

WAS FERDOWSI, THE AUTHOR OF THE *SHAH NAMEH* A ZOROASTRIAN IN SECRET (BAATEN)?

Dr. Kersy Antia, Jan 16, 2020; updated Jul 7, 2020

Background information about the *Shah Nameh*: When we think of Ferdowsi Tusi (real name, Abul Qasim), writing the *Shah Nameh* in Persian verse in the late tenth century and finishing it on February 25, 1010 A.D., it is hard to imagine that it took so many authors and so many centuries to compile its original, non-verse prose version, though all of which are still not known to us as some may have been lost to history. In addition to the various historical data compiled by various Greek writers such as Herodotus, Ktesias (not always known though for the veracity of his stories), Aelian and Atheoeus (a chamberlain to Alexander the Great), by the fifth century A.D. many heroic legends began emerging in Persia mentioning the names of Zareer, Jamasp, Kaaos, Khosrow, etc., indicating either their revival during this epoch or just the perpetuation of their memory. A “memorial book” of the hero Zareer, circa 500 A.D. is supposed to be the oldest genuine memorial legend ever preserved in any Persian language, though its original Pahlavi text has never been published. Another piece of such semi-epical genre, compiled circa 600 A.D., pertained to King Ardashir's purely phantastic deeds even though his actual historical record was quite extant at the time. Such heroic legends apparently may have gone though many changes and many of them seem to have been lost forever especially after the fall of the Sasanian empire. The Byzantine writer, Agathias informs us that by the reign of Khosrow I well kept records of all the Persian kings beginning with Gayomart were available. The Preface to the *Shah Nameh*, which was written by the order of the grandson of Timur Baisonghur explicitly states that during the reign of the last Sasanian King Yazdegird, a Dihqan, Danishvar, compiled a complete chronical of all Persian kings from Gayomart onwards which is quite plausible as the Dihqans were considered to be the actual perservers of the national tradition. A mention is also made therein of Farrukhan, the chief Mobed of Yazdagird as one of the sources of ancient Persian history. The substantial conformity between the Arab records and the *Shah Nameh* up to the murder of Khosrow II by his son indicates that his version must have been written soon after that event during the reign of Yazdegird, which is further confirmed by the fact that whereas Khosrow II is glorified therein despite his obvious flaws, his son who killed him along with Yazdegird's father are greatly condemned there. All the original works about the life and

achievements of all the Persian kings, fifty in all, were written in Pahlavi in the *Khodai Nameh*, meaning, "The Book of Lords," a name which corresponds fairly well with the *Shah Nameh*, "The Book of Kings." While the original Pahlavi works as well as their translations are now lost forever, they were introduced into the Arabic literature by Ibn Muqaffa during the eighth century. However, he omitted mentioning anything that will offend the Arabs' religious sentiments or even their rationalism. *Khodai Nameh* was hardly preserved in its original form due to the carelessness of the copyists, wilful corrections, the loss of the Sasanian empire and its dire consequences. For instance, one Mobed, Bahram had to examine 20 copies for establishing the correct chronology of kings. Since some other works also existed besides *Khodai Nameh* about the history of Sasanian kings, they led to divergences not only in the works of the Arab writers but also in the *Shah Nameh* itself. Thus, Tabari offers most reliable historical data about the first and the last Sasanians, apparently based on some Pahlavi works, which, however is not at all mentioned in the *Khodai Nameh*.

In his second preface to the *Shah Nameh*, Baisonghur mentions that a high official Abu Mansur had a prosaic version of the *Shah Nameh* compiled for the ruler of Tus, also named Abu Mansur (945-960 A.D.) by four Mobeds, one each from Herat, Sistan, Nishapur and Tus. Ferdowsi also mentions the fourth Mobed by name and confirms that the prosaic basis of his poetical work was laid out by these Mobeds. As Th. Noldeke notes in "The National Iranian Epic of The *Shah Nameh*" (translated from the German by L. Bogdanov, K.R. Cama Oriental Institute, Bombay, 1930), these four Mobeds "have certainly collected whatever they were able to. In what way the details were dealt by them, who it was who revised and edited the whole, again escapes our observation." As most of it was obviously theretofore transcribed in Pahlavi, Noldeke emphasizes the fact that the collaboration of the Zoroastrian priests became very critical for this task.

It may be added here that a Zoroastrian poet at the same court as Ferdowsi's, named Daqiqi, obviously a self-adopted poetical name, had by this time also embarked on copying a poetical version of the *Khodai Nameh*, but was killed by his lover, a Turkish slave when he had compiled only 1000 verses about the spread of Zoroastrianism by King Gushtasp. Ferdowsi included it in his *Shah Nameh* and Noldeke comments that Ferdowsi may have felt relieved by opting to do so as it may have shielded him from incurring the wrath of the orthodox Sunni natives (p. 35) who indeed condemned him as a Shi'ite heretic even on his death and refused him a burial service alongside the graves of the believers who must have included some of his own relatives.

As Noldeke reports, Ferdowsi uses very few Arabic words in his work and Daqiqi uses even less – only 36 Arabic words in one thousand

verses. Noldeke further notes: "The opposition against the idol worshippers, whose pictures are burnt by Isfandiyar is being laid more stress upon by Daqiqi, than by Ferdowsi".

One wonders what motivated a strictly orthodox Sunni ruler such as Mahmud to engage a Shi'ite poet such as Ferdowsi to memorialise in verse the ancient "heathen" rulers of Iran, even though their history was already extant then in prose? As Noldeke sees it, "Even the heathenish keynote of the *Shah Nameh* ought to have rather hurt the feelings of a strictly orthodox king like Mahmud, but it is quite possible that his zeal was less turned against the Zoroastrians than against the Muslim heretics," (p.44). In a footnote on the same page Noldeke adds: "He (Mahmud) persecuted not only the Shiah (Rafidi) and especially the Isma'iles (Batini), but also the Mu'tazilites, and those who attributed a body to God. The philosophical books and the books of the Mu'tazilites were burned by his orders. Batinis were put by his orders to death". As one who was suspected to be a Shi'ite heretic or a Bateni, the poet seems to have managed well to be alive.

In keeping with the views prevalent in his time, Noldeke totally accepts the veracity of Ferdowsi's satires but Shahbazi's findings already reviewed by me earlier as well as my own views in this matter as a clinical psychologist have convinced me that Ferdowsi was too noble and upright a Dihghan to stoop to such a low level of satirical verses which might instead represent the hostility and disillusionment felt by his ardent admirers towards Sultan Mahmud. Even Noldeke concedes: "Certainly not everything of it has to be taken literally and some things are rather doubtful in this story, yet that such becomes obvious, that the satire, as presumed by that oldest biographer, ('Arudi), never became known to the Sultan ---the circumstance, that he was finally able to return to his native place and to die there in peace shows that the verses never reached the King (that is I would add, if they were ever written by the poet himself at the time) who was described therein as the wretched son of a slave, faithless and ungenerous and where, in conclusion, God is invoked to have him burnt in hell". (p.47). Even Noldeke doubts if certain verses in which Ferdowsi sings his own praise to the utmost "were originally a part of the satire" (p.58, f.2). Noldeke states that some believed that the poet was finally so heart broken that "he began to find fault with the rest of his productions and disavowed the heroes of his nation".

While Noldeke concedes Ferdowsi must have become somewhat despondent at this turn of events, he believes "still such a high-minded man does not disavow the work of his life, should he even had undergone a total change in his convictions; yet no traces of such a change is apparent". Perhaps, it may have been a defense mechanism to protect himself in case Mahmud became aware of his true feelings. Like

Shahbazi, Noldeke is also convinced that many passages imbued with lyricism in the *Shah Nameh* shows that Ferdowsi was “fundamentally a gentle-minded man”. (p. 54).

Any work on the *Shah Nameh* cannot be complete for a Zoroastrian audience without mentioning the “supplements to the *Shah Nameh* from the Revayats” published by Spiegel. Noldeke finds their form, language and some content akin in nature to the *Shah Nameh*, but finds them to be “thoroughly Zoroastrian from the theological point of view” and “mostly merely versified expansions of the prosaic Rivayats,” which Ferdowsi and his forerunners somehow did not find quite relevant for their undertaking. They contain many Avestan and Pahlavi words, but often incorrectly. Noldeke finds its poetical value “a minimal one” and regards it as “a production of a later time Indian Parsi”, which does not surprise me as the Parsi author of the poetical *Kisseh-i Sanjan*, also a Mobed, composed it in the Persian language and style, quite reminiscent of the *Shah Nameh* centuries later in western India.