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Firdawsi: A Scholium

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Hakim Abu’l-Qasim Mansur b. al-Hasan al-Firdawsi al-Tusi (ca. 940/41-ca. 1020/25), a middle-ranking aristocrat recognised by his nom de plume, Firdawsi (‘paradisiacal’), was a central figure in the history of classical Persian literature. His monumental epic poem, Shahnama (‘Book of Kings’), conjures Homeric as well as Miltonic associations to the Iranian mind thus ensuring him a niche in the universal literary canon. This mytho-poetic masterpiece, dealing with Persian legendary and recorded history from the first man to the Arab conquest in AD 652, has been continuously read, recited, remembered, and re-enacted across the Iranian-speaking oecumene straddling West, Central and South Asia for over a millennium. Starting from the nineteenth century, a virtual school of Shahnama studies has flourished as successive generations of scholars interpreted and contextualised the text in published abridgements, translations and new editions. Animated productions of Rustam’s adventures, as those of Hercules, are keenly enjoyed by adults and children in contemporary Iran and the diaspora.

Although Firdawsi dedicated his work to Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (r. 998-1030), his life was spent in the town of Tus, Khurasan, away from the courts of princes and paladins. For almost a generation, about thirty years, he quietly worked on his magnum opus and interspersed it with brief vignettes of his personal life for the reader. As Shahpur Shahbazi has noted:

Much has been written on Ferdowsī and his work, but even learned studies have given inharmonious results for the simple reasons that our sources are late, uncritical and contradictory, and that … [t]he best authority is the Šāhnāma itself as the poet frequently breaks his narrative to insert a few lines about his age, work and thoughts.

Firdawsi belonged to the traditional squirearchy or dihqan class emotively tied to its land and ancient Persian culture. His family most probably converted to Islam a few generations earlier thus making him heir to a hybrid Perso-Islamic civilisation. Firdawsi’s pride in pre-Islamic Persia, however, did not imply that he was an expert on ancient history or retained more than a superficial knowledge of the former imperial Zoroastrian faith.

Scholarly consensus contends that the Shahnama was predicated on oral and written sources, both of which were available to Firdawsi. Its antecedents lie in a legendary and quasi-historical Iranian worldview, the Khwaday-namag or ‘Book of Lords’, a ‘compendium of moral and philosophical injunctions as delivered through the Persian poetical imagination’ which connoted ‘the earliest fictive renarration of a legendary history that puts the poetic occasion at the service of the ideological legitimation of the state apparatus and the Persian court.’ Written in (Zoroastrian or Book) Pahlavi towards the end of the Sasanian era, it was translated into Arabic as the Siyar al-muluk and several redactions appeared before the poet, Daqiqi (d. 977), Firdawsi’s immediate model, with ‘pulses, like Marlowe’s’ had attempted a New Persian versified version whose completion was interrupted by his murder. Daqiqi’s composition, those ‘few bugle notes which he had just begin to sound’ was the ‘herald of Firdausi’, who ploughed additional written and oral sources to begin ‘sowing the seeds of his words’ into this monumental endeavour around 980. He was about 71 years old when he finished it in some 60,000 couplets in 994 and, when aged 80, added a completion note dated February 25, 1010 to this final, revised version. Semi-legendary narratives and histories of pre-Islamic Iran, admittedly, are interpolated in the epic though inasmuch as Firdawsi sought not to compose a comprehensive account of that civilisation, ‘the bulk of this epic had become attached to the most representative expression of Iranian thinking, which is the one recorded in Zoroastrian writings.’ It is indeed puzzling that he completely left out important figures such as Cyrus the Great or the archer Arash. But then the epic is episodic and by focusing on select epochs does skim down the ages wherein Mazdean evocations ‘make the story more explicitly
human, almost as if freed of [Islamic] divine sanctions or moral standards, and hence makes the heroic deeds themselves more identifiably human in their passion and motivation. It merits no reiteration that ‘mythological’ and ‘heroic’ tales from the epic recounting the reign of legendary sovereigns such as Kayumars and Jamshid, and the heroic exploits of Rustam, Suhrab, Isfandyar and Siyavash, were and still are the most often recited and reminisced. Dick Davis recently observed:

As with the Achaemenids, the historical record of the Parthians, who ruled Iran from the third century B.C.E. until the third C.E., is largely absent from the poem; this is almost certainly due to the success of the Sasanians in deliberately obliterating the memory of the dynasty they replaced.

This is also evinced in the famous abridgement of the epic in seventeenth-century Mughal India where the large so-called ‘historical’ section of the *Shahnama* was left out altogether by Tawakkul Beg in his *Tarikh-i Shamshirkhani*. And it was this rendition, which formed the basis of almost all Indic translations of the Persian original, including the Urdu, Gujarati and Punjabi versions that appeared in the nineteenth century.

The poetical and philosophical influences of the *Shahnama* have been profound on later Persian and Persianate literatures. One of Firdawsi’s aims in crafting his verses was to revivify the language of ‘ajam (Iran) which, following the triumph of Islam, had become Arabicised. A heroic hymnist and national narrator, Firdawsi, the ‘resurrector of Iranian national identity and people’ (*zinda kunanda-yi milliyat va nizhad-i Iran*) artfully culled the disparate memories of a gracious past steeped in valour, justice, pleasure, love, tragedy, and redemption so that his subjugated kinsmen might hearken to a ‘frank call to the good old days and ways, full of battles and marvels, but also of touching passages of charity and tenderness shown equally to friend and foe.’ Firdawsi masterfully ‘shades off a melodramatic situation until it becomes firmly integrated in the commonplace; and how he relieves, for those who will accept such relief, solemnity and high drama with the ironical, and sometimes even with the comic.’ With a moral compass directed at the transitory glories and atrocities of the human condition, Firdawsi’s empathic imaginings earned him a reception among universal epicists. Although a Muslim, he appears to have harboured a disdain for the Arabs and lamented their annexation and sacking of his homeland. Composed in Dari, henceforth the literary medium of New Persian, the *Shahnama* is not entirely devoid of Arabic barring ‘uncommon Arabic words which the poet avoids’ for he was ‘simply writing in the language current in his native Khorāsān.’ And yet, tellingly, the Arabic lexeme in its limited corpus most frequently encountered is *gham* (‘grief’) revealing Firdawsi’s relentless upholding of the good, despite his overall pessimism, against the implacability of fate.

The *Shahnama* gave rise to a few spin-off epics composed in the same metre and style about the adventures of characters who are either minor or absent in Firdawsi’s text, such as *Faramarznama*, *Borzunama*, and one on Rustam’s daughter, *Banu Gushaspnama*. Timurid, Safavid, Mughal and Ottoman panegyrists would later versify the conquests of their patron-kings in similar paeans. Such *Shahnama*-modeled *masnavis* also celebrated the deeds of living monarchs who, as patrons, purposefully integrated it with the epic tradition in order to bolster their legitimacy. Indeed an imperial office for such writers of Persian-language *Shahnama* or *shahnama-gu* was to be found for a while at the Sublime Porte.

Firdawsi’s complex ideas on the capricious working of fate and the cyclical nature of time also exerted an influence on Persian poets and writers, classical and contemporary, in all kinds of innovative ways. The production of *Shahnama* manuscripts also went hand in hand with the history of Persian painting, especially the illuminated arts of the book. Some of the most exquisite Islamic miniatures – the acme of Muslim fine arts – are to be found in sumptuous manuscripts of the epic produced in royal ateliers, especially of the Timurid and Safavid dynasties.

In India, the K R Cama Oriental Institute has consistently promoted academic research and public interest in Firdawsi’s *Shahnama*. The earliest work to be published by the Institute, after its inception in...
1916, was Theodor Nöldeke’s, *The Iranian National Epic, or, The Shahnamah*. Following this rapidly acknowledged classic treatment, the Institute next published Sir J C Coyajee, *Studies in Shāhnāmeh* (Bombay, 1939 = *Journal of the K R Cama Oriental Institute*, Volume 33). This was a collection of six essays on comparative theology and mythology based on the author’s Government Fellowship Lectures delivered a year earlier, in 1938, at the Institute. Among several initiatives to commemorate the Institute’s Platinum Jubilee celebrations in December, 1991 was an English edition of Arthur Christensen’s *Les Gestes des Rois dans les Traditions de l‘Iran Antique* (Paris, 1936), that Danish Iranist’s four Bai Ratanbai Katrak Lectures delivered at the Sorbonne in Paris, 1934. This important work was now disseminated to a wider readership when the Institute commissioned a translation from the London-based Parsi scholar, Farrokh Vajifdar, *The Epic of the Kings in Ancient Iranian Traditions* (Bombay, 1991; repr. 1996). Earlier in the year, the Institute organised a ‘Firdaosi Festival’ in February, 1991, and anticipated by a decade, anniversaries convened during 2010-12 to mark the millennium of the completion of the epic. Two years later also appeared Arthur Christensen’s *Les Kayanides* (Copenhagen, 1931) as translated by F N Tumboowalla, *The Kayanians* (Bombay, 1993).


Exactly a decade on, in recognition of *Shahnama* millennium, an international seminar, the sole South Asian initiative, was held at the Institute in Bombay (Mumbai), 8-9 January, 2011. This brought together a truly diverse group of scholars from across disciplines some of whose papers are now presented herein. Those read in Bombay by other delegates have been separately published in Olga Davidson and Marianna Shreve Simpson (eds.), *Ferdowsi’s Shāhnāma: Millennial Perspectives* (Boston, 2013). Two contributions reprinted therefrom here are those of Firuza Melville and the co-editor of this volume, Sunil Sharma.

The first study in this collection, ‘The *Shāhnāma* Manuscript Tradition: The Next 1000 Years?’, was the keynote address delivered by Charles Melville. It affords a survey of *Shahnama* studies and highlights various conferences and exhibitions organised around the world to accompany earlier landmark dates and the millennium of the completion of the work. Melville also discusses the *Cambridge Shahnama* project, a database and an invaluable resource for scholars and students of manuscript illustrations of the text. The next four papers are broadly concerned with pre-Islamic Persian elements conspicuous in the epic. In ‘Parthian Heritage-Persian Culture: How the *Shahnama* became the Persian “national” epic’, Albert de Jong foregrounds the national setting of this text by examining the ‘Parthian’ or northeast background, a *communis opinio* although adumbrated but unanalysed until now. Kolsoum Ghazanfar’s ‘Ahriman and diwš in the *Shahnama*’, after marshalling all attestations of the arch fiend and his acolytes, distinguishes their roles and functions in Mazdean cosmology and, once Islamically rehabilitated, in the epic’s schemata. A brief overview of that world conqueror who straddles the mythological-heroic and historical divide, Sikandar or Iskandar in the Persian tradition, is discussed in ‘Alexander in the *Shahnama*’ by Syed Akhtar Husain. S A Hasan’s ‘The Rise of the Simurgh in the *Shahnama*’ comments on the background and history of the mythological bird that plays an important role in the Persian epic.

The next two papers deal with the manuscript tradition in India. In ‘The Production of Mughal *Shahnamehs*: Imperial, Sub-Imperial, and Provincial Manuscripts’, Sunil Sharma discusses the place of Firdawsi’s epic in the culture of Mughal India, as gift and collectible object, and ultimately a book of stories. In ‘Some Rare *Shahnama* Manuscripts Preserved at Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library
Imtiaz Ahmad, the director of this library, describes the codicological features of some important Shahnama manuscripts, both illustrated and non-illustrated copies, in one of the most important Persian collections in India. Four papers are on the larger topic of the ‘Influence of Firdawsi’s Shahnama on the Panj Ganj of Nizami’, by Sabar Havewalla; ‘The Shāhnāma cycle and the Digenes Akritas epic novel’, by Evangelos Venetis; ‘The Legend of Siyāvosh or the Legend of Yusof?’, by Firuza Melville; and ‘An Annotated Micro-history and Bibliography of the Houghton Shahnama’, by Burzine Waghmar. Havewalla provides a comparative-contrastive survey of three protagonists of Firdawsi’s epic as reflected in Nizami’s enduring quintet. Venetis examines, based on internal evidence in the Byzantino-Seljuq epic narrative, near similar depictions of martial men and women with its Persian counterpart which, given temporal and spatial propinquity, cannot be entirely ruled out; and Melville explicates, on the basis of painted and poetic sources, the seductive wiles of women as depicted in the liaisons of Yusuf-Zulaykha and Siyavush-Sudaba, and how Firdawsi came to be attributed as the versifier of another composition on the former, whose original narrative stretches back to initially Biblical, and subsequently, Qur’anic origins. Waghmar brings down the curtain on the twentieth century by detailing a Firdawsian tragedy of hubris and avarice with the acquisition and dispersal of arguably the most important illuminated codex of this epic in the possession of the late Arthur Houghton, Jr.

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The following bibliographical notes, admittedly prolix, are with a view to providing the student of Shahnama and Persian studies, in South and Central Asia but particularly present-day Iran, a fin-de-siècle survey of the extant literature in primarily English sources. Scholars elsewhere, in keeping with the millennial commemorative, will hopefully not disregard this raisonné.


3 The Stand der Forschung on all aspects of Shahnama studies is likely to be Heroic Epic: The Shahnameh and its Legacy, A History of Persian Literature IV, London and New York, (in work).

4 For just such a readership is Mahmoud Omidsalar, Iran’s epic and America’s empire: a handbook for a generation in limbo, Santa Monica CA, 2012.


7 An instance of Firdawsi’s doctrinal conformity with a now islamised Persia is evinced when Isfandiyar embarked for his showdown and eventual death at the hands of Rustam. Dismissing the ominous obduracy of his camel which refused to budge on the road towards Zabul, he exclaimed: ‘A noble warrior whose audacity/Lights up the world and brings him victory/Laughs at both good and evil, since he knows/Both came from God whom no one can oppose.’ The attribution of both
goodness and malevolence to a single godhead was anathema to Mazdean, not Muslim, dogma. How ironic then that Isfandfyar, the epic’s Zoroastrian zealot, is declaiming it. See Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Rostam: Tales of Love and War from the Shahnameh*, Dick Davis (tr. and introd.), Washington DC, 2007; London, 2009, p 210.


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20 Mahmoud Omidsalar, Poetics and Politics of Iran’s National Epic, The Shāhān̄me, Literatures and Cultures of the Islamic World, New York, 2011, pp 47ff., rightly reminds that the lemma Shahnama, in the first place, was deployed for narrative fables of kings and heroes even prior
to Firdawsi: the *Shahnama* of Abu Ali Muhammad b. Ahmad of Balkh; the prose *Shahnama-yi buzurg* or ‘Great *Shahnama*’ of the first half of the tenth century by Abu al-Muayyad of Balkh; and the prose *Shahnama* of Abu Mansur Asadi-Tusi completed in AD 957.


27 H N Modi, ‘History and Activities of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute’, in *Platinum Jubilee Volume: K R Cama Oriental Institute*, Bombay, 1991, p 9. Enactments of the life and times of Suhrab-Rustum, a perennially popular theme, were performed by students from the neighbouring Campion School and The Cathedral & John Connon High School. It might be pointed out here that Behramgore Anklesaria and Jamshed Unvala, two Parsi *Pahlavisants*, were part of the Indian delegation at the Ferdowsi Millenary Celebration of the imperial Persian government. An international congress of Iranists convened at Tehran’s Dar al-Funun, October 1-4, 1934 followed by a closing ceremony at Firdawsi’s tombstone, Tus, October 12, 1934. A bronze statue of the
poet, the first initiative of its kind in the nationalist period, was donated by Bombay’s Parsis and installed in the presence of Riza Shah Pahlavi. It is now in the courtyard of the Faculty of Letters, Tehran University. Anklesaria was the then joint honorary secretary of this Institute (1925-44) as subsequently was Unvala (1945-54). Anklesaria, however, had visited Persia even earlier when he presented a casket to Shah Riza Pahlavi on behalf of Indian Parsis and lectured on Zoroastrian topics to audiences nationally. A Gujarati account of that sojourn was authored by his wife who accompanied him in 1930. See Mehrbanu Anklesaria, *Pahalvi Iran ma musafiri, khas chitron sahit* [*Travels in Pahlavi Iran: with illustrations*], Bombay, 1932, and Marashi, *art. cit.*, 2009, p 109. Public recitals of the *Shahnama* in Bombay were also held on the occasion of the 2,500 anniversary celebrations of Cyrus the Great by school children as well as adults. See Jehangir Shroff, ‘Report of “Cyrus The Great” 2500th Anniversary Celebrations Week’, in *Kuruš Memorial Volume Bombay: Essays on Indology and Indo-Iran Relations in memory of CYRUS* celebration held in the city of Bombay on the 2500th anniversary of the Foundation of the Persian Empire, Bombay, 1974, pp xxv-xxvi. This was a joint publication of the Iran Cultural House, Indo-Iranian Cultural Society and the K R Cama Oriental Institute. Following these global celebrations, a Foundation for Shahnama Studies was established under the direction of the renowned scholar, educationist and man-of-letters, Mujtaba Minuvi, in Tehran, 1972, see Shahbazi, *op. cit.*, p 17.


29 For the Persian edition see *Dibacha-yi Shahnama*, Jahangir Afkari (tr.), Tehran, 1966; republished as *Dibacha-yi Shahnama-yi Firdawsi*, Los Angeles, 1989.