



## ḤOSAYN-E KORD-E ŠABESTARI

**ḤOSAYN-E KORD-E ŠABESTARI**, Persian popular romance narrating the exploits of a Kurdish warrior from Šabestar known solely by the name of Ḥosayn.

The romance begins by recalling that the governor of Tabriz, a subject of the Safavid shah ‘Abbās, had recently attacked and devastated Balk. The governor of Balk turns for help to the emperor in Keṭā, “Mongolia,” who responds by dispatching two warriors to Tabriz and Isfahan, each with his own small band of fighters; his ultimate aim is the disposal of Shah ‘Abbās. One of the two Mongol warriors, Babrāz Khan, heads for Tabriz, where he robs the mint, kills many innocent people, and starts terrorizing the city. As the governor and his warriors prove unable to resist the menace, the hero Ḥosayn suddenly appears and offers to help. From his introduction into the tale, Ḥosayn, who possesses an almost superhuman strength, dominates the plot. He defeats Babrāz Khan after a series of duels, and goes on to take revenge on behalf of one of his friends who has been mistreated by the governor of Mašhad, before traveling to Isfahan. In the capital, Ḥosayn saves the imprudent Shah ‘Abbās (who would walk around the city at night in disguise) from being taken prisoner by the second band of Mongols that had been dispatched. After annihilating the latter in a series of battles, Ḥosayn enjoys a few moments of leisure in admiring the beautiful young male dancer Yusof, and, shortly thereafter, in satisfying his carnal desire with a female singer. When Shah ‘Abbās tries to recruit Ḥosayn for his own troops, he declines. In order to prove his independence, he plans instead to acquire tribute for seven years



from the Mughal emperor Akbar. He travels to India and, after numerous adventures, challenges, and misfortunes, finally gains Akbar's acceptance, not to mention his admiration. After a whole year in Akbar's service, Ḥosayn travels home. The story comes to an open end shortly after his successful arrival back in Isfahan.

The only known manuscript of the romance dates from 1255/1839-40. Although the origin of the narrative itself remains obscure, a stylistic analysis reveals a strong association with the oral tradition of professional storytellers, supporting the view that it was probably not committed to writing much earlier than the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Soon after the date of the manuscript, *Ḥosayn-e Kord* became popular in lithograph editions, most of which were adorned with simple illustrations. The *editio princeps*, dating from 1265/1848-49, was followed by numerous further lithographs as well as later, printed editions in Tehran and Bombay; the survival of the tale in the oral tradition of the twentieth century is rarely documented, a fact that might be due to the lack of appreciation of this issue among researchers (see Amini, pp. 206-9, no. 30).

*Ḥosayn-e Kord* is a rare example of a Persian popular romance with a clearly identifiable geographical and historical setting: apart from the Central Asian locations mentioned at the very beginning, it is set in Persia and India, specifically during the period of overlap between the reigns of the Safavid ruler Shah 'Abbās (r. 1587-1629) and the Mughal emperor Jalāl-al-Din Akbar (r. 1556-1605). It also contains further historical references to the ongoing strife between the Sunnite Uzbeks and the Shi'ite Qezelbāš (for which reason Maḥjub, pp. 533-34, regarded the romance as a "religious epic"). However, such historical references merely set the stage for the glorification of the hero of the romance.

While the events recounted in the narrative may seem highly repetitious, Ḥosayn matures as an individual in the course of it. He is strong, fearless, and valiant from the very beginning, but on several occasions, owing to his being unaware of the danger, he is captured, and almost killed, only to resurface later, stronger than ever. In this way, Ḥosayn emerges as the exemplary hero who has devoted his life to fighting in the name of justice, and represents a late example of the traditional Persian ideal of chivalry (see JAVĀNMARDI; Hanaway, pp. 64-65), such as that portrayed in the classical Persian romance of *Samak-e 'ayyār*. While Ḥosayn, through his experiences as a warrior, eventually matures into an almost invincible hero, his pursuit of mostly



individual goals and his neglect of his own social needs make him, at the same time, a vulnerable figure; his few emotional encounters with females constitute no more than short digressions from the main narrative. From this perspective, in contrast with the heroes of other Persian popular romances, Ḥosayn seems more of “an idealized outsider.”

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