

WRESTLING AND MYTH IN IRAN

The principles and techniques of wrestling, as described in the *Shahnameh*, the Book of Kings, still need to be studied and analyzed in depth. The appeal of the Book of Kings has not lessened in the thousand years since it was written. There is every sign that the relationship between man and legend will long continue to give rise to passionate debate on the lifestyle and human relationships of the heroes immortalized in its pages.

Since all the wrestles of the different heroes cannot be fully discussed here, we will concentrate on the techniques applied by the protagonists of the great tragedy of “Rostam and Sohrab”.

Sohrab, the son of Rostam, the central figure throughout the epic, had an extraordinary birth, like his father’s. When Rudabeh had given birth to Rostam by Caesarean section, she is said to have whispered “Rastam”, “Relieved am I”. Hence the name by which the great hero came to be known. The story goes that when Sohrab’s eyes rested on his mother Tahmineh’s face, he smiled and was on that account given this name which means “rosy”.

Rostam had to leave Tahmineh before Sohrab’s birth, but gave her a bead as a memento, directing her to tie it around their son’s arm to serve as a mark of his identity in case they met.

On reaching the age of fourteen, Sohrab, whose physical stature and strength was exceptional, heads for Iran with the aim of finding his father and placing him on the throne in place of Kavoos Shah. He would kill Afrasiab and take his place as the King of Turan, Iran’s historical enemy, bringing about a lasting peace between the two kingdoms.

Afrasiab, being in the know about Sohrab’s identity, moves to help him with his plans, but with the aim of bringing about a confrontation between the father and the son and having Rostam killed at the hands of his own son before they are able to identify each other.

When the time for Sohrab’s departure comes, Tahmineh, who is deeply concerned about the outcome of his adventure, ties the

identity armband left behind by his father. On his way, Sohrab attacks and conquers a fortress guarding the Iranian border. Upon receiving the news of the misfortune along with a physical profile of the raider, Kavoos Shah is seriously alarmed and calls upon Rostam to deal with the intruder.

Sohrab is the talk of the town. All the Iranian commanders are afraid of him on the battleground. Even Rostam, who has approached his camp as an unknown soldier, getting involved in a night skirmish in which one of Sohrab’s close companions is killed, is awed by his antagonist’s prowess and physical appearance which unmistakably evokes his grandfather’s image. On his return to the Iranian camp, he mentions this astonishing resemblance to Giv and Kavoos “Saam on horseback you would call him and no-one else”.

THE FATHER AND THE SON FACE EACH OTHER

At last, the tragedy begins with the calamitous confrontation between Rostam and Sohrab, the former ignorant that the challenger he has taken on is none other than his own unrecognized offspring and the latter unaware that his opponent is the same beloved father whose company he has been seeking so eagerly. Sohrab is a powerful and proud youth, while Rostam is an old but experienced fighter. Rostam extends his hand for a handfight and Sohrab’s reply is: “You cannot stand a single blow of my fist”. Rostam replies gently: “Do not be so proud, my young man, or discard mild and polite speech”. Sohrab, noting signs provided by his mother and perceiving the distinctions of this old adversary in comparison with others he has thus far met, asks him straight out: “Are you not Rostam, Neiram’s great-grandson?” “Rostam is a great hero

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while I am no more than an ordinary insignificant fighter”, Rostam replies, hiding his identity.

Rostam thinks that if he is recognized by his adversary he will be exposed to greater danger, so he resorts to falsehood and deceit. In their face to face combat the two combatants make use of all types of weapons ranging from sword and spears to mace, bows and arrows and horseback fighting, but to no avail whatsoever. At the end of the first day the two antagonists, weary and exhausted from their fruitless struggle, call it halt and return to their respective camps determined to continue their battle the next day.

On his return, Sohrab speaks to Hooman of this adversary's stature and power and, comparing his features with signs told to him by this mother, adds: "I am of the opinion that he is Rostam". However, Hooman reminding him of Afrasiab's recommendations says: "This cannot be Rostam. I have seen him in several battles".

Sohrab passes the night deep in thought, making himself ready for the doomed battle with his father and reflecting: "Tomorrow I shall try wrestling to finish him off".

Wrestling in those days was very different from what it is today and contrary to current practice there was no restriction on hooking the hands around the opponent's waist and exerting as much pressure as possible, similar to the existing style of wrestling in Baluchistam. Furthermore, the opponent is pulled forward, hooked around the waist and brought under maximum pressure and finally brought down. It is sometimes possible to make use of the feet to overcome his resistance and accelerate his fall.

The next day, setting eyes on Rostam once again, Sohrab proposes smilingly and kindly that they quit fighting. "Let us get rid of the ways of cruelty and destruction and start on a path of friendship and benevolence" he suggests. But this rather childishly sincere proposal falls on deaf ears and the antagonists resume their wrestling.

Sohrab, romping like a frolicsome elephant, hooks Rostam around the waist, sweeps him off the ground, knocks him down

and sits on his chest, with his unsheathed dagger raised to finish him off. At this moment Rostam resorts to another trick and says to Sohrab: "Our creed requires that when an elder hero is down the younger hero refrains from slaying him unless he succeeds in knocking him down for the second time".

Readily taken in by this cunning stratagem, the youthful Sohrab gets off Rostam's chest, giving him a chance to recoup his strength (this event may account for the custom of having a second round of wrestling between contestants in the traditional Iranian gymnasia).

THE BLOODY END

Despite the good luck of a second chance, Rostam does not cherish much hope of success. However he moves to apply the last technique available to him: with a sudden thrust of Sohrab's shoulder with one hand while holding his waist with another, he bends his youthful opponent, sweeps him off the ground, brings him down on his back and loses no time in slashing his side.

