

"AT THE PALACE OF CTESIPHON":
A *QASEEDA* OF KHAQAANI,
Translated from the Persian

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Hassan al-^cAjam Afdal al-Deen Bedeel bin 'Ali Najjaar Khaqaani Sher-vaani (500-582 A.H./1106-1185 A.D.), first known as Haqaa'iqi, received his second *takhalluṣ* or pen name of Khaqaani by serving as court poet to the Khaqaan (king) of Shervaan, Aktisaan bin Minoochihr. Khaqaani has the reputation of being among the most difficult and learned of all Persian poets. He composed this poem while visiting the ruins of Ctesiphon, either ca. 551 A.H./1156 A.D.¹ or in 569 A.H.,² the former date being more probable on grounds of the poet's age. He was returning from his second pilgrimage to Mecca when he made this visit to Ctesiphon.

The Arab poet al-Buḥturi (206-284 A.H./821-897 A.D.) had written a *qaseeda* (long poem) on the palace at al-Madaa'in ("the cities," of which Ctesiphon was the chief; see below), with which Khaqaani was probably familiar.³ Yet the two *qaseedas* are quite different: the keynote of al-Buḥturi's is alarm and its alleviation by drinking wine; the keynote of Khaqaani's is sorrow at the relentless passage of time. After Khaqaani, other poets took up the theme, notably Hossein Daanesh (1286-1362 A.H./1869-1943 A.D.).

Khaqaani's *qaseeda* recalls the ruined glory of Ctesiphon. Ctesiphon was to the Parthian and Sassanian empires as Rome was to the Roman empire. The Parthian empire and its successor the Sassanian empire were the military match of wave upon wave of Roman legions (not that the Sassanians never gave up territory to the Romans, but they always soon gained it back).

¹E. G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1906), 2:398.

²Khaqaani, *Gozeedeh-ye Ash'ar-e Khaqaani Shervani [Selected Poetry of Khaqaani Shervani]*, ed. Sayyid Zeeyaa al-Deen Sajjaadi (Tehran, 1351/1972), p. 281.

³A. J. Arberry has published a translation of al-Buḥturi's *qaseeda* along with the Arabic original in *Arabic Poetry, A Primer for Students* (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 72ff.

Indeed, two Roman armies were captured and enslaved *en masse* by the Sassanians, the first under the emperor Valerian in 260 A.D. by Shaahpoor I, and the second under Julian the Apostate in 363 by Shaahpoor II. Earlier, however, under the Parthians, Ctesiphon was thrice briefly captured by the Romans. Trajan sacked and burned the city in 116 A.D., as did Marcus Aurelius ca. 164, and Septimus Severus held the city for a short time in 198. Long before, Crassus's Roman army was decimated and surrendered to the Parthians at Carrhae (54 B.C.) in an abortive drive against Ctesiphon.

The Arabs and Persians referred to the cluster of cities which included Ctesiphon and Seleucia as *al-Madaa'in* ("the cities"). Seven cities in all were clustered on the banks of the Tigris River (in what is now Iraq) in ancient times, Ctesiphon in its time being the chief of them and the winter capital of the Parthian (or Arsacid, 220 B.C.-226 A.D.) kings and the main capital of the Sassanian kings (226-651 A.D.). It was situated on the left bank of the Tigris River, across from the old Seleucid capital of Seleucia. When the Parthian king Mithradates I conquered Seleucia in 141 B.C., he founded Ctesiphon as his capital. From there the irrigation system of the Sawaad was administered. The land of the Sawaad was all royally owned and administered, the agricultural revenues derived therefrom being the financial mainstay of both the Parthians and the Sassanians. The Sawaad or ancient Sumeria was never part of Iran proper (Iran Zameen), though it was part of Iran Shahr, *l'Iran exterieur*; the people there spoke Aramaic during the dominion of the two empires.

Ctesiphon was sacked by the Byzantines under the emperor Heraclius in 628 A.D., foreshadowing the last sack in 637 by the Muslim Arabs and the final collapse of the Sassanian empire (marked by the battle of Nehavand in Iran proper in 642). Since the Arabs preferred to build their own cities, Ctesiphon was never rebuilt. During the subsequent Muslim period the palace at Ctesiphon was called Ivan-e Kisraa or Taaq-e Kisraa, "Khosrow's Palace," after one or both of the two great Sassanian kings named Khosrow (Chosroes)—Khosrow I being better known as Anooshirvaan the Just ('Aadel; reigned 531-579 A.D.)⁴ and Khosrow II as Khosrow Parveez (Aparvez) or simply Khosrow (reigned 591-628). Khosrow Parveez had conquered the greater part of the Byzantine empire when his army was outflanked by Heraclius's Byzantine army. Upon Heraclius's sack of Ctesiphon, Khosrow was assassinated by some of his own generals when he refused to abdicate the throne.

"The white (al-Abyad)," as the Arabs called the palace at Ctesiphon, was

⁴ See note 21 below.

was still standing, though in ruin, when al-Buhturi visited it in the ninth century and described the effects of the vivid frescoes upon him in his Arabic *qaseeda*.⁵ Yaaqoot (1179-1229 A.D.) says,

And al-Abyad is also the palace of the Chosroes in al-Madaa'in. It was one of the wonders of the world, and remained standing until the days of al-Muktafi in about the year 290 (A.H./903 A.D.). Then it was destroyed, and there was built on its parapets the foundation of al-Taj in the caliph's dwelling (Baghdad).⁶

Thus the palace must have been in utter ruin for some time when Khaaqaani (d. 582/1185) visited it. Now all that remains of palace and city is the partially collapsed, vaulted, royal audience hall.

Persian prosody is a healthy mongrel or a fertile hybrid between native, local verse forms and Arabic prosody—even as the Persian language is an Indo-European trunk with an Arabic graft. Persian metres are quantitative, consisting of a given number of long and short syllables, as are their Arabic counterparts; yet, unlike the Arabic, Persian prosody is a mixture of accentual and quantitative verse: some of the long syllables in Persian poetry are accented and some are not.

In this *qaseeda* the Arabic rhyme scheme is used. Each *bayt* (line) consists of two *mişra'as* (or *maşaaari'as*, hemistichs). The first two hemistichs rhyme and every second hemistich thereafter rhymes. The rhyme is a monorhyme, “-aan,” ending in the consonant *noon* (“n”), and hence is of the type called “fettered” (*muqayyada*), as versus the vowel rhyme called “absolute” (*moṭlaqa*). The first two *bayts* are transcribed below, the *bayts* numbered and the *mişra'as* lettered:

1. a. *haan ay del-e ebrat-been az deedeh ebar kun haan*
 b. *eevaan-e madaa'en raa aayeeneh-ye ebrat daan*
2. a. *yek rah ze lab-e dejleh manzel beh madaa'en kun*
 b. *vaz deedeh dovvom dejleh bar khaak-e madaa'en raan*

The metre of this *qaseeda* is one of four feet to a hemistich, each foot consisting of one short syllable and alternating between two and three long

⁵ Arberry, *loc. cit.*

⁶ Yaaqoot b. Abdallah, *Mu'jam al-Buldaan* (Geographical Dictionary), ed. Wustenfeld, 6 vols. (Leipzig, 1866), 1:100, quoted in translation by Arberry, *op. cit.*, note 12, p. 74.

syllables. In the following metrical diagram, short syllables are marked \cup , long syllables as $-$, and long, stressed syllables as \surd . It will be seen that the quantitative pattern, although not uniform, is more definite and regular than the accentual pattern. In addition, unlike Arabic metre, there may be a pause after the second foot, the distinction between the second and third feet being more marked than that between the first and second or the third and fourth feet. Thus the first two *bayts* scan as follows:

- | | | | | | |
|----|----|----------------|------------------|----------------|------------------|
| 1. | a. | $\surd - \cup$ | $\cup - - \surd$ | $- - \cup$ | $\cup - - \surd$ |
| | b. | $- - \cup$ | $\cup - - \surd$ | $- - \cup$ | $\cup - - \surd$ |
| 2. | a. | $- - \cup$ | $- \cup - \cup$ | $- \surd \cup$ | $\cup - \surd -$ |
| | b. | $- \surd \cup$ | $- \surd - \cup$ | $- \surd \cup$ | $\cup - - \surd$ |

As scanned above, the metre is derived from the Arabic, acatalectic metre *taweel* ("long"); however, this variant metre is not found in Arabic verse. The prime metre as seen in *bayt* one reverses the position of the short and long syllables in the first and third feet. For comparison, the prime, acatalectic *taweel* metre in Arabic is scanned:

- | | | | | | |
|----|----|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| 1. | a. | $\cup - -$ | $\cup - - -$ | $\cup - -$ | $\cup - - -$ |
| | b. | $\cup - -$ | $\cup - - -$ | $\cup - -$ | $\cup - - -$ |

No attempt was made in the translation to imitate either the rhyme scheme or the metre of the original. Rather, the two hemistichs of each *bayt* were slightly expanded to four or five, more or less rhyming, short lines per *bayt*.

Thematically, the Arabic *qaseed* form from which the Persian *qaseeda* is derived has various structural forms. Khaaqaani's *qaseeda* may be divided roughly into three main parts: introduction, body of the poem, and closure. In the introduction (*bayts* 1-10), the poet acts as tour guide to an invisible tourist (the reader or listener), indicating the points of interest in the palace at Ctesiphon and the landmarks in its environs. In the body of the poem (*bayts* 11-35), the poet recalls the lost glories of the Sassanian kings and recounts the havoc that time and fact have wreaked upon palace and kings both. The closure consists of the signature *bayt* (36) followed by Khaaqaani's request to the Khaaqaan for a reward for composing the poem. Significantly, unlike more traditional Arabic and Persian *qaseedas*, this request for a reward is not accompanied by praise of the person to whom the request is made.

AT THE PALACE OF CTESIPHON

- Look well, wise heart! and heed the lesson⁷ (1)
 offered by the sight of the palace at Ctesiphon.⁸
 Look well! and gain wisdom by steady gaze
 into the mirror of history bygone.
- Alight for once upon the Tigris shore at Ctesiphon (2)
 and let ope' the flow from your
 eyes' flood gates: a second Tigris
 coursing on the ground before Ctesiphon.
- The eye itself upon this ruined site (3)
 is such a mighty Tigris that it cries
 one hundred Tigrises of blood-red tears,⁹
 as if the eye's hot springs of blood
 were such a blast furnace that from eyelashes drips fire.
- Notice the Tigris River's lip. You see (4)
 how much it froths at the mouth—
 hot froth as if from the searing
 heat of its sighs,¹⁰ the Tigris's lip
 blubbers and bubbles and blisters away.

⁷The full title of the poem in Persian is "*Hengaam-e 'uboor az Madaayen va deedan-e taaq-e Kisraa gooyad*," as found in the edition used for this translation, *Deeva-an-e Hassan al-'Ajam Afḍal al-Deen Bedeel ibn 'Ali Khaaqaani Shervaani*, ed. 'Ali 'Abd al-Rasuli (Tehran, 1957), pp. 321-323. Also used in the translation was the edition of Sajjaadi (n. 2 above). An earlier English translation of this poem was made by Jerome W. Clinton as an appendix to his article, "The *Madāen Qasida* of Xāqāni Sharvāni, I," *Edebiyat*, vol. I, No. 2 (1976) pp. 153ff. (This translation was unknown to me when I made my own translation.) Clinton reports that there is another English translation of this *qaṣeeda* by Tom Bottin in *Azerbaijani Poetry* (compiled by Osman Sarybelli, Moscow, 1969), which I have never seen.

⁸The palace at Ctesiphon: *Ivan-e Madaa'in*, literally, "the palace of the cities." See introduction above.

⁹Blood-red tears: Persians believe that after prolonged and sustained weeping, the tear ducts dry up and blood issues therefrom instead. This is said to be the reason why a person's eyes appear red after much crying.

¹⁰The searing heat of its sighs: *taf-e aah*. Sighs are considered hot because they rise from the heart which burns in sorrow.

- See how the river's liver is broiled,
 fired by the heat of its sighs—
 when did you ever hear of fire
 barbequeing water? (5)
- Cry forth into the Tigris again and again.
 Give it tears as alms from your eyes
 even though the seashore in turn
 receives alms from Tigris's outflow.¹¹ (6)
- Were the Tigris to mix the cold wind—
 which blows out in sad sigh from its lips—
 with the scorch rising from its burning heart,
 half of it would freeze and the other
 half would turn into a furnace. (7)
- The Tigris was enchained as long as
 the dynastic chain which gave royal justice
 held and had not snapped off—so long
 was the river bound in twisting links. (8)
- From time to time call out to the palace.
 Talk to it in the tongue of tears
 that mayhap your heart's ear hears
 the answer of the ruined palace. (9)
- The niched parapets of each fortified tower
 reveal each and every one, moral upon moral.
 Take each parapet's lesson to heart
 at base of such crumbled power; (10)
- Thus its silent instruction:
 "You are of the earth and we,
 earth under your feet. Now take two, three
 steps over us and shed some two, three tears. (11)

¹¹ Khaaqaani is indicating that the Tigris weeps so much into the sea (gives the sea alms of tears) that the Tigris itself is reduced to a poverty of water. Thus the poet asks the reader to donate his tears to the river. The cause of all these tears is the fallen estate of the once mighty *al-Madaa'in* or Ctesiphon, for simplicity.

- “We have come to full headache (12)
 from the truth-screech, sooth-howl,
 dirge-wail of the hoot-owl.¹²
 So please relieve us of our ache
 by shedding tears’ rose-water odor.¹³
- “Indeed! what wonder can there be (13)
 that upon the world’s broad plain
 after the lilt of the nightingale
 comes the surge of the owl’s dirge-plaint?—
 after sweet melodies grates a screech?
- “We gave audience, heard complaint (14)
 and administered justice; for this,
 oppression upon us was visited, whelmed.
 What then—say you—deserve
 the palaces of tyrants as return
 for ignoring order in the realm?”

¹² Hoot-owl: *joghđ al-haqq*, literally, truth-owl. This is a play on “*morgh al-haqq*,” the bird which utters the cry, “*haqq! haqq!*” (“truth! truth!”) and, like the Mayan hoot-owl, is considered a harbinger of death. The first *mişraʿ* may also be read, taking *al-haqq* adverbially as *haqqan* or *biʿl-haqq*, “truly,” as: “truly we are fully in head-aching pain from the hoot-owl’s wailing dirge-howl.” Here the owl is, of course, the bird which inhabits ruins, not Pallas Athena’s bird of wisdom. When the owl is heard, the Persian belief runs, the places around it will soon become ruins, if they are not already. The most famous example of this sense of the owl appears in the trick which Bozorgmehr the Vizier played upon Shah Bahram Goor (Varahan V, reigned 421-439 A.D.) while riding in the desert. Coming across a ruin inhabited by owls, Bozorgmehr convinced the Shah that the owls were arguing about the number of ruins at which to fix a bride price. The owl for whose daughter suit was being made was supposed to be saying that a certain number of ruined houses was not too high a price, for the Shah was so neglecting his duties by hunting that houses were daily falling into ruin. The Shah, Bahram Goor, being both superstitious and well-admonished, called off the hunt to return to his royal duties and the realm was restored to order.

¹³ Rose-water is thought to alleviate headache. It is also called attar of roses in English, from the Arabic ʿatr, perfume, and ʿaṭṭaar, perfumer. In another of Khaaqaani’s *qaṣaaʾid*, entitled “*Mantiq al-Ṭayr*,” “Speech of the Birds,” he refers to rose-water: “*Dard-e sar-e roozegaar borad be-booye golaab*,” “Cut that headache pain with rose-water’s perfume.” See *Gozeedeh-ye Ashʿaar-e Khaaqaani Shervaani*, *op. cit.*, Sajjaadi’s commentary to *bayt* 11, p. 283 (*bayt* 12 in the unabridged editions).

It's as if the sky-like palatial vault
were inverse, upturned— (15)

is this
the star-studded firmament's fault
or the decree of Him who turns that firmament?¹⁴

All the while you smile at my eye, (16)
you think, "Why weeps he here?"—
But they all will shed a tear
for that eye which here won't break down and cry.¹⁵

The old hag of Ctesiphon is not less
than the woman ancient of Kufa
(she whose oven-crack covered earth with flood)—
nor is the former hag's hovel
more base than that latter's oven.¹⁶

¹⁴ Kaaqaani is asking here whether this apparent injustice of fate derives from the position of the stars (i.e., astrologically), or from Allah who turns the heavenly wheel of night and day.

¹⁵ Or more prosaically: "You pity me for being so weak as to cry at the sight of ruins, but he who doesn't so weep is rather truly deserving of pity."

¹⁶ Persian legend has it that in the heyday of Ctesiphon, there was an old hag who lived in a mean hut on a prime piece of property on the bank of the Tigris right next to the royal palace. She could not be induced to sell her hut at any price. Kaaqaani is comparing her with another famous old woman, a resident of Kufa in pre-Sassanian times, so myth has it. (Of course, Kufa was built by the Arabs in the middle of the seventh century A.D., after they had sacked Ctesiphon. But, no matter—all that is intended is that an old woman lived in a city in Iraq, ancient Sumeria. Perhaps she is an echo of Ereshkigal, Sumerian goddess of the underworld and of the dead.) This woman had an oven or fireplace hollowed out from the ground. Apparently the rock or earth on which the fire lay cracked or otherwise collapsed from the heat. The waters of the deep welled up therefrom, causing the flood which Westerners associate with Noah. (See Sajaadi's commentary, *ibid.*, p. 283.) This idea of the watery abyss welling up from a hole in the ground was not uncommon in the ancient Middle East. See the discussion by Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend of King David's incident with the foundation stone in the temple, in their *Hamlet's Mill* (Boston, 1969), pp. 219ff. and also the discussion connecting Gilgamesh to the digging of wells, p. 303; see also pp. 423ff. for several connections between "fire" and "flood."

- Try this on for size: on a level, (18)
 Ctesiphon with Kufa prize!
 Then make your chest's lungs bellows
 and seek the rising flood thus: let weep your eyes!
- This is the very palace whose threshold (19)
 was marked and remarked by forehead
 upon forehead, in obeisance, touching ground:
 in time, its doorway became a portrait gallery of entrants.
- This is the very royal court, that was of kings composed. (20)
 The king of Babylon was a servant therein
 And Turkestan's sovereign a Parthian chamberlain.
- This, the very palatial terrace was (21)
 whose regal lion emblem made assault
 on Leo the Lion, zodiacal sign,
 from the royal umbrella's awesome might
 on which it flew.¹⁷
- Imagine that you are back in that (22)
 very age!—with your mind's eye visualize
 that dynastic justice holding open court!
 (Pick out in that starry crowd:¹⁸
 unique peaks in the human range!)
- Knight! Dismount your horse (23)
 and be a pawn on the plain's chessboard.
 Place your face down on royal ground.
 See King Nu^cmaan in checkmate
 trapped and trampled under elephant foot.¹⁹

¹⁷Royal umbrella: In both ancient India and Iran, the umbrella ("little shade") or parasol ("sun shield") was the symbol of royalty, and kings did not go outside without one. Thus the old Buddhist stupas are topped with stone umbrellas and even the images of the Buddha in the Ajanta Caves are hooded with them.

¹⁸*Kowkabeh*: crowd. *Kowkabeh* suggests *kowkab*, "star." A field of stars is hence a crowd.

¹⁹*asb*: horse; knight (chess).

peeyaadeh sho: dismount! become a pawn (chess)!

peel: elephant, chess piece equivalent to the bishop in European chess sets. *Peel* as elephant is somewhat confusing, for the rook is often an elephant (with howdah).

- No! Rather, see how elephant-wrestling (24)
 kings like Nu'maan, Lakhmid King,
 are killed by the black elephant of night
 and the day-white elephant—the both in tandem,
 trampling out in measured rout, ages' passage.
 Time reigns, plays its own chess game.
- So many elephant-battling kings are just so (25)
 overthrown by the rook of fate, that great
 chess player's royal elephant—thrown²⁰
 down on the killing ground of hope's loss
 (tossed like a bag of broken bones): checkmate!
- Drunk! Hulking drunk is the ground (26)
 from downing, instead of wine, blood—
 blood of Anooshirvaan, once sovereign,²¹

shahmaat: shaahmaat: "king's death," i.e., checkmate.

Nu'maan: Nu'maan III bin (son of) Mundhir IV, king of the Lakhmid Arab kingdom, the Nestorian buffer state supported by the Sassanians and opposed to, and by, the Ghassanid Arab kingdom in Syria, the client buffer state of the Byzantines. Al-Hira on the upper Euphrates was the Lakhmid capital. The Sassanian Khosrow II (Parveez) invaded the Lakhmid kingdom, deposed Nu'maan and had him trampled to death by elephants in 602 A.D., thus ending the client dynasty. His army overran the Ghassanid kingdom immediately thereafter on its way to invading the Byzantine Empire. Khosrow's army conquered Syria, Egypt, and Asiatic Turkey before getting bogged down in a years-long, fruitless, siege of Constantinople. See introduction for more details concerning Khosrow Parveez.

²⁰ Royal elephant (*shah peel*): the rook. As in Indian chess sets (whence the origin of the game), the Persian rook ("castle" in Western sets) is an elephant with a howdah on top.

²¹ Anooshirvaan (Aadel, "the Just"), Khosrow I, Sassanian emperor, who reigned 531-579 A.D., has generally been considered by Iranians to have been the greatest historical pre-Islamic monarch (although Cyrus and Darius are equally famous). His reign was marked by a resurgence of Sassanian imperial power both within and without the empire. Imperial justice, whence Anooshirvaan's epithet, "the Just," and the title Anooshirvaan itself, meaning, "immortal soul," was extended over the entire empire with a rather heavy imperial hand. The Mazdakite grassroots social revolution was driven under-

drunk from skull-cup of Hormuz King.²²

Not a few maxims were displayed to view (27)
 chiseled and chased on the royal crown
 of Anooshirvaan. Now a hundred new
 ones, in the form of kites,
 inside his brain are hidden instead
 (as his head dries atop a tower of silence).

Khusrow with his toy sun, orange (28)
 of gold, Parveez with his quince²³
 of gold, where are they now?

ground, and Mazdak himself, hailed by some as the first prophet of Communist Revolution, was put to death. Stability was restored, but whether the welfare of the populace as a whole was improved or not is in doubt. For further details, see Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, second ed. (London, 1976), pp. 257-262.

²²Hormuz (or Hormuzd) Ardesheer, son of Shaapoor I, Sassanian king, reigned 272-273 A.D. His name is a shortened form of "Ahura-Mazda," literally, "Wise Lord," for Whom Zoroaster was prophet. Although this period of Sassanian history is generally obscure, two religious figures stand out: Mani (d. 277), prophet and founder of Manicheanism (see François Decret, *Mani et la Tradition Manichéenne* [Paris, 1954], pp. 44 and ff.), and Kartir, the first "mobad of Ahura-Mazda," who was instrumental in the persecution and execution of Mani. Kartir also instituted widespread reforms in Zoroastrianism, "purifying" it from the heresy of Zurvanism (Zurvan being equated with Primeval Time, in simplistic terms) during the reigns of Shaapoor I, Hormuzd, and Vahrahan. See R. C. Zaehner, *Zurvan, A Zoroastrian Dilemma* (Oxford, 1955) for further details. Politically and militarily, Shaapoor I (reigned 240-?272 A.D.) dominated this period, defeating the Romans decisively thrice and capturing the emperor Valerian with much of his army in 260. Shaapoor's army penetrated into Roman territory as far as Cappadocia (central Turkey).

²³Khosrow (*Kisraa* or Chosroes): any Sassanian king, but especially Parveez: Khosrow II, Khosrow Parveez, reigned 591-628 A.D.), son of Khosrow I (Anooshirvaan 'Aadel—"the Just"). (See introduction and notes 19 and 21 above.) The golden orange and golden quince are famous "toys" of Khosrow, which he handled in audience. It is not clear here whether Khaaqani intended to distinguish between *Kisraa* (as Khosrow I) and Parveez (Khosrow II) or whether "Parveez" is in apposition to "*Kisraa*." In any case, the sense is not affected one way or the other.

The wind took them, toy and prince.
The earth buried them, gold and royal flesh both.

Parveez sowed the imperial regions (29)
with seeds of greens and grains.
The golden spread of grain grown
was accounted, in harvest, as hoards of gold.
Gardens, orchards—these were his treasuries.²⁴

Parveez is now long gone, long lost. (30)
Leave him be in his oblivion.
But say, tell me, what happened to the golden grain?
No—let that slide away too. Recite
instead: "How much they left behind . . ."
from the Koran which fades not, fades not away.²⁵

You ask, where have those crown-kings gone? (31)
Look now, here below: they are laid
underground and the earth womb is more
and more pregnant every year, evermore.

Oh yes, it takes a long while (32)
for Mother Earth to give birth.
Getting pregnant is a simple thing and
Easy enough, but birthing is another matter—
plenty tough.

²⁴ Such living wealth, not mere coin of gold and plate of silver, but green against the windswept desert brown, can only be truly appreciated by those who have travelled over interminable desert, such as most of Iran is. The reference here is especially to the Sawaad (which technically is not Iran proper but Iraq), among other regions. (See introduction above.)

²⁵ This commences the passage in the Koran 44:25-27: "How many were the gardens and springs they left behind, and corn fields and noble buildings, and wealth (and convenience of life), wherein they had taken such delight!" (*The Holy Qur'ān*, trans Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali [Lahore, 1973]). Yusuf 'Ali interprets the "they" to mean the soldiers of the Egyptian army who drowned in the Red Sea. The passage may also have been intended to cheer the Meccan exiles (*Muhaajjareen*) in their new abode of Medina before they had gained the upper hand over the Meccans and became established in Medina. This would be from 1-19 A.H./622-630 A.D. The quotation in the poem alludes to the splendor of the bygone Sassanians.

- The wine which the grapevine gives up (33)
 is nothing but the blood of Sheereen the Sweet.²⁶
 The alembic in which the noble squire
 lets ferment grape juice into grape wine
 is formed from the water and clay of Parveez.
- So many self-willed highnesses has this earth (34)
 brought down gulletward, swallowed whole.
 Nonetheless, even after eating all of them,
 this roving eye is not stilled in its hunger,
 not full in the pit of its stomach.
- This earth rouges its cheeks with infants' red blood, (35)
 rubs it in good, mixes it with
 kids' salty heart sobs—this
 hoary-haired Zaal, white-eyebrowed hag,²⁷
 with black-titted Mother Time does
 them in. Such a bitter suck!

²⁶ Sheereen: literally, "sweet", name of the Armenian wife and lover of Khosrow Parveez. The triangular love story of Farhad, Sheereen, and Khosrow was made famous by Nizāami (ca. 1180), who developed the romance in his long poem *Khosrow vo Sheereen*.

²⁷ Hoary-haired Zaal, white-eyebrowed hag: *een zaal-e sepeed abroo*. This carries two meanings, both probably intended: (1) the old hag of Ctesiphon (whether an actual woman encountered by Khaaqaani during his visit, the legendary old woman of Ctesiphon who refused to sell her hovel and the plot it was on to Anooshirvaan for the building of his palace, or a metaphor for the wreckage of time he witnessed, a poetic counterfoil to the "woman ancient of Kufa"—see *bayt* 17 and note 16 above); and (2) Zaal, the albino father of Rostam, the great hero of the *Shaahnaameh*. Zaal was born with white hair. This caused fear and dismay to Zaal's father who exposed him to the elements. Yet as his white hair marked him for misfortune, it also marked him as not of this world, so the Simorgh (Phoenix of Divine Unity) had pity on him and reared him. In reference to Zaal, see *Shaahnaameh*, ed. Jules Mohl, second Persian ed., 8 vols. (Tehran, 1353/1974) 1:109-123, 133-141, 148-149, 155-156, 164-169, 172-174, 188, 213, 248, 254; *The Epic of the Kings, The National Epic of Persia*, trans. Reuben Levy (Chicago, 1967), pp. 35-46; and Shahaab al-Deen Yahyaa Sohravardi (d. 587 A.H./1191 A.D.), *'Aql-e Sorkh* (Tehran, no date), pp. 9-10; and *L'Archange Empourpré ('Aql-e Sorkh)*, trans. Henry Corbin (Paris, 1976), pp. 207-208. The double identity of Zaal here, worldly hag and otherworldly noble, hoary at birth, gives this line much breadth and depth through its tension. There are two other ten-

- Khaaqaani, a moral from this portal beg! (36)
 —so that the Khaaqaan hereafter
 will beg at your door.²⁸
- If a vagabond were today to beg (37)
 provisions from the Sultan, the morrow
 would see the Sultan seeking from him
 provisions.
- Now were the expenses of travel to Mecca (38)
 to be defrayed, including those
 of all the cities along the way,
 you would bring the offspring of Ctesiphon
 to the King as souvenir, a rare gift.²⁹
- Everyone comes away from Mecca bearing (39)
 a prayer seal of clay, formed from mud taken³⁰
 from the venerable precinct of Bu Hamzah's Tomb.³¹

sions in the whole *bayt*: (1) worldly hag vs. Mother Time and (2) other-worldly Zaal vs. Mother Time. Both pit white against black. This is again the play of night and day, so all of these tensions meld into Mother Time—unless, of course, we deem Zaal's otherworldliness to be beyond the scope of time. See *bayt* 24 for another depiction of Time Eternal as the complement of black and white.

²⁸The *Khaaqaan*: literally, "prince," but it came to mean "king." It was from this that Khaaqaani was allowed to style himself as "Royal." The *Khaaqaan* here intended is Shervaanshaah-e Akhtisaan b. Minucheher, to whom this *qaseeda* is dedicated. Here, the signature *bayt* does not come last. This is rather unusual in Persian poetry.

Khaaqaani intends to say that any lesson he learns from visiting Ctesiphon will be so valuable that kings will beg from him for his wisdom. This will become more explicit in the next two *bayts*.

²⁹The expenses of travel to Mecca: *zaad-e raah-e Makkeh*. Offspring of Ctesiphon: *zaad-e Madaa'in*. The homonymic play on *zaad* does not translate. Here the poet is asking the *Khaaqaan* to pay for his pilgrimage. In return, the poet will offer and dedicate this poem ("offspring of Ctesiphon") to the *Khaaqaan*.

³⁰Prayer seal of clay: *sobheh (mohreh)*. On these are stamped—molded, actually—the *shahaadah* (the creed: "There is no god but Allah, and Mohammad is His prophet"), various of the names of God, and, if the *mohreh* is Shi'ite, the names of 'Ali, Faatimah (daughter of Mohammad and wife of 'Ali), Hossein (son of 'Ali and third *imaam*), etc.

³¹Bu Hamzah: Abu 'Umaarah Hamzah bin 'Abd al-Muṭallab. He was the

So I shall come away from Ctesiphon
 bearing my seal of clay—ready for praise—
 made from the ground round Salmaan the Pure's grave.³²

Regard this ocean of intellectual spectacle! (40)

Don't pass it by without drinking in somewhat
 with thine eye! For the learning thirst,
 standing at the strand of such an open sea
 of knowledge, can never be slaked.³³

When friends and brothers return from the road (41)

they bring some splendid present.
 This souvenir I bring of exotica,
 this poem to warm friends' hearts.

uncle of the Prophet and the most socially and economically prominent of the early converts. He emigrated to Medina with the Prophet and was killed there at the Battle of Uḥud (3 A.H./625 A.D.), his liver eaten raw on the field by Hend (mother of Mu'aawiyah, the fifth caliph and founder of the Umayyad Dynasty, and daughter of a man whom Abu Ḥamzah had killed at the Battle of Badr the year before) to fulfill a vow of vengeance. Abu Ḥamzah is revered as the "Sayyid of Martyrs" (not to be confused with "the Prince of Martyrs" Hossein).

³² Salmaan the Pure: Salmaan Paak. As the first Irani convert to Islam, he has held a prominent place in the hearts of Iranis. He left Iran—so the legend has it—seeking spiritual guidance and found it in Mohammad the Prophet. Hence he is the prototype of the *saalik* (spiritual wanderer). From the purity of his spiritual intent and his fidelity to Mohammad, he was practically adopted into the family, i.e., considered as one of the *Ahl al-Bayt*. Thus he is also the prototype of *wali* (one who is especially close to Allah or the *imaam* and under the direct protection of such) for Sufis and Shi'ites. Indeed his figure is so powerful that he appears as the initiator and interlocutor of the "Mystical Recital of the White Cloud" vouchsafed to Qaadi Sa'eed Qommi: see Henry Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1972), 4:153 ff. Salmaan the Pure's mausoleum is not far from Ctesiphon. In the last century a village, now called "Salmaan Paak" after him, grew up around his tomb.

³³ Strand (riverbank): *shaṭṭ*. "*Shaṭṭ*" is also another name for the Tigris River (Dijlah), upon the left bank of which Ctesiphon was situated. The pun is not translatable.

Regard well and deep what spell (42)
 is woven in this poem, what weird is in here
 worded!
 —by a Jesus-heart, open and showing
 but its spirit confounds the mind in knowing.³⁴

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³⁴ This closing *mišraʿ* (half-*bayt*) does exactly what it appears to say: *mahtook-e maseeha del deevaaneh-ye ʿaaqel jaan*. There are two problems here, both centering on the word "mahtook," the passive participle of *hataka* (an Arabic verb). "Mahtook" conveys a variety of meanings: torn (clothes, veil), discarded (veil), divulged, unveiled, violated (honor), shamed (a person), defunct, dead. From the structure of the *mišraʿ*, which is evenly divided into two, *del* (heart) would appear to be opposed or contrasted with *jaan* (spirit). Yet these are often used synonymously. Then again, *mahtook* (dead) could be contrasted with *jaan* (here, "life"), and *del* (heart) with *ʿaaqel* (wise, wise man). The problem here is that Muslims believe that Jesus never died but was translated bodily to heaven as Elijah and Enoch. I have here translated *mahtook* as "open, unveiled, divulged," in the sense that the intent of the poem is clear to the heart and appeals to one's emotions. This leaves its corollary in the second half, i.e., the poetic tropes in the poem and (even more so) its emotive force confound the mind.