

Happy Ferdowsi Day

Contributed by Akbar Nemati

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Following is an article on Ferdowsi's masterpiece the Shahnameh, which was written by Charles Melville, a lecturer of the University of Cambridge, in 2007. The Shahnameh or "Book of Kings" is the longest poem ever written by a single author: Abu-Qasem Ferdowsi, from northeastern Iran.

His epic work narrates the history of Iran (Persia) since the first king, Gayomart, who established his rule at the dawn of time, down to the conquest of Persia by the Muslim Arab invasions of the early 7th century CE.

The Shahnameh contains approximately 50,000 verses (bayts, each consisting of two hemistiches, misra), and is generally divided into mythical, legendary and historical sections.

The first includes the formation of human society, the domestication of animals, the struggle with the forces of evil and the definition of Iranian territory vis-a-vis her neighbors.

The long central section incorporates the "Sistan cycle" of legends about the hero Rostam and his family, and the endless cycles of wars with the lands of Turan (approximately Turkestan or modern Central Asia), Iran's traditional foe. These "legendary" sections in fact contain many mythical features and more or less form a continuum with the first.

The historical section, that is, in which some reference to known historical events can be identified, starts only with the appearance of Alexander the Great, also treated as legend. It is remarkable, for example, that there appears to be no reference to the reigns of Cyrus the Great, Darius, or the Achaemenid dynasty that preceded the arrival of Philip of Macedon and Alexander on the scene.

Alexander (Iskandar) is followed by a very brief treatment of the Parthians, and then the Sassanid dynasty (226-651 CE).

The last episode is the murder of the Sassanid ruler Yazdegerd III (632-51), and the punishment of his killer, Mahuy Suri. Its last pages echo with the gloomy predictions of the Persian general Rostam, killed at the battle of Qadisiyah by the Arab commander Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas.

Ferdowsi was born circa 935 CE and died in around 1020. He was thus writing his life's work approximately four centuries after the fall of the ancient Persian Empire and the coming of Islam.

The first draft was completed in 999 and the final version in 1010, dedicated to the most powerful ruler of the time, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (modern Afghanistan, ruled 999-1020).

His work was conceived as a memorial to Iran's glorious past at a time when its memory was in danger of disappearing for good under the twin assaults of Arabic and Islamic culture and the political dominion of the Turks.

It has since been used by many subsequent regimes, both imperial and provincial, to assert their proper place in the political traditions of the country, and for dynastic legitimization.

One of the chief ways in which the text could be appropriated, along with the ethical messages it conveys, especially concerning just kingship and the ordering of society, was by commissioning illustrated manuscript copies of the poem. This started at least in the middle of the Mongol period, with the earliest known illustrated texts dating from circa 1300.

The production of illustrated copies continued into the late 19th century, when lithographic printing slowly replaced the creation of manuscripts.

The Shahnameh encapsulates and expresses, as no other work of Persian literature is able to, the Iranians' view of themselves and their traditional cultural and political values.