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Kush-e Pildandān, the Anti-Hero: Polemics of Power in Late Antique Iran

This study examines the character of Kush-e Pildandān, the anti-hero of the Kushnāmeh, *by arguing that the protagonist of the poem represents the monarchs of the Kushan dynasty. In order to substantiate this claim, the* Kushnāmeh *is introduced and the process of its formation and its reflections of Kushan history are examined. Then the various components of this image of the enemy are discussed. What is revealed is a polemical strategy of creating an enemy, a unique insight into the political ideology of the Sasanian period. The study offers a glimpse into the ideological discourse of political power in the Late Antique period, and how they drew upon a shared conceptualization of the past.*

Keywords: *Kushnāmeh*; Kushan; Sasanian; *Shāhnāmeh* Tradition; Late Antique Historiography

In the political landscape of the Late Antique world, the Kushan empire was a major player on a par with China, Sasanian Iran and Rome. Yet, unlike its counterparts, relatively little is known about its political, cultural and social history. Situated immediately to the east of the Sasanian Iran, the Kushans were the Sasanians' political rivals and constituted a threat to them until the western territories of their kingdom finally fell and an alliance, known as the Kushano-Sasanian alliance, was formed. The reason we know as little as we do about the Kushans must be sought in the nature of the sources they have bequeathed to us. Like other dynasties, such as the Indo-Scythian and the Indo-Parthian, that rose in the eastern Iranian borderlands, the so-called Indo-Iranian territories, the major sources for the Kushans is drawn from a great number of hoards of coins[1] and epigraphical data, both notoriously difficult to interpret in the absence of narrative history.

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[1]At Mir Zakah site north of the town of Gardez in modern-day Afghanistan, about 3–4 tons of coins, which amount to 500,000 specimens, have been collected. Osmund Bopearachchi has personally seen around 90,000 coins; they include Greco-Bactrian, Indo-Scythian, Indo-Parthian and Kushan and Kushano-Sasanian coins. Bopearachchii, "Recent Coin Hoard Evidence," 102.

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When searching for narrative sources, all has not fallen into oblivion, however. We do know that during the Sasanian period, extensive narrative sources existed. The nature, date and composition of the *Kh^{w}adāynāmak*, as well as its content, has been subject to extensive scholarly debate.[2] The debate, however, has been significantly limited by the field's continuous preoccupation with facts of history, facts that are admitted to the realm of history only after they have been dutifully separated from fiction. This is why philology, archaeology and numismatics take center stage—and this is not merely due to the exigency of available sources, but also because whatever is deemed to be the surviving material is evaluated with the yardstick of its factual value, solely for the purposes of reconstruction of political history. Fishing for facts will leave one rather empty-handed, because the bulk of extant narratives that have pre-Islamic provenance were not intended to be factually accurate. These narratives are about the past and constitute an extensive corpus of literature, containing histories and stories of the pre-Islamic kings of Iran, albeit in a revised and modified form. Some of these stories that seem to be set in the legendary and mythological sections, however, contain a discernable historical substratum. I shall henceforth refer to this corpus as the Shāhnāmeh tradition, by which I mean narratives that are about Iran's pre-Islamic past and that are organized according to the Pishdādid, Kayānid, Arsacid and Sasanian periodization of history.[3] That this corpus, in fact, should be considered as a body of a unique genre of historiography, containing commentaries, reflections and depiction of contradictory narratives of the past, has been shown in the case of the Sistani Cycle Epics; it forms a unique genre of historiography.[4] If a historical event was significant enough, it is likely to have left its mark on the Shāhnāmeh tradition, either by adding a new a story to the corpus or more likely by modifying a preexisting story, usually depositing a new layer on top of the preexisting layers of that story.

The Kushan–Sasanian rivalry was important and impressive. Shapur II's defeat at the hands of the Kushans was significant enough to be mentioned by an Armenian historian more than a century after it occurred. It is only natural for its reflection to find its way into the corpus of the Shāhnāmeh tradition, and this is what happened. Within this corpus there are, in fact, many references to the Kushans, and here I will discuss one of the major sources that contain reflections of the struggles of the Sasanians against the Kushans and the latter's eventual defeat. This is found in the *Kushnāmeh*, whose protagonist, Kush-e Pildandān, is depicted as an anti-hero representing the Kushan dynasty.

[2]Shahbazi, "HISTORIOGRAPHY ii. PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD." The various versions and recensions of the *Kh^{w}adāynāmak*, a collection of stories of kings, which later appears in the early Islamic period. In spite of the survival of a number of such translations and versions, the most notable of which is Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh*, there has been an attempt to narrow down the content of the *Kh^{w}adāynāmak* to one book, one version, or a mere list of Sasanian kings. Since the aim of this study is not to engage in this debate, a summary of the discussion is omitted here.

[3]The corpus includes the pre-Islamic section of Arabic and Persian histories such as Tabari, which attempts to juxtapose and reconcile material from the Shāhnāmeh tradition (governed by its specific chronology) with the chronology of the Abrahamic prophets and their stories (Stories of Prophets/ *qisas al-anbiyā*).

[4]Gazerani, *Sistani Cycle of Epics.*

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How could this enhance our understanding of the period? Certainly, if we attempt to mine the *Kushnāmeh* for data to establish a list of Kushan kings or offer yet another chronology for Kanishka's reign, for instance, we will be gravely disappointed. But examining the *Kushnāmeh* with the aim of excavating a layer that reflects a Sasanian–Kushan memory of events, as undertaken in the first part of this study, does help us understand how the polemical discourse against a political rival and enemy was formed, and how it was articulated within the Shāhnāmeh tradition.

The first part of this study, therefore, is devoted to a discussion of the Sasanian polemics against the Kushans as preserved in the *Kushnāmeh*. Several steps had to be taken before arriving at a description of the image of the enemy. In order to do that, I first introduce the *Kushnāmeh*, discuss its sources and manner of formation, and the various modification to its older source during the Saljuq period. The next task is to establish the Sasanian/Kushan layer of the *Kushnāmeh*, because only once the existence of such a layer is established can one argue about its ramifications for our understanding of the political culture of the Sasanians. I discuss how certain names and toponyms, as well as the outline of events, serve as "pegs" that fasten the narrative to their real historical referents. I do so by discussing parallels in names, topography, political history, and finally the construction of sanctuaries where the image of the king was worshipped. After having established the Kushan layer of the *Kushnāmeh*, a bit more must be said regarding the formation of its narrative. As mentioned earlier, this genre does not lend itself to separating fact from fiction, but rather collapses different events and characters into one story by invoking motifs and utilizing themes from the known repertoire of the genre. The discussion resolves several difficulties, such as the Pishdādi chronology of the story and the existence of several characters by the name of Kush who hail from different corpora of literature. What is also revealed as a result of this discussion is that the oldest substratum of the text comes from the Sasanian period, shedding light on how the stories of biblical prophets, preserved in *qisas al-anbiyā*, became intertwined with the Shāhnāmeh tradition, making the extant stories composite in nature. Finally, the character of Kush-e Pildandān as the political rival and enemy of the Sasanians is discussed. In creating the image of an enemy, several strategies of defamation have been employed, creating a powerful anti-hero, a hideous creature who is barely human, a tyrant who perpetuates grievous acts of injustice against his own subjects, and the founder of the "bad religion" of demon worship. Understanding the specifics of the polemics of delegitimization and its nuances would certainly complement our current view of how the ideology of power was articulated during this period.[5]

It is only by collating narrative material from Late Antique Iran with information extracted from inscriptions, coins and rock-reliefs that we start to get a fuller picture of Iran's elusive and distant past. In doing so, we move beyond strict boundaries of political history and venture into less explored aspects of history by taking into consideration mechanisms and strategies by which the image of an enemy was created, and how the very same enemies created their own image, all drawing upon a shared sense of history.

[5]The current contribution is to complement studies of the same topic that have used different sources to discuss these issues such as Canepa, "Sasanian Iran," and De Jong, "Religion and Politics."

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Introducing the Kushnāmeh

Once upon a time, the story of Kush-e Pildandān appeared in detail in various sources of the Shāhnāmeh tradition; sources that, with the exception of the *Kushnāmeh*,[6] are no longer extant.[7] Aside from the *Kushnāmeh*, there are references to this character and his story that reveal that he was a well-known anti-hero, and because, as we shall argue, he represents the Kushan dynasty, a political rival of the Sasanians, there are significant variations in how his story is told and who received the credit for his defeat.[8] Therefore, it is noteworthy that the story of Kush-e Pildandān appeared in many renditions of the Shāhnāmeh tradition, most of which are no longer extant, because over time the story lost its importance.

Fortunately, the *Kushnāmeh*, a detailed narrative of Kush-e Pildandān's adventures, was resurrected during the Saljuq period. Drawing upon an older prose source, the court poet Irānshāh b. Abi al-Khayr put it into verse roughly one century after

[6]The text is edited based on a unique manuscript and published with a long introduction by Matini: Irānshāh, *Kushnāmeh*, henceforth referred to by its title. For a summary of the plot also see Matini, "Kushnāmah." Noteworthy too is Molé's description of the *Kushnāmeh* and its comparison with other Iranian epics that appeared after Ferdowsi; see Molé, "L'épopée iranienne après Firdosi," 388–90.

[7]It is claimed that the story appeared in sources that are no longer extant. We can argue this because we have evidence that the *Shāhnāmeh*s of both Masʿudi-e Marvazi (verse) and Abu al-Moʾayyad (prose) included stories of Kush. The first is mentioned in the text of the *Kushnāmeh*, 536, as a source containing stories of Kush not included in the *Kushnāmeh*:

ز مسعودی این داستان بازجوی که او رنج دیده ست از این گفت و گوی
بدان هر که این کارنامه نهاد ز شاهان ایران سخن کرد یاد

(You should seek out this story from Masʿudi, for whoever set out to compose a book containing the affairs [of bygone times] mentioned also the kings of Iran).

The existence of the story of Kush in the *Great Shāhnāmeh* of Abu al-Moʾayyad is argued based on references to the story of Kush in sources such as Balʿami and *Mojmal* that had used it (see below). For a discussion of the sources of the Shāhnāmeh tradition in general and how some lost sources were incorporated in later works, see Gazerani, "Old Garment."

[8]Many medieval works that drew upon yet older versions of the Shāhnāmeh tradition contain references to the story of Kush-e Pildandān and his eventual defeat. Although complete versions of the story are no longer extant, it is clear from its variations that once it was an important story. Balʿami, *Tārikh-e Balʿami*, 102, for instance, makes Kush a contemporary of Fereydun, and briefly this Kush, who is given a biblical lineage (see below for a discussion of the biblical Kush), takes over Iran, committing injustice and commencing the tradition of idolatry, while the anonymous author of *Mojmal al-tawārikh wa-l-qesas* gives Qāren the credit for having subdued Kush-e Pildandān in China. In his account there are two different characters by the name of Kush. In this regard the references to Kush in the *Mojmal* are closest to the story preserved in the *Kushnāmeh* (*Mojmal al-tawārikh*, 41–2 and 187–9); Mostowfi, *Tārikh-e Gozideh*, 84, where Kush appears in Fereydun's reign in the region of Berbers (west) and is eventually defeated by Sām. According to *Rowzat al-safā*, Kush-e Pildandān, the ruler of China, is captured and imprisoned by Qāren b. Kāveh. Mirkhwānd, *Rowzat as-Safa*, II: 621. Khwāandamir repeats the same story. Khwāndamir, *Tārikh-e Habib al-siyar*, I: 182. In the Sistani cycle, in a famous episode of Bahman visiting the tomb of the Sistani heroes, there is a reference to Kush-e Pildandān, and in this version it is Rostam who is responsible for having defeated him (Irānshāh, *Bahmannāmeh*, 433–4).

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Ferdowsi had finished the *Shāhnāmeh*.[9] The bulk of the narrative of the *Kushnāmeh* revolves around the adventures of its protagonist Kush-e Pildandān, the founder of Kushānshahr, who is Zahhāk's nephew and whose father had been appointed to reign over "China" and other eastern territories.[10]

Were it not for its unique extant manuscript, the story of Kush-e Pildandān would have shared the same fate as numerous stories from the Shāhnāmeh tradition excluded from Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh*.[11] Like much of Ferdowsi's repertoire and other stories from the Rostam/Sistani cycle, the story of Kush had lost its intended function of (de)legitimizing certain characters and political actors.[12] The anti-hero of the *Kushnāmeh*, at some point in time, was constructed to represent the Kushan kings. This happened during a time when the Kushans were the rivals of the Sasanians. By the time they were being put into New Persian verse, centuries after the collapse of the Sasanian empire, its protagonist, Kush-e Pildandān, had lost his relevance as a political rival.

As we shall see, internal evidence suggests that far from being coherent, the text is composite in nature, derived from many sources. There are inconsistencies surrounding characters and events, references to different sources for the same episode, and abrupt shifts in the narrative. All of these reveal the seams where two different narrations have been sewn together. This hints at the antiquity and multiplicity of the sources, and also provides access to the process of formation of the narrative whereby, as we shall see below, different strands of the narrative from different sources were woven together. Since the events of the *Kushnāmeh* include reflections of the Sasanian conquest of the Kushan kingdom, the first kernel of the Sasanian substratum of the narrative must have taken shape some time in or after the fourth century when the Kushans had been conquered. Yet, like many episodes containing reflections of the Parthian period preserved in the *Shāhnāmeh* and the Sistani cycle, which have been anachronistically placed in the Kayānid section, this essentially Sasanian story has been pushed back to the Pishdādi period. Among other things, it is the story's polemical function that necessitates a particular periodization, resulting in a multi-layered and oftentimes anachronistic narrative. We shall get to this in the subsequent sections.

Here, however, it is necessary to start with the Saljuq-period text, the modification executed by Irānshāh, the rescuer of the old tale. The story had to speak to a different audience and had to be interesting enough to capture their imagination. In the case of the *Kushnāmeh*, Irānshāh—a figure who was very much interested in the old stories

[9]Irānshāh or Irānshān is also the author of the *Bahmannāmeh*. He served as the court poet of Ghiyāth al-Din Abu Shojaʿ Mohammad b. Malekshāh (498–511 H/1105–18 CE). This provides us with a pretty narrow time frame within which the poem must have been composed.

[10]Much more will be said below about the location of China and other toponyms that appear in the *Kushnāmeh*.

[11]The *Garshāspnāmeh*, *Bahmannāmeh*, *Farāmarznāmeh*, *Borzunāmeh*, *Banu-Goshaspnāmeh*, and *Kok-e Kuhzād* are some of the best-known stories that fall into this category; they have been discussed extensively in Gazerani, *Sistani Cycle*.

[12]That legitimizing discourse was the cornerstone of the Sistani cycle due to its function as historiography has been demonstrated elsewhere; see Gazerani, *Sistani Cycle*.

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belonging to the Shāhnāmeh tradition, as apparent in his versification of the *Bahman-nāmeh* in addition to the *Kushnāmeh*—found an ancient book which was in poor shape, and attempted to revive its story. Reviving the stories of ancient books was accepted practice in Iranshāh's literary milieu. In addition to Ferdowsi's famous reference to an ancient book, *Asadi-Tusi*, the author of the *Garshāspnāmeh* also claimed to have had an ancient book as the source of his story.[13] Iranshāh's ancient story, like that of Ferdowsi and Asadi, however, had to be clothed in a new garment so that it would become relevant and attractive enough for his patron Mohammad b. Malekshāh and his courtiers.

Irānshāh employs a few strategies in order to achieve this task by composing a lengthy preface. The structure of the preface, as we shall see, indicates that it was influenced by the literature of the Saljuq period. This preface is the source of much confusion, first because it is much more recent compared to the rest of the narrative (this has been discouraging to scholars, particularly those who are in search of pre-Islamic material), and second because of the choice of naming the imaginary Iranian king who appears in it Kush. This adds to the array of characters who bear the name. The preface, therefore, must be seen as an added Saljuq layer that attempts to create a frame that would make the Sasanian narrative of Kush-e Pildandān relevant, yet ironically has made the text less accessible for the modern reader.

The incomplete preface begins with the story of Kush, the king of Iran,[14] and the eventual defeat of his rival Manush, the Roman emperor. The emperor's brother is sent to Iran's king, where he spends some time at the Iranian court and becomes interested in "knowledge." He arranges for nine books to be sent to him from Rome: the first four are on medicine, works that were known by the time of Irānshāh by way of translations of famous Greek and Roman physicians and authors such as Hippocrates (360–470 BCE), Pliny (23–79 CE) (or alternatively Appolonius of Tayna) and Galen (130–210 CE). The remaining five are histories or *akhbār-e shāhān*.[15] Among the five books is the account of Alexander's adventures in the east. It is important to note that the story of Kush has been presented as part of a larger repertoire containing works on diverse topics.

At this point the preface starts narrating the story contained in the book of Alexander. What we have here, therefore, is a structure similar to *Kalileh wa Demneh* and

[13]*Kushnāmeh*, 152–3. Dick Davis has suggested that the reference to an ancient book in the beginning of a medieval work might be a literary *topos*, aimed at lending credibility to the medieval author; Davis, "The Problem of Ferdowsi's Sources," 48–57. While this may have been the case elsewhere, here as well as in the Sistani material, enough evidence exists to suggest that different narrations of the events described in the books were extant at the time of the composition of the works. For the case of *Garshaspnāmeh*, some of the content of the older book was incorporated in more recent sources; see Gazerani, "Old Garment," 181–3. Irānshāh's story of how he obtained the story in an ancient, neglected book seems rather credible, given the evidence for the existence of the story in multiple written sources prior to Irāns; see note 7 above.

[14]There are several characters by the name of Kush, which has created a lot of ambiguity, especially for those who have merely "skimmed" through the text. There is an erroneous but common idea circulating about the *Kushnāmeh* whereby its main protagonist is deemed to be the Kush from the Semitic tradition. For a discussion of the different characters that bear the name of Kush in the *Kushnāmeh* see below.

[15]*Kushnāmeh*, 170–1.

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the *Thousand and One Nights*, using stories within stories, a storytelling technique that is almost entirely absent in the Shāhnāmeh tradition. The structure of the preface hints at the time of its composition, because the popularity of the *Kalileh wa Demneh* during this time is well established.[16] Also it should be noted that older Iranian stories, both from the Shāhnāmeh tradition as well as the older romance of *Vis-o-Rāmin* have a linear structure and lack the complicated frames characteristic of *Kalileh wa Demneh* and the *Thousand and One Nights*. Therefore, it is highly likely that Irānshāh used this technique of storytelling according to the literary practices and tastes of his times.

The book of Alexander is the second frame of the preface, which details an episode or two from its contents. In the book, we are told, Alexander arrives at a place where a statue of Kush-e Pildandān, the king of China, is erected along with an inscription bequeathed by Kush himself. As expected from this motif, the inscription includes a description of Kush's conquests, his might and his achievements, and finally how he succumbed to death, the inevitable fate of mankind.[17] Alexander becomes curious and yearns to learn Kush's story. His adventures eventually lead him to a wise man named Mahānash, who tells him a brief account of the wars between China and India during Zahhāk's reign. After the king of China, who had offered a safe haven to the descendants of Jamshid, falls on the battlefield, Zahhāk sends his brother, Kush, to be the king of China. The statue that Alexander had seen was of this Kush's son, Kush-e Pildandān. Mahānash hands Alexander a book containing the story of Kush-e Pildandān, and dies shortly after that.[18]

With the handover of the book to Alexander the main story begins. When it comes to the story of Kush, it is given further importance by connecting it with the story of Alexander's adventures in the east. The abovementioned episode of how Alexander obtains the story of Kush-e Pildandān weaves it together with the well-known story of Alexander, and creates a "hook" on which the story of Kush can be hung. But the invocation of the Alexander romance functions more than a mere placement: it

[16]For a discussion of the significance of *Kalileh wa Demneh* and the diffusion of its various translations see Gazerani, "Ascetic Cat," 4–5.

[17]*Kushnāmeh*, 180:

همی راند یک روز و یک شب سپاه رسیدند نزدیک سنگی سیاه
بتی بر سر سنگ دید از رخام به نزدیک او شد شه نیکنام
نبشته چنین یافت بر دست اوی که این پیکر کوش وارونه خوی
شه پیل دندان و سالار چین خداوند فرمان و تاج و نگین
...

([Alexander] drove his army for another day and then through the night until they reached a black rock. He approached it, and on top of the stone he saw an idol made out of alabaster [white] stone. As the king of good repute [i.e. Alexander] came closer to it, he found that the idol was holding in its hand an inscription that read as follows: "this is the statue of ill-tempered Kush, King Pildandān, the monarch of China, lord of great command and kingdom … ").

[18]*Kushnāmeh*, 182–92.

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grants the story credibility. It was known that at that time that Alexander had travelled in the east and the west and had seen many wonders.

Apart from the structure of the preface that reflects the literary taste of its composer's time, there is further evidence demonstrating that this rather peculiar beginning for the story of Kush was a later addition. During the Saljuq period we have examples of other court poets creating large encyclopedias of knowledge covering a spectrum of subjects such as botany, medicine, history, literature and philosophy. The most famous example of such works, the *Nozhatnāmeh ʿOlāʾi*, was written by Irānshāh's contemporary, Shahmardān b. Abi al-Kheyr Rāzi, who served the Kākuyid ruler of Yazd Abu Kalijār b. Garshāsp b. Ali b. Farāmarz (r. 488–513/1095–1119).[19] The *Nozhatnāmeh*, in addition to chapters on medicine and botany, includes a section on history in which we find stories of Rostam's family not contained in the *Shāhnāmeh*. The work was highly influential and served as a model for later works such as *Farokhnāmeh* (598 H/1184 CE)[20] and Fakhr-e Rāzi's *Jāmeʿ al-ʿOlum* (570/1175).[21] Irānshāh too wanted to cast the story of *Kushnāmeh* as a part of a large encyclopedia of knowledge bequeathed by the Romans. Irānshāh's aim was to dress up this ancient—and by his time ideologically/historically irrelevant old story—in attractive new garments. The preface, therefore, is doubtless the work of Irānshāh and most certainly absent from his source which contained the main narrative of Kush-e Pildandān. Irānshāh had a penchant for composing heroic verse and was clearly conscious of the various versions of the stories from the Shāhnāmeh tradition. While putting into verse an old story that had an ancient genesis was a prestigious literary endeavor, the story had to be updated in order to appease the contemporary literary taste. In order to make the composition relevant to his own times, Irānshāh composed the preface in which the story of Kush is handed down as a great encyclopedia containing works of medicine, botany and history—something along the lines of the *Nozhatnāmeh*.

In addition to composing this lengthy preface, Irānshāh has other tricks up his sleeve to make his work relevant. In the narrative of the *Kushnāmeh*, several characters by the name of Kush appear, most notably Kush-e Pildandān, whose adventures unfold in the eastern territories, and the Kush who conquers territories in Africa. In spite of evidence that the western Kush is a character distinct from Kush-e Pildandān, Irānshāh merges the two characters into one. He does so, against the internal logic of his own source, as we shall see, in order to create an all-powerful anti-hero, whose adventures would encompass territories on the edge of the known world from the west to east. This way the adventures of Kush-e Pildandān match those of the famous heroes of the house of Rostam who traversed the eastern and western territories in search of glory and fame. All the strategies employed by Irānshāh certainly ensured that he achieved his aim of dressing up his narrative in new garments before presenting it to his patron.

Since the *Kushnāmeh* is referenced in this study, here I will offer a very brief summary of its main plot. The main narrative consists of two distinct parts. In the first part, events

[19]Shahmardān Abi al-Kheyr, *Nozhatnāmeh ʿOlaʾi*.
[20]Yazdi, *Farrokhnāmeh*.
[21]Fakhr-e Rāzi, *Jāmeʿ al-ʿOlum*.

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from Kush-e Pildandān's birth to his capture and imprisonment in Mount Damāvand are covered. Here we learn that Zahhāk sends his brother Kush to take over the vacant throne of "China." Kush the father has a son, Kush-e Pildandān, the main protagonist of the text. During the first part of the narrative we learn about the struggles of Kush-e Pildandān against Ābtin, Fereydun's father, and later Fereydun himself in the eastern territories of China, Māchin, Kabul and Kushānshahr, and later in the Caspian Sea region. Interspersed between the narration of the battles of Ābtin and other Iranian heroes against Kush-e Pildandān are episodes of wonder and romance. The first part comes to an end with the defeat of Kush-e Pildandān at the hands of Fereydun and his captivity along with to his uncle Zahhāk in Mount Damāvand. That, of course, would have been a great ending to the story. But, astonishingly, in the next part we learn that Kush-e Pildandān is set free, joins Fereydun's court and takes part in battles in the western territories on the Iranians' behalf. Kush-e Pildandān eventually revolts against Fereydun and declares independence from him. Considerable effort and manpower is devoted to bringing him back to the Iranian court and expelling him from his "western" kingdom. It is only towards the end of the reign of the next Iranian king, Manuchehr, that Kush-e Pildandān is defeated. He flees to the eastern territories, where he eventually meets a wise old man who is instrumental in transforming Kush-e Pildandān by educating him, putting him through purifying austerity and finally giving him a surgical makeover by removing his elephant teeth!

Establishing the Kushan Layer of the Kushnāmeh

Names. The very first clue for the connection of the work to the Kushans is in the name of its protagonist, Kush-e Pildandān. But the name Kush has been a source of confusion because Kush-e Pildandān is certainly not the only character by the name of Kush. It is also the name of his father, who is Zahhāk's brother.[22] Aside from these two, there are several other characters by the same name. As mentioned earlier, the first Kush we encounter in the *Kushnāmeh* appears in Irānshāh's preface and he is the king of Iran. Because this Kush appears in the Saljuq layer, a discussion of his name is not consequential for establishing a connection to the Kushans. Considering the preface is incomplete, we cannot argue for any meaningful connection between all the various Kushes of the main narrative and this character appearing in the preface. There are several descendants of Kush-e Pildandān also by the name of Kush, but the origin of their character/story is to be sought in the biblical tradition. As discussed below, because of the homonym, the characters and stories of Kush-e Pildandān and his descendants have become mixed with the stories related to the biblical Kush.

The repetition of the name Kush, in the case of Zahhāk's brother and his son, Kush-e Pildandān, not only serves as a reminder of the dynastic lineage, but it is one of the "pegs" by which the narrative asserts its historicity. Kush, after all, is not a random name but the name associated with the Kushan dynasty as well as the

[22]The significance of Kush-e Pildandān's descent from Zahhāk will be discussed below.

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territories under its dominion. The name Kushan is an ethnonym referring to a tribe or tribes that first managed to take over the region of Kabul and Kapisa, but it eventually came to denote the region of Bactria, the seat of the Kushan dynasty.[23]

We see a parallel in the *Kushnāmeh*, as the name is passed on from father to son to grandson, and, as discussed below, the city that becomes the seat of Kush-e Pildandān's empire is also called Kush. As far as the story is concerned, the repetition of the name Kush also serves to link him to the Kushan dynasty, a reference that was not lost on the audience. I must clarify here that by audience, I mean the intended audience of the story's oldest layer, which was composed during the Sasanian period: that audience would certainly have been aware of the threat of the Kushan empire and its eventual defeat at the hands of the Sasanians. The name Kush represents the Kushans; "China," as we shall see, represents the eastern territories where Kushānshahr was established, and eventually we learn that it was Kush-e Pildandān who founded Kushānshahr.

There are brief glimpses in the text of the existence of other members of the Kushan dynasty. There is yet another name that may have preserved a reflection of the great king of the Kushan dynasty Kanishka. Kaniyāsh (کنیاش)[24] is the prince of Qandahar, who has a secret love affair with Kush-e Pildandān's daughter. We learn that Kush-e Pildandān's daughter, who was the object of her own father's sexual advances, was in love with Kaniyāsh.[25] Unfortunately, there is little in our extant version of the *Kushnāmeh* about Kaniyāsh and his descendants. However, shortly after Kush-e Pildandān learns of the love affair between his daughter and Kaniyāsh, he beheads Kaniyāsh in a fit of jealousy; but, unbeknownst to him, the couple has a three-year-old son, who remains unnamed. That we never learn about the fate of the boy is an indication that the story of Kush-e Pildandān's grandson has been omitted in this current version of the text. It seems rather odd to bring a secret love-child into the narrative and then let this subplot hang loose without returning to it or bringing it to closure. Nevertheless, the name Kaniyāsh and the likely continuation of his line through his child are additional clues that there were more extensive and elaborate narratives regarding Kush and his family in the eastern territories of Kabul and Qandahar.

Topography. As mentioned earlier, the setting of the *Kushnāmeh*—its landscape, regions and toponyms—are some of the "pegs" by which the narrative is connected to the Kushan kingdom and the encounters with the Sasanians. The Shāhnāmeh tradition, however, because of its own perception of history, its function and above all the mode(s) of its formation, presents us with a rather complex geography. There are actual toponyms that survive until our time, and at other times they represent one or multiple locations that may or may not have anything to do with a present-day city or province. Hence, the region of Mazandaran, today a northern province in Iran, in Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh* refers

[23]For the significance of the name Kushan (the dynasty) see Fleet, "The Name Kushan," and Allan, "A Note."

[24]The name seemed to have been unfamiliar to the scribe, who produced different versions of it, but it is mostly written as Kaniyāsh or sometimes the letter "ی" is left without dots. *Kushnāmeh*, 407, n. 2, and 409, nn. 1 and 3.

[25]*Kushnāmeh*, 407–9.

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in some instances to India, while in other places it denotes Yemen.[26] Additionally, there are landscapes where the real and imagined have been merged, while at other times the narrative transports its characters to an entirely fantastical realm.

The complexities notwithstanding, when studied in their own generic context, the toponyms can yield important information for establishing the Kushan substratum of the text. Toponyms such as "China," Khomdān, Kabul, Qandahar and, most significantly Kushān(shahr) correspond to the delineation of the Kushan kingdom (minus its Indian territories), hence "pinning" the narrative to the historical event of the Kushan period. By the time of the composition of the text Khomdān referred to the city of Xi'an/Chang'an. Nevertheless, the city as described in the *Kushnāmeh* is not the Chinese capital but is situated in the Bactria/Tokhar region. As we shall see, knowledge of China's geography, if we consider the earliest geographical works composed prior to the Saljuq period, was negligible, and was mainly drawn from the *ʿajayeb* genre. At the same time, in addition to the geographically misplaced toponym "China," the landscape of the *Kushnāmeh* contains entirely fantastical locations as well. These include the Basilā Island, the second of the two Māchins,[27] a quasi-historical landscape as well as the location associated with the edges of the word, such as the land of Yaʾjuj and Maʾjuj,[28] Alexander's wall and Mount Qāf, a mythological mountain thought to have surrounded the earth.[29]

While the political struggles and wars, with their (de)legitimizing discourse, unfold in the realms associated with the Kushan kingdom, Basilā Island is the

[26]Monchi-Zadeh describes the different locations of Mazandaran in *Topographisch-Historische Studien*, 48–149.

[27]Māchin is a toponym usually invoked along with "Chin"/China. It has been suggested that Māchin is an originally Sanskrit name (Maha-China/Great China). In Persian literature, generally, it refers to the easternmost territories. Although it must be said that sometimes in the realms of the imagination Māchin could also extend west of the Caspian Sea, as in the popular story of *Samak-e ʿAyyār*, where the name of the king of Māchin is Armanshāh, hence connecting the location of Māchin to Armenia. Māchin, therefore, is one of those vague toponyms that lends itself to being used as an imaginary landscape, and here in the *Kushnāmeh* we have not one but two Māchins!

[28]Yaʾjuj and Maʾjuj (or Gog and Magog in the Judeo-Christian tradition) refer to hostile nations. These hostile nations also feature in the Alexander romance, where it is Alexander who, by building a wall/dam, keeps them at bay. For a discussion of these nations in the Judeo-Christian literature and development of apocalyptic notions and Alexander's role see Anderson, *Alexander's Gate*. Yaʾjuj and Maʾjuj are mentioned in the Qur'an twice, first in 8: 93–94, where the construction of an iron damn by Dhu al-Qarnayn, the benevolent character, is discussed, and second in 21: 96–7, where the breaking of this dam on Judgement Day is described. The mention of Yaʾjuj and Maʾjuj and their wall, usually at the eastern edges of the known world, is also found in numerous literary texts.

[29]This is comparable with the Avestan mountain Haraiti (in Yasht 19) and the Indian mythological mountain Lokaloka, which encircles the earth. Later it was equated with the Alborz ranges, but in Ferdowsi's case, Alborz does not refer to the modern-day mountain range, according to Monchi-Zadeh, but is the same old idea of a mountain range surrounding the earth. See Monchi-Zadeh, *Topographisch-historische Studien*, 88, n. 2. In the Islamic context, Mount Qāf appears in the earliest Qurʾanic exegetical works on Surah 50 (Surah al-Qāf), and is described as a mountain surrounding the earth; Tabari, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, XXI: 401. It becomes part of popular geography preserved in the *ʿajāyeb* genre where the mountain is said to be on the edge of the earth and Alexander is said to have visited it. For an example, see Tusi, *ʿAjāyeb al-Makhluqāt*, 125–6, 135. In mystical literature, Mount Qāf is seen as the abode of the mythological bird Simorgh, a place also equated with China; ʿAttār, *Manteq al-teyr*, 263, 265.

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setting for wonder and romance. The internal logic of the narrative demands two groups of settings, one imaginary and the other real. After all, the narrative, in addition to its polemical discourse of delegitimizing an enemy, has the additional function of entertaining its audience. After a series of descriptions of battles and political struggle and the evil deeds of its anti-hero, the narrative offers a break to its audience by transporting the story and its actors to a fantastical realm. The setting is a beautiful island, where the hero, like the audience, enjoy a pleasant, restful respite. There, the hero (here Ābtin), experiences new and delightful sights, smells and tastes, and at the end falls in love with a beautiful princess—a romance that ends happily. Basilā Island, therefore, remains a fantastical place, where one of the non-historical functions of the narratives must be fulfilled.

Let us now turn our attention to those toponyms that bear significance for establishing the Kushan layer of the text. Kush-e Pildandān's territories are generally referred to as China, with its chief city of Khomdān. But where is this China and what is its relationship to today's China? It has been noted that the China of Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh* refers to the southwestern territories of China, including Khotan, Tokhārestān and eastern Turkestan. In Ferdowsi's text, Turks and Chinese are often mentioned together, especially when the composition of eastern armies is discussed. In many instances, China is equated with Khotan, with the Sea of China separating Khotan from the land of the Turks.[30] This understanding of the location of China and its relationship to Makrān, which itself has been equated with the land of Sind, is useful because Makrān seems to be a neighboring land to Kush-e Pildandān's territories, and its king comes to his aid as an ally.[31] In Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh*, during Kay Khosrow's great war against Afrāsiyāb, all of a sudden the setting of the struggle is changed from "Chin" to Makrān.[32] It is clear that Makrān is thought to be the general region of Sind, and therefore the narrative should have a mechanism for transposing its characters into this territory, which would be far away from China if we take China to be the western territories of the modern country. Yet, as Monchi-Zadeh points out, Ferdowsi's Makrān/Chin describes the bulk of the Indo-Iranian borderlands, including the northern region of Balkh, stretching into Khotan and all the way out to the borders of the Khāqān's lands.[33] Furthermore, there might be evidence that the land of China, in an episode in the *Shāhnāmeh*, borders the land of the Kushans.[34]

[30]See Monchi-Zadeh, *Topographisch-historische Studien,*184 and 249.

[31]*Kushnāmeh*, 477 and 513, where the king of Makrān is introduced as an ally of Kush along with the rulers of the regions of Tibet and Māchin.

[32]For this episode see Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, IV: 293. This is where the conquest of Makran begins, and there are references before and after this story that clearly situate Makran close to or in the vicinity of "China."

[33]Monchi-Zadeh, *Topographisch-historische Studien*, 234.

[34]The lines in question are from an episode of Kay Khosrow's great wars (Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, IV: 183; henceforth cited by title):

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This rather imprecise notion of China persisted in Islamic times, where it is equated with Turkistan.[35] Actually, in the *Kushnāmeh* there is a passage that describes the different provinces of "China." When Kush writes to his *marzbān*s asking them to send him beautiful women from his realms, he mentions Fakhar, a territory between northern Afghanistan and Tajikistan, Tibet and Qandahar.[36] As a matter of fact, in some of the earliest geographical works, the bulk of the information provided about China, with its capital city of Khomdan, are episodes from Alexander romances, indicating that China and Khomdan were used as being synonymous with the world's eastern edge.[37]

But let us take a step away from the *Kushnāmeh* and consider what we do know about the geographical setting of the Kushan dynasty. One of the few things that we know with certainty about the Kushans is the location of their rise to power. That is because there is consensus among the scholars that the first Kushan king, Kujula Kadphises, began his reign after the conquest of the Kabul valley.[38] There is little doubt that Kujula and the Indo-Parthian king Gondophares[39] were contempor-

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همه نامداران ماچین و چین
نشسته به مرز (کورستان—کروشان—کروسان—کُشانی) زمین

(All the notables from Māchin and Chin, were sitting on the borders of the land of [Kawrestān/Karushān/Korusān/ Koshani]).

Now the puzzle is in the reading of this toponym, which Khaleqi-Motlaq has edited based on an alternate manuscript as Kawrestān. Marquart thought the correct reading was Koshāni-zamin and, based on other toponyms in the passage, argued that they are intended as the borderlands of the Kushan empire; Marquart, *Anrang und Wehrot*, 139, n, 4. Monchi-Zadeh offered a different reading, but his interpretation requires the transformation of the word in question into several other forms ending with Kavusān, which seems hardly plausible (Monchi-Zadeh, *Topographisch-historische Studien*, 219). The differences of orthography and interpretation notwithstanding, the Koshāni/Kushan reading seems a possibility.

[35]Istakhri, *al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, 11:

اما مملکت چین در میانه دریا و زمین غز و زمین تبت باشد. و چین خود این اقلیمست. لیکن دیگر شهرهای ترکستان را نسبت کنند .

(As for the kingdom of China, it is situated between the sea, the land of the Ghuzz, and the land of Tibet. The actual China is this land, but many other cities of Turkestan are called by this name.)

[36]*Kushnāmeh*, 409.

[37]Ibn Khurdādbeh, *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, 264. There is even less information in Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣurat al-ard*, I: 168—a mere mention of the name of the capital city and that it borders the regions of Tibet.

[38]This event is also very significant for the Indo-Parthians, whose founder Gondophares also played a crucial role in this region. It is important to keep in mind that Gondophares and the Indo-Parthians are the same characters whose actions have been preserved in the Shāhnāmeh tradition as stories of Rostam and his family, who reigned over the kingdom of Sistan; see Gazerani, *Sistani Cycle*, Chapter 1, for an in-depth discussion of identification of Gondophares with Rostam's family. The relationship of the Kushans and the house of Rostam/Indo-Parthians is also preserved in the Shāhnāmeh tradition and will be discussed elsewhere at length.

[39]For more on Gondophares see Bivar, "Gondophares."

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aries, and since the reign of Gondophares has been dated to 19/20–46+ CE—one of the very few dates about which there is broad agreement[40]—we are provided with a timeframe for the events that transpired in the Kabul valley in which Gondophares and Kujula Kadphises Kujula, who was also known as the prince of Kapa, struggled over the province of Kabul with Gondophares. Eventually, it was the Kushan Kujula who ended the occupation of the Indo-Parthian Gondophares and established himself in the region, hence building the first center of Kushan power.[41] According to one interpretation of the coins, Gondophares' occupation lasted for some time, subsequent to which the Kushans ousted the Indo-Parthians from this region. It is speculated that the Kushan takeover of the Kabul valley took place around the middle of the first century.[42] The Kushans established themselves in this region before moving their center of power to Bactria.[43] These conclusions have been drawn based on the documented overstrikes of coins belonging to Gondophares[44] and Kujula, but the numismatic evidence is substantiated in a rare passage from Chinese sources. In a Chinese chronicle, there is a description of the rise to power of Kujula Kadphises (Qiu-jiu-zhen) as Kushan *xi-hou*. He managed to unite the Yuezhi tribes and conquer the region of Kabul and its vicinities. The chronicle further reports that Kujula died at the age of eighty and was succeeded by his son Wima (Yan-go-zhen), who then conquered India. The source of this report is the Chinese general Ban Chao who added this information to the chronicle based on reports received up to 107 CE.[45] The rise to power of Kujula as hegemon (*yagbu*) of the Yuezhi seems to have taken place in the aftermath of Gondophares' invasion of the Kabul valley.[46]

In the *Kushnāmeh*, the setting for the first set of battles after Kush the father's rise to power is in fact not China, but Kabul. The mention of Kabul is confined to this episode that takes place at the beginning of Kush the father's autonomous reign in the region. It is in the mountainous regions of the Kabul valley that the battles between Ābtin and Kush the father unfold. Ābtin is forced to withdraw and escapes to the first and then second Māchin.[47] The mention of Kabul is strange, so much so that it was thought to have been a scribal error by the editor of the text, but it is far from an oversight.[48] It is one of the toponyms that has been preserved, by coincidence, during the various revisions of the text. What we have here in the *Kushnāmeh* echoes the trajectory of the Kushan history: their first stronghold was

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[40]With the exception of R. C. Senior, who has offered an alternative dating for Gondophares, but his proposed date creates several other problems; Senior, *Indo-Scythian Coins and History*, I: 66.

[41]Bivar, "Kushan Dynasty."

[42]Cribb, "The Heraus Coins," 131.

[43]Mac Dowall, "Numismatic Evidence."

[44]While agreeing to the existence of clashes documented by overstrikes, Michael Alram expresses doubt about Gondophares' conquest of Kabul, citing insufficient evidence. Alram, "Indo-Parthians and Early Kushan."

[45]Cribb, "The Heraus Coins."

[46]Cribb, "The Early Kushan Kings."

[47]*Kushnāmeh*, 247.

[48]*Kushnāmeh*, 247, n. 2.

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Kabul, and that in fact is mentioned as the seat of power of Kush at the beginning of the narrative. As the story progresses, and especially during the reign of Kush-e Pildandān, the seat of power shifts to the city of Khomdān, and then to the newly established Kushān(shahr).

In the *Kushnāmeh*, Khomdān is the capital city of China, an identification repeated by some medieval geographers.[49] Let us not forget that China had a vague definition and could very well have encompassed the region of Tokhār/Bactria. But there is further evidence that Khomdān, as it is used in the text, is the city of Balkh. First, there is still a city by the name of Khomdān in the north-eastern province of Takhār. Second, Khomdān is the metropolis mentioned in connection with Balkh in the Syriac list of monks and priests in the eighth-century bilingual (Chinese and Syriac) Xi'an Monument.[50] This is of utmost significance, since Balkh was in fact the seat of the Kushan empire. Hence what we have so far is the parallel rise of power of the Kushans in Kabul and their stronghold in the region of Bactria.

As if the references to Kabul and the region of Bactria were not enough, the *Kushnāmeh* offers the most convincing piece of evidence for connecting its anti-hero to the Kushan dynasty, by ascribing the founding of a city by the name of Kushan to him. Kush-e Pildandān, upon returning from his adventures in Transoxiana, hears about a wondrous place, nothing short of a paradise on earth. Once he crosses a river, he arrives in a mountainous region, where he finds many mines, of both gold and turquoise, and there he builds his city. It is in this city that he orders a statue of himself to be made, an image that becomes the object of worship for the inhabitants of Shahr-e Kushān. It is important to note that the title of this section refers to Shahr-e Kushān as Kushānshahr, and it is likely that two different forms of the name are due to the exigency of the poem's metrical requirements.[51] Aside from the name, it is also significant how Kushānshahr is described, especially the mention of an abundance of gold and turquoise mines in its vicinity. Northern Afghanistan, particularly the Balkh and Badakhshan regions, are known for the abundance of their mines. The text emphasizes the richness of Kush's treasury, especially its gold and precious jewels, when Kushānshahr falls to Qāren, the appointed general of the Iranian king.[52] The founding of Kushānshahr, as the city of Kush, is significant enough to establish the Kushan layer of the text, and tidbits of information such as the presence of mines of precious stones pin down the location. Add to this the evidence from the medieval geographer Ibn Faqih, who mentions that among the many "Alexandrias" established by Alexander, one is called Kush and that is the city of Balkh.[53]

[49]For example, Istakhri, *al-Masālik wa-l-mamālik*, 11.

[50]For the history and scholarship on the monument see Lieu, "Epigraphica Nestoriana Serica," 227–46. Reference to the priest from Khomdān is at 235.

[51]*Kushnāmeh*, 499–500.

[52]*Kushnāmeh*, 531.

[53]Ibn Faqih, *Kitāb al-buldān*, 617: "التي سميت كوش وهى بلخ . و منها الاسكندرية" (Among the Alexandrias there is one called Kush and that is Balkh).

Note this information is repeated verbatim by Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, I: 638.

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When considering the toponyms mentioned in the *Kushnāmeh*, along with the details provided, one can establish that in fact there is a substratum in the text that narrates the events of the Kushans' rise and eventual defeat at the hands of the Sasanians. As we shall see, there are further parallels between the *Kushnāmeh* and what little we do know of Kushan history.

Outline of events. The struggle over the city of Kush and other territories under Kush-e Pildandān's control is a lengthy affair during the course of which the Iranian party suffers numerous defeats. These events described in the *Kushnāmeh* are based on actual historical events. Here, I will briefly offer an outline of the Sasanians' encounter with the Kushans. Obviously the Kushans and the Sasanians were political rivals, and we have evidence that some of the members of the last Parthian king's family sought refuge with the Kushan kings.[54]

The first attempts of conquests of the Kushan empire coincides with Ardashir I's (224–40 CE) raids in Khurasan, which extended into the northern Kushan territories of Balkh and beyond.[55] It is apparent that these initial raids did not result in Sasanian dominion over the Kushan territories. There is evidence of several other attempts during the reign of subsequent Sasanian kings. Ardashir's son, Shapur I (r. 240/2–270/2) seems to have reached the Kabul valley, as evident by the rock-relief left behind on Rag-i Bibi.[56] The Armenian historian P'awatos Buzand (ca. 470) reports two occasions where the Persian army under Shapur II (309–79) suffered defeat at the hands of the Kushan army.[57] The memory of these setbacks must have been significant and enduring enough to have been captured by the Armenian historian a century after it occurred.

Sasanian attempts to conquer the Kushan empire persisted throughout the reign of Bahram II (279–93 CE).[58] There is speculation about the identity of the various groups—such as the Huns, the Chionites and the Kidarites, as well as the Kushans —and their activities in the eastern fringes of the Sasanian empire.[59] What remains certain is that the conquest of Kushānshāhr was a hard-fought series of battles stretching over the reign of several Sasanian kings. At some point, however, the Sasanians did manage to install their own vassal kings, known by the title of Kushānshāh (as opposed to the Kushan kings who bore the epithet Šaonano Šao, king of kings). The Kushānshāh were essentially vassals of the Sasanians, and their existence is attested by both the Sasanian inscriptions[60] and the series of coins they left behind. There have been many

[54]The two sons of Ardavan sought refuge with Kabulshāh, who is generally thought to be a Kushan. *Kārnāmeh-ye Ardashir-e Bābakān*, 55.

[55]Vaissière, "Kushanshahs." See Shahbazi, *Tamaddon-e sāsāni*, 100, and 270–1, where Shahbazi postulates about a treaty reached between Ardashir and the Kushan king of the time. This claim has not been substantiated by numismatic evidence, however.

[56]See Grenet, "Sasanian Relief," where he identifies the king depicted on the relief as Shapur I.

[57]Garsoïan, *Epic Histories*, 197–8, and 217–18.

[58]Grenet, "Sasanian Relief," 259.

[59]Potts, "Sasanian Iran," 287–301.

[60]The first Sasanian mention of a Kushan king is found in Humbach and Skjærvø, *The Sasanian Inscription of Paikuli*, 44.

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attempts to date and identify the Kushano-Sasanian kings.[61] Although there is no general consensus about when the main line of Kushānshāh commenced their reign, it seems to have occurred roughly around the year 300 CE.[62]

The new line of Kushānshāhs are clearly distinct from the previous Kushans, but not all local Kushan rulers were installed by Sasanian governors or kings. This is evident from the pantheon of gods and other images depicted on the Kushano-Sasanian coins, where local deities and iconographical traditions are mixed with Sasanian influences. It has been argued that had all the Kushan governors and officials been replaced with Sasanian officials sent from western Iran, the local interest depicted on the coins would have been totally obliterated.[63]

To summarize the events, it can be said that there were several attempts by the Sasanian kings, starting with their first, Ardashir I, to establish direct dominion over the Kushan empire. There were subsequent raids by his successors, who left the footprints of their attempts at overthrowing the Kushan empire. Although these attempts were temporarily successful, the establishment of Sasanian control over the northern part of the Kushan empire is only attested subsequent to the establishment of the Kushano-Sasanian kings, or the Kushānshāhs, around 300 CE. But even after the defeat of the main line of Kushans, the Kushan local rulers and their specific customs and traditions had a great influence on the Kushānshāhs, as depicted on their coins.

Now let us examine how the conflict between the Iranians and Kush-e Pildandān, the king of Kushānshahr, unfolds. In the *Kushnāmeh*, the conquest of Chin/Kushānshahr is a long process and although there are short-lived victories for Iranians, it takes several generations of Iranian kings and heroes to accomplish it. Their first attack is led by Ābtin, Fereydun's father, and this is the aforementioned attack on the surroundings of Kabul. Ābtin is defeated and escapes, and on his second attempt gains a short-lived victory.[64] Although Kush himself is absent, Ābtin is unable to break the resistance at Kush's capital city, and when Kush does arrive, once again Ābtin is chased away.[65] Next, and long after his father's demise, Fereydun appoints Nastuh-e Shiruy to tackle Kush-e Pildandān and to conquer his kingdom in order to annex it to Iran. The choice of Nastuh is a rather curious one, for he is not by any means a well-known character in the Shāhnāmeh tradition. He is one of the heroes who, according to Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh*, serves at Fereydun's court.

It is important to consider this choice, because it reveals one of the consequences of transposing this episode, which clearly reflects the affairs of the Sasanian period so far back into the Pishdādid period of the Shāhnāmeh tradition's chronology. Once Kush is made Zahhāk's close relative and a contemporary, everything else has to be narrated

[61]Schindel, "Ardashir I Kushanshah," identifies the first two Kushanshahs as Ardashir I and II based chiefly on iconographical evidence. For a discussion of different attempts at dating the Kushānshāhs see Schindel, "Kushanshah: ii Kushano-Sasanian Coinage."

[62]Grenet, "Sasanian Relief," 259, where he gives the date 280s–290s CE for Peroz. Schindel also thinks that the beginning of the main line of Kushānshāhs can be dated to about 300 CE.

[63]Schindel, "Sasaniden, Kushan, Kushano-Sasaniden."

[64]*Kushnāmeh*, 247.

[65]*Kushnāmeh*, 307–20.

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in that period. In other words, the established chronology of the genre takes precedence over historical accuracy, and this is due to the centrality of the narrative's polemical discourse. In other words, it is more important for Kush-e Pildandān to be Zahhāk's nephew (and of demonic descent) than to place the narration of the affairs of his kingdom in its accurate historical period. This does not mean there is no chronological accuracy, however. Once a character or an event has been placed in a certain period, everything else must remain chronologically consistent. This is why, instead of a better-known hero, those who tackle him from the Iranian side must be heroes from Fereydun's reign. As a matter of fact, when it comes to major events and actors, there is great internal coherence within the genre. For instance, at this point in Fereydun's reign the two prominent heroes, Garshāsp and Narimān, were busy with the conquest of India, while Qāren, another known character, had been sent off to Rum to defeat the western enemy. That Garshāsp and Qāren were busy on their respective adventures is well known, not from this particular text, but through intertextual references to episodes narrated elsewhere in the Shāhnāmeh tradition.[66] It is this kind of reasoning that justifies the choice of Nastuh-e Shiruy as the commander of the army sent to subdue Kush-e Pildandān.

Nastuh, however, suffers a humiliating defeat at the hands of Kush.[67] Next is the turn of Qobād, son of Kaveh and Qāren's brother. At first Qobād seems to be winning, but Kush-e Pildandān gets reinforcements from Makrān and eventually inflicts a crushing defeat on Qobād's army as well.[68] After a hiatus, Qāren, the mighty ancestor of the Qāren/Gudarziān house, is sent to the eastern realms with the same mission. Qāren defeats Kush and captures him on the battlefield, but there is still resistance in the capital city. He eventually conquers the city and wanders around Chin in order to subdue all rebels who resist the Iranian authority. He captures all of them and exiles them to Iran along with their families, not leaving anything to chance before he himself returns to Iran.[69] Kush-e Pildandān is imprisoned in Damāvand along with his uncle, Zahhāk, and Nastuh is installed as the new governor of Chin, a position that is eventually passed on to his son, Ardashir.

I think it goes without saying that the general outline of the Sasanians' struggles against the Kushans matches the description found in the *Kushnāmeh*. In both cases the conquest of the territories took several generations, and along the way there were short-lived victories but not a permanent Iranian dominion. There was a breaking point, and in the historical records that is signified by the appearance of the Kushano-Sasanian Kushānshāhs and here by the capture of Kush and appointment of Nastuh, an Iranian hero, to the kingdom of Kush. But the parallel does not end here: one should wonder why Kush-e Pildandān, the anti-hero of the story, whose capture and defeat is supposed to be celebrated, is once again taken out of captivity to serve the Iranian king, and why at the very end his image is rehabilitated

[66]For example, for Garshāsp's adventures in India, see Asadi Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 77–197.
[67]*Kushnāmeh*, 461–4.
[68]*Kushnāmeh*, 464–95.
[69]*Kushnāmeh*, 511–32.

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(more on this below).[70] It must have to do with the forging of an alliance with the local Kushan rulers—something that left its imprint on the syncretic iconography of the Kushānshāhs, which signifies their continued presence and alliance with the Sasanians. If we take Kush-e Pildandān as a representative of all Kushan rulers, it is only natural to whitewash the demonic imagery constructed for him while he occupied the role of an enemy, once he has become an ally. This is precisely what happens in the *Kushnāmeh*.

Kushan sanctuaries. Having the image of the king as the object of worship, as in the case of Kush-e Pildandān, should be of great interest to anyone familiar with the salient themes of Kushan history. In fact, in the *Kushnāmeh*, the statue of Kush plays a significant role, not only while Kush is alive, but also a long time after his demise, when Alexander the Great encounters it. The image of Kush, aside from being worshipped, has a memorialization function: it is there as a key to unlocking the story of Kush, as well as his message about the material world. But what does the *Kushnāmeh*'s mention of Kush's statue, housed in an elaborately adorned structure and intended to be worshipped, have to do with the actual facts of the Kushan history? There is in fact a parallel between the poem and what remains, in the form of archaeological discoveries of structures that contained statues of Kushan kings.

The nature of these structures, known as Kushan sanctuaries, like everything else related to Kushan history, is contested and complicated. Three such structures (*bagolaggo* in Bactrian, *devakula* in Sanskrit) have been discovered, two in Afghanistan, i.e. Rabatak and Surkh Kotal, and Māt near Mathura in India.[71] They were places where images of kings and gods were kept.[72] In Rabatak and Surkh Kotal, the inscriptions in the structure call it *bagolagoo*, "house of gods," while the sanctuary of Māt bears the same title in Sanskrit, *devakula*.

In his influential work on the Kushans, Rosenfield characterized these as temples dedicated to the ancestors of Kushan kings in accordance with what he perceived to be a dynastic cult. He postulated that the Kushan sanctuaries were places where Kushan kings were worshipped along with their dynastic pantheon of gods.[73]

[70]For more on the transformation of Kush-e Pildandān see below.

[71]For Māt see Rosenfield, *Dynastic Arts*, 140–2; and Fussman, "The Māṭ devakula." For Surkh Kotal see Schlumberger, Le Berre, and Fussman, "Surkh Kotal en Bactriane." For Rabatak see Sims-Williams and Cribb, "A New Bactrian Inscription," and "Further Notes."

[72]Bracey, "Policy, Patronage," 209.

[73]The religion of the Kushans seems to have its roots in a number of traditions. There are deities from Greco-Roman, Iranian and Indian (both Buddhist and Hindu) pantheons. Whereas the earlier Kushan kings seemed to have officially endorsed a smaller number of deities—for instance the only deity appearing on Vima Kadphises' coins is the Indian god Śiva—the number of deities on the coinage of Kanishka and Huvishka is increased to include mainly gods from the Iranian pantheon. There is a trend in Kushan scholarship that insists on the predominance of Iranian/Zoroastrian elements (for example see Bracy, "Policy, Patronage"; Grenet, "Zoroastrianism among Kushans"; Grenet, "Iranian Gods in Hindu Garb"). Of particular interest in debates regarding the religion of the Kushans is that about the identity of the Bactrian god Oešo, who has been identified with the Avestan god Vayu by some, in spite of the fact that he has been clearly depicted as the Hindu god Śiva (see Cribb, "Shiva Images on Kushan," which

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Rosenfield proposed that this type of dynastic cult was introduced from the west into India, since there is no parallel for it in Indian history.[74] The only example that can be considered as a precursor to the Kushan sanctuaries is the sanctuary of Nanghat, dated to around the turn of the millennium, which was devoted to the worship of the rulers of Satavaha dynasty, and linked to the Indo-Parthians, who also were a conquering group.[75] The lack of precedence in India, as noted by Rosenfield, may be due to the possible nomadic roots of the practice of building a cultic sanctuary. More recently, in an attempt to establish an Iranian precedence for the practice, the common nomadic background of the Iranian groups that left various types of sanctuaries has been pointed out.[76]

The notion of a dynastic cult devoted to the ritual worship of Kushan kings has been challenged, but not dismissed.[77] This is because the divinity of the Kushan kings represented in these sanctuaries is emphasized by titles such as *devaputra* (son of god), *devamanusa* (god in human form), *bago* (god/lord) and *bagopouro* (son of god/from Surkh Kotal). The opposition to the notion of the Kushan kings as divine beings notwithstanding, the function of sanctuaries as places dedicated to the *worship* of the Kushan kings could not be brushed aside, chiefly because of the royal titles such as "son of god" attributed to the Kushan kings. No exact parallels could be found in the Indian or Iranian contexts. Rosenfield had argued that at no time in Indian literature is any king referred to as *devaputra*,[78] and the concept of the king's divinity in the Iranian context is notoriously complicated.[79] With the discovery of Rabatak, new divine epithets ascribed to the Kushan kings came to light, lending credit to Rosenfield's thesis. More recently, Mukherjee expands on Rosenfield's thesis and speculates that the Kushan kings were worshipped at these sanctuaries while alive, as well as after their death.[80]

Antonio Panaino and Gherardo Gnoli once again reexamine Rosenfield's thesis and add certain significant nuances to the notion of dynastic cult.[81] Panaino argues that ritual sacrifice to the soul of a living king, or that of a dead one, was not unheard of in the Sasanian context.[82] He addresses Kanishka's new title, translated as "worthy of divine worship," attempting to define what the divinization of the king actually meant. The presence of this and other divinely imbued epithets, as Panaino

contains a summary of the debate up to the point of its publication; also see Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 154–8).

[74]Rosenfield, *Dynastic Arts*, 140–2.

[75]Ibid., 156–8.

[76]Canepa, "Dynastic Sanctuaries," 97.

[77]Verardi and Grossato, "Kushana Emperors as Cakravartins," where the authors attempt to discredit the notion of a dynastic cult. Among the counter-arguments, for instance, is that Surkh Kotal was not a sanctuary but a temple with portable images; but this itself is based on their interpretation of the few lines of the inscription.

[78]Rosenfield, *Dynastic Art*, 202.

[79]For a summary of the extensive literature on this topic see Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 56–8.

[80]Mukherajee, *Kushanā Studies*, 280.

[81]Panaino, "The Bactrian Royal Title," 331–46; Gnoli, "Some Notes," 141–60.

[82]Panaino, "The Bactrian Royal Title," 342.

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argues, "cannot prove a crude witness to complete divinization, although such a solution remains theoretically possible."[83] He then discusses practices of divinization from the Hellenistic and Sasanian context, as well as alluding to possible Indian and Chinese influences. While in the Greco-Roman context there is evidence of ritual performed for the king's image, there is also an Iranian/Sasanian practice whereby fires dedicated to the soul of the living king and his living and departed ancestors were established, and where rituals, most significantly sacrifice, were performed. It is argued that the Kushan kings' divinity, and the function of the sanctuaries, could be seen in the context of the Sasanian practice, but even then, he concludes, "these comparisons cannot eliminate the special character of the Kušan kingship, where the worship of the king's person took on some divine connotations."[84] This special character of Kushan worship of the king, as we shall see, is significant for the purposes of our discussion of the *Kushnāmeh*. Equally significant is Gnoli's study, where he begins by offering a significant reinterpretation of the pantheon of deities in the Rabatak inscription, concluding that the deities mentioned in the list, other than the pair occupying the top of the list,[85] are associated with death, the final judgement and the hereafter.[86] It is then argued that the Rabatak temple, which contained the statues of three dead Kushan kings and one live one, might have been a place where reverence was owed to the deceased ancestors or their "spirits" or *fravaši*.[87] To summarize the findings of both studies, the Rabatak sanctuary was a place where ancestors and the living king were venerated with some notion of divinity. While the nature of the divinization cannot be established, there is a funerary or, as Gnoli put it, *post mortem* aspect to the Kushan king's worship at the sanctuary of Rabatak, and by extension at other Kushan sanctuaries where statues of Kushan kings have been found.

The description of the same motif from the *Kushnāmeh* is actually a reflection of the practice of building statues of Kushan kings, both dead and alive, so that they may be worshipped. It is repeated, time and again, that the statue of Kush, and that of his daughter, were built to be worshipped.[88] Kush, as we shall see below, is made to realize his mortal and limited nature as a human being and gives up claims to divinity. But still, after this episode, he builds a statue of himself and houses it in a domed structure at the very end of the story. This is how the structure is described:

[83]Ibid., 340.

[84]Ibid., 342.

[85]At the top of the listed pantheon in the inscription, he identifies Ahuramazda/Śiva (Muzudhuwan and Nana/Umma(Omma), who form a pair. Gnoli, "Some Notes," 143.

[86]These are Mithra, Nairosang and Sroša. Sroša is the figure that guides the soul after death while Nairosang is Ahura Mazda's messenger and is associated with Sroša, who cooperates with the future savior Peshutan and prepares Wištāsp for his journey to paradise, and Mithra, who is the judge of souls at the Činvat bridge. Gnoli, "Some Notes," 143.

[87]For the development of the idea of fravaši, see Boyce, "Fravaši."

[88]See below for a detailed discussion of Kush-e Pildandān's practice of making idols in his own image and the poem's condemnation of the practice.

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He built an enormous dome,
all from granite stone, not from mere wood and sticks.
He made an idol in his own image from shining crystal,
then he placed his seal on that dome.
Then he had a great lamp built from the same stone,
a lamp that was burning oil.
When lit, it was as though a great fire was burning on earth;
it burned like an illuminating candle.
Each year at the time of spring,
all of a sudden it lit up at night time.
During the time when nature flourished, when the world became new,
this sun (i.e. the great lamp) lit up the Constellation of Cancer.[89]
When Alexander encountered this idol, he broke it.
But he did not touch the great lamp.
That dome and lamp still stand today;
they are not harmed by the passage of time.[90]

In some ways the narrative comes full circle with the description of Kush-e Pildandān's idol, because it connects the end to the beginning, where Alexander had encountered the very same statue. At the very beginning Alexander, on his adventures, had found a statue made out of alabaster, erected on a plinth.[91] There he also found Kush-e Pildandān's "advice," where the central theme is the world's ephemeral nature. In this inscription, Kush left a description of the splendor of his kingdom, and his own might, all of which have been reduced to nothing. Alexander, upon reading the inscription and learning of Kush-e Pildandān's lost greatness, and after shedding tears of sorrow at this reminder of his own eventual end, becomes interested in Kush's story.[92]

[89]The constellation of Cancer is only visible on spring nights.
[90]*Kushnāmeh*, 683:

در او گنبدي ساخت هشتاد گز همه سنگ خاره نه چوب و نه گز
بتی ساخت بلّور بر چهر خویش نهاد اندر آن گنبد از مهر خویش
ز بلّور، قندیل کردش یکی به نیرنگ روغنش داد اندکی
چو از سقف گنبد درآویختند بدو روغن زیت برریختند
یکی آتش اندر زمین بر فروخت به کردار شمع فروزان بسوخت
چو رفتی به برج حمل آفتاب برافروختی ناگاه گاه خواب
چنین تا جهان پر ز گلشن شدی ز خورشید خرچنگ روشن شدی
سکندر بدان بت رسید و شکست نکرد، این شگفتی، به قندیل دست
بجای است قندیل و گنبد هنوز زیانش ندارد خزان و تموز

[91]*Kushnāmeh*, 180.
[92]*Kushnāmeh*, 180–1.

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The parallels to what we know about the Kushan sanctuaries is rather striking. Kush-e Pildandān's statue, much like the ones belonging to the great Kushan kings, remains, to be worshipped after his death. It is housed in a domed structure and is standing on a stone plinth. It certainly could be argued that it is a mere coincidence that three fragmentary statues of Kushan kings found at the Surkh Kotal sanctuary all fit this description. The statues, like that of Kush, have been crafted from light-colored stone. Most significantly, however, there is an emphasis in the text that these statues of Kush and his daughter were made for ritualistic purposes. We know that many years after the demise of the great Kushans, these structures, albeit in a ruinous state, were still dotting the landscape of the former Kushan kingdom. This is corroborated by the archaeological finds as well as by the proclamation in the *Kushnāmeh*'s text that the dome where the statue of Kush-e Pildandān was once housed "is still standing today."[93]

Peculiarities of the Genre: Precision and Chronology

The Sasanian layer. There is an interesting juncture in the *Kushnāmeh*'s narrative where much is revealed about the way the Shāhnāmeh tradition was formed, and specifically how more recent stories are "pushed back in time" and embedded in its familiar chronology. This is significant for the present discussion beyond its revelation of the mechanism of the formation of this corpus of literature. Here, in discussing how and why the story of Kush-e Pildandān was pushed back into the period of Zahhāk/Fereydun, we can in fact establish the Sasanian provenance of the story. This crucial juncture in the story is where Ābtin is about to leave the scene (by being killed by Zahhāk) and his son Fereydun is to take his place. Now the story of Fereydun and his upbringing by the cow, Barmāyeh, and his eventual triumph over Zahhāk was well known. By the time the Kushan layer of the Shāhnāmeh tradition, as we have it in the *Kushnāmeh*'s source, was being developed, the Avestan myth of the dragon-slaying hero, Fereydun (Θraētaona) had been known, embellished, revised, told and retold for many centuries. If the new layer of the story of Kush were to be credible, therefore, it had to adhere to the known facts of the plot, but also take into account contemporary sentiments.

One of the best-known versions of the story must have been the one Ferdowsi put into verse in the *Shāhnāmeh*, a story that incorporates few but significant elements of the Avestan myth. According to this version, Ābtin is killed by Zahhāk, and his mother, fearing for the newly born Fereydun, entrusts him to be raised by Barmāyeh, the famous cow, and her keeper.[94] Three years later, Farānak takes Fereydun and escapes to a place in India, where the Alborz Mountain is said to be located.[95]

[93] *Kushnāmeh*, 683.
[94] *Shāhnāmeh*, I: 62–3.
[95] *Shāhnāmeh*, I: 64:

ببرم پی از خاک جادوستان شوم با پسر سوی هندوستان
شوم ناپدید از میان گروه برم خوبرخ را به البرز کوه

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Eventually, in this version, Fereydun learns of his descent and of Zahhāk's atrocities, removes him from power and becomes Iran's king.

In the *Kushnāmeh*, some of the elements of this well-known story remain the same, but some others have been modified. First is the question of Barmāyeh, the cow, because in the well-known narrative, this animal is of great significance and having been suckled by her is one of Fereydun's distinguishing traits. In this version, Barmāyeh makes an appearance, not as a cow but a chosen *dāyeh*, a person put in charge of his upbringing. Ābtin has chosen Barmāyān, a minister at his court, to be in charge of Fereydun, and there in the wilderness of the mountains, Barmāyān sets up a throne for Fereydun and teaches him how to read and write. There is an insistence on the importance of acquiring knowledge, and this is different from the older version of the story, where the significance was placed on the magical circumstances of the child's survival, hinting at his auspicious future. The narrative, however, has to justify its new interpretation of Fereydun's upbringing: after all everyone knew that Barmāyeh was a cow, and Fereydun an abandoned infant in the wilderness. In fact, the text does justify the new version of events by addressing the different version:

> Everyone says that he [Fereydun] was suckled by the cow, Barmāyeh.
> If you are to listen to what the commoners say,
> you will never learn the accurate version of events, the way things actually happened.
> Milk is a metaphor for knowledge and instead of *gāh* (the court set up for Fereydun in the Mountains), they will say *gāv* (cow).
> Fereydun learned his knowledge at that court, for it was founded by Barmāyān with knowledge.[96]

What we have in the *Kushnāmeh* version, therefore, is a revision that takes into account the sentiments of its contemporary audiences. This type of revision to the Shāhnāmeh tradition must have begun in the Sasanian period and continued to be practiced for the first few centuries after the fall of the Sasanians. But with the passing of time, and the process of transmission of various facets of knowledge at full force, new sentiments, beliefs and preferences had to be accounted for. What we witness is a process that I call "diluting the magical," here exemplified by updating the myth of Barmāyeh the cow into the minister Barmāyān with the aim of granting Fereydun knowledge. Having acquired knowledge had become equally essential (if not more so) to an auspicious birth and special upbringing.

(I shall abscond from this magic-afflicted land. Along with my son, I shall go to India. I shall hide from crowds and I shall take him [lit. the one with a beautiful face] to Mount Alborz).

[96] *Kushnāmeh*, 398:

چنین گفت هر کس ز مردان مرد که از گاو برمایه او شیر خورد
سخن گر تو از عام خواهی شنود ندانی شنودن بدانسان که بود
همی شیر دانش نماید به راز همی گاه را گاو گویند باز
فریدون از آن گاه دانش گشاد که برماین آن را به دانش نهاد

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This trend of "updating" the stories of the Shāhnāmeh tradition by diluting the magical elements is not unique to the *Kushnāmeh*, but is characteristic of more recent additions to the text. One such example is found in a version of the story of Zahhāk. According to this version, which appears in multiple sources, there were no serpents on his shoulders, but what appeared as snakes were outgrowths of flesh that protruded from his skin due to a rare disease with which Zahhāk had been afflicted. The *Nozhatnāmeh*, among other sources, offers this version of Zahhāk's snakes while also claiming that the Simorgh was not a mythological bird, but a wise man and Rostam's mentor. References to his nest should be read as the wise man's home or abode.[97] Ferdowsi also, in spite of his loyalty to his sources, attempts to explain away the presence of the demon Akvān. Once Rostam slays the demon, Ferdowsi takes a break from recounting this tale to offer his own commentary. He feels obliged to justify the fantastical element in his narrative by telling his audience that they should think of the demons as evil people, otherwise the point of the story would be lost to them.[98]

In the *Kushnāmeh*, aside from "diluting the magical," we see also that the location of the transpired events has been updated. While in the *Shāhnāmeh*, Mount Alborz referred to India, in the *Kushnāmeh*, although the toponym is kept, the location refers to the Alborz mountain range in northern Iran. This process indicates that the story of *Kushnāmeh* is a more recent addition to the Shāhnāmeh tradition, where we have internal evidence from the text that buttresses the thesis of its Sasanian origin.

Included in the same section of the story is a partial translation of the Middle Persian text *Andarznāmeh-ye Bozorgmehr*, also known as *Yadgār-e Bozorgmehr*. The Bozorgmehr mentioned in the title is none other than Khosrow Anushirvān's famous councilor, to whom many words of wisdom have been attributed. Various versions of the *Andarznāmeh* exist, most notably the Middle Persian text and Ferdowsi's versification of a large part of it, as well as what is preserved in the *Kushnāmeh*. Jalal Matini has established the Pahlavi origin of the verses in the *Kushnāmeh* by comparing the lines to the Middle Persian text as well as Ferdowsi's version. According to Matini,

[97] Shahmardān Abi al-Kheyr, *Nozhatnāmeh*, 302–3 and 342–3.

[98] *Shāhnāmeh*, III: 296-297:

تو مر دیو را مردم بد شناس کسی کو ندارد ز یزدان سپاس
هر آنکو گذشت از ره مردمی ز دیوان شمر، مشمر از آدمی
خرد گر برین گفتها نگرود مگر نیک معنیش می نشود

(You should consider evil people as demons, those who don't show God gratitude. Whoever fell off the path of humanness, count him among the demons and not among humans. Intellect refuses to follow such notions, unless it [does not] hear their true meaning).

Note that here both the readings نشنود and بشنود (according to main vs. alternate manuscripts) are possible. I think if we consider the context and the meaning of the verse, it makes much more sense to read it as بشنود.

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there is no doubt that the lines (verses 4363–592) in the *Kushnāmeh* are based on the Pahlavi text. Out of 264 stanzas in the Middle Persian version, 100 have been included in the *Kushnāmeh*, whereas in Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh* 123 of those stanzas have been included. There is evidence that both versifications are based on the Middle Persian text, and that they occurred independent of each other. In other words, there are enough differences and discrepancies between the *Shāhnāmeh* and *Kushnāmeh* versions to exclude the possibility of Irānshāh having copied it from Ferdowsi.[99] This is remarkable because unlike in the *Shāhnāmeh*, where the person uttering the words of wisdom is in fact Bozorgmehr, in the *Kushnāmeh* there is no mention of him. Instead, questions are addressed by Kamdād, a member of Ābtin's retinue, at Saklat's court to the sage Barmāyān. Yet both the form, namely the question and answer format, and the content of the Pahlavi treatise have been kept to a large extent. What this suggests, other than establishing the Sasanian provenance of the source of the *Kushnāmeh*, is the pervasiveness of such material centuries after the collapse of the Sasanian polity.

Biblical Kush: the merging of traditions. The question of the use of Kush as an ethnonym referring to the Kushans has been complicated by the appearance of line of descendants of Kush-e Pildandān, starting with his son Kanʿān.[100] Kanʿān is the father of yet another character by the name of Kush, who is the father of Namrud.[101] Obviously the reference here in Kanʿān (Canaan), Kush or Cush and Namrud (Nimrod) are two biblical figures that appear in the Hebrew Bible. According to the biblical tradition, Canaan, Cush and Nimrod are sons of Ham, one of Noah's three sons, who populate the earth after the flood. Ham is Cush's father, and Nimrod his son, while Canaan is Cush's brother (Genesis 10: 6–8). But aside from this character, the name Kush also appears in the biblical tradition to refer to a land, also described in the Hebrew Bible (Isiah 18: 1–2). The oldest mention of the name Kush is from Egyptian texts dated to the twentieth century BCE, whereupon the name and presumably the geographical designation entered Near Eastern languages, including Old Persian. There are various interpretations of the location of the land of Kush in different ancient languages of the Near East, but most indicate eastern African regions of Ethiopia and Nubia.[102] As a matter of fact, the land of Kush, according to biblical literature, stretches from Egypt to Central Africa. It follows then that the adjective Kushite/Kushi refers to a person of African descent, but this interpretation equating Kushite with African/black and in turn with slavery is a post-biblical phenomenon.[103]

The biblical character Cush, son of Ham, and his genealogy appear in the corpus of the *qisas al-anbiyā*, a large collection of stories about the Abrahamic prophets. When the Abbasid authors composed their first histories, their search for historical material prior to the Prophet Muhammad's birth led them to two main sources, first the *qisas*

[99]Matini, "Tarjomeh-ye manzum-e digari."
[100]*Kushnāmeh*, 406.
[101]*Kushnāmeh*, 497.
[102]Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, 17–25.
[103]Ibid., 167.

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al-anbiyā and second the Shāhnāmeh tradition. Pre-Islamic history, according to these and later Islamic histories, therefore, consisted of stories and anecdotes from these two different sources. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the biblical Cush, a descendant of Noah, makes an appearance in the pre-Islamic section of the Islamic histories. For example, according to Tabari, Kush is the son of Ham and brother of Kanʿān and father of Namrud. It is Kush's sons who populate Ethiopia, Sind and India.[104] The same genealogy, with some small variations, is mentioned by Maqdisi,[105] Masʿudi[106] and Balʿami,[107] to name a few historians who reported the biblical histories. The differences notwithstanding, it is clear that the story of Kanʿan, Kush and Namrud, as they appear in the *Kushnāmeh*, belong to the biblical narrative. That the biblical Kush was made a relative of Kush-e Pildandān is a result of the merging of two characters: the eastern Kush-e Pildandān who represents the Kushan kings with the biblical Kush.

Why, one might ask, would these two characters be fused together? The obvious starting point is the homonymy, of course. While this may have been the starting point, there are reasons beyond the mere similarity of the names. The biblical story of Kush, father of Nimrod, as narrated in the *qisas al-anbiyā*, was useful in the construction of Kush-e Pildandān's image as an enemy. After all, Nimrod is seen, especially in the Islamic tradition, as the opponent to Abrahamic monotheism. It's interesting that Kush-e Pildandān's proclivity for idol-worship—which, as we shall see, stems from the reflection of Kushan religious practices—has been connected to the idol-worship of Nimrod. The impetus for sewing together the narratives, as it were, by making the biblical Cush the son of Kush-e Pildandān must have been the usefulness of the story of Nimrod, Cush's son, as the perpetrator of evil deeds. As a matter of fact, the consolidation of the genealogies of the two lines has resulted in more than the solidification of Kush-e Pildandān's image as an anti-hero. It solves the enigma of Kush's adventures in the western territories and his connection to Africa.

The best clue offered for the existence and merging of a number of the narratives is found in the text of *Kushnāmeh* itself. Here one of the aforementioned "seams" of the narrative, a place where the two different characters are merged into one, appears in plain view. We are told by Irānshāh that there is confusion about the identity of Kush who wandered westward. According to some versions of the story, Irānshāh informs us, the Kush who embarked on adventures in the western territories was not Kush-e Pildandān, but his son. Irānshāh does not like this version of events and thinks that the person was none other than Kush-e Pildandān himself.[108] In another verse the Kush of the African adventures is identified as Kush-e Pildandān's grandson, namely the one with the biblical genealogy.[109] Yet, for Irānshāh, who had a free hand in editing the narratives in order to offer his own version, the idea of two

[104]Tabari, *Tārikh Tabari*, I: 202

[105]Maqdisī, *al-Badʾ wa-l-tārīkh*, III: 27.

[106]Masʿūdi, *Murūj al-dhahab*, III: 5.

[107]Balʿami, *Tārikh-e Balʿami*, 104.

[108]*Kushnāmeh*, 546.

[109]*Kushnāmeh*, 552.

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different Kushes, father and son or father and grandson, one in the west and one in the east, was unsuitable, and so he melded the two characters into one.

The idea that the Kush of the western adventures was not Kush-e Pildandān but his grandson had slipped back into Irānshāh's narrative, or rather remained unedited. It would make sense, considering the narrative of the *Kushnāmeh*, that the Kush of the west would be Kush-e Pildandān's grandson, because the narrative, or Irānshāh's source, had taken pains to weave together the biblical genealogy of Kanʿān, Namrud and Kush together with that of the main protagonist of the narrative. Why relate the account of the birth of Kanʿān and his son Kush and his son Namrud, if they are never to be mentioned again in the narrative? It seems, therefore, that the weaving together of the biblical line with the Kushes of the east was present in Irānshāh's source, but the two Kushes, the one in the east reflecting the affairs of the Kushan empire, though related, was kept distinct from the Kush who built a kingdom in Africa. Yet why would Irānshāh want to merge the two Kushes of the two different traditions and backgrounds and geographical locations into one where his source(s) had taken the pains to bring them together through a genealogical connection? Let us remember that Irānshāh was putting into verse an ancient story whose historical references and the polemical battles had lost their relevance. In his function as a panegyric poet, his task was to please his patron by composing a grand heroic narrative modelled on the known heroes of the Shāhnāmeh tradition. If Garshāsp and other members of the family of Rostam can accomplish astonishing feats in the east and the west, would it not be fitting for Irānshāh's anti-hero to have achievements of the same caliber? After all, going to the limits of the known world, both in the east and the west, and specifically the land of Kush in Africa, was ascribed to Alexander, whose heroic adventures served as a model for heroic discourse.[110] It would, therefore, serve Irānshāh's purpose to erase the distinction between the Kush of the west and Kush-e Pildandān, the founder of Kushānshār, and merge the two characters into one by creating one powerful anti-hero who is twice as dangerous and repulsive.

Creating the Enemy

Genealogy and dehumanization. The carefully constructed image of the enemy begins with the way in which he enters the world. In the ancient world in general, and in the Iranian world in particular, being of the right stock (*gohar*) is one of the prerequisites for the assumption of political power. Since it is the Shāhnāmeh tradition that defines the historical discourse of Iran's pre-Islamic past, when concocting a genealogy for the purposes of legitimacy one must claim descent from one of the kings belonging to the Shāhnāmeh tradition. It is not just monarchs and dynasties who had to link their reign to one of the figures in the Shāhnāmeh tradition, but well after the fall of the Sasanians, when local histories of different regions of Iran

[110]For example, Alexander travels to Africa and conquers the land of Kush according to a Hebrew version of Alexander romance, Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, 64. See also Döntiz, "Alexander the Great," 36.

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identify the founders of their respective regions, they are all exclusively figures from the Shāhnāmeh tradition.[111] Since the Shāhnāmeh tradition is where historical discourse unfolds, their anti-heroes also need to be placed within the world defined by its periodization, its heroes and its kings. As we shall see, this is exactly what happens in the case of the Kushans: they are made to be the descendants of Zahhāk, morally and ethically speaking one of the worst, if not the worst character of the Shāhnāmeh tradition.

But evil or not, Kush-e Pildandān, the character that stands for the entire dynasty of the Kushans, is not an ordinary fellow. Therefore, his birth is an extraordinary affair. In fact, some of the very same motifs describing the birth of a distinguished person are invoked to underline the fact that he is distinguished. Kush is born to a beautiful mother from a group of people by the name of Pilgush (lit., elephant-eared). The name notwithstanding, the mother's appearance is not unusual. Kush, the father (Zahhāk's brother), is also devoid of non-human features. Yet baby Kush has fangs like a boar, ears like an elephant, his hair is red, his eyes are deep blue and there is a black mark between his shoulder blades.[112] He is such a hideous creature that upon setting eyes on him, his father kills the child's mother for having borne such a demon-child.[113] Kush the infant, therefore, is cast off by his father into wilderness, so far sharing a fate similar to Zāl, who is abandoned in the wilderness by his father because upon birth his hair is white, a flaw that is perceived to indicate his "demonic" nature.[114] But unlike Zāl, who is brought up by the benevolent Simorgh, Kush-e Pildandān is found by his father's enemy and Fereydun's father Ābtin. This, in turn, resembles the *topos* of the cast-off future king/prophet who is raised by his family's enemies.[115]

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[111]Gazerani, *Sistani Cycle*, 31, n. 99.

[112]*Kushnāmeh*, 202:

دو دندان خوك و دو گوش آنِ پيل سرو موي سرخ و دو ديده چو نيل
ميان دو كتفش نشاني سياه سيه چون تن مردم پرگناه

(He had two teeth like boars, two ears like elephants;
his hair and head were red, two eyes dark blue.
Between his shoulder blades he bore a black mark,
black the color of the bodies of sinful people.)

[113]*Kushnāmeh,* 202-203; where he is called بچه اهرمن , child of Ahriman or demon-child.

[114]*Shāhnāmeh*, I: 166, Zāl is also called "devil-child" بچه اهرمن by his father, Sām:

از این بچّه چون بچُه اهرمن سیه پیکر و موی سرچون سمن
چو آیند و پرسند گردنکشان چه گویم از این بچه بد نشان
چه گویم که این بچه دیو چیست پلنگ دو رنگست گر بربریست

[(Sām speaking] What will all he heroes say when they ask about this ill-omened child,
this *ahrimanic* child, with his black body and white hair?
How can I describe this demon-child?
Like a tiger he has stripes upon his back.)

[115]For a discussion of this motif, see Gazerani, "Zahhāk's Story and History," 206–7.

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When Ābtin finds Kush, he does not take pity on him. Instead he resorts to all sorts of violent and brutal acts to kill the infant. First, he attempts to feed it to a dog and then to a lion, and finally he attempts to burn it in fire. After the baby Kush survives it all, his wife tells Ābtin that perhaps the infant is meant to live and promises to nurse it and raise it as her own child. The saving of the child by the wife of the person who is supposed to get rid of it is consistent with the abandoned child motif.[116]

The narrative, therefore, constructs a character that is both significant by means of invoking this *topos*, and at the same time highlights the fact that this character is distinguished, a great, powerful anti-hero, a worthy opponent of the Iranian kings and heroes. This reversal of the heroic motif in order to create an anti-hero is practiced elsewhere within the Shāhnāmeh tradition. For example, the Kayānid king Bahman, according to the Sistani version of events, fails to kill a dragon and is instead devoured by the beast. I have shown elsewhere that dragon-slaying was a feat attributed to a hero who would become the future king, and failing to do so indicates Bahman's lack of legitimacy. According to the Sistani version of events, Bahman is in fact an illegitimate king, an evil character who slays Rostam's son, Farāmarz, imprisons Zāl, and razes the kingdom of Sistan and plunders its wealth. Therefore, one easy way to buttress his image as an anti-hero is his inability to kill a dragon.[117] Here, too, we see how by reversing an established motif, a character is constructed that is distinguished and abhorrent at the same time.

In this case the demonic ancestry of the enemy was complemented by the appearance of the non-human features rendering the enemy only partially human. As we shall see, there are other elements added to his physical appearance to complete the characterization as less than good, human and natural. At the same time, Kush's non-human quality grants him bestial strength, creating an enemy who is both exceptionally loathsome and strong.

Although having been raised by Ābtin, Kush-e Pildandān eventually joins his father, but he does so after having slain his own brother, Nivrasb, whom he encountered on the battlefield while still fighting in Ābtin's camp.[118] Once he is reunited with his family, Kush-e Pildandān learns that he is of the lineage of Zahhāk. His father's seeming pride in the lineage is rather confusing to Kush-e Pildandān, because having been raised by Ābtin he had thought that Zahhāk was anything but a source of pride. But here his father gives him another version of history: it is Ābtin who is from an *ahrimanic* lineage, because he is a descendant of Jamshid, and Jamshid was the very king whose hubris was to such an extent that he claimed divinity, and thus allowed humankind to be afflicted by suffering, disease and death.[119] What

[116]Although it is not always the wife who rescues the child, it appears in some famous examples of the motif. See *Kushnāmeh*, 203.

[117]Gazerani, *Sistani Cycle*, 185–93.

[118]Nivrasb is Kush-e Pildandān's brother. The name is not attested in Justi's work, *Das iranisches Namenbuch*. My guess is that the name has been constructed to sound like Bivarasp, one of Zahhāk's names, in order to emphasize Kush and Nivrasb's descent from Zahhāk.

[119]*Kushnāmeh*, 234.

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we encounter here, in the alternate narration of events, is one of the interesting characteristics of the Shāhnāmeh tradition.

Deeds. A king's legitimacy in the Shāhnāmeh tradition is affirmed by the twin qualities of lineage (*gohar*) and skills/deeds (*honar*). Simply put, if a king has both, then and only then is he in possession of divine glory (*farr*), the one and only legitimizing source of political power. In creating an anti-hero, as we have seen, the reverse process is at play. Kush-e Pildandān, who represents the Kushan dynasty as a whole, has the worst possible lineage. After establishing his demonic pedigree, the text turns its attention to argue that its anti-hero also lacks skills of governance (*honar*).

It is known that the most significant measure of a king's action is whether he acts according to a certain conception of justice or the circle of justice, a conception that was prevalent for the *longue durée* of much of Iran's known history. It comes as no surprise that Kush-e Pildandān, once a king in his own right—i.e. after having received the mandate from Zahhāk to reign over the eastern territories—perpetrates unspeakable acts of injustice. To be precise, after defeating his local enemies and contenders to gain power, he expands his empire to encompass vast territories including Turan, Makrān and India, and once he is able to enforce payment of tributes from the kings of these territories, he is described as having behaved in the following manner:

> He deviated from the path of religion, custom, and justice;
> he set out to commit injustice.
> He set aside all compassion;
> he took away people's possessions.
> He became dauntless; he became ruthless; an unjust tyrant.
> He washed his hands of all goodness.
> Every day he singled out a beautiful woman.
> As night fell, he acted unjustly, took her away from her husband.
> He kidnapped beautiful children, both male and female, to become his lovers.
> When his counselor gave him advice against it, he didn't heed it.
> His harmful acts were not diminished over the years.[120]

These are the last things we hear about Kush-e Pildandān before the narrative shifts to the story of Ābtin and his romance with Farārang (Farānak, Fereydun's mother). The people of the city of Khomdān are described as despondent and helpless. This is the

[120] *Kushnāmeh*, 326:

بگشت از ره دین و آیین و داد به بیداد دست و زبان برگشاد
سر از چنبر مهر بیرون کشید همی بستد از مردمان هر چه دید
ستمکار و خونریز و بی باک شد ز نیکی دل و دست او پاک شد
نشان جست روزی از آن خوبروی شب آمد، ستم کرد بستد ز شوی
ز ره کودک خوب را بر گرفت دلارای هم ماده هم نر گرفت
نیارست دستور دادنش پند نه در سالیان کرد کمتر گزند

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last thing we are told before the narrative takes a break from the gloomy scene in order to narrate a romantic episode unfolding in the safety of Basilā Island. When the narrative returns to the city of Khomdān and Kush-e Pildandān as its ruler seventy-six pages later, the audience once again is reminded of Kush's deeds:

He took away from everyone whatever he could find;
he spilled the blood of many distinguished noblemen.
He forced women into his bed;
he did the same to children.
Neither a man's wealth was safe,
nor were his wife and children immune from him.[121]

The people of Khomdān decide to approach Zahhāk and inform him of Kush-e Pildandān's ruthless acts, but Zahhāk condones his nephew's actions. Once they return, and Kush-e Pildandān learns what they have done, he hangs them from trees, creating so much horror in the city that no one dares to complain again.[122] This gruesome display of injustice seals his image as a tyrant.

But let us step back and see what it is here that the discourse of this genre considers injustice, for that in fact leads us to the definition, albeit partial, of legitimacy in Late Antique Iran. That Kush-e Pildandān essentially plunders the denizens of Khomdān and takes any woman and child that he desires into captivity is not in itself considered an evil act according to the Shāhnāmeh tradition. There are many examples of such actions carried out by Iranian kings and heroes, but in these cases such violent acts are perpetuated against a conquered population and not the kings' own subjects.[123] Kush-e Pildandān, however, transgresses the moral purview of the genre by doing this to his own subjects, the very same people whose happiness, according to the notion of "circle of justice," is a prerequisite for him to be considered a just ruler. Being bereft of justice is the definite measuring stick for one's actions and is the most serious and delegitimizing charge any king could face. As a matter of fact, this sentiment is expressed explicitly at the end of this episode: "The worst of times are those when kings tread the path of injustice."[124]

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[121]*Kushnāmeh*, 402:

همی بستد از هر کسی هر چه یافت به خون گرانمایه مردم شتافت
زنان را سوی بستر خویش برد همان کودکان را بر خویش برد
نه بر خواسته مرد را دسترس نه ایمن به فرزند و زن ایچ کس

[122]*Kushnāmeh*, 402–3.

[123]Examples of this type of accepted violence are Garshāsp's army's plunder of Kabul as well as the devastation of the kingdom of Makrān by the Iranian army during Kay Khosrow's reign. Asadi Tusi, *Garshāspnāmeh*, 257–8; *Shāhnāmeh*, IV: 295.

[124]*Kushnāmeh*, 403; one instance of the gravity of king's unjust acts is articulated at the end of this section:. " زمانه نبینی بتر زآن که شاه همه راه بیداد دارد نگاه "

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Aside from taking what is not his, stealing women and children to satisfy his seemingly insatiable sexual desire is another charge brought against Kush-e Pildnadān. This charge of promiscuity or a lascivious lifestyle, of course, is a common rhetorical technique, and was in fact leveled against the Kushans in the Syriac *Book of the Law of Countries* by Bardesanes of Edessa (145–222 CE).[125] But whereas Bardesanes emphasizes the promiscuous habits of Kushan women, Sasanian polemics against the Kushans concerned themselves with the mismanagement of women as property. After all, Kush-e Pildandān takes women who do not belong to him. Interestingly this type of transgression was committed by Mazdak, another enemy of the Sasanians. Most of the debate concerning the issue of Mazdak's practices vis-à-vis women has been centered on whether the practice of women-sharing was real or not.[126] And that is of relevance for establishing the practices of the Mazdakites and other sects in the early Islamic period who are purported to have revived this practice. However, as far as Sasanian polemics is concerned, we have descriptions of how, once Mazdak revolted, he took women and wealth, a behavior that reminds us of the deeds of Kush-e Pildandān.[127] Like Mazdak, Kush-e Pildandān takes what is not rightfully and legally his, be it wealth or women.

The second piece of the puzzle in the construction of the image of our anti-hero has therefore been put into place. The description and emphasis on Kush-e Pildandān's particular brand of injustice leaves no room for the audience to give him the benefit of the doubt. His demonic lineage and revolting appearance have been coupled with his heinous actions of robbing his subjects of their wealth, homes, women and children. The picture of those complaining about his atrocities hanging from trees in vast numbers has the poignancy of perpetually sealing the image of the Kushan ruler as the embodiment of evil in the minds of the audience.

Religion. The heading of the section following the gruesome scene of people hanging from trees reads "Kush invites people to worship him," but this is not an accurate title. What follows here is a general discourse on the part of Irānshāh on the evils of idol-worship. But shortly thereafter we encounter the first mention of Kush's idol construction and worship.

The story of Kush-e Pildandān's pursuit of his own daughter, and her refusal to sleep with her father, is actually the starting point for demonstrating Kush's bad religion. His daughter not only refuses him, but takes a secret lover, Kaniyāsh, the prince of Qandahar. Once Kush-e Pildandān learns of the affair, he kills his own daughter in

[125] Cureton, *Spicilegium Syriacum*, 21: "Among the Bactrians known as Kushans women wear men's clothing and ornaments of gold and pearls. They are waited on by their servants rather than their husbands. They ride mares decked out in gold and precious stones. But these women are not chaste and they have intercourse with their servants and foreigners. Their husbands do not reproach them and the women are not afraid. We cannot say, however, of all Bactrian women that Venus is placed with Jupiter in the house of Mars at the meridian, where rich, adulterous and husband-dominating women are born."

[126] For example, see Crone, "Zoroastrian Communism."

[127] In Tabari's narrative of Mazdakite revolt, we read that the Mazdakites invaded people's homes, taking over their household, women and wealth; Tabari, *Tārikh-e Tabari*, II: 101:
" حتى كانوا يدخلون على الرجل فى داره فيغلبونه على منزله ، نسائه ، امواله ".

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a fit of rage. But soon after, he is overcome by remorse and this is when he orders statues of his daughter to be made and sent all around the east. This is the origin of idol-worship in the eastern territories.[128] The next time we hear about Kush's idol-worship is when he is on his western adventures and tries to spread his faith in the western territories. This is how the scene is described:

> Just as he had done in China, he sent out orders to all the *mobeds* in the world.
> He ordered them to build an idol in each house, and adorn it according to ritual.
> According to the customs and in the shape of Kush the Great,
> they then made idols, small and big.
> When women and men got up,
> they prostrated before it in the manner of Buddhists (*shaman*).
> They put their heads down at its feet;
> they sang its praises.
> Kush, the unjust tyrant, used to tell these dull-witted people:
> "I am the lord upon this earth, for I can set it to ruin or make it flourish at my volition."
> …
> People, close to him as well as distant,
> converted to his religion:
> all became idol-worshippers;
> all drunk on the wine offered by demons.
> If Kush were to find anyone who refused to worship idols,
> he would cut off his head without hesitation.[129]

It is important to note that for a short while, Kush-e Pildandān's evil traits, if not completely erased, were not as evident. That was a necessary adjustment because Kush

[128] *Kushnāmeh*, 411.
[129] *Kushnāmeh*, 597–8:

بدانگه فرمود بر او به چین بفرمود تا موبدان زمین
به هر خانه ای بتی ساختند نگارش به آیین پرداختند
به آیین ودیدار کوش سترگ بتی پیش بنهاد خرد و بزرگ
ز بستر چو برخاستی مرد و زن شدی پیش ایشان بسان شمن
نهادی سر از پیش او بر زمین فراوان بر او خواندندی آفرین
همی گفت با مردم تیره هوش ستمکار و بیداد جوینده کوش
که پروردگار این جهان را منم که آباد ویران چو خواهم کنم
…
بپذرفت مردم هم کیش اوی اگر بود بیگانه، ار خویش اوی
…
به فرمان او بت پرستان شدند ز جام می دیو مستان شدند
کرا یافت کاو بت ندارد به پیش سر از تن جدا کردش آن تیره کیش

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was sent to the west as commander/vassal of Fereydun. But after some time his wicked nature catches up with him and he refuses to follow Fereydun's orders. The above-quoted passage on his idol-worship appears in the narrative right after Kush once again reverts to his evil self.

There is a repetition of the story of Kush falling in love with his own daughter and his daughter refusing him, which results in him killing her. This time around also he builds idols in his daughter's image.[130] The fact that an entire story is repeated is rather strange. It is one of the text's inconsistencies mentioned in the introduction. This particular repetition is a result of the fact that the Kush that engages in the adventures in the west is a different character from Kush-e Pildandān. More evidence to support this will be offered below. There is also further emphasis on Kush's claim to divinity, as he is made to assist Rostam in his battles against the demons of Mazandaran. Sometime after he returns to his kingdom and holds court he proclaims:

> I do not want anyone calling me king,
> for I am no less than the creator.
> The world came into existence from me.
> Who can dare to leave the sphere of my influence?
> I am God upon this earth;
> if I decide, I can set ruin to this world.[131]

The implications of the depiction of Kush-e Pildandān as the progenitor of idolatry in the known world adds another thick layer of wickedness to his image as an anti-hero. That is obviously so for its last intended audience, at the Saljuq court, as it would have been since its creation during the Sasanian period. Islam's iconoclasm is at the cornerstone of its religious worldview. When it comes to Zoroastrianism, things are a little bit more nuanced. Mary Boyce's thesis on Zoroastrian iconoclasm[132] has been recently revised by Michael Shenkar, who concludes that there is no evidence of iconoclasm. Instead of militantly iconoclastic, Shenkar argues, Zoroastrianism was and remains aniconic.[133] Furthermore, we know now that the so-called cult of fire to which much of western Iran adhered was different than the cult of idols. As a matter of fact, tensions are recorded by post-conquest authors between fire-worshippers and idol-worshippers. While evidence of the two different religious groups is meager, it has been shown that there is a dichotomy when it comes to the religious practices in the

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[130]*Kushnāmeh*, 654–5.

[131]*Kushnāmeh*, 662:

نخواهم که خواند مرا شاه کس مرا آفریننده خوانند و بس
جهان از من آمد بدین سان پدید سر از چنبر من که یارد کشید؟
منم، تا جهان بود خواهد، خدای چو خواهم درآرم جهان را به پای

[132]Boyce, "Iconoclasm among the Zoroastrians."

[133]Shenkar, "Rethinking Sasanian Iconoclasm."

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eastern and western provinces of Irānshahr on the eve of the Arab invasion. While the Arabs encountered idols and idol-temples in the east, no such occurrences have been recorded in the west. Furthermore, it has been noted that there seems to have been a shift from idol-worship to fire-worship, whereby many idol-temples were converted into fire-temples.[134] Whether Sasanians practiced militant iconoclasm by destroying idol-temples or replacing them with fire-temples cannot be firmly established. It has been suggested that Sasanian society, while not iconoclastic—for it tolerated depiction of Iranian deities exclusively on rock-reliefs, coins and seals—eventually developed polemics against idols and idolatry.[135]

Erecting statues of gods and goddesses as objects of worship, as the Kushans had done, therefore, did not fall into the mainstream of western Zoroastrian practice. Added to that, the foreign religion of Buddhism was widely practiced in parts of Kushan kingdom especially in Gandhara, where previous to the rise of the Kushans it had developed its distinct character. Buddhism found supporters and patrons in some of the Kushan rulers, most famously Kanishka, who issued the rare but remarkable Buddha coins.[136] There is, therefore, solid historical evidence for religious practices of the Kushans that would have been considered abhorrent to the western Zoroastrian world. Adding this layer to the image of Kush-e Pildandān is neither a product of the composer(s) imagination nor has it been shaped as a result of the influences of Islamic iconoclasm. It is, rather, based on historical reality of the different religious practices of the Kushans and the Sasanians.

Understanding the complex world of the Kushan religion, two other observations can be made about Kush's idol-worship: first, the story with the construction of an idol in the shape of his daughter, i.e. a feminine deity; and second, his own claims to divinity. Both of these factors have been emphasized in the text through repetition. The first, the story of the statue of his daughter, may have been constructed in order to justify the prevalence of goddess worship in the Kushan kingdom. Goddesses such Nana[137] assumed a significant place at the head of the Kushan pantheon and were widely worshipped by kings and commoners. Nana was also placed as the head of deities in the Rabatak inscription.[138] Aside from Nana, the Great Goddess of eastern Iranian territories, the goddess Ardoxšo was also widely worshipped[139] Her image is most widely depicted on the reverse of late Kushan coins. Additionally, she

[134]Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 44.

[135]Shenkar argues that the Zoroastrian priesthood's discourse against idols and idolatry denotes "bad religion" in general and was formulated in response to challenges of Christianity; "Rethinking Zoroastrian Iconoclasm," 492.

[136]For Kanishka's Buddha coins see Cribb, "Kanishka's Buddha Image Coins," and more recently Raven, "Design Diversity."

[137]For a summary of studies on Nana see Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 116–28.

[138]Sims-Williams and Cribb, "A New Bactrian Inscription," 76 (line 2 of the inscription) and 108 (commentary on line 2). Nana was the most widely depicted deity on Kaniskha's coins, and she seemed to have been worshipped by the common people, as attested by the presence of earthen figurines; Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 117.

[139]There have been inconclusive attempts to identify Ardoxšo with the Avestan Aši (Ahura Mazda's daughter), as well as the Iranian goddess Anahita. She stands for abundance, but also has a legitimizing

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is the only figure paired with Pharro (*farr*), for whom there are free-standing images.[140]

The Kushans depicted anthropomorphic images of their goddesses and disseminated them on their coins. The importance and prevalence of the images of goddesses could have given rise to the story of Kush-e Pildandān's daughter and her posthumously constructed image. This brings us to the second factor, namely Kush's claim to divinity. That, too, can be a reflection of Kushan emperors as self-proclaimed divine beings, as discussed above in the context of Kushan sanctuaries.

In spite of the *Kushnāmeh*'s condemnation of Kush's religion, his practices, abominable as they are made to be, did not play a crucial role in forming the image of Kush as an anti-hero. As we saw, his idol-worship is rebuked, but Kush's "bad religion" is not rebuked as much as one would expect if Zoroastrian priests had a say in it. Being an adherent of a questionable creed is after all associated with being non-Iranian. Shaul Shaked has argued that the very term non-Iranian, *an-er*, in addition to its geographical and ethnic designation, had religious connotations.[141] Here, "bad religion" is part of the image of Kush as an *an-er* and this is not the basis on which the polemics against him is built. The question of him being the progenitor of idolatry is, in fact, an etiological tale because its primary function is to provide an explanation for the reality of existence of a number of religious practices in the eastern Iranian lands with icons as objects of veneration. The Kushan period is significant for the spread of Buddhism, already established in Gandhara, to Central Asia and eventually to China, with numbers of Buddhist monks and monasteries flourishing on the edges of the Sasanian empire.[142] Buddhism, however, was not the only religion practiced in the eastern territories that made ritualistic use of icons; as noted above, the religion practiced by the Kushans themselves made use of images as objects of worship, as opposed to the western aniconic tradition. In the *Kushnāmeh* we have reflections of how the religion of the Kushans was perceived by the Sasanians, and how its worship of cultic icons was seen as bad religion. But more importantly, Kush's bad religion is used against him while he is an enemy.

The rehabilitation of Kush. Although the aim of the *Kushnāmeh* is to create an anti-hero, a political enemy who is less than human, unjust and with detestable beliefs, we find that the same character can and eventually does become a political ally of the Iranian throne. Let us recall that Kush-e Pildandān is eventually defeated by the Iranians, but instead of being killed, he is imprisoned in Mount Damāvand. Later on, he is freed from captivity in order to partake in conquests of the western

function; Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 83. It has also been postulated that Ardoxšo is a local Kushan; Rosenfield, *Dynastic Arts*, 74–5.

[140]Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 83.

[141]Shaked, "Religion in the Late Sasanian Period." For a more general summary of religion during the Sasanian period, see de Jong, "Religion and Politics."

[142]For the spread of Buddhism in Indo-Iranian borderlands, which includes a discussion of Buddhism's spread during the Kushan period, see Tremblay, "Serindia: Buddhism among Iranians"; Rosenfield, "Some Debating Points."

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territories/Africa at Fereydun's behest. The sudden shifting of alliances and loyalties are, of course, due to the fact that the story has been constructed according to the historical realities of the Kushano–Sasanian relationships. As discussed above, the Sasanians eventually conquer Kushānshāhr, but the indigenous Kushan element is not obliterated. The *Kushnāmeh* now has to accommodate this new reality of the Kushans, and that has to deconstruct the image built of the enemy. In other words, the anti-hero needs to be peeled away from Kush-e Pildandān's image, layer by layer.

Let us see how the text handles this problem. We know that Kush-e Pildandān is freed[143] to serve the Iranian king in his adventures in the west (in other versions this was a descendant of the Great Kush), where he builds a kingdom. For some time he acts as a commander sent by Fereydun, but eventually he becomes rebellious and reverts to his old ways. What is important, however, is that at the end of his life he goes through a complete transformation.

Kush's reform commences not consciously or willingly, but he is led to it. One day while on a hunt, he encounters an exceptional wild ass (*gur*), and not being able to catch up with it, Kush follows it until it disappears from sight, and he is left thirsty and hungry in the wilderness. The wild ass is considered to be a semi-magical animal, and oftentimes the swiftness of its movements and the lines on its back have been used metaphorically to indicate the mundane world's impermanence.[144] Amongst its other functions is its appearance in a hunting motif, and this is what we have here. The animal is so bewitching that the hero cannot help but follow him: the *gur* leads him astray first to wilderness, and then disappears.[145] Once in the wilderness and lost, the hero enters a magical landscape where something out of the ordinary happens. Here, Kush wanders and eventually sees a palace. Knocking at the gate, a wise old man opens the door and Kush, once again, repeats his claim to divinity, but also asks for help. The old man laughs at this contradiction and then rebukes Kush for his hubris and his ignorance and asks him to leave. Eventually, however, he agrees to set Kush straight, and that involves going through several stages of rehabilitation. After soliciting a promise from him to cease his claims to divinity, Kush is put on a diet of fruits. Kush becomes feeble enough to admit that he has no power over his own body, let alone anyone else. After the wise man has ensured that Kush has learned the intended lesson, he removes the outward signs of Kush-e Pildandān's evil character, namely his huge teeth and his elephant ears.[146] With the transformation completed, the new Kush sets out to acquire knowledge. His training begins with learning how to write, then he learns whatever there is to know about medicine, astrology and casting

[143]In this version of the story; in others the Kush of western adventures, as we saw above, was a different character.

[144]For the animal's symbolism see Gazerani, "From Ancient India."

[145]An example of this is found in the story of *Samak-e ʿayyār* where Khorshid-shāh is led astray by a *gur*, which is how he meets and falls in love with Mahpari. This becomes the impetus for the narrative to move forward. Arjāni, *Samak-e ʿayyār*, I: 8.

[146]*Kushnāmeh*, 669.

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spells.[147] Then the wise man tells him about the seven virtues (*haft pand*).[148] Kush now embarks on a journey of building magnificent structures with innovative features, like a fountain. Among the structures he builds are a dome and a temple to house his own image. This, of course, is inconsistent with his rehabilitated image, but it may be due to the fact that the narratives of several characters of the dynasty were enmeshed to create one great Kush. In other words, in all likelihood the character in the original story was not great Kush but one of his descendants, creating more of a parallel between the outline of Kushan history and the text. This is the temple/sanctuary that Alexander eventually comes across. Actually, in the case of a golden structure by the name of Eram, also one of great feats of Kush, we are informed that the building of this structure has been attributed to the Chinese emperor Māhang as well as a previous Kush. In the text, we do have a mention of Māhang, but there is no other Kush and that is because the last composer of the text, Irānshāh, had decided to conflate all the stories of various characters by the name of Kush into one great anti-hero. Be this as it may, the *Kushnāmeh* ends with an emphasis on Kush's newly acquired good traits and his complete transformation.

Conclusion

As we have seen, one major arena where the battle of political legitimacy was to be fought was the shared history conceptualized and articulated by the Shāhnāmeh tradition. This was so for the Sasanians when they attempted to create a powerful image of the enemy. If we ignore the body of stories that are in some ways the output of these battles, because we do not have a "purely" Sasanian version of them, we not only miss out on the potential to explore aspects of social and cultural history of the period, but are also misinformed about how the material was formed, transmitted and recycled through many centuries. It is within this worldview, historical periodization and polemics of power, and among a familiar cast of its characters, that the past is recounted. The conception of the past articulated in this corpus was in fact tapped into in order to argue for the legitimacy of the contemporary political reality.

The response to the legitimizing efforts of the Kushans, which included the adoption and appropriation of Iranian cultural elements—a fact that was perhaps viewed as an encroachment upon an Iranian cultural heritage—received a swift response from the Sasanians, evident in the way they crafted the image of Kush-e Pildandān as an anti-hero. In creating an enemy that suffered from all relevant vices a ruler could be afflicted with, they revealed a strategy for dealing with a political rival. Previously, the strategy of appropriation was employed in the case of Alexander, who was

[147] Because of its associations with sorcery, it is strange that "casting spells" is listed among the good sciences. In the Iranian context, anything associated with sorcery is usually considered evil and its practitioners are strongly condemned.

[148] The seven virtues are ۱.خرد ۲. دانش ۳ . هوش ۴.راستی ۵. پاکی ۶. مهر ۷. داد و آزادگی: (1) Wisdom; (2) Knowledge; (3) Intelligence; (4) Honesty; (5) Purity; (6) Compassion; (7) Justice and freedom/being free-spirited. *Kushnāmeh*, 670–3.

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made half-Iranian. The strategy of elimination was employed in the case of the Parthian history, as the Sasanians attempted to obliterate the history of stories of their predecessors and rivals from the corpus of the Shāhnāmeh tradition. The character of Kush-e Pildandān is a result of dehumanizing the enemy by attributing the worst possible vices to him, creating a figure that resembles a caricature, a strategy that is still employed using some of the same motifs and themes in the Iranian political sphere. A careful consideration of the charges brought against the enemy, in turn, sheds light on the important components of the discourse of legitimacy. As we begin to bring back materials drawn from diverse sources into our examination of the Late Antique period, such a picture of the socio-political landscape begins to fill out.

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