



IRAN III. TRADITIONAL HISTORY

IRAN

iii. THE TRADITIONAL HISTORY OF PERSIA

The history of the Iranian lands, as known today and insofar as pre-Islamic Persia is concerned, is based on research initiated and largely carried out by Western scholars. The results of European research began to be available to Persians from about the mid-nineteenth century, when contacts with the West intensified. Before assimilating the results of European research on Persian history, however, the Iranians were in possession of a historical tradition that combined a mixture of myth, legend, and factual history. Its origins can be traced to the oral traditions relating to the Avestan figures in northeastern Persia, but these assumed a national character with the spread of Zoroastrianism, and continued to be orally transmitted until towards the end of the Sasanid period, when they were committed to writing in a semi-official book called *Kwadāy-nāmag*. After the advent of Islam, this book, which perhaps survived in more than one version, was translated into Arabic by Ebn al-Moqaffa' (q.v.; d. 757) and possibly by others as well. Later, Persian redactions of it, primarily based on Ebn al-Moqaffa's translation, were also made in both prose and verse, including one in prose ordered by Abu Maṣṣur 'Abd-al-Razzāq (q.v.), a governor of Khorasan, around 960, of which only its introduction, usually referred to as "The Older Preface to the *Šāh-nāma*," is



extant. In all probability it served as the main source for Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma* (completed in 1010), which contains the most extensive rendition of the traditional history.

This pre-Islamic history of Persia, ultimately derived from the *Kwadāy-nāmag*, has been narrated also by writers in Arabic and Persian and at various lengths, among them Ebn Kordāqbeh (9th cent.) in his *al-Masālek wa'l-mamālek*, Dināvari (d. 895) in *Akbār al-ṭewāl*, Tabari (d. 932), who provides, next to Ferdowsi, the most detailed information about Persian history in his *Ta'riḡ al-rosol wa'l-moluk*, Mas'udi (d. ca. 956) in his *Moruj al-dahab* and *al-Tanbih wa'l-ešraf*, Hamza Ešfahāni (d. after 961) in his *Seni moluk al-arz wa'l-anbiyā*, Ya'qubi (d. second half of 9th cent.), Ebn al-Qotayba (d. 889) in his *al-Ma'āref*, Ebn Beṭriq (see Eutychius; d. 940), Maqdesi (d. 1004) in his *al-Bad' wa'l-ta'riḡ*, Ṭa'ālebi (d. 1038), who appears to have used the same source as Ferdowsi, in his *Gorar akbār moluk al-fors*, Biruni (10th-11th cents.) in his *al-Āṭār al-bāqia*, and the anonymous author of *Ne-hāyat al-erab* (11th cent.), all of whom wrote in Arabic, as well as Gardizi (11th cent.) in *Zayn al-akbār* and the anonymous author of *Mojmal al-tawāriḡ wa'l-qeṣasā* (written in 1126), both writing in Persian, and also in part the authors of a number of Persian local histories such as *Tāriḡ-e Bokārā*, a Samanid work by Naršaḡi, written originally in Arabic in 943-44, which only survives in its later and much extended Persian translation, the anonymous author of *Tāriḡ-e Sistān* (11th cent.), Ebn Balḡi in *Fārs-nāma* (written in 1111), and Ebn Esfandiār in *Tāriḡ-e Ṭabarestān* (13th cent.).

The traditional history is reflected also in a number of Zoroastrian works written in Middle Persian in the 9th-10th centuries based on Sasanid tradition. Chief among these are *Dēnkard* (Books III, VII, and IX in particular), *Bundahišn* (especially chaps. xxxii and xxxv), and *Ayād-gār ī Zarērān* (qq.v.), a short epic which recounts the episode of the war between King Goštāsp and the Turanian (Turānian) Arjāsp (qq.v.), in which Zarēr, a son of Goš-tāsp, is killed (see Bibliography for details of the above sources).

The traditional history, which can in fact be called Iranian "national history," is divided into four sections.

(1) The Pišdādīd kings, from Gayomart (q.v.), the initiator of kingship through Zav. These are the mythological world kings who rule over all creatures on earth. The earlier ones have to face the challenge of the demons created by Ahriman. Through their teachings civilization progresses, arts and crafts are



introduced, and useful institutions take shape.

(2) The Kayānid kings, who may be divided into two lines, the major one from Kay Qobād, the founder of the dynasty, to Kay Kōsrow, who disappears mysteriously together with his noble warriors, and the second line, which begins with king Lohrāsp and ends with Dārā(b), son of Dārā(b), who is defeated by Alexander the Great (qq.v.) and with whom the Kayānid dynasty comes to an end.

(3) The Aškānid kings or the Arsacids (q.v.), who are dealt with in a summary fashion.

(4) The Sasanids from Ardašir I to Yazdgerd III, who succumbs to the Muslim Arab invasion.

From another perspective, the traditional history may be divided into three parts: (1) The mythological part and the cosmogonic account of the world kings. (2) The heroic era that comprises the Kayānid period and constitutes the largest part of the traditional history with fascinating episodes in which the great warriors of the era such as Rostam, Gudarz (see [GÖDARZ](#)), Giv (see [GĒV](#)), and Bižan (q.v.) are the main protagonists. (3) The historical part that basically conforms to factual history, even though the account of the Arsacids is, as remarked above, too brief to amount to anything substantial and the Sasanid portion is mixed with legends and fanciful stories.

To appreciate the traditional history, it will be helpful to recall the Persian pre-Islamic worldview that affects the general frame and orientation of this history. In the Avesta, where the earliest form of the national history is adumbrated, the context is a religious one, and the Persian kings and heroes as well as their opponents are bound to religious precepts and ruled by religious concepts. For instance, Jamšid (Av. Yima), who is chosen by Ahura Mazdā as the first guardian and ruler of the world, loses the divine grace or royal fortune (Av. *x^varənah-*, Mid. Pers. *farrah*, Pers. *farr*) bestowed on legitimate kings on account of his sinful pride, and as a result is vanquished by the tyrant Dahāk (in the Avesta, *Aži Dahāka-*, a three-headed dragon, Mid. Pers. *Azdahāg/Dahāg*; Arabicized into *Žaḥḥāk*, the form used by Ferdowsi). Afrāsiāb, the Turanian archenemy of the Persians, tries to capture *farr*, but fails. From the *Dēnkard* and the *Bundahišn* it is clear that the Sasanid rendition of national history was narrated within the framework of a religious worldview. The most prominent feature of this worldview is the primordial antagonism between



Good and Evil symbolized by the confrontation between Ahura Mazdā and Ahriman. Anticipating Ahriman's attack, Ahura Mazdā is prompted to create the tangible world or *giti* as a defensive rampart. Ahriman's onslaught pollutes and contaminates *giti*, bringing about an admixture of good and evil which is our world. The age of this world, beginning with Ahriman's defiant invasion, is conceived to be 6,000 years: 3,000 years to the appearance of Zoroaster, which comprises the Pišdādīd and the heroic part of the Kayānīd eras, and 3,000 years from Zoroaster to the end of time and the appearance of the Savior or Saošyant, who leads the forces of Good, defeats the forces of Evil, and renovates the world. Man is the creature of Ahura Mazdā and therefore intrinsically good, but he is susceptible to Ahrimanic temptations. He is to fight such temptations by following the precepts of the Good Religion, thereby assisting in the final triumph of Ahura Mazdā.

Kings are leaders of the community, guardians of the society, and authors of its laws and institutions. They symbolize the identity and the unity of their nation; and they expect unswerving loyalty and obedience from their subjects while committing themselves, as was enunciated in their throne addresses, to rendering justice to all and upholding the dictates of religion and making the land prosper. History is in essence an account of their words, their laws, and their deeds. They lead their community, and they are responsible for maintaining the country in good order, preserving the integrity of the land and defending it against external enemies and internal dissent. Their legitimacy depends on divine grace or *farr* that resides in good kings and assures their success; without it the kings lose their legitimacy. Therefore, as well as presenting a record of events, traditional history also aims to edify and educate and abounds in ethical precepts and didactic observations, buttressing the ideals of the society and affirming its underlying ethical tenets. A clear concept of Persian identity permeates the traditional history—a concept that may have originated in the Achaemenid period, but was definitely embraced by the Sasanids, who by calling themselves “kings of Iran and non-Iran (*an-ērān*)” clearly distinguished their own nation from the rest. The survival of this traditional history, promulgated through the widespread currency of the *Šāhnāma* among the Persian-speaking people, has to a considerable extent been responsible for the survival of Persian identity in the face of long periods of rule by the Arabs and the Turks in Persia.

Several features of the traditional history may be observed:

Firstly, it makes no distinction between myth, legend, and fact. They all merge



together in a unified and coherent narrative. The story of Tahmurat, who rode on the back of Ahriman around the world for 30 years, and the story of Kay Kāvus who, Icarus-like, ascended into the sky with four eagles carrying his carriage (a similar venture is also recorded in the Alexander Romance), are related in the same vein as the events of the reign of Ardašir I, the founder of the Sasanid dynasty, or the Arab invasion. The traditional history is the product of an age of faith, not of critical reason.

Secondly, in many respects the history reflects primitive conditions that must have had their roots in remote antiquity. For instance, battles are decided generally by single combats in which physical strength and the ability of individual warriors to wield weapons are the decisive factors. Another example is the frequent use in battles of lassos (*kamand*) and clubs (*gorz*), two ancient and primitive weapons. Warriors often engage in boasting conceits before battle, extolling their own superior strength and lineage and predicting their own victory, in order to weaken the morale of their opponents. Blood feud, a common tribal cause of warfare, is a major theme of the national history. The protracted feud between the Iranians and their close neighbors, the Turanians, originating from the murder of Iraj, the eponymous ancestor of the Iranians, by Tur, the forebear of the Turanians, runs through the entire first part of Kayānid period.

In many other respects, the traditional history of the Pišdādīd and Kayānid eras mirrors anachronistically the conditions prevailing in the Sasanid times when the *Kʷadāy-nāmag* was composed. For instance, the kings frequently send a “letter” to their vassals, their generals, or their opponents. The mobads (Zoroastrian priests) are present at the court, beside astrologers and “wise men” (*bekradān*) to advise the king. The localities mentioned are generally those associated with Sasanid Persia. The building of Stakr, the religious center of the Sasanids, is attributed to Gayomart; this city is the place where people offer allegiance to Hušang, the second Pišdādīd king, and Jamšīd makes it his capital. Kay Kāvus and Kay Kōsrow set out for Fārs, their “residence,” after their victory over Afrāsiāb. The young Goštāsp, the future protector of Zoroaster, leaves the capital Balk and goes incognito to Rum (Byzantium), where he marries a Byzantine princess. It is clear that conditions prevailing in Sasanid or late Sasanid times have been grafted onto an old layer of the ancient narrative. In general, the mythical Pišdādīd kings and the legendary Kayānids are cast in the mold of Sasanid monarchs: they begin their reign with an address from the throne, to which, following the Sasanid custom, the



mobads and nobles respond in laudatory terms.

Thirdly, the narration portrays a feudal society where the king wields absolute power by divine right, while a number of great houses enjoy local power, but bear allegiance to the king of kings. From a description of the Persian camp when Rostam's son, Sohrāb, invades Persia at the head of a Turanian army, it is clear that each of these noble houses commanded its own army and had its own distinctive heraldic ensigns. The great warriors who play crucial roles in the epic part of the national history are drawn from these houses, often being their heads. For instance, the house of Sām, to which belong Zāl and Rostam, rules in Zābol and is repeatedly called upon to save the king and the country from the imminent disasters facing them. Despite the absolute power enjoyed by the kings, there are occasions when the nobles voice their objections to a king's decision or conduct; for instance, Rostam angrily protests against Kāvus, who had objected to his arriving late at the capital when he had been summoned to the court.

Fourthly, it does not use an annalistic approach to history and is not concerned with allotting precise dates to events; the succession of kings is deemed sufficient as a general chronological framing device for the narrative. Altogether it appears that the *Kwadāy-nāmag* did not place any significance either on precise chronology or logistics. Nor was the analysis of the events the aim of the compiler(s) of the *Kwadāy-nāmag*. The dramatic aspects of the events were emphasized; for instance, battle scenes are described in great detail, as are dialogues and verbal clashes amongst the leading warriors.

Fifthly, the national history in the course of its evolution at the hand of narrators and minstrels combined different strands, originating in different periods and localities, not all of which fitted the general frame of the narrative. As a result, oddities and discrepancies do occur, such as the warrior Zāl living long enough to see the reign of some nine kings and the daughters of Jamšid being rescued from the palace of the tyrant Dahāk after a thousand years of his reign.

Sixthly, in Islamic times because of the penetration of the Turkic people into Central Asia, where the Turanians were supposed to have lived, Turan (Turān) became erroneously identified with the Turks, and "Iran and Turan" often came to mean Persians and Turks, whereas in the original traditional history they are two Iranian tribes, both descending from Faridun but occupying different domains and often at war with each other, mostly as a result of blood



feuds. Nonetheless they have close relations, and mixed marriages do occur between them. Some of the heroes of the Persian national epic, such as Kay Kōsrow, Siāvaš, and Sohrāb, are in fact the offspring of a Persian father and a Turanian mother.

Seventhly, the traditional history was intended not only to preserve and promote the ideals of the kingdom and its religion, but also to amuse and delight its own audience. Therefore, apart from casting the events in a fascinating and imaginative mold, it included many entertaining digressions. Ferdowsi, a perceptive poet of rare ability and verve, well understood the purport of the national history and placed his poetical genius at its service, emphasizing its edifying and dramatic aspects.

THE CONTENT OF THE NATIONAL HISTORY

Taking Ferdowsi and Ta'ālebi as well as Tabari as the main bases for our account, we may summarize the contents of the national history as follows: The history begins with Gayomart (q.v., "living mortal"), the first world king, who lives in the mountains and wears a leopard skin. He lives and reigns for 30 years (in Zoroastrian lore Gayomart is the prototype of mankind, created by Ahura Mazdā as the last of his creations; but he is injured in the course of Ahriman's onslaught and dies after 30 years). Hušang, his grandson, follows him and avenges the killing of his own father Siāmak, Gayomart's son, by the Ahrimanic Black Demon. He is instrumental in the advance of culture and improves people's lives by extracting iron from stone and making iron tools and weapons. He develops agriculture, introduces irrigation, domesticates useful animals, and makes use of their hide and fur. Hušang is considered to be the first of the Pišdādīd ("created first") kings, all civilizing world kings. He is followed by Tahmurat, who extracts the art of writing from the demons, and then by Jamšīd, the most illustrious of the ancient kings and a great "civilizer": he discovers various techniques and arts such as the weaving of cloth and mining of metals and imparts the knowledge to his subjects. But towards the end of his reign, he is afflicted by hubris and deluded by the extent of his own power; he claims divinity, and as a result the *farr* leaves him. This leads to his downfall through the agency of the already mentioned Ahrimanic invader Dahāk, who rises from the desert, subdues the country, and rules over the Persian lands for a thousand years. His reign is one of tyranny and associated with years of drought. Two serpents have sprouted from his shoulders, and they need to be fed on young men's brains. This eventually incites a rebellion among the people, led by Kāva, a blacksmith,



whose many sons had been victims of Dahāk's serpents, and who raises his leather apron as an emblem to gather the people together (later, adorned and bejeweled, it becomes the Persian royal flag). He seeks out a youth of royal blood by the name of Faridun (see FARĒDUN), brought up by his mother, Farānak, and fed by the milk of a wondrous cow. Faridun, who had also been hiding from Da-hāk's men, now leads the assembled crowd and attacks Dahāk in his palace, clubs him with his bull-headed mace, and takes him to Mount Demavand, where he is left in chains. According to Zoroastrian lore, Dahāk's final end will come at the end of time, when the promised Savior appears.

Faridun, a great king, has three sons: Iraj (q.v.), Salm, and Tur. He divides his realm between them, but the two elder brothers become jealous of the younger Iraj, who has been allotted Persia, the choicest part of the world. Consequently, they plot against him, and he is killed by Tur. The murder starts a blood feud between the descendents of Iraj and Tur, eponymous ancestors of Iranians and Turanians. Manučeher, the son of Iraj and the successor to Faridun, avenges the murder of his father by tracking down, defeating, and killing both Tur and Salm, but this act of vengeance only prolongs and intensifies the feud. Afrāsiāb, a descendent of Tur and the king of Turanians, invades Iranšahr and forces the Iranian army to retreat. Peace is finally reached when the two sides agree that an arrow be shot from Iran and wherever it lands be designated the boundary between Iran and Turan. Āraš (q.v.), the strongest archer in Persia, shoots the arrow from the Caspian province of Ṭabarestān. Assisted by divine guidance, the arrow flies for a whole day and at sunset lands by the river Oxus, a boundary that Afrāsiāb has to reluctantly accept (the episode does not appear in the *Sāh-nāma* but is described in other sources, including Biruni). Under Manučeher, the exploits of the vassal kings of Sistān, headed by Sām and followed by his son Zāl and his grandson, the redoubtable Rostam, begin to unfold.

It is also under Manučeher that Ferdowsi treats us to one of the most celebrated episodes of the traditional history: a white-haired son is born to Sām. In his shame he decides to abandon his son in the wilderness to perish; but Simorg, the miraculous bird, picks up the infant and takes him to its nest on a mountain peak, where it rears the child amidst its own brood. When the child grows into a young man, Simorg returns him to his father, who is now filled with remorse and, prompted by a prophetic dream, has been searching for him. The young Zāl grows into a matchless warrior and gains the approval of



Manu-čehr. An adventurous and tender romance with Rudāba, the daughter of Mehrāb the king of Kabul and a descendant of Dahāk, leads to their marriage. The fruit of this union is Rostam, who has a difficult birth because of his unusually large size and has to be taken out from his mother's womb by a "cesarean" operation, guided by Simorg. Rostam grows into a formidable warrior and an unsurpassed hero, who becomes the pre-eminent figure of the national epic through his phenomenal strength and his many victories against the Turanians and their foremost heroes. His marvelous steed Rakš is a great help to him and performs many acts of valor. Some of his most famous adventures take place in his seven exploits (*haft k'wān*) during his journey to Māzandarān, where he had gone to rescue king Kāvus and save the country from imminent danger. These exploits culminate in the fierce battle in which he fights and kills the White Demon. However, two episodes of single combat, in both of which he emerges with tragic irony as the victor, cast shadows over his brilliant career and foreshadow its end. In one he inadvertently slays his own exceptionally gifted young son Sohrāb, whom he fails to recognize, and in the other (see below), he finds himself compelled to fight and mortally wound the young and valiant prince Esfandiār, the son of Goštāsp. The two tragedies are treated by Ferdowsi with great art and bring out his poetic genius at its best.

During the reign of Nowdar, the son and successor to Manu-čehr, Afrāsiāb invades Iran. A fierce battle ensues, in which a great many leading warriors from both sides fall. Kāva's son Kāren, the general of the Persian army, aided by Zāl, and their adversary, Vēsa, a brother of Afrāsiāb and the general of the Turanian army, all distinguish themselves on the field. In the end Afrāsiāb emerges victorious and captures and puts Nowdar to death, occupies the Iranian throne, and lays waste to the country. In a fit of rage he even has his own brother, Aḡ-riraṭ, the noble warrior who had shown some compassion towards the Iranians, killed. But after a long period the country recovers, and Zāb, a prince related to the royal line, is proclaimed king. He is assisted by the formidable warrior Garšāsp, who is variously named a predecessor, a co-ruler, or a successor of Zāb.

The reign of Zāb, who leaves no clear successor, is followed by an interregnum, at the end of which the Iranian noble houses dispatch Rostam to fetch from his mountain stronghold Kay Qobād, a prince of royal blood, who rebuilds Iranšahr and wages war against Afrāsiāb. He is the founder of the Kayānian dynasty (the names of whose kings all start with *kay*, Av. *kavi-*



“king,” originally “seer or composer of religious hymns”).

Kay Qobād is followed by Kay Kāvus, an ambitious and choleric and at times feckless king who becomes embroiled in a number of ill-advised ventures from which Rostam has to rescue him before disaster befalls him. But as well as these mishaps, some with a strong element of the supernatural and the marvelous, his reign contains one of the greatest depictions of heroism and tragedy in the traditional history, that of his brave and pious son Siāvaš. It begins in a way reminiscent of the Biblical and Qur’ānic stories of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife. Sudāba, a favorite wife of Kāvus, becomes infatuated with the young prince, but, when she is rebuffed, she accuses Siāvaš of having made amorous advances towards her. An ordeal of fire is set to test the prince’s innocence. He comes through the fire unscathed, but, to escape further guiles of the queen and court intrigues, he volunteers to lead the army against Afrāsiāb, who has attacked the Iranian borders. Cautioned in a dream, Afrāsiāb agrees to Siāvaš’s terms for peace. Hearing that his son has made peace with the enemy, the bellicose Kāvus flies into a rage and orders him to send the prisoners to the capital and to renew his attack. Realizing that a breach of promise would be against his own chivalrous nature and a morally reprehensible act, Siāvaš declines to follow his father’s orders and return to the court. Persuaded by Pirān, the wise and well-meaning Turanian general and counselor, he agrees to take up residence in Turan, where Afrāsiāb welcomes him with kindness and gives his daughter Farangis to him in marriage. Siāvaš settles down and builds a marvelous castle in Turan as his abode, but Afrāsiāb eventually gives ear to his jealous and wicked brother Garsivaz and some others against Siāvaš and orders the execution of the innocent prince. The shedding of his blood only exacerbates the feud between the Iranians and the Turanians. Kay Kōsrow, Siāvaš’s son, eventually manages to escape from Turan with the help of the warrior Giv and, once in Iran, remains determined to avenge the murder of his father. His long reign is marked by a rare combination of courage and saintliness. He eventually succeeds in destroying the Turanian army, trapping and killing Afrāsiāb and also, regretfully, Pirān, who had once saved his mother’s life and had brought him up. This brings a long chapter of continuous war between Iran and Turan to an end, although clashes do continue in later reigns. Kay Kōsrow, having accomplished his duty, chooses to abandon the affairs of the world to devote himself entirely to meditation and prayer. Giving up the kingship, he names the pious Lohrāsp as his successor and disappears mysteriously together with all his noble warriors. With him the main line of the Kayānian dynasty comes



to an end.

Kay Lohrāsp is succeeded by his son, Goštāsp, during whose reign the prophet Zoroaster proclaims his new religion. According to Zoroastrian legend, this creates a rift between the Iranians, who accept the new religion, and the Turanians, who reject it. The Turanian king Arjāsp invades Iran and kills Lohrāsp, who had retired to a temple. Many warriors on both sides lose their lives, including Zarēr, Goštāsp's son, who is then avenged by Zarēr's brother, the mighty warrior Esfandiār. He has been promised the throne if he defeats the Turanian army and rescues his two sisters from captivity. He does so, but his father demurs and makes his own retirement conditional on his son's expedition to Sistān to rebuke and bring back Rostam in fetters for his negligently discourteous behavior towards the royal court. Esfandiār, young, ambitious and seeing no other way than obeying his father's command, goes to Sistan and challenges Rostam, who, as mentioned already, is reluctant to fight him. The prince is killed when Rostam aims his arrow at the one spot where Esfandiār, otherwise invincible, is vulnerable. Shortly afterwards Rostam himself is killed by the treachery of his envious and embittered brother Šogād, who plants arrows in a covered pit into which Rostam falls.

Goštāsp is succeeded by Esfandiār's son Bahman (q.v.), who avenges the death of his father by conquering and destroying Rostam's province, Zābol, and killing Rostam's brother and his son or, according to another tradition (Tabari, I, p. 687), Zāl and Rostam. Bahman is succeeded by his daughter Homāy (q.v.), whom he takes as his wife and who bears him a son, Dārā(b). Bahman's other son, Sāsān, disenchanted with his father and the court, leaves the court and takes to a life of wandering (later he is claimed by the Sasanids as their eponymous ancestor). Dārā(b) is succeeded by his son Dārā(b) the Younger, the king who has to face Alexander and is defeated by him. With his death, the long line of the Kayanians comes to an end, and the country falls to Alexander.

In the Iranian historical tradition, Alexander has two entirely different images. One represents the Zoroastrian priestly view, which regards Alexander as an accursed, Ahrimanic figure who ruins Zoroastrian fire temples, kills mobads, destroys their manuscripts and reduces Iranšahr to a state of petty kingdoms devoid of unity or strength. This is the view found in 9th-10th century Zoroastrian books, notably *Bundahišn* and *Dēnkard*. The other is the much more familiar and widespread one based on the Pseudo-Callisthenes' romance (see [CALLISTHENES](#)), in which Alexander becomes a son of Dārā the elder, born of Nāhid, a daughter of Philip (Filqus), and who is



sent to Dārā as a bride. He was thus a half-brother of Dārā the younger and therefore a legitimate king of Iran. This is the version followed broadly by Ferdowsi and later, again with new variations, by Neẓāmi in his *Eskandar-nāma*, as well as in the prose *Eskandar-nāmas* (q.v.). In all these, there is a poignant encounter on the battlefield between the victorious Alexander and the fatally wounded Dārā, a victim of treachery by two of his own satraps. Dārā asks Alexander to avenge his blood and marry his daughter Rošanak. Alexander obliges and then sets out to conquer other lands. Among his many adventures are his encounter with Gog and Magog (Ya'juj wa Ma'juj), two peoples mentioned in both Biblical and Qur'ānic eschatology, and his search for the water of eternal life in the Land of Darkness. This version of Alexander, depicting him as a wise and courageous ruler, must have found currency during the Hellenistic period among the non-priestly Iranian circles (discussed by Nöldeke in his *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Alexanderromans*, pp. 11-19, 34-42).

Iranian traditional historiography knows little about the Seleucids. Tabari has a mere fleeting reference to Seleucus and Antiochus (q.v.).

THE ACCOUNT OF THE ARSACIDS

The Arsacids too are only mentioned briefly in the traditional history. Ferdowsi mentions about eight names from the long list of the Arsacid kings and attributes some 200 years to their reign, admitting that he is only familiar with their names (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, VI, p. 139). This neglect of more than 500 years of Arsacid history can be attributed not only to the fading away of their memory soon after the demise of the dynasty and to the profound animosity of the early Sasanids towards them, prompting them to efface Arsacid accounts deliberately from all records, but also to the origins of the traditional history, which was inherited from the Avestan people, who did not go beyond the Kayānids even though the name of Vologases (Valakš) is mentioned in *Dēn-kard* as a good king who ordered the collection of the holy scriptures. Sasanid hostility also explains the almost complete lack of any monuments or inscriptions from Parthian times in Iran (except an insignificant inscription at Kāl Čangāl in Khorasan; see Henning, 1953). Nevertheless, the memory of some of the Arsacid kings has found a way of being obliquely remembered in the traditional history, and that is, as Nöldeke was the first to point out (*Nationalepos*, pp. 7-9), through the exploits of a number of noble houses such as Gudarz, Giv, and Milād (< Mehrdād) who bear the names of the Arsacid king of kings (in Gudarz's inscription in Bisotun, he is



called the son of Giv, whereas in the *Šāh-nāma* and other versions of traditional history he is the father of Giv; it was customary to call grandchildren by the name of their grandfather). Mary Boyce attributes such insertions in the traditional history to the work of the minstrels or *gō-sāns*, who would sing the story of the exploits of great Arsacid kings to entertain the Arsacid court and the populace, mixing them with the account of traditional history (see [GŌSAN](#)).

THE ACCOUNT OF THE SASANIDS

In contrast to the terse account of the Arsacids, the account of the Sasanids is extensive. The succession of kings is historically accurate and is supported by numismatic evidence. The chronicle of events is, however, less accurate, systematic, and detailed than one would expect from a dynasty that kept court records (Christensen, pp. 66-67, quoting Mas'udi, *Tanbih*) and had a well-developed system of administration and scribal tradition. In the account of the kings, the entertaining, the rhetorical, the moralizing, and the fanciful exceed historical facts and objective details of foreign policy, military logistics, and dateable events. Nor do we encounter any analytical discussion of motives or personalities. Instead, we are treated to a good deal of fictional and whimsical tales. Information about the relations between Iran and Rome, and later with Byzantium, is cursory and inadequate; the Armenian question is practically ignored, and succession conflicts before Šāpur II neglected. With Yazdgird I, the information provided about the kings becomes more factual, and yet we are offered only a selective account of the events, and the tendency to fictionalize and romanticize remains intact. On the other hand, the throne addresses, the kings' testaments, and their admonitions and counsels to their heirs at the time of death, descriptions of presaging dreams and their interpretations, the predictions of astrologers, hunting scenes, banquets, military reviews and pageantry, gifts received or bestowed, the dispatch and reception of envoys, and amorous adventures at the court are all vividly described. The last mentioned occupies a large space in the reign of Bahrām V (Gōr), depicted as a brave and debonair king who, according to Nezāmi's *Haft Paykar*, builds seven separate pavilions for his seven beautiful brides, each from a different land. The kings who are favorable to priestly prerogatives, such as Ardašir I, Šāpur II, and Kōsrow I, receive glowing praise; Yazdgird I, nicknamed the Sinner, who tried to curb the power of the clergy and treated religious minorities with a measure of impartiality and understanding, is, on the other hand, vilified. Altogether, history is treated not so much as a



repository of facts, but more as a literature of entertainment.

Ardašir is a descendent (or a grandson) of Sāsān, a son of the Kayānian Bahman, who is sent to Ardavān's court to receive a good education. His audacity angers Ardavān, who gives him a humiliating job. Ardašir decides to run away and return to his father's court, together with a favorite concubine of the king. On the way the Kingly Fortune (*farr*) joins him in the shape of a ram. He raises the banner of revolt and defeats and kills Ardavān in a decisive battle. Then he sets out to bring the rest of Iranšahr under his control. Among his famous exploits is his overcoming of Haftvād or Haftānbōxt (qq.v.), a dragon in a fortified castle. He sneaks into the castle in the guise of a merchant offering goods as gifts or for sale, gains the confidence of the dragon's guards, and succeeds in killing it by pouring molten lead into its throat. Having restored unity to the land, he organizes its administration and the affairs of the four social estates. He builds a great many cities and founds many fire temples, having already restored the good religion. An able vizier Abarsām (q.v.) and a wise counselor, Tansar (or Tōsar), help him in this task. He leaves a testament to his son Šāpur on good government and appropriate conduct. No mention is made of Kerdīr, the Zoroastrian arch-mobad either here or during the reign of the next three Sasanid kings, in spite of his profound influence in merging secular and religious institutions and transforming the Sasanid state into a theocratic one.

The following are two other fanciful episodes and stories from the life of the founder of Sasanid dynasty, essentially embodying some floating motifs and wandering episodes from Persian tales and popular stories: Ar-dašir has vowed to leave no one from the house of the Arsacids alive. When he discovers that he has inadvertently married a daughter of Ardavān (or an Arsacid princess) brought up in obscurity, he entrusts her execution to his vizier (or according to the *Kārnāmag ī Ardašir Pāpaḡān*, a Mid. Pers. work, to the chief mobad). The vizier, discovering that the princess is pregnant, hides her in his house and brings up the child himself. Years later, when Ardašir, who has remained childless, expresses his contrition, the vizier reveals what he had done, much to the king's joy. At the same time he asks the king to open the box that he had given to the king years before. In it Ardašir finds the severed manhood of the vizier as a proof of his innocence against possible charges that he himself had fathered the child. The other story concerns his son Šāpur. Ardašir, warned in a dream that a descendent of Mehrak, a former rebel whom he had destroyed, would ascend the throne, seeks to uproot Mehrak's



progeny. Mehrak's daughter, however, is brought up in secret, and Šāpur, the crown prince, falls in love with her on a chance visit and secretly marries her. By the boldness exhibited by their son Hormozd in a game, Ardašir discovers the affair and is gratified by the unexpected way that his dream has been realized. The above give a flavor of the manner in which the life and career of the Sasanid kings are treated in the traditional history (for some episode and stories attached to the life of other Sasanid kings see Yarshater, *Camb. Hist. Iran*, III/2, pp. 382-83).

THE ABSENCE OF MEDIAN AND ACHAEMENID HISTORY

The Median rulers and the early Achaemenid kings Cyrus the Great, Darius, and Xerxes are conspicuous by their absence from Iranian traditional history. This is all the more astonishing as the Achaemenid era is the most illustrious period of Persian history and one would have thought that their memory would be preserved in the Iranian consciousness as a golden age of which the Persians could be justly proud. But one need not go too far to find a plausible explanation for this strange national amnesia: When the Zoroastrian faith began to spread, probably before the Achaemenids came to power, it carried with it its own historical tradition inherited from ancient times and later included in Zoroastrian lore. In its progress, Zoroastrian traditions effaced local traditions. Only what pertained to the new faith and had its seal of approval was deemed worthy of preserving and recounting—the attitude of the Islamic Republic of Iran in its early years towards Iranian kings provides a telling parallel. With the firm establishment of Zoroastrian religion in Iran, the traditions of western and southern Iran, which did not figure among the new faith's tradition, went overboard and were gradually forgotten. Traces of such traditions survive only through external evidence by the Greeks who were in touch with the Medes and the Persians. The spread of Hellenism in Iran after Alexander and more than one hundred years of Seleucid rule helped separate the Iranian elite from their Achaemenid past and its memories, and the priesthood, which was interested only in the Avestan tradition, had no incentive to keep them alive; on the contrary, they most probably regarded them as reflections of a pagan era and hence objectionable. Thus, it came about that the Persians forgot all about the Medes and the Achaemenids before Artaxerxes I, by whose time Zoroastrianism had become dominant in Iran and the Zoroastrian calendar adopted by the Achaemenids (see [CALENDAR i](#)). As a result, what had been originally a local tradition, that is, the tradition of the Avestan people in the northeast, assumed the character of



national history. The fact that the priests constituted almost the only literate stratum of the society and were in control of all matters relating to education facilitated the process. With the development of Middle Iranian languages and scripts, the evidence available through acquaintance with cuneiform inscriptions, Aramaic documents, and other relics of pre-Alexandrian times was no longer available or used. During the long reign of the Arsacids, the memory of the Medes and Achaemenids, even if it had survived the Seleucid period, faded away completely, and there is no evidence that the early Sasanids, even though they were from Persis, had any recollection of pre-Alexandrian dynasties. What they knew about the past was what they were taught by the Zoroastrian tradition (see Yarshater, 1971; Wiesehöfer, pp. 157-58; Kettenhofen, pp. 49-75). Thus, they knew of Pišdādid and Kayānid kings, and thought that Alexander had defeated the “Kayānian” Dārā, and, when they wanted to bolster their legitimacy, they claimed descent from the Kayānids (Bahman and Homāy through their son Sāsān according to the *Šāh-nāma*), as the Arsacids had done before them, when they claimed descent from Esfandiār.

The existing versions of the traditional history have naturally gone through a certain degree of Islamization and have had their strong Zoroastrian aura jettisoned. This also explains Arabic rendition of Iranian names by Arabic forms, such as *Žaḥḥāk* for *Dahāk* and *Kay Qobād* for *Kay Kavād*. Zoroastrian traces, however, can be detected in such versions, particularly the *Šāh-nāma*, which had some Zoroastrians among its sources (Taqi-zadeh, 1920, pp. 9-11). For instance, repeatedly one swears by the Sun and the Moon and the Stars that have divine status in Zoroastrianism; and there is the fact that tyrants such as *Dahāk* and *Afrāsiāb* are presented as the agents of *Ahriman*.

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE TRADITIONAL HISTORY

As expected, the *Kwadāy-nāmag* reflected and supported the ideology of the Sasanid Persia, both political and religious. Absolute obedience to the king, who enjoyed divine rights through the agency of the royal *farr*, was considered a prime necessity for a well-ordered society and a stable government. It is preached in royal addresses and testaments and in the words of sages and the *mobads* and is exemplified in the deeds of the noble warriors and manifested in their subservience to the king. It also served to confirm and promote the strict observance of the distinction between social classes, which was deemed necessary to maintain social order. To lend greater credibility and irrefutability to the division of the people into social classes (basically



consisting of warriors, priests, and toilers, with some variation, including the addition of bureaucrats and professionals as a separate class), it was attributed by some sources to Jamšid and by some others to Ardašir. A tradition in the *Bundahišn* (chap. xxxv) implies that they were instituted by Zoroaster himself, whose three sons were each placed at the head of a social estate. Many of the political views and moral precepts were expressed through “wisdom literature” (see [ANDARZ](#)), specimens of which we see scattered in the *Šāh-nāma*, particularly in the Sasanid section in the course of dialogues between the kings and their counselors, royal pronouncements, and the utterances of the viziers, mobads, and “wise men.” The *andarz* corpus of Bozorgmehr-e Boktagān (q.v.), the famous sage and counselor at the court of Kōsrow I, whose own historical existence has been refuted, is a case in point.

Thus the traditional history, far from reflecting a search for critical facts, is a work which combines myth and legend, fact and fantasy, wonder and wit, moral precepts and rules of conduct, examples of heroism, loyalty, ambition, and sacrifice, and human frailty in the clutches of an inexorable fate; and it aims to instruct, entertain, edify, and bolster the sense of Iranian identity according to the Iranian worldview of the Sasanid era.

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