Institution:
University of Cambridge

Unit of Assessment:
UoA27

Title of case study:
The arts of the book in Persian culture

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)
Research on the *Shahnama* and the Cambridge 'Shahnama Project' have stood at the head of a wider effort to promote a better understanding of Persian culture in Britain and the West, especially in view of the current negative image of Iran and its clerical regime. The impact has been (1) to enhance heritage activity in Iranian diaspora communities in the UK and elsewhere; (2) create a focus and catalyst for raising awareness amongst the wider British public of Persian culture and history, and of past relations between Britain and Iran; and (3) inspire and support new forms of artistic expression.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)
The research has been carried out and directed by Professor Charles Melville (Lecturer at Cambridge 1984-2001, Reader 2001-2008, Professor of Persian History, 2008 onwards), since October 1999. Melville's research focuses on the history and historiography of medieval Iran, and Persian manuscript production.

The initial phase of the project (1999-2004) funded by the AHRB involved a collaboration with Professor Robert Hillenbrand at the University of Edinburgh. The Shahnama Project has also engaged: Dr Amin Mahdavi (01/10/1999-30/10/2004, PhD at Edinburgh), Dr Christine van Ruymbeke, Research Assistant (01/10/99-30/09/01; currently Senior Lecturer at Cambridge); Dr Gabrielle van den Berg, Research Assistant (01/10/01-30/09/04; currently Lecturer at University of Leiden); Dr Firuza Abdullaeva, Research Assistant (01/05/02-30/09/03; Lecturer at the University of Oxford 2005-2010 and a Research Associate at Pembroke College, Cambridge, 2010-onwards); a number of research assistants were employed for short periods during the period 2006-9: Dr Zahra Hassan-Agha (7 months in 2007), Mr Francois de Blois, Dr Bilha Moor and Dr Mandana Naini (for 6-9 months in 2008-9). The technical development of the website was undertaken by Mr John Norman (Director of the University of Cambridge Centre for Applied Research in Education Technology – CARET; joint PI in phase 2 of the project (2006-9) and to date, and Dr Dan Sheppard (CARET) (2003-2011).

The project has sought to identify and analyse illustrated manuscripts of the 11th-century Persian national epic, the *Shahnama* or Book of Kings, and has created an open-access online database relating images to the text and creating a means of comparing illustrated copies of the poem, and the development of the iconography of different scenes, across the centuries. The database contains 20,300 recorded illustrations of scenes in the poem (the choice of which is itself seen to be significant), from 1,558 manuscripts. It provides a rich resource for art historians, auction houses and other specialists in Islamic art.

The underlying rationale of the research has been to explore the multi-dimensional appeal of Firdausi's *Shahnama* as history, literature, art and propaganda. For many Iranians this great epic poem (c. 50,000 verses) encapsulates a whole tranche of Iran's cultural history and political experience, focusing as it does on the glorious days of the Persian Empire before the rise of Islam and the Arab conquests in the 7th c. AD. It therefore provides one of the key narratives of 'Iranianness' – one that is to an increasing extent seen as a rival narrative to the 'Islamic' and specifically Shi'ite Muslim strand that also defines Iranian identity. In short, the *Shahnama* has always been a political statement and continues to be used as such, while at the same time qualifying in its own right as a major work of world literature. Part of the response to this work has been the tradition of the illustrating the text, which had a 550 year history in the manuscript age (c. 1300-1850 in Iran), and it continues to be edited, reprinted and illustrated in modern editions down to the present day. This enables the study of the reception of the poem not only in Iran and neighbouring Muslim lands, but also more recently in the west.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. C. Melville, 'The Illustration of history in Safavid manuscript painting', in *New Perspectives on Safavid Iran: Empire and Society* (ed.) C.P. Mitchell (Routledge, 2011) pp.163-197. ISBN: 978-0-415-77462-8. *Peer-reviewed.*

2. C. Melville, "Serial killers: the mis-en-page of Firdausi's 'Davazdah Rukh'", *Persica*, vol. 23 (2009-10), pp. 73-107. DOI: 10.2143/PERS.23.0.2050509. *Peer-reviewed.*

3. C. Melville (ed.) *Shahnama Studies I. Pembroke Papers*, 5, (ed.) C. Melville (Cambridge, 2006; republished by Brill, 2011), in particular, C. Melville, "Introduction", pp. xix-xxvi and "Text and image in the story of Bizhan and Manizha: I", pp.71-96. ISBN: 9780951644324. *Peer-reviewed.*

4. C. Melville & G. van den Berg (eds.) *Shahnama Studies II*: *The reception of Firdausi's Shahnama* (Brill, 2012), in particular, C. Melville, "Introduction", pp.1-8. ISBN: 9789004211278. *Peer-reviewed.*

5. C. Melville (ed.), *Persian Historiography: History of Persian Literature*, vol. X (I.B. Tauris, 2012), in particular four chapters, pp. xxv-lvi, 56-100, 155-208, 209-57. ISBN: 978-1-84511-911-9. *Peer-reviewed.*

6. F. Abdullaeva & C. Melville (guest eds.), Special Issue: the Millennium of the Shahnama of Firdausi, *Iranian Studies*, vol. 43 no 1, February 2010. ISSN 0021-0862 (Print), 1475-4819 (Online). In particular, F. Abdullaeva & C. Melville, "Shahnama: The Millennium of an Epic Masterpiece", *Iranian Studies* 43/i (2010), pp. 1-11. **DOI:** 10.1080/00210860903451188. *Peer-reviewed.*

All outputs are available from the University of Cambridge on request.

Project website: http://shahnama.caret.cam.ac.uk/new/jnama/page/

RESEARCH GRANTS

1. AHRB, *The Cambridge/Edinburgh Shahnama Project*. AHRC Major Research Grant, 1999-2004. PI: Charles Melville. £401,699.
2. AHRC. *Digital Index of Shahnama Miniature Painting*. AHRC Research Enhancement Grant, 2006-2009. PIs: Charles Melville and John Norman. £287,950.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The Project's exploration of the multi-dimensional appeal of the Shahnama has promoted a greater awareness of Persian culture in the West, particularly when it coordinated its public engagement activities with the UNESCO-recognised millennial anniversary of the completion of the Shahnama in AD 1010.

The online database created to support the Project documents manuscript collections across the world, including numerous private and semi-public collections which normally restrict access. The website has had an average of 65,464 hits per month over the period from mid-2008 to July 2013. The Project joined Facebook in 2010 and has recorded 1,000 'likes' to posts by the Project and others. The highest number of 'hits' from any city in the world has consistently been Tehran, Iran.

The support given to the Project and to the resulting exhibition (discussed below) by the London-based Iran Heritage Foundation (IHF), the Aga Khan Development Network and the US-based charity, the Parsa Community Foundation, whose core goal is the 'preservation and advancement of the arts and culture' of the Persian Community, has been further testament to the importance of such endeavours aimed at the general public. A recent $2 million endowment for the Project from an Iranian philanthropist is a striking endorsement of this claim (ref. 1).

Furthermore, the Project has received a number of unsolicited letters from Iranians within Iran,

among them several students, expressing gratitude for the work of the project and the way in which it has brought Persian culture to a wider audience and enhanced mutual understanding (e.g. 2).

The key impact of this research on the wider public is the major exhibition, *'Epic of the Persian Kings. The Art of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh'* mounted at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge (01/09/10-09/01/11). The exhibition curator paid tribute to the work of the Project which informed the curatorial process (3). The research provided significant additional enhancements to the museum's presentation, with the creation of an audio gallery guide relating to 18 key items and a podcast offering an overview of the Shahnama (4).

The Museum's educational and outreach departments drew on the research to develop teaching resources, an interactive web resource, an online exhibition and a virtual gallery. The exhibition received extensive media coverage (72 separate press cuttings logged) and attracted 28,889 visitors and was visited by several school groups; Persian community groups, interest groups such as the Friends of the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, UK and overseas collectors; and tourists. The Museum's survey based on 126 respondents, indicated that 75% of the visitors had come to the museum specifically to see the exhibition (5). In September 2010, the exhibition was highlighted as a key UK tourist attraction: *BBC History Magazine* website listed it among its top ten 'very best historical attractions', as did the *Country Life* website for its 'Best exhibitions to see this September' feature (13/09/10). Melville has continued to work with other cultural/heritage organisations hosting Persian exhibitions, such as the John Rylands Library (Manchester) and the State Library of Victoria (Melbourne, Australia), giving a public lecture on both occasions (Manchester, 25/03/10; 50 attendees; Melbourne 12/04/12, over 500 attendees (6).

The visitor survey and other forms of media such as online blogs offer an indication of how the exhibition gave the public new insights into Persian culture; one visitor noted in a blog, that he was 'surprised by the clarity of certain illustrations, and how ideas and stories were conveyed so effectively even with a taste a thousand years old'. (7). For example, visitor feedback demonstrated that the exhibition raised a greater awareness of the cross-fertilisation of Persian and Indian cultural traditions, which was also raised by India's national newspaper, *The Hindu,* subsequently republished by the IRIB World Service website to highlight the role of this exhibition in raising awareness of the link between these two cultural traditions (8, 9).

These and other Iranian media agencies noted that Ferdowsi's legacy was being commemorated in the UK (10, 11, 12). The Foreign and Commonwealth Office further recognising the importance of the exhibition in relation to cultural diplomacy created a video in Persian emphasising the contribution of Persian culture, attracting 2729 views (13).

The exhibition catalogue, co-authored by Brend and Melville, was praised by *The Economist* which stressed its contribution to a better understanding Iran (14). The Museum shop has sold 868 paperbacks and 75 hardbacks of the catalogue (943 hardback and 701 paperback copies sold separately by the publishers) and 382 copies of the brief exhibition guide. Attendance at the 5 lunchtime Gallery lectures in the Museum and the evening lectures in the Faculty (max. 50) within a larger programme of events including Persian music concerts (max. 180), film screenings and literary talks, reached full capacity. Media interest in the Shahnama has continued beyond the exhibition, with Melvyn Bragg hosting an *In our Time* episode devoted to Ferdowsi and the *Shahnameh* with Charles Melville as one of the three speakers (13/12/12).

Inspired and informed directly by the research and the Cambridge Shahnameh exhibition, a group of Anglia Ruskin University students led by filmmaker, Sarah Gibson Yates, created short films which were aired at the Cambridge Picturehouse Cinema (15/11/10.

Similarly, Dr Fatima Zahra Hassan-Agha, following her association with the Project, was inspired to curate an exhibition of contemporary work of artists from Pakistan, Russia, Australia and within the Iranian diaspora, drawing its themes from the Shahnama, held in London's Prince's Foundation Gallery (16/11/10-13/12/10). Dr Hassan-Agha, based in Sharjah, is now embarking on a second phase of her project and planning a further exhibition (15). One of the artists involved (Feofanov) is

now holding a solo-exhibition in Moscow, inspired by the Shahnama and informed by the Cambridge research project.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. Iran Heritage Foundation Report

2. Email from person 1 (artist).

3. Letter from person 2 (Exhibition Curator)

4. Exhibition website with links to the teaching resources, interactive web resource, podcast, audio guide, online exhibition: http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/whatson/exhibitions/shahnameh/.

5. Exhibition report

6. Melbourne website coverage: http://exhibitions.slv.vic.gov.au/love-and-devotion

7. Visitor blog: http://www.paolopuggioni.com/a-two-weeks-old-post-i-never-had-the-time-to-post-it/

8. *The Hindu newspaper* (17/04/11;online edition http://www.hindu.com/mag/2011/04/17/stories/2011041750200500.htm; republished on the IRIB website (Iran's International Broadcasting station):

9. *http://english.irib.ir/subcontinent/culture/persian-heritage/item/79137-indian-miniaturists-depiction-of-the-shahnameh*

10. Iranian media coverage: JameJam/IRIB:http://www.jamejamonline.ir/en/newstext.aspx?newsnum=100915805229 (27/08/09);

11. Press TV: http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/126051.html (10/05/10);

12. *Jadid Online* review of the Exhibition: http://www.jadidonline.com/story/30092010/frnk/cambridge_shahname_exhibiton_eng (30/09/10)

13. FCO youtube video in Farsi: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTF5EZvg0T0

14. *The Economist*: http://www.economist.com/node/17036475?story_id=17036475&fsrc=rss ; http://www.economist.com/blogs/multimedia/2010/09/images_ferdowsis_shahnameh

15. Exhibition catalogue, ed. Manfred Milz, *Painting the Persian Book of Kings today. Ancient text and modern images*, Cambridge 2010. Featured in the Lahore *Daily Times* (26/02/11; online edition): http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2011%5C02%5C26%5Cstory_26-2-2011_pg13_7.