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## The Hero Rostam in Persian and Central Asian Art

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This lecture will explore aspects of the life of the Persian (Iranian) national hero, *Rostam*, and his creator, the poet *Ferdowsi*, as both larger than life characters come to us in the great literary masterpiece, *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings). In doing so, Ferdowsi revived and immortalized the Persian language and culture. For the Iranians, *Shahnameh's* Epic Poem (comprised of about 60,000 couplets) is their source of national identity and pride of their resilient culture and civilization, and *Rostam* is the heart of their identity.

*Shahnameh* and *Rostam* are also the joy of every Persian speaking nation (Afghanistan, Tajikistan), as well as non-Persian speaking countries surrounding Iran (Central Asian Countries, India, Pakistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Iraq, UAE). *Shahnameh* is still read widely by these countries, and has been translated into many languages. Various manuscripts of *Shahnameh* are scattered all over the world, in museums of many countries, and those held by collectors. The largest collection belongs to Iran. The representation of *Shahnameh* stories and of *Rostam* has been pictorially preserved in various artifacts and architecture, such as the wall paintings of Panjikent, in Tajikistan, as well as a great number of illuminated manuscripts that exist, dating to different eras, from the Iranian world and beyond. *Rostam* is also represented in the contemporary arts and films in both EU and US, among others.

### Dates:

***Ferdowsi* (940-1019 or 1025 AD)**

***Shahnameh* Completion (1010 AD)**

***Shahnameh Epithet*: "Palace of Poems", "Poetic Edifice", Monument of Poems".**

**House of *Rostam*, his forefathers, and his son:** Sistan, Dastan, Nariman, Saam, Zaal, Rostam, Sohrab, Shaghad.

***Rostam* meaning:** "Having the Strength of a River".

***Rostam* Epithets:** Rostam-e Dastan, Rostam-e Namdar, Gord-e Zoboli, Yal-e Sistan, Tahamtan, Piltan, Jahan Pahlavan, among many others.

***Ferdowsi on Rostam*:** Ke Rostam yali bud dar Sistan      که رستم یلی بود از سیستان  
Manash kardami Rostam-e Daastan      منش کردمی رستم داستان"  
(So Rostam was a hero in Sistan, I made him the Rostam of Story)

***Oldest Shahnameh at the National Library of Florence, Italy***

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2xvy1s>

**ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS HISTORY** <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00210862.2015.1023063>  
*Iranian Studies*, Vol. 48, 2015 - Issue 3: THE SHAHNAMEH OF FERDOWSI AS WORLD LITERATURE

Indeed, the impediment to a wider embrace of the *Shahnameh* in the canon of world literature was not due solely to the dismissive attitude of critics who found it wanting in comparison to Greek and Roman classics, or who found epic as a genre inferior to other kinds of Persian poetry. At least in English, the lack of an accessible, accurate and aesthetically compelling translation may have been the largest barrier to appreciation of the poem; after all, the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam in FitzGerald's translation, as well as the Arabian Nights (*Alf Layla wa Layla*) in various translations, had both become quite central to the English canon by the later nineteenth century. In English, a partial translation of the *Shahnameh* appeared already in the eighteenth century (Champion, 1785), with many others following in the first half of the nineteenth century (Atkinson, 1814; Weston, 1815; Robinson, 1819; Robertson, 1829; Costello, 1845), all before Matthew Arnold's version of the Rostam and Sohrāb episode brought Ferdowsi to

the general attention of the Anglophone poetry-reading public. These translations, as well as the later adaptation by Helen Zimmern, and the full verse translation by the brothers Arthur George and Edmond Warner, failed to a greater or lesser degree in bringing Ferdowsi to life in English, whether because they did not fully understand and appreciate Ferdowsi's aesthetics, or were not fully capable of vivifying the English, or because the negative comparisons to Homer had already poisoned the well. These translations, based on newer and more rigorous text critical editions of the original Persian text, have laid the groundwork for a new appreciation and critical engagement with Ferdowsi's epic, as it enters its second millennium. Meanwhile, though the tradition of comparison with Homer or other epics remains strong, Mahmoud Omidsalar has launched a salvo across its bow, arguing that the literary-scholarly tradition of presumptively measuring the *Shahnameh* by the aesthetics of Homer, or the assumptions of medieval European romances, smacks of Eurocentrism and Orientalism. Meanwhile, recent developments in theory grounded in a European perspective have tended to reconfigure world literature as global literature, or as translation studies, reworking some of its earlier premises.

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