



KAYĀNIĀN V. KAUUI USAN, KAY-US, KAY KĀVUS

KAYĀNIĀN

v. Kauu i Usan, Kay-U^s, Kay Kāvus

With Kauui Usan (Usaδan), Pahlavi Kay Us (Kāy Us), Persian Kay Kāvus (etc; [Figure 2](#)), the sources become a bit more substantial. His name corresponds to Old Indic Kāvya Uśānas. The spelling of the Pahlavi form of the name as leaves the vowel length undetermined, as <-^ʹy-> is often used to spell Avestan -*aii*- and -*aē*-, but the common form Kay Kāvus suggests that the first element of Kāvus was no longer recognized as Kay-. The spelling and the later forms with long -*ā*- may, in fact, continue an older form *Kāvya Usan-, which perfectly matches the Old Indic form.

The alternative Avestan form Usaδan remains unexplained and has no descendant in the later tradition, but as it is found only in two identical lists (in the genitive: *Yt.* 13.132, and accusative: *Yt.* 19.71) of the seven *kauuis*, it is suspected of being an error. In *Yašt* 13.132, it is preceded in *Yašt* 13.121 by a certain Usaδan, which may have influenced the form.

Avesta. In *Yašt* 5.45, where he sacrificed to Anāhitā on the Eagle Mountain (*ərəzifiāt paiti garōit*), Kauui Usan is called *auruua* and *aš.varəcah* “having great *varəcah*” (see above; cf. Pahl. *purr-warz*, *Pahlavi Rivāyat* 47.7), and, in *Yašt* 14.39, he is apparently said to have traveled through the air on the bird



vārənjina (relationship to the bird *vārəyna*, which, in *Yašt* 14.19, is said to be the fastest of birds, is unclear).

In the Pahlavi texts. According to the Pahlavi texts, he was the oldest of the sons of Abīweh, governed the seven continents, and was filled with *xwarrah* (*Dēnkard* 7.1.35, 37). He ruled for 150 years (*Bundahišn* 36.7) over *dēws* and men (*Dēnkard* 9.22.4, an Avestan phrase not applied to Kauui Usan in the Avesta, but to the pre-Kayanid hero-sacrificers).

He was the father of Siyāwaxš and grandfather of Kay Husrōy (*Bundahišn* 35.31; *Mēnōy xrad* 26.55: “Siyāwaxš was fashioned [*brēhēnīd*] from his body”). He is said to have instructed the Iranian lands with learned instructions (*handarz* [see [ANDARZ](#)]; *Dēnkard* 7.1.37) and ruled for seventy-five years before going to the sky and seventyfive years after (*Bundahišn* 36.7).

Wars. According to the *Bundahišn* (33.8-10), during Kay-Us’s rule, the *dēws* became oppressive, specifically the *māzanīg dēws* (Av. *mazaniia* “giant[?]”; Bartholomae, *AirWb.*, col. 1169), which he kept from harming and subduing the creatures (*Dēnkard* 9.22.4).

In the *Bundahišn* (33.9-11), there follows the episode of Zēnīgāw (Zainigāuš of *Yašt* 19.93, killed by Fraṇrasiīān), who attacked Iran from Arabia (*tāzīg*) and killed all he looked at with his poisonous eye. A Turanian (*Daštan) killed Zēnīgāw and assumed the rule of Iran, deporting large numbers, and laid Iran waste until Rostam came and seized the inhabitants of Šambarān and freed Kay Us and the captive Iranians. Kay Us then fought Afrāsiāb, pushed the Turanians back to Turkestan, and recultivated Iran.

Madness and fall. The story of Kay Us’s madness is found in two versions. According to the *Bundahišn* (33.8, cf. 36.7), his mind was disturbed (*wiyābānēnīd*) so that he tried to go up and do battle with the sky, but he fell down and the *xwarrah* was stolen (*appār*) from him; he devastated the world with his army, until they caught and bound him by deception in the land of Šambarān.

The story in the *Sūdgar nask* is more detailed (*Dēnkard* 9.22.5-12). The *dēws* plotted Kay Us’s death, and Wrath (see [AĒŠMA](#)), undertaking the task, went to Kay Us and, making him unsatisfied with ruling only the sevenfold earth, made him desire the rule of heaven as well and fight the gods themselves. He rushed up over Hariburz with *dēws* and evil men until he came to the Kavian



xwarrah in the shape of a mountain. Kay Us and his army attacked it, but Ohrmazd recalled the *xwarrah*, and the whole army plunged down to earth, but Kay Us into the Frāxkerd (Vourukaša) Sea, where he swam about. His death was prevented by the unborn Kay Husrōy (i.e., his fravashi; see [FRAVAŠI](#)) calling out to Nēryōsang, who was flying down after Kay Us, not to kill him, because then Siyāwaxš would not be born, nor Husrōy himself, and the Turanians would not be defeated (*Dēnkard* 9.22.9-11). An astral phenomenon, called “the road of Kay Us” or “the road of the snake Gōčihr” (*Bundahišn* 5B.22), may have been named after this event.

Establishing boundaries. According to the *Dēnkard* (7.1.37), he brought order to the seven continents and taught people the useful art of determining borders (*wimand-gōwišnīh*). The ability to tell boundaries was ascribed to a bull that appeared during Kay Us’s rule, and its story is told in the *Dēnkard* and by Zādspram (*Dēnkard* 7.2.62-67; *Wizīdagīhā* 4.10-26). This bull (Zādspram: living in a forest) was divinely enabled with the ability to determine exactly the border between Iran and Turān, according to the *Dēnkard*, but had the boundaries written on its hoofs, according to Zādspram. The Turanians envied Kay Us the bull and sent a warrior called Srid to kill it, but the bull told Srid not to do it, lest, when Zarathustra appeared, dire misfortune befall his soul. Srid refrained from killing the bull and went to Kay Us and told him what had happened. The king, however, misled by *dēws* and sorcerers, according to the *Bundahišn*, but skeptical about the coming of Zarathustra, according to Zādspram, ordered Srid to kill the bull, who so did, despite the bull’s remonstrations. According to Zādspram, Srid was overcome by remorse, but Kay Us told him to go to the forest, which was inhabited by witches who would remove his remorse, as they did, and Srid killed the bull. Again troubled, Srid returned to Kay Us and asked him to kill him, which Kay Us refused to do. Srid then threatened to kill Kay Us, but Kay Us told him to go back to the (same?) forest and have the witch in the shape of a dog kill him. Every time Srid struck her, she would split in half, and when there were a thousand replicas, they killed Srid. See also on Srid, Wištāsp, and the chariot, below.

Building. Kay Us built a mansion on Mount Hariborz, one part of which was of gold, which served as living quarters; two parts of crystal, which served as stables; and two of steel, where the herds were kept and water flowed from springs (*Bundahišn* 32.3, 11). Alternately, he built seven mansions, one of gold, two of silver, two of steel, and two of crystal (*Dēnkard* 9.22.4). He also founded Samarkand, which was completed by Siyāwaxš, and Kay Husrōy was born



there (*Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* 2-3; *Pahlavi Texts* I, pp. 18-24).

In the Perso-Arabic traditions. Ḥamza merely records that he lived in Balk and that he, according to what he had read in some books, built a building in Bābel that reached high into the air (p. 35; tr., p. 25).

Ṭabari tells the story of Kay Kāvus in the chapter on the Persians who ruled Babylonia and the East after Kay Qobād (I/2, pp. 597-604; tr., IV, pp. 1-7; cf. Bal'ami, ed. Bahār, pp. 595-602, chapter on the kings of the East in the time of Solaymān; Ebn al-Balki, ed. Le Strange and Nicholson, pp. 40-43; ed. Behruzi, pp. 49-52). He begins by saying that Kay Kāvus killed numerous enemies and kept the remaining ones strictly beyond their borders and lived in Balk. He then goes on to the birth of Siāvakš and his education by Rostam, governor (*espaḥbed* “general”) of Sistān (Bal'ami, ed. Bahār, p. 596: *mehtar-e Sagestān*). Bal'ami begins by stating that he ruled all of the East; that his western border was toward Torkestān (Jayḥun), which was ruled by Afrāsiāb, while the western regions belonged to Solaymān; and that he resided at Balk. This leads up to the report that Kay Kāvus requested from Solaymān a number of demons (*div*) to be placed at his command to build cities, which Solaymān granted him. He then continues like Ṭabari (Bal'ami, ed. Bahār, pp. 595-96).

He married Sudāba (Suḍāba; Bal'ami gives no name), the daughter of Afrāsiāb (Frāsiāb; Ṭabari, I/2, p. 598; tr., IV, p. 2; Ebn al-Balki, ed. Le Strange and Nicholson, p. 41: according to some, the daughter of the king of Yemen according to others), and she was a sorceress (Ṭabari: *sāḥera*, Ebn al-Balki: *jādu*). Sudāba having slandered her stepson Siāvaš to his father, Siāvaš was sent to fight Afrāsiāb (Farāsiāt), who had not delivered the dowry that he had promised when Kay Kāvus married his daughter, but Siāvaš joined Afrāsiāb and eventually sired a child on Afrāsiāb's daughter Visfāfarid (Farangis in the *Šāh-nāma*; see below), the future Kay Ḳosrow (Ṭabari, I/2, pp. 599-600; tr., IV, pp. 3-4; Bal'ami does not name the girl; Zotenberg has Kay Farsi). After Siāvaš was killed, apparently by Afrāsiāb's brother Kidar (differently, under Kay Ḳosrow, see below; see also [KARSIVAZ](#)), his wife, who was pregnant, was asked to abort the child, but she refused. Firān (Pirān), who had provided for peace between Afrāsiāb and Siāvaš, warned Afrāsiāb about the consequences of the treacherous killing of Siāvaš. He asked that Visfāfarid be turned over to him until the child was born, when he would kill the newborn child. The child was born, but Firān could not bring himself to kill the baby, and the war against the Turanians continued (Ṭabari, I/2, pp. 600-601; tr., IV, pp. 3-4; Ebn al-Balki, ed. Le Strange and Nicholson, p. 41). The heroes [Gōdarz](#) and [Gēv](#) make



their appearance under Kay Kāvus.

Solaymān then commanded devils to serve Kay Kāvus, who ordered them to build a city for him (its name, in Ṭabari, p. 602: or < qyqdwr>; tr., IV, p. 5; Bal'ami, ed. Bahār, p. 600: ; Zotenberg, pp. 464-65: or), 800 parasangs (Ba'ami, eight *farsang*) long, surrounded by walls of yellow brass, brass, copper, fired clay, silver, and gold (Bal'ami: copper, bronze, brass [*ruy, berenj, mes*], and iron). It was carried between heaven and earth by the devils together with its inhabitants. After god sent someone (an angel, Bal'ami, p. 600) to destroy the city and the devils were unable to protect it, Kay Qāvus slew their leaders.

In this connection, Ṭabari mentions that Kay Kāvus would not talk while eating or drinking (as required in Zoroastrianism), which may be a variant of the story reported in one manuscript of Bal'ami, where it is said that Kay Kāvus did not need to relieve himself after eating and drinking (Zotenberg, p. 465; Ṭabari, I/2, p. 602; tr., IV, p. 5; Bal'ami, ed. Bahār, p. 600, n. 4: ms. of Nafisi from Bahār's notes, introd., p. 80; apparently not listed in Maškur's ed., p. 50; the report recalls Aśoka's stomach ailment in the story of Kuṇāla, which exhibits numerous similarities with that of Kay Kāvus and Siāvaš; see Skjærvø, 1998).

After the destruction of the city, according to Bal'ami (ed. Bahār, p. 600), Kay Kāvus became unhappy and obsessive about going up to heaven to see heaven, the stars, the sun, and the moon. He made a magical machine (*ṭelasm*), by means of which he and several of his men rose up, but the ropes of the machine broke when they reached the clouds, and they fell down and died, all except Kay Kāvus. According to Ṭabari (I/2, p. 602; tr., IV, pp. 5-6), he became worried about his kingship and refused to eat and drink (*tanāwol*) "anything unless it reached him by ascent to heaven." According to another authority cited by Ṭabari (I/2, p. 603; tr., IV, p. 6), Kay Qāvus came to Babylon from Ḳorāsān, and, not content with his earthly command, he wanted to know about the heavens, the planets, and what was beyond them. God enabled him and his followers to rise as far as the clouds, then let them fall down. After this, war ravaged his kingdom. Ebn al-Balkī (ed. Le Strange and Nicholson, p. 42) simply notes that he became inclined toward drinking wine and partying, and his neighboring enemies took advantage to attack him, the fortunes of war going back and forth.

Kay Qāvus then attacked Yemen, whose king defeated him with a force of Himyarites and others, destroyed his army, took him prisoner, and threw him



in a pit, but he was rescued by Rostam, coming from Sejestān. Fearful of what might happen in the war, the Yemenites released Kay Qāvus, who returned with Rostam to Babylon and bestowed the lands of Sejestān and Zābolestān on him (Ṭabari, I/2, pp. 603-4; tr., IV, pp. 5-7; a slightly different version by Balāmi, ed. Bahār, pp. 601-2).

Masʿudi (sec. 542) briefly narrates that Kay Qāvus was the first to move from Iraq to Balk and that he built a building in Iraq in order to battle the heavens. The Yemenite king, Šammer Yarʿaš, marched against him, took him captive, and put him in jail. Yarʿaš's daughter, Soʿdā, fell for him and eased his captivity until he was delivered by Rostam. He returned home with Soʿdā, who gave birth to Siāvaxš (cf. Meybodi, V, p. 38, where Zolaykā's mother is said to be queen of Yaman). Masʿudi also credits him with founding the city of Kašmir in India (sec. 555).

Ṭāʿālebi is typically more detailed and rationalizes the mythical features of the narrative. He comments on Kay Kāvus's variable temperament, ranging from violent tyrant to irreproachable king, and that he made disastrous decisions but was saved by good fortune (pp. 154-55). He is no longer associated with devils, although Satan may have incited him to his Yemenite campaign (p. 157). The king and his generals were entombed in a ditch covered with a stone (also Ebn al-Balkī, ed. Le Strange and Nicholson, p. 42), and he was visited by the king's daughter Sudāna (Ṭāʿālebi, pp. 159-60). After chasing Afrāsiāb from Ray back to Transoxiana (Mā Warāʾ al-Nahr), he went to inspect Fars before returning to Balk. He appointed Rostam *sepahbed* of Nimruz, Zābolestān, and Hend (Ṭāʿālebi, pp. 163-64). He built his tower in Babylon (400 cubits tall), a story which Ṭāʿālebi, apparently, connected with that of the Tower of Babel. Its various materials were stone, iron, brass, silver, and gold. It is again Satan who confuses the king, making him think that he was god, and decide to mount up to heaven in order to rule both heaven and earth. His transport was four eagles (also Ebn al-Balkī, ed. Le Strange and Nicholson, pp. 40-41; ed. Behruzi, p. 49), which he had raised for the purpose (cf. Eagle Mountain, where he sacrifices in *Yašt* 5.45). As incitement to fly ever higher, he attached pieces of meat around the seat, just out of their range, with the result that they were famished when they reached heaven, as well as having their feathers burned (reminiscent of Daedalus.) They descended again, setting the king down in Sirāf, since he asked for milk and water (*šir āb*). Here, Ebn al-Balkī (p. 41) apparently retains the memory of the *divs* obliquely by commenting that passing through the air and reaching heaven are fantasies of madmen



(*divānagān*).

Ṭa'ālebi tells us that the king again survived in order that Siāvaš might be born and, in due time, sire Kay Kōsrā (i.e., Kay Kōsrow). The people of Sirāf carried him back to Babylon on a litter pulled by mules. Here he devoted himself to god, his splendor reappeared, and he remounted the throne (pp. 165-67). The story of Siāvaš is told at great length, concluding with Rostam bringing the news of his death and Suḍāna's treachery to Kay Kāvus, who is shattered and dies (p. 212).

In the Šāh-nāma. Tempted by a *div* masquerading as a minstrel and inspired by pride, but against the advice of his counselors, notably Zāl, Kay Kāvus leads a disastrous campaign against Māzandarān and the white *div* (Div-e Safid), who showers the Iranian army with stones and darts from the sky, which blind them all. Hoping to have taught the enemy a lesson, pointing out that they brought disaster upon themselves, the *div* returns home, while Kay Kāvus and his troops remain in custody. Zāl then sends Rostam to free the king and take revenge on the *div*, and there follow the seven feats of Rostam (see [HAFT K'ĀN](#)). At the end of Rostam's one-man exploit, the *divs* are dead, the king freed, and his troops' sight restored by three drops of the white *div's* blood. He sends a letter to the king of Māzandarān with a demand to subject himself to Iran, which the *div* refuses. Rostam himself is then sent to the *div*, who tries to tempt him into changing allegiance, which Rostam refuses to do, whereupon Kay Kāvus himself again goes against the *divs*. For seven days, the army is overwhelmed by the enemy, until, on the eighth day, Kāvus beseeches god for victory. During the battle, the king of Māzandarān turns himself into a stone, which Rostam carries to Kāvus. When Rostam threatens to break it asunder, the *div* materializes again and is finally slain, and Kāvus returns to Pārs (ed. Khaleghi, II, pp. 3-65; ed. Mohl, I, pp. 486-569; tr., II, pp. 27-78).

Kay Kāvus then journeys throughout his realm, all the way to Turān, China (Čin), and Makrān and the sea, and goes on a campaign against Barbarestān, whose resistance is easily broken, and to Mount Qāf, imposing tribute and new laws. He then crosses the sea to fight the Arab Hamāvarān, whose king soon surrenders, and Kāvus marries his daughter Sudāba. The king of Hāmāvarān, however, plots to imprison Kāvus, who is warned by Sudāba but disregards her warning and is taken prisoner together with his army leaders and is joined by Sudāba/Sudāva (ed. Khaleghi, II, pp. 67-80; ed. Mohl, II, pp. 4-21; tr., II, pp. 82-91).



During the ensuing jostling for the throne, Afrāsiāb invades Iran and is joined by the Arabs, whom, however, he then enslaves. Rostam writes to the king of Hamāvarān (who disregards his warning) and leads an army to free Kāvus. The king surrenders and hands over Kāvus and his men, who return to Iran and chase Afrāsiāb (ed. Khaleghi, II, pp. 80-93; ed. Mohl, I, pp. 20-39; tr., II, pp. 91-101).

Kāvus then orders the world and rules with justice. He has the *divs* build two mansions made of crystal for him on Mount Alborz, which he uses as pleasure houses. He also has them make a palace of gold, which was exempt from the passing of the seasons, there being only spring. Seeing the hardship perpetrated on the *divs*, Eblis tempts Kāvus to ascend to the sky and add it to his realm. He raises four eagles, which are attached to his throne and carry him skyward. Unable to reach beyond the clouds and having been exhausted, they carry him back down, and he lands, unharmed, in Āmol, where a *siāvoš* (duck or goose; see Schapka, pp. 137-38) appears to provide him with sustenance and keep him alive (cf. the *Dēnkard* story, above). Found and returned home by his men, Kāvus repents and returns to his just rule (ed. Khaleghi, II, pp. 93-101; ed. Mohl, II, pp. 38-51; tr., II, pp. 101-6).

Mirkvānd comments that the story is exceedingly improbable, since everybody knew that it was impossible to ascend to heaven without the assistance of Jebra'il and [Borāq](#) (I, p. 681; tr., p. 243).

There follow the stories of Rostam's battle with Afrāsiāb and of Rostam and Sohrāb; the story of Siāvaḵš and Sudāba; the departure of Siavaš to Turān and his marriage with Afrāsiāb's daughter, Farangis; the killing of Siavaš by Gorvi (see [KARSIVAZ](#)); and the birth of Kay Ḳosrow. After Rostam kills Sudāba, Afrāsiāb sends Kay Ḳosrow to Khotan to Siāvašgerd (see below); Gēv searches for him, finds him, and brings him before Kay Kāvus. He is set on the throne and greeted as king and, after capturing [Dež-e Bahman](#) (see also [FARIBORZ](#)), is also crowned (ed. Khaleghi, rest of II; ed. Mohl, I, pp. 50-557; tr., II, pp. 107-412).

Battles with the Turkmen rage on. Kay Kāvus and Kay Ḳosrow go to the temple of Āzargošasp to worship god in the hope of finding Afrāsiāb. Afrāsiāb is finally captured by Hum, but he escapes into [Lake Čččast](#), is recaptured by Hum, and, brought before Kay Ḳosrow, who kills him. Kay Kāvus and Kay Ḳosrow return to the temple of Ādargošasp to give thanks. Kay Ḳosrow returns home, then goes back to the temple of Ādargošasp to visit Kāvus together with



a throng of people making merry, and stays until his grandfather dies (ed. Khaleghi, IV, pp. 311-27; ed. Mohl, IV, pp. 192-215; tr., IV, pp. 258-72).

Immortality. According to the *Bundahišn*, the water from the springs in his mansion conquered old age (and death), and he who entered the house through one door as an old man would come out the other door as a youth of fifteen (*Bundahišn* 32.11). In the *Dēnkard* version, those debilitated by old age, if they managed to reach his mansions and circumambulated them, would be rejuvenated (*Dēnkard* 9.22.4). According to Biruni (1887, pp. 94-95; 1958, pp. 154-55; tr., I, p. 193), Esfandiād, when dying, had said that Kāvus, in his old age, went to Mount Qāf and, by the power of the things mentioned in the *ketāb al-dīn*, returned a young man in a chariot of clouds.

Predecessors of the Kay Us narrative. Friedrich Spiegel, followed by Martin Haug, may have been the first to point out the identity of his name with that of the Old Indic Kāvya Uśānas (Spiegel, 1852, I, p. 8; Haug, 1862, pp. 235-36; idem, 1884, pp. 278-79), an identification that was later contested (Bartholomae, *AirWb.*, col. 406) or ignored (Geldner: no mention; see Jamison, pp. 125-26). In the *Rigveda*, Uśānas is the prototype of those who proclaim the poetic art (*kāvya*); and even the divine Soma, uttering the births/generations (*jānimā*) of the gods, is compared with him (*Rigveda* 9.97.9; Jamison, chap. 4). The similarities between the Indic and Iranian figures in the later traditions were discussed at length by Georges Dumézil (1986, part two), who argued that they were originally sorcerers, rather than priests or kings, functions ascribed to them in the later traditions. In his discussion, Dumézil investigated every aspect of the Kāvus narratives in detail (see the critique in Jamison, chap. 4).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See at end of [KAYĀNIĀN XIV. THE KAYANIDS IN WESTERN HISTORIOGRAPHY](#).