

Research Article



Wandering Metaphors, Woven Worlds: Icons, Buddha-Idols and Demon-Deities from Inner Asia and India to Ottoman Europe

Dolaşan Metaforlar, Dokunan Dünyalar: İç Asya ve Hindistan’dan Osmanlı Avrupa’sına İkonlar, Buda Putları ve Demon-İlahlar

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Abstract

This article traces the migration of key metaphors and *Wanderwörter* across the Islamicate world, examining how terms rooted in Buddhist, Manichaean, and Brahmanical lifeworlds were reimagined in Persianate poetics and their Ottoman afterlives. Figures such as the Chinese Buddha-idol, the Sanskrit *maṇḍala*, and the Persian *dīv* illustrate a larger pattern: concrete referents from Inner Asia and India were divested of their original religio-philosophical associations and reconfigured within an expansive Islamic literary framework, often inverted in value or enriched with new semantic layers. At the centre of this study is the Persian *nigâr*, or icon, traced from its pre-Islamic origins through its reincarnation in Turco-Persian verse as the “icon gallery of China,” to its subsumption into the language of philosophical Sufism in twentieth-century Ottoman Istanbul. By following such metaphors in motion, this article reveals an integrated literary world not passively syncretic but actively appropriative, in which poets and mystics adapted foreign imagery to new aesthetic, metaphysical, and political ends, underscoring the adaptability and versatility that so came to define Persianate poetics.

Öz

Bu makale, İslam dünyası boyunca gezinen temel metaforların ve *Wanderwörter*’nin [seyyah kelimeler] göçünü izlemekte; Budist, Maniheizt ve Brahmanik yaşam dünyalarına kök salmış terimlerin, *Persianate* poetikada ve onun Osmanlı’daki devamında nasıl yeniden tahayyül edildiğinin izini sürmektedir. Çin Buda-putu, Sanskritçe *maṇḍala* ve Farsça *dīv* gibi figürler, daha geniş bir örgüyü gözler önüne serer: İç Asya ve Hindistan’dan gelen somut göndergeler, orijinal dini-felsefî bağlarından soyutlanarak İslami edebî çerçeveye yeniden yerleştirilmiş; kimi zaman değer bakımından tersyüz edilmiş, kimi zaman da yeni semantik katmanlarla zenginleştirilmiştir. Bu çalışmanın merkezinde, İslam öncesi kökenlerinden, başlayarak Türk-Fars şiirinde “Çin’in ikon galerisi” olarak yeniden doğuşuna ve nihayet yirminci yüzyıl Osmanlı İstanbul’unda felsefî tasavvuf diline dâhil oluşuna kadar izlenen Farsça *nigâr* (ikon) kavramı bulunmaktadır. Bu makale, hareket halindeki bu tür metaforların izini sürerek, pasif bir senkretizm değil aktif bir temellük süreci olarak işleyen, şairler ve sûfilerin yabancı imgeleri yeni estetik, metafizik ve siyasî amaçlara uyarladığı, böylece *Persianate* poetikayı tanımlayan uyarlanabilirlik ve çok yönlülüğün altını çizen bütünlüklü bir edebî dünyayı açığa çıkarmaktadır.

Keywords

Persianate poetics,
adab,
iconography,
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Introduction

During an Indo-Persian manuscript workshop convened at Yale in December 2024, Professor Chander Shekhar of Delhi University brought attention to a number of curious Arabo-Indic names as Zālim Singh (literally: Oppressor Singh) and—believe it or not—Shayṭān Singh (Satan Singh). A good number of the students present were scandalised. Others, such as the present author, found in such naming the occasion to let out a good, hearty laugh. The initial sense of shock having soon subsided, one question remained on everybody's tongue: Why? Why would seventeenth century non-Muslim Rajput nobility imitate naming conventions from an Islamic lifeworld, and ones that bear such overwhelmingly negative connotations at that? What could this tell us about mimetic practice and internalisation of etic topoi across disparate cultures? Could this be indicative of a re-appropriation that transformed *Shayṭān*, the Islamic demon par excellence, into one amongst many demons—or deities, even—as understood in a local, Indian context, more akin to the commonplace emic name Dev Singh?

The Satan in Shayṭān Singh was hardly anomalous. It is merely one striking instance amidst a broader nexus of tropes and metaphors that journeyed, often unpredictably, along intricate routes of trade, conquest, and pilgrimage, evolving in meaning and resonance across cultural, linguistic and religio-philosophical communities throughout the Persianate world. Satanic Rajputs aside, why is it that we encounter Brahmins—the priestly elite and pinnacle of India's caste hierarchy—in early modern Ottoman poetry composed by authors closer to Vienna than to Varanasi? And what of the Chinese Buddha-idols that so pepper the poetry of Persian mystical poet Ḥāfiz? Among these and other *Wanderwörter* few travelled as widely or evolved as curiously as the Persian *nigār*, or icon. Originating in the visual-didactic traditions of the pre-Islamic prophet-cum-artist Mānī, the *nigār* acquired new semantic layers upon layers as it migrated from the once-Manichaeen Inner Asia to an Islamised Iranian Plateau and beyond into India, Anatolia, and eventually the Ottoman European provinces. In tracing the remarkable journey of the *nigār* and kindred *Wanderwörter*, this paper follows how poets creatively adapted metaphors, conspicuously non-Islamic at root, to align with diverse aesthetic, metaphysical and mystical traditions, as well as local lived experiences and cultural conventions woven into the rich tapestry of an interconnected Islamic ecumene. By following these tropes through time, from pre-Islamic Iran to the Ottoman world of the early twentieth century, we reveal not only how poetic language adapts but also how deeper philosophical and spiritual meanings are negotiated through literary imagination.

What Is a Wanderwort? Case Study of Mandal

To illustrate how a word can wander and evolve, we begin with the journey of *mandal*, a term whose meaning has circled between the sacred and arcane. *Mandal*'s travels through Sanskrit, Buddhist, and later Persianate worlds provide a microcosm of the cross-cultural migrations and semantic shifts at the heart of this study. The term *mandal* traces its origin to the Sanskrit *maṇḍala*, literally meaning 'circle.' In the ritual lexicon of Indic religious traditions, a *maṇḍala* denotes a sacred circular diagram or space used for spiritual focus, worship, and meditation. Early Buddhist

practice adopted mandalas as metaphysical maps of the cosmos and aids in ritual visualisation. Significantly, Buddhism carried the term beyond India into Central and Inner Asia as it spread along the Silk Routes in the first millennium CE. Translations by Inner Asian monks and scribes (often via Sogdian intermediaries) transliterated *maṇḍala* into local languages, embedding the concept into the Buddhist vocabulary of the region. By the tenth century CE, *mandal* had entered the Old Uyghur Turkic language as a learned borrowing, retaining the phonetic shape of the Sanskrit word even as its meaning evolved in new contexts.

One particularly vivid Inner Asian attestation comes from the *Altun Yaruq Sudur*, an Old Uyghur Turkic text composed by Šiṅko Šäli Tutuṅ, twelfth-century Buddhist poet and head of a translation movement of Buddhist texts into Turkish, unearthed in Turfan (an oasis in the Tarim Basin in modern China). The *Altun Yaruq* ('Golden Light [Sūtra]') is a Uyghur Turkic rendering of a Mahāyāna Buddhist text, the seventh book of which contains a detailed ritual involving a *mandal*:

Then, in an isolated and tranquil area, prepare a clean space by smearing it thoroughly with cow dung and construct a quadrangular *mandal* measuring eight cubits on each side. Within this *mandal*, scatter fragrant flowers, fill golden and silver vessels with honey and milk, and neatly arrange mirrors, arrows, and swords. At each of the four gates of the *mandal*, station a person. Additionally, beautifully dress and adorn four youths, each holding a vessel filled with water, and seat them in the four directions. Let canopies be opened, incense burned, and music continuously performed.

In the centre of the *mandal*, dig a hole, bury a large stake, and place upon it a flat wooden plank, allowing water to flow over it. Boil herbs with water, then pour this hot herbal water directly upon the plank. Upon completing these preparations, recite the *Simbaghu dhāraṇī*, sprinkle impure water thirty times while chanting magical formulas, scatter grains in the four directions, and pluck the vīṇā. This procedure is the *dhāraṇī* for purifying previously untouched water. After reciting this *dhāraṇī*, prepare hot water by boiling herbs again, reciting magical formulas 108 times, pour this hot water upon the stake, and draw curtains around the four sides. Immediately thereafter, enter this water and bathe thoroughly for purification.

After bathing is complete, pour this bathwater along with food and drink within the *mandal*. Then, put on fresh, clean garments, exit the *mandal*, and enter a pure house. Therein, cultivate a heart filled with great compassion, free from any evil intent, directing pure thoughts towards all sentient beings. Thus, the merit and virtue of noble beings shall increase. Moreover, if someone suffers from a prolonged illness for which no remedy can be found, have them recite this jewel of teachings and perform this auspicious ritual of bathing and purification. Their illness shall vanish, and all dangers shall be overcome.¹

¹ "Ötrü antada basa ağlaḳ yerte satḡaksız arıḡ orunta ud mayāḳın suvap säkiz çikin turkī törtgil mandal kılsun. Mandal içintä tütsüg hua çäçäklär saçıp altun kümüş idişlartä tolu mir süttä ulatı tađıǵlıǵ közüñü oḳ kılıç birlä tügel urzun. Mandalnıñ tört kapıǵında kişi turǵurzun. Yänä tört oǵlanıyalarıǵ uz tonandurup edip yaratıp birär burnaçta suv tutdurup tört bulunṭa olǵurtsun. Pra küsetri aşıun, qara küji köyürsün, oyun üni üzülmäzün. Mandal oṭurasında oy qazıp bir uluǵ çopun kömüp üzäsintä suv aḡguluk yazı ban yığaç urup, ol yığaç üzäsintä ol soḱmış otuǵ suv birlä qayınturup ursun. Bo etiǵleriǵ kılı tüketdükte ötrü simbaḡu daranı tize arıḡ suv yoḳ bir otuz qata arvap törtin yınāḳ saçsun... Anta basa suvqa kirgü suv yoḳ arıṭqu daranı bo erür... Bo daranı üze ot birlä qayınturmış işiǵ suvuḳ yüz säkiz qata arvap çopunta qodup törtin yınāḳ bıntavır tarṭıp; anta kân tâmin ol suv içintä kirip arıṭı yunsun.

Such usage in a tenth-century Inner Asian text shows the term's migration and adaptation well underway, carried by Buddhism into a new linguistic and cultural sphere. By the early Islamic era, novel understandings of *mandal* were coming into being in the Persian-speaking east. In this new context, the earliest attested use occurs in the poetry of Rūdakī (d. 329 AH/941 CE), himself one of the earliest poets in New Persian. Strikingly, Rūdakī employs *mandal* not in a Buddhist or positive sacred sense, but as a metaphor for deceptive appearance. In one couplet, he writes:

nadīda tanbul-i ūy va badīda mandal-i ūy
digar numāyad u dīgar buvad ba-sān-i sarāb²

His trick is not seen, though his mandal is seen
It appears as one thing and yet, mirage-like, is truly another

Here, *mandal* denotes a phantasm or illusory sight, a site of trickery and delusion rather than a holy diagram. Rūdakī compares the *mandal* to a mirage (*sarāb*), reconstituting the metaphor as a place of appearance without reality. This represents a considerable semantic shift from the sacred circle of Indian ritual to a symbol of *illusion* in the early New Persian poetic imaginary. Rūdakī's usage, coming well before Perso-Islamic expansion into India, suggests that *mandal* entered his poetic lexicon via Inner Asian channels (likely Sogdian, a common denominator shared with the Uyghur Turkic *Altun Yaruq* above). In other words, New Persian picked up the word from the Buddhist milieu of Transoxiana, but as the concept filtered into a Muslim Persian context devoid of living Buddhist practice, its meaning tilted from holy to hoax. The *mandal* of this stage of New Persian poetry became a magic circle drawn by sorcerers, a place where false visions beguile the unwary, and a far cry from the original Sanskrit sense of a sacred cosmogram.

Over the next centuries, the term *mandal* firmly rooted itself in Persianate occult vocabulary, reflecting nascent conceptualisations of magic circles in the Islamic world. Persian lexicographers of the medieval period consistently define *mandal* as a magical circle used in sorcery. As early as the eleventh century, Asadī Tūsī's (d. 465/1072–3) *Lughat-i Furs* glosses *mandal* as “a line of conjuration that magicians draw.”³ Later authoritative dictionaries, such as the seventeenth-century

kaçan yuna tüketdükte ol yunmuş suvuk mandal içinteki aş, içgü birlä suv dä töksün. kaçan yunmısta kân, yañı arıĭ ton keĭip mandaltın ünüp bir arıĭ ev içintä kirip, uluĭ yarlıĭančuĭi köñülüg yügürü kılıp, ayıĭĭdın tıñılıp edgütä yaratıñıĭka köni oñaru süzüĭ köñül turgursun. Ötrü ol tözünlerniñ kutı buyanı asılĭĭay. Yänä kim kayu kişi uzun iĭläp ne-yne äm kılıp öñädmäsär, ötrü bo nom erdinig okıñip bo yunuluĭ törüg kılıp yunsun arıtınsun, iĭi aĭrıĭĭ ketkäy, adası tuĭası tarıĭĭĭay.” See Engin Çetin, *Altun Yaruq: Yedinci Kitap* (Karahar Kitabevi, 2012), 137–41. I have modified the transcription somewhat, as Çetin's is closer to modern Turkish orthographic conventions as it is to those of Old Uyghur Turkic. Hacer Tokyürek's notes on the original text helped my translation thereof into English. See Hacer Tokyürek, “Budist Uyĭur Metinlerinde Mandal Kılmak Töreni Üzerine,” *Journal of Turkology* 28, no. 1 (2018), doi.org/10.18345/iuturkiyat.437790

² Asadī Tūsī, *Lughat-i Furs*, ed. Muĭammad Dabīristānī (Kitābkhāna-yi Zuhūrī, 1977), 120.

³ Asadī Tūsī, *Lughat-i Furs*.

Burhān-i Qāṭi (17th c.) and the later *Farhang-i Ānandrāj* (19th c.), and the all echo this definition.⁴ They describe *mandalas* as a circle drawn on the ground by sorcerers around themselves, within which they sit and recite ‘*azā’im*, or demon-binding incantations.⁵ The circle functions as a protective boundary: these lexicons note that if the enchanter *steps outside the mandal*, the summoned spirits might harm him. This was no mere abstract notion, rather reflecting a well-known occult practice in the Persianate and broader Islamicate world. By the early modern era, *mandal* in Persian referred unequivocally to the magic circle used in magical rituals: a consecrated ring or diagram, often inscribed with divine names, within which the magician could safely summon and command supernatural beings. In sum, within Persian lexicography and lore, *mandal* had become thoroughly Islamised, repurposed from a Buddhist sacred diagram to an artefact of magical defence and demon-binding, the hallmark of the sorcerer’s art. The word’s journey from sanctity to sorcery is telling: it highlights how a culturally significant term can be adopted and re-signified in new religious communities while retaining the notion of a special enclosed space.

A detailed illustration of the Persianate *mandal* in practice comes from a sixteenth-century Indo-Persian occult compendium, the *Nujūm al-‘Ulūm* (Constellations of the Sciences), compiled for the eighth ruler of Bijapur (an Islamic sultanate spanning the Deccan and South India), ‘Alī ‘Ādil Shāh (d. 987/1580). This encyclopaedic work on astrology and magic contains numerous diagrams and miniatures of astrological tables, talismans, and ritual scenes. Notably, it provides explicit instructions for the use of *mandals* in spirit invocation and subjugation rituals, as is depicted in the folio of Figure 1:

⁴ See Muḥammad Ḥusayn ibn Khalaf Tabrīzī, *Burhān-i Qāṭi*, ed. Muḥammad Mu‘īn, vol. 4 (Amīr Kabīr, 1982), 2041 and Muḥammad Bādshāh ibn Ghulām Muḥyī al-Dīn, *Farhang-i Ānandrāj*, vol. 3 (Nawal Kishore, 1892), 429.

⁵ Muḥammad Ghiyās al-Dīn, *Ghiyās al-Lughāt* (Rizāqī, 1905), 503.



Figure 1. A Muslim enchanter performing a *mandala* ritual.
 Public domain; San Diego Museum of Art.

The Persian text of Figure 1 translates as:

When it becomes the night of the eleventh, they first shake the ground to such an extent that I fear that I might become unconscious. Afterwards, an angel will come accompanied by all the kings and bring forth a green seal-ring, hand it over to me, make a covenant and then return, after which all of those spiritual beings and the angel, along with their attendants and tribes, shall become subservient to you. Take heed never to show your seal-ring to anyone, for it may lead to death. If you do not reveal it, they shall remain forever subservient to you, bringing forth the Water of Life for your use, so you may do whatever you desire. Using a circular *mandal* of this kind is permissible, but a lengthy quadrangular one is (more) praiseworthy and superior to other *mandals*. I myself have done so and have subjugated (spiritual beings) within such *mandals*. This invocation is extremely powerful; with it I summon, sans subjugation, three hundred varieties of *jinn* and visions of spiritual beings, achieving all desires through this method. This (method of) subjugation surpasses all others whose descriptions are exceedingly difficult; it is profoundly free from fear (not dangerous), just as I have designed it. In the place where this subjugation is performed and ‘catches,’ if one gestures towards the earth, four trees shall spring forth, and from the base of each tree, a spring shall flow, and many wonders and marvels shall appear. [The passage ends pointing to the depiction of the *mandal*, the enchanter, and the act of summoning.]

The *Nujūm al-‘Ulūm* account of the *mandal* ritual demonstrates the extent to which reappropriation across communities is an act of negotiation. Both the Indo-Persian ritual and that of the Buddhist *Altun Yaruq* instances begin by creating a sacred geometric space, marked by circles, squares, or combinations, that serves as a purified threshold for spiritual interaction. Each ritual likewise aligns the space to the four cardinal directions, using gates or symbolic markers to protect against harmful forces. Within these consecrated spaces, carefully chosen ritual objects such as incense, lamps, mirrors, or seal-rings are positioned to attract, compel, or honour spiritual beings that are invoked through formulas such as the *dhāraṇī* mantras or the decidedly Islamic prayer formulae upon the Prophet Muḥammad and his family that seal the incantation at the end bottom of the folio in Figure 1. These thematic overlaps suggest a deeper resonance: the logic of the circle ritual—creating an ordered sacred microcosm, invoking higher powers into it, and thereby effecting change across cultural and religious communities. The Persianate *mandal* and its Turco-Buddhist predecessor thus illuminate how different traditions can independently evolve analogous spiritual technologies, even as the explicit theological justifications differ. The *wanderwort mandal* does not dissolve distinct cosmological paradigms but simply juxtaposes them, allowing us to compare a Buddhist healing rite with an Islamic occult rite and recognise a common *grammar of ritual*. Each is a testament to how humans imbue “circles” with power: as portals for the divine or supernatural, as containers for energy and intention, and as protective boundaries against the chaos outside.

In this journey from India to Inner Asia, the eastern Iranian world and back to India, *mandal* exemplifies the *wanderwort* par excellence. It originated in the sacred Sanskrit parlance of ancient India, travelled with Buddhism across linguistic frontiers, was adopted by Turkic Buddhists on the Silk Road, and then, via cross-cultural contact, entered New Persian with altered meaning. In Persianate contexts it was abstracted, Islamised, and later reinvented as a term of occult science; an association was in turn transmitted further westward in the term’s Arabic and Ottoman

afterlives.⁶ By the nineteenth-century, *mandal* had appropriately completed a full circle: it reappeared in South Asia's Islamicate traditions, now as part of Muslim magical praxis. A Sufi or folk-healer in nineteenth-century India, drawing a circle and reciting incantations in Urdu or another Indo-Islamic vernacular, would call that circle a *mandal*, likely unaware that the word has a genealogy that included ancient Buddhist diagrams. Such is the odyssey of this word. From sacramental circle to poetic mirage, to sorcerer's ring, *mandal* carried its core idea—the enclosed sacred space—through a millennium of cultural transformations. This case study of *mandal* thus encapsulates the method and scope of our larger inquiry: we follow a culturally charged term as it migrates across time, geography, and religious traditions, observing how its meaning is continually refashioned to suit new worldviews. In the end, the *mandal*'s journey illuminates how the Persianate world absorbed and repurposed a foreign concept, weaving it into its own rich tapestry of metaphors, a microcosm of the movements and semantic evolutions that this article as a whole seeks to trace.

While I borrow the heuristic of the *wanderwort* to trace terms across lifeworlds, this is not always a *Begriffsgeschichte* in the strict sense of conceptual history. Sometimes we are following a word as it is sedimented into technical vocabularies (*mandal* in occult sciences); sometimes as it becomes an autonomous poetic trope (*nigār* in lyric poetry); and sometimes as it remains responsive to realia beyond the poetic imagination (*dīv/dēv* in Indo-Persian encounters). In this sense, the odyssey of these terms is at once a conceptual history, a poetics of metaphor, and a record of transcultural literary practice.

With the *wanderwort* concept now illustrated by *mandal*, we return to the term at the heart of our introduction: *nigār*. Foreshadowed as the central motif of this inquiry, *nigār* resumes centre stage as both subject and metaphor, its origins in Mānī's visionary art setting the scene for the cross-cultural odyssey to come.

⁶ By the nineteenth century, Arabic-speaking magicians in Ottoman Egypt were using *al-mandal* to refer to magic circles. Edward Lane (d. 1876) describes a Cairene sorcerer's ceremony called *ḍarb al-mandal* (literally 'striking the mandal'), in which a boy gazes into a magic mirror inside a drawn circle to summon visions. See Edward Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (John Murray, 1860), 137–41. The term less conspicuously appears in Ottoman Turkish literature, though James Redhouse's *Turkish-English Lexicon* includes under *mendel*: "a magic ring drawn on the earth by a magician" among its definitions. See James William Redhouse, *A Turkish and English Lexicon: Shewing in English the Significations of the Turkish Terms* (American Mission, 1890), 1998. For even more recent accounts of twentieth century Arabic-language Yemeni and Ethiopian manuscripts of a book of exorcism titled *Al-Mandal al-Sulaymānī* ('The Solomonic Mandal'), with a precedence dating back to the twelfth century, see Anne Regourd, "A Twentieth-Century Manuscript of the *Kitāb al-Mandal al-Sulaymānī* (IES Ar. 286, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia): Texts on Practices & Texts in Practices," in *Amulets and Talismans of the Middle East and North Africa in Context*, ed. Marcela A. Garcia Probert and Petra M. Sijpesteijn, *Leiden Studies in Islam and Society* 13 (Brill, 2022), doi.org/10.1163/9789004471481_004

Prehistories: Mānī and His Icons

What, then, is a *nigār*? The term originates with the teachings of the third-century prophet Mānī (d. 274 CE), whose new religion synthesised Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Platonism, Gnosticism, and indigenous Mesopotamian beliefs under the rubric of a dualistic cosmology of darkness and light. Born into a community of Messianic Jews in Iraq, Mānī's religion spread through the Sassanian Empire (224–651 CE), gaining significant royal support before violent suppression by the Zoroastrian chief priest Kartīr in the late third century. Mānī's followers also included notable figures such as Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) prior to his conversion to Christianity. After suppression in the Roman and Sassanian realms, Manichaeism moved eastward into China, winning adherents among Central and Inner Asian peoples, notably the Sogdians, and becoming the state religion of the Uyghur Khaganate (c. 744–840 CE). Like the Persianate world, Mānī's faith bridged India, Central and Inner Asia, Iran, Anatolia, the Balkans, and the Mediterranean.

A distinctive practice initiated by Mānī was using visual imagery as a didactic tool. Central to this approach was a novel conception of mimesis; as one may come to appreciate the craftsmanship of the creator-artist through observing nature, engaging with art-as-microcosm could likewise grant insight into realities beyond the physical world. Besides composing his written gospel, Mānī was famed for his artistic mastery and actualised his teaching in an album figuratively portraying both the core teachings and metaphysical subtleties of his belief system. Although no original copies have survived to our day, reproductions continued as the religion expanded, adapting to motley local aesthetic traditions. Zsuzsanna Gulácsi, in her study of Manichaean didactic art,⁷ highlights the earliest Coptic language primary sources referring to Mānī's album using the Greco-Coptic term *hikōn* (from Greek *eikōn*, the root of English 'icon').⁸ The earliest Syriac texts provide two terms: *yuqnā* (also from Greek *eikōn*) and *šūrtā*, the latter defined by Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373 CE) as something to be learned visually when words fail. Mānī himself used *šūrtā* in Syriac to describe his illustrated teachings.⁹ This word is cognate with the Arabic *šūra* later employed by Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995) and the earliest Muslim commentators on Manichaeism. Parthian sources use the term *ārdhang*, as do Middle Persian texts (parent language to the post-Islamic New Persian) introduce *nigār*, both terms analogous to Coptic *hikōn*, Greek *eikōn*, and Syriac *yuqnā-šūrtā*. Gulácsi's philological analyses emphasise that the Middle Persian term *nigār* specifically denotes "a picture to be looked at during the course of a religious instruction

⁷ Zsuzsanna Gulácsi, *Mani's Pictures: The Didactic Images of the Manichaeans from Sasanian Mesopotamia to Uygur Central Asia and Tang-Ming China* (Brill, 2015).

⁸ Gulácsi, *Mani's Pictures*, 26.

⁹ Gulácsi, *Mani's Pictures*, 41.

delivered in an oral setting.”¹⁰ Its didactic function is similarly conveyed by the Uyghur Turkic term *körk*, meaning not merely “something visible,” but “something worth seeing.”¹¹

Whatever the language of the texts, be they Middle Persian or Coptic, Mānī’s visual representations or *icons* operated in syzygy, counterposing his written corpus and gospel and thus illustrating complementary methods of communicating his teachings. This deliberate pairing of the written and the figurative survives linguistically in the New Persian verb *nigāshtan*, which carries the dual meanings: to paint, portray or draw; and to write or inscribe.¹²

In contrast to the attitudes of later centuries, early Islamic sources more often than not portray Mānī negatively, his teachings often associated with *zandaqa*, or dualistic heresies deemed a political threat by Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd authorities. Texts as diverse as Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī’s (d. 356/967) musical anthology *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, al-Mas‘ūdī’s (d. 346/957) universal history *Murūj al-Dhahab*, and legal compendiums like those of the Ḥanbalī jurist Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) portray Mānī as an idol-promoting false prophet, with inquisitorial accounts recalling how contemporary alleged “Muslim” Manichaeans were obliged to spit on icons of Mānī in order to absolve themselves of *zandaqa*.¹³ In this way, Sharaf al-Zamān Tāhir al-Marwazī (fl. early sixth/twelfth-century) writes in his description of Mānī’s travels to India, Tibet, and China: “He prescribed for them laws [*nomoi*] and took up pictorial depictions and embellishments; he took such mimetic objects as a means of worship and drawing near unto God.”¹⁴ Or consider this far later Chaghatay Turkic source back-explaining the presence of Manichaeism in its Inner Asian environs: “Finally, he went to the provinces of India and Kashmir and called (the people) to his mission, and the people of Turkistan accepted his word. In the Indian province, he made idols, and with images he led the people astray.”¹⁵

¹⁰ Gulácsi, *Mani’s Pictures*, 219.

¹¹ Gerard Clauson, *An Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth-Century Turkish* (Oxford University Press, 1972), 741. The Turkic *körk* may itself be a translation from the Persian present stem *nigar*, from the verb to see, look, or behold.

¹² Francis Joseph Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary, Including the Arabic Words and Phrases to Be Met with in Persian Literature* (Routledge & K. Paul, 1892), 1107.

¹³ Gulácsi, *Mani’s Pictures*, 50. The Arabic term is itself derived from the Middle Persian *zandik*, meaning both ‘heretic’ and ‘Manichaean’, an allusion to the religion’s persecution at the hands of the Sassanian-Zoroastrian authorities before Islam.

¹⁴ “Wa sanna lahum nawāmīs wa ittakhadha al-taṣwīr wa-al-tazwīn, wa ittakhadha al-tamāthīl ‘ibādatan wa-taḡarruban ilā Allāh.” See Remke Kruk, *Sharaf az-Zamān Tāhir Marwazī (fl. ca. 10th cent. A.D.) on Zoroaster, Māni, Mazdak, and Other Pseudo-Prophets*, Persica 17 (Peeters Publishers, 2001), 65–6.

¹⁵ “Ākhir Hind va Kašmir vilāyatiḡa barip da‘vat qildi, va Turkistān khalqī aning sözini qabūl qildilar. Hind vilāyatida butlar tüzātđi, taṣvīr birlä khalq-ni gumrah qildi.” See Semih Tezcan and Abdurishid Yakub, “A Chagatai Turkic Text on the Life of Mani,” *Study on the Inner Asian Languages* 14 (1999), 69.

Though a good number of Islamic sources tend to regard Mānī's didactic artwork as being akin to idolatry, surviving Manichaean primary sources indicate their foundationally anti-idolatrous and didactic intent. Take this Middle Persian inscription unearthed in Turfan, China, which comments on a figurative depiction of idols in a temple and distinguishes clearly between didactic and devotional icons:

Listen delicate humankind! Direct eye and face toward how it is depicted here in front of you. On this *nigār*: idols, idol priests, altars, and their gods. Concentrate on the sacrament[s], the profession, and the belief in them. I will send the preaching... they raise their voices like dogs. Truth is not in their speech. But you, know your own self! Seize the road of the gods! Now in the first place at the hand of all these things that are depicted here, this is the temple of the idols, which they call "the dwelling of the gods." And corresponding to the name of the dwelling, there are many gods. Many are running about, and when you ask: "Whereto?" they say: "To the dwelling of the gods. To offer reverence, love, gifts in front of them!" The idol priests raise their voices: "Come forth to the dwelling of the gods!" However, inside "the dwelling of the gods," here are no gods! The deceived do not realize that, because their spirits have been made intoxicated.¹⁶

Al-Marwazī provides an early Islamic depiction of Mānī as a false prophet linked explicitly with China. This association is later echoed by the Persian poet Firdawsī (d. c. 416/1025), who calls him "an eloquent man from China,"¹⁷ criticised by the Zoroastrian clergy for promoting icon-worship in lieu of God. This link endured into later Islamic literary traditions, exemplified by Jamāl al-Dīn Īnjū's (d. 1035/1626) dictionary *Farhang-i Jahāngīrī*, describing Mānī as the "authority among the painters of China."¹⁸ Mānī thus, in the Islamic literary imagination, became strongly identified with China.

This association is historically grounded in the region's earlier connections to Chinese power. Prior to the 'Abbāsīd victory at the Battle of Talas in 133/751, much of the region that later formed the Qarakhanid Khanate (c. 382–609/992–1212)—Transoxiana and the western Tarim Basin—had been under Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) rule. Even centuries later, Qarakhanid rulers, recognising that they were within this Chinese orbit, adopted titles such as *Tamghach Khan* (Middle Turkic for 'Khan of China') and *Sulṭān al-Sharq wa-l-Šīn* (Arabic for 'Sultan of the East and China'). In early Islamic literature, China was understood through a dual geographic and cultural concept: *Chīn* and *Māchīn* (from the Sanskrit *mahācīna*, 'Greater China'). The term *Māchīn* specifically referred to those regions of Central and Inner Asia previously under Tang suzerainty. Firdawsī's *Shāhnāma* treats these two regions as a single political and cultural entity,¹⁹ reinforcing the historical linkage

¹⁶ Gulácsi, *Mani's Pictures*, 92.

¹⁷ Abū al-Qāsim Firdawsī, *Shāhnāma*, vol. 6, ed. Jalāl Khāliqī-Muṭlaq (Bunyād-i Mīrās-i Īrān, 2005), 336.

¹⁸ Gulácsi, *Mani's Pictures*, 181.

¹⁹ See the missive sent from Bahrām Chūbīna to the Emperor of China: "He asked the Khāqān not to permit anyone, whether Turk or Chinese, to proceed to the land of Iran or to allow any tidings to reach Khosraw, for any word would be a new gift to him. The Khāqān therefore sent out a herald to proclaim

of the Qarakhanids and other Turkic dynasties with China—and sowing further seeds for Mānī’s future literary association with that region.

Whereas early Islamic sources portray Mānī as a false prophet, later sources paint a different picture, with his most enduring legacy in the Muslim world being that of a legendary master painter. Within this later epoch of Islamic history, his *nigār* maintained its aesthetic signification as microcosm of/mirror unto divine beauty, albeit now sundered from the religious and philosophical Manichaean context in which it was originally couched, and reappropriated for the expediencies of a new Islamic lifeworld, poetic, mystical and philosophical.²⁰

Islamicate Beginnings

New Persian

The Manichaean concept of visual didacticism provided fertile ground for the development of the Persian *nigār* metaphor. As we shall see, Persian poets of the early Islamic period creatively adapted these visual practices into literary devices reflective of their own cultural and religious milieu. In the three centuries following the Islamic expansion into the Iranian plateau, the Persian language, known today as New Persian or *Darī*, came into being significantly beyond Middle Persian’s pre-Islamic literary and religious centres in *Fārs* or Persia proper, and especially in the eastern peripheries bordering China. Influenced as much by Arabic vocabulary and grammar as by its predominantly ex-Buddhist and ex-Manichaean cultural milieu, New Persian poetry emerged in the courts of early Persian Muslim vassals of the ‘Abbāsids, such as the Sāmānids (204–395/819–1005) and Ghaznavids (366–582/977–1186). Early examples, like the following verse by court poet Kisā’ī Marvazī (d. after 394/1004), explicitly reference this heritage within a new Islamic context:

*gar ba-takht u gāh u kursī ghurra khwāhī gasht khīz
sajda kun kursī-garān rā dar nigāristān-i Chīn*²¹

that if without his seal any man went to Iran he would be cut in two.” Abū al-Qāsim Firdawsī, *The Epic of Kings: Shah-Nama*, trans. Reuben Levy (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 369.

²⁰ It should come as no surprise that an image or metaphor can be appropriated by a new community and stripped of its original philosophical or religious meanings. In his Persian-language travelogue documenting the first Indian embassy to Britain, the Bengali Muslim emissary Mīrzā Muḥammad I’tiṣām ad-Dīn Panchnūrī (c. 1143–121/1730–1800) characterises European sailors as follows: “The rigours and dangers they willingly bear are beyond the endurance of any other people. During a storm, if the sails need to be rearranged or taken down, they will climb to the top and top-gallant masts with the agility of *Hanuman* and hang from there like bats.” Mīrzā I’tiṣām al-Dīn, *Wonders of Vilayet*, trans. Kaiser Haq (Peepal Tree, 2002), 34. In referencing Hanuman, Mīrzā I’tiṣām ad-Dīn does not affirm belief in the half-simian deity. Instead, he employs Hanuman metaphorically, extracting its symbolic agility and resilience while remaining within his own Muslim worldview.

²¹ Kisā’ī Marvazī, *Dīvān*, ed. Muḥammad-Bāqir Najafzāda Bārfurūsh (Zuwwār, 2017), 80.

*Should you be made haughty by thrones, offices and seats (of power), then arise
And prostrate yourself before the throne bearers in the icon gallery of China*

This verse represents one of the earliest New Persian references to a *Chinese icon gallery*. The wider context of the Kisā'ī poem is of an Islamic moralising milieu, and his metaphor is an overwhelmingly negative and sarcastic one, depicting the *icon gallery* as an alluring yet spiritually compromised, if not idolatrous space, whilst also cautioning against worldly ambition and greed. Kisā'ī composed his later court poetry under the patronage of Maḥmūd of Ghazna (r. 388–421/998–1030), whose invasions of India marked the beginning of Persianate presence. Writing a century after Kisā'ī in Ghaznavid Lahore, Mas'ūd Sa'd Salmān (d. 515/1121–2) offers a more abstracted and neutral representation of a beloved in terms of the *Chinese icon gallery*:

*nigārkhāna-yi Cīn ast yā shikufta-yi bahār
mah-i du panj u chahār ast yā but-i Farkhār*²²

*[Is s/he] the icon gallery of China or the spring [rose] in full bloom?
[Is s/he] the moon on the fourteenth night or the Buddha-idol from a vihāra?*

Here, man-made beauty (the *Chinese icon gallery* and the 'but-i Farkhār') is compared positively to natural and bodily beauty. *Farkhār* is the name of a city in today's Tajikistan famed in New Persian poetry for its pre-Islamic temple. Indeed, the very word *Farkhār* betrays its nature as synecdoche, coming from *vihāra*, the Sanskrit word for a Buddhist temple.²³ Though the word preceding *Farkhār*, 'but', later came to mean generic idol, here we see the origin of the New Persian etymology for 'idol' in the most concrete terms as 'Buddha' with Mas'ūd Sa'd Salmān's poetic portrait of nature being compared to the 'Buddha of the *vihāra*'. Salmān's contemporary Mu'izzī (d. 519/1125) employs the image of the *icon gallery* in praise of his patron:

*umīd hast kih ārad ba-dargahat Faghfūr
hama ṭarāyif-i Chīn az nigārkhāna-yi Chīn
kishand pīsh-i tū Jaypāl u Qayṣar-i Rūmī
butān-i zarrīn az Sūmnāt u Quṣṭanfīn*²⁴

²² Mas'ūd Sa'd Salmān, *Dīvān*, ed. Nāṣir Ḥīyārī (Intishārāt-i Gulshā'ī, June 1983), 192.

²³ Gerard Clauson provides insights into the origins of the New Persian *farkhār* by identifying analogous terms in Turkic Central and Inner Asia. Pre-Islamic Uyghur Buddhist texts, for instance, record the use of the term *vrhar*, which is phonetically closer to the New Persian *farkhār* than it is to the Sanskrit *vihāra*, again suggesting a shared Sogdian etymology. See Clauson's quotations from various Uyghur Buddhist texts, including: "vrhar sangram sanliḡ ed tavarīḡ" ("movable property and livestock belonging to a temple or convent"); "kim kayu tinh yaḡak... ka[buk]tinča vrhar étser" ("if a man makes a monastery the size of a nutshell [and adorns it with a statue of Buddha the size of a grain of wheat...]"); and "balıkdakı vrhar yanliḡ" ("like the monasteries in the town") in Clauson, *Etymological Dictionary*, 839, 900 and 950.

²⁴ Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Malik Nīshābūrī, *Dīvān-i Mu'izzī*, ed. 'Abbās Iqbāl (Kitābfurūshī-yi Islāmiyya, 1939), 619.

*One is hopeful that the emperor of China shall bring to your threshold
Chinese rarities aplenty from the icon gallery of China
Jaypāl and Byzantium's own caesar shall bring forth
Golden idols from Somnath and Constantinople*

Mu‘izzī’s poetry, composed in Nishābūr (in modern Iran) a thousand miles from Salmān’s Lahore, demonstrates the receptivity that so came to define New Persian, weaving together pre- and post-Islamic, Iranian, Indic, and Chinese metaphors at a moment when their referents were still very concrete. For instance, the term *faghfūr*, later limited to the meaning of ‘porcelain’ in Persian and Ottoman contexts, originates from the Sogdian *baghpūr* (son of God), itself a translation of the Chinese imperial title *tiānzī* (son of heaven). Though Jaypāl would later become a byname for the archetypal infidel Indian king in poetry, Mu‘izzī would have very much intended the Hindū Shāhī (207–417/822–1026) ruler Jayapāla (d. 392/1002) vanquished by Maḥmūd of Ghazna, whose fate of being either ransomed or sold into slavery by the latter became the stuff of legends for later Persian writers.²⁵ Though the rulers of lands beyond the Islamic frontiers bring golden Buddha-idols, the emperor of China is depicted as bringing his tribute from the *Chinese icon gallery*, again, sowing the literary seeds for the topos that would become prevalent later that the *icon gallery of China* is a place, real or imagined.

Qarakhanid Turkish

To the east of the Islamicate peripheries where New Persian was born and matured, in regions controlled by the Qarakhanid dynasty a kindred literary tradition developed. There had been many Turkic dynasties in the region prior, from the early Gök Türks (552–744 CE) and Türgesh (699–766 CE) to the Uyghur Khaganate. The latter and their successors left a rich written culture ensconced in both Buddhism and Manichaeism, a legacy that the Qarakhanids—the first Muslim Turkic dynasty—were only too well aware of. Unlike Persian literature, we observe a conspicuous absence of the term *nigār* or *icon* in Qarakhanid literature, whilst pre-Islamic figures such as the Buddha do feature, reflecting their more recent conversion and proximity to Buddhist and Manichaean communities and rivals. The first term, *but/bod*, much like the Persian term above, clearly entered the language and literature via Sogdian. Yūsuf Khāṣṣ Ḥājib (fl. mid-fifth/eleventh-century), in his Turkic mirror-for-princes *Kutadgu Bilig*, concretely refers to this Buddha-idol:

*evin barkın örte siğil burhanın
anın ornı mescid cemā‘at kılıj*²⁶

²⁵ See Abdur Rehman, *The Last Two Dynasties of the Shahis: An Analysis of Their History, Archaeology, Coinage and Palaeography* (PhD diss., Australian National University, 1976), 144 for a number of different takes. Of all the scenarios presented, it is most likely that Jayapāla was ransomed back to his home territories. Later sources include such accounts as Jayapāla being sold in a slave market in Central Asia for a paltry price.

²⁶ Yūsuf Khāṣṣ Ḥājib, *Kutadgu Bilig*, ed. Reşid Rahmeti Arat (Millî Eğitim Basımevi, 1947), 545.

*Burn down their houses and dwellings; smash their Buddha-idols
In their place, build a mosque for the congregation*

In contrast to Persian poetry, where the Buddha-idol came to be an image of beauty, the Qarakhanid *but-bod* symbolises the bodily and superficial form that veils true essence and spirit. Qarakhanid poet Edib Aḥmad Yüknēkī (fl. early sixth/twelfth century) illustrates this metaphor in a proverb:

*ubut kitti indāp bulunmas yiti
alāl yigli kani körünmäs bodi*²⁷

*The veil is gone, no amount of calling will find him, he has disappeared
Where is the one who ate only the lawful? His outward form [Buddha] is no longer visible*²⁸

The second and more frequently used Qarakhanid term, *burxan*, has its lifeworld not in Central Asian Buddhism, but in China proper. Chia-Wei Lin has traced the etymology of the Qarakhanid *burxan* to an Old Turkic compound combining the northwestern Chinese rendition of *but* as *bur* attached to the Turkic honorific *khan*, the whole compound itself a translation from the Sanskrit (via Chinese and then Sogdian) *buddharāja(n)* or Buddha-king.²⁹ Employing two variants of this term, Maḥmūd al-Kāšgarī (b. c. 397/1007), writing in Middle Turkic a generation after Kisā'ī beyond the Qarakhanid-Ghaznavid border, vividly recounts his dynasty's conquest of Buddhist Khotan:

*kālginläyü aqtimiz
kāndlār üzä çıqtimiz
furxan ävin yıqtimiz
burxan üzä siçtimiz*³⁰

²⁷ Edib Aḥmed Yüknēkī, *Atebetü'l-Hakâyık*, ed. Serkan Çakmak (Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı, 2019), 197.

²⁸ That Yüknēkī's *but-bod* is a stand-in for outward form is itself tacit indication that Qarakhanid Muslims recognised the emic claim that the Buddha-idol is not worshipped as an end in and of itself, but as a representation of a greater reality prior to the form.

²⁹ Chia-Wei Lin, "Scriptio Buddhica, Interpretatio Islamica: Buddhist Sūtras Translated in Rašīd Al-Dīn's Ġāmi' Al-Tawārīḥ (Beyond Comparison, IDK Philologie, LMU München, 14-16.06.2023)," Academia.edu presentation, accessed June 15, 2025. Clauson makes the same observation in his definition of the term *burxan*: "(*Buddha, prophet, idol, God, messenger*) compound of Chinese *fu* (Giles 3,589) and presumably *xan*. The Chinese character was the one chosen to transcribe *Buddha*, and was pronounced approximately *bur* in NW China in VII-VIII. This word, corresponding properly to some phr. like *Buddhareje*, was the one chosen to represent *Buddha* in the earliest Turkish translations of Buddhist scriptures, which must have anteceded the appearance of Manichaeism among the Turks, and was taken over by the Manichaean missionaries to translate words like 'prophet' applied e.g. to Mānī himself." See Clauson, *Etymological Dictionary*, 361.

³⁰ Robert Dankoff, "Kāšgarī on the Beliefs and Superstitions of the Turks," in *From Mahmud Kaşgari to Evliya Çelebi: Studies in Middle Turkic and Ottoman Literatures* (Gorgias Press, 2009), 79. The translation is likewise Dankoff's.

*We came down on them like a flood
 We went out among their cities
 We tore down their idol temples
 We shat on the Buddha's head!*

Kāšġarī's poem well explains why there should be no reference to a *nigār* or *icon*, a term so claimed by and ensconced in the Turkic literatures of the Qarakhanid's eastern Buddhist and Manichaean neighbours. Indeed, the Manichaean texts referred to in the previous section were all unearthed in Turfan in what is today Chinese Xinjiang, establishing that the Persian *nigār* was known amongst Manichaeans and Buddhists of the region. Robert Dankoff has argued that the more-Catholic-than-the-Pope 'Islamic' quality of Qarakhanid literature is a deliberate attempt on behalf of the dynasty to not only make the language of the recently converted Qarakhanids as prestigious as Arabic and Persian, but also to compete with the large number of mostly Buddhist and Manichaean works that had been written in the sister Uyghur Turkic language; in short, to create a new Turkic *adab* or literary tradition in the Islamic mould.³¹ That all said, even where literary corpora loudly declare hostility to Buddhism or to idolatry, residues of those very traditions persist. As Dankoff has shown, Middle Turkic literature retains Buddhist elements even amidst polemical denunciation, and likewise, Persianate lyric frequently oscillates between condemning idols and adoring them as metaphors for beauty. Such ambivalence is integral to the semantic life of these *Wanderwörter*.

This cultural reorientation can be well understood through David Damrosch's concept of a scriptworld, recently summed up as "a self-contained multilingual literary system joined under the umbrella of a single alphabet", one which "arises when a particular alphabet—take, for example, the Latin alphabet—bridges a set of distinct languages, joining them within a cohesive and exclusive cultural system."³² This notion is particularly useful here. Consider, for instance, the poetic excerpt above from Aḥmed Yūknekī's '*Ataba al-Ḥaqā'iq*', the second known work of Turco-Islamic literature after *Kutadġu Bilig* (also quoted above), composed under Qarakhanid patronage for a burgeoning Turkic Muslim audience. Of the four extant copies of the text, the oldest manuscript (Süleymaniye Manuscript Library, Ayasofya 4012, from Samarkand) is written entirely in the Uyghur script. Yūknekī's contemporary Šiñko Šäli Tutuṅ used that same script when

³¹ Robert Dankoff, "Qarakhanid Literature and the Beginnings of Turco-Islamic Culture," 18. Despite literary omissions, material culture from the Qarakhanid period reveals significant continuity with pre-Islamic Manichaean and Buddhist figurative traditions. A remarkable discovery at Samarkand's Afrāsiyāb citadel (the site of old Samarkand and sight of earlier pre-Islamic Sogdian mural traditions) in 2001 revealed a thirteenth-century Qarakhanid palace pavilion featuring mural paintings depicting both figural imagery and texts, reflecting stylistic links to earlier Manichaean motifs. Depictions include mythical beasts, yin-yang symbolism, and angelic figures, illustrating complex cultural continuities that the literature may have conspicuously tried to omit. See Yury Karev, "Qarakhanid Wall Paintings in the Citadel of Samarqand: First Report and Preliminary Observations," *Muqarnas* 22 (2005), doi.org/10.1163/22118993_02201004

³² William Stroebe, *Literature's Refuge: Rewriting the Mediterranean Borderscape* (Princeton University Press, 2025), 31 and 37. See also David Damrosch, "Scriptworlds: Writing Systems and the Formation of World Literature," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 68, no. 2 (June 2007): 197.

translating Buddhist texts—including the previously discussed *mandal* passage from the Golden Light (*Altun Yaruq*) Sūtra—for a Turco-Buddhist readership. Tutuṅ carried out these translations in the Uyghur Kingdom of Qocho (241–736/856–1335), which had adopted Buddhism as its official religion around the same time that the elite of their neighbours and rivals, the Qarakhanids, embraced Islam. Both the Qocho Uyghurs and the Qarakhanids inherited the Uyghur Khaganate’s cultural and linguistic legacy, including an initial common scriptworld. Their textual trajectories soon diverged, however; the second-oldest manuscript of *‘Ataba al-Haqā’iq* (Süleymaniye Library, Ayasofya 4757) is written in both Uyghur and Perso-Arabic scripts, reflecting a transitional phase between scriptworlds. In contrast to the Qarakhanids, the Uyghurs of Qocho, despite their conversion to Buddhism, largely held onto the scriptworld bequeathed by the Uyghur Khaganate scriptworld. This continuity was possible arguably because Manichaeism, the previous religion of the Qocho Uyghurs, had been more accommodating of Buddhist influence, and the Uyghur Khaganate had itself already been the site of considerable Buddhist literary production in the Uyghur script. By the time the last two manuscripts (University of Groningen Library, HS 474 and Topkapı Palace Museum Library, Treasury 244) were copied, the Qarakhanids’ cultural reorientation towards the Islamic East was complete: these copies render the text exclusively in the Perso-Arabic script. From a scriptworld perspective, then, the evolution of this single work’s script offers a window not only onto words in transition and on the move, but onto whole worlds.

Indian Detour

Zoroaster's Semantic Shift: Deities into Demons

While Persian poets embraced the *nigār* metaphor with enthusiasm, the semantic transformations accompanying the Islamisation of Persian literature were compounded further upon encountering Indian traditions. The Indo-Persian context introduced a dynamic semantic tension between deity and demon, exemplified through the Persian *dīv* and its Indic counterpart *dēv*. Both words share Indo-European roots, related to words meaning deity (compare the English divinity, Spanish *Dios*, or the Anglo-Germanic Tuesday, named for the deity *Tiw* or *Týr*). The Iranian languages uniquely diverge here for, unlike their European relatives to the west and their Indic kin to the southeast, the *dīv* cognates signify quite the opposite: not deities, but demons. Multiple hypotheses attempt to explain how and when this semantic shift occurred. An earlier and now somewhat outdated historical explanation, known as the reform hypothesis, suggests not a gradual evolution but a deliberate rupture introduced by the pre-Islamic Iranian prophet Zoroaster. According to this view, Zoroaster was a “revolutionary reformer” who explicitly condemned the *daēvas*—local deities in his Iranian milieu, often with direct counterparts in India—as demons.³³ Consequently, *daēva* cognates in Indic and pre-Christian European traditions retained their positive associations,

³³ Clarisse Herrenschildt and Jean Kellens, s.v. “DAIVA,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. VI, fasc. 6 (1993; last updated August 7, 2015), 599–602, accessed via iranicaonline.org.

whereas the modern Persian *dīv*, Armenian *dew*, Kurdish *dēw*, and Pashto *dew* all signify decidedly malicious supernatural entities.³⁴

Philologists today explain this discrepancy through what is known as the progressive hypothesis, which proposes a gradual semantic shift from deity to demon within the ancient Iranian cultural context, visible notably in the Zoroastrian *Gāthās*. These Avestan hymns attributed to Zoroaster himself portray the *daēvas* not as fully formed demons but as deities to be rejected in favour of exclusive worship of the one God *Ahuramazdā*.

Regardless of the term's precise origins, the transformation of *daēvas* from neutral or positive deities into definitively negative entities was firmly established by the Achaemenid period (c. 550–330 BCE) wherein Zoroastrianism received royal patronage, as corroborated by contemporary material evidence. An Old Persian inscription from Persepolis, commissioned by Xerxes I (d. 465 BCE), illustrates this vividly:

θātiy xšayaqršā xšāyaθiya
yaθā taya adam xšāyaθiya abavam
astiy a"tar aitā dahayāva tayaiy upariy nipištā ayauda
pasāva-maiy a"uramazdā upastām abara
vašnā a"uramazdahā ava^a dahayāvam adam ajanam
uta-šim gāθavā nīšādayam
utā a"tar aitā dahayāva āha yadā-taya paruvam
daivā ayadiya
pasāva vašnā a"uramazdahā adam avam
daivadānam viyakanam
utā patiyazbayam daivā mā⁺yadiyaiša
yadāyā paruvam daivā ayadiya avadā adam
a"uramazdām ayadaiy artācā barzmaniya³⁵

King Xerxes announces:

When I had become king,
 there was among the lands that are written above
 [one that] was in turmoil.

Then Ahuramazdā brought me aid.

By the greatness of Ahuramazdā, I struck down that

³⁴ Travis Zadeh mentions that a similar semantic shift from the neutral Ancient Greek *daimōn* to the malevolent English *demon* also seems to have taken place in the Middle Ages. Semantic shift notwithstanding, *daimōn* is not a cognate to *daēva* other kindred Indo-European terms. In the same book, Zadeh also recalls how the Arabic *Theology of Aristotle* (composed c. 225–6/840–70), a paraphrase of Plotinus' *Enneads* rendered Plotinus' Greek *daimōns* into Arabic as *jinn*. See Travis Zadeh, *Wonders and Rarities: The Marvelous Book That Traveled the World and Mapped the Cosmos* (Harvard University Press, 2023), 194.

³⁵ I do not read Old Persian and am grateful to Princeton's Daniel Sheffield for directing me towards Prods Oktor Skjærvø's transcription of the inscription (XPh §4-5a, 28-41) forthcoming in the *Writings of the Ancient World* series (Society of Biblical Literature).

land and set it down in its place.
 And among these lands there was a place where
 previously false gods [*daēvas*] received sacrifices.
 Then, by the greatness of Ahuramazdā, I destroyed
 that den of the false gods [*daēvas*],
 and I proclaimed: “The false gods [*daēvas*] are not to receive sacrifices!”
 Where previously the false gods [*daēvas*] had received
 sacrifices, there I sacrificed to Ahuramazdā
 according to the Order up on high.

Thus, by the eve of Muslim expansion into the Iranian world, with few exceptions the term *dīv* had attained a firmly negative connotation,³⁶ further solidified through the Islamisation of Persian language and culture, whereby emerged a new nexus between the Iranian *dīv*-demon and the Islamic devil.

Firdawsī’s Demons

The locus classicus for the playing out of the demon-deity duality within a new Perso-Islamic framework is Firdawsī’s epic poem the *Shāhnāma* (Book of Kings). Completed in 401/1010, the *Shāhnāma* records Iranian history from the creation of the world until the Muslim conquest of Persia in the seventh century of the common era. Though its subject matter is ostensibly pre-Islamic, much scholarship has analysed Firdawsī’s portrayal of Iran’s mythical past as one teleologically orientated towards Islam, with Iranian religions depicted as monotheistic and righteous Iranian kings depicted as proto-Muslims.³⁷ It would follow that the semantic shifts inherited in Firdawsī’s New Persian should likewise take up an Islamic veneer. Of interest is Firdawsī’s account of the legendary hero Rustam’s confrontation with two demon-giants on the eastern peripheries of his patrons’—the Kayānid Dynasty—empire: the *dīv-i sapīd* (White Demon) of Māzandarān and the *akvān dīv* from the Turkic borderlands.

³⁶ Two Islamic-era exceptions to this rule are Dēwāshtīch (r. 87–104/706–22), one of the final Sogdian rulers of Samarkand during the Umayyad conquests of Transoxiana, and Abū al-Sāj ibn Dēwdād (d. 266/879), yet another Sogdian prince and eponym for the Banū Sāj Dynasty (889–929) who ruled in the Lesser Caucasus under ‘Abbāsīd suzerainty. In regions of the Iranian world that were decisively Zoroastrian, the negative connotation of the *dīv* cognate persisted well into the Islamic period. Buddhism, however, emerged from a dialogue with Brahmanical religion in India and was thus unaffected by the said Zoroastrian semantic inversion. It makes sense, therefore, that as Buddhism spread northward and became ensconced amongst Iranian peoples such as the Sogdians, it too carried with it an original, positive Indian conception of *dēv*, ergo the latter prince’s father’s name (Dēwdād) translating to “God-given.” See Zohreh Zarshenas, “The Double Sense of Sogdian *dyw*,” in *Turfān Revisited: The First Century of Research into the Arts and Cultures of the Silk Road*, ed. Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst et al. (Reimer, 2004), 417.

³⁷ Dick Davis, “Religion in the ‘Shahnameh,’” *Iranian Studies* 48, no. 3 (May 2015), 343.

Rustam and the White Demon of Māzandarān

Let us start with the former. As the narrative goes, Rustam's patron, Kay Kāvūs, having consolidated his rule over the better part of the Iranian plateau and Central Asia, is enticed to conquer the hitherto unconquered land of Māzandarān. Spies allure him with descriptions as "Mazanderan was the partner of heaven, that all of this city was adorned like an idolater's temple with Chinese brocade and flowers, that the women were like houris, and their faces were like the blossoms of the pomegranate tree."³⁸

Where, then, might this idyllic Māzandarān be? Besides the allusions from the passage referring to idolatry and China, this much is clear that the Māzandarān of the *Shāhnāma* is not the contemporary Iranian province of Mazanderan that curves about the southern shores of Caspian Sea. The later 'Abbāsīd scholar Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1229) confirms this in his geographical compendium *Mu'jam al-Buldān*, pointing out that the area corresponding to today's Mazanderan was historically called Ṭabaristān, the new appellation being a recent innovation by the locals without historical or literary precedent.³⁹ An alternative definition is provided in the introduction to an earlier prose edition of the *Shāhnāma*, where Māzandarān is situated in syzygy with the place of the sun's rising: "They call the rising [place of the sun] the East, and call the Levant and Yemen Māzandarān."⁴⁰

The anonymous author of twelfth century Ghaznavid chronicle *Mujmal al-Tawārīkh wa al-Qiṣaṣ* notes that there are in fact two Māzandarāns, a Western Māzandarān encompassing the Levant and Yemen, and eastern one yonder side of the Iranian plateau.⁴¹ Modern Iranian scholarship has devoted a great deal of effort to resolving the question of where this latter eastern Māzandarān of the *Shāhnāma* is. The Iranian scholar Hūshang Dawlatābādī, in an in-depth study of the literary geographies, topographic and cultural references made in relation to the Māzandarān of the poem, has argued, for example, that Firdawsī's Māzandarān is in India.⁴² More recent

³⁸ For the sake of brevity, I have omitted transliterating the Persian originals of *Shāhnāma* accounts regarding demons and stuck to Dick Davis's prose translation thereof. See Abū al-Qāsim Firdawsī, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis (Penguin Classics, 2016).

³⁹ Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-Buldān* (*Geographisches Wörterbuch*), vol. 4, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (F. A. Brockhaus, 1869), 394.

⁴⁰ "Furū shudan rā khāvar khwāndand, va Shām u Yaman rā Māzandarān khwāndand." (See Raḥīm Rizāzāda Malik, "Dībācha-yi Shāhnāma-yi Abū Mansūrī," *Faslnāma-yi Nāma-yi Anjuman* 13, no. 1 (2004), 131–2.

⁴¹ Seyfeddīn Najmabadi and Siegfried Weber, eds., *Muğmal at-tawārīḥ wa-l-qiṣaṣ: Eine persische Weltgeschichte aus dem 12. Jahrhundert nach den Hss. Heidelberg, Berlin, Dublin und Paris* (Deux Mondes, 2000), 36.

⁴² Hūshang Dawlatābādī, "Sawdā-yi Gushūdan-i Māzandarān," *Āyanda* 15, nos. 3–5 (1989), 246. Māzandarān, he argues, is depicted in the text as being yonder side of the 'Alburz' mountain range, which is often referred to in equal measure as the 'Indian mountain' (*kūh-i Hind*). Dawlatābādī also draws comparisons between the description of the demon-king of Firdawsī's Māzandarān as being able

scholarship postulates the *Shāhnāmic* Māzandarān to be in Tibet or at the feet of the Kunlun Mountains in the southernmost part of Xinjiang in China.⁴³

Back to Firdawsī's account. A conceited Kay Kāvūs heads east and begins to sack the border towns of Māzandarān. A distraught demon-king of Māzandarān beseeches the *dīv-i sapīd* or 'White Demon' for help. Though the *dīv-i sapīd* is presented in the language of a demon, its description also betrays the function of a pre-Islamic local deity. It immediately answers the demon-king's prayers and promises to drive out the invading Persians: "Do not despair of fate; I will come immediately with a mighty army and drive them out of Mazanderan."⁴⁴ Though the White Demon is able to blind Kay Kāvūs, its powers are more so psychological and magical than they are physical:

When night had passed and day came, the eyes of half the men in the Persian army were darkened, and their leaders' heads were filled with fury against the king. Many men perished because of this; the army had never known such a disaster. The king was also blinded, and his actions brought evil on his army: their wealth was looted, and his soldiers led into captivity.⁴⁵

Thus, the White Demon is able subdue the Persian army by instilling a sense of anxiety and confusion in them. It then instructs his minions, lesser demons, to bind the soldiers up in chains: "Then he chose twelve thousand demons [*dīvs*] armed with daggers and set them to guard the Persians, filling their chieftains' minds with grief."⁴⁶

Reinforcing the subaltern reading of the White Demon as local deity is its victorious proclamation (the inference here being that he, the White Demon, has hearkened to the complaints of those who have called upon him): "I have not killed them [the Persian army], but only so that they will know how pain differs from pleasure. They will die slowly, groaning in despair, and no one will pay attention to their complaints."⁴⁷ Firdawsī then goes to situate the powerful White Demon in a new Islamo-Zoroastrian demonology through the mouth of Rustam's father, Zāl:

[I]f God wills that a demon [*dīv*] turn your days into darkness, can any man avert this from you? What comes us must be endured. No one can stay in this world forever; and even if he remains here for a long time, he is finally summoned to another place. If a man leaves behind him a noble reputation, he should not despair when he has to depart.⁴⁸

Moral clauses aside, Firdawsī's explanation of the demon's power is not so different from that of Zoroaster's metaphysical reconfiguration of the *daēvas* above. Whereas the Māzandarānī locals call onto him as a deity, Firdawsī declares his power to be subsumed in a supernatural hierarchy

to instantiate himself into an idol of stone, with the head of a boar and body of a man, as resembling a number of Indic deities.

⁴³ Mahdī Sayyidī, *Farhang-i Jughrafiyā-yi Tārīkhī-yi Shāhnāma* (Nashra-yi Nay, 2020), 16.

⁴⁴ Davis, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, 148.

⁴⁵ Davis, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*.

⁴⁶ Davis, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*.

⁴⁷ Davis, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*.

⁴⁸ Davis, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, 150.

under the power of one God; it is God that so wills that the demon should wreak havoc on the Iranian army, and for the observer to be patient and persevere. Rustam does as such, traversing seven mountains in deepest Māzandarān and facing bands of warrior demons in a bid to rescue the blinded and captive king. Upon Rustam's reaching the cave that is home to the White Demon, Firdawsī describes the latter in the following terms:

He [Rustam] rubbed his eyes and peered into the pit's darkness, and made out a mountain there, hiding the pit behind its bulk. It was the colour of night, its hair was white like snow, and the world seemed to be filled with its stature and breath. It moved on Rostam like a black mountain, wearing an iron helmet, its arms protected by iron armor.⁴⁹

Rustam eventually slays this frightful being and uses its liver to miraculously restore the sight of Kay Kāvūs, who ultimately succeeds in conquering Māzandarān and subduing its population, demon and human alike.

Rustam and Akvān Dīv

A similar account is found later in the *Shāhnāma* when Kay Kāvūs's grandson and successor to the throne, Kay Khusraw, busy at war with the Turks in the east, asks Rustam to rid him of an onager that is terrorising his herds and horses. After several days of pursuing the supposed onager, Rustam and his horse stop to rest. Firdawsī then reveals that the onager is in fact a demon by the name of *akvān dīv* who, metamorphosing into a tempest and then into a giant, carves out the soil beneath the sleeping Rustam and raises it towards the heavens.⁵⁰ Upon waking Rustam, the *akvān dīv* offers the hero two options: either to be cast into the ocean, or to find an equally painful death hurled onto a mountainside. Here we observe yet another Islamic modification to the Persian demon-divinity matrix: the depiction of demons as serial liars.⁵¹ Knowing that the demon will not keep his word, Rustam requests the latter fate, and is instead cast into the sea, as expected, where he swims to safety.⁵² Once he has recovered, Rustam returns to slay the *akvān dīv*, whom Firdawsī describes in the following terms:

It had a head like an elephant's, long hair, and a mouth full of boar's tusks; its two eyes were white and its lips black; its body didn't bear looking at. No animal is like him, and he'd turn that whole plain into a sea of blood; when I cut his head off with my dagger, blood spurted into the air like rain.⁵³

⁴⁹ Davis, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, 161.

⁵⁰ Davis, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, 237.

⁵¹ See: Qur'ān 6:112. See also Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, ḥadīth no. 6213, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, ḥadīth no. 2228.

⁵² In Rustam's rhetorical one-upping of the *akvān dīv*, it is interesting that he refers to the teachings of Chinese sages, yet another appeal to the eastern milieu of his captor: "*The Chinese sages teach/ Whoever dies in water will not reach/ The heavens, or see Soroush; his fate will be/ To haunt this lower earth eternally/ Throw me upon some mountain top, and there/ I'll terrify a lion in its lair.*" See Davis, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, 328.

⁵³ Davis, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, 330–1.

To conclude the paradigmatic depiction of *dīvs* in the *Shāhnāma*, Firdawsī ends this episode with an allegorical interpretation, revealing the ‘demon’ to be symbolic of moral depravity:

You should realize that the *div* represents evil people, those who are ungrateful to God. When a man leaves the ways of humanity consider him a *div*, not as a person. If you don’t appreciate this tale, it may be that you have not seen its real meaning.⁵⁴

Firdawsī’s narrative thus represents the consummation of the semantic evolution of *dīv* from pre-Islamic deity to Islamised demon, reinforcing the figure’s negative connotation while embedding it within a moral and monotheistic framework that is decidedly Perso-Islamic.

Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī and the Demon-Deity of Ajmer

But two hundred years after Firdawsī’s death, the Islamisation of the Indian Subcontinent was well under way, notably through the widespread efforts of Sufi mystics. The following account from Allāhdiyā Chishtī’s (d. c. 1069/1659 CE) *Siyar al-Aqtāb*, a Mughal-era biography of the Chishtī Sufis, recalls the story of Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī’s (d. 633/1236 CE) migration four centuries earlier from present-day Iran and settling in the Indian city of Ajmer. The hagiography is of particular interest to us for the conflict between (and subsequent resolution of) the Islamic and local Indic religions is one marked by the *dīv-dēv*/demon-deity tension. To solemnise his decision to settle in the city, Chishtī sacrifices a cow for his disciples to consume. The locals are scandalised by this and other displays of Chishtī’s miracle-working, and so head to their local temple, beseeching the resident *dīv/dēv* for assistance:

In short, the unbelievers were helpless and saw that they hadn’t the power to compete with such a perfect contender. They begrudgingly ceased fighting and, ashamed, went to their temple complex, that is to say, their place of worship, wherein was a *dīv/dēv*. They cried out before it and begged for succour.⁵⁵

Similar to Firdawsī’s demons of Māzandarān, this temple *dīv/dēv*’s powers primarily manifest psychologically and magically, requiring incantations from its devotees to challenge Chishtī:

When the *dīv/dēv* learned what the state of affairs was, it remained silent for a time. It thereafter proclaimed: o devotees of mine, this dervish who has come [to us] possesses great perfection in his own religion. I’ll not be able to overcome him save through the art of magic and incantations. And so it taught spells to all those present and proclaimed: recite [these] as often as you can, that the dervish may no longer have the strength to remain here. The unbelievers did as much.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Davis, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*.

⁵⁵ “Al-qiṣṣa chūn kāfirān ‘ājiz āmadand va dīdand kih tāb-i muqāvamat bā chunīn ḥarīf-i kāmīl namī-dārand, nāchār tark-i muḥāraba namūda pashīmān shuda dar ān butkhānahā kih ma‘bad-i īshān būd raftand wa dar ānjā dīv/dēvī būd, pīsh-i ū faryād āvardand va madad khwāstand.” See Allāhdiyā Chishtī, *Khvājagān-i Chisht, Siyar al-Aqtāb*, ed. Muḥammad Sarvar Mawlā’ī (Nashr-i ‘Ilm, 2007), 127.

⁵⁶ “Dīv/dēv chūn ba-ḥaqīqat bishnīd tā dīrī khāmūsh mānd, pas guft: ay dūstdārān-i man, īn darvīsh kih āmada ast dar dīn-i khūd basā ṣāḥib-kamālāt ast. Ba-ū ba-sar nakhwāham shud magar ba-‘ilm-i siḥr va

What are we dealing with here? The text simply says that there was a *dīv/dēv* in the temple; if we were to read the text according to its Persian lifeworld, the being's reliance on sorcery clearly marks it as demonic. However, the context of worship and its temple abode aligns with an Indic *dēv*, a revered local deity. Upon sufficient invocation by the locals, the *dīv/dēv*, seated as one would imagine an idol at the altar, arises animated, his stature large enough for worshippers to shelter behind him, and approaches Chishtī:

And so the *dīv/dēv* set out, leading those misguided ones until he reached the place of his saintly eminence. The lot of those damned ones had taken refuge behind it and began their incantation-chanting. A disciple reported this to the master, saying: O our refuge, o guide of ours, these 'impious infidels' have returned under the protection of their own *dīv/dēv* and are chanting spells in order to best us. The master replied: Their sorcery is entirely null; it shall have no effect upon the like of us, God willing. What's more, their *dīv/dēv* shall come to the straight path. Having said these words, he entered into prayer.⁵⁷

Upon confronting Chishtī, the *dīv/dēv* is profoundly affected, thus expressing its conflicted spiritual nature:

Upon beholding the perfect beauty of the master, the *dīv/dēv*, who was their leader, trembled from head to toe like a willow. However much it tried to proclaim Rām, Rām, naught but the words Raḥīm, Raḥīm escaped its tongue. When the unbelievers saw this, they were struck with bewilderment and began objecting. The *dīv/dēv*, perturbed by their advice, grew enraged and picked up whatever wood or stone it could find, with which it struck the heads of the unbelievers such that it killed many among that group, whilst the rest were scattered.⁵⁸

Chishtī pacifies this chaotic scene by offering a cup of water to the deity, symbolically extinguishing its fiery, demonic nature. This also represents an Islamic addendum to the demon-deity duality, for jinn are thought to be composed of fire. Spiritually subdued, the temple deity is renamed *Shādī Dēv* by Chishtī and petitions for the temple to become the future *dargāh* (shrine-

fusūn. Pas ān-hamahā rā siḥr ta' līm sākht va guft bikhwānīd chandān kih tavānīd kih īn darvīsh rā tāb-i māndan-i īnjā namānad. Kāfirān hamchunān kardand." See Allāhdiyā Chishtī, *Khvājagān-i Chisht, Siyar al-Aqtāb*.

⁵⁷ "Pas dīv/dēv pīshvāy-i ān gumrahān shuda ravāna gasht tā nazdīk-i maqām-i ān ḥazrat rasīd va ān-hama mardūdān dar 'aqab-i vay panāh girifta īstādand va afsūn-khwānī āghāz kardand. Shakhshī az murīdān az īn kār ba-khidmat 'arḍ rasānīd va guft: yā pīr-i dastgīr, īn kafāra-i fajara ba-ḥimāyat-i dīv/dēv-i khūd bāz-āmada-and va siḥr mī-khwānand tā bar mā dast yāband. Ān ḥazrat farmūd kih siḥrish hama bāṭil ast bar māyān hīch ta'sīr nakhwāhad namūd in shā' Allāh jalla jalāluh va dīv/dēv-i īshān ba-rāh-i rāst khwāhad āmad. Īn sukhan bifarmūd va dar namāz shud." Allāhdiyā Chishtī, *Khvājagān-i Chisht, Siyar al-Aqtāb*.

⁵⁸ "Dīv/dēv kih pīshvāy-i ānhā būd chūn jamāl-i ba-kamāl-i khwāja badīd az sar tā pā chūn bīd larzīd. Har chand khwāst kih Rām Rām gūyad, Raḥīm Raḥīm az zabānash bar-āmad. Kāfirān chūn badīdand mutahayyir shudand va mawā'iz āghāz kardand. Dīv/dēv rā az pand-i īshān khāṭir bar-āshuft, har chih kih chūb wa sang mī-dīd bar-dāshta bar sar-i kafāra mī-zad chandān kih bisyārī az ān jamā'at rā halāk namūd wa bāqī munhazim gardīdand." Allāhdiyā Chishtī, *Khvājagān-i Chisht, Siyar al-Aqtāb*, 128.

mausoleum) of its new spiritual guide.⁵⁹ Later in the hagiography, Indian sorcerers approach their deity and are astounded at what they find:

They beheld Shādī Dēv standing with hands bound in the service of the master and released a loud cry out in anguish proclaiming: “O *dīv/dēv*! Numberless are the years wherein we have served you, expending great amounts that you might one day be of use to us, and now you have left us and become the servant of a Muslim!”⁶⁰

Demon-Deity Paronomasia in Amīr Khusraw

Allāhdiyā Chishtī’s account presents an early instance of the Zoroastrian semantic shift from deity to demon, now Islamised and contextualised through Muslim interactions with Indian religious traditions. Barely a century after Khwaja Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī’s death, the nuanced interplay of the *dīv*–*dēv* duality reached new literary heights in the works of Amīr Khusraw (d. 725/1325 CE). Though renowned primarily for his poetry and devotion to his Chishtī Sufi master, Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā’ (also d. 725/1325 CE), Khusraw was closely associated with several Muslim dynasties of the Indo-Gangetic plain. His *Khazā’ in al-Futūḥ* is a literary-historical account of the victories and escapades in India of ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Khaljī (d. 716/1316). I use the term literary-historical (as opposed to solely historical) to describe the work, for many of Khusraw’s sources or, at the very least, the literary lenses through which he interprets the historical data before him, are rooted in both the Qur’ānic and Persian epic *Shāhnāma* traditions.

Khusraw explicitly models the Indian hinterland conquered by Khaljī on Firdawsī’s legendary Māzandarān, as when he writes about the recently subjugated ruler of the Deccan Seuṇa Dynasty, Rām Dēv (r. c. 669–711/1271–1311) and his providing of aid to Khaljī’s troops that they might expand further into the Peninsular Indian Hoysala Kingdom. Khusraw explains that Rām Dēv:

[C]ommanded that all useful supplies for the army be made available in the market. Should, for example, the Rustam-like warriors of the army require even the feather of the Simurgh for their arrows,

⁵⁹ Deities, and not just their human devotees, becoming convinced of the veracity of another belief system and converting to it is something a literary topos. Writing of a kindred example in Osian, a Rajasthani locality not so far from Ajmer, Divya Cherian writes: “The origin myth of the Jain community in Osian asserted that both the local deity, Sachiya Mata, a goddess requiring blood sacrifice, as well as a population of local rajputs converted to Jainism. Both the deity and the erstwhile warriors embraced the Jain ethic of nonharm, resulting in a cessation of ritual animal slaughter for this goddess.” As was the case for *Shādī Dēv*, so too did *Saciya Mātā*’s temple become a locus for Jain devotion in the region. See Divya Cherian, *Merchants of Virtue: Hindus, Muslims, and Untouchables in Eighteenth-Century South Asia* (University of California Press, 2022), 114.

⁶⁰ “Shādī Dēv rā dīdand kih dast basta dar khidmat-i ḥaẓrat-i khwāja īstāda ast. Faghān bar-āwardand va guftand: ay dīv/dēv, mā sālhā-yi sāl khidmathā-yi tū mī-kardīm, mablagghā kharj namūdīm badīn jihat kih tū rūzī ba-kār-i mā biyāyī va tū raftī wa ghulām-i Musalmānī shudī?” See Allāhdiyā Chishtī, *Siyar al-Aqtāb*, 129.

they should strive ceaselessly to obtain it, so that the fortune of Iran and Turan might rise to a state wherein every renowned rider in the army could slay a great *demon* from the lands of Dahūr Samandar [Dwārasamudra] and Ma‘bar [Coromandel Coast] just as Rustam had done in Māzandarān.⁶¹

Here, Khusraw casts Khaljī as the new Kay Kāvūs and his commanders, such as Malik Kāfūr (d. 715/1315), as contemporary Rustams, transforming the Indian interior into a mythic landscape dominated by demonic adversaries. Like Firdawsī’s Māzandarān, where Ahriman, the principle of absolute evil, reigns supreme, Khusraw explicitly situates these Indian territories under the dominion of the Islamic devil:

There were a good number of cities of the Indian *demon-deities* where devilry had persisted since the earliest of times, and where, through prolonged unbelief, Satan had sown his offspring far from the sanctuary of Islam and made his supererogatory devotions an obligatory part of his idol-worship. All these shadows of disbelief were, through sincere determination, first removed from the soil of Dēvgīr, and subsequently from every *demon-abode* of the unbelievers. Thus, the rays of the divine law reached the farthest corners of that region, and by the radiance of this sun, all the impure soils of that land were cleansed from the filth of falsehood, becoming elevated grounds from which the muezzin sounded the call to prayer and places in which the obligatory prayers were firmly established.⁶²

Khusraw is famous for his linguistic inventiveness and extensive use of paronomasia, often to humorous effect. Being of half-Indian and half-Turkic descent, he is not oblivious to the contrasting meanings contained in the *dīv-dēv* duality, further compounded by the fact that orthographic skeleton of both words in the Perso-Arabic script is one and the same. Khusraw capitalises on the cultural irony inherent in these dual meanings throughout his *Khazā‘in*.⁶³ His depiction of Rām Dēv illustrates this clearly:

Rāy Rām Dēv was a wild stallion who had once been caught in the halters of the imperial servants and disciplined with the [horse-breaker’s] whip of training, capable of taming even a *demon-deity*. However, the imperial riders, with utmost kindness, had released him back into desired the pastures of his ancestral *demon-land* and now, like a horse well-fed and at ease, he forgot the bridle of obedience

⁶¹ “Farmūd kih matā‘-i kār-āmada-yi lashkar dar bāzār nahand. Agar ba-jihat-i tūr, Rustamān-i sipāh rā maṣalan par-i sīmurgh ḥājat bāshad, lā-yazāl dar taḥsīl-i ān kūshish namāyand tā az ānjā kih kawkabā-yi Īrān va Tūrān musta‘id-i ān gardad kih har suvārī-yi nāmī-yi lashkar, dīv-i buzurg rā az diyār-i Dahūr Samandar va Ma‘bar kushad hamchū Rustam ba-Māzandarān.” See Amīr Khusraw Dihlawī, *Khazā‘in al-Futūḥ: A Short History of the Reign of Sultan Alā‘uddīn Khaljī from the Date of His Accession up to the Year 711 H.*, ed. Mohammad Wahid Mirza (National Book Foundation of Pakistan, 1976), 123.

⁶² “Chandīn dār al-mulk-i dīv/dēvān-i Hunūd kih shayṭanat dar ānhā az ‘ahd-i jān ibn-i jān zinda mānda būd va az tūl-i muddat-i kufr, Iblīs ānjā dūr az bayza-yi Islām bachcha karda wa tā‘at-i nawāfil-i khūd bar ‘ibādat-i aṣnām farz gardānīda, ān-hama sāyahā-yi kufr ba-ṣidq-i ‘azīmat, avval az khāk-i Dēvgīr va ba‘d-i ān az jumlagī-yi dīv-/dēv-khānahā-yi kuffār bardāshd tā lam ‘āt-i nūr-i shar‘ ba-aṭrāf va aknāf-i ān barasīd va ba-sha‘sha‘a-yi ān āftāb, jumlagī-yi khākhā-yi najas-i ān diyār az lawṣ-i bāṭil pāk shud va maqām-i irtifā‘-qāmat-i mu‘azzin va maḥall-i iqāmat ‘umda-yi ṣalāt gasht.” Ibid, 114.

⁶³ On the broader dynamics of Indo-Persian multilingual literary cultures and the interplay of local and transregional vocabularies, see Francesca Orsini, “The Multilingual Local in World Literature,” *Comparative Literature* 67, no. 4 (2015), doi.org/10.1215/00104124-3327481

that kept him fixed, unable to shift to either side, and began to rear his head in stubborn defiance once again.⁶⁴

The very name of the fort is an occasion for Khusraw's puns; *Dēvgīr* (what later came to be known as the *Dawlatābād Fort* in today's Maharashtra) comes from the Indic compound *Dēvāgīrī*, the suffix *gīrī* being the Sanskrit word for mountain. The *gīr* suffix in Persian, however, comes from the verb *griftan* meaning to snatch or to seize. Thus, the same orthographic skeleton, when read according to its Indic meaning translates to mountain of the gods as does the Persian simultaneously translate to a "confine of demons."⁶⁵ The name of the local Indian ruler is likewise paronomastic. With Rām Dēv likened to a wild horse, the horse-breaker's whip can be understood in a threefold manner. The whip either a) disciplines a demon-deity, b) disciplines Rām Dēv the man himself, or c) turns a demon into the deity Rāma, for the verb employed by Khusraw "to discipline" is one and the same as the name of the Indic deity.⁶⁶ The wild horse's meadows (i.e. Rām Dēv's home kingdom) likewise become the occasion for Khusraw to display his mastery of language, when he describes it by coining a wholly new Indo-Turkic compound *dēv-lākh*,⁶⁷ binding the Indic deity with the Turkic locative suffix *lakh*.⁶⁸ This is, of course, Khusraw's idiosyncratic translation of the word *Dēvāgīrī* (and a strong indication that he was aware of its original Indic meaning), though, as is often the case with Khusraw, the secondary Turko-Persian paronomastic possibility of being read as "abode of demons" remains ever present.

Building upon the *akvān dīv* narrative tradition of Firdawsī, Khusraw integrates Islamic demonological motifs into his portrayals of local Indian rulers and commanders. The army of Bilāl Dēv, a commander in the besieged fortress of Dēvgīr is described as being vanquished by the Muslims with an array of shooting stars, a Qur'ānic motif.⁶⁹ Describing Rāy Muhlik Dēv's defeat,

⁶⁴ "Rāy Rām Dēv tawsanī būd yakkbār dar kamand-i qudrat-i bandagān-i dawlat muqayyad shuda, va ba-tāziyāna-yi riyāzat kih dīv/dēv rā rām kunad murtāz gashta, chūn shahsuvār-i mulk ba-navāzish-i tamām dar riyāz-i murād-i dīv-/dēv-lākh-i qadīmash bāz guzāsht. Bar-sān-i aspān-i āsūda, lagām-i itā' at va qāyīza-yi gardan-shikan rā farāmūsh kard va ḥurūfī va gardan-kashī āghāz nahād." Orsini, "The Multilingual Local in World Literature," 65.

⁶⁵ Khusraw, master paronomasiac as he is, later goes on to say that this 'confine of demons' was 'protected by angels' (Ibid, 84), a pun on the fort's impregnability.

⁶⁶ Khusraw brings up a similar case of paronomasia when he writes that "*Rām Dēv, dīv-i nafs-i khūd rā rām-i ān dargāh sākht*," here appealing to Islamic psychology according to which the concupiscent faculty of the tripartite soul is likened to a devil. One reading, therefore, is that "Rām Dēv has made the devilish aspect of his soul submit before the [royal] threshold (dargāh)." *Dargāh* also carries the meaning of a Sufi shrine, as was the case when *Shādi Dēv* above offered to make his temple the future *dargah* of Mu'in al-Dīn Chishtī. In this second reading, thence, "Rām Dēv, has made the demon-deity of his soul the Rām of that shrine."

⁶⁷ The pre-Islamic Turkic word for an idol temple is *Tengrilik*, or dwelling of God/the gods. See Clauson, *Etymological Dictionary*, 525.

⁶⁸ See other Turkic words such as the Chaghatay *sānglakh* (a place abounding with stones) or modern Turkish *kalemlik* (pencil case).

⁶⁹ Khusraw, *Khazā'in al-Futūh*, 84. See also: Qur'ān 37:6-10 and 72: 8-9.

Khusraw also employs imagery of demons burned by shooting stars: “Rāy Muhlik Dēv, set aflame by a shooting star-like lancet, fled towards the spring of Sārī, and there was he slain.”⁷⁰ Similarly, the spy dispatched by Bilāl Dēv to the Muslim encampment is stunned by the recitation of the Qur’ān, another traditional Islamic notion: “Bilāl, to whom a demon constantly clung, dispatched Gīsū Mal to spy upon the army of Islam after the night prayer. As soon as Gīsū Mal approached the circle of their ranks, he became confounded as is Satan upon hearing the recitation of the Qur’ān.”⁷¹ Khusraw further exploits this theme by humorously punning on Indian names, such as Bālak Dēv Nāyak, rendered phonetically as *bā-lak dīv* (with a hundred thousand demons in Persian, though it means “god-lad” in Sanskrit). And so, he writes that “the Rāy taught all the spells and magic he knew to Bālak Dēv Nāyak, who in devilry is equal to a hundred thousand demons.”⁷² These linguistic flourishes creatively expand on Firdawsī’s earlier synonymisation between enemy and demon.

Furnishing the idea that Khusraw’s history is not solely historical but a literature-informed history, the very words of Bilāl Dēv’s surrender letter are couched in the Qur’ānic language of Solomon subjugating the jinn:

Your servant Bilāl Dēv, like Laddar Dēv and Rām Dēv, obeys the command of the Jamshīd-like king and follows whatever the Solomon of the times orders... Suppose that Bilāl Dēv, your servant, hurled a few stones from atop the fortress, God forbid that stones cast by a demon should harm any man!⁷³ ...An Indian becomes a *demon-deity* only after cremation, and so, before the flames of the Turk’s Indian blade have touched me, it is unwise for me to voluntarily become a *demon-deity*. See how many souls of Indian *demon-deities* whirl about like dust within the whirlwind of the imperial army; they lost their souls precisely due to disobeying this *demon-binding* Solomon, and inevitably remain lowly dust even after death. Though your servant Bilāl Dēv be of the lineage of (devotees to the) great *deities*[-*demons*(?)], he has cast aside all his devilry before this vizier with a mind like Āsaf, who commands the *demons* subdued by Solomon.⁷⁴ He has placed his *demonic* body under the protection of an army winged like angels, which stand ready “rank upon rank” to reinforce its right and left flanks, and, like a *demon* in the month of Ramadan, has submitted his neck obediently to the chains of captivity.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ “Rāy Muhlik Dēv ātash-zada-yi ḥarba-yi shihābī va sar-u-pa sūkhta, sū-yi chashma-i Sārī gurīkht va hamānjā kushta shud.” See Khusraw, *Khazā’in al-Futūḥ*, 59.

⁷¹ “Bilāl kih dīv lāzim-i ūst, ba’d az namāz-i khuftan Gīsū Mal rā ba-tajassus-i lashkar-i Islām bīrūn firistād, hālī kih ū dar ḥalaqa-yi sīna-yi ū dar-āmad mānand-i Iblīs az shinīdan-i āvāz-i Qur’ān, kar gasht.” Khusraw, *Khazā’in al-Futūḥ*, 133.

⁷² Khusraw, *Khazā’in al-Futūḥ*.

⁷³ Khusraw tries to excuse Bilāl Dēv’s previous obstinacy through further punning: “God forbid that the stones of a demon should do any harm to men” can equally be read as the stones cast by Bilāl Dēv himself.

⁷⁴ Yet another pun, for *dīvān* could mean either “demons” or “the ministry.” An alternative translation would thus be “who is the chief of Solomon’s courtly administration.”

⁷⁵ “Banda Bilāl Dēv chūn Laddar Dēv va Rām Dēv, rām-i farmān-i shāh-i jam-nishān ast va ba-dānchih kih Sulaymān-i ‘ahd amr karda, ma’mūr... Gīr kih banda Bilāl Dēv az sar-i qal’a sangī chand partāb kard, lā-ḥawl kih sang-i dīv/dēv bar ādamīyān āsīb tavānad āvard... Hindū ba’d az sūkhtan dīv/dēv

Here we have three local rulers submitting before ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Khaljī; all of whom, not coincidentally, have the title *dēv* in their names. Strikingly parallel to the Qur’ānic account, Khaljī is a new Solomon and the *dīvs* are demons whose former recalcitrance has now given way to servility before the legendary prophet-king. This richly layered submission speech underscores Khusraw’s literary synthesis, interweaving Persian epic, Indic religious symbolism, and Qur’ānic demonology into a coherent narrative fabric. Ultimately, Khusraw’s works reveal a sophisticated interplay of Persian *dīv*-demon, Indic *dēv*-deity⁷⁶ and Islamic-Solomonic traditions, powerfully framing Khaljī’s historical conquests in Central and Peninsular India within a literary tradition deeply rooted in cultural synthesis and poetic ingenuity.

While the preceding instances from Khusraw’s *Khazā’ in al-Futūh* humorously play upon local rulers and commanders as figurative demons, the text culminates in an episode featuring actual demon-deities reminiscent of Allāhdiyā Chishtī’s hagiographical narrative. Upon reaching the city of Brahmastpur (identified as modern-day Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu by historian S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar), Khusraw vividly describes the sacking of a significant seaside temple:⁷⁷

The golden idols⁷⁸ known as the ‘Mahādēv Lingam’ had long stood upright since times of old in the land of that flaccid one, and never before had the hoof of Islam’s steed reached that place to crush their lingas.⁷⁹ But now, the firm believers, wielding stones of resolution, so thoroughly shattered all those great lingas that their greatest, the mighty Mahādēv Lingam was reduced to fragments, and even Dēv Nārāyan was toppled. The *demon-deities* who had once stood firm with their feet planted in that place suddenly raised their feet and leaped away, fleeing swiftly until, in a single breath, they reached the fortress of Lanka. In such terror, even the lingam itself would have fled, had it possessed feet. The long-time resident Satan, who had long commanded the sons of Adam in those *demon-deity* temples to prostrate themselves before the lingas of the *demon-deities*, fled to Serendib [Sri Lanka] in such haste

shavad, va hanūz kih shu’la-yi tīgh-i hindī-yi Turk ba-man nārasīda, khūd rā dīv/dēv sākhtan az hushyārī nabāshad. Bingar kih chand jānhā-yi dīv-/dēvān-i Hindū dar ghubār-i lashkar-i bādshāh gardbād shuda mī-gardad kih ān-hama jānhā az bī-farmānī-yi īn Sulaymān-i dīvband ba-bād dāda-and, lā-jaram ba’d az murdagī ham khāksār mānda. Banda Bilāl Dēv, agar-chih az nasl-i dīv-/dēvān-i buzurg ast, ammā pīsh-i vazīr-i Aṣaf-rāy kih fārmāndah-i dīvān-i Sulaymān ast, har shayṭanatī kih dāsht az sar binahād va tan-i jānnī-yi khūd rā dar ḥimāyat-i sipāh-i farishta-jināh kih ‘wa al-malak ṣaffan ṣaffan’ ba-madad-i maymana wa maysara-yi ānīst afgand, va mānand-i dīv dar Ramaẓān gardan ba-silsila-yi inqiyād taslīm kard.” Khusraw, *Khazā’ in al-Futūh*, 134.

⁷⁶ This is further compounded by the paronomasia on the Indo-Persian Rām/rām, meaning both the Indic deity and “subjugated” reading as “Rām Dēv has become Rām to the order of the Solomonic emperor”, thus incorporating the Indian deity as one of many jinn subjugated before the Qur’ānic Solomon.

⁷⁷ S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar, *South India and Her Muhammadan Invaders* (Oxford University Press, 1921), 108.

⁷⁸ Translated by Muhammad Habib as “stone idols.” See Habib, *The Campaigns of Alā’u’d-dīn Khiljī*, 104.

⁷⁹ Khusraw’s risqué punning on the lingam, itself a phallic symbol, throughout this passage is not so hard to discern even in translation.

that he ended up at Adam's Foot and bowed his head. Consider how great a victory this was for Islam, that even Satan should lower his head before Adam's foot!⁸⁰

This episode recalls the conquest model of Firdawsī's portrayal of Māzandarān in the *Shāhnāma*, in which dominance is realised in both physical and metaphysical terms. Khusraw's account is not merely a political expansion narrative, marking the Delhi Sultanate's supposed expansion to the edges of South India and across the sea from the island of Sri Lanka, but equally a religious and metaphysical conquest. It is not only the case that demon-like humans (such as Rām Dēv, Bilāl Dēv and Bālak Dēv) are subjugated under Khaljī's rule, but that India is denuded of the sovereignty of its *dīv-dēvs* as is Māzandarān of its demons. Those who oppose the new Muslim rule, like Firdawsī's White Demon and Khusraw's Dēv Nārāyan (a reference to Vishnu) and the Mahādēv (Shiva) lingam, are destroyed, whereas those who refuse to submit are described as *very physically* fleeing overseas to Sri Lanka.⁸¹ As for those who remain, demon-like humans and demon-deities alike—as is the case for the *dīvs* of Māzandarān post-Kay Kāvūs' conquest—the *zunnār* is taken up as recognition of their protected and subjugated status under Islamic rule.⁸² These narratives of religious and metaphysical conquest in which local deities are subjugated under the one Islamic God—including that of the local deity of Ajmer, for example, who upon its encounter with Mu'īn al-Dīn Chishtī, can no longer articulate the words *Rām Rām*, but one of the names of the Islamic God, *Rahīm*—are all couched in the language of a literary conquest wherein local Indian names, geographies and religion are made sense of and reinvented through the *Qur'ānic-Shāhnāmaic*.

Post-Positioning the 'Historical' in the Literary-Historical

Interpreting Khusraw's narrative as primarily literary rather than strictly historical protects it from reductionist communal interpretations. The temple destruction at Brahmapur could easily be read as a deliberate reenactment of Maḥmūd of Ghazna's famed sacking of Somnath—a literary motif well known to Khusraw, who explicitly calls Brahmapur the 'Mecca of all Indians.'⁸³ As Romila

⁸⁰ “Butān-i zarrīn kih ān rā Ling-i Mahādēv gūyand, dar ān zamīn-i ān lang dīr-bāz pāydār mānda būd# va hīchgāh lagad-i markab-i Islām ānjā na-rasīda kih ling-i īshān rā bikushand. Mu'minān-i ṣalb bā sang-i ṣalābat ān-hama linghā-yi buzurg rā chunān khurd bishkastand kih Ling-i Mahādēv-i buzurg-i īshān khurd shud va Dēv Nārāyan az pāy dar-āmad. Dīv-/dēvānī kih ānjā qadam ustuvār karda būdand, chunān pā-buland kardand va bijastand kih dar yak nafas tā ḥiṣār-i Lank birasīdand va dar ān haybat, lang nīz bigurīkhtī agarash pāy būdī, va Iblīs-i dīrpāy kih dar ān dīvkhānahā awlād-i Ādam rā pīsh-i linghā-yi dīvān sajda mī-farmūd, sū-yi Sarandīp ba-ṭarīqī bīrūn shud kih dar qadam-i Ādam barasīd va sar binihād: bingar kih chih ḥadd būd dar Islām ṣafa/ kih Iblīs nahad dar qadam-i Ādam sar.” See Khusraw, *Khazā'in al-Futūḥ*, 159.

⁸¹ An allusion to Hanuman jumping across the sea to Sri Lanka in one breath.

⁸² See the statement by Bilāl Dēv, who submits to Khaljī whilst keeping his own religion: “Juz kīsh-i shikasta-yi Hindūy kih bar basta-yi zunnār ast va zunnārī bar basta-yi ān kīsh, dīgar rishta-tābī bā khūd nigāh nadāram” (“Apart from the broken faith of an Indian bound to the sacred thread, and the thread-wearer who is bound to that faith, I no longer keep any strand or thread entwined with myself”). See Khusraw, *Khazā'in al-Futūḥ*, 136.

⁸³ Khusraw, *Khazā'in al-Futūḥ*, 157.

Thapar has argued, Turko-Persian accounts of Somnath's destruction are largely literary artifices, often contradictory and at odds with local Sanskrit, Jain and vernacular histories. According to Thapar, such narratives are less historical records than rhetorical constructions of "fantasies of power", "amplifying and exaggerating the loot" to legitimise contemporary political authority.⁸⁴ This is even more the case for Khusraw's account of Khaljī's expansion into the Indian deep south, which may have actually been a series of raids and where Delhi Sultanate control remained at best tenuous. Indeed, Khaljī's control barely extended beyond Varanasi eastward, casting doubt upon the historical accuracy of this metaphysical-temporal subjugation as an all-India enterprise. As Thapar notes, such narratives were primarily composed by poets and chroniclers whose objectives were "to please and legitimise the reigning Sultan."⁸⁵ Khusraw, of course, was both, and it is with this consideration that his *Khazā'in* ought to be read, that is, as building on the fantastical requirements of the court-poetic genre, thus transforming India into Māzandarān whilst also legitimising his patron as a new Solomon-Kay Kāvūs who has denuded the subcontinent of its demon-deities.

The Devas Strike Back

If earlier sections have shown how Islamicate poetics reconfigured Indic and Buddhist figures into *dīvs* and idols, here I turn to the reverse process: how Indic literatures and performance traditions responded to Muslim expansion by casting the new arrivals as demonic in their own right. This bidirectional dynamic underscores that the *dīv-dēv* complex was not simply imported or imposed but became a shared field of polemical and poetic play. Of all literary and religious sources employed by Indians writing in Sanskrit and kindred vernacular languages, none provided a greater blueprint than the *Rāmāyaṇa*, set against the backdrop of a primordial battle between *devas*—benevolent deities—and *asuras*—malevolent and demon-like anti-gods. As Sheldon Pollock writes, the *Rāmāyaṇa* "offers unique imaginative instruments—in fact, two linked instruments—whereby, on the one hand, a divine political order can be conceptualized, narrated, and historically grounded, and, on the other, a fully demonized Other can be categorized, counterposed, and condemned," and the newly arrived Others "were especially vulnerable to the demonizing formulation the Ramayana made available."⁸⁶

Even before Khusraw, Indian dramatists began to describe Ghaznavid rulers and their Turkic armies as *rākshasas*, a class of demonic *asuras*, and especially as Rāvaṇa, the ten-headed demon

⁸⁴ Romila Thapar, *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History* (Verso, 2005), 75. On the entanglement of historical memory, literary figuration, and the politics of representation, see Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922–1992* (University of California Press, 1995).

⁸⁵ Thapar, *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History*.

⁸⁶ Sheldon Pollock, "Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination in India." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (1993), doi.org/10.2307/2059648.

and principal antagonist in the *Rāmāyaṇa*.⁸⁷ In the later context of Mughal-Rajput conflicts, the eternal *deva-asura* conflict later became a stand-in for the supposedly eternal conflict between Islam and Indic religions, as in the following vernacular Indian poetic depiction of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (d. 1118/1707):⁸⁸

ādi baira hiṃdū asura, dharani dharma duḥm kāma
koṭika ina bittai kalapa, sabala karata saṃgrāma
basumati Hiṃdū nṛpa baṛe, ilā Hiṃdu ādhāra
dharani sīsa Hiṃdū dhanī, bhāmini jyauṃ bharatāra
jora bhayai mahi mleccha jaba, taba hari jāni turaṃta
āpa dharai avatāra dasa, ānana asurani aṃta
ila tyauṃ hari avatāra iha, rājasiṃha mahārāṃṇa
*auramṅa se asuresa sauṃ, jītai jaṃga ju āṃna*⁸⁹

Primeval is the Hindu-Muslim [asura]⁹⁰ enmity,
both dharmas have a use in the world.
In the millions of eons that have elapsed,
mightily have they fought (repeatedly).
Because Hindus are the world's foundation,
the Hindu king is the greatest on earth.
Just as the husband (lords it) over the wife,
so too the Hindu ruler heads the world.
When mlecchas become powerful on earth,
Vishnu knows it immediately.
He himself took 10 incarnations,
to bring about the demons' end.
Rana Raj Singh,
just as did Vishnu's incarnations on earth,
Vowed to win in battle,
against Aurang who was like a demon-lord.

And a little later in the same poem:

dillīsa sāhi auramṅa diṭṭha
rukkeva pitā rajjahim baiṭṭha

⁸⁷ Basile Leclère, “Ambivalent Representations of Muslims in Medieval Indian Theatre,” *Studies in History* 27, no. 2 (2013), doi.org/10.1177/0257643012459415

⁸⁸ This might remind one of the Zoroastrian *daēva-Ahura mazdā* tension from the beginning of this section, *ahura* being the Iranian cognate of the Sanskrit *asura*, yet for the reasons outlined came to carry the completely opposite meaning.

⁸⁹ Rāj-vilās 9.5-8, transcribed and translated by Talbot. See Cynthia Talbot, “A Poetic Record of the Rajput Rebellion, c. 1680,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 28, no. 3 (2018), doi.org/10.1017/S135618631800007X. Emphasis my own.

⁹⁰ Though Talbot's placing of *asura* in parentheses after her translation of “Hindu-Muslim” may lead one to think that the term is an exegetical addendum here, the original, *hiṃdū asura* (Hindu-asura) bypasses the title Muslim by directly referring to them as demons.

*bisvāsa dei tina hanai baṁdhu
ai aisu duṣṭa ura rajja aṁdhu
niya gota sakala karikaimnikamḍa
sulatāna bhayau chala baḍa suchaṁda
mannai na citta para buddhimama
dasamukha samāna ahamevavaṁta*⁹¹

*The lord of Delhi, Shah Aurang,
decided to sit on his sick father's throne.
After giving assurances to them,
he killed his kin; such a wicked heart, blind to honor.
Having eradicated all of his own family,
he became sultan through unconstrained fraud and force.
Not considering the wise counsel of others,
he is as arrogant as the ten-headed one (Rāvaṇa).*

Such Indo-Islamic adaptations did not conclude with Khusraw.⁹² Though the name Zālīm (Oppressor) Singh from the introduction of this article was encountered in Mughal *akhbārāt* documents from the reign of Aurangzeb, a rudimentary search for the name “Shaitan Singh” on the online archive *IndianRajputs.com* will reveal a plethora of genealogical records bearing that name from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. In the Khetasar *ṭhikāṇā* (seat of a Rajput lord), for example, in a *jāgīr* (revenue assignment) granted in 1798, a family tree shows one “Shaitan Singh” as a descendant in the fifth-sixth generation after the estate’s founder, as does the Bajrangarh estate (a Rathore Rajput *ṭhikāṇā*) genealogy include a certain ‘Thakur Shaitan Singh Ji’ as one of the scions of a “Thakur Balwant Singh.” The most recent case, of course, is that of Major Shaitan Singh Bhati who died during the Sino-Indian war of 1962. This and kindred examples of such semantic interplay persist to our very day. Does the etymology of Deoband, seat of the world-famous Sunni Muslim seminary founded 1866, return to a Sanskrit compound *deva-vana* meaning “forest of the gods” or, as local Muslim hagiographies would have it put, the Persian compound *dīv-band* indicating the place where a local Sufi saint imprisoned a mischievous demon in a bottle and sealed it? Taken together, these examples show that the *dīv-dēv* polarity was never a one-sided Islamic imposition but a shared, reciprocal idiom through which both Indic and Islamicate literary communities made sense of one another.⁹³ The fact that such terms continued to animate political memory, placenames, and everyday practice into the modern period underscores their durability as *Wanderwörter* and prepares the ground for the next stage of their westward journey.

⁹¹ Rāj-vilās 9.10-11, Talbot, “A Poetic Record of the Rajput Rebellion, c. 1680,” 461–2.

⁹² A process of appropriation and internalisation seems to have already occurred in Khusraw’s time, for he above makes mention of a certain Muhlik Dēv, *muhlik* being the Arabic term for deadly or fatal.

⁹³ On Persianate modes of selfhood and belonging that structure such inter-religious and inter-linguistic negotiations, see Mana Kia, *Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin before Nationalism* (Stanford University Press, 2020).

Journey to the West

Frontier Literatures and Abstraction

If the Indian detour revealed the reciprocal vitality of the *dīv-dēv* polarity, the next stage of our itinerary traces how such *Wanderwörter* moved westward with Persianate and Turkic literary traditions. Not all Eastern Iranian and Central Asian metaphors became *Wanderwörter*. As some of the metaphors mentioned above migrated, many became denuded of their concrete associations, in the case of *nigār* increasingly representing an abstract ideal rather than a visual reality. This abstraction prepared the ground for their reception in Anatolia and subsequently the Ottoman literary imagination. The Qarakhanid *burxan*, for instance, never entered the New Persian poetic lexicon, where *but* remained the standard term for Buddha-idol, nor did it travel westward with the Seljuk Turks in their literature. The fate of the *icon gallery* was different, however. Qaṭrān Tabrīzī (d. after 482/1089), writing in New Persian from the frontier region of Shaddādīd (340–571/951–1175) Transcaucasia, offers an early instance of the metaphor's sundering from its concrete eastern lifeworld:

bād-i Nawrūzī hamī ārāyish-i bustān kunad
*tā nigārash chūn nigāristān-i Chīnistān kunad*⁹⁴

The Nawrūz breeze ever adorns the garden
And decorates it like the icon gallery of the land of China

Here the *icon gallery of China* stands in as a metaphor for the spring, followed by yet another early indication to such an *icon gallery* as being a repository of all things beautiful.

Al-Hamadhānī's Maqāma of Qazvin

The western frontier of the Islamic world remained mostly stable for the incubation period of New Persian; western Persian poets as Qaṭrān looked east for models established under Sāmānīd and Ghaznavīd patronage, for on the other side was Christian Byzantium. It wouldn't be until the Seljuk victory over the latter during the battle of Battle of Manzikert in 463/1071 that Qaṭrān's Transcaucasia would cease to be a Christian-Muslim frontier region, the frontier now extending deeper into Anatolia. To understand the subsequent semantic evolution of the *nigār* metaphor in Anatolia and later Ottoman contexts, it is necessary first to explore how these Western lands appeared in Arabic, Persian, and Turkic poetic imaginations on the eve of Seljuk expansion into them.

Valuable insight into frontier perceptions is provided by Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 398/1008), a renowned Arabic prose stylist and pioneer of the *maqāma* genre (frame tales blending a high classical Arabic prose style with social commentary and a dual function to entertain and edify). As his name suggests, al-Hamadhānī, like his near-contemporary Qaṭrān of Tabriz, was also from a Byzantine-facing frontier region, today's Hamadan in western Iran. Al-Hamadhānī's

⁹⁴ Qaṭrān Tabrīzī, *Dīvān*, ed. Muḥammad Nakhjavānī (Shafaq-i Tabrīz, 1954), 85.

eighteenth *maqāma* vividly portrays Islamicate literary conventions of the Christian West. In this narrative, a fictional Muslim raiding party decamps from Qazwin to the Byzantine frontier and encounters a supposed Christian convert who dramatically professes:

*I summon you to God, will anyone take up my call?
[I call] to spacious courtyards and fertile pasturage
And an Edenic garden up high, the fruits of which
cease not nor perish, are ever near at hand and never absent.
O people, I am a man who was repented
from the Land of Infidelity; mine is a strange tale!
Though I now be a true believer, o how many a night
did I deny my Lord in adoration of the cross.
O, how many a swine I have sucked the marrowbones of
and intoxicating wine I have sopped my share of!
And yet God rightly guided and saved me
from the ignominy of unbelief;
I continued to conceal my faith in this mine bosom from kith and kin
worshipping God with a penitent heart.
I would prostrate myself to al-Lāt out of fear of enemies
and would not look towards the Ka'ba for fear of spies.⁹⁵*

The character is ultimately revealed as the recurring scoundrel Abū al-Faṭḥ al-Iskandarī. His story highlights two prominent qualities associated with the Christian west in the Muslim poetic imagination: impurity (consuming pork and wine) and idolatry (prostrating before the cross, and the humorous claim on the part of the supposed Christian that he would worship the pre-Islamic idol *al-Lāt*).⁹⁶

‘Aṭṭār’s Shaykh Sam‘ān

The depictions of the West were compounded two centuries after al-Hamadhānī, during the Crusades, when the Levant became a frontier between Christians and Muslims. A notable illustration of this is found in Persian mystical poet Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār’s (d. 618/1221) ‘Shaykh Sam‘ān’ narrative, which prefaces his *Conference of the Birds*. A mystical classic, ‘Aṭṭār’s *Conference* allegorically recounts the pilgrimage of various birds in pursuit of the mythical

⁹⁵ “Ad‘ū ilā Allāh fa-hal min mujīb/ ilā dharan raḥb wa-mar‘an khaṣīb/ wa-janna ‘āliya mā tanī/ quṭūfuhā dāniyatan mā taghīb/ yā qawm innī rajul tā’ib/ min balad al-kufr wa-amrī ‘ajīb/ in aku āmantu fa-kam layla/ jahadtu fihā wa-‘abadtu al-ṣalīb/ yā rubba khinzīr tamashshashtuhu/ wa-muskīr aḥraztu minhu al-naṣīb/ thumma hadānī Allāh wa-antāshānī/ min dhilla al-kufr ijtiḥād al-muṣīb/ fa-ḥaltu ukhfī al-dīn fī usratī/ wa-a‘bud Allāh bi-qalb munīb/ asjud li-al-Lāt ḥidhār al-‘idā/ wa-lā arā al-Ka‘ba khawf al-raḥīb.” See Badī‘ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, *Maqāmāt Abī al-Faḍl Badī‘ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abduh (al-Maktaba al-Kāthūlīkīyya, 1908), 92–3.

⁹⁶ If literary parlance had *al-Lāt* worshipped in the western frontier, then the likes of Khusraw and a myriad Indo-Persian authors would have the *Manāt*, second the three pre-Islamic sister deities worshipped on the other edge of Islamic rule in India.

Sīmurgh, itself representative of the journey unto God. This preface, a kindred frontier narrative, tells the story of the legendary Shaykh Sam‘ān, a revered mystic-scholar who lived devoutly in Mecca for over fifty years, yet became deeply troubled by a recurring dream:

*chand shab bar ham chunān dar khwāb dīd
kaz Ḥaram dar Rūmash uftādī muqām
sajda mī-kardī butī rā bar davām
chūn bidīd īn khwāb bīdār-i jahān
guft dardā u darīghā īn zamān*⁹⁷

*A strange dream troubled him, night after night;
Mecca was left behind; he lived in Rome,
The temple where he worshipped was his home,
And to an idol he bowed down his head.
“Alas!” he cried, when he awoke in dread*⁹⁸

Seeing no other resolution to the aporia of his dream, Shaykh Sam‘ān journeys to Rome (*Rūm*, signifying the Christian West, particularly Byzantium, with Cyrus Zargar suggesting that it specifically denotes Constantinople).⁹⁹ Upon arriving in Christian territory, he falls desperately in love with a Christian girl to the point of forsaking everything for her. The girl then sets stringent conditions to prove his devotion:

*guft dukhtar gar tu hastī mard-i kār
chār kārāt kard bāyad ikhtiyār
sajda kun pīsh-i but u Qur‘ān bisūz
khamr nūsh u dīda az īmān bidūz*¹⁰⁰

*The girl replied: “There are four things you must
Perform to show that you deserve my trust:
Burn the Koran, drink wine, seal up Faith’s eye,
Bow down to images.”*¹⁰¹

Though scandalised, his disciples witness the Shaykh renouncing Islam and doing as commanded. Due to his old age and poverty, the Shaykh cannot afford the girl’s dowry, and so she demands he become her swineherd for a year. Again, the Shaykh complies. While ‘Aṭṭār’s story is primarily an allegory illustrating the sacrifice of good repute, name, and fame required of a true seeker and lover of God, it also reinforces common stereotypes about the Christian West within Islamic poetic discourse. Similar to al-Hamadhānī’s Arabic *maqāma*, themes of impurity (swineherding,

⁹⁷ Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār, *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr*, ed. Fāṭima Ṣan‘atī-nīyā and Kāmil Aḥmadnizhād (Zuwwār, 1993), 33.

⁹⁸ Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. Dick Davis (Penguin Classics, 2011), 58.

⁹⁹ Cyrus Ali Zargar, *Religion of Love: Sufism and Self-Transformation in the Poetic Imagination of ‘Aṭṭār* (State University of New York Press, 2025), 109.

¹⁰⁰ Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār, *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr*, 39.

¹⁰¹ ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference of the Birds*, 64.

consuming pork, drinking wine) and idolatry (veneration of Mary's icon) are prominent. These two are compounded in 'Attār's narrative, however, with a third association: the seductive, potentially ruinous beauty of fair-skinned, non-Muslim women beyond the frontier.¹⁰² Significantly, the Christian girl is referred to explicitly as a *nigār* no fewer than six times in the short story.

Completed Abstraction

By 'Attār's era, the *Chinese icon gallery* metaphor had become wholly abstracted. In his *Asrār-nāma*, 'Attār likens the beauty of the night sky to the famed *Chinese gallery*:

kih yā Rab bām-i zindānat chunīn ast
kih gūyī chūn nigāristān-i Chīn ast
*nadānam bām-i bustānat chih-sān ast*¹⁰³

O Lord, if the roof of your prison is so [adorned]
Such that one might liken it to the icon gallery of China
Then I cannot imagine what the roof of Your paradise must be like

The *roof of the prison* (the star-studded night sky over the mundane world) beheld by the dervish is so breathtaking that it calls to mind the legendary *Chinese gallery* full of wondrous paintings. 'Attār's analogy here is one of incomparability between God's art and that even the most marvellous instances of human art; for the divine garden of heaven must surpass even the *nigāristān-i Chīn*. Whereas 'Attār uses the *icon gallery* trope for mystical ends, his near-contemporary Sa'dī of Shiraz (d. 691/1292) employs the image to describe the didactic ideal of beauty. In the prologue to his *Gulistān*, Sa'dī humbly credits his patron's favour for the beauty of his book, saying that if adorned by the ruler's grace, his work becomes "*a Chinese icon gallery and an Arzhang portrait*."¹⁰⁴ This couplet, addressed to Sa'dī's patron Abū Bakr ibn Sa'd (r. 623–58/1226–60), the Salghūrid *atabeg* of Fārs, equates his edifying yet entertaining literary work with two supreme exemplars of didactic art: Mānī's legendary illustrated book and the fabled *gallery of China*, with Sa'dī's motley anecdotes covering all aspects of life, a reflection of the *Chinese icon gallery's* imagined status as a microcosm of such a gallery.

¹⁰² The enticement of the non-Muslim woman is not a new trope in Arabic or Persian literature. See the poem oft attributed to Umayyad poet al-Akḥṭal al-Taghlibī (d. 92/710): "inna man yadkhul al-kanīsa yawman/ yalqa fihā ja'ādhiran wa-ḡibā'a" ("whosoever enters the church one day/ shall find therein gazelles and antelopes"). See 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Aqīl al-Hamdānī, *Sharḥ Ibn 'Aqīl 'alā Alfīyya Ibn Mālik*, vol. 1 (Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyya, 1998), 346.

¹⁰³ Farīd al-Dīn 'Attār, *Asrār-nāma*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abbāsī (Markaz-i Kitāb-furūshī-yi Fakhr-i Rāzī, March 21, 1984), 120.

¹⁰⁴ Wheeler M. Thackston, trans., *The Gulistan (Rose Garden) of Sa'di: Bilingual English and Persian Edition with Vocabulary* (Ibex Publishers, 2017), 8.

Sa‘dī’s line above is referred to in a later Safavid definition of the *nigāristān-i Chīn*. In an exposition of the history of painting and Mānī’s contribution thereto, Safavid miniature painter and calligrapher Dūst Muḥammad (fl. tenth/sixteenth century) defines the *icon gallery of China* precisely as:¹⁰⁵

The short-sighted ones whose turbid hearts could not reflect the light of Islam, duped by his [Mānī’s] game, took his painted silk which was known as the Artangi Tablet, as their copybook for disbelief and refractoriness and, strangest of all, held that silk up as an equal to the Picture Gallery of China, which is known to contain images of all existing things, as the poet Shaykh Muslihuddin Sa‘dī of Shiraz has said of the two at the beginning of his *Gulistan*...¹⁰⁶

Thus, by the time the metaphor entered Turkic Anatolia and eventually Ottoman literature, we witness a metaphor that has been wholly abstracted to represent ideal forms of beauty, and we find repeated references to its supposed lifeworld in China, wherein a temple-gallery containing images of all things is said to exist.

Searching for the Ottoman Icon Gallery of China

Chinese Buddha-Idols

The Ottoman literary milieu absorbed and reshaped the abstracted metaphor of the *nigār* into a sophisticated conception of universal quality. This Ottoman *icon gallery*, increasingly divorced from its antecedents, represented the final transformation of the motif, embedding it firmly within an Islamic literary, ethical and philosophical framework. As we have seen, however, this journey began long before the Ottomans. With increased Mongol-era contact between East Asia and the Islamic world, a second wave of distinctly Chinese *Buddhist* imagery entered the Persian poetic repertoire.¹⁰⁷ By the time of Ḥāfiẓ of Shiraz (d. 791/1389), writing in Persian, the image of a Chinese idol (or more literally: a Chinese Buddha) had gradually been abstracted to represent perfect beauty and the beloved:

¹⁰⁵ I have elsewhere argued that Dūst Muḥammad’s Ottoman contemporary, Kemālpaşazāde titled his 400-page imitation of Sa‘dī’s *Gulistān* the ‘icon gallery’ (*Nigāristān*) in reference to this; since the Chinese picture gallery contains images of all existing things, so too should his literary work combine all genres into a comprehensive work. See Zakir Gul, “Persian Idiom, Ottoman Meanings: Introducing Kemālpaşazāde’s *Nigāristān*,” *Diḡār: Journal of Ottoman, Turkish and Middle Eastern Studies* 5, no. 2 (2024), doi.org/10.5771/2625-9842-2024-2-212

¹⁰⁶ Wheeler M. Thackston, “Preface to the Bahram Mirza Album,” in *Album Prefaces and Other Documents on the History of Calligraphers and Painters*, ed. Wheeler M. Thackston, Muqarnas Supplement 10 (Brill, 2001), 344.

¹⁰⁷ Johan Elverskog maps out this new source of Muslim engagement with Buddhism: “While we have already noted Rashid al-Din’s connection with Tibetan Buddhists, and his use of Sanskrit Nikaya texts, it is also important to note that one of the most pronounced elements in the Compendium is actually Chinese Buddhism.” See Johan Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 157–62.

but-i Chīnī ‘adū-yi dīn u dil-hāst
*Khudāvandā dil-u dīnam nigah dār*¹⁰⁸

The Chinese Buddha-idol is an enemy of faith and heart
O Lord, protect my heart and my faith

This metaphor passed seamlessly into Turkic poetry, exemplified by Safavid poet Qawsī (fl. eleventh/seventeenth century), writing in his local Turkic dialect from the city of Tabriz:

zāhid öz tāsbiḥini, küfr āhli zünnārın sevār
*mān büt-i Çīn istārām hār kimsā öz yārın sevār*¹⁰⁹

The ascetic loves his own rosary, the infidel folk their own girdle
I am desirous of the Chinese Buddha-idol; everyone loves his own beloved

In Ottoman poetry, as the empire expanded into Orthodox Christian and Catholic regions, poets increasingly came to situate Christian iconography within the heritage bequeathed by Persian literary tropes, as exemplified in this couplet by Ḥasbī (d. after 942/1536):

naḳş-ı hūsın ol büt-i Çīnūñ görelden Rūmda
*ḳaldı ḥayrān büt-perestān-ı Frengistān*¹¹⁰

Upon beholding the beautiful icon, that Chinese Buddha-idol, in Ottoman lands
The idolators of Europe were left astonished and captivated

This poetic tradition frequently juxtaposed Christian and Chinese icons, with the former being processed as objects of eastern idolatry, reflecting an imagined literary and cultural competition between Eastern Buddhist-Manichaean and Western Christian aesthetics. Hence, Necāī Beg’s (d. 915/1509) couplet:

bilād-ı Çīne senūñ gibi bir şanem heyhāt
*diyār-ı Rūma saçūñ gibi bir şalīb olmaz*¹¹¹

Alas! There is no Buddha-idol like you in the land of China,
*Nor a cross resembling your hair in the land of Rum*¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Ḥāfız, *Dīvān*, ed. Husayn-‘Alī Yūsufi (Rūzgār, 2002), 394.

¹⁰⁹ Ahmet Atilla Şentürk, *Osmanlı Şiiri Kılavuzu*, vol. 2 (Osmanlı Edebiyatı Araştırmaları Merkezi, 2016), 109.

¹¹⁰ Şentürk, *Osmanlı Şiiri Kılavuzu*, 552.

¹¹¹ Şentürk, *Osmanlı Şiiri Kılavuzu*, 552.

¹¹² Imaginary contents between Greek and Chinese artists appear to have been something of a topos in Persianate literature with a precedence well before Ḥasbī. Amongst those who have declared the superiority of one over the other, Friederike Weis includes Khusraw, but more so importantly Ḥasbī’s Safavid contemporary “‘Abdī Beg Shīrāzī’s (d. 988/1580) version of the ‘Contest of the Chinese-Cathayan Painters and the nimble Greek and Frankish artists’ of 1543/44” in which “Alexander the Great asked the two groups of artists to decorate two facing walls. The Chinese painters, considering themselves to be the inventors of painting and accusing the Greeks of falsely claiming the same,

Ottoman Brahmins and Somnath in Scutari

A parallel phenomenon occurred with Indian motifs familiar from earlier Persian poetry, such as the famed temple at Somnath that existed in the repertoires of Mas‘ūd Sa‘d Salmān and Amīr Khusraw above as a very concrete metaphor. Nā‘ilī (d. c. 1666–7) employs this distant Indic imagery metaphorically within an Ottoman context:

*yakar ey Nā‘ilī cibrīlī dāğ-ı reşk-i kıssîsi
muhabbet Sūmnāt-ı fitnedir hüsn-bütân âteş*¹¹³

*A priest’s envy can set even Gabriel ablaze, o Nā‘ilī,
Love is the Somnath of sedition, beautiful Buddha-idols are its sacred fire*

What would it mean for an Ottoman poet to invoke the Brahmin and the Somnath temple—concepts entirely disconnected from his or her immediate cultural context? How might such imagery resonate with audiences in Ottoman Bosnia or Constantinople, so distant in geography, cultural memory and lifeworld? William Granara provides insight into analogous poetic practices, describing the adaptation of pre-Islamic Arabian (Jāhili) tropes far from the unforgiving desert landscape of pre-Islamic poetry in medieval Sicily and Spain:

In the hunting lodges of eleventh- and twelfth-century Syracuse or Seville, in the palatine gardens of Palermo and Cordoba, or the public squares and taverns of Agrigento and Granada, far away in time and place from the Jahili warrior-poets of the Arabian wastelands, a poet such as Ibn Hamdis continued to compose and recite verses about the abandoned encampment of a former lover and the treacherous crossings of the desert terrain. Interestingly, one would find among his captivated audience men and women whose mother tongues were Berber, Latin, Hebrew, a French, Spanish or Italian vernacular, Persian or even Slavic. It is likely that few of these listeners would have actually seen a she-camel or a vast stretch of desert, nor would they have had any idea about the bitterness of the colocynth fruit or the size and shape of a wild oryx. But they could understand the poem, and they understood that this was nothing more than language, figurative language—traditional, repetitive, predictable, familiar, anticipated and performed—powerful enough to stir emotions, to entertain and instruct, to make one laugh or cry, to anger or appease, to reminisce and remind. It was the talent and skill of the poet and the sophistication of the audience, both honed and matured by long literary experience, to draw the lines between the figurative and the literal, between the artistic and the political, and between the sacred and the profane.¹¹⁴

triumph over the Greeks by using a polished wall as a mirror to reflect the Greek painting. The Chinese reflection wins over the Greek painting in the versions of the tale by ‘Abdi and al-Ghazali because the act of polishing the wall is seen as a metaphor for the Sufi polishing his heart like a mirror, so as to reflect the divine light.” See Friederike Weis, “How the Persian Qalam Caused the Chinese Brush to Break: The Bahram Mirza Album Revisited,” *Muqarnas Online* 37, no. 1 (2020), 67.

¹¹³ Ahmet Talât Onay, *Eski Türk Edebiyatında Mazmunlar ve İzahı*, (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1993), 378.

¹¹⁴ William Granara, *Ibn Hamdis the Sicilian: Eulogist for a Falling Homeland* (Brill, 2021), 111. I quote Granara at length here because his formulation crystallises the paradox of metaphor traveling far from its original lifeworld, yet still functioning as intelligible poetic language.

Similarly, Nā'īlī, a prominent Ottoman poet associated with the *ṭāza-gū'ī* ('fresh speak') movement, often termed *sabk-i Hindī* or 'Indian style' in modern Iranian scholarship, utilised the image of the Somnath temple as wholly denuded of explicit associations with local Indian polytheism, instead becoming a universal emblem of sedition and idolatrous seduction. This is emblematic of a great number of Indo-Persian metaphors in Ottoman poetic idiom, reappropriated and integrated in accordance with Ottoman lived experience of few Indians and many Christians. Whereas the temple metaphor in the poem exists to highlight the jealousy of a Christian priest, the decidedly non-Islamic Indian imagery is here fitted onto earlier Perso-Islamic tropes of the Zoroastrian, for example, the idols of Somnath are likened to the sacred fire of a (fire-adoring Magian) temple. Later, we witness Somnath as part of a whole nexus of Islamic idolatrous terms, as in this couplet by Yenişehirli 'Avnī (d. 1299/1883):

ḥāl ü ḥaṭṭūñ şūret-i Lāt u Menāt-ı fitnedir
*ser-te-ser iklīm-i ḥüsñüñ Sūmnāt-ı fitnedir*¹¹⁵

Your mole and down are seditious images of Lāt and Manāt
From head to toe, the realm of your beauty is the Somnath of sedition

Ottoman poetry's Indic images, unlike Chinese metaphors, do not exist merely to offer a yardstick for comparison with locally engaged Christian traditions of icon veneration and perceived idolatry. Instead, we see a multi-stage semantic shift, beginning with the term "Brahmin", traditionally denoting a non-Muslim Indian priest in Persian literature. Initially, Ottoman poets employed the Brahmin in a function not so different from Ḥāfiz's *pīr-i mughān* (elder of the Magi), a tavern-dwelling spiritual guide. See the following couplet of Ḥarputlu Raḥmī (fl. c. ~950s/mid-sixteenth century CE):

dün gece rakībe mey içürmiş büt-i tersā
*āyīnana döndürmüş anı berhemen itmiş*¹¹⁶

Last night, a Christian idol (beloved) made the rival drink wine,
Then turned him towards her mirror and made a Brahmin out of him

And another couplet by Yenişehirli 'Avnī:

olur şeyḥ ü berehmen cür 'a-baḥş-ı yek-diger der-ḥāl
*gelince bezme sāḳī şīve-i ibrāma yer ḳalmaz*¹¹⁷

It may be that the Shaykh and Brahmin at once offer each other wine cups
When the cupbearer enters the gathering, there's no room left for piety or resistance

¹¹⁵ Onay, *Eski Türk Edebiyatında Mazmunlar*, 378.

¹¹⁶ Şentürk, *Osmanlı Şiiri Kılavuzu*, 288.

¹¹⁷ Şentürk, *Osmanlı Şiiri Kılavuzu*.

It would not be long until the Brahmin, having appropriated Zoroastrian Magus attributes, likewise took on the negative connotations and paronomasia linked to the ‘fiery’ lower self. As Nā’īlī illustrates:

*bu Sūmnāt-ı vücuda saḡın perestişten
karîn-i berhemen-i nefîs-i bed-fi’âl olma*¹¹⁸

*Beware of worshipping this Somnath-bodied one
Do not become a companion to the evil-doing, Brahminical carnal self*

Nā’īlī’s phrase “Somnath of existence” (sūmnāt-ı vüçüd) cleverly captures multiple layers—philosophical (Somnath of existence), spiritual (Somnath of the body), and erotic (the Somnath-bodied object of desire)—all to caution against superficial attraction. Like Khusraw’s paronomasia of Rām Dēv submitting the demon of his lower soul to the emperor Khaljī, so too the Brahmin stands for the concupiscent soul in a metaphorical nexus with the sacred fire-tending Magus. Ottoman poet Yaḥyā (unidentified dīvān poet, likely active ~1000/late sixteenth to early seventeenth century CE) similarly engages the Brahmin-Magus nexus, equating beauty’s destructive power with fire:

*tāb-ı ‘ālem-süz-ı ḥüsnüñden ki ten sūzān olur
her zamān ol āteşe şad berhemen sūzān olur*¹¹⁹

*It is from the world-scorching glow of your beauty that the body burns
At every moment, a hundred Brahmins are consumed by that fire*

Yaḥyā’s imagery resonates with a famous Persian verse from Sa’dī’s *Gulistān*, in which a Magus tending to a sacred fire is suddenly consumed by it, again reinforcing the Brahmin-Magus nexus through Persianate intertextuality:

*agar şad sāl gabr ātash furūzad
agar yak dam dar ū uftad bisūzad*¹²⁰

*A Magus might tend the sacred fire for a hundred years
But if he falls into it for a single moment, he’ll be burned alive*

Whereas Sa’dī’s term ‘gabr’ was historically used as a derogatory label for Zoroastrians, in Yaḥyā’s case, it is a hundred Brahmins that are burned.

Yet Ottoman poetry further transformed Brahmin imagery, transposing it from Eastern idolaters or Magi to signify Orthodox Christian priests. Yenişehirli ‘Avnī’s poetry demonstrates this third step in the term’s semantic evolution:

¹¹⁸ Onay, *Eski Türk Edebiyatında Mazmunlar*, 378.

¹¹⁹ Onay, *Eski Türk Edebiyatında Mazmunlar*, 77.

¹²⁰ Thackston, *The Gulistan (Rose Garden) of Sa’dī*, 25.

o büt kālā-fürûş-ı hüsn iken farṭ-ı perestişle
*'abeş harc itdi 'ömrün berhemem şekl-i çelîpāya*¹²¹

While that idol was but a cheap peddler of beauty, in excessive devotion
The Brahmin spent his life in vain [adoring] the form of the cross

There is little room for doubt here that the religious figure here is indeed a Christian priest. Yenişehirli Belîğ (d. 1174/1760–1) confirms this association:

kapılur bâṭıl olan sözlere şeyḥ-i sālūs
*hoş gelür berhememün gūşına bāng-ı nākūs*¹²²

The hypocritical Shaykh is taken in by false words,
*Just as the sound of the [church] bell delights the Brahmin's ear*¹²³

The Brahmin now a Christian priest, both metaphors, Christian and Indic, are played upon in mystical contexts to provide poetic alternatives to Muslim spiritual guides and clergy:

deyr-i 'aşkıñ o berehmenleriyiz ki elḥak
*bāng-ı yā Rab ile nākūsunu gūyā ederiz*¹²⁴

Truly we are the Brahmins of the monastery of love
Who make its bell echo with the cry of 'yā Rabb' (o Lord)

The early Turkish Republican literary scholar Ahmet Talat Onay (d. 1362/1943) in his commentary of the this couplet, curiously argues that since Fā'ik (d. 1317/1899), himself from today's North Macedonia, had such Christian terms as priest, monk and clergy at his disposal and yet nonetheless chose to use the term Brahmin, his Brahmins represent a special, new class of adherents to a religion of love that combines Islam and Christianity.¹²⁵ Although this interpretation might be overly expansive, a final semantic shift indeed positioned the Brahmin not just as any Christian priest but as one of the elect from amongst the Christian priesthood. Ferīdūn (d. 991 AH/1583 CE) explicitly positions himself within this nuanced metaphor:

münzevī-i deyr-i 'aşkam men Mesīḥā-meḥhebem
*pārsā-ı beste-i zunnār berehmen-meşrebem*¹²⁶

I am the hermit of love's monastery, on the Messiah's path
A devout ascetic bound with the zunnār, Brahmin in disposition

¹²¹ Şentürk, *Osmanlı Şiiri Kılavuzu*, 286.

¹²² Şentürk, *Osmanlı Şiiri Kılavuzu*, 287.

¹²³ It could be argued that this is a reference to Indian Brahmanic practice of ringing a small, hand-held bell during *sevā*, or service, before a deity, but there is little to prove that Ottomans were aware of this or any traditions of contemporary Indian Brahmins.

¹²⁴ Onay, *Eski Türk Edebiyatında Mazmunlar*, 76.

¹²⁵ Onay, *Eski Türk Edebiyatında Mazmunlar*.

¹²⁶ Şentürk, *Osmanlı Şiiri Kılavuzu*, 287.

The term *zunnār*—originally a Zoroastrian sash in the context of Persian poetry, later the Brahmanical sacred thread in Indo-Persian literature—here signifies Ottoman protected minority status. Ferīdūn merges the three meanings, as he incorporates the terms *madhhab* (literally: way of going) and *mashrab* (source of satiation); the former formally understood as one’s religion or inter-Islamic legal school, and the latter, one’s spiritual affiliation.¹²⁷ The Brahmins, then, as envisaged by Ferīdūn, are not simply a byword for any and every Orthodox Priest, but their spiritual elite and crème de la crème.

The consummation of this semantic shift occurs by the nineteenth century. Take these two ghazals from the Ottoman mystical poet Shaykh Ghālib (d. 1213/1799):

‘aşk-ı bālā-rev rūh-ı dil-dāra etmez iltifāt
ol hümmā-ı lā-mekān gülzāra etmez iltifāt
hey ‘aceb çeşmim dil-i pür-ḥūnumuzdan bī-niyāz
mest olur hem sāğar-ı ser-şāra etmez iltifāt
deyr-i ‘aşk-ı büt-perestānı heme Haḡ-bındır
berhemenler şüret-i dīvāra etmez iltifāt
gülistān-ı ḥüsn ser-tā-ser tecellī-zārdır
jālesi ḥurşīd-i pür-envāra etmez iltifāt
ḡasta çeşmiñ eylemez lāl-i revānbahşa nāzar
neyler ol ‘İsāyı kim bīmāra etmez iltifāt
şīr ü şekerdir Celāl ile Cemāl ammā yine
merd-i vaḡdet subḡa-i zūnnāra etmez iltifāt
çāre-reslik ḡamzeve kânūn-ı ḡikmetken yine
ben demem ki Gālib-i nā-çāra etmez iltifāt¹²⁸

*Ascending love pays no heed to the soul of the beloved
The phoenix of that placeless realm shows no regard for the rose garden
Oh, how strange! Mine eye, indifferent to this blood-filled heart
Is intoxicated, yet ignores even the goblet brimming with heady wine
The idol-worshippers of the monastery of love—all behold the Real,
The Brahmins glance not at the icons etched upon the wall.
The rose-garden of beauty is entirely adorned with divine manifestations,
Yet its dewdrop pays no heed to the radiant sun.
Your ailing eye casts not a glance upon the ruby of flowing delight
What care would it have for a Jesus who shows no concern for the sick?
Though divine Majesty and Beauty both be like milk and sugar,
Still, the man of unity pays no heed to the rosary and sacred thread.*

¹²⁷ See Mughal Persian poet Chandar-bhān Brahmin’s (c. 994–1073/1586–1662) self-designation in his *Chahār Chaman* as “belonging to the caste of Brahmins of the sacred thread.” See Chandar Bhān Brāhman, *Chahār Chaman*, ed. Muḡammad Yūnus Ja‘farī (Markaz-i Taḡqiqāt-i Fārsī-i Rāyzanī-yi Farhangī-i Jumhūrī-yi Islāmī-i Irān, 2007), 166.

¹²⁸ Naci Okçu, ed., *Şeyh Gālib Dīvānı*, (Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, n.d.), 227–8.

*Though remedy lies in a glance decreed by divine wisdom,
I do not say that Ghālib, forlorn, goes ignored.*

And further:

*sihr ü şūhuñ beste çeşm-i ğamze-i cādūsudur
çeşme-i maḥbūbān kemend-i zūlfüniñ āhūsudur
bağlamışlardır 'Ene-l-Hak' küfrünüñ zünnārını
berhemenler kim muḳīm-i ma'bed-i ğīsūsudur
cāmdır qandīl-i gül-reng-i şebistān-ı vişāl
būseniñ yākūt-ı mey gül-reng-i şeftālūsudur
sānki mihrāb-ı ḥarīm-i Ka'beniñ kerrārıdır
ol nigeḥ kim ḥāne-zād-ı kūşe-i ebrūsudur
ḥasret-i ḥāl-i rūḥuñla ğark-ı mevc-i āteşiz
şu 'le-i 'aşkıñ sevād-ı çeşmimiz Hindūsudur
bıkr-i ma'nıdır ser-ā-ser şūret-i Meryemleri
öyle bir büthāneniñ şimdi gönül nākūsudur
mevc urur āyın-i Mevlānādan zevk-i iştİYāk
bāng-ı ney Ğālib o bezmin na'ra-i yā Hūsudur¹²⁹*

*Magic and mischief lie bound in her enchanting glance
The fount of all beloveds is that gazelle snared in her tresses
They've fastened the girdles of the 'I am the Real' heresy¹³⁰
Those Brahmins who dwell within the temple of her tresses
The lamp of the rose-coloured chamber of union is a goblet
And the ruby of her kisses is a wine of rose-hued peach.
Her gaze, born from the curve of her brow's secluded arch
Is as if 'Alī, champion of the Ka'ba's niche, has returned.
With the soul's burning longing, we're drowned in a wave of fire
The flame of passion is our eye's dark pupil turned Indian
The icons of Mary have taken on wholly fresh meanings
Such that the heart has now become the bell of the idol temple
The ritual of Mevlevi whirling sends desire's waves to surge
The cry of the reed flute in that gathering is Ghālib's shout of 'yā Hū!'*

Here, we witness all of the *Wanderwörter* we have been discussing, be they Buddhist, Chinese, Indian or from further afield become fully abstracted and subsumed into a Sufi metaphysical and Persianate poetics within a new Christian context. Brahmins and icons of Mary coexist in idol temples (literally: houses of the Buddha-idol) where even the outwardly idolatrous bear witness to divine unity. The Sufi in such later Ottoman poetry is able to discern the truth intended by the Christian iconographer of Mary and thus perceive the reality behind her graven image. Even Brahmins, often condemned for their misplaced devotion to created forms, indirectly attest to the

¹²⁹ Naci Okçu, ed., *Şeyh Ğālib Dīvānı*, 241–2.

¹³⁰ A reference to the ecstatic exclamation of Muslim mystic Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) that led to his execution on the charge of heresy.

oneness of God and are themselves enmeshed in metaphors for divine and human beauty. Ultimately, Ghālib's Brahminic and Marian metaphors—despite their symbolic inclusion within a hierarchy of experiencing divinity—nevertheless retain something of an inferior status and tarry in spiritual incompleteness before the 'man of unity' (*merd-i vahdet*), the consummate Sufi who is able to move beyond the alluring particularities and outward representations of forms.

Ottoman Iconostasis

Thus, we arrive at the full assimilation and adaptation of the *nigār* within an Ottoman literary and cultural context. As with previous *Wanderwörter*, Ottoman literature shows several progressive stages of abstraction and appropriation of this metaphor. At the first level, Ottoman uses of the *icon* metaphor are continuous with those of Persian poetry, in which the *icon gallery* is a stand-in for natural beauty, as exemplified by the poet Bākī (d. 100/1600):

bülbülde şavt-ı şîrîn, güllerde şûret-i Çîn
*faşl-ı bahār Mânî, gülşen nigârḡâne*¹³¹

In the nightingale is a sweet voice, in the roses a picture of China
Spring is Mânî, and the rose-garden an icon gallery

This aesthetic equivalence evolves into metaphors of competition, whereby the privileged position of the *icon gallery* as criterion by which beauty is measured is inverted, and now the *icon gallery* (and the ideal of artistic representation) itself becomes enthralled with nature's beauty. Ahmed Paşa (d. 902/1496–7) offers a striking example:

şaldı bir na 't-ı münakkaş sahn-ı şahrāya şabā
*kim anıñ naķşında ḡayrāndır nigāristān-ı Çîn*¹³²

The Saba breeze unfurled a finely adorned panegyric upon the plain,
Such that even the icon gallery of China stands in awe of its design

This is followed by a full sundering of the *icon* and its motley meanings from its eastern semantic lifeworld, in a similar manner to the Brahmin's re-appropriation for an Ottoman Christian context. So goes the concluding verse of an *Ars Poetica* by Meḡmed the Conqueror (d. 886/1481), known by the nom de plume 'Avnî:

şanemler ḡüsni taşvîrinde bir büt-şekl ile 'Avnî
*gönül deyrini ser-tā-ser kamu naķş u nigār itdüm*¹³³

In depicting the beauty of idols, 'Avnî, in the form of a single Buddha-idol did I
Adorn the entire monastery of the heart, replete with images and icons

¹³¹ Onay, *Eski Türk Edebiyatında Mazmunlar*, 318.

¹³² Şentürk, *Osmanlı Şiiri Kılavuzu*, 287, 319.

¹³³ Avnî (Fatih Sultan Mehmed), *Dîvân*, ed. Muhammed Nur Doğan (Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, n.d.), 24–5.

The most novel semantic addendum afforded to the *nigār* by Ottoman poets and scholars arguably came about in the generations that followed. The authoritative Ottoman commentator on Persian poetry, Sūdī of Bosnia (d. c. 1000/1591) describes the *icon gallery of China* as “a grand cathedral, for each of the master painters who appeared in that land has inscribed therein the strange forms and wondrous icons which he himself devised and extracted.”¹³⁴

And so the *icon gallery of China* becomes the cathedral, its *nigār* the new Ottoman iconostasis. While the Christian iconostasis separates sacred from profane space with concrete images, the Ottoman literary ‘iconostasis’ was imagined as purely metaphorical, a transcendent boundary between worldly experience and metaphysical truth. The Ottoman iconostasis, therefore, represents the apex of the semantic migrations we have explored, from Manichaeism didactic imagery through Persian literary conventions, Indian semantic inversions, and Central Asian metaphorical abstractions, culminating in an Ottoman abstraction that encapsulates universal Islamic ideals. This continued in the early twentieth century, when it was subsumed into the language of philosophical Sufis as a stand-in for the world of imaginal representations, as in this verse by Merzifonlu Mu‘allim İbrāhīm Cūdī (d. 1350/1931):

*kūy-ı tecrīde nigāristān-ı Çinden geçmişiz
hey ne dīl-keş dīl-rübā dīl-ber şanemler görmüşüz*¹³⁵

*We have passed through the icon gallery of China on the path of abstraction
Ah! What soul-alluring, heart-captivating, beauty-bearing idols we have beheld!*

Cūdī Efendi’s usage marks a philosophical appropriation of the *nigār* image. In Arabic-language philosophical works of the tradition of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 428/1037), Suhrawardī (Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā, d. 587/1191) and Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), the term *şūra* is used to describe the imaginal component of their respective metaphysical hierarchies of being. In as much as the Syriac *şūrtā* cognate was the same as used by Mānī as a translation for his *nigār*, the New Persian term is

¹³⁴ “[Çin] nigārḥānesi bir ‘aẓīm kilīsādur ki ol memleketde peydā olan üstād naḳḳāşların her biri kendi isthrāc eyledüğü nuḳūş u eşkāl-i ğarībe vü teşāvir-i ‘acībeyi anda naḳş eylemişdür.” See Sūdī-i Bosnevī, *Gūlistān Şerhi*, ed. Ozan Yılmaz (Çamlıca, 2012), 80. The association of icon gallery with church in Ottoman lexicography extends to other metaphors of eastern Persianate provenance. Sūdī, for example, likewise describes the Turkistani city of *Chighil* as famed not merely for human beauty but specifically for a ‘grand church’ (*mu‘aẓẓam bir kilīsā*) decorated by Mānī himself, whose icons made it a poetic shorthand for unsurpassable beauty. See Sūdī-i Bosnevī, *Şerh-i Dīvān-ı Hâfiz: Sūdī’nin Hâfiz Dīvānı Şerhi*, vol. 1, ed. İbrahim Kaya (Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı, 2020), 240. A century later, the lexicographer Şu‘ūrī (d. c. 1100/1689) similarly noted this ‘church’ or ‘*kenīsā*’ as a centre of seductive idolatry, indicating a continuous literary tradition from early Persianate contexts into Ottoman imagery. See Şu‘ūrī Hasan Efendī, *Lisānu’l-Acem (Ferheng-i Şu‘ūrī)*, ed. Ozan Yılmaz (Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı, 2019), 1471. The inhabitants of Chighil initially practised Manichaeism before later adopting Nestorian Christianity—indeed, the very concept of a ‘church’ to describe sacred icon-filled spaces directly originates with Mānī who used the very same terms employed by Sūdī and Şu‘ūrī to describe his religious establishments.

¹³⁵ Onay, *Eski Türk Edebiyatında Mazmunlar*, 319.

likely the same term. And yet neither in Avicenna's Persian philosophical works (as the *Dānishnāma-yi 'Alā'ī*) nor in those of Suhrawardī (*Hayākil al-Nūr*) does the word *nigār* feature in the meaning of such metaphysical images or icons.

But it is here in Ottoman Turkish that we see the *wanderwort* incorporated into the terminology of Sufi metaphysics. What Merzifonlu is describing in his "path of *tajrīd*" is the philosophical-Sufi concept of ontological abstraction or detachment from the realm of multiplicity and sensory forms towards unity. In both Avicennan and Sufi traditions, this denotes the movement from the phenomenal to the intelligible or from the material to the immaterial. Between the sensible and intelligible realms lies the realm of images (*'ālam al-mithāl*), a world in which one can experience Platonic forms and images of immutable archetypes, here symbolised by the *icon gallery of China*. The poetic image is integrated seamlessly with the concept of the realm of images, as the *icon gallery* is conceived of as the repository of all things in their most perfect and pristine form. This fittingness is further compounded by the centuries-long pedigree of China serving as a symbol of artistic ideality and mimetic excellence in Persian poetry. Yet even more, in Turkish poetry, as in most Turkic languages, *chīn* has an additional meaning not present in Persian, that of truth and reality,¹³⁶ thereby introducing the interpretation of an "icon gallery of the real."

The Ottoman absorption of the terms discussed here showcases a mature literary culture capable of negotiating multiple, overlapping heritages—Indic, Iranian, Central Asian, Anatolian and Balkan—within its imperial boundaries. In capturing the subtle interplay between metaphysical symbolism, religious discourse, and poetic creativity, this study underscores the enduring power of literary tropes to traverse boundaries, adapt to new contexts, and serve as mirrors reflecting profound shifts in religious and cultural identities. That the final case study in this article concerns a figure who not only survived the Ottoman Empire but also died in the first decade of the modern Turkish Republic underscores the remarkable elasticity of this term. What began as a didactic image in Manichaean ritual art, then as a beloved in Persian lyric, ultimately became a technical category for the imaginal in Ottoman metaphysics. Its trajectory demonstrates not only the longevity of Persianate poetics but also its capacity to generate philosophical concepts out of aesthetic metaphors. This is a reminder that the history of ideas in Islamicate Eurasia is inseparable from the history of its poetic vocabulary.

Tracing the *longue durée* of the *nigār* thus reveals something of a *Begriffsgeschichte* of aesthetic categories, but one that is inseparable from philology and poetics. If conceptual history usually reconstructs ideas within a stable language or polity, the Persianate case shows how wandering metaphors themselves generate new conceptual worlds across languages, genres, and

¹³⁶ See Clauson, *Etymological Dictionary*, 424. Also see *chīn* as both an adjective ("çin Anūṣīrvānī") and adverb ("çin tutar") in Yüknēkī, *Atebetü'l-Hakâyik*, 151, and Mīr 'Alī Shīr Navā'ī's (d. 906/1501) much later use thereof ("çin ayatsin") in his account of a Jew's conversion to Islam in his *Nasā'im al-Mahabba*, Bibliothèque nationale de France (Gallica), Supplément turc 316, 31, <https://archivesetmanuscripts.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc346630>

lifeworlds. From pre-Islamic Iran to early Republican Turkey,¹³⁷ the journey of the *nigār* thus spans more than a millennium—beginning as a didactic tool of metaphysical representation, to abstracted poetic metaphor, and then returning to metaphysical representation albeit within a different philosophical system—and is a fitting closure to this odyssey of wandering words.

¹³⁷ A postscript on Manichaeism afterlives: Our narrative need not with Sūdī's definitions or the mystical-philosophical verse of Merzifonlu Cūdī. Curious echoes of Mānī are encountered well into the early Republican period of modern Turkey. An entry in the early Turkish Encyclopaedia of Islam concerning Edirne's Üç Şerefeli Mosque exemplifies this: "In the middle of the harem courtyard, there is a fountain that Evliya Çelebi refers to as the 'Hanafî basin'. On the side of the mosque there is one entrance, and the harem has three gates. Evliya Çelebi recounts that Sultan Murad II had special paints brought from Iran for the mosque's interior decorations and the ornamentation of the domes in the harem, and that he had these executed by an Iranian painter named Manī. He also adds that, just as in the Old Mosque, flowers were placed among the rows of the congregation during prayer times in the Üç Şerefeli Mosque." ("Haremin ortasında Evliya Çelebi'nin 'havz-ı hanefî' dediği şadırvan vardır. Câmîin yan tarafta bir ve hareme üç kapısı vardır. Evliya Çelebi Murad II.'nin, câmîin iç tezyinatı ve haremdeki kubbelerin nakışları için, İran'dan hususî boya getirdiğini, Mani adında İranlı bir nakkaşa bunları yaptırdığını ve bir de, Eski câmide olduğu gibi, Üç şerefeli câmide de namaz vakitleri cemaat safları arasına çiçekler konduğunu anlatır.") See Tayyip Gökbilgin, "Edirne," in *İslâm Ansiklopedisi: İslâm Âlemi Tarih, Coğrafya, Etnografya ve Biyografya Lûgati*, vol. 4 (Millî Eğitim Basımevi, 1948), 122. I have written elsewhere on how Evliyâ Çelebî (d. c. 1096/1684–5) uses the *icon gallery* image to describe numerous beautiful edifices, from a market in Vienna to the Prophet Muḥammad's own tomb in Medina (see Gul, *Persian Idiom, Ottoman Meanings*, 216). The author of this encyclopaedia entry, however, misinterprets Mānī, transforming him into a contemporary Iranian artisan responsible for Edirne's mosque decoration in the fifteenth century. Thus, centuries of poetic abstraction and reinterpretation at times inadvertently recast Mānī, originally a prophet-artist, into a forgotten historical figure, exemplifying the enduring yet complex afterlife of Persianate metaphors within late- and post-Ottoman Turkish culture.

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