

Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland

<http://journals.cambridge.org/JRA>

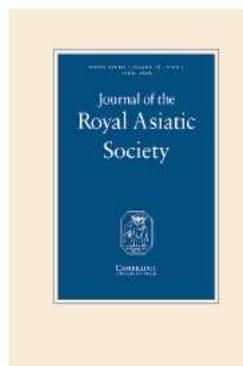
Additional services for *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



***Hindu Arms and Ritual: Arms and Armour from India 1400–1865.* By Robert Elgood. pp. 312, 277 col. Illus. Delft, Eburon Academic Publishers, 2004.**

Crispin Branfoot

Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland / Volume 16 / Issue 01 / April 2006, pp 95 - 96
DOI: 10.1017/S1356186305255918, Published online: 15 March 2006

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1356186305255918

How to cite this article:

Crispin Branfoot (2006). Review of Robert Elgood 'Hindu Arms and Ritual: Arms and Armour from India 1400–1865' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, 16, pp 95-96
doi:10.1017/S1356186305255918

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

a number of essays which lack some of the methodological finesse of recent discussions of these issues in the humanities at large. Some kind of broader reflective (or indeed reflexive) essay may have helped situate the volume better within these wider debates, perhaps even addressing the meaning and politics of memory in the tradition of Islamic Studies and close textual scrutiny represented here. Perhaps this weakness should be seen as reflecting a collision of scholarly genres, for only in the rarest circumstances can the *Festschrift's* common point of reference in the esteemed colleague or teacher compete with the sense of collaborative intellectual effort and collective objectives found in the best thematic anthologies. But then *Culture and Memory in Medieval Islam* is ultimately a commemoration volume rather than a thematic work, and to demand such unity of purpose is inevitably to detract from both the merits and charms of the scholarly miscellany.

NILE GREEN

Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford

HINDU ARMS AND RITUAL: ARMS AND ARMOUR FROM INDIA 1400–1865. By ROBERT ELGOOD. pp. 312, 277 col. Illus. Delft, Eburon Academic Publishers, 2004.
doi:10.1017/S1356186305255918

This richly illustrated book, by an established authority on Middle Eastern and South Asian arms and armour, is a notable contribution to the study of late medieval and pre-modern Indian decorative arts and material culture, especially in southern India. The study of South Asian arms and armour has been dominated by Mughal northern India and little attention has been paid to material from southern India. Elgood successfully draws attention to the wealth of evidence from southern India for the creation of superb examples of metalwork, with exquisitely detailed ornament and figural decoration.

One of Elgood's key contributions in this study is to bring together, assess and thoroughly illustrate a large number of south Indian arms from museum collections in Madras, the Metropolitan Museum in New York and smaller numbers in other museums and private collections. The primary provenance for these metal objects – swords, daggers, *ankushas* (elephant goads), arrows, maces, axes, spears and armour – is the Tanjore armoury, dispersed by the British following the fall of the Maratha polity that ruled from the centre of the Tamil heartlands from 1675. An appendix reproduces the 1860 inventory of the Tanjore armoury, listing the huge numbers of accumulated armour for men, horses and elephants, shields, various types of sword, daggers, knives, spears, pistols and rifles. Rather than simply asserting that the weapons discussed were all made in eighteenth and nineteenth century Tanjavur, as previous authors have suggested, Elgood convincingly dates many of these to the earlier Vijayanagara and Nayaka periods of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. This highlights the circulation of prestige arms and armour amongst the many courts of pre-modern southern India: Vijayanagara, the Nayakas of Tanjavur and Madurai, the Wodeyars of Mysore and Maratha Tanjavur.

The book is divided into twenty chapters of varying length and content: some address a particular type of arm, others develop a contextual theme such as ritual kingship, the weapons' iconography or the metal-working tradition in south India. Colour illustrations of the weapons, details of wall and manuscript paintings, and sixteenth and seventeenth century Tamil temple sculptures are distributed throughout this attractively produced book. Some of the chapters are photographic essays where long captions accompany each image rather than the text developing a sustained narrative. Many of these objects are stunning: the exquisite detail of the *ankusha* from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts on the front cover, for example, emphasises the wealth of ornament and rich iconography found on these far from purely functional objects.

Without direct evidence for provenance and date of manufacture from the objects themselves, Elgood surveys the depiction of weapons in architectural sculpture and painting to support the

attribution of his examples to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Tamil temples of this period often include innovative, huge monolithic columns with 2–3 metre high images of deities, mounted cavalry, or royal portraits. These are used as supporting evidence for different arm-types and their dates. Elgood wisely notes that accurate dates for these architectural sculptures are far from certain in many cases, but the dating of the south Indian weapons he examined is reliably narrowed to the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries rather than the previously thought eighteenth and nineteenth century. These sculptures have previously been examined as evidence for contemporary dress and jewellery (by Jean-François Hurpré), but Elgood's research marks a further advance in their study.

An issue that might have been better addressed is signalled by the book's title, *Hindu Arms and Ritual*. Despite Elgood's great efforts to provide contextual evidence for their production and use, there is little to suggest a 'Hindu' nature for their conception and reception, despite the appearance of imagery better known from religious art. A more accurate title, or at least a clearer subtitle, might have emphasised that these objects are from south India and that their iconography and use was part of courtly not religious ritual. Elgood rather uncritically adopts the outdated notion of Vijayanagara as a Hindu empire preserving south India from the ravages of the Islamic north. Together with the broader scholarly move to see pre-colonial India through indigenous categories other than the communal Hindu vs. Muslim, this characterisation of Vijayanagara and Nayaka south India has been challenged by a number of recent scholars. There was a greater degree of sharing of cultural forms, titles, dress and material culture amongst the diverse communities of the region than such a communally-based binary classification would suggest – material culture is clear evidence for this, as demonstrated by Phillip Wagoner in a study of Vijayanagara dress and by George Michell's work on the period's palace architecture. Some of the contextual material is thus not always as directly relevant as it might be, however interesting in its own right – modern *teyyam* ritual in Kerala, for example, the meaning of the goddess in India or the extensive quotations from the Vedas. In many ways this demonstrates the difficulties in studying south Indian decorative arts when they are divorced from their context, without dates and little direct literary evidence to help assess their production, conception and reception – ivory carving from the region poses a similar problems. The linguistic skills needed to study all the available literature of southern India are great; few of the scholars who have the requisite abilities have shown much serious interest in visual culture. Scholarly collaboration is clearly necessary.

The book might have been organised better – there are three chapters on sixteenth and seventeenth swords, for example – and could have been shorter to emphasise the beauty and fascination of the material gathered, rather than getting too distracted by contextual studies. Tighter editing might also have ensured the accurate and consistent use of diacritical marks, and the inclusion of all references in the bibliography.

In summary, this is a fascinating book on a poorly studied subject; it would be wonderful if more books on Asian visual culture could be so thoroughly and generously illustrated. Elgood's book makes a significant contribution to the study of arms history, and draws attention to the material wealth in southern India contemporary to the better-known Mughal empire and its successors. I will certainly be returning to this book for insights into the visual and material culture of pre-modern south India.

CRISPIN BRANFOOT
De Montfort University, Leicester

WAHHABI ISLAM: FROM REVIVAL AND REFORM TO GLOBAL JIHAD. By NATANA J. DELONG-BAS. pp. ix, 370. London, I.B. Tauris, 2004.

doi:10.1017/S1356186305265914

This study is the first examination, so we are told, of the entire corpus of the thought of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1702–91), the founder of the Wahhabi tradition. It destroys the stereotype of this