



IRANIAN IDENTITY II. PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD

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The idea of Iran as a religious, cultural, and ethnic reality goes back as far as the end of the 6th century B.C.E. As a political idea, we first catch sight of it in the twenties of the 3rd century C.E. as an essential feature of Sasanian propaganda (Gnoli, 1989; 1993; 1998), since it does not seem possible to trace it back any further than the reign of Ardašīr (see [ARDAŠĪR i](#)). In actual fact we cannot say that the political idea of an **ariyānām xšaθra*- had ever existed before the advent of the Sasanian dynasty, though this claim has been made on several occasions (von Gutschmid, p. 123; Markwart, 1895, p. 629; Herzfeld, 1932, pp. 36-37; 1935, p. 9; 1941, p. 192; 1947, p. 700; and recently, Shahbazi, 2005, p. 105).

The inscriptions of Darius I (see [DARIUS iii](#)) and Xerxes, in which the different provinces of the empire are listed, make it clear that, between the end of the 6th century and the middle of the 5th century B.C.E., the Persians were already aware of belonging to the *ariya* “Iranian” nation (see [ARYA](#) and [ARYANS](#)). Darius and Xerxes boast of belonging to a stock which they call “Iranian”: they proclaim themselves “Iranian” and “of Iranian stock,” *ariya* and *ariya čiça* respectively, in inscriptions in which the Iranian countries come first in a list



that is arranged in a new hierarchical and ethno-geographical order, compared for instance with the list of countries in Darius's inscription at Behistun (see [BISOTUN](#); Gnoli, 1989, pp. 22-23; 1994, pp. 153-54). We also know, thanks to this very same inscription, that Ahura Mazdā was considered the “god of the Iranians” in passages of the Elamite version corresponding to DB IV 60 and 62 in the Old Persian version, whose language was called “Iranian” or *ariya* (DB IV, 88-89). Then again, the Avesta clearly uses *airya* as an ethnic name (*Vd.* 1; *Yt.* 13.143-44, etc.), where it appears in expressions such as *airyāfi*; *daiṇ’hāvō* “Iranian lands, peoples,” *airyō.šayanəm* “land inhabited by Iranians,” and *airyanəm vaējō vanhuyāfi*; *dāityayāfi*; “Iranian stretch of the good Dāityā,” the river Oxus, the modern Āmū Daryā (q.v.; see [ĒRĀN-WĒZ](#)). There can be no doubt about the ethnic value of Old Iran. *arya* (Benveniste, 1969, I, pp. 369 f.; Szemerényi; Kellens).

The Old Persian and Avestan evidence is confirmed by the Greek sources: Herodotus (7.62) mentions that the Medes once called themselves *Arioi*; Eratosthenes apud Strabo (15.2.8) speaks of Arianē as being between Persia and India; Eudemus of Rhodes apud Damascius (*Dubitaciones et solutiones in Platonis Parmenidem* 125 bis) refers to “the Magi and all those of Iranian (*áreion*) lineage”; Diodorus Siculus (1.94.2) considers Zoroaster (*Zathraustēs*) as one of the *Arianoi*. The ethnic, linguistic, and religious import of terms connected with Old Pers. *ariya* and Av. *airya* is therefore borne out by a lot of different evidence, over a span of time that goes from the Achaemenid to the Seleucid and Parthian periods and in Iranian and non-Iranian sources. Besides Greek, the non-Iranian sources include Armenian, as in the expression *ari Aramazd* “Ahura Mazdā, the Iranian” in *The History of the Armenians* (sec. 127) by Agathangelos (de Lamberterie, p. 243; Schmitt, 1991; Gnoli, 1993, p. 19). An Iranian source, the Rabatak inscription (l. 3 f.) in the Bactrian language, has *ariao*, meaning “in Iranian (language)” (Sims-Williams, 1995-96, p. 83; 1997, p. 5; Gnoli, 2002). All this evidence shows that the name *arya* “Iranian” was a collective definition, denoting peoples (Geiger, pp. 167 f.; Schmitt, 1978, p. 31) who were aware of belonging to the one ethnic stock, speaking a common language, and having a religious tradition that centered on the cult of Ahura Mazdā.

Although, up until the end of the Parthian period, Iranian identity had an ethnic, linguistic, and religious value, it did not yet have a political import. The idea of an “Iranian” empire or kingdom is a purely Sasanian one. It was the result of a convergence of interests between the new dynasty and the



Zoroastrian clergy, as we can deduce from the available evidence. This convergence gave rise to the idea of an *Ērān-šahr* (see *ĒRĀN*, *ĒRĀNŠAHR*) “Kingdom of the Iranians,” which was both *ēr* (Middle Pers. equivalent of Old Pers. *ariya* and Av. *airya*) and *mazdēsn* “Mazdean” (see *ĒR*, *ĒR MAZDĒSN*), as is evident from the formula *ēr mazdēsn* (Gnoli, 1987) placed before the name of Narseh, one of the sons of Šābuhr I, in the Ka’be-ye Zardošt inscription (ŠKZ, Mid. Pers. 24, Parth. 19, Greek 42-43) or before the name of Bahrām II on some of his coins (Lukonin, 1969, pp. 104, 177; 1979, pp. 39, 92 note 4, 116). Mid. Pers. *ēr* (plur. *ērān*), just like Old Pers. *ariya* and Av. *airya*, has an evident ethnic value, which is also present in the abstract term *ērīh*, “Iranian character, Iranianness” (Gnoli, 1986; 1989, pp. 147-48).

The singular and plural forms, *ēr* and *ērān*, in Middle Persian were widely used in the Sasanian period. We have examples in the royal titles (*šāhān-šāh Ērān [ud Anērān]*, literally “King of Kings of the Iranians [and non-Iranians]”) and in the titles of the civil and military administration: senior officers, dignitaries, and top-grade civil servants have titles such as *Ērān-āmārgar*, a sort of paymaster general, *Ērān-hambāragbed*, the super-intendent of the warehouses, *Ērān-dibīrbed*, the head of the bureaucracy, *Ērān-drustbed*, the court surgeon, *Ērān-spāhbed*, the marshal of the empire. These titles have no precedent in the Arsacid period; and even the Parthian royal title *šāhān šāh Aryān*, “King of Kings of the Iranians,” which occurs, for instance, in the Ka’be-ye Zardošt inscription, is no more than the Parthian version of the Sasanian title, just like the Greek version *basileús basi-léon Arianón*.

It is clear that the name *Ērān* in the official titles of the new state and its administration was a typically Sasanian usage that came into being in the 3rd century C.E. with the advent of Ardašīr I. In an ideological context where some traditional values were given new life, *Ērān* also appeared in toponyms, in the naming of cities that were renamed or refounded or in the case of newly founded ones. From this point of view some significant place-names are *Ērān-šahr Šābuhr*, *Ērān-āsān-kerd-Kawād* (q.v.), *Ērān-šād-Kawād* (q.v.), *Ērān-win (n)ard-Kawād* (q.v.), *Ērān-xwarrah-Šābuhr* (q.v.) or *Ērān-xwarrah-Yazdgerd* (q.v.; Gyselen, 1989). These last two names are particularly important because they contain the concept of *Ērān xwarrah*, which recalls the Avestan concept of *airyanəm* or *airyana4m xvarəno* (see *FARR(AH)*, the ‘Iranian’ Glory or Glory ‘of the Iranians,’ so as to form a link between Sasanian royal ideology and archaic myth and epos, in other words, between the Kayanid tradition and the new dynasty of the Iranian kingdom in the 3rd century C.E. (Gnoli, 1989, pp.



148-51). A situation fairly similar to the one involving *Ērān xwarrah* must also have existed in the case of *Ērān-wēz* (q.v.), a Middle Persian expression that reflected that Avestan *airyanəm vaējō* (see above). In both cases there is evidence of an uninterrupted link with the religious tradition, on account of the Middle Persian *ēr*, which is connected not so much with Old Pers. *ariya-* as with an older form with epenthesis, which is documented by the Av. *airya-* in Old Iranian (Eilers, 1974, p. 283; 1982, p. 8; Gnoli, 1986, p. 115). Furthermore it should be noted that, besides the royal titles, civil and military administrative titles, and place-names, also the personal proper names such as *Ērān duxt*, *Ērān-Gušnasp*, *Ērān-xrad* (Gignoux, 1986, pp. 79-80) show how widespread the use of the name *Ērān* was in the Sasanian period. All these factors can only be explained by the pronounced sense of national identity that had begun to emerge from the 3rd century onwards.

Third-century Iran was shaken by a conflict between universalism and nationalism that was most clearly manifest in the religious and cultural sphere. The outcome of this conflict is well known: the traditionalistic and nationalistic impulses gained the upper hand, and Manichean universalism succumbed to the nationalism of the Zoroastrian Magi. Iranian identity, which up to that point had been essentially of a cultural and religious nature, assumed a definite political value, placing Persia and the Persians at the center of the *Ērān-šahr*, in other words, at the center of a state based on the twin powers of throne and altar and sustained by an antiquarian and archaizing ideology. This ideology became more and more accentuated during the Sasanian period, reaching its height in the long reign of Xusraw/Kosrow I (531-79 C.E.). Of course, economic and social factors favored the victory of the stronger classes in a society that was based mainly on a rural economy, namely the aristocratic landed and warrior classes and the Magian clergy.

All this largely fitted in with the spirit of the times. Indeed, the formation of national cultures was a typical feature of the third century, marking the transition to Late Antiquity. The idea of a strong national identity, a hallmark of the Sasanian dynasty's rise to power in Iran, must therefore be considered in the light of a phenomenon that was far more widespread, involving on the one hand the Roman empire from East to West and on the other the ecumene that Alexander of Macedon had united six centuries earlier with his conquest of the Persian empire (Gnoli, 1989, pp. 162-64; 1998, pp. 119-22).

In Iran the claim to Achaemenid origins, the identification of the Sasanian dynasty with the dynasty of the Kayanians, the setting up of a traditional



heritage that met the requirements of the new dynasty and the social forces that were its mainstay are just so many aspects of a single political and cultural process that was vigorously upheld by the Sasanian propaganda. The tradition of *Ērān-šahr*, which was supposed to have its roots in remote antiquity, though in actual fact at that time there survived only a vague and scanty knowledge of it (Yarshater, 1971), only goes as far back as the 3rd century C.E. Moreover, there can be no doubt that the Iranian national history is a mirror of Sasanian conditions. Both the Pishdadian and Kayanian periods are treated in a Sasanian way (Yarshater, 1983, pp. 402-11).

The fact is that the advent of the Sasanians gave a national or even nationalistic sense to the various aspects of Iranian culture, which managed to survive the fall of the monarchy and the decline of Zoroastrianism (Spuler). In Sasanian Iran there began to take shape a national culture, fully aware of being “Iranian,” that was motivated by the restoration and the revival of the wisdom of the “sages of old,” *dānāgān pēšēnīgān*, as well as by the glorification of a great heroic past, and was imbued with an omnipresent antiquarian taste and an archaizing spirit. This process developed steadily in the course of time and took on a definite shape especially in the 6th century, but its roots were nonetheless in the 3rd century, in the transition of power from the Arsacids (q.v.) to the Sasanians and in the Zoroastrian church’s gaining of political recognition.

Pahlavi works, which have also come down to us in Arabic or in Persian, reflect the process of formation of an Iranian identity that was based on (1) the combination and revision of various features connected with the epicolegendarious tradition—as seen, for instance, in the brief mention of the foundation of each and every “provincial capital” in the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērān* (Markwart, 1931; Daryaei, 2002)—and (2) the royal ideology of the new dynasty and the view of history in the religious tradition of the *hērbeds* and *mobeds*. The latter is expressed in the *Testament of Ardašīr* (Grignaschi; ‘Abbas; de Fouchécour, pp. 87-89) and in the *Letter of Tansar* (Darmesteter; Minovi; ‘Eqbāl; Boyce, 1968; de Fouchécour, pp. 89-93).

As regards the geographical concepts connected with the imperial propaganda in ancient Iran, we must point out that the Sasanian inscriptions, from Šābuhr to Kerdir, give a list of the Iranian and non-Iranian provinces that alters in part the Avestan concept of the seven climes, whereas a late Sasanian tradition identified the *Ērān-šahr* with the central *kešwar* (see [AVESTAN GEOGRAPHY](#)), so that, in a new image of the world, the Persian empire came to coincide with



that central region, the *Xvaniraθa* (Daryaei, 2002).

It was in the Sasanian period, then, that the pre-Islamic Iranian identity reached the height of its fulfilment in every aspect: political, religious, cultural, and linguistic (with the growing diffusion of Middle Persian). Its main ingredients were the appeal to a heroic past that was identified or confused with little-known Achaemenid origins (Yarshater, 1971; Daryaei, 1995), and the religious tradition, for which the Avesta was the chief source. Both these ingredients were amalgamated in the Sasanian *Xwadāy-nāmag*, whose heroic and legendary character was combined with the “later accretions and elaborations of a non-heroic and religious nature” (Yarshater, 1983, p. 394). This work, which is the main source for Iranian national history, was translated into Arabic by Ebn al-Moqaffa’ (q.v.) and, although the original Middle Persian version and the Arabic or Persian translations or adaptations have not survived, it widely influenced Islamic historians, men of letters and poets, as is clearly evidenced by the *Annals* of Ṭabarī and the *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsī (q.v.).

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