Introduction

The Khavaran-nama by Ibn Husam (d. circa 875/1470) is an epic poem in the mutaqarib metre, celebrating the heroic deeds of ‘Ali b. Abi Talib and his four companions, Sa’d-i Vaqqas, Abu’l-Mihjan, Malik-i Azdar/Ashtar and ‘Amr-i Umayya, during their adventurous journey to the far-off lands of Khavaran to eradicate paganism there and replace it by Islam.

The epic takes place in the lands of the allied pagan kings on the steppes of Khavaran and evolves through a series of battles interspersed with sub-plots of alternating mischief and bravery involving the participants. The main characters among the pagan rulers are the king of Khavar-zamin, called Jamshid; the king of Sahil-zamin, called Tahmas; and the king of Qam al-ruqum, called Salsal, who is also the protector of the City of Gold, the Shahr-i zarrin. Although certain events in the Khavaran-nama are reminiscent of those known to ‘Ali and his four companions during the early battles of Islam, fictional elements have completely overtaken the narratives, embellishing the epic with fantastic fairy-tale motifs describing ‘Ali’s extraordinary feats of courage against wicked wizards, lions, dragons, and a whole troop of divs, jinns, and other mythical creatures living in the lands of Khavaran. ‘Ali’s supernatural powers are further emphasised by his ability to decode the charms and talismans found at the “Fortress of the Talismans of Dal”, a most complicated task but necessary before he is able to enter the City of Gold. “To take this fortress thought is needed, it is full of tricks and magic, it cannot be conquered with the sword and the noose ... whosoever dispels the talismans of this fortress can go into the Golden City.”

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1 Special thanks to my editor Charles Melville, who was kind, helpful and inspiring throughout the entire process.


3 The translation is taken and rendered into English from Giovanna Calasso, “Un epopea musulmana di epoca timuride”, 466, where the author refers to fols. 125r–125v (margin) in a still
Having approached this Fortress of Talismans, at the threshold of the City of Gold, ‘Ali learns from an inscription on stone that the Kayanid (i.e. Iranian) king Dal, whose kingdom of goodness and justice was brought to an end by his brother Salsal, had contrived before his death to plant there powerful magic spells to make the City of Gold inaccessible to ordinary mortals, until, “in another epoch”, the Arab hero ‘Ali will come and break them and bring back justice to the City of Gold. As predicted, ‘Ali breaks the talismanic codes and enters the City of Gold, where he eventually kills the evil ruler Salsal and converts his righteous widow, Shamama, to Islam. The conquest of the Golden City, then, is the climax of the story representing the triumph of Islam over the lands of Khavaran. After the conquest, on the way back to Medina, every fortress or city that had been conquered on the outward journey is now bestowed by ‘Ali on a Muslim, enjoined to govern justly and in accordance with Muslim law and religion (dad u din).

As Ibn Husam declares in the sixth bait of his epilogue, he completed his work in 830/1426–27 in the lands of the east, that is, in the peripheral province of Qhistan that was his homeland. At that time, the cultural context in which he was writing was characterised by a long-term interplay between a strong pro-‘Alid sentiment, and a conservative attachment to the ancient Iranian

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4 The closure of the Golden City by King Dal takes place in the time between the outbreak of Salsal’s coup and his treacherous murder of his brother Dal, taking possession of his crown and wife.


6 Since the word “Khavar” usually means East (cf. Calasso, “Il Xavar-name di Ibn Hosam”, 155–56, n. 2; ibid., “Un epopea musulmana”, 115–17), one may propose that the Khavar in Ibn Husam’s epic refers to Greater Iran, located to the east of Arabia where the Muslim heroes start their journey. This may be supported by the fact that almost all the pagan kings, viziers and generals met by ‘Ali have Persian names (e.g. Qubad, Dara, Jamshid, Tahmas, Ardashir, Shapur). This may further imply that they were probably meant by the author to represent the royal courts of pre-Islamic Iran. If this is the case, he may have wished to exemplify the early Islamisation of the Iranians during the first Islamic conquests.

7 The converted king Jamshid was granted a mandate over his former region, Khavar-zamin; the queen Shamama became sovereign over the city of Qam al-ruqum, which had formerly belonged to Salsal, and also over the region of Sahil-zamin, whose former king, her brother Tahmas, had been killed because he persisted in refusing Islam.

8 The devotion to ‘Ali may reflect the popular religious piety current around the native home of Ibn Husam—the village of Khusf in the district of Qhistan, on the edge of Kavir-i Lut, on