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The Shahnameh

Ferdowsi

DELPHI POETS SERIES

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Ferdowsi

(940-c. 1025)



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Abul-Qâsem Ferdowsi Tusi



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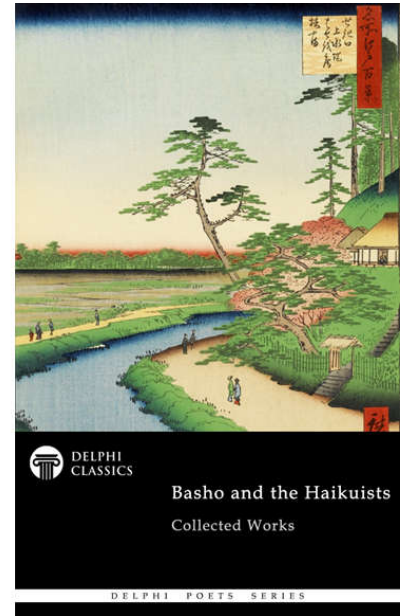
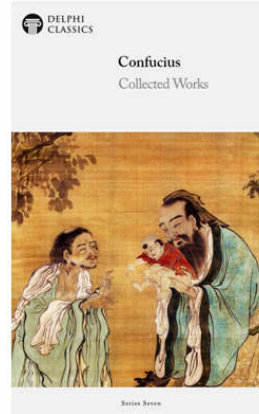
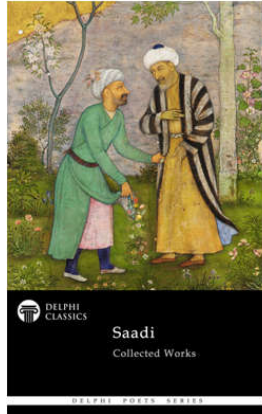
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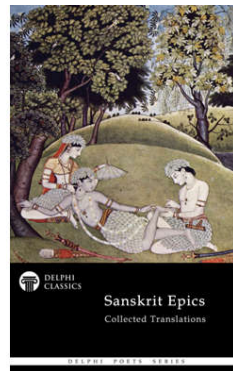
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NOTE



WHEN READING POETRY on an eReader, it is advisable to use a small font size and landscape mode, which will allow the lines of poetry to display correctly.

The Life and Poetry of Ferdowsi



Tus, an ancient city in Razavi Khorasan Province, Iran, near Mashhad — Ferdowsi was born in the village of Paj, near the city of Tus, in the Khorasan region of the Samanid Empire in 940.



Statue of Ferdowsi in Tehran

Brief Introduction: Ferdowsi



Abul-Qâsem Ferdowsi Tusi, the author of one of the world's longest epic poems, was born into a family of Iranian landowners in 940 in the village of Paj, near the city of Tus, located in present-day Razavi Khorasan Province of north-eastern Iran. His family belonged to the class of *dehqans*, landowning Iranian aristocrats that flourished under the Sassanid dynasty, the last pre-Islamic dynasty to rule Iran, and whose power, though diminished, had survived into the Islamic era following the conquests of the seventh century. The status of the *dehqans* was attached to the pre-Islamic literary heritage. Therefore, they saw it as their task to preserve the pre-Islamic cultural traditions, including tales of legendary kings. Little is known about Ferdowsi's early life. We do know that he had a wife, who was literate and came from the same *dehqan* class. He also had a son, who died at the age of 37, and was mourned by the poet in an elegy that he inserted in his epic poem.

The Islamic conquests had brought gradual linguistic and cultural changes to the Iranian Plateau. By the late ninth century, as the power of the caliphate had weakened, several local dynasties emerged in Greater Iran. Ferdowsi's hometown of Tus was under the control of the Samanids, who claimed descent from the Sassanid general Bahram Chobin. The Samanid bureaucracy favoured the New Persian language, which had been used to bring Islam to the Eastern regions of the Iranian world and supplanted local languages, while commissioning translations of Pahlavi texts into New Persian. Abu Mansur Muhammad, a governor of Tus, had ordered his minister to invite several local scholars to compile a prose *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), which was completed in 1010. Although this text no longer survives, Ferdowsi used it as one of the sources of his great epic. Samanid rulers were patrons of important Persian poets like Rudaki and Daqiqi and so Ferdowsi followed in their footsteps.

He began work on the *Shahnameh* in c. 977, intending it as a continuation of the work of Daqiqi, who had been assassinated by a slave. Ferdowsi received generous patronage from the Samanid prince Mansur and completed the first version in 994. When the Turkic Ghaznavids overthrew the Samanids in the late 990's, Ferdowsi continued to work on the epic, rewriting sections to praise the Ghaznavid Sultan Mahmud. Mahmud's attitude towards Ferdowsi and how well he rewarded the poet have long been a matter of dispute among scholars. The Turkic Mahmud may have been less interested in tales from Iranian history than the Samanids. The later sections of the *Shahnameh* reveal Ferdowsi's fluctuating moods: in some passages he complains about old age, poverty, illness and the death of his son; in others, he appears happier. Ferdowsi finally completed the epic poem on 8 March 1010. Virtually nothing is known with any certainty about the last decade of his life.

According to legend, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni offered Ferdowsi a gold piece for every couplet of the *Shahnameh* he wrote. The poet agreed to receive the money as a lump sum when he had completed the task. He planned to use it to rebuild the dykes in his native Tus. After thirty years of work, Ferdowsi finished the masterpiece. The sultan prepared to give him 60,000 gold pieces, one for every couplet, as agreed. However, the courtier whom Mahmud had entrusted with the money despised Ferdowsi, regarding him as a heretic and so he replaced the gold coins with silver. Ferdowsi was in the bath house when he received the reward. Finding it was silver and not gold, he gave the money away to the bath-keeper, a refreshment seller and the

slave that had carried the coins. When the courtier told the sultan about Ferdowsi's behaviour, he was furious and threatened to execute him. Ferdowsi fled to Khorasan, wrote a satire on Mahmud and spent most of the remainder of his life in exile. Mahmud eventually learned the truth about the courtier's deception and had him either banished or executed. By this time, the elderly Ferdowsi had returned to Tus. The sultan sent him a new gift of 60,000 gold pieces, but just as the caravan bearing the money entered the gates of Tus, a funeral procession exited the gates on the opposite side: the poet had died from a heart attack.

The *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi's only surviving work, is the national epic of Greater Iran. Consisting of some 50,000 *distichs* (couplets), it principally narrates the mythical and partly historical past of the Persian Empire from the creation of the world until the Muslim conquest in the seventh century. Iran, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and the greater region influenced by Persian culture such as Armenia, Dagestan, Georgia, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan also celebrate this national epic. It is a work of central importance in Persian culture, regarded by many as a literary masterpiece.

Traditional historiography in Iran has claimed that Ferdowsi was grieved by the fall of the Sassanid Empire and its subsequent rule by "Arabs" and "Turks". The *Shahnameh* has been regarded as an effort to preserve the memory of Persia's golden days and transmit it to a new generation, so that, by learning from it, they could acquire knowledge to build a better world. Most scholars have contended that Ferdowsi's main concern was the preservation of the pre-Islamic legacy of myth and history.

The first section concerns the Mythical Age, which is relatively short, amounting to some 2,100 verses, about four percent of the entire epic. It narrates events with the simplicity, predictability and swiftness of a historical work. After an opening in praise of God and Wisdom, the poem gives an account of the creation of the world and of man as believed by the Sassanians. 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 discovers fire and establishes the Sadeh Feast in its honor. Stories of Tahmuras, Jamshid, Zakhāk, Kava or Kaveh, Fereydūn and his three sons Salm, Tur, and Iraj, and his grandson Manuchehr are related in this section.

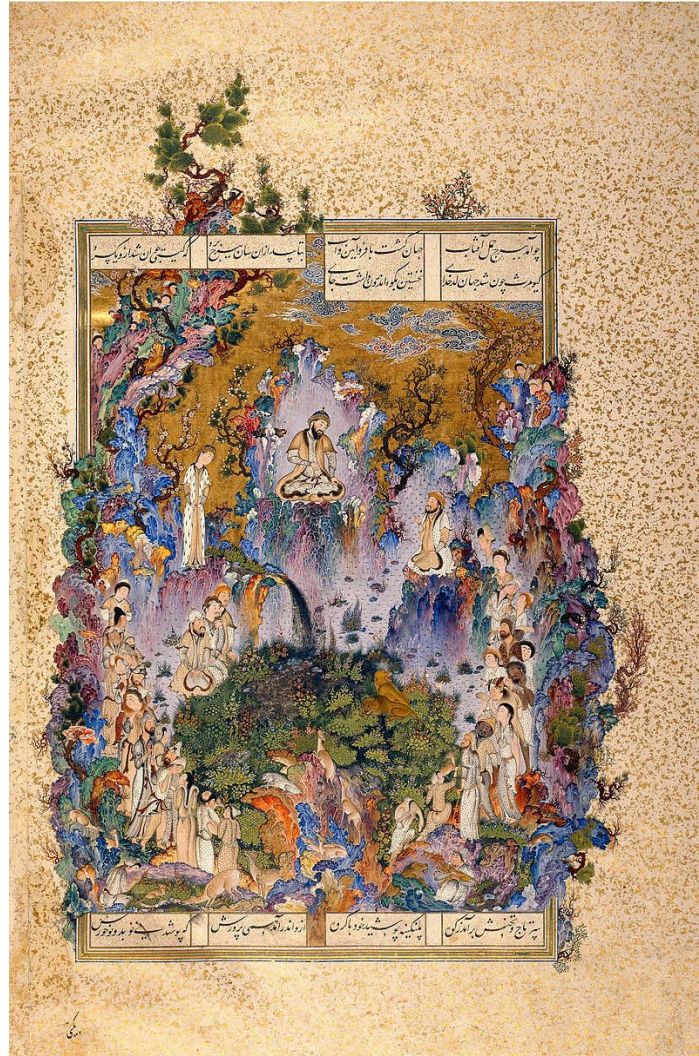
Next comes the Heroic age, of which two-thirds of the epic is devoted to, spanning from Manuchehr's reign until the conquest of Alexander the Great. This age is also identified as the kingdom of Keyaniyan, which established a long history of heroes in which myth and legend are combined. The chief feature of this period is the role played by the Saka heroes that feature as the backbone of the Empire. Garshāsp is briefly mentioned with his son Narimān, whose own son Sām acts as the leading paladin of Manuchehr. His successors are his son Zāl and Zāl's son Rostam, the bravest of the brave, and then Farāmarz. Among the stories described in this section are the romance of Zal and Rudāba, the Seven Stages of Rostam, Rostam and Sohrab, Sīyāvash and Sudāba, Rostam and Akvān Dīv, the romance of Bijan and Manijeh, the wars with Afrāsīyāb, Daqiqi's account of the story of Goshtāsp and Arjāsp, and Rostam and Esfandyār.

Lastly we have the Historical Age, as a brief summary of the Arsacid dynasty follows the history of Alexander and precedes that of Ardashir I, founder of the Sasanian Empire. After this, the Sasanian history is related with accuracy. The fall of the Sassanids and the Arab conquest of Persia are narrated in a romantic vein. A chief aspect of the *Shahnameh* is the didactic approach to a wide variety of moral virtues,

including worship of one God; religious uprightness; patriotism; love of wife, family and children; and the helping the poor.

Several themes of the *Shahnameh* were viewed with suspicion by the succession of Iranian regimes. During the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, the epic was largely ignored in favor of the more abstruse, esoteric and intellectual Persian literature. Historians note that the theme of regicide and the incompetence of kings embedded in the epic did little to appease the Iranian monarchy. Later, there were Muslim figures such as Ali Shariati, the hero of Islamic reformist youth of the 1970's, who were also antagonistic towards the contents of the epic, since it included verses critical of Islam. These include to the infamous line: "spit on your face, oh heavens spit!" which Ferdowsi uses as a reference to the Muslim invaders who despoiled Zoroastrianism (one of the world's oldest organised faiths).

After the widespread dissemination of the *Shahnameh*, a number of other works similar in nature appeared over the centuries within the cultural sphere of the Persian language. Without exception, all such works were based in style and method as the *Shahnameh*, but none of them could achieve the same degree of popularity. Many believe that the Modern Persian language today is more or less the same language as that of Ferdowsi's time over 1000 years ago due to works like the *Shahnameh*, which exerted a lasting and profound cultural and linguistic influence. The 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 *Shahnameh* in their works.



Court of Keyumars, Miniature by Sultan Muhammad from the Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp, Aga Khan Museum, 1525



A beaker illustrating the story of Bijan and Manijeh, Iran, late twelfth century, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C



A page from the Florence 'Shahnameh', the oldest known manuscript of the epic, Anatolia, National Central Library of Florence, 1217

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Another page from the Florence 'Shahnameh', 1217

Shahnameh: James Atkinson Translation (1823)



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A scene from the 'Shahnameh', depicting the Parthian king Artaban facing the Sassanid king Ardashir I, c. 1330

THE SHÁH NÁMEH

by

FIRDUSI

(Abul Kasim Mansur)

Translated into English by James Atkinson

The system of Sir William Jones in the printing of Oriental words has been kept in view in the following work, viz.: The letter *a* represents the short vowel as in *bat*, *á* with an accent the broad sound of *a* in *hall*, *i* as in *lily*, *í* with an accent as in *police*, *u* as in *bull*, *ú* with an accent as in *rude*, *ó* with an accent as *o* in *pole*, the diphthong *ai* as in *aisle*, *au* as in the German word *kraut* or *ou* in *house*.

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End of Sample