

A REVIEW OF WHAT *ENCYCLOPAEDIA IRANICA* OPINES ON FIRDAUSI'S VIEWS ON ZOROASTRIANISM

Dr. Kersey Antia, Mar 20, 2020

I find it useful to include what *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (E.I.) also notes in this context. While it confirms the aspurianness of many lives in the satire it observes it doesn't establish that the satire never existed at all.

Various manuscripts of the *Shah-nama* describe Firdausi's father as a *dehqan* who was a victim of oppression by the financial controller of Tus. Firdausi was one of the *dehqans* of Tus and he was able to live independently of others' help. The *dehqans* were known as preservers of traditional civilization, customs and culture, including the national legends, introduction to the *Shah-nama*, p. vii; Noldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, p. 440; Safa, *Hanasa*, pp. 62-64. In the *Shah-nama* *dehqan* appears along with the *azada*, meaning "Iranian" along with *mobad* (Zoroastrian priest) as "preserver and narrator of the ancient lore." Firdausi belonged to the class of wealthy *dehqan* families which generally accepted Islam mainly as a way of preserving their own social position and avoiding tax. Therefore, unlike the new converts, not only did they not turn their backs on the culture of their ancestors but made its preservation and transmission their mission in life. His character, and the national spirit of his work, were founded primarily on this class consciousness and ancient Iranian tradition in which his genius was engendered.

Khorasan had witnessed political religious national, and cultural movements at least with the rebel of Abu Moselem. Firdausi, was just seventeen years old when the *Shah-nama* of Abu Mansur was completed and cannot have been inspired by it. As Noldeke put it, the poet's attachment to Iran is so visible in every line of the *Shah-nama*. He struggled for the preservation of Iranian identity while Persia was Arabized in the name of the Islamic community.

Firdausi was completely conversant with the sciences of his own time. Badi'-al-Zaman Foruzanfar (q.v.: pp. 47-49) and Ahmad Mahdawi Damgani (p. 42) believe that Firdausi even had a thorough knowledge of Arabic. However Yagmi I and Lazard maintain that Firdausi knew Pahlavi. The problem of Pahlavi was mainly in the difficulty of its script but someone read a Pahlavi text to the poet. He could have understood it well. But the *Shah-nama* does not indicate that he knew either Arabic

or Pahlavi.

Firdausi's religion was Shi'ite Islam, which is quite apparent from the *Shah-nama* itself and it is confirmed by early accounts as Nezami Aruzi and Qazvini but some have questioned it.

I see the need here to quote the E.I. Verbatim to avoid any projection on my part: "On the one hand, Firdausi was lenient as regards religion. As Noldeke remarks, Firdausi remembered the religion of his forbears with respect, and at the same time nowhere did he show any signs of a deep Islamic faith. Indeed to the contrary, here and there are moments in the *Shah-nama* (e.g., Moscow, IX, p. 315, v. 56) which, even if they were present in his sources, should not strictly have been given currency by the pen of a committed Muslim (Noldeke, 1920, pp. 38-39). On the other hand, however, Firdausi showed a prejudice in favor of his own sect and, as is apparent from the exordium to the *Shah-nama*, considered his own sect to be the only true Islamic one. The explanation for this contradiction in the E.I. is the present writer's opinion, lies in the fact that during the first centuries of Islam, in Persia, Shi'ism went hand in hand with the national struggle in Khorasan, or very nearly so such that the caliphate in Baghdad and its political supporters in Persia never made any serious distinction between the "Majus" (i.e., Zoroastrians), "Zandiq" (i.e., Manicheans), "Qarmatis" (i.e. adherents of Isma'ili Shi'ism), and Rafezis (i.e., Shi'ites in general; see Bagdadi, tr. pp. 307 ff). Patricia Cohn's definition of Khuramiya, etc. supports this observation, as reviewed by me elsewhere. Fedowsi was, as Noldeke remarks, above all a deist and monotheist who at the same time kept faith with this forbears (Noldeke, 1920, pp. 36-40, Taqizada, 1983, pp. 124-25)."

He worshiped God but he remained silent as to regards the whys and wherefores of faith (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 1975, pp. 66-70). This absolute faith in the greatness of God is disturbed in the *Shah-nama* by a fatalism "that is possibly the result of Zurvanite influences from the Sasanian period" and at times leads to a self-contradictory viewpoint. My own view, however, is this fatalism stemmed from the Iranians' sudden overwhelming turn in their fortune, to say the least.

Adhering to the ancient Iranian tradition of drinking wine at times of happiness, I would add even during religious celebrations Firdausi reproaches the Arabs who are strangers to the custom of drinking wine. The most important of the poet's ethical attitudes per E.I., are chasity of diction, honesty, gratitude and acting fairly even toward enemies. Fine speech seem to be basically Zoroastrian, though the E.I. does not say so. But it adds: "when it comes to the domination of Iran by her enemies, especially at the end of the *Shah-nama*, he is violently opposed to both Arabs and Turks (Noldeke, 1920, pp. 37, 41). Certainly, these attitudes are in the poet's sources, but he incorporated them into his work with

complete conviction. Generally, it seems as though the ethical values of the poet's sources and of the poet himself reciprocally acted on one another. In this way, certain ethical values of the *Shah-nama*, such as praise for effort, condemnation of laziness, recommendation of moderation, condemnation of greed, praise for knowledge, encouragement of justice and tolerance, kindness towards women and children, patriotism, racial loyalty, the condemnation of haste and the recommendation of deliberation in one's actions, praise for truthfulness and condemnation of falsehood, the condemnation of anger and jealousy and so forth, are considered also to be values held by the poet himself (see ADAB; Eslami, pp. 64-73." I also see these qualities as quintessentially Zoroastrian. Nevertheless, it is hard to prove Firdausi was at least a Zoroastrian *Baatenone* (secret) as many of the new converts tended to be. However, *Shah-nama* leaves little doubt about his ample empathy for this ancient culture and tradition.