

The Role of the *Shāhnāme* in the Culture of the Parsi Community  
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As a contribution to the discussion of the role of Ferdowsi's work in cultures outside Iran, it is proposed here to consider the reception of the *Shāhnāme* in the Zoroastrian community of India, especially over the past two centuries. As is well-known, the Indian Zoroastrians, or Parsis, migrated from Iran to their current homeland some time after the advent of Islam in Iran, and they preserved much of their original, Iranian culture and traditions.<sup>1</sup>

The paper will argue that the *Shāhnāme* is now regarded by many Parsis as a central part of their cultural heritage, but that this is a relatively recent development. Such a course of events, it seems, could only have taken place under special circumstances, when profound changes in the culture in question led to a new perception of various aspects of its heritage. Also, such a development could probably only occur in the case of a few, special, works of art. The present case study could therefore be said to illustrate a very significant aspect of Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme*, viz. the fact that it can legitimately be perceived in a number of ways. This polyvalence make it possible for the work to be integrated into a range of cultures and even, as in the present case, to fulfil a new role when changes in a society demand this.

The *Shāhnāme* of Ferdowsi bridges several gaps. The work can be seen as the culmination of a development in which various ancient Iranian narrative traditions—religious, heroic and historical—which were once handed down independently in oral transmission, came to be seen as parts of a single whole, and were eventually combined into a written, more or less linear historical narrative. Thus the *Shāhnāme* bridges both the gap between oral and written literature and that between the Islamic and pre-Islamic heritage of the Iranian civilisation. While Ferdowsi's work is a landmark in the history of Islamic Persian literature, which ensured that Iranian Muslims could be proud of ancient elements of their culture, it is also an easily accessible source for those who seek information about Zoroastrian mythology.

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Some of those factors may help us understand the apparent anomalies in the following case. On an e-mail list about Zoroastrian culture and religion, a Parsi contributor is currently publishing a

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<sup>1</sup> In the latter half of the 20th century many Indian Zoroastrians migrated to the West, notably to the USA and the UK. The findings of this paper are chiefly based on interviews and discussions with urban Parsis residing in India (see further below), and to a lesser extent on information originating with Parsis living in the West.

long series of postings containing his English rendering of the Gujarati translation of the *Shāhnāme* by the brothers Faramarz and Mahiar Kutar, which was published in the second decade of the 20th century.<sup>2</sup> To an outsider this may seem strange for several reasons. First of all, not many translators might feel justified in publishing an English version of an 11th century Persian work based solely on a 20th century translation into another language. Secondly, it may seem astonishing to outsiders that an undoubtedly Islamic text could have such prestige in a non-Islamic community as to warrant a lengthy series of postings on an e-mail list focusing partly on questions of religious identity.

In theory, all this might be explained by the assumption that Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* corresponded so closely to the tradition known to the Zoroastrian community that it was simply accepted as a new and superior way of formulating this knowledge, and became so authoritative among Zoroastrians that the Parsis brought it with them to India as part of their heritage. That scenario, however, cannot be true. Not only do later Zoroastrian sources indicate that the mythological tradition of the Iranian Zoroastrians did not depend on Ferdowsi's work, but a simple calculation shows that the Parsis could hardly have known Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* when they migrated to India; although we have no certainty as to the time of the Parsi migration, no serious estimate so far has put this later than 936 CE, i.e. around the time of Ferdowsi's birth.

It seems likely therefore that the *Shāhnāme*, which is now regarded as a jewel in the crown of the Parsi heritage, did not play a major role in Indian Zoroastrian culture during most of the community's history, and came to prominence only in the course of the 19th century, when British culture became dominant in India and the first lithographed editions of the *Shāhnāme* were produced in Bombay.<sup>3</sup> It will be argued here that an important reason for this state of affairs, apart from the polyvalence of the *Shāhnāme* itself, is to be sought in the fact that the work became well-known to the Parsi community at a time when Parsis began to think about their cultural, literary and religious heritage in a profoundly novel way. In the 19th century Parsis were learning so many new things about their cultural heritage that the legitimacy of yet another hitherto unfamiliar work as part of that heritage was probably accepted without much questioning.

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The present writer's recent research on the contemporary Parsi community, which generated some 80 in-depth interviews with some Parsis of different backgrounds, clearly shows that the *Shāhnāme* is widely perceived as an essential part of the Zoroastrian heritage, and that its

<sup>2</sup> *The Shahnamah of Firdausi: its full text & its translation (in Gujarati)*, 10 vols., Bombay 1914-18. I am indebted to Mrs Dinaz Kutar Rogers for sending me copies of articles about the Kutar brothers which she and Mr Phiroze N. Kutar contributed to *Parsiana* (Fall 1997, pp. 70-71) and *Fezana Journal* (Fall and Winter 1999, pp. 76-77 and 68-70 respectively).

<sup>3</sup> See U. Marzolph's paper elsewhere in this Volume.

validity as a source of information on religious matters is rarely questioned.<sup>4</sup> Qualitative research is of course not statistically significant, but in this case the results nevertheless suggest that during the first five or six decades of the 20th century, the *Shāhnāme* was the main source of ordinary Parsis' information about their cultural and religious heritage.<sup>5</sup>

A gentleman who was born in 1905 reports that, in his youth (i. e. around 1920 or later) public *Shāhnāme* story-telling sessions were organised. Those who grew up in the 1930s and 1940s often say that the stories they were told as children were generally from the *Shāhnāme*. A little later, classes were organised for Parsi children, in which tales from the *Shāhnāme* were used in much the same way as stories from the Old Testament are in Christian Sunday Schools: as instances of 'Zoroastrian knowledge' in their own right and as a basis for discussions about morals. Pupils of Parsi schools received books with prose tales based on the *Shāhnāme* as school prizes. In modern discussions about Parsi life, including those on the Internet, reference is frequently made to examples from the *Shāhnāme*. Moreover, the *Shāhnāme* now forms an important part of the curriculum of both Parsi *Madressas* or teaching colleges for priests—a type of institution which originated in the mid-19th century.

Furthermore, as we saw earlier, the Kutar brothers published their Gujarati translation of the *Shāhnāme* in 1914-18, thus enabling a considerable section of the Parsi community to take cognisance of its contents. As far as I have been able to ascertain this is the first and only published translation of the whole of Ferdowsi's work into the Indian language of the Parsi community. Such a state of affairs would be consistent with the hypothesis that the *Shāhnāme* was not well-known in earlier times, but that its importance as part of the Parsi heritage had been accepted in the community by the beginning of the 20th century.

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Turning to the early history of the Zoroastrian community of India, the first thing to be said is that we have very few firm data. Until recently, Western scholars generally assumed that the Parsis arrived in India in 936 CE, while many Parsi scholars held that this took place in the 7th or 8th century. All these opinions, however, were based on interpretations of one text, the *Qesse-ye Sanjān*, a work dealing with the community's early history which was written as late as 1600 CE, presumably on the basis of oral tradition. Chronicles of this kind usually represent history as the community has remembered it over the centuries, stressing events that seemed important to generations of Parsis without necessarily being accurate as to dates and periods of time. The *Qesse-ye Sanjān* is therefore valuable as a guide to the collective memory of the Parsis of an early age, and as the basis of modern Parsis' understanding of their own past, but not necessarily reliable as a historical document in the Western sense. Apart from the debates

<sup>4</sup> See Philip G. Kreyenbroek, *Living Zoroastrianism: Urban Parsis Speak about their Religion*, in collaboration with Shehnaz N. Munshi, London, Curzon, 2000. In that work, only 30 interviews are published; the present paper uses information from these and other interviews and discussions resulting from the research project.

<sup>5</sup> See Kreyenbroek, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

about the time of the Parsis' migration, little research has been done on the history of the Parsi community from the earliest times until the 19th century. In what follows, references to the earlier cultural history of the community are therefore necessarily speculative.

As we saw earlier it is unlikely that the Parsis came to India after 936 CE, which means that Ferdowsi's work cannot have formed part of the cultural heritage they brought with them. Nor is there any known evidence to suggest that the *Shāhnāme* achieved a sudden popularity in the community at any time before the 19th century. Of course, given their knowledge of Persian and the importance of Persianate Islamic culture in Mughal India, some learned Parsis must have known Ferdowsi's work, and many more must have been familiar with elements of Zoroastrian mythology which have a counterpart in the *Shāhnāme*. It is possible, moreover, that the concept of a 'Book of Kings' had always been familiar to the Parsi community. In fact, the occurrence of the names Rostam and Sohrāb<sup>6</sup> (which are not of Avestan origin) among pre-19th century Parsis, could be taken to suggest that a narrative tradition combining myths of Avestan origin with heroic tales of the 'Sistan cycle'—in other words, a proto-*Shāhnāme* tradition—formed part of their culture from the time of their arrival in India.

At the same time, discrepancies between accounts of ancient Iranian kings and heroes as found in Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* and in the Zoroastrian *Revāyat* literature (the correspondence between the priests of India and Iran, conducted from the 15th to the 18th century CE) suggest that the Iranian Zoroastrians had a mythological tradition that was largely independent of Ferdowsi's work. For example, Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* tells us that the wicked Zakhāk ruled for a time as King of Iran and was later defeated by Faridun and imprisoned in Mt Damāvand. Faridun eventually distributed all his lands among his sons Salm, Tur and Iraj. Iran was given to Iraj, but his brothers were jealous and killed him. Iraj's son Manuchehr, who was born posthumously, eventually slew Tur and Salm. Later in the epic Pashang, the King of Turan, sent his son Afrāsiāb to wage war against Iran.<sup>7</sup>

The version we find in a *Revāyat*<sup>8</sup> is very different, and apparently aims to explain the origin of the Zoroastrian feast of *Tiragān*, which was celebrated on the day and month devoted to the divinity Tir and had a connection with rain and fertility.<sup>9</sup> There it is said that, when Afrāsiāb the Tur ruled over Iran it did not rain for eight years. Afrāsiāb is told that this is because only Torkestan was allotted to him, and he has no right to rule over Iran. Afrāsiāb asks how his proper territory can be ascertained. The astrologer Zu Tahmāsb answers that he will shoot an arrow (Pers. *tir*) and that Afrāsiāb's territory shall begin where the arrow falls. The arrow falls in Torkestan and Afrāsiāb understands that his sin had caused the drought and leaves Iran. This took place on the day Tir of the month Tir, nine days afterwards the rain fell copiously.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. B.N. Dhabhar, *The Persian Rivayats of Hormazyar Framarz*, Bombay 1932, pp. 106, 612, 614, 622, 624, 629 *et passim*; S.H. Hodivala, 'The Dates of Hormazdyār Rāmyār and Neryosang Dhaval. Lecture V', *Journal of the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute* 8 (1926), pp. 85-133, esp. pp. 111, 117, 119, 130.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. R. Levy, *The Epics of Kings*, Chicago etc. 1967, pp. 11ff.

<sup>8</sup> See Dhabhar, *op. cit.*, pp. 342-3.

<sup>9</sup> On the modern Zoroastrian observance, with its traces of rain-symbolism, see M. Boyce, *A Persian Stronghold of Zoroastrianism*, Oxford 1977, p. 206.

Another significant discrepancy is that in Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* Faridun's father is called *Abtin*; whereas the *Revāyat* tradition calls the son *Faridun-e Atfiyān*, which seems closed to the Av. original *Atβiia*. The Zoroastrians, in other words, used a form of the name they cannot have learned from Ferdowsi's work.

These texts were composed by the Zoroastrian priests of Iran and represent the Iranian tradition. However, there is no evidence that the Parsi priests challenged such 'divergent' versions of mythological lore when they found it in the *Revāyats*, as they presumably would have done had they regarded Ferdowsi's work as an important source of religious knowledge. It seems safe, therefore, to say that there is no evidence at present to contradict the historical probability that the Parsis reached India before the *Shāhnāme* had been written, and did not adopt it as a major source of knowledge until much later.

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Although the work was presumably known to individual Parsis much earlier, it seems plausible to assume that the Parsi community as a whole did not become familiar with the *Shāhnāme* until the first lithographed editions of the work were produced in Bombay, the cultural capital of the Parsi community, in the mid-19th century.

For the Parsis, the 19th century was a period of profound reappraisal of their cultural and religious tradition. Until that time, a community that was defined by its own customs, history and religion fitted in naturally with the Indian social order, where most people belonged to such groups (castes, sub-castes, and communities defined by religion such as Moslems). For generations, therefore, it would have been natural for Parsis to feel that they belonged to the community primarily because they were born into it; membership of the group entailed observing its laws, customs and traditions, and presumably some limited knowledge of its history and other aspects of its culture. Neither the concept of culture nor that of religion appears to have been problematised.

All this changed when British culture became dominant in India, roughly in the 19th century. In the view of the British, the prestige of a people or community was directly linked to the quality of its past achievements and cultural heritage. The question of the ancient Iranian heritage of the Parsis therefore came to be seen as a crucially important one. (Some British colonialists are known to have admired the *Shāhnāme* and to have discussed the work with learned Parsis.)<sup>10</sup> Whilst it would have been difficult for 19th and early 20th century Parsis to rediscover their mythology by studying the sources traditionally known to them, the newly discovered *Shāhnāme* offered a splendid opportunity to do just that.

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Mr A. Khatibi of Tehran for drawing my attention to the *Farhang-e Shāhnāme*, a glossary of older Persian, Middle Persian and Pāzand words, written by the Parsi Mobad Edal son of Dārāb, at the request of his British patron, 'Major Malcolm', and published in 1809. This aptly illustrates the role which the views of British colonialists played in promoting the prestige of the *Shāhnāme* in the Parsi community.

Another factor to play a role in these developments is that until the early 19th century Avestan and Middle Persian, the languages of the Zoroastrian scriptural tradition, were very imperfectly known. The Avesta, it seems, was widely seen as God's mysterious and powerful word (Av. *manthra*), which humans might comprehend intuitively but could not understand literally. European philologists, on the other hand, had been studying the Avestan language since the late 18th century and in the British period the results of their work gradually became known in India. To the amazement of many Parsis it was shown that the Avesta could be understood in the same way as other languages;<sup>11</sup> the Parsis' knowledge of Middle Persian also improved under the influence of European philology. Translations of ancient texts became available to educated sections of the community, which opened up the possibility of actually exploring the contents of its ancient tradition rather than merely venerating it as an arcane mystery.

This had important consequences for the Parsis' understanding of their own religion,<sup>12</sup> and the influence of British culture strengthened a tendency among educated Parsis to think of the concept of religion in a novel way. Whereas being a Parsi had until then largely been a matter of birth and communal identity, the Parsis now began to look for the deeper meaning of their religion and to seek new information from any sources where it could be found. All such sources would have seemed new to the emerging Parsi middle class, who probably accepted the *Shāhnāme* as just another hitherto unknown element of the Zoroastrian tradition.

As far as 'culture' was concerned the Parsis, who had of course always regarded the civilisation of pre-Islamic Iran as their cultural heritage, now showed a more active interest in ancient Iranian lore. Given the interest many Europeans of the period had in mythology and legends, the rich mythological tradition of ancient Iran was of course of particular interest. A difficulty in this respect was that, even though some Parsis had learned Avestan and Middle Persian, the Zoroastrian scriptures could hardly be used as simple introductions to Iranian mythology: references are short and allusive, the languages are difficult, and there is little there to excite the interest of a non-specialist. The newly-available *Shāhnāme*, on the other hand, had all the necessary attributes to make ancient Iranian mythology seem fascinating.

As was argued above, educated sections of the general public had probably become so used to a reversal of traditional ideas about ancient texts that they had little resistance to the acceptance of Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* as a legitimate part of their heritage. The inclusion of the *Shāhnāme* in the curriculum of the *Madressas*, moreover, ensured that leading priests came to regard the *Shāhnāme* as a valid source of knowledge, which obviously furthered its acceptance in the community. Lastly the work of Parsi scholars also contributed to this development, both implicitly, by giving a great deal of attention to the work,<sup>13</sup> and explicitly, by stating that Ferdowsi's text was faithful to the ancient Iranian tradition.<sup>14</sup> In other words, although scholars

<sup>11</sup> See M. Boyce, *Zoroastrians: their religious beliefs and practices*, London etc., 1979, p. 197f.

<sup>12</sup> See Kreyenbroek, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> The *Journal of the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute*, for example, contained regular contributions on subjects related to the *Shāhnāme*, in the period c. 1920-1940, after which interest in the subject seems to have waned.

<sup>14</sup> See F. C. Davar, 'The Historical Epic with Particular Reference to the Shah Nameh', *Journal of the K.R. Cama Oriental*

were aware of the *Shāhnāme*'s status as an Islamic literary work, by claiming that it followed the pre-Islamic tradition in every respect they legitimised it as a source of knowledge of the Zoroastrian heritage.

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Thus a community that probably knew little about Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* until the 19th century, came to regard its contents as a central part of its heritage because it was felt to have faithfully preserved the contents of its mythological tradition. There is nothing strange, in this light, about the postings on the Zoroastrian e-mail list which were mentioned at the beginning of this paper: these reflect the community's veneration for the *Shāhnāme* on account of its contents rather than its form. The *Shāhnāme*'s novel status in the Parsi community can thus be attributed largely to the polyvalence of that masterpiece of Persian literature.

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*Institute* 10 (1927): 17: "It can be clearly seen that Firdousi never trifled with history, but faithfully enshrined the materials that came into his hands in undying verse... Many proofs were adduced by I.J. Modi in his Gujarati work on the Shāh Nāmeḥ of Firdousi--to show that the poetic work is genuine and honest."