Great works of literature do not materialize out of thin air. They are created by individuals filled with all sorts of human frailty. Ferdowsi was no exception. To reach Ferdowsi the man and find verifiable facts about his life, we must first penetrate the thick fog of myth that envelops his career and personality. Although verifiable facts about Iran’s national poet are by no means abundant, they are also not entirely absent. Our most important source of reliable facts is, of course, the poet himself. Much in the Shāhnāmeh may be used to either establish the truth of specific events in his life or support meaningful conjectures about his biography. This chapter will isolate some of what can be said about him with reasonable confidence.

Ferdowsi was born into a family of small landowners in the township of Pāzh. The name of this city is spelled as fāz (فاز), bāz (باز), or pāzh (پاژ) in different Persian and Arabic sources. There’s little doubt the town’s name was spelled with an initial $p$, and probably pronounced pāzh. The great Arab geographer, Yāqūt (d. a.d. 1229) writes that when the name of the city was rendered into Arabic, they expressed the initial sound by the letter $f$. Since Arabs routinely expressed the Persian sound $p$, which does not exist in classical Arabic, by means of the Arabic letter $f$, it’s reasonable to conjecture that the original Persian form of this city’s name began with an initial $p$. So, in all likelihood, Ferdowsi’s hometown was known as Pāzh.¹

Pāzh is now a small town that is located about 15 kilometers to the northeast of the city of Mahshhad. Some 200 families of farmers and sheepherders resided there in 1969, which would indicate a total population of about 1,000 persons if we assume five persons to a family. This estimation is confirmed by the census of 1993, which again showed a population of 1,000. The reason the community did not change for nearly 30 years may be that young people immigrated to larger cities in search of employment. Archaeological excavations of the city’s old fortress indicate that it was a prosperous town with a relatively large population in the
past.\textsuperscript{2} By A.D. 1165, Nizāmī-yi\textsuperscript{4}Arūzī reported that in A.D. 1155, the city could field an armed force of 1000 men.\textsuperscript{3} Assuming that each of these men represented a family of five, the population of old Pāzh may be placed at roughly five to seven thousand, including its resident slaves and tradesmen. Important scholars, whose fame drew the great jurist and biographer, al-Samānī (A.D. 1113–1166) to Pāzh, resided in the city.\textsuperscript{4} Therefore, the city of Ferdowsi’s birth was by no means a small or provincial backwater.

Ferdowsi was probably born in the winter of A.D. 940. The date of his birth can be deduced from a number of verses in the \textit{Shāhnāmeh}: In the exordium to the story of Kaykhosrow’s Great War, which we briefly discussed in the previous chapter, he complains that at the age of 65, he must live in poverty (iv: 172: 40–42). He reminisces in the same piece that Fereydūn, the mythical king, was reborn and took over the realm when Ferdowsi turned 58 (iv: 172: 43–46).

\begin{quote}
But when I had turned fifty-eight  
—I was growing feeble; alas, how my youth departed—  
I heard a great call throughout the world  
That sharpened my mind and cured my ailing body  
It said: O’ noble ones of fame,  
Who seek the auspicious [king] Fereydūn!  
The sagacious Fereydū is reborn  
And the whole world came under his command.
\end{quote}

By Fereydūn, of course, he means Mahmūd, and this verse is an allusion to the beginning of Mahmūd’s reign, which we know was in A.D. 998. Therefore, we can learn that in A.D. 998 he was 58 years of age, and can put the date of his birth in (998-58 =) A.D. 940. This date is confirmed by two other references in the \textit{Shāhnāmeh}. The first is in the story of the reign of Bahrām-i Bahrāmiyān (vi: 276: 9), where he says that he is 63 years old; and again some 730 verses later in the story of Shāpūr II (A.D. 309–379), where he complains of having grown deaf in his 63\textsuperscript{rd} year; and also tells us that the first day of the Persian month, Bahman, had fallen on a Friday, in that year. Within the period of Ferdowsi’s lifetime, it is only in the year A.D. 1003 in which the first day of the month, Bahman falls on a Friday. Knowing that he was 63 years old in A.D. 1003, we can reconfirm our poet’s date of birth as (1003-63 =) A.D. 940. Also, at the end of the book, Ferdowsi speaks of being 71 years old, and specifies that he completed his book in the Muslim year 400, which puts the date of his birth in (400-71 = ) 329 \textit{hijrī} or A.D. 940.\textsuperscript{5}

Although Ferdowsi’s date of birth can be determined with reasonable certainty, we know very little about his early life and circumstances.