The Cartoonist and the Demon-King:
How the Shahnameh became Wartime Propaganda

After having worked closely with Dr Firuza Melville on my undergraduate History dissertation about the 1648 Windsor *Shahnameh*, I was excited to have the opportunity to return to the Centre having now completed my degree and begun my MPhil in Islamic Art and Architecture at Wolfson College, Oxford. I was able to complete my internship remotely in January under Dr Melville's supervision. As an undergraduate I spent time researching American and Soviet wartime films, and so a recently-acquired set of propaganda posters produced by the British government in 1942 for distribution in Iran jumped out at me. As can be imagined, opportunities to combine an interest in Second World War propaganda with one in Islamic art do not come along very often, so I was eager not to miss this one.

The posters depict scenes from the Zahhak cycle of the *Shahnameh*, with the faces of wartime world leaders added to make a political point in the hope of enlisting Iranian support for the allied war effort. Thanks to the kind donation of John Drake, whose late father Sir Eric Drake collected the posters, the Centre now has almost all (five of six) of the series. Sir Eric spent over fifteen years working in the Anglo-Iranian oil company at their refinery at Abadan, starting as an accountant in 1935 and becoming the general manager in Iran in 1950. He then played a prominent role in negotiations with the British cabinet following Mohammed Mossadeq's oil nationalisation of 1951, the events of which he and his wife Margaret discuss in Episode 5 of the 1985 documentary *End of Empire.* It was while he was a young man in Abadan that he came upon these posters, and carefully transported them out of Iran during that uncertain period.

After leaving Iran, Sir Eric took up positions in Australia and North America. Returning to the UK, he eventually took up the chairmanship of BP, a post which he held from 1969 to 1975. In his retirement, Drake devoted himself to heritage preservation as a Trustee of the Westminster Abbey Trust and chairman of the Mary Rose Trust. It is therefore appropriate that these posters should have now found their way into an academic institute, especially one affiliated with his *alma mater,* Pembroke College. We are grateful for this generous donation, which makes these unusual documents available to students and academics working across the university, as well as the wider public.

The Posters

The pictures were drawn by the Egyptian-born cartoonist Kimon Evan Marengo, known professionally as 'Kem', while working for the Political Warfare Executive's (PWE) French and North Africa section. He produced the cartoons in late 1942, and they were distributed originally as posters but then reissued as postcards in November 1943 on the eve of the Tehran Conference. The original idea for propaganda based on the most well-known stories of the *Shahnameh* had been mooted in private correspondence between Dr Arthur Arberry, later the Sir Thomas Adams Professor of Arabic at Pembroke College, and the Persian intellectual Mojtaba Minovi, then working for the BBC Persian Service and teaching the language at Oxford. In these letters, Minovi had suggested that the demon-king Zahhak might be depicted 'like Hitler with Musso[lini] and Tojo [...] as the two snakes growing from his shoulders', and indicated verses which might be used (Homan, 2002). This idea was passed onto Kem who set to work making this idea a reality between March and October 1942. The surprising collaboration between an Iranian intellectual, a

Cambridge orientalist, the Foreign Office, and an Egyptian cartoonist thus produced the unique set of images which caught Sir Eric's eye in wartime Abadan.

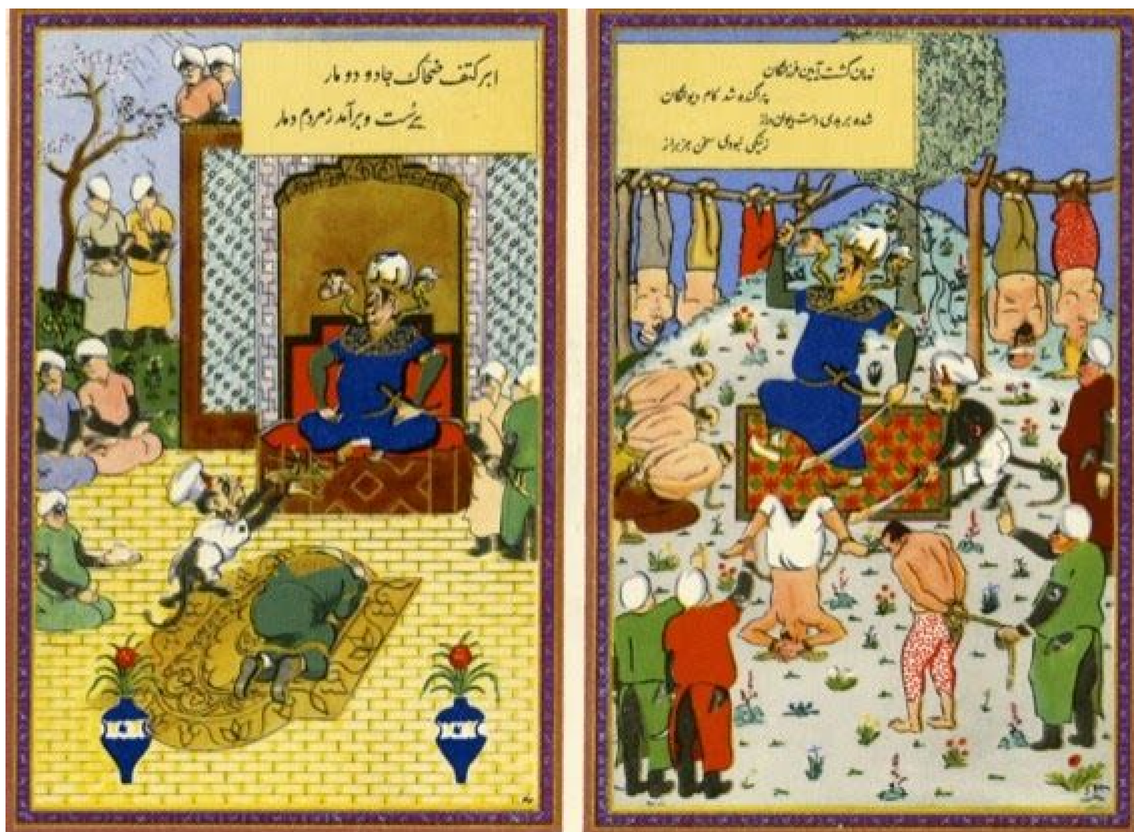


Fig. 1. Zahhak/Hitler enthroned before Ahriman/Goebbels. The caption reads: 'Two snakes grew out of the shoulders of Zahhak the wizard and destruction was rained down on the people.' (This and subsequent translations thanks to Dr Melville)

Fig. 2. Zahhak/Hitler receives his tribute of Iranian youth, with Ahriman/Goebbels beside him The caption reads: 'The laws of the wise became hidden and the desires of madmen became widespread; the hand of the madmen grew long for the evil; goodness was only heard of in secret.'

The images themselves follow the story of the demon-king Zahhak, one of the Shahnameh's most well-known cycles. It appears in the early 'mythical' section of the poem, and features one of Ferdowsi's classic confrontations between good and evil, a story with a moral simplicity which the later text rarely returns to. In the original, the ambitious prince Zahhak is persuaded by Ahriman (Satan) to kill his father, and take over his kingdom. Now a king, Zahhak is once again visited by Ahriman, this time in disguise as a cook, who serves him a sumptuous dinner of meat: a luxury which humanity had never before tasted. In gratitude, Zahhak grants Ahriman's wish to kiss his shoulders, and when he does so snakes sprang from them and could only be satisfied if fed a human brain every day. This is the subject of the first of Kem's posters, (Fig. 1), which depicts Goebbels as Ahriman serving Zahhak/Hitler a cup of coffee while Nazi

officers, clad in both turbans and swastika armbands, stand around. Just as Minovi had recommended, the snakes on his shoulders bear the faces of Mussolini and Tojo.

Though Zahhak is an Arab king, the growing arrogance of Shah Jamshid - the rightful ruler of Persia - leads his people to invite Zahhak to take over the country and rule in his stead. Only too glad to oblige, Zahhak takes over Iran, has Jamshid sawn in two, marries his two daughters, and begins a reign of terror. A parallel was doubtless intended with those under Reza Shah who believed that courting an alliance with Germany might offer a solution to the country's ills. Kem's second poster (Fig. 2) attempts to depict where such an alliance might lead, with Zahhak/Hitler brandishing a sword and a whip over his unfortunate victims. In light of Camran Michael Amin's discussion of the growing use of sexual and violent imagery in the Iranian Press of the 1940s, this grotesque image would have been well-suited to the sensationalist tastes of Iranian consumers (Amin, 2001). But this was also coupled with reference to one of the most graphic scenes of the *Shahnameh,* the story of the execution of the Zoroastrian Prophet Mazdak, who is executed along with his followers who are buried alive with their feet in the air as a grisly reflection of the Prophet's utopian idea of a 'human garden'. This scene, though incorrect for the Zahhak cycle, shows how closely Kem engaged with the *Shahnameh* tradition in producing this work.

Fig. 3. Zahhak/Hitler has a nightmare about the coming of three warriors, here Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt. The caption reads: 'Then he saw three warriors of the royal household suddenly appear'.

Fig. 4. Kaveh raises his leather apron in protest to Zahhak/Hitler's tyranny. The caption reads: 'He cried and struck his head before the Shah, 'O Shah, I am Kaveh in demand of justice. There must be a limit to oppression, oppression must always have a just cause'.

The third poster sees the beginning of Zahhak/Hitler's downfall. In the poem, one night Zahhak is in bed with Arnavaz (one of the daughters of Jamshid). He has a nightmare in which he is set upon by three noble warriors, the youngest of whom proceeds to skin him and use that flayed skin to bind his hands and take him to Mount Damavand. Troubled, Zahhak consults his astrologers who predict his doom at the hands of a man named Faridun, who has yet to be born. Following a familiar literary trope of a man resisting fate, Zahhak sends men to find the boy and chase him into the mountains in a vain attempt to cheat death. Minovi intended to use this scene to further build a political narrative: he suggested that Churchill could take on the guise of Faridun, and appear accompanied by 'his older and greater Brothers, Roosevelt and Stalin' (Holman 2002). In this poster, Zahhak/Hitler's attendants guide the viewer through the scene with their gazes, with one directing the viewer towards the dream-bubble, the others towards the restless dreamer. This mimicked the inner workings of the medieval miniatures which inspired Kem.

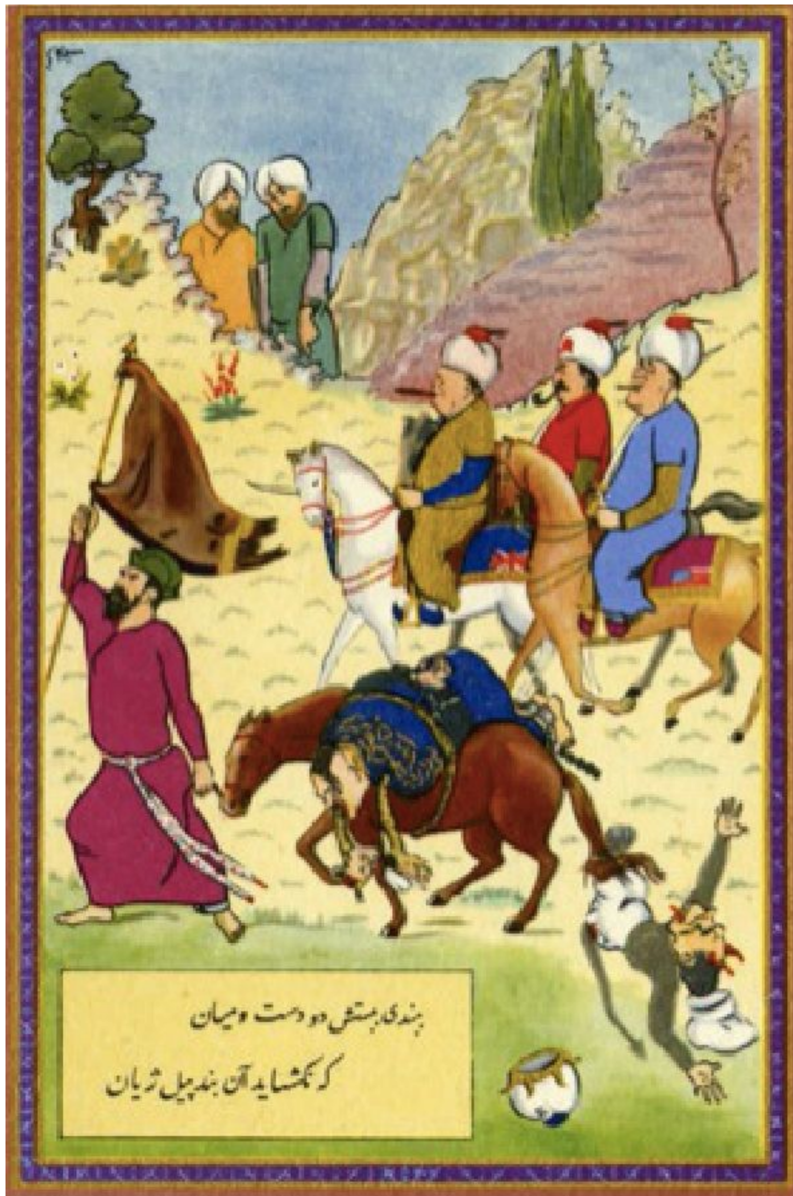
The next poster (Fig. 4) repeats the scenery of the first, another technique not unfamiliar in older Persian manuscripts. This has the effect of heightening the contrast in this scene when, instead of receiving tribute from Ahriman/Goebbels, Zahhak/Hitler faces an angry subject. In the poem, Kaveh the blacksmith comes to beg for the life of his last surviving son, after his last seventeen had been fed to Zahhak's snakes. Zahhak agrees to show mercy if Kaveh will sign a document attesting to his clemency. But Kaveh refuses, and defiantly raising his leather apron as a flag of rebellion (*Derafsh-e Kaviani*) he assembles a crowd to find Faridun and bring an end to Zahhak's reign.

Fig. 5. Kaveh leads a triumphant procession, with Zahhak/Hitler bound and the allied following behind. The caption reads: 'Strongly he tied his two hands and waist, so that his fetters could not be broken even by a raging elephant'.

Fig. 6. The victorious allies have Kaveh nailed to Mount Damavand, to stay there for eternity. The caption reads: 'Swiftly as a post-messenger he brought Zahhak away and bound him to Mount Damavand and, when the name of Zahhak became as dust, the world was cleansed of his evil'.

The fifth poster sees the culmination of the efforts of Kaveh and the warriors. In Ferdowsi's original, the crowd finds Faridun hiding from Zahhak's men in the Alborz Mountains. With their support he storms the palace, and eventually succeeds in capturing Zahhak and becoming the new ruler of Iran. In Kem's poster, once again it is three warriors who answer Kaveh's call for justice rather than just the one. The allies follow on horseback behind the blacksmith and the defeated king, whose crown has fallen to the floor - a common symbol of disgrace in Persian art.

The final poster of the series - the only one to elude Sir Eric's collection - brings the story to a close. Rather than kill him, Faridun is told by the angel Sorush to nail Zahhak to Mount Damavand and leave him there for eternity. In this image, the three warriors watch as the nails are driven into Zahhak/Hitler's limbs. At the top right, three soldiers look on and hold their swords - their resolute stance contrasting with the German stormtroopers who had looked furtively around in the first poster. In the bottom left hand corner, onlookers hold the flags of Britain, America, the Soviet Union and - barely discernible at the edge of the frame - Iran.



Essay

As a student of Islamic Art, I was struck by Kem's sensitive use of the source material to construct these posters. The settings, perspective, and content of the image all combine to create an effective pastiche of the miniatures which adorn many *Shahnameh* manuscripts. One wonders whether Dr Arberry provided Kem with access to Persian manuscripts, in original or reproduction, which he could refer to. In these settings, the presence of Nazi symbolism has a particularly unsettling effect on the viewer. The decision to depict the attendant figures common in paintings of this style with jackboots, pistols, and swastika armbands makes a statement about the violation of Persia's historic culture by German influence. Minovi knew that in order to mobilise the sentiments of the Iranian population most effectively, British propagandists would do well to make use of one of Ferdowsi's most popular stories. In his

correspondence with Dr Arberry, he assured him that ‘my people are accustomed to putting new interpretation to old and familiar quotations’ (Holman, 2002). The unmistakable image of a rampaging monarch with snakes on both his shoulders would have been immediately recognised both by educated elites, familiar with the manuscripts, and to the rest of the population familiar with the scenes from the walls of *zurkhaneh* (traditional sports clubs or gymnasia) and coffee-houses, which had been popular in Persia since the sixteenth century.

With Iran’s oil reserves and its strategic position - giving a potential route into the Soviet Union for American lend-lease war materiel - Kem’s task of winning over Iran’s population was high on the British government’s list of priorities. Yet this would also be an extremely difficult task, even for a veteran cartoonist like Kem. For all the political controversy and ferment of the Reza Shah’s Iran, one thing which could unite much of the population was a deep fear of British and Russian power. This sentiment had its roots in the ‘Great Game’ of the nineteenth century, and only grew more pronounced with the Anglo-Russian occupation of much of Iran in World War I. Indeed, only a year prior to the printing of these posters, British and Soviet forces had once again - without a formal declaration of war and after the Iranian government had agreed to meet their ultimatum - invaded the country, bombed its major cities into submission, and forced the Shah’s abdication. By 1942, all of Iran’s major roads and railways had been requisitioned for allied trucks heading into the USSR, the famous ‘Persian Corridor’. To those who saw these cartoons, it might have seemed ironic that it was the Allies rather than the Axis powers who had occupied Iran and were now ‘feeding’, if not on the brains of its youth, then at least on its resources and infrastructure.

Turning to Kem’s fifth poster, depicting the trussed Zahhak/Hitler being bundled off to Mount Damavand, one can detect the ways in which Kem tried to make his propaganda message more palatable. In the original story, though three warriors come to Zahhak in his dream, it is only Faridun who answers Kaveh’s call. In these posters, however, Kem depicts three warriors - Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt - coming to depose Zahhak/Hitler. This went some way to diluting the poster’s Anglophile stance. The appearance of Stalin - complete with a hammer and sickle on his turban - might have engaged the many Iranians whose sympathies lay with the left-wing *Tudeh* party, closely aligned as it was with Moscow. Some might also have viewed Roosevelt’s inclusion positively, at a time when America retained some of that Wilsonian promise as a potential check on British ambitions. But for many, the appearance of Winston Churchill - the man who, before becoming Prime Minister, had in 1909 persuaded the Admiralty to take out a commanding share in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company - would have been total anathema. With its positive depiction of the allied leaders, it is not hard to see why these posters were reissued on the eve of the Tehran Conference to prepare the ground for the leaders’ arrival in the city to discuss their war aims. Yet it is also possible to imagine that this poster could have backfired among Iranian nationalists who might have seen the trio not as heroic warriors, but unwelcome invaders.

Indeed, it is possible that for some Iranians the repurposing of their national epic by a foreign power might have produced reactions of indignation, or even outrage. The Zahhak cycle is such a favourite in part because of the character of Kaveh. The only charismatic commoner in the *Shahnameh,* the blacksmith-turned-revolutionary held unique appeal to the masses and served as an archetype for generations of Iranian rebels. This poster was neither the first nor the last time that Kaveh would be evoked in response to political events. Between 1916 and 1922, for example, constitutional activist

turned *Shahnameh* scholar Hasan Taqizadeh edited a magazine entitled *Kaveh,* featuring nationalist articles which reflected on the Anglo-Russian occupation during the First World War. In Kem's posters, Kaveh is evoked in a completely different way: rather than resisting foreign invaders, here he appears leading them into his country. Perhaps this is in line with Ferdowsi's story, recognising - as did Kaveh - that his motley band of followers could not topple Zahhak alone. Yet Kem was playing a dangerous game by recasting a symbol of Iranian independence as a harbinger of foreign domination. Looking at the fifth poster, a hierarchy is created as Kaveh walks barefoot before the mounted allies. It is also telling that, while other characters were changed into recognisable political personalities, Kaveh is portrayed as a generic Iranian man. Though Kem likely feared single out a single politician in the unstable political climate of wartime Iran, when anyone he chose might fall from favour before his poster even hit the press, this also visually marginalises the only figure in these cartoons who represents Iran. In using such evocative source material, Kem had a powerful means of connecting with ordinary Iranians. Yet this also carried the risk that, by taking liberties with the source material, his reinterpretation of the beloved story might come across as arrogant or inappropriate.

Taken in this light, these posters could be seen as a striking example of the nexus between Orientalist scholarship and colonial power. The specialist knowledge of Dr Arberry, a scholar in the pay of the British Government, was used here to produce propaganda to justify the extension of colonial power (albeit informal) to an occupied people. Yet the complex process of cross-cultural interaction which gave rise to these posters defies such easy categorisation. Their inception involved the agency of Mojtaba Minovi, an Iranian intellectual often critical of Western orientalists, and the artistic skill of a colonial subject, the Egyptian-born Kem. If these posters reveal anything, it is the mechanics of the process whereby the British Government worked out how to craft their wartime propaganda to unfamiliar cultures. This process prioritised not only the learning of British academics but also with the input of 'representatives' of the culture in question, a mantle which Minovi took on enthusiastically. It is fascinating to read the exchange between Arberry and Minovi and consider how their knowledge and ideas passed from academic correspondence into officially-produced propaganda. Similar posters and processes doubtless exist for countries across the world, produced by similarly personal and haphazard methods: one may think, for example, of how Japanese propaganda paid close attention to the specific discontents of interwar India, and consider how similar conversations with Indian nationalists played a part in shaping them.

For me, these posters offer lessons to *Shahnameh* scholars. In the foregoing discussion, we have seen how different actors - from exiled intellectuals to British intelligence - turned to the *Shahnameh* to communicate an agenda. This was possible thanks both to the openness of the text, allowing it to be used to justify a wide range of messages, and its popularity, making it a powerful tool in the hands of propagandists. Yet it is this same openness which makes any one interpretation insufficient. Referring to the original poem, the nuance of Ferdowsi's text - especially the unexpected complexity of Zahhak's character - makes Kem's retelling of the story seem oversimplified, his political metaphor seem crude. Though the *Shahnameh* has been used and abused for a thousand years, it resists control. Often used to justify absolutist visions of monarchy, Ferdowsi's kings repeatedly bring ruin to Iran through their flaws. A rallying cry for nationalists, the poem is packed with reflections on the tragedy of war and inevitability of death. Through such paradoxes, the *Shahnameh* will always exceed the meanings imposed upon it.

Archie Williams
January 2021

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