

Article

IRANIAN IDENTITY IN SHAHNAME

Abolfazl Khatibi

Abstract: This study explores how Ferdowsi's epic Shahnameh has served as the enduring embodiment of Iranian national identity, tracing the origins of this identity to ancient Persian myths and historical accounts. Based on a particular rendition of the Xhwadāy-Nāmag text, the Shahnameh played an instrumental role in safeguarding Iranian culture and stoking national pride during epochs marked by political turmoil and cultural subjugation. Ferdowsi's masterpiece preserves Iranian identity through depicting political unity under Iranian rulers across time; geographical unity centered on the conception of Iranshahr as the dominion, despite changing borders; and historical unity through a consistent, conflict-free narrative distinct from other sources. The research underscores the resilience of this Iranian cultural identity that not only persisted but thrived within literary, artistic and folk traditions, awaiting the eventual restoration of political sovereignty under the Safavid dynasty.

Keywords: Shahname, Iranian national epic, Iranian national identity, Ferdowsi

The Iranian identity is deeply rooted in the myths crafted and perpetuated by our ancestors thousands of years ago. Epic tales of ideal Iranian kings and heroes, such as Kaykhosrow, Geršāsp, Arash, and Rostam, have served as potent intellectual and spiritual pillars, bolstering national cohesion throughout Iranian history. From the dawn of history to the present day, despite enduring repeated invasions and periods of foreign domination following the fall of royal dynasties, Iranians have never forgotten their identity. Even in the direst circumstances, when everything seemed destroyed, the visible and invisible bonds of national identity bound them so tightly that they could rise like a phoenix from the ashes.

The Shahnameh is an exceptionally rich source of shared Iranian heritage, illustrating the continuity of Iranian identity from the realm of myths and epics to the reign of the last Sassanid ruler. Ferdowsi played an indispensable role in reviving the Persian language, a pillar of national identity. The Shahnameh's content contains features that have preserved the national identity of Iranians. Among these features are political, geographical, and historical unity:

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Political Unity: Throughout the Shahnameh, there is no period without an Iranian ruler. Even a foreign ruler like Alexander is included in the narrative and granted an Iranian identity.

Geographical Unity: From the beginning of the Shahnameh until the era of Fereydun, Iranian rulers are depicted as reigning over the entire world. From Iraj onwards, they rule over Iranshahr, which remains the focal point of events until the Shahnameh's conclusion, although the borders of Iranshahr changed during historical periods; for example, at one time Armenia was part of Iran's territory, and at another time it was not.

Historical Unity: Unlike other Persian and Arabic sources on Iranian history, the Shahnameh offers a consistent narrative, free from conflicting accounts of single events.

These features are not unique to the Shahnameh but were also present in a Pahlavi book called Xwadāy-Nāmag, the official history of the Sassanid era compiled during the reign of Khosrow Anushiravan.¹ This book was translated into Arabic and Persian from the second century AH (8th century CE) onwards, and precious epic poems were formed based on its prose renditions. Ferdowsi built his lofty edifice poetic opus on the foundation of one of these Persian renditions of the Xwadāy-Nāmag, namely the Abu Mansouri Shāhnāme, composed in 346 AH (957 CE).

In the historical era depicted in the Shahnameh, the unity of Iranian thought in political and religious terms is evident in three distinct periods and continues throughout the Sassanid era.

The First Period pertains to the era of Dara of Daras (Dārāi ī Dārāyān), the last Kayanian king in national history, which evokes the memory of Darius III, the final Achaemenid ruler. Certain events related to Darius III's reign are reflected in the era of this Kayanian king. This period in the Xwadāy-Nāmag represents the confluence of two principal concepts of ancient Iranian thought: one political, centered on Iranshahr, and the other religious, encompassing the entire realm. The compilers of the Xwadāy-Nāmag embodied the politically and religiously unified Iran of the Achaemenid era within the period of Dara. According to the Dēnkart (bk. 4, 316, 10-12) and Ardā Wīrāz-Nāmag (Chapter 1, Section 1), Dara possessed two copies of all the Avestan texts, one kept in the royal treasury and the other in the deznebeht (diz [ī] nibišt). However, Alexander burned and destroyed them. Thus, Alexander not only shattered the political unity of Iranshahr during Dara's time but also its religious unity. Following Alexander's conquests, the territory of Iranshahr lost its centrality and was divided into provinces with multiple kings, resulting in rulers from Alexander's era until Ardashir I of the Sassanids being called "Mulūk Al-Ṭawā'if" ("petty kings" of the various provinces). The Avesta, symbolizing the religious unity of that era, also became dispersed.

¹ Regarding the Xwadāy-Nāmag and its sources, see. Shahbazi 1990.

The Second Period marks the reign of Ardashir Papakan, who, according to *Tarikh Tabari* (1879-1901 Vol. 1, 814; Nöldeke 1999, 34), rose to avenge his cousin Dara and, as reported in the *Kārnāmāgī Ardashīrī Pāpakān* (Section 1, Clauses 20-1, Also, *Name-ye Tansar* 1975, 56; Kellens, 1989), unified the entire Iranshahr under a single royal system. He also instructed Tansar or Tosar, the high priest of his era, to collect and organize the scattered Avestan texts from the Parthian period. Pahlavi texts describe the re-establishment of political and religious unity during the Sassanid era with expressions such as “the reestablishment of Iranshahr” (abāzārāyīh ī Ērānšahr) and “the return to a monarchy” (Abāz ō ewxwadāyīh). However, a contentious issue arises from the fact that in the *Shahnameh* and *Xwadāy-Nāmag*, apart from a vague memory of Darius III of the Achaemenids reflected in the Kayanian Dara, there is no mention of the Median and Achaemenid kings. This absence has puzzled researchers of national history, leading to questions about whether the Sassanids were unaware of the Achaemenid kings despite originating from the same province that had been the homeland and capital of the Achaemenids for years. Initially, the hypothesis was put forward that the reason for the absence of the Median and Persian kings in national history was that during the Parthian era, the stories related to the southern and western regions of Iran were gradually replaced by tales and narratives originally belonging to the Avestan people². The influence and infiltration of Zoroastrian religious circles in the compilation of the *Khwadāy-Nāmag* caused the Sassanids to remain unaware of the Achaemenids. The influence of Zoroastrian religious circles in the compilation of the *Khwadāy-Nāmag* likely contributed to the Sassanids’ apparent ignorance of the Achaemenids. Although the impact of Zoroastrian circles in omitting Achaemenid history from national history cannot be overlooked, some Iranologists have provided evidence suggesting that, contrary to official Sassanid history, the Sassanids were not unaware of the Achaemenids.³ Evidence supporting this view includes several key points:

- In the Cologne Mani Codex, there is a fragment where Mani refers to Ardashir I as “Dara Ardashir,”⁴ a compound name that serves as evidence of the Sassanids’ conscious effort to link themselves to the Achaemenid royal dynasty.

² By the term “Avestan people” here, it refers both to Zoroaster’s own tribe along with his patron, Kay Goshasp, as well as the peoples inhabiting eastern Iran who, although their languages were not all Avestan, had a connection to the Avesta in the sense that they participated in the transmission and composition of portions of the sacred texts (Boyce 1989, 62)

³ More recently, Shahbazi and then Daryaei have presented numerous evidences regarding this. (Shahbazi 2001; Daryaei 2002) For some evidences: Daryaei 2002, 3; Herodian 1968, 4.22; *Tarikh al-Tabari*, [Vol 1], 814; also Nöldeke noted that “Ardashir aimed with his own bow to return the dominion to its people and to place it, as in the time of his forefathers before the Mulūk Al-Tawā’if, under the rule of a single chief and a single king of kings” (1999, 34); also, *Nameh-ye Tansar* 1975, 48-49; *Tarikh al-Sani Muluk al-Ard wa al-Anbiya’* 1922, 32-33

⁴ This name (Dariaidaxar) is used in a Greek text in the “Cologne Mani Codex” (Heinrichs and Koenen 1975, 21,121, n.53; Shahbazi 2001, pp. 66, 72, n. 42).

- The Sassanids erected their rock inscriptions and sculptures near the Achaemenid rock inscriptions in Fars and introduced themselves with the same titles as the Achaemenid shahanshah (king of kings) (Shahbazi 2001, 66-67).
- The silence of national history regarding the Achaemenids cannot be a convincing argument for the view that the early Sassanid kings were unaware of the Achaemenids. Just as the silence of the Xwadāy-Nāmag and Shahnameh about Kartir, the renowned mobad (high priest) of the Sassanids, or the conflicts of Narses with Bahram Chobin cannot lead to the conclusion that the Sassanids were unaware of Kartir or these conflicts (68).
- It is also unlikely that the Jews, Armenians, and Nestorian Christians living in Sassanid Iran, who sometimes had good relations with the court, did not convey to the Sassanids the information available in their sacred texts about the Achaemenids, especially Cyrus (Daryaei, 2001-2002, 8-9).

The *third period* pertains to the reign of Khosrow Anushirvan in the sixth century CE. This architect of the Sassanid Shahanshahi revived the lost political unity and national pride of Iranians following the death of his grandfather, Piruz, in the war with the Hephthalites and subsequent raids by savage tribes on the northern borders. Concurrently, in response to the religious disunity during his father Qobad I's reign—due to the rise of Mazdak and the spread of his teachings—Khosrow Anushirvan ordered the scattered religious and national narratives to be compiled into the Xwadāy-Nāmag. Additionally, during this period, a council of Zoroastrian mobads, headed by Veh-Shapur, the mobad of mobads, authenticated the 21 Avestan texts and unanimously endorsed their validity (*Namaha-ye Manuchehr* 2016, Vol. 1, Chapter 4, Clauses 17-14).⁵

The Xwadāy-Nāmag was a comprehensive historical record, detailing a continuous chain of dynasties and kings who ruled over a unified nation from the most ancient times until its compilation. Beyond chronicling the bravery and heroism of individuals in each era, it aimed to awaken and reinforce the national pride of Iranians, especially in their struggles against northern enemies. The vivid depictions of constant wars between Iran and Turan during the Kayanian era served as a powerful tool for fostering a spirit of sacrifice and selflessness in defending the borders and homeland of Iranshahr.

Following the Arab Muslim conquest of Iran, political and religious unity dissipated, but the idea of Iranian unity persisted through the translation of the Xwadāy-Nāmag into Arabic and Dari Persian. In the tenth century CE, this idea reached its culmination with the composition of the Shahnameh. Recently, a coffin was discovered in Istanbul, belonging to an Iranian Christian named Khordad, son of Hormazafrid, who had traveled to Byzantium in the ninth century CE. The Pahlavi

⁵ For this narration, see Tafazzoli 1997, 66 footnote

inscription on the coffin introduces his homeland, which was then the eastern part of the Islamic caliphate's territory known as Dar al-Islam, as follows:

"From Iranshahr, from the village of Chalagan, from the hamlet of Khisht" (see Daryaei 2003, 26)

The notable aspect of this inscription is that, even at a time when the political state of Iranshahr no longer existed physically, an Iranian Christian still regarded his homeland as Iranshahr.

Ferdowsi adorned a particular edition of the *Xwadāy-Nāmag* with an exquisite robe, and at a time when Iranian identity was seriously threatened and there was a fear that Iranian culture, like the cultures of other nations, would dissolve into the dominant culture, he instilled the sense of being Iranian in hearts by displaying Iran's glorious past.

We said that Ferdowsi based his work on a particular edition of the *Xwadāy-Nāmag*. What was this special rendition that left such a profound impact? It was neither entirely crafted by the royal establishment and court scribes, nor by the Sassanid religious apparatus. Most likely, the middle social class, primarily the *dehqān* (landed magnates), played a role in shaping and perpetuating this rendition, whose foundation was undoubtedly the official *Xwadāy-Nāmag*, and fittingly, the *Shahnameh* was composed by a wise *dehqan*. The main feature of this rendition is that, in a substantial heroic section, instead of kings, it expresses greater interest in heroes, and a king like Goshtasp, who is highly favored in the official *Xwadāy-Nāmag* rendition, is portrayed as ambitious and deceitful.

After the collapse of the Sassanid monarchy, Iranian religious identity faded, but the nationalism reflected in the *Xwadāy-Nāmag* crystallized and evolved in the *Shahnameh*. Although during the emergence of the *Shahnameh*—unlike the period of formation of its ancient archetype, the *Xwadāy-Nāmag*—Iran did not possess political unity, one can find some commonalities between the two eras to a certain extent. In the tenth century CE (4th century AH), the northern enemies were Turkic peoples who had been absorbed into Iranian culture and had seized power themselves. Instead of the Roman Empire, there were Arab Muslims who sought their identity in denigrating other nations, especially Muslim Iranians, and skillfully used the new religion as a pretext for increasing ambition and extortion. Hence, in the *Shahnameh*, the Tazis (Arabs) are embodied in the form of the greedy Azhi Dahāka, the ancient enemy of Iranians.

After Ferdowsi, Iranian identity persisted not within a politically and religiously unified state, but in a cultural, literary, and artistic sphere. Iranians preserved the *Shahnameh* as their national identity and awaited an opportunity to revive the political and geographical unity of ancient times, which they did. From the emergence of the *Shahnameh* until five hundred years later, when the Safavids restored political unity to Iran, despite the existence of local governments, the concept of Iranshahr continued to thrive. Evidence of this can be found in the panegyrics of poets such as Sanai, Nezami,

Khaqani, Khaju Kermani, and Obeyd Zakani, who addressed their praised rulers, although ruling over a region in a corner of Iran, as the Shah of Iran or Khosrow of Iran.

Iranian identity in the Shahnameh does not gain luster through the subjugation of other nations; rather, it is firmly grounded in powerful intellectual, spiritual, and ethical foundations. For this reason, Iranian 'nationalism' has never descended into the repulsive racism of Nazism and fascism in the twentieth century throughout history. In the twenty-first century, based on those same foundations, especially the ethical principles that permeate the Shahnameh, Iranians can preserve and perpetuate their Iranian identity in a world where, due to the lightning-fast advancements in communication technology, there is a fear that many indigenous cultures may be forgotten.

In conclusion, if Hafez's Divan reflects the collective unconscious of Iranians, the Shahnameh is the collective consciousness of Iranians.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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