

Zekrgoo, Amir H. (December 2012). "Islamic Initiation of a Pre-Islamic Myth: From Shahnameh to Rostamnameh," in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Commemorating Ferdowsi: Shahnameh in the 2nd Millennium*, Under the Supervision of Dr. Maryam Khalili Jahantigh, Volume 4, pp.3848-3872.

Islamic Initiation of a Pre-Islamic Myth: From Shahnameh to Rostamnameh

Abstract & Introductory Remarks

Unlike its wide acceptance in the Persian culture today, the *Shahnameh* was not much favored among the Persian Muslims during the first centuries of the Islamic calendar. In fact the epic received sharp criticism on the assumption that it harbored Zoroastrian beliefs. The controversy became so hot that at a point in time promoting it and acting favorably towards it came to be regarded as an act of blasphemy.

Yet the epic survived, and some of its prominent heroes – such as Rostam – penetrated deep into the body of the Islamic literature and secured permanent positions next to the Muslim saints. The visual arts have been an effective tool in promoting *Shahnameh* among masses and bridging its pre-Islamic sources with the Islamic identity of Persians in the eras proceeding Ferdowsi. Page illuminations that resembled decorations of Islamic manuscripts, along with illustrations that carried Islamic symbols & emblems paved the way for the *Shahnameh* and brought it to the highest peak of national pride and cultural identity – Persian and Islamic combined!

On the other hand the magnificent character of Rostam, the leading hero of the epic, his courage, wisdom, devotion, loyalty and morality appealed so deeply to the masses that the collective wisdom of the society decided to treasure him. This found expression, at the initial stage, in the creative imagination of the masses as reflected in the body of the folklore and, at a later stage, in the form of refined literature – poetry as well as prose.

Rostam Nameh, a manuscript dated 1038/1628, is a unique poetic account in this respect. The book is composed in the similar epic style as Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. Recounting a



spiritual dream that takes place at Imam Ali's shrine in Najaf (or a story heard in the shrine), the book describes in a masterly manner the process in which the pre-Islamic legendary hero of *Shahnameh* (Rostam) converts to Islam in an encounter with Imam Ali.

This paper tackles the process of Islamicization of the *Shahnameh* epic from two angles: literature and visual arts.

- a) The literature part will be focused on the timeless qualities of Rostam as a universal model, a "perfect man", qualities that transcend religious and ethnic affiliations. Using *Shahnameh* and *Rostamnameh* as core sources, it will also discuss the role of a single hero in reconciling pre-Islamic and Islamic identity of a nation.
- b) The Visual arts aspect will be dealt with through an study of the Islamic elements in the illustrations of a Safavid *Shahnameh* (dated (1021AH/1612 CE) preserved in the manuscript collection of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) of the International Islamic University Malaysia. The volume is penned in fine Nasta'liq style scribed by Ibn Hassan (or Mohsin) al-Kermani. It starts with an attractive *sarlawh* in lapis lazuli and gold. The manuscript is further adorned by 29 magnificent miniature paintings in Isfahan school style.

History or Myth

Historical studies report of the existence of a tradition of historiography of the kings and dynasties in the pre-Islamic Iran. It is said that Sasanians (224-661 CE) possessed a variety of historical traditions – ranging from 'official' royal or priestly histories to more popular works on the heroic deed of great Iranians.¹ The actual documents to support such claim, except for some religious accounts from the remaining parts of the Avesta from the Sasanian period, however, are very rare.² A reason for such lack of solid secular historical evidences may be found in the nature of assessment of 'reality' by mystic Persian mindset that made it difficult, even within the literary accounts such as the *Shahnameh*, to distinguish between legendary, semi-legendary and historical elements. As a matter of fact during the period of compilation of the *Shahnameh*, the Samanids (819-999 CE) were experiencing serious crisis, which may have resulted in the lack of a proper dynastic history.

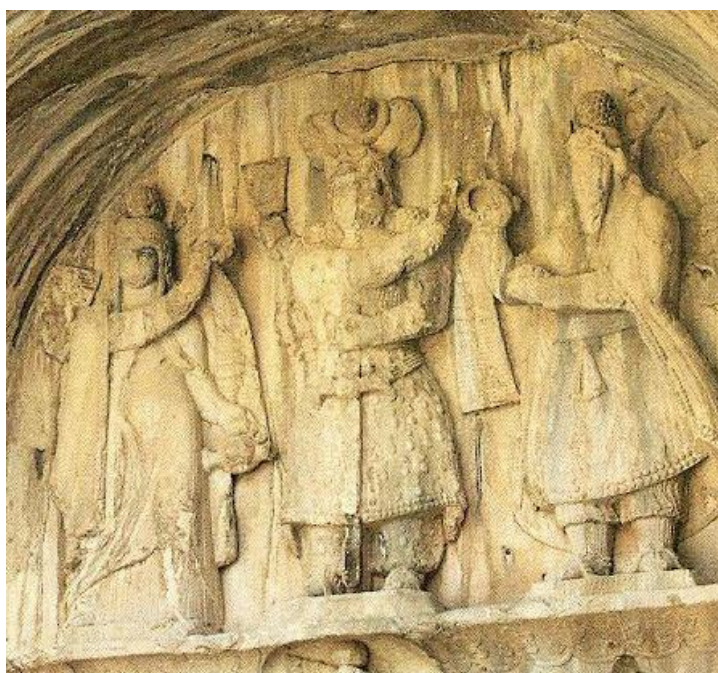
¹ For an account of sources see Julie Scott Meisami (1999), *Persian Historiography To The End Of The Twelfth Century*, Edinburgh University Press

² For an account of the Zoroastrian religious texts carrying historical data see Hosein Kariman(1997), *A research into Shahnameh* (Persian) , edited by Ali Mir Ansari, Iran National Archives Press, Tehran, pp. 15-18



In order to reach an in-depth understanding of the status of the *Shahnameh* in the Persian history and its eminence as an anchor of national pride and social identity, one is required, along with other requirements, to comprehend the mindset of the race that led to the creation of such masterpiece. Only then the true role of the epic in the process of its religious transformation will be unveiled.

It is important to note that the concept of history or historiography for that matter, for the people ancient traditions differ from the modern notion that tends to treat history like empirical ‘sciences’. In traditional cultures one cannot expect a clear-cut separation of history and myth/religion, because myths deal with archetypes, and living with archetypes (that are timeless in their essence) would help man achieve a ‘real’ experience of life within or, in Mircea Eliade’s words, “a primordial hierarchy, the revelation *in illo tempore* of the norms of existence, a disclosure by a divinity or mystical being.”³ Unlike the modern perception of time and history that regards everything as a byproduct of ‘history’, the traditional mindset evaluates history as an accident of religious reality. Hence the presence of the ‘unseen domain’ in life’s events is regarded as more significant (more real) than that of the material elements. Traces of this worldview are eminently clear in the Sasanian relief works. (See image 1)



³ *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Translated from the French (*Le Mythe de L'eternal retour: archetypes et repetition*) by Willard R. Trask, New York 1959, p. 95



Figure 1: Relief from Taq-e Bostan (Kermanshah Province, in Iran) from the era of Sasanian Empire. The figure in the middle is believed to be King Khosrow Parviz (590-628 CE) whose kingship is endorsed by the presence of two mythical/divine figures: Ahura Mazda (to the right) and the Persian Goddess Anahita (to the left).

The same perception is also reflected in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* where history and myth combine creatively to produce a 'usable' presentation of 'the pasts' – from the immemorial time of creation of the world to the introduction of the arts and formation of civilization (invention of fire, cooking, metallurgy, law, etc), all the way to the Arab conquest.⁴

Book of the Kings or Book of the Sins!

It is significant to understand that *Shahnameh* is not just a literary work, but a strong sense of history is imbedded in it. In fact the *Shahnameh* goes beyond history to the domain of philosophy of history.⁵ Monarchs, heroes and villains come and go like constant succession of sunrises and sunsets; some characters live for hundreds of years – as do some of the characters of the *Mahabharata*, the *Bible* and the *Qur'an* – while others live a normal life spans. In the mean time the book covers some 3600 years in four dynasties, the first dynasty of which is mythical, the second legendary, and those in third and fourth historical, spanning the historical events of 150 B.C.E. to 632 C.E.⁶

Ferdowsi was a devoted Muslim; he displays his deep love and respect for the Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) in a few couplets of his grand epic *Shahnameh*. However, as "The Book of the Kings" was intended to provide an account of the history of the Persian monarchs, the text is naturally tinted with the colors of pre-Islamic culture of Persia. But the mindset of some newly converted Persian Muslims did not favor such association. Still young and inexperienced in building up an Islamic heritage for Iran, many attacked *Shahnameh* on the assumption that it

⁴ See Donna Rosenberg (1997), *Folklore, Myths and Legends: A World Perspective*, NTSC Publishing Group, Chicago, p. 98-99

⁵ *Shahnameh* provides a historical account of the pre-Islamic Iran. It is also important to the contemporary adherents of Zoroastrianism, in that it traces the historical links between the beginnings of the religion with the death of the last Zoroastrian ruler of Persia during the Muslim conquest. But the work is certainly beyond a historiography as its main aim, it appears, is an idealism. In this sense the author tends to tint the entire history that he is presenting with ethical values, good and evil, and the importance of sacrifice in this sacred battle. He brings in supernatural forces and mythical creature (all existing in the folklore) to provide a sense of meaning to history from its beyond. This is philosophy of history.

⁶ Donna Rosenberg, p. 98-99



harbored Zoroastrian beliefs. The heat was spread to a level that reading *Shahnameh* came to be regarded as an act of profanity. Books were written and poems were composed to confront the *Shahnameh* wave:

The oldest account of such attacks is the *Alinameh*⁷, in which the author belittles *Shahnameh* by calling it “Mogh Nameh” (Book of the Zoroastrians), and encourages the readers not to read it and to read *Alinameh* (Book of Ali) instead:

نظر کن در آثار اشراف تو...	به شهنامه خواندن زن لاف تو
علی نامه خواندن بود فخر و فر ⁸	که مغ نامه خواندن نباشد هنر

Another poet by the name of Sheikh Hassan Kāshi (13-14 century CE) composed on the same line. In his work the *Shahnameh* is referred to as “the Book of Sins” (Gonah Nameh), which contains “False Story” (Qesseh-e Majaz):⁹

الحذر الحذر ز خواندن آن	ای پسر قصه مجاز مخوان
یاد کن زود زین گنه نامه ¹⁰	چند خوانی کتاب شهنامه

Some writers make their hostility more personal and criticize the character of the composer of *Shahnameh* from a religious (Islamic) point of view: Calling Ferdowsi a “Zoroastrian from a Zoroastrian ancestry” (مغ مغ نسب), “fire worshiper” (آتش پرست) or “alienated from Islam” (ز اسلام بیگانه), they attack both the manuscript and its author as anti-Islamic elements.¹¹

⁷ *Ali Nameh* is a poetry book composed in Mathnawi style by an anonymous poet nicknamed Rabi’ in 482 9AH/1089 CE. A facsimile edition of the manuscript was published in Tehran by Miras-i Maktoob in 2009

⁸ Ibid, folio 82a

⁹ See Rasoul Ja’farian, *Story Tellers in the History of Islam and Iran* (Qesseh Khanan Dar Tarikh-e Islam and Iran) (Persian), Dalil-e Ma Press, pp.120-121;

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ The couplets that record the personal attacks to Ferdowsi and his faith has been quoted in Mohammad Amin Riahi, *Sarcheshmeh-haye Ferdowsi Shenasi* (سرچشمه های فردوسی شناسی), Institute of Cultural Studies and Research, 1372 (Shamsi), pp. 464-465; see also *Rostamnameh*, Introduction by Sajjad Aidenlu, Miras-i Maktoob, p. xi-xii,



Ibn Hisam Khosafi¹² in his *Kavaran Nameh* while referring to the historical events of the battles fought by Imam Ali and his companions adds a mythical edge to the narrative through engaging *Shahnameh* characters (obviously pre-Islamic and in certain cases imaginary) in a battle against the Muslim fighters! For instance, Bahman, son of Isfandiar who – according to the *Shahnameh* – occupies the throne after Garshasp, emerges in *Khavaran Nameh* as the commander of the Kahavaran army. He is eventually killed by Malik al-Ashtar – one of the most loyal companions of the fourth Caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib. Imam Ali, according to the same book, is the core figure who caused the decline of Zoroastrianism in Iran and the establishment of Islamic faith instead.

The Process of Islamization

As already mentioned, the intermingling of fictional and factual events, inspired largely by religious sentiments, gave birth to a wide range of works of literature, poetry as well as prose. In the earlier examples, ‘Islamic’ and ‘Iranian’ were treated by the authors as mutually exclusive forces and, understandably, pious Muslims felt the need to attack their earlier identity (Persian Identity) in order to defend their new faith. The battle that was taking place in the battleground of literature was but a reflection of an inner conflict – an identity crisis! The constant criticism of the ‘past self’ as opposed to the ‘new self’ gradually led to a dialogue of some sort of compromise between the ‘selves’, as a result of which the creative minds of the men of pen adopted a new approach.

Hamzeh Nameh (*Hamzanama*) is among the instances where the pre and post-Islamic figures meet and reconcile. A 15th century Persian work (anonymous writer) that comprises a collection of stories, *Hamzeh Nameh* is said to have been compiled to exhibit the character of Hamza, Prophet Muhammad’s uncle, but the actual stories are far from the said intention. As a matter of fact the work is more romantic and fanciful than factual. Hamza of *Hamzeh Nameh* marries Mehrnegar, the daughter of the Sasanian Emperor Anushirvan (r. 531–579), a creative step to bring Persian nationality to a settlement or reconciliation with its Islamicity.¹³

¹² Mohammad bin Hissam al-din al-Hassan, a Persian mystic poet, lived during 8th and 9th cent. AH (14th-15th cent CE)

¹³ The reconciliation took place in various social levels: folk culture, art, literature and even the name of the historical sites. For instance, a number of historical sites and certain shrines that are known to be historically Islamic have been argued to have had pre-Islamic origins. An example is the Shrine of Bibi Shahrbanu – a Persian princess (daughter of the last Sasanian Emperor Yazdgerd III) who, according to certain sources, married Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad and the third Shi’a Imam. A nearby mountain is also named after her. However, some sources attribute the shrine to Anahita, the goddess of water and fertility in ancient Persia, claiming that the temple was renamed in Islamic times to protect it from any possible harm after the conversion of Iranians to Islam.



Rostam Nameh

Rostam Nameh (The Book of Rostam) is the first part of a two-part manuscript composed in the same style as *Shahnameh* during the Safavid period (1598–1722).¹⁴ The author is anonymous. Rostam, the great hero of *Shahnameh*, as indicated in title of the manuscript, is the central figure who converts to Islam in a fantastic confrontation with Ali ibn Abi Talib – yet another creative attempt to blend history, myth and faith with the intention of sustaining the Iranian national/cultural identity within the Islamic worldview and religiosity. Apparently the book was based on a widespread oral tradition, as written traditions often do. In fact the author of *Rostam Nameh* claims to have heard the anecdote in the Shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf (Iraq):¹⁵

به پابوس سلطان تخت نجف	مشرف چو گشتم ز راه شرف
سرم بود بر قبه مهر و ماه	در آن بارگاه فلک اشتباه
حدیثی شنیدم من ای پاک کیش ¹⁶	به گفتار اجداد و آبای خویش

King Solomon and King Khosrow

The event takes place in a ‘time’ when the Zoroastrian King Kai Khosrow¹⁷ and Prophet Sulayman (King Solomon, c. 1011 - 931 BC) were contemporary. According to the story, Prophet Solomon, has under his command people, animals, fairies and demons. This theme has its reference both in the Islamic sources and in the *Shahnameh*; due to its rich visual content the theme has many interested many artists. (See Figure 2)

See Mary Boyce, Bibi Shahrbanu and the Lady of Pars in the Bulletin of the School of Oriental & African Studies, vol. 30, No. 1, 1967; Mehrdad Bahar (1367 A.H. Shamsi), *A Study of Persian Mythology*, pp. 446-447

¹⁴ Sajjad Aydenloo has compiled a volume under *Rasa'il No. 5, Rustam Namah*, published by Miras-i Maktub, Tehran, 2009.

¹⁵ The language used raises a certain degree of ambiguity as to whether the author has actually heard the tale from someone heard or that the story came to him in a dream.

¹⁶ *Rostam Nameh*, couplets 97-99

¹⁷ Kai Khosrow is among the ancient kings of Persia during Kayanian Dynasty. He was known as the righteous king, who is also praised in the Avesta. In a battle between Iran and Turan, Rostam kills his opponent Afrasiab, as a result of which Kai Khosrow occupies the throne and reigns over Iran for about 60 years.



Figure 2: King Solomon on the throne, Page from a *Shahnameh* manuscript, late 16 century, British library

The prophet is portrayed in typical Safavid attire sitting on a hexagonal throne. The flame-shaped golden halo around his head is indicative of his venerated status. He is surrounded by all sorts of creature: The golden sky on the top of the painting is field with a wide variety of birds – real and mythical alike – including the famous Simorgh. On the next level (beneath the sky) the mountains are depicted. As the most elevated earthly platforms they symbolize the intermediary realm between heaven and earth. The eminence of this stage is stressed upon by the presence of a pair of winged angels (on the left). The two angles, which represent the good, are balanced with two demonic creatures that symbolize evil on the opposite side of the painting (on the right, at a slightly lower level). Then comes the human level with four people (including King Solomon) followed by the animal domain that occupies almost the entire lower part of the painting.



As God's messenger and instrument of divine will, he sends out envoys to various rulers around the world, among them King Kai Khosrow, encouraging them to renounce religious traditions of their ancestors, demolish idol worshiping temples, and to embrace *tawhid* instead.¹⁸

The Iranian court's reading of the message was that of a threat to country's sovereignty. Hence an army of heroes, under the command of Rostam, is sent to Jerusalem where Solomon is based.¹⁹

Solomon is informed about Rostam's preparation to attack, but assures his army that this is an auspicious event. He speaks high of Rostam and predicts that "in this very journey he will

¹⁸ See *Rostam Nameh*, couplets 108-112

¹⁹ Ibid, couplets 113-129



become a man of faith and shall give up Zoroastrianism". He then asks the army to adorn the court and prepare to receive the "world class hero".²⁰ Rostam is invited to the court, but upon his arrival he finds that all the high seats are taken by row fierce demons. Furious by such disrespect he commands the chief demon to vacate the seat immediately, calling his kind unworthy of occupying high seats and claiming that the best seats in all gatherings belong to him. This rages the demon beyond measure and a fight blasts. The battle does not last long as, in an eye's blink, Rostam knocks the demon down with only one blow. Everyone present is astounded; this includes Prophet Sulayman who whispers to his minister Asif²¹ that the hero's might has divine origins:

سلیمان ز رستم تعجب بماند جهان آفرین را نهانی بخواند
به آصف نگه کرد کای نامدار بود قوت رستم از کردگار²²

Rostam and Ali: The First Encounter

Rostam stays in the court, has a chat with the prophet, joins the feast and returns to his companions where he informs them about his plan. The next day, early morning, the Persian army is ready. Rostam puts on his armour, rides his mount Rakhsh²³ and commands his army in an attack at Sulayman's camp, aiming at seizing his crown and throne, and taking the prophet with his hands tied to court of Persian King Kai Khosrow's.²⁴ However, the marching army is unexpectedly stopped by a warrior whose horse moved "as swift as the wind". The warrior warns Rostam, in a commanding tone, to change course immediately, otherwise harm may come onto him:

بزد نعره کای رستم نامدار ندیده نبرد دلیران کار

²⁰ See *Rostam Nameh*, couplets 130-134

²¹ Asif bin Barkhiya was the vizier of Prophet Sulayman. According to Muhammad Baqir al Majlisi (*Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 26, p.170) Allah had revealed only one of His Great Names to 'Asif bin Barkhiya who, with the power imbedded in that Name, was able to bring the throne of Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, from her capital to Jerusalem within a wink of an eye

²² *Rostam Nameh*, couplets 183-184

²³ The Persian word Rakhsh means luminous. It is the name of the stallion of Rostam. It is described by Rostam as:

*"Its body is a wonder to behold,
Like saffron petals, mottled red and gold;
Brave as a lion, a camel for its height,
An elephant in massive strength and might."*

²⁴ *Rostam Nameh*, couplets 191-205



بگردان ازین ره تمنای خویش مبادا که آید گزندت به پیش²⁵

... for “Sulayman is not like Afrasiab” and capturing his land “is nothing compared to Turan and China” (whom apparently Rostam had a victorious experience with), nor are the warriors of Sulayman’s army as [vulnerable as] “Akwan, Ashkboos and Kavoos” – renowned personalities in the *Shahnameh*:

نباشد سلیمان چو افراسیاب	که بنیاد او را رسانی به خاک
نه اکوان دیو است و نه اشکبوس	نه مانند ایران و کاووس و طوس
نه این سرزمین است توران و چین	که رستم نماید به این ها کمین
به دل آن خیالی که داری به سر	برون ساز ای رستم نامور
که این ملک جای سلیمان بود	نه مانند ایران و توران بود ²⁶

Upon hearing such words, issued from a state of solid authority, Rostam experienced his very first trembles of fear! Being a veteran warrior he pulls himself together and politely asks his opponent to identify himself. The horseman introduces himself as Zaygham (one of Ali’s titles) - a brother to Prophet Sulayman!

Symbolism of Light and Veil

The dialogue between the two grand warriors is carried to a symbolic/mystic level as each of them represent an epoch and a worldview: Rostam bears all the highest morals, spiritual and even physical human qualities representing Iranian nationality and race on the one hand and Zoroastrianism on the other. His opponent, Imam Ali, belongs to a later epoch and is representative of Islam. He appears wearing a veil over his face while speaking to Rostam. Rostam asks about the significance of the veil. Ali’s response is symbolic and mystic. He explains that Rostam’s heart is veiled and cannot stand the dazzling light of sun of truth (referring to Islam that is manifested in him); that his heart has darkened due to his association with ‘Din-e Majus’ (Zoroastrian religion). “That your darkened sun will regain its light only when you move away from fire worshipping. Only then I will remove my veil and you shall embrace salvation in this life and The Hereafter”:

²⁵ *Rostam Nameh*, couplets 214-215

²⁶ *Rostam Nameh*, couplets 216-220



گرفته است اختر رخ آفتاب	که از ما تو در دل چه داری نقاب
به تو مهر خورشید مایل شود	سیاهی ز قلبت چه زایل شود
به مردانگی ز اهل ایمان شوی	ز دین مجوسی پشیمان شوی
ز آتش پرستی شوی چون تو دور	مبدل شود مهر تارت به نور
به دنیا و عقبی شوی کامیاب ²⁷	پس آن گه ز چهره بر آرم نقاب

Battle of Ali and Rostam:

The verbal attack of Ali on Rostam's faith came heavy on the Iranian hero. The flames of his rage rose even higher when Ali questioned his fighting skills and advised that: "first you need to learn fighting skills from me":

بیا اول از من بیاموز جنگ پس آن گه بکن عزم جنگ پلنگ²⁸

The two combatants eventually engage into a man to man battle. Rostam initiates the fight using his long lance, but to no avail; for Ali grabs tight on the tip of the pole with his mighty fist pulling it to one side, and as a result, separating the massive body of the lancer from his mount, and tossing him to one side.

The infuriated Rostam makes his second move using his famous "bull-head mace, a memorial from Sam²⁹ and Nariman³⁰" (Figure 3); but Ali snatches the heavy club effortlessly and smashes it so hard that the mace disappears in the ground:

که گردید رنجه سر شست او	ربود آن چنان نیزه از دست او
بغرید رستم به مانند شیر	به یک سمت صحرا فکنده امیر
ز سام و نریمان بدش یادگار	ز قرپوس زین گرزه گاوسار
که کوبد به مغز سر شیر نر	کشید از غضب برد بالای سر

²⁷ Rostam Nameh, couplets 231-237

²⁸ Rostam Nameh, couplet 230

²⁹ Sam is Rostam's grandfather in the *Shahnameh*

³⁰ Nariman is Sam's father and Rostam's great grandfather



گرفت از کفش گرز سالار دین نجنید و زد گرز را بر زمین
که پنهان شد از ضرب دستش به خاک به وی آفرین خواند یزدان پاک³¹

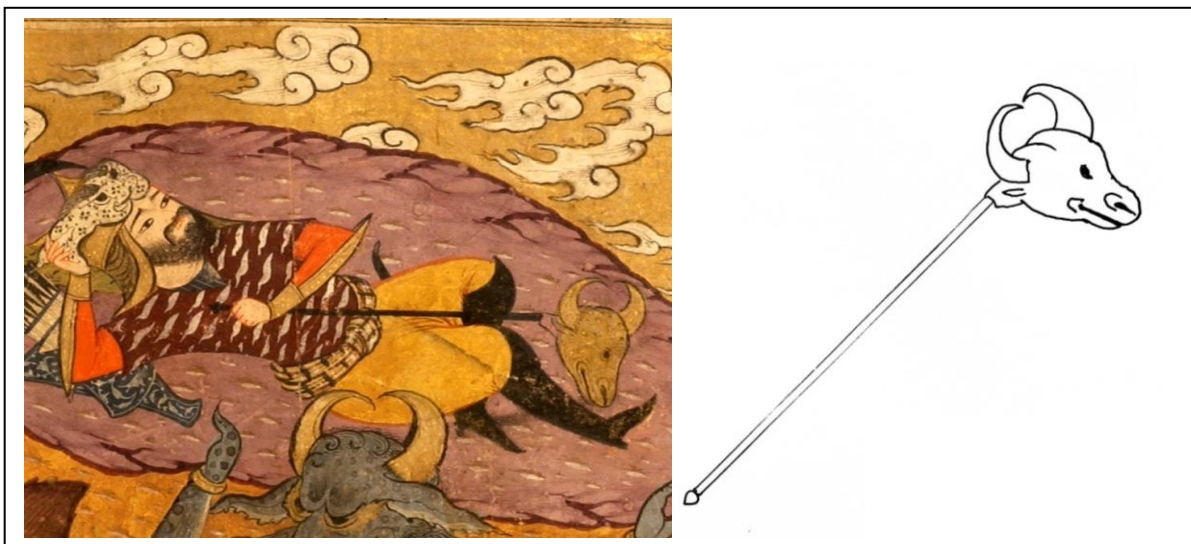


Figure 3: Rostam with his "bull-head mace" (line drawing of the mace on the right) a family inherited weapon, the famous bull-head mace, over the head of Akvan the Demon; Detail of a page from *Shahnameh*, ISTAC MSS collection, International Islamic University Malaysia

"The sun of your life is about to sink in the darkness of night: O' Arab", shouts the frustrated Persian warrior.³² "Wait until you have a taste of Rostam's sword ... I shall split you in half like a cucumber":

³¹ *Rostam Nameh*, couplet 247-252

³² It is important here to know about a historical conflict that may be known as "the Arab-Ajam dichotomy": The expression "Arab" in certain contexts carries similar negative socio-cultural values as "Ajam" – a demeaning expression used by Arabs to address Persians. The Arabic word *Ajam* (عجم) literally means "one who is illiterate in language", "silent", or "mute". The word was used as a racist, derogatory term by Arabs towards migrated Persians. (The term has also been used in the contemporary political arena as propaganda against Iran by some Arab countries encouraging conflict with Iran.) The roots of this dichotomy may be found in the close association of Islam and the Arabic language, which, at certain social levels, led to a widespread arrogance among some, to regard their native Arabic language as a clear confirmation of their superior Islamicity. (Traces of the same mindset are also observed among Muslims of non-Arab origins. South-east Asian Muslims, for example, generally favor to trace their genealogy to Arabs, while being a Muslim from an Indian ancestry may not be as favorable.) Persians, on the other hand, were always proud of their rich ancient and refined culture. The humiliating expression "Ajam" led to a



خروشید و جوشید و گفت ای عرب رسیده است خورشید عمرت به شب
کنون ضرب شمشیر رستم بین به فرقت ز من تا رسد پشت زین
دو پاره نمایم تو را چون خیار که ماند ز من در زمین یادگار³³

This time too, skills of the Persian hero with the sword do not get him anywhere. He has not yet realized that Ali is not merely ‘another hero’ from a different land; that he is relying on the endless divine might in his fight. The round with bow and arrow also leaves Rostam in vain.

Up to this stage all the military hardware has been exhausted by both heroes, yet the battle does not have a confirmed victor. The encounter reaches its final phase where the combatants have to engage in a grapple to test their physical might. Rostam, who has never lost a fight in his entire life, goes for Ali’s waist, grabbing his belt and making an effort to raise his opponent over his head and smash into extermination – a technique that has brought him victory in a number of battles. But this rival seemed exceptional! Rostam could not even move ‘the lion of God’³⁴ for an inch! “It feels like moving a mountain from its base”, whispered Rostam to himself. The pressure was unbearable and made Rostam bleed from his nose and arm. He looked gloomy and infuriated. It was now Ali’s turn:

“The Arab Amir (Ali), that enemy hunting lion,
The dignity of grace, mystery of the Omnipotence
Laughed at Rostam and said: O’ Zaboli³⁵:
Compare your strength with that of Ali”³⁶

امیر عرب، شیر دشمن شکار مکان کرم سر پروردگار

similar reaction from the Persian side. In such a context the term “Arab” was used to express inferior qualities such as primitiveness or lack of refined cultural manners.

³³ *Rostam Nameh*, couplets 254-256

³⁴ The Arabic “Asadullah” and the synonymous Persian version “Sheer-e Khoda” meaning “Lion of God” are among famous nicknames of Ali ibn Abi-Talib. Lion represents courage and Ali’s courageous performances in the many battles he fought for Islam brought him this honorary title.

³⁵ Zaboli, a resident/citizen of Zabol; Zabol is believed to be the birth place of Rostam in Sistan and Baluchistan Province in Iran.

³⁶ *Rostam Nameh*, couplets 273-274



بخندید و گفتا که: ای زابلی بین قوت خویش و زور علی

Rostam Receives Advice from Angels

Having said this Imam Ali, reaches out and grabs Rostam's waist, shooting him up deep into the sky where he could no longer be seen! This is when moment the attempt to Islamize the Persian hero takes yet another interesting turn. Having been thrown up high in the sky Rostam himself explicates:

I heard angles making *zikr* at the highest heaven,... earth and moon darkened in front of my eyes,... hanging in the sky I lost hope and felt my soul was about to leave my body,... then I heard someone talking to me; the voice said: Oh great hero! Shall you desire liberty from this frustration and attain salvation then make your intentions pure say 'Ya Ali' while descending to earth.

که در ذکر بودند فوق فلک	شنیدم ز بالا خروش ملک
جهان در جهان پیش من خیره شد	زمین و زمان پیش من تیره شد
میان هوا زار و نالان شدم	بشستم زجان دست و بی جان شدم
چه خواهی ازین غم شوی رستگار	که دیدم یکی گفت ای نامدار
ز روی ادب، نی ز روی فریب!	ز بالا نمایی چه عزم نشیب
بگو "یا علی" تا شوی رستگار ³⁷	رسی چون به نزدیک آن شهسوار

Rostam Converts to Islam

The Persian warrior is now in the process of transformation. He follows the instructions of the angel and, in a critical moment, when he is about to hit the ground asks Ali for forgiveness and salvation:

که رسم بزرگان نباشد چنین	به چرخم رساندی مزن بر زمین
مروت بود شیوه بوالحسن	... چه برداشتی بر زمینم مزن
امان یا علی، الامان الامان ³⁸	منم رستم، ای پهلوان جهان

³⁷ Rostam Nameh, couplets 278-283

³⁸ Rostam Nameh, couplets 291-294



You exalted me to the height of heavens; so don't humiliate me after reaching such height; for this is not the manner of the noble ones... Generosity is known to be the style of Bul-Hassan: Have mercy O' universal hero, O' Ali, have mercy – have mercy

The words taught by the angels prove their magical effect: Ali ibn Abi Talib grabs the falling warrior in a swift move, saves his life and treats him with grace. Tahamtan (Rostam) bends with extreme respect and humility, and kisses the feet of his savior. The Imam then commands Rostam: "Embrace 'the *Din*' so that you may be liberated."³⁹ And with this, "the chief commander of Iranian army was given a new life. He gave up the path of '*Kufr*' and embraced '*Iman*' instead. He then learned about the rituals and foundations of the Religion, and turned into a devotee of *Sayyed al-Mursalin*⁴⁰." ⁴¹ "With the transformation of the son of *Zal*⁴² ... fire became dark, and light gained brilliancy"⁴³

ولیّ خدا گفت ای نامدار	به دین اندرآ تا شوی رستگار
سپهدار ایران ز نو جان گرفت	ره کفر بگذاشت ایمان گرفت
بیالید نور و بکاهید نار	چه شد رستم از دوستان کبار
چه شد پور زال از ره کفر دور	سیه گشت نار و ضیا یافت نور ⁴⁴

The converted Rostam is to redirect his might and high moral qualities in bringing his people (Persians) into the new faith. To pursue this Imam Ali sends the hero to the court of Prophet Sulayman. The prophet receives the Persian hero with kindness and respect, spends some time speaking with him and eventually sends the hero back to his homeland, to Kai Khosrow's court on a mission to convert Persians to Islam.

Islamization of Shahnameh

As stated in the introduction Ferdowsi (940 – 1020 CE), a devoted Muslim, expresses his deep conviction towards the Prophet of Islam, the Four Righteous Caliphs, the companions (*Sahabah*)

³⁹ *Rostam Nameh*, couplets 298

⁴⁰ سید المرسلین: 'chief of all prophets', title of Prophet Mohammad

⁴¹ *Rostam Nameh*, couplets 299-300

⁴² Zal is the name of Rostam's father in Shahnameh

⁴³ *Rostam Nameh*, couplet 302

⁴⁴ *Rostam Nameh*, couplet 298-302



and the household of the Messenger (*Ahl al-Bayt*) in his *Shahnameh* under a distinct section entitled “In the Praise of the Messenger of God”.⁴⁵ In spite of this, the epic received sharp criticism on the assumption that it harbored Zoroastrian beliefs. This was mainly due to the subject matter of *Shahnameh*, which revolves mostly around the pre-Islamic themes and the praise of certain figure such as Rostam. The controversy reached an extent that promoting *Shahnameh*, at a point in time, came to be regarded as an act of blasphemy. Yet, in the course of time, men of art and literature kept the spirit of the *Shahnameh* alive. The monarchs and patrons commissioned numerous copies of *Shahnameh*, and calligraphers, illuminators, painters did their share in promoting the epic. The efforts have brought to us rich collections of the manuscript that are preserved in museums and private collections the world over. Though the text contents of all the *Shahnameh* copies are about the same, the creativity of the artisans who produced them brought to each copy a fresh dimension. Stage settings, costumes, architectural forms and decorations, gestures, postures, sceneries, armors, weaponry and other pictorial elements help the reader to connect to the theme of the epic, while the variety of presentations reflect the traditions, manners and aesthetic values of the patrons and societies in which they were produced. In other words the works have a ‘contemporary quality’ in them; this quality helps the audience make a dual connection to the *Shahnameh* in hand: connecting to the timeframe of the epic (pre-Islamic/mythological) on the one hand, and relating to the contemporary ambiance of the time of its production on the other.

Interestingly, these ‘contemporary qualities’ have also served as facilitators in the process of Islamization of the epic. When the spectators view the warriors, kings and ordinary characters of the *Shahnameh* appearing in recognizable Muslim outfits, surrounded by Islamic architectural forms and decorations he/she connects to the epic at a deeper, more personal and intimate levels. A study of such elements can bring *Shahnameh* studies to a new stage.

Tracing Islamic Elements in the Kermani Shahnameh (ISTAC)

The Manuscript collection of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)⁴⁶, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia is host to a valuable manuscript of *Shahnameh* dated 1021 AH. This beautiful volume is penned in excellent Nasta’liq style. It starts with an attractive *sarlawh* in lapis lazuli and gold, a typical opening decoration used in Qur’ans and other religious manuscripts. (Figure 4)

⁴⁵ *Shahnameh*, Book 1, Chapter 7, couplets 4-10

⁴⁶ ISTAC is a postgraduate institute of the International Islamic University Malaysia



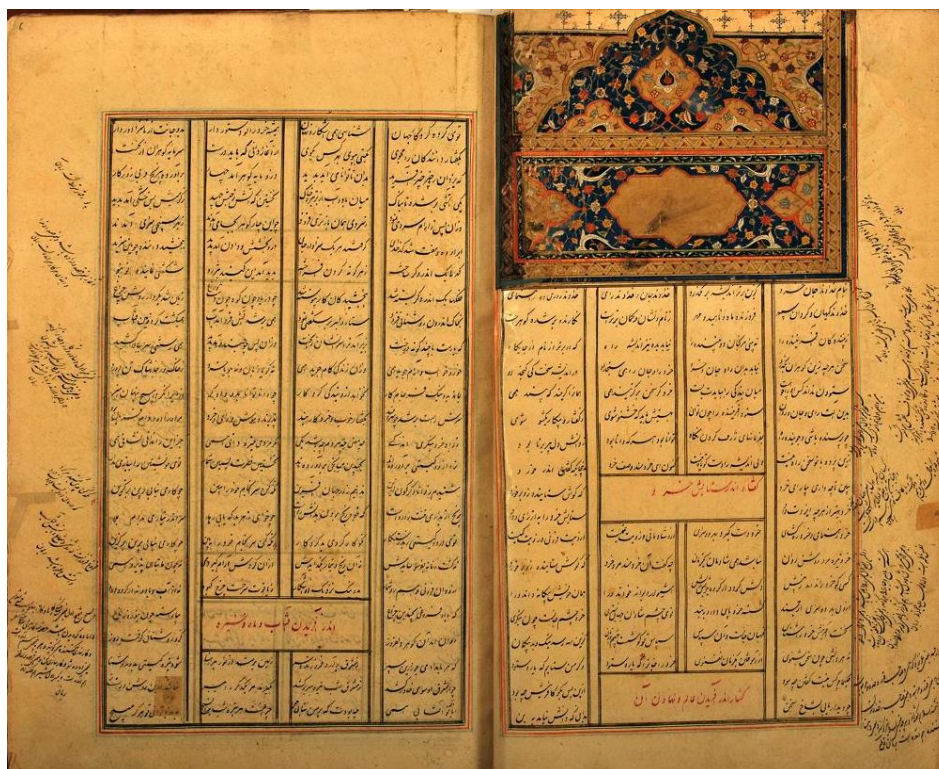


Figure 4: The Sarlowh of the Kermani Shahnameh (Named after its calligrapher),
Courtesy of ISTAC Library

The manuscript is adorned by 29 magnificent miniature paintings in Isfahan school style.⁴⁷ Indeed a dominating feature that brings an overall Islamic identity to all the *Shahnameh* manuscripts is the script. Iranians adopted Arabic alphabet after accepting Islam as their religion. In fact the contribution of the Iranians to the development of Islamic calligraphy is more significant than any other Muslim nation.⁴⁸ The majority of the *Shahnameh* manuscripts are penned in Nasta'liq – a distinctive style invented and used mainly by Iranians. Beside the script, all other visual elements speak in a culturally “Islamic” language. (See figure 5)

⁴⁷ For an elaborate introduction of the said manuscript see: Amir H. Zekrgoo, ‘An Illustrated Safavid Shahnameh from the Collection of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization’ in Congress of Isfahan School: The Collection of Essays on Painting, Iran Academy of Art Publishing, 1385 AH (Shamsi)/2005, pp. 417-428

⁴⁸ The credit of establishment of the rules for ‘the six styles of cursive writing’ (including Naskh style, that most of the Qur’ans up to the present day are written in that script goes to Ibn Muqla. Ibn Muqlah (died 939) was a native of Shiraz (Iran) and a minister to four Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad.





Figure 5: King Kai Khosro offers the imperial treasures to Rostam; Detail of a page from *Shahnameh*, ISTAC MSS collection.

The architectural forms and decorations are clearly Islamic (Safavid to be precise). The blue dome on the upper right, the stylized curved brackets at either side of the main stage, the floral designs and arabesques all create an interior that is associated with the Muslim style of life. Even the carpet design, the throne, and the attire worn by the characters (long robes, vest, and waist-shawls) have their root in the 16th-17th century Muslim tradition. The rectangular opening at the center leads to a flower garden with a tall cypress tree that extends out of the picture frame into the text area and outside it into the upper margin. Cypress is among ancient Iranian symbols associated with righteousness, pride and longevity. In the Islamic period it continued to present the same qualities and was designated as a symbol for tree of life.

Another remarkable feature is the 'flags and finials'. They are among popular elements, especially with the battle scenes. Quite a number of the flags depicted in the paintings of this *Shahnameh* have a finial on the top with the name Allah engraved on them! Having in mind that



all of the events of *Shahnameh* take place in a pre-Islamic time frame, the presence of this “purely Islamic symbol” is both interesting and thought provoking. (Figures 6, 7 & 8)



Figure 6: Detail of image from folio 149-b, *Shahnameh*, ISTAC MSS collection. The red flag is adorned with floral motifs and a golden panjeh finial with the name “Allah” engraved on it. A line drawing of the flag is provided on the right



Figure 7: Detail of folio 157-a, *Shahnameh*, ISTAC MSS collection. The red flag is adorned with floral motifs and a golden finial with the name “Allah” engraved on it. A line drawing of the flag is provided on the right





Figure 8: Detail of folio 157-a, *Shahnameh*, ISTAC MSS collection. The red flag is adorned with floral motifs and a golden finial with the name “Allah” engraved on it. A line drawing of the flag is provided on the right

Presenting an elaborate account of the visual elements of this *Shahnameh* is beyond the scope of this study. The author has been studying the said manuscript for the past few years and has presented several talks and papers on the subject. He has been working on a bilingual coffee table book (English and Persian) with images, drawings, tables and charts; with chapters that would cover various aspects of the work with symbolic elements, vegetation, clothing, weaponry, architectural forms, etc. Over seventy percent of the work is completed. It would be a comprehensive work that would set outlines for multidimensional studies on illustrated manuscripts in general, and on *Shahnameh* in particular. It is hoped with the grace of God the necessary support (funds and technical) will be made available so that the book will see the light of publication soon.

