Chapter Eight

Persian Farhangs as Sources for the History of Culture

A language is the mirror of a people's life. The historical and cultural experience of past generations is deposited within an ever-evolving and self-renewing lexicon passed on from century to century. This enables us to use the language as a tool to unearth the history of a society, in order to reconstruct its material and spiritual culture during the various phases of its development.

At the most basic level, a classic illustration of the use of a language as virtually the sole key to the remoter origin of its speakers is provided by the study of the history of the Roma (Gypsies), who were already well known in Europe in the eleventh century, and popularly supposed to have come from Egypt. Only within the last two centuries did lexical cognates between Romany and Sanskrit reveal India to be the point of origin of these long-distance migrants [see, e.g., Oranskii 1977b: 96-97; Angus Fraser, The Gypsies, Oxford 1992: 14-22]. This fact, incidentally, was already buried among the legends of Middle Persian lore and incorporated by Firdawsī into the Šāhnāma, as an etiological myth, in his story of the reign of Bahrām Gūr (421-439 C.E.).

Scholars have noted that acquiring adequate linguistic material for the study of the cultural history of the Orient remains one of their most urgent and continuing problems [Oranskii 1977b: 95]. This exceptionally valuable and irreplaceable source has obvious advantages over non-linguistic historical sources, and every effort should be made to control the various linguistic relicts of a self-consciously literate culture.

Medieval Persian defining dictionaries represent a valuable and, in many cases, unique source of information about the
historical and cultural past of the Iranian peoples. The farhangs, as demonstrated above, were to a great extent encyclopaedias: they are replete with detailed and minute descriptions of objects, customs, ideas and beliefs. More specifically, the earlier dictionaries, as distinct from the more voluminous and voluble ones that 'superseded' them, record for us (a) many terms that have survived from Middle Persian, but may not be present (or comprehensible) in the Aramaic-script literature of Pahlavi; and (b) the primitive, and transitional, meanings of terms that subsequently underwent semantic shifts. They offer clues not only to words, forms, and meanings that may have vanished from today's Persian, but to lexica which in some way may have survived as cognates or loanwords in neighboring tongues.

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As already noted, readers of the early classics of Persian poetry required help to fully understand those lexical elements which in the intervening century or more were less commonly used. Sometimes they had lapsed into oblivion together with the objects and notions they expressed, but more often had simply given way to new terms.

The influence of Arabic and its lexical baggage upon the formation of New Persian manifested itself for the most part in a plethora of synonyms, both abstract and concrete. To an even greater degree, however, this explosion of synonymy was due to the historical fact that Persian poetry, which during the pre-Mongol period spread rapidly both throughout Iran proper and into adjacent territories with courts where Persian was fostered (Anatolia, Transoxiana, India), inevitably experienced a strong influence from local dialects and regional peculiarities of vocabulary. Dialect forms infiltrating the language of belles-lettres introduced variants in the designation of some well-known items and notions, contributing to the difficulty of poetical texts at some remove in time or space.