

The Shahnamah

The Shahnamah, "the Book of Kings," is the Iranian national epic outlining the four mythical/historical eras of pre-Islamic Iran: the Pishdadian, Kayanian, Ashkanians, and Sassanians. Many of the episodes of the Shahnamah have existed for thousands of years within the Iranian world's oral tradition, but it was first written by the poet Abu al-Qasim Firdowsi in the late tenth century in present-day Central Asia. The hymns of the Avesta (Yasts), for example, make reference to several the figures in the Shahnamah. Many early Arab and Persian historians make reference to books dealing with the stories of various Iranian heros and kings, and we also know of a prose text in Pahlavi called the Book of Kings (Xwaday-namag). Writing in the first half of the 10th cent., Hamza Isfahani notes that there were more than 10,000 folios written in "Persian script" narrating historical, heroic, and romantic traditions. There also exists a fragment of the Rustam cycle in Sogdian, though it is in poor condition, and these stories were likely extant in other Iranian languages.

Ferdowsi's sources include "an old book," most likely the "Persian scripts" referred to above, as well as the works of his contemporaries and oral informants. The first to undertake the versification of this chronicle of pre-Islamic and legendary Persia was Daqiqi, a poet at the court of the Samanids. Daqiqi passed away having completed only 1000 verses (his verses deal with the rise of the prophet Zoroaster and the reign of King Goshtasp). Ferdowsi incorporated Daqiqi's lines into his poem with an acknowledgement. The poet began work on the Shahnamah in 975-76, seeking out a prose version of the Shahnamah of Abd al-Razzaq in Bukhara (apparently the same text that Daqiqi used as a reference) as his source. He never made it to the Samanid capital, as another version of the text was brought to his city. Ferdowsi worked under the patronage of Mansur Muhammad for quite some

time. Mansur was eventually executed, though Ferdowsi continued his work, and the poet later sought the support of Shah Mahmud of Ghazna to little avail. Nonetheless, Ferdowsi completed Shahnamah—some 50-60,000 verses ("bayts," each one being made up of two hemistiches, "misra")—and it is now the definitive text of Persian epic literature. The first illustrated Shahnamah was probably commissioned in the Mongol period (the earliest known illustrated texts dating from around 1300). The production of illustrated copies continues to this day.

As one would imagine, there are many different themes in the Shahnamah. The earliest sections tackle the formation of human society and the definition of an Iranian cultural and geographical sphere. The central section primarily incorporates the 'Sistan cycle' of legends about Rostam and the wars with the lands of Turan, Iran's traditional rival. As Melville points out, these sections are based on many mythical structures and can be understood as a continuum with the earlier sections.

The historical section is not straight history, but rather a collection of stories referencing known historical events. It begins with Alexander the Great (Iskandar), which should come as no surprise as the Alexander cycle was extremely popular and far-reaching in the pre-modern period. The Alexander narrative is followed by a brief treatment of the Parthians (Ashkanians), who are treated as interlopers to the Iranian royal tradition. The events of the Sasanian dynasty follow, with the last sections of the Ferdowsi's Epic centering on the murder of the Sasanian ruler Yazdagird III.

Further readings and resources:

Shahnama Project. <http://www.oriental.cam.ac.uk/shah/>.

De Blois, F. "Epics," in Encyclopaedia Iranica, (New York, 1999).

Dick Davis. 1992. Epic and sedition. The case of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press.

Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, "Ferdowsi, Abu'l-Qasem, Life," in Encyclopaedia Iranica X (New York, 1999).

Shahbazi, A.S. 1991. Ferdowsi: A critical biography. Cambridge: Harvard University Middle Eastern Center.

E. Yarshater, "Iranian National History", in The Cambridge History of Iran, vol. 3, (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 359-477.