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EPICS
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EPICS,narrative poems of legendary and heroic content. Classical Persian literary theory did not recognize the epic as a distinct genre and included works discussed here under the general heading *maṯnawī*. Modern Persian critics have coined for them the term *ḥamāsa-sarāʾī*, roughly "heroic poetry." These works, however, have nothing in common with the Arabic monorhyme poetry that medieval compilers associated with the term *ḥamāsa*, i.e., "enthusiasm." The poems discussed here are composed in rhymed couplets, almost always use the *motaqāreb* meter, and are generally quite long. This survey is restricted to the "heroic epic," the epic in the narrow sense, and excludes poems concerned with historical events of the Islamic period ("historical epics," e.g., Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfī's *Ẓafar-nāma*), narrative poems with an explicitly religious or mystical content ("religious epics," such as the various versions of the story of Yūsof and Zolayḵā), and versified collections of fables, anecdotes, or homilies, with or without a frame-story (e.g., *Kalīla wa Demna* or the homiletic poems of ʿAṭṭār and Rūmī).

The national epic down to Ferdowsī. The ancient Iranians, like most peoples of antiquity, doubtless had some form of epic poetry, but no works have survived. The hymns (*Yašts*) of the Avesta contain numerous allusions to the deeds of the heroic and demonic figures known to us from the *Šāh-nāma*, such as Yima-xšaēta- (Jamšēd), Dahāka- (Żaḥḥāk), Θraētaona- (Farēdūn), Kərəsāspa- (Karšāsp), Fraŋrasiian- (Afrāsīāb), Kauui-usan- (Kāōs), Haosrauuah- (Ḵosrow), Tusa- (Tōs), Vaēsaka- (Vēsa), Vīštāspa- (Goštāsp), and Spəntōδāta- (Esfandīār). From these references the content of the oldest form of the heroic legends can

be reconstructed to a certain extent.

The earliest surviving piece of heroic poetry in an Iranian language, the *Ayādgār ī Zarērān* (q.v.), belongs to the Middle Iranian period. A fragment in unrhymed, accentual verse, doubtless originally composed in Parthian but in its surviving form partially transposed into Middle Persian, it deals with the battles of Wištāsp (Goštāsp) and his followers against the enemies of the Zoroastrian faith. There were evidently many other works of the same kind. Ḥamza Eṣfahānī, writing in the first half of the 10th century, says that even in his own day there survived more than 10,000 sheets "in Persian script" containing the historical and romantic traditions which the Persians had "turned into verse for their kings." These writings, Ḥamza notes explicitly, were composed in a meter of sorts but unrhymed (see the passage from his unpublished *al-Amṯāl al-ṣādera ʿan boyūt al-šeʿr,* tr. S. Shaked in the *Henning Memorial Volume*, London 1970, p. 405). Similar works may well have existed in other Iranian languages. Indeed, there is a fragmentary text in Sogdian dealing with the adventures of Rostam, although it is not preserved well enough to indicate whether or not it was a poem.

There is, however, no evidence that the various episodes of the Iranian national saga were ever collected into a single epic before the Islamic period. The Middle Persian *Xwadāy-nāmag* (Book of kings), to which Arabic sources frequently refer, was almost certainly not a poem, but rather a prose compendium of legendary and historical traditions put together toward the end of the Sasanian empire. It was translated into Arabic prose by Ebn al-Moqaffaʿ (q.v.) around the middle of the 8th century and thereafter became the principal source of Arabic authors' information about the "history" of Persia. Titles of a number of books in Arabic and later also in New Persian, which dealt with various heroic figures of the Iranian national tradition and evidently were translated from Middle Persian prose or verse, are also recorded. Such books are direct or indirect sources of Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma*. In fact, Ferdowsī indicates in quite a number of passages that his poem is based on an "old book," that is to say, on one or more sources written in New Persian prose. By contrast, the passages in which the poet appears to invoke oral informants can be shown to go back to his written sources; in other words, when the poet says that he has "heard" a story from such-and-such a person, he is merely repeating in verse what his source had already said in prose.

In reworking these books into poetry, Ferdowsī had a number of distinguished predecessors among both Arabic and Persian poets. Already around 200/815

Abān b. ʿAbd-al-Ḥamīd Lāḥeqī (q.v.) had put a number of books of Sasanian origin into Arabic rhymed couplets in *rajaz* meter—among them the *Book of Mazdak*, one of the works that eventually went into the *Šāh-nāma*. Before the middle of the 10th century Masʿūdī Marvazī compiled a version of the *Book of Kings* in Persian rhymed couplets in *hazaj* meter, a meter built out of the same rhythmic elements as the Arabic *rajaz*. Only three verses from this poem are known, quoted in the *Ketāb al-badʾ wa'l-taʾrīḵ* (III, pp. 138, 173) of Moṭahhar Maqdesī (ca. 355/966). It is possible that the historian Masʿūdī, when he says that the buildings constructed by Esfandīār are mentioned by "the Persians in their poems" (*Morūj* II, p. 44, ed. Pellat, p. 229), is referring to this same work by Masʿūdī Marvazī. In the second half of the 10th century the poet Daqīqī set out to create a second Persian version of the entire "Book of kings" in verse. This enterprise was cut short by his death, but some thousand verses of his account of the reign of Goštāsp, largely agreeing in content with the Middle Iranian *Ayādgār ī Zarērān*, were incorporated by Ferdowsī into his own *Šāh-nāma* and thus preserved for posterity (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VI, pp. 66 ff.).

Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma* is the last and definitive retelling of the Iranian national saga in verse. This monumental poem of some 50,000 verses, completed in 400/1010 and dedicated to Maḥmūd of Ḡazna, covers the whole of the legendary and, from the time of Alexander onward, semi-legendary history of Iran. The poem begins with the "first king" Gayōmart and continues through to the Arab conquest. It is justly regarded by Persians as their national epic *par excellence*.

The Persian "Epic Cycle." Although no Persian poet after Ferdowsī has attempted to retell the whole national saga, a number of lengthy poems expound on episodes either not included in the *Šāh-nāma* or touched upon only briefly there. The anonymous author of the *Mojmal al-tawārīḵ wa'l-qeṣaṣ*, compiled in 520/1126, mentions among the sources available to him "the *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsī, which is the trunk, and the other books, which are its branches and which other wise men have put into verse, such as the *Karšāsp-nāma*, the *Farāmarz-nāma*, the traditions (*aḵbār*) of Bahman and the story of Kōš-e Pīl-dandān," as well as various writings in prose (ed. Bahār, p. 2). It is thus clear that by the early 12th century at least four heroic epics (apart from the *Šāh-nāma*) existed. The metaphor of "branches" and "trunk" evidently alludes to a passage in the introduction to Asadī's *Karšāsp-nāma* (chap. 11), in which the author says that his poem is "a branch from the same tree" as Ferdowsī's epic. In quite a number of late manuscripts of the *Šāh-nāma,* parts

or even the whole of one or more of these "branches" are interpolated into the text of Ferdowsī's poem. Undoubtedly, such interpolation reflects in part the endeavor of copyists to produce the most "complete" possible edition of the epic, but interpolation might also result, at least in part, from the combination of various epics in the oral tradition of the *Šāh-nāma* reciters. By analogy to the Greek "epic cycle" of poems surrounding and complementing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, one can speak also of a Persian epic cycle supplementing the episodes of the *Šāh-nāma*. The question of whether any of these supplements actually contain genuine pre-Islamic traditions or whether they are purely imaginative imitations of the *Šāh-nāma* can be decided only when the poems have been studied more thoroughly. As yet no hard evidence for the former hypothesis has been put forward.

The best known of these poems is the *Karšāsp-nāma* (less correctly, *Garšāsp-nāma*) by Abū Manṣūr ʿAlī b. Aḥmad Asadī (q. v.), completed in 458/1066 and dedicated to the ruler of Naḵjavān (ed. Ḥ. Yaḡmāʾī, Tehran 1317 Š./1938). The dragon-slayer Kərəsāspa is mentioned several times in the Avesta and (as Karsāsp) figures prominently in Middle Persian Zoroastrian writings. In Asadī's poem he has been turned into the great-great-grandfather of Ferdowsī's principal hero, Rostam, and has been credited with many adventures of which there is no hint in pre-Islamic sources. An incident from Rostam's childhood is narrated in the *Dāstān-e Kok-e Kōhzād* (published in Macan's edition of the *Šāh-nāma* IV, pp. 2133-60).

A number of poems deal with the adventures of Rostam's three children, Farāmarz, Bānū-Gošasp, and Jahāngīr. Two versions of the *Farāmarz-nāma* are combined, evidently from two different manuscripts, in the lithographic edition by Rostam pūr-e Bahrām (Bombay, 1324/1906). Both are anonymous and undatable. The shorter contains an introduction in which the author calls himself a "slave" (*ḡolām*) of Ferdowsī and claims (truthfully or otherwise) that he has based his poem on a story told by Sarv of Marv. The latter is doubtless identical with Āzād-Sarv (q.v.), whom Ferdowsī (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VI, p. 322) gives as his authority (i.e., the authority used by his written source) for the story of the death of Rostam and who, according to Ferdowsī, flourished in Marv at the time of Aḥmad b. Sahl (d. 307/919; q. v.). This *Farāmarz-nāma* dwells in particular on the adventures of Farāmarz in India and includes episodes in which the hero engages in philosophic debates with the Brahmans and converts the king of India to the "Persian religion." The longer version of the *Farāmarz-nāma* appears to give no indication of the author's identity or

sources, but as Khaleghi-Motlagh has noted (pp. 22-45), it shares some material with the *Nozhat-nāma-ye ʿAlāʾī* of Šahmardān b. Abi'l Ḵayr.

The *Bānū-Gošasp-nāma* tells the story of one of Rostam's daughters and is the only poem in the epic cycle which has a woman as its protagonist. It has been neither published nor studied in detail.

The *Borzū-nāma* (q.v.) is a very long poem dealing with Rostam's grandson, Borzū the son of Sohrāb. An abridged version was published by Macan in the appendix to his edition of the *Šāh-nāma* (IV, pp. 2160-2296), but much more extensive recensions exist in manuscripts. In the modern secondary literature the poem has on occasion been attributed without foundation to ʿAṭāʾ b. Yaʿqūb (q.v.). The story, at least in its first part, is an obvious doublet of the story of Borzū's father, Sohrāb, as known from the *Šāh-nāma*: the orphaned Borzū is brought up by his mother in the land of Tūrān. He joins the Turanian king Afrāsīāb in wars against the Iranians, fights with Rostam, and at the last moment is recognized by and reconciled with his grandfather. Borzū then defects to the Iranian side and engages in many battles against Afrāsīāb. There is a long episode involving the sorceress Sūsan. Finally, the hero is killed by a demon.

The *Jahāngīr-nāma* was published in Bombay in 1309/1886. The author gives his name as Qāsem-e Mādeḥ and indicates that he composed the poem in Herat. The poem uses Arabic vocabulary and Islamic content extensively and would thus appear to be of later composition than the other works belonging to this genre. It also seems to be largely an imitation of the *Borzū-nāma*: Rostam's son Jahāngīr is brought up among the Turanians and fights with them against Iran, but he is recognized by his father, joins the Iranian ranks, and battles on behalf of their king Kāōs. In the end he is killed while hunting by a demon.

Borzū's son Šahrīār is the hero of the three poems. One version of the *Šahryār-nāma* survives in a unique manuscript in the Bankipore library (Patna, India) and contains several passages in which the author gives his name as Farroḵī and identifies his patron as Maḥmūd. Thus, it is ostensibly the work of the celebrated early 11th-century poet Farroḵī Sīstānī (q.v.). A second *Nāma-ye Šahrīār* was apparently composed by the well-known poet ʿOṯmān Moḵtārī and dedicated to the Ghaznavid Masʿūd III (r. 492/1099- 508/1115). A very short fragment of this version is contained in the British Library manuscript Add. 24,095, fol. 14. A third version is contained in an incomplete manuscript in

Dushanbe and is available in an edition (ed. Ḡ.-Ḥ. Bīgdelī, Tehran, 1358 Š./1979) wrongly attributing the poem to the above-mentioned Moḵtārī. In fact, this version is written in a somewhat sub-standard Persian and must belong to a much later period. The Bankipore and Dushanbe *Šahrīār-nāma*s are quite different poems, but they tell much the same story. Both describe, among other things, battles between the hero and a queen of Sarandīb by the name of Farānak and numerous adventures with monsters.

The last chapter in the saga of Rostam's family is told in the story of Bahman, the son of Esfandīār (q. v.). This king is mentioned in various Middle Persian texts, and the story of his wars against Rostam's children and father, Zāl, and of their final defeat is told in Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma*. The story already appears (according to Ṭaʿālebī, *Ḡorar*, p. 388) in the early *Šāh-nāma* of Masʿūdī Marvazī, but it is also the subject of another, much more extensive narrative. The author of the *Mojmal al-tawārīḵ* was evidently familiar with two different poems on the subject. He refers to both the versified *Aḵbār-e Bahman* mentioned in the passage quoted above and a "version" (*nosḵa*) of the *Bahman-nāma* "which ʾyrʾnšʾn (emended by Bahār to "Īrānšāh") b. Abī'l-Ḵayr versified" (p. 92) and which dated the death of Zāl during the reign of Dārā (Darius). Since this dating is not found in the extant *Bahman-nāma*, the latter is evidently not the version by "Īrānšāh" (the poem has now been edited by R. ʿAfīfī, [Tehran], 1370 Š./1991).

The extant *Bahman-nāma* (q.v.) contains verses dedicating the work to the Saljuq Moḥammad b. Malekšāh and indicating that it was written in 495/1101-2, or shortly afterward. It tells the story of the coronation of Bahman and his adventures with Katāyūn, the daughter of the king of Kašmīr, and with Homāy, the daughter of the king of Egypt. It goes on to tell of the death of Rostam and of Bahman's war against Rostam's relatives in Sīstān. Bahman captures Zāl, kills Farāmarz, and pursues Rostam's daughters to India. After defeating the whole family, Bahman abdicates in favor of Homāy and is killed while hunting by a dragon. The story of the family of Bahman also can be found in the (prose) *Dārāb-nāma* (q.v.).

The same anonymous poet (i.e., "pseudo-Īrānšāh") is the author of the unpublished *Kōš-nāma*, who refers in the introduction to the reward which he received from Moḥammad b. Malekšāh for the composition of the *Bahman-nāma*. The *Kōš-nāma* deals with two supposed rulers of China, Żaḥḥāk's brother Kōš and the latter's son Kōš-e Pīl-dandān, and with their wars against the Iranians. An edition of the poem is currently in preparation. The two

poems by “pseudo-Īrānšāh” stand apart from the other components of the epic cycle in presenting their central characters as the enemies of the heroes of the *Šāh-nāma.*

Other fragments are found only as interpolated episodes in manuscripts of the *Šāh-nāma* and have not been traced as independent poems. These fragments include the *Dāstān-e Jamšīd* (published in Macan’s edition of the *Šāh-nāma* IV, pp. 2099-2133) and the *Dāstān-e Āḏar-borzīn*, the story of the son of Farāmarz. The latter, which has not been published, is perhaps merely an extract from one of the above-mentioned epics.

Early development of the romantic epic. The distinction between the heroic and the romantic epic is not clear-cut. There are a number of amatory episodes in the *Šāh-nāma*, while the “romantic” epics almost always deal with legendary royal (or at least noble) characters and normally contain extended battle scenes. The earliest romantic epics not only are in the same *motaqāreb* meter as the majority of the heroic epics, but also are close to them in style and narrative technique. The earliest datable works of this genre, about which we have any precise information, are two poems dedicated to Maḥmūd of Ḡazna. One of them is the *Wāmeq o ʿAḏrā* of ʿOnṣorī (d. after 422/1031). Fragments of a very old manuscript of this poem were discovered by M. M. Shafīʿ in the binding of another codex and published by him (posthumously) in Lahore in 1967. Asadī’s dictionary contains further quotations from the poem, which is evidently based on an Arabic or Persian translation of the Hellenistic (prose) romance of Metiochus and Parthenope. The other poem is the *Warqa o Golšāh* of ʿAyyūqī (q.v.; ed. Ḏ. Ṣafā, Tehran, 1343 Š./1964), a retelling in verse of the pre-Islamic Arabic story of the love of ʿOrwa b. Ḥezām ʿOḏrī for his cousin ʿAfrāʾ. Both works are in *motaqāreb* meter.

Faḵr-al-dīn Gorgānī wrote his *Vīs o Rāmīn* not long after 441/1050 and dedicated it to the Saljuq governor of Isfahan. It is in *hazaj*, henceforth the most popular meter for romantic epics, and tells the story of an adulterous love affair set at a royal court in pre-Islamic Parthia (critical edition by Todua and Gwakharia, Tehran, 1349 Š./1970). The author tells us that he has based the poem on an old book in “Pahlavī” (i.e., Middle Persian), possibly a poem, although his statement is ambiguous.

The anonymous *Homāy-nāma* (ed. A. J. Arberry, London, 1963), a rambling story of the love of an Egyptian prince for the daughter of the king of Syria, may belong to roughly the same period.

After a gap of about a century, from which we have no datable works of this genre whatsoever, the romantic epic comes to full fruition in the works of Neẓāmī Ganjavī from the last quarter of the 12th century. Two of these poems, *Ḵosrow o Šīrīn* and *Haft peykar*, deal with the romantic and military adventures of the Sasanian kings Ḵosrow II and Bahrām V, respectively, and thus overlap to a certain extent with the *Šāh-nāma*. ʿAṭṭār's only romantic epic, *Ḵosrow-nāma* tells a different story but is very similar in character to Neẓāmī's *Ḵosrow o Šīrīn* and was quite likely influenced by it. By contrast, Neẓāmī's *Leylī o Majnūn*, like ʿAyyūqī's poem, retells a well-known story from pre-Islamic Arabia. His two poems devoted to the life of Alexander, *Šaraf-nāma* and *Eqbāl-nāma*, are Neẓāmī's only epics in *motaqāreb* meter. They, too, share much of their material with Ferdowsī's account of the same king, but the styles of Neẓāmī and of Ferdowsī could not be more different. Where Ferdowsī, like all the other early epic poets, tells his story in a straightforward and deceptively simple manner, Neẓāmī spins an elaborate web of rhetorical conceits and learned allusions, often hinting at his story more than actually telling it. Moreover, Neẓāmī's work contains a constant backdrop of religious and mystical symbolism. What we have here is no longer epic poetry. This new, very Persian and very Islamic type of narrative poetry was developed further by Neẓāmī's many imitators in later centuries, the most illustrious among them being Amīr Ḵosrow Dehlavī and ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān Jāmī.

For a music sample, see Alimardan Khān.

For a music sample, see Ilari.

For a music sample, see Jangnāme.

For a music sample, see Köroğlu.

For a music sample, see The Köroğlu Story: an Excerpt.

For a music sample, see Mirqambar.

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