



# HISTORIOGRAPHY VII. AFSHARID AND ZAND PERIODS

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## HISTORIOGRAPHY

### vii. AFSHARID AND ZAND PERIODS

Persian historical writing in the 12th/18th century reflected the profound changes that occurred in Iran after the 1134/1722 Afghan conquest of Isfahan. The next few decades saw the swift rise and fall of numerous pretenders to the Safavid throne, the most important of whom were the Afsharid (q.v.) and Zand dynasties. Afsharid and Zand court histories largely followed Safavid models in their structure and language, but departed from long-established historiographical conventions in small but meaningful ways.

Mirzā Moḥammad Mahdi Khan Astarābādi (q.v.), Nāder Shah's official historiographer, wrote the most famous Afsharid chronicle, the *Tāriḵ-e jahāngošā-ye nāderi*. Astarābādi's work began as Nāder's court history but was put into final form sometime in the 1160s/1750s after Nāder's death. This history found wide circulation due to Nāder's broad, if brief, impact across the Middle East and India. It was one of the first contemporary Persian chronicles translated into French and English by Sir William Jones in the 1770s. Astarābādi, an antiquarian versed in Timurid era Persian and Chaghatay



literature, imitated K̄vāndmir, Šaraf-al-Din Yazdi, and Neẓām-al-Din Šāmi with his flowery style (see v. above).

His work also employed an annalistic structure developed by Safavid historians that featured elaborate descriptions of each new spring and its *nowruz* festivities. In his *nowruz* sections, though, Astarābādi's baroque descriptions of natural phenomena went beyond decorative embellishment. He used these accounts of spring as complex metaphors for events described in prose in each year's narrative section. (For an example, see Astarābādi, *Tārīkò*, p. 87.) This technique blurred an aesthetic boundary that Safavid chronicles had preserved between poetry and historical narrative text. The use of vivid images of nature permitted Astarābādi to convey feelings associated with events more directly than in prose (see Astar-ābādi, *Tārīk*, p. 178; also v. above).

Astarābādi carried this descriptive style even further in his *Dorra-ye nādera*, a completely poetic rendering of events discussed in the *Tārīk-e jahāngošā*. He asserted in the *Dorra-ye nādera* that he was trying to revive the aesthetic world of Waṣṣāf, a 14th-century historian famous for his bombastic, prolix style. Following this model, the *Dorra* offered an account of Nāder's life in which aesthetic and decorative language totally subsumed the work's ostensible content (see, e.g., Astarābādi, *Dorra*, pp. 368-85).

Another Afsharid era chronicle that was completed following Nāder's death, Moḥammad Kāẓem Marvi's *Tārīk-e 'alamārā-ye nāderi*, provides a clear contrast to the works of Astarābādi. Marvi employed many familiar devices of the Persian chronicle form such as his use of dreams to foreshadow events. Like Astarābādi, who departed from traditional chronicle form by privileging poetic descriptions over prose narratives of events, Marvi recast chronicle tradition in yet another way by redefining royal legitimacy. His work did not ultimately defend Nāder's right to rule. Although Marvi praised Nāder for saving Iran from foreign domination, he believed that the execution of the last Safavid ruler, Shah Ṭahmāsb II, along with his family, sealed Nāder's fate (see Marvi, *Tārīk*, pp. 851, 1196).

Marvi portrayed Nāder's complicity in this crime as an offense against Safavid legitimacy, marking the point at which his reign became doomed. His work cast blame on Nāder for his role in getting rid of the Safavids, a disaster only resolved by the accession of Nāder's grandson Šāh-roḳ to the throne. As depicted in the *Tārīk-e 'alamārā*, because Šāhroḳ's lineage united Nāder's



charisma with the ancestral legitimacy of the Safavids, his accession held the promise that balance might be restored to the Iranian throne (Marvi, *Tāriḳ*, p. 238).

In general, most literary structures and techniques used by Astarābādi and Marvi cannot be considered innovative or novel. The minor, but meaningful alterations made by both authors to long-established patterns of Persian chronicle writing reveal how social and political change in post-Safavid Iran affected historical consciousness. The upheavals of the Afsharid era increased the importance of literary genres beyond court chronicles such as diaries and memoirs. Two such works in particular, the *Ruz-nāma* of Mirzā Moḥammad, *kalāntar* of Fārs, and Moḥammad ‘Ali Ḥazin’s autobiography, were used by later historians to fill in gaps created by the lack of continuity in dynastic histories. Ḥazin’s account reflects how his own life was affected by instability in Iran, since he was only able to finish it after he had taken refuge in India. Contemporary Indian chroniclers, who shared literary models with their Safavid and Afsharid counterparts, provide additional context for Iranian history in this period, particularly regarding Nāder’s activities in India and Central Asia. The most important of these was ‘Abd-al-Karim Kašmiri, who accompanied Nāder throughout his campaigns in India (see Kašmiri, *Memoirs*).

Following the Afsharid rulers’ failure to become established as the Safavids’ successors, the Zand dynasty established a period of relative stability in Fārs province during the last half of the 12th/18th century. Like Astar-ābādi, the main Zand historians followed a royal chronicle form that had already become archetypal by the late 11th/17th century. Among them, Moḥammad Ṣādeq Nāmi and Mirzā Moḥammad Abu’l-Ḥasan Ġaffāri Kāšāni both depicted Karim Khan and other Zand rulers as exemplars of classic Persian kingly virtues. The most significant novel aspect of these chronicles was how they subtly promoted Zand legitimacy while still honoring Safavid tradition. Nāmi, for example, avoided ever calling any Zand ruler “shah,” although he did use other titles indicating authority such as *wakil* or “deputy.” His *Tāriḳ-e gitigošā* portrayed Karim Khan as the *de facto*, not *de jure* monarch of his realm. He was only following Zand rulers themselves, who chose not to be known as “shahs.” Karim Khan retained a shadow Safavid shah, Ebrāhim, until Ebrāhim’s death in 1783. Later Zand rulers continued to honor the Safavid claim of ancestral connection to the Imams. The Zand chroniclers were restrained from depicting their rulers in traditional terms, since Karim’s



successors did not employ even the modest title of *wakil* (Nāmi, *Tāriḳ*, p. 253).

Zand works included very little discussion of *jolus* (coronation) ceremonies: an important feature of Safavid and Afsharid chronicles. Although Ġaffāri's *Golšan-e morād* (q.v.) did record one *jolus*, that of Ja'far Khan, it noted that his enthronement occurred only several years after he had already taken power. Zand chroniclers did not seem to care much about maintaining even the appearance of a lineal royal succession, offering further evidence of the upheaval in concepts of royal legitimacy at this time. Developments in Persian historiography during the Zand period occurred just as new poetic styles were coming into fashion with the rise of the *bāzgašt* movement. However, any historiographical equivalent of the *bāzgašt* transformation of poetry would have to wait until well into the Qajar era (see, e.g., Sepehr, *Nāseḳ al-tawāriḳ*).

The 18th century marked the end of the primacy of traditional chronicles as legitimating devices for Iran's ruling dynasties. This can be seen in the imbalanced excess of poetic imagery in *nowruz* depictions seen in Astar-ābādi, the changes in perspective and agenda witnessed in the works of Marvi and the Zand chroniclers, and the growing importance of alternative styles of historical writing such as diaries. The changing styles of 18th-century chronicles signaled the beginning of a systemic transformation in the writing of history in Iran that extended well into the 19th century.

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