

Khagani Shirvani (1120-1194)

BIOGRAPHY

Khagani (real name, Afzaladdin Ibrahim-ibn Ali Nadjar), a great Azerbaijani poet and thinker, a master of panegyric qasida was born in the family of a carpenter in Melgem, a village near Shamakhy. Khagani lost his father at an early age and was brought up by his uncle Kafietdin, a doctor and astronomer at the Shirvanshah's **palace, who for seven years** till his death acted "both as nurse and tutor" to Khagani.

In his youth Khagani wrote under the pen-name Haqiqi, which means the seeker of truth. After he had been invited to the court of the Shirvanshah's **s** he assumed the pen-name of Khagani ("regal"). The life of a court poet palled on him, and he "fled from the iron cage where he felt like a bird with a broken wing" and set off a journey about the Middle East. His travels gave him material for his famous poem Tohvat-ul Iraquein (A Gift of the Two Iraqs), which supplies us with a good deal of material for his biography and in which he described his impressions of the Middle East, and also his philosophical qasida The Ruins of Madain. On return home, Khagani broke off with the court of the Shirvanshah's **s**, and shah Akhsitan gave order for his imprisonment. It was in prison that Khagani wrote one of his most powerful anti-feudal poems called Habsiyye (Prison Poem). Upon release he moved with his family to Tabriz where fate dealt with him one tragic blow after another: first his young son died, then his daughter and then wife. Khagani was left all alone, and he too died in Tabriz. He was buried at the **Poet's Cemetery in Surbakh**, near Tabriz.

Khagani left a remarkable Persian-language heritage which includes some magnificent odes-distiches of as many as three hundred lines with the same rhyme, melodious ghazals, dramatic poems protesting against oppression and glorifying reason and toil, and elegies lamenting the death of his children, his wife and his relatives.

POETRY

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A Meeting with Jamaladdin of Mosul (excerpts from the poem
"Tohvatul-Irakein")

I read to the savant some works of my art
And praise for my verse welled up from his heart.

Pure mother-of-pearl his mouth seemed to be
That with jewels and pearls could fill all the sea.

Pearls always have come from deep in the brine,
But the savant found pearls could fill all the sea.

Pearls always have come from deep in the brine,
But the savant found pearls in verses of mine.

He told me, "Two things I would that I knew -
In what land were you born? And whose son are you?"

"A student am I, a man of the arts.
From my town of Shirvan I came to these parts.

"My father served the true God on high,
But a carpenter by my trade am I.

"For many a year in calamity's cave
I would suck from my thumbs the wisdom they gave."

He asked how I came to be in Iraq.
For what cause on my land had I turned my back.

"Great famines swept through our land without halt.
Where wheat once grew tall, now waters run salt.

"The countryside there is rich and delightful,
Yet the life that men lead is bitter and frightful.

"Cool waters well up from many a spring,
But the mountains spit fire, standing by in a ring.

"So my land had suffered at Fate's ruthless hand
There is now an inferno where once was my land.

"A Damocles sword hangs over the town,
How can men fight volcanoes and rocks raining down!

"In my hand I bore torture far worse than the rack,
So I shook off its dust and came to Iraq.

"Pray hie to the palace. Enlighten the Shah -

And say to his gates I come from afar!

"A hearing I crave. The Shah shall know all!
Be my guide to the Royal Audience Hall."

The savant replied, "Unworthy you are
For an honour as great as greeting the Shah!

"Your 'I, only I' sounds boastful and vain.
You should learn to be brief, more modest and plain.

"The emptiest barrel makes the most sound,
But a wise man won't talk or look too profound.

"The folk who hear fools find their interest flags,
Even lions' hearts crack when anyone brags.

"A flood of vain words can not put to flight
A man who is brave and ready to fight.

"To spout without logic any fool can,
It's the sign of petty, ignorant man.

"Go preen like a pheasant, if such is your wish,
Then be plucked like a pheasant and served on a dish!

"When a mirror reflects a fool-cockatoo
He will ask with surprise: 'who on earth are you?'

"But after such birds are nonplussed by the truth,
They will parrot refinement much worse, forsooth.

"Our Shah favours praise well rounded and ripe,
But he knows men and words - put that in your pipe!

"True wisdom he loves, that never will fade,
But to callow words little heed shall be paid.

"A great many men the Shah's sherbet drink,
Yet the ones who forget it are more than you'd drink.

"No sane man small drops by oceans would measure,
Nor you and your mite by shahs and their treasure.

"Do not be too eager great riches to take,
Lest the noise make the guardian dragon awake.

"Be modest and brief in all of your phrases,
Don't beat your breast, don't sing your own praises.

"Pay heed to your master. Drink in each word
Like a boy who is seen, but seldom is heard.

"If an evil-tongued knave full of malice you are,
Know, you won't be let near to the gates of the Shah.

"Your speech lets you down when your tongue's like a flail,
Let the mouth hold the tongue as tight as in jail.

"The tongue is the sharpest of swords, it is said.
Have a care lest that sword should cut off your head!

"The tongue is the doorman of hell's deep abyss;
Where as silence can lead to heavenly bliss.

"The fish found the strength to make its mouth close.
It was guided by signs the zodiac shows.

"The serpent of Eden showed its forked tongue -
When the Lord cast it out the world was still young.

"A man may be sure his soul he can save
If his tongue will lie still as if in a grave.

"So hurry off home for all you are worth.
And don't stop till you reach the land of your birth!

"In schools study arts and crafts, learn them all
And the lessons you learn forever recall.

"Since you are a Turk, and because you are young,
You should learn, while you can, the Arab's great tongue!

"Today far too much in culture you lack.
When you finish your schooling return to Iraq."

I said, "I have come from afar, as you know,
So I cannot return with nothing to show.

"What a gift shall I bear when I go again
To my home that lies under famine's stark reign?

"When the neighbours ask me what should I say
About teachers that speeded me on my way?"

He said, "Take this ring back home from Iraq,
Men will know you are studious, not one to slack.

"I give you this ring. Let that be your prize.

Forever it should be the light of your eyes.

"To reset this sapphire craftsmen were bid
From the chalice men call the eye of Jamshid.

"As long as you wear this ring on your hand
You have nothing to fear on sea and on land.

"The most sacred names engraved on this ring
Have endowed it with force - a magical thing.

"The seal breaks names engraved on this ring
Have endowed it with force - a magical thing.

"This seal breaks the spells the Ahriman cast.
It was worn by Jamshid in days now long past.

"And if in your country famine should linger
You'll be saved if you wear this band on your finger.

"Now that you own this most precious band
Make sure you don't let it out of your hand.

"The seven wide bands of earths knew this ring
For Jamshid would wear it when he was their king.

"Though you are no doctor men's wounds you shall dress
And through your own land bring the balm of redress.

"This ring can detect all venom and bane,
And what cunning would hide to you shall be plain.

"To take and possess it many men dream,
But you never should yield to any man's scheme.

"On your ring inscribe words by which men will be told
That it cannot be bought, borrowed or sold.

"The true worth of what by right you now own
I'm afraid by its owner can never be known.

"So here is your ring. And now you must go..."
On taking his gift I bowed very low

And answered, "May Allah lengthen your days!"
I expressed my deep thanks in thousands of ways.

I bowed down before him, kissing the ground -
The most grateful of souls that ever was found.

I knew I was helped by Allah's firm hand
On the road from Iraq that leads to my land.

I crossed the boundary of Kukhistan
And the gossips soon saw me enter Shirvan.

I found that each moment people had free
They would fill by discussion my ring and me.

Each one who had seen, or not seen my ring
Would expound on that wond'rous magical thing.

The news of my gift from mouth to ear flew
Very soon it had reached the Khagan's palace, too.

So soon to the royal court I was called.
The great ruler breathed threats, he'd swear and he'd scold

"To please me is all that you can expect.
Give your ring to your ruler. He'll gladly accept!

"That ring has cost lives and fabulous wealth.
Don't you dream you can keep it all to yourself.

"Unworthy your hand is of such a fine ring -
A cheap iron band for you is the right thing.

"Don't treat Jamshid's jewel like some silly toy
Or you'll find yourself deep in trouble, my boy!"

I said, "But I trust our Shah won't begin
By abandoning justice, for that is a sin!

"If evil prevail at any king's court
Then his rule shall be cursed, his life shall be short.

"If God did not build justice for all
The blue dome of your court would shatter and fall."

The Shah spoke again, "That ring you can trade -
And a town is the price that to you shall be paid!"

I said, "Sell a gift? Such act I despise!
That would sully the sun that shines in the skies!

"My ring has no price. It could not be sold
Though you offered the world and all of its gold!

"By wearing my ring I can dominate space.

Right off to the Moon and back I can race.

"The deepest blue seas by Khizir once known
Would be no more than pearls to set off my stone.

"When I trim my nails the heavenly sphere
Seems to me many moons with light silver-clear.

"The Sun found my ring such a splendid sight
He believed it the North Pole gleaming white."

When troubled or ill, when my spirits were low,
I would gather new strength from that magical glow.

The ring in my turban's folds I would hide,
Or concealed in a pocket, deep down inside.

I kept so secret because of its worth
Far beyond any treasure down here on earth.

Then fear of the tongues that wag night and day
Made me keep it at home well hidden away.

So great was my fear with my ring I might part
A great pain in my head seemed to split it apart.

Transgressing all bounds, the devil of gain
Split open my mind and lodged my brain.

My rage made me lean towards Tugan Shah,
But selfishness drew me towards Tekin Shah

Like a paralysed beggar dumped on the street
I could not go ahead and could not retreat.

Since bread one must eat, at feasts many times
I would chant for the riff-raff flattering rhymes.

I often felt horror, stricken with shame -
For their gold I had let them sully my name.

When a lamb meets a dragon it freezes with fear
So my heart always cringed as if danger were near.

A cup I became for the wine rascals drank
From the touch of their hands my inner soul shrank.

All bibbers of wine love to pass round the cup
To drink it and then to break it up.

The cup of my soul was soiled, but not broken -
Though a chattle for years by wastrels bespoken.

Jamshid's magic chalice I never became -
I was just cheap goblet for knaves, to my shame.

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One night I saw dreams as if I were cursed,
Till it seemed that my head most surely would burst.

My mind walked beside me, then, seizing my ear,
It showed me a word where oneness shines clear.

With one hand I held onto reason, my brother,
And the staff of my faith I grasped with the other.

With reason and faith to guide and support me
I found the true way as the savant had taught me.

My eyes found that seven dark veils had grown bright
While another nine veils were blazing with light.

At dawn clear horizons delighted my eyes
With the hues of silk raiments adorning the skies.

I gazed at the glorious heavens above
And my heart overflowed with ineffable love.

I saw a great tent of white move up and rise -
And it trailed ropes of fire as it swept to the skies.

It set all the heavens blazing that morn
While the Moon changed its tint in the circle of dawn.

Miraculous scenes I saw all around
And I hear many voices rise and resound.

The wonderous dawn redoubled its might
And infinity's secrets I learned from the sight.

What Adam once witnessed in forty long days
Was revealed in one morning to my startled gaze.

As day raised its banner someone drew near
And I saw that my guest was none but Khizir.

His face glowed with glory splendid to see.
With respect and affection Khizir looked at me.

His crescent-shaped mouth had uttered no word
Yet I knew all his thoughts as if I had heard.

His lips exhaled light, illuminating his head
And a new sun was born with each word he said.

Then thirty-two stars formed in once lambent row -
Gleaming mother-of-pearl by the sun set aglow.

Like an intimate friend, the most precious on earth,
He spoke words that proved of infinite worth.

He saw that my life had been bitter and dreary
And he knew that my heart was wounded and weary.

He shouldered my load and drove away pain
From my head, and I found I was well once again.

Like rose-scented myrrh, his words, full of grace,
Anointed my head, and I sprinkled my face.

Sweet attar of roses, camphor and balm
Soon had soothed my vexation leaving me calm.

The one who such pain from my shoulders could lift
I longed to repay with some marvellous gift.

The voice of clear reason had set my mind free,
The breath of Khizir was sweet unto me.

My inner voice said - The ring I should give
To Khizir, for it's thanks to him still live.

I kissed the dear ring my mentor gave me,
Then I laid the gift down for my saviour to see.

He hardly could trust his eyes any more,
Astounded he gazed and whispered with awe:

"How came you by Jamshid's marvel unique,
This miraculous thing? - I beg you to speak..."

I said, "In Iraq, that land afar,
A wise man I met, a famous khodja.

"The straight way of truth by him I was shown,
And he gave me this ring, a rainbow-bright band.

The gift that he offered where iris arcs burned

He placed on my ring and my own gift returned.

"This ring", he said, "wear on the right hand alone,
On the left - the magnificent one of your own.

"The two will give aid in your most dire plight -
That ring on your left hand and this on your right."

He added, "I've seen some good friends of mine,
Men with crystal-clear souls, the finest of fine,

"At a hunt in the hills for the bravest of brave.
They indulged in that sport for which many hearts crave.

"Our company made a very fine sight,
So yesterday's hunt was a day of delight.

"I recited your poems while we took rest,
And your work underwent a most astringent test.

"They drank in your poems. They savoured each word,
And said, 'It's the first time such verses we've heard!

" 'Say, who is this poet? What is his name?
In his land do they sing his praises and fame?'

" 'Khagani of Shirvan he's called,' I replied,
'Both his name and his verses are known far and wide.

" 'A master of learning, both genial and wise,
His knowledge and skill should be praised to the skies.'

"I lauded your learning, its depth and its range.
Then my friends said to me, 'Indeed it is strange,

" 'Such attainments should earn Khagani a high place,
And that they have not is a shame and disgrace!

" 'The worth of this poet and men of his kind
Is not understood by the evil and blind.'

"They spoke of your fate and they said in the end,
'Khizir, go to him - be the poet's best friend.

" 'Support him and guide him on his road through this life
Protect him from foes, from hardships and strife.'

"Those noble souls bade me to speed on my way
And now I have come here to do as they say.

"So pay great attention, remember right well
The advice that I give you, the tale that I tell...

"Of a honey-hued life you cannot be sure,
It is fickle and you must trust it no more.

"Chameleons and turncoats - keep them at bay.
Don't let double-faced monsters hold you in sway.

"Don't heed wavering colours that seem the most bright,
Don't trust scented beauty at dawn or by night.

"A man is made splendid by arms that he bears -
But a woman by paints and silks that she wears.

"Though seventy centuries be Adam's age,
It must seem but one day to the righteous and sage."

Khizir's exhortation, though graciously told,
Were barbed and my face went as yellow as gold.

To use this great moment my mind was inspired.
I stuttered and blushed, but made bold and inquired,

"You came like an angel, I listened to you,
You say that our world has a honey-like hue,

"You say it's exalted, yet also it's low,
Tell me, when to our doom with our world must we go?

"How long must men live in hope and in sorrow?
How long must we live in fear of the morrow?

"Will some men escape over bridges that blaze?
Or must hell-fire take all at the end of their days?

"From mankind's five senses can there be relief
For us here on earth, be it ever so brief?

"A canopy covers our little home,
Tell me, is it a stage with a black-painted dome?

"Will peace ever come to this circle in space?
When will this little spot be dislodged from its place?

"Beyond the equator, what could I see?
What lands and what peoples are waiting for me?"

I put many questions to him in my haste,

But I saw that my manner was not to his taste.

He frowned and then spoke, "I see for a start
That the spirit of evil has entered your heart.

"Introspection," he said, "leads away from the truth
You dream of the cosmos like some callow youth.

"Thus never would reason the learned and wise,
For a grave contradiction within your words lies.

"How long will you gabble with hardly a pause
Philosophical rubbish and theories of yours?

"Such studies we call by the name 'felsafeh'
Which is just like the word meaning foolish - 'safeh'!

"The words of the Koran no sophism hide,
Nor do facts it expounds; that can't be denied.

"The wise men well known - and to them you may speak -
There's taught in philosophy preached by the Greek.

"Abandon your thinking, don't be so foolish
All your philosophies are not worth one phylis.

"Turn your face to the Kaaba and give up your vuce.
You've no need for six facets like gamblers' bone dice!

"Find the meaning of life. You never should be
Like an empty old cage for a bird long set free.

"Don't be double-faced, without body or head,
Like a tambourine's vellum, whitened with lead.

"Don't squander your time for moments of bliss,
They are fleeting as joy obtained by a kiss.

"In faith your support you always must find,
And not in Euclid and Greeks of that kind!

"Don't pay too much heed to their empty word -
Justly forgotten as soon as it's heard.

"Would you order the nightingale - 'Trill till you faint'?
Or the spider to make you a picture with paint?

"So busy's the spider, so by spinning diagrams neat,
That like geometricians he's no time to eat!

"About Islam's doctrines and scholars please ask...
I shall answer, for that is genial task!

"A man who the turban of true faith can wind
Has no need of the crown of kings and their kind.

"If you don't have a diadem you should not frown,
For the lack of it may prove your most precious crown.

"The finest of heads is the head still uncrowned,
For no better in this or the next word is found.

"Should a head that is crowned lose the love of the mass -
It will find that uncrowned it looks sorry and crass!

"The tricks of this world do the strangest of things -
Jamshid becomes slave and monsters are kings!

"The demands of the epoch have such a wide range -
Like the skins that hold water they vary and change.

"A waterless skin will be parched as with thirst,
While a skin with too much will swell up and burst.

"Now say, Khagani, will you always be able
To gather up crumbs from the new-rich man's table?

"At times, beyond doubt, you may break a long fast,
But how long do you think such a blessing will last?

"By people's portals don't hang around,
Or you'll be like the crooked tail of a hound.

"Those stupid, ignoble men fear honest work
Like base cringing curs, any duty they shirk!

"The chains on a dog that is guarding a gate
Are better than tawdry gold crowns of the great.

"Don't serve the unholy - don't let them come near -
But fling open the gates of the truth without fear.

"From the gateway of evil your soul you must thrust.
Go your way, Khagani, in your God put your trust."

The Ruins of Madain

My soul, come, draw lessons from life, look around..
A mirror to help you in old Madain can be found.

Beside the Dajla lie the ruins of great Madain.
The river's long banks with bitterest groaning resound.

More blood flows than water from Dajla's suffering eyes.
No tears touch its cheek, dried by flames that from
Smouldering ruins arise

See - the Tigris is foaming - foal curls on the lips of each wave..
How mournful those ruins burying hearts and their sighs!

The heart of the Tigris is burnt by sorrow and fear.
Can flames be so intense that the water itself they sear?

The river great tribute must pay every year to the sea,
So add your small part with a drop of your blood, not a tear.

Heave a sigh and the flame from your heart will divide the
Tigris's great stream -
Then one river of ice and another of lava will gleam.

The river enchained had to witness the end of this place,
It twisted and turned like a chain when it heard the last scream.

May their hearts draw men here! May the voice of the ruins prevail!
Let every heart hear at least one whispered word without fail!

It seems that those jagged-toothed ramparts hold precepts for men,
That they soon must be granted a tongue and will tell their own tale.

The owl's endless hoot makes my head ring as if with mad cries.
To sooth my discomfort the tears will soon start from my eyes.

All songs here are elegies. Nightingales here are all owls.
The cry Madain raised to heaven throughout the world flies.

This place speaks of chambers of justice once ruined by hate.
The throne fell to tyrants who rose unaware of their fate.

Was fortune or God's retribution the force that could shatter
The towers and bring down in ruins a palace so great?

Don't laugh at my tears in this dead place enveloped in palls -
A man would look foolish if he did not weep in such halls.

As mighty as Kufa was great Madain in its prime.
As lofty its towering fortress, as strong were its walls.

Though pity burns hot in your heart, of your judgement is cold,
You will see Madain in its beauty like Kufa of old.

Yes, once long ago Madain in its beauty was a work of great art.
The palace had gateways that blazed with mosaics and gold.

Here Babylon's king fulfilled orders that other men gave.
At Madain's court Turkestan's mighty khan was a slave.

From this spot was launched an attack on the lion of fate,
By that lion whose statue is standing here noble and brave.

I imagine this place that once held a whole land in its sway,
The fort as it was, not the ruins that lie here today.

The walls would say, 'Weep! For you, too, have good reason for sorrow.
To dust all must crumble and you, man, are just living clay!'

Dismount from your horse, for your lips to this earth you should press.
Here an elephant's foot crushed Ne'eman, the great master of chess.

Now elephants' castles by monarchs are no longer won,
For the elephant time marches on and brings kings to distress.

Time was hwen the shahs could bring elephants under their sway.
Now time checkmates shahs, they're like elephants gone far astray.

Here Nushiravan's blood was drunk by Ormuz from his skull.
The drink was so strong that it made Ormuz stagger and sway.

A moral was carved on the rim of the crown on his head.
In mine are now surging a thousand as yet still unsaid.

For mandarins Kesra was famed, for his splendour was Parvis.
They have long been forgotten and lie with the most humble dead.

For banquets great Parvis had greenery beaten from gold -
A golden-green garden! A wonderous sight to behold!

That ruler has gone and his plants made of gold are no more
Proclaim "Kemtaraku". His fate shall no longer be told!

You ask where such rulers have gone, since today there are none -
The earth has embraced all these kings, every shah and khagan.

Now pregnant with life, she conceived with greatest of ease,

But bearing new life she now finds is not easily done.

The wine pressed from grapes here is blood of Shirin
dripping red.
The peasants make pots from the body of Parvis long dead.

How many a despot and tyrant this earth has embraced!
Yet still she is yearning for more to recline in her bed.

That black-hearted earth with a snowy and mountainous head -
She rouges her cheeks with the blood that her children have shed!

Teach men, Khagani, how fickle is fortune and life
And let the khagans come to you and by wisdom be led.

Though dervishes wait at the gates of the shah for a gift
That shah one fine day like a dervish may have to make shift.

From Mecca come presents, but I sent my gift to Shirvan
From old Madain, may its moral men's spirit uplift.

The beads many count come from Jamra near Kabaa today
But yours should be made from the flesh of Salman turned to clay.

These vast flowing waters hold lessons - so drink while you may
Where two rivers unite as the Shatt - then set off on your way.

From journeys on far one should bring back a fine souvenir -
My friends, let my gift be the verses I offer you here.

Though seeming disordered my words have made mysteries clear,
Thus Isa also taught, half deranged by a single idea.

A Love Song

As long as my heart is still beating
the one that I love shall be you.
As long as I hold something dearer
than life, it shall always be you.
Affection within my soul burning
lent strength to my heart in the past.
The impulse to keep my heart beating
forever, my dear, shall be you.
Whatever the wound I may suffer

the balm for my pain shall be you.
Whatever disorder afflicts me
the cure for my ill shall be you.
I always shall be at your service
whatever your heart may desire.
One sultan in life I acknowledge,
and that one shall always be you.
If ever I write about faith
and ingratitude, now I proclaim
The title shall start with the letter
which begins my beloved's first name.
In matters of state, or of faith and apostasy you can't
deceive me...
For you are my Khan, my Belief, my idol - al one and
the same!
Who is Khagani? Oh, my sloe-eyed sweet beauty, approach
me and claim
To be Khagani's khagan, be my monarch demanding acclaim.