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Drought, Famine and Prosperity: The Slaying of the Dragon and the Legitimation of Iranian Kingship in Persian Epics (Fifth/Eleventh to Eighth/Fourteenth Centuries)

NAHID NOROZI (Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna)

Abstract

In Persian epic poetry, the killing of the dragon by a king or the king's champion is usually implicitly, but sometimes explicitly, linked to the legitimisation of kingship, since the malevolent beast obstructs the flow of vital water resources such as rivers, causing drought and famine. In fact, one of the most important aspects of the political art of Persian rulers, whether legendary or historical, in both the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods has always been to ensure a prosperous reign, and in this sense Persian authors systematically associate good governance with prosperity and the flourishing of the fields, and thus ultimately with the abundance of water. The figure of the dragon, an imaginary animal, is one that holds symbolic value, and hence the field of investigation in this article is primarily mythological and symbolic rather than historical per se. To this end, the mythological-religious background of the demonic figure of the dragon (*azhdahā*) in pre-Islamic Persia will be examined first, and then its role in the medieval Persian epics of the fifth/eleventh to eighth/fourteenth centuries.

Keywords: Dragon, *azhdahā*, famine, kingship, Persian epics, *Shāh-nāma*, *Sām-nāma*, *Gul u Nawrūz*, *Bahman-nāma*

Foreword

Kingship in Persian culture is a key concept embedded in at least 2,600 years of monarchical tradition. The figure of the righteous sovereign emerges, especially in the pre-Islamic phase, as a sort of representative of God on earth, who becomes the assistant of Ahura Mazdā, the God of Good in the relentless struggle against the Prince of Evil, who is represented by Ahrīman.[1] The religious character of the sovereign is confirmed through the actions of a

1 According to WIESEHÖFER 2014, 32: 'The idea of the divine right of kings also convinces the subjects ideologically, because they are pious people, but at the same time see themselves as members of a community which their God has made part of his good creation. Thanks to the actions and qualities of the divine appointed and inspired ruler, it has become a community of fate for the benefit of the king and the subjects alike.'

supernatural entity, the 'Royal Glory' (*Khᵛarəna* in ancient Persian, *Farr(ah)* in Neo-Persian; see GNOLI 1999), which, in the form of a wild animal or a luminous nimbus, pursues the legitimate heir to the throne in order to rest on him, thereby conferring on him the royal rank that he deserves. A famous example of this can be found in accounts of King Ardashīr, founder of the Sassanid dynasty (third to sixth century CE), whose legitimisation by means of the Royal Glory is recorded in various sources, especially literary ones, that were also in circulation in Islamic Persia (See HĀSHIMĪNIZHĀD 1369/1990, 41–42; FIRDAWSĪ 2012, 5:154, vv. 298–301). In contrast, an illegitimate or usurper sovereign is devoid of Royal Glory and his reign may be characterised by a series of nefarious and catastrophic events that directly involve his subjects.

In addition to the attainment of Royal Glory as a sign of the legitimacy of kingship, we find in Iranian epic culture another relevant symbolic sign that determines royal valour, namely the slaying of the dragon, on which this article will focus. The figure of the dragon will be examined on the one hand in relation to famine and other catastrophes, and on the other hand in relation to the legitimation of royal power, primarily in terms of its symbolic valences. First we will examine the mythological-religious background of the figure of the dragon (in Persian; *azhdahā*) and its demonic connections in pre-Islamic Persia, and then explore the development of the motif in the medieval Persian epics of the fifth/eleventh to eighth/fourteenth centuries.

1. The Mythological Legacy

In Indo-Iranian mythology we find various deities associated with water, especially rain. The warrior god Indra, who occupies a prominent place among the Vedic deities, defeats the cosmic dragon/serpent Vṛtra, who holds back the waters and causes droughts. Indra then kills Vṛtra and releases water and cows from his belly, the latter symbolising rain-laden clouds. Vṛtra, who also has some counterparts in the *Avestā*, is described in the *Rigveda* as a creature of monstrous power. As the Iranist Skjaervø tells us:

> [The dragon] Vṛtra is described in the Rigveda as keeping the (heavenly) waters imprisoned in caves in the mountains. With the *vajra* (in the Avesta *vazra* is the chief weapon of Miθra), Indra smites him on the neck, [and] splits his head thus freeing the waters, which immediately rush out like cows and run to the sea. (SKJAERVØ 2011)

It is assumed that the figure of this snake or dragon, which obstructs the flow of water and causes famine, was later transformed in the Iranian environment into the figure of the evil demon Apaosha. Apaosha, the demon of famine, works with other demons, snakes, dragons and other vermin in the ranks of the Prince of Evil, Ahrīman, who opposes all life and prosperity on earth. As is well known, Ahrīman, the Satan of the Zoroastrian tradition, is the arch-enemy of Ahura Mazdā, the God of Goodness, who together with his associates promotes life and the joys of living. Although the demon Apaosha is not a true dragon, he has some similarities with the attributes of the Vedic dragon Vṛtra. In fact, the Avestic Apaosha fights Tishtar, depicted in the Mazdean pantheon as the angel or rain-bearing deity. Apaosha, in the form of a black horse with a terrifying and demonic appearance, initially succeeds in defeating Tishtar, who has the appearance of a beautiful white horse, but later,

following the prayers of the faithful, Tishtar succeeds in defeating the demonic Apaosha, who represents drought and famine, and successfully releases rain to fall and fertilise the earth (See SKJAERVØ 2011 and CHRISTENSEN 1941, 13–14).

In addition to the mythological-religious aspects we have just seen concerning the dragon as symbolising an evil being that causes famine by blocking the sources of life, it also, as mentioned above, carries implications in Iranian culture relating to the legitimisation of royal power. This is already evident in the ancient inscriptions of King Darius in Persepolis, where the Achaemenid king asks Ahura Mazdā and the gods of his pantheon to protect him from three things: enemies, lies and famine.[2] In other words, Darius implicitly declares in these inscriptions that his royal prerogatives are to guarantee peace and political tranquility; to represent Ahura Mazdā on earth in his fight against the lie; and to combat drought and hence guarantee the kingdom's prosperity, the latter of which is of particular interest to us. Indeed, a number of Persian writers of the Islamic period systematically linked good governance with agricultural prosperity, and ultimately with the abundance of water as a sign of divine approval of their rule. According to Mujtabāʾī, for the ancient Iranians the religiosity and justice of a legitimate king was measured by the abundance of rain (Pahl. *vārān kartār*) and the prosperity of the fields and cities during his reign.[3] It is no coincidence that the Persian adjective for 'prosperous' is *ābād*, a word containing the component *āb*, 'water'; moreover, the derivative noun *ābādī* (village or populated centre/oasis) has in its etymology an obvious and direct link with the presence of water, and is historically associated with human settlements near rivers or water sources.

It is also useful to recall that the Iranian scholar Khaleghi-Motlagh, speaking of the Pahlavi redaction of Pseudo Callisthenes's Alexander Romance, considers the killing of the dragon, along with his royal lineage, as a fundamental aspect/motif of the Greek king's legitimacy:

> Later, when this [Alexander] romance was translated into Pahlavi, the translator saw fit to add two further themes, not present in the original [Greek text], but of great importance for Alexander's legitimation in Iran: Alexander's Iranian descent and his killing of a dragon. (KHALEGHI-MOTLAGH 2011)

But how does the link between the legitimacy of the ruler and the figure of the dragon emerge in Neo-Persian literature, i.e. from the fourth/tenth century onwards?

2. The Slaying of the Dragon in Neo-Persian Literature and the Legitimisation of Royal Power

In Neo-Persian epics we sometimes find an explicit link between the dragon and drought (a few examples of which will be explored here), but more often the dragon threatens another

2 For inscriptions by Darius in Persepolis, see SCHMITT 2009, 116.

3 The Iranian scholar goes on to report a number of accounts from the pre-Islamic and Islamic literature of Persia, for which see MUJTABĀʾĪ 1352/1973, 107–11.

crucial aspect of the kingdom's prosperity. Since the vitality and survival of the human species is guaranteed by the fertility of young women, in Persian poetry the motif of water imprisoned by the dragon is very often replaced by that of the imprisonment of a beautiful maiden: the water of the river is thus replaced by the water of childbirth, which is no less symbolically linked to the prosperity of the kingdom.[4] It is no coincidence that from the fifth/eleventh century onwards, Persian epic poetry figures heroes who set out to liberate a beautiful young woman from the clutches of a dragon, or to avenge her if the evil beast has already devoured her. There is a shift from the trope of the fertility of the earth to the fertility of the royal line, but the underlying danger remains the same: a threat to 'prosperity' of the kingdom and the legitimacy of the ruler who must guarantee it. In fact, the king who kills the dragon (either directly or through one of his champions) also proves that he deserves his royal status by acquiring full political-religious legitimacy. Let us now turn to some examples from Neo-Persian literature.

2.1. Examples of Dragonslayers in Firdawsī's *Shāh-nāma*

The first and perhaps most famous of the 'superhuman' dragon slaying Iranian heroes in Neo-Persian literature is King Fereydūn, who appears in Firdawsī's fifth/eleventh-century *Shāh-nāma* ('Book of Kings'), but of whom we find traces as early as the *Avestā*.[5] Here his name appears as Thraētaona, and the dragon he faces is a three-headed demonic monster called Azhi Dahāka, which the text says was created 'to destroy our settlements and slaughter the followers of Asha (the name of an entity who, in the Mazdean world, personifies Truth or Justice) (*Avestā* 2008, *Yasna* 9.7 and 9.8). Note here the stark contrast between King Fereydūn and his followers of Asha, on the one hand, and the dragon Azhi Dahāka, a creature of the evil prince Angra Mainyu which is identified with a Druj (i.e. lie), on the other. It is from this demonic dragon Azhi Dahāka that the Neo-Persian term Żaḥḥāk is probably derived. Żaḥḥāk is the name of a strange dragon-king figure who usurps the kingdom of Iran; he has two snakes growing from his shoulders which feed on the brains of young boys, thus killing the most vital and fertile members of society. However, this dragon-king is not content with just young boys. According to the *Shāh-nāma*, two sisters of the legitimate Iranian king Jamshīd, the princesses Arnavāz and Shahrnāz, are also magically abducted and subjugated by Żaḥḥāk. Later, after the death of King Jamshīd, the Iranian hero Fereydūn takes charge of defeating the diabolical dragon-king, rescues the two princesses, marries them and attains the Iranian throne (see FIRDAWSĪ 1391/2012, 1:55–92). The pattern is clear: kidnapping of the royal princesses by the dragon-king → their liberation by the hero Fereydūn → his legitimation as the new king of kings of Iran.

4 It is extremely interesting to note that in Persian a pregnant woman is called *ābistan*, which again contains the element *āb*, here indicating the water of pregnancy, a word naturally associated with female fertility.

5 On dragonslayers in Persian literature from ancient times to medieval epics, see SARKĀRĀTĪ 1357/1978. On Ferdowsi and his work see KHALEGHI-MOTLAGH 1999.

The demonic aspect of the dragon, which acts against vital resources and life itself, is clearly visible both in the *Avestā*, where it figures as an adjutant of Angra Mainyu or Ahrīman, and in the tyrannical figure of the dragon-king Żaḥḥāk of the *Shāh-nāma*.[6] Indeed, the dragon in Firdawsī's epic also represents a rupture or subversion of the natural order, a return to chaos and primordial darkness, hence the inescapable need for human society to fight and eliminate it. Consequently, we find in Persian epic literature, as well as in popular fairy tales, the mobilisation of heroes who, often at the behest of a ruler who wishes to protect his harassed subjects from the evil of the dragon, set themselves the task of overthrowing this form of threat to life, creation and the unfolding cycles of nature. Firdawsī's *Shāh-nāma* does also feature an episode in which the positive figure of King Fereydūn unexpectedly transforms into a fearsome fire-breathing dragon one day, but, it emerges, this is only to test his three sons, to see which of them is best suited and entitled to be his heir (FIRDAWSĪ 1391/2012, 1:103–4).

Fig. 1 *Shāh-nāma* of Shāh Tahmāsp Fereydūn in the Guise of a Dragon Testing His Sons

6 For the general demonic dimension of the dragon, see RASTIGĀR FASĀ'Ī 1370/2000, 128-44.

Let us now look at another example of a dragonslayer, this time one who is overtly connected with the control of a river. This is again drawn from Firdawsī's *Shāh-nāma*, in the book dedicated to the Iranian king Manūchihr and his paladin Sām. In a letter that Sām writes to King Manūchihr, he describes a dragon that lives in a river, the Kashaf-rūd (literally: Turtle River), which he then, of course, kills (FIRDAWSĪ 1391/2012, 1:232, vv. 998–1004):

چنان اژدها کو ز رود کشف برون آمد و کرد گیتی چو کف
زمین شهر تا شهر بالای او همان کوه تا کوه پهنای او
جهان را ازو بود دل پر هراس همی داشتندی شب و روز پاس
هوا پاک دیدم ز پرندگان همان روی گیتی ز درندگان
زتفّش همی پر کرکس بسوخت زمین زیر زهرش همی برفروخت
زمین گشت بی مردم و چارپای جهانی مر او را سپردند جای

Such a dragon, coming out of the Kashaf-rūd, made the world as [deserted] as the palm of his hand.
The distance from one city to another was its height | [the distance] from one mountain to another was its width,
The whole world had its heart in terror because of him | everyone was on alert day and night.
I saw the air emptied of birds | as well as the surface of the world emptied of predators,
By his fire the wings of the vultures were set ablaze | and the earth burned up under his poison.
The earth became emptied of [both] man and beast | a whole world made room for him.

In this description we learn that this dragon is a fire-breathing and poisonous beast, a devourer of men and animals, and is seen as a bringer of death and famine, indeed as a general catastrophe, as—according to Firdawsī—'the whole earth became emptied of [both] men and animals'. He seems to live in and control the Kashaf-rūd River, preventing access to it, with all the consequences this entails. In short, he is presented as a demonic creature who destroys the 'prosperity' of the place, not only by killing every living thing with his fire, but also by depriving everyone of the vital resource he controls: water.

2.2. The Association of the Dragon with Vital Resources

In the *Sām-nāma*, which is traditionally attributed to Khwājū Kirmānī (d. 750/1349) although its true author is unknown, we find some other interesting aspects related to the dragon-slaying theme.[7] For example, the association of the dragon/serpent with treasure, especially

7 On the complex issue of *Sām-nāma*'s authorship see NOROZI 2023, 1–10. On Khwājū Kirmānī and his work, see NOROZI 2019. A monograph on Khwājū's Romantic poetry in a Western language is also in

in the guise of the owner or guardian of treasure, which is usually located in ruins, is ubiquitous in Persian literature, and not only in the epic genre, as it is a topos that is well integrated into the entire classical literary repertoire. Here is just one example (from KHWĀJŪ KIRMĀNĪ 1370/1991b, 363, vv. 2150–51):

بود رسم این چرخ بد مهر پیر که گه چون کمان است و گاهی چو تیر
خمارست و مستی و تخت است و دار نشاط است و اندوه گنج است و مار

Such is the custom of this old malevolent Wheel (= the world) | which sometimes is like a bow and sometimes like an arrow:
It is languid and drunken, now throne and now gallows; | it is joy and sorrow, now *treasure* and now *serpent*.

The dragon always takes possession of precious things or resources, be it treasure, a spring of water or a beautiful maiden, the appropriation of which can cause intolerable disorder to the human community: infertility, drought and poverty, and/or the destruction of nature. Consequently, the slaying of the dragon is often seen, not only in the Iranian context, as a necessary remedy, indeed as a 'righting' of the natural order, as is illustrated by the following example from the *Sām-nāma*.

One day, a fearsome dragon/serpent appears in the path of the brave Sām, advancing menacingly. Sām—as he always does when faced with danger—piously asks God for help, and suddenly a beautiful fairy appears and gives him a bow with three apparently magical arrows, one of which, the fairy explains, would serve to kill the serpent, while the other two would serve him well later. Having said this, the fairy—who, according to the text, was created by spells cast by mubads (Mazdean priests)—disappears into thin air. Sām kills the dragon/serpent with a poisoned arrow, and after its death a lofty golden palace with a portal of precious stones and golden bricks suddenly appears to him. He immediately enters the palace and discovers a magnificent turquoise throne upon which sits what appears to be the statue of a beautiful king. Next to it hangs a tablet inscribed with a series of wise and edifying messages of advice from the legendary Tahmūrath, a king of the earliest times, all of them addressed directly to Sām (see *Sām-nāma* 1392/2013, 419–22).[8]

In other texts (see below) the dragon or demon kidnaps a maiden or princess, another recurring topos that is perhaps reminiscent of the kidnapping of King Jamshīd's sisters by the serpent king Żaḥḥāk mentioned above. In the *Shāh-nāma*, Prince Isfandiyār also, in the third of his seven labours (*haft khwān*), kills a dragon in order to save his sisters from Arjāsp's prison (see FIRDAWSĪ 1391/2012, 5:221–72 and 232–35).

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preparation (NOROZI 2025). In addition, the first full translation of a verse novel (*mathnavī*), *Humāy u Humāyūn*, by Khwājū Kirmānī, with an extensive introductory essay, has been published in Italian, for which see KHWĀJU DI KERMAN 2016.

8 This episode recalls a similar one in Neẓāmi's *Iqbāl-nāma* ('Book of Fortune'), in which Iskandar (the Alexander of the Islamic tradition) enters a golden palace during his travels and reads a similar message on a slab (see NIẒĀMĪ 1317/1938, 182–85; NEZÂMI 1997, 207–10).

Returning to the *Sām-nāma*: although this is a work of predominantly epic-heroic content, the force that guides and directs the hero is his love for the Chinese princess Parīdukht.[9] In order to be reunited with her, he has to defeat numerous monsters, demons and even dragons. In the course of his long and endless journey, Sām also frees Parīnūsh, the cousin of his beloved Parīdukht. This girl has been kidnapped, not by a dragon exactly, but by a demoness (*māda dīv*) called Zhand Jādū ('Zhand the Witch'), who kidnaps beautiful young people and keeps them locked up in an enchanted fortress (note the connection with magic) known as (again significantly for us) Ganjīna Dizh ('The Fortress of Treasure'). Zhand Jādū is described in terms that are reminiscent of certain external features of the dragon, such as her fangs and the smoke and lightning she produces, but another relevant detail is that she holds a snake in her hand as a whip, consolidating her connection with the draconic dimension (*Sām-nāma* 1392/2013, 73, vv. 6-12):

پدید آمد از دامن کوهسار　　یکی زشت پتیاره مانند قار
ازو هر زمان برق جستن گرفت　　دل سام ازو کی شکستن گرفت
یکی پیر جادو دراز و سیاه　　رخش چون دل مردم پر گناه
چو شبهای دیجور بالا دراز　　دو دندان برون کرده همچون گراز
همه موی و ابرو چو یال ستور　　ز دودش شده تیره رخسار هور
دو پستان چو خیکی درآویخته　　ز هولش دل دیو بگریخته
چو پیلی شده بر پلنگی سوار　　به دستش چو تازانه بگرفته مار

From the slopes of the mountain appeared | a terrible demoness [black] as pitch.
Lightning flashed from her at every moment | but when would Sām's heart break?
A tall, black old witch | her face was like the heart of sinners,
Like the dark nights was her tall figure | two tusks protruded from her like those of boars.
Her hair and eyebrows were like the manes of four-legged animals | by her smoke the face of the sun was blackened,
Her two breasts were like two hanging wineskins | for fear of her [even] the devil lost his heart.
She was like an elephant riding on a panther | she held a snake in her hand like a whip.

It is interesting to note that once Sām has defeated the witch-demoness who held the maiden captive and freed her, he immediately finds his reward in the form of an immense royal

9 The *Sām-nāma* is a composite poem, the result of a collage of at least two works: one heroic in nature, dating back to the fifth/eleventh to sixth/twelfth centuries, and the other more purely amorous, dating back to the eighth/fourteenth century. For more information on this complex issue, see the first chapter of Norozi 2024, particularly pp. 30–51.

treasure, which is explicitly said to belong to the legendary Iranian king Kay Khusraw. With the hero's reward (the treasure) we find another element that integrates into the scheme of the dragon controller/guardian of natural resources (water, rivers) or human resources (maidens, princesses), completed by the possession of financial resources (the treasure). It is clear that the dragon is interchangeable in the scheme with the witch-demoness, who exercises the same narrative function.

It is also possible to find variants on the dragon motif in Persian literature, which are likewise linked to the conquest of women and, ultimately, the conquest of the royal throne. In particular, killing a dragon is sometimes a condition of the hero's marriage to his beloved. One such example is found in Khwājū Kirmānī's epic-romantic poem *Gul u Nawrūz*,[10] in which the Iranian prince Nawrūz falls in love with the Roman princess Gul. Caesar (*qayṣar*), father of the beautiful Gul, makes it a condition of marriage that his daughter's suitor slay an invincible dragon (Khwājū Kirmānī, 1370/1991a, 499, vv. 628–29, 634–35):

که در این کوه سرکش تیره جاییست در آنجا آتش افشان اژدهایی ست
به دم در می‌کشد کوه گران را همی سوزد به دود دم جهان را ...
به ایوانم کسی سر بر فرازد که آن مار سیه را صید سازد
به دامادی من آنکس را پسندم جزو دل در کسی دیگر نبندم

In this towering mountain there is a dark place | where a fire-breathing dragon hides.
With his breath he can melt a heavy mountain, | he can burn the whole world with the smoke of his breath [...].
In my palace he will proudly raise his head | [he] who will be able to capture this black dragon
Only this one will I want for my son-in-law. | Except for him I, will not bind my heart to anyone else.

Prince Nawrūz succeeds in slaying the hideous dragon and, after further protracted vicissitudes, finally marries Gul and ascends the throne, demonstrating once again the close relationship between slaying the dragon and conquest of royal power.

However, is it always the case that the ruler or one of his paladins successfully defeats and kills the dragon? Not really. In fact, the following example provides the case of an Iranian king who confronts the dragon but succumbs; it is the story of King Bahman, the grandfather of King Darius III, who was defeated by Alexander the Great.

2.3. A Confirmation *e contrario* of the Paradigm: the Dragon Devours the King

In the sixth/twelfth-century *Bahman-nāma* ('Book of Bahman') by Īrānshāh, King Bahman learns that the city of Awbār is suffering from an unprecedented famine because a dragon is

10 For a study on this work, which includes a summary interspersed with translation of the most significant verses into Italian, see Norozi 2020.

systematically burning the locals' crops with its fire. But let us see exactly what Īrānshāh, the author of this poem, tells us through the words of the persecuted farmers as they address King Bahman (ĪRĀNSHĀH 1370/1991, 596, vv. 10311–13):

بکاریم هر سال تخمی ز نو　　نبینیم شاخی به‌گاه درو
به گاه درودن یکی اژدها　　بیاید کند دشت ما بی بها
بسوزد همه دشت زان سان به دم　　که نه سبزه ماند زمین را نه نم

Every year we sow again | [but] at harvest time we see not even a stalk,
Because at harvest time a dragon | comes and renders our fields barren.
It burns all the fields with one breath, | so that there is no grass or moisture left.

Here again we see the dragon associated with drought and famine. King Bahman asks one of his generals to venture out and kill it, but he refuses, for reasons we cannot go into here. At this point, King Bahman is forced to face the dragon in combat himself. However, he not only fails to defeat it, but also actually succumbs to it, and the dragon devours him. More precisely, it sucks him up in a single breath (ĪRĀNSHĀH 1370/1991, 600–1, vv. 10380, 10389, 10394, 10398):

ز اسب اندر افتاد خاور خدای　　فرو بردش آن اژدها هر دو پای …
بزد اژدهای دژم باز دم　　فرو برد مر شاه را تا شکم …
فرو بردش آن اژدها تا به بر　　ز بیرون نماندش بجز دست و سر …
دگر باره آن اژدهای دمان　　فرو برد دستش هم اندر زمان

From the horse fell the King of the East. | The dragon sucked his legs [...],
The wrathful dragon still inhaled, | swallowing the king down to his belly [...].
[Then it swallowed him up to his chest, | nothing was left but his head and arms [...].
And again, the roaring dragon, | in a moment, swallowed even his hands [...]

We observe the author almost providing live reportage of the devouring of Bahman, and with almost sadistic satisfaction, describing inch by inch the king's disappearance into the dragon's jaws in full view of the spectators, who were probably not displeased at all, for reasons we shall see in a moment.

In another work, this time in prose, the sixth/twelfth-century *Dārāb-nāma* ('The Book of Dārāb') by Ṭarsūsī, we find the same episode recounting King Bahman's inglorious end,[11]

11 In historical and literary sources there are actually three distinct versions of King Bahman's death, including variants: by natural death, at the hands of Rustam's descendants and, finally, in the belly of the dragon. See GHAFŪRĪ and AMĪNĪ 1391/2012: 119–21.

with the difference that here the author is much hastier, as the dragon swallows Bahman and his horse in one gulp (ṬARSŪSĪ 1396/2017, 8–9).

This is the only case in which a king fails to defeat the dragon, and one has to wonder why. However, we should remember that Bahman's father had been the hero Isfandiyār, who was killed in a duel by Rustam.[12] Rustam was the quintessential paladin of several legendary

Fig. 2: King Bahman is Devoured by the Dragon

12 Isfandiyār is in fact killed in a duel by the hero Rustam, who shoots him in the eye with a double-edged arrow made from the Gaz plant and the feathers of the mythical Sīmurgh bird (which was the protector of Zāl, Rustam's father), because Isfandiyār's eyes were his only vulnerable spot. Isfandiyār's invulnerability, about which there is a legend that is worth summarising, has its own legendary origins: When Zarathustra explained his faith to King Gushtāsp, he told him that he would only accept the new faith on three conditions: that the Prophet show him Paradise in this world, that he give him enough knowledge to know the future, and that he suddenly become invulnerable. Zarathustra replied that wishes can be granted, but not for the benefit of one, only for the benefit of three. Gushtāsp chose Paradise for himself, knowledge of the future for his brother Jāmāsp, and invulnerability for his son Isfandiyār. For the latter, they brought a basin of milk from Paradise and immersed the infant Isfandiyār in it, but he had his eyes closed, and they therefore remained the only vulnerable part of his body. See DABĪR SIYĀQĪ 2011, 262, n. 1.

Iranian kings, as well as a dragonslayer and a descendant of other dragon-slayer heroes who also appear in Zoroastrian religious texts. In order to avenge his father's death, King Bahman had fought an all-out war against Rustam's descendants over many years. But, to engage in battle with Rustam's descendants, in a kind of pan-Iranic feud, was to offer an unforgivable insult to all the legitimate kings that Rustam had served so well, and thus call into question his own legitimacy. It should also be noted that Persia had lost its independence in the war against Alexander the Great during the reign of Bahman's nephew, King Darius III, and so it is plausible that the author of Bahman's story purposely wished to emphasise, via the king's inglorious death in the belly of a dragon, his lack of legitimacy to reign, as was later confirmed by the end of the Achaemenid empire under his nephew's rule. This story contains all the necessary elements: a dragon causing catastrophe by destroying fields and crops, and a king who must confront and kill it to reassert his legitimacy. Although in this case the outcome for the ruler is inauspicious, the centrality of the motif of killing the dragon in Persian literature as proof of royal legitimacy is once again reaffirmed.

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◄ nahid.norozi2@unibo.it ►

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Notes on Contributors

Javier ALBARRÁN – is Tenure-track "Ramón y Cajal" researcher at the Department of Medieval History of the Universidad de Granada. He focuses his research on the medieval Islamic West, particularly on issues related to religious violence, the history of jihad, the figure and veneration of prophet Muhammad, the creation of sacred memory and spaces, and encounters between religions, topics on which he has published extensively. His last edited book, *Violencia Interconfesional. Realidades y percepciones en la península ibérica,* has been published by the Universidad de Granada Press (2024).

Abdessamad BELHAJ – is a senior researcher in Islamic Studies at the Institute of Religion and Society (UNPS-Budapest). He holds a PhD in Islamic Studies from Mohammed V University (Rabat, 2001) and a PhD in Political and Social Sciences from UCLouvain (Louvain-la-Neuve, 2008). He worked as a researcher and visiting lecturer at UCLouvain between 2012 and 2024. His latest book, published in 2023, is entitled *Authority in Contemporary Islam: Structures, Figures and Functions*.

Massimiliano BORRONI – is a senior team member of the ERC project *Science, Society, and Environment in the First Millennium*. He is a researcher at the Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, where he teaches in the Master's program in Environmental Humanities. His work initially focused on the Iranian calendar and its New Year during the Abbasid period, examining fiscal and cultural dimensions. He later turned to the study of traditional irrigation techniques and the conceptualization of water, with particular attention to premodern thought on the water cycle, the role of the sea in creation, and the physical behavior of water. He recently published a monograph titled *Connecting Water: Environmental Views in Premodern Arabic Writings*, which explores these themes.

Ilaria CICOLA – has been Adjunct Professor at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna since 2017. Her research focuses on Arabic language and linguistics, with particular emphasis on specialized terminology, corpus linguistics, and computational linguistics. Her interests range from medieval Arabic alchemical vocabulary to the lexicon of non-normative sexualities in classical and modern texts. She is currently investigating the semi-automatic annotation of digitized corpora. She also works with the Istituto per l'Oriente C.A. Nallino, where she contributes to the creation of a digital index of names and toponyms for the historical journal Oriente Moderno. She has additionally collaborated with the Department of Languages and Literatures at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna as a Research Fellow within the PRIN project "Environmental Anomalies & Political Legitimacy in Global Eurasia, 12th–14th Century."

Marco DEMICHELIS (PhD) – is Assistant Professor in History of Islamic World and Islamic Thought at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna. He has been Berenson Fellow (2022-2023) at the

I Tatti (The Harvard University Center for the Study of Italian Renaissance), Senior Research Fellow in Islamic Studies within the ICS at the University of Navarra (2019-2021) after having worked as Marie Curie Fellow (IF 2016) in the same and post-Doctoral Research Fellow within the Dept. of Religious Studies at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan (2013-2016). Among his last monographs, *Violence in Early Islam. Religious Narratives, the Arab Conquests and the Canonization of Jihad* (IB Tauris, 2021) and *Salvation and Hell in Classical Islamic Thought: Can Allah Save Us All?* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018). His last edited Special Issue is *The Qur'an in History. The History of the Qur'an. From Canonization to Critique and Semantic Hermeneutics* (mdpi.com).

Nahyan FANCY – is the Al Qasimi Professor of Islamic Studies at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, UK. He examines the intersections of medicine, philosophy and religion in post-1200 Islamic societies. His first book, *Science and Religion in Mamluk Egypt: Ibn al-Nafīs, Pulmonary Transit and Bodily Resurrection* was published by Routledge (2013). He is currently working on a follow-up monograph, *In Ibn al-Nafīs's Shadow*, which examines eight medical commentaries produced on the *Canon of Medicine* and its abridgment between 1160 and 1520 CE. He has also published on and is currently working on understanding the the onset of the second plague pandemic and its impact on Middle Eastern societies from the 13th to the 14th centuries. He has received grants and fellowships from the National Endowment of Humanities, American Council of Learned Societies, British Academy and the Institute of Advanced Study, Princeton for his work.

Chiara FONTANA – is Assistant Professor of Arabic Literature at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna. Her studies focus principally on Islamic eloquence (*balāgha*), the evolution of Arabic literary theory and canon over time, specifically emphasizing *al-balāgha* as a cognitive framework to understand reality creatively. Her recent works include, *Poesie di Najīb Surūr. Studio critico e traduzione*, AMSActa, 2025; "The Name of the Key: al-Sakkākī's Literary Craftsmanship and Pragmatic Poetics in Miftāḥ al-ʿUlūm", *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 25, (1), 2025: 57-87; "Craftsmanship in Literature and Literary Craftsmanship in 9th Century Baghdad: Ibn Abī ʿAwn's (d. 322/934) *Kitāb al-tašbīhāt* [The Book of Similes] as a Case Study", *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, 20, 2025, 1-39; "Arabic Poetics and Prosody in Practice: Najīb Surūr's Experimentalism in 'Kalimāt fī-l-ḥubb' [Love Words]," In R.R. Gould, H. Rashwan, N. al-Askari [Eds.] Arabic, Persian, and Turkic Poetics. *Towards a Post-Eurocentric Literary Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024: 304-338.

Nahid NOROZI – is Associate Professor of Persian language and literature at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna. She is the director of "Ferdows: Collana di Studi Iranici e Islamici" (WriteUp Books), and is the co-founder of "Quaderni di Meykhane", an e-journal of Iranian studies. Her research focuses on medieval Persian epics and verse romances, as well as Arabic-Persian mystical treatises. She has published extensively on contemporary and medieval Persian authors, including Najm al-Dīn Kubrà, Sohrāb Sepehrī, Khwājū Kirmānī, al-Sahlajī, Aḥmad Shāmlū, Sīmīn Behbahānī, and Gorgānī. Her latest monographs include *Esordi del romanzo persiano. Dal* Vis e Rāmin *di Gorgāni* (XI sec.) al Ciclo di *Tristano* (2022), *"La mia spada è la poesia". Versi di lotta e d'amore nella poetessa persiana Simin Behbahāni* (2023), and *Amori e demoni nel* Libro di Sām. *Storia di plagi, riscritture e collage in un epos persiano cripto-mazdeo dal XI al XVII sec.* (2024).

Muhammad OMAR – is a PhD candidate in Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter. His research explores the social history of scholarly communities in the early Islamic period, examining

them within the broader religious and cultural dynamics of Arabia and its peripheries during Late Antiquity. He is currently completing his dissertation, *Genesis and Development of the Social Substrate of the Early Arabo-Islamic Scholarly Traditions.*

Ines PETA – is Associate Professor of Arabic Language at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna. She has participated in several research projects promoted by the Oasis International Foundation (2014, 2015, 2017) and is currently the Bologna team PI of the EU-funded project *Environmental Anomalies & Political Legitimacy in Global Eurasia, 12th–14th century* (PRIN 2022). Her research interests focus on the religious lexicon, particularly theological, philosophical, and mystical terminology. She has worked on Muslim–Christian polemical literature, the thought of al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), and, more recently, the writings of Aḥmad Amīn (d. 1954). Her publications include *Il Radd pseudo-ġazāliano: Paternità, Contenuti, Traduzione* [*The Pseudo-Gazālian Radd: Authorship, Contents, Translation*] (OSM, 2013) and *L'alba, il mattino e il meriggio dell'Islam di Aḥmad Amīn* [*The Dawn, The Morning and The Noon of Islam by Aḥmad Amīn*] (IPOCAN, forthcoming).

Andrea PIRAS – is Professor of Iranian Studies at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna and Visiting Professor of Iranian Philology at the Università Ca' Foscari Venezia. Member of the Institute for Advanced Study (Princeton). Directeur d'études invité at École Pratique des Hautes Études (Section de Sciences historiques at philologiques). Specialist in writings, languages, texts and cultural history of pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia. Among his research interests: Zoroastrian texts, Manichaean texts and images; contacts between Iran, Greece, Rome, Byzantium and Turan; religious history of the Iranian world (myth and ritual, eschatology, soteriology, asceticism, ecstasy, apocalypticism); phenomena of interaction and shared textualities between Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Among his books: *Hādōxt Nask II. Il racconto zoroastriano della sorte dell'anima*, Roma 2000. *Verba Lucis. Scrittura, immagine e libro nel manicheismo*, Udine-Milano 2012. *Manicheismo*, Brescia 2015.

Emmanuel PISANI – is an Islamologist, Director of the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies, and Associate Professor at the Vice-Rectorate for Research at the Institut Catholique de Paris. A Doctor of Philosophy and Theology, his research focuses particularly on the thought of al-Ġazālī (d. 505/1111), the question of otherness in Islam, and a Muslim theology of religions. A member of the Scientific Council of PLURIEL and the Network of Centers for Christian-Muslim Relations (NCCMR), he has held the Anawati Chair, "Fighting Extremism through Interreligious Dialogue," since October 2023. He recently published *Hétérodoxes et non musulmans dans la pensée d'al-Ġazālī* (Vrin, 2022) and co-edited *Dynamiques de l'islamologie en Europe* (Cerf, 2023).