

# Lives of Ferdowsi, Phase 1: Translation of the Baysonghori Preface to the Shahnama of Ferdowsi

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## VERSE

In their opening discourse, it is fitting for the devotees of perfection,  
To praise the King of the realm, the Exalted Almighty,  
A King of kings that even to the outskirt of His Exaltedness,  
And from the very inception of time to eternity, no trace of decline or decay, will ever reach.

A King of kings whose designs and deliberations on the earthly and heavenly kingdoms, and his imposition of order on both spheres, divine and human, never need allies and supporters, or reliance on ministers and counselors. His kingship and sovereignty rest assured, for His eternal domains are steadfastly secure, immune from decline and fall, and free from vicissitudes of succession and mutability. His grandeur and magnificence are exempt from all the degradation and apprehension that ensue from [worldly and dynastic] severance and cessation.

## VERSE

A King to whose bounty and munificence  
(Terrestrial) kings owe their crowns,  
All this pomp and circumstance, splendor and magnificence,

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<sup>1</sup> The current text of the translation is a work-in-progress, re-edited by Neguin Yavari and Olga M. Davidson. The text follows Riyahi, Mohammad Amin, *Sarcheshmeh-hāye Ferdowshi-shenāsi*, Tehran, Mo'ssessehe Motale'at va tahqiqat-e farhangi, 1993, p. 364ff, which is based on the text of the facsimile edition of the Golestān Library, 1350, with some reference to the Turner Macan text of the Preface. The Malek Library text was not consulted by him, or in this translation by us.

Is but a drop from His divine merciful bounty.

A seasoned commander (*qeddimi*<sup>2</sup>) over whose glorious mantle the dust of daily calamities cannot settle, and on His Heavenly Court incidents of the ravages of time cannot leave a stain. The nine spheres of heaven <sup>3</sup> are but the lowly first ring of the ladder to the threshold of His Almighty audience; the lamp (*qandīl*) of the world-illuminating sun<sup>4</sup> and the lantern (*fānus*) of the moon are but the faintest lights in the niches of His omnipotent Court. <sup>5</sup>

#### VERSE

The triumphant (Fereydun-like) Sun, mighty as Jamshid <sup>5</sup>  
Revolves in this dome by His command.  
Thanks to His artistry and in the darkness of the night, the light of the moon,  
Glitters like Bijan's face from the deep depth of the well<sup>6</sup>.  
Two radiant lamps, each morning and night,  
He lights upon this azure dome,  
With one, He brightens the horizon's visage,  
Through the other, He turns the celestial courtyard into a rose garden (of the star-studded sky).  
The Omnipotent (*Qāder, al-Qader al-moqtader*)<sup>7</sup> who welded together the elements and constituents deftly on a just basis, so that from their blending with due proportion and in harmony, many thousands of creatures and beings appeared in this transient and corruptible world<sup>8</sup> thanks to His power and self-sufficient Will.<sup>9</sup> And He made the human

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<sup>2</sup> *Qadim/qeddīm*: punning on the word *qeddīm* in the sense of king, born leader or commander, and *Qadīm* implying tested by time and proven immune from its ravages, almost like the Divine Name “al-bāqī al-wāreth”.

<sup>3</sup> The Ptolemaic notion of the seven planets plus the fixed stars and the First Movable.

<sup>4</sup> The Sun was sometimes referred to as *qandīl-e 'Isā*/or *tarsā* alluding to the use of lamps in churches as well as the fact that both Jesus and the Sun are associated with the Fourth Sphere.

<sup>5</sup> The two pre-Islamic Iranian mythical kings used here as adjectival attributes. A common literary feature as in, e.g., Sa'di's reference to “Fereydun-vazīrī.”

<sup>6</sup> Reference to a frequently illustrated episode of Bijan and Manijeh in the *Shahname*.

<sup>7</sup> One of the 99 divine names.

<sup>8</sup> *'Alam-e kaw-n-o-fesād*: a common designation for the world here and now, prone progressively to corruption and decay.

<sup>9</sup> i.e. *mashshiyat-e be-'ellat*. The efficient cause in Aristotelian terminology.

kind the epitome and the conclusive idea of this act. And He bestowed the gift of Speech on their souls, a gift that makes them special and sets them apart from the rest of His creatures, thereby endowing them with the ability to understand and to convey understanding, the power to learn and to teach, of unraveling intricate spiritual notions, the capability to provide themselves with sustenance in the present world, and gather and store (through good deeds and leading a virtuous life) means of salvation for the next (world). And He also made sharp distinctions among mankind based on their caliber and character; so that those He had endowed with a greater share of intellect, wisdom, virtuous qualities, and good conduct, also received a larger portion of felicity and rose in status and esteem, and would enjoy high rank and prestige in this world as well as attain to their ultimate aim of blissful proximity to the Almighty Creator in the next world. And throughout the earth, His profound and mature wisdom brought forth and installed the sovereigns of the domain of divine message and the champions of the land of prophethood, in order to proclaim the divine invitation and enact the mysteries of proof; for it is they who remove the obstacles on the path of religion. They are the leaders in the world of certitude (yaqin<sup>10</sup>) and the pearls in the sea and the stars in the sky of the elect<sup>11</sup>, privy to mysteries that the intellect alone cannot decipher and allusions beyond comprehension so “**that mankind, after (the advent) of the prophets, should have (no grounds for a plea against God)**”<sup>12</sup>; and so that by means of their manifest miracles and clinching arguments, they could act as sincere guides leading God’s creatures on the path of righteousness; and through their clear proof and demonstration, the rewards and the punishments of the everlasting world would become apparent to people, east and west, and through the light of knowledge and spiritual understanding, and total success in their guidance, the essence of religions and sects and the boundaries of duties and obligations are all set in order and clearly delineated.

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<sup>10</sup> Note in this context Q. 102.5 on ‘*elm al-yaqin*. Also Franz Rosenthal’s discussion of the concept in broad terms in his *Knowledge Triumphant* Brill, Leiden & Boston, reprint 2007, pp. 23-25.

<sup>11</sup> *Eṣṭefā* and *Ejṭebā*: Those endowed by God with special gifts. Q.35.32 “...We have given the Book of Inheritance to such our servants as We have chosen.” See further on *Eṣṭefā* in R. A. Nicholson’s tr. of Hujwīrī’s *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, new ed. London 1936, p. 265 and p. 390.

<sup>12</sup> Q. 4.165 as well as Q.28.47: An often repeated Qur’anic statement that in their role as admonishers, prophets were sent throughout the ages to guide their flock and pre-empt any possible pleading on grounds of ignorance and want of moral education to justify and cover their past sins on the Day of Judgment. Arabic quotations in **colored** bold font.

And amidst that gathering, the candle of the assembly of the messengers, the sun in the heaven of glory, the Jupiter at the wheel of (blessed) fortune, the pole of the revolving globe of lordship (*siyādat*)<sup>13</sup> the foremost in the roll call and register of the prophets and saints, the sultan at a paradisiacal (*ferdowsi*)<sup>14</sup> palace, the king of the pristine throne ('Onşuri<sup>15</sup>), a lord (*seyyidi*) that when the sun of his religious doctrines dawned from Arabian lands, the customs and traditions of the Persian kings became, like the waning moon, hidden from view, effaced entirely in the horizon of consternation and dismay.

#### VERSE

The roof and ceiling of the Fire-worshipper's portico<sup>16</sup>,  
Were shattered to pieces by the mace of his miracles.

The sound of his renowned and welcomed kettledrums reverberated five times a day <sup>17</sup>in the lands of both Iran and Turan; and the fame of his virtuous and superior qualities became widespread in all their dependencies and subject territories. An unlettered [prophet] “**whom We had taught knowledge from Our own**”<sup>18</sup>, crossed out and annulled the writings of previous sects and nations and their ancient books and traditions. He spoke with such eloquence that when he unshielded his tongue of discourse, all those gifted with eloquence, whether Arab or not, were bereft of their power of speech, and when he rode his charger of eloquence into the arena of excellence, all fine orators, in

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<sup>13</sup> *Siyādat*: Sovereignty and lordship. Perhaps also hinting at later usage as *seyyed*, descendants of the Prophet through the marriage of 'Ali and Fāṭema.

<sup>14</sup> Pun on the name of the poet Ferdowsi and *ferdows*, paradise.

<sup>15</sup> Again a pun on the name of the famous Persian panegyrist poet 'Onşori of the Ghaznavid court in early 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century, mentioned later in this Preface. On him see François de Blois, PL V/1 'Unşurī, (no. 149), pp. 232-27.

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps recalling “Eyvān-e Madā'in”, i.e. Ctesiphon.

<sup>17</sup> *Panj nowbat*: The ceremonial beating of the royal kettledrums five times a day in most courts. Here it specifically refers to the five daily worships incumbent on all Muslims.

<sup>18</sup> Q.18.65. A reference to “‘elm-e lādoni” i.e. the esoteric knowledge that can only be acquired through direct divine inspiration and not attainable otherwise.

towns and tribes alike, lost their reins of control and confidence. “**Say: Produce your proof if you are truthful!**” (Q. 2. 111) and (Q. 27. 64).<sup>19</sup>

And it behooves to send infinite greetings and offer salutations upon the Prophet’s grave,<sup>20</sup> and its sweet-scented enclosure and pure and holy tomb; and innumerable blessings upon all his descendants, and those of his house, and his companions and followers, particularly upon the Four<sup>21</sup>, for it was through their struggles for the faith that the pillars of the laws of religion were strengthened and fortified, and it was through their concord that the path of the right conduct was leveled and paved; those fighters of the arena of the **Foremost** and those gracious residents of the garden of the **nearest to God**.<sup>22</sup> Abu Bakr, ‘Omar, ‘Othmān, and Ḥaydar (‘The Lion’, i.e. ‘Ali’.<sup>23</sup>)

#### VERSE

Each of the four, the four bounds of the edifice of Prophethood,  
Each, one of the Four Elements of the spirits of the prophets;  
Without the love for the four in these few five days of life,  
One cannot find release from this prison-house of affliction (this world)<sup>24</sup>  
**May The Almighty be pleased with them all.**

And to proceed further with our account,<sup>25</sup> now that we have arrived in the year of 829 (A.H.) after the Prophet’s pilgrimage, in the reign of the greatest of all princes, prophet-

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<sup>19</sup> An often repeated refrain in the Qur’an challenging the unbelievers to offer a more valid and convincing discourse than that of the Qur’an.

<sup>20</sup> *Rauḍa ṭayyeba*. Literally the paradisiac plot in Medina referring to the tomb of The Prophet.

<sup>21</sup> i.e. The Four Rightly Guided Caliphs listed shortly afterwards.

<sup>22</sup> Q. 56. 10-11. 10: “**And those foremost (in faith) will be foremost (in the hereafter).**

And 11: **These will be nearest to God.** (tr. A. Yusuf Ali).

<sup>23</sup> The use of Ḥaydar (“Lion” a familiar epithet for ‘Ali) rather than ‘Ali might be a way of appeasing Shi’ite readers who would have opted for a longer title for ‘Ali with the addition of *Amir al-mo’menin* to distinguish him from the other three caliphs. For further details on the ‘Four Rightly Guided Caliphs’ see Hibri’s *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History. The Rashidun Caliphs* n. 44 below.

<sup>24</sup> The verses, which continue the reference to the first four caliphs, are from a long *qasida* in praise of the Prophet by Khāqāni (*Divān*, ed. Ziyā’al-Din Sajjadi, pp. 3-6). Riyahi’s text, following the G. manuscripts has ‘anā for ‘fanā.’ There is a poetical reference to a winning position in the game of backgammon, “sheshdar,” similar to checkmate in the game of chess, blocking any movement, a metaphor therefore to depict our inescapable incarceration in the world here and now.

<sup>25</sup> Paraphrasing the conventional phrase “*ammā ba’d*”, the standard expression in Persian and Arabic used to signal the transition in the narration sequence from prefatory remarks to the main narrative. Frequently

like in conduct and angelic in his temper, the pearl in the casket of the realm, the glittering star on the pinnacle of majesty and good fortune, a reflection of the Creator's compassion, the *raison d'être* for the creation of the seven (planets) and the four (elements), doubly blessed with holy and angelic spirits, the frontispiece of the book of justice and good governance, the index of the roll-call of high rank and splendor, the Jamshid of the Age, the Darius of the Era, the purveyor of tidings of peace and security, the conveyor of justice and benevolence, the planter of the ensign of the realm, strengthened by divine support, the first fruit of the royal garden, the rose bush in the orchard of Divine bounty, the moon in the sky of chivalry (*fotowwat*), and the cypress in the garden of manliness (*morowwat*)<sup>26</sup>, a king created by His grace, born and nurtured devoid of sin through His protection, a soul draped in the cloth of fine virtues through His design, his purified essence the very epitome of God's great mystery<sup>27</sup>, the precious stone in the signet of favorable fortune, the ruby in the mine of happiness, the turquoise upon the crown of victory, the pearl inside the shell of felicity, the medial star-gem in the necklace of bravery<sup>28</sup>, the ruby in the crown of sovereignty.

He whom from near and afar / the mighty and the lowly offer allegiance.

The ocean is but a drop compared to the trickling of his bounty / as are the rays of the sun, compared to his spear.

The righteous mainstay of the temporal and spiritual worlds, The shadow of God upon the earth, aptly chosen for His utmost favors by the Lord of the Universe, Sultan b. Sultan, and Khaqan b. Khaqan b. Khaqan, Prince Baysonghor Khan, whose gloriously victorious banners remain victorious so long as the seven firmaments last<sup>29</sup>, and his signs of perfection and power recall the seven oft-repeated and celebrated

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used a narrative marker in popular prose stories, heralding the start of the story proper or different sections in an episodic narrative.

<sup>26</sup> For definitions of *morowwat* and *fotowwat* see: "Futuwwa" in *EP* Cl. Cahen and Fr. Taeschner and Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies I*, "Introductory chapter: Muruwwa and Dīn" tr. C. R. Barber and S.M. Stern.

<sup>27</sup> Reference to Q.2.30 and God's response to the angels questioning Adam's creation, "I know what you know not."

<sup>28</sup> "Ṣafdar" as a conquering hero on the battlefield is also on occasion an epithet for 'Alī so perhaps an allusion here.

<sup>29</sup> "seb'-e shedād" the seven skies, ref. to Q. 78.12, "and built over you the seven firmaments."

opening verses of the Qur'an<sup>30</sup>, and the ropes of his regal tent firmly fastened to its pegs forever.

#### Verse

He whose bounteous mercy upon all / Is a divine blessing upon the globe,  
The world ordered fresh and spring-like / With April showers through his command.<sup>31</sup>

Given his love and intense interest in poetry and pleasing diction, and in studying accounts and worthy deeds of great kings, and commendable customs of world ruling monarchs, such as famed Persian kings and victorious Roman ones, which are displayed on the pages of passing eras, occasionally he spent time perusing Ferdowsi of Tus' *Book of Kings*, in which the poet has remolded Persian poetry into pearls.

Although there were a number of manuscripts of the *Shahname* on display at the Royal Library (*Ketābkhāne*<sup>32</sup>), given his delicate taste and discriminating nature, they failed to win his princely approval. And now, since in this era of his royal reign—may it endure to the end of time!— the arts are no longer moribund and appear lively and on the ascent, **and the drought-ridden shoots of knowledge and learning appear day by day more rejuvenated due to the rain drops of his instruction and education; and the rose garden of desires and aspirations continuously replenished from the water-fount of his generosity and benevolence.**<sup>33</sup>

If hitherto those endowed with artistic gifts and talent were wary of the times / Now, Praise be to God, in this eternal reign, they can be rewarded according to their desert. A royal decree instructed that among a selection of titles, one should be chosen and corrected in a consummate manner.

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<sup>30</sup> “al-sab‘al-mathāni” usually a reference to the opening seven verses of the Qur'an (*sura-ye ḥamd*), referred to later in the Qur'an: Q. 15. 87: “We have bestowed upon you the seven oft-repeated verses and the Qur'an”.

<sup>31</sup> “Neysān” the second month of Spring noted for frequent showers. The lines are quoted from a qasida by Awḥad al-Din Anvari (see *Divān-e Anvari*, ed. Mohammad-Taqi Modarres-e Raḡavi, Tehran, 1337, Vol. I, qasida no. 196, p. 485. Further on Anvari and his courtly reception see Annemarie Schimmel and Stuart Cary Welch, *Anvari's divan, a pocketbook for Akbar*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983.

<sup>32</sup> For princely workshops/libraries in general, see the bibliography under Richard, 2010. For Baysonghor's own celebrated workshop and library see Akimushkin 1997; Roxburgh, 2001a; Thackston, “Arzadasht”; and Mihan, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> An example of almost exact phrases in Ḥāfeẓ-e Abru, *Joghrafiyā* II, p. 796. **Here marked in red.**

## VERSE

In a script like a plaited dark chain / though also like flowing water in its limpid fluency.

And in the preface comes the story of how “*Bāstān-nāme*,”<sup>34</sup> which is the original source of *The Shahname*, was compiled and how a number of poets embarked on turning it into verse until the time when they all agreed on Ferdowsi (i.e. on his unique suitability). And [the story of] how Ferdowsi completed the *Shahname* and how he became disillusioned with and disappointed in Sultan Mahmud<sup>35</sup>, and the verses he composed about his grievances against Sultan Mahmud, as well as what has been reported about Ferdowsi’s life, as well as a dynastic chart in which the various branches of the kings of Persia are displayed and their lineage from Kayomarth to Yazdegerd <sup>36</sup>is written down. Thus according to the exalted commission was the preface in this manner composed. “**And my success can only come from God**”<sup>37</sup>

### The Compilation of the Book:

The narrators of records and conveyors of accounts relate<sup>38</sup> that in ancient times the kings of Persia and particularly the Sasanians and among them most notably the just king

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<sup>34</sup> Note the choice of “*Bāstān-nāme*” instead of “*Khodāy-nāme*” by earlier writers including Ḥamza Eṣfahāni to describe pre-Islamic Iran in its any facets. It hints at a closer affinity to “*asāṭir al-awwalin*” derided in the Qur’an though without the pejorative implications of the Quranic use of “*asāṭir*”. See Franz Rosenthal, “*Asāṭir al-Awwalīn*”, *EP*<sup>2</sup>, [http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_SIM\\_8355](http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_8355) and Nejmeddine Khalallah, “*Asāṭir al-awwalīn*: Une expression coranique ambigüe,” *Arabica* 59/1-2, 2012, pp. 145-56.

<sup>35</sup> Mahmud b. Sebüktegin, Ghaznavid ruler (r. 998-1030), see Peter Hardy, “Mahmud of Ghazna and the Historians” *Journal of the Panjab University Historical Society*, XIV, 1962, pp. 1-36 and C. E. Bosworth, “Mahmud of Ghazna in Contemporary Eyes and in Later Persian Literature,” *Iran* IV, 1966, pp. 85-92.

<sup>36</sup> i.e. the entire history of pre-Islamic Iran from Creation to the end of the Sasanian empire as covered by the *Shahname*, from its cosmogonic origin and the first king/man Kayomarth to the last king, Yazdegerd III (r. 632-651) of the Sasanian dynasty (224-651). For Kayomarth see Mansour Shaki “GAYŌMART”, in: *Elr. Online*: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_1951](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_1951)

<sup>37</sup> A frequent quotation from the Qur’an (11.88) as a marker at the end of a section or preface. Note that the above paragraph serves as an abstract or curtain raiser for what follows.

<sup>38</sup> The first few words are couched in the conventional and formulaic set phrases found at the beginning of popular stories. It can be argued that the choice sets the tone for the entire long preface as a typically Timurid “historical romance,” a compound narrative with many strains, a cornucopia of intertextuality, opting for comprehensiveness and inclusivity in dealing with life and the afterlife of poets, thereby complicating questions of genre, taxonomy, and factuality all at the same time. This chimes well with the editorial approach to the text of the poem itself which also favors inclusion of verses which in modern scholarly editions are discarded or relegated to footnotes.



Anushirvān<sup>39</sup> had an insatiable passion for collecting accounts of the past generations and having them revised and shorn of their anomalies. He habitually sent messengers to enquire throughout the world and gather stories of rulers of different regions along with any other noteworthy accounts; and he deposited a copy of their research in the [Royal] library.

When it came to Yazdgerd's reign<sup>40</sup>, all those historical accounts had been preserved in his library but in no particular order. He ordered Dāneshvar the Dehqān<sup>41</sup>- a senior figure at Madā'in [i.e. at the royal court] who combined courage with learning and wisdom- to organize a list of chapters and arrange them in order from the beginning of the rule of Kayomarth to the end of the reign of Khosrow Parviz<sup>42</sup>. And whatever lacunae he found there he filled and appended by asking information from the learned and the Zoroastrian *mobeds*.

And so a chronicle of sheer perfection and comprehensiveness was created.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Aushirvān: Khosrow I (r. 531-79). For a detailed account of his image in historical and didactic sources see 'Ali Marzbān-Rād, Khosrow *Anushervān dar adab-e fārsi*, Dāneshgāh Melli Publications, Tehran, 1978.

<sup>40</sup> Yazdgerd III (r. 632-651). The last Sasanian king. See Edmund Hayes, "The Death of Kings, Group Identity and the Tragedy of "Nezhād" in Ferdowsi's 'Shahnameh'" *Iranian Studies* 48/3, 2015, pp. 369-93.

<sup>41</sup> Dāneshvar the Dehqān. The first of many problematic names of the various assumed 'authorities' listed as early compilers/narrators of the pre-Islamic history of Iran. Nöldeke repeated the information in this passage with a note of caution (1879, p. xv; Zaryāb tr., p.16) but revised his views later, and followed the preface in this passage. Some later western scholars also had no qualms (see, e.g. Morony, 1976, p. 603) though more recent research in the west (e.g. Hämeen-Anttila 2018, p. 231) has taken note of Dhabih-Allāh Ṣafā (1333, p. 61), discussed in detail by Omidsālār (1390, 273-75). Moreover, Omidsālār quotes a suggestion by Bāstāni-Parizi (1371, pp. 36-37) citing from a preface in a 16<sup>th</sup> century illustrated manuscript of the *Shahname* in Cluj, Romania. The manuscript refers to "dāneshvarān-e dehqān," i.e. learned *dehqāns* in general, suggesting the source of the possible misreading in the Baysonghuri Preface (see Eleazar Birnbaum, "Turkish Manuscripts: Cataloguing since 1960 and Manuscripts still uncatalogued. Pt.2." *JAOS* 103/3, 1983, pp. 515-32 referring to A.M. Sowti's brief unpublished catalogue of the Cluj manuscript). It is clear that the confusion arises from the common urge, particularly in pre-modern literature, to enlist as many "authorities" as possible, and endow them with a life and biography of their own.

<sup>42</sup> Khosrow Parviz. See James Howard-Johnston, "Kosrow II" in *Elr*. online:

[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_10314](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_10314)

The end of his reign also marks the end of the glorious days of the dynasty and the beginning of its downfall.

<sup>43</sup> Note the emphasis on the exquisite comprehensiveness of the narrative, an implicit acknowledgement of a delight in creative embroidery- the hallmark of the *Baysonghuri Preface*. The point is lost to those modern literary historians in search of a pristine vita while smirking at the anachronisms.

When Sa'd b. Waqqās<sup>44</sup> captured Yazdgird's treasures and library, the chronicle was part of the booty which they presented to the Caliph 'Omar<sup>45</sup>. He sent for a translator to inform him of the contents. He recounted parts of the book dealing with the codes of justice of the Pishdādīān<sup>46</sup> and other Persian dynasties and their wise decisions and sober measures. The Caliph 'Omar was most pleased with these and ordered them to be translated into Arabic. But other sections contained far-fetched and unworthy matter. When 'Omar heard [the passages dealing with] the beliefs of the Sun worshippers and fire worshippers and the codes of the Sabians<sup>47</sup> and the story of Zāl and Simurgh and such like, he decreed that the book was not fit for study and scrutiny for it bore an exact likeness to this world and this [material] world was not worthy of attention and care.

"In what sense is it like this world?" They [his entourage] asked.

I have heard the Prophet say," 'Omar replied, "that God regards this world so worthless that he has mixed the licit and the illicit in it. And in this book too, the lawful and the unlawful are mixed together; I mean true and false." <sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Sa'd b. Waqqās, a Companion of the Prophet and a commander of the Arab armies against the Sasanians. See G. R. Hawting, "Sa'd b. Abī Waqqās," *EI*<sup>2</sup> VIII, pp. 696-97.

<sup>45</sup> 'Omar. The second of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. See in particular Tayeb El-Hibri, *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History. The Rashidun Caliphs*, Columbia U.P. New York, 2010; particularly chapter vii, pp. 262-99.

<sup>46</sup> Pishdādīān. The first mythical dynasty after the Creation.

<sup>47</sup> Šābians. The Sabians are listed as one of the religious minorities or sects tolerated in the Qur'an (2:62; 5:69; 22:17). This did not imply approval of their beliefs which could be dismissed, as in this passage, as no more valid than the fables of pre-Islamic origin such as the story of the birth and infancy of the Iranian hero Zāl under the protection of the mythical bird Simurgh (see Davis, tr. *Shahnameh*, pp. 63-79). Further on Sabians see Kevin T. Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaean to Šābians of the Marshes*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> In the text the Caliph 'Omar recites the Prophet's words first in Arabic before the Persian translation. See also Yaq'ubi's *Ta'rikh* on the topos of the false fables of the Persians and passages in Qeṭṭī's *Ta'rikh al-Ḥokamā'* and Ibn Khaldun's *Moqaddema* cited in the secondary references below.

The various versions of a willful destruction of books-emblematic of a clash of cultures- are often conflated together and include the destruction of the Library at Alexandria after the Arab conquest as well as the many centuries earlier destruction of Zoroastrian religious texts at Persepolis by Alexander. See Paul Casanova, "L'incendie de la bibliothèque d'Alexandrie par les Arabes" in *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 67 année, no.2., 1923, pp. 163-71. Diana Delia, "From Romance to Rhetoric: The Alexandrian Library in Classical and Islamic Traditions", *AHR*, 97/5, 1992, pp. 1449-1467; Daniel Heller-Roazen: "Tradition's Destruction: On the Library of Alexandria", in *October*, Vol. 100, *Obsolescence* (Spring, 2000), pp. 133-53).

For a rebuttal of accusations of arson against Muslims particularly by a number of nationalist modern Iranian scholars see Ayatollah Morteżā Moṭahhari, *The Burning of Libraries in Iran and Alexandria*, tr. by N. P. Nazareno and M. Nekdoost, Islamic Propagation Organization, Tehran, 1983 (Persian text in Moṭahhari, *Khadamāt-e motaqābel-e Īrān va Eslām*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. Tehran 1357, pp. 267-306.)

So when they divided up the booty among those who had fought in the holy wars, this book was allotted to the people of Abyssinia. They took it to the Abyssinian ruler along with other treasures and rare objects from Yazdgird's treasury<sup>49</sup>. The ruler ordered it to be translated and became very familiar with its contents and extremely fond of it.<sup>50</sup> And in most regions of Ethiopia and India the book became popular.

Then came a time when in Khorasan, the Al-e-Layth dynasty came to power. Ya'qub<sup>51</sup> Layth sent an envoy to India to fetch a copy. And he ordered Abu Mansur Abd-al-Razzāq b. Abd-Allāh b. Farrokh<sup>52</sup> who was his close confidant to have all that Dāneshvar the Dehqān had recited in the Pahlavi language translated into Persian, and to add to it all that had happened between the time of Khosrow Parviz until the end of Yazdgerd's era [i.e. the final years of dynastic decline and fall].

Abu Mansur therefore commanded his own official Abu Mansur al-Ma'mari to prepare the book using this copy accompanied by four others from Baheh (Riyahi sic)<sup>53</sup> b. Khorasan

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<sup>49</sup> Treasury/*Khazine*. The term is usually used in medieval texts to describe the store /chamber containing all the moveable items of value belonging to a prince, including his library of manuscripts. See further Avinoam Shalem, "The Fall of al-Madā'in: Some Literary References concerning Sasanian Spoils of War in Mediaeval Islamic Treasures," *Iran*, Vol. 32, 1994, pp. 77-81.

<sup>50</sup> Note the existence of an Ethiopic version of the Alexander legend (*Eskandar-nāmeḥ*) tr. into English by Wallis Budge, Oxford U.P., London, 1933. See also *A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*, ed. Samantha Kelly, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2020, esp. Ch.6: Alessandro Gori, "Islamic Cultural Traditions of Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea," pp. 142-61, and Phillips Steven, Jr. "The Kisra Legend and the Distortion of Historical Tradition," *Journal of African History*, xvi/2, 1975, pp. 185-200. Riyahi, p. 352, note 1., citing Turner Macan's comments (pp. 17-18), and consistent with his perennial endeavor to distinguish fact from fable, expresses his incredulity concerning this passage.

<sup>51</sup> On Ya'qub's attitude and image see contributions by M. S. Stern ("Ya'qub the Coppersmith and Persian national sentiment," in *Iran and Islam, in memory of the late Vladimir Minorsky*, ed. C. E. Bosworth, Edinburgh, 1971, pp. 535-56) and D. Tor. "Historical representations of Ya'qub b. al-Layth: a reappraisal", *JRAS* 12/3/, 2002 pp. 247-75.

<sup>52</sup> See Djalal Khalegi-Motlagh, "Abū Manšūr 'Abd-al-Razzāq" in *Elr.* online:

[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_4624](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_4624)

and Djalal Khalegi-Motlagh, "Abū Manšūr Ma'marī" in *Elr.* online:

[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_4627](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_4627)

<sup>53</sup> There is much confusion in the citation of these names (compare, e.g., Riyahi, p. 173 "Mākh" with Riyahi's "Bāḥa" p. 370 which does not even conform with the Golestān manuscript. For various other differences in reading the names of these narrators see references to editions of the "Older Preface" in Qazvini, p. 24, Nöldeke, *Das Iranische Nationalepos*, p. 16, Eng. Tr. P. 26, Minorsky, p. 266, Monchi-Zadeh, p. 6.

Some of the name of these narrator/authorities also appear in the text of the *Shahname*: Shādān son of Borzin is cited as the narrator of the episode in the *Shahname* at the very beginning of the often quoted episode of *Kalila and Demna* (*Shahname*, VII, ed. Khakeghi-Motlagh and Khatibi, 1386, p. 361, line 3383 ("Negah kon ke Shādān-e Borzin che goft..") and Mākh in the beginning of Hormozd's reign ("Yeki pir bod marzbān-e Heri...Jahāndida-i nām u bud Makh") VII, p.466. line 16.

from Herat Yāzdān-dād b. Shāpur from Sistan, Mahuy b. Khorshid from Nishābur, and Shādān b. Barzin from Tus and in 360 (sic) *Hejri* they prepared the book and they made copies in Khorasan and Iraq<sup>54</sup>.

When the rule of the Āl-e Layth passed on to the Samanids<sup>55</sup>, they too were most avid at reading and studying it [the chronicle] until their time was cut short and the kingdom fell into the hands of Mahmud b. Sebüktegin. Now at the time of the Samanids, they had decreed that the poet Daqiqi<sup>56</sup> should turn the book into verse and he had composed one or two thousand lines before his own slave killed him and there the matter rested. And because Sultan Mahmud had been brought up in the Samanid entourage, in all matters he looked up to them up as his mentor and model, and spent most of his time conversing on learned subjects. In particular he was an insatiable reader of the history of pre-Islamic Persian kings and he wanted to show his appreciation and make his mark in a way which had never been done by the Laythians or the Samanids: he therefore decreed that it should be rendered into verse.

And some people give this version of how the book came into Mahmud's hands: A certain Khor Firuz<sup>57</sup> from Fars who was of a royal lineage and a descendant of Anushirvān, had been forced by the turn of events to leave his native Fars and go into exile. The revolving wheel of fortune, the tyranny of destiny, and his own unruly and dark fate finally landed him in the city of Ghazna, the royal seat of that just and religious monarch [i.e. Mahmud.]

Verse (in the *mathnavi* form):

Shorn of all substance, like a shadow / His festive moon waned under the weight of his grief,

If the Sun appeared to him in a cloudless sky, like a round cake / His mouth would fill with water, just like his eyes.

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<sup>54</sup> Implying therefore a wide distribution, from East to West.

<sup>55</sup> On Samanids and Persian historiography see Julie Scott Meisami, "Why Write History in Persian? The Historical Writing in the Samanid Period," in Carole Hillenbrand, ed. *Studies in Honor of Clifford Edmund Bosworth*, Vol. II, Brill, Leiden, Boston, and Cologne, 2000, pp. 348-74.

<sup>56</sup> Persian poet of the late Samanid period. See François de Blois, PL V/1, no. 52, pp. 105-108.

<sup>57</sup> On Riyahi's conjectures on the late introduction of this prince into the narrative and his possible origins, see pp. 266-67. It provides him and other contemporary traditionalist scholars including Jalal Matini to once again carp at the introduction of late and anachronistic fictional details to the biography of Ferdowsi.

He wanted to follow the decree that “**the Sultan is the shadow of God on Earth and all the oppressed and afflicted take refuge in him**”<sup>58</sup> and pour out his heart to him.

For if the Sultan hears this story / He may well cure his aching poverty.

He loitered around the royal court. There he came across a person, resplendent like a glittering moon and clad in a pitch-black cloak. He happened to be the Sultan’s imam, a man of pure and exquisite nature and blessed disposition. He gave him an account of some of the misfortunes and the calamities that had befallen him.

VERSE (in the *mathnavi* form)

He talked of the tyranny of Fortune’s Wheel / And of the sorrows of living far away from friends and home.

His tales of alienation, of poverty, and of dire need / One by one he retold them all.

As befits those of a generous disposition, the munificent imam took it upon himself to present his case to His Majesty so that once again fate would smile kindly upon him and address the reversal of his fortune.

Khor Firuz presented an account of his life couched in an elegant diction and eloquent phrases to be delivered through the imam. And he too went along to the Sultan’s court. Upon arrival he saw the poets dotted here and there like the Pleiades spread across the threshold of the mighty firmament.

VERSE

Those riders on the playing fields of Persian poetry/ Monarchs mounted on the throne of culture,

Hurling the ball of eloquence across the field / With spectators viewing the sight.

In the midst of all this watching and judging/ They were handed a scroll from the poet ‘Onsori,

Like a pearl from the sea or a gem from a mine / He sent it to the King of the World.

Having glanced at that poem / The Sultan lodged it in his ear as a priceless pearl.

He was lavish in his praise / And heaped favor on him at a formal audience.

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<sup>58</sup> Hadith. In some later versions of this hadith “ ‘ādel”[just] is tagged on to the Sultan to ward him off from the tyrannical sort.

Thus decreed the great ruler / that ‘Onsori should turn the book into verse.

Khor Firuz’s face blazed like the sun [*khōr*] in astonishment<sup>59</sup>; and striving to succeed [*piruz*]<sup>60</sup> at getting at the truth, he racked his brain to decipher what kind of a book this could be that enabled its would-be author to deserve such [generous] treatment before actually embarking on it? And how come ‘Onsori who had not yet laid the foundations of this work, could be eligible for such adulation? So he asked the imam about this.

The imam replied: “From the beginning of creation, rulers and kings have all had their own particular motives, instigated by different urges: Some sought pleasure in banquets and feasting, some in warding off martial threats and hostile menaces. This enlightened Sultan’s ruling passion is for stories and chronicles and poems by people of talent. The sages of the world and the wise men of the era have gathered from all regions and corners of the world and like the Gemini and the Pleiades surround the court like a string of pearls.

VERSE (in the mathnavi form):

To this enlightened king, art and culture / are akin to a life-giving soul invigorating an enfeebled body.<sup>61</sup>

For those with talent, his reign is a joyous time / As they ride on the mount of good fortune.

In the past few days they have brought a manuscript from Sistan<sup>62</sup> containing material on the life and manners of past kings; and the Sultan has decided that the very best of these stories should be turned into verse. That explains why such crowds and multitude of poets have assembled at the court. Today was the day that the poets were to bring their versified pearls and present them at the court. And in the Sultan’s discerning mind, ‘Onsori’s poem was deemed to be the most beautiful. He commissioned him for the task.”

Khor Firuz heaved a heavy sigh from his heart and displayed signs of deep sorrow and grief.

The imam asked, “Why such writhing in agony?”

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<sup>59</sup> Pun on “*khōr*” as first part of his name and the Sun.

<sup>60</sup> Pun on the other part of his name as ‘*firuz*’: “victorious.”

<sup>61</sup> Phrased so that it could fit and applaud Baysonghor as a celebrated patron of arts.

<sup>62</sup> On the significance of Sistan as a source of heroic stories and epic material, see Saghi Gazerani, *The Sistani Cycle of Epics and Iran’s National History. On the Margins of Historiography*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2016.

He replied [in verse]:

“Had Fortune come to my aid / My star would have been the [victorious] Jupiter  
I wouldn’t have stayed still / until I had brought this book to his court.”

The imam said, “You should recount this at the end of the supplication that you are submitting to the Sultan, so that Sultan might think of ordering this book and you rise in esteem at the court.”

Khor Firuz appended this account to his petition.

Driven by his great desire to acquire the book, the Sultan commanded that Khor Firuz should be summoned for an audience; and he questioned him about the possibility of acquiring the book.

He [i.e. Khor Firuz] replied: “It is impossible for me to return to my native land, but it is feasible to acquire the book by sending an envoy with a letter.”

The king immediately ordered a letter written and gave it to a messenger to take it to his abode [i.e. Khor Firuz’s] and deliver it to his people and acquire the book and bring it back with him.

VERSE (in mathnavi form)

The messenger sped off like lightening / Out on his mission through day and night  
He skimmed over the high and the low like a gale in fury / sinking into the heart of the night like a secret thought.

When he reached Khor Firuz’s place, he handed over the letter to his people. They rewarded him with many gifts and gave him the book. The messenger brought back the book to the Sultan. Thanks to this, Khor Firuz was greatly favored and attained a high rank at the court.

The Sultan then chose seven stories from this Deeds of the Kings (*Siyar-al-moluk*) and distributed them among seven poets so that each could turn a story into verse.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Seven stories narrated by seven narrators a common narrative device of course, as in the stories told by seven viziers, or seven princesses, etc.

In the midst of all this, when the gold (‘asjad) of the poetic talent <sup>64</sup> was being tested for its caliber and quality, and the essential ingredient (‘onşor) of the poetic corpus of those fine poet/orators was parading its true essence and worth, a son of a *dehqān*<sup>65</sup>, from whose fountainhead the sturdy tree of knowledge was replenished, and who had, as a young tree himself, become fruitful through total immersion in learning- his name was Abu’l-Qāsem- the splendid garden of his mind had begun to bear its first fruits with exquisite poetry and the graceful orchard of his memory had been nurtured by the rarest of verses, and according to the dictum that although:

#### VERSE

There are numerous stars in the sky, no doubt / But the burden of an eclipse falls only upon the Sun and the Moon.

Because of the enmity of the people in his own land, departed from there and came to Ghazna<sup>66</sup> hoping that the strong arm of the Sultan’s justice would remove the grasping fists of his enemies and the fair rays of the sun of *The Shadow of God* would shine upon the desolate and poison-infected eternal darkness of his condition.

#### VERSE

Perchance after all the toil and trouble of the road / He could find shelter under the shadow of a just king.

And fed from the fountainhead of the justice of that crown-bearer / his branch of hope would bear fruit.

He made Ghazna the epicenter of his desires and craving for comfort, he settled down there. And it is also reported that at the same time when the news of Sultan Mahmud’s vast appetite for collecting this book had become widespread, the ruler of Kerman was anxious

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<sup>64</sup> A pun on “‘Asjad”, “gold or any precious gem” and “‘Asjadi” the panegyrist at the Ghaznavid court. See C. Edmund Bosworth, “The poet ‘Asjadi and early Ghaznavid history” in Iván Szántó, ed., *From Aşl to Zā'id: Essays in Honor of Éva M. Jeremiás*, Piliscsaba, 2015, pp. 1-8. Also, as in a previous instance, a pun on ‘onşor and the poet ‘Onşori.

<sup>65</sup> Dehqān. In this context a member of the minor landed nobility. See Aḥmad Tafazzoli, “Dehqān” *Elr.* online <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_8255](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_8255)>

<sup>66</sup> See Xavier de Planhol and Roberta Giunta, “Ġana or Ġazni” *Elr.* online <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_1980](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_1980)>



to seek the Sultan's friendship and was in the habit of continuously sending him gifts and presents. In that time in Kerman there was one Āzarborin<sup>67</sup>, a descendant of the Sasanian Emperor Shāpur Dhu'l-aktāf<sup>68</sup>, who was forever engaged in collecting accounts of the Persian kings. The ruler of Kerman heard about this and sent his collection to Sultan Mahmud. The Sultan gave the envoy ample rewards and sent many a gift to the ruler of Kerman and their mutual friendship was firmly fortified.

And also in Merv, there was a person from the lineage of Sam the son of Narimān called Sarvāzād<sup>69</sup>. And he had kept records of Sām, Zāl, and Rostam, and he took his collection to Mahmud.

To cut a long story short, from these collections the history of the Persian kings was compiled.

AN ACCOUNT OF THE LIFE AND TIMES OF HAKIM FERDOWSI, MAY GOD HAVE COMPASSION  
UPON HIM.

His father was Mawlanā Ahmad b. Mawlanā Farrokh Al-Ferdowsi, his name was Mansur and his *konya* was Abu'l-Qāsem.

At his birth, his father dreamt that Mansur had climbed on a rooftop and facing Mecca, had uttered a loud cry, and an answer had come from the same direction. He had also shouted towards the right and the left and from each side a voice had been heard. Early next morning he asked Najib-al-Din the Dream Interpreter (Mo'abber) who was a most famous

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<sup>67</sup> See the reference to "Ādhar-e Mehr-e Borzin" in the Daqiqi section of the *Shahname* in the section on the advent of Zoroaster. Khaleghi-Motlagh, vol. V, p.81. line 60. See also Mary Boyce, "ĀDUR BURZĒN-MIHR", in EIr. online: <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_4788](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_4788)>

<sup>68</sup> Shāpur. His epithet as the piercer of shoulders refers to his cruel treatment of the Arabs. See Touraj Daryaei, "Shāpur II" in EIr. online: <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_11179](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_11179)>

<sup>69</sup> Usually called Āzādsarv or Sarv and mentioned not only in the text of the *Shahname*, but also in other and so-called secondary epics. See Djālal Kalēghi-Motlagh, "Āzādsarv" EIr. online: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_6179](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_6179) and Marjolijn van Zutphen, *Farāmarz, the Sistāni Hero. Texts and Traditions of the Farāmarznāme and the Persian Epic Cycle*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2014, particularly section 1.3.1. "The Narrations of Āzādsarw" pp. 29-31.

oneiromancer and the author of the book *Ta'bir-e Najibi* (*Najibi's Book of Dream Interpretations*) and asked him about the meaning of that dream.<sup>70</sup>

Najib-al-Din replied, “the interpretation of a “loud voice” (*Āvāz*) is “fame” (*Āvāzeh*)<sup>71</sup> “Your son is going to be so skilled in words that his fame will reach the four corners of the earth. And that response that you heard coming from all directions is the sign that his words will be greeted and welcomed in all quarters.”

Anyway, when Ferdowsi had reached the right age to be educated, he embarked on his studies. He surpassed all his contemporaries and was most studious and diligent in his perusal of books, devoting much time to them.

His home was by the side of a water channel fed from the waters of the river at Tus; and he happened to have a fondness for flowing water. Whenever there were floods, the irrigation dikes would be washed away and the water to the channel would be cut off, making him most unhappy. And all day long he would grieve and say, “It would be a great blessing if the city dikes which are presently made of earth and sprigs could be constructed out of stone, iron, and bricks so that floods could not destroy them.” And he had pledged that he would spend all his means, and whatever else God bestowed upon him, to fulfill this task.<sup>72</sup>

And it is reported that in those days he heard that the poet Daqiqi, who was engaged in turning the *Shahname* into verse, had been assassinated by one of his own slaves; and Ferdowsi had a great desire to turn this book into verse. He kept ruminating about this and saying to himself that perhaps he could do this instead and fulfill his wishes. He was

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<sup>70</sup> Dreams are significant not only in the text of the *Shahname* but also as a machinery in conveying the poetic gift of epic poetry from one poet to another as in the case of *Khavarān-nāme*. For a discussion of dreams in the *Shahname* itself see Hossein Ziai, “Dreams and Dream Interpretation”, in *EIr.*, <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_8546](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_8546)>

<sup>71</sup> A play on words *Āvāz/Āvāzeh* not easily rendered into English as the equivalents somewhat feeble. e.g., talk/talked about; note also the semantic range of the word *Avāz* in Persian which includes “song” and “melodious voice” and has none of the discordant associations of the word “shout” in English, although it could mean addressing someone in a loud voice.

<sup>72</sup> The parallels with the section on Ferdowsi in Nezāmi ‘Aruzi’s (tr. Browne, p.78) are instructive: there his wish for a more secure dam is replaced by his desire for an adequate dowry for his daughter but interestingly there is a metaphorical allusion to ‘flowing water’. A manuscript of the *Chahār maqāle* (possibly the earliest extant illustrated copy was in B.’s Ketābhāne (Sims, Eleanor. “Prince Baysunghur’s *Chahar Maqala*”, *Sanat Tarihi Yıllığı*, 6, 1974-75. pp. 375–409. See also ill. in Minneapolis Institute of Arts, <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/1203/al-mamun-proposes-marriage-baysunghur-school> and more recently contribution by Shiva Mihaan: <https://digitalorientalist.com/2023/12/19/digital-contributions-of-auction-houses-the-emergence-of-the-chahar-maqalas-oldest-manuscript/>

resolute in this matter but did not possess a complete account of the history of the Persian kings.

One day he asked for advice about this from one of his friends, a certain Mohammad Lashkari<sup>73</sup>. This close friend encouraged him warmly, displaying much largesse, and said, “I possess the entire account and you must embark upon it with the utmost resolution.” Ferdowsi therefore wanted to start composing it (*goftan*)<sup>74</sup> at once and he wondered how to proceed. He asked Shaykh Mohammad Ma’shuq Tusi<sup>75</sup>, [May God have compassion upon him](#), who was a man of divine holiness, to strengthen his resolve<sup>76</sup>.

The Shaykh said: “tighten your belt and use your tongue for you will achieve your aim.” Ferdowsi felt fully assured for he knew that every arrow sent from his eminence’s shooting finger, always landed on the intended spot.

So he started out and turned some of the episodes of the war between Fereydun and Zahāk<sup>77</sup> into verse. And everyone was keen to hear his work.

And at that time the governor of Tus was Abu Mansur Asghatkin<sup>78</sup>, who held allegiance to Sultan Mahmud [he was amongst his *mawālī*<sup>79</sup>]. He gave Ferdowsi an audience and asked for the recital of his poem. When he heard it, he found it exceedingly well executed and pleasing and showed him much favor and encouraged him to proceed. And he took care of all his needs and Ferdowsi carried on with the task. Until by God’s Will Asghatkin passed away and his elegy is recorded in the *Shahname*. And as a result, there was a lull in the

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<sup>73</sup> The name does not appear in the earlier prefaces to the *Shahname*. See Khaleghi-Motlagh, *Notes on the Shahnameh*, Vol. I, Part one, pp. 24-25. Shapur Shahbazi suggests a certain Mohammad al-Yashkari, a Samanid commander, as a possibility (p. 68. note 33). But the silence of earlier sources makes this highly unlikely. See also Davis, 1996 (p. 50. Note 11).

<sup>74</sup> *Gofstan* (and *sakhon goftan*) Note the wide semantic latitude implicit in the word. The ‘narrating’ and the ‘shaping’ combine.

<sup>75</sup> A Sufi wise fool mentioned in several mystical texts. For a detailed account pointing to significant connections between Ferdowsi and Sufi figures with quoted excerpts see Sa’id Nafisi, “Moḥammad Ma’shuq Ṭusi,” in the journal *Mehr* II/8, 1313, pp. 813-17. Also M-R. Shafī’i-Kadkani, ed. *Asrār al-Tawḥid*, II, notes, pp. 725-27.

Hellmut Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul*, in analytic index s.v. ‘Ma’shūq Ṭūsī’ p. 780.

<sup>76</sup> Awliyā’ Allāh, on Friends of God endowed with miraculous powers. See Bernd Radtke and John Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism. Two Works by Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī*, Curzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, 1996.

<sup>77</sup> For this episode, Khaleghi-Motlagh, *SN*, I, pp. 71-86.

<sup>78</sup> Another corrupted name with variance in different copies of the *Baysonghuri Preface*.

<sup>79</sup> On *mawālī* see P. Crone, “Mawla. II. In Historical and Legal Usage” *EI<sup>2</sup>* online <[http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_COM\\_0714](http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0714)>

work. And Mansur's elegy is in the beginning of the *Shahname* just after Mohammad Lashkari is mentioned.

VERSE <sup>80</sup>

There was an illustrious man, endowed with fame and heavenly favor / a byword for his munificence.

He was young and from the stock of heroes / Wise, alert, and of a pure soul;  
Judicious in deliberations and gentle in manners / Of fine speech and mellifluous in tone.  
He asked me "what can I do / to encourage you to compose your verse  
I will do everything in my powers / Making sure that you need no one else."  
Thus I embarked on this chronicle / Upon the order of that noble man of such dignity.

After that the Sultan (i.e. Mahmud) sent Arslān Jādheb <sup>81</sup> as governor of Tus. And in that time, the Sultan had heard of Ferdowsi's name and it was in those same days that the Sultan's missive directed to Arslān Jāzeb to summon Ferdowsi reached Tus.

Arslān summoned him and put him in the picture. Ferdowsi at first showed some reluctance and asked to be excused but this was not accepted. Then he recalled his encounter with Shaykh Ma'shuq and all the doubts were banished from his mind and he set off on his journey; but on reaching Herat, the arrival of a report from Ghazna induced fresh doubts again.

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<sup>80</sup> This is from the *Shahname* but the various editions differ substantially. See Khaleghi-Motlagh, SN, I, pp. 14.15 line 147ff. For comments on this passage and Abu Mansur see the detailed, verging on convoluted, contributions by Khalegh-Motlagh conveniently reprinted in his *Sokhanhā-y dirine (si goftār dar bara-ye Ferdowsi va Shāhnāme)*, compiled by 'Ali Dehbāshi (ch.4: "Yeki mehtari bud garadanferāz", pp. 59-74; ch. 5:"Javān bud va az gowhar-e pahlavān", pp. 75-92), Nashr-e Afkar, Tehran, 1381.

<sup>81</sup> A military commander in Mahmud's entourage mentioned frequently in *Tārīkh-e Beyhaqi*. He died before the end of his reign. See the entry by A. Khatibi, GIE VII, Tehran 1998, pp.610-11. At the end of the preface, he is again mentioned as the benefactor who placed a dome upon the poet's grave.

And the reason for this has been related in this way: when Ferdowsi was summoned to Ghazna, Badi' al-Din the Secretary, who was a secretary to the Court and in charge of the Chancery (*Divan-e rasālat*),<sup>82</sup> spoke thus to 'Onsori and Rudaki:<sup>83</sup>

“One cannot see any good coming out of this commissioning of Ferdowsi to turn this book into verse. For presently the Sultan knows full well that this task is not within the capacity of the poets in his own entourage and this implication will lower the prestige of these poets. And it is quite possible that when it comes to Ferdowsi, he too will not be able to do justice to the task and as a result this embarrassing situation will be compounded.”

They said, “But we cannot now ask the Sultan to order Ferdowsi to turn back.”

In brief, even before Ferdowsi's arrival, the poets of Ghazna, thinking that if he reached the capital and if his verse proved superior to theirs, he would rise in stature, and they would plummet in their position, were inflamed with jealousy, the direst of all afflictions and the most detestable of all evils. And they regretted in their decision to invite Ferdowsi and his (imminent) arrival at the Sultan's court.

And they said, “We did this to ourselves, now how do we undo what we have done? We can in no way broach the subject of his return back to his homeland with the Sultan. Now the wise plan is to think of a stratagem to undermine Ferdowsi's resolve. He should be led to think that from joining the entourage in Ghazna and reciting his poetry in front of the Sultan, he would reap no benefits, so that he would abandon the thought of coming here and make his excuses.”

'Onsori and Rudaki wrote a long letter jointly addressed to Ferdowsi. After the prefatory greetings, the gist of the message went like this:

“You know full well how keen we are to seek your life-enhancing presence and you are thoroughly aware and in complete cognizance of the extent to which we believe in you. As your truly devoted friends and intending to procure you advancement in rank and enhancement in fortune, and to ensure that you reap the rewards of the largesse and bounty

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<sup>82</sup> Perhaps an anachronistic reference to the well-known author of the *'Atabat al-kataba*, the collection of correspondence from the reign of Sanjar (1117-1157) of Mo'ayyed al-dawla Montajab al-din Badi' Atābeg al-Jowayni. See Ann K.S. Lambton, “The Administration of Sanjar's Empire as Illustrated in the *'Atabat al-kataba*”, *BSOAS* 1957, pp. 367-88.

<sup>83</sup> Another anachronistic observation, making the Samanid Rudaki and the Ghaznavid 'Onsori contemporaries.

of His Majesty's presence, we devised this scheme and concocted this stratagem. Now contrary to all expectations, we are witnessing the reverse in all this:

From that very day when this proposal was broached, and apart from the edict he had sent to summon you, the Sultan has made no reference to it—no mention, laudatory or derogatory. It can further be said that when we, as his lowly subjects, make an appearance at court, he shows no signs of a favorable recognition towards us.

Now, on the one hand, if you, our dear friend, choose to come, you must face all the travails of an arduous journey, which, as you know, can be insufferable in its scope. And, on the other, when we look at this matter, we see nothing save disturbing His Majesty and upsetting his days while at the same time squandering your own precious time.

Given the current situation, we thought it incumbent upon us to humbly inform you of this so that you can ponder over it and weigh the pros and the cons, and so that at the end of the day your well-wishers would not have any cause for remorse.”

They chose a messenger and sent this missive to Ferdowsi. And he had already arrived at Herat when he received their messenger.

When he learnt of the contents of the letter, he saw that it contained the opposite of what they had intimated before and what he himself had imagined. He began to have grave doubts about going to Ghazna and decided to return to Tus.

But for a while he stayed in the house of Abu Bakr Warrāq<sup>84</sup> who was a man of considerable learning in that era and his house a debating venue for the gatherings of gifted scholars. And he thought to himself that those people who had sent him this news may harbor ill intentions towards him and on the principle that *tellers of tales dislike tellers of tales*, are making out the matter like this.

At the same time and for some unspecified reason, Badi' al-Din Kāteb fell out with 'Onsori and Rudaki and they had a quarrel. In the midst of their arguments they attributed Ferdowsi's reluctant return to Badi' al-Din's instigation. Badi' al-Din became worried

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<sup>84</sup> A celebrated Sufi Sheikh again indicating the growing tendency in the reception history of Ferdowsi to connect him to Sufi circles and noted Sufi masters. On Abu Bakr Warrāq see his biography in Jāmi's *Nafahāt al-'Ons* ed. 'Abedi, (no. 127, pp. 123-24) and Benedikt Reinert, "Abū Bakr al-Warrāq," in *Elr.* online <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_4532](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_4532)>

about the implications of this as in such cases Sultan Mahmud's chastisement could prove to be extremely sever.

So at once he appointed a messenger and sent him to Ferdowsi and gave him a full account of their jealousies and their schemes in turning Ferdowsi back, forcing him to abandon hope. And he said, "Whatever story they had told you about this was a pure lie and utter fabrication. Now if he could compete with them in composing poetry.

#### VERSE

When they come forth to the judgement field / those brave hearts in the battle lines of eloquent speech,  
Wielding maces of learning and throwing their spears of art / Charge and strike blows against each other.

If you consider yourself valiant enough to respond to them, hasten to come, for the Sultan's bounty towards this ilk and his favorable concern, far exceeds what can be expressed in writing."

When Ferdowsi had been informed of Badi' al-Din's letter and the malevolence of the poets became apparent to him, he penned his response to Badi' al-Din in an eloquent diction, and inserted these verses in that letter:

#### VERSE

Many a good tiding has the Angel Soroush<sup>85</sup> brought to my ears / My heart is a treasure filled with gems, my tongue a dragon.

How can 'Onsori be judged measured by my scales? / How can a mere twig stand up to a rose bush?

Only through his ignorance and immaturity / Can Rudaki boast of his superiority.

In short, he left Herat and arrived at Ghazna.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> The Zoroastrian deity with a rich poetic and mystical impact on later Persian literature as a divine messenger and literary muse. See G. Kreyenbroek, *Sraoša in the Zoroastrian Tradition*, Brill, Leiden, 1985. For the history after Islam see Mohammad Mo'in, *Mazd Yasna va ta'thir ān dar adabiyāt-e Pārsi*, Tehran University Publications 1326.

<sup>86</sup> The journey to Ghazna and the poetical tournament with the poets occur in other prefaces too, including what Riyahi calls the first preface (Riyahi, p. 202ff.) which appears in the beginning of the so-called London

And some people say that: “Ferdowsi had suffered some injustice from the king's tax agent (*‘āmel*)<sup>87</sup> at Tus and had come to Ghazna. It happened at the same time when Sultan Mahmud had picked seven stories from the History of the Persian Kings and had given them to seven poets, so that each would turn one story into verse.<sup>88</sup> Whoever produced the finest verse would be given the task of versifying the entire book. The names of the seven poets are as follows: ‘Onsori, Farrokhi, Zeynabi, ‘Asjadi, Manjik Tirmidhi, Horami the Harp Player, and Abu Hanifa Eskāf<sup>89</sup>.

The story of Sohrāb had fallen to ‘Onsori’s lot. These seven poets, who were the stars of the firmament of fine speech and rhetoric obeyed the Sultan’s decree and set upon their task.

While this was going on, Ferdowsi arrived and settled down in a garden and sent someone to town to let his friends know of his arrival. He then performed his religious ablution before his prayers. By chance the poets of Ghazna: ‘Onsori, Farrokhi, and ‘Asjadi, had decided to evade their rivals and enjoy a private gathering in that garden, each bringing along a pretty slave boy with him. When Ferdowsi had finished his prayers, he decided to join their company for a while. Realizing this, the poets said to each other, “the presence of this dry-as-dust ascetic will spoil these delightful moments; it is incumbent upon us to get rid of him.” One of them suggested that they should act as if they were blind drunk to chase him away. ‘Onsori vetoed this. Someone else suggested, “Let's each recite a half-line of a quatrain with a difficult rhyme and ask him to compose the fourth half-line to complete it. If he agrees, he may join the company; otherwise it will give us a good excuse.” When he reached them, they acknowledged his presence and explained the terms to him.

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manuscript of the *Shahname* [though in a different, later and more crude hand; see the facsimile edition]. The manuscript page of Ibrahim Sultan’s *Shahname* in the Bodleian library Oxford also has this (see Abdullaeva and Melville’s *The Persian Book of Kings*, the manuscript page is on p. 50 and their commentary (with a few errors) on p. 60. The story is also in Dawlatshāh’s *Tadkerat-al-Sho’arā*. The Baysonghori text may be closest to Ibrahim Sultan’s. The encounter is frequently illustrated in different manuscripts (see note on the next page).

<sup>87</sup> See. Edmund C. Bosworth, “‘Āmel,” *EIr*. online: <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_5287](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_5287)>

<sup>88</sup> Note the duplication from earlier pages (note 62).

<sup>89</sup> H(Kh?)orami the Harp Player is not recorded elsewhere. On Abu Hanifa Eskāf see the detailed note in Beyhaqi, tr. Vol. III, pp. 176-77, n. 574,

<sup>90</sup> In the illustration in the less than satisfactory Tehran ‘facsimile’ of the Golestān Baysonghor manuscript, [preface, p. 13], Ferdowsi is greeted by one of the three poets [presumably ‘Onsori] in a beautiful garden



Ferdowsi replied, "I will if I am able to, and if not, I will go away and not burden you with my presence." 'Onsori said, "Then we are all settled on this."

['Onsori said] The moon cannot match your effulgent face.

['Asjadi said] Nor indeed can the rose in the flower garden.

[Farrokhi said] Your eyelashes can pierce any armor.

[Ferdowsi said] Like Give's spear in the battle of Pashan.<sup>91</sup>

They asked about the battle of Give and Pashan and he gave them a most pleasingly graphic account so that they were convinced of the all embracing nature of his erudition. He became well acquainted and friendly with that group. The poets would test him in many ways; and in the field of extemporization, Ferdowsi proved a singularly adroit rider.

POETRY:<sup>92</sup>

When he mounted the steed of poetry to extemporize / He could demolish a whole army of conjectures.

Wielding his spear of words in the ranks of improvisation / In his solo charge to the heart of an army, at once he would put them to rout.

When the literati and the poets of Ghazna realized the extent of Abu' l-Qāsem's literary capability and skill, they barred his way to the Sultan's receptions and prevented him from becoming acquainted with his chamberlains.

But it happened that he struck a friendship with Māhak, a boon companion of the Sultan's, and the bonds of affection between them became so strengthened that Māhak who was a glittering star in the firmaments of generosity and manliness, took this moon of the firmament of learning and erudition under his own roof, and in the manner of the Pleiades

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while the other two poets sit a little distance away conversing together and two young slave boys stand further away holding a wine vessel and cup. Also, as Riyahi points out, the names of the poets, which appear in other identical passages of this episode or in other copies of the text (e.g. Turner Macan, preface, pp. 27-28), are replaced here by golden foliage decoration and have been inserted here by Riyahi.

<sup>91</sup> For variants on this, see Browne, *LHP* II, pp. 129-30. There seems to be a confusion here and elsewhere, mistaking the name of a battle with that of a warrior. See the illustrated folio of the battle on folio 243v of Shah Tahmasp (Houghton) *Shahname* at the Metropolitan Museum:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/452146>

<sup>92</sup> The actual word used here and in many of the later headings is more technical: *mathnavi*, implying of course mono-rhyme, and certain meters but from here onwards the more general term verse or poetry is used since the purpose of such labels here is merely to serve as the marker to distinguish prose from verse.

in the celestial vault, engaged in feasting and revelry with him. Every night when Māhak left the Sultan's presence and came home, he would feast with Abu'l-Qāsem and not take off the garland of jollity and merrymaking till dawn.

VERSE

For the sake of pleasure and their own delight / They tied a collar of daylight and placed it about the night

Abu'l-Qāsem beseeched Māhak to present him as a speck of dust to the presence of the sun-like glitter of the fortune-favored Sultan, so that aided by his opportunity to kiss the grounds in front of the king he might be able take a step towards promotion and attain a completely secure future.<sup>93</sup>

VERSE

Bu'l-Qāsem is but a mote in the sunbeam and the Shah the Sun / In the train of the Sun, the mote ascends high into the sky.

Māhak said, "Today the poets had gathered in the presence of the Sultan,<sup>94</sup> resembling the necklace of Pleiades in the sky; and each humbly presented the king with whatever had dawned upon their mind regarding the laudable mores and manners of past kings. The gathering concluded with the tale of Rostam and Sohrāb that 'Onsori had turned into verse, thanks to the two lines of verse which had shone brightly like the Gemini<sup>95</sup> from his mine of talents and so favorably affected the royal command that it was decreed that the book should be based upon his words.

Abu'l-Qāsem asked, "What were those two verse?"

Māhak said: "At the time when Rostam overcame Sohrāb, Sohrāb was thinking 'I did once let him go, he too should give me a second chance.' But Rostam drew out his dagger, and Sohrāb recited while lying under Rostam's dagger: (Verse)

'If you thirst after blood / and stain your brightly polished dagger with it

The World too will thirst after your blood / and each hair on your body will turn into a dagger' <sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> "*chahār bālesh*". The four pillows around the sovereign seated on the throne, used metaphorically here.

<sup>94</sup> Majles-e Soltān- more specifically a convivial gathering or banquet with poetry and music.

<sup>95</sup> The whole passage is replete with astrological imagery. Here the two verses are compared to "do-peykar," the Persian equivalent of Jowzā (Ar.) and Gemini.

<sup>96</sup> These lines are relegated to footnotes in Khaleghi-Motlagh *SN* II, p. 185. Note 24.

The Sultan found these two lines of verse most praiseworthy.”

Afterwards, and in a short space of time, Abu’l-Qāsem composed the story of Rostam and Esfandiyār in verse, without Māhak’s knowledge. It began thus (Verse):

Now has come the time to imbibe sweet-tasting wine / While the scent of musk wafts from the stream.<sup>97</sup>

One night he said to Māhak, the *Deeds and Virtues of Kings* (*Seyar al-moluk*) has been rendered into verse in former times, and its literary qualities have already been made safe and secure.

“That’s impossible,” Māhak retorted.

Abu’l-Qāsem said, “I happen to have one of the stories from that book with me and its wonderfully bejeweled versified content is far more valuable in comparison to the choicest centerpiece gem in ‘Onsori’s repertoire and the overall composition far more attractive than the heart-stealer beauty that he has conjured up in his mind.”

VERSE

A bride, dazzling like the Sun / But hidden under a veil of pure musk  
With a body, like that of Holy Spirit, of rays of light / And not from the world of elements  
(‘*onsor*’) and ‘Onsori’<sup>98</sup>  
Glittering from beneath her ink-colored veil / Like the Water of Life<sup>99</sup> in the midst of darkness.

So Abu’l-Qāsem gave Māhak the story and Māhak took it to the Sultan for his perusal.

VERSE

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<sup>97</sup> Khaleghi-Motlagh *SN V*, p. 291. Line 1.

<sup>98</sup> Word play on the name of the two poets ‘Onsori and the equally famous though later poet Anvari of the Saljuq period.

<sup>99</sup> Lit. Water of Khezr but a common image in Persian poetry to denote the Water of Life as well as the knowledge of esoteric arts. For further on the figure of Khezr: Patrick Franke, *Begegnung mit Khidr*, Beiruter Texte und Studien 79, Beirut and Stuttgart, 2000; and Anna Krasnowolska, “K̲ez̲r”, in *Elr.* online <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_851](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_851)>

When these words had lodged themselves in the Sultan's ear / They went straight (as an *alef*) to his heart and made their home there.

He asked Māhak, “From which luminous celestial station has this shining moon emerged? And who has brought these eloquent planets to the threshold of this realm?”

Māhak responded, “The person is someone who has come to the Sultan's court, driven by the excess of oppression and injustice inflicted on him in his native land, and as fate would have it, I fell into conversation with him and struck a friendship and when he learnt of this matter, he told me that the book had been versified and gave me this story.”

The Sultan ordered that he should be summoned, for if the book had already been rendered into verse, there would be no need to undergo the travails of a new arrangement.

They brought and presented Abu'l-Qāsem at the Sultan's audience.

The Sultan asked about the real identity of the versifier of the story.

Abu'l-Qāsem rose from his place and after making the due obeisance said, “I am a stranger from the land of Tus and have escaped the arrows of injustice from my own native land to seek refuge in the protective shade of the Sultan's court, and am basking in the shadow of his Islamic Majesty, safe and secure from the ravages of fate. When I heard about this matter, I rendered this story into verse.”

The Sultan was pleased with this, and asked after the land of Tus and its inhabitants and in this context, asked him who had first founded the city.

Ferdowsi responded, “Tus, the son of Nowzar,” and then explained the reason behind it, that when Keykhosrow was about to send Tus, the son of Nowzar, to Turān, he commanded him, “On no account should you pass near Kelāt where my brother Forud, the son of Siyavosh, resides, for he is of an atrabilious temper, and not without a streak of madness, lest it leads to some major disturbance and ends in unwarranted loss. And he described it as it is set down in the *Shahname*.<sup>100</sup> And when Tus headed towards Kelāt and battles ensued between him and Forud, and Forud was killed, Keykhosrow was livid with Tus for this reprehensible action; for he had sent Tus to avenge his father's blood, and he had instead killed his brother. To cut a long story short, when Tus returned from Turān, he

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<sup>100</sup> For Keykhosrow's words of warning in the *Shahname*. See Khaleghi-Motlagh *SN* III, p. 29. v. 33: “*Gozar bar Kelāt ich gune makon /k'az on rah ravi, khām gardad sakhon.*”

dared not approach Keykhosrow, and settled in Tāberān which was a large hamlet where Tus is now; and since it was small in size and constricted, he built this town and named it after himself so that his name would live on so long as the town remained in existence.

When the Sultan heard this story he acknowledged the breadth of Ferdowsi's knowledge of the history of the Persian kings. He ordered the seven poets to be summoned.

When they had all arrived, the Sultan pointed to Ferdowsi and said, "This man is a poet and claims he can compose couplets and has rendered this story into poetry; whoever amongst you who can compose better than this will be commissioned to complete the book. When 'Onsori—who was *primus inter pares*<sup>101</sup>—observed the fluency and decorum of Ferdowsi's verse, the fabrics holding up his house were shaken<sup>102</sup> and the pillars of his nature weakened and said, "It is impossible for anyone in this age to match these words, let alone improve upon it."

#### VERSE

What kind of a verse is it that it is superior to the stars / what kind of poetry is it that is brighter than Sirius.<sup>103</sup>

It flows as smoothly on the tongue as blood [lit. life, soul] in one's body/ Who can deliver such fine speech in this day and age?

'Onsori, whose treasure casket of being was filled with gems of fair-mindedness and the vessel of his essence replete with subtleties of knowledge, out of a sense of judiciousness, adopted an apologetic stance and humbly bowed to kiss the hand of Abu'l-Qāsem, and showered him with praise, as proven by these verses:

#### POETRY:

Although Speech emanates from High Heaven / You have made it soar higher, O Man of Wit!

You were the one who gave full rein to Speech in this field / You who the object of praise in all gatherings.

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<sup>101</sup> He was the poet laureate at Mahmud's Court.

<sup>102</sup> Two puns on both the poet's name and the double meaning of *beyt* as line of verse and a house.

<sup>103</sup> Again puns abound.

All your constituents are imbued with art / Your name will remain forever as a memorial  
You are the king of kings in the realm of Persian verse / ‘Onsori stands before you as an  
obedient servant.<sup>104</sup>

In front of him [i.e. Ferdowsi] they all rose to their feet / And embellished their tongues  
with his praise.

Then the Sultan, the lord of all obedient slaves / Commissioned him to compose the book  
in verse.

Meanwhile the Sultan asked for a couplet describing the down on Ayāz’s face.<sup>105</sup> The poets  
all pointed to Ferdowsi. He extemporized this poem:

Your eyes look drunken, O my idol! and are armed with arrows / Many a soul has been  
injured by arrows from your drunken eyes.

If your face now dons a coat of mails, it is all too understandable:/ Everyone fears arrows,  
more so from a drunken source.<sup>106</sup>

The Sultan was so delighted that he exclaimed, “May God shower you with bounty  
Ferdowsi! For you have made our banquet appear like the Garden of Eden [*ferdows*]. From  
that time that on he received the name ‘Ferdowsi.’ And from then the Sultan allotted him  
all kinds of privileges and honors and thanks to the cleansing and polishing powers of royal  
favor the remaining rust of the past grievances was wiped away from the mirror of his  
consciousness.

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<sup>104</sup> Lit. In your presence ‘Onsori will tighten his belt, gesture signifying obedience and readiness to serve.

<sup>105</sup> Ayāz features frequently in Persian literature as a paragon of both unquestioning loyalty and  
handsomeness or even lack of it (see for example *Chahār maqāla*, Discourse II, anecdote xiv-Browne tr.  
pp. 56-58), with his name coupled with that of Maḥmūd. See *EP* art. “Ayāz” (P. Hardy); *Elr* art. “Ayāz” (J.  
Matīnī); and for his later image, Gertrud Spiess, *Maḥmūd von Ġazna bei Farīdu’-d-dīn ‘Aṭṭār*, Basel 1959,  
pp. 46-95, and H. Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul. Man, the World and God in the stories of Farīd al-Dīn*  
*‘Aṭṭār*, Leiden 2003, pp. 309-12.

<sup>106</sup> These lines and the Sultan’s wonder and exclamation also appear almost verbatim in *Mojmal-e Fasihi*  
(vol. II, p. 588) in the long section where he follows the Baysonghori preface closely with minor variance  
though not in the same narrative sequence. Here Faṣiḥi adds a reference to Ayāz’s famed locks of hair to  
his wispy down for good measure.

From then on, he would take to the royal presence whatever story and episode that he had turned into verse; and the Sultan would say that “although we have heard this story many a time before, Ferdowsi’s wording has a different impact. In his depiction of fighting, he stiffens one’s valor, boldness, and courage; and in his evocation of feastings, he instills gaiety, comradeship, and jollity, and when he recalls tales of decline and downfall, sadness and compassion prevail. In all circumstances, he offers solace to the heart and provides a balm to allay inner anxieties.

He therefore ordered e Kh<sup>v</sup>aja Ahmad b. Hasan<sup>107</sup> to give him a hundred *methqāls* of gold upon the completion of every thousand lines. And Ferdowsi put all his effort and endeavor into the task of composing the *Shahname*. And following the instructions, Khwāja Ahmad b. Hasan would bring the payment to Ferdowsi for each thousand lines. He would not, however, accept it at once for he preferred to take it all in one lot, so that, as already mentioned, he could spend the entire sum on the construction of an irrigation dam at Tus. Some poets have written verses in praise of Ferdowsi, and in this preface, to pay homage to his worth and high estimation, they will be noted down.

#### VERSE<sup>108</sup>

Praise be upon Ferdowsi’s soul / A man of noble origin and auspiciousness.  
He was not our master, nor we his pupils / He was the lord and we his slaves.

Khāqāni of Shervān says:<sup>109</sup>

In their dark night of melancholy, the bright candle for those possessed of wit / Is a pleasing phrase from the mind of Ferdowsi of Tus.

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<sup>107</sup> Aḥmad b. Ḥasan Meymandi, vizier to Sultan Maḥmud till his fall in 416/1025, and then appointed to the same office by the new sultan, Mas’ud, in 422/1031. He died in office two years later. See Beyhaqi, tr. Vol. III (commentary) p. 62. note 270 for further references. His tendency to keep a tight budget and alienate influential courtiers is also noted.

<sup>108</sup> In *Mojmal-e Fasihi* these verses (with significant variants) are attributed to Anvari, Faṣiḥi II, p. 586; and n.8.

<sup>109</sup> In Faṣiḥi II, p. 586; and n.9. The verses are not in any of the standard editions of Khāqāni though they appear very much in his style. See the detailed study by Sajjād Āydanlu, “Noktahā-i dar bāra-ye talmiḥāt-e ‘Shāhnāma-i’ Khāqāni,” in *Faṣl-nāma-ye pajuḥesh-hā-ye adabi*, IV, Summer 1383, pp. 7-36.

The offspring of his pure nature and imagination are all paradisiacal houris / He is born of a houri from paradise, if he happens to be Ferdowsi<sup>110</sup>.

[Emāmi of Herat<sup>111</sup>]

Last night in a dream I addressed the poets saying / “You who manage to make your word and meaning conform,

Who is a better poet than you? Who writes better poetry?” / From the tribe of Arab poets and the clan of those writing Persian,

Came a cry in unison, all voicing in one accord:/ “Ferdowsi and *Shahname*, *Shahname* and Ferdowsi!”

Ebn-Yamin:<sup>112</sup>

That coin Ferdowsi struck in terms of speech (logos) / was minted by no ordinary Persian:  
First the Word descended from the Throne above, down to earth / He lifted it up again and placed it upon the Throne.

AN ACCOUNT OF SOME OF THE FACTORS BEHIND THE ADVERSE CHANGE OF ATTITUDE BY  
THE SULTAN REGARDING FERDOWSI.

One of them was the Vizier's antipathy towards Ferdowsi. And the cause of it, we are told, was that Ferdowsi used to eulogize all the pillars of government and the notables at Mahmud's court and attend to and befriend them, except for Kh<sup>v</sup>aja Hasan Meymandi who was the Grand Vizier. Ferdowsi never joined his retinue nor did he show much deference towards him or praise him in his verse. As a result, a cloud of misunderstanding appeared between them and the wind of enmity began to blow and increase by day. And the root of this want of sympathy from Ferdowsi for the Vizier was that Ferdowsi was inclined

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<sup>110</sup> A word play again on the Garden of Paradise, *ferdows*, and Ferdowsi.

<sup>111</sup> The lines are not found in the printed edition of his *divan*: *Divān Emāmi Heravi*, ed. ‘Eṣmat Kho’ini, Mirath-e maktub publications, Tehran, 1394 but, as in the case of the other poets cited, also appear in Faṣiḥi II, pp. 586-87.

<sup>112</sup> This is in Ebn Yamin's *Divan* (ed. Hoseyn-‘Ali Bāstāni-Rād, Tehran, 1964, p. 387 (no. 302). It is also in Faṣiḥi II, p. 587. Ebn Yamin has a poem in which he repeats the story of Rostam appearing in a dream to Ferdowsi to divulge the location of a treasure which is already recounted in both ‘*Ajā’eb al-Makhluqāt* and the early 6<sup>th</sup> century A.H. preface. See Riyahi, pp. 340-41. The verse itself refers to the familiar religious allusion to the Word (logos) as having a divine origin. For the ‘*Ajā’eb al-makhluqāt* passage discussed later in the footnotes (n.130).



towards Shi'ism and the Vizier was one of the main figureheads of the Kh<sup>w</sup>ārej [Khwarejites].<sup>113</sup> And no matter how hard his friends and well-wishers tried to encourage him to strike a friendship with the vizier and refrain from opposing him, he would persevere and sharpen his antipathy and refrain from any friendly approaches and would say,

VERSE

Whoever harbors in his heart a hatred for 'Ali / His ill-will can be retraced to his mother and his birth.

For he comes from a soiled lineage and is a foe to the king / Even if he holds on to office and power for a time.

Do not expect of a Meymandi to follow the codes of chivalry / Do not delve too deeply into his name or pry into his pedigree.

Strike out his name, as I have done / May his name vanish from all gatherings and society.

He then said that if it appears that the Almighty God, *Praise be Upon Him*, from the very beginning of time has so decreed that this book should be completed by me, and since I am not hankering after the Sultan's wealth, I do not need to bank on the Vizier's prestige and strive to approach him, for I have no need of him.

I who have from the very outset of my creation / Never sought wealth, nor a high status,  
Why should I enter the Vizier's clan / When I make do without the king's court.

Spies and informers were reporting his words to the Vizier, and the Vizier was biding his time to settle scores with him. Finally he did what he could as will be narrated in its proper place.

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<sup>113</sup> On Kharejites see Hannah-Lena Hagemann, *The Kharijites in Early Islamic Tradition: Heroes and Villains*, Edinburgh U.P., 2021. There is no substance in this attribution to Maymandi. Kharejite is used as a convenient damning device to tarnish his reputation, a favorite slur as in many other cases to bring down an eminent vizier or official in a supposedly 'orthodox' court: the Ghaznavid minister Ḥasanak being a prime example. The question of Ferdowsi and his Shi'ite sympathies or indeed his overall religious beliefs have been the subject of much debate to the present time (compare divergent views of scholars in the convenient though partisan compilation by Mohamad-Rezā Ardestāni Rostami as well as under individual authors such as Davis and Mahdavi Damghani. See also Khaleghi-Motlagh *Notes to SN*, Vol. I/1: pp. 18-20 for a summary of different views). This and the following passages discussing Ferdowsi's outlook should be seen in the wider context of religious debates in the Timurid and later Safavid periods, as well as that of modern scholars eager to imprint their own preferences on eminent figures from the past.

The other factor was that a group of envious people were maligning Hakim Ferdowsi and accusing him of dabbling in philosophy and heresy (rafż) and Mo‘tazlite<sup>114</sup> views and whatever defect that they could label him with. On the strength of these verses of his: (Verse):

You cannot see the Creator with your eyes / Therefore do not harm your eyes<sup>115</sup>

They called him a Mo‘tazelite; for on the surface, these verses imply that the direct sight (of God) is impossible; as declared in Mo‘tazelite doctrines.

And because of these verses (POETRY:)

Behold this chagrin-ridden Dome / From which pain and remedy both arise.

Attribute abundance to it, as well as need / From it comes your abject downfall, and from it too, your successful rise.<sup>116</sup>

They said that he was a philosopher. For these lines maintain that whatever happens in the world is under the influence of the heavenly spheres including pain and its remedy, and increase and decrease in one’s fortune; and this is the religion of the philosophers who attribute all events to the working of the spheres.

And from these verses:

“Neither does the passage of time exhaust it / Nor does all that pain and suffering affect it. Neither does it ever rest from perpetual motion / Nor does it need to seek a refuge in the way we do;”

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<sup>114</sup> Rafż and Rāfezi, were derogatory terms to address Shi’ites (for their refusal to acknowledge the other Rightly Guided Caliphs). For the background introduction to both and their alleged ties see Wilferd Madelung, “Imāmism and Mu‘tazilite Theology,” in T. Fahd, ed. *Le Shi‘ism imāmīte*. Colloque de Strasbourg (6 mai 1968), Paris, 1970, pp. 13-30; and Sophia Vasalou, *Moral agents and their deserts. The character of Mu‘tazilite ethics*, Princeton U.P., 2008.

<sup>115</sup> Khaleghi Motlagh, SN I, p. 3, line 5, at the very beginning of the *Shahname*. The strong opposition of the Mo‘tazilites to anthropomorphism extended to “their denial of the beatific vision in the afterlife, since the denial of corporal aspects entailed that God could not be perceived by sight.” (Vasalou, p.2) The passages here closely follow Nezāmi ‘Aruzi’s *Chahār maqāle* (Qazvini and Mo‘in ed. p. 78). The extensive commentary in this edition discusses in detail the theological debate arising from this in relation to interpretations of the Quran and Moses’ encounter (Q. 7: 143) and the overall question of “ro‘yat”, i.e. where (here or hereafter) and if such a vision can be attained. Commentary, pp. 238-42 with extensive references to medieval sources.

<sup>116</sup> Khaleghi Motlagh SN I, p.8, lines 70 and 73 (in the section on the Creation of Mankind) with considerable variance.

they concluded that these verses attempt to prove that the motions of the spheres and the condition of heavens will always remain the same, and no change will affect them, and this is the creed of Materialists (*dahriyān*)<sup>117</sup>.

And such following verses from which Shiism or *rafz*<sup>118</sup> can be deduced, and there are many such samples:

If you are eager to enter Paradise / Secure a place by the Prophet and ‘Ali.<sup>119</sup>

If you take offence at these words, mea culpa! / This is how things are and this is my creed and my way.

And that is why they called him a heretic (*rāfezi*; Shi’ite).

And the intentions of those nurturing a malicious bias is all too clear in this line of reasoning: for it is impossible for a person to be a follower of Greek philosophy (*falsafe*), and be a materialist (*dahri*), a Mo‘tazelite, and a heretical Shiite (*rāfezi*) all at the same. For those who believe in the eternity of this world have no business in liking or disliking ‘Ali and ‘Omar, and those who favor ‘Ali above others do not believe in the eternity of this world and attribute events to one’s destiny and not to the working of the planets and spheres. These contradictions that have been found in his poetry are inherent traits in the very nature of poetry itself which operates metaphorically and not literally; and perchance the meaning and interpretation extracted by the critics to which they refer and cavil at, was not intended by the poet, and he had other things in mind, verily God knows best!<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> M. Shaki and D. Gimaret “Dahrī”, EIr. online: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_7958](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_7958)  
See also Patricia Crone, “The Dahrīs according to al-Jāhīz,” in *Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph* 63 (2010–2011), pp. 63–82.

<sup>118</sup> Presumably “Shi’ism” here stands for Twelver Shiism, and “Rafz” as a derogatory term applied to Ismā’ilis although the term was also frequently hurled at both.

<sup>119</sup> Text with variance in the prefatory section “On the Praise of the Prophet,” Khaleghi-Motlagh, *SN* I, p. 11, lines 102–103, Notes to *SN*, I/i p. 21. The passage also in *Chahār maqāle* with, as in other instances, the editors’ extensive commentary. This section was of course highly prized in Safavid Iran and the “Ship of Ali and the Prophet” illustrated, as in the Shah Tahmasp manuscript: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/452110>

<sup>120</sup> The above is a succinct response to the views expressed in earlier prefaces which have been so extensively quoted and mined by the Baysonghori preface’s far longer and seemingly more ramshackle construction. The dogmatic certainties of earlier prefaces exhibit their shortcomings once they are collated together and appear all in one account. Intertextuality leading inevitably to ecumenical conclusions.

Another reason for the Sultan's adverse change of mood was the long duration of the composition, for his taste for poetry and listening to stories was on the wane.

And there was also a particular point which had not at first occurred to Ferdowsi and which was finally pointed out to him by Ayāz, who was like a father to him, but it came too late and by then things had gone too far to be remedied. And that point was that in narrating the lineage of the past kings, Ferdowsi had indulged in excessive adulation.<sup>121</sup> For example in the case of Keykhosrow<sup>122</sup> he says:

VERSE

I am the Emperor of the World, Siyāvosh's son / I come from the seeds of the invincible bodied Keyanid kings.

I am the grandson of King Kāvus / life-invigorating, deeply learned, and of fine pedigree. On my mother's side I stem from Afrasiyāb / Whose fury could deprive all from food and sleep.

The (great) grandson of Fereydun, son of Peshang / Whose army found the whole world too small a challenge.<sup>123</sup>

And where Esfandiyār proclaims, in his flyting contest with Rostam:

VERSE

"I come from Goshtāsp's seed / And Goshtāsp is the son of Lohrāsp

And Lohrāsp was the son of Arvand Shah / Who at the time possessed the crown and the throne.

Arvand descended from Pashin / Each generation thereby greeting the other.

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<sup>121</sup> What follows is an example of the perennial debate in medieval literature on the binary tension between honar (the individual's own considerable potentials exploited and acted upon with resolution to achieve impressive results) and gowhar (pedigree, inherited virtues). See Louis Marlow, *Hierarchy and egalitarianism in Islamic thought*, Cambridge, 1997; C.-H. de Fouchécour, "Vertu, nature, et lignage des rois dans la deuxième partie du Livre des Rois," *Luqmān* VIII/1, 1991-92, pp. 35-40. In Bayhaqi's *History*, for example, the fact that Amir Sebüktegin had started life as a slave (Beyhaqi, tr. Vol. I, pp. 296-98) is described with tacit approval in a laudatory exemplum where the Amir stresses his own lowly beginnings.

<sup>122</sup> On Kayanids in general see Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "KAYĀNĪĀN", EIr. online, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_11281](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_11281) and particularly Kayāniān vii on Kaykhosrow.

<sup>123</sup> Khaleghi-Motlagh, *SN* IV, pp. 345-46, lines 2735-38.

Pashin came from the seed of Keyqobād / A king noted for his talents and his justice- filled heart.

Thus you could proceed on and trace them all till you reach Fereydun / Who was the origin of the Kayanids and the adornment of the throne.<sup>124</sup>

And the *Shahname* abounds in such verses. And in certain places, he has also criticized those of lowly birth; and this kind of pride in ancestry was most unpalatable to Sultan Mahmud but he felt restrained to express this openly and these festering sentiments left a bitter residue in his mind.

Another reason was that while Ferdowsi was engaged in composing the *Shahname*, whatever story that he turned into verse would attract fame and copies would be taken to different regions and those notables of different lands who happened to be endowed with generous dispositions would send gifts and offerings to Ferdowsi and since he had put his trust in the Sultan's promise, he did not put any of these aside for the future.<sup>125</sup>

For example, someone had taken a copy of the episode of the battle between Rostam and Esfandiyār to Rostam b. Fakhr al-dowla the Deylamite<sup>126</sup> and he had bestowed 500 dinars on him and had sent a thousand dinars for Ferdowsi himself. He had also intimated that should the poet pay him a visit; he would perform the duties of hospitality and bounty to an unimaginable extent. This report became known in Ghazna and reached the ear of the Sultan and was one of the causes of his discontent. This was the main bone of contention in this affair for at that time there was great enmity between the Sultan and the Dailamites. In the end they accused Ferdowsi of being a *rafẓi* (Zaydi Shi'ite) and the Sultan believed this was because the majority of the Dailamite kings were Zaydi Shi'ites.

And likewise gifts and presents kept coming to Ferdowsi from all lands.

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<sup>124</sup> Khaleghi Motlagh *SN V*, pp.349-50, lines 691-95 with variants.

<sup>125</sup> Or could it be, if one accepts the printed version, an ambiguously phrased sentence implying that because of these lavish gifts, he did not put much in store regarding the Sultan's promise of a final reward?

<sup>126</sup> Rostam b. Fakhr al-dowla, 387-420/997-1029 (Buyid branch in Ray).

On Dailamites see WOLFGANG FELIX, Wolfgang Felix and Wilferd Madelung, "Deylamites" *EIr.* online <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_8353](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_8353)>

*A Story* (hekāyat): <sup>127</sup>A most bizarre incident was Ferdowsi's seeing Rostam in a dream. And it happened like this: At a royal banquet they were discussing Ferdowsi's gift for composing poetry; and an envious group harboring a grudge against him declared, "There is a want of delicate wit in his verse, and he is altogether bereft of rhetorical novelties. But because naturally one has a craving for the pristine sources of the stories, one is inclined to hear his poetry. Another group who had a favorable opinion of Ferdowsi said, "The true worth of these stories comes from the way Ferdowsi presents them in his verse"; and their debate and argument dragged on. It was therefore decided in the presence of the Sultan that Ferdowsi should render a story into verse that very day in order to assess how much Ferdowsi's own literary input contributed to the enhancement of the original story. They chose the episode of Rostam's battle with Ashk(a)bus-e Kashāni. <sup>128</sup>

And the nub of the story is no more than this: Kāmus sent Ashkabus to do battle with the Iranians. Rahām from the Iranian side rode to fight him but ultimately had to flee to the mountains. Tus was most perturbed about this and wanted to take to the field on his own. Rostam said to him, "You are the commander of the army, how can you afford to settle scores on your own? Keep the army in formation and let me deal with it. He then proceeded on foot towards Ashkabus and shot an arrow at his horse. When the horse fell, Ashkbus dismounted and shot an arrow at Rostam.

Rostam ducked the arrow and shot one aimed at Ashkabus' chest and killed him.

So, on that same day Ferdowsi turned this story into verse as told in the *Shahname* and presented it to the Sultan.

And verily he had reached the acme of artistry in his words, and such fine exposition and of a story is beyond the reach and capability of other talents. It is also plainly manifest that,

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<sup>127</sup> Faṣiḥi, II, pp. 588-90 with some variations and additions.

<sup>128</sup> For further details on this much quoted and illustrated episode see Mohsen Ashtiany, "Rustam: Images of a Persian Epic Hero," in *Mughal Paintings: Art and Stories*, ed. Sonya Rhie Quintanilla et al., Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland and London, 2016, pp. 41-71, esp. pp. 58-61. Khaleghi Motlagh SN. III, pp. 182-85.

leaving the delicacy of the diction aside, how much majesty and magnificence are embedded in these illustrious lines.

The boon companions and other recipients of these words in the audience were dumbfounded and offered fulsome praise. These are some of the lines that he composed describing Rostam's manner of drawing the bow with his thumb and letting loose the arrow:

VERSE<sup>129</sup>

Then he polished his bow of Chāch with his hand / And held with his thumb-stall the buck-string.

He adjusted it from right to left, and from left to right / the bent bow of Chāch gave out a groan as it straightened out

When the arrowhead kissed his fingertip and sped away / It went through the shoulders of Ashkabus

Destiny said "Give!" ; and fate said: "Take"/ The Heavens said "Excellent", and the Moon said "Splendid"

The Sultan said on a number of times, "These few lines are worth all the tribute that Rostam used to receive from the lands of Zabol and Kabol," and there was much talk of Rostam and his brave deeds in that Royal session.

And when night fell, Ferdowsi saw Rostam in a dream, at the gate of Teginābād<sup>130</sup>. He was approaching on foot, with his helmet on and clad in his coat of mail, looking most fearsome, and clutching a bow, exactly in the manner in which he had eulogized him in the battle Ashkabus Kashāni. Ferdowsi went up to him and greeted him and he responded with the utmost courtesy and warmth and smiled upon him. Then he shed some tears and said, "I wish to offer you my gratitude, but I do not have the means. However, once in the past I extracted a necklace from the neck of an adversary, but I did not wish to hold on to it. I

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<sup>129</sup> The lines that follow are some of the most often quoted lines from the *Shahname* and rightly praised for the wide range of rhetorical skills paraded in such a concise manner by the poet, including skillful use of onomatopoeia- -we hear the arrow being released --as well as the use of caesura in the last line to rounding off the section. They are however relegated to footnotes as supposedly later accretions. See Khaleghi-Motlagh, SN III p. 184. Note for lines 1305-6.

<sup>130</sup> i.e. the gate in Ghazna leading to the road to Teginābād, a location and fortress in the medieval Islamic region of Rokhkhaj in southeastern.

used the tip of my spear and buried it in the ground, go and take it out.” He pointed to a mound of earth, and he shot an arrow towards that direction.

In the morning Ferdowsi remembered his nocturnal dream. He said to himself, “If I discussed it with anyone they would put it down to melancholia, or some debilitating bile; not a soul should hear of it.” But it did occur to him that genuine dreams are often based on truth. Time passed.

It happened that the Sultan’s route passed in the direction of Teginābād, and Ferdowsi was in his retinue. His attendants pitched their tents outside the gates. He remembered the dream and saw that mound of earth which was still visible there. He told Ayāz about it, having made him promise not to divulge the matter to anyone, lest they should accuse him of weakness and frailty of mind.

Ayāz said, “The fact that you are blessed with a pure heart is beyond dispute.<sup>131</sup> It is most probable that this dream was true in substance and had appeared to your rational soul by divine grace.”

Then he went to the Sultan and said, “This is a place which is frequently on the path of your Majesty’s travels. With your permission, a halting place can be erected here in the name of Your Majesty.” The Sultan found this a pleasing idea. Ayāz issued the orders, and they got busy and put great effort into it and began removing earth from that mound. After a few days they found a large chain made from red gold. In the same way that in this day and age kings bestow belts as gifts; those days they would bestow chains. When the chain was found, Ayāz took it to the Sultan and recounted the tale of Ferdowsi’s dream. Sultan was much surprised by this, but he imagined that the reason Ayāz had told him the story was because he wanted the Sultan to offer it to Ferdowsi. He ordered that it should be given to Ferdowsi. They took it to him.

Despite suffering from penury, Ferdowsi said, “This a reward for fine authorship and a prize for artistry and craftsmanship: it should be divided amongst all craftsmen and writers of eloquence and talent.”

The Sultan was astounded at the extent of Ferdowsi’s nobility and high mindedness and realized that the story of the dream had been a truthful account. He converted the gold

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<sup>131</sup> In ancient theories about dreaming, the nature of the dreamer was pertinent to the truth-value of the dream itself.



chain at once into gold currency and divided it up as Ferdowsi had suggested and did not even lay hand on a single dinar of it. And the story of this dream has been written down by Amir Fakhr al-din Mahmud b. Amir Yamin al-Farivmadi in the name of Khwāja Abd-al-‘Ali Nishāburi:<sup>132</sup>

VERSE<sup>133</sup>

O Fate! Why are the great and the good in our own time / so mean and so wanting in chivalry?

Rostam, he who related how out of a sense of honor / Bahrām had kissed his rein and saddle strap,

One day in a dream said to Ferdowsi, “O dear one! / Our soul is in your eternal debt  
All prepared and placed in a certain place is a buried treasure / Acquired by the efforts of  
our mace and our world-conquering dagger,

Take it! For we have naught else to give / Though our soul feels ashamed of our penury”  
Such tales of generosity do they relate about the dead / With no need to beg the patron or  
prove our need.

It goes to show that in these times when the servile are favored / the living are worth less  
than those already gone.

[The well-matured excrements of the notables of that time / are superior to the beard and  
the moustaches of our present masters]<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Note that again the dream anecdote has been used here as a vehicle and marker to distinguish Ferdowsi as a heroic poet with almost a universal prophetic mission from panegyric court poets. Where in usual *tadhkeras* we have colorful accounts of poets vying with each other regarding how much patronage money they can claim for themselves, and grade themselves according to the amount of reward given to them by the king, Ferdowsi takes a different line and behaves more like the image of the ascetic mystic disdainful of the king’s material enticements. This intended input in the dream can be contrasted with an earlier version in Mohammad b. Mahmud b. Ahmad Tusi’s *‘Ajā’eb al-makhluqāt*, ed. M. Sotudeh, Tehran, 1966, Sec. 7: On dreams, p. 473: “They say that when Ferdowsi left Mahmud the Ghaznavid’s presence in a rage, he went to Mazandaran. There he dreamt of Rostam, son of Zāl. Ferdowsi said (in his dream to Rustam): “O Rostam! I praised your valor and manliness so often and made your name known worldwide. What is my reward for all that?”

He (i.e. Rostam) said, “Return to Tus, in such-and-such a place is the location of a treasure; take it without being seen, and do not ask for anything from Mahmud the Ghaznavid for this treasure will meet all your needs.” He woke from the dream and went to Tus and built himself a house where the treasure had been and prospered.”

<sup>133</sup> The verses also appear in Faṣiḥi II, p. 590.

<sup>134</sup> Rihahi’s footnote indicating that the square bracketed last line only appears in the printed edition of the *Divan* and is not in the *Baysongori Preface*.

DESCRIBING HOW THE *SHAHNAME* WAS FINISHED AND THE VERSES COMPOSED AS A  
COMPLAINT BY FERDOWSI

When Ferdowsi had finished the book in 60,000 lines (*beyts*), he sought the Sultan's permission to present it to him. The Sultan ordered that it should be brought to him. Ferdowsi gave it to a messenger and sent it off.

When it was presented, it pleased the Shah immensely and appealed strongly to his taste. He ordered Kh<sup>v</sup>aja Hasan to give him an elephant load of gold on the grounds that since the very advent of the art of versification up to then, no one had ever composed verses in such a style and with such graceful fluency and had not pierced the pearls of poetry with such fine thoughts in such a sophisticated and judicious manner.

VERSE

Such agreeably flowing mellifluous lines / Who but Ferdowsi can compose in this day and age?

The fame of his oratory has reached heavenly heights / Who else has composed such sublime verse?

In matter and manner like the sun and the moon / it has brought together night with day.  
In its essence it imparts a life-giving breath / In its diction it flows as freely as a running brook.

And when he unsheathes his sword of speech / He puts to rout entire battalions of wordsmiths.

In the battlefield of knowledge never have we seen / Such an elephant-bodied, sword-wielding, fighter.

Since he has opened before me a treasure replete with gems / I will reward him with an elephant load in silver and gold.

Hasan the Miscreant <sup>135</sup>said, "Although an elephant load of gold if measured by the scales of the king's bounty would weigh as little as the wings of a gnat, and granted that the Sultan's largesse is too large to fit even the vast spaces of the entire universe, it cannot be hidden from the discerning royal mind that excessive joy, just like unbounded sorrow, can

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<sup>135</sup> i.e. The vizier Maymandi.

prove lethal to life. If, Heaven forbid, this bounty that the King has ordered reaches him, it would undoubtedly lead to his prompt and fatal demise.

#### VERSE

When joy and sorrow become excessive / Even a robust soul can become tarnished and dejected.

Those two pillars of sadness and joy will cut his life short / like the lifespan of those malevolent to the king.

The Sultan decreed: His health deserves a greater priority than the matter of a reward.

Hasan Meymandi placed sixty thousand dirhams in money bags and sent them to Ferdowsi who happened to be at the time in a public bath.<sup>136</sup> When he came out, the King's servant placed the purse in front of him. He opened it, thinking it was gold coins sent as his bounty. When he saw that it was all silver, he gave twenty thousand to the bathhouse attendant, and another twenty thousand to the man selling [clay] pots of cold drink at the door<sup>137</sup> of the bathhouse, and another twenty thousand to the servant who had brought the reward; and he said to him, "His Majesty should know that the troubles that I have endured in performing this labor were not instigated by a desire for dinars and dirhams or a personal whim but when I set about kindling the candle of intellect, I did it all upon the foundation of preserving a memorial and sustaining a high and honorable reputation." The servant went back and reported every word that Ferdowsi had said.

The Sultan became furious on account of this mean gesture of Hasan Meymandi and reproached him with bitter words, that "thanks to your inappropriate action, you have made our name and reputation a subject for the admonishment of the poets, and worthy of all kinds of opprobrium and censure in the talk of these people."

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<sup>136</sup> Compare this account for its similarities as well as differences with the account in Neẓāmi 'Aruẓi's *Chahār maqā'eh*, see Browne's Eng. tr., *Revised Translation of the Chahār Maqāla (Four Discourses)*, London, 1921, pp. 56-57; Pers. text and commentary in Riyahi, pp. 227-37.

<sup>137</sup> For Foqqā' see Sayyed Mohammad Dabirsiaqi, "Foqqā'", *Elr. Online*, <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_1653](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_1653)>

Meymandi replied, “A royal gift should be regarded as the same, be it one dirham or a hundred thousand dinars; nay, even if a handful of dust was sent to him from the royal court, he should have treated it with utmost respect and placed it reverently upon his eyes as if it had been a precious panacea for curing blindness, and should have vanquished his boorishness and incivility by the force of good manners and sagacity.

#### VERSE

A royal gift, however paltry / Should be deemed as vast:

For whoever is graced by a favor from the king / becomes at once worthy of a crown and a throne.

Doesn't rain start as a few drops at first? / Though it turns into a torrent by the end.

If you seek a torrent, look for a drop / Follow this through the eyes of wisdom.

When Hasan Meymandi succeeded in planting the notion of Ferdowsi's boorish lack of courtesy and respect in the Sultan's mind, the Sultan commanded that “At dawn I will throw this Carmatian<sup>138</sup> under the feet of an elephant, thereby making his dire end serve as a lesson to other discourteous ruffians!”

They conveyed a report of the Sultan's rage to Ferdowsi. It made him extremely fearful, and he became apprehensive. His own chamber was within the inner quarters of the court. When the Sultan went to perform his ritual cleansing in the ablution chamber in the garden before performing his prayers, Ferdowsi threw himself in front of his feet and expressed his grief and pleaded thus:

“My detractors and backbiters have insinuated at your Majesty's presence that I belong to the Carmatians. They are in error. The punishment for my discourtesy in not accepting the reward hinges on the Sultan's compassion; and upon the fate and destiny allotted to followers of different sects and creeds; for in this vast realm of the king there are plenty of

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<sup>138</sup> Mahmud regarded himself as a champion of Sunni Islam and a scourge of all so-called deviants. See earlier note on his image. “Qarmatī” was a frequent and convenient allegation, as in the more famous case of Ḥasanak in the reign of Mahmud's son. On Carmatians see Farhad Daftary, “Carmatians” *EIr.* online <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_7476](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_7476)>

On Ferdowsi's alleged Isma'ili inclinations, see article by Zaryāb-Kho'i article on Ferdowsi's religion as deducted from a selective reading of the prefaces in various parts of the poem.

all sorts of different sects, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians, and others who pay their religious dues<sup>139</sup> to the royal chancery and find refuge and redress in the world-protecting court of the monarch and bask in utmost security, free of all cares and anxieties. I beseech Your Majesty to count me as one of these groups and lift the threat of an execution order and the death sentence from my feeble being.

VERSE

Since in the realm of this Sultan, whom the very firmaments are loud in his praise / There are many Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews,  
From whom the payment of the set dues suffices / And their gold, property, and personal safety, are all protected.

They shelter under the shadow of his justice / Safe and secure from the vicissitudes of fate.  
How would it be if the Sultan with his cosmic grandeur / Enlists this slave as another member of these groups?

Ferdowsi's account induced an element of remorse in the Sultan's mind and the fiery flames of ire were put down by the gentle rain of his compassion.

VERSE

Ferdowsi then kissed the ground / And rubbed his forehead in the dust.  
He left the King's court safe and secure / But decided to leave that land, and take to the road.

When he returned to his own abode, he had composed several thousand other lines but had not yet transcribed them into a fair copy, he shredded the rough draft and threw it into the fire and burnt it all.

This limpid water of his soul-soothing verse, / He threw into the fire without a care.  
Although fire is killed by water / Here the pure water was soiled by the fire.

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<sup>139</sup> Jezya. See Vera B. Moreen, "Jezya" *EIr*. online ,<[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_4003](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_4003)>

When Ferdowsi decided to leave Ghazna, he went into the Friday Mosque and at the spot where the Sultan used to sit he wrote these two lines of poetry on the wall:

The glorious court of Mahmud-e Zāvoli is like a sea / A measureless sea with coasts invisible.

Many a time I swam in it without a reward / I blame my fortune, and not the sea.<sup>140</sup>

Therefore, bent on leaving, he came out but he did not have the wherewithal to travel. He had forged bonds of paternal and filial affection with Ayāz. He gave Ayāz a sealed letter and said to him, “My son! in twenty days’ time, and while the king is indulging in merry making and with the help of a few cups of wine wiping away the cares of the kingdom from his mind, take this writing to him.”

Ayāz, bound by his bonds of his devotion to him, at such a fixed time and setting, gave the letter to the king. When the Sultan took the seal off and opened up the notepaper, he found these verses written upon it.

VERSES COMPOSED AS A COMPLAINT AGAINST THE SULTAN BY FERDOWSI: <sup>141</sup>

King Mahmud! Conqueror of so many lands! / If you don’t fear me, fear God Himself!  
If, as it happens, kingship in the world belongs to you / How come you indulge in such trite speech?

When you saw for yourself my devastating wit / Didn’t you take note of my blood-letting blade ?

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<sup>140</sup> Faṣiḥi, II, 591-92.

<sup>141</sup> The authenticity of this long diatribe against Sultan Maḥmud and the variety of the versions have been the subject of long discussions from early on. In particular see Khaleghi-Motlagh’s section on the *Hajw-name*:

In Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, A. Shapur Shahbazi and EIr, “FERDOWSI, ABU’L-QĀSEM” *EIr*.online :[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_9759](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_9759)

And far more extensively by Abu’l-Faḥl Khatibi, *Āyā Ferdowsi Maḥmud-e Ghaznavi rā hajv goft?* Pardis-e Dānesh, Tehran, 1395; reviewed by Theodore S. Beers in *Al-‘Usūr al-Wuṣṭā* 25, 2017, pp. 213-18.

Its full insertion here provides a clear contrast in approaches to patronage: the parsimony of a past monarch, in spite of his grandeur and opulence, with the lavish and informed approach of the Timurid princes, particularly towards his coterie of poets and painters (Faṣiḥi II, p. 1126). In the case of Prince Baysonghor, as related by several different anecdotes in various sources, there seems to have been also an element of jovial informality.

See for example Fakhri Heravi, *Rowzat al-salāṭin*, pp. 37-38 and Roxburgh, “Emulation in the Arts of the Book...,” 2018. pp. 150-51.

That now you call me a heretic and of an abhorrent faith / I am a lion and you call me a sheep!

You threatened to trample me under an elephant's feet / And crush and pulverize my body like so many indigo plants.

I fear you not, for my heart is alight / With the love of the family of the Prophet and Imam Ali.

They have been maligning me, charging me for having a vicious tongue / Since I have grown old with the love of the Prophet and Ali.

But as for he who harbors hatred in his heart for Ali / Who on earth could be more wretched than he?

The kings of religion were the Prophet and Ali / By Grace of God, two omnipotent kings. And I remain the slave of the two until the Day of Resurrection / Even if the Shah tears my body into shreds.

I will never forsake the love of these two kings / Even if the Shah's blade severs my head.

I am a devoted slave of the House of the Prophet / A worshipper at the feet of Ali<sup>142</sup>

What did that master of the revelations and divine messages (i.e. The Prophet) say / That master of commanding right and forbidding wrong?

[He said] "I am the city of knowledge and Ali is my gate"<sup>143</sup>/ In truth these are the very words of the Prophet/Verily this saying came from the Prophet.

I testify that the words are from him / It is as if I have heard his voice with my own ears.

If you are a person of wisdom and discernment / Secure yourself a place by the side of the Prophet and Ali.

If you take offence at these words, I shoulder the blame / For this is my way and the way I see things.

I was born in this belief and will die in it / Think of me as mere dust at Haydar's feet (i.e. Ali's).

I have no truck with others [presumably the other Rightly Guided Caliphs] / And no need to encounter them.

If Shah Mahmud fails to grasp this / It means there is not a whit of wisdom in his brain.

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<sup>142</sup> *Wasi*, i.e. the executor of the Prophet's last will and testament and his successor

<sup>143</sup> An oft-quoted Shi'ite *hadith*.

For God has placed on the royal throne / The Prophet and Ali, in the Other World.  
 Were I to expound on their power of love / I would show that it would offer me  
 protection from a hundred like Mahmud,  
 In the Other World too he [i.e. Ali] pleads in my case / For he has both the sword and the  
 pulpit.  
 My detractors became jealous of me / And blotted my name with the king.  
 My choice words, redolent with meaning / He belittled with contempt, swayed as he was  
 by backbiters.  
 So long as the world exists, there will be monarchs / My message is for all (rightful)  
 holders of crowns:  
 "That Ferdowsi of Tus, famed for his intellect / did not compose this book in the name of  
 Mahmud.  
 I composed it in the name of the Prophet and Ali / Polishing many a gems of worthy  
 thoughts.  
 Whoever is put down through the words of the poet / Will not be given a helping hand by  
 the celestial sphere.  
 If the world ruling monarch (i.e. Mahmud) was not so tight-fisted / I would now be seated  
 on an exalted throne.  
 There was no one ever like Ferdowsi in time / A pity that his fortune did not remain  
 forever young.  
 Such a monarch and such a would-be benefactor / A glittering star amongst the monarchs  
 of the world,  
 Did not delve deeply into this book: / The words of the malignant detractors led to his  
 offense.  
 I toiled unceasingly in these thirty-years / Implanting life, through such pure Persian, into  
 a garbled tongue.<sup>144</sup>  
 There were many a notable figures and brave warriors; / I traced them all and made them  
 known, one by one.

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<sup>144</sup> These are of course famous lines inserted in the midst of the long and amateurish versification. It plays on the various associations of both words '*ajam* and '*pārsi* and hints at the *sho'ubiya* debate of earlier centuries as well as the perennial debate, which lasted far longer, on Persian lit. as a 'reference culture' though a relatively late-comer compared to Arabic.



Among them were figures of high rank and repute/ Men like Tur, or Salm, or such as Afrasiyāb,  
 All dead, a long time ago / though their names have a new lease of life, through my verse.  
 He <sup>145</sup>said to me “Who was this Khosrow, and who was Giv ?/ And Fereydun and Kaykhosrow, that warlike king?  
 My kingship happens to be of a novel order in this age / Many of my servants are on a par with Kaykhosrow.”

I toiled on this for thirty-five years / In poverty, hardship and penury.  
 Hoping that in old age all this would bear me fruit / And the king would bestow a throne and a crown upon me.  
 Three scores and five were spent on this by me / Much toil and expense were spent on this by me.  
 For thirty years I toiled over the *Book of Kings* / So that the king would bestow on me crowns and treasures.  
 That he would see to it that I had no care in the world / That he would secure me a high repute among his champions.  
 In order to reward me he did open his treasury: / He offered me naught save the price of a pot of ale.  
 The king lacks any access to knowledge / Or else he would have offered me an exalted place at the court.  
 I received no rewards from the king’s dinar / For as a king he fails to appreciate the true fitness of things.  
 If the Shah had a shah as father, <sup>146</sup>/ he would have placed on my head a golden crown.

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<sup>145</sup> i.e. Maḥmud. This is an allusion to an earlier anecdote and a favorite panegyric device. *Tārikh-e Sīstān* (ed. Bahār, p. 7) describes Mahmud making light of Ferdowsi’s eulogy of pre-Islamic heroes by claiming that in his army he has a thousand men like Rostam, a point that Ferdowsi is quick to challenge and which causes an immediate rift between the king and the poet. Later poets of course were eager to outdo each other in praising their contemporaries at the expense of the historical memory of glorious heroes of the past, thus for example suggesting that although Alexander was a mighty conqueror, his record was dismal compared to Maḥmud’s. See also Riyahi, pp. 187-88 for a direct quote from *Tārikh-e Sīstān*

<sup>146</sup> The lowly origins of the Ghaznavids could not be easily covered up and were contrasted with blue-blooded dynasties like the Samanids. Some dynasties, like the Saffarids, made a virtue of this and boasted about being self-made men relying on their own talents and muscle, and as mentioned before, so did the Ghaznavids in some sources, including in Bayhaqi. See also E.G. Browne’s *A Literary History of Persia*,

Since his own lineage lacks any nobility / He cannot tolerate hearing stories about the great.

Descending from a line of minions is of no use / Even though one's father happens to be a king.

A dime is worth more than such a king, / since he lacks wisdom, knowledge, and has no faith.

A king wary of impoverishment / should not showered in praise in a *Book of Kings*.

To further elevate the fame of the unworthy / Hoping for betterment from them,

Is to create havoc for oneself / akin to nurturing a snake in one's pocket.

A tree whose essence is bitter / Even if you plant it in the Garden of Eden<sup>147</sup>

And even when from the river of paradise / you give its roots pure milk and honey

At the end of the day its original essence will do its work: / It will produce the same bitter fruit.

If you pass by the quarter of ambergris sellers / Your clothes will be redolent of amber.

And if you come by a coal merchant / you will find naught save dark soot.

Evil from the evil-natured should not come as a surprise / Darkness cannot be wrenched from the night.

To expect good from one born of evil / Is like throwing dust into one's own eyes.

Since The Creator has created him thus / You will not be able to open the divine lock.

Do not put your hopes in evildoers / The black do not turn white by washing.

I have composed these long lines / So that the king can learn from my advice.

I grieve at the Court of the Almighty God / Pouring dust upon my head.

O God! Burn his soul in fire / Lighten the heart of this deserving slave!

And when Ferdowsi had handed over these verses, he took his leave of the city of Ghazna, without adequate provisions for the journey. He threw his cloak over his shoulders, picked up his walking stick, and set out on foot.

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II, p. 137 for his translation of similar lines. In fact, this section of Browne is well worth reading for the comments on Ferdowsi's life and his translations into appropriately ornate English.

<sup>147</sup> The following three lines are attributed to Ferdowsi and are one among many Persian sayings on the theme that "like it or not a snake can only beget a snake" See under "*Az mār nazāyad joz mār bacheh*" in Dehkhoda's *Amthāl o ḥekam*, I, p. 146.

Many of his friends and notables wished to see him off ceremoniously and fulfill the usual rituals of departure, and to provide him with the necessary fare for the journey, but they feared the Sultan's wrath and the machinations of the vizier. Ayāz managed, without anyone's knowledge, to dispatch a party after him, with whatever he could muster to meet the poet's needs for the journey in terms of travel and trappings of transport. By now Ferdowsi's plight, the disregard of the king, and the iniquity of the vizier, were public knowledge in all quarters; with those of a judicious mind disapproving of it all. The news reached Qohestān where Nāser-al-Din Mohtasham was the governor of the region.<sup>148</sup> He had established a firm bond of allegiance to Sobuktegin, and after the latter's death he opposed Esmā'il, the elder brother of Sultan Mahmud, on account of his alliance and friendship with Mahmud and secured Qohestān for him. The Sultan held him in high esteem and regarded him as one of his intimate confidants. Nāser-al-Din sent someone to greet Ferdowsi on his arrival and bring him to Qohestān. He showered him with many compliments and exhibited great respect towards him, far beyond what Ferdowsi had expected.

And Mohtasham had heard that Ferdowsi was planning to write an account of his own life and the injustice inflicted upon him by the Sultan, a book that would last long in the world, replete with harsh criticism and vituperative denunciations from cover to cover, and that the poet was intending to travel to the Deylamite court.

And since his sympathies and loyalties were on the side of the Sultan, he said to Ferdowsi, "such backbiting and bitter criticism is not worthy of men of fine taste and refinement, especially if aimed at kings", and he further said and did whatever he could to mollify him and soothe his nerves. And he gave him several thousand dirhams and beseeched him to send him all those verses that he had composed complaining against the Sultan at the peak of his grievance and when he had been overwhelmed by sadness and

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<sup>148</sup> The historical Naser-al-Din Mohtasham was of a much later date and the generous patron of Nasir-al-Din Tusi (hence Tusi's *Akhlaq-e Mohtashami*, ed. M.-T. Dānesh-pajuh, 2<sup>nd</sup>. pr. Tehran, 1982). He was himself a scholar of considerable erudition. See, Maryam Mo'ezzi, "Jāme-'a-ye Nezāri-ye Qohestān as negāh-e Mohtasham Nāser al-Din," *Jostārkhā-ye tārikhi*, I/2, 1389, pp. 81-94. For conjectures on the clear anachronisms in this anecdote, see Riyahi, pp. 355-58.

sorrow, and that he should keep nothing back and restrain from reciting them to anyone or putting them down in writing.

Ferdowsi too was feeling less ruffled and disconcerted in his mind. He sent him all those words accompanied by these few verses:

VERSE

Although my heart did bleed in Ghazna / from the injustice of that unjust king  
Because of him my thirty years toil came to naught / Heaven itself heard my cries from  
the earth below.  
I had wished to give voice to my long laments / Broadcast in the world many a tale about  
him.  
Since he turned down my verses where I offered him false praise / I would now turn to  
the reprehensible truths:  
I would tell about his mother, and about his father too / Fearing no one save the Lord of  
the Heavens.  
I would tarnish his face so well from scratch / That no amount of water could wipe it  
clean.  
Since he cannot tell friend from foe / I would have him skinned with the blade of my  
tongue.  
But given the commands of Mohtasham / I know not how to disobey them.  
I have sent whatever I had said / Keeping back nothing with me.  
If these written words appear unwise and injudicious / throw them into fire, or wash them  
away in water.  
I forsake to seek redress, O my master of sound judgment! / and defer the judgment to the  
Other World.  
Divine compassion will redress my grievance / He will extract justice for me on  
Judgment Day.

To cut a long story short, Nāṣer-al-Din Mohtasham sent off Ferdowsi with utmost decorum, and given the intimacy and candor of his relationship with the Sultan, he courteously inquired from him, “Why should you drive away Ferdowsi from the court

after his thirty years' toil, just because of the false insinuations of some narrow-minded soul? And he recounted the account of Ferdowsi's anguish and turmoil that he had witnessed and inserted these verses:

"I forsake to seek redress, O my master of sound judgment! / and defer the judgment to the Other World.

Divine compassion will redress my grievance / He will extract justice for me on Judgment Day".

Along with the text of his petition and sent it off to the Sultan.

By chance it was on a Friday that Mohtasham's petition arrived at its destination and ever since the day when Ferdowsi had inscribed those two lines on the wall <sup>149</sup> of the mosque, as related before, the Sultan had not visited the Friday Mosque; and therefore, when on this Friday he read the two lines, he became most disconcerted and perturbed, and he left the mosque with his mind still dwelling on this.

When he reached the court, by coincidence the petition Mohtasham's letter had also arrived from Qohestān. He therefore became altogether unsettled; and the two lines inscribed in the petition struck a deep fear into his heart.

A group of close attendants at the court who were sympathetic to Ferdowsi's cause and had meanwhile been unable to air their views, seized on this opportunity and humbly pointed out that because of the envy and backbiting from certain quarters, grievous injustice and palpable harm had been inflicted on Ferdowsi; and doubtless the account of this would survive to the very end of time, and from now on adversaries would harp on this episode in their stories and explicate it in terms of mean and miserly instincts and a base nature, and that the benefits reaped from saving sixty thousand dinars in the treasury, which amounts to some thousands of tumāns, would never compensate for this damage. The verses that he had entrusted to Ayāz were also brought into open.

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<sup>149</sup> i.e. the verses in Riyahi, p. 400.

The Sultan decreed severe chastisement on those who had inflicted such mischief upon Ferdowsi, and in the particular case of Maymandi, not only addressed him in most derogatory terms, but had the name of that ill-fated soul inscribed in the roll-call of the dead.

VERSE

When Ferdowsi, that man of such fine nature / suffered distress from the uncouth  
Meymandi,  
He suffered many a torment from that mean spirited fellow / And severe pain and  
deprivation unjustly,  
Nature embarked on retribution / And picked Meymandi's head as a playmate for the tip  
of the blade.

And Ferdowsi had proceeded towards Mazandaran, fearful of the backbiting of the vizier and possible harsh treatment from the Sultan; and he stayed there and began to revise the *Shahname* and wrote a few lines in praise of the governor of the land and appended them to the book.

The Governor of Mazandaran in those days was one of the descendants of Shams al-Ma'ālī Qābus son of Voshmgir<sup>150</sup>, whose son was the author of *Qābus-nāmeḥ* and son-in-law of Sultan Maḥmud; and from the maternal side, the son of the daughter of Marzbān, son of Rostam, son of Shervin, the author of *Marzbān-nāmeḥ*.<sup>151</sup>

VERSE

When Ferdowsi departed from Ghazna / From there he went to Mazandaran  
He displayed there his gift for words / Becoming a byword in all gatherings.  
He embarked on emending the *Shahname* / Leaving no infelicities behind.

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<sup>150</sup> See C. Edmund Bosworth, "Ziyarids", *EIr*. Online, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_10675](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_10675)

and J. T. P. de Bruijn, "Kaykāvus b. Eskandar" *EIr*. Online <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_10466](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_10466)>

<sup>151</sup> See Riyāhi, p. 252 for a reference in Varāvini's *Marzbān-nāmeḥ* to Ferdowsi, quoting Ahmad Ghazālī, Rowshan ed. I, p. 143. Not in the abridged Reuben Levy translation.

Since he was residing in that land / He praised its governor in the *Shahname*,  
With verses of such exalted quality that they vied with the stars / and poetry that made  
Sirius fall at its feet<sup>152</sup>

He praised the ruler in the way / that in a dark night those lost on the road, praise the  
moon.

Then he resorted to someone to convey his story to the Governor's attention. The man  
reported: "A poet has arrived from Tus, he is a Shi'ite and has brought a book that he had  
turned into verse in Ghazna. They call it the *Shahname*. He wishes to present it to you.  
The Governor knew all about his story with the Sultan, and he himself happened to be not  
only the son-in-law of the Sultan, but also one of his courtiers, and was most fearful of  
him. He said, "The poet's residence in these lands could prove troublesome." But since  
the Governor belonged to an 'extremist branch' of the Shi'ites<sup>153</sup>, he added, "This poet is  
a devotee of the Family of the Prophet<sup>154</sup>, and therefore if he sends us the book, we will  
bestow upon him a suitable reward."

Ferdowsi sent the book to the Governor who happened to be a seasoned connoisseur and  
well-versed in gems of poetry and jewels of speech. Ferdowsi had inserted five hundred  
lines in his praise in the *Shahname*, and following the usual custom of poets had greatly  
extolled and expounded on his good name and fine stock and waxed lyrical at some  
length in his eulogy. All this was most thrilling to the Governor, and he now decreed that  
the poet should stay. But once again he began to fear the Sultan's chastisement and  
displeasure. He therefore sent a hefty gift to Ferdowsi and made his excuses, saying that:  
Since the Sultan is unhappy with you, it could be that your prolonged stay might prove  
harmful. Now take this humble offering and unbeknown to anyone, take yourself to  
another land and a new destination:

#### VERSE

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<sup>152</sup> Play on words *nathr* and *nathreh* and *sh'er* and *she'ri* (Sirius).

<sup>153</sup> See: Heinz Halm, "Gölāt" *EIr*. <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_2248](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_2248)>

<sup>154</sup> See I. K. A. Howard, "Ahl-e Beyt", *EIr*. Online <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_4907](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_4907)>

When Ferdowsi who had suffered such oppression / Heard these choice words from the Governor,

He consented and inscribed them on his memory / And put all his heart into departure from thence.

He accepted that gift most happily / And from there he took the road to Baghdad.

When he reached Baghdad, he found himself alone, not knowing a single soul. He spent some days in dismal solitude. One day a merchant with whom he had had amicable contacts in the past caught sight of him. He displayed all kinds of respect towards Ferdowsi and took him to his own lodgings, providing him with a respite from the hardships of the journey, and the travails of the road:

There he planted his tree of residence / And shook off the dust of hardship from his clothes.

He told the merchant all his tales / divulging it all to him openly.

The merchant said: “Now that you have reached the capital (the Seat of Islam), and like a babe are lying secure in the cradle of the Commander of the Faithful—and the Caliph at the time was Al-Qāder bi'llāh<sup>155</sup> —know that Baghdad is the epicenter of art and culture, and you can be safe and secure from the ravages of time and daily snares and nightly machinations, and shielded from adverse incidents of the present, for I have considerable standing here and enjoy close proximity and much favor from the Caliph's vizier.

And the Caliph's vizier at the time was Fakhr al-Molk<sup>156</sup>, noted for his care and compassion towards strangers and endowed with vast knowledge and deep learning. The merchant said, “I will at once bring the matter to the vizier’s attention so that he can inform the Commander of the Faithful.

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<sup>155</sup> Al-Qāder be-Llāh r. 381-422/992-1031). See D. Sourdel, “al-Ḳādir Bi’l-lāh”, *EI2*, online [http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_SIM\\_3761](http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3761)

Also Tayeb El-Hibri, *The Abbasid Caliphate. A History*. Cambridge U. P., Cambridge, 2021, p. 193ff. Note that from the point of view of chronology this is accurate (i.e. he was the Caliph at the time of Sultan Mahmud). The episode also appears, more briefly, in the preface to the Florence manuscript of 614. See Riyahi, p. 285.

<sup>156</sup> Possibly a reference to Abu Moḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Khalaf Fakhr al-Molk, the Buwaihīd vizier. See H. F. Amedroz, “Three Years of Buwaihīd Rule in Baghdad, A.H.3890393,” *JRAS* Oct. 1901, pp. 749-86, esp. pp. 764-71. Fakhr al-Molk apparently revoked restrictions on mourning on ‘Ashurā (see ‘Alī-Asghar Faqīhi, *Āl-e Buyeh*, Ṣabā publications, Tehran 1357, p. 473, quoting Ibn Kathir, vol. II, p. 311.



## VERSE

So off went this merchant of good will / to the problem-solving vizier  
The tales of Ferdowsi, the poet of such talent / He recounted to him, beginning to end.  
When the Vizier learnt of his state / For he was peerless in knowledge and virtue,  
He, that essence of justice and good religion, asked for him / And had him seated with  
due respect and decorum.

And Ferdowsi was not only a skillful rider on the plains of Arabic poetry but also,  
celebrated for his knowledge of the finer intricacies of the sciences of the time and  
literature, as the Ebn Bājjā of his time<sup>157</sup>. He composed a panegyric ode in Arabic brimful  
of fine meanings and appearing pearl-like on the page, and they presented it to the Vizier.  
The men of eloquence and the cognoscenti present there marveled at his rhetorical  
powers and the wholesome virtuosity of the poem and were left bewildered and  
astonished.

The Vizier strove to wipe away Ferdowsi's concerns and fears from the mirror of his  
memory and have him lodged firmly in the abode of security. He told him. “You will find  
an exalted rank and high esteem in presence of the Commander of the Faithful, for the  
fame of your oratory and reports of your artistry are already well-known and widespread  
in many a region and realm.

The Vizier, blessed by fortune, a lover of learning / And worthy of high office and much  
accolade,

Conveyed Ferdowsi's words and account / And described in detail how he was crestfallen  
and low in spirits.

And as soon as he stepped into the Caliph's presence / He lodged them all, as pearls, in  
the Caliph's ear.

The Sultan's many acts of tyranny and his disparagement / And Ferdowsi's thirty-years  
toil and his reward.

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<sup>157</sup> Ibn Bājjā (Latin: Avempace), known not only as a great philosopher of 6th/12th century Spain but also  
as a poet and musician as well as a vizier under the Almoravids; note Riyahi has a different name.  
Josep Puig Montada, “Ibn Bājjā [Avempace]”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of  
Philosophy* <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/ibn-bajja/>>.

As well as the malignant Meymandi, the mean tempered vizier: / Evil in mind, evil in nature, and foul-mouthed too.

All this he divulged to the Caliph / For physicians should be told of pains.

When they brought Ferdowsi to the presence of the Caliph, he had added a thousand more verses to the *Shahname* in praise of the Caliph, and he presented them there. The Caliph ordered sixty thousand dinars and a robe of honor bestowed on him. And they opened the gates of bounty and brought the keys of felicity to enlighten his mood and uplift his condition.

#### VERSE

So then the Caliph treated him with great respect / And with his royal attention made him renowned

He allowed him access and the honor of private audience / He bestowed on him much wealth, recognition, and status.

The Vizier gave him the good tidings from the Caliph / That “Rest assured Since you have made the praise of Ali your constant prayer <sup>158</sup>/ The world will look after you”

“For every heart which nurtures love for the Shah <sup>159</sup> / Will be immune to sorrow and to grief.”

Now that Ferdowsi had become a resident of Baghdad and since the Caliph and the citizens of Baghdad were finding faults with the *Shahname* for praising the kings of the Persians who were fire-worshippers and followers of the magi, Ferdowsi versified the story of Yusof which is described in one sura of the Holy Qur'an<sup>160</sup> and said:

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<sup>158</sup> This is particularly ironic coming from a Sunni source anxious to praise all the Rightly Guided Caliphs without singling out Ali as the Shi'i would. One notes the fuss that the Caliph had made (as reported in *Tārikh-e Beyhaqi* and Ibn Athir and elsewhere) when he had thought that Mahmud had gone soft on the Isma'ilis.

<sup>159</sup> i.e. 'Ali, Amir al-Mo'menin.

<sup>160</sup> Sura 12 of the Qur'an and the source of a rich literature in Persian. The attribution of *Yusof and Zoleykhā* to Ferdowsi was only firmly challenged in the 20th century when even eminent scholars like Ethé still held to the view. For the earliest attribution to Ferdowsi, see Riyahi, pp. 345-48. For a comprehensive account see 'A. Khayyāmpur, *Yusof va Zolekhā*, Shafaq Press, Tabriz, 1339.

The episodes in this story are extremely pleasant, / With their life-enhancing heart-warming words.

*Alif lām rā telka* [A. L. R. These are...] <sup>161</sup>read these verses / So that you learn about these episodes.

When the story of Yusof was presented, the Caliph and the citizens of Baghdad were extremely pleased and took even greater care of him.

After a while when the spies and informers of the Sultan searched around to locate Ferdowsi's whereabouts, it became apparent that the parrot of the garden of oratory and high soaring phoenix of the firmaments of artistry was resting securely in the glittering threshold and the cradle of contentment of the Caliph of Baghdad, whose clement breath of protection blew gently over the garden of his desires.

#### VERSE

When he secured a place beneath the shadow of the Caliph / Like a parrot with sugar, he enjoyed pecking away.

From the Sultan's injustice and the ravages of time / He was relieved, basking in the shade of safety and security.

The Sultan sent a letter to the Caliph's palace, shot through with threats and menaces that "if he does not send back that Carmatian, I will have the land of Baghdad trampled beneath my elephants' feet. The Caliph commanded that they should inscribe on the back of the Sultan's letter, "*a.l.m*; Hail and Farewell!"<sup>162</sup>

When the envoy returned and brought the response to the missive, the masters of wit and scholars of speculation and conjecture were dumbfounded by the three letters. The upright *alef* of the body of those men of intelligence became more bent than the letter *lām*

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<sup>161</sup> The beginning mystical letters (A.L.R) and words of Sura XII. The second line of the verse is quoted directly from the poem, *Yusuf va Zoleykhā* (see Hermann Ethé, ed. *Yūsuf and Zalikhā by Firdausi of Tūs*, Philo Press Amsterdam, 1970 (reprint of Oxford ed. 1908), p. 15. line 126.

<sup>162</sup> *alam* is the beginning of Sura 105, Fil, Elephant, and the rest of the āya is: See you not how your Lord dealt with the Companions of the Elephant (*ashāb-e fil*). The Timurids were extremely fond of clever puzzles (see Maria E. Subtelny, "A Taste for Intricate: The Persian Poetry of the Late Timurid Period," *ZDMG* 136, 1986, pp. 56-79.

under the weight of their cogitation, and the inlet of the sea of memory of those learned literati became narrower than the eyelet of the letter *mim*, thanks to their confused and confusing deliberations in pondering this problem.

However, a youth who had labored intensely and toiled hard on the road to knowledge and had tasted the wine of erudition from the hand of the cupbearer of high culture said, “One can solve this problem and unravel this mystery with due thought and discernment.”

They said, “What do those letters allude to?”

He said, “The Sultan had addressed the Caliph and threatened to have Baghdad trampled upon by his elephants. In response the Caliph wrote “*See you not how your Lord dealt with the Companions of the Elephant?*” The Sultan was overjoyed and showered him with bounties and showed much favor towards him.

Learning and crafts<sup>163</sup> enhance and buttress a man’s position / They bring good fortune and have an auspicious effect.

Wherever art casts its shadow / Phoenix-like it provides a secure protection.

Art will bear you the fruits of success / Art can offer you the buds of bliss.

Wherever necessity requires art / There the craftsman is held in high esteem.

We seek after learning and art / For it is through art that we find satisfaction in this world and the next.

Acquired learning is more vital than innate intellect / This is the secret recipe for a worthier soul.

After a while, the Sultan decided to engage in hostilities against the Ghaz tribes<sup>164</sup> and to send a missive to them. He consulted one of his ministers who happened to be present and said: “In this letter, how should I phrase my threats?”

The vizier replied: “In the way that Abu’l-Qāsem has put it:”

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<sup>163</sup> The repeated word here is *honar*, which here covers a range of skills, knowledge, etc. acquired through toil and training, as opposed to *gowhar*, innate nobility (also note *hasab* va *nasab*). This dichotomy and debate is of course a favorite topic in Persian literature as pointed out in a previous footnote (n. 120)

<sup>164</sup> Riyahi has a footnote (p. 414) suggesting this is a garbled borrowing from Nezāmi Aruzi’s *Chahār maqāla*, reading Ghaz for Ghazna. But in fact, the story as it stands here makes equal sense as an anecdote.

VERSE

Should I receive an answer not to my taste / You will find me and my mace in the  
battlefield of Afrāsiyāb

The Sultan said, "That poor man got nothing from us, and no beneficial rays of our  
bounty were reflected in the chambers of his hopes and desires.

VERSE

Three scores he toiled and suffered / ere he put together the *Shahname* in verse,  
He delved deep in the sea of his recollections / Opening wide the gates of thoughts and  
reflections in his heart.

He galloped so long and hard on that road / That his hair turned white with age.

The Sultan therefore ordered sixty thousand dinars of pure gold with a robe of honor to  
be sent to him. At the same time Ferdowsi had had a change of heart and had come back  
to Tus from Baghdad.

One day, as he was passing through the marketplace at Tus, he heard a child reciting this  
verse:

With a father like Rostam, and a son like me / I will not let a single crown to survive in  
the world. <sup>165</sup>

Ferdowsi let out a sigh of anguish, recollecting all the injustices and recriminations which  
had been directed towards him from all quarters, and he passed out. When they carried  
him home, the bird of his soul flew away from the cage of his frame, soaring towards his  
Maker; and at the very moment when they were carrying his corpse to the grave, the  
king's bounty was brought into the town of Tus.

Ferdowsi had a daughter, and they took the king's gift to her but she didn't care for it and  
refused to accept it. They spent the sum on building a Sufi hospice and as an endowment  
for the upkeep of his grave.

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<sup>165</sup> This is a celebrated line from the Rostam and Sohrāb episode in *the Shahname*, pointing to Sohrāb's  
youthfully misguided over-reaching hubris. There are variants. The most frequently cited has 'nabāyad'  
rather than namānam, i.e. there ought not be any other monarchs (given the incomparable combination of  
R&S).

And others have narrated that his sister had said that my brother had always intended to construct and fortify the dam at Tus with lime and stone and that the good deed would remain a memento of him. Now with this sum they did manage to build the dam, and it became known as the dam of ‘Āyeshā Farrokh, and remnants of it survive to date.

And Hakim Nāser-e Khosrow in his *Book of Travels* has written<sup>166</sup> that, “In the year 437 after the Hijra I was going to Tus by way of Sarakhs. When we reached the large hamlet of Chāheh, we saw a large new hospice. They said this was built from Ferdowsi’s stipend that Sultan Mahmud had sent him, and when it reached him, he had already died and his legatee did not accept it; they put the point to the Sultan and he ordered that a building should be constructed there. And this is the story behind the hospice at Chāheh.”

They narrate that when Ferdowsi passed away, they buried him in his garden and were all much saddened by his departure. But the eminent Sheikh Abu’l-Qāsem Korrkāni (Jorjāni),<sup>167</sup> the most eminent sheikh of his time, did not present himself for the ritual worship at the graveside and said: “Here is a man of learning and an ascetic who abandoned his stance and spent his life amidst the discourse of those of evil faith, fire-worshippers, and false and fabricated tales. I will not perform worship at such a person’s grave.”

When night fell, the Sheikh dreamt he was visiting Paradise. A castle of great magnificence appeared in front of his eyes; and he entered it. He saw a throne made of rubies and Ferdowsi sitting there with a crown on his head and clad in a regal mantle. The Sheikh felt so embarrassed that he wanted to turn round and go away. Ferdowsi rose from his place and greeted him and said, “O Sheikh! You did not perform the rites at my grave, but the Almighty God sent thousands of angels to pray for me and to bring my soul to the exalted garden of paradise, and this stature was bestowed upon me for the sake of one line of verse.

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<sup>166</sup> This account is not in the *Book of Travels* of Nāser-e Khosrow as we have it today, leading some scholars to believe that what we have is therefore a truncated version. On the other hand, it could be argued that the account here is simply fictitious. See Riyahi, pp. 358-59

<sup>167</sup> See the section on “The Means of Mercy” in H. Ritter (Eng. tr. *The Ocean of the Soul*, p. 283) describing ‘Attār’s version. In ‘Attār’s *Asrār-nāme* (ed. Shafi’i-Kadkani, Sokhan publications, Tehran, 1386, p. 229. line 3205ff and commentary p. 486) he is only called by his first name and the Korrkāni attribution seems to be of a later date. The passage here in the preface is clearly adapted from the section in ‘Attār with several verses quoted from *Asrār-nāme* ad verbatim. See also Riyahi. p. 259.

## VERSE

He sat beside the Sheikh and said thus / O Sheikh whose soul is akin to the light of truth  
You did not perform the act of worship as you saw no need / For you thought it shameful  
to pray for an infidel

But your God sent down a host of angels / All imbued with divine favor  
All out of compassion and love / So that they could pray by my grave  
They destined me for Paradise / For Ferdowsi should go to Ferdows (Paradise).

When the Sheikh woke up, he went hurriedly and bare footed to the grave of Ferdowsi,  
crying all the way. He performed the ritual worship at his grave and spent some days  
there in prayer and solitude. As long as he lived, he would go to his graveside every day  
to pay his respects.

And they say that Arslān Jādheb<sup>168</sup> had a dome constructed over Ferdowsi's grave and it  
remained standing until the time when Monku Qāān<sup>169</sup> sent Gurguz<sup>170</sup> as governor to  
Khorasan and he lodged at Tus. Since the time when Gurguz had built a citadel at Tus, its  
structure had suffered some damages and the men who had come from different parts to  
repair the citadel, demolished the dome and took its material for the walls of the citadel.  
Then at the time of the just King Ghazān<sup>171</sup>, the Amir Isn Qotlogh<sup>172</sup>, who held Tus and  
its environs as his fiefdom<sup>173</sup>, commissioned a building to be constructed at his grave;

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<sup>168</sup> A famous commander and courtier at Mahmud's court mentioned earlier. On Ferdowsi's mausoleum see A. Shapur Shahbazi, Ferdowsi, Abu'l-Qāsem iii. Mausoleum in Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, A. Shapur Shahbazi and Elr, "Ferdowsi, Abu'l-Qāsem" *Elr.* online [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_9759](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_9759) which needs updating as it omits part of the reception history of the foundation of the mausoleum.

<sup>169</sup> See D. O. Morgan, "Möngke," *El*<sup>2</sup>

<[http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_SIM\\_5260](http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5260)>

<sup>170</sup> For an account of his career and reference to his building repairs in Tus, see 'Abbās Eqbāl, *Tārikh-e mofaṣṣal-e Irān (Tārikh-e Moḡul)*, Amir Kabir Publications, Tehran, 2<sup>nd</sup> printing, 1341, pp. 167-69.

<sup>171</sup> On Ghāzān see R. Amitai-Preiss, "Gāzān Khan, Maḥmud," *Elr.* online

<[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804\\_EIRO\\_COM\\_1973](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_1973)>

<sup>172</sup> On him see brief eulogies in Nāṣer al-dīn Monshi Kermāni, *Semt al-'olā lel-ḥazrat al-'Olyā*, ed. 'Abbās Eqbāl, Asāṭir publications, Tehran, reprint 1362, pp. 8-9 and Ebn Yamin Farivmadi, *Divān*, ed. Ḥ. Bāstāni-Rād, Tehran, Sanā'i publications, Tehran, 1344, p. 429, line 8866.

<sup>173</sup> *Siyurghal*. See A. K. S. Lambton, "Soyūrghāl", *El*<sup>2</sup> online [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_SIM\\_7097](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7097)

I.P. Petrushevskii, tr. Samie & Woods, "On the History of the Institution of the Soyūrghāl", *JESHO*, 64, 2021, pp. 1035-1071.

And for an overview, Jürgen Paul, "Remarks on Petrushevskii's Article *K istorii instituta soiurgala*," *JESHO*, 64, 2021, pp. 1072-1100.

beginning first with a hospice connected to his grave; but before the hospice was fully built, Isn Qotlogh passed away, and the construction was left unfinished.

To sum up, Ferdowsi went up to heaven, leaving the *Shahname* as his memorial, and there is no doubt that so long as the Persian language survives and remains in common usage, this book will never fall into disuse and obscurity.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the *Shahname* is this: that it has managed to say the last word on a certain kind of poetry: the recital and description of rulers and kings, battle scenes and braveries, and tales of victorious conquest of foreign lands and holding on to them through wise management; and no matter how ardently the poets have striven after him to achieve such poise and artistry, they have not succeeded to reach that awesome grandeur that is the hallmark of the *Shahname* and its sublime diction. For if in ten lines of it, five or six happen to fall short in their fluency and high distinction, the three or four remaining exhibit such felicity of diction and dignity of tone that each line is able to compensate for the inadequacies of two less successful ones. And furthermore, in spite of all this, the verses of the *Shahname*, from the point of view of the organization and narration of each episode, reach the pinnacles of eloquence and fine writing. Were it not so, it would have suffered the same neglect as the books which were composed after it such as: *Garshāsb-nāme*, *Bahman-nāme*, *Dārāb-nāme*, *Sekandar-nāme*, *Saljuq-nāme*, *Shahanshāh-nāme*,<sup>174</sup> and others. It is clear in what level and degree the fame of the *Shahname* stands compared to those books.

Even in those lands where Persian is rarely spoken, such as Egypt, Syria, Anatolia and Turkistan, one can find many copies of the *Shahname*; while in Khorasan, Fars, and Western Persia and Iraq, there is no small town where several copies of the *Shahname*

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<sup>174</sup> Almost all these so-called secondary epics have been edited. By *Shahanshāh-nāme* perhaps *Shahryār-nāme* of ‘Othmān-e Mokhtārī is intended and for *Saljuq-nāme* see Cl. Cahen, “*Le Malik-Nameh et l’histoire des origines seljukides*,” *Oriens* 2, 1949, pp. 31-65. See also Marijan Molé, “L’épopée iranienne après Firdosī,” *La Nouvelle Clío* V, 1953, pp. 377-93.



cannot be found. And in this day and age, after four centuries have passed from the date when it was first written down, it is still being copied.

And the other merit of is that on any topic that they desire, readers can find fine verses in that context in the *Shahname*.

Mawlana Abu Tāleb of Kashan arrived in Tus after the time when the army of Chengiz Khan had massacred the inhabitants of Tus and Nishabur. He visited Ferdowsi's graveside and composed these lines at the time.

#### VERSE

Greetings upon you, O unique sage! / Ferdowsi of pure religion and exalted stature!  
May your soul rest in peace and in a blissful state / May your heart too be free from all care and sorrow.

Raise your head from the earth below and contemplate the land of Iran / See how it is being devoured by bold warriors from Turan

Where did he go, that elephant-bodied champion, your Rostam?/ Along with Sām, Giv, and Narimān?

All men of worth have abandoned hope and are sunk in despair / While the mean spirited bask in exalted ranks.

Abu Tāleb of Kāshān arrived there / and when his eyes fell on that lifeless corpse.

He shed tears and lamented bitterly / for the way the heavens had treated so unjustly a man of your exalted stature.

And the death of Hakim Ferdowsi occurred in 416; May God's Compassion be upon him!  
May the servants and attendants of this exalted court be blessed in the perusal of this book.

#### HALF-VERSE

All the people of the world say Amen to this prayer.

#### FINIS

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## Abbreviations

GIE = *Dā’irat al-ma’āref-e bozorg-e Eslāmi* (The Great Islamic Encyclopaedia)

IJMES = *International Journal of Middle East Studies*

JAOS = *Journal of the American Oriental Society*

ZDMG = *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*