Published: December 15, 2002
Last Updated: June 5, 2013

HAFT ḴᵛĀN

HAFTḴᵛĀN, the title of two famous episodes in Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma*, the *Haft Ḵᵛān-e Rostam*, and the *Haft Ḵᵛān-e Esfandiār*, describing seven exploits that each hero had to undertake before reaching his ultimate goal. The orthography of the word *ḵᵛān* or *ḵān*, and the structural parallels between the two episodes, have instigated debates among scholars in the past two centuries. These theories are of more than purely historical interest for they shed considerable light on the composition and function of both episodes within the framework of the *Book of Kings* as a whole.

The two standard critical editions of the *Šāh-nāma*, by Evgeniĭ Eduardovich Bertel's (see BERTHELS) et al., and Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, offer uniformly divergent spellings, *ḵᵛān* in the case of the former and *ḵān* in the case of the latter (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] II. pp. 91-110; VI, pp. 166-215; *Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, II, pp. 21-44; V, pp. 219-89). This systematic disagreement does not reflect the variations in the manuscripts, which can at times contain a mixture of the two, although, as confirmed by the critical apparatus furnished by both editions, the majority of the early manuscripts tend to favor *ḵᵛān*, an option also followed by the early Arabic translation by Fatḥ b. ʿAli Bondāri EsÂfahāni (p. 341).

The spelling is relevant to the meaning. The orthographic variations *ḵᵛ-* and *ḵ-* in the manuscripts of the *Šāh-nāma* show that *ḵᵛ-* and *ḵ-* were once distinct initial phonemes. The phonemes *ḵᵛ-* and *ḵ-* collapsed into *ḵ-*, and this merger is reflected by inconsistencies of spelling in the manuscripts. The use of the compound *haft ḵ(ᵛ)ān* in the *Šāh-nāma* reflects a traditional poetic wordplay

and double-entendre (*ihām*) associating the heroic themes of fighting and feasting (Davidson, 1994, p. 158). The semantic world of heroic ordeals, as reflected by *k̲ān*, in the sense of a stage or station (i.e., *manzel*, another term used to mark out the exploits of Esfandiār in most mss.) is poetically linked with the semantic world of heroic feasts, as reflected by the rhyming word *k̲ᵛān* in the sense of "feast," which is the stylized context for the narration of heroic ordeals. In the poetics of the *Šāh-nāma*, it is the distinctness of the two words *k̲ān* and *k̲ᵛān* that makes possible the thematic interplay between feasting and fighting. This interplay predates the phonemic merger of *k̲ᵛ* and *k̲*.

Feasting and fighting constitute a major theme associated with heroic figures in the *Šāh-nāma*, who are conventionally described as warriors particularly given to two activities, *razm* 'fighting' and *bazm* 'feasting.' The activity of feasting, with its full panoply of ceremonial rituals, is also the context for the telling of stories about the exploits of warriors, their activity of fighting. And this context is the ultimate occasion for the expression of regal authority on the two levels of performance: that of heroic prowess and of poetic skillfullness.

The same fecund duality can be seen in a synoptic scrutiny of both quests and their internal structure. Here the debates about the origin and function of the episodes can be illuminating. Thus, Friedrich Spiegel in *Eranische Altertumskunde*, (I, p. 714 ff.) and later in an article in *ZDMG* (1891, p. 201), offers an extensive review of both episodes, and attempts to prove that the exploits of Esfandiār were in fact a carefully constructed calque (on the seven quests of Rostam) by the Zoroastrian clergy, eager to extol Esfandiār as a champion of the faith over the popular hero Rostam. They thus embellished his exploits to make them appear grander in scale than those of Rostam (summary in Theodor Nöldeke, *Das Iranische Nationalepos*, p. 47, sec. 30 ff.; Eng. tr., p. 72 ff.). But as Nöldeke points out, though initially swayed by the above argument, his own final conclusions tend to go against Spiegel and favor the co-existence of different tradi-tions for the episode and, if anything, opt for privileging Esfandiār's quest as the model for that of Rostam. This judgment was mainly based on an examination of other early Persian and Arabic sources, which usually refer only to the Esfandiār quests (see Ṭabari, 1st series, II, pp. 679-80; Ṭabari, tr., IV, p. 75; Balʿami, ed. Bahār, II, p. 666; *Mojmal*, ed. Bahār, p. 52; and most extensive of all, Ṯaʿālebi, *Ḡorar*, pp. 301-38).

A detailed and in many ways convincing rebuttal of Nöldeke was presented in Kurt Heinrich Hansen's *Das Iranische Königsbuch: Aufbau und Gestalt des*

Schahname von Firdosi, in which the author examined in some detail the interaction between the royal tradition embedded in the *Šāh-nāma* and the Sistāni heroic cycle with Rostam as the main protagonist, which is also such a vital part of Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings*, but far less of a feature in the extant early Arabic and Persian prose accounts of the same material (though there are notable exceptions; see the last paragraph in this entry). But in a closer examination of Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma* and Abu Manṣur Ṯaʿālebi's (the question of the disputed authorship of the *Ḡorar* is not germane to the issue) *Ḡorar aḵbār moluk al-fors*, Hansen comes to the conclusion that omission of the Rostam episode did not indicate an ignorance of the Rostam saga. On the contrary, he argues, it was a deliber-ate policy decision for thematic reasons. He explains the lack of reference in Ṯaʿālebi, by pointing to his penchant for excising from his account material not directly relevant to his strictly 'royal' chronicle as well as his reluctance (as he points out at the beginning of the *Haft Ḵᵛān* episode of Esfandiār, with a direct jibe addressed to the Matter of Sistān; Ṯaʿālebi, *Ḡorar*, p. 301) to include what he regards as far-fetched and "marvelous." He further claims (*Das Iranische Königsbuch*, Pers. tr., p. 114, 118) that the Rostam episode is much more ingeniously put together and that it has all the hallmarks of an ancient, traditional, heroic saga (with his horse Raḵš taking an active part), and that by contrast Esfandiār's exploits seem to be a later imitation, a lackluster performance in comparison.

A close reading of both episodes may, however, suggest that the differences between the two are as much related to their mimetic function in the overall structure of the epic, as to any possible questions of precedence and imitation. In other words, it is not a case of either being finer-wrought or less naïve than the other: they are both there because of different moral and aesthetic ends, as indicated in this brief synopsis of the episodes.

i. *Haft Ḵᵛān-e Rostam*. The preliminary setting for the *haft ḵᵛān* ofRostam sets the stage for what follows, both in manner and matter. Unlike that of Esfandiār, there is no long preamble, and no slow, elaborate buildup. The episode is woven with an almost imperceptible stitch in the wide cloth of the epic. The concise exchange between father and son, Zāl and Rostam, uttered in a clipped military manner, captures the stark, almost minimalist tone of this solitary quest by the hero and his horse. Rostam's terse question "The road is long, how can I fare without an army?" is answered in a staccato manner by his father, "From this kingdom to the other," said Zāl, "there are two ways, both requiring hardship: One is the way Kāvus rode, the other mountains and

uplands for seven days and nights. Filled by lions, ogres and darkness, fixating you in awe. Choose the short cut; witness marvels, for you will have the World Creator at your side." (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, II, p. 19, lines 247-551).

At the outset of the quest, a hunt and a feast set the tone. The aura of a single-handed strife is maintained: the hero hunts, kills, skins, roasts, eats, and throws the gnawed bones away. There are no pots and pans, no rich trappings of a princely table (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, II, pp. 21-22, lines 281-84). Solitariness pervades all: the feast and the fight, the quest and the rest.

Zāl's promise that the Creator will be the guardian companion is confirmed by the first two *k̲ᵛān*s, in which Rostam is the one saved, rather than the savior. In the first, he falls asleep and is attacked by a lion, but Rak̲š fights the beast and kills it. In the second, he crosses a desert where he almost perishes, but is shown the way to a watering place by a divine guide in the shape of a wild ram. Again there is a simple description of the hero's thankful prayers and purification in water, a recurrent motif in both quests, followed by a solitary feast. As a micro-episode in itself, it reads as an allegorical gloss on the human predicament: the initial sense of anguish and abandonment, followed by trust and submission, and finally salvation.

Talking dragons and cunning witches provide the next two ordeals. In the third *K̲ᵛān*, Rostam confronts a dragon with the manners of a human adversary: the hero, aided by his horse, kills the dragon but only after some initial flyting. In the fourth, an alluring banquet in a paradisiacal setting is the opening gambit (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, II, p. 29, lines 391-93). There is gentle irony in the way that Rostam picks up the lute left by the sorcerers and, before embarking on his banquet, laments the hard life allotted to him, and the fact that God has never bestowed on him a feast in an idyllic setting. There is a further twist and irony lurking in the corner. The hero's lament is, in a sense, justified: the banquet belongs to the witches rather than to God and is the prelude to a new hostile encounter. Once again, in conformity with the terseness of the plot, the mention of God's name is sufficient to destroy the witch's schemes. Unlike Esfandiār in his parallel ordeal, Rostam has no talismanic armbands provided by a prophet.

In the last three ordeals, Rostam captures Ulād, the local lord of the marches, and forces him to become his guide for the rest of the quest. As often in the *Šāh-nāma*, there are echoes of other parts of the poem, not only in terms of similar plot motifs, but also in the descriptive repertoire. In the fifth *k̲ᵛān*, for

example, the description of the night, “black as a cannibal’s face,” at the beginning of the episode (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, II, p. 31, line 419) is reminiscent of the generally more familiar description of the dark motionless night in the beginning of the *Bižan o Maniža* episode (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, III, pp. 303-4, lines 1-8), with several shared key images. In the final two ordeals, Rostam manages to defeat and kill his supernatural foes, most notably Aržang the Div, and finally the main target of the quest, Div-e Sapid (the White Demon), thus not only securing Kāvus’s freedom but also restoring his sight by bathing his eyes in the Div’s blood. In the final stage, both physical and moral sight are restored, and the usually intemperate and irascible Kāvus decides on a magnanimous response to the conflict: he consults, and is endorsed by, Rostam and the other notables of the court, who feast together for seven days in complete harmony.

ii. *Haft K̲ᵛān-e Esfandiār.* In contrast to the understated way in which the ordeals of Rostām are interwoven into the rest of the narrative, that of Esfandiār is marked out by an elaborate prologue: a long panegyric to Sultan Maḥmud, with the poet implying at the outset that he will be the reciter (*šāh-nāma k̲ᵛān*) of his own magnificent tale: “And now I shall present seven banquets (*haft k̲ᵛān*); I shall serve fresh, choice words” *Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, V, p. 218, line 1534). This prelude to the enconium is echoed at the outset of the narrative itself, with the archetypal guardian of the traditions, the *dehqān*, replacing the poet and spreading out the rich fare and embarking on the *haft k̲ᵛān* (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, V, p. 221, line 21).

In contrast to Zāl’s brief sketch of the challenges ahead, it is the captured enemy commander, Gorgsār, who recites, with undisguised rhetorical relish, the long catalogue of the perils and pitfalls that awaits Esfandiār and requires a series of quests replete with embellishments and ingenious engines of war. The entire ordeal, including its formulaic repetitions (e.g., Gorgsār being given three cups of wine in every ordeal before he is interrogated about the future hurdles) has a strong, consciously rhetorical/sacramental veneer, confirming the promise at the outset that this is a polished piece of narration. This is further endorsed if the episode is compared with the prose rendition given in the *Ḡorar* and the way they replicate each other, even in detailed imagery (compare “the sun draped in a yellow robe,” *Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, V, p. 236, line 191, and Ṯaʿālebi, *Ḡorar*, pp. 306-7).

The ordeals themselves provide many parallels and contrasts to that of Rostam. Unlike the Sistāni champion, the Kayanid prince and his entourage

appear to take an active role in the first two ordeals, with Esfandiār beheading two wolves in the first, and killing two lions in the second. The fight with the dragon in the third is, in conformity with the texture of the entire episode, a more elaborate affair, involving a special chariot with spikes. In the fourth ordeal, the talismanic armband originating from Zoroaster himself, recalls Esfandiār's role as a sanctified prince and defender of the faith, an image reinforced in the fifth ordeal by his supplication to the Almighty after killing Simorḡ (*ʿAnqā* in the Arabic versions)—the famous mythical bird and helper of Ros-tam, regarded as an evil supernatural being in this context (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, V, p. 243, lines 270-73). The challenge of the snowstorm in the sixth ordeal, and the initial reluctance of his entourage to face imminent death, echoing the disappearance of Kayḵosrow at the end of his reign, again reinforces the communal aspect of Esfandiār's *k̲ᵛāns*, and is reflected in its social and political vocabulary of gift-giving and contractual obligations (*ʿahd*, *sowgand*, *k̲elʿat*; *Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, V, p. 247, lines 323-24). After that, they all cross the river, which is the seventh "course," and Esfandiār asks Gorgsār how he would feel after they devastate the Turāniān lands. Gorgsār retorts that he wishes Esfandiār ill, whereupon Esfandiār kills him.

As stressed above, Rostam goes through his seven ordeals completely alone, with the exception of his horse, whereas Esfandiār has an army, a minister, a brother, and a guide from the very beginning. It should be noted in this context, that in his brief account of the *Haft K̲ᵛān*, Ṭabari allots others in the quest, Fašutan, Āḏarnuš, and Mehrin, a share in the final victory (Ṭabari, 1st series, II, p. 680). Esfandiār's entourage seems to be there to underscore his "princely rank," for what is a prince without followers, or even better, what prince will act without some sort of consultant, that is, Gorgsār, to guide him every step of the way? Hence, though Esfandiār leaves organized society, that is, Iran proper, to go to Turān, a place that is constantly threatening to disrupt the order of Iran, he keeps a link with this ordered society in the form of the organized army, ministers, and so on, who accompany him. If one regards each hero's *haft k̲ᵛān* as an instance of the warrior's separation from society, as part of a "rite of passage," then Esfandiār is "marked" (to use a Jacobsonian term of the Prague School of Linguistics) whereas Rostam is "unmarked," in that both are warriors but Esfandiār is a sovereign as well as a warrior.

Hence, the two *haft k̲ᵛāns* are distinct battle-narratives framed by distinct banquet-settings, ostensibly enjoyed by the hero but also dramatizing the context of the recitation of the narrative itself. This can be taken even further

if we look at the two heroes' songs while they are at a banquet before they encounter their respective sorceresses. Rostam sings about himself in the third person, how hard his life is fighting all alone in the wilderness, like an outcast, where the wilderness must serve him as a cultivated garden. He mourns that he will never experience the ordered or cultured garden. He will always be an outsider, that is, a liminal figure. Esfandiār, on the other hand, has quite a different song (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Kha-leghi, V, p. 237, lines 202-6), switches from the third to the first person halfway, and ends with a set description of an ideal beauty. In comparing these two passages, one may note that they accurately describe the nature of their respective heroes. Rostam is a "loner," or an outsider, and always will be out of synchrony with society, whereas Esfandiār is a prince and thereby potentially embodies the very essence of the body politic. Both, however, yearn for a civilized dinner in a well-structured social setting. The audience, however, who is listening to their respective songs while they literally feast, is also enjoying its own feast, that is, all seven courses of the *haft ḵᵛān* that the hero is performing.

The difference in the mimetic function of the two episodes, alluded to at the outset, can be further clarified by using sources not available or not exploited by earlier scholars. In this context, Šahmardān b. Abi'l-Ḵayr's *Nozhat-nāma-ye ʿAlāʾi*, written in 513/1119-20 (Lazard, p. 103), provides an early counterpart (pp. 319-44) to Ṯaʿālebi's *Ḡorar*. On the one hand, it dismisses much of the adventures of Rostam as "mere" fable (*afsāna*, p. 319), and on the other, admits to their charm and attraction and provides possible explanations to make the story, including the blindness of Kāvus, confirm to common notions of verisimilitude (p. 343, with a brief description of Rostam's *haft ḵᵛān*). If the Sistāni cycle could not be so readily absorbed into the later fictions of advice and *adab* literature, it retained its hold on other spheres of cultural imagination, from murals and book illustrations coveted and commissioned by princes (already pointed out in Ṯaʿālebi, *Ḡorar*, p. 302), and the stock imagery of classical Persian poetry, to the oral stories collected by Abu'l-Qāsem Enjavi Širāzi (q.v.) more than three decades ago among ordinary townspeople and villagers of all ages and regions of Iran (I, pp. 78-90).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abu ʿAli Moḥammad Balʿami, *Tāriḵ-e Balʿami*, ed. M. T. Bahār, I, 1341 Š./1962.

Fatḥ b. ʿAli Bondāri Eṣfahāni, tr. *al-Šāh-nāma*, ed. ʿA. ʿAzzām, 2 vols. in one, Cairo, 1350/1932; repr. Tehran, 1349 Š./1970.

Arthur Christensen, *Les Kayanides*, Copenhagen, 1932.

Olga M. Davidson, "The Haft Khwān Tradition as an Intertextual Phenomenon in Ferdowsi's *Shāh-nāma*," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 4. *In Honor of Richard Nelson Frye*, 1990, pp. 209-15.

Idem, *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1994.

Abu'l-Qāsem Enjavi Širāzi, *Mardom o qahra-mānān-e Šāh-nāma*, Tehran, 1357 Š./1978; repr. as *Ferdowsi-nāma*, 3 vols., Tehran, 1369 Š./1990.

Kurt Heinrich Hansen, *Das iranische Königsbuch: Aufbau und Gestalt des Schahname von Firdosi*, Wiesbaden, 1955; tr. into Per. by K. Jahāndāri as *Šāh-nāma-ye Ferdowsi: sāḵtār o qāleb*, Tehran, 1996.

Gilbert Lazard, *La langue des plus anciens monuments de la prose persane*, Paris, 1963. Turner Macan, *The Shah-nameh*, 4 vols., Calcutta, 1829.

Marcia E. Maguire, "The *Haft Khvān* of Rostam and Isfandiyār," in Peter J. Chelkowski, ed., *Studies in Art and Literature of the Near East in Honor of Richard Ettinghausen*, Utah and New York, 1974, pp. 137-59.

Theodor Nöldeke, *Das Iranische Nationalepos*, 2nd ed., Berlin and Leipzig, 1920; tr. into Eng. by L. T. Bogdanov as *The Iranian National Epic or the Shahnamah*, Bombay, 1930; tr. into Per. by Bozorg ʿAlavi as *Ḥamāsa-ye melli-e Irān*, Tehran, 1327 Š./1948.

Maḥmud Omidsālār, "Rāz-e ruyin-tani-e Esfandiār," *Irān-nāma* 1/2, 1983, pp. 254-81.

Idem, "Rostam's Seven Trials and the Logic of Epic Narrative in the Shahnama," *Asian Folklore Studies* 60/2, 2001, pp. 259-93.

Šahmardān b. Abi’l-Ḵayr, *Nozhat-nāma-ye ʿAlāʾi*, ed. Farhang Rajāʾi, Tehran, 1362 Š./1983.

Friedrich Spiegel, *Erānische Altertumskunde*, 3 vols., Leipzig, 1871-78.

Idem, “Ãwesta und Schâhnâma,” *ZDMG* 45, 1891, pp. 187-203.

Abu Man-ṣur Ṯaʿālebi, *Ḡorar aḵbār moluk al-Fors*, ed. and tr. H. Zotenberg as *Histoire des rois des Perses*, Paris, 1900.

Moḥammad b. Jarir Ṭabari, *Ketāb taʾriḵ al-rosol wa’l-moluk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., 15 vols., Leiden, 1879-1901, 2nd ed., 1964.