Starting in the 9th century of our era, Persian came to be a major contact vernacular and an international literary language over an area spanning, at its maximal extent, the Iranian plateau from the south Caucasus to the Indus, Central Asia from Khiva to Kashghar, and the northern three-quarters of the Indian subcontinent. As a language of imperial administration and epistolography, and in terms of elite readership of the Persian literary classics and lexical and stylistic influence on other languages, its influence extended to more distant centers such as Konya and Istanbul, Cairo and Mombasa, Saray and Kazan. Its active range was reduced to Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan only during the early decades of the 20th century, as a result of the success of newer imperial languages (chiefly English and Russian) and the emergence of local and national languages on the territories of the old empires.

How did this millennium of cultural hegemony evolve, without (for the most part) political dominion by Persians, and what factors underpinned it? As in most historical developments, part of the explanation lies in a subtle balance between aspects of continuity and innovation. The geopolitical history and philological background is fairly clear and has been outlined in specific cases, if never adequately explained or even fully summarized. Here I shall attempt to look beneath the established strata of sociocultural generalities and individual etymologies, and identify some specific linguistic mechanisms and sociolinguistic processes that arguably facilitated the transition of spoken Middle Persian to literary New Persian and its subsequent cultural ascent.
This nuts-and-bolts approach is not intended to replace the interpretation of sociocultural factors, but to motivate and document it. Ultimately I shall emphasize two such intangibles, which I think best explain the success of Persian as a supranational literary language. The first is its homoglossia, i.e., the essential identity of written and spoken Persian as it expanded its written and spoken domains throughout the pertinent period, as distinct from the more commonly occurring feature of diglossia (a systematic distinction in grammar and lexicon between “high” and “low” stylistic registers) in languages such as Greek and Arabic. Related to this is the inclusivity of Persian, which attracted into its cultural and linguistic realm communities that might have been, or felt, excluded as being ethnically or socially alien from the locus of Persian literature and history. I begin with a fresh look at the given of “Islam” as the matrix for the diachronic dynamism of Persian language and its associated literature and world-view.

**PERSIAN AND RELIGION**

Persian is rightly regarded as the second language of Islam. Paradoxically, an important but hitherto neglected point is that the direct ancestor of New Persian, i.e., spoken Middle Persian (which Ibn al-Muqaffa` called Dari) at the time of the Arab Muslim conquest, was a secular language. In stark contrast with Arabic and with some of the adjacent non-Iranian languages ultimately replaced by Arabic (such as Aramaic and Coptic), it was devoid of immediate religious associations and connotations.

Several living Iranian languages were being written in the 7th century AD, in scripts derived from imperial Aramaic or Syriac Aramaic by priests and missionaries of existing religions. These writing systems included Estrangelo or “Manichaean” script, a Nestorian Christian script, a Buddhist script, Pahlavi script (for the written Middle Persian of the Zoroastrian priesthood), and the Avestan alphabet, derived from Pahlavi. Most of these systems, apart from formal character variations, used features of historical and archaizing spelling which distanced them from the vernacular even of the community they represented, and further served to dissociate them and their readers from members of the broader speech community (e.g., Sogdians or Persians as a whole) who used another script variety for a different purpose (religious or secular), or who did not use writing at all. Thus Dari (Middle and Early New Persian, known later, when it began to be written in
Arabic script, as Pārsi, the spoken tongue of much of the Iranian plateau during the 7th to the 9th centuries (1st to 3rd Islamic centuries), was not the same as Pārsik, Zoroastrian Middle Persian as written in Pahlavi script, and hence often popularly called Pahlavi.

In other words, spoken Persian of the time (for which Dari was one name) served as the vernacular for Zoroastrians, Jews, Manichaeans, Christians, and Muslim converts in Iran (for some Jews, additionally in a written form using Hebrew script). It did not, however, serve as an original or regular vehicle for any scripture or liturgy, and was not identified with a particular religion. Dari and Pahlavi stood in much the same relationship (from a linguistic and a socio-religious perspective) as Early Romance to Late Latin in Europe of the same period. The other major Iranian language of the region, Sogdian, both spoken and written, was one of several languages of the Silk Road in which Christian, Manichaean, and Buddhist works had been written, but was not identified exclusively with any one religion. It was known to the Arabs in a secular context as a language of diplomacy in which were written some of the letters they received from Devâšhtich, the last lord of Samarqand.

These and other Iranian vernaculars (such as Khwarazmian, east of the Caspian sea, and Azeri, to the west of it) evidently posed no ideological threat to Arabic, the scriptural and liturgical language of the victorious Muslims. Incidents are reported of new converts who had difficulties with Arabic being permitted to recite the Koran in Persian or Sogdian translation (Sâdeqi 1978:63–64, Narshakhi 1954:48 and n184). It is hard to imagine Aramaic-speaking Jewish, or Syriac- or Coptic-speaking Christian, converts being granted the same leniency, since their vernaculars were also to varying extents scriptural and liturgical languages of the supplanted religions. This factor may well be one of the elusive reasons for the survival and efflorescence of Persian, whereas Aramaic, Syriac, and Coptic had their domains severely reduced in the aftermath of the Islamic conquests of Iraq, Syria, and Egypt.

Almost all the basic concepts of Islam, such as god, prophet, angel, devil, heaven, hell, purgatory, prayer, fasting, and sin, translated smoothly into Persian without the need for loanwords. Most of the Persian terms were already in use by Zoroastrians, Christians, Jews, and Manichaeans and needed, at the most, some specification: thus namâz ‘prayer’ might still be polyvalent, but namâz-e jom’a ‘Friday prayer’ was unambiguously Islamic. Popular Muslim and Zoroastrian superstitions merged: thus in Central Asia the Koranic term sirât ‘road’ (< Latin strata ‘paved [highway],’ as used in
the opening surah (verse) of the Koran in the phrase al-sirāt al-mustaqim ‘the straight [i.e., righteous] path’) now designates the legendary bridge called by Zoroastrians Chinvāt, which mankind must cross on the Day of Judgment (the righteous will reach the other side, while sinners will tumble into the abyss). Here a popular Zoroastrian belief has crossed without fanfare into popular Islam, taking an Arabic name with similar connotations of moral choice and divine judgment.

During the 3rd to 5th centuries of the Hijra (9th–11th c. AD) Persian not only replaced Sogdian as the vernacular of Transoxiana, but having adopted the writing system and much of the vocabulary of Arabic, under the active patronage of local dynasties (notably the Samanids), smoothly eased into a partnership with the invaders’ tongue as a complementary literary language of administration, the secular sciences, and the humanities in the lands of the Eastern Caliphate. In subsequent centuries its domain expanded, particularly in the frontier areas of Islamdom such as Anatolia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and India, and in poetical genres, to embrace even purely religious education and devotion.

Paradoxically, Persian’s geographical expansion was initially due to the rapid advance of the Arab armies eastward, where they and their converted Persian auxiliaries from Pārs and western central Iran settled in Khorasan and Transoxiana, forming an economic, military, and political bloc to be reckoned with by the later Umayyads and early Abbasids. The language’s further expansion from Anatolia to India was due in large part to the conquests of Turkish and Mongol dynasts, who patronized Persian as a mercantile contact vernacular and a literary language, and promoted the institution of the Persian bureaucrat. Finally, its apotheosis as the primary language of Islam in the East was undoubtedly a consequence of the destruction of the Abbasid caliphate by the Mongols in 1258 and the demise of Arabic as a living language east of Iraq and the Gulf. Nevertheless, the evolution of spoken Persian as a language of both secular and religious literature resulted ultimately from its neutral, non-religious beginnings.

FERDOWSI’S SHĀHNĀMA

Likewise related to Persian’s secular status is the single most important factor in, and symbol of, the peculiar and unchanging identity of Persia and Persian. The most notable triumph of continuity from Middle to New
Persian literature and ideology belonged to the dehqāns, the traditional and conservative landed nobility of the Sasanian realm: this was the recovery of the Iranian national legend and its royal traditions. The Zoroastrian religion was not totally expunged in Iran; having secured the status of protected scriptuaries—“People of the Book”—its adherents were not subject to any greater persecution than Iranian Christians or Jews. However, as a result of conversion and emigration, and the demotion of the priests from political power, the remnants of the faithful in Iran receded to the periphery, where their scholars continued for some time to produce works on a discarded law and theology in an archaic language and a superseded script. Zoroastrianism was never again to be an integral part of Iranian society, and the persona of the Magian priest, the mobad, was relegated in later lyric verse to a nostalgic metaphor, the pir-e moghān or mentor of Sufi neophytes. (In the Persian dictionary Me`yār-e Jamāli, composed at Shiraz by a contemporary of Hāfez in 1344, mobad was defined as ‘a learned man; one from whom they listen to stories’ (Baevskii 2007:195). The legends of kings and heroes, on the other hand, proved to be more enduring. As secular tales of martial valor and courtly magnificence, they were no ideological threat to Islam; they not only circulated freely in the Dari vernacular, but persisted in written accounts in Pahlavi, and both were selectively translated into Arabic by new Muslims who remained old Persians at heart.

The urge to collect all of this national patrimony was clearly manifested in the Samanid realms several generations before Ferdowsi realized it in ca. 1010. Several shāhnāmas (no longer extant) were reportedly composed during the course of the 10th century, including at least one in prose, and the beginning of a versified one by Daqiqi, commissioned by the Samanid amir, was incorporated by Ferdowsi in his own Shāhnāma after Daqiqi’s untimely death in about 979. Nor did this industry cease with Ferdowsi; Asadi of Tus—significantly, one of the first lexicographers of Persian—also produced a historical verse epic, the Garşāsp-nāma, in 1066. With the canonization of the Persian royal history and the rapid integration of its ethos into Turco-Iranian regnal practice in the East, this fundamentally secular corpus became a force for the standardization and resistance to change of Persian, but also one of its sources of innovation and expansion, as will be argued under the next two headings.

This definitive literary version of the national legend was in verse (ostensibly in a meter derived from Arabic, but actually a Persian innovation),
in an epic form and diction that set a new standard. The work was eagerly learned and recited, and widely imitated throughout the Persianate world. Persian and foreign scholars have of course hailed the Shâhnâma as an ideological vector, the prime vehicle of ancient Iranian civilization and essential Persian culture. As Ferdowsi himself claimed, ‘ajam zenda kardam ba-d-in Pârsi, “I have resurrected Persia with this Persian of mine.” I will argue more specifically that the Shâhnâma was a major determiner of the role of written Persian as an Eastern parallel to, and successor of, the language of its old rivals and former conquerors, namely, Greek. This analogy is nowhere explicitly made, since the Persians were ignorant of the literary epics of the Greeks—though not, it seems, of Hellenistic romances (see Davis 2002). Let us however consider the sociolinguistic parallels set forth below.

THE IMPULSE TO A NEW WRITING SYSTEM

The Greek alphabet was brilliantly adapted from the Semitic consonantal system in its Phoenician form, probably about 800 BC, and became not only the vehicle of a uniquely influential philosophical and poetical literature, but the model for all subsequent fully alphabetical writing systems up to the present day. It has been argued that this script was devised by a single individual for the express purpose of writing down Homer’s epic poems, the Iliad and Odyssey (Powell 1991). Though this extreme view is not widely accepted, it seems certain at least that the introduction of an efficient and widely disseminated writing system would challenge poets to re-work the formative literary legends of their particular cultures, hitherto preserved by oral tradition. This is not to say that a definitive written version immediately superseded the oral; in the case of both Homer and Ferdowsi, written versions of the epics remained for long (in the latter case, up until the last century) aides-mémoire for professional reciters.

At first sight, the differences from the case of Ferdowsi and the Shâhnâma are more striking than the similarities. Perso-Arabic script was an adaptation of degree, rather than kind, from an existing Semitic consonantal script, and had already been in use to write Persian poetry and prose for several generations when Ferdowsi took up the pen. Moreover, it was Ferdowsi the poet himself who committed his verses to writing, using mostly existing conventions. However, the need to write the Iranian national legend in epic form was no less urgent for the Persians of the 10th century AD than for the
Greeks of the 9th century BC. A self-consciously epic work craves immortality in "authentic" written form as well as in the diverse voices and vacillating memories of its performers, whether rhapsodes or rāwis (whether in the Greek or Muslim tradition). Henceforth, the form of this Persian classic was to dictate innovations in the new writing system, and the standardization of existing features, that endured in Persian and were transmitted to derivative systems in Turkic and Indic literary languages.

The Persians’ prompt adoption and adaptation of Arabic script was almost the reverse of the process by which their forebears had adopted Aramaic script for Middle Persian (MP)—a long and unintentional change, completed about six centuries previously, which may be characterized briefly as follows. The Aramaic language, with its established literary tradition, was adopted as the language of imperial administration throughout the far-flung Achaemenian empire, written on clay tablets and parchment initially by an Aramaean secretariat. (Old Persian in its cuneiform syllabary was used only for ceremonious epigraphic inscriptions in Iran.) As Persians and other Iranians themselves came to use written Aramaic, the text would be routinely translated orally into Persian (or Parthian) for officials or audiences who did not know Aramaic, until this written-to-spoken translation register (and the reverse process) became in effect an indirect way of reading and writing (Middle) Persian.

As users became less competent in the grammar and lexis of Aramaic (which, after the fall of the Achaemenids to Alexander, lost its native-Aramaic secretariat and its status as an official imperial language), they took to writing Persian words phonetically in Aramaic characters, producing a mixed language in which an Aramaic grammatical skeleton was progressively relexified by Persian—a literary creole, with no spoken counterpart. Soon enough the tail was wagging the dog, as forms of this writing (notably literary Middle Persian, or Book Pahlavi) became overwhelmingly Persian in content. The still considerable Aramaic residue (known as uzvārishn in MP) was to be seen in such as function words (prepositions, e.g., MN ‘from, of’), and nouns such as MLK’ standing for šāh. Oddly enough, far from eliminating these Aramaeograms, later scribes introduced even more redundant and corrupt ones—perhaps out of professional snobbery (Skalmowski 2004:295–96). These words were never loanwords, but sigla on the order of “&” or “viz.” in English.

Under the Arab Muslim empire, the Persians, like other conquered peoples, initially used Arabic as the common administrative language (and,
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notably in the west of Iran, under the Iranian but arabizing Buwayhid dynasts, as a literary language for court-patronized poetry). The process by which bilingual Persian intellectuals came to write Persian in Arabic characters was not through an accidental loss of rigor by a still-elitist nativized secretariat, but on the contrary a conscious striving for literary parity and comprehensibility on the part of secretaries, scholars, and poets. Arabic was rapidly and selectively adapted to the needs of Persian by appropriation of the writing system and selected vocabulary. As in Luther’s Germany, the drive by the literati to promote the vernacular to literary status was actively patronized by ambitious independent princes, such as the Saffarids and Samanids in the east of Iran.

The two languages were not mixed by accident, but kept separate by design. Whereas Middle Persian had relexified a debased form of written Aramaic by default, literary Arabic was used purposefully, but selectively, to relexify New Persian. The swiftly growing body of Arabic vocabulary was assimilated phonologically to spoken Persian, but retained its original orthography in the written language, including the distinctive Arabic letters representing sounds alien to Persian. This lent the loanwords a high profile—recognizability, status, and a degree of semantic and lexical stability—not only in Persian but also in Turkish, Urdu, and other languages into which they were incorporated through the mediation of Persian. Many components of this topmost stratum of Arabic vocabulary nevertheless trickled down into vernacular usage. A few early and common Arabic loanwords, such as mosalmān ‘Muslim’ and mir ‘emir’, show by their orthographic alteration from the Arabic etymon that they were initially incorporated via the spoken language (see below, under Homoglossia).

The conscious reservation of the two languages, Arabic and Persian, for separate and appropriate functions is seen in the attitude of early Muslim Iranian scholars. Biruni (d. after 1050) held that Arabic was the proper language of science and that Persian, being less clear and precise, should stick to epic verse and storytelling. The astronomer Shāhmardān b. Abī’l-Khayr endorsed this position, observing that the would-be popularizers of science in the vernacular “have recourse to words of pure Persian [dari-ye vizha-ye motlaq] which are more difficult than Arabic” (Lazard 1975:631–32). The targets of their criticism were colleagues such as Ibn Sinā (d. 1037) and Ghazālī (d. 1111), who sought to equip Persian as a language of philosophy for non-Arabic speakers by excerpting their Arabic opera magna in Persian
epitomes such as the Dāneshnāma-ye ‘Alā‘i and Kimiyā-ye sa‘ādat, for which they coined native technical neologisms. Scribes, poets, and dilettantes argued about the proportions of Arabic and Persian vocabulary appropriate for various functions and stylistic registers of Persian: thus the Ziyārid prince Kay Kā‘us, that consummate Muslim dehqān, counsels his son, if he would be a lyric poet, to “avoid heavy and unfamiliar Arabisms (tāzi-hā’); but should he become a secretary, he is advised: “If the letter is in Persian, do not write pure Persian [pārsi-ye motlaq], for it is unpleasant” (Kai Kā‘us 1951:109 and 119 respectively).

As in Greek, the use of the Semitic matres lectionis as vowels was expanded to make verse more readable: w and y each stood for two “long” vowels of Persian, alef for a third, and any optional, metrically conditioned vowel shortening (bud ~ bod, digar ~ degar, shāh ~ shāh, etc.) was systematically indicated by their absence in written verse. The expanded use of matres lectionis was previously a feature of the adaptation of Aramaic and Hebrew scripts to Persian. The optional alternation with zero vowel graphs—apart from a limited application in derivational morphology (e.g., rāh-namā‘i ‘guidance’ in preference to rāh-namā‘—has remained proper to poetry; similar variations in early prose manuscripts have since been regularized.

Perhaps even more important, the early adaptation of the Arabic prosodic system (‘aruz) to Persian verse—in combination with the consistent orthography for long and short vowels—provided a stable matrix for the efflorescence of poetry beyond the simple motaqāreb meter of the Shāhnāma. The system accommodated dialect differences and vowel shifts and still works perfectly today, through a conventional contrast of short and long vowels (and, in combination with consonant clusters, of short, long, and overlong syllables). ‘Aruz was adapted, with appropriate variations, to Turkic and Indic poetics. With the invention of the masnavi form (rhyming couplets), found first in the motaqāreb meter of the Shāhnāma, Persian poetry evaded the restriction of length imposed by the monorhyme of Arabic and became capable of supporting indefinitely long epic, lyrical, or mystical poems.

Ferdowsi’s younger contemporaries among early 11th-century court poets, notably Farrokhi, ‘Onsori, and Manucheheri, distinguished themselves as court encomiasts in the genre of the qasida, an ode in monorhyme modeled on Arabic antecedents. They too contributed to the richness of
the New Persian lexicon and idiom, but—by virtue mainly of the difference in subject matter—more in terms of Arabic loanwords than Ferdowsi. Whereas the Shāhnāma contains about 8.8 percent of Arabic in its vocabulary and a frequency of occurrence of some 2.4 percent (Moinfar 1970:61, 66), ‘Onsori’s verses yield ca. 32 percent and 17 percent respectively (Elwell-Sutton 1987:234).

For its earliest purposes—the preservation and propagation of a national (i.e., supradialectal) poetry—the Perso-Arabic consonant system was superior to the Greek alphabet (in its Homeric context), which—being a narrower transcription—was constrained to record instances of dialect variation. The advantages of a basically underdetermined writing system for a national, supradialectal verse are obvious when contrasted with the over-determined, phonographic Latin system devised for the Tajiks (Persians of Central Asia) in the late 1920s. One unintended (and unpublicized) result of the switch from Arabic script was that classical Persian verse could no longer be appreciated, or composed, by anyone educated solely in the new alphabet (or its even worse successor, Cyrillic), since this was based on a dialect that allegedly did not distinguish the traditional “long” and “short” vowels (Perry 1997:8). Elsewhere, the “defective” Perso-Arabic system with its overt long and covert short vowels has preserved, promoted, and exported classical Persian verse, which is the heart of the literature.

Three other instances of orthographic innovation had permanent and important consequences for the lexical evolution of New Persian.

First was the Persian spelling of the dichotomous pronunciation of the Arabic feminine ending (in Arabic, a device to distinguish syntactic structures, but written as a unitary graph, the tā’ marbuta) as two distinct graphic and lexical endings, -at and -a (the latter pronounced /e/ in modern Persian). This opened a series of doors to semantic sorting and lexical innovation in some 1500 items of the Arabic loan vocabulary (Perry 1991). For example, most of about forty doublets (Arabic feminine-ending loanwords lexicalized in Persian with both variants) show semantic, lexical, or stylistic distinctions in the use of the two forms. Thus qovvat ‘strength, power,’ the original form and meaning, remains a mass noun of quality in modern Persian, whereas qovva, a lexical doublet recorded from about 1150, was soon specialized in medical and philosophical literature as a term for ‘faculty, capability,’ as in qovva-ye erāda ‘will power’; as a count noun of single instance, it could now pluralize (using either Persian or Arabic forms), and

The second change was in essence simply a phonographic re-spelling of Persian words that were now simpler in form than their Pahlavi ancestors. It involves two important form classes which had undergone related sound changes shortly before the Arab invasion. Most MP relative adjectives in -ig lost the final velar (pahlavig > pahlavi, etc.), as also did substantives ending in -ag (dānag > dāna ‘grain’, khoftag > khofta ‘sleeping’, etc.). These new forms were written respectively with terminal {γ} and {h} (the latter device was probably extended from its application in Arabic loans in the feminine ending that were likewise realized in -a: see above). The immediate and massive result was that these large form classes each became indistinguishable from, and in effect merged with, two equally large and important Arabic form classes, members of which were being incorporated rapidly into Persian vocabulary. These were the nisba adjective, formed with the suffix -iyyun (> New Persian -i, as in the borrowing ‘arabi ‘Arabic’), and all substantives in the Arabic feminine ending -a[t] (whether suffixal or integral to the word) that were incorporated in Persian as -a (not -at), such as madrasa ‘school’ and tohfa ‘gift.’

The absolute convergence of the adjectival forms in -iyyun and i is apparent from homonyms such as dudi ‘smoky,’ from Persian dūd ‘smoke’ + the Persian suffix -i (< -ig), and dudi ‘peristaltic, worm-like’ (from Arabic dūd ‘worm’ + the Arabic nisba suffix), and putative blends such as fārsi: is this simply an Arabized variant of pārsi (cf. Persian pil ~ fil ‘elephant’), or an incorporation of Arabic fārisyyun? The Persian and Arabic word classes in terminal -a are semantically less homogeneous than those in -i. Nevertheless, the extent of their assimilation into a single broad lexical class is shown by the (early, and usually continued) application of Persian morphophonological rules to these Arabic loans; e.g., nazzāragān ‘spectators’, khebrāgan ‘experts’ (cf. Pers. bandagān ‘slaves’), khebragi ‘expertise’ (cf. Pers. khastāgi ‘fatigue’).

Today, substantives of both Arabic and Persian origin ending in a (nouns and adjectives; Tehran pronunciation /e/) number at least 9,000, and there are at least 6,000 Persian adjectives of both origins ending in -i. There is also, of course, an approximately equally large class of purely Persian nouns ending in i (at least 4,000); these are the abstract nouns of quality or activity formed mainly from adjectives and agatives, such as bozorgi ‘size, great-
ness’ and qālī-bāfī ‘carpet weaving.’ This formal surface identity, resulting from a similar Arabic respelling of the unrelated formative -i (written in Pahlavi script as -ih), occasions very little ambiguity, since the function of each ending is exclusive of the other. What these form classes in -i do have in common (other than form) is that they are open classes: their identical suffixes are the most productive formatives in Persian. Virtually any toponym, for example, incorporated into Persian, would automatically acquire a plausible relative adjective in -i (e.g., ādamābdā-i, pertaining to a putative place called ādamābdād), and almost any adjective, agentive, or type noun could derive, as needed, a noun of quality or occupation in -i (e.g., sagbān-i ‘the office of Master of Hounds’).

The high-profile stratum of Arabic vocabulary that Persian incorporated was made available for all readers and writers, not only of Persian wherever it spread, but of its adoptive literary offspring Chaghatay, Ottoman, Urdu, etc. Together with this inventory went the rules and examples for continuing lexical incorporation and expansion, principally the semantic and stylistic dichotomy of -at and -a and the use of auxiliaries (esp. the dummy kardan) to “verbalize” many of the borrowed substantives. Above all, the new literary language, following the example of Arabic as the vehicle of a scripture for all believers, was to remain accessible to its speakers. Pārsik (Middle Persian, written non-phonographically in an Aramaic-derived script, the purview of a small trained elite) gave way to New Persian (Pārsi), the speech and writing of kings, poets, and peasants—in part lexically integrated with Arabic, but functionally separate. A brilliant marriage of the subtly underdetermined Semitic consonant repertory with the morphological simplicity of New Persian had produced just the right balance between phonographic precision and supradialectal universality.

HOMOGLOSSIA

Although the emergence of New Persian, via partial relexification of Dari by Arabic, was essentially a literary process in which Arabic vocabulary was initially used in the writings of bilingual scholars and poets from the 9th century on, there was evidently some earlier input from both spoken Arabic and spoken Dari. Common Persian onomastic elements such as bu and bā (< Ar. abu, abā ‘father’, as in Bu Ja`farak or Bāyazid) and mir (< Ar. amir ‘commander’) correspond phonologically to the aphasis characteristic of vernac-
ular Dari, as distinct from Pahlavi (cf. the pairs Anāhīd/ Nāhīd, Anushiravān/ Nushiravān, and the poetical variants ayār/yār ‘friend’, abā/bā ‘with’, abar/ bar ‘upon’, of which the former is Middle Persian and the latter is New Persian in form). It may also be pointed out that bu is a colloquial form in some Arabic dialects, and there is at least one sociolinguistically significant instance where a historical personage has both a formal Arabicate name and a colloquial Persianate variant: ‘Abu `Ali ebn-e Sinā’ is the philosopher-physician Avicenna, while “Bu `Ali” is his vernacular alter ego, the folktale magician.

In course of time, the fusion of Pahlavi and Arabic learned vocabulary with Dari phonology and syntax and Dari and Arabic vernacular words resulted in a Persian vernacular-cum-literary language with minimal stylistic differences. Any resulting linguistic dichotomy was in the form of bilingualism between Persian and Arabic, or Persian and another Iranian (or, later, a Turkic) language. Some of these languages—Parthian, Sogdian Khwarazmian, (pre-Turkish) Āzari—were overwhelmed by Persian and ceased to be written as their speakers took advantage of Persian, the language of high culture and interregional communication. Their descendants and successors among speakers of current Iranian dialects and minority languages—such as Lori, Semnāni, Yaghnobi, Qashqā’i Turkish—likewise use the written and spoken Persian of their host country in dealing with affairs outside their community, while their mother tongues tend to absorb more Persian elements and shrink in geographical and social domains.

In an earlier paper (Perry 2003) I demonstrated statistically that modern Persian, in comparison with modern Egyptian Arabic, does not represent a case of diglossia (in which a lexically and grammatically distinct form of the language is taught and used for high literature, formal speech, etc., while the current and local vernacular serves for everyday writing and speech). I argued that there are sound historical and linguistic reasons for Persian’s escaping the diglossic polarity of Katharevousa and dhimotiki Greek, or fushā and `āmmiyya Arabic—or indeed Pārsik and Dari Middle Persian.

Whereas the High form of the language (‘H’) in modern Egypt or German-speaking Switzerland, earlier modern Greece, Sasanian Iran, etc., is a distinct dialect, evolved in a temporally and/or spatially distant milieu from the vernacular (‘L’) and superimposed upon it, modern written Persian is (like written English) a minimally varied form evolved from, and evolving with, the vernacular. Islamic New Persian also evolved in symbiosis and competition with Arabic content for the first three or four centuries
to resign to Arabic the status of 'H' (the high language of scripture, liturgy, and scholarship), written and spoken Persian thus continued to develop side by side as mutually comprehensible versions of the same language. While written Persian progressively claimed the domains proper to Arabic literature as its own, expanding its lexicon with loanwords, loan compounds, and calques, spoken Persian preserved the common syntactic and lexical basis and incorporated what was borrowed from Arabic as it trickled down from scholarly usage. The principal common bond was Persian poetry, the repository of the national legend, communal and moral values, and spiritual aspirations—which both the literate and the illiterate knew and transmitted orally. Sociolinguistic dichotomy there was, but by way of bilingualism with Arabic, not diglossia within Persian. Most Iranian scientists and philosophers of the pre-Mongol period wrote their scholarly output in Arabic while speaking in Persian (and, like 'Omar Khayyām and al-Ghazālī, writing popular essays and poetry in Persian).

This state of hierarchical bilingualism was reversed after the Mongol invasions: Arabic throughout the eastern Islamic world suffered a reduction in its intellectual domain, while Persian expanded into philosophy and the religious and secular sciences, written not only by Iranians but also by Turks, Indians, and others who came to be included in the Persianate sphere. Conversely and contemporaneously, spoken Persian was challenged for hegemony as the lingua franca of the same region by other vernaculars, the most important of which were several varieties of Turkish. Once again, Persian was in a hierarchical bilingual (not diglossic) partnership, this time as 'H' to the 'L' of Turkish—a situation that lasted in many parts of the Iranian world up until modern times.

Obviously, bilingualism with Arabic and/or a Turkic or Indic vernacular is a fairly polarized sociolinguistic and cultural state; pressures for linguistic change within such a Kulturbund would likely push toward uniformity rather than diversity. When native speakers of Turkish or, say, Kurdish needed to reach a wider audience, they would use written or spoken Persian; and their style, insofar as they were educated, would tend toward the universal, or more formal, rather than less formal, standard. When a Persophone elite wished to express their identity vis-à-vis the Turks or Arabs in their midst, they would use a Persian comprehensible to, and valued by, their co-linguals of whatever socioeconomic station. As the conventions of a valued common tradition of Persian verse proliferated, native and non-native users
of the literary koine would (and did) tend toward a poetical standard; consumers and producers—some of whom were technically illiterate, reciting from memory and composing orally—thus tended to keep the “literary” language largely homoglossic with the vernacular. The pressures for a fissure of this language of solidarity along diglossic lines were simply not there.

THE RISE OF PERSIAN LEXICOGRAPHY

If the most obvious triumph of Persian literary survival from pre-Islamic times is that of the hero-tales of the dehqān class, a less obtrusive but no less important continuity is seen in the traditions of the third estate of Sasanian society, the dabirs or government secretaries. Their primary functions as epistolographers, secretaries, and belletrists are obviously pertinent to the theme of this symposium; but I will here stress a lesser-known achievement of this class which is relevant to a neglected field of Persian language studies—that of historical lexicography.

By way of preparation, let us remember that the Pahlavi language and its writing system were not factors in this continuity, except in the most tenuous way. New Persian, the written embodiment of Dari, was newly clothed in Arabic script, which shared with Aramaic-based Pahlavi little more than a right-to-left directionality. The purposes of Middle Persian and New Persian dictionaries were likewise different. The Middle Persian Frahang-i Pahlavig (ostensibly a glossary of Aramaeograms) was organized thematically in 30–31 chapters (dar ‘gate; topic, chapter’). The topics follow in a descending universal taxonomy from the sublime and cosmographic, through flora and fauna, to human types and activities. These last include farming, hunting, horse breeding, royalty, the army, crime and punishment, and (in two chapters) the art of the scribe and chancellery usage. Though the content and arrangement vary in different recensions, the work appears to have been a manual not only of uzvārishn, but of traditional lore and practice for Middle Persian scribes. The topics treated clearly represented a traditional Persian cyclopaedia and were recapitulated to a great extent in New Persian genres of andarz (sage counsel) and adab (etiquette, established usage) as represented in the 11th century Qābus-nāma and Chahār Maqāla. Significantly, the word farhang (elusively polysemous even in modern Persian) is explained by `Abd al-Rashid Tatavi, the learned Indian lexicographer of Shāhjahān’s era, in the introduction to his Farhang-e Rashidi, as originally
a synonym of the Arabic adab 'etiquette, culture' (Dabirsiyæqi 1989:152).

In terms of scribal and lexicographical usage, the _Frahang-i Pahlavig_ gave to New Persian _farhangs_ (defining dictionaries, which reportedly began to appear before AD 900) not only its designation, but also the name and use of its structural unit, the dâr ‘topic, category, section, chapter.’ The Persian word inspired a calque, Perso-Arabic (and hence Arabic) _bāb_ ‘chapter,’ etc., adding to the Arabic sense of ‘gate, door’ the abstract metaphor from its Persian synonym. This rubric was applied not only to thematic but also to alphabetical divisions of Persian dictionaries up until the late 19th century (by which time the practice of strict alphabetization had long made it redundant).

The initial and continuing purpose of the New Persian _farhangs_, as the lexicographers themselves tell us, was to explain and help to preserve and promulgate New Persian poetry. Initially they were also designed as active vade-mecums for poets, being arranged as reverse, or rhyming, dictionaries. The earliest extant Persian dictionary, the _Loghat-e Fors_ of Asadi Tusi, was produced about 1050 explicitly to introduce the prestigious poetical vocabulary of Khorasan to readers in western Iran. Paper, imported from China to Samarqand under Sogdian rule and subsequently manufactured locally, materially aided in this linguistic reconquest. Moreover, in 1055 the Seljuk Turks ousted the Buwayhid rulers (Iranians who nevertheless patronized Arab poets at court) from Baghdad and western Iran. Persia was politically and culturally united, so that poets (and scholars) of all regions found patrons for works in Persian. After about 1300, the most numerous, innovative, and successful Persian dictionaries were produced in India under both Turkish and Indian rulers.

If the concept and, in part, the layout of the dictionary were transmitted by the pre-Islamic scribes, the content was inspired primarily by Ferdowsi’s epic. From the time of the earliest Indo-Persian dictionaries, a frequent convention employed in the _dibācha_ (author’s preface) to explain his motivation was a personal anecdote, as follows: “Once the compiler was reading the _Shāhnāma_, ‘the best of all books,’ with a group of friends, who were often frustrated by unfamiliar vocabulary. He yielded to their entreaties to compile a glossary” (so the _Farhang-e [Fākhr-e] Qavvâs_, ca. 1300, and the _Dastur al-afâzel_, 1340). Some lexicographers add Nezâmi’s _Eskandarnâma_, praised as “the companion of kings,” as a text in question (e.g., the _Dāneshnāma-yi Qadar Khân_ of ca. 1400, fol. 46). All Persian dictionaries compiled in India during the 14th and 15th centuries cite vocabulary from the _Shāhnāma_,
whether they include a version of this etiological myth or not (Baevskii 2007:73, 114, 128–29, 132). Farhangs thus paralleled the basic poetical corpus itself in establishing norms of interpretation, orthography, and orthoepy for Persian; and in overtly paying homage to their source of inspiration, they contributed a meta-legend that enhanced the aura of the Book of Kings.

**THE SPREAD OF AN IDEOLOGY**

Ferdowsi’s *Shāhnāma* faithfully represented the royal and heroic tradition of the national legend, as distinct from the priestly and mythical. Thus, for instance, his version of the legend of Alexander (who, as the destroyer of the sacred books, was anathema to the Zoroastrian priesthood) legitimizes the Macedonian conqueror as an Iranian king by grafting him onto the Achaemenid lineage. It was this politico-cultural and desacralized history of Iran—beginning with the myths of the pre-Zoroastrian culture heroes of the Aryans, analogues of the Vedic gods, and incorporating Transoxiana Iranian and other steppe peoples, Afghans, Indians, and Macedonians (Rum, ‘Greeks’) into the fabric of the Iranian empire and world-view—that the *Shāhnāma* sold to successive Turkic conquerors and neighbors of Persia, from the Ghaznavids to the Mughals. Even an enemy of Samanid (and Ghaznavid) Persia, the Qarakhanid, or Ilek-khanid, dynasty of Qarluq Turks at Kashgar, was happy to buy into the convention and adopt the dynastic name Al-e Afrāsyāb, alluding to the traditional (and respected) Turanian rival of Iran’s kings and heroes: better the villain of the piece than an outsider.

The work was also widely imitated, not only in Iran and Central Asia, but also in India, to flatter royal patrons and portray their conquests as analogous with those of the ancient Shāhs and heroes of Iran (cf. Fragner 1999:60). There is even a 19th-century *Jārj-nāma*, penned by Mullā Feroz, a loyal Parsi subject of the British Raj, extolling the exploits of Clive and Cornwallis in the service of George III. (It was printed in 1837, ironically a few years after the East India Company discontinued Persian as the official language of administration.)

Like Beowulf, much of the *Shāhnāma* is a saga from pagan times retold in the context of the new monotheism. Not overtly anti-Islamic (though the clerical leaders of the Islamic Republic banned it from the curriculum), this secular celebration of *Irānigari*, ‘Persianness,’ is nevertheless obviously pagan in inspiration and, despite superficial islamization, even in expres-
sion. Its acknowledgment of the advent of Zoroaster is perfunctory; the destinies of men are determined by blind fate, not by a merciful God; invocations to the deity are usually to izad or yazdān—barely singularized denizens (the yazatas) of the pre-Zoroastrian pantheon. Despite the carefully even-handed treatment of the Arab Muslims in the final chapter, the work is a semi-conscious reaction to Iran’s defeat and conversion; it must be read in the spirit of the old paganism, or more likely a new agnosticism.

This is where the parallel with Greek language, verse, and culture seems most apt. Hellenistic civilization was able to pervade much of the known world not so much through military conquest as by ideological conversion and infection, by incorporating territories as varied as Macedon, Anatolia, Egypt, and Rome, and embracing aspects of Babylonian, Iranian, Indian, Judaic, and its own “pagan” philosophies, on a foundation of Homer and the alphabet. After Alexander’s conquest of the East, the Greek language and its alphabet were adopted to varying degrees by Iranian peoples such as the Bactrians and Parthians, together with much of Greek art and philosophy in the realms of music, medicine, military and civic organization—as is attested by the Greek-derived vocabulary in the early farhangs. Persianate civilization, retaining much of its Hellenistic experience and catalyzed by the Islamic conquest, infused a large part (territorial and intellectual) of the Islamic East with a neo-pagan sensitivity, building on the Shāhnāma and a restructured language exemplified in, and evolving from, the epic.

**INCLUSIVITY**

In the post-Mongol period poetry joined forces with music, and built on the legacy of mystical and lyrical poets who gained an international following in their lifetimes: Rumi, who wrote outside Iran in a non-courtly environment where Greek, Armenian, and Turkish were spoken, and was later claimed for Turkish as much as Iranian culture; Sa’di, a world traveler (or posing as such), who added new words and memorable quotations to Persian, as Shakespeare did to English; Hāfez, invited to India, but too devoted to an idealized Shiraz to leave home.

The inclusiveness of Persian is first of all evident in the many ways in which it incorporated Arabic vocabulary and Islamic lore, processing and manipulating them to its own purposes and those of the Turks, Indians, and other peoples whom it embraced as partners in the complex Persianate
venture. It is well known that many Indians (not only Muslims, but Hindus and those of other faiths) joined willingly in the Persianate venture: fusing the fissures between Sunni and Shi’i, *shari’a* and Sufism, Believer and Infi-
del, and compiling Persian treaties and treatises, dictionaries, grammars, histories, and above all, Persian poetry.

Like Hellenistic civilization, Persianate culture proved to be adaptive and inclusive, which made it popular with a variety of elites in the con-
quered territories. The underlying reasons for this adaptivity were not necessarily the same. Probably the salient feature of Hellenistic inclusivity was its religious tolerance, whereby local deities and their cults were let be, or (notably in Egypt and Mesopotamia) patronized and assimilated to the Greek pantheon and practices. This was a widespread attribute of polythe-
istic societies, practiced just as magnanimously (and shrewdly) by the Ach-
aemenians and the Roman republic. As a monotheistic culture, Persianate Islam could not be expected to practice such a degree of tolerance. How,
then, could a Persianate culture formally invested in Islam manifest inclusiv-
ity for, in particular, Indian polytheists?

It seems unreasonable to expect much cultural accommodation between a society of mainly vegetarian polytheists, venerating the cow and honoring their gods with fruits and garlands of flowers, and an army of carnivorous monotheists whose principal annual holiday culminates in the mass butchery of assorted livestock. Predictably, the first Arab invaders of India set about looting temples and destroying the idols (which were popularly identified with Hubal and other anathematized idols of pre-Islamic Arabia). The Turkish dynast Mahmud of Ghazna renewed this custom some three centuries later, albeit more for the temple treasure than from outraged monotheism. Biruni, the Persian scientist who accompanied his annual campaigns, interviewed pandits and learned to read the Sanskrit scriptures. He has left us a coolly ob-
jective ethnography of northern India and a penetrating, sympathetic analysis of the philosophy of Hinduism and the monotheism that underlies its prolif-
eration of divinities. This, and studies like it, no doubt contributed to a theo-
retical basis for the subsequent treatment of Hindus and Buddhists as People of the Book; though it was in practice the fact that the polytheists were vastly in the majority, and that dead men pay no taxes, that chiefly restrained later Muslim rulers from righteous massacre. Nevertheless, Buddha statues were occasionally defaced (literally, de-faced) by Muslim iconoclasts, and in the case of the colossi in Bamian, Afghanistan, finally destroyed.
After the time of Biruni it was Persian ulama and Sufis, and Persianized Turkish rulers and soldiers, who undertook the Islamization and Persianization of India—and who in turn were usually Indianized to a degree. This process was a long and complex affair, not always benign and predictable, and impossible to summarize here. However, I will suggest at the outset that not just the Shāhnāma and its congener, but the bulk of Persian poetry of the classical period carries at least the germ of that same new agnosticism which, in the East, flavored the plain cup of Islam. This attitude is not exclusive to Persian, being seen plainly even in the cynical Arabic wine songs of the half-Persian Abu Nowās and the skeptical verses of Arab poets such as Abu’l-‘Atāhiya and Abu’l ‘Alā’ al-Ma’arri. But it is most overtly manifested in the robā’is of ‘Omar Khayyām, which directly challenge the competence and ethics of the conventional deity. Even the less aggressively antinomian ghazal, with its mystical “metaphors” of idolatry, drunkenness, and debauchery, seems often to be an elaboration of Khayyām’s carpe diem.

At some point in this transaction, a tipping point was reached: the recipient cultures were bringing more to their portion of Persianate civilization than they were receiving. Persian verse in forms such as the robā’i, the mo’ammā (literary riddle), the chronogram, and especially the ghazal, as practiced in an Indian and not even necessarily Muslim milieu, was no longer mainly a vehicle for the national legend and sociopolitical ethos of Iran, nor for the pristine message of Islam. Persian poetry and elegant prose mediated between the spiritual and the worldly, particularly in India where its offspring, Urdu, inherited and refined its tradition in a unique regional culture.

This “regional” Indo-Persian culture proved also to be vertically inclusive to a remarkable degree. Given sufficient education, markers such as religion, sect, caste, and ethnicity were no bar to the enjoyment or production of Persian or Urdu verse, their ancillary language sciences, and their aura of ādāb, of literary taste and cultural refinement. Not generally appreciated is the extent to which resident foreigners, Farangis, also indulged in the mild intoxicant known as Persian poetry—especially the ghazal. During the 18th and 19th centuries, more than sixty Europeans and Indo-Europeans (including six Britons, thirteen Frenchmen, and eight women) dabbled in composing Persian and Urdu poetry, some of them accumulating considerable divāns (Saksena 1941).

Several reasons might be adduced for this addiction, such as the genial multicultural milieu of Indian courts, and the exceptional gene pools from which many of these accomplished foreign adventurers (and, in the case of
the second generation, their native spouses) sprang. But heading the list, surely, was the unique attraction of the ghazal, the sonnet of the East, for those adept at languages. According to one scholar who has spent many years wrestling with theories of the ghazal, it is “a comical brain-teaser based on a semantic stunt” (Skalmowski 2004:127). Without endorsing so extreme a position, we must admit that it is an enjoyable and challenging exercise for writer and reader alike (a trait it shares with the robāʿī and, to an extent, the masnavī); and for educated Europeans who already delighted in trying out epigrams in Greek or Latin, to play with another intuitively cohesive set of poetical conventions in a classical language was irresistible—all the more to do so in a living vernacular, Urdu, and bask in the applause of indulgent native speakers.

Whether in Iran, Anatolia, or India, two basic characteristics of the most popular “classical” Persian poetry assured it of an interactive relation with the reader, of whatever cultural origin or class. These are its humor (most commonly manifested as wit—through linguistic techniques such as the pun—but also in drollery, bawdry, and other forms); and its comfortably homoglossic register between styles ranging from the pedantic and archaizing to the colloquial, drawing on dialect and vulgarity. Rumi is the past master of this “high colloquial,” both in the Masnavi and his ghazals (cf. Skalmowski 2004:163–74); but Saʿdi and Hāfez follow closely in his footsteps. Persian prose styles have varied much more widely in accordance with the topic, readership, and other imperatives; but since the basic lexicon was established on the poetic corpus, and classical Persian evolved as a vehicle for less specialized literature than Arabic (and for the haute vulgarisation of Arabic originals), the homoglossic principle was preserved.

Even more telling is the prestige of the ghazal as an absolute intellectual accomplishment. So completely have the challenges of its conventional form eclipsed the relevance of its content that even for someone without a sense of humor, and seemingly opposed to all that the ghazal expresses, composing a few typical Persian ghazals is a rite of passage. Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989), who banned music in Iran, declared in a radio broadcast in 1979: “Allāh did not create man so that he could have fun. The aim of creation was for mankind to be put to the test through hardship and prayer… There are no jokes in Islam. There is no humor in Islam. There is no fun in Islam. There can be no fun and joy in whatever is serious” (Taheri 1986:259). Yet, as a pious seminarian at Qom in the 1930s, under the pseudonym Hendi
“the Indian,” he penned several ghazals in which he ostensibly craves wine and love, bewails his infatuation, frustration, and hypocrisy, and prays for annihilation in the throes of a drunken tryst (Thiesen 1991:211–19). Fifty years later, as ruler of Iran, he wrote—and published—a further collection of ghazals and other verse; these also include celebrations of love, wine, and, yes, music (“Close up the shop of abstinence, for...the song of the lute has come again”). Whether these lays of vicarious fun are the secret dreams of an uptight theology student, or metaphors of divine ecstasy or political engagement, the surface form is that of the typical mystical-lyrical ghazal (if somewhat over-stuffed with the conventional imagery). So highly regarded is the ghazal that even the favorite butt of its barbs, the supposedly hypocritical puritan, must pay it homage; and so strict are the rules of this “comical brain-teaser” that the amateur must always be a lover.

CONCLUSION

Persian began as an Iranian vernacular (Dari), related to but distinct from conservative written Middle Persian (Pahlavi), the vehicle of Zoroastrian literature and Sasanian administration. When Islam replaced Zoroastrianism and Arabic hence replaced Pahlavi as the language of scripture, liturgy, and (for some time) administration, Dari—being free of specific religious associations—gradually occupied the domain of secular literature in Iran. It presumably already had a foothold in the field of (orally transmitted) poetry, since this was the first genre to be recorded when Dari began to be written in Arabic characters, and was often the medium of antinomian or agnostic sentiments.

As the language of the Samanid court in 10th-century Bukhara (used in poetry and local administration under bilingual secretary-litterateurs), Persian orthography became standardized, translations were made from Arabic prose classics, and a controlled flood of Arabic loanwords entered the language (by this time called Pārsi, soon arabicized as Fārsi). The Arabic element in Persian was adapted systematically to Persian, evolving rules for the formation of nominal and verbal compounds and derivatives that were later transmitted to other Iranian, Turkic, and Indic languages as these entered the literary sphere of Islam. In Persian, the rapid trickle-down of learned Arabic borrowings in a milieu that encouraged literary competition, and the spread of madrasa education, ensured that the literary lan-
guage and the vernacular did not split diglossically. Despite (or more likely because of) historical bilingualism with Arabic and Turkish, Persian has remained essentially homoglossic to the present day.

The production of a poetical version of the national legend under the patronage of independent Persianate dynasties established Persian’s prestige and viability throughout Iran and Transoxiana. The volume and importance of the Shāhnāma, and the large number of unfamiliar words that it preserved from spoken and literary Middle Iranian languages, made it the primary and model corpus, and indeed the impetus, for the earliest Persian dictionaries. On the basis of Ferdowsi’s epic and the rising corpus of other Persian verse, early lexicographers in Iran and India set the standards of Persian orthography, orthoepy, and poetics.

Poetry expanded its formal, thematic, and geographical range, spreading not only the ethos of the Iranian national legend but also a code of civil ethics and a message of spiritual enlightenment, each of which hewed ostensibly to Islamic norms but actually owed much to Iranian, Hellenistic, and Indian antecedents. A sense of humor and a propensity for games of wit rendered this verse more interactive and inclusive. The broad acceptability of its non-sectarian content (or, in other words, its adaptability to the subtle expression of different philosophical or religious beliefs), and—thanks to homoglossia—the formal ease of access to this verse by even technically illiterate Persian-speakers and speakers of Persian as a second language, ensured its popularity from Azerbaijan to Bengal, and among readers and amateur poets from the ruling, clerical (in both senses), commercial, and artisan classes. Particularly in India, Persian became the agora in which different peoples, classes, and faiths—Iranian, Turk, and Indian; Muslim, Hindu, and Parsi; ruler, trader, and scholar—could meet and mingle on equal terms. Pari passu with the geocultural triumph of Persian poetry, of course, marched the more utilitarian advance of the language in prose genres such as history and belles-lettres, and for purposes as varied as tax-collection, political intrigue, international diplomacy, and business.

The geographical range of Persian at its premodern zenith appears to have exceeded that of Hellenistic Greek east of the Mediterranean. Greek was sprinkled more sparsely over the area, confined in its full usage to the Alexandrias and other major cities; yet the Hellenistic legacy in philosophy and the arts was surprisingly pervasive, as is testified in the numerous Greek loanwords in Persian, the similarities between Greek and Persian romances,
and the homage to Hellenistic usages in adab literature. After the fall of the Seleucids, none of the successor languages (Parthian, Pahlavi, Aramaic, or even Arabic) adequately filled this interregional geocultural vacuum until its inundation by New Persian. Thanks chiefly to the long-distance trade networks frequented by (in many cases, established by) Persian-speaking merchants, Persian’s hegemony as an auxiliary contact vernacular and written language was continued well outside the Iranian plateau during the period of Mongol, and subsequently Turkish, dominance in Asia. From the early 13th century into the late 14th it was arguably the official foreign language in China (see David Morgan in chapter 4). Until well into the 16th century on the upper Volga the term “Tajik” was a synonym for merchant: on the occasion of the Russian conquest of Kazan in 1552, the city was surrounded by a “ditch of the Tajiks” (tezichki/teshichkii rov; Barthold 1934:598b); and as late as the 19th century, as we have seen, Persian was the primary literary vehicle over most of the South Asian subcontinent.

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