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KASRAVI, AḤMAD III. AS HISTORIAN

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iii. As Historian

At the time when Kasravi began to write history, most historical research in Iran was carried out within the framework of political historiography with a nationalist purpose. A goodly number of historians were engaged in tracing the traditional history of Iran (which, following the mythological eras, began with the Parthians and the Sasanians) back to the forgotten dynasties of the Medes and the Achaemenids, demonstrating a factual historical continuity of the Iranians with antiquity.

This historiography had two goals. The first, as Sayyed Ḥasan Taqizādeh (q.v.) said, was the imparting of new courage and hope to the Iranians by teaching them the "glorious" history of their ancestors (*Kāveh*, no. 25, 15 February 1918, p. 14). The second goal was for historical research to serve as the foundation for constructing Iran as a nation-state—an essential ambition for any government in modern times—by proving that all Iranians share the same continuous identity. This historiography was inherently anti-Arab and antiquarian (though not unprecedented in Iran's history during the Islamic period; on the anti-Arab *Šoʿubiya* movement in the early Islamic period, see IRANIAN IDENTITY iii). It exalted pre- Islamic Iran and all that was considered

purely Iranian in the cultural patrimony and to some degree rejected the contribution of Islam to Persian culture and civilization (see HISTORIOGRAPHY viii. QAJAR PERIOD; ix. PAHLAVI PERIOD; see also IRANIAN IDENTITY i-ii and iv).

To awaken patriotism among his compatriots and revivify their nationalist feelings, Kasravi took a different path. His deepest desire was to preserve and consolidate national unity, which he believed to be under threat from sectarian differences and the multiplicity of languages and dialects. As a young man, in his native town he had witnessed confrontations between different religious sects; and, having traversed many regions, he was aware of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Iranians, which he believed to be the source of mutual misunderstanding and hence of conflict. Each denomination, Kasravi tells us, had elaborated a history filled with loathing of Iran and had constructed a martyrology in which the martyrs were supposedly murdered by the Iranians (*Peymān*, September 1940, p. 420). Through examining Kasravi's most significant works, we will see below how, beginning with these observations, he chose the themes of his research.

One of Kasravi's concerns in his work was to demonstrate that the output of Western orientalists on Iranian history and culture was not error-free. This concern is related to his battle against the passion for Europe that he dubbed "Europeanism" (*orupāyigari*), which at the time had captivated the cultural and political elite and those Iranians who championed modernism. He rejected the notion that the work of famous European scholars was utterly impeccable. Nonetheless, he believed that in order to explore the history of their country scientifically, Iranian researchers had to learn the methods and procedures of European scholars in the humanities (Kasravi, 1978, p. 13). This was the mindset behind the article "Tāriḵ-e Ṭabarestān" (Kasravi, 1922-23), in which he showed that the famous English orientalist Edward G. Brown (q.v.) had committed flagrant errors both in his annotated edition of Ebn Esfandiār's *History of Tabarestān* and in his English translation of the work. As Saʿid Nafisi acknowledged, it was the first time an Iranian scholar had pointed a finger at a scientific error of a European scientist (*Sepid o siāh*, 3/28, 1956, pp. 11-12).

Despite the diversity of topics investigated in Kasravi's historical oeuvre, the goals he set in choosing them never varied. One of his most valuable aims—writing the history of the constitutional movement—was to awaken in his compatriots a real collective sensibility. He wanted to make the Iranians aware of the bravery, devotion, and determination of the fighters in the recent

popular and unprecedented movement that had been unleashed in the cause of liberty and the establishment of a constitutional state (Kasravi, 1996a, p. 209). The pre-Islamic history of Iran was not, in his eyes, fertile ground for achieving that purpose. This history, which, thanks to the work of European orientalists and archeological excavations, had only recently become detached from folklore and mythology, to a large extent recorded the prowess in war of kings, the rise and fall of dynasties, and the continuity of Iranian kingship since the original Achaemenids; it scarcely concerned the man in the street. The constitutional movement was, in his opinion, "the supreme example of the demonstration of the meaning of the honor (*ḡayrat*) of any men whatever . . . whose bravery and resolve could awaken a sense of dignity among the Iranians" (Kasravi, 1996c, pp. 223-24). Kasravi narrates the deeds of these men with passion. He skillfully exploits the art of storytelling to render his account more appealing. He thus combines history and art without doing the facts any violence. His account allows the informed reader to comprehend the attitudes, the sensitivities, and the limitations of a generation in its quest for liberty and dignity.

Even though he never held a dichotomous vision of society and social groups, he thought that, within the constitutional movement, those who had sacrificed the most were in particular the illiterate or the poorly educated, most of whom had passed on or had scattered afterward. Since they did not seek to become known or be put on display, says Kasravi, they remained for the most part unacknowledged, leaving room for liars and braggarts, who had begun to put themselves forward as the principal players in the movement. If there was no one, he considered, to rise against these braggarts to rebut their claims, their lies would take root, and later, among future generations, few people would care to try to verify them (Kasravi, 1996c, p. 225).

Kasravi wished first of all to rescue the movement from oblivion, and secondly to pay homage to its unknown participants (Kasravi, 1994a, p. 3). According to him, the only cause of the extent and persistence of the movement was the steadfastness of men unknown, of shopkeepers and of ordinary folk, in pursuing the struggle against despotic power. It is thus natural, he concluded, for the history of this movement to be written in their name, out of consideration for their bravery and devotion (idem, pp. 3-4). It is necessary to be aware that if, in his history, Kasravi paid homage to the devotion of ordinary people to the ideals of the constitutional movement, it was not because he had any sort of natural affinity of mind with them. They were to

become, in other circumstances, the object of his vicious criticism. In writing this history, the author was not satisfied with merely examining all the documents in Persian and English that were available to him; he also collected the accounts of the surviving participants in the movement. Kasravi's two massive volumes on the history of the constitutional movement remain irreplaceable. No serious study of the topic can afford to ignore them.

The motivation for writing his essay on the Azeri language called "Āẕari, or the ancient language of Azarbaijan" (Kasravi, 1993), he says in the preface, was political. Its publication coincided with a controversy raging between Iranian and Istanbul and Baku papers on the origin of the Azarbaijanis. After examining both arguments, he came to the conclusion that the claims of the Turkish journalists were baseless, but the replies of the Iranian journalists were not founded in a knowledge of history. He therefore resolved to investigate the topic. In this book, he attempts to show that the word "Āẕari" found in most old history books, especially those from the first centuries of Islam, was the name of the old language of Azarbaijan and had nothing to do with Turkish (ibid., p. 62). Āẕari, he claimed, was a language born in the fusion of two ancient languages—that of the Medes (after their intrusion into Azarbaijan) and that of the original inhabitants of the country before the arrival of the Medes. It was related more closely to Iranian languages than to Turkish. He then explains how Turkish spread in Azarbaijan, and he clearly shows that, contrary to the received idea, this spread was not the work of the Mongols, because they, despite all their cruelty, did not attempt to change by force the language of a people. Moreover, Turkish was not their language. If they ruled all of Iran, Kasravi wondered, how was it that they had expanded Turkish only in Azarbaijan?

This book was to echo resoundingly among scholars. Nonetheless, it has not been uncontroversial since. Quite aside from the scientific interest of the work, on the political level its publication could be considered an assertion of the irrevocable commitment of Turkish speakers within Iran to Iran. The enthusiastic reception of this book by the intelligentsia of the period clearly shows how any discussion that in any way questioned national unity had galled them. This unity was, theoretically, based in the linguistic unity of all Iranians. If this unity was called into question by reality, it was necessary to search the past to justify its realization in the present. This is how Kasravi contributed to a historiography of national import with the mission of bolstering the ongoing, highly dynamic process of identity construction (se

iranian identity iv).

By writing the history of the "unknown rulers" (*Šahriārān- e gomnām*; 1928-30; see Kasravi, 1978) or "Five centuries of the history of Khuzestan" (*Tāriḵ-e pānṣadsāla-ye Ḵuzestān*, 1934; see Kasravi, 1994b), Kasravi paved the way for regional history that remained outside the limited framework of national historiography. These two books associate geography and history to an extent. "The unknown rulers" tells the story of the dynasties that came to power in Iran during the first centuries of Islam, whose existence was unknown to contemporary historiography. According to Kasravi, from the fall of the Sasanians and the appearance of Islam in 642 to the deposition of the Qajars in 1925, more than 150 families ruled in Iran. Famous historians such as Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfi, Mirḵᵛānd, Ḵᵛāndamir, Ḥāfeẓ-e Abru, Sayyed Yaḥyā Sayfi Qazvini, and many others, who had written general traditional histories of Iran at different periods after the arrival of Islam, spoke of only twenty or so dynasties. If we want to know how the Iranians had been able to liberate themselves from the Arab yoke after the conquest of Iran, there was no other way than to investigate the history of the native rulers who had seized power here and there across Iranian territory in the 3rd and 4th centuries (Kasravi, 1978, p. 11). According to him, contrary to the claims of most historians who were in charge of writing the national history, the history of Iran after the accession of Islam is not at all clear, and we do not have sufficient resources to advance research in this domain. There are still many shadowy areas, especially as concerns the unknown rulers.

In addition to the Persian and Arabic texts on the history of Iran, we must, Kasravi tells us, make use of histories of the Armenians and Georgians, as well as works in Syriac and histories of the Eastern Roman Empire. Books of peoples who were in permanent contact with Iran can assist us in illuminating shadowy periods in our history (Kasravi, 1978, p. 13). Indeed, the history of the "unknown rulers" is a painstaking reconstruction of the past. The book is based on a vast array of sources in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Armenian, English, and French. Furthermore, to corroborate his findings, the author has dissected several collections of poems in Persian and Arabic. In this book, Kasravi also exposes several errors made by European orientalists or Iranian scholars in their works on the period corresponding to the reign of these unknown rulers (ibid., pp. 15, 132-34, 252-54). According to him, the task of the historian is like that of the zoologist who, by dint of laborious research, gathers old bones scattered underground to reconstruct the skeleton of an

extinct animal. It is thus a matter of recreating history and not of narrating the events of the past (ibid., p. 14). Inspired by a metaphor, he describes the history of the past as follows: “If we view the history of the distant past as a human body, the history of the kings is, so to say, the framing of this body. This comparison is all the more relevant in the Orient where the masses have always been like sheep obedient to shepherds who are sometimes kindly, sometimes bloodthirsty” (ibid., pp. 10-11). It should be noted that reflections like this on history and the craft of the historian are without precedent in Iran.

In “Five centuries of the history of Khuzestan,” he not only recounts the fate of the families that headed the Arab tribes that had seized power one after the other in the region from the 9th/15th century to our day, but also provides valuable information on the country’s geography by describing the appearance of the towns, rivers, and dams. The book is in two separate parts, with the first presenting the history of the Mošaʿšaʿiān and the second the history of the Kaʿabiān (Bani Kaʿab). At the end of the book he describes the reign and fall of Shaikh Ḵazʿal (q.v.), chief of the Arab tribe of the Bani Kaʿb, who had been supported for a time by the British to constitute an autonomous government in Khuzestan. Kasravi had himself met the Shaikh during his stay in Khuzestan as head of the tribunal of this oil-rich province and had been present at his fall (Kasravi, 1994b, p. 248). After his return to Tehran, he gathered an immense amount of documentation of the pasts of the principal families of the country, including the beginnings of Sayyed Moḥammad Mošaʿšaʿ, who, in the 9th century claimed to be the Mahdi (the Hidden Imam of the Twelver Shiʿites) and succeeded, by force and the bloody repression of his opponents, in making himself chief of the Arab tribes of the province and imposing on them for centuries his and his family’s power. This book is also unique in the extent to which it is based on primary sources and gives for the first time the unexplored history of the region. It is through this type of study that Kasravi paved the way for scientific investigation of the history of the various regions of the country. No subsequent study of the history of Khuzestan can afford to ignore it.

The specifics that distinguish the work of Kasravi from the labors of his contemporaries are many. He is without doubt the first Iranian historian in modern times who in his investigation of the past did not shrink from recourse not only to linguistics, but also to numismatics and vexillology.

His long article “History of the lion and the sun” (*Tārīḵča-ye šir o ḵoršid*), also published separately, is dedicated to the Iranian “boy scouts” (*pišāhangān*) It is

the outcome of scholarly research into the emblem on the Iranian flag. He shows how there appeared on the banners and coins of yesteryear at first a lion alone, and then a sun unaccompanied by a lion, and how subsequently the lion and the sun got together, from which time they jointly became the official emblem of the Iranian state. To write this little book, Kasravi examined inscriptions, old coins, and poetry anthologies as well as many books in Persian, Armenian, and Arabic (Kasravi, 1996e, pp. 15-55).

Kasravi wrote several pieces of this kind on a wide variety of subjects, including “The names of the towns and villages of Iran” (*Nāmhā-ye šahrhā va dihhā-ye Irān*, Kasravi, 2000). It was while he was on a mission to western Iran (1929) that Kasravi began, with his inclination toward etymology, to take an interest in the names of towns and villages. He asked the finance departments of several towns to extract from their registers a list of the villages that had been recorded and in this way gathered some eight thousand names. Then, by comparing them with their current names, he could explain the meaning of most of the names of towns and villages of the land. He published his findings in 1930. This is a most interesting work, even if it is not entirely error-free. Its originality lies in the fact that this was the first time systematic research had been undertaken by an Iranian on a subject dealing with the geography of Iran. Another reason that might have led Kasravi to pursue this line of research was the incompetence of a certain number of European orientalists in this area, since in this book he points a finger at their errors while at the same time criticizing the star-struck attitude of the Iranians of his time toward them. Kasravi attempted, as he himself said, to make the Iranians understand two things: first, that orientalists were not all at the same level of knowledge and competence. Among them are found great scholars like J. Darmesteter, Th. Nöldeke, J. Markwart, F. C. Andreas, and many others, but a goodly number of them were mediocre people whose work was unreliable. The second thing he wanted the Iranians to understand was that Oriental Studies was not the private domain of Europeans; Orientals could also engage in it if they entered on the same path and put in the same amount of work (Kasravi, 2000, p. 200).

In the course of his research on the Āẕari language, he came across an interesting point concerning the origins of the Safavids (1501-1736). The Safavid dynasty had always been known in Iranian history as descended from the Prophet (*sayyed*), even though, according to Kasravi, it was not. Nonetheless, the idea that this dynasty originated in the family of the Prophet was so deeply entrenched in history that even its enemies had never contested

it. A goodly number of Ottoman historians who had told the story of the succession of wars between the Safavids and the Ottoman empire, and had never shown any sympathy for the kings of this dynasty, were silent on their origins. Kasravi shows that the Safavids became linked to the lineage of the Prophet after the death of their ancestor, Shaikh Ṣafi. During his lifetime he never claimed that the blood of the Prophet coursed through his veins, and no one ever considered him a descendant of Moḥammad. It was only after his death that his son, Ṣadr-al-Din, conceived the idea of linking himself with the family of the Prophet and, with the efforts and fantasies of his disciples, fabricated such a genealogy for his family. Kasravi also shows that Shaikh Ṣafi was a Sunni, whereas his great-grandson, Shah Esmāʿil I, proved to be a fanatical Shiʿite and persecutor of Sunnis. Furthermore, the Shaikh spoke Azeri, whereas these descendants adopted Turkish. According to Kasravi, the fact of claiming to be of the blood of the Prophet was a political instrument that the Safavids needed to win power, for at that period the Iranians venerated the descendants of Moḥammad. When Kasravi published his findings on the religion and origins of the Safavids under the title “Shaikh Ṣafi and his lineage” (1926-27), voices were raised against his views, but shortly thereafter, most historians of the Safavid period, whether Iranian or European, accepted them (Kasravi, 1996b, pp. 57-105).

Kasravi’s contribution to the historiography of Iran is manifold. As a historian, he traversed unexplored paths. In his quest to comprehend the past and render it intelligible, he was the first Iranian historian to have recourse to the knowledge produced by a wide range of disciplines. In his historian’s craft, he always informs the reader of his presuppositions, thus facilitating the critical examination of his work. Without questioning the political history, he warns the reader against the reductionism of the historians who wrote the political history of a period based solely on the reports emitted by so-called official chroniclers, that is, by the men who had contacts with the power of the period under study (Kasravi, 1996d, p. 196). The lasting value of his work is due not only to all the qualities of his writings of which we have spoken above, but also to his acute awareness of the craft of the historian that sparkles throughout the texts that he has left us.

For a comprehensive bibliographical survey of Kasravi’s works and works on him, see below, vii.

(Translated from French by Peter T. Daniels.)

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