



BAHRĀM V GŌR IN PERSIAN LEGEND AND LITERATURE

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The growth of legends around prominent figures is familiar in Persian literature, and the case of Bahrām V is an excellent example of this. The relatively colorless and straightforward accounts by the early historians (Ṭabarī, Dīnavarī, Baḷ'amī, Ebn Balkī), which emphasize Bahrām's military prowess and his efforts to rule well, contain small hints of the way the legends will develop. Ferdowsī's and Ṭa'ālebī's accounts contain many of the characteristics of popular romances: a childless king (Yazdegerd I) who eventually fathers a son, the boy's auspicious horoscope, his precocious physical and intellectual development, his education in the three areas of letters, manly arts, and kingship, and a life devoted to military and amorous adventures and the chase. His sobriquet *gōr* (wild ass) is said to have been inspired by a spectacular hunting feat where he killed a lion and an onager with one arrow, or in later accounts, by his love of hunting wild asses.

The major versions of the romance of Bahrām Gōr are in Ferdowsī's *Šāhnāma*, Neẓāmī's *Haft peykar*, and Amīr(-e) Ḳosrow's *Hašt behešt*. In each case the framework of the story is the same, but the emphasis and details differ considerably. Ferdowsī's is the most balanced, and presents the life of Bahrām in an exemplary fashion, many of his adventures giving him the opportunity to display qualities admired in Persian kings. Neẓāmī's and Amīr Ḳosrow's are



psychologically more subtle, but also more erotic and symbolic. In the latter two the account is dominated by an elaborate framed story, focused on seven princesses whom Bahrām marries and the stories that each one tells him as he visits them on successive days of the week. The symbolism of planets, colors, and the number seven pervades the romance.

One of the most remarkable differences among the various versions of the story is the manner of Bahrām’s death. Ferdowsī’s version has Bahrām die in his sleep, while in *Haft peykar* and *Hašt behešt* he chases an onager into a cave and disappears. Versions of the legend by early historians have him sink into a swamp, fall into a deep pit, or drown. Most of these variants appear to be local legends. For a discussion of this question, see M.-J. Maḥjūb, “Gūr-e Bahrām Gōr,” *Īrān-nāma* 1, 1361 Š./1983, pp. 147-63.

Bahrām Gōr is mentioned in early literary sources as the first person to write poetry in Persian. ‘Awfī, *Lobāb* I, pp. 19-20, quotes Arabic and Persian verses attributed to him, but the Persian ones are obviously of a later date.

The homonyms *gūr* “onager,” and *gūr* “grave” have led to many puns in classical Persian poetry, such as in this line from Ḥāfez: *Kamand e šayd-e bahrāmī be-afkan jām-e Jam bar dār/ke man peymūdam īn šaḥrā na Bahrām ast o na gūraš* (Throw down Bahrām’s hunting lasso and take up Jamshid’s cup/I have crossed this plain and there is neither Bahrām nor his onager, or: his grave; *Dīvān*, ed. Qazvīnī and Ġanī, Tehran, 1320 Š./1941-42, p. 188).

The adventures of Bahrām Gōr are a favorite subject for manuscript illustrations. J. Norgren and E. Davis in their *Preliminary Index of Shah-Nameh Illustrations* (Ann Arbor, 1969) list thirty-two scenes showing Bahrām Gōr, the most popular of which are “Bahrām Gōr hunting in the company of Āzāda,” “Bahrām snatching the crown from between two lions,” and “Bahrām kills a dragon.” Manuscripts of the *Haft Peykar* and *Hašt behešt* are also frequently illustrated.



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