Introduction

THE KUSHNAMEH AND THE GLOBAL MIDDLE AGES

The Kushnameh, meaning *The Epic of Kush*, is an epic about a monstrous king with tusks and ears like an elephant. The story takes place across a vast geography that spans most of the Eastern Hemisphere, from China and Korea in the east to the Pyrenees and the Sahara in the west. Insofar as one can speak of medieval globalization—a process of encounter and increasing connectedness driven by the rise of diverse literate, urban societies across the Eastern Hemisphere, and an increasing consciousness of how large and how diverse the world was—*The Kushnameh* can be considered an epic of the global Middle Ages.

The Kushnameh not only reflects, but also *reflects on* the great size and diversity of the world and its peoples. As part of a deeply political literary tradition in which kingship is a core theme, *The Kushnameh* grapples with the intellectual and political challenges and opportunities these discoveries posed for the imperial traditions of Persia, Rome, and Islam. Building on the Sistani epic cycle—heroic stories that made up the most famous portions of great Persian *Epic of Kings (The Shahnameh)*—and on the example of Pseudo-Callisthenes's *Alexander Romance*, *The Kushnameh* enlarges both the geography and thematic depth of the epic tradition. However, it also does not represent a full-fledged transformation of the epic tradition into the erudite, cerebral, virtuosic works that would be undertaken by later poets such as

Nezami of Ganja and Amir Khosrow of Delhi. Instead, it stands somewhere in the middle: a heroic epic full of action and drama that ventures beyond the already rich example of *The Shahnameh* to explore both the most distant corners of the known world and the depths of evil concealed within the human psyche.

We know almost nothing about the probable author of *The Kushnameh,* Iranshan or Iranshah b. Abuʾl-Khayr. There has been some disagreement about his name, which is only known from an anonymous historical work, *The Mojmal al-Tavarikh,* whose four manuscript copies spell the name in three different ways.[1] *The Kushnameh* is dedicated to the young Seljuq sultan Mohammad b. Malekshah, and the copyist's notes identify the author of *The Kushnameh* as "the Azeri sage" *(hakim-e azari)*, which may mean he came from the region of Azerbaijan.[2] Iranshah was author of another epic, about the hero Bahman, which however may not be *The Bahmannameh* that survives.[3] The text of *The Kushnameh* contains evidence the author was a Shiʿi, or strongly sympathized with Shiʿism.[4] This is remarkable, given that the Seljuq sultans had a hostile relationship to their Shiʿi neighbors including the Fatimid state that ruled Egypt, and its offshoot, the Nizari Ismaʿilis (the so-called "Assassins") who had their redoubts in the Alborz mountains. Internal evidence allows us to date *The Kushnameh* to between 1108 and 1110 CE.[5]

The text survives in only one manuscript, which is held by the British Library, dated October 1397.[6] The copyist was Mohammad b. Saʿid

1. Īrānshān ibn Abī al-Khayr, *Kūshnāmah,* edited by Jalāl Matīnī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i ʿIlmī, 1377 [1998]), 25–30. In his introduction, Matīnī argues for reading the name Īrānshān. Mahmūd Umidsālār makes the opposing case that Īrānshāh is the more likely reading. Mahmūd Umidsālār, "Yāddāshtʾhā-yi Kūshʾnāmah," *ʿUlūm-i ijtimāʿī: Farhang-i Īrānzamīn* 30 (1384 [2006]): 313–20.

2. Īrānshān, *Kūshnāmah,* 26.

3. The extant *Bahmannameh,* contained in OR 2780, may not, in fact, be the same epic about Bahman that the author of *The Kushnameh* wrote. For discussion of this issue, see Marjolijn van Zutphen, *Faramarz, the Sistani Hero: Texts and Traditions of the Farāmarznāme and the Persian Epic Cycle,* Studies in Persian Cultural History, 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 134–36.

4. Īrānshān, *Kūshnāmah,* 30–31.

5. The Persian text can be read in the critical edition edited by Jalāl Matīnī, Īrānshān, *Kūshnāmah*.

6. British Library, OR 2780. For an analysis of the manuscript, see Elaine Wright, "Firdausi and More: A Timurid Anthology of Epic Tales," in *Shahnama: The Visual Lan*

b. Abdollah al-Qadari. The codex also contains Asadi-ye Tusi's *Garshaspnameh,* a versified history of the Mongol conquests by Ahmad-e Tabrizi called *The Shahenshahnameh,* and *The Bahmannameh;* it originally also contained the text of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh.* Each page consists of ninety-nine couplets divided into six columns. It contains two color illustrations, very generic depictions of armored warriors added at a later date.[7] There are thus no medieval illustrations specifically for *The Kushnameh.* The depictions of Yama and other fearsome deities in Central Asian Buddhist art, as well as Islamicate paintings of demons with elephant heads, offer us an idea of how audiences may have pictured Kush.

The fact that the text survives in only one manuscript indicates that it did not enjoy wide circulation, and did not have a very large presence in the intellectual life of the medieval Islamic world—although of course any text that survived in the manuscript tradition for more than nine hundred years can be deemed relatively important, and the fact of its survival in a unique manuscript is shared by texts that today enjoy much greater fame, such as *Beowulf.* Its scarce representation in the manuscript record can be considered the result of the text's own weirdness, rather than any literary shortcomings. It is unsurprising that such a work was not a frequent object of patronage by imperial courts, which produced the great number of copies of *The Shahnameh* and later epics and romances that populate the manuscript collections of libraries today. Those works were part of a literary canon that crystallized by the fifteenth century, and served the needs of the courts, which commissioned illustrated manuscripts of high quality.[8]

The Kushnameh is a strange book, a heroic epic in form, but with a certain spiritual kinship to *The Thousand and One Nights'* underworld of demons, concubines, eunuchs, and one-eyed dervishes, of sorcery, enslavement, and exile, and even to modern horror stories—which themselves owe no small debt to *The Nights.* Bearing in mind that it was

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guage of the Persian Book of Kings, edited by Robert Hillenbrand, 65–84 (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004).

7. Wright, "Firdausi and More," 70.

8. Paul E. Losensky, *Welcoming Fighānī: Imitation and Poetic Individuality in the Safavid-Mughal Ghazal*, Bibliotheca Iranica, 5 (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1998): 145–53.

a courtly work, dedicated to and reproduced for kings and princes, not a work of popular literature like *The Thousand and One Nights,* we may still classify *The Kushnameh* along with the various versions of *The Nights* as part of a body of more experimental writing, a realm of literary production more inclined to produce a great variety of different stories in different configurations, than to produce many copies of a few canonical texts. To dismiss such works because they do not, individually, survive in many manuscript copies would be to dismiss precisely what was creative and experimental in medieval Islamic literary culture.

The Kushnameh in particular is a record of a time of discovery. Iranshah rewrote old stories upon a geographical stage that had rapidly and recently been enlarged by travel and scientific investigation, as well as by dramatic economic and social change across the hemisphere, especially in East Asia.[9] By the twelfth century, the circulation of Arabic geographies across the whole Islamic world made geographical knowledge widely available.[10] Readers of Arabic in Spain could learn of the existence of a state such as Korea at—almost—the other end of the hemisphere; people in Yemen who obtained copies of geographical works could read about the Subarctic.[11] Decades earlier, the Central Asian scholar and scientist al-Biruni (973–c. 1050) had completed a measurement of the earth's circumference and speculated that there might be people living on the opposite side of the world in unknown lands.[12]

9. While there is geographical content in texts like *The Bundahišn,* which enumerates mountains and other geographical features, and in texts like *The Šahrestānihā-i Ērānšahr,* which enumerates Sassanian cities, geography as a distinct discipline was likely absent from Pahlavi literature. See Dan Shapira, "Was There Geographical Science in Sasanian Iran?" *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 54, no. 2/3 (2001): 319–38; Domenico Agostini and Samuel Thrope, trans., *The Bundahišn: The Zoroastrian Book of Creation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

10. Hyunhee Park, *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds: Cross-Cultural Exchange in Pre-Modern Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

11. Kei Won Chung and George F. Hourani, "Arab Geographers on Korea," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 58, no. 4 (1938): 658–61; Abū Zayd Ḥasan ibn Yazīd Sīrāfī and Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān, *Two Arabic Travel Books,* edited by Tim Mackintosh-Smith and James E. Montgomery, Library of Arabic Literature (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

12. Hakim Muhammad Al-Biruni and Ansar Zahid Khan, *Al Biruni: His Times, Life, and Works* (Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 1990), 123–36. Cited in Frederick S. Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 591n174.

The Kushnameh's plot, themes, and setting draw on historical memory and up-to-date knowledge of regions and states that interacted with the Islamic world, whether through trade or war. These include the Korean kingdom of Silla (57 BCE–935 CE), which gives its name to Besila, one of the most important locales in the story, Jaca, a principality in the Pyrenees that would grow into the kingdom of Aragon, and Basque country.[13] Iranshah read his geographical sources carefully, perhaps with guidance from travelers. Had he been less deliberate and programmatic in his use of geography, he might have chosen any number of toponyms for regions in China or cities in the Iberian Peninsula. Instead, he identified precisely those independent states or regions that lay just beyond the frontiers of the Islamic world, the Roman Empire, and China.[14]

So, it is important to understand that the world of this epic was both an ancient world of myth and legend—the mythic past of epic heroes who traveled the breadth of the earth—and a modern world of learning, discovery, and geopolitical conflict. Not long after al-Biruni's scientific work came the Seljuq Turks' conquest of Southwest Asia and their defeat of the Byzantine Roman Empire at the Battle of Manzikert, which led to Turkic conquest and settlement of Anatolia, and a few decades later, the Crusades. Iranshah likely believed that history was cyclical, and that the present repeated the past. But that did not mean the present was the same as the past, and the names, places, and actions of the characters in the various parts of the main narrative and the double frame tale conspicuously belong to distinct period settings.

13. These terms may have been derived from Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad Iṣṭakhrī and M. J. de Goeje, *Kitāb masālik al-mamālik,* 3rd ed., photomechanice iterata (Leiden: Brill, 1967). On the name of Korea, see Mohammad Bagher Vosooghi, "Silla, Basilla, or Bosilla: New Findings Concerning Korea from Persian Manuscripts," in *Proceedings of the 1500 Years of Korean-Iranian Cultural Encounters Based on the Persian Epic* Kush-Nāmeh, 100–13 (Seoul: Hanyang University, 2013). On Jaca and Basque country, see Daniel König, *Arabic-Islamic Views of the Latin West: Tracing the Emergence of Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 301.

14. Northern Spain had been assumed until recently not to have seen settlement by Muslim populations; however discovery of Muslim burials shows substantial local populations in Tauste, north of Zaragoza. See Guede et al. "Isotope Analyses to Explore Diet and Mobility in a Medieval Muslim Population at Tauste (NE Spain)," *PLoS ONE* 12, no. 5 (2017): 1–27.

Knowledge of one era could enable greater understanding of other eras, the present, and even the future.

Was there a global Middle Ages, and did globalization begin around the year 1000 CE, as recent scholarly conversations and works have proposed?[15] What *The Kushnameh,* as a literary work, can tell us is that some people at the time *knew* they were living in a larger and more interconnected world than that of their ancestors. Both Korea and Spain, peninsulas at the far ends of the Afro-Eurasian landmass, appear in the story as island paradises (the Perso-Arabic term, *jazireh,* can mean either a peninsula or an island). Korea, in particular, is reached by the virtuous king, Abtin, through a set of plot twists reminiscent of the frame stories by which utopia is reached in More's *Utopia* and derivative works. *The Kushnameh* was completed about twenty years before the first appearance of the Prester John legend, the rumor of a powerful Christian king in Central Asia that circulated widely in Europe during and after the Crusades. The depiction of Prester John's kingdom in the fourteenth century text, *The Travels of Sir John of Mandeville,* has been interpreted as a medieval European utopia. The concept of an island paradise, which also anticipates Marco Polo's island of Cypangu, whose gold Columbus sought, certainly draws on travelers' tales, and may have been influenced by Daoist legends of Islands of the Eastern Sea.

Utopian rumors were fed by authentic travelers' lore. *The Kushnameh* was written in a time when China, under the Song Dynasty, had witnessed rapid technological change, and scarcely resembled the land of China portrayed in older Persian texts. Foundries there had begun to use coal for fuel, producing steel in unprecedented quantities, while improved shipbuilding techniques and the invention of the compass, gunpowder, and printing would soon begin to transform travel, warfare, and the circulation of knowledge worldwide. Porcelain supplanted silk as the iconic and inimitable product of Chinese craftspeople. The Islamic world was at least broadly aware of this technological transformation. China, with its large and prosperous population of Muslim merchants, was portrayed in Islamic literatures as a land of master

15. Valerie Hansen, *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World—and Globalization Began* (New York: Scribner, 2020).

craftsmen and a font of knowledge.[16] Chinese civilization was understood by some Muslim thinkers to be the product of human invention, not prophetic revelation.[17] In Iranshah's epic vision, the *sources* of utopia—the island paradise of Korea—are both the journey and the act of invention, the operation of human reason across a vast, agreeable world.

THE MEDIEVAL PERSIAN EPICS AND THEIR HISTORICAL CONTEXT

To make sense of how and why *The Kushnameh* was written, and how it was read, we must look back to Ferdowsi's *Epic of Kings (The Shahnameh),* completed a century earlier in 1010 CE, and the earlier background of how Persian became the second most prevalent written language of the Islamic world. *The Shahnameh,* more than any other single text, represented the revival of the Persian imperial tradition after the Islamic conquests, and provided a foundation for later epics, ranging from the more light-hearted, heroic fare of the epic romances, to Nezami-ye Ganjavi and Amir Khosrow's didactic and philosophical Alexander epics, to elaborately crafted courtly romances. *The Shahnameh*'s tale of Persian kings and heroes from the dawn of humanity to the Islamic conquests was the backdrop against which the strange tale of the monstrous Kush was written and read. *The Shahnameh* advanced a compelling vision of the political order, one which privileged aristocratic lineage *(nezhad)* and the exalted but problematic status of kings. Understanding this political vision is essential to understanding the significance of events and characters in *The Kushnameh.*

The Islamic conquests of the mid-seventh century seized the Roman Empire's most populous and wealthiest territories, Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, and completely eliminated the Sassanian Persian empire. Peroz, son of the last Sassanian ruler, Yazdegerd III, fled to China and

16. Francesco Calzolaio, "China, the Abode of Arts and Crafts: Emergence and Diffusion of a Persian Saying on China in Mongol Eurasia," *Ming Qing Yanjiu* 22 (2019): 136–54. The prophetic tradition *(hadith),* "Seek knowledge even unto China," considered inauthentic by Muslim scholars, was nonetheless invoked in texts such as *The Kushnameh* (lines 45–50).

17. Tarif Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography: The Histories of Mas'ūdī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 110–13.

he and his descendants were supported there for several decades.[18] The first dynasty of caliphs, the Umayyads, depended heavily on the administrative expertise of the Middle Persian-speaking Sassanian scribal class, now subjugated by the Arab conquerors in this new, Islamic political order. In 750 CE, a coalition of rebels overthrew the Umayyads and brought to power the Abbasid Caliphate. The revolutionaries included Persian-speaking converts as well as Shiʿis, Muslims who believed that the caliphs elected after Muhammad's death by leaders of the Muslim community were not its rightful rulers, and that instead, Muhammad's son-in-law, ʿAli b. Abu Taleb, had been designated as his successor, and he and his descendants were the rightful rulers.

The Abbasid caliphs ultimately turned on the Shiʿis, but their government incorporated Arab and Persian Muslims on essentially equal terms. Arabic was still the official, cosmopolitan language of the Abbasid Caliphate and became the host language for translations of a vast range of literature, from works of Greek philosophy to *The Fables of Bidpai,* a Middle Persian translation of the Sanskrit *Panchatantra* known in Arabic as *Kalilah wa Dimnah.* The Abbasid capital of Baghdad, founded in 760 not far from the site of the Sassanian administrative capital, Ctesiphon, became a cultural and commercial entrepôt. By the ninth century, Arabic geographies described regions spanning most of the Eastern Hemisphere.

The Abbasids lost effective political power in 942 CE, when the Buyids, a Shiʿi dynasty from the forested Caspian coast, took over and made the Abbasid caliphs their puppets. The Islamic world would henceforth remain divided between rival kingdoms, many of which nonetheless, like the Buyids, recognized the Abbasid caliphs as the nominal sovereigns of all Muslims and ostensibly governed on their behalf. These successor kingdoms included the Fatimid Imamate, based in Cairo, a Shiʿi state whose rulers denied the legitimacy of the caliphs and claimed that they were themselves descendants and successors to Muhammad, with absolute authority over matters doctrinal and legal, as well as the Samanid Dynasty, which had asserted inde-

18. Yingjun Liu, "Possible Connections Between Historical Events and the Plots of Iranian Princes Exiled in Chīn and B.Sīlā Depicted in Kūshnāma," *Acta Koreana* 21, no. 1 (2018): 37–63.

pendence from the Abbasids in Transoxiana and present-day Afghanistan but remained nominally loyal to them.

Samanid ideology was founded on a revival of Sassanian imperial traditions, including courtly poetry in an eastern dialect of Persian—written in the Arabic script and incorporating a large number of Arabic loan words—which modern scholars call New Persian to distinguish it from the Middle Persian (Pahlavi) of the Sassanian Empire, and the Old Persian spoken in the time of Cyrus the Great. The oldest surviving example of New Persian is in fact a document from the eighth century, written in Hebrew script by a Jew from Khotan, quite far east of the Samanid domains—evidence that Persian in Central Asia had been gradually transformed through the adoption of Arabic terms after the conquests.[19] The Persian turn of Samanid court culture was not a rejection of Islam or of Arabic literary culture. Instead, the Samanids advanced a process of converting the Sassanian imperial tradition, a byword of which was "kingship and religion are twins," into a religiously amphibious political tradition that offered formulations of kingship stripped of their Zoroastrian character and adaptable for use by both Muslim and non-Muslim rulers. Over the next seven hundred years, New Persian would become a cosmopolitan language: an increasingly important language of public affairs and religious instruction in a vast triangular region stretching from the Balkans to the Deccan in Southern India to the Gansu Corridor in northwestern China, as well as for Muslims throughout China.[20]

It was under Samanid patronage that Abuʾl-Qasem Ferdowsi, a native of Tus (present-day Mashhad, Iran), began composing the *Epic of Kings (The Shahnameh),* which memorialized and codified the histories of Iranian kings and heroes related both in Middle Persian texts and in Arabic histories such as Tabari's *History of Kings and Prophets*.[21] The

19. British Library, OR 8212/166. Bo Utas, "The Jewish-Persian fragment from Dandan-Uiliq," *Orientalia Suecana* 17 (1968 [1969]): 123–36.

20. For an overview of the spread of Persian, see the essays in Nile Green, ed., *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

21. Ṭabarī, General Introduction, *and,* From the Creation to the Flood, translated by Franz Rosenthal, vol. 1 of *The History of Al-Ṭabarī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

home of these Iranian world-kings is called Iranzamin or Iranshahr. These toponyms are imprecise and correspond roughly to the territory of the Sassanian Empire, including Mesopotamia, the Iranian plateau, and present-day Afghanistan—distinct from the Roman Empire in the west, and Turan, which refers to lands in the east. Scholars have found it useful to divide *The Shahnameh* into "mythic," "heroic," and "historical" sections or eras, the first heavily rooted in the Avesta (the oldest body of Zoroastrian scripture), the latter two making up the great majority of the text. A cyclical view of history is essential to Zoroastrian cosmology, and there are many self-evident parallels between characters and events in different eras in the epic. The heroic section includes stories of epic heroes like Rostam, called the Sistani heroes, because they were associated with the province of Sistan located in the southeast of present-day Iran and southern Afghanistan. In the heroic section, Turan, which includes the lands of the Turks and China—the domain of Kush in *The Kushnameh*—is the principal enemy of the Iranian kings.

The heroic section is followed by a brief narrative of Alexander of Macedon based on the *Alexander Romance* of Pseudo-Callisthenes, followed immediately by a much longer narrative of the Sassanian rulers that ends with the Arab conquests. The Seleucid (312–63 BCE) and Parthian (247 BCE–224 CE) eras are essentially omitted. The historical sections tell of the wars and other interactions between the Sassanian kings and their rivals, including the Roman Empire (Rum) and Chin, a term which can refer to China, but in these texts often refers to Central Asia, reflecting the reality of nomadic Tabghach rule over China's heartland during the fifth century.

WORLDVIEWS OF *THE SHAHNAMEH* AND EPIC ROMANCES

The Shahnameh, along with the other epics and epic romances composed in the eleventh century and later, drew on a large common body of Middle Persian oral and textual sources, including a Sassanian-era work called *The Khwadaynamag* (*Book of Kings*), through which each epic expressed its own political and aesthetic vision.[22] *The Shahnameh* is

22. Dick Davis, "The Problem of Ferdowsi's Sources." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, no. 1 (1996): 53–56; Zutphen, *Faramarz, the Sistani Hero,* 138–42.

often thought of as an Iranian national epic that glorified the ancient rulers of the Persian empire after centuries of Arab rule and thus kept alive an Iranian national identity during another eight centuries of rule by Turkic and Mongol dynasties. This reading has increasingly been challenged. Not only is interpreting a medieval epic through modern national identities anachronistic, but why would Mongol conquerors and later Turkic rulers promote an epic if one of its core messages was that they were foreign usurpers? In an Islamic context, *The Shahnameh* may be best understood as an imperial epic that put the legacy of the Persian empire at the disposal of dynasties from Oghuz Turkic, Mongol, or other lineages. Looking back to *The Shahnameh*'s sources in an older oral epic tradition and the Sassanian-era *Book of Kings*, its cosmopolitan imperial vision was based on the Sassanians' "vision of a global political order" based on Zoroastrian cosmology, which positioned the Iranian world-kings as "guarantors of the peace and prosperity of the entire world."[23] The *Book of Kings,* like the other sources that *The Shahnameh* and *The Kushnameh* were based on, articulated the cosmological functions of kingship by narrating kings' successes and failures.[24]

Social hierarchy was central to this cosmology. Aristocratic lineages were an essential, foundational component of the older political order. Establishing genealogies of living dynasts through legendary ancestors was an important part of the process by which Persians, Arabs, and other social groups were constructed and negotiated their membership within a common Islamic community.[25] The concept of *nezhad,* lineage, held central importance in the epic: an individual's lineage determined their character and, to a great extent, their actions and their destiny.[26]

23. Richard Payne, "Cosmology and the Expansion of the Iranian Empire, 502–628 CE." *Past and Present* 220 (August 2013): 3–33, 8.

24. Payne, "Cosmology and the Expansion of the Iranian Empire," 14.

25. On the process of identity-formation as a whole, see Sarah Bowen Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion,* Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). See also Patricia Crone's analysis of accounts of Mazdak as an ancient communist in Patricia Crone, *The Iranian Reception of Islam: The Non-Traditionalist Strands: Collected Studies in Three Volumes.* Islamic History and Civilization, 130, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 19.

26. See Edmund Hayes, "The Death of Kings: Group Identity and the Tragedy of Nezhād in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh," *Iranian Studies* 48, no. 3 (2015): 369–93, for in-depth discussion of this concept.

Although the Samanids, Ferdowsi's original patrons, were not Shiʿi, Shiʿi sympathies had long been entangled with Persian and even Zoroastrian revivalism, and the epic's strong emphasis on lineage dovetails with the core conviction of Shiʿis that the rightful leaders of the Muslim community were ʿAli's descendants.[27] There is also internal and external evidence that Ferdowsi was Shiʿi.[28]

Two major axes of conflict in *The Shahnameh* and related texts are the cosmic struggle between good and evil, and the conflicting moral imperatives of duty to one's ruler and individual moral integrity. The first axis of conflict does align with glorification of legendary Persian emperors, but this is the dominant theme only in the "mythic" sections of the epic. The theme of cosmic struggle between good and evil is certainly not absent from the much longer "heroic" and "historical" sections, but the second axis of conflict—between hierarchy and moral integrity—becomes more important.

From the beginning of *The Shahnameh* and through the earlier chapters, the cosmic principle of good is embodied in the lineage of world-kings, beginning with Gayomard, a being who gave rise to the first humans in Zoroastrian scriptures, and who in *The Shahnameh* is the first king. The later good kings are descendants of Gayomard, and this lineage *(nezhad)* is repeatedly invoked as a necessary qualification for kingship. The greatest world-king, Jamshid, presides over an Edenic era of perfect justice, in which death and disease are gone from the world. He then claims to be God, falls from grace, and is replaced by the tyrant Zahhak, who makes Jerusalem his capital. Ferdowsi's spelling of Zahhak is conspicuously Arabic (similar to how a name with umlauts would read as conspicuously German to English-speakers). The character of Zahhak, who has snakes growing from his shoulders, is based on the evil dragon king of the Avesta.

When Zahhak comes to power, Jamshid flees to the east and hides until he is caught and killed near the Sea of China. Eventually, Faridun, son of Abtin, who is a descendant of Jamshid's father, Tahmuras,

27. Sean W. Anthony, "Chiliastic Ideology and Nativist Rebellion in the Early ʿAbbāsid Period: Sunbādh and Jāmāsp-Nāma," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 132, no. 4 (2012): 641–55.

28. Khaleghi-Motlagh, Djalal. "Ferdowsi, Abuʾl-Qasem: 1. Life," *Encyclopaedia Iranica,* 2012, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ferdowsi-i. Accessed June 6, 2021.

emerges from the region of Mount Damavand near the Caspian coast. Faridun is based on the dragon-slaying king, Thraētaona, of the Avesta. His father having been killed by Zahhak's agents, his mother, Faranak, had him nursed by a cow, Barmayeh. Faridun rises up to overthrow Zahhak and restore the rule of good kings.[29] The Faridun cycle can be considered the legendary background for the main narrative of *The Kushnameh,* which begins with the story of Abtin.

The Shahnameh has a well-defined moral geography that identifies the lineage of good and evil kings with known places and events. Jerusalem, the capital of the Arab tyrant Zahhak, while of course a sacred city in Islam, was also closely identified with Christianity, the religion of the Roman Empire, the main rival of the Sassanians. Just as Jamshid flees east, the last members of the Sassanian dynasty took refuge in the Tang court in China. Just as Faridun returns after having been sheltered in the east, the Abbasid revolution that ended Umayyad rule began in the east, in Khorasan (corresponding roughly to present-day Afghanistan), and just as Faridun was traditionally said to be born and raised on Mount Damavand, the Buyids' takeover of the Abbasid caliphate in 942 also began near the Caspian coast. The cosmological association between great kings and the sun rising in the east—*ex oriente lux*—may also have influenced the story of Faridun and, later on, that of Siyavash (see below). The epic's sense of time is cyclical, and its moral geography invites interpretation of the "legendary" sections as allegories for relatively recent events, as well as templates for staging a future revolution.[30]

This brings us to a second major axis of conflict: the dilemmas faced by good heroes who serve highly flawed kings. *The Shahnameh* has been received as a pro-monarchical text that glorifies the legendary Persian emperors as biological or cultural ancestors of current rulers. Evidence from manuscript paintings confirms that even

29. Jalāl Matīnī, "Rivāyat'hā-yi mukhtalif dar bārah-i dawrān-i kūdakī va nawjavānī-yi Farīdūn," *Iran'namah* 4, no. 1 (1364) [1986]: 78–132, 88–96.

30. For example, in the late fifteenth century, the Safavid state founder Shah Esmaʿil I was given refuge, as a child, in a fortress in the Caspian coastal region of Gilan, and his march out of Gilan was remembered as the triumphal beginning of his reign as Safavid Shah. Michel M. Mazzaoui, *The Origins of the Ṣafawids: Šīʿism, Ṣūfism, and the Ġulāt,* Freiburger Islamstudien, 3 (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1972), 79–81.

unsympathetic kings in the epic were objects of reverence.[31] But its most important characters were not the kings but the warrior heroes *(pahlavan)*—noble Sistani paladins, such as Rostam. Many scholars have accepted Dick Davis's view that the epic places greater emphasis on the dilemmas misguided kings create for the heroes than on the kings' glory.[32]

Rostam and other Sistani heroes were the subject of other, often anonymous epic romances, written in the same heroic meter as *The Shahnameh,* that appeared starting later in the eleventh century.[33] These include *The Garshaspnameh, The Faramarznameh,* and *The Bahmannameh*—all, like *The Kushnameh,* named for their title characters. Such works do not attempt to recreate the cosmic scope of *The Shahnameh,* but instead tell the stories of individual heroes.[34] They often are more light-hearted in tone, and have distant settings, such as "India" (Hend) which includes both South Asia and the islands of the Indian Ocean, not unlike the European concept of "the Indies."[35] On a formal level, *The Kushnameh* belongs to this group of epic romances, however its tone and thematic content are more serious, and its chronology more properly epic in character.

A great part of the content of *The Shahnameh,* as well as of *The Kushnameh,* concerns politics, statecraft, and warfare, including battlefield tactics.[36] Part of this content, including *The Kushnameh*'s depiction of espionage, is similar to texts on statecraft such as *The Book of Government (Siyasatnameh),* written by the Seljuq grand minister

31. Francesca Leoni, "Picturing Evil: Images of Divs and the Reception of the *Shahnama*," in *Shahnama Studies II: The Reception of Firdausi's Shahnama,* edited by C.P. Melville and Gabrielle Rachel Van den Berg, 101–18, Studies in Persian Cultural History, 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 111.

32. Dick Davis, *Epic and Sedition: The Case of Ferdowsi's Shāhnāmeh* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1992).

33. For a detailed and ambitious study of these epics, see Zutphen, *Faramarz, the Sistani Hero,* 62–144.

34. Zutphen, *Faramarz, the Sistani Hero,* 65.

35. Saghi Gazerani, *The Sistani Cycle of Epics and Iran's National History: On the Margins of Historiography,* Studies in Persian Cultural History, 7 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 55–61.

36. Matīnī catalogs these stratagems in the *Kushnameh.* Jalāl Matīnī, "Barkhī az nīranghā-yi kār-i zār dar Kūshʾnāmah (bih yād-i ustādam Zabīhullāh Safā)," *Iranʾshinasi* 43, no. 11 (1378) [2000]: 649–67

Nezam al-Molk.[37] A reader or listener could thus expect to find many stories of political interactions, both violent and nonviolent, that could serve as instructive examples.[38] Other important themes, such as dynastic succession and royal lineages, are of a less practical, more theoretical nature, but still concern the foundations of kingship.

The Shahnameh and its offspring were thus a literary marriage of pen and sword that provided material for imperial ideology across the whole Balkans-Deccan-Gansu triangle, beginning with a core region including present-day Azerbaijan, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, and establishing a wider reach over time. The political nation that the epic represented in the eleventh century and beyond included not only the Persian-speaking elite of the Iranian plateau and regions to the east, but also Turkic elites educated in Persian, and the Persian-speaking Muslim elite of South Asia.[39] Nor was this imperial culture confined to Islamic polities. Versions of the epic were produced in the Georgian and Armenian languages. The Mongol emperor Abaqa (r. 1265–82), son of Hulegu (r. 1256–65), who in his conquest of the Middle East pillaged Baghdad and had the last Abbasid caliph killed, built a palace at a former Sassanian site known as the Throne of Solomon (Takht-e Soleyman) during the 1270s, and decorated it with ceramic tiles that bore inscriptions from *The Shahnameh* alongside Chinese motifs such as dragons and phoenixes.[40] A tradition of making ceremonial visits and writing inscriptions on the ruins of Persepolis, which continued from the Sassanian period through the fifteenth century, and references by poets in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to the province of Fars, where the ruins were located, speak to how this institution of universal empire was

37. Niẓām al-Mulk. *The Book of Government, or, Rules for Kings: The Siyar al-Muluk, or, Siyasat-Nama of Nizam al-Mulk,* translated by Hubert Darke, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002).

38. Nasrin Askari, *The Medieval Reception of the* Shāhnāma *as a Mirror for Princes*, Studies in Persian Cultural History, 9 (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

39. Davis, *Epic and Sedition.*

40. Yuka Kadoi, *Islamic Chinoiserie: The Art of Mongol Iran,* Edinburgh Studies in Islamic Art (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 51–52; Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, "Le Livre des rois, miroir du destin. II—Takht-e Soleymān et la symbolique du Shāh-nāme," *Studia Iranica* 20, no. 1 (1991): 33–148