

Impressionistic Views of Ancient Iranian History

Richard N. Frye

Inasmuch as the sources for the ancient history of Iran are exceedingly few, one must rely on analogy and common sense to reconstruct the past. The following remarks are presented as food for thought rather than any definitive picture of past events, and some are not original but adapted from the theories of others. We begin with very broad statements and then gradually focus on Iran in antiquity.

1. Until the agricultural revolution of the Neolithic age, probably matriarchies were the norm in human societies, witness the many statuettes of "mother goddesses" that have been excavated in many parts of the world. In the pre-Neolithic age men hunted animals for their livelihood, and their task was to secure freedom from want for the family and the clan. Such a life was dangerous, and men frequently lost their lives, while at home women preserved the hearth and family. After the agricultural revolution, however, gunmen had to work in the fields, and men with more leisure began to hunt each other, such that freedom from want was replaced by the goal of freedom from fear. Patriarchies replaced the matriarchies, and this state continued to the present. Did this physical change in society result in a different outlook among people? If so it may be the result of a change from a pastoralist-nomadic life to a settled one, and what was the changed view of society and the world?
2. People, or even scholars, can be distinguished between those who divide the world and classify everything in twos (as Chinese yin and yang), and those who do so in threes. So knowledge may be understood in duality or trinity, or multiples thereof. I used to argue with the late Georges Dumézil about this in regard to Iran and Central Asia, for he was a fervent trinitarian. Perhaps one might compromise and suggest that a transition from a nomadic life, where a duality of society seems to obtain, to a settled society, where a trinitarian view may better fit, would more adequately characterize the change in society in the history of Iran and Central Asia.

Finally, we come to our subject Iran, with Central Asia, for they were intertwined from the earliest times, and here I use the word "Persia" for the present land of Iran, while "Iran" historically means the greater world of Iranian peoples, comparable to the Germanic world, or the domain of Slavic peoples. In the briefest of terms, the history of that part of the world can be explained as follows:

1. The two dominant themes in Iran's history are water, especially irrigation, and trade, especially international trade.

2. From the human point of view, conflicts in the history of Iran can be summed up in the antagonism between the steppe and the town, between nomads and settled folk. In modern times one could almost substitute "tribal mentality" for the steppes and "urban mentality" for the town.
3. In the realm of religion, one might characterize Iran as the land of dualism *par excellence* throughout history - time of long duration and boundless time in Zoroastrianism, good versus evil, conservatism versus innovation, church versus state, etc.
4. In the medieval and modern Near East, one could use a medieval European popular belief to characterize the outlook and culture of various peoples. The European characterization of *dominium* belonging to the Germans, *sacerdotium* to the Italians, and *magisterium* to the French, is paralleled by an Arabic saying: *al-daulah 'ind al-turk, din 'ind al-'Arab wa adab 'ind al-Furs*.

One question one may ask is: did people believe the above, and other, characterizations, and interpret actions in such a manner, or is it simply an abstraction of scholars seeking to simplify or find patterns in history? When stereotypes are presented do people strive to live up to them? In the history of Iran the repetition of patterns is almost eerie. Some have said that the meeting of the Semitic concept of linear history and time with the Indo-European belief in the circularity of history is best exemplified in Persia. That is another question, however, and I shall end these general remarks with this observation.

In the nineteenth century historians followed Leopold von Ranke's dictum that history should be understood as: *was eigentlich geschehen ist*. Then perhaps it was the French positivists who declared, no, history is the record of what people thought had happened. In Iran history is the account of what people thought should have happened.

To elaborate on the differences between the steppe and the town in the history of Iran, we may begin with a note on the geographical differences between Iran and other parts of the Near East, such as Jordan and Egypt, for geography plays a vital role in the history of that part of the world. In Egypt and Jordan the line between the desert and settled areas is straight, on one side desert and on the other cultivation, at some times the line should advance or retreat. In Iran settled areas essentially are oases, large or small, and the steppe surrounds the town, such that the symbiosis between the two in the past was much greater than in Egypt, for example, where the Bedouin are really apart in many respects from the *fellahin*. What were the differences between the steppe and the town in history?

1. The military force of nomads was a horde, Turkic *ordu*, German *Heer*, Old Persian *kara*, the fighting men of the tribe, whereas for the settled state a professional army, OP *spada*, was important. This is beautifully seen in the development of the Achaemenid Empire, where at the beginning we find a horde, and at the end an army of professional soldiers, especially Greek mercenaries.
2. Nomads expanded their power through conquest by confederation. A defeated tribe was absorbed into the victor's tribe, best seen in the rise of Chinggis Khan to power over the Mongols. In a settled state conquest was the expansion of one's own territory, and taking over the bureaucracy of a defeated state.
3. The economic base of a nomadic empire was the exploitation of the lands of other people (especially of settled folk), while for a settled state it was the exploitation and expansion of one's own land. Many have characterized the nomadic state as anti-productive in opposition to the productive nature of a settled society.
4. Continuity was vital to the settled state, and the sacralization of traditions provided the impetus to continuity, as in Sasanian Iran and Tang China, where obligatory belief in a state religion or philosophy was important. On the steppes, on the other hand, we find a choice of beliefs and no required institution for any particular one. This has been described as the traditional tolerance of nomads in regard to religions.
5. The charismatic clan and leader of that clan among the nomads was paralleled by the bureaucracy in a settled state. The charisma of the individual, equivalent of a king, was important for the nomads, whereas in a settled state it was the charisma of the institution -kingship- which was vital for the continuity of rule.

There are other differences, but let us examine some contributions of Iranian culture and civilization to world history. If we consider the ancient Near East, the Fertile Crescent and Egypt, to be the origins of Western civilization, based on the Greek and Roman continuation of earlier traditions, then one may ask what the Iranians contributed to the Near East. This can be summed up in the influences which the Achaemenid Empire had upon the world of the mid-millennium B.C., for it was the creation of the first "world empire" in that part of the world, which lasted more than two centuries, and made changes that were to influence the future. What were the changes?

1. In the realm of religion it was the concept of a world state which began to change the current ideas of henotheism towards monotheism. In the mixture between Iranians and local peoples Mannaeans, Elamites and others - on the Iranian plateau, ideas of syncretism appeared, as we infer from information on the clay tablets from Persepolis in the Elamite language. As Persians became assimilated with Elamites it seems that Humban, chief god of the Elamites and Ahura Mazda, supreme deity of the Persians, also came together. One could suggest that perhaps for some Elamites Ahura Mazda became another name for Humban. We cannot say how far such thinking developed, nor what influences came from the Zoroastrian emphasis on good and evil, with the ethical triad of good thoughts, good deeds and good speech. Abhorrence of the lie and affirmation of the ethical value of the truth as good probably had an influence on the *Zeitgeist* in religion all over the Achaemenid Empire.
2. The most important contribution of the Persians to world civilization, in my opinion, was their legal system, which was a great advance over past empires. In the preceding Assyrian Empire conquest of other peoples had meant submission of their deities to those of Assyria, and the imposition of subject status on the conquered, with obedience to the laws of Assyria. Perhaps it was the respect shown by the Persians, not far removed from a tribal society, for the superior civilizations of the settled peoples they conquered, that made them not only tolerant, but also respectful, of the religions, the institutions and cultures of those they conquered. In any case, it was the creation of an imperial legal system, the laws of the king (*data da malka* in Aramaic), which provided the background for later Roman law, which is universally admired. Achaemenid law was a kind of secular legal system above the local religious laws of the Egyptians, Babylonians, Hebrews and others. "The laws of the Medes and Persians which changeth not," impressed the peoples of that time.
3. In many realms ideas of universality came into being under the Achaemenids. The spread of the Aramaic language, and especially the alphabet, which reached Inner Asia and India, began under the Achaemenids. The concept of a universal, imperial bureaucracy, imperial coinage, imperial weights and measures, imperial art and architecture, also developed under the Achaemenids. They solved the problem of the integration of city states and local states into an imperial system better than the Greeks with Athens attempting the same. On the other hand, they did not understand the democracy of the Greeks, for theirs was a paternalistic system, that developed in the wrong direction, with the ruler above the law. In the eternal conflict between the individual and institutions, freedom versus organization, the latter won in Persia and the former in Greece, as the Spartan king, a refugee in the court of Xerxes eloquently explained.

Postscript: After the Achaemenids, Iran more or less leaves the pages of world history until the coming of Islam, which not only changed the course of history, but also in many respects the nature of Persian culture and society. There is little doubt that in the creation of an ecumenical Islamic religion, Islamic philosophy, Islamic art and architecture, even Islamic mores, the Iranians played THE (not a) major role. But they also later split all of the above into an eastern and a western version of Islamic civilization. In the sixteenth century Iran participated in the world decline of international trade in favor of regional markets. In Europe international trade cities of Venice, Genoa, Novgorod and others declined in favor of new regional centers such as Madrid, Munich and Vienna. Iran became part of the decline. Nomadism also declined and personal rather than vicarious religious movements developed everywhere. That is another story.

Some have said that Persia introduced the maxim that the end justifies the means, for in the case of Persia, the Persian language, art and culture, the end was survival, in the succession of Macedonian, nomadic, Arab, Turkish, Mongolian and Western invasions. Those who look back to the "golden ages", and deplore the degeneration of the present, compare the emphasis on truth and hate of the lie in Iranian antiquity, with the maxim from the poet Sa'di, found in textbooks of the Persian language and literature, that the little white lie which causes pleasure is better than the truth which causes pain. I suggest that continuity from the past is more important.