
Introduction: Book History in the Persianate World from the Samanid Dynasty to the Present Day

Esmail Yazdanpour

My visit in 2017 to the ancient city of Bam in southeastern Iran, fourteen years after the tragic earthquake of 2003, revealed the indomitable resilience and spirit of Persian book culture. Amongst the rebuilt structures and homes, standing alongside visible remnants of the quake's impact, I stumbled upon the city's bookstore. Relocated from a shipping container to a cozy refurbished storefront, the bookshop symbolized Bam's revival after devastation. The poignant scene encapsulated for me how in times of crisis, books and libraries are so often the first destroyed and the last restored. This explains how the essence of Persian book culture has endured across centuries, repeatedly rising from the ashes. Its spirit persists within pages rewritten, meticulously transcribed, enhanced by new bindings, and brought to life through translation—an enduring tribute to humanity's unwavering reverence for the sanctity of books.

The articles translated in this edition of *Lingua Franca* offer a glimpse of the central yet overlooked role of books within Persianate society over a millennium, spanning territories across modern-day Iran, Central Asia, and Afghanistan. As an abiding feature

Lingua Franca: The open access journal of the

Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP)

Editors: Cynthia Gabbay, Susan Pickford, Mariana Silveira

ISSN 2475-1367

Issue 9 (2023), Book History in the Persianate World
from the Samanid Dynasty to the Present Day

Guest editor: Esmail Yazdanpour

Cite: Esmail Yazdanpour, "Introduction," *Lingua Franca*, Issue 9 (2023),
<https://www.sharpweb.org/linguafranca/2023-Introduction>.

of this culture, books and libraries prospered amidst turmoil and transition. The articles selected for this special issue not only highlight how the written word facilitated resilience, harboring a community identity that survived periods of upheaval, but also served as a beacon of hope, illuminating the path for other civilizations to follow. They unveil a rich tradition of book craft, circulation and reading that was integral to intellectual and civic life, transmitting wisdom across borders and eras.

To appreciate the enduring importance of books in Persian culture, we must look back to its origins. Persian religious tradition has always been centered around holy texts, beginning with the Zoroastrian Avesta compiled around 1500-1200 BCE and preserved orally before the advent of writing in the sixth century BCE. The region's pre-Islamic Sasanian empire (224-651 CE) also promoted book production, developing the Pahlavi script. Under Sasanian royal patronage, philosophical and medical manuscripts proliferated, compiling Persian and Hellenistic knowledge. With the seventh-century Islamic conquest, numerous works were translated into Arabic. Despite regime changes, the appreciation for books as vessels of wisdom persisted in Persia. Collecting written works was an early Islamic ideal: preserving knowledge was a sacred duty. The Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom), founded by eighth-century caliphs in Baghdad, housed texts collected across empires. This veneration of learning inherited from antiquity undergirded the later flowering of Persian libraries. The centuries of accumulated manuscript heritage were to fuel the tenth-century Renaissance under the Samanids.

The first paper in chronological order transports us back to the tenth-century Samanid era, focusing on the flowering of libraries under Persian rule in a golden age of wealth, science and arts. The Samanid Renaissance nurtured philosophy and medicine, fostering such luminaries as Farabi, Avicenna, Biruni and Omar Khayyam, whose treatises filled library shelves. Scientists, poets and scholars alike drew deeply from these book collections containing centuries of accumulated multicultural knowledge. Libraries were not just repositories for manuscripts; they were sociocultural hubs integral to Persianate identity. Tragically, the Mongol sieges of later centuries would see many destroyed. Yet the pride invested in books as sanctuaries of knowledge persisted.

This is poignantly evidenced in the two articles on bookbinding and libraries following the devastating thirteenth-century Mongol invasion. With cities razed and libraries destroyed, bookcraft emerged as an act of resilience. Artisans combined traditional Persian and Central Asian methods with Chinese and Indian motifs introduced by the conquerors to produce splendid manuscripts with ornate tooling and lacquer work. Their craft memorialized the past, while looking ahead to reinvent tradition. Across workshops in Shiraz, Tabriz, Herat and Samarkand, bookbinders meticulously repaired manuscripts salvaged from the ruins to preserve the threads of collective memory and foster innovative new readings of ancient texts.

The Timurid dynasty sustained Persia's venerable manuscript culture into the fifteenth century through an interconnected web of libraries across their domain centered in Khorasan. Though the khans conquered through brutality, they ruled as discerning patrons, lavishing funds on books and learning. The libraries of Herat, Mashhad, and Samarkand became hubs where scholars and artisans from diverse lands exchanged ideas, translated texts, and produced beautifully crafted manuscripts. In this era before universities, the libraries served as *de facto* academies sponsoring humanities and sciences, with a spirit of open inquiry. The libraries embodied the Timurid ideals of showcasing Persianate identity and accumulating knowledge from across civilizations. This pluralistic scholarly culture fueled advancements in astronomy, medicine, philosophy, arts and literature. The Timurid libraries propagated these achievements through copying, discussion, and dissemination of knowledge within their manuscript workshops. By preserving and transmitting knowledge, they allowed Persian literary brilliance to endure convulsions and connect cultures across continents. The lavish collections amassed and volumes produced in this Persian Renaissance set new pinnacles of excellence for later generations.

The next article, on the transfer of print technology to Iran, jumps ahead to the seventeenth century, when Iranians first came into contact with the typographic revolution. The new technology, imported from Europe, promised to multiply texts and knowledge. Christian minority groups initiated printing within Persia, focusing on religious books. The authorities, wary of the new technology's disruptive effects, put

strict limits on such early printing ventures. However, by the nineteenth century, modernizing reformers like Abbas Mirza championed printing technology, recognizing that mass publication would allow ideas flourishing abroad to circulate locally; this would help Persia adopt the values of France and Britain's Enlightenment. Manuscript production held symbolic value, but mobilizing knowledge effectively required print.

This new intercultural dialogue accelerated in the nineteenth-century Qajar era, as explored in the article on Persian literary translation. Situated on the ancient Silk Road linking East and West, Iranian literary culture had long mediated textual exchange. Now Enlightenment philosophy, novels, plays and political treatises arrived in Iran from France, Britain and Russia. Translating involved not just linguistic substitution, but recasting ideas between cultures. Iranian translators creatively rendered works like Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* (1748) to engage local readers, debating how to transmit rationalist ideals in Persian literary forms. This challenge of bridging divergent worldviews fostered a nuanced cosmopolitanism.

In the early twentieth century, a cohort of scholars revived interest in classical Persian literature, preparing critical editions and analyses of texts like the *Shahnameh* and works by medieval poets Hafez (c. 1315-1390 CE / c. 715-793 AH), Rumi (1207-1273 CE / 604-672 AH) and Saadi (c. 1210-1292 CE / 607-692 AH). This helped instill cultural pride and identity. Meanwhile, pioneering early-twentieth-century authors like Sadegh Hedayat (1903-1951 CE / 1320-1370 AH), Sadegh Choobak (1891-1932 CE / 1334-1419 AH) and Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh (1916-1998 CE / 1334-1419 AH) enriched Persian fiction with social realism. Poets like Nima Yushij (1897-1960 CE / 1313-1379 AH) revitalized verse by departing from classical forms. Literary critics like Mohammad-Ali Foroughi (1877-1942 CE / 1294-1361 AH) assessed both classical and modern literature. Major foreign authors like Kafka, Melville, Hemingway, Dostoevsky and Hugo were also translated, expanding Iranians' international literary horizons. With a rising literate populace, dozens of new story writers, poets and literary scholars emerged between 1900 and 1950, providing abundant books for public consumption. This blossoming of creative literary talent both satiated and further stimulated the public's desire for books.

The influx of foreign writings included popular novels, consumed avidly by newly literate urban women, as discussed in the article on reading romantic popular fiction. Heroines like Jane Eyre electrified the imaginations of newly literate women, while notions of romance and personal freedom inspired Persian female authors in turn. The arrival of print technologies made books affordable and accessible for middle-class women, facilitating new reading communities. Stories stretched imaginations beyond confined domestic horizons, connecting women across cultures.

The collection concludes with a study of children's reading clubs, which blossomed as literacy became widely attainable in the early twenty-first century. Young Iranians eagerly embraced fiction, gathering to discuss it with sophistication equaling adult literary salons. This peer-guided reading culture, separate from didactic schooling, cultivated independent critical thinking. The organic spread of these clubs speaks to literature's power to engage young minds.

Taken together, these illuminating articles spotlight the vital yet overlooked impact of book culture throughout Iran's history. They reveal how literary identity endured and reinvented itself, even in times of uncertainty and instability. Understanding this rich heritage challenges prevailing assumptions about Middle Eastern societies, often miscast as inhospitable to intellectual pursuits. Appreciating Persian literary traditions in all their diverse glories nuances simplistic perceptions of Iran's rich culture and history.

It is an honor to bring these articles to a broader audience through publication in English by the generous efforts of the SHARP editors. SHARP's mission has always been to push the boundaries of Book History as a field, broadening the canon and the interrelatedness of societies across languages. This collection advances that vision of inclusive, cosmopolitan scholarship. In bringing to life Persia's multifaceted bibliophile past, it sows the seeds of future dialogue.

Tehran, October 1, 2023.