

# UC Merced

## The Undergraduate Historical Journal at UC Merced

### Title

The Individual and Ideal: Preserving the King and Persian Kingship

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/36z7n8h9>

### Journal

The Undergraduate Historical Journal at UC Merced, 4(1)

### Author

Salsman, T.R.

### Publication Date

2018

### DOI

10.5070/H341038369

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2018 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

# **The Individual and Ideal: Preserving the King and Persian Kingship**

By T.R. Salsman

## **Introduction**

The Middle East has a long history of cultivating power; since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, many individuals have sought to successfully garner a large following to extend their influence in the region. These individuals were referred to as caliphs, or successors to the Prophet. Caliphal rule spanned two dynasties: first from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century with the Umayyad Caliphate having control, followed by the Abbasid Caliphate. In the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century, the Abbasid Caliphate began to crumble and by the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century, they lost complete secular authority; one of the earliest and most vehement defectors to Abbasid power, and a political context ripe for shaping new forms of legitimacy, was Iran.<sup>1</sup>

In the late 11<sup>th</sup> century, Kay Kāvus, king of the short-lived Western Persian dynasty called the Ziyarids, sought to preserve his legacy. In doing so, he wrote a book of advice, called *The Qābusnāmeḥ* (*The Book of Kāvus*). This work was created for his favorite son and later successor, Gilānshāh. *The Qābusnāmeḥ* contains practical advice on how nobles and rulers should comport themselves, as well as short stories to illustrate Kay Kāvus's points and create a legacy for himself. The Samanid dynasty of the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, had somewhat larger ambitions than the Ziyarids. Located in Eastern Persia, the Samanids, attempted to legitimize themselves as the worthy successors to the great ancient Persian civilizations of the Sassanids and Achaemenids.<sup>2</sup> To this end, they commissioned the poet Abolqasem Ferdowsi to compose an epic poem about the mythical, legendary, and historical pre-Islamic kings of Iran. The poem, known as *The Shāhnāmeḥ* (*The Book of Kings*), was intended to glorify the ideals of Persian kingship.

Although Islamic conquerors had succeeded in taking political control of the region, Persian culture had remained resilient; the moment Arabic hegemony began to wane, Persian kingship reemerged. Several dynasties established themselves as independent of caliphal political authority (though the caliph still claimed religious authority over the Ummā).<sup>3</sup> However, these fledgling dynasties were tenuous. As a result, they required effective governance and new sources of legitimacy. The purpose of this paper is to examine two different approaches of legitimacy and kingship, as they arose at the intersection of local and post-Abbasid political contexts

## **Approaches to Legitimacy**

Both *The Qābusnāmeḥ* and *The Shāhnāmeḥ* were intended to preserve a legacy. However, the nature of that legacy differs. In the case of *The Qābusnāmeḥ*, the immediate intention was to make sure that Gilānshāh would continue the line of the Ziyarids; this would ensure that Kay Kāvus's legacy continued directly as he intended. In the case of Ferdowsi, the intention was to

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper I will be referring to the physical space of greater Iran (including land that is currently not part of Iran) as Iran, however, I will be referring to the culture of the region as Persian culture, deriving the term from the language.

<sup>2</sup> The Sassanids ruled Iran from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE and the Achaemenids ruled from the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> Centuries BCE.

<sup>3</sup> The community of all the world's Muslims.

legitimize the reign of the Samanids. In preserving the legacy of the dynasty as a whole, Ferdowsi wanted the Samanids to be viewed in the same light as the great dynasties before them. Depending on who is controlling the story, one could argue that Persian kingship was centered around the strength of the ruler or dependent on the strength of the entire empire; it is this distinction that demonstrates the power that stems from the works at this time.

*The Qābusnāme* contains a wealth of practical advice for those that proceed Kay Kāvus are expected to follow. This is because the success of Kay Kāvus's legacy is dependent on the fact that his methods for reign must outlive him. He directly informs his successors that a king needs to be ready to find a way to get out of any predicament. For instance, in the chapter on lying and truth telling, Kay Kāvus advises his son to, "become known for veracity, so that if ever in an emergency you utter a lie it will be believed."<sup>4</sup> This advice makes it clear that Kay Kāvus does not intend *The Qābusnāme* to be a guide of morality, but rather as a practical guide to surviving and maintaining power. Kay Kāvus demonstrates that a king must place the needs of the king before anything else; rather than focusing on being morally conscience of those being ruled over, the king must exercise any avenue to maintain control.

On the other hand, Ferdowsi emphasizes morality over practicality. In one of *The Shāhnāme*'s mythic stories, Iraj, the king of Iran, goes to negotiate with his brothers Salm and Tur, who are jealous of his prosperous kingdom. Faridun, their father, advises him to go armed, but Iraj refuses and is murdered. Ultimately, his grandson Manuchehr avenges him by killing Salm and Tur. At the end of this story, Ferdowsi includes a short moral, "O world from end to end unreal, untrue/ No wise man can live happily in you—/ But bless'd is he whose good deeds bring him fame;/ Monarch or slave, he leaves a lasting name."<sup>5</sup> The wise man refers to Faridun and it implies that Iraj is among those whose honorable deeds brought them fame. Iraj represents an ideal of benevolent kingship. Ferdowsi points to the notion that kings should be just and move beyond the habit of prioritizing themselves over what is morally right.

When analyzing how *The Qābusnāme* and *The Shāhnāme* approach legitimacy, it becomes clear to see that both emphasized different approaches. Kay Kāvus was concerned with having rulers exploit any means to get around those being ruled over. Abolqasem Ferdowsi called for rulers to exploit proper and just means; this was emphasized in order to ensure the longevity of the dynasty, rather than the individual at the head of the dynasty. These differences demonstrate that at a time when the future of a dynasty was uncertain, those in power had different takes on the type of approaches future rulers should follow in order to ensure the livelihood of their respective dynasty.

### Writing for an Audience

The differing audiences for these two sources explains why *The Qābusnāme* and *The Shāhnāme* approach kingship by separate means. *The Qābusnāme* was not intended to be viewed by the public, but rather for the elite class. This explains why it takes a more direct and pragmatic approach. *The Shāhnāme* was expected to reach the public and influence public perception pertaining the Samanid dynasty. Because of this, it takes an approach that is more readily propagated orally. Keeping the intended audience in mind allows for a deeper analysis on the nature of why each source was written in the manner it was produced. Both Kay Kāvus and

---

<sup>4</sup> Kai Kā'us, *A Mirror for Princes: The Qabus Nama*, Trans. Reuben Levy, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1951), 35.

<sup>5</sup> Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, Trans. Dick Davis, (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 62.

Ferdowsi were trying to control their expected reader's perception of the king or dynasty; ultimately, influencing how either would be remembered.

Kay Kāvus emphasized several times that appearances were more important than actual ethical behavior. For example, the Muslim Ziyarids should have been opposed to drinking on principle. However, Kay Kāvus resigned himself to the fact that Gilānshāh would drink regardless of his advice, and instead advises his son, “never drink wine in the open or in an orchard; but if you do then return within doors before reaching intoxication... for what is proper within your own dwelling is intolerable under the open sky.”<sup>6</sup> He urged his son to maintain the appearance of following the doctrinal ban on wine drinking, but not to actually obey the rule in practice. Since it is unwise to inform the public that they are being deceived by those in power, we can infer that this advice was not intended for public consumption. Kay Kāvus is free to be pragmatic because he is writing for nobles, not the public. Doing this allows Kay Kāvus to preserve his son's reign by explaining how one in power can break the rules if done discreetly. The candid advice given is not meant to please the public, but rather instruct successors of practices that will please the public. Kay Kāvus is concerned with future rulers maintaining the appearance of morality, rather than instructing these rulers to live by a foundation of grounded morals.

Ferdowsi was writing with the intention to have his work spread to a public audience. *The Shāhnāme* was part of a rich oral tradition and was originally commissioned as Samanid propaganda. This would indicate that an image of the Samanid dynasty was on display for the world to see. However, *The Shāhnāme*'s relationship with its audience is more complicated than simple propaganda, because the Samanids lost power before it was finished and were replaced by the Ghaznavids, who were Turks. Throughout the poem, Ferdowsi insults the Turks. They are portrayed as cruel, treacherous, violent, and unjust. For instance, in the heroic tale of Bizhan and Manizheh, when the young Persian Bizhan is discovered in the chambers of the Turkish Manizheh, the Turks promise that he will not be harmed if he surrenders and lets himself be bound. However, when he is brought before the king, Bizhan is not given a chance to prove his worth.<sup>7</sup> To add insult to injury, Rostam, one of the greatest heroes of *The Shāhnāme* must come and rescue Bizhan<sup>8</sup> and together they defeat Afrasyab, who eventually flees.<sup>9</sup> Because the Ghaznavids were Turks, Ferdowsi's criticism seems quite peculiar. There are several possible interpretations that could explain why these anti-Turk messages were not omitted; Ferdowsi is arguing that legitimate Persian kingship must be ethnically or culturally Persian because unlike the Turks, Persian culture is presented as an ideal that should be emulated. Ferdowsi encourages the Ghaznavids to assimilate to the Persian tradition, rather than rule as culturally Turkic outsiders.

The authors of *The Qābusnāme* and *The Shāhnāme* were both concerned with how their respective audiences would receive their work. In *The Qābusnāme*, Kay Kāvus is speaking directly to those that will succeed his reign. He is very direct and offers future rulers with information that will allow them to get away with deceiving and appeasing the public at the same time; Kay Kāvus wants to preserve the power of the king. In *The Shāhnāme*, Abolqasem Ferdowsi is concerned with selling the image of the Samanid dynasty. Because his work was designed for public consumption, Ferdowsi writes in a manner to associate the Samanid dynasty with morality and control; this allows *The Shāhnāme* to be used to popularize the best elements of the Samanid dynasty. The differences in audiences demonstrates that both authors were concerned with how

---

<sup>6</sup> Kā'us, *The Qabus Nama*, 59.

<sup>7</sup> Ferdowsi, *The Shahnameh*, 341-342.

<sup>8</sup> Ferdowsi, *The Shahnameh*, 364.

<sup>9</sup> Ferdowsi, *The Shahnameh*, 369.

their respective dynasties would be ruled and remembered. Deciding to write in a direct or propagated manner, allows the authors to control how their history would be remembered.

### **Conclusion**

Having witnessed other dynasties' fall from grace, Kay Kāvus and Abolqasem Ferdowsi wanted to control how their respective dynasties would be controlled. Both *The Shāhnāmeḥ* and *The Qābusnāmeḥ* are intended to preserve the legacy of rulers and kingdoms. However, they are intended to do so for distinct reasons and audiences. *The Qābusnāmeḥ* is a practical guide to political maneuvering written for an elite audience of nobles and princes and designed to keep kings alive and in power. As such, its advice is distinctly amoral, and deals far more with the appearance of what is right than with actual ethical behavior. Whereas, *The Shāhnāmeḥ* is an epic poem about ideals, intended to glorify Persian kingship and to revile other, unworthy rulers. As a result, it is full of Persian kings and heroes who are incessantly noble, even when their nobility results in death and destruction.

Although they both deal with the question of how kings should behave, the advice of Kay Kāvus and Ferdowsi are entirely different; Ferdowsi is discussing the preservation of an ideal of kingship, whereas Kay Kāvus is discussing the preservation of the king himself. In this, we see that the legacy of a reign is dependent on where a ruler wants power to remain long-after his death. Kay Kāvus demonstrates a reign and a ruler that sought to keep those in power with power, whereas Ferdowsi demonstrates an attempt to keep Persian power, historically and regionally, intact. Although the success of these separate attempts at preservation are still up for debate, the history surrounding these accounts is controlled by the authors who penned them, meaning that what we know is dependent on what they chose to emphasize as crucial to understanding power in post-Abbasid Persia.

## Bibliography

- Ferdowsi, Abolqasem. *The Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*. Translated by Dick Davis. New York: Penguin Books, 2016.
- Kâ'us, Kai. *A Mirror for Princes: The Qabus Nama*. Translated by Reuben Levy. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1951.