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Sunset of Empire. Stories from the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi. Volume III, Translation from the Persian by Dick Davis, Washington DC, Mage Publishers, 2004, 552 p.

Christine Van Ruymbeke



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*Sunset of Empire. Stories from the
Shahnameh of Ferdowsi. Volume III,
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- 1 This volume – *Sunset of Empire* – is the last of three, presenting stories of the *Shahnameh* in a prose translation, with some verse interludes. In his introduction to this volume, the translator, Dick Davies, explains that the previous volume – *Fathers and Sons* – ended with the appearance of the future founder of the Sasanian dynasty and thus, the so-called historical part of the *Šāh-nāme*. This part starts with the two brief reigns of the Achaemenid kings, Darab and Dara, continued in the lengthy episode of Sekandar's reign. His death in turn is followed with the short account of the Ashkanian dynasty (Parthians) immediately heralding the dawn of the Sasanian dynasty, which lasts till the overthrow of Yazdegerd III by the Arab invaders and the full stop of the epic. Thus, this last volume presents us with virtually the whole of the second half of the *Šāh-nāme*, the lesser-known and lesser-loved part of the epic poem. Davis' enthusiasm for his translation task however has not flagged and his interest in this second part of the *Šāh-nāme* is evident. He presents Firdowsi's verses in English with his inimitable and usual elegance and flair, putting in prominence the lively and relentless rhythm of the epic's action, the author's humour, the stories' drama, the deeply human characterisation and the heroic atmosphere of the Persian original. In his introduction Davis very rightly mentions the puzzle of several ambiguous portraits found in this part of the poem: Šīrīn, Mazdak, Sekandar are examples of unresolved character portrayals, where the author seems to shift from sympathy to disapproval. The explanation might be that Firdowsi referred to several sources without reconciling their contradictions, as he appears to have done for some legendary tales earlier on in the poem. The four prominent "hero-kings" of this second part are Sekandar, Ardešīr, Bahrām Gūr and Nūšīn-Ravān, though Bahrām Čūbīne is also

important and illustrates, by his revolt against his two monarchs and his ambition to seize the throne, how the heroes' relation to the crown, one of the motifs Davis had already pinpointed in the previous parts of the *Šāh-nāme* continues to hold Firdowsī's interest in the "historical" part.

- 2 The collection of three volumes of *Stories from the Shahnameh* is a very useful achievement indeed in the realm of *Šāh-nāme* studies. By the magic of his lively and pleasant translation, Davis brings this bulky work to life. He has reduced it to agreeable and manageable dimensions, while not omitting anything of importance, presenting – as no previous complete verse translation or prose recounting was able to do so well before – an excellent introduction to the complete Persian text. As was the case in the two previous volumes, the wonderful illustrations consisting of numerous details taken from a collection of illustrated manuscripts of the *Šāh-nāme*, bring to life – often with that particular touch of humour which abounds in them – the characters and the actions recounted by Firdowsī. This collection of three volumes presenting one of the world's epics in such a pleasant manner while remaining so respectful of its original, ought not to be restricted to specialised institutions, but should be found in every public library!

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Thèmes : 11.1.1. Littérature persane classique

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