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HISTORIOGRAPHY II. PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD

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ii. PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD

The idea of history as a science seeking the truth by investigating man's action in a dated past based on evidence was first conceived by Herodotus in the 5th century B.C.E. (Callingwood, pp. 17-30) and later developed by Western thinkers from Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) to Arnold Toynbee and others (Callingwood, pp. 63-71, 159-65). Iranian historiography remained unaffected by the Herodotean school (Klima, pp. 218-20) and developed from oral traditions and the Mesopotamian-style "quasi-history," which embellished historical narratives with theocentric conceptions, ideological preachings, and romantic lore (Klima, pp. 14-17). Hence, "applying the principles of Western historical criticism ... will be of little help in achieving an appreciation of true purport of Iranian historiography" (Yarshater, p. 367). Western historiographical terminology can be adapted usefully only for defining the distinctive features of the Iranian idea of history.

Development. Ancient Iranians favored oral narration of history, which allowed successive transmitters to rework narratives of events and reattribute them to different heroes at different times (Boyce, 1954, 1955, 1957; Shahbazi, 1990; see also GŌSĀN). Their oldest historical traditions are the heroic

material found in the Avestan *Yašt*s (Christensen, 1917, 1928, 1931; Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, pp. 92-108; Yarshater, pp. 411-53), in which "historical facts and accurate genealogies" are interwoven with "poetic fiction and fable." In these traditions "are seemingly preserved both secular and priestly traditions, transmitted by minstrel poets as well as by religious schools; and there are elements also of popular superstition and dread, in the tales of demons and witches and fearsome beasts. These intermingle with the stories of valour which show also the power of the gods to grant to men's prayers and succor them in distress" (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 108).

With the conquest of the ancient Near East, the Iranians became familiar with cultures that had long established traditions of written history (Klima, pp. 214-17; Grayson, 1975a, pp. 1-7; G. Cameron, pp. 79-81). This led to a number of developments. Firstly, the Iranians began keeping records of historical events, of which Cyrus's Chronicle from Babylonia (see CYRUS CYLINDER) and Darius's Bisotun inscriptions and their Aramaic versions, which were dispatched to the empire's provinces, are the best examples. They meant to convince the reader that "Persians were divinely appointed saviors whose mission was to bring justice, order, and tranquility to the people of the world" (G. Cameron, pp. 81-94, esp. p. 93). The Achaemenids also kept Babylonian-style "diaries" (on the genre see Grayson, 1975a, p. 1). Thus, during the battle of Salamis, Xerxes ordered a secretary to set down in writing the name of any captain who performed a worthy exploit "together with the names of his father and his city" (Herodotus, 8.90). When Prince Darius was charged with high treason against his father Artaxerxes II "the king ordered scribes to take down in writing the opinion of each judge" (Plutarch, *Artoxerxes* 29.4). Ctesias claimed that he used as the source of his *Persika* "the facts about each kings," which he found in the "royal records"(*basilikōn diphtherōn*) "in which the Persians in accordance with a certain law of theirs kept their ancient affairs" (Diodorus Siculus, 2.32). The claim was false, as Ctesias merely recorded gossip (Photius, *Epit*. 1, apud Gilmore, in Ctesias, p. 122), but a "Book of Chronicle," recording historical events and royal decrees, seems to have existed (Ezra 6.1-2; Esther 2.32.4: *Sēfer dibrē hayyām īm ləmalkē Māday ū-Pāras*; also 2.23 *Sēfer dibrē hayyām īm*; cf. 6.1; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 11.2). As Otakar Klima has pointed out (pp.214-17) the contents of such a book mainly dealt with the affairs of the court and bore little resemblance to a written history. Indeed, "history" remained "a royal art" to the early Islamic period (Klima, p. 220, citing Jāḥeẓ). All documents were dated, in the Babylonian scribal tradition, to the regnal years of the ruling monarch (cf.

Parker and Dubberstein, pp. 14-19). In this way, Mesopotamian-style king lists and dynastic chronicles (Grayson, 1975a, pp. 8 ff., 193-95; idem, 1975b, pp. 9, 16-22) were developed. Since Babylonian scribes wrote in cuneiform well into the Seleucid and Parthian periods (Lewy, pp. 201-4; Parker and Dubberstein, pp. 20-24; Sacks and Wiseman; Debevoise, pp. xxxiv, 72, n. 7, 76, n. 22; Geller), their documents contained valuable data, which Berossus and other subsequent astronomers and chronographers used to arrange king lists and data charts. One such king list is provided by the *Ptolemic Canon*, which is "the general basis" for chronological calculations from the 7th century B.C.E. onwards (Prašek, p. 12; Parker and Dubberstein, p. 10; cf. Bickerman, p. 81). Exactly as Babylonian documents do, it counts Cyrus the Great's regnal years from his Babylonian accession (in 539 B.C.E.) and gives him nine years of reign (for Babylonian evidence see Parker and Dubberstein, p. 14), whereas classical authors knew that Cyrus had reigned for thirty years (Dubberstein, 1938). The *Canon's* Persian king list (Bickerman, p. 108) then gives Cambyses seven years, Darius [I] thirty six years, Xerxes twenty-one years, Artaxerxes [I] forty-one years, Darius [II] nineteen years, Artaxerxes [II] forty-six years, Artaxerxes [III] twenty-one years, Arses two years, and Darius [III] four years; in all 206 years. From about 300 B.C.E., the Seleucid Era (counted in Babylon from spring 311 B.C.E.) was used as a fixed chronological device, which remained in use till recent times. Māni calls it "the Era of Babylonian astronomers" (Biruni, *Āṯār*, pp. 118, 208); others designated it as "the Era of the Greek dominion" or "the Era of Alexander" or referred to it simply as "from Alexander"; see Taqizadeh, 1939a, pp. 125 ff.; Shahbazi, 2002, pp. 31-33). The Parthians established their own dynastic era (counted from 247 B.C.E.) but continued to use the Seleucid Era under the title "the Former Reckoning" (see ARSACID ERA). When the Seleucids published a (false) claim that Seleucus's Iranian queen, Apama, has been a child of Alexander by a daughter of Darius, the Seleucid Era came to be associa-ted with Alexander's accession (Shahbazi, 1977, p. 29). Hence the 228-year interval between the Babylonian accession of Cyrus (539) and the Seleucid Era (311) was reinterpreted as the duration of the Persian rule (Agathias, 2.25.7, probably based on Alexander Polyhistor; see Prašek, p. 12, n. 3; for more evidence, see Shahbazi, 2002, p. 33).

Despite written records, Iranian historiography really flourished only in oral form (Klima, p. 221). The Avestan history transmitted by the *Yašt*s was known also among the Persians (Yarshater, p. 388). In addition, the Persians created a rich oral history of their own. Several times Herodotus refers to his "Persian informants" (Wells) and calls them *logographoi* "narrators of current events"

(in contradistincion to historians, who “inquired”). They told him four different versions of the story of the rise of Cyrus, and he followed “those Persian authorities whose object it appeared to be not to magnify the exploit of Cyrus, but to relate the simple truth” (Herodotus, 1.95). On the death of Cyrus, too, he heard “many different accounts” and chose the one he deemed “most worthy of credit” (1.214). As classical authorities have emphasized, oral historiography was the domain of the Persian poet. Xenophon reports (*Cyropaedia* 1.2.1) that even in his day the Iranians “tell in story and song that Cyrus was most ambitious, so that he endured all sorts of labor and faced all sorts of danger for the sake of praise.” According to Strabo (*Geography* 15.3.18), the Persian youths learned “with song and without song the deeds both of the gods and the noblest men.” The escape of Cyrus from Astyages’ court was narrated in allegorical songs by singer-musicians of the Median court (Dinon, apud Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 14.663b ff.), and the exploits of Zopyrus (one of the six helpers of Darius the Great) were woven into romantic stories (Herodotus, 3.152-60; Polyaenus, *Strategica* 7.12, apud Shahbazi, 1990, p. 261). It was due to the favoring of oral historiography that with the fall of the Achaemenid Empire its records perished or were neglected, while incidents related in oral traditions survived in reworked versions reattributed to later heroes or adapted for incorporation into Kayanid history (see below).

Contact with Babylonians left profound influences upon the Iranians’ idea of history, however. Firstly, history came to be periodized through the concept “that three empires had previously divided human history between them, namely the Assyrian, Median, and Persian” (Boyce and Grenet, *Zoroastrianism*, p. 374). When Alexander’s conquest ruined the expectation “that the Persian empire would endure until the end of time” (Boyce, loc. cit.), the hope of resurrecting it was expressed into poetic literature of the “dynastic prophecy” type. This was an Akkadian genre consisting of predictions after the event, arranged according to reigns characterized as good or bad and often started with “a prince will arise” or the like (Grayson, 1975b, pp. 13 f.). In fact one such text describes in prophetic form the rise and fall of Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia and the rise of Macedonia (Grayson, 1975b, pp. 24-37). The section of *Bahman Yašt* concerning Alexander must have been based on similar pseudo-prophecies (Eddy, pp. 18-23; Boyce and Grenet, *Zoroastrianism*, pp. 382-85). Later Iranian examples (*Jāmāsp-nāma*, prophecies of Rostam son of Farroḵzād Hormoz in the *Šāh-nāma*, etc., popularly known as Rostam Farroḵzād) all derive from this Babylonian genre.

Secondly, since some Babylonian scribes dated Alexander's regnal years from his Macedonian accession in 336 B.C.E. (Parker and Dubberstein, p. 19, cf. p. 36), later Iranian authorities relying on this Babylonian practice gave the conqueror fourteen years of reign (336-322 B.C.E.), whereas he in fact ruled Iran no more than eight years.

Thirdly, Babylonian speculations on Time had created an idea of a "world age" with recurring great world-years of millennial duration. This led to the acceptance by the Iranians of the Zurvanite heresy with the consequence of belief, among other things, in a limited age of the world determined by the Time (Zurvān) and the movements of the planets, and divided, according to the twelve signs of the Zodiac, into twelve millenia or *hazāra*s (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, pp. 276, n. 107, 285-86, 291-92; II, pp. 32-33, 234-37, 240; III, p. 538; see also BABYLONIAN INFLUENCE ON IRAN). Applying this scheme to their own idea of history, the Iranians placed the creation of the world at the beginning of this 12,000 year period, and at the end of it the coming of the Savior who will restore the cosmic order. Of the 12 millennia, the first 3 were taken up by Ahura Mazdā's acts of creation, and the rest by the conflict between Ahura Mazdā, aided by man, and Ahriman and his emissaries (Yarshater, pp. 353 ff.). The Iranians assigned six of the *hazāra*s to their "historical" figures: Gayōmart, Hōšang, Jamšēd, Bēvarasp, and Frēdōn (Biruni, *al-Qānun al-masʿudi*, cited by Taqizadeh, 1937, p. 79, n. 159). It was in this way that "Zoroastrian apocalyptic was born in Babylonia in the early Hellenistic period" (Boyce and Grenet, *Zoroastrianism*, p. 386). A direct effect of this idea was the eventual domination of fatalism, as if the "stars" had preordained the course of history, the rise and fall of empires, and had destined great calamities for man prior to the advent of the Savior (Boyce, loc. cit.; for details, see Shahbazi, 2001, pp. 67 ff.).

Gradually, the memory of the Achaemenids became hazy, retained only in the oral historiography in the three main traditions: that the "Persian period" had lasted for 228 years (Agathias, 2.25.7), that the Persian kings (from Artaxerxes I) had assumed the throne name Artaxerxes (so Diodorus Siculus 4.93.1), and that Alexander had "killed" the last Persian king, a younger Darius (Dāra; Agathias 2.25.8; Ebn Maʿšar, cited by Taqizāda, 1937, p. 288, n. 419; *Bundahišn* 30.14, pp. 274-75; *Šāh-nāma* [Moscow], IX, p. 60, vv. 844-45). The memory of the Parthians did not fare better. They too favored oral historiography, which assured the corruption of their history once they had been vanquished. Minstrels (*gōsāns*) of Parthian magnates, flourished under the Sasanians,

eventually transferred the Arsacid noble families and their achievements to the remoter antiquity, the Kayanid period (Boyce, 1954; idem, 1955, pp. 473-74; idem, 1957, pp. 17 ff.; Yarshater, pp. 457-61; Shahbazi, 1993, with reference to the earlier works of Markwart, Nöldeke, and others). Incidentally, the claim that the Arsacids kept a sort of national history which "contained the authentic account of the ancients and ancestors" and which had been translated from Chaldaen into Greek by the command of Alexander (Moses Khorenatsʿi, 1.9) is not substantiated (Moses Khorenatsʿi, Thomson's intro., pp. 82-84). Later, when the origins of the Seleucid Era was forgotten, the Sasanians reinterpreted this universally used"Former Reckoning" as the era used by former Iranians, the "Era of Zoroaster" (Lewy, pp. 213-14; Taqizada, 1947; Henning, 1951, pp. 37-39; cf. the Christians' reinterpretation of the "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun" on 25 December as Christmas). The 538-year interval between this era (311 B.C.E.) and the accession of Ardašir I (in Syriac reckoning) in 227 was apportioned as follows: (228 + 30) 258 years from the birth (30 years before the call) of Zoroaster to "Alexander," 14 years for Alexander, and the remaining (538 minus 258+14=) 266 years for the Parthians. This last figure was rounded up by Agathias to "nearly 270 years" (Shahbazi, 1977, p. 27; idem, 1990a, pp. 219-23). This was the origin of the "faulty Persian chronology" that Masʿudi (*Tanbih*, pp. 97-98) and Abu Rayḥān Biruni (*al-Qānun al-masʿudi*, apud Taqizada, 1940, p. 128) tried to explain.

The Sasanians revived the Achaemenid practice of counting by regnal years or (since the accession to the throne was marked by the establishment of a royal fire) by "royal fire" (Henning, 1957, p. 117). They also revived the recording of royal achievements in multi-lingual inscriptions. Thus the trilingual inscription of Šāpur I (r. 239-70) on the walls of the Kaʿba-ye Zardošt near Persepolis bears strong stylistic and thematic resemblances to the Bisotun inscription of Darius I (Rostovzeff, p. 19; Sprengling, pp. 334, 335-36, 337, 338, 340; Skjærvø; Huyse). The thematic similarity is more pronounced in Narsē's bilingual Paikuli inscription (Humbach and Skjærvø), which chronicles the events leading to his accession. Furthermore, following Babylonian, Christian, and Buddhist traditions, Māni and his disciples composed autobiographical and biographical literature, which came to form part of the Manicheans' religious history. Kirdēr, the Zoroastrian chief priest of the early Sasanian period and the erstwhile enemy of Māni, countered by publishing his "autobiography" in rock-carved inscriptions in Middle Persian (Gignoux; MacKenzie).

These were isolated attempts at approaching written historiography, however. By the end of the 4th century, even the practice of carving rock reliefs and leaving short inscriptions was abandoned. Instead oral historiography flourished. Thus the Persian story of the rise of Cyrus that we know from Herodotus was adapted for Kay Ḵosrow, and the one narrated by Ctesias was transferred to Ardašir (Gutschmid, pp. 133 f.): The tale of the capture of Sardis by Cyrus through the betrayal of his enemy's daughter was reworked for Šāpur I or II (Shahbazi, 1990a, p. 260); the imprisonment and subsequent marriage of the daughters of Cyrus by the False Smerdis was attributed to Żaḥḥāk and the sisters of Jamšēd (Markwart, pp. 132, 135 f.); and the wonderful building of a town with seven walls of different colors by Deioces was retold for Kay Kāvus/Kāōs and his palaces on the Alburz mountain (*Bundahišn* 32.11). Reflecting the age of Ḵosrow I Anōširavān, *The Letter of Tansar* laments (*Nāma-ye Tansar*, pp. 11-12) this trend and reproaches people: "You have also lost the science of genealogies and histories and biographies and have erased from memory. Some you write in books and some on rocks and walls, and a point has been reached when you do not remember what happened in the days of your own fathers let alone knowing the affairs of the ordinary people and history of kings …"

Anōšīravān, who was interested in history (see his testimony, in Grignaschi, pp. 27-28), and who "studied the history of Ardašīr I" to learn statesmanship better (Ṭabari, I, p. 898; Ṯaʿālebi, *Ḡorar*, p. 606), resolved to have the Iranian past recorded in a great national history. Scholars at his court compiled such a work and called it *Xwadāy-nāmag* "Book of Lords/Kings" (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, pp. xiv-xviii; idem, 1920, pp. 13-15; Yarshater, pp. 359 ff.; Klima, p. 221; Shahbazi, 1990b, with further literature). True to the practice of oral historiography, however, the compilers neglected the use of documentary sources such as the Middle Persian inscriptions of Ardašīr I, Šāpur I, Šāpur II, and Narsē, and mingled the memory of recent history with remote past and hoary legends. They described the Iranian past, from the creation and the appearance of the first man, in four dynastic periods. The mythical figures of the Indo-Iranian antiquity were represented as "the first kings," the Pišdāds (first appointed [to rule]; Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 104), and a coherent historical narrative (derived from various traditions and anachronistic historiography) was concocted for them. They were described as establishers of political institutions, promoters of urban and agricultural developments, inventors of skills and crafts, originators of laws and social classes, and defenders of Iranian people. They were followed by the Kayanid semi-

legendary kings with a good deal of historical lore transferred to them from the Arsacid, even Sasanian, period. Zoroaster was placed in the middle of the Kayanid period, and his patron, Kay Vištāsp (see GOŠTĀSP), was linked tothe Persian king by becoming the grandfather and predecessor of Artaxerexes (Bahman-Ardašīr). The rest of the Kayanid history was divided among a queen (Homāy), Dārā son of Bahman, and Dārā son of Dārā. The last was killed by Alexander, who destroyed the empire and harmed the religion. But after fourteen years of rule,the Arsacids, descendants of the Kayanids, restored the empire and ruled for 266 years. Their history was not remembered beyond a mere king list (*Šāh-nāma* VII,p. 116, v. 65,) but incidents from their periods were re-interpreted as events of the earlier times. Finally, Ardašīr son of Pāpak and a descendant of Bahman-Ardašīr, restored the Persian empire and the Religion of Zoroaster (Agathias, 26.2; *Nāma-ye Tansar*, pp. 11, 42) and established the fourth Iranian empire, the Sasanian.

The *Xwadāy-nāmag* is lost, but Arab-Persian works derived from it show that it was heavily influenced by oral historiography and mingled all sorts of traditions. Nothing of the inscriptions of Šāpur I on the walls of Kaʿba-ye Zardošt or of Narsē at Paikuli entered this so-called national history. Contrary to historical documents Ardašīr I was called a son of Sāsān; Šāpur I's wars with the Romans were either glossed over or reattributed to Šāpur II; Kirdēr was forgotten, and his place was given to the legendary Tansar; Narsē was represented as a son of Bahrām (II or III). Conversely, the war of Ḵosrow Anōširavān with the Hephthalites was reinterpreted as the great war of Kay Ḵosrow with Afrāsiāb (q.v.), the Turanian (Shahbazi, 1990b, pp. 210-13); the vanquishing of the Parthian dynasty of Sakastān by Ardašir I was Bahman-Ardašir's destruction of the House of Rostam (Shahbazi, 1994); and the total defeat of Pērōz by the Hephthalites was retold as the annihilation of the Pišdādi king Nōḏar (Nöldeke, 1920, p. 3, n. 10).

In any event, by the end of the 6th century, a national history of Iran existed in the royal archive at Ctesiphon, from which Agathias indirectly derived his account of the Sasanian history (A. Cameron). Other historical works also came to be compiled. One was an autobiography of Ḵosrow Anōšīravān, of which excerpts are preserved in Moskuya's *Tajāreb al-omam* (Grignaschi, pp. 16-28). Another was a short autobiography that Borzuya prefaced to his Middle Persian rendition of the *Kalila and Demna* (Nöldeke, 1912; de Blois). A slightly later work is about the trial of Ḵosrow II Parvēz, which details the charges brought against him as well as his responses (Ṭabari, I, pp. 1050-58;

Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, pp. 363-79; Balʿami, ed. Bahār, pp. 1160-81; cf. above, the case of the Achaemenid prince Darius, son of Artaxerxes II). Following his triumph, Ḵosrow Parvēz ordered the writing of an account of his wars with Bahrām Čōbin (q.v.; Bayhaqi, p. 481); and others wrote the history of the fall of the Sasanians and gathered heroic sagas, romantic tales, and didactic fables, all purporting to be historical works, but these (including the *Kār-nāmag ī Ardašir*, Rostam and Esfandiār, Šarvin of Daštpay, Vis and Rāmin) belong to the field of Pahlavi literature in general and beyond the scope of this paper.

Characteristics. As evolved in the "national history," Iranian historiography was moralistic, providential, apocalyptic, rather particularistic, and utilitarian (for these technical terms see Callingwood, pp. 14 ff. and passim). The concept of history was based on moral and intellectual foundations, which assigned man a significant place in the universe by making him a partner with the Creator Ahura Mazdā (q.v.) in the cosmic fight against Ahriman and his emissaries. Man's actions were thus part of a cosmic plan, hence memorable. This memory was to serve future generations as a guide, a device for maintaining and promoting national and moral ideals of the state (Yarshater, p. 369). God had created man as His active partner for bringing about, within a limited time, the final annihilation of evil, when a Savior would restore the cosmic order on earth. The course of history exhibited a series of conflicts between the forces of good, usually Iranians, and the destructive powers, usually associated with non-Iranians. The particularism limited the scope of history: Iran was represented as the center of the world (see HAFT KEŠVAR), its people as the chosen ones possessed of a national glory (*Airyanəm Xᵛarənō* > *Aryān Xurrah*> *Farr-e Ērān[šahr]*; see Bailey, p. 22), and its kings as guardians of culture and law and promoters of civilization, whose legitimacy was assured through royal descent and Royal Fortune (*Kaviyanəm Xᵛarənō* > *Kayān Xurrah* > *Farr-e Kayān*, see Bailey, pp. 22 f.). History was the narrative of events: "No distinction was made between the factual, the legendary, and the mythical. All three blended in a unified whole, presented as a continuous narrative" of a national history from the creation to the fall of the Sasanian Empire (Yarshater, p. 366). The utilitarian aspect of history saw in it "an educational instrument of social stability and cohesion," teaching virtues of loyalty, observance of law and order, natal love and patriotism by commemorating the exalted life of the Iranian heroes as paragons of success, by recalling the wisdom of sages, and by emphasizing the harm brought about by heretics and anarchists. "Thus the historiographer, far from being an

impartial investigator of facts, was an upholder and promoter of the social, political, and moral values cherished by the Sasanian élite" (Yarshater, p. 366).

To make it readable and persuasive, rhetorical style and didactic form were blended with nationalistic spirit and vivid descriptions adorned with hyperbole and metaphor (Yarshater, pp. 393-401). The preface to the older *Šāh-nāma* (Qazvini; Minorsky) has preserved the subject matter, characteristics, and purport of the national history. A prose *Šāh-nāma* was compiled by the order of Abu Manṣur, son of ʿAbd al-Razzāq of Ṭus, "so that men of knowledge may look into it and find in it all about culture of kings, noblemen, and sages, the royal arrangements, their nature and behavior, good institutions, justice and judicial norms, decisions and administration, the military organization, the art of war, storming expeditions and punitive campaigns and taking the enemy by surprise as well as their match-making and ways of respecting honor" (Minorsky, p. 267). The aim of the work "is to offer utility to everyone." The readers learn from it the art of statecraft and "will be able to get on with anyone in administration," and they also get pleasure from its stories and matters "suitable to (their) strivings." In short, this book "is a recreation for the world, comfort to the afflicted, and medicine to the weary" (Minorsky, p. 268).

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