



Hakim Abol Qasem Ferdowsi Tousi the greatest Persian poet

May 15 is annually celebrated by Iranians as Ferdowsi Day. Many art and cultural festivals are held across the country to commemorate the great Iranian epic poet.

National Ferdowsi Day has been commemorated in Tehran during a ceremony, organized by the Niavaran Historical and Cultural Complex and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Ferdowsi was born in Khorasan in a village near Tous, in 935 CE. His great epic The Shahnameh (The

Epic of Kings), to which he devoted most of his adult life, was originally composed for the Samanid princes of Khorasan, who were the chief instigators of the revival of Persian cultural traditions after the Arab conquest of the seventh century. During Ferdowsi's lifetime this dynasty was conquered by the Ghaznavid Turks, and there are various stories in medieval texts describing the lack of interest shown by the new ruler of Khorasan, Mahmud of Ghaznavi, in Ferdowsi and his lifework. Ferdowsi is said to

have died around 1020 CE in poverty and embittered by royal neglect, though confident of his and his poem's ultimate fame.

The Shahnameh or The Epic of Kings is one of the definite classics of the world. It tells hero tales of ancient Persia. The contents and the poet's style in describing the events takes the readers back to the ancient times and makes he/she sense and feel the events. Ferdowsi worked for thirty years to finish this masterpiece.

Ferdowsi is considered as the greatest Persian poet, author of the Shahnameh («The Epic of Kings»), the Persian national epic, to which he gave its final and enduring form, although he based his poem mainly on an earlier prose version. For nearly a thousand years the Persians have continued to read

and to listen to recitations from his masterwork in which the Persian national epic found its final and enduring form. It is the history of Iran's glorious past, preserved for all time in sonorous and majestic verse. Though written about 1,000 years ago, this work is as intelligible to the average, modern Iranian as the King James version of the Bible is to a modern English-speaker. The language, based as the poem is on a Pahlavi original, is pure Persian with only the slightest admixture of Arabic.

According to Nezami, Ferdowsi was a dehqan (landowner), deriving a comfortable income from his estates. He had only one child, a daughter, and it was to provide her with a dowry that he set his hand to the task that was to occupy him for more than 30 years.

The Shahnameh of Ferdowsi, a poem of nearly 60,000 couplets, is based mainly on a prose work of the same name compiled in the poet's early manhood in his native Tus. This prose Shahnameh was in turn and for the most part the translation of a Pahlavi (Middle Persian) work, the Khvatay-namak, a history of the kings of Persia from mythical times down to the reign of Khosrow II (628-590 CE), but it also contained additional material continuing the story to the overthrow of the Sasanians by the Arabs in the middle of the 7th century A.D. The first to undertake the versification of this chronicle of pre-Islamic and legendary Persia was Daqiqi, a poet at the court of the Samanids, who came to a violent end after completing only 1,000 verses. These verses, which deal with the rise of the prophet Zoroaster, were afterward incorporated by Ferdowsi, with due acknowledgements, in his own poem.

An important feature of this work is that during the period that Arabic language was known as the main language of science and literature, Ferdowsi used only Persian in his masterpiece. As Ferdowsi himself says «Persian language is revived by this work».

Ferdowsi's Tomb in Tus near Mashhad The Shahnameh, finally completed in 1010 CE, was presented to the celebrated sultan Mahmud of Ghaznavid, who by that time had made himself master of Ferdowsi's homeland, Khurasan. Information on the relations between poet and patron is largely legendary. According to Nezami, Ferdowsi came to Ghazna in person and through the good offices of the minister Ahmad-ebn-Hasan Meymandi was able to secure the Sultan's acceptance of the poem. Unfortunately, Mahmud then consulted certain enemies of

the minister as to the poet's reward. They suggested that Ferdowsi should be given 50,000 dirhams, and even this, they said, was too much, in view of his heretical Shi'ite tenets. Mahmud, a bigoted Sunnite, was influenced by their words, and in the end Ferdowsi received only 20,000 dirhams. Bitterly disappointed, he went to the bath and, on coming out, bought a draft of foqa (a kind of beer) and divided the whole of the money between the bath attendant and the seller of foqa.

Fearing the Sultan's wrath, he fled first to Herat, where he was in hiding for six months, and then, by way of his native Tus, to Mazanderan, where he found refuge at the court of the Sepahbad Shahreyar, whose family claimed descent from the last of the Sasanians.

There Ferdowsi composed a satire of 100 verses on Sultan Mahmud that he inserted in the preface of the Shah-nameh and read it to Shahreyar, at the same time offering to dedicate the poem to him, as a descendant of the ancient kings of Persia, instead of to Mahmud. Shahreyar, however, persuaded him to leave the dedication to Mahmud, bought the satire from him for 1,000 dirhams a verse, and had it expunged from the poem. The whole text of this satire, bearing every mark of authenticity, has survived to the present.

According to the narrative of Nezami, Ferdowsi died inopportunely just as Sultan Mahmud had determined to make amends for his shabby treatment of the poet by sending him 60,000 dinars worth of indigo. Nezami does not mention the date of Ferdowsi's death. The earliest date given by later authorities is 1020 and the latest 1026 CE; it is certain that he lived to be more than 80.

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