

## SHAHNAMAH: HISTORY OF THE PERSIAN KINGS

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### **Abstract:**

*The Shahnamah is a Persian Epic written by Firdaosi between 977 CE and 1010 CE. It is known as the "Book of the Kings"; as it covers the reign of fifty Persian Kings. It is the National Epic of Persia (now called Iran). This epic records the legends and history of Persia from the primitive times till the Arab conquest in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE. This work is Firdaosi's Magna Opus.*

**Keywords:** Epic, Firdaosi, Kings, Persia, Persians

*"Listen: this story's one you ought to know,  
 You'll reap the consequence of what you sow.  
 This fleeting world is not the world where we  
 Are destined to abide eternally:  
 And for the sake of an unworthy throne  
 You let the devil claim you for his own.  
 I've few days left here, I've no heart for war,  
 I cannot strive and struggle any more,  
 But hear an old man's words: the heart that's freed  
 From gnawing passion and ambitious greed  
 Looks on kings' treasures and the dust as one;  
 The man who sells his brother, as you've done,  
 For this same worthless dust, will never be  
 Regarded as a child of purity.  
 The world has seen so many men like you,  
 And laid them low: there's nothing you can do  
 But turn to God; take thought then for the way  
 You travel, since it leads to Judgment Day"*

— Firdowsi, *Shahnameh of Firdowsi (Persian) - 10 volumes including index* (Shahnameh Quotes)

The word Shahnamah means "The Book of Kings". It records the history and covers the reign of fifty Persian Kings. Shahnamah is the National Epic of Persia now called Iran. This Epic poem Shahnamah is written in Persian language by Hakim Abul-Qasim Mansur, who is better known by his pen-name as Firdaosi Toosi. Firdaosi completed the Shahnamah around 1010 CE.

This Epic chronicles the legends and histories of Persians (Aryan) kings from primordial times to the Arab conquest of Iran in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE. It is inscribed in classical Persian Language which is apparent from its Middle Persian Pahlavi roots. During this time Arabic was the language of the court. So Firdaosi is seen as a National Hero as he reignited pride in Persians by writing this epic in

Persian language. This epic not only illustrates history, but also reflects its values, its ancient religion and its sense of nationhood. It took Firdaosi thirty-three years to complete this epic. During this passage of time, the rule of Eastern Persia had passed to the Turkoman Ghaznavid – who had based themselves in the Northeastern province of Khorasan with Ghazni as its capital. (Eduljee, Ferdowsi's Shahnamah - The Epic).

When A.H. Nuhbin Mansur occupied the throne in 563, he was of the opinion that the history of his ancestors should be written down in the verse form so that it is not lost to the future generations. Subsequently he sent a messenger to summon Abu Mansur Daqiqi, who was one of the most prominent Persian Poets of the Samanid era. The task of composing the National Epic was entrusted to him. Daqiqi wrote about a thousand verses, when he was assassinated by his own servant. Abul Qasim Hasan Balkhi who was the poet of the Royal Court suggested the name of Firdaosi. He was sure that Firdaosi was competent enough to complete the work of versification of the epic which Daqiqi had started. Mahmoud was happy and the work was entrusted to Firdaosi. When the Shahnamah was completed, he was offered only Twenty thousand dirhams instead of fifty thousand; which he did not accept. (Persian Language and Literature)

The Shahnamah covers three main dynasties of Persia, namely:

- 1. The Peshdadian** - It refers to the early legendary Kings and the beginning of civilization. It occupies about 10% of the Shahnamah.
- 2. The Kayaanian** – It sets the geographical identity of Persia which includes the region of Zaabulistaan that was occupied by Rustam and his ancestors. It occupies about 55% of the Shahnamah.
- 3. The Sasanian** – This part of the Shahnamah is the historical section and covers human and political exploits. It occupies about 35% of the Shahnamah. One is curious to note that the Achaemenian and the Parthian – two of the chief

historic dynasties are nearly ignored in the Shahnamah. There are some who believe that the Peshdadian and Kayaanian dynasties are mythological and not historical, since there is no records of events in a chronicled order or archaeological proofs (physical evidence) obtainable for that era. But Dr. Ramiyar Karanjia disagrees as he points out that these dynasties covered a period which was roughly between 9000 to 6000 BC; and this era belongs to the realms of pre-history when the natural ability for writing had not yet been appropriately developed. And so we have to depend on the Avestan and Pahlavi texts for constructing much of the history of this period. Currently, archaeological discoveries dating around 4000 BC are being excavated near the Central Asian regions in and around ancient Iran. (Karanjia).

The Shahnamah opens with the cosmography and the creation of the world and how the arts of civilization like the cooking, metallurgy, fire, and law were introduced to the Aryans. During this period humankind lived close to the wild animals – hunting as well as domesticating them. The sections in the book are divided according to the Coronation and the Bereavement of the Individual Sovereigns starting from Kayumars from primordial times until the ill-fated Yazdgurd III, who was murdered as he tried to flee from the Arabs during the Arab conquest of Persia in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Though this Epic is not precisely chronological, nonetheless there is a general movement through time. There are numerous Kings, Knights and Heroes, who lived for hundreds of years – just like some characters mentioned in the Bible; but most have a normal life span. The images of a series of sunrise and sunset exemplify the passage of time in a remarkable manner and each daybreak brings along with it, the hope of another new bright day (CAIS - The Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies).

The Shahnamah is approximately allocated into three parts:

#### **PART I: The Mythical Age**

Firdaosi opens the Shahnamah in praise of God and Wisdom, and gives us details of how the world was created, as believed by the Sassanians. This is followed by the story of the first man Kayumars, who was also the first king during the period when men were mountain dwellers. His grandson Hooshang, son of Siyamak, was the one who discovered the fire accidently and established the Sadeh feast in its honor known as Jash-e-

Sadah; which is celebrated till date. Stories of other Kings like Tahmuras, Jamsheed, Zahhaak, Kaavah, Fareedoon and his three sons Salm, Toor, and Eerach, and his grandson Meenochehr are also mentioned in this section. Each of the kings in this age had contributed something for the progress and advancement of the civilization. Kayumars had used his power to benefit his people but King Jamsheed had become so powerful and proud of his endeavors that he pronounced himself God. His egotistical conviction in his own splendor caused God to withdraw his farr (*divine Halo*). This portion of the Shahnamah is relatively short and amounts to two thousand one hundred verses or around four percent of the entire book. Firdaosi's poetry has the fascination to make the story of this period appealing and lively (Ferdowsi & The Shahnameh).

#### **PART II: The Heroic Age**

Almost two-third of the Shahnamah is devoted to the age of heroes; extending from Meenochehr's reign until the conquest of Sikandar (Alexander the Great). This period is marked by perpetual wars against Tooraan, a central Asian country whose ruler Afraasiaab was the affirmed enemy of Persia. The main feature of this period is the major roles played by the heroes of Zaabulistaan. They were the backbone of the Persian Empire and always supported the Persian Kings and fought their wars though they themselves were kings of their own territories. Garshaasp is briefly mentioned along with his son Nareemaan. Nareemaan's son Saam was the leading paladin of Meenochehr while ruling over his own country of Seestaan. Saam was succeeded by his son Zaal and grandsons Rustam and Faraamarz who successfully occupied the throne. Rustam is the champion of all the heroes belonging to this era. He was brave and strong, devoted to his king and committed to his country. He is also responsible for creating terror and fear amongst his enemies. Among other stories narrated in this section are the romance of Zaal and Rudaabah, the tragic story of Rustam and his son Sohraab, prince Siaavoush, King Kaikhusrav, King Kai Kaaos, queens Tahmeenah, Soodaabah, and the Persian Woman warrior Goodrafrid, the romance of Beezhan and Muneezhah, King Gushtaasp, Aspandiyar, Shaghaad. The enemy king of Tooraan: Afraasiaab and his son Arjaasp and other Tooraanian warriors are also mentioned. The feudal society in which they lived is fabulously portrayed in the Shahnamah with precision and abundance to bring

forth to us the customs and traditions followed during those times (Ferdowsi & The Shahnameh)

### Part III - The Historical Age

In this age, there is a brief mention of the Ashkaniyan Dynasty. This is followed by the history of Sikandar (Alexander) and then Ardsheer I, who founded the Sassanid dynasty. Using the most striking poetic language, this part of the Shahnamah tells us of the exploits of the Sassanid rulers and how destruction took place after the Arabs conquered Persia. Here Firdaosi calls this age as the arrival of 'the army of darkness' and laments over this catastrophe (Ferdowsi & The Shahnameh)

The Shahnamah appropriately ranks amongst the greatest Epics of the world along with the Iliad and Odyssey of the West and Ramayana and Mahabharata in the East. It is said that Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth guru of the Sikhs was so inspired by the Shahnamah that he composed "Zafar Namah," in Persian verse, in the same rhyme and meter as the Shahnamah in 1706 A.D, and this transformed the Sikhs into a virile and martial race (Surti).

The Shahnamah is one of the best examples of belletrist and classic writings of Global literature. It is a treasure of intelligent advice and contains images from Persian History. The Shahnamah is not just about legends. It compiles the history of the Kings as well as the Heroes of Persia who were continuously involved in fights, hunts and court functions like drinking, feasting and merry making which were the key rudiments of the warrior code and the pass-time of the ruling elite during that era. In this Epic, we discover traces of some religious thinking, way of life and traditions and historical events related to the lives of the Persian Kings and warriors. Till date this epic is enthusiastically read with zest and pleasure all over the world; sharing interest, passion, desires, pleasures, treachery, agony and torment shared by the Persians. The Shahnamah relates to stories of the rise and fall of the great Empires, the difference of opinion between the Kings and Knights, the disagreement between fathers and sons, man's struggles against nature and his own providence and principles.

The concluding lines of Firdaosi's Epic Poem were:

*"I have reached the zenith of this phenomenal history,  
 And all the world will talk of me,  
 I shall be immortal, these seeds I have sown will save,*

*My name and repute from the grave,  
 And men of sense and knowledge will declare,  
 When I have departed, my applauses and my fame"*  
 (Inskeep, 2009).

The Shahnamah is like a dew drop in the sea of literature and is passionately acknowledged by its readers. Shahnamah is one of the 'Greatest Poetic Masterpiece' of all times. It is Firdaosi's Magna Opus.

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