this inventory of gender research on Iran that the special symbolism of Takhti's widely circulated photograph showing him at the victory ceremony in Melbourne in 1956 (see above, p. 13) must be evaluated – precisely the victory ceremony that the wrestler himself allegedly hoped would bring satisfaction to the nation, according to his coach. In the picture, which shows the Iranian champion framed by the lower-placed, inferior athletes in the duel, of those powers that have determined politics in Iran almost at will not only since the invasion in 1941, the gender dimensions of national honour and the hopes of regaining a masculinity thought lost are condensed.

70 Najmabadi, *The Erotic Vajān* (fn 69), p. 445.

71 Balslev, *Iranian Masculinities* (fn 59), pp. 92-93: ›The triangle of patriotism-*gheyra*-*namus* bind nationalist activity to honorable masculinity. Patriotism thus becomes much more than an ideology. It is a character trait as inseparable from masculinity as honor, as personal as it is political.‹

72 I have examined the processes listed here in relation to the mobilisation potentials of configurations of masculinities. On the Constitutional Revolution, see Gözl, *Racketeers in Politics* (fn 42); on the 1950s and 1960s: Gözl, *Gewaltakteure in Iran* (fn 47); Gözl, *Representation of the Hero Tayyeb Hajj Reza'i: Sociological Reflections on Javanmardi*, in: Ridgeon, *Javanmardi* (fn 8), pp. 263-280; Gözl, *The Dangerous Classes* (fn 40); on the phase of the Islamic Revolution in the 1970s and 1980s: Gözl, *Martyrdom and Masculinity in Warring Iran* (fn 56); Gözl, *Der Heroismus der Revolutionsgarden im Iran-Irak-Krieg. Von der Gewaltgemeinschaft zur Avantgarde des Martyriums*, in: Gözl/Cornelia Brink (eds), *Gewalt und Heldentum*, Baden-Baden 2020, pp. 151-178.

4. Wrestling and the Dimensions of Heroic Masculinity

In a language that, like Persian, does not have a grammatical gender, the gendered associations of terms and concepts play an outstanding role in the deconstruction of the gender order. This is also relevant for the discussion of the heroic, in which discourses on morally exemplary behaviour are condensed in individual figures. The example of the wrestler shows that the gender order in Iran is decisively shaped by the concepts of the heroic – and all the following four levels of meaning of the heroic are condensed in the figure of Gholamreza Takhti.

Persian does not offer a direct translation of the container term ›hero‹ with all its connotations conveyed in European languages, but differentiates the heroic contextually and is almost always masculine-coded; this applies to the four terms *shahid*, *pahlevan*, *qahreman* and *javanmard*. The heroic thus forms a central access-regulating factor in the Iranian gender hierarchy. In the current discourse, which is strongly related to Shiite Islam and the martyrdom narratives of its founding history, the *shahid*, the martyr, represents a central configuration that includes the heroic, defines masculinities, and significantly shapes the gender order. The rumour of Takhti's murder serves precisely this pattern and supports at least his posthumous heroisation. The innocent, unjustly killed *shahid* enjoys a place of honour in Iran's collective memory.⁷³ In their study, Davari and Sohrabi show how, after Takhti's funeral, for the first time the Shiite rhythm of mourning unfolded its explosive mobilising effect, which shaped the later phase of the Islamic Revolution: ›The aftershocks of that explosion continued into the 1979 revolution that toppled the Pahlavi state.‹⁷⁴

Of greater importance to the question of the gendered dimensions of the heroic in the context of the wrestler Takhti, however, is the concept of the *pahlevan*. The *pahlevan* is used in connection with ideas of ancient Persia and the mythological dimensions of Persian-language epics, especially the *Shahnameh* (›Book of Kings‹, completed around 1010 CE) by Abu l-Qasem Ferdowsi (940–1020). *Pahlevani*, here initially translated as ›heroism‹, is defined on the one hand by morally exemplary behaviour, on the other hand it is not conceivable without reference to the body. Houchang Chehabi aptly summarises: ›The ideals of Iranian chivalry and sportsmanship are expressed by the notion of pahlavan. A pahlavan is not a mere champion, in Persian *qahraman*, but also a moral exemplar who is just, fair, self-abnegating and kind to the weak. Reflecting Iran's dual heritage as a Shii Muslim country with an ancient culture going back to pre-Islamic times, two primordial heroes exemplify the values of ›pahlavanhood‹:

73 See Olmo Gözl, Gemartert, gelächelt, geblutet für alle. Der Märtyrer als Gedächtnisfigur in Iran, in: Nina Leonhard/Oliver Dimbath (eds), *Gewaltgedächtnisse. Analysen zur Präsenz vergangener Gewalt*, Wiesbaden 2021, pp. 127-150.

74 Davari/Sohrabi, ›A Sky Drowning in Stars‹ (fn 5), pp. 213-214.

Rostam and Imam Ali. While the first of these, whose exploits are narrated in Iran's national epic, the *Book of Kings*, belongs to the realm of legend, the second is a key character in early Islamic history.⁷⁵

In modern Iran, only wrestlers and athletes of a few other sports such as weightlifting, which are associated with the classical forms of *varzesh-e bastani* (ancient sport), can be called *pahlevan* without opposition.⁷⁶ *Pahlevan* can only be who is a man and strong, a fictional hero or a real athlete. *Pahlevani*, however, is a trait indicating idealised moral behaviour, it is heroism or heroic courage that anyone can display, men as well as women; another translation is simply: wrestling. Consequently, ideality is not only negotiated through a term with masculine connotations, but also through one that explicitly refers to performatively displayed physical strength. The circle of heroism, myth and morality closes with the intensification of the *pahlevan*, the *jahan pahlevan*, because there are only two of them: the mythological Rostam and the wrestler Takhti.

Jahan pahlevan is not a title to be obtained through victories in wrestling – other Iranian wrestlers won more medals internationally than Takhti and did not receive this epithet.⁷⁷ It is actually a title reserved exclusively for Rostam, the central heroic figure from the Persian national epic *Shahnameh*. The honorary title is deeply anchored in the myth about an authentic Iran and its long Persian, even pre-Islamic history. In modern Iran, it has been awarded only once through a form of consensual recognition, to Takhti.⁷⁸

In the *Shahnameh*, whose importance for the re-emergence of a Persophone self-confidence in the area of today's Iran and Central Asia after the Islamic-Arab conquest in the 7th century can hardly be overestimated, the duel between the mythological heroes, known as *koshti* and today also simply translated as ›wrestling‹, occupies a prominent place.⁷⁹ The tragic wrestling match between the two heroes Rostam and Sohrab, father and son, who do not recognise each other on the battlefield, represents a dramatic climax of the *Shahnameh*. In their first clash, the son seems to be victorious over the father when Rostam is thrown to the ground by Sohrab, who sits on the elder's chest to cut off his head. However, Rostam, lying in the dust, explains the rules of duel to the younger hero, namely that good manners would not allow the head to be cut off the first time a warrior was thrown into the dust. It would only be opportune the second time, because that had been the custom in Iran for ages.⁸⁰ With this ruse, Rostam saves himself on the second day of fighting, on which the antagonists once again tie

75 Chehabi, *Sport and Politics in Iran* (fn 2), pp. 48-49.

76 In the Iranian media, the weightlifter Hossein Reza Zadeh and the judoka Arash Mir Esmail are currently also referred to as *pahlevan*. However, this is met with resistance and, in any case, proximity to the Iranian national epic *Shahnameh* is sought.

77 Chehabi, *Sport and Politics in Iran* (fn 2), p. 48.

78 Ahmadi, *Takhti* (fn 50).

79 Cf. Chehabi, *Wrestling in the Shahnameh* (fn 9), pp. 276, 281.

80 Abū l-Qāsem Firdausī, *Schāhnāme. Die Rostam-Legenden*, ed. by Jürgen Ehlers, Stuttgart 2016, pp. 156-157.

up their horses, set about resuming their duel and grab each other by the straps of the belt before the father finally wrestles the still unrecognised son to the ground and kills him – by a completely unsporting dagger thrust into the chest, however.⁸¹

In later Persian epics, the personal arsenal of the *Shahnameh* is taken up and enriched step by step with explicitly Islamic elements.⁸² Here, the appearance of Rostam, who in the *Shahnameh* itself is still quite erratic and ruthlessly brutal, also seems to be expanded to include moral dimensions; above all, however, the wrestling and the techniques used there are described in greater detail, so that the duel increasingly acquires its formalised structures.⁸³ The popular success of epic narratives about mythological heroes, thus perceived as pre-Islamic, then also leads to the representation of figures of early Islam in verse by pious poets. In particular, Ali b. Abi Talib, the reference figure for Shiite Islam, stands out.⁸⁴ In Safavid Iran (1501–1722), the amalgamation of decidedly Persian mythological forms with Shiite-Islamic topoi even goes so far that Rostam and Ali meet directly in the heroic epic *Rostamnameh*, written at that time, and Rostam finally converts to Islam after being defeated by Ali.⁸⁵ Chehabi notes that the Muslim Rostam was the perfect metaphor for a Safavid-Iranian identity that reconciled the two central dimensions of Iranian self-understanding, namely the pre-Islamic period and Shiite Islam.⁸⁶

The modern conflation of wrestling with the mythological dimensions of Iran cannot easily be dismissed as an invention of tradition, as one is initially tempted to assume. Rather, there seems to be at least a tradition of discussing certain ideas of what Iran is in this sport; and this also concerns the question of what it means to be Iranian. As shown at the beginning, notions of masculinity in modern Iran are closely interwoven with discourses of authenticity – and wrestling provides a prominent foil against which the corresponding masculinities can be presented. Just as *Jahan Pahlevan Rostam* was built up as a metaphor for an Iranian-Islamic identity in Safavid Iran, *Jahan Pahlevan Takhti* could become a metaphor for an authentic, strong Iran at a time when the country saw itself degraded to the plaything of foreign powers and the catchword *gharbzadegi* with its criticism of the limp, effeminate man struck by the West made the rounds.

Qahreman, the third term to be discussed here with reference to Takhti, is closer to the European concept of a hero, but always carries the connotation of victory – one could translate the term as ›victorious hero‹. Whoever wins a world championship is a *qahreman-e jahan*, a world champion, regardless of the sport. Whoever loses the final is not a world champion. Except in wrestling, it seems. Iranian wrestlers are always

81 Ibid., pp. 158-159.

82 Chehabi, *Wrestling in the Shahnameh* (fn 9), p. 258.

83 Ibid., pp. 268-269.

84 Ibid., p. 271.

85 Ibid., p. 273.

86 Ibid., p. 274. As an example of a consistent ›Shiitisation‹ of Takhti, including many symbols that also refer to martyrdom, see this artwork by Khosrow Hassanzadeh, 2007: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_2008-6032-1>.

qahremanan (plural), even if they lose. Thus, the daily newspaper *Ettela'at* headlined the reception of the Iranian wrestlers at Tehran airport after their disappointing performance at the 1960 Rome Olympics: ›Esteqbal-e Tehran az *qahremanan*‹ (Tehran's welcome of the *qahremanan*). If they were footballers, this headline would have implied the victory of the receiving team. But they were wrestlers – and in connection with them, therefore, the same term, which in other contexts refers without ambiguity to a victory, is to be translated as ›hero‹. ›Tehran's welcome of the heroes‹ it could thus read; and yet everyone knows that it is about wrestlers who lost. However, to make the distinction from *pahlevan*, *qahreman* is always translated as ›champion‹ in this article.

The dimensions of heroic masculinity in Iran can be summarised: there can be female martyrs, but the prototype of the *shahid* follows the male norm. *Pahlevan* can only be a man; physical strength and decency as well as tradition and cultural authenticity are negotiated through him. *Qahreman* has a masculine connotation, but it can at least also be used for female winners, especially in sports. It is a term that refers to competition, victory and agonality. The fourth term central to the heroic is also related to idealised masculinity: *Javanmardi* – the concept was discussed in the previous section – is a term of virtue and the body at the same time; it has often been translated in English as chivalry. In Persian, the word manliness (*mardi*) is already an integral part of the concept. In Takhti's person, at least the last three terms unite paradigmatically. He is not only someone to whom these heroic configurations are applied, but vice versa: they are explained with him. He is the ideal *pahlevan*, *qahreman* and *javanmard* at the same time. He is the ideal man. This representational function of Takhti for configurations of heroic masculinity in Iran applies both to the 1960s and 1970s and to contemporary Iranian discourses on idealised masculinity, with the rumour of his assassination adding to the ›Shiitisation‹ of the figure through the connotations of martyrdom. Takhti thus represents the remarkable exceptional case in which the heroic potential of the figure was transferred almost unbroken from the Pahlavi period to post-revolutionary Iran with only minor discursive adjustments (it is worth remembering not only his death but also the supposedly pious childhood in contemporary biographies) – precisely because there was never any doubt about his ›cultural authenticity‹.

5. Sport, Masculinity and National Honour

The gender dimensions in the area of tension between Takhti's heroic figure on the one hand and the search for Iranian authenticity and national honour on the other are not only to be found after the athlete's death; they already shaped his heroisation during his lifetime. In particular, the coverage of the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome and the 1961 World Wrestling Championships in Yokohama is noteworthy. It gives an impression of both the enthusiasm for freestyle wrestling in Iran at the time and the connections that were drawn between this sport, its representatives, the imagination of a mythologised Iranian identity and national assertiveness.

The 1960 Olympic Games were disappointing for Iranian wrestlers. Takhti's team could only win three medals. Mohammad Paziraei (1929–2002) won bronze at the end of the first week in the flyweight, the lightest weight class of the Greco-Roman style (*koshti-ye farangi*, literally ›European wrestling‹), which is unloved in Iran and in which only the upper body provides the attacking surface.⁸⁷ After that, things continued promisingly at first, both in the Greco-Roman style and in freestyle wrestling, where the entire body may be attacked. Takhti defeated his opponents in series, and the other team members also recorded convincing victories, which were enthusiastically received in Iran.⁸⁸ Although the highly touted Olympic champion of 1956, Emam-Ali Habibi (born 1931), missed out on a medal in the lightweight division, the dominance of the athletes in the light heavyweight and flyweight divisions, Gholamreza Takhti and Ebrahim Seifpour (born 1938), was overwhelming. The disappointment in Iran was even more bitter after Seifpour had to settle for the bronze medal and finally Takhti also lost to the Turkish Athlete İsmet Atlı (1932–2014) in the final. Takhti's defeat was met with disbelief and outrage. In the aftermath, it was claimed that Atlı had been afraid of the real champion (*qahreman*) Takhti on the mat and had literally fled.⁸⁹ The real winner, the article ›Who is the champion, Takhti or Atlı?‹ insinuated, was the Iranian athlete: ›How could our invincible champion lose?‹ It was clear to all, the newspaper continued, that ›in truth, their strong and superior hero had not lost and that it was only external circumstances‹ that had led to defeat, ›such as the division of weight classes, cheating and violating the principles of sport and *pahlevani* – which unfortunately only exists in the world of sport today.‹⁹⁰

Wrestling is the place where the values of *pahlevani* are upheld – at least from the Iranian side, the subtext goes. The Turkish Olympic champion was guilty of violating these values, whereas Takhti had once again paid respect to his opponent in his own humble way on the mat by deliberately not dominating him, because ›everyone knows that when Takhti wrestles a weak competitor, he tries to wrestle like him.‹⁹¹ (That he had once not attacked his opponent's injured knee in another important match is common knowledge in Iran.) And despite his supposedly unjust defeat and visible anger, after the medals were awarded, the defeated wrestler ›in a gesture of utmost *javanmardi* [i.e., ›manly virtue‹ here] shook hands with his opponent Atlı (*ba nehajat-e javanmardi Atlı harife khod dast midehad*).‹⁹²

The transfer of this interpretation of a sporting clash between two national representatives to Iran's political experience in dealing with foreign powers, especially after the national trauma of the coup d'état of 1953, is by no means contrived: ›unfair treatment‹ on the global stage was considered the central Iranian experience of the 20th

87 Iran wins first medal, in: *Ettela'at*, 10 Shahrivar 1339 (1 September 1960), p. 1.

88 Takhti beats all, in: *Ettela'at*, 13 Shahrivar 1339 (4 September 1960), p. 1; Radiant victory of Iranian wrestlers, in: *ibid*.

89 This is how Takhti and Habibi lost, in: *Ettela'at*, 19 Shahrivar 1339 (10 September 1960), pp. 1, 17.

90 Who is the champion, Takhti or Atlı?, in: *Ettela'at*, 20 Shahrivar 1339 (11 September 1960), pp. 1, 19.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

92 The Olympic fire is extinguished, in: *Ettela'at*, 21 Shahrivar 1339 (12 September 1960), p. 1.

century – a not entirely unsubstantiated feeling, it should be added cautiously. The religious dimension need not be overstressed here, but it should at least be pointed out that the predominant Shiite denomination of Islam in Iran is based on the tragic founding narrative of the Battle of Kerbala and that dealing with the unjust defeat is part of the core of Shiite collective identities today as well.

In 1960, the exemplary handling of suffering not only culminated in Takhti's assurance after his return that he alone was responsible for the defeat, but also came to a dramatic head when he was involved in an accident on the way home from the airport and brought the injured to the hospital himself.⁹³ Honour, humility, decency, sincerity, modesty and at the same time physical perfection in terms of strength, aesthetics and technique – these are the masculine virtues amalgamated in the figure of Takhti. How all this could be heightened to represent an idealised Iranian identity is shown in the confluence of times of loss, as was the case with the Olympics, with times of triumph shortly afterwards.

During the World Championships in Yokohama in June 1961, it became clear what symbolic significance victory in wrestling, the ›adornment of the heroic duel‹, could have, as the Iranian publicist Hoda Saber (1959–2011) described the sport.⁹⁴ In Yokohama, the Iranian team dominated freestyle wrestling, winning five gold medals in eight weight classes as well as one silver and one bronze – only in heavyweight, where the West German Olympic champion Wilfried Dietrich (1933–1992) won, did Iran leave empty-handed. On the day of the finals, the Iranian press reported extensively on the upcoming competitions and believed that the world of wrestling was firmly in Iran's grip (rightly so, as it turned out in the evening). A cartoon published in *Ettela'at* on 8 June summed up the expectations.

In front of the flags hoisted in the background, the foremost of which reads ›Yokohama‹, stands the massive wrestler, stoically at peace, with Iran emblazoned on his chest. It is probably no coincidence that the shape of the jersey, on which the country's name is written, is reminiscent of Iran's geographical borders. In fact, it seems to be Iran that presents itself in the figure of the wrestler. Here, *mellat-e Iran*, the male nation, stands in contrast to the beloved homeland, *vatan*, which has female connotations and is therefore passive and cannot travel to Yokohama to stand up for its honour. In a steely grip, Iran holds the little wriggling and diaper-wearing boy with the words ›worldwide wrestling‹ above his head. On the same newspaper page, a longer report appeared with the headline ›The people are delighted with the brilliant victories of their national heroes (*qahremanan-e melli*)‹, in which representatives (exclusively men) of different social classes expressed their pride in the wrestling team in short interviews.⁹⁵

93 Reception of the Heroes in Tehran, in: *Ettela'at*, 26 Shahrivar 1339 (17 September 1960), p. 19.

94 Hoda Saber, Takhti: strong as a tree and firm in character, in: *Cheshmandaz-e Iran [Perspective of Iran]* 53 (Dey 1387 [2009]), pp. 20–24, here p. 20, URL: <<http://ensani.ir/file/download/article/20101208145711-619.pdf>> (in Persian).

95 *Ettela'at*, 18 Khordad 1340 (8 June 1961).



›Iranian wrestling after the
Yokohama matches‹
(from: *Ettela'at*, 18 Khordad 1340
[8 June 1961])

The return of the wrestlers, who had become national heroes, was triumphant, and the ›welcome of the victorious heroes by the people of Tehran became a national demonstration‹.⁹⁶ 200,000 people reportedly took part in the welcome parade, on whose stage poems from the national epic *Shahnameh* were recited and Takhti was finally transferred into Iran's mythical canon of heroes: ›Takhti's face was impassive. By his small eyes, bony face and massive body, he resembled the heroes from the *Shahnameh*.‹⁹⁷ When the journalist reporting for the *Ettela'at* asked Takhti for a message to the people, he is said to have replied, ›I am the people's champion (*man qahreman-e mardom hastam*). My victory is the result of their support. I extend my hand to them.‹⁹⁸

96 *Ettela'at*, 22 Khordad 1340 (12 June 1961), p. 1.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

98 *Ibid.*

6. Conclusion

That this popular hero as a representative of *what Iran really is*, of Iranian cultural authenticity in the sense of Al-e Ahmad,⁹⁹ should have taken his own life was almost unbelievable a few years later. Only the rumour of his assassination completes an analysis of Iranian masculinities along the heroisation of the wrestler Gholamreza Takhti. Only his death exposes the tragic dimensions that are, on the one hand, connected to the questions of postcolonial empowerment on Iran's path to the revolution of 1978/79 and, on the other hand, to be found in the implications of the hypermasculine gender order that research has diagnosed for modern Iran. Through the rumour of the assassination of the national hero, not only is the figure of the *shahid*, the martyr, interwoven into the discourses around Takhti, so that ultimately all the figurations of heroic masculinity addressed here are condensed in Takhti's person. Likewise, the historical experiences of powerlessness and betrayal that shaped Iran in the face of foreign influence during the 20th century are also called up through the wrestler.

In summary, it can be said about Takhti as an example of the heroisation of body-related masculinity in Iran that his veneration is based on various phenomena that go beyond the aforementioned politicisation of the ›strong man‹ with reference to his social milieu. To this day, the wrestler's name stands for a sporting honour and sincerity that refers to Iran's mythological dimensions, is surrounded by numerous legends and defines idealised behaviour towards opponents and weaker people. Takhti's example also describes a form of ideal behaviour that refers to a tradition of male virtue understood as Iranian-authentic. Takhti is not only presented as an ideal man, but vice versa, his example is itself used to describe corresponding notions of masculinity. As was discussed in the section on masculinity research, the discourses on idealised masculinities in the Iranian case know concrete (albeit ambiguous) and redeemable concepts for everyone, which refer to supposed cultural authenticity and have morally exemplary lifestyles with simultaneous work on one's own body as the standard of evaluation. The concepts of *pahlevani* and *javanmardi* in particular offer resources for empowerment in the face of experiences of marginalisation. Since his death in 1968 at the latest – and that is why his example is so significant – Takhti has been regarded as a virtually archetypal representative of these concepts: on the one hand, his humble origins exemplify the possibility of redeeming them (anyone could be like him); on the other hand, his sporting biography makes him appear like a modern version of *Jahan Pahlevan Rostam*. He thus becomes the embodied answer to the experience of ›non-existence‹ that Jalal Al-e Ahmad formulated so forcefully in the 1960s as the collective experience of Iranians who would have lost their cultural roots in the face of a superiority of the West.

99 Al-e Ahmad had first published his book *Gharbzadegi* in 1962, when the wrestler Takhti, who resembled the heroes of *Shahnameh*, reached out to the people and presented himself as an indigenous representative of the country.

However, the heroisation of body-related masculinities does not merely involve romanticising references back to a mythologised *real* Iran, but must also be analysed as an essential component of gender discourses in a ›hypermasculine social order‹. The masculinity discussed in this article using Takhti as an example is thus not to be understood as an irrelevant ›male role‹ for power relations within the gender order, but rather has significant effects on both men and women as well as on the relationship of the sexes to each other, because ideality itself and ›Iranian-ness‹ are negotiated with all the political dimensions about it. As a manifestation of anti-colonial male self-empowerment, it already carries within itself the hypermasculine and distinctively binary negotiated social order of Iran, which was only problematised later in research. Or to put it differently: if the oppressed man can or could experience his (imaginary) empowerment through access to the configurations of heroic masculinity that Gholamreza Takhti ideally represented, then this cannot be detached from the oppression of the other sex.

(Translated from the German by Christoph Langer)

For additional images, see the internet version at
<<https://zeithistorische-forschungen.de/3-2021/5981>>.

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