



ŠĀH-NĀMA III. ARABIC WORDS

It is well known that the *Šāh-nāma* has comparatively few Arabic loanwords. Most commentators claim casually, like E. G. Browne (1862-1926; q.v.), that Ferdowsi consciously “avoided their use ... because he felt them to be unsuitable to the subject of his poem, but even in his time many Arabic words had become so firmly established in the language that it was impossible to avoid their use.” (II, pp. 145-46). Browne goes on to sample 21 verses from the episode of Sohrāb and Rostam, and estimates the Arabic vocabulary in the *Šāh-nāma* at four or five percent.

The one study offering a complete count and a comprehensive commentary on the Arabic vocabulary of the *Šāh-nāma* is the Swiss dissertation by Mohammad Djafar Moïnfar, written under the guidance of [Emile Benveniste](#) (1902-76) and Gilbert Lazard (b. 1920). Moïnfar rightly criticizes previous attempts for their incomplete samples and loose criteria, such as lax etymology, inclusion of proper nouns, and counting derivatives, compounds, and components of collocations as separate words (pp. 1-2). His study is based on the 1935 *Glossar zu Firdosis Schahname* by Fritz Wolff (b. 1880) and supplemented with references to the text of the *Šāh-nāma* in editions published up to the 1960s. For semantic categorization Moïnfar adapts the system that Rudolf Hallig (1902-64) and Walther von Wartburg (1888-1971) first applied in 1952 to French lexicography.

Moïnfar calculates that the *Šāh-nāma* contains 706 words of Arabic origin, occurring a total of 8,938 times, which yields 8.8 percent of Arabic in the vocabulary (i.e., individual tokens), and a frequency of occurrence of 2.4



percent (pp. 61, 65). As is usual in this type of study, a relatively small number of words in the inventory accounts for the majority of occurrences in the text. The 100 words occurring most frequently account for 60 percent of all occurrences of Arabic loanwords (pp. 62-63, compare the ranked frequency list pp. 72-87). The most frequent word is *ḡam(m)* “sorrow, grief,” with 707 occurrences; next is *hawā(ʿ)* “air,” with 435; and third comes *bar(r)* “land” with 239, often collocations such as *bum o bar* “territory.” These loanwords illustrate, incidentally, the typical reduction of a final geminate consonant and deletion of the final *hamza* when an Arabic word with these consonant combinations is incorporated into Persian. Of least frequency are 258 words occurring once only; these include *šarṭ* “stipulation,” *noqṣān* “deficiency,” and *baḥr* “sea.” Of these words of unique occurrence, 104 are noted as missing or having variants in some texts (pp. 3, 81-84). Other modifications of borrowings include the loss of an initial vowel, as in *amir* > *mir* “commander” and *abu* > *bu* “father” the substitution of an epenthetic for a prothetic or other initial vowel, as in *aṭnāb* > *ṭanāb* “rope” and *Aflāṭun* > *Falāṭun* “Plato;” the distribution of words with the Arabic feminine ending as *-at* or *-a* (p. 66; see [ARABIC ELEMENTS IN PERSIAN](#), Suppl.); and metathesis, as in *ketf* > *keft* “shoulder” (p. 67). Grammatical influence is restricted to the incorporation of some Arabic broken plurals, such as *aṭrāf* “sides, region” and *fonun* “ways, arts.”

There are 89 personal and place names in the text, which are not counted for statistical purposes (pp. 4-11, 61). Also excluded are 28 arabicized Persian or Iranian words (pp. 14-18, 61), eight words of probable Sanskrit provenance (pp. 18-19, 61), 30 Greek and Latin loanwords in their Arabic or Persian forms (pp. 19-22), and 21 Iranian loanwords in their Arabic forms (pp. 67-68). Arguably the chess terms *roḡ(k)* “rook” and *māt* “mate” (p. 45), which are included, should be relegated to one of the first two categories (see [CHESS. ii. CHESS TERMINOLOGY](#); note that *roḡ(k)* has no more connection with the homonymous bird than does its English equivalent *rook*). Of the semantic categories, two of the largest sub-categories, as might be expected, are that of army (pp. 49-51) and warfare (pp. 51-53).

Moīnfar notes that a larger proportion of Arabic vocabulary is found in the *Šāh-nāma*’s introduction and conclusion, neither of which is integral to the epic’s narrative (p. 62). These passages include Ferdowsi’s eulogy and satire (see [FERDOWSI ii. HAJW-NĀMA](#)) of the Ghaznavid sultan Maḥmud (r. 998-1030). Since they treat contemporary matters and have recourse to polite and pious formulae, typically they have a high proportion of unique



occurrences: e.g., *wojud* “existence,” *ḥamd* “praise,” *hijrat* “hijra.” The satire (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Mohl, I, p. lxxxviii-xcii) is 93 verses long, and has 45 Arabic words, or 48.2 percent.

Ferdowsi himself, though arguably a language nationalist (*‘Ajam zenda kardam bedin Pārsi* “I have brought the Persians to life with this Persian” in the satire—if this line is authentic, cf. Amin-Reyāḥi, p.28 note 1), does not state explicitly that he minimized his use of Arabic (see FERDOWSI i. LIFE, p. 518). Moīnfar, citing the variable proportions above, takes the view that the constraints of material and style were enough in themselves to reduce the count in more Persian contexts, and concludes that the poet did not discriminate against Arabic loanwords (p. 61). Supporting this position is the fact that many of Ferdowsi’s Arabic words are not neologisms, but synonyms for ordinary Persian words that he uses elsewhere: e.g., Ar. *donyā*, *‘ālam* = Per. *jahān*, *giti* “world,” Ar. *bar(r)* = Pers. *bum*, *zamin* “land,” Ar. *ḡam(m)* = Per. *anduh* or *andoh* “sorrow,” Ar. *tannin* = Per. *aždahā* “dragon.” Like later poets, Ferdowsi used Arabic borrowings for Persian words in elegant variation, or where necessary to fit the meter.

There was a practical constraint on acceptable Arabic vocabulary, because the syllabic structure of Arabic loanwords had to fit the *motaqāreb* meter of the *Šāh-nāma*: ˘ – – / ˘ – – / ˘ – – / ˘ – // . Moīnfar illustrates cases where five loanwords were altered to fit the meter (p. 67). It should be noted, however, that it would be impossible to accommodate any words of the patterns *motaḡā‘el*, *motaḡā‘el*, *estefāl*, or *mofā‘ala(t)*. Verbal nouns (*mašdars*) of roots with a final weak consonant that are formed on this last pattern may, and do, occur: e.g., *moḡābā* “respect,” *modārā* “moderation,” *mokāḡāt* “recompense.”

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