

# Shahnameh

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Monument of [Ferdowsi](#) on his memorial square in [Tehran](#). At the feet of the poet the heroes of his epic *Shahnameh*: future hero [Zal](#) and bird [Simurgh](#).

**Shāhnāmé**, or **Shāhnāma** (Persian: شاهنامه) (alternative spellings are *Shahnama*, *Shahnameh*, *Shahname*, *Shah-Nama*, etc.) is an enormous poetic opus written by the [Persian poet Ferdowsi](#) around 1000 AD and is the [national epic](#) of [Iran](#). The Shāhnāmeh tells the [mythical](#) and [historical](#) past of [Iran](#) from the creation of the world up until the Islamic conquest of Persia in the 7th century.

Aside from its literary importance, the Shāhnāmeh, written in almost pure Persian unmixed with [adoptions](#) from [Arabic](#), has been pivotal for reviving the Persian language after the massive influence of Arabic. This voluminous work, regarded by Persian speakers as a literary masterpiece, also reflects Persia's history, cultural values, ancient religions ([Zoroastrianism](#)), and profound sense of nationhood. Ferdowsi completed the Shāhnāmeh when national independence had been compromised. While there are memorable heroes and heroines of the classical type in this work, the real, ongoing hero is Persia itself. It is thus an important book for Iran.

This book is also important to the remaining 200,000 Zoroastrians, because the Shāhnāmeh traces the history of [Zoroastrian](#) religion from its beginnings up to the defeat of the last Zoroastrian king by Arab invaders.

Illustrated copies of the work are among the most sumptuous examples of [Persian miniature painting](#). Several copies remain intact, although two of the most famous, the

*Houghton Shahnameh* and the *Great Mongol Shahnameh*, were broken up for sheets to be sold separately in the 20th century. A single sheet from the former (now Aga Khan Museum) was sold for £904,000 in 2006.



There is an ongoing controversy among scholars about the sources of the Shâhnameh. Ferdowsi's [epic](#) is probably based mainly on an earlier prose version which itself was a compilation of old Persian stories and historical facts and fables. However, there is without any doubt also a strong influence of oral literature, since the style of the Shahnameh shows characteristics of both written and oral literature. Some of the characters of the Epic are of [Indo-Iranian](#) heritage, and are mentioned in sources as old as the ancient [Avesta](#) and even the [Rig Veda](#). The Shâhnameh itself was written in [Pahlavi Persian](#), which at the time was looking towards a bleak end.

The Shâhnameh of Ferdowsi, an [epic](#) poem of over 50,000 [couplets](#), is based mainly on a prose work of the same name compiled in the poet's earlier life in his native [Tus](#). This prose Shâhnameh was in turn and for the most part the translation of a Pahlavi work, a compilation of the history of the kings and heroes of Persia from mythical times down to the reign of [Khosrau II](#) (590-628), but it also contains additional material continuing the story to the overthrow of the [Sassanids](#) by the Arabs in the middle of the 7th century. The first to undertake the versification of this chronicle of pre-Islamic and legendary Persia was [Daqīqī-e Balkhī](#), a poet at the court of the [Samanids](#), who came to a violent end after completing only 1000 verses. These verses, which deal with the rise of the prophet [Zoroaster](#), were afterward incorporated by Ferdowsi, with due acknowledgments, in his own poem.

Ferdowsi started his composition of the Shahnameh in the [Samanid](#) era in 977 A.D and completed it around 1010 A.D. during the [Ghaznavid](#) era.

The Shâhnameh recounts the [history of Persia](#), beginning with the creation of the world and the introduction of the arts of civilization (fire, cooking, metallurgy, law) to the [Aryans](#) and ends with the Arab conquest of Persia. The work is not precisely chronological, but there is a general movement through time. Some of the characters live for hundreds of years (as do some of the characters in the [Bible](#)), but most have normal life spans. There are many [shāhs](#) who come and go, as well as heroes and villains, who also come and go. The only lasting images are that of [Greater Persia](#) itself, and a

succession of sunrises and sunsets, no two ever exactly alike, yet illustrative of the passage of time.

*Father Time*, a Saturn-like image, is a reminder of the tragedy of death and loss, yet the next sunrise comes, bringing with it hope of a new day. In the first cycle of creation, evil is external (the devil). In the second cycle, we see the beginnings of family hatred, bad behavior, and evil permeating human nature. Shāh Fereydūn's two eldest sons feel greed and envy toward their innocent younger brother and, thinking their father favors him, they murder him. The murdered prince's son avenges the murder, and all are immersed in the cycle of murder and revenge, blood and more blood.

In the third cycle, we encounter a series of flawed shahs. There is a *Phaedra*-like story of Shāh Kay Kāūs, his wife Sūdāba, and her passion and rejection by her stepson, Sīyāvash.

In the next cycle, all the players are unsympathetic and selfish and evil. This epic on the whole is darker over all than most other epics, most of which have some sort of resolution and catharsis. This tone seems reflective of two things, perhaps: the conquest of the Persians by the Arabs, and a reflection of the last days of Persian Zoroastrianism. The old religion had been fraught with heresies, and somehow Zoroaster's optimistic view of man's ability to choose had become life denying and negative of this world. There is an enormous amount of bad luck and bad fate in the stories.

It is only in the characterizations of the work's many figures, both male and female, that Zoroaster's original view of the human condition comes through. Zoroaster emphasized human free will. We find all of Ferdowsi's characters complex. Nobody is an archetype or a puppet. The best characters have bad flaws, and the worst have moments of humanity.

Ferdowsi was grieved by the fall of the Persian empire and its subsequent rule by Arabs and Turks. The *Shahnameh* is largely his effort to preserve the memory of Persia's golden days and transmit it to a new generation so that they could learn and try to build a better world. Though formally Muslim, the *Shahnameh* nevertheless has a certain anti-Arab and anti-Turk bias.

## **Shâhnameh and its impact on Modern Persian**

After Ferdowsi's *Shâhnameh*, a number of other works similar in nature surfaced over the centuries within the cultural sphere of the Persian language. Without exception, all such works were based in style and method on Ferdowsi's *Shâhnameh*, but none of them could quite achieve the same degree of fame and popularity.

Some experts believe the main reason the Modern Persian language today is more or less the same language as that of Ferdowsi's time over 1000 years ago is due to the very existence of works like Ferdowsi's *Shâhnameh* which have had lasting and profound cultural and linguistic influence. In other words, the *Shâhnameh* itself has become one of the main pillars of the modern Persian language. Studying Ferdowsi's masterpiece also became a requirement for achieving mastery of the Persian language by subsequent Persian poets, as evidenced by numerous references to the *Shâhnameh* in their works.

The *Shâhnameh* has 62 stories, 990 chapters, and some 60,000 rhyming couplets, making it more than seven times the length of Homer's *Iliad*, and more than twelve times the

length of the German [Nibelungenlied](#). There have been a number of English translations, almost all abridged. Mathew Arnold produced one of the first English translations of the story of Rostam and Sohrab.

In 1925, the brothers [Arthur & Edmond Warner](#) published the complete work in nine volumes, now out of print. A recent translation by Dick Davis <sup>[8]</sup> has made this epic poem accessible for English speakers. The translation is a combination of poetry and prose, although it is not the complete translation of the Shahnameh.

## Synopsis

The Shâhnameh is an impressive monument of poetry and [historiography](#), being mainly the poetical recast of what [Ferdowsi](#), his contemporaries, and his predecessors regarded as the account of [Iran's](#) ancient history. Many such accounts already existed in prose, an example being the Shâhnameh of [Abu Mansur Abd-al-Razaq](#). A small portion of Ferdowsi's work, in passages scattered throughout the Shâhnameh, is entirely of his own conception. Added to the vivid descriptions of various scenes and phenomena, these occasional comments expresses his reflection on life, his religious and ethical beliefs and his admiration of virtue, his praise for his patrons, and his references to the sources he used. The rest of the work is divided into three successive parts: the *mythical*, *heroic*, and *historical* ages.

### The mythical age

After an opening in praise of [God](#) and Wisdom, the Shâhnameh gives an account of the creation of the world and of man as believed by the [Sasanians](#). This introduction is followed by the story of the first man, [Keyumars](#), who also became the first king after a period of mountain dwelling. His grandson [Hushang](#), son of [Sīyāmak](#), accidentally discovered fire and established the [Sadeh](#) Feast in its honor. Stories of [Tahmuras](#), [Jamshid](#), [Zahhāk](#), [Kawa](#) or [Kaveh](#), [Fereydūn](#) and his three sons [Salm](#), [Tur](#), and [Iraj](#), and his grandson [Manuchehr](#) are related in this section. This portion of the Shâhnameh is relatively short, amounting to some 2100 verses or four percent of the entire book, and it narrates events with the simplicity, predictability, and swiftness of a historical work. Naturally, the strength and charm of Ferdowsi's poetry have done much to make the story of this period attractive and lively.

### The heroic age

Almost two-thirds of the Shâhnameh is devoted to the age of heroes, extending from Manuchehr's reign until the conquest of [Alexander the Great](#) (Sekandar). The main feature of this period is the major role played by the *Sagzi* ([Saka](#)) or [Sistānī](#) heroes who appear as the backbone of the [Persian Empire](#). [Garshāsp](#) is briefly mentioned with his son [Narimān](#), whose own son [Sām](#) acted as the leading paladin of Manuchehr while reigning in [Sistān](#) in his own right. His successors were his son [Zāl](#) and Zal's son [Rostam](#), the bravest of the brave, and then [Farāmarz](#).

The feudal society in which they lived is admirably depicted in the Shâhnameh with accuracy and lavishness. Indeed, the Masters' descriptions are so vivid and impressive that the reader feels himself participating in the events or closely viewing them. The tone is significantly epic and moving, while the language is extremely rich and varied.

Among the stories described in this section are the romance of Zal and [Rudāba](#), the Seven Stages (or Labors) of Rostam, [Rostam & Sohrāb](#), [Sīyāvash & Sudāba](#), Rostam & Akvān Dīv, the romance of [Bižhan & Manížheh](#), the wars with [Afrāsīyāb](#), [Daqiqi's](#) account of the story of Goshtāsp & Arjāsp, and Rostam & [Esfandyār](#).

It is noteworthy that the legend of [Rostam and Sohrāb](#) is attested only in the *Shâhnameh* and, as usual, begins with a lyrical and detailed prelude. Here Ferdowsi is at the zenith of his poetic power and has become a true master of storytelling. The thousand or so verses of this tragedy comprise one of the most moving tales of world literature.

The historical age

A brief mention of the [Ashkânīyān dynasty](#) follows the history of Alexander and precedes that of [Ardashir I](#), the founder of the [Sassanid dynasty](#). After this, Sassanid history is related with a good deal of accuracy. The fall of the Sassanids and the [Arab conquest of Persia](#) are narrated romantically, and in very moving poetic language. Here, the reader can see Ferdowsi himself lamenting over this catastrophe and over what he calls the arrival of "the army of darkness".

According to Ferdowsi, the final edition of the *Shâhnameh* contained some sixty thousand distichs. But this is a round figure; most of the relatively reliable manuscripts have preserved a little over fifty thousand distiches. [Nezami-e Aruzi](#) reports that the final edition of the *Shâhnameh* sent to the court of Sultan [Mahmud of Ghazni](#) was prepared in seven volumes.

## The *Shâhnameh's* message



Scenes from the *Shâhnameh* carved into reliefs at [Tus](#), where [Ferdowsi](#) is buried.

The epic language is rich, moving and lavish. Personal touches in the *Shâhnameh* prevent it from falling into a dry reproduction of historical narratives. No history has been so eagerly read, so profoundly believed, and so ardently treasured in Iran as has the *Shâhnameh* of Ferdowsi. If a history were ever to influence its readers, the *Shâhnameh* has done and still does so in the finest way. Where many "[Persian](#)" military and religious leaders failed, Ferdowsi succeeded. An example of Ferdowsi's works illustrates his mastery of poetry and brings to the reader's imagination vivid pictures through the power of language: e.g.

Be rooz nabard Aan yal e arj-mand,  
Be Shamsier, Khanjar, be Gorz-o-Kamand,  
Boried-o-Daried-o-Shekasst-o-Basst,  
Yallan-raa Sarr-o-Sieneh-o-Paa-o-Dasst.

(Translation)

On the day of battle that grandiose warrior,

By Sword, Dagger, by Mace and Rope,  
Severed, slivered, shattered, and tied,  
warrior's heads, chest, legs, and hands.

Thus, to such an extent Ferdowsi is confident of his masterpiece's endurance and  
immortality that he versifies in the following couplets:

بناهای آبدادگردد خراب  
زبیران و از تابش آفتاب

پی افکندم از نظم که اخی بلند  
که از باد و بباران نیابد گزند

ماز آن پس نمیرم که من زنده  
که تخم سخن را پراکندم

هر آنکس که دارد هوش و رای و دین  
پس از مرگ بر من کند آفرین

*Banāhāye ābād gardad kharāb*  
*ze bārānō az tābeshē āftāb*

*pay afkandam az nazm kākhī boland*  
*ke az bādō bārān nayābad gazand*

*az ān pas namiram ke man zendeh'am*  
*ke tokhme sokhan rā parākandeh'am*

*har ānkas ke dārad hosh o rāy o din*  
*pas az marg bar man konad āfarin*

"Magnificent Buildings will be destroyed  
From rain and the radiation of the sun."

"I founded a great palace of verse so high[The Shahnameh]  
That is impervious to the wind and the rain"

"Thus I won't die that I am the eternal lord  
"As I've spread the seed of the word"

"Whoever who has intelligence, vision and belief  
Even after my death will praise me."

Ferdowsi did not expect his reader to pass over historical events indifferently, but asked him/her to think carefully, to see the grounds for the rise and fall of individuals and nations; and to learn from the past in order to improve the present, and to better shape the future. Ferdowsi stresses his belief that since the world is transient, and since everyone is merely a passerby, one is wise to avoid cruelty, lying, avarice, and other traditional evils; instead one should strive for justice, honor, truth, order, and other traditional virtues.



The singular message that the Shâhnameh of Ferdowsi strives to convey is the idea that the history of Sassanid Empire was a complete and immutable whole: it started with [Keyumars](#), the first man, and ended with his fiftieth scion and successor, [Yazdegerd III](#), six thousand years of history of Iran. The task of Ferdowsi was to prevent this history from being lost to future Persian generations.

## Shahnameh, its praises and influence

Modern Persian has existed as a living language for around 1100 years, and the Shahnameh, despite being more than 1000 years old, is read by Persian speakers throughout the world in its original form. This makes the Shahnameh different from other epics which are written in languages that are now dead. As an example, [Beowulf](#), an important epic in its own right, can not be understood by the modern English speaker. Because it is a living language, and because it has sustained Persian poetry throughout the centuries, the Shahnameh has had a tremendous influence in shaping the modern identity of its Iranian, Afghan and Tajik readers. Beside being an epic book, Ferdowsi has decorated his book with many universal virtuous and moral concepts. According to the expert Dr. Jalal Khaleghi Mutlaq, the Shahnameh teaches: Yekta-Parasti (Worship of one God), Khoda Tarsi (Fear of breaking the commandments of God-respeting God), Din Dari (Religious Uprightness), Mihaan Doosti (patriotism), Mehr beh Zan o Farzand (love of wife, family and children), Dastgiryeh Darmandegaan (Helping the poor), Kheradmandi (Pursuit of Wisdom), Dad-Khahi (Pursuit of Justice), Door-Andishi (Long term thinking), Miyaneh Ravi (Seeking and Acting in Equilibrium-moderation), Adaab Daani (Acting and Knowing correct manner-courtesy), Mehman Nawazi (Seeking the happiness of Guests-hospitality), Javanmardi (Chivalry), Bakhshesh (Forgiveness), Sepasgozari (Thankfulness), Khoshnoodi o Khorsandi (Being content and Happy with existence), Kooshaayi (Hard Work), Narmesh Yaa Modaraa (Being Peaceful and Kind), Wafadaari (Being faithful), Raasti o Dorostkari (Truth and opposing anything that is against the Truth), Peymaan Daari (Keeping covenants), Sharm o Ahestegi (Shame at committing immoral acts and also control over one's self), Khamooshi (Not acting loud-modesty), Danesh Amoozi (Pursuing Knowledge-education), Sokhan Dani (Knowledge of Wise Words) and many other moral qualities.

Ferdowsi wrote in the end of his Shahnameh proclaims:

*I've reached the end of this great history*

*And all the land will talk of me:*

*I shall not die, these seeds I've sown will save*

*My name and reputation from the grave,*

*And men of sense and wisdom will proclaim*

*When I have gone, my praises and my fame.*

This prediction of Ferdowsi has come true and many Persian literary figures, historians and biographers have praised him and his Shahnameh. The Shahnameh is considered by many to be the most important piece of work in Persian literature. Western writers have also praised the Shahnameh and Persian literature in general. Persian literature has been

considered by such thinkers as Goethe as one of the four main bodies of world literature<sup>[11]</sup>. Goethe was inspired by Persian literature, which moved him to write his famous "West-Eastern Divan". Goethe writes: *When we turn our attention to a peaceful, civilized people, the Persians, we must—since it was actually their poetry that inspired this work—go back to the earliest period to be able to understand more recent times. It will always seem strange to the historians that no matter how many times a country has been conquered, subjugated and even destroyed by enemies, there is always a certain national core preserved in its character, and before you know it, there re-emerges a long-familiar native phenomenon. In this sense, it would be pleasant to learn about the most ancient Persians and quickly follow them up to the present day at an all the more free and steady pace.*

Saint - Beuve, when he observed the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi, proclaimed: *If we could realize that great works such as the Shahnameh exists in the world, we would not become so much proud of our own works in such a silly manner.*

### Biographers

Sargozasht-Nameh or Biography of important poets and writers has long been a Persian tradition. Some of the biographies of Ferdowsi are now considered apocryphal, nevertheless this shows the important impact he had in the Persian World. Among the famous biographers are:

- 1) Nezami 'Arudi-i Samarqandi in his Chahar Maqaleh (Four Articles).
- 2) Dolat Shah-i Samarghandi in his Tazkeye-Al-Shu'ara (The Biography of poets)
- 3) Jami in his Baharestan.
- 4) Muhammad 'Awfi in his Lobab al-Lobab.
- 5) Natayej al-Afkar by Mowlana Muhammad Qudrat Allah
- 6) 'Arafat Al-Ashighin written by Taqqi Al-Din 'Awhadi Balyani

A modern biography in English is written by the late Professor Abdullah Shapur Shahbazi of Eastern Oregon University titled: "Ferdowsi: A Critical Biography"

### Poets

Famous poets of [Persia](#) and the Persian tradition have praised and eulogized Ferdowsi. Many of them were heavily influenced by his writing and used his genre and stories to develop their own Persian epics, stories and poems:

- 1) [Anvari](#) a famous poet in his own right remarks about the eloquence of the Shahnameh: "He was not just a Teacher and we his students. He was like a God and we are his slaves".
- 2) [Asadi Tusi](#) was born in the same city as Ferdowsi. His Garshasnameh was inspired by the Shahnameh as he attests in the introduction. He praises Ferdowsi in the introduction and considers Ferdowsi the greatest poet of his time



3) Masud Sa'ad Salman, originally from Persia, was a poet of the Ghaznavid courts of India. Showing the influence of the Shahnameh only 80 years after the composition of the Shahnameh, he recited its poems in the Ghaznavid court.

4) Othman Mukhtari another poet at the court of the Ghaznavids of India remarks: "Alive is Rustam through the epic of Ferdowsi, Else there would not be a trace of him in this World"<sup>[20]</sup>

5) Sanai believes that in reality the foundation of poetry was established by Ferdowsi.<sup>[21]</sup>

6) Nezami Ganjavi was influenced greatly by Ferdowsi and three of his five jewels had to do with pre-Islamic Persia. His Khosro o Shirin, Haft Paykar and Eskandarnameh used the Shahnameh as a major source. Nezami remarks that Ferdowsi is "the wise sage of Tus" who beautified and decorated words like a new bride.

7) Khaghani of Shirvan who was the court poet of the Shirvanshah has remarked about Ferdowsi:

The candle of the wise in this darkness of sorrow,

The pure words of Ferdowsi of the Tusi are such

His pure sense is an angelic birth

Angelic born is anyone who's like Ferdowsi

جور غمی شد مع جمع هوشمندان است در د  
ب ود یطوس یکز خاطر فردوس ی نکت ه ا  
حوروش اند یزادگ اه طبع پ اکش جمل گ  
ب ود یزاده حوروش بود چون مرد فردوس

8) Attar remarks about the poetry of Ferdowsi:

Open eyes and through the sweet poetry see the heavenly eden of Ferdowsi

باز کن چشم و ز شد هر چون شد مگر  
نگر یر یدر بهشت است دن فردوس

9) Sa'adi in a famous poem remarks:

How sweetly has conveyed the pure natured Ferdowsi, May blessing be upon his pure resting place: Do not harass the ant that's dragging a seed, because it has life and sweet life is dear.

پ اکزاد یچه خوش گفت فردوس

که رحمت بر آن تربیت پاک باد

که دانه کش است یازار موریم

ن خوش است یری که جان دارد و جان ش

10) Jami in his Baharistan remarks: *He came from Tus and his excellence, renown and perfection are well known. Yes, what need is there of the panegyrics of others to that man who has composed verses as those of the Shah-nameh?*

Many other poets can also be named. For example Hafez, Rumi and other mystical poets have used many imageries of Shahnameh heroes in their poetry. With this regard, the Saqinaameh of Hafez and the famous verse of Rumi: "Shir Khwoda o Rostam Dastanam Arezoost"(The lion of God (Ali) and Rostam of Dastan is what I seek) come to mind.

## Historians

The Shahnameh's impact on Persian historiography was immediate and some historians decorated their books with the verses of Shahnameh. Below is sample of ten important historian who have praised the Shahnameh and Ferdowsi:

- 1) The unknown writer of the Tarikh Sistan (History of Sistan) (circa 1053 A.D.)
- 2) The unknown writer of [Majmal al-Tawarikh wa Al-Qasas](#) (circa 1126).
- 3) Mohammad Ali Ravandi the writer of the Rahat al-Sodur wa Ayat al-Sorur (circa 1206)
- 4) Ibn Bibi the writer of the history book Al-Awamir al-'Alaiyah written during the era of 'Ala ad-din KayGhobad
- 5) Ibn Esfandiyar the composer of the Tarikh-e Tabarestan.
- 6) [Muhammad Juwayni](#) the early historian of the Mongol era in his *Tarikh-e Jahan Gushay* (Ilkhanid era)
- 7) Hamdullah Qazwini also paid much attention to the Shahnameh and wrote his Zafarnama based on the same style. (Ilkhanid era)
- 8) Hafez Abru (1430) in his Majma' al-Tawarikh
- 9) Khwand Mir in his Habab al-Siyar (circa 1523) has praised Ferdowsi and has given an extensive biography on Ferdowsi.
- 10) The Arab Historian [Ibn Athir](#) remarks in his book titled "Al-Kamil": "If we name it the Quran of 'Ajam, we have not said something in vain. If a poet writes poetry and the poems have many verses, or if someone writes many compositions, it will always be the case that some of their writings might not be excellent. But in the case of Shahnameh, despite having more than 40 thousand couplets, all its verses are excellent".

[edit] Patronage of Shahnameh by different dynasties

The [Shirvanshah](#) dynasty adopted many of their names from the Shahnameh. The relationship between Shirvanshah and his son, Manuchihr, is mentioned in chapter eight of [Nizami's](#) Lili o Majnoon. Nizami advises the king's son to read the Shah-nama and to remember the meaningful sayings of the wise.

According to the Turkish historian Mehmat Fuad Koprulu:

“ Indeed, despite all claims to the contrary, there is no question that Persian influence was paramount among the Seljuks of Anatolia. This is clearly revealed by the fact that the sultans who ascended the throne after Ghiyath al-Din Kai-Khusraw I assumed titles taken from ancient Persian mythology, like Kai-Khusraw, Kai-Kaus, and Kai-Qubad; and that Ala' al-Din Kai-Qubad I had some passages from the Shahname inscribed on the walls of Konya and Sivas. When we take into consideration domestic life in the Konya courts and the sincerity of the favor and attachment of the rulers to Persian poets and Persian literature, then this fact {i.e. the importance of Persian influence} is undeniable. ”

Shah Ismail Safavi was also deeply influenced by the [Persian literary tradition](#) of Iran, particularly by the "Shāhnāma" of [Ferdowsi](#), which probably explains the fact that he named all of his sons after Shāhnāma-characters. Dickson and Welch suggest that Ismā'il's "Shāhnāmāye Shāhī" was intended as a present to the young Tahmāsp. After defeating Muhammad Shaybāni's Uzbeks, Ismā'il asked Hātefī, a famous poet from [Jam \(Khorasan\)](#), to write a Shāhnāma-like epic about his victories and his newly established dynasty. Although the epic was left unfinished, it was an example of [mathnawis](#) in the heroic style of the Shāhnāma written later on for the Safavid kings.

[edit] Impact of Shahnameh on local Iranian and Christian cultures

Professor Victoria Arakelova of Yerevan University states: *During the ten centuries passed after Firdausi composed his monumental work, heroic legends and stories of Shahnameh have remained the main source of the storytelling for the peoples of this region: Persians, Kurds, Gurans, Talishis, Armenians, Georgians, North Caucasian peoples, etc.*

Professor Jamshid Sh. Giunshvili remarks on the connection of Georgian culture with that of Shahnama<sup>[30]</sup>: *The names of many Shahnama heroes, such as Rostam, Tahmine, Sam-i, or Zaal-i, are found in 11th- and 12th-century Georgian literature. They are indirect evidence for an Old Georgian translation of the Shahnama that is no longer extant.. Furthermore he remarks: The Shahnama was not only translated to satisfy the literary and aesthetic needs of readers and listeners, but also to inspire the young with the spirit of heroism and Georgian patriotism. Georgian ideology, customs, and worldview often informed these translations because they were oriented toward Georgian poetic culture. Conversely, Georgians consider these translations works of their native literature. Georgian versions of the Shahnama are quite popular, and the stories of Rostam and Sohrab, or Bijan and Manizha became part of Georgian folklore.*

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By [EMILY ESFAHANI SMITH](#)

Before the Islamic Revolution dimmed the Iranian literary imagination in 1979, and before an expanding Islam swept Iran into its Arab empire in the seventh century, there

existed the rich and colorful Iran recounted in Ferdowsi's "Shahnameh," or the Book of Kings. Nearly four centuries after the Arab conquest, the "Shahnameh" tells the story of pre-Islamic Iran—when Persian civilization was at its zenith.



The epic proceeds through the reign of many monarchs, chronicling the at times legendary, at times mythological, and at times quasihistorical stories of each reign. Then, with the Arab conquest, the chronicle comes to an end. This might seem to mark the end of Persian civilization, too. But Ferdowsi's masterpiece, composed about A.D. 1000, both went on to inspire the greatest Persian miniature paintings and retrieved Iran's lost identity—along with its language, which still survives.

The epic is not only a remembrance of a wondrous past but a mourning of the passing of that history and all that falls prey to "the absolute of all tyrants, time," says Azar Nafisi. She relates her love of the work in her 2009 memoir, "Things I've Been Silent About." In the "Shahnameh," the mortality of all creation insists that the world's meaning can be derived only from man's moral choices. What it means to be a good man is one of Ferdowsi's chief concerns. Personal, national and spiritual integrity are defended against a chaotic world trying to destroy it. That the "Shahnameh" reminds readers today of what integrity and heroism mean—two words nearly left out of our cultural lexicon—is enough to make it a masterpiece. But there is so much more than this to recommend it to our time.

The great hero of the epic is Rostam, a warrior who defends the homeland from invaders, but his heroism goes beyond just that. The worst characters of the "Shahnameh" are beset by pride and hubris, while the most noble and interesting characters humbly understand their place in the great moral order. Rostam can be wise and compassionate, understanding that his strength and glory are limited by God. Yet the moment that he forgets this truth, calamity follows.

In one of the epic's most tragic tales, Rostam meets his son, Sohrab, in combat. Early in the story, Rostam, searching for his Pegasus-like horse, Rakhsh, came to the kingdom of Turan, or Turkey, where a king offered to host Rostam in his palace. There, in Rostam's night chamber, entered the beautiful Tahmineh, whose "mind and body were pure, and she seemed not to partake of earthly existence at all," according to Dick Davis's majestic translation of the work.

Nine months later, long after Rostam returned to Iran, Tahmineh gave birth to Sohrab, who would spend his youth in Turan. As he came of age, growing to be as strong and brave as his father, he asked his mother about his lineage. After his mother told him that the famous hero Rostam was his father, Sohrab vowed to "drive Kavus," Iran's king, "from the throne . . . and give the royal mace and crown to Rostam, I'll place him on Kavus' throne." With good intentions then, the young Sohrab led an army against Iran. Despairing, the sometimes cowardly Kavus called on Rostam to defend Iran against Sohrab's invading army.

As Rostam and Sohrab meet in combat, man to man, Sohrab has a suspicion that the hero he fights is Rostam. But Rostam denies his identity. After the first combat, when neither father nor son could prevail over the other, Sohrab in his heart realizes that Rostam is indeed his opponent. The next time they meet, he says: "Throw your mace and sword down, put aside / These thoughts of war, this truculence and pride." But Rostam's "wits were dimmed by an evil nature." So he fights his son until he plunges a dagger into the "lionhearted hero's chest."

Among the most heart-wrenching lines of the epic are Sohrab's dying words to Rostam. Sohrab asks Rostam to tell his father, "I sought him always, far and wide, / And that, at last, in seeking him, I died."

At that moment, Rostam recognizes a clasp on Sohrab's upper arm, which Rostam gave to Tahmineh. As Sohrab lies dying, Rostam realizes that the boy "whose mouth still smelled of mother's milk" is his son. Realizing the evil thing he did, Rostam "roared in an agony of anguish."

Rostam, before his encounter with Sohrab, says that "war is the way to glory." But with the story's completion, the reader is to understand that glory in war has its limits. Sohrab, who seeks war to glorify his father, is ultimately undone in the very war he started. The moral complexities of this story are especially tragic. Rostam is brave, proud, then penitent; Sohrab is loyal, rash, then compassionate. Behaving morally means overcoming one's inner demons—and the price for letting them overcome you is a heavy and unwelcome reminder of man's mortality.

In the "Shahnameh," after we are reminded that "We are all death's prey," we learn that "this tale is full of tears."

Iranians felt this pathos in 1979, with the Islamic Revolution: Another phase of Iran's history had passed. With the revolution, the Iranian regime thought Ferdowsi's pre-Islamic masterpiece had no place in the Islamic Republic. According to Ms. Nafisi, it even wanted to tear down Ferdowsi Square in Tehran. But it couldn't. Later, she says, the regime "had to join the people in celebrating him." The "Shahnameh" was too integral to Iranian culture, its universal themes impossible for anyone—Iranian or not—to overlook. Governments, including those run by mullahs, will come and go, but this story endures.

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From: <http://www.shaikhsiddiqui.com/shahnameh.html>

The Shahnama (The Book of Kings or The Epic of Kings) also written Shahnameh, written by Firdowsi around 1000 AD, is the national epic of Persia (Iran) and one of the definite classics of world literature. The contents and the poet's style in describing the events takes the reader back a thousand years and allows the reader to sense and feel the events in the magical theater of mind. It is based mainly on an earlier prose version which itself was a compilation of old Iranian stories and historical facts and fables. For over a thousand years the Persians have continued to read and listen to recitations from this masterwork in which the Persian national epic found its final and enduring form. It is the history of Iran's past, preserved in hypnotic and majestic verse. Though written over 1000 years ago, this work is very much intelligible to the modern reader. The language used in composing the Shahnama is pure Persian with very few Arabic loanwords used.

The Shahnama of Firdowsi, an epic poem book of over 60,000 couplets, is based mainly on a prose work of the same name compiled in the poet's earlier life in his native Tus. This prose Shahnama was in turn and for the most part the translation of a Pahlavi (Middle Persian) work, a compilation of the history of the kings and heroes of Iran from mythical times down to the reign of Khosrau II (590-628 A.D.), but it also contains additional material continuing the story to the overthrow of the Sassanids by the Arabs in the middle of the 7th century A.D. 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, who came to a violent end after completing only 1000 verses. These verses, which deal with the rise of the prophet Zoroaster, were afterward incorporated by Firdowsi, with due acknowledgements, in his own poem.

After Firdowsi's Shahnama a number of other works similar in nature surfaced over the centuries within the cultural sphere of the Persian language. Without exception, all such works were based in style and method on Firdowsi's Shahnama, but none of them could quite achieve the same degree of fame and popularity.

Some experts believe the main reason the Modern Persian language today is more or less the same language as that of Firdowsi's time over 1000 years ago is due to the very existence of works like Firdowsi's Shahnama which have had lasting and profound cultural and linguistic influence. In other words, the Shahnama itself has become one of the main pillars of the Modern Persian language. Studying Firdowsi's masterpiece also became an absolute requirement for achieving mastery of the Persian language by all the subsequent great Persian poets, as evidenced by numerous direct and indirect references to the Shahnama in their works.

There are several aspects of the Shahnama that are remarkable. One is that it is one of the few original national epics in the world. Many peoples of the world have their "own" national epics, but more often than not, the original theme of such national epics are borrowed from other cultures (usually from neighbouring cultures). This is not the case with the Shahnama, which is based on the original Persian stories. Another remarkable aspect of the Shahnama is the language element itself, which is nearly pure Persian, and yet very much natural. After studying the Shahnama, one can clearly see that Firdowsi must have had a solid command of the Pahlavi language (Middle Persian) as well, with an astonishing linguistic understanding of the transitional patterns from Middle Persian to Modern Persian. Yet another important aspect of the Shahnama is the honesty with which the author has delivered the stories without allowing his personal views enter or alter the original story; in this regard, if he has had something to say, he has said it on his own account and in between the narrations of the original stories. The language that Firdowsi has used is uttermost clean and free of any vulgarism, sarcasm or offensive expressions. That, combined with Firdowsi's unparalleled artistic and linguistic magic, has produced a masterpiece which has captivated its audiences for over a thousand years now. Many Persians (Iranians) consider the Shahnama to be their true certificate of national identity. The Shahnama is remarkable for its epic length. It has 62 stories, 990 chapters, and contains 60,000 rhyming couplets, making it more than seven times the length of Homer's Iliad. There have been a number of English translations, almost all abridged. In 1925 the brothers Arthur and Edmond



Warner published the complete work in nine volumes, it is now a rare volume and out of print, although an electronic scanned version has recently become available.

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From: <http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Literature/Shahnameh/shahnameh.htm>

Master Abolqasem Mansour **FERDOWSI** (circa CE 940 -1020), Iranian eic-poet known as the Homer of Iran, born near Tus in the province of Khorasan. He was married at the age of 28 and some eight years later began the work for which he is most famous, the great epic poem SHÂHNÂMEH (The Book of Kings).

The work is based on a poem by the Iranian poet Daqiqi (died about 980). Ferdowsi spent 35 years writing this epic and completed it in 1010, when he was about 70 years old. The poem contains 60,000 rhyming couplets, making it more than seven times the length of Homer's Iliad.

It deals first with the legendary Iranian kings: Q-mars, Hushang, Tahmouress, and the most famous of the group, Jamshid, who reigned for 500 years during the golden age of the earth. Following this happy period came the evil rule of the Arab Dhahhák, or Zohak (Adzdi-dahaka in Avestan), who was tempted by Ahriman (devil), his own ancestor. As a result, Dahhák fell into sin, becoming more and more evil until Kavah, a smith, rebelled and established his leather apron as the banner of revolt. Finally, the tyrant was bound and confined beneath Mount Damavand on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Soon after this point in the poem an episode of considerable beauty is inserted; it recounts the loves of Zal, of the royal line of Iran, and Rudabeh, the daughter of Mehrab the king of Kabul. Their union resulted in the birth of the most romantic of all the heroes of the Shahnameh, Rostam, who occupies a position in Iranian legend somewhat analogous to that of Hercules in Greek and Latin literature.

The epic progresses through Iranian legend to historic times, tracing the reigns of the Sasanian Emperors down to the Muslim conquest and the death of Yazdegerd III in 641. Thus, the work constitutes a valuable source for the early history of Iran, which is necessary to supplement the accounts given in the old Persian cuneiform inscriptions and the Avesta. In addition to his poetic incentive, Ferdowsi had a distinctly patriotic motive in writing the Shahnameh. He plainly desired to keep alive in the hearts of his people the faith of their ancestors and the glories of their deeds so that the Iranian would not become mere puppets under Arab domination.

The epic contains an introductory eulogy of Soltan Mahmud of Ghaznavdi, to whom the work is dedicated. Ferdowsi went to Mahmud's court to present his work as a tribute and was awarded the sum of 20,000 dihrams. The disappointed poet took his revenge by writing a bitter satire on Mahmud, which he sent to the soltan as a substitute for his former eulogy.



Ferdowsi then fled to Herat in east of Iran (today in Afghanistan), and from there to Tabarestan, where the reigning prince protected him. He later settled in Baghdad where he composed an epic of 9000 couplets, Yusof and Zoleikha. The work is an Arabic version of the biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, a favourite theme of Oriental poets.

In his old age Ferdowsi retired to his native town near Tus, where, according to legend, he received Mahmud's forgiveness just before his death. The Shahnameh is perhaps best known to English readers through Rostam and Sohrab, a poem by the English poet Matthew Arnold, which is based on the Persian epic.