

Despite the diversity of the Islamic world, until the late ninth century Arabic remained the sole literary, administrative, and religious language of the *dar al-Islam*. It was only with the Samanid and Ghaznavid promotion of New Persian in the sphere of literature that this linguistic hegemony was challenged. Due to the efforts of local elites, statesmen, and rulers in these empires, by the eleventh century Persian was no longer solely used to write popular poetry but had also been adopted in the composition of scholarly works, panegyrics, and epics. A lack of sources means that the reasons for its development as a literary language remain unclear. There was a segment of the population, such as Iranian landowners, who had an invested interest in reviving Persianate culture, but the ascendancy of Persian was not assured given a multitude of limiting factors, the most significant being the entrenched dominance of Arabic, which as the language of the Qur'an and many other important texts was considered superior. Through careful examination of the Samanid translations of Tabari's *Tarikh* and *Tafsir*, *qasidas* composed for Ghaznavid sultans, and the works comprising the *shahnameh* tradition, it is possible to come to several conclusions regarding the circumstances of Persian's rise to prominence. Contrary to what some historians believe, this phenomenon was not a continuation of the Shu'ubiyya movement, nor was it motivated by nationalism. It was instead catalysed by an amalgamation of practical, political and religious factors, the most important of which were the Samanid and Ghaznavid governments' need to appeal to the large Persianate population of the eastern Islamic lands through the patronage of literature in a secondary language and the instability that these two empires experienced during this time period.

The composition of New Persian works should not be seen as an extension of the ninth century Shu'ubiyya, as the latter was essentially a literary movement, while the former had practical and political motives. Shu'ubite pieces were primarily criticisms of the privileged place of Arabs in society, but they were not, paradoxically, extremely politicised.<sup>1</sup> A large part of the Shu'ubiyya was carried out in Arabic by educated Arabs in Iraq, and its purpose was mainly literary entertainment. Even works such as Abu Ishaq Mamshadh's poem written for Ya'qub the Coppersmith that reference the pre-Islamic Iranian past and are similar in tone to compositions produced under later Persianising dynasties like the Ghaznavids were not actually in Persian. Literature of this type was likely not intended to serve any political purpose or further an ideology by making the government's policies more linguistically

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<sup>1</sup> S.M. Stern, 'Ya'qub the Coppersmith and Persian National Sentiment', in C.E. Bosworth (ed), *Iran and Islam: in Memory of the Late Vladimir Minorsky* (Edinburgh, 1971), p. 537-38.

accessible to the local population, but was instead part of the Shu'ubiyya corpus.<sup>2</sup> Due to the nature of this ninth century movement and the fact that its texts were often composed in Arabic, the promotion and subsequent spread of New Persian in the tenth and eleventh centuries was not simply a renewal of the Shu'ubiyya tradition.

The entry of New Persian into the literary realm was also not motivated by a patriotic desire to suppress the influence of Arabic in the eastern Islamic lands. In his article on the development of the language, Hayrettin Yücesoy maintains that the Samanids and Ghaznavids utilised Persian to create a unique cultural space that was not influenced by the Arabs.<sup>3</sup> Roxanne Marcotte takes a similar stance, arguing that the renewed interest in pre-Islamic Iranian traditions that characterised the tenth and eleventh centuries prompted the rise of Persian, and that its literary usage was part of a larger nationalistic movement to re-Persianise the east.<sup>4</sup> It is true that the Samanid *diqhans* were keen on preserving their Iranian heritage after the Arab invasions, and therefore ensured their culture, including oral *dari* poetry, remained alive in their courts.<sup>5</sup> In the early tenth century, they began recording these verbal poems in New Persian and also patronised more elaborate styles that were influenced by Arabic, thus playing a large part in raising the language to literary status.<sup>6</sup> Despite this, there are significant caveats to Yücesoy and Marcotte's viewpoints. Persian's promotion was likely not part of an effort to completely remove Arab influences from Samanid and Ghaznavid culture, as most patrons commissioned works in Arabic and Persian simultaneously, and throughout the reigns of the Samanids and Ghaznavids, Arabic retained its place of importance as a more elegant and clearer tongue, a belief illustrated by al-Bairuni and Shahmardan.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the New Persian literature sponsored by landowners and rulers places little emphasis on the pre-Islamic Iranian past and was not nationalistic. In the Samanid translation of Tabari's *Tarikh*, Bal'ami does not highlight the story of Bahram Chubin, an important Iranian character from whom this dynasty claimed ancestry, and in fact decreases the amount

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<sup>2</sup> Stern, 'Ya'qub', p. 541.

<sup>3</sup> Hayrettin Yücesoy, 'Language of Empire: Politics of Arabic and Persian in the Abbasid World', *PMLA* 130:2 (March, 2015), p. 389, Perry, 'New Persian', p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Roxanne Marcotte, 'Eastern Iran and the Emergence of New Persian', *Hamdard Islamicus*, 21:2 (April-June 1998), p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert Lazard, 'The Rise of the New Persian Language', in R.N. Frye (ed), *The Cambridge History of Iran Vol 4: The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 606.

<sup>6</sup> Marcotte, 'Eastern Iran', p. 68.

<sup>7</sup> Lutz Richter-Bernburg, 'Linguistic Shu'ubiya and Early Neo-Persian Prose', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 94:1 (Jan-Mar. 1974), p. 60-61.

written about him.<sup>8</sup> Another example is the collection of *shahnamehs* commissioned during this period. Marcotte and other scholars designate the tradition as a nationalist movement meant to revitalise Iranian culture in a language suited to the subject matter, but most of these texts, including Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, were actually created with the aim of Islamising the Persian past rather than protecting it from Arabisation.<sup>9</sup> In addition to these problems, a fundamental flaw in this line of argument about the emergence of New Persian in literature is that the eastern region was too fragmented and ethnically diverse during the tenth and eleventh centuries for any form of nationalism to truly exist.

It is necessary to investigate other potential explanations to determine why New Persian developed as a literary language and did not remain restricted to popular and sometimes court poetry. The Samanid translations of Tabari's *Tarikh* and *Tafsir* represent the language's first entry into the world of historical writing and are two of the greatest examples of Persian being employed in a scholarly environment. These texts are not strictly translations, but extensive reworkings of the originals, and the motivation behind their production remains obscure. Lutz Richter-Bernburg has argued that historical and scientific works were written in Persian out of necessity, citing examples such as Maisari's introduction to the *Daneshnama* in which he claims he utilised this language because "our land is Iran the majority of whose population knows Persian."<sup>10</sup> The *Tarjumah-yi Tarikh-i Tabari's* introduction is in agreement; apparently it was modified "so that subjects and authorities could share in reading it and learning from its knowledge..."<sup>11</sup> Bal'ami's translations, however, include many Arabic quotations and were clearly aimed at an audience with some knowledge of the language.<sup>12</sup> It is almost certainly true that scholarly texts were produced in Persian with the intention of making them available to a wider audience, but practicality was not the sole reason that the Samanid government patronised this type of literature.

Around the time Persian histories began to appear, the government was being challenged internally by local *dihans* and Turkish commanders. *The Ornament of Histories* reveals that the reigns of Nuh b. Nasr and Mansur b. Nuh were wracked by instability due to the activities of several rebellious

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Peacock, *Mediaeval Islamic Historiography and Political Legitimacy: Bal'ami's Tarikhnama* (New York, 2007), pp. 97, 107.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Peacock, 'Firdawsī's *Shahnama* in its Ghaznavid Context', *Iran* 56:1 (2018), pp. 5-6.

<sup>10</sup> Bernburg, 'Linguistic', p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Elton Daniel, 'The Samanid "Translations" of al-Tabari', in Hugh Kennedy (ed), *Al-Tabari: A Medieval Muslim Historian and His Work* (Princeton, 2008), p. 265.

<sup>12</sup> Peacock, *Mediaeval*, p. 171.

local leaders, the most threatening of whom was the governor of Khurasan, Abu Chaghani.<sup>13</sup> The *History of Bukhara* confirms this, stating that when the *amir* Sa'id passed away "everyone revolted in every place," and that upon the death of Rashid in 961, chaos ensued again.<sup>14</sup> While neither account can be considered entirely reliable, the information provided by both sources supports the view that there was an increase in internal political issues just before the production of the Tabari translations. External events also provided a source of concern; in 945 the rival Buyids captured Baghdad, thus increasing their own power while weakening the Abbasid caliphate, one of the major legitimisers of Samanid rule.<sup>15</sup> The Persian Tabari texts were meant to bolster the government's legitimacy at a time when its power base was threatened. The simple act of translating monuments of Arabic literature into Persian was in itself a form of justification of the dynasty's right to rule. Middle Persian texts had been rendered into Arabic during the conquests, and Samanid sponsorship of the translation of Arabic works into Persian was supposed to show internal dissenters and international opponents that knowledge, and thus power, was shifting back to the rulers of the eastern Islamic lands.<sup>16</sup>

These translations also served to justify the religious credentials of the Samanid government at a time when the Abbasid caliph was unable to provide it with ideological backing. Some historians uphold the idea that the *Tarikh* and *Tafsir* were specifically commissioned to condemn the rising heterodoxy of the Samanid elite in the late tenth century, as translating the texts would have made them more accessible to this segment of the population, many of whom often understood Persian better than Arabic. Through careful examination of the content of these two works, it can be argued that this view is inaccurate. The translators do not seem to have inserted any material directly condemning heresy, and in fact often removed Tabari's indictments of such movements.<sup>17</sup> The *Tarikh* and *Tafsir*, particularly the latter, focus to a greater degree on the pre-Islamic prophets, a topic of importance in the medieval Muslim world that would have been interesting to a conservative religious audience.<sup>18</sup> There was also probably little impetus to include scathing criticisms of divergent religious views, since Isma'ilism and other heresies were not as widespread among the elite as Nizam al-Mulk and other sources suggest. The purpose of these translations was to portray the Samanids as pious Sunnis at

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<sup>13</sup> Abu Sa'id Abd al-Hayy Gardizi, *The Ornament of Histories* trans. Edmund Bosworth (New York, 2011), pp. 62-66.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Narshakhi, *The History of Bukhara* trans. Richard N. Frye (Princeton, 2007), pp. 125, 127.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel, 'Samanid', p. 281.

<sup>16</sup> Julie Scott Meisami, *Persian Historiography to the End of the Twelfth Century* (Edinburgh, 1999), p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> Peacock, *Mediaeval*, p. 167.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 98, 102.

a time when Shi'i states like the Buyids and Fatamids were rising to prominence and the caliph was losing power. The Samanids' reputation as the defenders of orthodox Sunnism was key to their legitimisation effort, and to perpetuate this view the empire's leader commissioned a translation of two significant Sunni texts to illustrate to the *ulema* and religious conservatives who were literate in Persian that even at a time of weakness, the government retained the ability to uphold its religious duty.<sup>19</sup> In addition to this function, Julie Meisami has hypothesised that the two works were designed to fulfil different roles, maintaining that the *Tarikh* was aimed at members of the court while the *Tafsir* was suited to addressing a wider audience that would have included recent converts.<sup>20</sup> This implies that it served the dual purpose of assisting in the teaching of correct belief while also reinforcing Samanid credentials. It is possible that the *Tafsir* was meant to further disperse a government-sanctioned religious ideology in an endeavor to push new converts towards orthodoxy, but this was ultimately secondary to the ruler's desire to illustrate his commitment to Sunnism. Through the translation and editing of these religious historical works, the weakening Samanids used New Persian as a medium through which to express to religious elites who were more comfortable reading Persian than Arabic that despite the rise of Shi'ism and the decline of Abbasid support, the state remained a strong Sunni authority.

The Ghaznavids were also active patrons of New Persian literature, and it was during their reign that court poetry in this language reached maturity, with princes and kings commissioning *qasidas* to glorify their achievements.<sup>21</sup> Panegyrics are often neglected by scholars, who believe that the form was only written to eulogise patrons, but viewed from a historical perspective, these poems are of political significance and illustrate the use of Persian lyrical works as a method of legitimisation. The Ghaznavids were Turkish slave soldiers before they came to power, and because of this they took every opportunity to present themselves as Persian.<sup>22</sup> This perhaps explains the sultan's focus on acquiring an entourage of literati who could write laudatory poems that placed the dynasty in a Persianate, rather than Turkish, historical context. In one of Farrukhi's panegyrics, Mahmud of Ghazna is referred to as the "Khusraw of Iran," while another characterises his son as a thoroughly Persian king, demonstrating their desire to eliminate the memory of their Turkish roots.<sup>23</sup> Internally, these *qasidas* were designed to convince both

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<sup>19</sup> Peacock, *Mediaeval*, pp. 170-171.

<sup>20</sup> Meisami, *Historiography*, p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> Lazard, 'Rise', p. 617.

<sup>22</sup> Roy Mottahdeh, 'Finding Iran in the Panegyrics of the Ghaznavid Court', in A.C.S. Peacock and D.G. Tor (eds), *Medieval Central Asia and the Persianate World: Iranian Tradition and Islamic Civilisation* (London, 2015), p. 133.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 132-33.

the Persian-speaking lower classes and bureaucrats, who continued to hold powerful positions within the government, that the new leaders were Persianised. While the results of this particular effort remain unknown, if it was successful, it would have allowed the Ghaznavids to further solidify their control over the Iranian population both directly following their conquest and during times of strife. Outside the empire, these works served as propaganda illustrating the strength and beneficence of the Ghaznavid sultan, which may have attracted more poets to the court, thereby increasing the prestige of the state.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, some poems attack the right to rule of neighbouring empires such as the Qarakhanids; Unsuri writes that when they “battle with the *shah*, the Ilak flees with his neck lacerated towards Turkestan.”<sup>25</sup> Panegyrics such as these were written in Persian so that they could be disseminated widely, thus increasing the citizenry’s confidence in the power of the leader while also, in theory, warding off Persian-speaking invaders by projecting the image of a powerful Ghaznavid state.<sup>26</sup> New Persian was utilised to write court poetry, particularly *qasidas*, because this choice of language furthered the Iranian credentials of the Ghaznavids and it also allowed these works to be used as propaganda; had they been in Turkish or Arabic they would have been less effective, as the majority of the conquered population and many of the Ghaznavid’s opponents understood only Persian.

The tenth and eleventh century *shahnamehs* represent another major component of the rise of New Persian literature, namely the development of the Islamic-Iranian epic as a genre. The *shahnameh* tradition was largely utilised by governors to legitimise their claims to authority.<sup>27</sup> The contemporary explanations provided for the composition of these texts are rarely convincing; for example, the prose *Shahnameh* sponsored by Abu Mansur Tusi was apparently commissioned “so that men of knowledge may look into it and find in it all about the wisdom of kings... justice and judicial norms...”<sup>28</sup> As Julie Meisami argues in her article about Persian historiography, given when this epic was created and the inclusion of an extensive genealogy that links Tusi to both the Sasanians and a son of Jamshid, it was undoubtedly produced to support his claim to be ruler of Tus and all of Khurasan when his position was threatened.<sup>29</sup> As there were many Islamic elements present in *shahnamehs* as well as references to

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<sup>24</sup> Julie Scott Meisami, ‘Ghaznavid Panegyrics: Some Political Implications’, *Iran*, 28 (1990), p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> Mottahdeh, ‘Iran’, p. 131.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 132.

<sup>27</sup> Julie Scott Meisami, ‘Why Write History in Persian? Historical Writing in the Samanid Period’, in Carole Hillenbrand (ed), *Studies in Honor of Clifford Edmund Bosworth Vol. 2* (Leiden, 2000), p. 364.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 362.

<sup>29</sup> Meisami, *Historiography*, p. 21-22.

Iranian traditions, these works also likely bolstered the reputation of their patrons as pious Muslims.<sup>30</sup> They were written in Persian for many of the same reasons other texts were composed in the language; so that they were comprehensible to both the lower classes and the majority of elites, and so patrons could propagate an image of themselves as legitimate Islamic-Iranian rulers. The culmination of this tradition, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, is an anomaly since it was not sponsored by anyone, and the author did not attempt to legitimise either the Samanids or Ghaznavids, the two dynasties he worked under. His epic differs in "aim, context and execution from histories preceding and succeeding it in the Samanid and Ghaznavid courts."<sup>31</sup> The majority of the *shahnamehs* were compiled for legitimisation purposes, written in Persian to reach the widest possible audience and to allow leaders to strengthen their Iranian and Islamic credentials, which was necessary in regions that had citizens who held both beliefs about what constituted effective and just rulership.

The development of New Persian as a literary language was not merely an extension of the ninth century Shu'ubiyya, nor was it an expression of Iranian patriotism in response to increased Arabisation. Instead, the language was developed through patronage by Samanid and Ghaznavid leaders and elites as both a practical way to ensure their works were read by a large audience and as a linguistic medium through which to justify their rule. Naturally, literature was composed in Persian for pragmatic reasons, given that there was a substantial part of the population whose knowledge of Arabic was limited or nonexistent, but as the works examined have demonstrated, it was often the language of choice for political and religious purposes as well. Its use for the composition of histories, poems, and epics at times of turmoil suggests that these works were meant to bolster legitimacy not only through content, but also language choice. New Persian was raised to literary status by the Samanids and Ghaznavids due to the ethnic plurality of the eastern Islamic lands and so that it could serve as the vehicle by which these governments expressed their ideologies and claims to power.

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<sup>30</sup> Meisami, *Historiography*, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> Ghazzal Dabiri, 'The Shahnama: Between the Samanids and the Ghaznavids', *Iranian Studies*, 43:1 (2010), p. 26.

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