



DERAFŠ-E KĀVĪĀN

DERAFŠ-E KĀVĪĀN, the legendary royal standard of the Sasanian kings.

In the *Šāh-nāma* (ed. Khaleghi-Motlagh, pp. 66-70, vv. 184 ff.) it is recorded that, when the blacksmith Kāva revolted against the tyrant Žaḥḥāk, he draped his leather apron from a wooden spear as a standard. As a result of the revolt, the throne passed to a prince of the ancient royal house, Ferēdūn, who adorned the apron with gold and brocade, gems, and tassels of red, yellow (or blue), and violet and called it *derafš-e kāvīān*, “the standard of the *kay(s)*” (i.e., *kāvīs* “kings”) or “of Kāva.” Each succeeding king added jewels until even at night it shone like the sun. In early Islamic sources this story was elaborated in various ways. According to the 10th-century historians Ṭabarī (I, pp. 2174–75) and Mas‘ūdī (*Morūj*, ed. Pellat, III, p. 51), the banner was made of panther skin and was 8 x 12 cubits, about 5 x 7.5 m; K̄vārazmī cited sources to the effect that it was of bear or lion skin (p. 115; cf. Maqdesī, *Bad’* III, p. 142: goat or lion skin). In the 14th century Ebn K̄aldūn (III, pp. 168-69) reported that it “had a magic square of a hundred fields woven into it in gold,” reflecting the belief that an army carrying a banner with such a square would never be defeated in war. It was also sometimes called the “standard of Jamsēd,” the “standard of Ferēdūn” (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, I, p. 202 v. 1007; VI, p. 113 v. 704), and the “royal standard” (*derafš-e kayī*; *Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, I, p. 147 v. 939; cf. Ṭa‘ālebī, *Gorar*, pp. 38-30).

According to the *Šāh-nāma*, when the army was mustered five *mowbeds* (priests) would bring the standard forth from its storehouse, and it would be carried with the king or army commander on campaign; it was often



mentioned with the adjectives “auspicious” or “blessed” (*homāyūn*, *kojasta*; I, p. 118 v. 656; V, p. 102 v. 294). In battle the standard served as a rallying point for the troops (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Moscow, III, p. 42 v. 621; cf. III, p. 173 v. 2654; IV, pp. 97-98 vv. 1384 ff. and 1389, 140 v. 386, 147 vv. 498 ff.; V, pp. 207 v. 2094, 331 v. 1615, 398 v. 2758; VI, p. 100 vv. 517 ff.; Ṭabarī, I, p. 609; cf. Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.15).

There is no direct mention of the Derafš-e Kāvīān in the Avesta or in Achaemenid or Parthian sources, but several scholars have argued that it is depicted in a damaged portion of the Alexander mosaic from Pompeii, the subject of which is the victory of [Alexander the Great](#) over [Darius III](#) at the battle of Issus (Levy, pp. 439-40; *Grundriss* II, pp. 486-87; Justi, *Namenbuch*, p. 160; Sarre, p. 348; Mann, pp. 3 ff.). Xenophon (*Anabasis* 1.10.12) mentioned, however, that the standard of the Achaemenid king was a golden eagle on a shield carried on a spear. Arthur Christensen (pp. 19-20; idem, *Iran Sass.*, p. 502–04) accepted the Derafš-e Kāvīān as the royal standard of the Sasanians and argued that the myth of Kāva had its genesis in the Sasanian period, reflecting the fame of the house of Kārēn, which traced its lineage to Qārēn, son of Kāva. Stig Wikander (1942, pp. 170, 203; idem, 1946, pp. 97 ff.) agreed but argued that the standard was adopted not by the Kavis of the Gathas but by the eight Kavis of the *Yašts*, the *mairyō* (Mid.Ir. *mērag*, Ved. *marya*). He argued further that Derafš-e Kāvīān became the national banner of Iran in the Parthian period.

In the battle of Qādesīya (ca. 16/637), in which the invading Arabs defeated the Sasanian army, the standard fell into the hands of Żerār b. Kaṭṭāb. He received 30,000 dinars for it, though its real value was said to be 1.2 or even 2 million dinars (Ṭabarī, I, p. 2337; Ebn al-Aṭīr, II, p. 482). After the jewels were removed the caliph ‘Omar is said to have burned the Kāvīān standard (Bal’amī, ed. Bahār, p. 148).

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