

A TERM FOR ROME AND BYZANTIUM IN THE PERSIAN TEXTS

DARYOOSH AKBARZADEH
ICHTO. Tehran, Iran

Resumen: El *Kush-nameh*, uno de los textos islámicos más famosos, que trata de las relaciones históricas entre Irán y Silla, fue escrito por el gran erudito iraní Iran-Shan ibn Abal-khayr en el año 501-04 de la Hégira (1108-11 AD). Referencias al *Kush-nameh* y al Kush se conocen a partir otros escritos islámicos. El *Kush-nameh* menciona *Frwm*, que está ubicada en el norte (oeste) de Irán, como un topónimo chino. El término deriva del parto *frwm* y generalmente se expresa como *hrwm* en persa medio. *Farvaneh*, la designación de la ciudad construída para el Kush en el *Kush-nameh*, puede ser reconocida como una modificación del persa medio *Brwm/frwm* (Roma/Bizancio), que aparece aquí como *Farvaneh*, y no *Forunneh*, debido a razones métricas.

Palabras clave: *Kush-nameh*, *Frwm*, Roma y Bizancio, Período Persa Medio.

Abstract: The *Kush-nameh*, one of the most famous Islamic epic texts, dealing with the historical relations between Iran and Silla, was written by the great Iranian scholar Iran-Shan ibn Abal-khayr in 501-04 Hegira (1108-11 AD). References to the *Kush-nameh* and to Kush are known from other Islamic writings.

The *Kush-nameh* mentions *Frwm*, which is located to the north (west) of Iran, as a Chinese toponym. The term derives from Parthian *frwm* and is generally rendered *hrwm* in Middle Persian. *Farvaneh*, the designation of the city built for Kush in the *Kush-nameh*, may be recognized as a modification of a Middle Persian *brwm/frwm* (Rome/Byzantium), which is rendered here as *Farvaneh*, and not *Foruneh*, owing to metric reasons.

Keywords: *Kush-nameh*, *Frwm*, Rome and Byzantium, Middle Persian Period.

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Correspondencia: DARYOOSH AKBARZADEH, damavandiiranmihir@yahoo.com
Assistant professor of Ancient and Middle Iranian Languages and Linguistics, Cultures.
Address: Shahrak Apadana, Bloc. 39, 2nd Entrance, n° 5, Azadi Sque., Tehran, Iran.
Mobile: ++98-09123050132

Archaeology, texts, and oral traditions preserved by mythological narratives confirm that the relations of Iran simultaneously with the West and China, via both the Silk Road and the Persian Gulf (Akbarzadeh 2008), went at least as far back as the reign of Mihrdad II (123-87 BC) in the Arsacid period. From the Iranian side, especially valuable testimony for Iran's far-reaching historical, religious, and artistic contacts with, on the one hand, China, Japan, Korea in South and Southeast Asia in the East and, on the other hand, the Greco-Roman and Byzantine worlds in the West, is provided by important Post-Sasanian geographical-historical texts, which are extensively affected, in turn, by pre-Islamic oral and written sources. Sometimes, details that became garbled in the transmission may also be elucidated with the help of Middle Iranian writings, such as Sogdian (northern) texts and Zoroastrian Pahlavi (southern) texts. A case in point is an archaic toponym, *Farvaneh*, which is referred to China in the *Kush-nameh*, but which properly belonged, as it is argued here, in the Greco-Roman/Byzantine sphere.

The *Kush-nameh*, one of the most famous Islamic epic texts, dealing with the historical relations between Iran and Silla, was written by the great Iranian scholar Iran-Shan ibn Abal-khayr in 501-04 Hegira (1108-11 AD). References to the *Kush-nameh* and to Kush are known from other Islamic writings (cf. Matini 1998; Zayn al Akhbar 2006).

In the introduction to the work, Iran-Shan explains how he came to write this epic text using an earlier written source. One of the nobles of city, who was his friend, had a prose text related to China and offered it to Iran-Shan to versify it. The text, which Iran-Shan accepted to put in verse, was the tale of *Kush*:

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 127. Zamaneh chu karam delaray kard | delam dastani degar kard |
| 128. Yeki mehtari dashtam man be shahr | kea z danesh o mardomi dasht bahr |
| 132. Mara goft agar ray dari bar in | yeki dastani daram az shah-e Chin |
| 133. Ke har kas an ra be khanad be hush | basi bahreh bar darad az kar-e Kush |

134. Bedidam man in nameh-ye sudmand sirasar hameh danesh o ray pand

“I had a noble friend in my city who was a knowledgeable and important person. He told me:”I give you a *written text related to China*, if you plan to write a new book ...”

The epic written by Iran-Shan is divided into two parts. The first part, ending at verse 918, focuses on tales related to the Greeks, Romans and Byzantines, such as stories about Alexander’s visit to Central Asia and India and the Christians, and includes references to iranized western names (e.g., Hippokrates, Plinius) and texts (e.g., Galenos’ text) (Matini 1998). In the second part (verses 919-10129), Iran-Shan tells, generation by generation, the story of a community of Iranians who were in China since Jamshid’s time. He explains in detail the situation of these Iranians in China, their escape to Basila (>Silla, Akbarzadeh 2013), and their friendship with the king of Silla, Tayhur. Historical events mentioned in the text appear to be confused occasionally with mythological beliefs current in ancient Iran. The materials range widely across the Parthian-Kushan, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Sasanian and, finally, Islamic periods, while the proper name Kush also recalls, of course, the Kushan empire.

Kush, the hero of text, received the kingdom of China, in place of his father (also named Kush), and decided to build a city and make his statue so that people would worship him:

6654. khosh amadsh, benshasht bar kuh-e zharf pas afgand az an shahr sangi shegarf
6655. basi ranj bordand zan char mah sar-e kongrash bar kashid ow be mah
6656. rokhamin yeke sang bar pay kard sar-e paykar-e khish ra jay kard
6657. kaf das tow baz kardeh ze ham bar ow bar nebeshteh yeke bish o kam
6658. ke in chehreh-ye kush garden-kash ast ke hengam paygar chun atash ast...
6664. nihadand Kushan bedan shahr nam bar-avardeh-ye Kush joyandeh kam
6665. *ke Chini hami khandash Farvaneh* be anbu shahri ze bar o beneh
6666. sar-e sal farmudashan ta hameh shaved pish an pil-e mardom rameh
6667. parastesh konan pish an paykarash setayesh namayad bar afsarash

“Kush ordered to build a city by the nearest mountain. He ordered the people to complete formidable tasks for the

construction of such a big city. He also ordered a statue of his to be placed inside this city, with an inscription on the hand of the statue reading: ‘This is the statue of Kush, who is unique in times of combat and killed many kings’...People called this city Kushan, meaning that it was founded by Kush. *This city is known as Farvaneh in the Chinese language*, a populous city. He also ordered that people worship his statue.”

We know that in Sogdian texts the Romans and Byzantines are called *βrum* (Frūm) (Gharib 2004, no. 2712, 2713, 2788, 2789, 3934, 3935; Gershevitch 1954). The term derives from Parthian *frum* and is generally rendered *hrwm* in Middle Persian. *Farvaneh*, the designation of the city built for Kush in the *Kush-nameh*, may be recognized as a modification of a Middle Persian *βrum/frum*, which is rendered here as *Farvaneh*, and not *Foruneh*, owing to metric reasons.

I believe that it is possible to restore the same toponym in two further instances. In the first instance, in a passage of his work, entitled *About the Commanders of the Roman Troops*, Ibn Balkhi (Gharehchanlu 1992) mentions that “Constantinople is the biggest city of Rome [i.e., of the Roman world] and its center of commanders, and this city [i.e., Constantinople] is called *Ba/ozrōm*”. Given the similarity between *z* and *o* in the Persian writing system, it seems that the first part of the city name (Ba/oz: the northern Middle Persian *β* becomes an *f* or a *b* in modern Persian) can be a miswriting for *BW/وب*, rather than *Bδ/بδ*, by copyist(s). At the same time, the second *o*, following *r*, can induce a further *o* in the first part because of assimilation (cf. *be* > *bodo* = ‘run’, *ast* > *ostokhan* = ‘bone’). In this case, a toponym, such as *بوروم/ن*, recalls *Farvaneh/Forun* > *Frum/n*.

In the second instance, in Masudi’s (Payandeh 2011) writings, entitled *Nazareth Roman Kings* it is stated that:

“The first king was Constantine. He built the city of Constantinople on the seacoast in the third year of his reign. This city is located in Byzantium, and he selected it as his capital. The city was named after him and Roman kings resided there. To date the Romans refer to it as *Bolun* and, when they want to indicate that it is a capital, as *Estan Bolun*.”

I take *Bolun* as a modified form of *Folun* (> *frum*). In this case, *Estan Bolun* would be “Eastern *Frum* [i.e., eastern Rome = Constantinople/Byzantium]”.

The surprising reference to *Farvaneh* as a city in China in the *Kush-nameh* may be possible to understand with reference to the impact of ancient Iranian perceptions concerning the configuration of the world through the ages. According to the *Avesta*, the world is subdivided into seven mythological “climates/countries/geographical directions”¹.

These mythological subdivisions of the world take a quasi-historical significance in Sasanian texts. In late Sasanian and Post-Sasanian texts, moreover, country names that are associated in the *Avesta* with geographical parts of the world are flatly used some times in place of “actual” geographical directions. This transposition is a normal occurrence in the case of China (which is associated with one of the mythological “climates/directions”) and results in a confusion of the actual boundaries of the Iranian and Chinese regions which is perpetuated by Islamic writers.

Examples are offered by the uses of terms, such as *čyn* and *čynst’n*, in the *Bundhišn*. In one instance (MS.TD2 1978), it is stated that:

“One may reckon: who are in the Iranian (Aryan) lands, and who are in the non-Iranian lands; on the other hand, who are in Tur’ s land, who are in Salm’s land, meaning Rome[’s territory], who are in the *Sin*’s land, meaning *Čīnestān*, who are in the Sind land ...”

Elsewhere, we are told that “the mountain of Aspōrz is up of *Čīnestān*, [in the way of] Dāybād to Pārs, Pahargar to Xwarāsān...” (Ibd.8) or: *kōf ī syāh-ōmand*, *kōf ī varf-ōmand ān iš-ān Kāwul*, *ān kustagihā u-š rust ēstād tā ō ī kust ī Čēn* “the mountain of Syah-omand and the mountain of Varf-omand which are located [near] Kabul, spread from there [i.e., Kabul] toward the China ‘climate’/‘direction’ ” (or, perhaps, “the mountain of Syah, which is the keeper of the snow, is located [near] Kabul and spreads from there [i.e., Kabul] toward the China ‘climate’/‘direction’ ” (Ibd.79) (see, Akbarzadeh 2010).

Judging by these examples, ‘China’ could be used sometimes as a country name and at other times as a reference to an east ‘climate’/‘direction’, like *čīnestān* and *kust ī Čēn*. This interpretation is further corroborated by references

¹ This division is also attested in later texts. In the description of Mojmal al Tavarikh (Unonymous 2009), for instance, these seven “climates” are:

“(the) Climate of Iran, (the) Climate of Rome, (the) Climate of Africa, (the) Climate of Arab, Climate of India, *Climate of China*, Climate of Turk”. As the same author notes, “the Climate of Iran is in the center of world” and “the *first Climate* [that of China] is located in the East.”

in Islamic texts, wherein the expression China climate and Chinese *Balād* is used instead of *čīnestān* (Akbarzadeh 2008). See, for instance: “He (Faridun) gave *Čīnestān* and the *East* to Tuj” (Ba’lami 2008) and: *baraft ān brādar za Rum, in za Chin be zahr andar āmixteh angabin*

“This brother went from Rome [i.e., from the West] and that brother went from China [i.e., from the East]. Both carried on them poison mixed with honey” (Firdowsi 2002, Vol. I., 93; *passim*).

In a number of Post-Sasanian texts, the same east ‘climate’, that of China (and Tibet), includes Sogdiana and parts of the Great Khorasan Highway. Thus, according to Ibn Ru/asteh (Gharehchanlu 1987):

“[The fourth [i.e., China] climate] starts from the east. After Tibet and parts of Khorasan, the main cities are: Farghaneh, Khojand, Osrushoneh, Samarqand, Bokhara...Hamadan, Nihavand...”

A similar perception occurs in Maghdasi (Shafie Kadkani 2008), who notes that:

“[t]he fourth [i.e., China] climate starts from the east. From Tibet and Khorasan, Gorgan, Tabaristan...and cities of Khorasan: Faraghaneh, Khojand, Osrushoneh, Samarqand, Bokhara, Balkh... Nihavand...” (cf. Masudi: 2009, 31).

The references to China (as a ‘climate’) as encompassing Sogdiana (i.e. Farghaneh, Khojand) and parts of the Great Khorasan Highway implies a merging of the boundaries of the Chinese and Iranian regions.

This merging of the boundary of the China ‘climate’ with eastern and northern Iranian regions, thus, along the path of the Silk Road by means of which Rome and Byzantium, Iran, and China had long had contact with one another, may be the main reason why the *Kush-nameh* mentions *Frum* (i.e., Rome/Byzantium), which is located to the north (west) of Iran, as a Chinese toponym. This would also mean, however, that by the time of the composition of the *Kush-nameh*, the Iranian origins of the toponym *Frum* had been forgotten. Historical oblivion and geographical confusion are probably to understand in this instance against the backdrop of the major historical developments that followed the collapse of the Sasanian Empire and the shakedown of Iranian authority in parts of central Asia, as far as China, with the advent of Islam and subsequent Chinese and Turkish invasions in Central Asia.

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