

The *Shahnama* in Print Lithographed Editions of the Persian National Epic

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For many centuries since the time of its compilation, the *Shahnama* was exclusively copied by calligraphers making manuscripts, many of which were then illustrated with magnificent pictures. It is only at the beginning of the 19th century that printed copies of the *Shahnama* appear. The new dimension – a published text of the Persian national epic in print and in multiple – is due to British colonial scholars in India. Matthew Lumsden (1777–1835), professor of Arabic and Persian at the College of Fort William and one of the most prolific European Persianists of his day, undertook to publish a complete edition of Firdausi's epic poem, projected in eight printed volumes, but only managed the first; it appeared in 1811. The first complete printed edition of the *Shahnama* was achieved two decades later, by Major Turner Macan (who later also earned fame for bringing to India the manuscript of the *Thousand and One Nights* on which this work's subsequent edition, by William Hay Macnaghten, was based). Macan's edition of the *Shahnama*, in four volumes, was published in 1829 in Calcutta. Besides this *editio princeps*, other 19th-century editions are the work of Jules Mohl (Paris, 1838–1878) and Johann August Vullers (Leiden, 1877–1879) (see also the essay by Mojtaba Kolivand). Yet by far the greatest number of the early printed editions of the *Shahnama* as produced in India and Iran, by means of lithography.

Book Printing in Iran and India

In Iran, the art of printing as a pervasive permanent cultural practice was only established in the second decade of the 19th century. Thanks to the initiative of 'Abbas Mirza (1783–1833), governor of the province of Azerbaijan, printing equipment was imported into Iran from England and, somewhat later, from Russia. Movable type – typography – was the first printing technique to be practiced in Iran. Used by the Orientalist printing houses in India and elsewhere for some time prior, it did not, however, yield satisfactory results and really only became successful toward the end of the 19th century. Already in the late 18th century, Alois Senefelder in Prague had invented the process of lithographic printing. This technique was soon to become extremely popular for the printing of Persian texts in Iran and India, since it permitted the production of printed works by relatively simple technical means and at comparatively low cost.

Lithography was practiced in Iran in this manner: the item to be printed – whether text, illumination, or illustration – was first prepared on a special sheet of paper to which the greasy ink, in which text, ornament, and image had been created, would not permanently adhere. This original copy was then used to print a negative image onto the surface of the lithographic stone, the stone having been treated with weakened *aqua fortis*; the printer's ink would be repelled in those places touched by the *aqua fortis*. Some 300 to 400 copies could be printed from any original, before the surface of the only existing negative image would weaken and wear

out. Introduced to Iran in about 1830, lithographic printing was so successful that, for some time, printing from movable type was abandoned altogether. In fact, most works printed in the Arabic script in Iran, India, and Central Asia in this period were produced by means of lithography.

As with 15th-century incunabula in Europe, lithography in Iran at first resulted in the production of books whose formal conception and layout were more or less identical to manuscript volumes. Compared with movable type, lithography had a special advantage: it allowed calligraphers, illuminators, and illustrators to work on the very same surface. Books produced by this technique might be comparable, in quality, to the fine illustrated manuscripts of previous centuries.

Western literary scholars, however, traditionally regarded lithographed classical Persian texts with a certain disdain. In their opinion, such editions did not stand up to the criteria of critical scholarship and, at best, were regarded as only another "manuscript" version. Theodor Nöldeke is one of the few European scholars to have discussed lithographed editions of the *Shahnama* in any detail. Even though he judged them to be of comparatively little value for the purpose of textual criticism, he did admit that their publishers had invested considerable effort and care in their production.

The First Printed Editions of the *Shahnama*

In terms of the text, the lithographed editions of the *Shahnama* closely follow Macan's *editio princeps*. A certain amount of variation probably results from a lack of care on the part of the calligraphers, rather than from conscious editorial decisions. Even so, when evaluating the quality of lithographed *Shahnama* editions, we should bear in mind that the demands of the reading public in the East differed widely from the expectations of the West. Western scholars preparing critical editions of the *Shahnama* took great care to establish a text that aimed to be as close as possible to the presumed original, hence the concern with identifying

later textual "interference". "Oriental" editors, on the other hand, addressed an audience of Indian and Iranian readers, for whom the *Shahnama* constituted a greatly admired work of classical literature, for whom the *Shahnama* was part of their heritage, and their cultural identity. "Oriental" readers, then, were not so much concerned with the critical substance of the text. Instead, possessing a personal copy of the *Shahnama* had long been a matter of honor and pride, even if most would not have been able to afford the commission of a handwritten copy, or even the purchase of one that might already exist. For the first time, lithographed editions made affordable the personal possession of the *Shahnama* volume with which its "Oriental" readers would be quite satisfied, so long as the work contained more-or-less what they expected it would contain. What were of importance to them, however, was the work's material presentation and its appearance.

This criterion applied, first of all, to the appealing appearance of its Persian *nasta'liq* calligraphy, documented, for instance, by the fact that the 1855 Indian edition written by the famous calligrapher Auliya' Sami' al-Shirazi was reprinted many times in the offset technique. Moreover, the "Oriental" audience was well aware that magnificent illustrated manuscripts of the *Shahnama* had been produced for wealthy patrons in prior centuries. Consequently, they likewise expected that their lithographed editions of the *Shahnama* should also be adorned with illustrations and illumination. In this sense, lithographed editions of the *Shahnama* are indeed works of art, albeit – in comparison with Timurid and Safavid copies, with their splendid calligraphy and their splendid paintings – lithographed *Shahnamas* are perhaps better judged on their own terms: fairly modest aesthetically, later Indian editions in particular. The unpretentious quality of Persian lithographed *Shahnama* illustrations by no means justifies their disregard. On the contrary, Persian lithographed books offer the charming simplicity of an art that, given its production in hundreds of copies, derives a special significance from this: owning a copy was now within reach of the common people, and no longer reserved for the privileged few. Appreciating this social dimension may eventually contribute to a better understanding of the art of the Persian book in the Qajar period.

Lithographed Editions of the *Shahnama*

The exact number of lithographed editions of the *Shahnama* remains unknown. The available bibliographical data, starting with the Bombay edition of 1846, suggests that some 30 lithographed Oriental editions of the *Shahnama* were probably published, most of them in India, in Bombay, Lucknow, and Cawnpore. By contrast, only five lithographed *Shahnama* editions were ever published in Iran – in Tehran and Tabriz – in the course of more than half a century, from 1851 to 1904. This disparity, compared with some 25 Indian editions of the *Shahnama* published in the 70-year period from about 1850 to 1920, is striking but the reasons for it remain obscure. Economic factors, such as the price of paper or the salaries of those who produced the printed volumes, must have played a certain role. We should also bear in mind that the Indian editions were not exclusively – perhaps not even primarily – intended to satisfy local demand, since substantial numbers of books printed in Persian in India were exported to Iran. We should also consider the central significance of the *Shahnama* for the Zoroastrian communities in India: the epic established their link to the glorious past of the country from which they had come. This is corroborated by images illustrating the moment in which Zoroaster founds the religion that bears his name, his handing over the sacred fire to Gushtasp. Understandably, the episode is rarely included in the numerous *Shahnama* manuscripts commissioned by Muslim patrons, let alone by princes and shahs. Yet in all the work's lithographed editions, both in Iran and notably in India, it is part of the standard pictorial repertoire.

Three years after the publication of the first lithographed *Shahnama* of 1846 – in 1849, the year following Nasir al-Din Shah's ascension to the throne – work began on the *Shahnama*'s first Iranian edition. Its calligraphy is the work of the famous scribe Mustafa-Quli ibn Muhammad Hadi Sultan Kajuri, and it is, accordingly, known as the *Shahnama-yi Kajuri*. Its illustrations were executed by Mirza 'Ali-Quli Khu'i (Fig. 1), unrivaled master of lithographic illustration in Iran. Work on this edition was completed in 1851, some two years later. In the meantime, a second Indian edition had been published, in 1849, and further Indian editions fol-

lowed in rapid succession. The second Iranian edition, illustrated by Ustad Sattar (Fig. 2), was published in Tabriz in 1858, but by that date, at least four more editions had appeared in India, including one with calligraphy by Auliya' Sami' al-Shirazi. The third Iranian edition, illustrated by Mustafa (Fig. 3), only appeared in 1889, about forty years after the second Iranian edition and, again, many more editions had appeared in those decades in India, including another with calligraphy by Auliya' Sami', and two editions from the firm of the well-known publisher Newal Kishore. The fourth Iranian edition dates from 1898; the text of the fifth, and last, Iranian edition of the *Shahnama* was completed in 1904. Commissioned by the highly influential politician Husain Pasha Khan Amir Bahadur, it is known as the *Shahnama-yi Bahaduri*.

Various reasons blur our understanding of the exact number of 19th- and 20th-century Indian editions of the *Shahnama*. For instance, the Bombay 1913 edition is a photomechanical reproduction of a previous edition, dated 1855. Later Indian versions came to be of increasingly modest quality, both in terms of physical appearance and in the care invested on the text as well as the illustrations. The last lithographed edition of the *Shahnama* prepared in India is probably that published in Cawnpore in 1919.

The first lithographed edition of the *Shahnama*, of 1846, contains 57 illustrations and, just as with other illustrated lithographed works of Persian literature, it set the standard for virtually all *Shahnama* editions to follow. Most later illustrations are either faithful copies of earlier pictures or are at least inspired by their models; only rarely were new illustrations (or new subjects) introduced into the repertoire. It is interesting to note that the two earliest Indian editions apparently represent two different iconographical schools. The first and second Iranian editions follow the iconographical program of the first Indian one, of 1846, while the third and fourth Iranian editions are modeled on the second Indian one, of 1849. We should keep in mind, however, that it is well nigh impossible to draw a clear line of distinction between "Indian" and "Iranian" editions. Many of the editors, calligraphers, and artists collaborating on the publication of Persian texts in India were of Persian origin, often from



1 "Rustam Kills the White Div"
(Tehran, 1849–51; Artist: Mirza
'Ali-Quli Khu'i)

2 "The Div Akvan Carries the
Sleeping Rustam" (Tabriz,
1858; Artist: Ustad Sattar)

3 "Rustam Kills his Half-
Brother Shaghad before He
Himself Dies" (Tehran, 1889;
Artist: Mustafa)

Shiraz. Moreover, a certain number of books printed in India were undoubtedly produced for Iranian customers. The extent of this international cooperation, and its mechanisms and consequences, remain to be studied.

At the same time, it is not easy to account for the relatively limited production of lithographed *Shahnama* copies in Iran. The first printed edition of the *Shahnama* in India – Macan's, of 1829 – was published when the art of printing had already been introduced to Iran, in the reign of the Qajar monarch Fath-'Ali Shah (1797–1834); his successor, Muhammad Shah (1834–48), would, shortly thereafter, witness the success of lithographic printing in Iran. Yet neither of these Qajar rulers appears to have been interested in using the new techniques of printing to effect a wider distribution of the national epic in Iran. Muhammad Shah did commission a luxurious lithographed edition of a major work of classical Persian literature; instead of the *Shahnama*, he chose Nizami's collection of five poems known as *Khamsa*. It was left to the young Nasir al-Din Shah, Iran's last traditional monarch (1848–1896), to commission the *Shahnama*'s first Iranian edition following his accession to the throne. And

while two more Iranian editions were prepared during Nasir al-Din's long reign, India remained the major locus of production for the Persian national epic in multiple.

The *Shahnama-yi Bahaduri*

The *Shahnama-yi Bahaduri* holds a special position within the overall group of lithographed Iranian editions, differing from all the others in several aspects. If in size it is the largest lithographed book ever produced in Iran (43 x 32 centimeters), it also only has 40 illustrations, considerably fewer than the standard suite of at least 57 found in most Indian and Iranian editions. Moreover, the illustrations are not integrated within the text; instead they were printed on separate sheets whose reverse sides were left blank. These were added to the book during the process of binding, written explanations identifying the specific relation of image to text. It is not altogether clear how many illustrations might have been prepared for this particular *Shahnama*, and who decided which picture(s) to bind together with the text at



4 "Suhrab Slain by Rostam"
(Tehran, 1901–1904; Artist:
Muhammad-Kazim)

exactly which point of the book; moreover, it is uncertain that each and every copy of the *Shahnama-yi Bahaduri* includes the same set of illustrations. While presenting more or less the usual complement of traditional subjects, the illustrations are clearly influenced by European styles of painting, particularly in the realistic depiction of figures and the use of perspective, features unknown in traditional Iranian art. Moreover, the *Shahnama-yi Bahaduri* includes extensive introductory texts highlighting the context of its production; it also includes true portraits, images of both of Nasir al-Din's successors, Muzaffar al-Din and Muhammad-'Ali, and of the sponsor, Amir Bahadur, the work of the famous artist Musavvir al-Mulk (Fig. 5).

While little is known about the context in which earlier Iranian editions of the *Shahnama* were produced, a considerable amount is known about the circumstances of the *Shahnama-yi Bahaduri's* creation. Especially striking is the long hiatus, the interval of more than four years, between March 1904 when the process of printing appears to have been virtually finished, and July 1908, when the individual illustrations were bound into the volume. Perhaps, the interval is to be explained by contemporary political circumstances: the constitutional revolution, ending in Muzaffar al-Din's forced signing of the new constitution, just days before he died on January 10, 1907. Conflicts between his successor, Muhammad-'Ali, and the constitutionalists culminated in the *coup d'état* of June 24, 1909, in which the Shah called on the army to dissolve parliament. Continuing political opposition, together with civilian unrest, would subsequently force the new Shah to abdicate and leave the country.

Seen against this background, we may appreciate that the *Shahnama-yi Bahaduri* was produced in a highly charged period of Iranian history. It is ironic that the epic celebrating Iranian monarchy, the *Shahnama – the Book of Kings* – was dedicated to the Shah of the moment at the very time when the threat to the Iranian monarchy was greater than ever before. Yet we should also recall that it was not the Shah, himself, who had commissioned its production but rather the politician Husain Pasha Khan, known as Amir Bahadur. His long-time service to Muzaffar al-Din, and the position of great influence he had gradually gained,



5 Portrait of Amir Bahadur
(Tehran, 1901–1904; Artist:
Musavvir al-Mulk)

had earned him the dubious reputation of being “virtually dictator of Persia.” Stoutly opposed to the constitutionalist cause, Amir Bahadur stood out as one of the “most stubborn reactionaries” but, as a devout nationalist, he also possessed great affection for Firdausi’s *Shahnama*, whose verses he is said to have recited on various occasions. A staunch defender of imperial rule, the profile of its sponsor helps to account for the *Shahnama-yi Bahaduri*, commissioned at a time when the very concept of monarchy in Iran was beginning to disintegrate. Seen in this context, Amir Bahadur appears to defy contemporary political developments with his enduring vision of Iran’s glorious monarchic past. If he failed to appreciate the changing realities of his world, Amir Bahadur did sponsor the most splendid printed edition of Firdausi’s *Shahnama* ever produced, undoubtedly a superb piece of lithographic printing in Iran.

Shahnama Lithographic Editions so far Recorded:

1 1262/1846, Bombay

Page: 21,5 x 31,5 cm; written surface 14,5 x 24 cm, 4 columns, 27 lines; calligraphy by Riza al-Husayni al-Shirazi; 57 illustrations by an anonymous artist; edited by Muhammad Mahdi Isfahani

2 1266/1849, Bombay

Page: 19,5 x 29 cm; written surface 4,2 x 23,9 cm, 4 columns, 27 lines; calligraphy by Riza ibn Ahmad al-Husayni al-Shirazi; 57 illustrations by 'Ali Akbar; published by Muhammad Baqir Shirazi

3 1265–1267/1849–1851, Tehran

Page: 20,5 x 33 cm; written surface 15,5 x 26,5 cm, 4 columns, 29 lines; calligraphy by Mustafa-Quli ibn Muhammad Hadi Sultan Kajuri; 57 illustrations by Mirza 'Ali-Quli Khu'i; published by Hajji Muhammad Husayn Tihrani

4 1270/1853, Bombay

Calligraphy by Aqa Baba

5 1272/1855, Bombay

(photomechanical reprint, Bombay, 1331/1913) Page: 25,5 x 35,5 cm; written surface 19,5 x 30 cm, 6 columns, 33 lines; calligraphy by Muhammad Ibrahim ibn Muhammad Husayn Khan Auliya' Sami' al-Shirazi; 58 illustrations by Muhammad ibn Mirza Kazim al-Husayni al-Shirazi; published by Muhammad-Baqir Shirazi

6 1274/1857, Cawnpore

7 1274–1275/1857–1858, Bombay

Page: 38,5 x 25,5 cm; written surface 19,5 x 32 cm, 6 columns, 37 lines; calligraphy by 'Abd al-Karim ibn Muhammad Ibrahim al-Tabataba'i al-Isfahani al-Ardistani, Muhammad ibn 'Abdallah al-Shirazi; published by Muhammad Sadiq Shirazi

8 1275/1858, Tabriz

Page: 22,5 x 36 cm; written surface 6,5 x 29,5, 6 columns, 29 lines; calligraphy by 'Askar Khan ibn Husayn-Beg Urdubadi Tabrizi; 57 illustrations by Ustad Sattar; published by Mashdi Hajji Aqa ibn Aqa Ahmad Tabrizi

9 1275–1276/1858–1859, Bombay

Page: 21 x 31 cm; written surface 16,5 x 27,5 cm, 6 columns, 37 lines; calligraphy by 'Abd al-Karim ibn Muhammad Ibrahim al-Tabataba'i al-Isfahani al-Ardistani, and Mirza Muhammad Riza ibn Aqa Muhammad Husayn Shirazi; published by Mirza Baqir ibn Mirza Kuchik Shirazi

10 1275/1858, Bombay

Calligraphy by Mirza Muhammad ibn Mirza 'Ali Tabib Shahid-i Shirazi

11 1276/1859, Bombay

Page: 22,5 x 33 cm; written surface 6,5 x 26 cm, 6 columns, 32 lines; calligraphy by Muhammad Ibrahim ibn Muhammad-Husayn Khan Auliya' Sami'; 56 illustrations by Muhammad ibn Mirza Kazim al-Husayni al-Shirazi

12 1279/1862, India

13 1284/1867, Lucknow

14 1287/1870, Lucknow

Page: 26,5 x 41 cm, written surface 22 x 36 cm, 6 columns, 37 lines; calligraphy by Janki Parshad; publisher Newal Kishore

15 1290/1874, Cawnpore

16 1291/1875, Cawnpore

17 1298–1300/1881–1883, Bombay

Calligraphy by Mirza 'Ali-Khan al-Fasavi; publisher Haydari 1301/1884, Lucknow Page: 30 x 19,5 cm; published by Newal Kishore

19 1307/1889, Tehran

Page: 21 x 34 cm, written surface 16,5 x 28 cm, 6 columns, 33 lines; calligraphy by Muhammad Riza Safa Sultan al-Kuttab ibn Hajji Khaqani Mahallati; 62 illustrations by Mustafa; published by Muhammad Husayn Kashani

20 1306–1308/1888–1890, Bombay

Page: 23 x 32 cm; written surface 18 x 27,5 cm, 6 columns, 37 lines; calligraphy by Sayyid Nazim-Husayn Rizavi Muhani; published by Qazi 'Abd al-Karim ibn Qazi Nur-Muhammad, Qazi Fath-Muhammad; publisher Fath al-Karim

21 1308–1315/1890–1898, Bombay

Page: 24,5 x 33 cm; written surface 18,5 x 28 cm, 6 columns, 37 lines; calligraphy by Mir Baraqani Murtaza al-Husayni, 'Ali Riza ibn Abu al-Hasan ibn Mirza Aqa; published by Aqa Mirza Ibrahim Shirazi; publisher Nadiri

22 1314/1897, Cawnpore

Page: 31,5 cm; publisher Newal Kishore

23 1315/1898, Bombay

publisher A'ina-yi Khurshid

24 1316/1898, Tabriz

Page: 21 x 36 cm; written surface 17 x 28 cm; calligraphy by Mirza 'Ali Dilkhun ibn Muhammad Javad Tabrizi; 63 illustrations by 'Abd al-Husayn, Karbala'i Hasan; published by 'Ali-Aqa

25 1321/1903, Bombay

1319–1322/1901–1904, Tehran Calligraphy by 'Imad al-Kuttab; 41 illustrations by 'Ali-Khan, Muhammad Kazim, and Husayn-'Ali; portraits by Musavvir al-Mulk; commissioned by Amir Bahadur

26 1326/1909, Cawnpore

Page: 21 x 32,5 cm; publisher Newal Kishore

27 1338/1919, Cawnpore

Literature:

Marzolph 2001, 2003 and 2006; Van Zutphen 2009.

Heroic Times

A Thousand Years of the Persian *Book of Kings*

For the Museum für Islamische Kunst –
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
and the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin

edited by
Julia Gonnella and Christoph Rauch



**Museum für
Islamische Kunst**
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Preußischer Kulturbesitz

Edition Minerva