According to Sam‘ani in Lubab Al-Ansab, Rudaki’s full name is Abu Abdullah Ja’far ibn Muhammad ibn Hakim ibn Abd al-Rahman ibn Adam. He has the distinct privilege of being not only the founder of Perso-Tajik literature but also one of its most prominent poets. Some have attributed Rudaki’s fame to the grandeur of the court of his patron Nasr ibn Ahmad II (914-943).

Fortunately, enough of his poetry (in various genres: masnavi, qit’ah, ghazal, ruba’i and marsiyyah) is extant to establish his unequivocal mastery of the art and to prove that, on his own, he merits the unsurpassed greatness that is attributed to him. In fact, the poetic standards that he established in the 9th century endured for centuries and guided Persian poets until the advent of Muhammad Taqi Bahar (1880-1951).

The contributions of Rudaki in setting standards are remarkable. Although the revitalized Persian language used during his time had developed sufficiently to express the sentiments, needs and aspirations of the people, it lacked the means necessary to convey those aspects of the culture in a technical, yet elegant and thought-provoking manner.

Rudaki met that challenge. Additionally, the Persian language, which had been neglected for two hundred years prior to his time, did not have sufficient letters to represent all its sounds.

However, when a new script was developed based on the Arabic alphabet, Rudaki used it to reeducate Iranians and to alert them to the significance of their language in any project that would attempt to revitalize their ancient heritage. He was also wise when writing his own verses to avoid using ornate Arabic words, especially at a time when the other court poets promoted their works in just that way. Instead, Rudaki relied on his unique poetic talent and his gift of singing his lyrics while playing the lute.

Early Life

Rudaki was born in the village of Banuj in the Rudak district of Samarkand in AD 858 which was then part of the great Persian Empire. We are better informed about Rudaki’s early life than about the early lives of his contemporaries, thanks to the contributions of the chronicler Awfi. According to him, Rudaki was so intelligent and sharp that by the age of eight, he...
had memorized the entire text of the Qur'an.

Soon after he learned to read Persian, he composed poetry that was most appealing to his people who were scattered in the foothills of the Zarafshan Mountains. Again, according to Awfi, Rudaki had a pleasant voice, a talent that connected him with the world of the musicians and dancers of his time. We learn that his lute teacher was the famed Abu al'Anak Bakhtiyar under whom the art of patvazak singing was elevated to its highest level. In due course, he excelled his master and created ruba'i; and taraneh genres.

**At the Samanid Court**

His poetic talent combined with his skill at playing the lute, and his good voice gained him great fame. Eventually, he was summoned to the court of Amir Nasr ibn Ahmad II, where he spent most of his life. A good part of his time was spent on the supervision of the work of junior poets, a position that became a prominent feature of the courts of later Samanid and Ghaznavid rulers and which benefited Unsuri the most. At the time of Rudaki, the Samanid court was the hub of the literary, scientific, economic and social activities of the lands of the Eastern Caliphate. The Arab invasion had dislocated Iranians from Ctesiphon, Susa and Ray, and relocated them in Transoxiana. In two centuries, a new Persian milieu had developed and gained semi-independence. Saman Khuda seized upon this opportunity that had come to the Persian lands.

Centering, his rule on Bukhara, he created the Samanid dynasty with a firm policy of reviving the lost legacy of the Persians.

Rudaki served at the court of the Samanids of Bukhara (874-999), the only dependency in the Caliphate that was strong enough to promote nationalism and opulent and wise enough to push the frontiers of knowledge, rivaling Baghdad. Al-Tha'alibi, a contemporary traveler, provides a vivid description of life at the court of the Samanid Amirs: "Bukhara was under the Samanid rule, the focus of splendor, the Shrine of Empire, the meeting place of the most unique intellects of the age, the horizon of the literary stars of the world and the fair of the greatest scholars of the period.

Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Musa al-Musawi related to me as follows: My father, Abul-Hassan received an invitation to Bukhara in the days of the Amir-i-Sa'id (Nasr II b. Ahmad, reigned A.D. 913-942), and there, were gathered together, the most remarkable of its men of letters ... And when these were settled in familiar conversation one would engage with another in plucking the fringes of some discussion each offering to the other fragrant flowers of dialectic, and pursuing the perfumes of Culture, and letting fall in succession necklaces of pearls, and blow-..."

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**He has the distinct privilege of being not only the founder of Perso-Tajik literature but also one of its most prominent poets.**

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**Bakhtiyar**

Rudaki's acquaintance with Bakhtiyar opened a new vista in his life-music. He traveled with Bakhtiyar all around the Kuhistan (the present-day Tajik high lands), composing and singing. When Bakhtiyar passed away and left him his famous lute, Rudaki continued the tradition and enjoyed a growing fame. By this time, he could have served at courts of lesser lights like: Ahmad ibn Isma'il, Abu Ja'far Banuyeh and Makan ibn Kaki. It is his acquaintance with Abu al-Fazl Ba'ami, however, that leads to his access to the court of Bukhara and to a prosperous life.

**Born Blind?**

There are several questions in Rudaki's life that have engaged the attention of researchers the most. For instance, there is an assertion in Awfi to the effect that: Rudaki was blind from birth (az madar nabina amadeh). But Awfi's assertion is not supported by other chroniclers of the time such as Sam'ani, Nizami Aruzi and the anonymous author of Tarikhi Sistan (The History of Sistan).

Could a poet conjure up delicate and delightful images of nature in the way that Rudaki has and be blind from birth? Some scholars, like Abu Hayyan Tohidii, who lived close to Rudaki's time, give a positive answer. "Rudaki was born blind", Tohidii says. "When he was asked about how he visualized colors, he answered, like camels. (Rudaki az madar kur bazad, guftand rang dar nazdi to chegune ast? Guft manandi shutur)." The response is ambiguous. It can mean he saw colors in the same way that he saw camels, or it can mean he saw colors in the same manner that camels visualize color! Could Rudaki have lost his vision gradually or suddenly due to an illness or unknown circumstance? In the west, Herman Tiet was the first to cast doubt on Rudaki's blindness from birth. He was then followed by other scholars.

M.M. Gerasimov, who examined Rudaki's remains (1970), concluded that towards the end of his life the poet refused to follow the traditions to produce empty praises of the ruler for pay. They held red-pot iron rods before his eyes and blinded him.

The great contemporary Tajik writer,
Sadriddin Aini states that the poet's ability to compose poetry is related to his hearing rather than to his vision. His verdict is that the poet was blind from birth.

In either case, there is no doubt that Rudaki had a keen appreciation of images seen or described to him. They form a wonderful reservoir on which he draws for the similes and metaphors with which he enriches his verse.

On the basis of Awfi's report, Gerasimov's effort at reconstructing Rudaki's physical features, and taking into account Aini's and Abdulghani Mirzoev's studies of Rudaki's life, the following general assertion can be made: Rudaki lived a happy life as a child, listening to his people's stories and songs, learning about his contemporaries' ways, as well as about their aspirations and needs.

He lived a highly protected life at court and a forlorn and frustrating one after his banishment. He put words to his diverse experiences and expressed his peoples' desires alongside his own sentiments. Blindness, to him seems to have been a nuisance, by no means a hindrance.

Rudaki's Faith

Another issue that scholars have dwelled on is related to religion especially Isma'ili Shi'ism that played a major role at the courts of the region, the Isma'ilis were seeking prominent personalities to support their doctrine and da'wa.

It is alleged that Amir Nasr ibn Ahmad II was an Isma'ili and shared the faith with Abul Fazl Ba'ami who served as his prime minister for a long time. It is further speculated that Rudaki was a favorite of Abul Fazl Ba'ami and according to Ravandi, there is evidence that Rudaki, and a number of other figures of the time, had Isma'ili tendencies.

According to Rypka, Amir-Nasr ibn Ahmad shared his Isma'ili tendencies with Rudaki.

This indicates that Nasr II, Ba'ami and Rudaki shared the same views, if not the same faith.

Fallout between Ba'ami and the Amir resulted in the dismissal of Ba'ami from the court in 937, and the banishment of Ba'ami's protégé, Rudaki, soon after.

Whether the fallout was politically motivated or was the result of religious intrigue is hard to tell. What is certain is that Rudaki did not survive the humiliation and the lack of support at the court that he had enjoyed for the greater part of his life.

According to Al-Ansab of Sam'ani, Rudaki died in wretched poverty in 940 (329 JAB) in the village of Banuj. Some of his later poetry describes his sentiments about his past and his disappointment with Fate.

His qasidah entitled Shikayat az Piri (complaint about old age) is an example. Power politics, it seems, may have played a decisive role in the double banishment from the court rather than shared religious sentiments.

Kalilah va Dimnah

Yet another issue is related to Rudaki's with Kalilah va Dimnah. The difficulty here is that this work was considered lost, in its entirety until recently when some 120 bayts of it were discovered.

The original work known variously a Pancha- Tantra or the "Fables of the Bidpai", was part of the treasury of the rulers of India.

Buzurgmehr, the well-known Sassanid vazir of Anushirvan, in recognition of the contributions of the physician, added yet another chapter about Buzurgmehr to the work.

After submission of Iran to Islam, Ibn Muqaffa (d. AD 762) translated Kalilah va Dimnah into Arabic and Aban ibn Abd al-Hamid Lahaqi (d. AD 815) rendered the text into Arabic verse. It was not until the time of Nasr ibn Ahmad II that, encouraged by Abul Fazl Ba'ami, Rudaki produced a verified Dari (Farsi) version of the work.

According to Ferdowsi, Rudaki rendered the stories into Dari verse while the stories were being read to him. Since 120 verses of the work have been attested to, it is safe to assume that Rudaki's connection to Kalilah va Dimnah is firm.

Buy-e Juye Mulyan

Rudaki's life was quite eventful, especially during his youth. In fact, a good deal of the qasidah (ode) called Shikayat az Piri is a recollection of his youth, discussing his appearance, his association with women, and regret over the wealth that he had acquired and squandered.

His opulent life style and the fact that at the time he had the ear of the Amir have spawned a number of stories about him.

The most fabulous among these stories is the one about an event in Herat that led to the composition and recital of his Buy-e Juye Mulyan or "The Fragrance of Mulyan Brook". The story is centered on Rudaki's power of persuasion. According
to Nizami Samarkandi in his Chah’ar Maqala (Four Discourses), Amir Nasr’ ibn Ahmad II, Rudaki’s main patron, used to spend the winters in Bukhara but spring and summer time in other delightful spots.

One year, the Amir had not only overstayed his visit to Herat but intended to spend the winter there as well.

The Amir’s retinue, the commanders of the army and others who had been anxious to return to Bukhara and their families, were disappointed at the revelation. They approached Rudaki and asked him to use his power of persuasion to move the Amir so that he would depart for his beloved Bukhara.

Here is the transcription of the text of the poem that Rudaki composed and recited for the occasion. The transcription is followed by this author’s translation:

**Transcription**

BUY-E JUY-E MULIYAN AYAD HAMI,
YAD-E YAR-E MEHRABAN AYAD HAMI.

**Translation**

The sweet fragrance of the Muliyan Brook, Recalls memories, so long ago forsook. Rough sands of the Oxus beneath my feet, Caress them as would silk, soft and sweet.

Enjoy life everlasting, always full of cheer, Your guest’s the Amir, ever joyous and dear. Tumultuous Oxus, full of joy and mirth, Greets us and leaps warmly to our girth. O Bukhara! Thou art the Sky, brilliant moon is He, O mighty Sky, embrace Thy Moon with glee.

Thou art the Mead, stately Cypress He, Receive Thee anon, Thy beloved Cypress tree.

The story goes that the Amir did not wait for the qasidah to conclude. While Rudaki was still strumming his lute and singing, the Amir set off for Bukhara, leaving his riding-boots to be carried after him.

The circumstances of this event have been immortalized in a number of ways. To begin with, four hundred years after its composition, Vassaf composed an imitation of Buy-e Ju-yu Muliyan. Rypka speculates that Vassaf felt that the poem did not carry the weight that it had been afforded.

In more recent times, Satim Ulughzoda, a major Tajik playwright, wrote a film script called Qismat-i Sho’ir (The Lot of the Poet) and a movie was produced around the theme in 1957. Rasul Hadi-Zade’s short story, “A Wind from Home”, deals with the same subject. But nowhere are the circumstances as neatly and appropriately recreated as in Haydn’s Symphony 45 in F Sharp Minor; the symphony is appropriately called the “Farewell Symphony”.

It is the symphony’s final movement that brings Rudaki’s skill to mind most prominently. As is the case in “The Fragrance of the Muliyan Brook”, the 4th movement is intended to gently remind Prince Nicholas Esterhazy that Vienna was waiting far his arrival, and that he should pack up and leave his summer palace.

The prince had spent the entire fall of 1772 in Esterhazy and the length of his stay had affected the men in Haydn’s orchestra; they were anxious to get home to their families in Vienna. In the same way that the soldiers and commanders in the camp of the Amir had approached Rudaki, the men of the orchestra approached their master, Haydn, and persuaded him to compose a symphony that would persuade the prince to hasten his departure for Vienna.

Haydn obliged with Symphony 45 in F Sharp Minor. In the last movement, Haydn’s fast, driving dramatic music gives way to a gentle conclusion. At this paint, per Haydn’s instructions, the players, as they finished their solo parts, put out their candles and one by one, left the stage.

At the end of the movement only two violinists, one of whom was Haydn himself, remained, playing muted violins in the dark hall.

They, too, in due time, blew out their candles and left the dark stage. Within a week of the performance, Prince Esterhazy and his courtiers arrived in Vienna and all were well. Needless to say, Haydn’s “Farewell Symphony” became Prince Nicholas Esterhazy’s most favorite symphony. Persian sources attribute anywhere from
100,000 to 1,300,000 bayts to Rudaki.
Of these, only 1,000 bayts are in existence, and even those are fragments scattered among a number of biographies, histories and books of advice. Rudaki’s major themes include passage of time, old age, the inevitability of natural death, the fickleness of fortune, importance of the matters of the heart and the need to stay happy. He pays special attention to the role of the individual, he says, one must strive to achieve what is best for him. Although he lavishly showers kings, nobles and champions with praises, his most cherished idols are knowledge and experience.

This bayt, which until recently was thought to have been the only one surviving from the nearly 12,000 bayts of Kalilah va Dimnah, appears on Rudaki’s monument in Dushanbe, capital of Tajikistan.

It underscores the poet’s lasting dedication to knowledge and experience: Har ki nunukht az guashthi ruzgar, Niz nima muzad zi hich amuzgar. No ordinary teacher will ever reach, Those whom Time has failed to teach.

It must be stated that, in spite of their simple diction, Rudaki’s verses include a completed array of Persian poetic meters, used for the first time, and some 35 Persian rhythmic variations.

Altogether, these account for why he is regarded as one of the greatest poets of the Khorasan School.

In general, Rudaki’s poetic legacy can be divided into three categories. In the earlier stages of his career, he wrote love lyrics. Later on, love poetry gave way to poems focused on ethical themes.

A prominent example of this is his versification of his life, he wrote about his dissatisfaction with the situation in which found himself, forlorn and in abject poverty. A good example of the poetry of this period is his Shikayat az Pir.

This qasidah, like his other qasidahs, is unique in that it begins with a simple introductory set of remarks in the form of a ghazal, dealing with the main theme of the poem-old age.

Mara besudu foru rikht harche dandan bud, Naubud dandan labal chiraghi taban bud. Every tooth, ah me, has crumbled, dropped and fallen in decay! Tooth it was not, nay say rather, ‘twas a brilliant lamp’s bright ray! Old age is inevitable, he says.

There is no reason, therefore, to look for either someone, like Providence or something like Saturn’s curse to blame it on.

The memories of the hours, days and years that have resulted in one’s old age remain unchanged.

Those memories are vivid at the end of life as they were when the Master of Time dealt them. Two things lingered in his imagination: the beauties he took to bed and the wealth he squandered.

Poetry of Rudaki in the West The study of the poetry of Rudaki in the West has a relatively long and productive history. It begins in the 19th century with Amede Jardin’s 1814 work entitled Iran, followed by Hammer: Purgshtal’s History of Persian Poetry in 1818, and Louis Liobo’s Iran, which includes a biography of Rudaki (1841).

With the appearance of the German scholar Herman Ete’s Rudaki: the Poet of the Samanids (1873), the study of Rudaki enters a new phase. In his essay, Ete culls Rudaki verses from 23 sources and provides translations for each.

In subsequent decades, Ete’s work becomes the standard work for further study of Rudaki.

The contribution of the French appeared in James Darmesteter’s “The Appearance of Persian Poetry”, published in 1887. Darmesteter evaluated Rudaki’s verses, gave him very high marks and called him the Homer of Iran.

Rudaki was born in the village of Banuj in the Rudak district of Samarkand in 858 AD which was then part of the great Persian Empire.

by Hammer: Purgshtal’s History of Persian Poetry in 1818, and Louis Liobo’s Iran, which includes a biography of Rudaki (1841).

In 1890, the British author Charles Pickering called Rudaki Iran’s Chaucer and reminded his audience that at the time that Rudaki contributed his masterpieces, Europe was passing through its dark ages.

In the 20th century in the west, the American scholar Paul Horn’s 1904 History of Persian Literature is followed by William Jackson’s “The Ancient Poetry of Iran” (1919). A most remarkable contribution in the middle of the 20th century is, of course, Jan Rypka’s “The History of Perso-Tajik Literature” in Czeck (1956), followed by an English translation “The History of Iranian Literature” in 1968.

In the East, contributions begin in the early 20th century with the Urdu scholar Shibli Nu’mani’s five volume work entitled “Shi’r ul-Ajam” (1924), wherein he provides a comprehensive view of Rudaki. This is followed in Iran by the three volume contribution of Sa’id Nafisi, entitled “Life and Verses of Abu Abdullah Jafar ibn Muhammad Rudaki”.

This work, completed during the decade of the 1930’s, provides the most comprehensive study of the life and works of the poet. Other Iranian scholars who followed Sa’id Nafisi in providing information on Rudaki are Hushang Mostofi’s “Prominent Iranian Poets” (1934); Rezaazade Shafaq’s “History of Iranian Literature” (1943); and Zabihullah Safa’s “History of Literature in Iran” (1955).

In Russia, A. Krimskii’s “History of Iran, Its Literature and Sufism”, appeared in 1914, and followed by Tajikistan’s Sadriddin Aini’s Ustad Rudaki. Aini not only studied the poetry of Rudaki but also investigated the circumstances of the poet’s birth and death.

He even discovered the burial place of Rudaki. His findings resulted in a celebration of the anniversary of the birth of the poet in Tajikistan in 1958.