

SHAHNAMEH IN THE KURDISH AND ARMENIAN ORAL TRADITION

(abridged)¹

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The Iranian national epic "Shahnameh" has always been a source of inspiration and literary imitation for various folk traditions - first of all of Iranian ones. There is a considerable number of folkloric cycles in New Iranian languages and dialects going back to the motives of "Shahnameh", its rich treasure of subjects and topics.

Among the monuments of the world literature "Shahnameh" is, perhaps, the most popular one having made a great impact on the whole literary process of peoples living in a vast area embracing the territories between Asia Minor, Caucasus, the Central Asia, India and, even, Far East. The onomastic system of "Shahnameh" almost entirely can be traced in the name-giving traditions of the peoples and ethnic formations of this huge part of the world: Rustam, Suhrab, Bizhan, Manizhe, Rudabe, Tahmine, etc. are the most current names of the representatives of Iranian and non-Iranian peoples of this area, followers of different confessions (Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, etc.).

During the ten centuries passed after Firdausi composed his monumental work, heroic legends and stories of "Shahnameh" have remained the main source of the storytelling for the peoples of this region: Persians, Kurds, Gurans, Talishis, Armenians, Georgians, North Caucasian peoples, etc. Although due to the merits of this literary masterpiece and the predominance of the New Persian language in the region, the traditions of *naqqaalii* (narration, storytelling), as well as *Shahname-xani*, were formed generally in New Persian, the recitation of "Shahnameh" in other New Iranian languages and dialects is also a long-standing reality.

The outstanding *Shahnameh-xani* tradition (*dangbeezhii*), especially, is attested among the Kurds and adjoining Iranian ethnic groups (Gurans, etc.) and among the Armenians (*banasacut`yun*) - within the non-Iranian peoples. There have been also preserved some literary versions in New Iranian dialects, i.e. in Gurani (see *Biizhan u Manijja* -

¹ Unfortunately, some very important parts, in particular, linguistic analysis, etymologies, etc. are omitted because of a big number of special signs which can not be emailed.

version populaire du sud du Kurdistan en langue gouranie. Texte établi, introduction, etc. par M.Mokri. Paris, 1966)

It is beyond doubts, that certain folk versions were current long before Firdawsi's time, but, in all likelihood, most of them written down during the period from the end of the last century until now, are extemporized variants of the various episodes of "Shahnameh" enriched and embellished with folkloric details. It is a matter of special scrutiny and profound comparative-historical analysis of all folkloric versions to reveal their older layers going back to the times before Ferdousi from the elements directly borrowed from "Shahnameh" and from the later modifications or folklorisation of the appropriate motives.

The main task of this paper is rather modest: to represent the variants of "Shahnameh" (mostly the cycle of Rustam) in the North Kurdish and Armenian oral Traditions. This is a preliminary report of a big project carried out in the framework of the Caucasian Centre for Iranian Studies in Yerevan and the Chair of Iranian Studies, Yerevan State University. It is based par excellence on the materials written down by the members of our group and previous works done in Armenia during the last decades in recording the Kurdish folklore from the last storytellers originated from Western Armenia (Eastern Anatolia), bearers of the rich tradition once existed among the Kurds before the holocaust of 1915-1920 and, may be, still alive but inaccessible for the researchers. An important point I have to note in this connection is that a considerable part of the Kurdish dangbeezhi-s were Armenians by origin, the reason why they appeared in Armenia after the massacres. And it was not a sporadic phenomenon - no matter how strange it sounds - the most conspicuous reciters of the Kurdish folklore in the Eastern parts of modern Turkey once inhabited by the Armenians with the mixed Kurdish population were the Armenians who equally performed the folklore in Kurdish and Armenian. That is why the versions of "Shahnameh" in Kurmanji and Armenian are so perplexed and interwoven that sometimes it is very difficult to distinguish them from each other and to determine the original variant of the given version. Some of them are partly bilingual, having within the main text Armenian or Kurdish interpolations. In the Armenian story published by S.Haykuni (see below), for instance, the text is ended with a quatrain in Kurdish:

Ham chinaar, ham chighaal, ham zinaar
chee buu Rustamee kurree Zaal,
Amr kir seesit shesht saal,

Heezh bichuuka, t'ifaal,
Daayee himbees kir, bira maal,
i.e.: "(He is) both like plane tree and a rock,
(He was) born, Rustam, the son of Zaal,
(He) lived 360 years,
(Yet) he is now a small kid,
(His) mother cuddled him and took home".

This statement is true, of course, only if we speak about the Northern Kurdish region; the South Kurdish folkloric and literary tradition is quite different, having its own peculiarities - it is rather akin to the folk traditions of Persians, Gurans and other ethnic formations of the Western Iran. Moreover, despite the fact that there is a number of oral versions of "Shahnameh" in Southern Kurdish - Sorani (cf., e.g. Beezhin uu Maniija - version written down by Prof. D.N. Mackenzie in Halabj near Suleimaniya. - Kurdish Dialect Studies, vol. 2, London, 1962, pp. 92-106, par.-s. 208-238), yet, can by no means be compared with the rich "Shahnameh" tradition in Kurmanji and even in Armenian.

It must be noted that the most favorite part of "Shahnameh" among the rural and nomadic population is the cycle of Rustam, due, perhaps, to the epic and heroic characteristics of personage. The main bulk of recorded materials, not only in Kurdish and Armenian but also in other Nlr. dialects, therefore, are the popular interpretations of the motives concerning this epic hero (cf., e.g. H. Mahamedi. The Story of Rostam and Esfendyar in an Iranian Dialect. - JAOS, 102/3 (1982), pp. 451-459).

A very kin interest towards the Iranian cultural heritage and epic tradition in particular, can be seen in Armenian from the hoary past - V c. AD, the time of the formation of the Armenian written literature. Rustam Sagchik, the stories of Artashir and Artavan, Byuraspi Azhdahak (Azdahak-i beevarasp), etc. were first recorded in the Armenian sources - Movses Khorenatsi, Agathangelos and Pavstos Buzand - and many times in different forms - revealed in later monuments - e.g. in Grigor Magistros' writings (see in detail: K.Melik` Ohanjanian. Firdusin ev Irani vipakan motivnere "Shahnameyum" u hay matenagrut`yan mej. - In: Firdusi (Collection of articles). Yerevan, 1934, pp.3-114; B.L.Chugasian. Hay-Iranakan grakan arnchutyunner (V-XVIII dd.). Yerevan, 1963).

Old Armenian data concerning the epic history of Iran are of great importance for the historical investigation of "Shahnameh" ; they definitely prove that the epic heroes of Iran were close to Armenians due to the common genetic, cultural and historical background, almost identical national Weltanschauung. In pre-Christian Armenia there was a syncretic Culture which absorbed and adapted many genuine elements of Iranian origin, later lost in Iran but preserved until now in Armenia (religious non-Christian beliefs, language, etc.).

Further on, in the late medieval period Firdousi's "Shahnameh" gave a vigorous incentive to the formation of a new wave of Iranian epic tradition among the Armenians.

Unfortunately, in Armenia the first steps in recording the oral versions, having, no doubt, very old roots, were undertaken only from the end of the XIX century and, besides, very fragmentarily, because of the political instability Armenia and especially its western part within the borders of Ottoman Empire, faced at that time. The annihilation of the Armenian population of Western Armenia at the end of the 19th c. - first decades of 20th c. put an end to the indigenous Armenian tradition of "Shahnameh" , and the initiated process of the text recording, thus, was practically nipped in its bud. Later, the work with the refugee storytellers in Soviet Armenia reminded rather the gleanings of once rich harvest. However, the variants of "Shahnameh" preserved by the efforts of the Armenian folklorists, give a clear idea of the scope of the whole cycle, although still requires thorough investigation.

Armenian "Shahnameh" originated from Vaspurakan, the region around the Van lake (Van, Moks, Shatak, Mush, Sasun, etc.) in Southern Armenia where the most of Kurmanji variants come from by the way. It should be emphasized, inter alia, that the mentioned area was the hearth of the formation of epic traditions and folkloric ideas in general, their breeding ground. The Armenian National epic "Sasuntsi David" and even Kurdish epic cycle on the twin brothers were formed in this region, on the frontier one with Iran and the cradle of the ancient Near Eastern civilizations by that.

The Armenian versions of "Shahnameh" are generally known under the name "Rustam-Zal", although they include various episodes of the Iranian epic.

The following variants of the epic, written down and published, have been preserved: Rustam-Zal: Zhoghovrdakan vep (Azgagrakan Handes, 1901, pp.205-258); Rostam Zal (by S. Haykuni. - in Eminean Azgagrakan Handees, vol.V, Vagharshapat, 1904, pp.3-13); Bechan (ibid., pp.40-53), Sam (ibid., pp.53-60); Ghantili Siyap'ush ev

Heozbek (ibid., pp. 150-160); Salmann u Rostamn (G .Srvanjtian, Hamov-hotov. Tiflis, 1904, pp.222-224); Rustam Zal (Azgagrakan Handees, V.XIII,1906, pp. 69-85; Rostam Zal (Firdusi, op.cit., pp.169-222). There is also a number of versions, still remained unpublished in the Archive of the Museum of Literature in Yerevan. Five new versions from the Gavarr region of Armenia inhabited by West Armenian migrants, were recorded by the members of our groups - researchers of the Caucasian Centre for Iranian Studies - during the recent expeditions to the area. Unfortunately, the tradition is dying together with a few storytellers spending their last days.

Despite the fact that Armenian Shahnameh versions represents a very important material being able, perhaps, shed a light to certain points of the epic tradition of Iran, they have not been a subject of thorough investigation (except an old article of G.Hovsep`ian in Azgagarakan Handees, 1905, pp. 5-39, which is quite obsolete now, and the booklet of B.Xalat`eants published in 1901 in Paris: Irani herosnere hay zhoghovrdi mej). The main line of the plot of the Armenian and Kurdish "Shahnameh", as by Ferdousi, is the endless struggle between Iran and Turan; the Iranian side, of course, is positive one, and Turanian - negative; Iranians always win, Turanians - defeat, etc. But in many legends "Shahname" motives are contaminated with the motives of "Sasuntsi David" - the Armenian Heroic epic. Sometimes David is represented even as the uncle of Rustam and the whole story is unfold in Sasun, the homeland of the heroes of the Armenian epic, cf.: Aval zhamanak Sasuma K`aghak` Zal t`agavor ki tirer_al t`agavorin ker mek aghber, anun Davit." "Once upon a time in the town of Sasun was a king by the name of Zal, king Zal had a brother, Davit." (B.Xalateabts, op.cit., p.24).

It is interesting, that in a Kurdish text recorded by T.Chituni (Azgagri husheric, 1902, p.37), Rustam, being a Kurd, is also hailed from Sasun, cf. : Rustam kuree Zaal, Zaal kuree Kaal, Kaal kure Saasuum-kiraal, i.e. "Rustam - the son of Zal, Zal - the son of Kal, Kal - the son of Sasum-kiral". The usual pedigree of Rustam in the Kurdish variants looks as follows: R'oostam kurre Zaal, Zaal kurre Daal, Daal kurre K'aam, K'aam kurre Saam, Saam kurre Nariiman, Nariimaan kurre Qaramaan, i.e. Rostam the son of Zal, etc.

"Shahnameh" in Armenian is so highly influenced with "Sasuntsi David" Epic, and so armenized, adapted to the Armenian folkloric mind, that it gives to some authors the warranty to call it Hay-iranakan vep, i.e. "Armeno-Iranian epic" (see, e.g. Firdusi, p.161 et.sq.)

Nevertheless, the content of Ferdowsi's "Shahnameh" in its given parts is preserved in general, although in Armenian, as well as in Kurdish versions one can not exclude the impact of the later Persian tradition (Burzoo-naame, etc.), besides, of course, the indigenous elaboration of the motives. The characters of "Shahnameh" with various combinations, sometimes different from the original canva of "Shahnameh", are present in the Armenian and Kurdish versions. Some new characters introduced from the native folkloric tradition also occur in the recorded materials. The Armenian onomastic system of "Shahnameh" looks as follows: Rustam, Zohrab, Rudabe, Kaw-Xosrov (K`ef-Kosra, K`aw-Xsir), Kaw-Kobat (K`aw-Ghbat`), K`av-Kavus, Godarz, Gev, Bechan (Vzhan, Pezhang), Tus, Siyavush (Siyapu`ush), Burzo, etc. The linguistic parameters of the names attested in the Armenian, definitely points to the fact, that almost all of them are derived from Classic period of the New Persian (i.e. to the time of Firdousi). I mean the vocalic characteristics of the words: bong-ee- (Gev), long -oo- (Godarz), short -u- (Burzo), etc.

Moreover, some of them reveal the characteristics of the oldest time, being derived, perhaps, from the Middle Iranian Period. Cf. Vzhan (< Vezhan, perhaps, from OIr. *wajjana-, *waig-), Kav- (NP Kay), from Mlr. *kav- < OIr. *kawi- "king" (cf. OInd. kavi-), etc. It brings us to the conclusion, that in Armenian "Shahnameh", a certain layer of elements going back to the time before Ferdousi can be traced by means of more profound academic scrutiny.

The first oral version of "Shahnameh" in Kurmanji (in two variants) was written down by Albert Socin and published in 1890 (cf. A.Socin. *Kurdische Sammlungen: Erzählungen und Lieder in Dialekte von Bohtan*. 2 Abt. SPb, 1890, pp.126-253). Here the genealogy of Rustam has another interesting representation, which in the German translation of A.Socin sound as: "Es war Rustam, Sohn des Saal, Saal war der Sohn des Qaar (perhaps, Qaaran), Qaar war der Sohn des Saam, Saam war der Sohn des Piir, Piir war der Sohn des Neriimaan, Nariimaan war der Sohn des Qaameraan, Qaameraan gehorte zu den Enkeln Adams" (ibid., p.126).

Then, another Rustam story from the Kurdish cycle was recorded in Arabic exposition by Hugo Makas. The German translation of this text was published in his famous *Kurdische Texte in Kurmaanji Dialecte aus der Gegend von Mardin*. L-d, 1928, pp.100-102.

Next publication of the Kurdish Rustam cycle came out only half a century later in 1977 in Yerevan; it includes more than a dozen of texts without translation and

commentaries; it was done by late Prof. Hajiye Djindi (see: *Rustam Zal eposi k'rdakan patumnere*. Yerevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences). For the time being under the disposal of the group engaged in the oral Armenian-Kurdish "Shahnameh" project I mentioned above, there are more than 40 stories, half of them being unpublished. Most of them of course, are directly connected with Rustam or his relatives, cf: *Chirookaa Zaal* ("The Story of Zal"), *Ruda'va* (Rudaba), *Zaal*, *Uushangii Shaao uu R'oostam* ("Zal, the King Hushang and Rustam"), *Zaarrootii uu sharree R'ostam* ("The Childhood and the struggle of Rustam"), *Sharree R'uustam uu Azriif* ("The Fight between Rustam and Azrif"), *R'ostam dichu Chiinistaanee* ("Rustam goes to China"), *R'ostam u Beejaanee kurree wii* ("R'ostam-Zaal and Burzo, his Son"), *R'oostam uu kurree wii Faramaz* ("Rustam and Faramarz, his Son"), *Falamas R'oostam zhi deewee Xarmaan aazaa dika* ("Faramarz saves Rustam from Xarman-dev"), *Sharree R'oostam uu kurree wii Zohraab* ("The Fight of Rustam and his son Sohrab"), *R'oostam Zuhraavee kurree xwa dikuzha* ("Rustam kills his son Sohrab"), *Sharree deewee sipii uu R'uustamii Zaal* ("The Fight of White Dev and Rustam-Zal"), *Sharree Iraanee uu Tuuraanee* ("The Struggle of Iran and Turan"), *Afrasyaab uu R'oostam* ("Afrasyab and Rustam"), *Kushtinaa R'ustam* ("The Murder of Rustam"), *Syaawuush* (Syawush"), etc.

Unlike Armenian, the Kurdish "Shahnameh" stories are more close to the original although having explicit Armenian connotations, even in onomastic system. E.g. Simurgh is represented in the texts as Azriif (Arm. *arciw* "eagle"). Besides, the Kurdish versions are composed with the models of fairy-tales with all the attributes of this genre; e.g. the opening formulae, which are the same almost in all the versions, as in fairy-tales: *jaarakee jaaraan, rrama dee uu baavee haadir guhdaaraan, i.e.* "Once upon a time, God bless the mothers and fathers of those present and listening_ "

Thus, the investigation of a local version presupposes, first of all, revealing the authentic Iranian tradition in it, then - local genuine tradition and its relation to the original tradition or other local traditions, if any. Only this previous analyses allows us further to talk on folkloric elements. Text investigation, in its turn, points out very interesting archaic elements, which, as you know, are in the best way preserved just in the language of folklore. In this regard, it is interesting to mention that Kurdish versions have preserved a number of ancient Iranian archaic elements, and Armenian - Middle Iranian elements which were not attested in Old Armenian texts. By the way, Armenian versions, although few in numbers, are mostly turning to be more interesting and, to a

certain extent, more complicated for investigation, as here, many times we meet the replacement of original characters with traditional genuine heroes.