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The Poetic Heritage of *Farr* in the *Shâhnâma*

The emphasis of this paper is on comparative approaches to the poetic heritage of Ferdowsi's *Shâhnâma*. The basic question is not only how the methods of Comparative Literature enhance our understanding of this poetic heritage but also how the Persian evidence in its own right illuminates some major topics of Comparative Literature today.[1]

Among these topics are (1) convergences and divergences between oral and written traditions and (2) interactions of myth and poetics. My 1994 book, *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings* (published by Cornell University Press), centered on these two major topics, setting off lively debate by applying the comparative methods of two scholars in particular: Albert Lord and Georges Dumézil. The paper that I present to you here is a set of arguments unified by the central purpose of continuing that productive debate and applying further comparative methodology as well as further evidence from Persian poetics, primarily with reference to Ferdowsi's *Shâhnâma*. In order to provide a context for proceeding further, I will also briefly revisit key aspects of the methods applied by Albert Lord in his comparative studies of oral poetics[2] and those applied by Georges Dumézil in his comparative studies on parallelisms between heroes of epic and gods of myth and ritual.[3]

The first part of my presentation, then, concerns the medium, that is, the poetic heritage of the *Shâhnâma*. The second part concerns the message, that is the humanistic values communicated by the *Shâhnâma*. Emblematic of these values is the poetic concept of *farr*.

At the heart of my project is the study of Ferdowsi's poetry for its own sake. It is precisely for the sake of this poetry that I impose no arbitrary restrictions on the applications of methodologies, comparative or otherwise, new or old. There is a great deal at stake right now in this field of study. There are some specialists who prefer to *contain* Ferdowsi's poetry (and Iranian civilization in general) by attempting to exclude and even discredit the applications of some new approaches, especially those of Lord and Dumézil. They too, like me, may claim to be studying Ferdowsi's poetry for its own sake. Unlike me, though, such specialists imply that this poetry is worthwhile only for specialists like themselves. The counter-claim of my paper is that such an attitude of exclusiveness impoverishes the humanistic legacy Ferdowsi's poetry, of Persian culture, and of Iranian civilization in general.

To put it positively, I claim that comparative methods can actually enrich the study of Ferdowsi's poetry, and there are many specialists in Persian poetics who evidently agree.

What is ultimately at stake, in any case, is the future of studies in classical Persian poetry. It comes down to a basic question: does this literature, as a continuation of

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[1] For a forceful articulation of the value of Comparative Literature as an academic discipline, see Guillén 1993.

[2] Lord 1960, 1986, 1991, 1995.

[3] Dumézil 1968, 1971, 1973. For an assessment of the importance of Dumézil's work, see Skjærvø 1998a.645. For a rigorous exploration of the methods required for the study of interactions between myth and ritual, see Jamison 1991.

Iranian civilization, stand on its own as a vital contribution to humanities and even to humanity itself? As one who resolutely believes that the answer is "yes," I firmly resist the notion that any single group of specialists, any single school of thought, can claim the authority to contain or control the methods applied to the study of this literature. The ultimate test of any methodology - comparative or otherwise - is the results achieved.

I start with comparative methods applied to the study of oral poetics, as reapplied to the study of Ferdowsi's poetry. The comparative approach offers criteria for establishing what is or is not typical of oral poetics. There are two levels of comparison. One involves the evidence of living traditions of oral poetics as observed and described in fieldwork. The primary case in point is the research of Milman Parry and Albert Lord on the living traditions of South Slavic heroic song.[4] Another level involves the evidence of texts revealing patterns of formulaic composition that are demonstrably analogous to what is observable in living oral traditions. Pursuing this point, I argued in my 1994 book that oral transmission of poetry as found in the *Shâhnâma* continued side by side with the written transmission of the text. Each new occasion for performing any part of this poetry could have entailed some degree of recomposition, so that oral poetry could even influence the transmission of the text.

The coexistence of oral and textual transmission is actually metaphorized in the poetry of Ferdowsi, as we see from references to (1) performances by a "singer" or *sarâyanda*[5] and (2) tales about the recovery of an archetypal Book of Kings. In other words, "the medium of Ferdowsi's *Shâhnâma* talks about itself both as a stylized performance and as a stylized book."[6] Furthermore, the *Shâhnâma* "refers to its sources in terms that suit either stylized performances or a stylized book."[7] The main point of this argumentation is that the *poetic* concept of an archetypal book as the claimed source of Ferdowsi's *Shâhnâma* is not at all incompatible with the likewise *poetic* concept of claiming the actual performances of a *sarâyanda* as an authoritative source.

There are two central passages in Ferdowsi's *Shâhnâma* concerning the theme of an authoritative book as the poet's source. In my 1994 book, I argued that both of these passages reflect the mentality of an oral poetic tradition, and I offer here a brief summary of my argumentation. I will refer to these two *Shâhnâma* passages short-hand as (1) the "mystical gift" and (2) the "regenerated archetype."

Let us begin with the first mention of the authoritative sourcebook, the passage about the "mystical gift." When Ferdowsi says at the opening of his monumental poem that he received an archetypal Book of Kings, written in Pahlavi, as a gift from a mysterious "friend" (I 23.156-161 Bertels), I argue that he is in effect laying claim to the

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[4] The best overview remains Lord 1960.

[5] I have prepared an inventory of such references, forthcoming, which complements the inventory in Davidson 1994.36-39 featuring contexts where the poetry of Ferdowsi is metaphorized as the performance of a *môbad* or *dehqân.*

[6] Davidson 1994.33.

[7] Ibid.

authority of all previous "books of kings."[8] Such a claim, I further argue, is typical of oral traditions that coexist with written traditions:

> Ferdowsi's claimed control over both oral and written traditions ... is an expression of authority that is derived primarily from oral, not written, poetic traditions. Ferdowsi's poetic tradition was an oral tradition in its own right, and his *Shâhnâma* had survived as a living oral tradition in the period following its composition. Ferdowsi's poetry ... was an accretive medium that kept adapting itself to the society for which it was composed and recomposed.[9]

A key to this argumentation is the second central passage, about the "regenerated archetype," to which we now turn. Here we see Ferdowsi's own description of the genesis of the Pahlavi book of Kings that he claims as his source. In this description, as I argue, "we have what amounts to a myth-made stylization of oral poetry."[10] A noble and wise *pahlavân*, who is described as a hereditary *dehqân*, assembles *môbad*-s from all over Iran, each of whom possesses a "fragment" of a preexisting Pahlavi book that had disintegrated through neglect. What now happens is a reintegration of the disintegrated text. After all the *môbad*-s are lined up in the correct order, each of them is called upon to recite his own part of the notional totality that is the Book. It is thus that this ancient but once "fragmented" Book is wondrously reassembled by the assembly of *môbad*-s (*Shâhnâma* I 21.126-136 Bertels).

Over a century and a half ago, Jules Mohl had already interpreted this same passage as an example of a well-known type of myth that serves to explain the genesis of a national epic poetic tradition.[11] As an example of such a myth, I have adduced a medieval French parallel, the romance known as *Guiron le courtois* (composed around 1235).[12] This romance begins with a prologue telling of a mythical Latin book about the Holy Grail, parts of which kept getting "translated" into French:

> For it is certainly true that several holy men, clerks and knights have already undertaken to translate this book from Latin into French. Sir Luce del Gat first took it up. And he was the first knight who devoted his study and bent his will to it, as we well know. And he translated into French part of the story of Lord Tristan, and indeed less than he should have. ... Next Sir Gace the Blond took it up, who was a relative of King Henry. Next Sir Walter Map took it up, who was clerk to King Henry. And he worked on the story of Lord Lancelot du Lac, for he did not speak much about anything else in his book. Sir Robert de Boron took it up next.[13]

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[8] Davidson 1994.33-35, with commentary on the mystical implications of *mehrbân* 'friend'. On the convention of describing the archetypal book as written in Pahlavi, see Davidson pp. 3, 4, 7, 21, 35, 40, 42-45; also Davis 1996.51.

[9] Davidson p. 29.

[10] Davidson p. 48.

[11] Mohl 1838.xi. See Davidson 1994.50.

[12] Davidson, ibid., with reference to Huot 1991.218.

[13] Lathuillère 1966.176, translated by Huot, ibid.

The narrative of the prologue continues up to the present time of its narrator, one Hélie de Boron; Sylvia Huot summarizes the decisive point of the narration:

> So abundant a source is this Latin Ur-text that even after all of the aforementioned translations, King Henry realizes that *ne encore n'estoit dedens tous ses livres mis ce que li livres du latin devisoit, ains en remest a translater molt grant partie* ("all his books still did not contain that which the Latin book told of, for there remained a large part of it still to translate" [Lathuillère 177]). It is from this untranslated portion of the Latin book, of course, that *Guiron le courtois* is supposedly produced. Like the *Perceforest* author, Hélie inscribes himself in a historical movement from Latin to French literary expression. What is also clear from the *Guiron* prologue is that the production of French literature is a collective enterprise involving both knights and clerics, and that each individual romance, far from standing alone, is an integral part of the overall corpus.[14]

Following my analysis of the "mystical gift" and the "regenerated archetype" passages in the *Shâhnâma*, Nagy interprets them as evidence for the kind of culture "where written text and oral tradition coexist."[15] In such cultures, as Nagy argues, "the idea of a written text can even become a primary metaphor for the authority of recomposition-in-performance."[16] The consequences can be enormous:

> The intrinsic applicability of *text* as metaphor for *recomposition-in-performance* helps explain a type of myth, attested in a wide variety of cultural contexts, where the evolution of a poetic tradition, moving slowly ahead in time until it reaches a relatively static phase, is reinterpreted by the myth as if it resulted from a single incident, pictured as the instantaneous recovery or even regeneration of a lost text, an archetype. In other words, myth can make its own "big bang" theory for the origins of epic, and it can even feature in its scenario the concept of writing.[17]

In brief, the Persian model of a "regenerated archetype" of the *Shâhnâma* reveals "a myth about the synthesis of oral traditions that is articulated in terms of written traditions."[18]

For Nagy, the most striking comparative parallel to the Persian model is a set of ancient Greek myths that tell of the disintegration and subsequent reintegration of the Homeric corpus itself, culminating in the historicized narrative of the so-called "Peisistratean Recension."[19] Other comparable parallels include the medieval Irish aetiology of the "lost" book of the *Cattle Raid of Cúailgne*.[20] Another parallel adduced by Nagy is the medieval French narrative of *Guiron le courtois*, as quoted above, which "lays

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[14] Huot, ibid.
[15] Nagy 1996b.70.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Nagy 1996b.71-72, with bibliography.
[20] Ibid., with bibliography.

the foundation for its authority by telling of the many French books that were produced from what is pictured as an archetypal translation of a mythical Latin book of the Holy Grail."[21] Yet another parallel comes from ethnographic fieldwork on the oral epic tradition of an illiterate society, the untouchable Malas of India: "The epic, it is claimed [by the performers], was first written by a Brahmin poet, torn into shreds, discarded, and then picked up by the present performers."[22]

Dick Davis 1996.48-51 adduces two further comparative parallels, one from the *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth and the other from the *Brut* of Layamon. In the case of Geoffrey (ca. 1150 AD), his prologue about "a very ancient book" (*vetustissimus liber*) that had once been given to him by a "friend" (one "Walter of Oxford") is comparable to the ancient book given to Ferdowsi by his mysterious "friend." There are further analogies to be drawn from Layamon's *Brut:*

> The picture of an author gathering together his sources, collating them and beginning work, is in essence very similar to the one given at the beginning of the *Shâhnâmeh,* where Ferdowsî speaks of a dehqan's gathering (*farâham âvordan*) of scattered texts which were then reduced to one narrative, and both Ferdowsî and Layamon insist on the added authority of unfamiliar or ancient languages.[23]

With reference to the Persian theme of a *dehqân*'s "gathering (*farâham âvordan*) of scattered texts which were then reduced to one narrative," we may compare again the Greek myths that tell of the disintegration and subsequent reintegration of the Homeric corpus, culminating in historicized narratives about the so-called "Peisistratean Recension."

The historicized narratives about the "Peisistratean Recension" lead to another important point of comparison. In the classical Persian traditions, as I have argued extensively in my earlier work, there is a comparable historicized narrative about a prose *Shâhnâma*, as reported in the so-called "older preface" to Ferdowsi's poetic *Shâhnâma.*[24] According to the "older preface," this prose *Shâhnâma* was commissioned by the "Lord of T.ôs," Abu Manṣur 'Abd al-Razzâq, and compiled by his secretary, Abu Manṣur Ma'mari (the project was reportedly completed in 346/April, A.D. 957). Here is a key portion of the narrative:

> Therefore he [Abu Manṣur 'Abd al-Razzâq] commanded his minister [*dastur*] Abu Manṣur Ma'mari to gather owners of books from among the *dehqân*-s, sages, and men of experience from various towns, and by his orders his servant (the said) Abu Manṣur Ma'mari compiled the book: he sent a person to various towns of Khorasan and brought wise men therefrom [variant: and from elsewhere?], such as Mâkh, son of Khorâsân, from Herât; Yazdândâd, son of Shâpur, from Sistân; Mâhôy Khorshêd, son of Bahrâm, from Bishâpur; Shâdân, son of Borzin, from

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[21] Ibid.
[22] Blackburn 1989.32n25; cf. Nagy 1996b.71.
[23] Davis 1996.50.
[24] Davidson 1985.117, 123-126; 1994.42-53.

> T.ôs. He brought all four and set them down to produce those books of the kings, with their actions, their life-stories, the epochs of justice or injustice, troubles, wars, and the (royal) institutions, beginning with the first king [*key*] who was he who established the practices of civilization in the world and brought men out of (the condition of) beasts - down to Yazdgerd Shahriyâr, who was the last of the Iranian kings.[25]

This narrative from the "older preface" has led to the common assumption that the book in question must have been Ferdowsi's own source.[26] In arguing against this assumption, I have pointed out that this historicized narrative is strikingly parallel to Ferdowsi's poetic narrative, as quoted above, concerning the genesis of the Book of Kings. We can also find other parallels in other preface narratives stemming from other branches of the *Shâhnâma* textual tradition.[27] In one such parallel narrative, it is King Anôshirvân (reign: 531-579) who commissioned a collection, from all the provinces in his empire, of popular stories concerning ancient kings.[28] In another such narrative, the last Sasanian king, Yazdgerd, commissions the *dehqân* Dâneshvar to reassemble the Book of Kings.[29] On the basis of such parallel versions, I argued that the version of the "older preface," even if it has a historical basis, "conforms nevertheless to a mythmaking pattern that keeps revalidating the Book of Kings by way of explaining its 'origins'."[30]

> The greater density of historical information in the "prose preface" version need not take it out of consideration as a variant. Cross-cultural studies of interaction between the myths and historical events that are independently known to have taken place show that myths tend to appropriate and then reorganize historical information. As for Ferdowsi's own version of the story, it is more versatile because it is more stylized and therefore generic. Ferdowsi's version of how the Book of Kings came about can usurp more specific versions because it is so generic. His version implicitly acknowledges the variation of these stories by avoiding specificity in referring to the persons, places, or time involved in the genesis of his own source "book" for the *Shâhnâma*. And by acknowledging this multiformity, Ferdowsi is in effect transcending it. His *Shâhnâma* does not depend on any one version for the establishment of a text. The myth gives validity to the text by making the assembly of wise and pious men in the community the collective source of the text.

In the first "fascicule" of *Persian Literature* V, intended as a continuation of Charles Ambrose Storey's *Persian Literature: A Bio-Bibliographical Survey,* François de Blois launches his enterprise with a first chapter bearing the ambitious title "The Origins

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[25] Translation by Minorsky 1964.266. For the variant reading of Bishâpur, see Shahbazi 1991.36n96.
[26] Starting with Nöldeke 1930.
[27] See Davidson 1994.51, with references.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Davidson p. 52.

of Persian Poetry" (Blois 1992.42-58). After summarizing various received opinions about "early Persian narrative poems" [1992.53], Blois makes this sweeping claim about their authors (pp. 53-54):

> Despite the insistence by the authors of these narratives that they are merely [*sic*] retelling what they found in a 'book', attempts have occasionally been made to view early Persian poetry in the light of the well-known theory of 'oral poetry', a theory which has had a very strong influence particularly on the Anglo-Saxon school of Homeric studies, but [*sic*] which has also been applied with interesting results to such fields as pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.

The placement of "but" reveals a negative attitude on the part of Blois, but it is not clear whether his negativity has to do with "the well-known theory of 'oral poetry'" or with "the Anglo-Saxon school of Homeric studies" or with both. Other things too are left unclear. For example, Blois never says what exactly he means by "the Anglo-Saxon school of Homeric studies." Nor does he name those who have produced "interesting results" in applying oral poetics to such fields as pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. Nor does he indicate why and how these results are "interesting" to him. The reader finds no footnotes here about any of these questions. There is in fact only one footnote that anchors any of his claims in the blanket assertion as I have quoted it immediately above, and that is a single reference, at the point where he speaks of "the well-known theory of 'oral poetry'," to my article, Davidson 1985. In his footnote, he refers to no other bibliography besides that article.

After this sweeping statement, just as I have quoted it, we find a mere four pages in support of the claim that the authors of early Persian narrative "are merely [*sic*] retelling what they found in a 'book'".[31] Blois starts by attempting to anticipate an objection, with reference to passages in the *Shâhnâma* where the poet Ferdowsi "states, or implies, that he has heard the story he is about to tell from an 'old *dehqân*' or the like".[32] At this point he appends a footnote referring to "the collection of passages" in my article.[33] As in his immediately preceding footnote, about "the well-known theory of 'oral poetry'," Blois refers to no other bibliography besides my article. After this second reference to my work, I am never heard of again as Blois proceeds to claim that "it is much more likely that in all the passages of this sort the poet is merely repeating, in verse, the statement by his written source that it has derived its information [*sic*] from the person in question."[34] His claim, as we will see, is not original. As for the main argument that he produces to back up his claim, it is not original either, as we will also see presently. In fact, his argumentation depends on assumptions against which I have already formulated counter-arguments.[35]

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[31] Blois 1992.53.

[32] Blois p. 54.

[33] Davidson 1985.113-115 (I have since reworked this collection in Davidson 1994.36-39).

[34] Blois p. 54.

[35] Davidson 1985 (reworked in Davidson 1994.48-53).

Looking back at the argumentation of Blois, I see no successful rebuttal of my principal arguments. What I do see instead is a misunderstanding or even misrepresentation of these arguments - and an outright ignoring of the counter-arguments that I had already formulated in opposition to the assumptions of scholars whom Blois is following, most notably Nöldeke. Like Nöldeke, Blois insists that poets like Ferdowsi were "merely retelling what they found in a 'book'."

My main thesis in Davidson 1985 had been formulated not negatively, "that the *Shâhnâma* is not primarily dependent on written sources," but positively: that it *can* be analyzed as "oral poetry." Furthermore, my 1985 article had made it clear that "oral poetry" in medieval Persian traditions is not at all incompatible with "written sources," and my 1994 book makes this point even clearer, improving on my argumentation by adducing further comparative and internal evidence. Another improvement in the 1994 version of my argumentation is the added feature of a detailed critique of the valuable work of Shahbazi 1991. In the context of my friendly ongoing debate with Shahbazi, I have developed counter-arguments to his thesis that the sources of Ferdowsi, even in contexts where the poet says that he heard the performer perform, were exclusively texts.[36]

> I stress that my goal is not to deny the likelihood that some of the declarations by the poet within the poem, especially concerning such details as his precise age at various stages of his composing the *Shâhnâma*, are based on historical fact (Shahbazi's book is particularly valuable in offering a rich collection of such details). Rather, I repeat my earlier argument that such details cannot be treated as raw data about the real life and times of the poet but as part of a traditional discourse that incorporates factual details into an ongoing reinterpretation of the poem's role in society. We may say that such reinterpretation operates on the principles of myth, provided we understand myth in the sense of a given society's codification of its own truth-values.[37]

Let us return once more to the claim of Blois that Ferdowsi and other authors of early Persian narrative "are merely [*sic*] retelling what they found in a 'book'." His primary argument in support of this claim is that Ferdowsi refers to as many as three of the four figures who are identified by the "prose preface" as compilers of the "prose *Shâhnâma*."[38] In making his case, Blois is actually anticipated by Shahbazi.[39]

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[36] Davidson 1994.33n14, 34n15, 48n57, 52n71, and especially 52n72.

[37] Davidson 1994.34n15.

[38] Blois 1992.44-58.

[39] Shahbazi 1991.133-134n87, whose arguments are countered already in Davidson 1994.52n72. In his 1998 review of Davidson 1994, Blois fails to give credit to Shahbazi for having anticipated his primary argument and, needless to say, he also fails to give me credit for my counter-argument in Davidson 1994.52n72. In any case, as I have already noted, the argumentation of Blois is anticipated by Nöldeke 1930.62. On the arguments of Nöldeke, see again Davidson 1994.40-41.

In his earlier work, Blois simply ignored my argumentation against a literal-minded interpretation of the "prose preface" of the "prose *Shâhnâma.*"[40] In Blois 1998, he now also ignores Davis 1996, who likewise argues against such an interpretation and who joins me in arguing for an oral poetic tradition as the foundation of Ferdowsi's *Shâhnâma.*[41] Davis agrees with my argument: that traces of an oral tradition are reflected in Ferdowsi's stylized references to his sources - not only where Ferdowsi speaks of antecedent performances that he had heard but even where he refers to an archetypal Book of Kings.[42] Davis supports my thesis that Ferdowsi's stylized poetic references to an archetypal source-book reflect a "rhetoric" of oral poetics.[43]

Following my analysis of Ferdowsi's references to an archetypal source-book, Nagy interprets them as evidence for the kind of culture "where written text and oral tradition coexist."[44] In positing such a coexistence, he is following the later work of Lord 1991 and 1995, who explored the interactions of oral and written traditions in a variety of cultures. In light of this work, it is a pity that critics like Blois persist in assuming that the very existence of written traditions disproves, of and by itself, the possibility of any coexistence with oral traditions.[45]

When Blois claims that poets like Ferdowsi were "merely [*sic*] retelling what they found in a 'book'," his wording reveals a curious attitude toward classical Persian poetry. For him, the poetics of Ferdowsi is reduced to a "retelling" of prose narrative in poetic narrative, and the reductiveness is made clear by the placement of "merely." According to this reductionistic scenario, Ferdowsi first reads something in prose and then he "merely" retells it in "versified" form. This is to misread and even slight the power of poetry - "oral" or otherwise. My understanding is different: even in situations where the poetry of Ferdowsi may happen to draw from a written source, the actual process of "retelling" is still an art form of poetic re-creation. The same goes for situations where the poetry of Ferdowsi happens to draw from an oral traditional source. Either way, whether the immediate narrative source of Ferdowsi is "oral" or written, I hold that the actual process of his narration is a matter of oral poetics.

As I look back one last time at "The Origins of Persian Poetry," this first of chapters in what Blois calls his "continuation" of Storey's work, I must in the end reject his reductionistic views of these "origins." I prefer instead the vision of Gilbert Lazard, who argues that the development of Persian literature...

> ... was neither a pure and simple resurgence of the ancient culture nor the expression of an entirely fresh culture of Arab-Islamic origin. The links with ancient Iran had been established partly perhaps by such of the Middle Persian

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[40] Blois 1992.54-58. See Davidson 1985.111-127.

[41] See again Davis 1996.48 n1 and 53 n22, with reference to Davidson 1994.

[42] See again Part I of Davidson 1994, pp. 19-72, and my earlier discussion in Davidson 1985.103-142, where I also address the problem of the "prose preface" to the *Shâhnâma.* My arguments about the "prose preface" in Davidson 1994.29-53 are supported by the arguments of Davis 1996.

[43] Davis 1996.48-51.

[44] Nagy 1996b.70

[45] Blois 1992.54-58.

> writings as were still being read, but surely much more by what had been handed down to Arabic literature and what still remained, more or less modified and brought up to date, *in the living oral tradition.* It is in these two sources, Arabic literature and *oral Iranian literature*, that the origin of the forms and themes of Persian poetry must be sought [italics mine].[46]

I can sum up my position on the oral poetic heritage of the *Shâhnâma* as follows (Davidson 1994.53):

> Ferdowsi's claim, that he received an old Pahlavi Book of Kings, written in prose, and that he turned it into poetry - the first, the best, and therefore the only *Shâhnâma* - could not have been made without the authority of the oral poetic traditions that he had mastered. The idea of the book contains, like a time-capsule, not only an idealized composition-in-performance but also, cumulatively, an idealized sum total of all oral poetic traditions as they were performed before Ferdowsi and as they continued to be performed after Ferdowsi. As such, the book is both a concrete object and a symbol, expressing the authority and authenticity of the oral poetic traditions that are being performed.

The idea of the Book of Kings as a concrete object or symbol brings me to the second part of my paper, the concept of "luminous glory" or *farr* in the poetic heritage of the *Shâhnâma*. I propose here to re-examine a comparison, developed in my earlier work, between the Persian hero Rostam as guardian of the *farr* or 'luminous glory' of the Keyânid *shâh*-s in the *Shâhnâma* of Ferdowsi on one hand and, on the other, the Avestan god Apąm Napāt as guardian of the *x'arənah* - a prototype of Persian *farr* - as the 'luminous glory' of solar power in *Yašt* 19 of the *Avesta*.[47] Pertinent to this re-examination is the poetic epithet of Rostam, *tâjbakhsh* 'crown-bestower', as deployed by Ferdowsi in the *Shâhnâma*. In a forthcoming work, I will argue in detail that the meaning of this epithet, though not the actual idea of a crown, can be traced back to an Indo-Iranian tradition, just as the Avestan name Apąm Napāt goes back to an Indo-Iranian tradition - and further back to an Indo-European tradition. A decisive piece of comparative evidence comes from the vast body of documentation concerning an ancient Indic royal consecration ritual known as the *râjasûya*, and the key passage comes from Book II of the *Mahâbhârata*.[48]

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[46] Lazard 1975.612. On the term "oral literature," see Lord 1991.2-3, 16, with further comments by Nagy 1996b.13.

[47] Davidson 1985.67-103, 1994.114-127. For an overview of the influence of Iranian oral traditions on the *Shâhnâma* of Ferdowsi, see Skjærvø 1994.205-207, 240. For the derivation of Avestan *x'arənah* from *x'ar-* 'sun', and for an overall discussion of Iranian myths about gods and heroes connected with the concept of *x'arənah* as solar power, see Puhvel 1987.277-283. For more on *Yašt* 19, see Skjærvø 1994.217-219 and 1996a.602, 613. On the oral traditional background of the Avestan hymns, see Skjærvø 1994, especially p. 200.

[48] I rely heavily on the standard work concerning the *râjasûja*, Heesterman 1957.

The Avestan god Apąm Napāt has a cognate in the Indic Vedas: he is Apâm Napât, a god celebrated in *Rig-Veda* II 35. The Avestan-Vedic parallelisms in form and theme have led to the reconstruction of the Indo-Iranian figure Apâm Napât.[49] Clearly, Apâm Napât is a god in both the Avestan and the Vedic traditions.[50] But the actual words *Apâm Napât* mean much more than just the name of a god: Apâm Napât is the 'descendent of the waters', which is a *kenning* that expresses the mystical idea of fire-in-water.[51] In Indic traditions, the mystical referent of the kenning is the fire-god Agni, who is reborn every morning as the solar fire that rises out of the depths of the earth-encircling cosmic waters; as we see from *Rig-Veda* II 35, this macrocosmic fire of the sun corresponds to the microcosmic fire of sacrifice, and both fires come together in the figure of the Indic god of sacrifice, Agni.[52]

The kenning of "fire-in-water" is not only Indo-Iranian: it is even older, of Indo-European provenience.[53] We can find thematic cognates of Indo-Iranian Apâm Napât in other Indo-European languages, as in the case of the Old Norse skaldic kenning *sævar niðr* 'kinsman of the sea', referring to fire.[54] Such a kenning tells a micro-narrative, which is actually contained in the epithet Apâm Napât.[55]

Moreover, this kenning about the progeny of the waters is a sacred myth, and its micro-narrative is contained in the names of the Roman god *Neptûnus*, as celebrated in the cult myth of the Feast of the Neptunalia on July 23, and of the Irish mythological figure *Nechtan*, custodian of a magic mound that hides a secret well radiating heat and light.[56] In the Irish myth, the dangerous fire in the well makes the waters burst forth to become the river Boyne as it flows to the sea, from where it takes a submarine and then subterranean course, "reemerging to form many of the world's great rivers, only to return in the end to Nechtan's mound."[57] As for the corresponding Roman myth about the Alban Lake that threatens to flow into the sea, the historian Livy (5.16.9-11) "quotes" the words of the

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[49] Dumézil 1973.21-89; Nagy 1980.170-172, 1990b.100-102; Puhvel 1987.277-283.

[50] Boyce 1975; also 1986.149: "What is indisputable with regard to the Iranian Apąm Napāt is that this name represents a powerful divinity, an Ahura, a close partner of Mithra, who, though still daily honoured through the Zoroastrian liturgies, has ceased to be popularly worshipped."

[51] Watkins 1995.45, 153, 254. For an Armenian parallel to the Indo-Iranian kenning of Apâm Napât, see Watkins pp. 167 and 254, who adduces the myth of the birth of Vahagn, preserved in Movsēs Xorenaci, *History of the Armenians* 1.31 (following the Armenian text as established by Russell 1987.196).

[52] Nagy 1990b.100. As Watkins p. 254n18 argues, "The gender-marked kinship term *nápāt* reflects the masculine *Agni*." By contrast, Boyce has a theory concerning an "identification of Iranian Apąm Napāt as Varuṇa" (1986.149, with reference to Boyce 1975), on which see further below.

[53] For a summary, see Puhvel 1987.277-283, Chapter 16: "Fire in Water."

[54] Puhvel 1987.278; cf. Watkins 1995.45, 153.

[55] On epithets as containers of micro-narratives, see Nagy 1990b.22-23.

[56] Summary and analysis of the Roman and Irish versions of the myth in Puhvel 1987.279-282. On names as containers of micro-narratives, see Nagy 1990a.207n35, with further references.

[57] Puhvel p. 279.

Delphic Oracle warning the Romans lest they "extinguish," paradoxically, the water of the lake, *aquam ... caue ... exstingues*: this formula, it can be argued, "slipped through the demythologizing fingers of Livy as a phraseological survival from the ritual of the Roman protomyth, a formula proper to the *procuratio* of a theological prodigy, originally indicating what to do when there was eruptive fiery water pouring forth and running amok from Neptûnus' mythical lake."[58] We may also compare the Hellenized place-name *Napas*, glossed in the ancient dictionary of Hesychius as "an oil-producing well in the mountains of Persia," and the borrowed Greek word *naptha* (cf. Indo-Iranian *naptya-*) "that we still use for the quintessential flammable liquid substance."[59]

The fullest argumentation about the Indo-European heritage of the sacred narrative of Apâm Napât is given by Georges Dumézil in the section of *Mythe et épopée* III entitled "La saison des rivières" (1973.19-89). My own work on Apâm Napât has systematically applied the findings of Dumézil,[60] which in the meantime have been augmented by a wealth of supplementary findings.[61] I concentrated on the heroic rather than the divine aspects of the sacred narrative of the Indo-Iranian Apâm Napât, the essentials of which are more evident from the Iranian, not the Indic, evidence. Puhvel offers the following summary (1987.278-279):

> The Vedic god [Apâm Napât] has no obvious myth, but his characteristics, gleaned from the hymns, ... mark him as a fiery deity immersed and inherent in watery depths, giving off light and lightning without visible energy source, and as a power that needs to be ritually placated for proper utilization of waters. In this instance Iran contributes the story. *Yašt* 19 of the *Avesta*, celebrating the *x'arənah* as the luminous and fiery hallmark of the duly elect king of Iran, tells of a mythical time when it became a pawn in the tug-of-war between the poles of Zoroastrian dualism (Spənta Mainyu and Angra Mainyu), in the course of which it withdrew from the fray in the direction of the mythical Lake Vourukaša. At that point Apâm Napât seized the *x'arənah* and deposited it in the safety of the waters of the lake. Ahura-mazda thereupon declared open season on the *x'arənah* as a legitimate goal of striving for qualified humans, holding out sacerdotal, pastoral, and martial rewards.

I emphasize the idea of the *x'arənah* "as a legitimate goal of striving for qualified humans." As we are told by *Yašt* 19, the first human who tried to seize *x'arənah* was the Turanian Fraŋrasiian, who happens to be the prototype of Afrâsiyâb, King of the Turanians and arch-enemy of the hero Rostam in the *Shâhnâma*. In *Yašt* 19, there is no mention of Rostam. Instead, what we see is that the *x'arənah* recoils by itself from the grasp of Fraŋrasiian, creating an outflow from the lake that leads a multitude of rivers, one of which, the Haêtumant, still contains the "escaped" *x'arənah*: this river, the modern

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[58] Puhvel p. 282.

[59] Puhvel p. 297, summarizing Puhvel 1973.

[60] Davidson 1985.80-103, 1994.110-127.

[61] Especially Puhvel 1973, Ford 1974, Puhvel 1987.106, 120-121, 277-283, and Nagy 1990.99-102, 118.

Helmand, "empties into the mythical lake, which is thus the beginning and end of earthly watercourses."[62]

Even though the hero Rostam is missing in the extant Avesta, his arch-enemy Afrâsiyâb, so prominently featured in the *Shâhnâma*, is very much present in *Yašt* 19. To that extent, the heroic dimension of the sacred narrative is also present in *Yašt* 19, since the Turanian Afrâsiyâb is featured clearly on a human level. Moreover, the rescue of the *x'arənah* by Apâm Napât is also heroic *as an action*, even if the figure of Apâm Napât is himself a god. Finally, the antagonism of Apâm Napât toward Fraŋrasiian as a Turanian reveals that his deed of protecting the *x'arənah* is a pro-Iranian action, parallel to the actions of Rostam in protecting the corresponding *farr* of the *shâh*-s. Here, then, is the essence of my drawing a parallel between the Avestan god Apâm Napât and the Persian hero Rostam: as protectors of the *x'arənah* / *farr* respectively, they are parallel in the action of a basic sacred narrative.[63]

This is not the same thing, however, as to claim that Apâm Napât *is* Rostam, and I never make any such claim in my work. The actors in a sacred narrative may be gods or heroes. For example, in Indo-European myths about dragon-slaying, as encoded in such sacred micro-narratives as the Indic formula "Indra slew Vṛtra" (*índro vṛtrám jaghāna* or *ahan*),[64] the subject - the dragon-slayer - "is indifferently god (Zeus, Apollo, Thor, Indra) or man (Perseus, Kadmos, Herakles, Trita)."[65] It is therefore simply wrong of Blois to claim that I "identify" the god Apâm Napât with the hero Rostam. Here is what he says about my argumentation: "the upshot of her presentation is that she *identifies* Rustam with the Avestan deity Apąm Napāt (Vedic Apâm Napât), 'grandson [*sic*] of the waters'".[66] He goes on to say: "The *identification* is quite gratuitous" (ibid., again emphasis mine). Blois explains his reasoning this way: "Apąm Napāt is not a warrior hero, but a god, an *ahura-* (like Ahura Mazdā and Miθra, and he is addressed, in the Avesta, as in the Veda, as the creator of mankind" (ibid.). Such thinking shows no awareness of the extensive investigations concerning the systematic parallelisms of god and hero in Indo-Iranian sacred narrative. The most eminent example is Dumézil's *Mythe et épopée* I (1968), which explores the thematic and formal parallelisms linking gods and heroes in the *Mahâbhârata*, especially in the case of the gods (1) Dharma (2) Indra plus Vâyu and (3) the twin Aśvins, corresponding to the heroes (1) Yudhiṣṭhira (2) Arjuna plus Bhîma and (3) the twins heroes Nakula and Sahadeva.

When Blois speaks in terms of an "identification" between one mythical figure and another, whether these figures be divine and human, he is lapsing into the assumption that he is somehow dealing with historical figures. I explicitly reject this kind of a

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[62] Puhvel p. 279; cf. Davidson 1994.116-117.

[63] See especially Davidson 1994.177, 126.

[64] Watkins 1995.301.

[65] Watkins p. 298. See especially his ch. 49: "From God to hero: The formulaic network in Greek," pp. 471-482. See also his pp. 167 and 254, comparing the Armenian traditions about Vahagn with the Indo-Iranian traditions about Apâm Napât.

[66] Blois 1998.270; emphasis mine. On the semantics of Indo-European **nepōt-* see Puhvel 1987.277-278; cf. Dumézil 1973.21n1 and Watkins 1995.254n18. In the case of Indo-Iranian *napāt-*, "proximity, intimacy, kinship are implied, not necessarily filiation" (Puhvel p. 278).

"prosopographical" approach to myth, arguing that the shaping of identities in mythical discourse is variable, depending on genre and context.[67]

In the case of Blois, there may be other reasons for his insistence on speaking in terms of an "identification" between Apâm Napât and Rostam. Here we may consider the usage of Mary Boyce, in an article that she published on Apâm Napât in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.[68] This article is cited by Blois as a key to refuting the "identification" that I purportedly made.[69]

For Boyce, the "identification" of Apâm Napât is all-important. In her encyclopedia article, she cites an earlier work of hers[70] in which she had argued that Apâm Napât is "an Indo-Iranian title" of the Vedic god Varuṇa, "whose apparent absence from the Iranian pantheon has always been a source of perplexity." Although she admits that "the *identification* of Iranian Apąm Napāt *as* Varuṇa remains controversial," nevertheless "a reasoned refutation of the hypothesis has yet to be published."[71]

Pursuing this "identification," Boyce insists that Apâm Napât as "son of the waters" is a "water deity" (ibid.). Following Oldenberg (1917.100-101, 113-114, 117-119), she notes the application of the "title" Apâm Napât to the fire-god Agni and to the sun-god Savitṛ, explaining that "the original Apâm Napât had been an independent divinity, an Indo-Iranian 'water-spirit,' who had become associated with and partly absorbed in Agni because to ancient Indian thinkers water held fire within itself";[72] also, "the link of this 'water-spirit' with Savitṛ could be similarly explained because the setting sun was thought to sink into the seas beneath the earth."[73] Boyce seems to regard the theme of fire-in-water as merely an Indic mythical elaboration, adding: "in Indic rituals, as in Iranian ones, Apâm Napât's connection *remained* solely with water [emphasis mine]."

While I agree with Boyce that Varuṇa as god of the earth-encircling waters overlaps in part with Apâm Napât, I disagree with her view that the theme of fire-in-water is merely an Indic myth elaboration on the theme of the "Son of the Waters." This inherent theme of *Apâm Napât*, as we have seen, is not only Indo-Iranian but also Indo-European, centering on the sacred narrative of "fire-in-water." The fullest argumentation, as we have also seen, is given by Georges Dumézil in the section of *Mythe et épopée* III entitled "La saison des rivières" (1973.19-89). In her *Encyclopaedia Iranica* article on Apâm Napât, Boyce ignores Dumézil completely. She also ignores completely the related work of Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (1963) on the Iranian *x'arənah*, which is essential to Dumézil's argumentation.

My own work on Apâm Napât has systematically applied the findings of Dumézil.[74] When Blois dismisses my argumentation about Apâm Napât by citing Boyce (1986) as a "good synthesis," he is relying on a work that fails to provide any counter-arguments to the findings of Dumézil.

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[67] Davidson 1994.117n25.
[68] Boyce 1986.
[69] Blois 1998.270
[70] Boyce 1975.
[71] Boyce 1986.149; emphasis mine.
[72] Boyce 1986.149; Oldenberg 1917.100-101, 113-114, 117-119.
[73] Boyce ibid.
[74] Davidson 1985.80-103, 1994.110-127.

The Avestan version of Apâm Napât features a heroic deed connected with *x'arənah*. Any parallelism with Rostam is to be sought with reference to his own heroic deeds as connected with *farr*. In the *Shâhnâma*, this connection is thematically conveyed by way of the epithet *tâjbakhsh* 'crown-bestower', which I have studied extensively in my earlier work.

Another study of this epithet is that of Alishan 1989. Basically, Alishan follows Bivar 1980/1, who argues that the "epic personality" of Rostam "represents an expansion of the hero of Carrhae," that is, the victorious Parthian general of the Surena clan who defeated the Roman army of Crassus at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 BC.[75] Alishan tries to show how his explanation of the epithet is different from the one offered by Bivar, whose approach he describes as "the historical method".[76] When it comes to results, I cannot see any major difference, since the thesis of Alishan's argumentation is basically the same: that the epithet *tâjbakhsh* derives from the historical event of the Parthian victory over the Roman army of Crassus at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 BC.

Alishan also contrasts his approach with mine, which he calls "the socio-mythical method," and with that of Sarkârâti, dubbed as "the legendary or epical method," in that Sarkârâti "argues that Rostam should be sought in neither history nor mythology but in the legendary or epic tradition of the Saka people".[77] Sarkârâti is described as rejecting explanations "seeking one distinct historical personage for identifying Rostam".[78]

In describing my approach, Alishan begins by allowing that "Davidson avoids the fallacies of the historical method," and then he goes on to claim: "by misreading *tâj.bakhsh* as someone who has the power to 'confer' the '*farr* of the Keyânids ... upon them, she argues for the 'intrinsic' relationship of Rostam to the national epic tradition".[79] My reading of *tâjbakhsh* is a "misreading" for Alishan because it takes the theme of a warrior's conferring sovereignty on a king well beyond the historical event of the Battle of Carrhae. Alishan wants to derive the entire thematic legacy of the epithet *tâjbakhsh* from this one historical event. My argument, by contrast, is that the narrative tradition about the Battle of Carrhae, centering on a historical event, nevertheless fits a much older Iranian narrative tradition concerning the heroic conferral of *x'arənah*. In my forthcoming work on the *râjasûya*, I argue for parallels in the Indic epic traditions.

In general, I follow Skjærvø in his "reflections on the question of how the oral tradition incorporated historical events and characters on one hand and foreign material on the other."[80] He gives a central illustration: "the example of Zarathustra and Vištāspa in Bactria and Babylon shows that the Old Iranian mythical and legendary characters *were repeatedly relocated in history*" (emphasis mine).[81] We may start with Vištāspa: "What is surprising is that even such a 'recent' character as Darius' father Vištāspa seems to have retained none of his genuine historical identity, but has been completely integrated

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[75] Bivar 1980/1.150.
[76] Alishan p. 3.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Alishan p. 5.
[79] Alishan p. 6.
[80] Skjærvø 1996a.624.
[81] Skjærvø p. 624.

with the Vištāspa of the Young Avestan epic narratives."[82] Skjærvø then extends the argument to Zarathustra himself:

> By analogy with the case of Vištāspa we may wonder whether something similar may not have happened in the case of Zarathustra. The insistence of the sources in putting him either in Bactria or Babylonia, combined with the uncertainty about the form of his name (Zathraustes, Zōroastrēs, Zaratas, Zaradēs), may well reflect some tradition by which a historical ruler was synchronized and identified with the Avestan Zarathustra, whom the oral poets and narrators then transported down in time and relocated.[83]

An important parallel is the Indic typology of "partial incarnations."[84]

My reading reconstructs the epic role of Rostam as guardian of the Shah's sovereignty back to the Iranian myths of Apąm Napāt as the rescuer of *x'arənah*. This is not the same thing as to say that Rostam is Apâm Napât. Like Blois, Alishan misrepresents my argument: "Ultimately Davidson's hypotheses [*sic*] argues for an identification [*sic*] of Rostam with the divinity Apâm Napât."[85]

Alishan is wrong in claiming that "Davidson does not distinguish between a god who keeps the *farr* in the absence of a legitimate ruler and the hero who protects the king (who already has the farr by the will of the celestial powers)."[86] But I do systematically distinguish between god and hero. So too does Dumézil. By contrast, Alishan and Blois do not. They ignore the argumentation in my 1985 article about the narrative parallelisms between gods in myth and heroes in epic, where I follow the work of Dumézil and Puhvel and Watkins on myths of dragon-killing. In fact, they ignore all 1463 pages of Dumézil's *Mythe et épopée* I / II / III.[87]

I am unconvinced by the interpretations of Alishan concerning specific contexts of *farr* in the *Shâhnâma*, since they are all based on his assumption that the *farr* is inherent in kingship only, not in heroism.[88] An egregious example is this: "Sâm's statement [of refusal to take over the kingship of Shâh Nowzar, offered by dissatisfied Iranians] and his refusal of the crown *explicitly* refutes the idea that his family is in possession of the *farr-e shâhanshahi*."[89] I see here a basic misunderstanding of the theme inherent in the epithet *tâjbakhsh*. The hero does not possess kingship in the sense that he is king, but in the sense that he is a kingmaker.

More generally what is at stake is not kingship per se but the charisma that goes with kingship - a charisma derived from heroic radiance. That radiance is *x'arənah* or *farr*.

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[82] Ibid.
[83] Skjærvø p. 626.
[84] As mentioned by Skjærvø 1996.626.
[85] Alishan p. 6.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Davidson 1994 pp. 120-126.
[88] Alishan pp. 6-7.
[89] Alishan p. 7.

That radiance, moreover, is not only heroic: it is thereby also inherently poetic.[90] That *farr*, I submit to you, is what will always radiate from Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings*.

[90] For a demonstration, by way of Irish parallels, see Ford 1974.

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