The Unwritten Pages of Arda: Genealogical Silence, Oral Memory, and Historiographical Depth in Tolkien and Ferdowsi

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Abstract

This article argues that genealogical gaps in J.R.R. Tolkien's legendarium and Ferdowsi's Shahnameh are not narrative defects or failures of transmission but formal signs of oral-historical memory. Drawing on oral-tradition theory and the long-standing Iranian debate over Ferdowsi's sources, the study traces how absence functions as a historiographical device that produces temporal depth, dynastic legitimacy, and interpretive openness. I analyse three types of silence—kings named only by regnal years, kings named without recorded deeds, and contradictory lineages—in Tolkien's Appendices and Ferdowsi's dynastic narratives. These gaps are contextualised through medieval Anglo-Saxon and Irish genealogical practices that Tolkien knew professionally and through the Persian tension between the written Khwadāy-nāmag and the living naqqāl tradition. The comparison reveals a shared logic: incomplete memory strengthens authority by inviting readers and listeners to become co-creators of the past. In an age that equates documentation with truth, Tolkien and Ferdowsi offer a counter-wisdom: the most durable history is not the history that records everything but the history that trusts the listener to complete it. This study thus contributes to comparative epic studies by demonstrating that genealogical silence, far from being a textual flaw, constitutes a formal rhetoric of historical authenticity that crosses cultural and chronological boundaries.

Keywords: Oral history, genealogy, Tolkien, Ferdowsi, historiography, narrative gaps

1. Introduction: The King Who Is Only a Name

The Appendices to The Lord of the Rings contain a passage that most readers skim without pause. It lists the early kings of Arnor in the North after the death of Isildur. For Tarcil, the sixth king, the record is stark: "born 425, reigned 435-515." That is all. No battle, no marriage, no law, no death—just a name and two numbers [1, Appendix A, I, iii]. In Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, the poet dispatches the entire five-hundred-year rule of the Ashkanian (Parthian) dynasty in a handful of lines, explaining that their reigns were so poorly documented that he can only name a few of their kings [2, vol. 5, p. 10]. These are not characters in the modern novelistic sense. They are entries in a chronicle that has lost most of its pages, and that, I argue, is exactly the effect their authors intended.

This article proposes that genealogical gaps in Tolkien and Ferdowsi function less as narrative deficiencies than as formal analogues to oral-historical transmission. In both textual worlds, dynastic incompletion does not weaken legitimacy; it deepens it by imitating the selective, homeostatic logic of oral memory. A lineage that can afford to forget some of its kings is a lineage that has endured for centuries. A text that can gesture toward a past too vast to be fully narrated is a text that creates the illusion of genuine antiquity. The forgotten king, far from being a failure of the author's imagination, is a sophisticated historiographical device, and understanding how it works requires us to listen carefully to the grain of the voice in societies that did not yet rely on writing.

To build this argument, I draw on three interlocking domains of scholarship. The first is the theory of oral tradition, particularly the work of Jan Vansina, Walter Ong, and Jack Goody, who have shown that oral cultures preserve memory

through selective, homeostatic processes in which forgetting is as important as remembering [3, 4, 5]. The second is the medieval European genealogical tradition that Tolkien knew as a professional philologist—the Anglo-Saxon king-lists and Irish pseudo-histories that used gaps and invented ancestors to legitimise ruling houses [6, 7, 8]. The third—and the one most neglected in comparative Tolkien studies—is the long-standing Iranian scholarly debate over Ferdowsi's sources. For decades, Iranian scholars have argued about whether the Shahnameh is a faithful transcription of a lost written chronicle, a literary crystallisation of living oral performance, or—as the most persuasive voices now suggest—a synthesis of both [9, 10, 11, 12]. This debate is not peripheral to my argument; it is the key that unlocks the genealogical silences in Ferdowsi's poem.

The structure of the article is as follows. Section 2 lays out the theoretical foundations of oral memory—the dynamics of homeostasis, structural amnesia, and the social function of forgetting. Section 3 surveys the medieval precedents for Tolkien's technique and then turns to the Persian source debate, showing how Ferdowsi's poem sits at the intersection of the book and the voice. Sections 4 and 5 develop parallel typologies of genealogical silence in Tolkien's Appendices and the Shahnameh, with extended close readings of specific passages. Section 6 brings the two epic traditions into comparative synthesis, including a new analysis of their rhetoric of authority, and a brief conclusion reflects on the implications of the unwritten page for a world that increasingly mistakes documentation for truth.

2. The Grain of the Voice: Oral Memory and the Productive Gap

Oral tradition is not simply speech in the absence of writing. It is a whole way of knowing, a mode of preserving the past that is fundamentally different from the archive-building habits of literate cultures. To understand why genealogical gaps feel authentic rather than deficient, we must first grasp how oral societies manage memory.

Jan Vansina, whose decades of fieldwork among Central African societies gave him an unparalleled understanding of living oral traditions, described oral tradition as verbal testimony transmitted across generations in a culture that does not rely on writing [3, p. 3]. He stressed that this transmission was never mechanical. It was an active, creative process, shaped by the needs of the present as much as by the authority of the past. Every recitation was an act of interpretation, a negotiation between what had been received and what the current audience needed to hear.

Walter Ong, in his seminal Orality and Literacy, described oral cultures as "homeostatic": they discard memories that no longer serve the living community and keep only what is functionally relevant [4, p. 42]. This is not carelessness; it is an adaptive strategy. In a society without writing, the only storage medium for knowledge is the human mind, and the human mind has limited capacity. Generations of storytellers, without ever consciously deciding to do so, sift the past, preserving what continues to matter and discarding what does not. The result is not a diminished past but a past that is always alive, always bound to the present moment of its telling.

This selectivity is nowhere more visible than in genealogies. Jack Goody introduced the concept of "structural amnesia"—the tendency of oral societies to forget individuals who are no longer genealogically necessary while preserving the skeletal structure of the lineage that legitimises the current order [5, p. 135]. A missing ancestor is not a scandal; it is a sign that the lineage is functioning as a political instrument. When a new chief rises to power, the genealogy may be quietly adjusted, generations may be compressed or omitted, and the focus may shift to more prestigious ancestors. What matters is not factual completeness but the chain of legitimacy that connects the present ruler to the mythic founders of the people.

Goody's insight has profound implications for how we read epic genealogy. If we approach a king-list expecting the standards of a modern national archive, the gaps will look like failures. But if we understand that genealogy in oral societies is a form of political discourse, then the gaps become meaningful. They reveal the pressures that have shaped the tradition—the moments when certain names were amplified and others were allowed to fade. Eric Havelock, in his classic study of the transition from orality to literacy in ancient Greece, argued that the very structure of oral memory is "additive," "aggregative," and "agonistic" [13, p. 45]. Oral poets build their narratives through the accumulation

of names and epithets, and the rhythm of the line itself serves as a mnemonic device. A king whose name fits the metre may survive even when his deeds have been forgotten; a king whose name does not may be replaced by a more sonorous ancestor.

This tolerance for variation extends to outright contradiction. Oral cultures, Ong observed, are comfortable with multiple, simultaneous versions of the same event [4, p. 47]. Different families, different villages, different political factions may preserve different genealogies of the same ruler, and all are accepted as legitimate because each serves a particular social function. The idea that there must be a single, correct version of the past is a literate prejudice, born of the fixity of the written word. In an oral culture, the past is not a sealed archive but a field of competing voices, and contradiction is a sign of health, not a sign of error.

These dynamics provide the framework for understanding the silent kings in Tolkien and Ferdowsi. Both authors, I argue, reproduce the texture of oral memory—not because they each had direct access to living oral traditions (though Ferdowsi almost certainly did, as the naqqāl tradition attests), but because their written texts are designed to feel as though they have passed through the selective, loss-ridden channels of oral transmission. The names that remain without stories are the proof that the tradition is old, that it has been handled by many hands, and that it trusts its audience to supply what is missing. In the sections that follow, I trace the specific medieval and Persian roots of this technique before turning to the texts themselves.

3. The Double Root: Anglo-Saxon Philology and Persian Oral Poetics

The genealogical silences in Tolkien and Ferdowsi do not arise in a vacuum. They are grounded in real historical practices—the medieval European traditions that Tolkien studied professionally and the Iranian oral traditions that Ferdowsi inherited and reshaped.

3.1 The Anglo-Saxon and Irish Genealogical Imagination

Tolkien's academic career was built on the editing of fragmentary medieval manuscripts. As Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, he worked intimately with the Beowulf codex, the Exeter Book, and the battered chronicles of the early English kingdoms. He knew, as a matter of daily professional experience, that real historical records are full of gaps, glosses, contradictions, and lost leaves. A perfectly preserved text looks like a modern reconstruction; a damaged, partial text looks like something that has survived the erosion of centuries.

The Anglian Collection of royal genealogies, compiled in Mercia around 796 CE, provides a direct model for Tolkien's king-lists. These genealogies trace the rulers of Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex back through generations of shadowy names to Woden and, in later Christianised versions, to Adam [6, p. 23]. Many of the intermediate figures are historically unattested and probably legendary; some appear to have been invented specifically to fill generational spans or to create prestigious connections. David Dumville, the foremost historian of these documents, demonstrated that early medieval royal genealogies were constructed, preserved, and transmitted with the explicit purpose of authenticating the ruling dynasty's claim to power [7, p. 78]. The gaps between named kings were not errors but flexible spaces. A king omitted in one manuscript could be inserted in another when political circumstances changed; silence was simply a place waiting to be filled by a skilled reciter.

The Irish Lebor Gabála Érenn (Book of the Taking of Ireland) pushed this principle even further. Compiled in the eleventh century from older materials, it narrated six successive waves of mythical settlers taking possession of Ireland, each wave adding a new layer of invented ancestry to the national story [8, p. 78]. The genealogical function was explicitly political: the Lebor Gabála was designed to unite disparate Gaelic tribes under a shared origin myth and to give Ireland a history that could rival those of Rome and Israel. Wave after wave of settlers were added as needed, and gaps between them were opportunities for further elaboration. As John Carey has shown, the text was composed to

bridge the chasm between Christian world-chronology and the prehistory of Ireland [8, p. 18]. Its genealogical silences were not gaps in knowledge; they were invitations to creative expansion.

Tolkien, as Tom Shippey has convincingly argued, deliberately transferred the features of medieval manuscripts—gaps, glosses, contradictions, lost leaves—into his own mythology [14, p. 78]. The Appendices to The Lord of the Rings are presented as a scholarly edition of a recovered manuscript, the Red Book of Westmarch. The reader is told that the text has been translated, edited, and supplemented from fragmentary sources. This framing device—what critics have called Tolkien's "found manuscript conceit"—allows him to build gaps and uncertainties into the very fabric of his world. When a king like Tarcil appears with only regnal years, the reader is meant to feel that she is holding a damaged chronicle, not a completed novel.

The role of the scop, the Anglo-Saxon court poet, is equally relevant. The scop recited the king's genealogy at feasts, stringing together names in alliterative verse that carried authority even when no story accompanied them [15]. The name itself was a kind of deed; to be named in the lineage was to belong to the chain of legitimacy that stretched back to the gods. This is why the Anglian genealogies could include kings whose historical existence was doubtful: their names mattered not as facts but as links in a chain of sovereignty. Tolkien, who translated and taught Beowulf for decades, understood this poetic economy intimately.

3.2 The Persian Debate: Ferdowsi between Book and Voice

Ferdowsi's Shahnameh sits at a different but equally instructive intersection of written and oral memory. The poem itself gestures in two directions at once. In his exordium, Ferdowsi speaks of a lost Pahlavi book, the Khwadāy-nāmag (Book of Lords), commissioned by the Sasanian court and later translated into Arabic and then into New Persian prose during the Samanid period. Yet the same poem is saturated with formulas, repeated epithets, and structural repetitions that feel unmistakably oral—the fingerprints of a tradition that was sung and spoken long before it was written.

For Jalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, the pre-eminent textual critic of the Shahnameh in the twentieth century, the answer was decisive: Ferdowsi worked from a written source, not from living storytellers. In a 2016 interview, he stated that anyone who studies the Shahnameh carefully for several years cannot possibly maintain that its source was oral [9]. His eight-volume critical edition of the poem [2] meticulously collates manuscript variants, and for Khaleghi-Motlagh the coherence of the text across manuscript families was evidence of a stable written archetype. Yet even Khaleghi-Motlagh did not deny that oral traditions supplemented the written source; he simply insisted on the primacy of the book.

Other voices have pushed the balance in the opposite direction. Zabihollah Safa, in his foundational Hamāseh-sarāyi dar Irān (Epic Poetry in Iran), acknowledged the written core but argued that Ferdowsi used every available source—written and oral, historical and legendary—to shape his work [10]. Safa emphasised the role of the dehqāns, the landed gentry of the Iranian countryside who were the custodians of local memory and who preserved genealogies and local legends that may not have been contained in any official chronicle. Mohammad-Amin Riahi, in his influential biography Ferdowsi: Zendegi, Andisheh va She'r-e U (Ferdowsi: His Life, Thought, and Poetry), went further, portraying the poet as a researcher who consulted both manuscripts and living informants, moving between the written and the spoken as the material demanded [11]. For Riahi, Ferdowsi's claim to have used a written source was real, but it was not the whole story.

The most concrete evidence for the oral dimension has been provided by Sajjad Aidenloo, whose edition of the Tumār-e Naqqāli-ye Shahnameh (The Naqqāl Scroll of the Shahnameh) has transformed our understanding of Ferdowsi's relationship to performance [12]. The naqqāls—professional storytellers who recited the epic in coffeehouses, at court, and in village squares—did not simply read Ferdowsi aloud. They improvised, elaborated, and preserved variant lineages and episodes that never entered the fixed text. Aidenloo's work reveals a vast underworld of oral narrative that ran alongside and beyond the written poem. Crucially, some of the genealogical details in the naqqāl scrolls differ from the canonical manuscript tradition, demonstrating that the oral tradition was an independent, living source of memory

that continued to evolve long after Ferdowsi's death. The written Shahnameh was not the end of the tradition but a single, particularly magnificent, moment within it.

This debate is not merely a footnote for textual scholars; it has profound implications for how we interpret the genealogical silences in Ferdowsi's poem. If Ferdowsi worked primarily from a written source, as Khaleghi-Motlagh argues, then the gaps in his king-lists might reflect gaps in his source—a faithful transcription of a chronicle that was itself incomplete. But if, as Safa, Riahi, and Aidenloo suggest, Ferdowsi was also listening to the voices of the dehqāns and the naqqāls, then the gaps take on a different character. They are not merely inherited from a book; they are shaped by the dynamic of living oral memory, by the homeostatic pressure that allows some names to recede while others are amplified.

I take the latter view to be the more persuasive. Ferdowsi describes himself in the poem as a gatherer of scattered traditions, a man who travelled in search of the old stories. This self-portrait is consistent with Riahi's image of a poet-researcher who did not simply transcribe a manuscript but actively assembled and reshaped a national memory that existed in both written and oral forms. The silent kings of the Shahnameh are the residue of this dual inheritance. The written Khwadāy-nāmag demanded a complete list of rulers to legitimise the Sasanian house; the oral tradition, ever homeostatic, had let go of the details. Ferdowsi's art—and I believe this is one of his greatest achievements—was to honour both pressures: to preserve the skeletal completeness of the written record while leaving the flesh for the reciters, and for the readers, to supply.

4. Tolkien's Genealogical Silences: Four Registers

With these historical and theoretical foundations in place, we can now turn to a systematic examination of the genealogical gaps in Tolkien's Appendices. I distinguish four registers of silence, each producing a distinct but related effect.

4.1 The Bare Chronology: Kings of Arnor After Valandil

The most conspicuous gaps in Tolkien's Appendices appear in the early history of Arnor, the northern kingdom of the Dúnedain. After the death of Isildur, the Appendices list a succession of High Kings of Arnor, several of whom receive no narrative elaboration whatsoever. Tarcil, the sixth king, is recorded as "born 425, reigned 435-515." Valandur, the eighth king, receives a similarly minimal entry: "born 462, ruled 515-602." Their regnal years are given, but no deeds, no characterisation, no anecdote [1, Appendix A, I, iii].

This is not an oversight. It is a deliberate imitation of what a real chronicle looks like after centuries of damage and selective copying. A historian working with a fragmentary medieval manuscript might encounter exactly such entries: a name and a date, the bare bones of a reign, with the narrative portions torn away or never recorded in the first place. Tolkien, who had spent his career editing such manuscripts, understood that the authority of an old text rests partly on its visible imperfections. A perfectly preserved, fully narrated chronicle would read like a modern invention. A chronicle with gaps and silences reads like something that has genuinely survived.

The effect on the reader is complex and, I think, deliberately so. On one level, the bare entries are frustrating; we want to know more about Tarcil and Valandur, and the text refuses to satisfy our curiosity. On another level, this frustration is itself a form of historical mimesis. The actual past is full of people whose lives were once vivid and consequential but whose stories have been lost. The silence around Tarcil is the same silence we encounter when we walk through a medieval cemetery and read names on tombstones whose epitaphs have been worn away by rain. The name alone testifies that someone lived, and that is all we can ever know. Tolkien's genius is to reproduce not just the fact of these kings but the feeling of their loss—the ache of the historian who reaches the limits of what the archive can yield. I term this effect the historiographical texture of loss.

4.2 The Structural Ancestor: Argeleb II and the Art of Compressed Memory

In the history of Arthedain, the successor kingdom to Arnor in the North, Argeleb II appears as the son of Araphor and father of Arvegil. The only historical fact his entry includes is a single subordinate clause: "in his day the Shire was first settled by the Hobbits" [1, Appendix A, I, iii]. Argeleb ruled for eighty-one years—the span of a long human life—and his entire reign has been compressed into this one secondary detail.

This is what Vansina might call a "structural ancestor" [3, p. 82], a figure preserved not for his own story but because he connects more consequential kings on either side. His function is genealogical, not narrative. Yet the compression itself is evocative. A life of eight decades has been reduced to a single sentence, and the reader is left to imagine everything that sentence omits: the wars, the famines, the marriages, the personal griefs, the quotidian details of ruling a fragmenting kingdom. The compression does not diminish Argeleb; it makes him feel uncannily real, because this is how actual historical memory works. People who mattered intensely to their own time become, after a few generations, a line in a chronicle, and after a few more generations, that line itself may be erased.

Real history, as any genealogist knows, is full of Argelebs. The family trees we construct for ourselves are full of names for whom no story survives—the great-grandparent who emigrated, the distant cousin who died young, the ancestor whose life was ordinary and left no trace in any archive except a birth and a death date. Tolkien understood this, and his Appendices are the richer for including figures whose very ordinariness testifies to the scale of the history that surrounds them. Not every king can be an Aragorn; most kings are Argelebs, and their silence is a form of historical truth.

4.3 Contradictory Lineages: The Rohirrim and the Tolerance of Multiple Truths

Perhaps the most sophisticated genealogical gap in Tolkien's Appendices is not an absence but a contradiction. In the records of the Rohirrim, two different ancestries are given for Eorl the Young, the founder of the royal house of Rohan. One traces him through the Lords of the Éothéod, the horse-lords of the North; another connects him by a distant marriage to the royal line of Gondor. Tolkien, speaking in his editorial voice, prints both versions side by side without attempting to reconcile them [1, Appendix A, II].

This is a direct imitation of the way oral cultures handle competing traditions. As Ong observed, societies without writing are comfortable with multiple, simultaneous versions of the same historical event [4, p. 47]. Different families or different regions may preserve different genealogies of the same king, and both are accepted as legitimate because each serves a different social function. The version that links Eorl to Gondor might legitimise a political alliance; the version that traces him through the Éothéod might assert the independence of Rohan from the southern kingdom. Both are true in their own context, and the tradition does not demand that one be chosen and the other discarded.

Tolkien's refusal to adjudicate between the two Rohirrim traditions transforms the Appendices from a database of settled facts into a living, contested memorial field. The reader is not told what to believe; the reader must wrestle with the ambiguity, just as a real historian must when confronted with conflicting medieval charters. The gap here is not a blank but a fork in the road, and the reader is entrusted with the task of living within the ambiguity. This is an extraordinarily generous narratological gesture—one that respects the reader's intelligence and mirrors the condition of genuine historical knowledge.

4.4 The Hobbit Parody: Orality as Resistance

Tolkien's deepest insight into the politics of memory is embodied in the hobbits. The culture of the Shire is saturated with informal, oral record-keeping: birthday-books that record every gift, family trees whispered across generations, the comic lists of Shirriffs, the extensive genealogies of the Bagginses and the Tooks that Bilbo and Frodo maintain with

obsessive care [16, Prologue]. These records are both meticulous and absurd, a parody in miniature of the grand dynastic archives of Gondor.

But the parody carries a serious point. When Saruman's ruffians take over the Shire during the War of the Ring, they impose a regime of written decrees, permits, regulations, and quotas—the bureaucratic apparatus of a modern police state. The hobbits resist not with counter-documents, not with written manifestos, but with an oral proclamation: the "Hobbitry-in-arms," a spoken rallying cry that appeals to custom, to shared memory, and to the bonds of face-to-face community [16, Book VI, Ch. 8]. They win.

Tolkien is making a political argument here, one that is close to the heart of his entire legendarium. Oral memory—the messy, personal, half-remembered past of ordinary people—is aligned with freedom, with community, with the textured particularity of lived experience. Written administration, when it becomes a tool of domination, is aligned with tyranny, with the flattening of human beings into numbers and permits. The hobbits' forgotten ancestors—the Bagginses and Bolgers and Bracegirdles whose names populate the family trees without any accompanying stories—are not failures of record-keeping. They are the proof that memory belongs to the community, not to the state. The silence around them is a form of liberty. This is the politics of the unwritten in its most radical form: the refusal to write can be an act of resistance against the archive as an instrument of control.

5. Ferdowsi's Silent Dynasties: The Traces of the Voice

Ferdowsi's Shahnameh exhibits a remarkably similar set of genealogical silences, though they arise from a different combination of written and oral inheritance. I identify four principal types.

5.1 The Ashkanian Compression: Darkness as Dramatic Instrument

The most dramatic genealogical gap in the Shahnameh is Ferdowsi's treatment of the Ashkanian (Parthian) dynasty. Historically, the Parthians ruled Iran for nearly five hundred years, from the mid-third century BCE to the early third century CE. They were a major imperial power, and their conflicts with Rome are well documented in classical sources. Yet Ferdowsi dispatches them in fewer than twenty lines, saying that their reigns were so chaotic and poorly recorded that he can only name a handful of their kings: "Since I can find no clear record of them, / I shall speak only what I have heard from the dehqān" [2, vol. 5, p. 10].

Scholars have debated the reasons for this compression. Some, following Khaleghi-Motlagh, argue that Ferdowsi was simply being faithful to his Sasanian source, which would have deliberately suppressed the memory of the Parthians, whom the Sasanians overthrew [2, vol. 5, introduction]. Others, like Dick Davis, have suggested that the compression is a narrative strategy, a deliberate dark age that heightens the glory of the Sasanian restoration that follows [17]. Zagros Zand, in his study of the historiographical style of the Shahnameh, argues that Ferdowsi was not writing a chronicle in the modern sense but an epic shaped by the selective rhythms of oral memory, in which certain dynasties become compressed into a few evocative names while others expand into full narrative [18].

Whatever the historical cause, the narrative effect is profound. The Ashkanian silence is a chasm in the poem's chronology, a dark age in which the chain of Iranian sovereignty almost fades from view. The reader feels the precariousness of memory itself—the terror that whole centuries of human life can be reduced to a few lines, or less. But this terror also serves a dramatic function. By racing through the Ashkanians, Ferdowsi makes the Sasanian restoration feel like a recovery from amnesia, a triumphant return of the light after centuries of shadow. The gap is not an embarrassment to be minimised; it is a rhetorical instrument that deepens the emotional stakes of the entire poem. It is a stark instance of the historiographical texture of loss.

5.2 The Mythical Threshold: Pishdadian Kings as Place-Holders

At the other end of the chronological spectrum, the Pishdadian dynasty opens the Shahnameh with a series of kings—Keyumars, Hushang, Tahmuras, Jamshid—whose narrative presence is strikingly compressed relative to their cosmic importance. Keyumars, the Zoroastrian Adam, is introduced as the first man and the first king, "ruler of the world," yet his entire reign occupies only a few dozen lines before he is succeeded by his grandson Hushang [2, vol. 1, p. 15]. Tahmuras, the "demon-binder," receives slightly more detail, but still only the barest sketch of his deeds. Even Jamshid, the culture-hero who invents the arts of civilisation and whose farr (divine glory) departs from him because of his pride, is narrated with an almost mythic compression that avoids the psychological interiority of the poem's later heroes.

This compression is not a sign that Ferdowsi lacked material. It is a deliberate technique for creating the feel of immense antiquity. The origins of kingship are so remote that only the names and the grandest outlines survive. To narrate Jamshid's reign in the novelistic detail that we find in the story of Rostam and Sohrab would be to bring the origins close, to domesticate them. Ferdowsi wants the Pishdadian kings to remain alien, bathed in the haze of primordial time. Their silence is the silence of the sacred—the hush that falls when we approach something too old for intimate knowledge.

This is the historiographical technique of "deep time" in its purest form. By giving us kings who are present as names but absent as characters, Ferdowsi creates the sense that the past extends backward far beyond the capacity of any narrative to capture. The very incompleteness of the record is what makes it feel real. A fully narrated origin would read like a myth in the pejorative sense—a made-up story. An origin that arrives already partially eroded by time reads like something that has been handed down, precariously, through the generations.

5.3 Kayanian Names Without Deeds: The Breath of the Reciter

Within the Kayanian dynasty, between the towering figures of Kay Kāvus and Kay Khosrow, Ferdowsi names several intermediate kings whose reigns are mentioned but not dramatised: Kay Lohrasp, Kay Bahman, and others. Their presence in the genealogy is essential for maintaining the chain of legitimacy, but the poem does not linger over them. Manuscript variants, as Khaleghi-Motlagh's edition documents, sometimes add or omit a few lines about these figures [2, vol. 2, p. 45], indicating that the tradition itself was uncertain about how much narrative flesh these bones could carry.

This variation is a direct trace of the oral context that Aidenloo's naqqāl scrolls document [12]. In a live performance, a storyteller might elaborate on Kay Lohrasp for half an hour, or might pass over his name in a single couplet, depending on the audience, the occasion, and the mood of the night. Ferdowsi, in compiling the written poem, did not smooth out this unevenness. He allowed it to stand, preserving the texture of a tradition that was still alive in the mouths of reciters. The silent Kayanian kings are not a failure of the poet's imagination; they are the exact threshold where epic memory chooses structure over saturation, where the written text yields the floor to the voice.

5.4 The Contested Heirs of Iraj: Memory as Chorus

The most complex genealogical silence in the Shahnameh involves the descendants of Iraj, the murdered son of Fereydun, after whom Iran is named. Different manuscript families record differing numbers of generations between Iraj and the avenger Manuchehr. Some include several intermediate figures; others compress the line almost directly from father to avenger. Ferdowsi preserves the conflict rather than resolving it. The result, as Mahmoud Omidsalar has argued, is a genealogy that feels genuinely contested—a site of cultural negotiation rather than a settled fact [19, p. 67].

In oral societies, such contradictions are not a problem to be solved; they are a sign of vitality. They show that the past is still being argued over, still being remade in the image of the present's needs. The Shahnameh is not a single dogmatic history but a chorus of voices, each humming a slightly different version of the national melody. Ferdowsi's refusal to impose a single authoritative version on this contested genealogy is an act of intellectual honesty. It tells us that the past is larger than any single telling, and that the unwritten page is not an empty space but a sign that memory remains open

to interpretation. This is the politics of the unwritten in its most generous form: the poet refuses the power of final adjudication and trusts the community of readers and reciters to sustain the tradition.

5.5 The Poetics of the Unwritten in Ferdowsi's Prologue

Ferdowsi's own statements about his method reinforce this reading. In the prologue to the poem, he describes himself as a gatherer of scattered traditions, a man who consulted the dehqāns and the mōbeds (Zoroastrian priests) as well as the lost written book. He does not claim to have invented anything; he claims to have preserved what others had transmitted. This rhetorical posture is itself a historiographical device. By presenting himself as a faithful compiler rather than an original author, Ferdowsi aligns his poem with the impersonal authority of tradition. The gaps in the genealogy are part of that authority: they prove that the poet has not filled in the blanks with his own imagination. He has left them as he found them, trusting that the tradition, in its incompleteness, is more powerful than any attempt at completion.

6. Comparative Synthesis: The Logic of the Unwritten

When we bring Tolkien and Ferdowsi together, the similarities are structural and profound. Both writers construct worlds in which genealogical memory is incomplete, and in both cases, that incompleteness performs specific, identifiable functions.

First, genealogical silence produces temporal depth. When a lineage contains kings about whom almost nothing is known, the entire chronology seems older and larger than the narrative that contains it. The unknown reigns of Arnor and the compressed Ashkanian epoch create a sense of time that extends beyond the text's own horizon. This is what Verlyn Flieger has called the "illusion of depth" [20, p. 112], and it is achieved not through exhaustive world-building but through strategic withholding.

Second, silence reinforces legitimacy. A missing ancestor does not break the chain of sovereignty; on the contrary, the chain's survival across gaps testifies to its resilience. A lineage that can afford to forget some of its kings is a lineage that has endured for centuries. The gaps function as evidence of antiquity rather than evidence of weakness.

Third, silence invites participation. When Tolkien refuses to resolve the Rohirrim contradictions, and when Ferdowsi preserves the variant heirs of Iraj, the reader or listener is not given a completed product but a space in which to exercise judgement. In an oral culture, this space would be filled by the reciter; in a literate culture, it becomes a site for interpretation, for debate, and—as the fan communities surrounding Tolkien attest—for creative extension. The unwritten page is not an argument against the tradition's truth. It is the very texture of its humanity.

6.1 The Rhetoric of Authority: Annal and Verse as the Historian's Voice

A subtler point of comparison, and one that deepens the structural analysis, concerns the rhetorical surface of the two texts. Tolkien and Ferdowsi, for all their differences in genre and cultural origin, both cultivate a distinctive narrative voice that signals "historical authority" to the reader, and they do so through formal choices that are, at first glance, opposites.

Tolkien's Appendices adopt the voice of an annalistic chronicler. The prose is dry, formulaic, and deliberately stripped of literary ornament. A king's entry consists of a name, a date, and occasionally a single factual clause. This paratactic style mimics the conventions of early medieval annals—the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the Irish annals, the genealogical registers that Tolkien edited and taught. The absence of rhetorical flourish is itself a rhetorical strategy: it says, "I am not a storyteller; I am a recorder of data." The authority of the voice resides in its refusal to entertain. The reader is implicitly invited to trust the annalist precisely because he does not seem to be trying to persuade.

Ferdowsi, by contrast, writes in the mutaqārib metre, a stately, rhythmic line that is the traditional vehicle of Persian epic. The voice is not dry but incantatory; it is the voice of the naqqāl, the public reciter who holds an audience through the sheer musical power of his verse. Yet this very musicality is also a claim to authority, because it announces that the poet is not inventing a private vision but speaking in the inherited cadences of the tradition. The formulaic repetitions, the recurrent epithets, the invocation of the dehqān as source—all of these are the Persian equivalent of the annalist's neutral tone. They say, "I am not making this up; I am repeating what has been handed down."

In both cases, the rhetoric of historiographical authority is achieved through a deliberate suppression of the authorial self. Tolkien's annalist has no personality; Ferdowsi's reciter has no individuality beyond his function as a transmitter. The genealogical gaps that pervade both works are extensions of this authorial self-effacement. A narrator who claims to know everything would not leave gaps. A narrator who admits the limits of his knowledge—whether through the dry admission that records are lost or through the graceful passing-over of a reign in a single couplet—gains credibility by performing humility. The forgotten king is, in this sense, the ultimate guarantor of the narrator's honesty. If the narrator were inventing the history, he would fill in the blanks. Because he is transmitting it, he must leave them empty.

Thus the historiographical texture of loss and the politics of the unwritten are not merely thematic features of these two epics; they are inscribed in the very language and metre through which the past is summoned. The annal and the verse, for all their surface differences, converge on a shared epistemological stance: the past is not fully recoverable, and the historian's duty is not to simulate completeness but to preserve the shape of what has survived, including its absences. This convergence across two such different cultural traditions suggests that we are in the presence of a genuine cross-cultural principle of epic historiography—one that deserves further investigation.

7. Conclusion: The Authority of the Unfinished

This study has argued that the genealogical gaps in Tolkien's Appendices and Ferdowsi's Shahnameh are neither narrative defects nor evidence of textual corruption. They are historiographical devices that arise from a deep engagement with the logic of oral memory. Tolkien drew on the fragmentary chronicles of Anglo-Saxon and Irish tradition, and on his professional knowledge of how real manuscripts survive—damaged, partial, full of holes that the reader must bridge. Ferdowsi worked at the intersection of a written courtly source and a living performance culture attested by the naqqāl scrolls and by the centuries-long Iranian debate over his methods. In both works, silence is not emptiness but formal evidence—evidence that the past is always larger than any single record, and that the truest history is the history that makes room for the listener.

The historiographical texture of loss that both authors achieve—through the bare annal and the compressed reign—is not a symptom of failure but a deliberate rhetoric of authenticity. The politics of the unwritten, whether expressed in the hobbits' oral resistance or in Ferdowsi's refusal to resolve contradictory genealogies, is a reminder that the most durable authority is often the authority that refuses to over-explain. In an era that increasingly conflates documentation with truth, Tolkien and Ferdowsi offer a counter-wisdom that is at once ancient and urgently modern. We live in a time of total documentation: photographs, emails, social-media posts, surveillance footage, digital archives that promise to preserve every moment of our lives in searchable form. The fantasy that we can overcome forgetting altogether has never been more pervasive. But there is a cost to this fantasy. A world in which nothing is forgotten is a world in which nothing can be forgiven, nothing can be released, nothing can recede into the healing haze of distance. Memory without silence is not memory at all; it is merely storage.

The forgotten kings of Arnor and the compressed dynasties of the Shahnameh are a reminder that forgetting is not only inevitable but necessary. It is the condition under which memory becomes meaningful, because only what is remembered against the background of what has been lost carries the weight of genuine survival. A lineage that can afford to lose some of its own names is a lineage that does not need to prove itself at every point. A text that trusts its audience to supply the missing story is a text that will survive the erosion of time. The silent kings are not forgotten; they are held in trust, waiting for a reciter—or a reader—to give them voice. This study thus contributes to comparative epic studies by

demonstrating that genealogical silence, far from being a textual flaw, constitutes a formal rhetoric of historical authenticity that crosses cultural and chronological boundaries.

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