



ENGLISH I. PERSIAN ELEMENTS IN ENGLISH

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i. PERSIAN ELEMENTS IN ENGLISH

Words from all stages of Persian and from many fields have found their way into English, but almost always through the medium of one or more other languages. The earliest were literary words, quoted from Old Persian by classical Greek and Latin authors, which were then carried down to later European languages. The best known is probably Gk. *parádeisos* < OPers. **paridaiza-*, (from which came NPers. *pālīz* “a kitchen garden”), used by Xenophon for an “enclosed park” of the Persian kings, whence later a “garden, orchard” generally and specifically by the authors of the Septuagint for the “garden of Eden” and in the New Testament for the “abode of the blessed,” in



which sense “paradise” first appeared, through Lat. *paradisus*, in the Anglo-Saxon Gospels of about 1000 C.E. Xenophon also brought the Achaemenian title for a viceregal governor, in its Median form **xšaθrapāwan-* (OPers. *xšašapāwan-*, lit., “kingdom-protector”), as *satrápēs*: through Lat. *satrápa*, this first appeared in Wyclif’s Bible of 1382 (anachronistically, for governors of the Babylonian empire) as “satrap.” Of local products, OPers. **nafta-* “moist” and “petroleum” (NPers. *naft*), in the latter meaning assimilated from Akkadian *naṣtu*, reached English in the Gk. form “naphtha”; OPers. **pistaka-* (NPers. *pešta*) gave Gk. *pistákion*, Lat. *pistacium*, and so French *pistache* and “pistachio”; OPers. *si(n)kabru-* (NPers. *šangarf*, Arabic *zenjafr*), a red mineral, appeared in Greek much modified as *kinnábari*, whence Lat. *cinnabaris* “cinnabar.” Ancient Persia also gave its name to a fruit, actually originating from China, as Gk. *mēlon persikon* “Persian apple,” Lat. (*malum*) *persicum*, later *persica*, Italian *pesca*, French *pêche*, whence “peach.” Words of this early generation could also produce unexpected offspring. The Old Persian royal treasury **ganza-* (cf. NPers. *ganj*), and then “treasure” in general, became known in Greek and Latin as *gāza*. This gave its name to a small coin in 16th-century Venice, the *gazzetta*, by which, as the price asked for them, the first news-sheets of that time became known, whence “gazette.” Other developments were more complicated. 10th-century Greek had *pambákion* “cotton,” evidently < NPers. *pamba(g)*. Possibly by confusion of this with *bombyx* “silk-worm, silk” the form *bambax*, *bambaki-* “cotton” arose. From this late Latin developed *bombax*, *bombacem*, found in Old French as *bombace* and in English as “bombage” (1553), “bombast” (1568) and “bombasie” (1576), all synonyms of “cotton, cotton-wool.” From these came “bombast” in the sense of “padding” and “inflated speech,” and “bombasine” for a fabric first silken, then of cotton.

Middle and early New Persian words reached Europe through Arabic, having undergone some inevitable phonetic changes ($g > j$ or q , $p > b$ or f). Most also passed through mediaeval Latin. A few belonged to the learned realm of astrology, like “hyleg,” the ruling planet of a nativity, < Arabic *hailāj* < Mid.Pers. *hilāg* (“one who lets loose”), this a translation of the Greek term *aphētēs*. More are the names of characteristic features of Persian life, or of products. Here belong “bezoar” < Ar. *bāzahr* < NPers. *pādzahr* “counter-poison”; “fistic,” an obsolete name for “pistachio,” < Ar. *festoq* < Mid.Pers. *pistag*; “julep” < Ar. *jollāb* < NPers. *golāb* “rose-water”; “jasmine, jessamine” < Ar. *yāsamīn* < NPers. *yāsaman*; “azure,” first the precious stone lapis lazuli, then its bright blue colour, < Ar. (*al*)-*lāzoward* (with loss of the initial *l-* in late



Latin *azura*, etc., along with the Ar. article) < NPers. *lājavard*; “musk” < Ar. *mesk* < NPers. *mošk*; “orange,” from a form like Spanish *naranja*, < Ar. *nāranj* < NPers. *nārang* (probably from a north Indian language; cf. late Sanskrit *nāraṅga*-). Two other products of India, the once-prized “zedoary” and “zerumbet,” owe their names to the Persian forms *zadwār* (Ar. *jadwār*) and *zoronbād*, respectively. The link between NPers. *tāfta*, silk cloth, and mediaeval Lat. *taffata* “taffeta,” is missing.

Another crop of Persian words owes its introduction to European contacts with the Turkish empire: “bazaar” < *bāzār*; “dervish” < *darvīš*; “firman” < Turk. *ferman* < NPers. *farmān*; “divan” < *dīvān*; “kiosk” < Turk. *kōšk* < early NPers. *kōšk*; “caravan” < Turk. *kervan* < NPers. *kārvān*; “caravanserai” < *kervansaray* and “serai, saray” (palace, or harem) < NPers. *sarāy* (the latter largely replaced by “seraglio,” from confusion with the similar-sounding Italian *serraglio* < popular Lat. **serrāculum* “a place of confinement”); “pasha,” earlier “bashaw” < Turk. *paša*, ultimately < *pādišāh*; “seraskier” (Turkish Minister of War) < *serasker* < *sar-’askar*; “spahi” (cavalryman, originally Turkish, later French Algerian) < *sipahi* (NPers. *sepāhī*). Both “turban” and “tulip” (earlier “tulipan,” a description of the flower by Europeans) derive from the Turkish pronunciation *tūlbend* of NPers. *dolband*. The “narghile” tobacco-pipe, with water originally contained in a coconut, NPers. *nārgīl* (< Sanskrit *nārikela*), was first described in 1839. Many words of Persian origin were acquired through direct contact with Urdu (Hindustani) during the centuries of British rule in India. Many of these Anglo-Indian words, however, concerning essentially Indian matters, are now practically obsolete; e.g. “baksheesh” < *baḵšeš*; “bund” (an embankment) < *band*; “bheesty” (a water-carrier) < Urdu *bhīstī* < *beheštī* “(man) of heaven”; “charpoy” (bedstead) < Urdu *čārpāi* < *čahārpāy*; “chenar” (Oriental plane-tree) < *čenār*; “chuddar” (sheet, mantle) < *čādor*; “durbar” (court, audience) < *darbār*; “dustoor” (customary commission) < *dastūr*; “khansama(n)” (house-steward) < *kānsāmān*; “khidmutgar” (waiter) < *kedmatgār*; “mehtar” (in this context, a low-caste sweeper, v. below) < *mehtar*; “mussuck” < *mašk*; “nylghau, nilgau” (an Indian antelope) < *nīl-gāw*; “posteen” (sheepskin coat) < Afghan Pers. *pōstīn*; “serang” (a native boatswain) < *sarhang*; “sirdar” (military leader) < *sardār*; “syagush” (1727 “shoegoose,” the Persian lynx) < *sīāh-gūš* (also “caracal” < Turk. *karakulak* “black-ear”); “zemindar” < *zamīndār*. Others have become naturalized, such as “cummerbund” (a sash) < *kamarband*; “khaki” (dust- or mud-colored) < *kākī*; “lascar” (Indian sailor) < *laškar(i)*; “purdah” (curtain, seclusion of women) < *parda*; “sepoy” (native soldier) < *sepāhī* (cf. “spahi” above). A few only remain



as slang, mostly originating among soldiers, like “blighty” (home country) < Urdu vulgar *bilātī* < *welāyatī*; “cha(r)” (tea) < *čā* (ultimately from northern Chinese). Only a few words have come directly from Persia, through the writings of travellers or of scholars. Thus “shah” (*šāh*) first occurs (as “shaugh”) in 1566, later than “sophy” (< *ṣafī*) 1539, as the designation of the king of Persia. Other ranks or offices appearing in this way were “mehtar” (1662, groom of the chamber) < *mehtar* and “mirza” < *mīrzā*. The supernatural “peri” (*parī*) and “div” (*dīv*) were first mentioned in the earliest Persian-English dictionary of 1777-80, the former to appear not long after in literature.

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