CHAPTER 2

The Persian Epic Cycle

1 The Later Epics as a Genre

From the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, a number of poems were composed that hark back to Ferdowsi’s Shāhnāme. Their, often anonymous, authors are generally regarded as Ferdowsi’s imitators or emulators. The poems for the most part deal with and expand on subject matter of the Shāhnāme’s legendary section; recounting stories that are set in the period that runs from kings Jamshid to Bahman, they in a sense may be regarded as the Shāhnāme’s supplements. Like the Shāhnāme, each of these poems is a mašnawi. They all follow the internal rhyme scheme aa bb cc and so on, and have the motāqareb metre.1 Also, these mašnawis often borrow from Ferdowsi’s language and imagery. They tell of battles and personal feats in a manner that resembles the descriptions in Ferdowsi’s poem and they include well-known Shāhnāme kings and heroes. The novelty of these poems is that they add new kinds of adventures and introduce previously unknown characters. By analogy with the Greek cycle of poems that surround and complement Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey, the poems that supplement the Shāhnāme have collectively been termed ‘the Persian epic cycle’.2 They are also often referred to as ‘later epics’.

The anonymous author of the early-twelfth-century Persian compendium of histories Mojmal al-tawârikh wa’l qeṣaṣ, who mentions four titles from the epic cycle, calls Ferdowsi’s Shāhnāme the ‘trunk’ and the later epics its ‘branches’.3 This statement not only points to the fact that the later epics expand on Ferdowsi’s poem, but also implies that they are not able to live up to its standards and thus have a lesser status. Indeed, the poems from the epic cycle are generally thought to lack the Shāhnāme’s sophistication, both in style and content. Mohl, for example, considers their authors mere imitators

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3 Mojmal al-tawârikh wa’l-qeṣas, ed. Nadjmâbadi and Weber, 2; the four titles are the Garshâspnāme, the Farâmarznāme, the Akhbâr-e Bahman, and the Qeşse-ye Kush-e pildandân. See further, below and chapter 5.4 on the Mojmal al-tawârikh. The statement of the branches is referred to in several works, for instance Mohl, 1, lli, Molé, ‘L’épopée iranienne après Firdûsi’, La nouvelle Clio 5, 377–93, at 380, and De Blois, ‘Epics’, 475.
of Ferdowisi, who fall short of his level with regard to both their choice of material and their poems’ literary form.\(^4\) Because the poems, on the one hand, were written after and on the basis of Ferdowisi’s opus and, on the other, are regarded as being of a lesser quality, they are at times designated as ‘secondary epics’.

This designation, though, is rather derogatory, because it denies that the later epics developed and functioned, both as individual poems and collectively as a genre, within their own right. Also, whilst the *Mojmal*’s classification of the later epics as the *Shāhnāme*’s branches may reflect the fact that they were written in emulation of Ferdowisi, this classification, just like the term ‘secondary’, fails to do justice to their contents. The poems are not mere derivatives of the *Shāhnāme*, but treat new subject matter.\(^5\) Whatever the value judgment of the poems’ contents or the manner in which they compare to Ferdowisi’s poetry, it should be kept in mind that they were composed in later centuries that were marked by a change in the audience’s taste.

Ferdowisi began his epic under the Sāmānids, a dynasty that promoted the use of the Persian language as a literary medium and revived Iranian customs and traditions. Historiography in the Sāmānid period served in part to legitimate the dynasty’s rulers through their ancestry. Although this tradition was continued in later centuries, the production of the tenth-century *Shāhnāmes* more or less represented this tradition’s culmination.\(^6\)

By the time Ferdowisi had completed his *Shāhnāme*, the Ghaznawids had seized power in the eastern Iranian lands. The change in the political makeup of the state involved a decline in the status of the old Iranian class of landowners, the *dehqāns*, who had borne a large responsibility in the preservation and transmission of Iranian traditions. At the same time, there occurred a shift in historical works and other literary expressions. Historical interest that previously had been rather universal now became more particular. The focus was no longer placed on Iranian kingship in general, but rather on localities, dynasties, or specific rulers. Instead of commemorating a remote past, preference was given to the celebration of present-day achievements. At the same time, the emphasis moved from Iranian traditions to Islamic models and values.\(^7\)

There was also a change in the use of language; the rather archaic language and style of Ferdowisi’s poem was no longer appreciated in the eleventh and

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\(^4\) Mohl, I, lxx.

\(^5\) Yamamoto, *The Oral Background of Persian Epics*, 111.
