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## Duel Between Rostam and the White Div: An Allegorical Critique of War in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* in Ghazniavi Context

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**Abstract:** *Ferdowsi's Shahnameh was written during the reigns of two very different ethnic dynasties. The Samanids created an ideal climate for a scholar of the history of pre-Islamic Iran, which made it easier for Ferdowsi to begin his work, but the change in the ruling dynasty meant that his work did not receive the reception he had hoped for. In the article I hypothesize that the main reason for this was the poet's anti-war criticism of the policies of Mahmud of Ghazni, specifically his expedition to India in the years 1000-1001. For his own safety, Ferdowsi hid the criticism under a historical allegory and placed it in the initial, non-historical part of the poem – Kay Kavus' expedition to Mazandaran. The duel between Rostam and White Div, which is the climax of the expedition, is also the culmination of the anti-war message. Despite hiding the criticism in literary fiction, it was read by Mahmud and his court, resulting in his strong negative reaction. To prove my hypothesis, I cite evidence showing that Ferdowsi drew inspiration from contemporaneity in creating other elements of the Shahnameh.*

**Key words:** Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, Duel, Rostam, White Div, Mahmud of Ghazni, Justification of War, Just War, Critique of War, Reception of *Shahnameh*

### Introduction

In the year 977, Abu'l-Qasem Ferdowsi Tusi (940-1020) embarked on the composition of what would become the most comprehensive account of pre-Islamic Iranian history, serving as a foundational text for Iranian cultural identity for centuries. At approximately 35 years of age, he was deeply invested in his project, driven by both intellectual ambition and the expectation of lasting recognition. The process of writing, however, extended far beyond his initial expectations, ultimately consuming 33 years of his life. Despite the scope and significance of his work, it did not receive the reception he had anticipated. The ruling dynasty under which he completed *Shahnameh* failed to grant him the recognition and patronage he had sought, leaving him to pass away without the material or symbolic rewards he had hoped to secure.

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His partial failure is influenced by the change in power that occurred between the time he started writing (approximately 977) and when he finished (1010).<sup>1</sup> Not only the ruler, but the entire ruling dynasty changed. The Iranian Samanid dynasty (reigning from 818 to 1005) was replaced by the Ghaznavids, “an Islamic dynasty of Turkish slave origin (366-582/977-1186),”<sup>2</sup> who by then were subject to the Samanids. According to Richard W. Bulliet, they were the conquerors of Iran, who themselves were “seduced and conquered by the great Iranian imperial tradition in its Islamic form.”<sup>3</sup> Iran's most famous ruler of the Ghaznavid dynasty, Mahmud (998-1030), was a warrior king making conquests of northern India. His interest in fine art, poetry and storytelling<sup>4</sup> rivaled his predilection for the art of war. He valued talented people and wanted to have them around him, which is why even musicians were part of the court.<sup>5</sup> Mahmud was a ruler who entered the pages of history as an iconoclast and bigot,<sup>6</sup> and his empire, according to Bosworth, “was essentially a military machine, geared primarily to the exploitation of India.”<sup>7</sup> His support for the arts only on the surface contrasted with the ruthlessness with which he destroyed Indian and Pakistani temples, as in fact his treatment of poets and scholars was rather rough.<sup>8</sup>

The discussion of *Shahnameh*'s anti-war overtones is not a new topic.<sup>9</sup> Also, Kay Kavus' expedition to Mazandaran and the ensuing duel between Rostam and White Div was analyzed in this context.<sup>10</sup> In this article, however, I focus on the anti-war overtones of Ferdowsi's description of this war in the context of the era in which his work was written.

This article employs a historical-literary analysis, situating Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* within the socio-political realities of its time. Drawing on primary sources, including Ferdowsi's own verses and historical records of the Ghaznavid court, it explores the possibility that the duel between Rostam and White Div serves as an allegorical commentary on contemporary warfare. The study examines intertextual connections between Ferdowsi's narrative and the ideological constructs of just and unjust war in both pre-Islamic and medieval Islamic traditions. Additionally, it considers Ferdowsi's potential engagement with courtly discourse and the constraints imposed by political censorship, which may have shaped his approach to depicting conquest and military ambition.

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<sup>1</sup> Khaleghi-Motlagh, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Bosworth, 2001: 578. See also Bosworth, 1966, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Bulliet, 1978: 36.

<sup>4</sup> Yamamoto, 2010: 243.

<sup>5</sup> Boyce, 1957: 26.

<sup>6</sup> Raza, 2011: 213. See also Jha, 2018: 109. With the image of Mahmud as a religious fanatic, fights Nāzīm, 1931.

<sup>7</sup> Bosworth, 1966: 85.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, 1964: 95-96; Bosworth, 1968: 38.

<sup>9</sup> Mahallati, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Szklarz, 2022.

## Historical context of the creation of *Shahnameh*

As I mentioned in the introduction, Ferdowsi wrote his chronicle during the reign of two dynasties. He began it in the very favorable times of the Samanids, a dynasty of Iranian origin, descended from Transoxiana, “a landowner or *dehqān* who resided in Balkh.”<sup>11</sup> The poet belonged to the same social group as the Samanids, “was a dihqan, or squire, of Tus, and as such, was a man of respectable position and comfortable means.”<sup>12</sup> This social group showed a wide interest in the history of their country,<sup>13</sup> and the Samanids created conditions ideal for “revival of interest in indigenous Persian culture.”<sup>14</sup> It was during that period that prominent chronicles were written telling about pre-Islamic history of the empire, such as first draft of unfinished Daqiqi’s chronicle<sup>15</sup> or work by Abu’l-Mu’ayyad al-Balkhi.<sup>16</sup> Hourieh Yektatalab and Amin Karimnia report that:

Ferdowsi’s book is apparently the fifth *Shahnameh*. The first four manuscripts were composed in the Samanid dynasty, in the 10th century. These books were written by Masudi Marvazi, Abu Moayyed Balkhi, Abu Mansur Mohammad and Abu Mansur Daghighi two of which were in prose and two in verse.<sup>17</sup>

These data clearly indicate the great interest in Iran’s past and the favorable conditions for research on it during this dynasty.

Ghaznavids, the dynasty that succeeded the Samanids, “became thoroughly Persianized.”<sup>18</sup> Soon after taking power, Mahmud began filling his court with poets,<sup>19</sup> a continuation of the Persian Renaissance.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, his policy was directed towards warfare and territorial expansion as a means of securing his authority.

Therefore Ferdowsi wrote his poem in troubled times. Bulliet emphasizes that before the Ghaznavids took power, there were strong local tensions in the power struggle, but also linked to religious factions and *madhhab* (‘law schools’).<sup>21</sup> Satish Chandra describes that period as follows:

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<sup>11</sup> Yarshater, 2006: 227.

<sup>12</sup> Maudud, 1953: 16. See also Davis, 2007: XVIII-IX; Yektatalab & Karimnia, 2013: 36.

<sup>13</sup> Tafazzolī, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Davis, 2007: IX.

<sup>15</sup> Daqiqi’s work has been partially combined with Ferdowsi’s work, as confirmed by numerous researchers, including Davis, 2007: IX.

<sup>16</sup> Peacock, 2018: 2-3. See also Bondar, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Yektatalab & Karimnia, 2013: 36.

<sup>18</sup> Yarshater, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Meisami, 1990.

<sup>20</sup> Harter, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Bulliet, 1978: 40-42. See also Malamud, 1994.

The continuous incursion of the Turkish tribesmen from Central Asia, the mercenary character of the Turkish soldiers who were prepared to switch loyalties and abandon an unsuccessful ruler without much thought, the strife between different Muslim and between different regions made the period a restless one. Empires and states rose and fell in rapid. In this situation, only a bold warrior and leader of men, a person who was as adept in warfare as in withstanding intrigues could come to the surface.<sup>22</sup>

Maintaining a strong government in such turbulent times required Mahmud to have power that the military provided, and the military needed money.

Ordinary citizens, however, do not have the ambitions of kings. Mahmud's expeditions to India, which began in 1000 with his march at Lamaghan,<sup>23</sup> were most likely seen by the public as the ambition of a young ruler from a new dynasty seeking to prove his power. While for sultan it was a way of securing his dynasty's status and military power through plundered wealth and enslaved captives, the ordinary people of his subordinate lands bore the brunt of taxes for the war. The war required huge financial outlays, which took a painful toll on Mahmud's subjects. As Bosworth points out:

Whilst the prevalence of oppressive rule in the Islamic world may accordingly be an extenuating factor, the exploitation of the population of the Ghaznavid empire seems to have been carried to an extreme degree. In the earlier part of Mahmud's reign, Khurasan, which had not long passed out of the hands of the Sāmānids of Bukhara, was ruled with great harshness by the Vizier Abū'l-Fadl Isfarā'inī, who was, it is true, being continually pressed by the Sultan for money to finance the Indian campaigns.<sup>24</sup>

Mahmud was, therefore, in a constant and pressing need for material wealth, which could be obtained through the spoils of war. The 1001 expedition to North India brought him substantial riches:

The necklace was taken off the neck of Jaipál, — composed of large pearls and shining gems and rubies set in gold, of which the value was two hundred thousand dīnārs; and twice that value was obtained from the necks of those of his relatives who were taken prisoners, or slain, and had become the food of the mouths of hyenas and vultures. God also bestowed upon his friends such an amount of booty as was beyond all bounds and all calculation, including five hundred thousand slaves, beautiful men and women. The Sultán returned with his followers to his camp, having plundered immensely, by God's aid, having obtained the victory, and thankful to God, the lord of the universe.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Chandra, 2014: 57.

<sup>23</sup> Nāzim, 1931: 86.

<sup>24</sup> Bosworth, 1966: 86.

<sup>25</sup> Elliot & Dowson, 1869: 26.

Jewels and gold were not the only riches acquired during this expedition. S. Jabir Raza stresses that the Battle of Peshavar (1001) alone brought 10 000 slaves of both sexes to the Iranian side.<sup>26</sup> Earlier researchers report that those captured into captivity were as many as 500 000.<sup>27</sup> Indian slaves were excellent for recruitment as infantry and cavalry soldiers. They were also used in the palace guard (*ghulaman-i-Saray*), which suppressed a revolt in Sistan in 1003 and took part in other operations against Islamic and Christian citizens.<sup>28</sup> The presence of Indian military commanders was evident in Sistan, but also in military campaigns in Khurasan, Iran, Central Asia.<sup>29</sup> In their article, G.S.L. Devra and Shashi Arora list a number of prominent Hindu princes who achieved high military standing as well as high status at the Ghaznavid court, such as Sewand Rai (who was even considered as Mahmud's successor), Bijji Rai and Tilak.<sup>30</sup> The military experience of Indians was also used in the Ghaznavid elephant corp, formed after Mahmud's expeditions to India.<sup>31</sup> This clearly indicates the importance of the enslaved population in Mahmud's military games. The wealth he accumulated allowed him to strengthen his army and maintain the throne for his dynasty. His expeditions gave rise to the long reign of Turkish warlords over the territories of northern India and the spreading there of "greater Iran."<sup>32</sup>

The *Shahnameh* was thus created during a period of dynastic transition between the Samanids of Iranian origin and the Ghaznavids of Turkic descent. Both dynasties showed an interest in the revival of Persian literature and culture; however, Mahmud of Ghazni's reign was marked by numerous military campaigns. Particularly, the expeditions to India led to a massive influx of enslaved Indian people, to the extent that "the capital became like a city of India."<sup>33</sup>

### ***Shahnameh* reception**

According to legend cited by Abdul Maudud, Ferdowsi has written his epic in two stages. The first version of *Shahnameh* was completed in 999 and was dedicated to Ahmad ibn Bakr of Khalaljan.<sup>34</sup> The change in ruling dynast however made him present his work to ruler of a new dynasty. *Shahnameh* found approval first from the Mahmud's prime minister, then was presented to the sultan. Apparently Mahmud had some reservations, because Ferdowsi spent next 10 years "recasting, remodelling,

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<sup>26</sup> Raza, 2010: 213.

<sup>27</sup> Elliot & Dowson, 1869: 26.

<sup>28</sup> Raza, 2010: 214-215.

<sup>29</sup> Devra & Arora, 2012: 205.

<sup>30</sup> Devra & Arora, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Raza, 2010: 216; 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Melville, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Raza, 2010: 213.

<sup>34</sup> Maudud, 1953: 16

revising and rewriting, in major parts, his original work.”<sup>35</sup> The revised version, however, not only did not please the sultan, but actually endangered the poet's life and forced him to flee Ghazna.<sup>36</sup>

Clifford Edmund Bosworth quotes after Nizami Aruzi,<sup>37</sup> “that Firdausī spent twenty-five years on his masterpiece, that he brought it to the Ghaznavid court, but that Mahmud repulsed him and offered only a miserable present.”<sup>38</sup> While the two legends clearly differ in detail, they agree on the ruler’s strong negative reaction to the final work presented to him.

Abdul Maudud writes on the subject:

It is really difficult at this distant age, after a lapse of more than a thousand years, to apportion precisely the various elements which contributed thereto: the poet’s sensitiveness, arrogance and peculiar sense of pride and prestige; the court intrigues of the Sultan’s favourites, Ayaz, Wazir al-Maymandi and others, who are represented as poisoning Mahmud’s mind against the poet by accusations of heresy, and also the Sultan’s unfortunate failure to appreciate the worth [...],<sup>39</sup> the immortal poet. But the fact remains that the feeble gra [...]<sup>40</sup> old poet had to flee from Ghazna for his life.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, in light of the currently available evidence, we are unable to determine either the exact course of the poet’s creative process or the true reasons for the negative reception of his work by court circles and the sultan himself. Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh shows evidence that the poet worked on stories from the Sasanid period during the Ghaznavid reign. In 1002 he described the rulers from Bahram III to Shapur II, in 1004 he began writing the history of the great war fought by Kay Khosrow’s, then, in 1006 he described the history of the reign of Khosrow Parvez.<sup>42</sup> However, the researcher’s insightful analysis based on the poet’s own comments on his life does not answer the question of whether these fragments were written for the first time or, as Maudud suggests, were “remodelled, revised, and rewritten.”

Researchers seem to focus on the literary style in which Ferdowsi wrote the *Shahnameh* as the main point of contemporaries’ rejection of the poem.<sup>43</sup> Peacock, however, points to existing works of similar content and style at the time, such as the lost *Shahnameh* by Abu Mansur Ibn ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Tusi, a work by Daqiqi, barely begun and interrupted due to his sudden untimely death, or the *Shahnameh*

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<sup>35</sup> Maudud, 1953: 16.

<sup>36</sup> Maudud, 1953: 16.

<sup>37</sup> Nizamī-i Arūzī-i, *Chahā maqāla*, 54-59.

<sup>38</sup> Bosworth, 1968: 39-40. See also Browne, 1964: 132-139.

<sup>39</sup> This short section of text has been damaged and is unreadable.

<sup>40</sup> This short section of text has been damaged and is unreadable.

<sup>41</sup> Maudud, 1953: 16.

<sup>42</sup> Khaleghi-Motlagh, 1999.

<sup>43</sup> Peacock, 2018: 2.

by Abu'l-Mu'ayyad al-Balkhi.<sup>44</sup> The texts were said to have enjoyed wide acclaim, confirming that both style and content were acceptable at the time. Moreover, the literary style alone seems too superficial a reason for the sultan and his court to have displayed such strong aversion toward the poet and his work. The cause must have either lain in the narrative content of the text or in extratextual circumstances unknown to us.

The text itself suggests that while composing the *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi was not entirely free from the political and cultural influences of his time. However, before discussing the poet's anti-war critique expressed during the reign of a ruler defined by warfare – an element that seems to have played a key role in the negative reaction toward him – I will first examine two indirect pieces of evidence indicating that Ferdowsi drew inspiration from his contemporary reality. These will be the wine feast and the associated *sāqī* function.

### **The customs of kings – a reflection of modern times and the pre-Islamic past**

Evidence that Ferdowsi reflected his contemporary world when writing *Shahnameh* will undoubtedly be the wine feasts he describes. Since they are a frequent element of the plot, I have chosen only the one introducing the Mazandaran expedition as a reference. Related to the wine feast is the function of the *sāqī*. *Sāqī* was “diversely understood as ‘cup bearer’ or ‘sweetheart’ either male or female.”<sup>45</sup> Later general and administrator of Lahore, famous for his loyalty to Mahmud of Ghazni, Malik Ayaz, was a *sāqī* man highly regarded by Mahmud for his talents and charms. S. Jabir Raza even states that he was “the chief of the eight imperial cup-bearers.”<sup>46</sup> Nizami Aruzi describes a court anecdote involving Mahmud and Ayaz, writing of the ruler “There-upon love plucked the rains of self-restraint from the hands of his endurance, and lover-like he drew him to himself.”<sup>47</sup> Yarshater, referring to the poetry of the period as well as the works of preceding scholars, states:

Sensually tempted by his feelings toward Ayāz, during one of his drinking bouts, Mahmud is suddenly awakened by the voice of his religious conscience, and urged by a contrite spirit, he orders Ayāz' locks to be cut off, so as to impair his attraction and tempting looks.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Peacock, 2018: 2-3.

<sup>45</sup> Yarshater, 1960: 48.

<sup>46</sup> Raza, 2011: 287.

<sup>47</sup> Nizamī-i Arūzī-i, *Chahā maqāla*, 37.

<sup>48</sup> Yarshater, 1960: 51. See also Nizamī-i Arūzī-i, *Chahā maqāla*, 37-38.

However, this is an anecdote written two centuries after the events described and is not based on texts by authors contemporary to the Ghazniavids. Abū Sa‘īd ‘Abd al-Ḥayy ibn Ḍaḥḥāk Gardīzī (d. 1040), Abū’l-Faḥr Muḥammad ibn Ḥusajn Bayhaqī (995-1077), and court poet Abū’l-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Julugh Farrukhī Sīstānī (d. 1037/38) describe Ayaz as a noble, close associate and even successor to the sultan.<sup>49</sup> They, however, also wrote their texts from the perspective of a time when Ayaz Malik was already a person of high titles and positions. Ferdowsi, on the other hand, wrote *Shahnameh* at a time when Malik Ayaz was still merely a *sāqī*, that is, a person of service to a feast of wine.

We find similar “cup bearers” that can act as “sweethearts” in several passages in the *Shahnameh*, two of which are particularly interesting because they bear important parallels. These are the tale of the demon king Zohhak and Iblis – a demon disguised as a beautiful young man who is the decisive factor in the depravity of a young Arab, and the Div-minstrel who provokes Kay Kavus with his song to wage war against Mazandaran. In both cases we have a beautiful young man who, with sweet words, seduces the king’s heart into unjust and tragic acts. Both do so during a feast with wine.

Yarshater points out that wine feasting was widely described by Iranian poets of the 10th and 11th centuries. He cites such well-known names as Manūčehrī Dāmghānī (d. 1040/41), Abū ‘Abd Allāh Ja‘far ibn Muḥammad al-Rūdhakī (c. 859-940), and Farrukhī Sīstānī and Amīr Kai-Kāvūs ibn Iskandar (c. 1021-1098).<sup>50</sup> This was a common custom, although, as the researcher notes:

Whereas in the courts of the Omayyad and Abbasid Califs the custom could be considered a corrupting innovation mainly attributable to foreign influence (1), in Persia it continued, as Noldeke has pointed out, an age-old pre-Islamic tradition (2)<sup>51</sup>

Yarshater also refers to Greek sources that confirm such a custom in pre-Islamic Iran, quoting from Herodotus’ *The History*:

it is their custom to deliberate about the gravest matters when they are drunk; and what they approve in their deliberations is proposed to them the next day, when they are sober, by the master of the house where they deliberate; and if, being sober, they still approve it, they act on it, but if not, they drop it. And if they have deliberated about a matter when sober, they decide upon it when they are drunk.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Raza, 2011: 286.

<sup>50</sup> Yarshater, 1960: 43.

<sup>51</sup> Yarshater, 1960.

<sup>52</sup> Herodotus, 1.133.4.

Thus, this is an old court custom recorded as early as the 5th century BC and apparently continued in Iran after the Muslim conquest. Perhaps this freedom resulted from the Abbasid rather liberal policy toward Iran, which tolerated pre-Islamic customs. Yarshater cites a very interesting passage by Amīr Kai-Kāvūs, a prominent thinker, poet and ruler,<sup>53</sup> taken from *Qābūs-Nāma* (*Book of Qābūs*, 1082): “Begin your drinking after your saying the afternoon prayers, so that by the time you are intoxicated, night will have fallen and nobody will perceive your drunken condition.”<sup>54</sup> The researcher suggests that the poet’s “ironic attitude” may have resulted from the prevalence of this custom in that era. Kai-Kāvūs’s life experiences, which led him, among other things, to the court of Sultan Mawdud b. Maḥmud (r. 1041-1050), where he spent couple years and married Sultan Maḥmud’s daughter,<sup>55</sup> allowed him to reflect the realities of his era. Leaving *Qābūs-Nāma* as a guide to life for his son, he took into account many of the prevailing customs of the time, as scholars scrupulously report.<sup>56</sup> He also did not forget to instruct him “best to refrain from indulging in what is against the dictates of the faith, but should one indulge, it is better to do so in style.”<sup>57</sup>

And indeed the royal wine feasts described by Ferdowsi were held “in style.” The poet clearly reflects the courtly reality of his time as well as those of the past. As Yarshater suggests, Ferdowsi was referring directly to the customs of the Sasanid dynasty, which were then continued by the Samanids, Ghaznavids and Saljukid.<sup>58</sup> However, we know that the Sasanids, for propaganda reasons, made a selection of information about the dynasties that preceded them, destroying much of it, as Daryaei repeatedly writes.<sup>59</sup> Sasanid and later sources thus provide a logical basis for the world depicted in *Shahnameh*. Ferdowsi, like Kai-Kāvūs, was a guest at the court of Ghaznia for some years. For both authors, therefore, court life in Ghaznia was a direct reference and inspiration. Therefore Ferdowsi may have been an eyewitness, or at least heard about the affection Mahmud had for his favorite *sāqī*, Ayaz.

It is the wine feast that is the beginning of story about Kay Kavus’ expedition to Mazandaran described by Ferdowsi. He writes that one day King Kay Kavus, accompanied by Iranian chieftains, was drinking wine in the garden. Then a *div* disguised as a musician from Mazandaran was brought before him. This *div* sang to the king about the wealth of his country arousing in him a desire to conquer. Kay Kavus decided on war and ended his speech with the words: “a king should be ambitious to conquer the world.”<sup>60</sup> His decision was made over a cup of wine, which

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<sup>53</sup> de Bruijn, 2000.

<sup>54</sup> Amīr Kai-Kāvūs, *A Mirror for Princess*, 59.

<sup>55</sup> de Bruijn, 2000.

<sup>56</sup> de Bruijn, 2000.

<sup>57</sup> Yarshater, 1960: 46.

<sup>58</sup> Yarshater, 1960: 45-46, Cf. Nöldeke, 1896-1904: 170-171.

<sup>59</sup> Daryaei, 2006, 2023: 1197; see also Pourshariati, 2008.

<sup>60</sup> Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 144.

gave the chieftains hope that it was not binding and would even be forgotten by him, as: “If what the king said in the cups isn’t forgotten, we and Iran are facing the disaster.”<sup>61</sup> They expect that, according to custom, a decision made at a wine feast will be further discussed when everyone is completely sober. However, this is not the case. The young king, deceived by the sweet song of the handsome youth, disregards the voice of reason spoken by his advisors. He does not concern himself with potential threats to his own nation. The desire for conquest and wealth awakened within him is too strong. The question of the legitimacy and justice of waging this war becomes secondary to his personal ambitions.

The issue of justifying the war is precisely the subject I address in the next section of this article.

### **Justification od War**

Starting a war with another country is not a decision that can be made hastily. In the states of the ancient Near East, the king would make public the motives for his decision, then place them before his god in the temple.<sup>62</sup> War could be fought: as a defensive war; when the Just fights the sinner (evil) under the Gods’ command; to gain power over the world, as a demonstration of greatness and strength.<sup>63</sup> The last three reasons are clearly found in the motivation that appears in Kay Kavus, the ruler clearly indicating that he wishes to do deeds of war greater than his ancestors, but also to defeat the unrighteous and evil people of Mazandaran, who live against the teachings of the right religion. The young king does not seek permission to carry out this war, however, he repeatedly expresses the reasoning that this war is just.

As Rory Cox proves, the concept of just war dates back to the civilization of Egypt and also appeared in the Hittite and Israelite civilizations.<sup>64</sup> Peeter Espak shows that the concept of just war also appears in Mesopotamia and Sumer.<sup>65</sup> It is therefore a concept as old as civilization itself. Europe is familiar with the concepts of *jus ad bellum* (“the right to war” or “the right to wage war”) and *jus in bello* (“the right in war” or “the law of war conduct”), to which it attached special importance, in contrast to the concept of just war in ancient India, as suggested by the work of Torkel Brekke.<sup>66</sup> In light of the studies on the ethics of war in other civilizations cited above, Brekke goes too far in his assumptions about the uniqueness of this concept in Europe and its absence in other cultures. Flawed is his assumption that “If one compares

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<sup>61</sup> Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 144.

<sup>62</sup> Elgavish, 2008: 38.

<sup>63</sup> Elgavish, 2008.

<sup>64</sup> Cox, 2023.

<sup>65</sup> Espak, 2011.

<sup>66</sup> Brekke, 2005.

the just war tradition with ethical systems of other cultures, one is struck by the European concern about *jus ad bellum* and the lack of interest in the same in other traditions.”<sup>67</sup> Raj Balkaran and A. Walter Dorn prove that the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* is explicit about the circumstances that allow a move to violence, including war.<sup>68</sup> Richard Solomon, on the other hand, questions the *Gītā*<sup>69</sup> as a message to fight against evil both within ourselves and as a reason to wage war.<sup>70</sup> Roger Boesche, in turn, argues that in Kautilya’s *Arthaśāstra*, war for conquest was a kind of just defensive war, as it protected the country from an imminent attack by a neighboring state.<sup>71</sup> Mahallati, focusing his research on the *Shahnameh* in the context of the era of its creation, which is the Islamic world, clearly shows the existence of the idea of just war in the Islamic and pre-Islamic world.<sup>72</sup> These reasons are similar to those put forth by Elgavish, suggesting the universality of this concept in the Pre-Indo-European world.

It is precisely this perception of war as just or unjust in Ferdowsi’s time that forms the central theme of this article. Josef Wiesehöfer emphasizes the importance of peace to the Iranians, who clearly prioritized it over war.<sup>73</sup> A declaration of war that disturbed the peace could therefore not be a rash action. In order for the war to pass as just in Ferdowsi’s poem, the king had to be justified by one of two reasons, i.e. “defending land and dignity (defensive war), and penal or corrective justice (punishing a person or a state for a crime or aggression).”<sup>74</sup> Kay Kavus’ expedition to Mazandaran in accordance does not preserve these conditions. Kay Kavus clearly states: “a king should be ambitious to conquer the world.”<sup>75</sup> The opposition of his *pahlavans* and his initial defeat indicate that the war clearly bore the hallmarks of an unjust one. It was not until the final period of it, when Kay Kavus admitted his mistake before God and asked for forgiveness, that the fortunes of the war were reversed. This provides evidence that the shah’s original intentions were not pure. The desire for glory and riches were not a worthy justification for aggression against a peaceful nation.

Ferdowsi may have seen a similar motivation in Mahmud’s expedition to India. It is worth noting here that Ferdowsi, although he belonged to the social group of *dehqāns* never participated in hostilities. Tus was located in the northwest of Iran, about 30 days away from Ghazni, which made smooth flow of information between those cities difficult. The poet probably viewed the expedition through the eyes of the merchants

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<sup>67</sup> Brekke, 2005: 61.

<sup>68</sup> Balkaran & Dorn, 2012.

<sup>69</sup> *Bhagavad Gītā* – part of *Mahābhārata*, which is often considered the most important religious text of Hinduism. Allen, 2020: 2.

<sup>70</sup> Solomon, 2007: 61-63.

<sup>71</sup> Boesche, 2003.

<sup>72</sup> Mahallati, 2015.

<sup>73</sup> Wiesehöfer, 2007.

<sup>74</sup> Mahallati, 2015: 7.

<sup>75</sup> Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 144.

he met or his own as *hakim*<sup>76</sup> (wiseman), not as a politician. The current state of research makes it impossible to answer the question of whether Ferdowsi had knowledge (and if so, to what extent) of the relationship between India and Iran before Mahmud of Ghazni took power.

Researchers give two main reasons for the Muslim invasion of India, and these are religious (the desire to propagate the faith) and financial (the desire for India's wealth).<sup>77</sup> The religious motive runs through as one of the basic and righteous ones for starting a war from the most ancient times, the financial motive, according to Mahallati, is rejected by Ferdowsi.<sup>78</sup> Yet he is one of the main motives for the new Iranian ruler's war against its eastern neighbor. Bosworth even writes: "The Ghaznavid empire was essentially a military machine, geared primarily to the exploitation of India."<sup>79</sup>

However, for Mahmud of Ghazni, religious reasons were the main justification for the war. S. Jabir Raza writes that he: "is usually depicted as an iconoclast who destroyed temples and images in his zeal for Islam. Communal historians on both sides project him as a religious fanatic and a bigot."<sup>80</sup> However, he points out that this is an incomplete picture, and in recent years there have been glosses indicating that his actions were primarily political, not religious. Mahmud of Ghazni needed money to maintain his army, which he used to ensure the stability of his dynasty and expand his territory, as I mentioned earlier.

The sultan carried out economic devastation<sup>81</sup> of the conquered territories without focusing on converting them to Islam. Among the population forcibly brought from India were astronomers, mathematicians or excellent medics with unique knowledge of medical methods. Hindu had the opportunity to reach high positions of military administration, but also civilian administration.<sup>82</sup> Their knowledge and skills were as valuable to Mahmud of Ghazni as material goods.

Mahallati emphasizes that:

*Adab* texts and "mirrors for princes" contemporaneous with the emergence of the Shahnameh provided convenient mediums through which writers explored subtle ways of expressing ethical concerns. Written sometimes at court with the intended aim to please the sovereign and his circle, the production of these literary genres also

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<sup>76</sup> Abdullaeva & Melville, 2010: 1.

<sup>77</sup> Jha, 2018: 109.

<sup>78</sup> Mahallati, 2015: 7.

<sup>79</sup> Bosworth, 1966: 85.

<sup>80</sup> Raza, 2010: 213.

<sup>81</sup> Flynn & Zein, 2014: 88.

<sup>82</sup> Raza, 2010: 213-217.

influenced, or was meant to influence, the moral behavior of the latter – amirs and sultans – who rarely conducted military campaigns purely for ideological reasons.<sup>83</sup>

Thus, Ferdowsi's work was intended to be a text admonishing rulers about the morality and ethics of war. It was not a trivial matter. Mahallati even suggests that Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* "has influenced all Eastern Muslim cultures on the ethics of war and peace beyond its time and geography for more than a millennium."<sup>84</sup> Ferdowsi does not condemn war per se; he understands its necessity and significance, and the heroes of this epic engage in many battles and wars. However, Ferdowsi took care to clearly show which military actions can be considered justified and which deserve condemnation. The motivation related to the desire for wealth in the form of prisoners and spoils of war that guided Mahmud of Ghazni and Kay Kavus is not one that *hakim* Ferdowsi would consider justified. Mahallati goes so far as to say that the poet rejects "by rejecting both the theology of Mahmud of Ghazni and his methods of war."<sup>85</sup>

### **Duel Between Rostam and the White Div**

We can clearly see this rejection in the way Ferdowsi described the expedition to Mazandaran. It was organized hastily, against common sense, the advice of the most distinguished advisors, and decency itself. Significant is the opposition of Zal, the ruler of Sistan, who, according to the *pahlavans*, could have been the only one capable of stopping the king. Although he is not, unlike his son, the central character of the *Shahnameh*, his greatness, bravery, and wisdom are widely respected. Like his father, Sam, he is one of the *jahān pahlawān*<sup>86</sup> – a hero who is not only invincible, but also embodies the ideals of an entire civilization. This is the highest title that can be given to a man who is the ideal of chivalry (*jawānmardī*). And yet it is he who openly opposes the expedition to Mazandaran, pointing out that it will be a waste of financial and human resources, the inevitable downfall of the Iranian leaders, as any attempt to conquer this country is doomed to failure.<sup>87</sup>

Zal's voice, and thus the voice of honor and reason, as I have already mentioned, is ignored. The consequence is the defeat predicted by him and the *pahlavans*, as well as the blinding and capture of the king and his army. Not only did they fail to achieve a glorious victory, but they suffered a humiliating defeat. This war is therefore unjust in the eyes of God and punished by him. In his darkest hour, the king turns to Zal, one

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<sup>83</sup> Mahallati, 2015: 2.

<sup>84</sup> Mahallati, 2015: 3.

<sup>85</sup> Mahallati, 2015: 4.

<sup>86</sup> Omidsalar & Afshinvaiaie, 2022: 185.

<sup>87</sup> Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 146.

of the Crown Givers<sup>88</sup> and guardians of kings and states.<sup>89</sup> In his wisdom, Zal does not send his army to the rescue, which in the absence of the royal troops must guard Iran, but sends one man, a young man with little experience in battle, but descended from the greatest heroes. He is his son, Rostam. The young hero has a clear and distinct goal – to save the king. Kay Kavus was defeated by the White Div, commander-in-chief of the Mazandaran army. This old and experienced dev used his magic to blind the Iranians, and only his liver can restore their sight. Rostam must therefore defeat him, kill him, and obtain this organ.

Rostam's duel with White Div became the subject of analysis by Joanna Szklarz, who studied its significance in the context of monotheistic moral concepts,<sup>90</sup> war ethics<sup>91</sup> and cosmological ideas about the conflict of natural forces.<sup>92</sup> Her research indicates that a clear-cut classification of the antagonists in terms of good and evil remains problematic, and the reception of the scene can vary depending on cultural and religious perspectives.

Szklarz researches are largely based on Maria Składankowa's concept that the first-born sons of the Sistani family alternately represent the "rainy" and "sunny" shaman.<sup>93</sup> Described as a "relic of nomadic tribal culture,"<sup>94</sup> the theory harks back to Iran's oldest traditions, dating back to before Zoroastrianism. It assumes the existence of harmony between the forces of nature, in which both the sun, which is identified with goodness, and the destructive aspect attributed to rain have both destructive and beneficial properties and must remain in balance. In this context, the *Shahnameh* does not present reality in terms of absolute good and evil, but operates a moral system based on a dynamic balance between the forces of order and chaos.

For Iranians, *divs* are evil beings, both in terms of theology<sup>95</sup> and folklore.<sup>96</sup> The White Div who blinded Kay Kavus and his troops is therefore an evil being. Sadeghi even goes so far as to say that the Mazandaran warrior has no moral justification in his actions<sup>97</sup> despite his the earlier claim that "none of the heroes or anti-heroes in the text conforms to a good versus evil morality."<sup>98</sup> Szklarz presents a different interpretation, suggesting that White Div's actions should be considered in a political and war context. His resistance to Rostam can be seen as a reaction to Iranian aggression and defense of his own community's territory. In this view,

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<sup>88</sup> Davidson, 1985.

<sup>89</sup> Składankowa, 1989: 171.

<sup>90</sup> Szklarz, 2017.

<sup>91</sup> Szklarz, 2022.

<sup>92</sup> Szklarz, 2023.

<sup>93</sup> Składankowa, 1983: 92-96, 1989: 195.

<sup>94</sup> Szklarz, 2023: 58.

<sup>95</sup> Williams, 1994.

<sup>96</sup> Omidshafar, 1995; Yousefvand, 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Sadeghi, 2004: 199.

<sup>98</sup> Sadeghi, 2004: 198.

the White Div is not an arbitrarily sinister being, but acts as a defender of his people against invasion.<sup>99</sup> Unlike many demonic figures, he does not exhibit traits of cruelty or a ruthless lust for destruction. On the contrary, his behavior is characterized by prudence and the ability to think analytically – qualities usually attributed to wise rulers. Describing his character, the researcher states that “His behavior is prudent, like the behavior of a sage who can coldly assess the situation and draw appropriate conclusions.” This portrayal of the character suggests that the struggle between Rostam and White Div is not merely a clash between good and evil, but rather a confrontation between two defenders – representing different values and world orders. Szklarz refers to this as a “clash of national heroes,” indicating that both heroes play analogous roles in their respective communities, and that their struggle is not due to the moral superiority of one of the parties, but rather to a conflict of interests and loyalty to their own people.<sup>100</sup>

Thus, the two heroes face each other in battle, representing exactly the same approach – the desire to save those to whom they owe their loyalty. However, this is not a typical duel in front of an army, fought as a prelude to victory, a desire for glory or honor, as Ferdowsi usually depicts. Such duels, such as the fight between Bijan and Forud, Sohrab and Gordafarid, Rostam and Sohrab, Rostam and Esfandiyar, are fought in the sunshine and splendor, even if their outcome is an epic tragedy. Rostam does not face the White Div in open combat, but sneaks into his lair in a cave. Outside, it is noon and a bright, sunny day, but inside the cave, it is dark, and Rostam can only see his opponent thanks to his white fur. It is a surprise attack, without a prior challenge, more reminiscent of the actions of a trickster hero<sup>101</sup> than an Iranian *pahlavan*. There is no splendor in the fight itself, no opportunity to show off knightly skills, it is a brutal and quick exchange of blows. The fight is therefore stealthy, fast, hidden from the eyes of any accidental observers by the walls and darkness of the cave – as if there was something shameful about it. As if this fight should not have taken place at all.

The expedition to Mazandaran and Rostam’s duel with White Div can be seen as a battle between good and evil, where good is Iran and evil is Mazandaran, the homeland of sorcerers, demons, and peris. This is also consistent with the universal assumption that “we” – in this case, Iranians – are good, while “they” – Mazandaran – are evil. Therefore as Ali Sadeghi notes, that readers’ sympathies remain with Rostam, but despite being a demon, his opponent cannot be considered evil.<sup>102</sup> Interestingly, Rostam himself also has demonic origins. His mother, Rudabe, is a descendant of the demon king Zohhak, who terrorized Iran hundreds of years earlier. Rostam’s maternal origins have been discussed many times, as they are an important

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<sup>99</sup> Szklarz, 2023: 56-57;

<sup>100</sup> Szklarz, 2023: 57.

<sup>101</sup> Davis, 1999: 233-235.

<sup>102</sup> Sadeghi, 2004: 197-199.

part of his unique identity. He is like a hero on the borderline between two worlds: the primitive world, before the evolution of the tribal community into a developed civilization, where the laws of nature were the basis of all laws, and civilization, where they become subordinate to the laws imposed by God and man. Thus, even as a trickster hero, he is not a character completely faithful to the original image of this trope, but rather an evolution of it. Above all, however, he is a young man who is just gaining experience in war and life and who does not question the orders given by his superiors.

## Conclusions

The duel between Rostam and the White Div is a compelling subject for analysis and interpretation. First of all, it is not a typical duel, as we see many in the *Shahnameh*. The heroes do not clash on the battlefield, in front of entire armies, but fight their short, fierce and unchivalrous battle in a dark cave. The participants themselves are also extremely intriguing, as their origins, nationality, role as champions, and character traits make them multidimensional and morally ambiguous figures. This duel can be successfully interpreted as a clash between good and evil when viewed from the perspective of monotheistic religions, or it can be considered in the symbolic context of a clash between the forces of nature, such as the destructive and beneficial power of the sun and rain.<sup>103</sup> In this article, however, the duel between Rostam and White Div is considered in the context of Ferdowsi's anti-war criticism of Mahmud of Ghazni's expeditions to northern India.

In light of indirect evidence in the form of wine feasts and the tradition of *sāqī*, we see that when writing his poem, Ferdowsi was not isolated from court customs and used them to create the world presented in the *Shahnameh*. This gives us an interesting insight into the customs of both Iran at the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries and the pre-Islamic period, as sources and researchers indicate that the custom of wine feasts dates back to ancient times. This custom allowed the *pahlavans* to hope that the decision made over a cup of wine would be forgotten, otherwise both they and Iran itself would face defeat.<sup>104</sup> None of them feel that this is a war that should be waged, and therefore they do not feel that this war is righteous. Thus, Kay Kavus' expedition to Mazandaran is parallel to Mahmud's expedition to India, which, according to Ferdowsi, also had no justifiable reason. Ferdowsi allowed only two righteous causes for war, namely war in defense of land or honor, and war to punish injustice – causes that neither Mahmud nor Kay Kavus had when setting out to wage their wars.

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<sup>103</sup> Szklarz, 2017: 17-19.

<sup>104</sup> Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 144.



Fig. 1. Firdausi and the three poets of Ghazna, folio from *Shahnama*. Attributed to Aqa Mirak, dated ca. 1532. Inv. AKM156, The Aga Khan Museum  
 [Public Domain: <https://collections.agakhanmuseum.org/collection/artifact/firdausi-and-the-three-poets-of-ghazna-akm156>].

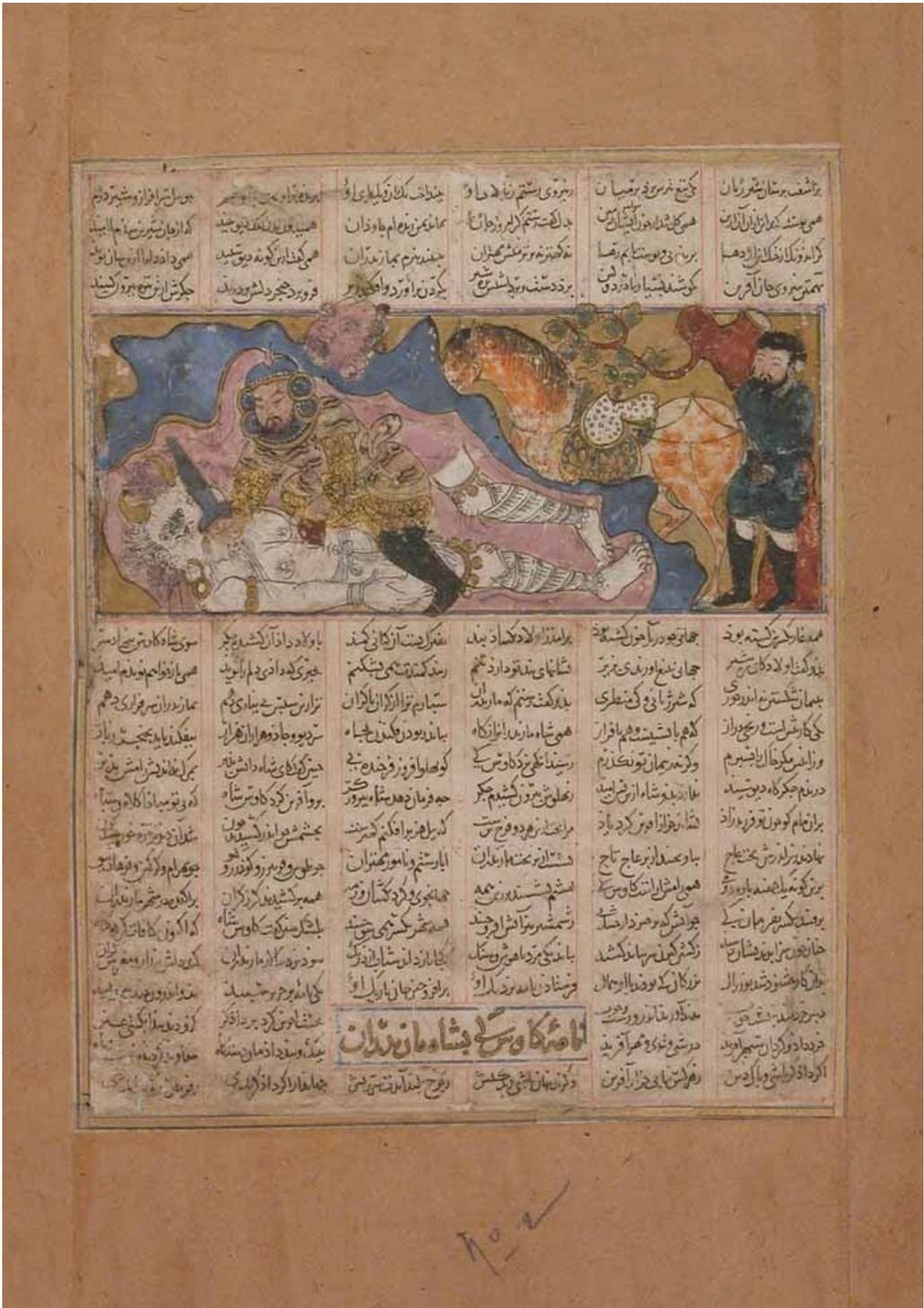


Fig. 2. Rostam Kills the White Div, folio from *Shahnama*. Attributed to Northwestern Iran or Baghdad, dated ca. 1300-1330. Inv. 69.74.7, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York [Public Domain: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/452047>].



Fig. 3. Rostam Kills the White Div, folio from *Shahnameh*. Attributed to Iran, probably Isfahan, dated ca. 1330-1340. Inv. 1974.290.7, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York [Public Domain: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/452632>].



Fig. 4. Rostam's seventh course: He kills the White Div, folio 124 from *Shahname*. Attributed to Mir Musavvir (c. 1510-1555) / Abd al-Vahhab (c. 1516), The Cleveland Museum of Art [Public Domain: <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1988.96>].



Fig. 5. Rostam kills the White Div (the 7th feat), folio W.601 from *Shahnama*. Attributed to 19th century (Safavid), W.601.131B, The Walters Art Museum [Public Domain: <https://art.thewalters.org/object/W.601.131B/>].

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