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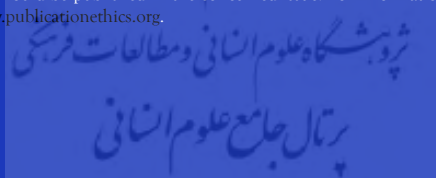
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On Foot or on Horseback? The Honorable Way of Dueling in Pre-Islamic Iran based on Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*

Joanna Szklarz¹ , Patryk Skupniewicz² , Katarzyna Maksymiuk³ 


Abstract

Duels, despite their cultural visibility and symbolic significance, were never a common nor universal form of conflict resolution. In the Iranian tradition, as presented in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, however, they hold a special place as an element of the hero's ethos. This raises questions about the extent of the practice of such encounters and about their ritual, whether the fighting took place on foot or on horseback. The article addresses this issue in the context of pre-Islamic Iran, juxtaposing three perspectives: the narrative of Ferdowsi's epic, historical accounts concerning rulers and commanders, and the iconography of reliefs. In the *Shahnameh*, mounted combat appears as the most prestigious form, yet the poet subtly challenges its superiority, pointing instead to victory as the true criterion of honor. The comparison of these three sources allows for a deeper understanding of the significance of duels in pre-Islamic Iranian tradition.

Keywords: Ferdowsi; *Shahnameh*; Duel; Pre-Islamic Iran; Iranian Art.

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Introduction

However culturally significant and, in modern times, recognizable the institution of dueling may be, it was not a common military tactic. Individual armed confrontation between two people became the appropriate means of resolving disputes of honor, and in many cases also legal disputes, in societies that had grown out of militarized ethos, constituting a kind of formalized violence, regulated by tradition, agreements, laws, or codes of honor (Kiernan, 1988; Frevert, 1995; Shoemaker, 2002; Allen & Reed, 2006).

In contemporary world culture, we know famous figures who were victims of duels, such as Alexander Hamilton (Jensen & Ramey, 2020) and Alexander Pushkin (Vickery, 1968). The Western film genre popularized and romanticized the idea of dueling, often giving it the dimension of an individual's moral struggle against evil, reconnecting the topos of dueling with the figure of the knight. Currently, the climax of numerous computer games and action films is the protagonist's duel with the final "boss," who often turns out to be the most skilled opponent in the art of combat.

Meanwhile, despite the prevalence of duels in culture, it is difficult to speak of the true prevalence of this phenomenon in history. Similarly, one cannot speak of the exclusively aristocratic-chivalrous nature of duels. Judicial duels were a legal remedy in most of Europe throughout the Middle Ages and allowed disputes to be settled not only between knights but also between men of lower social status, as well as between women and men (Hopton, 2011: 173–174; Moore, 2016). In

Japan, only samurai fought duels (McMillan, 1996: 385–403), but this practice is known from the Edo period and has nothing to do with European judicial duels, although it is very similar to modern European and American duels of honor. At the same time, it is worth recalling the custom of "mensur" (German: akademisches Fechten) among German student fraternities, which can be classified as a relatively safe duel or a rather bloody sport (the appearance of a wound determined victory or defeat) (Zwicker, 2011).

Due to the number of regulations, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish a duel from a sport, but it is usually characterized by antagonistic motivation, which distinguishes a duel from all other forms of agonistic competition, such as gladiatorial games, European Fechtschulen, or confrontations between Mamluk horsemen fighting with lances in specific competitions. However, regardless of the degree of brutality of agonistic confrontations, a duel is characterized by an antagonistic approach, an authentic dispute, the resolution of which is the goal of the duel.

Meanwhile, a duel as a formalized and legal, or quasi-legal, armed confrontation between two people is not a common phenomenon at all. Suffice it to say that ancient Greece loved agon, including its most brutal forms such as pugilism or pankration. Even in the case of the confrontation between Coragus and Dioxippus (Hollenback, 2009), the matter seems to be more a consequence of a drunken dispute over the superiority of skills or weapons than a deeply antagonistic conflict. It therefore seems that

the confrontation, which did not end in anyone's death, although it had all the prerequisites for it, was an agon, a trial of strength, a demonstration of mastery of sporting technique.

Civil duels did not exist in Roman civilization. Again, despite their ruthlessness and the high risk to participants, gladiatorial games were more a kind of agon than a regulated antagonistic contest. Similarly, cockfighting, dogfighting, lei tai, muay thai, and sumo wrestling were not antagonistic. And yet, despite the lack of civil duel formulas, Roman soldiers occasionally dueled with representatives of enemy armies in pre-battle clashes (Oakley, 1985). However, the famous duel between Ardazanes and Areobindus does not fit into Roman tradition, as John Malalas clearly emphasizes that it was initiated by the Persian ruler (Jeffreys, Jeffreys, & Scott, 1986: 199).

Similarly, it is difficult to find traces of the institution of dueling in China, a civilization with a long tradition of civil and military violence, as evidenced by its existing, highly developed system of martial arts. Lei tai, or platform fighting, despite its ruthless rules, should be considered an element of agonistic culture, similar to gymnastic displays or other demonstrations of skill in the use of various types of weapons.

A type of military duel was the pre-battle confrontation of champions known among the Romans, but also practiced by the armies of the Arab conquest period. It can be assumed that the forms of European judicial duels stem from the traditions of Germanic societies, where all men were members of the "army" and

the distinction between military and civilian elements came much later. The Viking holmgang was also a manifestation of the traditional legal duel (Jones, 1933). Thus, the transfer of military customs to the legal structure resulted in the legalization of armed confrontation, but subject to a set of rules and rituals resembling sport in essence, yet resulting from medieval legalism.

This article aims to analyze duels that have grown out of Iranian tradition and to highlight their uniqueness in a cultural context. The analysis covers duels described in the *Shahnameh*, an epic poem that has remained an excellent source of knowledge about Iranian culture for a thousand years. Although various forms of duel are found in ancient Greek (Homer's *Iliad*) and Roman culture, in the *Shahnameh* Ferdowsi makes one-on-one fights a part of the warrior ethos. This leads one to wonder whether duels were widely practiced in Iran – and if so, whether there was a ritual for such clashes, such as fighting on foot or on horseback – or whether they were exceptional situations and Ferdowsi, using his privileges as a poet, gave them special significance.

Duels in *Shahnameh*

The duel between Sohrab and Gordafarid is fought entirely on horseback (Skupniewicz & Maksymiuk, 2019). The opponents begin by shooting at each other with bows (from a long distance). Then they close the distance to lance and sword range. Sohrab then grabs his opponent with a lasso, effectively ending the physical fight and moving on to a verbal

confrontation. During the confrontation, neither of them touches the ground with their feet.

Another example of such a duel is the first day of the fight between Rostam and Sohrab (Ebrahimi & Taheri, 2017). It takes place entirely on horseback, although the order is different – here, the warriors begin with close combat with swords, but since neither gains an advantage, they increase the distance and begin to fight with arrows and bows. They close the distance again for a wrestling match, still on horseback. In the end, they both ride away without a clear winner.

On the second day, the fight between Rostam and Sohrab begins with them dismounting from their horses. After neither of them gained a clear advantage the previous day, the warriors did not even attempt to fight on horseback. However, this is not a separate fight, but a resumption of the previous one after a break. Knowing that it is impossible to gain an advantage in a mounted fight, the warriors move directly to the next stage – fighting on foot, and only here is the duel resolved. This is a perfect example of the second acceptable type of duel.

A kind of hybrid resulting from circumstances arising during combat is a fight stopped after the loss of a horse. This can be seen in the series of fights on Mount Sapid and Mount Hamavaran. These are: the successive withdrawal of Tus and Giv from the fight against Forud when he disabled their mounts (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 1999). Forud's action is deliberate so that he does not have to kill the brave and famous Iranians who want to avenge the death of his father,

Siyavush. Killing or seriously injuring a horse meant that, according to custom, a high-born Iranian should withdraw from the battlefield.

In opposition to the above, Ferdowsi creates two one-on-one fights on foot, where he questions the honor of withdrawing from battle after losing a horse. Bizhan is the voice of youthful rebellion against bitter customs that do not bring results. He echoes the temperament and approach of his grandfather Rostam, who, due to his trickster qualities, does not shy away from solutions that are not considered honorable, as long as they are effective (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 1983; Davis, 1999: 235; Davis, 2009: XVII; den Uijl, 2010; Szklarz, 2024). This approach is both primitive, as the concept of the trickster dates back to ancient times, and innovative, as it boldly challenges the ossified and ineffective patterns of "honor." For what is honor in the *Shahnameh* (or in the view of a Persian nobleman/*pahla-van*)?

After Tus withdraws from the fight, the military commanders surrounding him say: "O famous paladin of earth! / What can be better than thy safe return?" (Warner & Warner, 1908: v. 813, p. 56) However, deep down, the defeated general feels that withdrawing from the fight because of the loss of his mount is not honorable behavior. Thus, custom allows as honorable what is not so in its natural/original state. Withdrawing from the battlefield after losing a horse is not seen as an instinct for survival, but as common sense:

"Did no one ever teach thee this –
That circumspection is required in war?

Thou hast no wisdom, providence, or brains,
And may he cease to be that nurtured thee." (Warner & Warner, 1908: v. 816, p. 59)

However, a warrior should have the instinct to win even at the cost of his own life – he does not fight only for himself and for his own glory, but for the glory of Iran and, as a leader, for the good of his troops. When faced with an obstacle that cannot be overcome in the usual way, an unconventional approach is the only solution; otherwise, the impasse will not be broken. Customary honor must therefore give way to unconventional action that goes beyond the norm. In his fight against Forud, Bizhan exceeds his limits, proving that a true Iranian warrior is more than just a rigid framework of chivalry. A true Iranian warrior is multifaceted.

It is worth taking a closer look at the fight between Bizhan and Forud, as it is a kind of manifesto or question about the honor of a *pahlavan*. Bizhan is the son of Giv and, on his mother's side, the grandson of Rostam, Iran's greatest hero. He therefore carries the noble and ancient blood of the legendary founder of Sistan, Garshasp (Skjærvø, 2011: 601). Although he belongs to the Giv family, Rostam does not abandon him in his time of need and rushes to his aid in a later episode entitled "Bizhan and Menishe." His origins and status are therefore high. In the duel in question, he is still only a young man on the threshold of fame, but he has the courage to question his elders and oppose them when he thinks it is right.

Despite the opposition of his elders, Bizhan decides to face Forud. He receives a horse for battle, as well as his father's royal helmet and the miraculous armor of Prince Siyavush, "These neither double-headed dart / Nor shaft can pierce." (Warner & Warner, 1908: v. 818, p. 61) He thus enters the fight fully equipped, as befits a young man of his background. This is both an indication of his dignity and respect for his enemy. Bizhan does not underestimate his opponent and faces him fully prepared. However, Forud is an excellent archer and, taking advantage of the height of the terrain, kills Bizhan's mount. As in the case of Tus and Giv, he does not want to harm the rider and hopes that he will retreat after losing his horse, as his two predecessors did. However, Bizhan has no intention of retreating. On foot, he boldly attacks his opponent, forcing him to retreat and thus achieving a physical and moral victory.

A similar, yet completely different situation occurs during the second expedition to avenge the death of Prince Siyavush, during the battles on Mount Ham-avarán. Here, too, the Iranian leaders are unable to defeat the champion of the enemy army, bringing shame upon Iran and its troops. This time, Bizhan's grandfather, Rostam, fights against the Kashani warrior Ashkabus (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 1987: 770). However, the Iranian hero does not treat his opponent with due respect – he does not wear beautiful armor and, most importantly, he does not ride a horse. While Bizhan was ready to continue the fight after losing his mount and winning it, Rostam intended to fight on foot from the very beginning.

Bizhan's determination stems from his desire to avenge his friend, who died in a clash with Forud. The young hero clearly states:

"Break not my heart,
Break not mine arms and shoulders
too just now,
For I have sworn a great oath by the
moon,
The world's Judge, and the Sháh's own
diadem,
That if I am not slain I will not ride
Back from the mountain but avenge
Zarásp" (Warner & Warner, 1908: v.
817, p. 60).

When Gustaham refuses to give him a war horse, Bizhan adds: "I will go afoot,/ And so avenge Zarásp: I need no horse." (Warner & Warner, 1908: v. 817, p. 60) His motives are therefore noble. Not being able to avenge his friend is the greatest insult to him. That is why Bizhan reacted so emotionally earlier when his father, Giv, withdrew from the fight because of his injured horse:

"My father--lion-quelling paladin,
Whose might is greater than an elephant's!
Why did a single horseman see thy
back?
Thy hand was wont to be the heart of
fight,
But now because a Turkman shot thy
steed
Thou wentest reeling like a drunken
man!" (Warner & Warner, 1908: v. 816,
p. 58-59).

Giv punishes Bizhan for his "most unacceptable words" (Warner & Warner,

1908: v. 815, p. 58), but his anger suggests that he also does not consider his withdrawal from the fight to be honorable—reasonable but unsatisfactory.

In the case of Rostam's duel with Ashkabus, the situation is quite different. Rostam is much older and more experienced than his grandson and is not driven by personal revenge. His decision to fight the Kashan warrior on foot is, on the one hand, a sign of contempt, but on the other, it is a lesson to the Iranians themselves, who, during this ill-fated expedition, lost their sharpness and even their will to fight. Rostam deliberately puts himself in a position considered weaker to prove that an Iranian warrior is more than just armor and a horse. His comparison to predatory animals reminds them that fighting is not just a display of chivalrous customs, but a means to an end – victory.

Discussion

It is difficult to find traces of civil duels in Iranian tradition, but the practices described in the duels in the *Shahnameh* bear the characteristics of developed rituals, although not always clear. This testifies to the specific development of the warrior tradition among Iranians, which was, on the one hand, reserved for the aristocracy, and on the other, required a kind of initiation, the acquisition of knowledge about honorable and dishonorable actions through "socializing," participation in the community of "knights," rather than referring to written formulas. Perhaps this phenomenon should be seen as a manifestation of a rich tradition of oral literary transmis-

sion, which in this case would mean the necessity of personal transmission of tradition (Szklarz & Moradi, 2023). The best example of this phenomenon is the duel between Rostam and Sohrab, where the old warrior manipulates the young man by inventing rules for the duel on the spot, which save his life but ultimately lead to the death of the young warrior. This points to a kind of ambiguity in the approach to honorary customs, which, perhaps through verbal communication, are unclear and at the same time become a tool of cunning for the combatants.

However, even if unclear, the rules of military combat seem to be confirmed in the *Shahnameh*. At least, the custom of formalized combat in a military context, based on the principle of a duel between champions, is confirmed. However, it is difficult to determine the actual origin of this custom. Although suggestions of agonistic formulas related to combat can be found in the *Husraw i Kawadan ud Redag-i* (Azarnouche, 2013), they seem to be a kind of training technique, shaping the ability to use weapons, horse riding, and other skills related to participation in war, rather than formulas of antagonistic confrontation. Similarly, the inscription of Shapur I at Hajjiabad (MacKenzie, 1978), boasting about shooting an exceptionally distant arrow with a bow, testifies to the existence of agonistic competition related to archery, but not directly related to any antagonistic formula. Another important skill related to the training of young aristocratic warriors, which was agonistic in nature, was the game of polo, as evidenced by the aforementioned the *Husraw i Kawadan ud Redag-i*,

but also the *Kar-Namag i Ardashir i Pabagan* (Grenet, 2003). None of these forms of competition, despite their connection with military skills, seems to confirm a connection with the institution of duels. It should be noted, however, that the European Fechtschulen of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, which were a form of agonistic confrontation and a system of teaching combat skills, were originally strongly linked to the institution of dueling. Japanese sword fighting schools, which emerged in the cities of the Edo period, were also associated with dueling. However, it is difficult to assume that such a connection is necessary, as quite similar martial arts schools in China did not require the institution of duels for their development. It is also noteworthy that the above-mentioned analogies are related rather to the development of urban societies than to the tribal structures of ancient Iran.

Despite the lack of sources that could confirm the existence of any form of duels during the Achaemenid period (Root, 1979), it should be noted that the motif of the king personally killing his victim already appeared in Neo-Assyrian iconography. Assyrian kings were often depicted killing lions, while fragments of the bodies of slain enemies appear in genre scenes (E.g., Relief of the Banquet Scene from the Palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh, BM inv. 124920). Achaemenid reliefs show the king stepping on the body of a slain enemy. An example is the relief of Darius I at Behistun. The scene does not capture the moment of killing itself, but the king's personal participation is suggested in the inscriptions. In

iconography, Achaemenid rulers were depicted with the bow, a traditional royal weapon (Skupniewicz, 2021a), which was intended to emphasize the king's personal role in battle. Darius I's self-image as an archer is linked to the ideology of power, primarily in its heroic aspect (Maksymiuk, 2027).

In turn, Achaemenid art from Anatolia depicts an Iranian figure in Persian or Median clothing or armor personally killing an enemy, both in the formula known from Assyrian reliefs, where the ruler holds his victim, piercing him with a sword, as well as during horseback confrontations, but also killing a pedestrian, either with a spear or by shooting an arrow at a surrendering, fleeing enemy. What seems important, however, is that most examples place these scenes in a battle context, between wings showing armies in battle formations. Thus, although the scenes themselves emphasize the personal participation of the protagonists and direct confrontation with the enemy, the context of battle does not allow them to be interpreted as actual duels, although it seems that it was precisely this iconographic emphasis on personal heroism that may have been the factor that initiated the tradition of military duels.

Accounts of the Achaemenid kings' participation in battles do not confirm a desire for personal confrontation with the enemy commander. Clear examples of this can be found in the Battle of Cunaxa in 401 BCE (Lee, 2016), where Cyrus, attacking Artaxerxes, is killed by his guards, and Darius III, both at Issus and Gaugamela, did not engage in

combat with Alexander, despite the fact that they were most likely not far apart (Skupniewicz, 2024). No references to a possible custom of dueling in Achaemenid Iran can be found in accounts of the Persian-Greek wars.

The custom of personal participation in battles, following Alexander's example, was cultivated by the Hellenistic rulers. The motif of a ruler participating in direct horseback combat with lances found its way into Parthian art (Fig. 1) and was continued in early Sasanian reliefs (Fig. 2) (Skupniewicz, 2021b; Skupniewicz & Maksymiuk, 2024a; Skupniewicz & Maksymiuk, 2024b). Literary accounts also claim that early Sasanid kings personally killed their enemies. However, for the current topic, it is irrelevant whether such accounts describe the actual state of affairs or are merely declarations. The fact that such declarations were made testifies to the existence of an ethos of personal participation in combat, which translates into the suggestion of glorification of victory in combat. It is noteworthy that the personal victories of Ardashir or the superiority of the young Bahram in the agonistic formulas appearing in the *Kar-Namag i Ardashir i Pabagan* and the *Shahnameh* emphasize their victorious character, heralding their military victories.

Conclusion

As historical evidence, including reliefs, indicates, duels between the elites were fought on horseback. For Iranians, "horse emerged as a powerful icon of nobility, strength, and divine favor" (Khos-

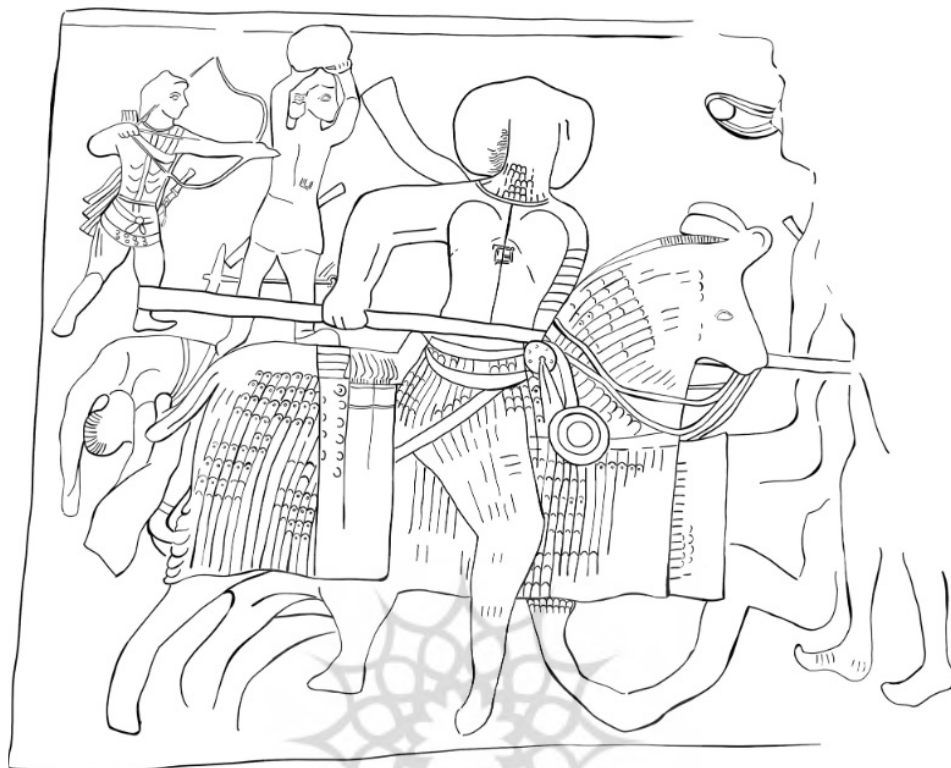


Fig. 1. Drawing of the Tangi Sarvak III Relief (drawn by Eleonora Skupniewicz)

ravi, 2025; see also Farrokh, Maksymiuk & Skupniewicz, 2023) Ferdowsi does not deny this custom; on the contrary, he emphasizes it repeatedly. The greatest duels of the epic, such as Rostam's with Sohrab or Rostam's with Esfandiyar, begin on horseback.

Only one very important one-on-one battle is fought by both warriors on foot, Rostam against White Div (Szklarz, 2025: 113), but this battle does not meet the criteria of a duel in front of the army, a "man-to-man" duel. Therefore, when a formal duel takes place where the social position of the combatants is clearly marked, such as prince against prince, chief against chief, the fight begins on

horseback, which confirms historical evidence and conclusions.

When describing duels, the poet attaches great importance to the issue of honor. Three variants of duels are considered honorable in the poem: a fight fought entirely on horseback; a duel where the warriors begin the fight on horseback but during the fight they begin to fight on foot, and when they lose their horse, they withdraw from the fight – retreating after losing a mount is not considered dishonorable.

Ferdowsi confirms that fighting on horseback is the honorable way to fight. He praises fighting on foot when fighting on horseback does not give an advan-

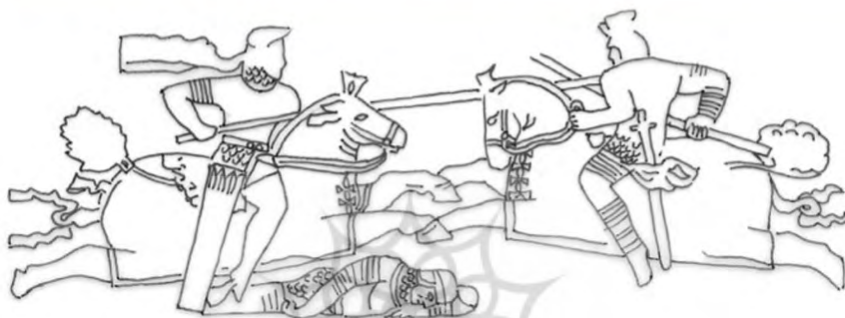


Fig. 2. NRm7. Relief in Naqsh-i Rostam, Lower Scene (photo by E. Shavarebi, after Syväne & Maksymiuk, 2018: 62; drawn by Patryk Skupniewicz)

tage. However, he takes a rather interesting approach to a situation in which a warrior withdraws from the battlefield after his horse is wounded or killed. He enters into a discourse between what is considered honorable and what should be considered so.

Interestingly, the poet does not make this negative assessment explicitly, as withdrawal in such a situation is considered honorable and socially acceptable. Open negation would be risky for the reception of the poem. However, he leaves the reader with clues that reveal this condemnation. Tus is portrayed by him as an incompetent leader and a warrior of dubious quality (Melville, 2013:

58–60). After withdrawing from the fight, Giv clearly feels uncomfortable and, after an outburst of anger, ultimately supports his son. Bizhan, who will be one of the greatest heroes of the epic, clearly criticizes this custom and proves that an Iranian foot soldier can defeat a horseman. Finally, Rostam – an icon of heroism and a symbol of the age of heroes (Szkларz, 2024) – confirms the superiority of the Iranian foot soldier over the non-Iranian horseman.

Ultimately, the honorable way to fight is the one that brings victory, not the one determined by social conventions.

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