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## Duel Between Rostam and Sohrāb. King-Pahlavan Relations in a Historical and Cultural Perspective

*Pojedynek pomiędzy Rostamem i Sohrābem. Relacje król-pahlavan w perspektywie historyczno-kulturowej*

### ABSTRACT

Duels are one of the main elements of *Shāhnāma* by Abu'l-Qāsem Ferdowsī. Not only do they serve as exciting entertainment, they also reveal many intriguing aspects of the culture of pre-Islamic Iran. This paper analyzes one of the most important one-on-one fights in *The Persian Book of King*, i.e. the duel between Rostam and Sohrāb. However, I do not focus on the tragedy stemming from Rostam's unintentional filicide but on the relationship between the king and the *pahlavan*. The duel brilliantly demonstrates the relationship of the ruler with the subject and the subject with the ruler in pre-Islamic Iran, providing a basis for reflection on the topic.

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**Key words:** *Shāhnāma*, Rostam and Sohrāb, King-*Pahlavan* relations, pre-Islamic Iran, duel, national identity, cultural history

#### STRESZCZENIE

Pojedynki są jednym z głównych elementów *Shāhnāme* autorstwa Abu'l-Qāsema Ferdowsī'ego. Służą one nie tylko jako ekscytująca rozrywka, ale także ujawniają wiele intrygujących aspektów kultury przedislamskiego Iranu. W niniejszym artykule analizuję jedną z najważniejszych walk jeden na jednego w *Księdze Królewskiej*, tj. pojedynek pomiędzy Rostamem i Sohrābem. Nie skupiam się jednak na tragedii wynikającej z niezamierzzonego synobójstwa Rostama, ale na relacji między królem a *pahlavanem*. Pojedynek ten znakomicie ukazuje relację władcy do poddanego i poddanego do władcy w przedislamskim Iranie, stanowiąc podstawę do rozważań na ten temat.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *Shāhnāma*, Rostam i Sohrāb, relacje król-pahlavan, przedislamski Iran, pojedynek, tożsamość narodowa, historia kultury

#### INTRODUCTION

The great Persian Empire collapsed in 651 CE with the Arab invasion ending the reign of the Sassanid dynasty, which began in 224 CE. Slow and gradual Islamization pushed the culture, religion and traditions of one of the most powerful empires in known history out of people's consciousness. However, the Samanid dynasty, which traced its roots to the Persian social class of *dehqāns*<sup>1</sup>, showed great interest in Iran's past. This created the perfect climate for daredevils who wanted to preserve the history of pre-Islamic Iran in the written form<sup>2</sup>. One of them was Abu'l-Qāsem Ferdowsī Tusi (940–1019 or 1025), also having origins in this 'petty aristocracy'<sup>3</sup> and reportedly passionate about the stories of prominent kings of Iran since he was a child<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps it was this love of history that led the poet to devote approximately 35 years of his life to creating a monumental poem telling the history of his homeland.

<sup>1</sup> A. Tafazzolī, *Dehqām I. In the Sasanian period*, in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. VII, Fasc. 2, ed. E. Yarshater, New York 1998, pp. 223–224; A. Tafazzolī, *Dehqām II. In the Islamic period*, in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. VII, Fasc. 3, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, New York 1998, pp. 225–226; idem, *Sasanian society. I. Warriors II. Scribes III. Dehqāns*, New York 2000; C.J. Harter, *Narrative and Iranian Identity in the New Persian Renaissance and the Later Perso-Islamicate World*, Irvine 2016 [PhD dissertation, University of California], pp. 1–7.

<sup>2</sup> C.J. Harter, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> B. Zulyeno, *Firdowsi: National Character in Persian Literature*, "International Review of Humanities Studies" 2016, 1, p. 126.

The *Shāhnāma* (*The Persian Book of Kings*) by Ferdowsī carries aesthetic<sup>5</sup>, ethical<sup>6</sup>, as well as historical values, although the latter is disputed<sup>7</sup>. While I absolutely agree, with the Polish translator of the *Shāhnāma*, Władysław Dulęba, that: ‘The heroes of The Book of Kings, both those derived from historical figures and those whose primary models are creations of mythology, are depicted with the same fantasy and exaggeration. At the same time, the historical figures were given supernatural traits, while the heroes of myths were chained to earthly hardships and miseries. That is why it is so difficult for us today to distinguish them – like poppy seeds from ashes’<sup>8</sup>.

I also believe that Ferdowsī’s work is an excellent source of knowledge about the cultural history of pre-Islamic Iran. Yes, *Shāhnāma* is ‘even if of some historical significance, is primarily an epic poem’<sup>9</sup>, but it is not suspended in a vacuum – the events it describes take place in the cultural world of pre-Islamic Iran. While not necessarily faithful to political facts, after all it completely ignores the existence of the Achaemenid dynasty, awareness of whose existence among Iranians was lost until the 20th century<sup>10</sup>, it is the best and most complete source surviving to our time

<sup>5</sup> H. Mashhady, M. Noura, *A Case Study: Translation Problems in the Story of Rustam and Sohrab Based on Warner & Warner Translation*, “English Language Teaching” 2012, 5, 9, pp. 115–121.

<sup>6</sup> Z. Amiri, R. Ashrafzadeh, M. Badiezadeh, *Comparison of arrogance in Shahnameh and Bahmannameh based on the ancient story of Bahmannameh*, “Propósitos y Representaciones” 2021, 8; L.G. Baghi et al., *Moral Commitments in Firdausi’s Shahnameh*, “Journal of Social Studies” 2015, 1, 7, pp. 102–108; L. Ahmadi Nasr, A. Eshghi Sardehi, S. Ruzbahani, *Investigating the manifestations of greed in the epical and mythical characters of Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh*, “Journal of Advanced Pharmacy Education & Research” 2020, 10, 1, pp. 90–98; E. Zohdi, S. Faghfori, *Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh: An Attempt to Save Aryan Tradition through Diminishing the Concept of Filicide*, “International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies” 2015, 3, 3, pp. 27–38.

<sup>7</sup> M. Omidssalar, T. Daryae, *Šāh-nāma nn. The Šāh-nāma as a historical source*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sah-nama-nn-historical-source> [access: 28.12.2024].

<sup>8</sup> Org. „Bohaterowie Księgi Królewskiej, zarówno wywodzący się z postaci historycznych, jak i ci, których wzór pierwotny stanowią twory mitologii, przedstawieni są z tą samą fantazją i przesadą. Przy tym postaciom historycznym dorobiono cechy nadprzyrodzone, bohaterów mitów przykuto do trudów i niedoli ziemskich. Dlatego też tak trudno nam ich dzisiaj odróżnić – jak mak od popiołu”. Author’s translation. W. Dulęba, *Miedzy mitem a historią*, in: *Księga Królewska. Wybór*, by Abolqasem Ferdowsi, transl. W. Dulęba, Warszawa 1981, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> M. Omidssalar, T. Daryae, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> T. Daryae, *Introduction*, in: *Cyrus the Great: An Ancient Iranian King*, ed. idem, Santa Monica 2013, p. III. Daryae also points out that knowledge of the Achaemenids and Ardacids was deliberately erased from history by the new Sasanid dynasty, see idem, *Memory*

describing society before the Muslim conquest. As Omidsalar and Daryaei point out, the *Shāhnāma* is concerned with the history of the Iranian people, it is an ethnic history, and although it has elements of dynastic and local histories its primary focus remains the Iranian people as a whole. The most incontestable fact about this ethnic history is that it is not a chronicle of factual events but an ethnopoetic narration of Iran's story<sup>11</sup>.

So in its very form, Ferdowsī's work is oriented towards the people and the nation. It instills a sense of national identity stemming from a shared past and culture. To quote researchers: 'Shahnameh is a marvelous work of assertion of the cultural identity, language, values and the compendious history of a nation at a time when it was suffering from a tumultuous period of transition, transformation and the consequent confusion of the aggressive march of alien influences'<sup>12</sup>. The study of the text thus makes it possible to know, at least to some extent, that this culture pushed towards oblivion by Islamic culture, as seen through the eyes of a *dehqān* living at the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries. Learning about culture, on the other hand, makes it easier to understand certain political relations of pre-Islamic Iran. For politics are shaped by people, and people are shaped by the culture of their time.

Particularly intriguing in this context are duels, the analysis of which allows one to cover various aspects of society and culture. Duels can inspire researchers to consider destiny and tragedy through the eyes of Iranians of pre-Islamic Iran<sup>13</sup>, the criteria for Iranians' perception

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*and History: The Construction of the Past in late Antique Persia*, "Nāme-ye Irān-e Bāstān, The International Journal of Ancient Iranian Studies" 2001–2003, 1, 2, pp. 1–14 and idem, *The Convergence of History and Epic in Late Sasanian Era*, in: *For Shapur, Whose Lineage Was From The Gods: Proceeding of the Memorial to Alireza Shapur Shahbazi*, eds. K. Abdi, M.T. Atayi, Tehran 2023. On the diminished role of Parthian rulers, see K. Maksymiuk, *The Parthian nobility in Xusrō I Anōšīrvān court*, in: *Elites in the Ancient World*, v. 2, eds. D. Okoń, P. Briks, Szczecin 2015. Thus, Ferdowsī writing *Shāhnāma* probably had highly limited information about the pre-Sassanid world both in terms of historical facts and culture, which I will allude to later in the article.

<sup>11</sup> M. Omidsalar, T. Daryaei, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> E. Zohdi, S. Faghfori, *op. cit.*, pp. 27–38.

<sup>13</sup> R. Nazemiyan, M. Khoeini. *Recognition of Latency and Tragedy in Two Stories From 'Shahnameh'*, "Örgütsel Davranış Araştırmaları Dergisi Journal Of Organizational Behavior Research" 2018, 3, 2, pp. 1–12, ID: 81S2365; C. Cross, *'If Death is Just, What is Injustice?' Illicit Rage in 'Rostam and Sohrab' and 'The Knight's Tale'*, "Iranian Studies" 2015, 48, 3, pp. 395–422; M. Ebrahimi, A. Taheri, *The Tragedy in the Story of Rostam and Sohrab in Ferdowsi's 'Shahnameh'*, "Journal of History Culture and Art Research" 2017, 6, 1, pp. 96–105.

of right and wrong<sup>14</sup>, or the role of women on the battlefield<sup>15</sup>, and many more.

In this article, I analyze one of the most famous and tragic duels fought in *Shāhnāma* – the duel between Rostam and Sohrāb. About this event, scholars very aptly write that ‘The combat between Rostam and Sohrab is enumerated among the most sensitive epic stories and a similar example of it can be barely found in terms of sophistication and robustness’<sup>16</sup>. They emphasize its ethical values as much as its aesthetic, and the special emotionality that earned this fight a lasting place in the hearts of Iranians. Here we have a situation where a son and a father, without recognizing each other, confront each other in a deadly battle that ends with the death of the son inflicted by the father – a tragic, unintentional filicide<sup>17</sup>. In my analysis, however, I focus not on the tragedy of the fighting heroes, but on their relationship with their kings. Indeed, the circumstances that led to the duel are strongly linked to the two rulers and their relationships with their *pahlavans*. This gives us an intriguing picture of what his subordinate was to the king, and what his king was to the *pahlavan*. A careful analysis of the text changed my initial assumption that Kay Kāvus presents himself as a negative character in the story. While he is the antagonist of the scene’s protagonist, Rostam, he is not a villain, as he is sometimes perceived. However, the relationship between him and Rostam is much more complex, as I discuss later in the article.

At the beginning of the article, I focus on analyzing the relationship between Sohrāb and Afrāsīāb by showing the young hero as a tool in the hands of the Turanian king. I first show a brief characterization of each of them in the context of Sohrāb’s future duel with Rostam. In this section, too, I devote some attention to Tahmineh, Sohrāb’s mother, and the problem of the young hero’s identity resulting from not knowing

<sup>14</sup> J. Szklarz, *Rustam pokonuje Białego Dewa: odwieczna walka dobra ze złem w tekście i ikonografii*, in: *Istoriya Religiyi w Ukrainyi*, eds. M.M. Kapral et al., Lviv 2017; eadem, *Rostam’s Fight with the White Dīw in the Context of the Primeval Myth of the ‘Rain Shaman’*. *Theory of Polish Researcher Maria Składankowa*, „*Persica Antiqua*” 2023, 3, 5, pp. 51–60; eadem, *Wyprawa Kej Kausa na Mazanderan – szlachetna wojna przeciw demonom czy przerosł królewskiej ambicji? Rozważania na podstawie Księgi Królewskiej*, in: *Człowiek a historia. Ludzie i wydarzenia*, vol. 8, eds. B. Cecota, P. Jasiński, A. Sęderecka., Piotrków Trybunalski 2022.

<sup>15</sup> J. Szklarz, *Significance of the Helmet in fight between Sohrāb and Gordāfarid*, in: *Crowns, hats, turbans and helmets. The headgear in Iranian history*, vol. 1, *Pre-Islamic Period*, eds. K. Maksymiuk, G. Karamian, Siedlce–Tehran 2017, pp. 9–19; J. Szklarz, M. Moradi, *Gordāfarid of ‘Šāh-nāma’, the woman, who revolutionized the ‘naqqālī’ tradition*, “*Historia i Świat*” 2023, 12, pp. 193–206.

<sup>16</sup> L. Ahmadi Nasr et al., *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>17</sup> E. Zohdi, S. Faghfori, *op. cit.*

his own father's in a patriarchal society. I then analyze the duel itself, in which the characteristics of the two combatants are also shown in the context of their relationship with their kings. In the final phase of the article, I focus on the relationship between the *Šāhānšāh* (king of kings) of Iran, Key Kāvus, and his *pahlavan*, Rostam, wondering if the enmity between them contributed to the tragedy in which a father kills his son? These analyses will allow me to answer the question of whether and, if so, to what extent the relationship between the *pahlavan* and the king was linked to the tragedy of the duel in question.

### SORĀB AND HIS MOTHER, TAHMINEH

The story of Sohrāb's conception can be summarized as follows: the hero of Iran, Rostam, in search of his lost mount ends up in Samangan, where a beautiful princess in order to obtain the semen of a hero offers him her body and information about the missing horse. There is no great love or tragedy between them, there is one night of mutual understanding and passion. Rostam then rides off on Rakhsh's back and almost completely forgets about the encounter. Almost, because after a few years for the purposes of *The Tale of Sohrab*, he recalls a son who grows up by his mother's side in her homeland, without knowing anything about his father.

For many scholars<sup>18</sup>, Tahmineh fits into the group of great women who 'enjoy reason, magnanimity and even bravery' and 'have both inward and outward beauty'<sup>19</sup>. Elaheh Rahmanian and Reza Ashrafzadeh additionally point out her function of a loving mother to her child<sup>20</sup>. Tahmineh is a beautiful princess who consciously chooses to raise her son alone. Sohrāb grows up to be a beautiful and courageous young man who cannot be matched in battle by Iran's greatest heroes. However, she fails to provide him with one thing – a father who would instill in him a full sense of pride in his background. The ten-year-old hero asks: 'Tell

<sup>18</sup> F. Basirizadeh, N. Raoufzadeh, S. Zaheri Birgani, *The Image of Women in Eastern and Western Epic literature: 'Shahnameh' and 'Odyssey'*, "Humanities and Social Sciences" 2020, 3, pp. 768–776; R. Habibi, A. Toloei-Azar, *Women's Rebellion in Ferdowsi's 'Shahnameh'*, "Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology" 2021, 18, 7, pp. 3123–3135; S. Loveimi, *Fateful Women in Ferdowsi Shahnameh*, "English Language Teaching" 2016, 9, 5, pp. 46–53; E. Rahmanian, R. Ashrafzadeh *Women in Shahnameh: An Overview on Mythical, Lyrical and Social Aspects*, "Revista Humanidades" 2020, 10, 1.

<sup>19</sup> R. Habibi, A. Toloei-Azar, *op. cit.*, p. 3126.

<sup>20</sup> E. Rahmanian, R. Ashrafzadeh, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

me truly now, why is it I'm so taller than other boys of my age? Whose child am I, and what should I answer when people ask about my father? If you keep all this hidden from me, I won't let you live a moment longer'<sup>21</sup>. It seems that the problem of an unknown father is important to him, since he doesn't hesitate to threaten his mother with death if he doesn't get an answer. To have a father is to have an identity in a world that was clearly patriarchal<sup>22</sup>. Tahmineh is undoubtedly a brave, strong and independent woman, but her decision to raise a child without his father's involvement was somewhat selfish. Her lineage was not prominent or connected to any great family. She was the daughter of a king, but of Samangan, a city without much political significance. The recognition of her beauty and the bestowal of attention on her by the greatest hero known to the world is her desire. Tahmineh offers him more than just herself, knowing full well how important Rakhsh is to Rostam.

Desire destroys my mind, I long to bear  
 Within my woman's womb your son and heir;  
 I promise you your horse if you agree  
 Since all of Samangan must yield to me<sup>23</sup>.

She uses her beauty, her authority in the city and his wish to regain his beloved horse to satisfy her desires. The child born from that night is so precious to her that she says outright, 'if Rostam hears of how you've grown, he'll summon you to his side and break your mother's heart'<sup>24</sup>. Tahmineh is thus aware that Rostam, as a father, has a greater right to raise

<sup>21</sup> A. Ferdowsī, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, transl. D. Davis, New York 2007, p. 190.

<sup>22</sup> M. Brosius, *No Reason to Hide. Women in the Neo-Elamite and Persian Periods*, in: *Women in Antiquity, Real women across the Ancient World*, eds. S. L. Budin, J. MacIntosh Turfa, London–New York 2016; M. Macuch, *The Pahlavi model marriage contract in the light of Sasanian Family Law*, in: *Iranian languages and texts from Iran and Turan. Ronald E. Emmerick memorial Volume*, eds. M. Macuch, M. Maggi, W. Sundermann, Wiesbaden 2007; M. Macuch, *Incestuous Marriage in the Context of Sasanian Family Law*, in: *Ancient and Middle Iranian Studies: Proceedings of the 6th European Conference of Iranian Studies, Held in Vienna, 18–22 September 2007*, eds. M. Macuch, D. Weber, D. Durkin-Meisterernst, Wiesbaden 2010, pp. 133–148; K. Maksymiuk, *The position of women in the court of the first Sasanians*, in: *Género y mujeres en el mediterráneo antiguo. Iconografías y literaturas*, eds. P.D. Conesa Navarro, R.M.G. Bernal, J.J. Martínez García, Murcia 2019; K. Maksymiuk, *Marriage and divorce law in Pre-Islamic Persia. Legal status of the Sassanid' woman (224–651 AD)*, "Cogent Arts and Humanities" 2019, 6, 1, pp. 1–9; J. Szklarz, *Significance*, p. 11; J. Szklarz, M. Moradi, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

<sup>23</sup> A. Ferdowsī, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 190.

their son<sup>25</sup>, although he has never seen him with his eyes. Thus, this will involve a change of homeland for the boy, who is the fruit of a couple from two nations that have a deep hatred for each other. This issue was raised by Kathryn Johnston noting: 'It can be hypothesized that Sohrab's tragic death, compared to the less tragic deaths of others of mixed lineage, is because the Persian Rostam does not seek Sohrab's birth and because Sohrab is not raised in Iran by Iranians'<sup>26</sup>. Being raised as a prince of a country other than Iran actually puts him on the opposite side from his father in the event of a potential armed conflict, but I dare to point out that Sīāvākš coming from an Iranian father and a Central Asian mother<sup>27</sup>, his son Forūd, whose mother was Turanian, Esfandiār, son of an Iranian and a Rūmi princess – they all suffered tragic and untimely deaths. Let's look at the case of Sīāvākš's sons: Forūd (son of Pirān's sister/daughter<sup>28</sup>) and Kay Ƙosrow<sup>29</sup> (son of Farangīs, Afrāsīāb's daughter<sup>30</sup>). They were half-brothers and grew up together in Turan, fatherless, from two different mothers, both Turanians. Polygamy was not unheard of in Iran, especially among the ruling classes. Thus, for example, as Katarzyna Maksymiuk points out. 'The polygamy of the Sassanian kings resulted, on one hand, from a necessity to produce numerous male offspring, which would allow selection of the most able successor of the throne, on the other hand, from marriages with the high aristocratic families and allies aiming in consolidation of political arrangements'<sup>31</sup>.

Farangis, by virtue of her royal ancestry, may have been a Padishah-wife (*pādixšāy*-marriage)<sup>32</sup>, thus it was her son, Kay Ƙosrow, who was

<sup>25</sup> This topic is addressed by Davis in: D. Davis, *Women in the Shahnameh: Exotics and Natives, Rebellious Legends, and Dutiful Histories*, in: *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic Masculinity (The New Middle Ages)*, eds. S.S. Poor, J.K. Shulman, New York 2007. The author points out here that the sons of foreign women belonged to their father's country.

<sup>26</sup> K. Johnston, *Sleeping With the Enemy: Exogamous Marriage in the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi*, "Central Eurasian Studies Review" 2006, 5, 1, p. 38.

<sup>27</sup> D. Davis, *Women*, p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> D. Khaleghi-Motlagh, *Forūd* (2), in: *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. 10, fasc. 1, ed. E. Yarshater, New York 2001.

<sup>29</sup> P.O. Skjærvø, *Kayāniān vii. Kauui Haosrauuah, Kay Husrōy, Kay Ƙosrow*, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/kayanian-vii> [access: 11.12.2024].

<sup>30</sup> D. Khaleghi-Motlagh. *Farangīs*, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/farangis> [access: 11.12.2024].

<sup>31</sup> K. Maksymiuk, *Marriage*, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 4–5; M. Macuch, *The Pahlavi*.

chosen to succeed Kay Kāvus and brought with her mother to Iran<sup>33</sup>. Forūd retained a Turanian identity. Brothers from one father, born almost at the same time and raised together, adopted separate national identities because of their mothers' positions in the wife hierarchy. Sīāvākš's abandonment of Iran is, in my opinion, a more complex problem than Johnston suggests<sup>34</sup>, requiring deeper discussion, also in the context of considering Kay Kōsrow Iranian. We can also hypothesize whether Rostam's own death, no doubt tragic, was not a result of his mixed ancestry. In fact, he was a half Zaboli, and half Kābuli. He is politically Iranian, but his cultural and national distinctiveness is repeatedly emphasized in the pages of *Shāhnāma*. Nevertheless, he is referred to as the greatest hero of Iran, 'considered the foster father of all the warriors and kings of Iran'<sup>35</sup>. In this context, what contributes to the tragedy is not the fact that Sohrāb is the son of a mixed relationship, but that growing up he had no knowledge of his father's identity and thus his own.

The information that he is the son of none other than the world's greatest known hero inspires pride and ambition in the boy: 'the world's chieftains tell tales of Rostam's prowess; how can it be right for me to hide such a splendid lineage?'<sup>36</sup>. Pride of his lineage is part of his pride as a man<sup>37</sup>, and his descent from his father's side Sohrāb could indeed count among the most illustrious in the world. For the Sistān family boasts descent from Garšāsp (Karsāsp), descended from Jamshid<sup>38</sup>. Garšāsp was a great hero and founder of Sistān<sup>39</sup>. A boy who grew up without a father suddenly discovers that he is the son of Iran's greatest hero, proudly bearing the nickname 'Crown Bestower'<sup>40</sup>, and whose lineage is as noble and ancient as that of the line of kings of Iran. But it is Rostam who is the 'World's

<sup>33</sup> The Sassanids and the Kayanids are not the same dynasty in *Shāhnāma*, but as I mentioned earlier, the Sassanids removed the previous dynasties from the historical consciousness of Iranians, hence I assume that Ferdowsī may have imagined the culture of pre-Islamic times through the prism of Sassanid culture. This assumption seems valid when analyzing the epic.

<sup>34</sup> K. Johnston, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>35</sup> E. Zohdi, S. Faghfori, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>36</sup> A. Ferdowsī, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>37</sup> Z. Amiri et al., *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> A. Ferdowsī, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>39</sup> P.O. Skjærvø, *Karsāsp*, in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 15, fasc. 6, ed. E. Yarshater, New York 2011, p. 601.

<sup>40</sup> O.M. Davidson, *The crown-bestower in the Iranian Book of Kings*, 1983 [PhD diss., Princeton University]; idem, *The crown-bestower in the Iranian Book of Kings*, "Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce. Acta Iranica" 1984, 24, pp. 61–148; idem, *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings*, Ithaca–London 1994.

Hero' respected and admired among allies and enemies alike, which in the young man's mind makes him more suitable to be the King of Kings. Sohrāb said: 'If Rostam is my father and I'm his son, then no one else in all the world should wear the crown; when the sun and moon shine out in splendor, what should lesser stars do, boasting of their glory?'<sup>41</sup>. Without a moment's hesitation, he decides to overthrow both the King of Iran and King of Turan because he has no loyalty to either of them. This is because loyalty to a ruler arises from national identity, from the beliefs in which one is raised. Growing up without a father, without the values instilled by his family's vow to protect the Kayānids for generations, Sohrāb did not so much not share their values as simply not know them.

Tahmineh is unable to stop Sohrāb from his reckless expedition. Despite his very young age, as a mother, she does not have enough power over him. Although seen by scholars as a powerful woman, she is still only a woman limited by a certain cultural tradition. We see this bluntly when Sohrāb meets Gordāfarid, daughter of Gaždaham, on the battlefield and discovers in amazement that the woman bravely and without complexes faced him. He is sincerely amazed 'How is it that a woman should ride out from the Persian army and send up from her horse's hooves into the heavens?'<sup>42</sup>. The encounter with a female warrior is a surprise to him, as it is an unheard-of phenomenon in his homeland. It is also his first encounter with an Iranian trickster, for whom victory counts more than commonly held honor and 'he plays tricks in order to win his victories'<sup>43</sup>. Gordāfarid deception is a foreshadowing of his later encounter with Rostam, a lesson from which Sohrāb has not learned adequately. He proves too young, too inexperienced, or too driven to achieve his goal. He goes through the lands like a storm, and had it not been for the trickery of the courageous Gordāfarid<sup>44</sup>, would have captured Iran unprepared to defend itself.

Sohrāb thus proves that he poses a real threat to the entire country and the power and life of Kay Kāvus. He is brutal: 'When Sohrab heard such slighting words, he turned his back on Hojir and hid his face. Then he turned and struck him with such violence that Hojir sprawled headlong in the dirt'<sup>45</sup>. He is also volatile and dangerous: 'Sohrab's response was

<sup>41</sup> A. Ferdowsī, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 192.

<sup>43</sup> D. Davis, *Introduction*, in: *Rostam: Tales of Love and War from the Shahnameh* by A. Ferdowsī, transl. D. Davis, New York 2009, p. XVII. See also: idem, *Rustam-e Dastan*, "Iranian Studies" 1999, 32, 2, p. 235.

<sup>44</sup> A. Ferdowsī, *op. cit.*, pp. 192–194.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 202.

to bend low in the saddle and bear down on the Persian camp. With his lance he severed the ropes of seventy tent pegs; half of the great pavilion tumbled down, the sound of trumpets rang in the air, and the army scattered like wild asses before a lion<sup>46</sup>. Kāvus has every right to fear him, as the young man announced exactly what he would do to him: 'I swore a mighty oath [...], that I'd string Kavus up alive on gallows'<sup>47</sup>. It would seem that no one could stop the powerful, dangerous young man. Hojir, who was not a weak fighter himself and was defeated by him almost without resistance, thought: 'With his massive strength and mighty frame, he could well kill Rostam, and who from Iran would be able to avenge the hero's death? Then this Sohrab will seize Kavus's throne'<sup>48</sup>. The attack by Sohrāb's army and himself as an angry, aggressive assailant thus pose a real threat to Iran and its king.

Ferdowsī hints that the striking similarity in appearance between the two warriors should signal their kinship. He writes: 'he saw Sohrab, whose massive frame appeared like that of Sam'<sup>49</sup>. The resemblance between Sohrāb and Rostam was evident in their powerful physiques, making it plausible for them to recognize each other. However, while Rostam's physicality was indeed remarkable, he was not the only warrior of such stature. Describing Pilsom, Pirān's younger brother, Susan Fotoohi points out that: 'He was powerful as same as Rustam'<sup>50</sup>. The physical resemblance of stature is therefore not evidence, but merely a premise to prepare the reader for the impending tragedy.

#### KING AFRĀSĪĀB, IRAN'S ARCH-ENEMY

As I mentioned in the introduction, King Afrāsīāb plays an extremely important role in Sohrāb's tragedy. Ehsan Yarshater sums him up as follows: 'Turanian king and hero and Iran's archenemy in its legendary history. By far the most prominent of Turanian kings, Afrāsīāb is depicted in Iranian tradition as a formidable warrior and skillful general; an agent of Ahriman, he is endowed with magical powers and bent

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 201.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 203.

<sup>50</sup> S. Fotoohi, *Tur Family in Shahname*, "International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences" 2013, 9, p. 34.

on the destruction of Iranian lands'<sup>51</sup>. This description perfectly shows us Afrāsīāb's position not only as a powerful king and warrior, but also 'the most prominent of Turanian kings'. His antagonistic position towards Iran is also made clear, which from the point of view of Iranian culture makes him a negative figure. Indeed, Afrāsīāb is the arch-enemy of Iran, the main antagonist of the heroes and kings of the heroic part of *Shāhnāma*. Despite being the grandfather of one of Iran's most prominent *Šāhānšāh*, Kay Ǧosrow, the enmity and hatred between the neighboring countries during Kay Ǧosrow's reign has only increased. A definite contributor to this was the decision of the Turanian king to kill the Iranian prince, Sīāvaks<sup>52</sup>, married to his daughter, Farangīs<sup>53</sup>. This resulted in an intensification of hatred between the descendants of the Tur and the descendants of Iraj – two brothers, where greed, avarice<sup>54</sup> and jealousy of Tur and Salm led to fratricide. Iranian tradition strongly identifies the sons of Feridun with the countries over which they held power, which is clearly reflected in the onomastics: Tur – Turan, Iraj – Iran.

The resentment and enmity between Iran and Turan thus dates back to the beginnings of Iranian statehood and is based on jealousy, disloyalty and murder committed by Tur. Thus, Tur's descendants are portrayed as the opposition to Iranians who are honest, courageous and value loyalty and truth<sup>55</sup>. Or at least that is the general assumption, since Ferdowsī, in writing *Shāhnāma*, did not blindly follow this pattern and on the Turan side we find noble people like Pirān. Afrāsīāb, however, is not one of them. His hatred of Iran is as deep as his ambitions.

At this point I must mention that, in my opinion, Afrāsīāb's motivation in this story was not only political. In the earlier part of *Shāhnāma*, the still young Afrāsīāb suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of Rostam, who made his debut on the battlefield<sup>56</sup>. Given the Turanian's driven and vengeful nature, carrying in his heart a desire for revenge is not something outside his character. Using a son in battle against his father, making him a tool in the destruction of his father's homeland is a cunning and cruel plan. As the researchers rightly note, 'Upon getting aware of the lineage and race of Sohrab, Afrasiab decides to remove his most original enemy

<sup>51</sup> E. Yarshater, *Afrāsīāb*, in: *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. 1, fasc. 6, ed. E. Yarshater, London–Boston 1984, p. 570.

<sup>52</sup> P.O. Skjærvø, *Kayāniān vi. Siiāuuaršan, Siyāwaxš, Siāvaš*, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kayanian-vi> [access: 12.12.2024].

<sup>53</sup> D. Khaleghi-Motlagh, *Farangīs*.

<sup>54</sup> A. Nasr et al., *op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>55</sup> S. Fotoohi, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>56</sup> A. Ferdowsī, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

through this son. The Turani king crookedly uses the unskillful Sohrāb to achieve his ominous goals<sup>57</sup>. Whether Sohrāb succeeds in his goal or fails, for Afrāsīāb it would be a victory both politically and privately.

The decision to go to Iran with the army was Sohrāb's own idea and execution. However, it seems unlikely that a young general would be allowed to arbitrarily start a war against a neighboring country. True, Ferdowsī writes 'The informants said that he was treating war against Kavus, that a mighty force had flocked to him, and that in his self-confidence he took no account of anyone'<sup>58</sup>, but these very words show that the event did not happen without Afrāsīāb's knowledge. Use of 'the informants' points out that the king had multiple sources of information confirming the same state of affairs – Sohrāb had launched an invasion of Iran. 'Afrasyab laughed with delight'<sup>59</sup>, and then he decommissioned twelve thousand warriors at the young man's disposal thus giving him not only permission, but also support. He also sent him 'a letter encouraging the young warrior in his ambition and promising support'<sup>60</sup> when at the time he ordered his generals to 'dispatch him to his endless sleep'<sup>61</sup> immediately after defeating Rostam.

One thing is clear – despite the strict secrecy about Sohrāb's origins, Afrāsīāb has accurate knowledge of who his father is. In the text, the Turanian king clearly says to Barman and Human, his chieftains: 'This secret must remain hidden. When those two face each other on the battlefield, Rostam will surely be at disadvantage. The father must not know his son, because he will try to win him over'<sup>62</sup>. Fully aware that the son may kill his own father, and perhaps even hoping to do so, he encourages the boy to speak out against Iran and shows him his support. By sending an army to his aid and ordering Barman and Human to kill Sohrāb at the end, he shows how little the life of the young warrior mattered to him, who was merely a tool for him to cause as much destruction in Iran as possible.

Sohrāb remains unaware until the end that he has become a tool of Afrāsīāb's manipulation. In dying, he clearly takes sole responsibility for the invasion. He asks Rostam for mercy for his Turanian soldiers: 'Be merciful to them and do not let king make war on them; it was at my instigation they attacked Iran. What promises I made, what hopes I held

<sup>57</sup> L. Ahmadi Nasr et al., *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>58</sup> A. Ferdowsī, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 191.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*.

out to them! They should not be the ones to suffer'<sup>63</sup>. His words completely clear Afrāsīāb of any responsibility for invasion.

#### KAY KĀVUS – A KING HARDLY FIT TO BE ONE?

At the time of the unfolding events, the *Šāhānšāh* of Iran is Kay Kāvus. He is undoubtedly one of the less respected Kayānids, who is mainly famous for his unsuccessful and rather unrighteous expedition to Māzandarān<sup>64</sup>, his unjust conflict with Sīāvaḵš<sup>65</sup> and his controversial decision towards his *pahlavan*, Rostam at the darkest moment of his life, which I will discuss in this part of the article. It is almost unheard of for heroes to speak ill of their king, yet after one of Kāvus' failed ventures, Gōdarz says of him: 'this full / Who's so unwise he's hardly fit to rule'<sup>66</sup>. Firuza Abdullaeva, however, expresses a different opinion. According to her, the scene in which Kay Kāvus tried to reach the sky, and which was met with such a negative comment from Gōdarz, allows Ferdowsī to describe the character of the king as not only an ideal legitimate ruler, good in his thoughts, words and deeds, patronized by *farr* (divine charisma), but also as a king with a very live, contradictory and human nature, revealing him as an adventurous and curious person, sometimes brave, tender, grateful, clever and just, sometimes stubborn, cruel and silly. Kay Kāvus, the suzerain of the greatest hero Rustam, is one of the most interesting figures in the whole lineage of Iranian kings depicted by Firdawsī, according to whom he is a representative of the mythological Kayanid dynasty<sup>67</sup>.

Certainly, his profile is interesting and very human. Researchers write about him, 'Kaikavus is enumerated among one of the most wishful kings in *Shahnameh* in such a way that his adventurous behaviors repeatedly brought troubles upon Iranians'<sup>68</sup>. His unwise, ill-considered decisions repeatedly needlessly cost the lives of many Iranians, including his own son. To this day, the story of Sīāvaḵš is exemplified tragedy. On the other hand, 'stubborn, cruel and silly' are the qualities that dominate his

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 210.

<sup>64</sup> P.O. Skjærvø, *Kayāniān v. Kauui Usan, Kay-Uš, Kay Kāvus*, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kayanian-v> [access: 12.12.2024]; J. Szklarz, *Wyprawą*.

<sup>65</sup> P.O. Skjærvø, *Kayāniān v*; *idem*, *Kayāniān vi*.

<sup>66</sup> A. Ferdowsī, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>67</sup> F. Abdullaeva, *Kingly Flight: Nimrūd, Kay Kāvūs, Alexander, or Why the Angel Has the Fish*, "Persica" 2009–2010, 23, pp. 3–4.

<sup>68</sup> L. Ahmadi Nasr et al., *op. cit.*, p. 93.

character in the context of the duel I discussed and its consequences, but do they indeed? Since his decision works to the detriment of Rostam, the main character in this scene, Kāvus should be seen as an antagonist. And antagonist he is indeed, but as I mentioned earlier, he is not a villain.

After Sohrāb and his troops attack Iran, Kāvus sends Gēv to bring Rostam immediately: '[...] Don't delay in Zaboli; if you arrive at night, set off on return journey the next morning. Tell Rostam that matters are urgent'<sup>69</sup>. The Sistāni hero, however, ignores the summons and begins to feast. Only on the fourth day under the effect of strong persuasion from Gēv's part, Rostam obeys the king's order. Such a clear disregard for the king's command infuriates the king: 'Who is Rostam that he should ignore me, that he should flout my orders in this way? Take him and string him up alive on the gallows and never mention his name to me again'<sup>70</sup>. His order infuriates all the assembled chiefs – punishment is humiliating and disproportionate to the guilt of 'delaying' in coming to the call. However, Kay Kāvus' call was not on a whim, but out of clear wartime necessity, so Rostam did not follow the commander's order in wartime. Perhaps this is what makes that they do not rebel against the order of humiliating execution. Rostam, however, is seized with rage. After describing Kāvus as 'not fit to be king'<sup>71</sup>, he still says:

I am  
The Crown Bestower, the renowned Rostam,  
When I am angry, who is Kay Kavus?  
Who dares to threaten me? And who is Tus?  
My helmet is my crown, Rakhsh is my throne,  
And I am slave to none but God alone<sup>72</sup>.

And then he announces that protecting Iran is not his problem, but the king's, and he intends to leave and not come back again.

At this point Rostam shows not only pride, arrogance and insubordination, but also outright rebellion against the king. His words clearly show that he not only does not see Kāvus as his superior, but also has no respect for him. He humiliates the king by publicly undermining his authority as ruler and saying that the king would be nothing without him, after all, Rostam is the 'Crown Bestower'. This function, which was bestowed on Sām, the progenitor of his lineage by Feridun as an honor, in Rostam's behavior turns into a tool to humiliate the

<sup>69</sup> A. Ferdowsī, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 195.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 196.

*Šāhānšāh* who dared to punish him for disobedience, the consequences of which could be disastrous for the state. Rostam breaks the promise his ancestors and himself made to Kay Kāvus' ancestors and himself, yet 'the heroes prized faithfulness in the promises more than the kings and champions and they were aware of the end of who breached the promises'<sup>73</sup>. Consequently, in order to save his country, Kāvus succumbs to Gōdarz's persuasions and steps down. Rostam, however, continues to express himself about his king: 'I have no need of Kay Kavus'<sup>74</sup> and even 'Why should I fear Kavus's rage; he's no more to me than a fistful of dirt'<sup>75</sup>. Eventually, however, 'Shamefaced, he rode back to the king's court, and when he entered, the king stood and asked his forgiveness for what had passed between them'<sup>76</sup>. An agreement is reached between them, and they will feast together many more times before another disagreement occurs. The situation, however, makes it clear that Rostam is a real threat to Kay Kāvus' power. It was the ruler who had to give way to his *pahlavan* and forgive him for his disobedience verging on rebellion, because Rostam is more powerful than *Šāhānšāh* and they both are fully aware of this fact.

Describing Rostam, Dick Davis rightly points out that 'There is something anarchic about him'<sup>77</sup>. He also points out that the hero decides his own life and his own loyalty, 'and that he is at no one's beck and call, not even his king's'<sup>78</sup>. This is precisely the situation we face in this story. The freedom that Rostam so cherishes is, in his eyes, threatened by the king's orders creating not only an external conflict with Kay Kāvus, but also an internal conflict for the protagonist. 'Promise is one of the main subjects in *Shahnameh* that plays an important role in the events, characters and their fate'<sup>79</sup>, and in the end the Sistāni hero decides to stand up to the aggressive Turanian chieftain. Rostam, however, still harbors resentment toward Kay Kāvus. Although he still feasted with him that night, at the king's summons he complains:

When other kings have unexpectedly  
 Asked for my service, or summoned me,  
 I've been rewarded with a gift, with treasure,  
 With banquets, celebration, courtly pleasure—

<sup>73</sup> L.G. Baghi et al., *op. cit.*, p. 103.

<sup>74</sup> A. Ferdowsi, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 197.

<sup>77</sup> D. Davis, *Introduction*, p. XI.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>79</sup> L.G. Baghi et al., *op. cit.*, p. 107.

But from Kavus I've witnessed nothing more than constant hardship and unending war<sup>80</sup>.

Before the start of his duel with Sohrāb, when asked if he is Rostam, he even responds, '[...] Rostam's a champion, I'm a slave—I own / No royal wealth or crown or kingly throne'<sup>81</sup>. His words may be considered a manifestation of his trickster nature and deliberately concealing his identity to deceive the enemy<sup>82</sup>, however, in the context of his earlier feud with a king, another interpretation comes to mind – Rostam actually feels he is a slave whose personal freedom does not belong to him, but to the *Šāhānšāh*. The legendary Rostam belongs to the past, or even to the legend. That Rostam is the powerful one with the 'noble name'<sup>83</sup> and presumably the privileges, recognition, gifts and feasts that flowed from it, as he mentioned a moment earlier. The present man on the other hand, is a disrespected old man existing to serve an ungrateful king. This sense of bitterness that he is serving an ungrateful, evil king will accompany him during the duel itself, influencing its onset. The aforementioned nature of the trickster will show itself in Rostam, but only on the later part of the duel, as I will discuss later in this article.

Before I delve into the critical juncture of the relationship between Rostam and Kay Kāvus, I find it necessary to briefly examine the duel itself. This analysis is crucial for fully understanding the pivotal moment when the king refuses to save his *pahlavan's* son.

### THE DUEL BETWEEN ROSTAM AND SOHRAB

As I mentioned earlier, Rostam confronts the Turanian general in a rather grim mood resulting from his feud with Kay Kāvus. He sees no future glory for himself in the fight and potential victory over Sohrāb. Rostam already has a well-established reputation as the greatest hero known to the world, so killing the overly zealous young man won't bring him much fame. He views their clash as part of his duty to the *Šāhānšāh* and Iran. After all, he is a 'slave' to his king. At this point he actually imposes on himself the role of champion required of him, although he does so reluctantly.

Their battle is fought in some distance from military camps, on horseback, as befits noble warriors. It begins in a flash and proceeds violently:

<sup>80</sup> A. Ferdowsī, *op. cit.*, pp. 202–203.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 203.

<sup>82</sup> D. Davis, *Rustam-e*, p. 235.

<sup>83</sup> A. Ferdowsī, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

At first, they fought with short javelins, then attacked one another with Indian swords, and sparks sprang forth from the clash of iron against iron. The mighty blows left both swords shattered, and they grasped their ponderous maces, and a weariness began to weigh their arms down. Their horses too began to tire, and the blows the heroes dealt shattered both the horse armor and their own cuirasses<sup>84</sup>.

This violent clash exhausts the opponents, but gives no advantage to either of them. Both feel dissatisfied. Rostam reluctantly admits that even his fight with White Dīv was not so difficult, and it was a fight in which he almost lost his life. Probably the aforementioned exhaustion causes the heroes not to resume the fight at close range, but to reach for their bows. They: 'strung their bows. But their remaining armor rendered the arrows harmless'<sup>85</sup>. The ineffectiveness of the long-ranged attack only increased their discontent.

In fury then the two closed, grasping at one another's belts, each struggling to throw the other. Rostam, who on the day of battle could tear rock from the mountain crags, seized Sohrab's belt and strove to drag him from the saddle, but it was as if the boy were untouched and all Rostam's efforts were useless. Again the mighty lions withdrew from one another, wounded and exhausted<sup>86</sup>.

So three clashes, two at close range (including hand-to-hand) and one at long range, bring no advantage to either side. That changes, however, when: 'Then once more Sohrab lifted his massive mace from the saddle and bore down on Rostam; his mace struck Rostam's shoulder and the hero writhed in pain'<sup>87</sup>. This blow is a small triumph for the young fighter, but it still does not give him a significant advantage, and the two again gain distance. However, they do not return to their camps to rest, but charge into the enemy camp. While Rostam only creates confusion and panic among the Turanians, Sohrāb mercilessly kills the Iranians. Rostam, fearing for the safety of Kay Kāvus, returns to the ranks of his troops.

The attitude of the warriors during this brief pause in the duel perfectly shows their characters. Rostam, despite his feud with the king and his sense of bitterness, returns to protect his ruler from potential harm. He shows a sense of loyalty and duty. He does not allow private animosities to lead to tragedy for the nation, although his earlier behavior toward the king might have suggested such a development. Meanwhile,

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 204.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*.

Sohrāb commits blind murder. He does not behave as befits the son of the great Rostam, or grandson of Zāl, a man 'with great physical power and a brilliant mind'<sup>88</sup>, who became famous for his wisdom and prudence.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Polish scholar Maria Składankowa proposed a theory regarding the alternation of generations within the Sistan family. According to her interpretation, the family's progenitor, Sām, and his grandson, Rostam, symbolically embodied the archetype of the rainy, shadowy steppe shaman. In contrast, Zāl represented their opposite – a sun shaman<sup>89</sup>. The two types must coalesce to ensure the country's prosperity, just as the sun and rain affect the fertility of crops. The rain shaman will represent vehemence and darkness while the sun shaman reflects composure and light. According to the logic of this theory, Sohrāb was therefore meant to be a bright, positive hero<sup>90</sup>, which would have heightened the tragedy of his death. The scene in which he tramples the Iranian warriors, however, portrays him in a negative light by emphasizing his cruelty and desire for bloody revenge and murder with lack of compassion, qualities that put him rather on the side of evil, on par with Afrāsīāb, his king. Like Rostam, he has the inheritance of the blood of the demon king, Zahhāk (to this day considered a symbol of evil and oppression, a metaphor for tyranny<sup>91</sup>) which he inherited with the blood of his grandmother, Rudāba<sup>92</sup>. Unlike Rostam, though, Sohrāb did not grow up in a loving nuclear family teaching him the morals and laws of Iran, as I mentioned earlier. He grew up without a father, without a clear moral compass and, judging by his behavior, without awareness of the consequences of his actions. His first desire when he discovers his father's identity is not to meet his family or receive instruction from Iran's greatest hero, but his ambition for throne and power.

Sohrāb's bloody attack, on the other hand, can be understood as a manifestation of the young general's exceptional loyalty to his soldiers. It was Rostam who, unprovoked, initiated the attack on the Turanian troops. Given the significant distance between the camps, Sohrāb could not have known that the Iranian hero's intent was merely to instill

<sup>88</sup> A. Shapur Shahbazi, S. Cristoforetti, *Zāl*, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zal> [access: 22.12.2024].

<sup>89</sup> M. Składankowa, *Bohaterowie, bogowie i demony dawnego Iranu*, Warszawa 1984, pp. 92–96.

<sup>90</sup> J. Szklarczyk, 'Szahname', pp. 103–104.

<sup>91</sup> N. Amiri Ghadi, A.R. Davoudpour, *The Legend of Zahhak: An Examination of Iranian Mythology and Its Impact on Modern Social Crisis*, "Journal of Iranian International Legal Studies" 2024, pp. 2, 6.

<sup>92</sup> A. Shapur Shahbazi, *Rudāba* <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/rudaba> [access: 18.12.2024].

panic among the enemy forces. From Sohrāb's perspective, Rostam's actions appeared to be a deliberate attempt at murder, prompting the young general to retaliate in kind. He explains: 'And Turan's army had no part in this battle either, but you attacked them first even though none of them had challenged you'<sup>93</sup>. Rostam has no answer to this, and because of the approaching dusk he proposes to postpone the battle until the next day.

On the second day, the duel begins with a conversation in which Sohrāb attempts to persuade his opponent to abandon the fight. Rostam, however, refuses. Unwilling to engage in dialogue, he dismisses the young Turanian's behavior as mere trickery. As he declares, 'I've seen much of good and evil in my life, and I'm not a man for talk or tricks or treachery'<sup>94</sup>. Yet, on that day, the course of the fight takes a different turn:

They dismounted, tethered their horses, and warily came forward, each clad in mail and helmeted. They closed in combat, wrestling hand to hand, and mingled blood and sweat poured from their bodies. Then Sohrab, like a maddened elephant, struck Rostam with a violent blow and felled him [...], he flung himself on Rostam's chest, whose mouth and fist and face were grimed with dust. He drew a glittering dagger to sever the hero's head from his body[...]<sup>95</sup>.

The advantage that Sohrāb achieves in battle is sudden and unexpected. The world's greatest hero is a hair's breadth away from death inflicted by the hand of a young, inexperienced opponent. At this point, Rostam forgets the words that came out of his mouth moments ago and commits trickery. Taking advantage of Sohrāb's youth and lack of worldly familiarity, he convinces him:

Our customs do not count this course as right;  
According to our laws, when warriors fight,  
A hero may not strike a fatal blow  
The first time his opponent is laid low;  
He does this and he's called a lion, when  
He's thrown his rival twice-and only then<sup>96</sup>.

Sohrāb frees Rostam once again proving that he is simple and naive. First of all, he doesn't remember the lesson he should have learned from his duel with Gordāfarid, where his opponent fraudulently convinced him

<sup>93</sup> A. Ferdowsī, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 207.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 207-208.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibidem*.

to free her, causing him to lose his tactical advantage. Additionally, even if such a custom as Rostam speaks of existed in Iran, Sohrāb, as a Turanian, was under no obligation to conform to it. The author does not clarify why the young man made this particular decision. Was he driven by a desire for fame, the aspiration to embody the ideals of an honorable warrior, or the self-confidence that led him to believe he could easily defeat the old warrior once more? Sohrāb's brief statement 'Do not make light of any enemy / No matter how unworthy he may be'<sup>97</sup> may suggest the last possibility, but could also be a warning to his nameless opponent not to ignore a young man who has yet to make a name for himself. In any case, the discovery of Rostam's ruse further motivated boy to fight.

After a rest break, the warriors on horseback engage in hand-to-hand combat by grabbing each other's belts. This time it is the Iranian hero who gains an instant advantage:

Rostam seized him by the shoulders and finally forced him to the ground; the brave youth's back was bent, his time has come, his strength deserted him. Like a lion Rostam laid him low, but, knowing that the youth would not lie there for long, he quickly drew his dagger and plunged it in the lionhearted hero's chest<sup>98</sup>.

The wound is fatal. Rostam shows no mercy. He is acutely aware that allowing Sohrāb to live would pose a mortal threat to himself, Kay Kāvus, and the entirety of Iran. By fulfilling his duty to the king and his homeland, Rostam secures their safety. However, this comes at a significant personal cost, as Sohrāb, sensing his imminent death, reveals that he is son of Rostam.

In his final moments, Sohrāb displays an innocent, almost childlike demeanor. He pleads for mercy on behalf of his soldiers, deceived by his unfulfilled promises, absolves Afrāsīāb of responsibility for the attack, and shifts the blame for his death away from Rostam. In Ferdowsī's narrative, the Turanian commander who had mercilessly massacred soldiers in the Iranian camp is reimagined as a naive, innocent youth who meets an untimely and arguably undeserved death, cementing this episode as one of the *Shāhnāma's* most poignant tragedies. Resigned to his fate, Sohrāb remains unaware until the very end that he had been merely a pawn in the machinations of his king.

Meanwhile, Rostam realizes that Kay Kāvus has a potion that heals all wounds – perhaps the only remedy in the world that can save Sohrāb.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 209.

However, he doesn't ask the king for a favor, he doesn't beg for mercy and help to save his son, but to be rewarded for his past services: '[...] if he has any regard for all I have done in his service, to have pity on my suffering and to send me the elixir he keeps in his treasury...' <sup>99</sup>. His 'request' is met with a refusal, for the king remembers Rostam's words about Kāvus being nothing in his eyes and fears that the Sistāni hero will one day kill him. His refusal is interpreted by Gōdarz as Kāvus' 'malicious nature' <sup>100</sup>, and the researchers write: 'the ogre of ambitiousness caused Kaikavus to prefer the protection of his government to the saving of a human being's life' <sup>101</sup>. And yet, the *Šāhānšāh* is not merely an individual; it is an institution that upholds the stability and security of the nation through laws granted by the Creator. Both Rostam and Sohrāb have demonstrated themselves to be volatile, unpredictable, and beyond control, rendering them invincible to any 'ordinary' warrior. Allowing Sohrāb to live would pose a perpetual risk of rebellion and civil war in Iran. Kay Kāvus is fully aware of this, yet his *pahlavans* perceive only the personal tragedy affecting one of their own.

As I mentioned earlier in this article, Kay Kāvus' *pahlavans* hold little respect for him and openly express their negative opinions. Nevertheless, the power of the *Šāhānšāh* – the King of Kings – was absolute, derived from the divine grace of the Creator, who bestowed *farr* upon him. Kāvus may not be a perfect ruler, but he possesses *farr* (Glory), is of Kayanid lineage, listens to his advisors and corrects his mistakes (of which we have an example, for example, when he reverses the order to hang Rostam alive). All these qualities, as Homayoun Katouzian points out, legitimize him as a king <sup>102</sup> to be respected and obeyed. Rostam's arrogant words and behavior, therefore, can clearly be seen as the seed of a rebellion that must be nipped in the bud by the king. Although this is only an interpretation on my part, Kāvus may have realistically feared that one powerful insubordinate and mindless in anger hero poses a serious threat, but two (father and son), is certain doom for the Kayānids and an Iran engulfed in the civil war they may cause.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 211.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 212.

<sup>101</sup> L. Ahmadi Nasr et al., *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>102</sup> H. Katouzian, *Legitimacy and Succession in Iranian History*, "International Journal of New Political Economy" 2022, 3, 1, p. 9.

## CONCLUSION

The duel between Rostam and Sohrāb is considered one of the two greatest duels of *Shāhnāma* (next to the clash between Rostam and Esfandīār) and the most tragic event of the epic. Here, a father, failing to recognize his son in his opponent, commits unintentional filicide. However, this duel is not solely a depiction of personal tragedy but also a reflection of the intricate relationship between the king and the *pahlavan*. The King of Turan, Afrāsīāb, unscrupulously takes advantage of the naiveté of his subject, Sohrāb, hoping that the latter will kill his father, or that the father will kill his son (which consequently happened). The King of Turan, Kay Kavus, unceremoniously disposes of Iran's greatest hero, Rostam, which arouses resistance bordering on rebellion. However, the relationship between Rostam and Kay Kāvus is more complicated, as is revealed in the circumstances of his duel with Sohrāb and in the fight itself. Rostam, feeling unappreciated and enslaved by the king, nevertheless defends him and Iran at a critical moment, prepared to sacrifice his own life for their cause. The life he ultimately sacrifices, however, is not his own but that of his son, whom he did not know.

Rostam commits an unconscious filicide, but suffers no punishment for it other than suffering from the death of Sohrāb. The researchers point out that 'the reason for not condemning filicide in *Shahnameh* is that the action itself is favoring the older side over the younger side. It is a punishment for the younger generation who disrespected the older generation without any reason'<sup>103</sup>. Sohrāb was disrespectful to the older generation: to his mother, threatening to kill her if she did not reveal his father's identity to him; to his own King Afrāsīāb by setting out for Iran without notifying him and planning to overthrow him when he returned victorious; to the King of Iran by threatening and ridiculing him; and finally to Rostam. For Sohrāb grew up without a father in a patriarchal society, and therefore without ancestral and national consciousness. The Sistān family, to which Sohrāb should belong, was among the most loyal to the Kayānids and Iran, and this virtue was instilled in each successive generation. 'Sohrab's life ended before the boy could fully prove his worth to the world'<sup>104</sup> and develop his potential, which perhaps would have given him fame equal to his father. He never had the opportunity

<sup>103</sup> E. Zohdi, S. Faghfori, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>104</sup> Org. „Życie Sohraba skończyło się zanim chłopiec mógł w pełni udowodnić światu swoją wartość”. Author's translation. J. Szklarz, 'Szahname' jako rezerwat mitów Iranu na podstawie przedstawienia rodu sistańskiego, in: *Mit narodowy w sferze sacrum i profanum: tom monograficzny*, eds. R. Małecki, A.A. Borkowska, Warszawa–Siedlce 2018, p. 103.

to learn what love and loyalty to his true homeland and its ruler is and felt victim to manipulations of Afrāsīāb.

Rostam's duel with Sohrab shows the diversity of the relationship between a *pahlavan* and his king. Betrayal, manipulation and exploitation are mixed sometimes with ambition and a desire for revenge and sometimes with the desire for peace of the whole nation. The fight, however, reveals something more – the precarious interplay of loyalty, power, and sacrifice that sustains the realm but often comes at the expense of individual lives and personal bonds. This complex dynamic between the king and the *pahlavan*, marked by tension, duty, and sacrifice, underscores a central theme of the *Shāhnāma*: the fragile balance of power and loyalty necessary to uphold the stability of the realm, even at the cost of personal tragedy.

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