12. Rustam shoots Ashkabūs (145b)

Though besieged, and Kay Khusraw summons Rustam and requires him to reinforce the army of Iran. The Turanian army is also reinforced by the Khāqān of Chūn. A warrior named Kāmūs wounds Gīv. Rustam arrives by night with forces from Zābulistān. In the morning, Ashkabūs, a haughty champion of Turān, calls for a warrior of Iran to meet him in combat. Rahām takes up the challenge but, his helmet smashed, he is forced to retire. Tūs would have followed him, but Rustam intervenes and takes the field on foot. Ashkabūs is astonished and asks Rustam his name. Rustam evades the question, issues his own taunting challenge, and shoots Ashkabūs’s horse. Ashkabūs replies with a volley of arrows. Rustam selects an arrow of great size fletched with eagle’s feathers, and sets it to the bow:

‘The shot took Ashkabūs full in the chest:
Rustam’s the hand, but heaven’s kiss
the rest’.

The Khāqān and Kāmūs admire the stature of the Iranian warrior and the size of the mighty arrow. Fīrān cannot enlighten them as to who this champion of Iran might be who outclasses Tūs and Gīv.

This is the first illustration to show an action in the context of confronted armies. Figures are more numerous than heretofore, and it may be that Rustam is now adorned in a cap of snow-leopard skin to make him more distinctive. Under a sky with rather naturalistic clouds, the landscape is used to structure the scene. The painter takes the relatively unusual course of making the foreground darker than the background. The mauve foreground encompasses the combat and the army of Turān: suggestive of rock in shadow, it here bespeaks a hostile zone, while vertical ridges behind Rustam lend urgency, suggesting that there is no escape and he must prevail or die. The central focus is the dialogue of the two bows: Ashkabūs has loosed an arrow that has failed to take effect; Rustam sights his shot with extreme concentration. The forces of Turān form a dense phalanx along the right margin, and are seen from behind at the lower edge. By contrast, the army of Iran is in a zone of light coral colour, which conveys warmth. Their standard waves, its chinoiserie design surmounted by the legend: al-mulk al-‘izz wa l-qafar, ‘dominion, honour and victory’. Their trumpet gives sound. Furthermore, the Iranians turn to the viewer faces that have touches of individuality. Framed in the central col are fear, resolution, and amazement. The use of such a rocky frame to isolate a group of watchers is already present in ‘Hunayn kills the demon sorcerer’ in Iskandar’s Anthology Add. 27261 (pl. 14). The fines and faces of this Shāhnāma appear to have a legacy in a copy of the Khamsah of Amir Khusrau Dihlavi in sub-Herat style of 1504 (British Library, Or. 11527).