



Two Newly Identified *Šāhnāme* Stories in Panjakent Paintings

FRANTZ GRENET

COLLÈGE DE FRANCE, PARIS

The Prologue of the Rostam Cycle

The first proposal to compare a painted cycle at Panjakent with a story from Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme* came in 1956–57, when the paintings now famous as the “Rostam cycle,” reassembled at the Hermitage Museum (fig. 1), were discovered in the reception hall of an aristocratic house (Room 41 of Sector VI). On the basis of associated coin finds, these paintings are now dated to around 740 CE, the final flourish of Sogdian painting at Panjakent, which had been occupied, at least in certain periods, by an Arab garrison since 722. Aleksandr Belenitskii, then director of the excavations, was by training an Arabist and Iranist with perfect knowledge of the *Šāhnāme*; he immediately recognized Rostam's exploits in the “first war of Māzandarān.” The discovery was quickly published by him in French in 1958 and subsequently in English in 1963, and caused a great sensation.¹ Since then, many studies have been devoted to this cycle, especially by Boris Marshak in his fundamental book of 2002, by me as part of an article in 2015, and, more recently, by Larisa Kulakova in 2021, following restoration work that revealed the end of the painted sequence.² Occupying most of the second register on the four walls (the lower register is devoted to separate, self-contained tales), the cycle starts with Rostam and his companions entering the country of the demons of Māzandarān, where he has been called to help after Kāvus, king of Iran, has been taken prisoner. After a sequence of exploits that partly echo Rostam's seven exploits in the *Šāhnāme* (including the fight with the army of demons, which roughly corresponds to a Sogdian written fragment found at Dunhuang),³ the poorly legible portion near the end seems to show the eagle-like

Simorg, protector of his family, and a final combat on horseback.

The register above is largely destroyed, except for a section which contains two scenes (figs. 2–3): on the left part of the northern wall, a conversation between a king (?) and three courtiers, with a small female harpist standing between them and delivering some form of discourse (as indicated by the movement of her right hand); to the left (on the western wall), a horseback combat involving several knights on each side. Marshak treated this scene separately from the story below, as he considered the registers independent of one another (or, in some cases, that the upper register continued the lower one).⁴ Since he published this idea, however, the *Farāmarz-nāme* cycle (Room 50 of Sector XXIII), elucidated by Michael Shenkar, has provided a clear example of a top-down layout,⁵ and the cycle in the “Blue Hall” of the Shahristan palace in Ustrushana a probable one.⁶

Bearing this in mind, and checking the tale in the *Šāhnāme*, the meaning becomes clear. At the beginning of his reign, King Kāvus, while resting in a garden, is persuaded by a minstrel from Māzandarān, a demon (*dīv*) in disguise, to conquer his country. Kāvus' courtiers, chiefly Zāl, try to dissuade him from this foolish enterprise, but eventually they remain loyal and decide to fight by his side, while Zāl returns to Sistān.⁷ In the first battle, the Iranians are routed and the king is made prisoner. On the painting (fig. 2, right; fig. 3), we can recognize Kāvus on the right (Marshak already identified him as a king because his patterned silk dress is richer than the others; the headgear zone is lost). Behind him, a flower indicates the garden, while the object at the bottom right is enigmatic. The minstrel, who in the *Šāhnāme* is a lute player, is a harpist here; the



Fig. 1. The Rostam Cycle exhibited in the Hermitage. The two preserved scenes of the third register are in the corner. ©The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg; photo: Vladimir Terebenin.

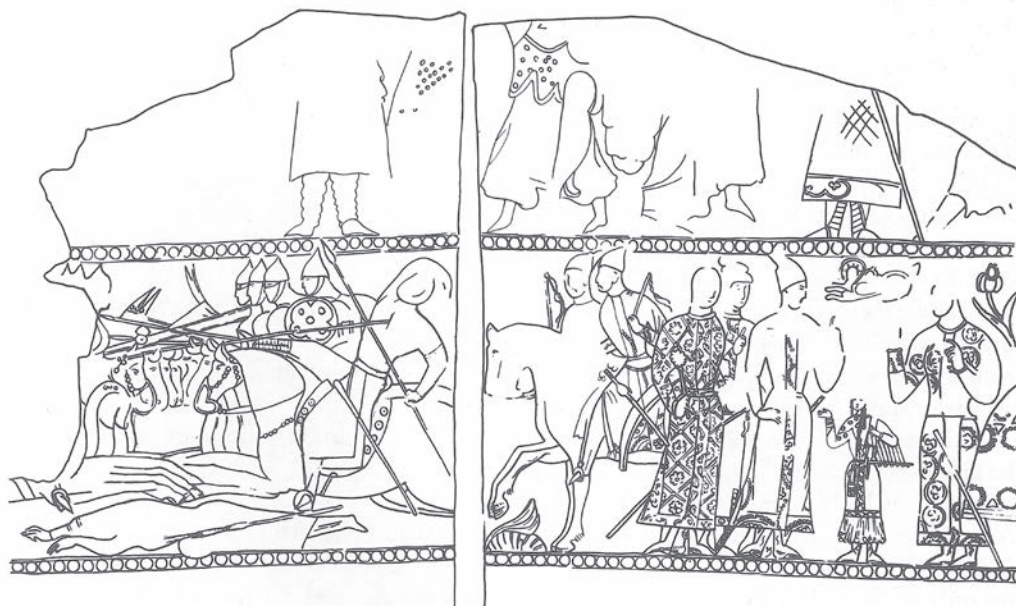


Fig. 2. Preserved scenes of the third register; from Marshak 2002, fig. 30.

Persian word, of course not gendered, is *rāmešgar*. As his or her song celebrates the charm of the pleasure girls of Māzandarān, the female gender might have appeared logical. Directly above her, a dragon is flying. This is not the *farn* “charisma, fortune,” usually depicted flying toward the heroes. In such cases, this mutable symbol never assumes the shape of a long-necked dragon (in the case of Rostam, it has a fish tail but a lion forepart), and it always carries a ring, or a ribbon, or both, none of which is present here. The dragon is, in fact, a warning of the minstrel’s devilish nature. The king is faced by three courtiers who seem to argue with him. The first seems to have his forefinger bent, the usual gesture of respect, but the second has his finger raised straight. The one in front is most probably Zāl: he has the same “Hephthalite” profile as his son Rostam (who, as in the *Šāhnāme*, is not present in this scene).⁸ To the left of the scene, two departing horsemen (the one in the foreground apparently Zāl again) create a link with the following battle, which indicates that in this register the order is right to left, contrary to the lower register. In the battle, those who come from the right, i.e., the Iranians, are on the losing side, as one of their men lies on the ground and another is unseated. The next scene is destroyed (see fig. 1). It might have shown Kāvus’ capture or Zāl prompting Rostam to restore the situation, just above the scene capturing Rostam’s arrival in Māzandarān, a scene that takes over in the lower register, if we assume a *boustrophedon* order. As for the scenes that once occupied the upper register, one can only speculate, as nothing remains. They may have depicted the early adventures of Zāl, Rostam, and the Simorg, who, indeed, appears at the end of the lower cycle.

The ‘Rings and Dragons Cycle’: Bīžan’s Story and the Ensuing War

This method also yields interesting results when applied to another painted cycle at Panjakent. Executed in Room 1 of Sector VI, it is attributed to the period 700–722 CE, slightly earlier than the Rostam and Farāmarz cycles. Marshak, who could not propose an interpretation based on the texts at our disposal, analyzed it from the viewpoint of its internal logic, calling it the “Rings and Dragons cycle.” He rightly understood that the story opposes two kings characterized by the

pommels of their swords and daggers; they share these attributes with their respective warriors, who are also distinguished by their type of armor – lamellae with wavy edges for the “Rings,” rectangular lamellae for the “Dragons.”⁹ The documentary situation is not ideal, as this was one of the earliest discoveries of an epic painted cycle, made between 1951 and 1953, at a time when the conservation methods were not yet sufficiently developed. Consequently, publications included only watercolor copies by Iulia Gremiachinska, not fully accurate, and drawings made from them.¹⁰ The originals have since been restored and are now exhibited in the National Museum of Antiquities of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, but their condition has worsened, and it seems that some details have been touched up.

The scenes described in the first publications, and then by Marshak, are all located on the lower register. The first one (starting from the door in the northern wall, in a right-to-left order) (fig. 4) shows a kneeling warrior who points toward a camel looking backward; its load, if any, is not visible in the preserved portion.¹¹ The “King of the Rings,” seated on his throne, is angry at what he sees and throws the contents of his cup. In the same scene, three aristocrats are banqueting (fig. 5). The one on the left is pointing his finger to his face, a convention that indicates the speaker.¹² In the next scene, to the left, the “King of the Dragons” is sitting on a folding chair, with what appears to be a floating cloth above him; seemingly indicating that he is in his camp. His *farn* takes the shape of a flying camel (the other king’s *farn* is a bird, according to Marshak, a pheasant, but perhaps rather a hawk).¹³ Then comes a battle between horsemen from both camps, followed by a combat on foot (fig. 6), in which the “King of the Rings,” on the left, shoots and kills with an arrow a young, non-royal knight of the “Dragons,” who is followed by a companion holding a mace.¹⁴ Further on is the capture of a fortress by the “Rings”: a young boy opens the gate from which a bull or cow emerges (fig. 7).

After Marshak had drawn my attention to the details of the first scene, I began to reflect on elements that recalled the story of Bīžan and the ensuing war between Iran and Turan. In brief: Bīžan, a young Iranian knight, during a hunting party, is misadvised by his mentor Gorgīn, who is jealous of his success at court. Gorgīn persuades him to approach Turanian girls. While doing so,



Fig. 4. The "Rings and Dragons Cycle," lower register: first scenes. From Marshak 2002, fig. 98.

Bīžan meets Manīže, a daughter of Afrāsiyāb, king of Turan, who falls in love with him and brings him to her father's palace. There, he is recognized and condemned to be locked in a well, into which he is thrown headlong in chains.¹⁵ His exhausted horse returns to Iran, and Giv, Bīžan's father, understands the situation. At Nowruz, King Ƙosrow (Xosrō), as is his custom during this festival, looks into his magical cup and sees Bīžan's condition. He starts the war.

The details shown in the painting coincide quite well with this plot. The "Rings" are the Iranians; the "Dragons" are the Turanians. Their kings are, respectively, Ƙosrow and Afrāsiyāb, already depicted as an aging man with a long beard. Incidentally, when Afrāsiyāb is eventually killed, it is proclaimed: "By the sword of Kay Ƙosrow the evil of the dragon (*aždahā*) was made to disappear from the face of the earth."¹⁶ Some details are at variance, but they do not affect the story's structure. Bīžan's horse is replaced by a camel, which suggests it has returned from Turan (this is also the shape of Afrāsiyāb's *farn*). Perhaps it is not Bīžan's mount, but rather an animal messenger sent by the Turanians, carrying Bīžan's weapons? In the *Šāhnāme*, Ƙosrow does not throw the contents of his cup; nonetheless, this scene takes place at Nowruz, which the banqueters of the painting are indeed celebrating (the one on the left holds a branch with flowers, see fig. 5).¹⁷

A decisive key lies, in my opinion, in what

remains of the upper register. Marshak, who presumed that this was the continuation of the story, while we now know that it was the beginning, mentioned (without an illustration) dying warriors, a king's reception, and "the hands of a man who has been hanged head down." Thanks to Michael Shenkar, I can add a photograph (fig. 8). What more do we need? One could object that poor Manīže, obliged to beg near the well in order to feed Bīžan, is not visible, nor is the structure of the well (perhaps here rather a gibbet?). But nothing subsists of the prisoner except for his hands. Marshak assumed the presence of a king, probably because, to the right, there are remnants of a platform covered with a silk fabric, with a vertical post meant to support a canopy. The king (in my opinion, Afrāsiyāb) would have been sitting here.

For the following scenes, the identifications are more tentative, but I think they are worth a try. Concerning the combat on foot, Marshak was uneasy with the fact that the king fights on foot and against an adversary of lower status. But this situation finds a precise echo in the *Šāhnāme*: Ƙosrow is challenged by Šīde, Afrāsiyāb's son, who proposes to fight only on foot; after a debate with his courtiers Ƙosrow accepts this breach of the protocol and kills Šīde. Also, the Turanian prince has a co-fighter, his "interpreter."¹⁸ On the painting, the small warrior between the champions is a servant of arms or a herald; he turns towards the victor while uplifting a banner. His



Fig. 5. Detail: Aristocrats banqueting at Nowruz. Watercolor by Iulia Gremiachinska. From Iakubovskii and D'iakonov 1954, pl. 37.



Fig. 6. The "Rings and Dragons Cycle," lower register: Combat on foot. From Piotrovskii and Belenitskii 1959, pl. 7, center.



Fig. 7. The "Rings and Dragons Cycle," lower register: Capture of the fortress. From Piotrovskii and Belenitskii 1959, pl. 7, left.



Fig. 3. Detail: right scene (©The State Hermitage Museum; photo Vladimir Terebenin). For color photographs, see https://warfare.x10host.com/6-10/Sogdian_murals_from_Panjakent-Blue_room-upper.htm.



Fig. 8. The “Rings and Dragons Cycle,” upper register. At the upper right: hands of a man hanged head down. National Museum of Antiquities of Tajikistan, Dushanbe. Photo: Michael Shenkar.

reduced size indicates his lower social status, as is the case with the harpist in the other cycle (who, consequently, is not necessarily a child). The Dragons' fortress then captured by the Rings is probably Kang, Afrāsiyāb's main stronghold. The bull or cow which appears behind the door is puzzling.¹⁹ Perhaps, as Kang is described as containing a self-sustaining agricultural estate where nothing is lacking, this is a symbol of its abundance?²⁰ The last scene is of a battle above which a small figure is sitting frontally in a chariot: a young prince, as proposed by Marshak? A deity? In this case, I have nothing to propose.²¹

As long as all evidence of *Šāhnāme* stories at Panjakent was based on scenes directly involving Rostam, the emphasis was placed mainly on their originality in comparison with Ferdowsi, and on the originality of the Sogdian fragment in comparison with both. This was linked, probably rightly, to the idea that the epic of the Sistān princes had formed a cycle independent from the Sasanian *Xwadāy-nāmag* (as mentioned by Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, II: 118), of which some original features could still be traced after it was integrated into the *Šāhnāme*.²² As more episodes are now identified in Sogdian painting, we can realize that the more they involve Kayānid kings (Kāvus in the prologue of Rostam's story and in the Shahristan cycle, Qosrow in the "Rings and Dragons"), the closer we come to the Persian poem, sometimes with striking analogies in narrative details. More than two centuries before Abū Mansur, governor of Tus, collected materials among local Zoroastrian *literati* that were eventually used by Ferdowsi, quite similar stories were circulating in Sogdiana.²³ In what form? Oral transmission? Written texts, like the unique Rostam fragment preserved in Sogdian? Illustrated scrolls with prompts for recitation accompanied by music?²⁴ A combination of all these? This is a matter for further research.

Notes

1. Belenitskii 1958; Belenitskii 1963.
2. Marshak 2002: 25–54; Grenet 2015: 423–29; Kulakova 2021: 263–69.
3. Sims-Williams 1976: 54–61; Sims-Williams, *Appendix* in Grenet 2015: 444–45; Lurje 2017: 250–52 (an attempt at reconstructing the rhythmic structure). Knowledge of the *Šāhnāme* in Sogdiana is also attested

by a list of wishes that includes several of its heroes (Kāvus, Gōdarz, Rostam, Sām, Sohrāb, Frēdōn, and the Simorg): Yoshida 2013.

4. Marshak 2002: 55–61. He thought that the battle scene comes first, and that the harpist is singing a song of praise.

5. Shenkar 2010 [2014].

6. The paintings are reproduced, but without a global interpretation, by Sokolovskii 2009. In an article in preparation with Samra Azarnouche and Michael Shenkar, we attempt to demonstrate that this cycle depicts Kāvus' attempted ascent to the heaven, followed by the "second war of Māzandarān," in which, contrary to the first, where he is taken prisoner from the beginning, he plays the main role, with Rostam as his helper. For the main conclusions, see Grenet 2020; Grenet 2022: 465–66.

7. Khāleqi-Motlaq ed., 1386/2007, vol. 2: 4–9, verses 11–151.

8. Perhaps his yellow dress alludes to his nickname *Zāl-e zar*, "Zāl the old"; Zāl being a white-haired albino, sometimes deformed in Persian as *Zāl-e zard*, "Zāl the yellow." In Sogdian, too, *zyrtk* "old" (a rare word) and *zyrt'k* "yellow" could be conflated.

9. Marshak 2002: 145–50.

10. Iakubovskii and D'iakonov 1954: pls. 34–39; Piotrovskii and Belenitskii 1959: pls. 1, 3–8.

11. This detail was not recognized in the first drawings. Marshak completed it in his book (fig. 98, here fig. 4).

12. Cf. Marshak 2002: 144, fig. 95 (in the scene of dice playing from the *Mahābhārata*).

13. Marshak misinterpreted the *farn* of the "King of the Dragons" as a bull. The identification was later corrected by Michael Shenkar. The face of the "King of the Rings" seems to have been touched up, with the addition of a short beard that is not visible on the older drawings, where this part is damaged. Only the "King of the Dragons" definitely has a beard.

14. The crown of the "King of the Rings" is simpler than the one he wears in the first scene (it seems to have smaller wings, but the detail is not completely clear). There is no reason, however, to suppose that there is more than one "King of the Rings." A crown attached to a helmet in battle would be expected to be less cumbersome than the one worn when enthroned. Moreover, since both kings wear nearly identical crowns, the differences were likely not considered significant (unlike in the case of Sasanian crowns, whose later versions provided a clear model). Here, the crown is just a general marker of royal status.

15. Khāleqi-Motlaq ed., 1386/2007, vol. 3: 333,

verses 380–83 (translation below provided by Samra Azarnouche):

“Then the king (Afrāsiyāb) commanded Garsīvaz:
Prepare heavy chains and a dark well.
Bind his hands with chains, his neck with
Rūmī fetters as strong as a bridge.
Fasten him with heavy wedges,
so that he is restrained from head to foot.
Once bound, cast him headlong into the well,
that he may be deprived of the sun and the moon.”

16. Khāleqi-Motlaq ed., 1386/2007, vol. 4: 324, verse 2395.

17. Khāleqi-Motlaq ed., 1386/2007, vol. 3: 344, verses 540–44.

18. Khāleqi-Motlaq ed., 1386/2007, vol. 4 : 212–14, verses 656–94.

19. Marshak though it was the Dragons’ *farn* deserting them, but this idea no longer holds now Afrāsiyāb’s *farn* is recognized as a camel. The bull is one of the seven animal incarnations of Wahrām, the god of war, along with the camel, but it is not otherwise attested as his iconographic symbol (the main one is the boar).

20. Khāleqi-Motlaq ed., 1386/2007, vol. 4: 236, verses 1054–1056 (translation below provided by Samra Azarnouche):

“There is food, *ayvāns*, treasures, armies
greatness, order, throne and crown.
This is the land they call ‘Paradise’ (*behešt*)
for everywhere are joy, peace, and contentment.
In every corner, a spring and a pool
as deep and wide as the flight of an arrow.”

And p. 238, verses 1061–1062:

“He (Afrāsiyāb) entered Behešt Kang with a joyful
heart
with his weapons, his army, and his gear,
He toured the whole city
and nowhere did he see a wasteland.”

For this passage, Azarnouche suggests that the cow indicates that the fortress can sustain a siege. According to a folkloric variant of this type of story, recorded in Khorazm by archaeologists, a cow, overfed with grain by the starving defenders of a fortress, is released through the gate to deceive the besiegers’ forces into thinking that the defenders are far from surrendering; see Yagodin and Betts 2009: 51–53. Similar variants likely exist elsewhere.

21. Marshak 2002: fig. 102. The list of Wahrām’s incarnations includes a boy of fifteen. This is hardly relevant here.

22. Mas’ūdi, trans. Pellat: § 541 (tome I, 201). The reading *as-Saghēsarān* “the chieftains of Sistān” for this cycle is disputed as it is only one of the forms

attested by the manuscripts. On the “Sistani cycle,” see Christensen 1932: 129–46.

23. One can add the image of Zāhhāk falling from his throne, in the portico of Temple I (Belenitskii, Marshak 1981: 56 with fig. 33). This painting is attributed to the sixth century. I quote their earlier comment, which appears very perceptive today: “Consequently, the legend of Zāhhāk was known to the Sogdians of the 6th century and had found its way to their ‘Holy history,’ which allowed to put this subject in the *ayvān* of the temple’s main building”; Belenitskii, Marshak 1973: 56 (with a partial reproduction). A fifth-sixth-century painting with Zāhhāk and Frēdōn has been identified at Kuh-e Xwāje; see Grenet and Ory 2025.

24. The presence of a *trompe-l’oeil* shaped as a harpist-caryatid next to the scene with the combat on foot (see fig. 6) is a strong indicator in this sense.

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