



HISTORIOGRAPHY I. INTRODUCTION

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i. INTRODUCTION

Historiography, literally, is the study not of history but of the writing of history. In modern usage, this term covers a wide range of related but distinct areas of inquiry. From a pedagogical point of view, it refers to basic training in the “nuts and bolts” of how history is written (such as the techniques of locating and evaluating sources, providing documentation, preparing a manuscript, and so on). It commonly applies to studies of significant historians or their writings, i.e., the identification and interpretation of major historical texts, especially with an eye to the cultural forces and other factors which shape the assumptions and methods of such works and their authors. Beyond that, it encompasses analysis of the nature and purposes of historical literature and its literary techniques—as a form of entertainment, as a “science” or intellectual discipline, as a means of commemorating great deeds, as an instrument of moral instruction, as a form of political propaganda, as a tool for the construction of national consciousness, etc. At yet another level, it refers to the so-called “philosophy of history,” i.e., theoretical and epistemological discussions of historical writing as an intellectual activity as well as grand schemes of the meaning of history as a universal process. In perhaps the most restrictive and technical sense, the concept of the



historiography of a subject is also used to mean the classification of the modern academic literature on a particular topic, taking into account the relative importance of the works involved and the relationships among them in terms of the critical issues and debates they reflect, thereby suggesting lines of inquiry that might be followed in future studies.

All of these concepts of historiography could potentially and profitably be brought to bear on the case of historiography as it applies to the Iranian world and in the Persian language, but for the most part such historiographical study remains at a very rudimentary stage of development. Relatively little work has been done, for example, on how traditional Persian historians collected their material and assembled their narratives, the biases and preconceptions which may have affected them, or even how (or whether) they conceived of “history” as a field of study or literature distinct from others. Such early work as was done on these topics tended to be superficial and unsatisfactory in both methodology and conclusions (e.g., studies by Gibb, Spuler; see critique in Meisami, pp. 1-3). Nonetheless, some progress has been made in understanding the problematic nature of historical writing in pre-Islamic Persia (Dentan; Yarshater) and in the Islamic period (although this has tended to concentrate mainly on the classical Arabic tradition: Khalidi, Rosenthal, Robinson). The most extensive body of work to date on specifically Persian historiography has been in the way of studies of individual historians and works (e.g., Waldman), especially for the early Islamic period; the compilation of catalogues of historical texts (e.g., Storey, Storey-Bregel, Monzavi) and, finally, at least one broad survey of Persian historical writing in the early Islamic period (Meisami).

Modern academic historical literature on the Iranian world, while certainly substantial and growing in quantity, is still relatively small when compared to that on Europe or the United States, where an awareness of the plethora of interpretations, revisionisms, and counter-revisions in the vast amount of scholarly literature is essential to the study of various topics. In the case of Persia and the Iranian world, there are now useful bibliographical guides to the academic literature (Afšār, Pearson) as well as some analytical surveys of general relevance (Elwell-Sutton, Humphreys, Sauvaget) and accounts of the historiography of particular events such as the Revolution of 1979-80 (Bādāmčīān). For the most part, however, historiographical studies of this type are still best done in the context of treatments of the specific topics in Persian history where enough academic work has been done to generate clear-cut



issues and debates among professional historians.

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