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Concepts of Just Rule in Medieval Islamicate Texts: The Shahnameh, The Siyasatnama, and The Muqaddimah

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Abstract

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Introduction

In a time in the United States of acute political unrest, justice has become a major issue that has dominated public discourse. Just rule by a nation's government is a universal topic of debate which is heavily influenced by western philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. However, concepts of justice in the Islamic Middle East are less known and there is a long tradition of advice texts which have sought to advise kings on how they can rule justly.

The *Shahnameh* (*Book of Kings*), the Iranian national epic poem completed by Abolqasem Ferdowsi in 1010 for Ghaznavid Sultan Mahmud (reigned 997-1030), covers several thousand years of myth, legend, romance, and history.¹ Usually only considered a great work of world literature, the *Shahnameh* is an early work of Islamicate advice literature because it provides examples on how to remain a good king by outlining past mistakes and emphasizing the importance of maintaining royal glory (*farr*). The *Shahnameh* has been ignored from discussion of advice literature despite its emphasis on just rule and thorough examples for kings to follow. The *Shahnameh* has exercised tremendous influence on two other texts: an 11th century Persianate manual for kings, the *Siyasatnama* (*Book of Government*) (1091) by Nizam al-Mulk, and a 14th century Arabic text, the *Muqaddimah* (*The Introduction*) (1377) by Ibn Khaldun. Though it is difficult to compare the *Shahnameh*'s poetic structure with the latter texts' prose, the *Shahnameh*'s overarching message of just rule is present in these texts and serves an integral function of upholding the theme of a cyclical process of justice.

I will begin with a discussion of the *Shahnameh* using the 2007 translation by Dick Davis.² This study will identify four key moments in the text which will exemplify not only its

¹ Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis (New York City: Penguin Random House, 2016), xvi.

² Ibid.

position as an advice text, but also instances where the message of just rule is exhibited explicitly. First, I will discuss the reign of Zahhak, an early mythical king in Iran that is seen as a cruel, outside invader. Zahhak neglects the people and must deal with blacksmith Kaveh's rebellion, which represents what happens to unjust rulers and demonstrates the necessity for a moral sense of justice in kingship. Additionally, this story also exhibits the Zoroastrian battle between the elements of "good" and "evil." Second, the reign of Goshtasp will be discussed, which shows how the king ultimately relies on other political figures within the dynasty to support and uphold the monarchy. Thirdly, the reign of Ardashir is presented as a model king whose actions represent the critical aspect of the king's support for the people. Ardashir builds villages and irrigation systems as well as fights Haftvad and his evil worm, further exemplifying the Zoroastrian cosmic conflict between good and evil. Fourthly, Yazdegerd is presented as a king who inherited an empire that had long stopped working for its people. Its frail, weak state allowed for another foreign invader, this time the Muslims from Arabia, to conquer and rule ending the pre-Islamic era of kings. Yazdegerd's assassination by the miller Khosrow also exemplifies the power of the people and the right of the people to overthrow unjust governing systems.

The *Siyasatnama* is then presented based on the 1978 translation by Hubert Darke.³ The *Siyasatnama* is used to show the connection between the *Shahnameh* and other commonly studied advice texts, or mirrors for princes. Nizam al-Mulk began writing the *Siyasatnama* in 1086, nearly 60 years after Ferdowsi died.⁴ As a fellow Persianate text, the *Siyasatnama* reflects numerous recommendations Ferdowsi makes through the *Shahnameh*. Nizam al-Mulk wrote the

³ Nizam al-Mulk. *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings: The Siyasatnama of Nizam al-Mulk*, trans. Hubert Darke (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).

⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv.

Siyasatnama as a manual for kings and instead understands justice more bureaucratically, instructing kings to maintain power however possible but rule justly to ensure legitimacy. Nizam al-Mulk made numerous references to Persian kings that are also in the *Shahnameh*, but the most cogent aspect in this case is the importance of the king controlling the elite and not allowing them to oppress the people. Nizam al-Mulk's parable of 'Ali Nushtgin will be paralleled with Ardeshir's instructions to his son concerning watchfulness of the elite when he bestowed his kingdom to him on his deathbed.

Lastly, the much later Arab text, the *Muqaddimah*, by Ibn Khaldun is analyzed and compared with the *Shahnameh* using the abridged and translated version by Franz Rosenthal from 1967.⁵ The *Muqaddimah* is an explanation of history and Ibn Khaldun described a cyclical lifespan for dynasties, using a sociological approach when discussing justice and dynastic survival. Dynasties function in a sedentary urban environment, according to Ibn Khaldun, and tribes can only dominate urban environments through a strong 'asabiyyah, or "group feeling."⁶ Persian was the language of the learned classes and the *Shahnameh* was widely known and read.⁷ As Persian became the language of culture in the eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia, importantly, Ibn Khaldun wrote his scholarship in Arabic yet found most of his readership in the Persianate east.⁸ The *Muqaddimah* was translated into Turkish and was popular in the Persianate milieu of the Ottoman Empire.⁹ There are important parallels with the *Shahnameh* and the most obvious is Ibn Khaldun's citation of Bahram, a Sasanian king also presented in the *Shahnameh*. Ibn Khaldun discusses the issue of supporting villages through the parable of an owl, and

⁵ Ibn Khaldun. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. By Franz Rosenthal. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

⁶ Ibid., xi.

⁷ Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization v. 2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 268.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 482.

Bahram is depicted as constantly developing as a king and learning how to stay just to his subjects.

This study seeks to compare these texts and discuss how they fit together, especially since the *Siyasatnama* and the *Muqaddimah* are traditionally considered advice texts by scholars. Fariba Zarinebaf and Linda Darling have both written the most thorough studies of just rule in the Islamic Middle East. Karen Barkey has produced a comparative study on the Ottoman Empire (1299-1923), showing how the empire was ordered and negotiated difference.

Linda Darling primarily relies on normative texts to investigate advice literature and concepts of just rule within it. In her book, *History of Social Justice and Political Power in the Middle East*, Darling utilizes oft-cited advice texts to explain and document the Circle of Justice throughout history.¹⁰ This is a broad survey text that traces the development and exercise of the Circle of Justice, a summarized, graphic depiction of the interrelationship between Middle Eastern governments and their subjects.¹¹ Darling traces the Circle of Justice from its conception in ancient Mesopotamia through the rise of Islam, the gunpowder empires, and modern political discourse in current Middle Eastern states and their formation. Crucially, Darling does not regard the *Shahnameh* as a work of advice literature in her book and the text only appears in the book as a looming cultural function of successive dynasties. Importantly, the *Siyasatnama*, an advice text she does discuss, and the *Shahnameh* were both written in 11th century Persia. The *Shahnameh* does not have explicit ideations of the Circle of Justice, and instead represents justice and governance as a flexible cycle: kings rise and fall. The *Shahnameh* demonstrates how their just deeds influence their longevity and political survival. Near Eastern concepts of justice cannot be

¹⁰ Linda Darling, *A History of Social Justice and Political Power in the Middle East: The Circle of Justice from Mesopotamia to Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

fit into a restrictive mold, as the Circle of Justice implies, and the term does not account for the nuances of other texts like the *Shahnameh* which had a major influence on advice literature in the decades and centuries after.

Conversely, Fariba Zarinebaf uses a legal, archives-based approach in the early modern era of the Ottoman Empire to understand the state and justice. Advice texts primarily rely on the idealistic notions of justice, such as how a king should act and run their empire. The question still stands, however, if kings actually followed this advice. In Zarinebaf's book *Crime and Punishment in Istanbul: 1700-1800*, she discusses law and order in Istanbul and cites the Circle of Justice as being one of two components of the conception of justice in the Ottoman Empire. The other was the Hanafi school of Islamic law, which was more flexible than other schools of law in Islam.¹²

A comparative study of the Ottoman Empire is also an effective means of understanding how justice and difference were negotiated, providing another indication of the practical understanding empires had of these advice texts. Karen Barkey in her book *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* argues for a process-based approach in understanding how empires were organized and negotiated with subjects.¹³ Barkey additionally uses a comparative approach to understand difference and social organization in the Ottoman Empire, moving past the uniform mold of rise, fall, and decline. Advice literature gives scholars insight into state formation and how these empires were ordered. These advice texts, especially the *Shahnameh*, were known by the Ottoman literati, especially since Barkey argues that the Ottoman Empire in part grew out of a post-Seljuk imperial formation, the empire for which

¹² Fariba Zarinebaf, *Crime and Punishment in Istanbul: 1700-1800* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2010), 149.

¹³ Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5-24.

Nizam al-Mulk wrote the *Siyasatnama*.¹⁴ Barkey's work provides a compelling way of understanding and analyzing advice literature as a component in how to manage difference, justice, and the broad expanse of these empires.

This study seeks to include a new understanding of the *Shahnameh* into the scholarship on advice literature and demonstrate the influence the text has had on conceptions of just rule. The practice of just rule is a topic each society has a vested interest in, and the *Shahnameh* is a unique work that has educated the people and kings alike on the importance of justice in a state's governing systems.

The *Shahnameh* and Just Rule

The *Shahnameh* is the Iranian national epic composed by Abolqasem Ferdowsi (940-1020) over a period of around 30 or 40 years (c. 970-1010) under the patronage of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (reigned 997-1030) of the Ghaznavid Dynasty in Iran.¹⁵ The *Shahnameh* is a work of advice literature because it was written for and under the Ghaznavid sultan and consists of numerous instances of kings falling from the throne because they had surrendered their *farr* (royal glory bestowed by God) and collapsed. The Zoroastrian rooted conflict between good and evil is a major underlying factor in the messaging of the *Shahnameh* and is a prime example of the importance of just rule operating in the kingly class — the king must treat the people well, be just to his subjects, and fund the military or else he risks relinquishing his *farr*.

The *Shahnameh* is Ferdowsi's one great work and consists of a long epic poem covering several thousand years of myth, legend, romance, and history. The work spans many different dynasties, that are both mythological and historical, from the dawn of Iranian civilization to the

¹⁴ Barkey, *Empire of Difference*, 24.

¹⁵ Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, "Ferdowsi, Abul-Qasem," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation 2012), <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ferdowsi-i>.

Islamic conquest.¹⁶ Ferdowsi used the Pahlavi-language chronicles of heroic tradition that told of superhuman exploits by heroes and kings.¹⁷ Originally written in Persian, the current standard edition of the poem runs into nine volumes, including over 50,000 lines (in English, nearly 100,000 because each line has 22 syllables making it longer than a heroic couplet).¹⁸ The 7th century Arab/Islamic conquest of the Sasanian Dynasty (224-651) was a major moment in Iranian history, and according to Dick Davis, “must have seemed for a while as though Persian civilization would disappear as an entity distinguishable from the culture of other countries subsumed by the Caliphate.”¹⁹ This may have been a motivator for Ferdowsi to revive Persian language, culture, and history through this work.

A primary feature of the *Shahnameh* is its root in the cosmic battle between good and evil, a concept found in Zoroastrianism. Founded by the prophet Zarathustra (also written Zoroaster) in the 6th century BC in Iran, major portions of Zoroastrian beliefs come from the Avesta, which was a work from Zoroastrian priests who collected and edited a mass of oral traditions and beliefs written in the ancient Iranian language of Avestan.²⁰ This includes the central writings of Zarathustra known as the Gathas.²¹ Zoroastrianism is centered on the dualistic cosmology of good and evil which is represented in the *Shahnameh*. A key aspect in the *Shahnameh* is *farr* (royal glory) which attaches itself to legitimate and good rulers which illegal usurpers (the bad ruler) cannot have or take. Without this royal glory, a prospective king cannot hope to hold power.²² The cosmic battle between good emanates from Ahura Mazda and evil

¹⁶ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* v. 2, 157.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, xiii.

¹⁹ Ibid., xvii.

²⁰ William W. Malandra, “Zoroastrianism: Historical Review Up to the Arab Conquest,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Encyclopaedia Iranica, 2005), <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zoroastrianism-i-historical-review>.

²¹ Jenny Rose, *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction* (New York City: IB Tauris, 2011), 9.

²² Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 9.

originates in Angra Mainyu (also written as Ahriman), the destructive energy that seeks to oppose God's creative energy.²³ God initially created a pure world but the angry Angra Mainyu continues to wreak havoc through disaster and disease. This cosmic dualism causes the binaries in the world such as night and day, good and evil. Accordingly, this dynamic is evident in the good and bad aspects of kings: a king either has *farr* or he does not, he is either good or evil.

The *Shahnameh* covers approximately five major dynasties and chronicles the kings and their rise and fall. Ferdowsi is primarily writing a history of Iran and started by detailing the first group of kings, the most prolific being Jamshid, a mythological figure of an unknown era. Jamshid reigned for 500 years and taught men how to fashion helmets, chain mail, cuirasses, swords, and barding for horses.²⁴ He spent 100 years total in raising an army, giving his people clothes, education, and tamed demons.²⁵ Additionally, he organized society into four groups: (roughly) priests, soldiers, farmers, and artisans and tradesmen.²⁶ Concurrently, Jamshid founded the still-celebrated Persian holiday of Nowruz.²⁷ The last king chronicled by Ferdowsi is Yazdegerd III and primarily shows what happens when a king loses the support of his people.²⁸ A large portion of this final section's poetry is directly translated and chronicles the young king's tragic final days. This section discusses the virtues of a king, bravery for example, and chronicles Yazdegerd's flight to a mill where he is killed by the miller, prompting Ferdowsi to lament over the collapse of the Persian monarchy.²⁹

²³ Mary Boyce, "Ahura Mazda," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Encyclopaedia Iranica, 2014), <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ahura-mazda>.

²⁴ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 6

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 940.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 956-957.

There are numerous examples in the *Shahnameh* that depict justice and kingship as a fragile cycle. Notable among these is Jamshid's overthrow by Zahhak, a king who invades Iran from Arabia. Ferdowsi attributed this to Jamshid's arrogance which is an example of avoidable bad behavior. However, it is also important to understand Jamshid's blunders and arrogance that resulted in the loss of his *farr* and overthrow by Zahhak. Additionally, Goshtasp is unjust in the sense that he will do anything to hold onto his throne and power. Consequently, Goshtasp's son Esfandiyar was killed by the recurring hero Rostam and he loses his ability to govern effectively. This story also presents a compelling reminder to kings that their power is not absolute and that they must rely on other figures in the dynasty to defend the realm. Ardeshir is a common symbol of kingly justice and his actions are chronicled at length by Ferdowsi. A historical king, Ardeshir built cities in barren deserts and fought an evil warlord which exemplifies his justice. Lastly, Yazdegerd III is the final historical king chronicled and is described as somewhat of a victim of circumstance. Yazdegerd's fall to the Arab Muslim invaders after his empire rotted and ultimately collapsed is a further example of kingly rule no longer supporting the people.

The Reign of Zahhak and the Rebellion of Kaveh

Zahhak was born in Arabia where his father Merdas was a just and generous king.³⁰ Ferdowsi makes it clear from the beginning that Zahhak was born with an evil spirit; "he was an ambitious youth ... brave, turbulent in his moods, and of an evil disposition."³¹ Ferdowsi also identifies Zahhak as a spoiled and wealthy youth with "ten thousand Arabian horses, all with

³⁰ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*

golden bridles. He spent most of his days and nights riding them, not into battle so much as to demonstrate his wealth and greatness.”³²

One morning, Eblis, the principle shapeshifting evil jinni in the Quran analogous to the Christian Satan, appeared before Zakhak and made him swear secrecy.³³ Eblis convinced Zakhak to allow Eblis to murder his father which would make Zakhak king, marking his first unjust act.³⁴ Merdas had an orchard where he would go to pray, and early one morning, Merdas fell into a deep pit dug by Eblis, killing him.³⁵ Ferdowsi scolds Zakhak for his behavior, writing:

“The noble king had taken pains to bring up his son in comfort; he had rejoiced in him and given him wealth. But his evil offspring broke faith with him and became complicit in his father’s murder. I heard a wise man say that, no matter how much of a savage lion a man might be, he does not shed his father’s blood, and if there is some untold secret here, it is the mother who can answer an inquirer’s questions.”³⁶

Eblis continued to manipulate Zakhak and one day, Eblis asked to kiss Zakhak’s shoulders.³⁷

Zakhak allowed this and two black snakes emerged from the king’s shoulders, a stunning image that embodies Zakhak’s injustice, especially since these snakes are fed by the brain meal of two young men brought each night in a misguided attempt to cure Zakhak’s malady.³⁸

Immediately after Ferdowsi wrote this story, he narrated the downfall of Jamshid. As his *farr* dimmed, Jamshid “gave himself to evil and foolishness.”³⁹ Jamshid’s realm became engulfed in dissension and revolt with multiple claimants vying for the throne. Meanwhile, “seeking a king,

³² Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 9.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 10.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

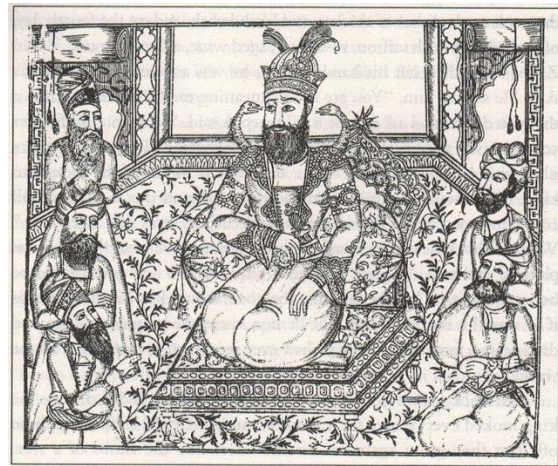
³⁸ Ibid., 11.

³⁹ Ibid., 12.

Persia's horsemen approached Zahhak: they greeted him as a sovereign, hailing him as the ruler of Iran."⁴⁰ Zahhak invaded Iran and overthrew Jamshid, and he went into a mysterious exile.⁴¹ No one saw him for a hundred years until he reappeared on the shores of the Sea of China (probably the modern-day Bay of Bengal).⁴² Zahhak decided to have him sawn in two "and filled the world with terror at his fate."⁴³

After Zahhak's victory, Feraydun emerged into the narrative as Ferdowsi told of the brutal characteristic of Zahhak's regime. In perhaps the most poetic and telling description, Ferdowsi wrote:

"Zahhak reigned for a thousand years, and from end to end the world was his to command. The wise concealed themselves and their deeds, and devils achieved their heart's desire. Virtue was despised and magic applauded, justice hid itself away while evil flourished; demons rejoiced in their wickedness, while goodness was spoken of only in secret."⁴⁴



Zahhak with his two snakes among noblemen. Photo Courtesy of Dick Davis' *Shahnameh*.

Ferdowsi then narrated a dream Zahhak had of a challenger to the throne, one radiating *farr* and ready for battle. Ferdowsi painted this scene as an action by God to torment an evil man and, in the dream, the challenger Feraydun "smote him (Zahhak) with an ox-headed mace ... the young

⁴⁰ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

man flayed him from head to foot,” with Feraydun dragging Zahhak to Mount Damavand, the highest peak in Iran.⁴⁵ Zahhak awoke screaming, shaking the palace walls, and his wife, Arnavaz, told him to seek counsel from astrologers and magicians.⁴⁶ In a poignant example of Ferdowsi regularly including the opinions of women in the text, Zahhak listened to her and called for sages. One brave sage, Zirak, told Zahhak frankly that Feraydun would take his throne though he has not been born yet.⁴⁷ Zahhak ordered that the world “be scoured for signs of Feraydun. He knew no rest, and could neither eat nor sleep; the brightness of his days had darkened.”⁴⁸

As Zahhak lived in fear, Feraydun was born and “Jamshid’s imperial *farr* radiated from him as if he were the sun.”⁴⁹ His father was killed by Zahhak’s soldiers and his mother Faranak took the unweaned Feraydun to the owner of a meadow where a multicolored cow, Barmayeh, grazed.⁵⁰ She asked the owner of the meadow to care for her son and he agreed, feeding him the milk from Barmayeh.⁵¹ A few years later, Faranak sensed danger, retrieved Feraydun, and fled to the Alborz mountains.⁵² Zahhak heard news of Barmayeh and came to the field where he killed her and burned the house of the meadow owner to the ground.⁵³

Meanwhile, while Zahhak was strategizing with his advisors, the sound of a man demanding justice arose from the court and he was brought in and given a place in front of the

⁴⁵ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 14-16.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

nobles.⁵⁴ Zahhak frowned and demanded that the man tell him who had been unjust to him. The man spoke:

“‘I’m Kaveh, and a blacksmith, sire,’ he said,
And as he spoke his clenched fists struck his head.
‘It’s you whom I accuse, you are the one
Whose fire’s destroyed all that I’ve ever done.
A king then, or a monster? Which are you?
Tell us, your majesty, which of the two?
If you reign over seven kingdoms, why
Must our fate be to suffer and to die?
Acquit yourself then, let me weigh your worth,
And let your words astonish all the earth;
And when we’ve heard you out we’ll see
The evils that the world has done to me,
And why it is my son’s brains have to feed
Your snake’s insatiable and monstrous greed.’”⁵⁵

Astonished, Zahhak returned Kaveh’s son and demanded that he sign a testament lauding Zahhak’s justice.⁵⁶ Kaveh read the document, and said to Zahhak’s advisors:

“‘You’re in the demon’s clutches now,’ he roared,
‘Your evil hearts no longer fear the Lord,
And all your faces are set fair for hell;

⁵⁴ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 19.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Your hearts believe Zahhak, you wish him well,
But I will never sign, or give a thought
To this corrupted tyrant and his court.”⁵⁷

After this exchange, Kaveh entered the marketplace and rallied a militia to go to the Alborz mountains and bring back Feraydun to fight Zahhak.⁵⁸ Feraydun eventually captured Zahhak and imprisoned him in Mount Damavand, becoming a symbol of the fight against injustice and the fall of tyranny.⁵⁹ This moving passage exemplifies a major moment in the *Shahnameh*, a man standing up to a tyrant for the wrongs that he had done. Additionally, this portion of the *Shahnameh* clearly contains the Zoroastrian cosmic battle between good and evil. Kaveh stated poignantly in the marketplace that “this king is Ahriman,” referring to Zahhak, and this is the beginning of the insurgency Feraydun leads to rid the land of Zahhak’s cruelty.⁶⁰ Feraydun takes on the role of the cosmically good and a raging battle ensues to rid the land of Ahriman, or in this case Zahhak’s evil actions that have oppressed the populace. Additionally, Zahhak is the archetype of an evil king throughout the *Shahnameh* and future characters make him a universal referent for evil. This is the first example of what happens when a king is unjust to his subjects. Jamshid lost his *farr* because he became too arrogant and displeased God. He was usurped by an evil foreigner who wreaked havoc and compounded the problems experienced by the people already. Zahhak was almost inexpressibly cruel and oppressed the common subjects. Eventually, someone (Kaveh) rose up against Zahhak and in coordination with Feraydun, ousted the evil king from the land.

⁵⁷ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 19.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

Goshtasp and Dynastic Stability

The narrative of Goshtasp, a member of the Kayanian dynasty, and his son Esfandiyar occurs toward the end of the life of Rostam, arguably the most renowned and important hero of the epic. It is necessary to have an understanding of his life before discussing the power dynamic and relationship between Goshtasp, Esfandiyar, and Rostam.⁶¹ Rostam was the son of Zal and Rudabeh, a princess of Kabul, and was born in Zabolestan, roughly southern Afghanistan today.⁶² Rostam was descended from a long line of kingmakers in Persia and is presented as a hero in numerous occasions, the most noteworthy being when he saved the king Kay Kavus from demons in Mazanderan by completing seven challenging trials.⁶³ Much later in Rostam's life, he is given the lordship of Sistan (Zabolestan) by Kay Khosrow and this is his base of power through the end of his life.⁶⁴ Rostam's importance in the epic cannot be understated which sets up the clash between Goshtasp and an aged Rostam.

Dick Davis sums up the interceding years after the occultation of Kay Khosrow and the accession of Goshtasp. Khosrow's successor, Lohrasp, became king per Khosrow's wishes and Lohrasp had two sons, Goshtasp and Zarir.⁶⁵ While a young man, Goshtasp demanded that his father name him as high heir to the throne which Lohrasp refused to do.⁶⁶ This prompted Goshtasp to run away to India and Zarir was sent to bring him back.⁶⁷ Goshtasp did return, only to have another fight with his father and left for Rum, which connotes the "west" and corresponds to modern-day Turkey.⁶⁸ Goshtasp married the King of Rum's daughter, Katayun,

⁶¹ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 527.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 105-106.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 468.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 477.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

and ingratiated himself in the king's court by slaying a dragon and a wolf.⁶⁹ At this point, with the favor of his father-in-law, Goshtasp posed a threat to Lohrasp and upon his return to Iran, Lohrasp ceded the throne to Goshtasp and went into religious retirement at Balkh, a town in northern Afghanistan.⁷⁰ In Turan (a country north of the Oxus River and a longtime rival of Iran dating from a split between Feraydun's sons), a new king Arjasp took the throne and at the prompting of Zoroaster, Goshtasp demanded tribute from him sparking a war.⁷¹ Zarir was killed and Goshtasp's son, Esfandiyar, was the only warrior capable enough to drive the Turanian army back across the Oxus River (Amu Darya).⁷² Esfandiyar is presented as a brave warrior who embraced the new religion of Zoroastrianism with great zeal and led numerous excursions to propagate the faith by the sword.⁷³ However, Goshtasp's advisors began to worry over Esfandiyar's desires for the throne, and in a push for self-preservation, Goshtasp imprisoned Esfandiyar.⁷⁴ Arjasp heard this news and launched an attack against Balkh, sacking the city, killing Lohrasp, and taking many prisoners including Esfandiyar's sisters back to Turan.⁷⁵ Goshtasp appealed to an aged Rostam who declined and so Goshtasp led the counter attack, barely surviving.⁷⁶ His advisor Jamasp encouraged him to release Esfandiyar so he could save the throne.⁷⁷ Esfandiyar was ultimately released and he once again drove the Turanian army back.⁷⁸ Esfandiyar was then tasked with going deep into Turan to save his sisters which involved a series of seven tasks similar to what Rostam encountered in Mazanderan.⁷⁹ Arjasp was killed during

⁶⁹ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 477.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 478.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

the rescue and Esfandiyar returned to Iran a victor.⁸⁰ Expecting a royal welcome, Esfandiyar is then tasked with killing Rostam.⁸¹

The beginning of Esfandiyar's encounter with Rostam is first introduced when Esfandiyar is visiting his mother Katayun. He expressed his frustration at his father for refusing to give him the throne, even after he promised to if Esfandiyar successfully defeated Arjasp, rescued his sisters, and his own past endeavors in spreading Zoroastrianism.⁸² In a sort of *déjà vu* to Goshtasp's youth, Esfandiyar threatened to take the crown himself if his father would not bestow the throne to him.⁸³ In a further example of women voicing their opinion in their household, his mother warned him to be patient, knowing that Goshtasp had no intention of relinquishing power.⁸⁴ Goshtasp is concerned about Esfandiyar's thirst for the throne and he asked for counsel from his advisor Jamasp, wondering if Esfandiyar would die peacefully or at the hands of another.⁸⁵ Jamasp consulted his astrological tables and told Goshtasp that Esfandiyar would die in combat with Rostam.⁸⁶ "The king grew pensive," Ferdowsi wrote, "and his thoughts made his soul like a tangled thicket ... He brooded on the turnings of Fate, and his speculations turned him toward Evil."⁸⁷ This is the first indication that Ferdowsi included that Goshtasp would eventually lose his *farr*. In order to secure his throne and eliminate any challengers, Goshtasp was willing to sacrifice his own son.

At dawn the next morning, Esfandiyar made his case as to why he should become king and cited Goshtasp's promises. In his response to Esfandiyar, Goshtasp indicated his jealousy for

⁸⁰ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 478.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 477-8.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 479.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 480.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 479-80.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 480.

Rostam, calling him “foolish,” and then instructed Esfandiyar to go to Zabolestan, arrest Rostam, and bring him back to the palace in chains.⁸⁸ In this elaborate ploy, Goshtasp believed that he would be able to solve the succession question once and for all, knowing that Rostam would kill Esfandiyar. Esfandiyar responded to his father quite candidly:

“Enough! It isn’t them you’re circling round,
You’re not pursuing Zal and Rostam — I,
Your son, am singled out by you to die;
Your jealous passion for sovereignty
Has made you want to rid the world of me.
So be it! Keep your royal crown and throne,
Give me a corner to live in alone.
I’m one of many slaves, no more; my task
Is to perform whatever you may ask.”⁸⁹

Katayun ardently warned her son not to go, telling him that this mission is “the work of Ahriman” and that Esfandiyar will be killed trying to defeat Rostam.⁹⁰ Esfandiyar refused to listen and the next morning he set out for Zabolestan.⁹¹ Esfandiyar was in Zabolestan for quite a while where he fought Rostam several times and also negotiated and drank with him.⁹² While Zal encouraged Rostam to either accept the chains or go into exile, Rostam pressed on, giving Esfandiyar plenty of opportunity to return to Iran.⁹³ In a final battle, Rostam first attempted to make peace with Esfandiyar but he refused.⁹⁴ Rostam eventually killed Esfandiyar, and Pashutan,

⁸⁸ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 480.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 482.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 484.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

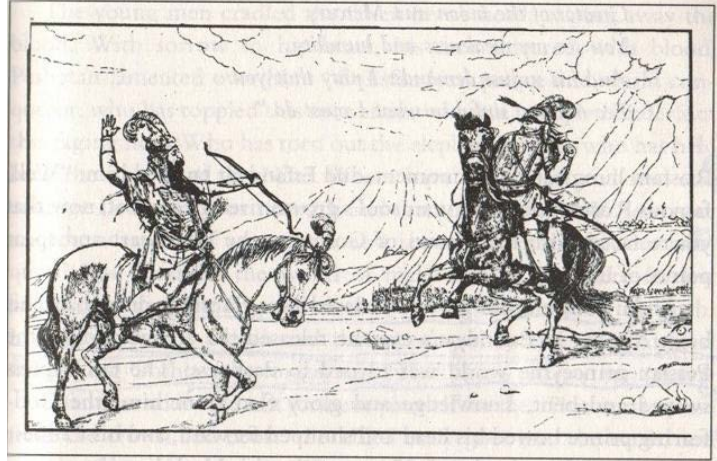
⁹² *Ibid.*, 492-518.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 520.

Esfandiyar's brother, brought Esfandiyar's corpse back to the Court of Goshtasp.⁹⁵

Goshtasp wept for Esfandiyar and proclaimed that he would never have an equal.⁹⁶ However, knowing Goshtasp's true intentions, the Persian nobles were angered: "Accursed king, to keep your throne and crown you sent Esfandiyar to



Rostam kills Esfandiyar in combat. Photo courtesy of Dick Davis' Shahnameh.

his death in Zabolestan: may the Kayanid crown shame your head, may the star of your good fortune falter in its course."⁹⁷ When word reached the women's quarters, Katayun and Esfandiyar's sisters emerged and wept over his body. Afterwards, an interesting exchange occurred between Goshtasp and Pashutan in which Ferdowsi narrated the downfall of Goshtasp as the death of Esfandiyar ultimately resulted in the desertion of Goshtasp's family and supporters. Pashutan exclaimed:

"Most arrogant of men, the signs of your downfall are there for all to see. You have destroyed Iran and yourself with this deed: wisdom and the divine *farr* have deserted you, and God will repay you for what you have done. The back of your power is broken, and all of your throne you imbrued in your son's blood. And may your eyes never see the throne or good fortune again! The world is filled with evil, and you will lose your throne forever: in this world you will be despised and in the world to come you will be judged."⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 519-26.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 527.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

The action Goshtasp chose resulted in the loss of his *farr* and Goshtasp's legitimacy. The sending of his son to his death to secure his crown was not only a ghastly crime but had completely alienated Goshtasp's supporters. This serves as a reminder to kings that they cannot abuse their power because it is not them who uphold the crown alone. This exemplifies how fragile kingship is and that ultimately it is other elites, the common people, and warriors who uphold the dynasty. This lesson comes to Goshtasp from his daughters Beh Afarid and Homay: "They said: 'Great king, haven't you considered what Esfandiyar's death means? He was the first to avenge Zarir's death, he led the attack against the Turks, it was he who stabilized your kingdom.'"⁹⁹

Goshtasp became too arrogant and, in a quest to consolidate power, made a grave error. He killed the one great stabilizer, Esfandiyar, and alienated the rest of his supporters when the extent of his injustice became clear. Esfandiyar is a member of the king's household and a commander of the military. As an elite and a prince, Goshtasp must treat him fairly. However, Goshtasp instigated a conflict between the great hero Rostam and Esfandiyar undermining peace and stability. In order for the kingdom to be prosperous, a king must ensure that the kingdom is safe and calm so tax revenues can continue to support the king and his treasury. Without this element, the king does not have a kingdom. Esfandiyar served his father as a loyal soldier and saved his kingdom on multiple occasions. Worried for his throne and crown, Goshtasp devised to have him killed. Since Goshtasp forsook his son, and the stability of the kingdom, he ultimately lost his *farr* and all legitimacy. This example reminds kings that they do not stabilize the dynasty alone and must rely on other members of the elite, the people, and warriors to guarantee a firm foundation.

⁹⁹ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 528.

The Reign of Ardashir: Urban Prosperity and the Fight Against Evil

Ardashir is a historical king and founder of the historical Sasanian dynasty (224 CE -651 CE), the final rulers of Persia before Islam came to the region.¹⁰⁰ The Sasanians rose after a period of civil strife weakened its predecessor, the Parthian Dynasty (247 BCE - 224 CE).¹⁰¹ Ardashir rose in open rebellion against the dynasty in 212, claiming he was descended from the pre-Alexandrian ancient kings and promised to reunify Persia.¹⁰² He eventually became the leader of the Sasanian House, adopting the title Shahanshah, or “king of kings,” after defeating the Parthian king Ardavan at the Battle of Hormzdagān in 224.¹⁰³ After consolidating his rule in Fars, he went on to conquer other local dynasties in Persia in the next 12 years.¹⁰⁴ He was known as an able ruler, and Ferdowsi proclaimed and illustrated his *farr* with a large mountain sheep following him as he flees Ardavan.¹⁰⁵ He introduced bureaucratic reform and deposed local elites, replacing them with his own sons.¹⁰⁶ A calendar reform is credited to Ardashir as well as the introduction of backgammon and his son Shapur succeeded him around 242.¹⁰⁷ Two major characteristics Ardashir exhibited in the *Shahnameh* is his construction of cities in arid regions which signify his justice as well as his battles with evil rivals, which shows the Zoroastrian duality of good and evil in his rule.

Ardashir’s construction of towns and cities is a major indicator of kingly justice. Primarily, a king was remembered as being able to bring irrigation to deserted lands and build towns for his people. The Avesta praised kings who could reclaim wastelands, hailing them as

¹⁰⁰ A. Shahpur Shabazi. “Sasanian Dynasty,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, 2005), <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sasanian-dynasty>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 645.

¹⁰⁶ Shabazi. “Sasanian Dynasty,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, 2005).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

“the Feeder.”¹⁰⁸ The preceding Achaemenid Dynasty (539-311 BCE) were particularly known for their city-building ideals and Sassanian political ideas resembled the ideals of the Achaemenids.¹⁰⁹ The ability to provide prosperity to a king’s subjects is critical and the success in housing them and reclaiming arid desert for irrigation is a prime signifier of a successful king. Ferdowsi highlights Ardeshir’s construction of his capital early on in his reign and elaborates on its beauty. Ardeshir built his city in Pars, an arid region of southwestern Iran.¹¹⁰ For context, Ardeshir had just returned from a taxing war with Ardavan which lasted 40 straight days.¹¹¹ The soldiers were starving and a gusty wind spread over the armies making it difficult to fight.¹¹² Eventually, Ardeshir was able to capture Ardavan and killed him.¹¹³ Sabak, a ruler of Jahrom who joined Ardeshir to fight Ardavan, advised him to take Ardavan’s daughter in marriage which he agreed to do.¹¹⁴

After he rested in Rey (a city in northern Iran), he returned to Pars where he built his capital city. Ferdowsi described the city as quite a stunning and beautiful place:

“He built a town there filled with palaces and gardens, streams, open spaces, and mountain slopes: a wise old local dignitary still refers to that place as Khurreh-ye Ardeshir — ‘The Glory of Ardeshir.’ From an inexhaustible spring of water within the town, he led off streams and irrigation channels. Near the spring he built a fire-temple, and there he celebrated the Zoroastrian festivals of Mehregan

¹⁰⁸ Darling, *A History of Social Justice and Political Power in the Middle East*, 36.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹¹⁰ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 650.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 649.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 650.

and Sadeh. Around the temple there were gardens, open spaces, and palaces; he made it into a splendid place.”¹¹⁵

Building cities was a way for kings to project their power while also supporting the countryside. Gardens and open spaces, which Khurreh-ye Ardeshir was reportedly filled with, emphasizes this aspect and highlights his justice.¹¹⁶ Ardeshir also built many villages for the people in the provinces which opened up new lands for cultivation, raising prosperity in Ardeshir’s realm. Ardeshir was able to construct a beautiful capital around a natural spring and irrigated and brought life to otherwise dusty and dry land. This signified his ability to raise prosperity and provide the means to support life and agriculture under his rule, major components for kingly justice. His construction of Zoroastrian temples can also be interpreted as the burnishing of his good qualities in the Zoroastrian good-versus-evil cosmic paradigm. Ferdowsi also highlighted Ardeshir’s fight against evil in the narration of Ardeshir’s conflict with a local warlord Haftvad and his magic worm in a tale retold from a local dignitary.

Haftvad is from Kajaran near the Persian Gulf who uses a lucky worm to gain tremendous power. His daughter discovered the worm when she was spinning cotton which brought her good luck.¹¹⁷ She was able to spin twice the number she normally did and when she told her father Haftvad, he took this as a good omen and his luck renewed.¹¹⁸ They fed the worm and it became plump and healthy.¹¹⁹ With the help of the worm, Haftvad and his seven sons became very powerful in Kajaran and, with his vast supplies of gold, was able to raise an army.¹²⁰ He subsequently built a fortress above Kajaran with a tall wall.¹²¹ Five years later, the

¹¹⁵ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 650.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 653.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 654-55.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., 655.

worm was “as massive as an elephant” and Haftvad now controlled the land between Kerman to the Sea of China.¹²² Haftvad became very powerful and his fortress became so renowned that “even the winds of heaven did not dare blow about it.”¹²³ Haftvad derived his power from the earthly worm instead of God and challenged Ardeshir's stature as a ruler endowed with *farr*, the good figure in this dichotomy. Ardeshir alluded to this, “In his essence that worm is Ahriman, the enemy of the creator of the world,” meaning that if Haftvad is deriving his power from this evil creature, his rule is illegitimate.¹²⁴ Ardeshir attempted to fight Haftvad but was evenly matched and each wave of men Ardeshir sent were defeated.¹²⁵ Knowing he must kill the worm, Ardeshir and seven of his best soldiers disguised themselves as merchants and infiltrated Haftvad’s lair.¹²⁶ He dumped molten lead down the worm’s throat, killing it, and Haftvad and his son were slain by a hail of arrows after Ardeshir captured the fort.¹²⁷

Haftvad and the worm further represent the good versus evil dynamic in Zoroastrianism. Ardeshir represents the good hero, because he knows that the worship of this worm not only goes against his religion, but also represents a grave threat to the entire realm. When Ardeshir killed the worm and Haftvad, this represents a triumph over Ahriman and the restoration of balance to the world. Haftvad is compared to Zahhak casting him as an evil ruler worthy of deposition and overthrow. Haftvad only draws legitimacy from the evil worm, not from *farr*, making him ultimately illegitimate. This powerful example demonstrates to kings that they must bring infrastructure to their realm through public works and ensure that justice flourishes by protecting their realm from internal threats.

¹²² Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 654.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 652-55.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 658.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 655-660.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 659.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 655-61.

The Overthrow of Yazdegerd III and the Collapse of the Persian Monarchy

Yazdegerd III (reigned 632-650) was the last and final king of the Sassanian dynasty (224-650) as the Arab Muslims invaded the realm, with the decisive battle being at Qadesiyah (around 634).¹²⁸ This portion of the *Shahnameh* is historical and sheds light on the weakness of the frail empire that Yazdegerd III inherited. Yazdegerd III was merely eight years old at the time he rose to the throne and inherited a dysfunctional and crumbling empire wracked by assassinations and political intrigue.¹²⁹ After several defeats by the Byzantine army in Anatolia and the Levant, Kosrow, king at the time, was deposed by the warrior aristocracy who enthroned his son, Seroye.¹³⁰ Seroye's reign was marked by large-scale violence, as he murdered all 17 of his brothers, depriving the monarchy of a successor.¹³¹ Additionally public works projects failed across Persia and Mesopotamia and plague devastated the western provinces.¹³² His successor, Ardeshir III, was murdered by Sahrvaraz and he assumed the throne who was then killed after 40 days.¹³³ Two daughters of Kosrow then reigned who were also murdered and Yazdegerd III succeeded them.¹³⁴

Omar, the second of the caliphs who succeeded the Prophet Muhammad, sent armies to conquer Iran and bring Islam. Yazdegerd dispatched his general Rostam to fight the oncoming Arab armies.¹³⁵ Ferdowsi explained that they fought for 30 months, or approximately two and a half years, until the army made a final stand at Qadisiyah in Iraq.¹³⁶ Rostam consulted his

¹²⁸ Alireza Shahpur Shabazi. "Sasanian Dynasty." Encyclopaedia Iranica, 2005.; D. Gershon Lewental. "Qadesiya, Battle of," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, 2014), <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/qadesiya-battle>.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 940.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

astrolabe and found that “the day of disaster” loomed and subsequently penned a lament to his brother, translated by Davis.¹³⁷ Rostam wrote about what the stars had told him, giving him instructions to flee but use all of his strength to keep the king alive, “since of this noble line the king alone still lives; the House of Sasan and its throne depend on him.”¹³⁸ This lament certainly reflected the fear among Persians that with the Arab invasion, their culture would be destroyed.

“But for the Persians I will weep, and for
The House of Sasan ruined by this war;
Alas for their great crown and throne, for all
The royal splendor destined now to fall,
To be fragmented by the Arabs’ might;
The stars decree for us defeat and flight.
Four hundred years will pass in which our name
Will be forgotten and devoid of fame.”¹³⁹

Rostam also fears for the people and the disaster that will fall on Persia when the Arabs win, and described a considerably apocalyptic picture:

“Justice and charity will disappear,
At night, the time to hide away and sleep,
Men’s eyes will glitter to make others weep;
Strangers will rule us then, and with their might
They’ll plunder us and turn our days to night.
They will not care for just or righteous men,

¹³⁷ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 941.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

Deceit and fraudulence will flourish then.
Warriors will go on foot, while puffed-up pride
And empty boasts will arm themselves and ride;
The peasantry will suffer from neglect,
Lineage and skill will garner no respect,
Men will be mutual thieves and have no shame,
What's hidden will be worse than what is known,
And stony-hearted kings will seize the throne.”¹⁴⁰

Rostam feared for the collapse of kingly justice and worried that the Arabs would only destroy Persia instead of develop it. His fear for the people is particularly pronounced as he routinely cited their plight and predicted that this decline would be a serious breach of justice and would weaken elements of Arab rule. Rostam died in this battle which prompted Yazdegerd to flee to Khorasan.¹⁴¹ The governor of Khorasan was Mahuy, and Yazdegerd trusted him because he raised him up to his current position from that of a “a lowly shepherd, and laborer in the fields.”¹⁴² Despite his advisor Farrokhzad's warning not to trust Mahuy, Yazdegerd insisted and upon their journey, they encountered numerous subjects who came forward weeping and mourning Yazdegerd's flight. When Farrokhzad departed for Rey, and with Yazdegerd left with Mahuy, “soon the malevolent Mahuy forgot all thoughts of kindness.”¹⁴³ During his stay in Marv, Mahuy sent 10,000 cavalry to capture Yazdegerd and seize the Persian throne.¹⁴⁴ When Yazdegerd and his men were about to attack the oncoming Turkish army, Yazdegerd's force

¹⁴⁰ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 943-44.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 950.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 951.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 953-4.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 954.

“turned their backs on the monarch and abandoned him to the enemy cavalry.”¹⁴⁵ Though he fought hard, Yazdegerd ultimately had to retreat and fled to a mill.¹⁴⁶ Ferdowsi lamented this twist of fate:

“This is the way of the deceitful world, raising a man up and casting him down. When fortune was with him, his throne was in the heavens, and now a mill was his lot; the world’s favors are many, but they are exceeded by its poison.”¹⁴⁷

Yazdegerd slept there overnight and the next morning, the humble miller named Khosrow came and recognized Yazdegerd and was shocked to find him hiding in his mill.¹⁴⁸ Yazdegerd does not explicitly admit he is the king and instead explained he was a soldier hiding from the battle.¹⁴⁹

The miller fed him some bread and then left to find Yazdegerd a barsom to pray.¹⁵⁰ When Khosrow went to the headman of Zarg, the headman asked Khosrow who needed the barsom and Khosrow described who he saw.¹⁵¹ The headman demanded he tell Mahuy who he saw and gave Khosrow to one of Mahuy’s soldiers.¹⁵² Khosrow told Mahuy and, knowing that this was none other than Yazdegerd, ordered Khosrow to cut Yazdegerd’s head off.¹⁵³ Khosrow went back to the mill and, filled with tears, plunged a dagger into Yazdegerd’s chest, killing him.¹⁵⁴

Ferdowsi’s lament exemplified his sadness:

“A man who understands the world soon says

There is no sense or wisdom in its ways:

¹⁴⁵ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 955.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 956.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 957.

If this is how imperial blood is spilled
And innocents like Yazdegerd are killed,
The seven spheres grow weary of their roles —
No longer do they cherish mortal souls.
The heavens mingle their malevolence
With kindnesses in ways which make no sense,
And if it is best if you can watch them move
Untouched by indignation and by love.”¹⁵⁵

Ferdowsi painted Yazdegerd largely as a victim of circumstance in this passage and mourned the loss of Yazdegerd. However, the insight into the destruction of the empire exemplified its weakness and frailty and what happens when an empire stops serving its people. Though Yazdegerd inherited a collapsing empire, the story harkens back to that of Jamshid when he lost his *farr* — a foreign (Arab) invader captured the throne and wrought havoc, bringing the story in full circle. This underlying current of the rise and fall of kings emphasizes the importance of good kingly rule. The *Shahnameh* exhibits a cycle of justice and kingly rule and though a king will enjoy prosperity, they will weaken eventually and collapse. This was true for Jamshid in the far past and Yazdegerd experienced the same fate.

Ferdowsi also lamented the triumph of Omar and religious-based government: “After this came the era of Omar (the second caliph of the Rashidun Caliphate and a senior companion of the Prophet), and when he brought the new faith, the pulpit replaced the throne.”¹⁵⁶ Justice had failed in the empire and the dynasty grew weak. There are several predictions by Rostam that parallel Zoroastrian predictions of social collapse, where Rostam foretold the collapse of the

¹⁵⁵ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 957.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 961.

empire and his own death.¹⁵⁷ Justice broke down in the empire and caused a foreign enemy, the Arabs in this case, to invade Persia and establish Islam as the dominant religion. This spelled the end for the Persian monarchy and ultimately underscores the importance of maintaining a just empire for the people. When justice disappears, the empire is doomed.

The *Shahnameh* is the oldest advice text in this study and carried significant influence in the texts that were written in the decades and centuries after. The *Shahnameh* was read and known across numerous empires in the Middle East as Persian became the language of culture and scholarship. The following texts draw several examples from the *Shahnameh*, and bolster its role in advice literature as the master narrative.

The *Siyasatnama* and controlling the elites

The *Siyasatnama*, or in English, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, was written by Hasan ibn ‘Ali of Tus, entitled Nizam al-Mulk. For almost 30 years, he served under Sultan Alp Arslan (1063-1072) and then under his son Malik Shah (1072-1092) from 1063 to 1092 as vizier of the Seljuk Empire (1037-1194).¹⁵⁸ He began writing the *Siyasatnama* in 1086 when he was commissioned by Sultan Malikshah to write the text, placing its actual composition between 1086 and 1091.¹⁵⁹ Similar to the *Shahnameh*, the *Siyasatnama* is also of Persianate origin and was written about 60 years following Ferdowsi’s death in 1020 indicating the probability that Nizam al-Mulk understood the *Shahnameh* and its recommendations. Additionally, Nizam al-Mulk’s father was an administrator in the Ghaznavid Empire.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Hayes, Edmund. “The Death of Kings: Group Identity and the Tragedy of *Nezhād* in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*,” *Journal of Iranian Studies* 48 no. 3 (2015): 369-393.

¹⁵⁸ Nizam al-Mulk. *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, ix.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, ix.

The Seljuks were originally a tribe of Turkish nomads from the Central Asian steppes who migrated to what was the Ghaznavid Empire (977-1186) and eventually became strong enough to establish their own dynasty in Khorasan in eastern Iran.¹⁶¹ By the 1030s, the Seljuks had become restless and the Ghaznavid Sultan Mas'ud (1030-41) "lost all control over them."¹⁶² The local notables of the Khorasani cities had been alienated by high taxation and they turned their loyalty to the Seljuk leaders of the region.¹⁶³ After about 20 years, the Ghaznavids were displaced and forced to relocate to the Punjab region of modern-day Pakistan.¹⁶⁴ The Seljuks established themselves in Anatolia and Iran, east of Baghdad, and, according to Marshall Hodgson, was the "most nearly successful attempt at the restoration of Muslim unity."¹⁶⁵ Toghril-beg, the paramount Seljuk ruler, came to an agreement with the caliph in Baghdad, that as a Sunni, he replaced the Shi'a Persian Buyid dynasty (934-1062) in 1055 and the Buyid territory fell to him cementing their power and legitimacy rooted in the caliph's religious authority.¹⁶⁶

Hasan was born in 1018 in Tus in Khorasan and was assassinated in 1092 by a member of the Ismailis, a Shi'i sect who used assassination as a means of war against the Seljuks, eventually drawing Nizam al-Mulk's harsh criticism in the final pages of the *Siyasatnama*.¹⁶⁷ Hasan's father migrated to Tus as a tax collector in the service of the Ghaznavids.¹⁶⁸ When Khorasan fell to the Seljuks in 1040, his father went to Ghazna taking his son Hasan with him.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶¹ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* v. 2, 41.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 42.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 41.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 43.

¹⁶⁷ — — —, *The Secret Order of Assassins: The Struggle of the Early Nizari Isma'ilis Against the Islamic World*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 82.

¹⁶⁸ Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, ix.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., x.

He probably worked in the administration of the Ghaznavid empire at the time but then returned to Khorasan after a few years and worked under the Seljuks.¹⁷⁰ Simultaneously, the Seljuk brothers, Tughril Beg (990-1063) and Chaghri Beg (990s-1060), divided the dominion between them with Tughril taking the western half with its capital in Baghdad and Chaghri taking the east with his capital in Merv.¹⁷¹ When Chaghri died in 1060, Tughril became paramount leader and Chaghri's son, Alp Arslan, succeeded him as governor of Khorasan.¹⁷² Nizam al-Mulk had been an advisor to him for some years during the period that Alp Arslan served his father in a subordinate command in eastern Khorasan.¹⁷³

The *Shahnameh's* influence can be observed in some anecdotes and advice Nizam al-Mulk offers in this didactic text, lending credence that the *Shahnameh's* lessons contributed to a Persianate understanding of good rule and justice. When the Central Asian tribes migrated west and established a foothold, their governing styles typified that of a decentralized and nomadic people. To this effect, they captured pasturelands and developed a governing philosophy that added Byzantine and Fatimid practices to that of Iran and the Fertile Crescent to create a new mode of Islamic governance that was more cosmopolitan in nature.¹⁷⁴

In the *Siyasatnama*, Nizam al-Mulk educated the king in sedentary ruling principles using Ferdowsi's lessons on kingship. However, Nizam al-Mulk wrote as a bureaucrat and provided practical skills of rule such as surveillance, just taxes, total authority centralized in the king, and just administration. Nizam al-Mulk is writing as an elite and provided lessons of bureaucratic justice rather than Ferdowsi's moral sense of justice. Nizam al-Mulk is concerned with

¹⁷⁰ Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, x.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, x.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Darling, *A History of Social Justice and Political Power in the Middle East*, 90.

maintaining power at all costs, suggesting the use of surveillance apparatuses and bureaucratic centralization. Nizam al-Mulk does not mention *farr* or Zoroastrianism's good versus evil paradigm. Instead, Nizam al-Mulk wrote of power in a raw and practical manner, asserting that maintaining and securing power is the primary responsibility, though justice is important for the king's legitimacy.¹⁷⁵ Nizam al-Mulk additionally does not discuss what happens when the king is not just and only focuses on securing a king's power. This makes the *Siyasatnama* a manual for kings and treats justice as a tool for maintaining power but utilizes Ferdowsi's message that a king must be just in his actions to keep the people from rebelling against his authority.

Nizam al-Mulk illustrated these lessons through a series of anecdotes and chief among these is the story of 'Ali Nushtgin, a general and boon companion (a close friend chosen to spend time with the sultan) of Seljuk Sultan Mahmud. 'Ali Nushtgin and another general, Muhammad 'Arabi, drank all night with Sultan Mahmud. By breakfast-time the next morning, 'Ali Nushtgin was "in a state of giddiness and he was suffering badly from lack of sleep and excess of wine."¹⁷⁶ 'Ali Nushtgin asked permission to go home, but Mahmud warned, "It is not fitting for you to go out in this state in broad daylight. Rest here indoors until the afternoon prayer and then go when you are sober. If the censor (*muhtasib*) sees you like this in the bazaar, he will arrest you and give you the lash."¹⁷⁷ Sultan Mahmud further warned that 'Ali Nushtgin will be "put to shame" and that he would be "very embarrassed and unable to help you."¹⁷⁸ 'Ali Nushtgin commanded a force of 50,000 men and his hubris resulted in him doubting the *muhtasib* would publicly punish him.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ London, Jennifer A. *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 32 No. 3 (Autumn 2011: Imprint Academic Ltd.), 433.

¹⁷⁶ Nizam al-Mulk. *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, 45.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

In the middle of the bazaar, the *muhtasib* caught ‘Ali Nushtgin and ordered his retinue to pull ‘Ali Nushtgin from his horse.¹⁸⁰ The *muhtasib*, with his own hand, then beat ‘Ali Nushtgin forty strokes with a stick while his servants and followers looked on.¹⁸¹ “Nobody was bold enough to say a word,” Nizam al-Mulk wrote, “and that [*muhtasib*] was a Turkish eunuch, old and venerable, who had acquired many rights by his long service.”¹⁸² The next day, ‘Ali Nushtgin went to Sultan Mahmud’s court, where the sultan asked if he escaped the *muhtasib*.¹⁸³ ‘Ali Nushtgin showed his bruised back to the sultan, and the sultan laughed and said, “Now repent and resolve never to go outdoors drunk again.”¹⁸⁴ Nizam al-Mulk concluded, “Since the rules of administration and discipline were firmly established in the country, the workings of justice took this course that we have related.”¹⁸⁵

This story reminded a sultan of the importance of ensuring justice is delivered to both poor and rich alike, and that government officials are held accountable despite rank and power. Ensuring justice is reciprocated and that corruption and the potential for state elites to take advantage of the people are limited is a major component for just rule. However, it is important that this is seen as more of a method of survival and maintaining power rather than a means of a moral sense of justice. Additionally, this story indicates that there is a link between the *Shahnameh* and the *Siyasatnama*. Ferdowsi recommended the importance of ensuring that elites are not left to their own devices. This sentiment is narrated through the story of Ardeshir as he gave instructions to his son Shapur as Ardeshir, on his deathbed, bestowed the kingdom to him. “Don’t despise the petitions of the poor, and don’t promote to high rank people who have an evil

¹⁸⁰ Nizam al-Mulk. *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, 46.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid., 46.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

nature,” stated Ardeshir, “... always be someone who dispenses justice, and who looks after his subjects, since a man who is generous and patient is blessed.”¹⁸⁶ This interlaces the concept of just rule into the *Shahnameh* by ensuring that the people are allowed to flourish and agriculture can thrive without oppression by greedy elites. Additionally, the dimension of supporting the people converges here as Ardeshir is keenly aware that they are the foundation to a healthy governmental system.

The *Muqaddimah*: The Sociological and Urban Forms of Justice

The *Muqaddimah*, or “The Introduction” in English, was written by Ibn Khaldun, a statesman, jurist, historian, and scholar, who was born in Tunis in 1332.¹⁸⁷ Ibn Khaldun began writing the text as an introduction to his first book of his universal *Kitab al-'Ibar (Book of Lessons)* in 1377.¹⁸⁸ Ibn Khaldun was descended from an aristocratic family who had enjoyed several centuries of prominence in the political leadership of Moorish Spain.¹⁸⁹ Not long before the fall of Seville to Ferdinand of Castille in 1248, the family migrated to North Africa and became employed in the court of the Hafsid dynasty (1229-1574) in Bone and Tunis in modern-day Algeria and Tunisia, respectively.¹⁹⁰ Ibn Khaldun oscillated between several dynasties in northwest Africa during the intense political upheaval of the formative years of his life.¹⁹¹ This was primarily centered around the growing instability of the Hafsid dynasty and a series of ineffective leaders.¹⁹² While Seljuk and Central Asian states were rising in the east, the fractured

¹⁸⁶ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 679.

¹⁸⁷ Ibn Khaldun. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. By Franz Rosenthal. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), vii.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., ix.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam v. 2*, 478.

regional events of northwest Africa proceeded largely separate from Abbasid influence.¹⁹³ Though they were somewhat removed from the Abbasid empire (750-1258, 1261-1517), the Berber dynasties in the west Mediterranean had some Islamic influences though left Berber cultural identity and tradition largely intact.¹⁹⁴ It was not until the 11th century that Islam had become deeply rooted in the Maghreb and began to spread south of the Saharan desert.¹⁹⁵ As Persian became the language of culture in the eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia, importantly, Ibn Khaldun wrote his scholarship in Arabic yet found most of his readership in the Persianate east.¹⁹⁶ The *Muqaddimah* was also translated into Turkish and was popular in the Persianate milieu of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁹⁷

Ibn Khaldun narrated the importance of just rule in the realm of the broader urban environment. Ibn Khaldun stands in contrast to Nizam al-Mulk because of his sociological perspective. Nizam al-Mulk analyzed governmental functions and then provided anecdotes in a manual for kingly rule. Ibn Khaldun instead traced the lifespan of dynasties through a very formulaic method: kings initially gained power, then adopted citted life and civilization, developed an increased dependence on luxury goods which resulted in the over-exploitation of the population, and the eventual collapse of the dynasty.¹⁹⁸

Ibn Khaldun saw the development of dynasties through urbanization. The human condition in rural environments, according to him, lacked the refinements of culture and civilization.¹⁹⁹ With strong *'asabiyyah* (“group feeling” or solidarity), tribes could dominate already developed urban environments and with this new group solidarity could develop settled

¹⁹³ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* v. 2, 268, 375.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 482.

¹⁹⁸ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, xi.

¹⁹⁹ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* v. 2, 481.

arts or allow it to flourish in urban areas.²⁰⁰ However, tribal dynasties had a life cycle and with the adoption of a sedentary lifestyle and luxuries, rulers languished and the group feeling crumbled.²⁰¹ The rulers lived on the wealth of conquered cities, and the people's taxes were expected to be used to build public works projects, such as canals for agriculture in a social contract based on justice.²⁰² Ibn Khaldun wrote that royal authority is reciprocal, in essence, there exists a "relationship between ruler and subjects."²⁰³ Ibn Khaldun explained that if this authority is exercised effectively and justly, "the purpose of government is perfectly achieved. If such rulership is good and beneficial, it will serve the interests of the subjects. If it is bad and unfair, it will be harmful to them and cause their destruction."²⁰⁴

The most compelling story Ibn Khaldun narrated in the text is of the Sasanian king Bahram V (reigned 420-438) which in this parable illustrated the importance of kingly justice through the mouth of an owl.²⁰⁵ Darling also cites this parable, stating that it shows the ill effects of injustice on society.²⁰⁶ However, the story of Bahram is important in the *Shahnameh* and the intersection of both narratives not only exemplifies Ibn Khaldun's knowledge of and influence by the *Shahnameh*, but the profound effects of Ferdowsi's moral sense of justice on later advice works. Nonetheless, as Darling notes, it reinforces Ibn Khaldun's assertion that injustice has a disastrous effect on civilized life.²⁰⁷ Ibn Khaldun quoted the parable with the advice from the *mobedh* (Zoroastrian priest) in his work:

²⁰⁰ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, xi.

²⁰¹ Darling, *A History of Social Justice and Political Power in the Middle East*, 123-4.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁰³ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, 153.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ O. Klíma, "Bahrām V Gor," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, III/5, pp. 514-522, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bahram-05>

²⁰⁶ Darling, *A History of Social Justice and Political Power in the Middle East*, 124.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

“In the days of King Bahram b. Bahram, the Mobedhan, the chief religious dignitary among the Persians,²⁰⁸ expressed to the King his disapproval of the latter’s injustice and indifference to the consequences that his injustice must bring upon the dynasty. He did this through a parable, which he placed in the mouth of an owl. The King, hearing an owl’s cry, asked the Mobedhan whether he understood what it was saying. He replied: ‘a male owl wanted to marry a female owl. The female owl, as a condition prior to consent, asked the male owl for the gift of twenty villages ruined in the days of Bahram, that she might hoot in them. (the male owl) accepted her condition and said to her, “If the King continues to rule, I shall give you a thousand ruined villages. This is of all wishes the easiest to fulfill.”’²⁰⁹

Bahram is portrayed as a leader constantly learning and Ferdowsi carefully traced the transformation of a restless youth and prideful warrior to a king endowed with the *farr* and determined not to repeat the mistakes and injustices of his father, Yazdegerd I. Nonetheless, Bahram had many flaws, such as a weakness for wine and women, possibly what Ibn Khaldun means by Bahram’s “indifference.” His chief priest Ruzbeh, or the *mobedh*, complained of Bahram’s expansive harem and the financial drain it causes: “the chief eunuch has counted nine hundred and thirty nobly born women in his harem,” adding,



A silver plate showing a Sasanian lion hunt, popularly interpreted to be of Bahram V who was known for his hunting exploits. Photo courtesy of the British Museum.

²⁰⁸ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, 40. A Mobedh is a Zoroastrian priest. The Mobedhan is the Persian plural.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 239-240.

“whoever heard of such a king.”²¹⁰ Bahram’s enemies across the world seized on this “indifference” (preoccupation with wine and women) and used it as a pretext to invade, which caught the Persians somewhat off guard.²¹¹ However, in the story that Ibn Khaldun recounted above, Bahram is also painted as a king who is learning and growing into his role which is consistent with his portrayal by Ferdowsi.

The story in the *Shahnameh* parallels the parable of the owl quite well as Bahram traveled the realm routinely with Ruzbeh.²¹² Bahram, irritated from not finding any deer or onager on a hunting trip, wished to rest in a village on the path.²¹³ No one came to greet him and he was greatly offended so he ordered Ruzbeh to destroy the village:

““May this green, prosperous village be a den
Of beasts — a wild, uncultivated fen —
And may the water dry in every ditch
And turn to stagnant mud as black as pitch!””²¹⁴

The *mobedh* then announced that all leaders no longer held authority and everyone was equal in rank and stature: “laborer and headman are equal: men, women, and children, you are all headmen of the village!”²¹⁵ This plunged the village into a civil war. The following year, Bahram goes hunting in the same area and comes across the ruined village. Saddened, he ordered Ruzbeh to restore the village with money from the treasury.²¹⁶ This story follows a similar arc: Bahram’s injustice, in this case his jealousy and ego, ruins a village and is obligated to restore it out of concern for the long-term impacts. The village, though, resembles more than continuity of

²¹⁰ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 743.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 755.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 734-754.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 734.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 735.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

stories: it establishes the exceptional nature of the people in ensuring just rule. The villages are important in upholding the government because a ruined village provides no taxes, and restoring the village not only exemplifies the king's justice but the health of the realm.

This parable of the owl, a common bad omen in most of the Middle East, demonstrated the importance of just administration and how, according to Ibn Khaldun, injustice would certainly ruin an otherwise prosperous urban civilization. These ancient empires relied on agriculture and the king was expected to bring prosperity to the realm through cultivation and fair taxes, hence the emphasis on the villages. If the king let this important task lapse, his kingdom was destined for collapse because these villages no longer provided a tax base, starving the dynasty for money. Though these kings were often settled in an urban environment, the linkages between urban and rural were crucial to maintain especially since losses in productivity are felt less in urban spaces.

Conclusion

Just rule is portrayed as a cycle in the *Shahnameh*. This cyclical relationship exemplifies the importance for kings to ensure they remain devoted and just to their subjects. These texts were important sources of wisdom and important sources for the ethics of governing a population. Elites in these dynasties were multilingual and had access to these texts as Persian was the language of culture and scholarship. Although traditionally seen as a great work of world literature, this study has shown that the *Shahnameh* is an advice text because of its lengthy and rich portrayal of many previously influential kings and the display of their *farr*. The *Shahnameh* indicated to a king who may have read this text that it is imperative to behave justly and remain humble to God or inevitably risk losing his *farr*.

In the reign of Zahhak, the good versus evil dynamic of Zoroastrianism is evident. Jamshid, though noble in the beginning, lost his royal *farr* after becoming too arrogant. The invasion of Zahhak represents the ruin Iran could experience when kings do not serve their people. Kaveh rebelled against Zahhak's injustice and sought Feraydun who was living in exile, and brought forward the good hero in this dichotomy. Kaveh's rebellion illustrates that the people have a duty and a right to topple unjust leaders, but also shows kings what they risk when they act unjustly toward their people. Kaveh is a blacksmith and through him, Ferdowsi gave a prominent voice to the artisans and provided a method of action for injustice.

The death of Esfandiyar orchestrated by Goshtasp emphasized to future kings that it is critical to uphold the peace and stability of the kingdom. This is a critical component of just rule because without the taxes and agriculture kept constant by peace, the kingdom fails. Similarly, in the story of Goshtasp, his kingdom lost all legitimacy by forsaking the components that stabilized the government. This was an unjust act and Goshtasp consequently lost all support for his reign because he no longer appreciated and supported this vital part of his kingdom.

Ardeshir, the historical founder of the Sasanian dynasty, is presented as a city-builder, a great conqueror, and the victor over evil. These qualities emphasized the importance of bringing infrastructure to the deserts and the people. Ardeshir built numerous cities throughout his realm and his construction of a great capital overflowing with gardens and palaces out of an arid landscape is a symbol of his justice. Ardeshir's public works projects brought prosperity, a major aspect of maintaining just rule and peace. Ardeshir's conflict with Haftvad who draws his power from an evil worm exemplifies the Zoroastrian good versus evil dichotomy as well and casts the importance of drawing legitimacy from *farr* and nothing else. Ardeshir's justice is reflected through his construction of public works, which kings were expected to do in order to provide

prosperity to their subjects. Good administration and justice is exemplified in Ardeshir's narrative and reflects the encouragement of later advice writers to support their populace through major projects, such as irrigation canals and the construction of cities.

Kings are also presented with the troubling scene in the *Shahnameh* of when a government stops serving its people. Yazdegerd III inherited a frail Sasanian empire, and though Yazdegerd is painted largely as a victim of circumstance by Ferdowsi, he failed to adequately take hold of his kingdom. Coupled with the turmoil the Sasanian dynasty was already experiencing when Yazdegerd finally took over, a foreign invader, the Muslims from Arabia, was once again allowed to take over and, this time, permanently. Yazdegerd was killed by Khosrow the miller which notably exemplifies the power of the people in maintaining a dynasty.

The overlap between the *Shahnameh* and both the *Siyasatnama* and the *Muqaddimah* indicates that the *Shahnameh* is the master narrative and Nizam al-Mulk and Ibn Khaldun derived their recommendations from the teachings of the *Shahnameh*, a text they would have had access to. Through the story of 'Ali Nushtgin, Nizam al-Mulk emphasized the importance of controlling state elites to ensure they do not act unjustly toward the people. 'Ali Nushtgin was a famed general and a friend of Sultan Mahmud, yet he was still punished which held the elites to the same standards as the people. Using the same lessons taught in the *Shahnameh*, Nizam al-Mulk provided a blueprint for power and how to preserve it. The parable of Bahram and the owl exemplified the importance of just administration and how, according to Ibn Khaldun, injustice would ruin a prosperous urban civilization. Bahram is portrayed in both the *Shahnameh* and the *Muqaddimah* as a leader who is constantly developing but ultimately transformed into a better and more just king. Ibn Khaldun used a similar concept of cyclical justice when discussing dynasties and their lifespan.

Ferdowsi, Nizam al-Mulk, and Ibn Khaldun are rarely included in discussions of just rule in the humanistic tradition or curricula on political thought. Primarily, students only discuss or read the writings of Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Politics* with the exclusion of Near Eastern scholars. This study has also shown the rich characteristics of Middle Eastern scholarship on political theory and the value of their own contributions to political advice works in their respective empires. There are parallels to the western notion of just rule outlined in Plato and Aristotle's works. However, the scholars in this study ultimately outline a type of justice that is uniquely focused on its existence in a non-democratic framework but with the king remaining accountable to his subjects.

Ferdowsi called for a moral sense of justice and this made kings remember exactly who they derive their power from, and how fragile that power is. The *Shahnameh*'s influence is clearly seen in these works and its recommendations on how a just king should act provided a foundation for later works. The three texts outlined in this study are related and learn from the *Shahnameh*, though they build on the lessons for their own recommendations. Indeed, dynasties have a lifespan and they hinge on the propensity for kings to rule properly. Ultimately this message applies to any type of government, and calls on leaders to not only be just in their dealings, but conscious of how everything is cyclical and requires every interlocking part to move together.

Glossary

Ahriman: The destructive and evil spirit and adversary of Ahura Mazda in Zoroastrianism.

Ahura Mazda: The creator and highest deity in Zoroastrianism.

‘Asabiyyah: Literally “group feeling,” this is a term coined by Ibn Khaldun in the *Muqaddimah* that implies a strong sense of social unity that will help tribes conquer and flourish in urban civilizations.

Mobedh: A Zoroastrian priest.

Muhtasib: A market inspector; the supervisor of bazaars, or marketplaces, in the medieval Middle East.

The *Muqaddimah*: Literally, “The Introduction,” the text was written by scholar Ibn Khaldun in 1377 as an introduction to his larger work *The Book of Lessons (Kitab al-‘Ibar)*.

The *Shahnameh*: Completed by Abolqasem Ferdowsi in 1010, the *Persian Book of Kings* is the Iranian national epic, chronicling the actions of pre-Islamic Iranian kings and heroes.

The *Siyasatnama*: The *Book of Government or Rules for Kings* written by Nizam al-Mulk between 1086 and 1091 for Sultan Malikshah of the Seljuk Empire.

Sultan: The Arabic-derived word meaning “king.”

Vizier: A high ranking minister in Islamicate empires.

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Bahram V who was known for his hunting exploits,” photo provided to author from the British Museum. Date unknown.