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Unlike the rose, which must soon wither and die,  
A book once written should be a thing of beauty for all time.  
Ta’likizade, Eğri Fethi Tarihi.¹

This chapter discusses the contribution of the Shahnama of Firdausi to Ottoman discourse, focusing on its reception, propagation and perception in the diyar-i Rum or the lands of Rum.²

The Ottoman dynastic şehnames, most of which date from the second half of the 16th century, closely correspond to the image invoked by the fourth Ottoman şehnameci (official court chronicler/şehirname writer) Ta’likizade (d. c. 1599). They are precious items of ‘beauty’, produced at the Ottoman court nakkaşhane (the imperial atelier), by master calligraphers, illustrators, illuminators and bookbinders.

¹ Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Museum Library (TSMK), H. 1609, f. 7v; cited and translated by Christine Woodhead, Ta’likizâde’s Şehnâme-i Hümayûn, 4.
² The editors of the 24th volume of Muqarnas, dedicated to the papers presented at the symposium on the architectural heritage of the lands of Rum held in 2006 at Harvard University, state that they chose the term the “Lands of Rum” as opposed to “Ottoman Empire” or “Turkey” because the symposium was planned to question precisely the dynamic or nationalistic categories that these titles evoked. Sibel Bozdoğan & Gülru Necipoğlu, eds, History and ideology: Architectural heritage of the “Lands of Rum”, 2. I had independently chosen the title for my essay, for similar reasons. Cemal Kafadar’s erudite discussion of the term “diyâr-ı Rûm” and the nisba “Rumî” from the same volume, “A Rome of one’s own”, 7-25, clarifies the significance of these terms. Using selected sources from the 13th century onwards, Kafadar states that the term “diyâr-ı Rûm” for defining a cultural as well as a physical space (the lands of Rome, limited over time to the eastern Roman lands, i.e., Byzantium) was adopted from earlier Arabo-Persian usage” to be “stretched by Turkish speakers to refer to the zone that they inhabited and in large part also governed.” The term diyar-i Rum, however, was not part of the official language of the Ottoman documents to refer to the Ottoman lands. The term “Rumi,” referring to a person from the geographical region of Rum, was a category shaped by the civil society (p. 5). Its usage in the biographical dictionaries of poets (or literati) implied that “Rum was a cultural space inhabited by a community that shared a literary language, Turkish” (p. 9). For earlier discussions of the Rumi identity, see, among others, Cornell H. Fleischer, Bureaucrat and intellectual in the Ottoman Empire, 253-72; Salih Özbaran, Bir Osmanlı Kimliği; Tülay Artan, “Questions of Ottoman identity and architectural history”, 85-109.
The Ottoman şehnames are almost all preserved in unique copies in the imperial treasury, unlike their 11th-century Persian namesake, the Shahnama of Firdausi, which was produced continuously for centuries under subsequent dynasties in the pre-modern region of Greater Iran (comprising parts of Transoxiana, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq). It was never prepared as an illustrated copy in its original Persian in the Ottoman court, nor indeed in the lands of Rum. It was, however, translated into Turkish several times.

The Şehname-i Türki, in other words the Shahnama of Firdausi in Turkish, needs to be evaluated within the context of the general translation movement that had started in Anatolia after the collapse of the Rum Saljuqs. From the 14th century onwards, all kinds of works previously produced in the Islamic world, from medical to literary, began to be translated. This continued through the 15th and 16th centuries, as many of the important Persian works were translated on imperial orders. In addition, Ottoman poets’ works were often based on translations of earlier works with the same names. For example the Khusrau and Shirin of Şeyhi (d. 834/1431), who is the best-known poet of the Çelebi Mehmed (1413-21) and Murad II (1421-51) periods, is a translation of Nizami’s Masnavi with the same name. Şeyhi dedicated his work to Murad II, in whose reign many other such works were produced. Over twenty, which were mostly translated from Persian originals, survive with dedications to the same sultan.

In the 16th century, even the Saljuq Şehname of Dehhan, which had been written in Anatolia but in Persian, was translated into Turkish. Four versions of the Şehname-i Türki, translated on separate occasions, have extant illustrated copies. Three of the illustrated versions were written in prose; two upon the orders of Ottoman sultans in Istanbul. The first Istanbul translation was done for Murad II around 1450-51. All of its illustrated copies, however, stylistically appear to be from the second half of the 16th century. The second Istanbul translation was done in the 17th century.

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3 Gönül Tekin, “Turkish literature: Thirteenth to fifteenth centuries”, 502.
5 Tekin, “Turkish literature: Thirteenth to fifteenth centuries”, 510 and 512.
6 By a poet called Şikari, who lived among the Karaman, see Fuad Köprülü, “Anadolu Selçukluları Tarihi’nin yerli Kaynakları”, 399-401.
7 Serpil Bağcı, “From translated word to translated image”, 165-72; idem, “An Iranian epic and an Ottoman painter”, 421-50.