

Political archaeology and the Growth of nationalism in historiography of Iran in early twenty century : the Case of Pirniya's Ancient History

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It is argued that whenever the political situation provides a favourable environment, the archaeological activities has been encouraged to provoke nationalism, and historians in various capacities have used archaeological data and historical records to advocate nationalist agendas. Owing to its rich archaeological and historical past and its contemporary socio-cultural diversity, Iran is, particularly interesting for exploring the connection between archaeological activities and manipulations of historical records, especially by taking into account the re-establishment of Achaemenid history by late nineteenth century and then the rise of Reza Khan to power in the early twentieth century.

Those developments, however, left a deeper impact on Iranian Historiography which the case of Pirniya's Ancient History will be discussed in this paper. In this paper the process of establishment of Achaemenid history is reviewed and then, it has been argued that how the archaeological activities and re- establishment of Achaemenid history raised the historical nationalism and led to new trend in historiography of Iran in twenty century. It has been concluded that Pirniya's approach to ancient history of Iran can be called as beginning of scholarly and modern historiography in Iran.

Keywords: Iran, Historical Nationalism, Political Archaeology, Historiography, Pirniya's History

Introduction

Probably the most commonly held assumption about nationalism is that it arises ultimately from sort of national identity or from historical consciousness (Johan Breuilly 1985:1). By this definition we can claim that the roots of nationalism in Iran extend into extraordinarily rich Iranian civilization down beyond the Achaemenid period. Without question many insights could be gained regarding the quality of Iranian nationalism by a thorough exploration of this civilization (Cottam 1979: 11).

The Near East, owing to its rich archaeological and historical past and its contemporary socio-cultural diversity, has been particularly interesting for exploring the connection between historical nationalism and political manipulations of historical record to advocate nationalist agendas. It is argued that whenever the political situation provided a favourable environment, intellectuals and historians

in various capacities have used archaeological and historical record to advocate their nationalist agendas (Abdi 2001:51); as following the collapse of Ottoman territorial and dynastic control in the Near East during the later nineteenth century, the archaeological activities was encouraged by Turkish Republic to provoke nationalism in this country (Atakuman 2008: 215-235). It seems the ground for this purpose in Iran also was provided first by re-establishment of Achaemenid history by end of 19th century and then the rise of Reza Khan to power by early 20th century. These developments left a deeper impact on Iranian Historiography which will be discussed in this paper. To examine the connection between the growth of historical Nationalism and the beginning of this new trend in historiography of Iran in early twenty century, the process of establishment of Achaemenid history will be reviewed first.

Exploration of Achaemenid History by 19th A.D. century

The defeat of Median kingdom in 559 B.C. by

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Persia and foundation of the Persian empire by Cyrus the Great and establishment of his authority over an enormous expanse of lands including Lydia, and thereby reaching the Aegean sea and Greek cities on the Anatolian coast brought some hostility between Persians and Greeks during Darius the Great and his successor, Xerxes, which led to the Persian-Greek wars of 490 and 480 BC. Those wars and the vital role of Persian Empire in ancient world, its civilization and defeat of this great empire by Alexander the Great became an event of world-historical importance that has fascinated the great interest in the subject by ancient historians like Herodotus, Xenophon, Ctesias, Deinon, Diodorus Siculus, Nicolaus of Damascus, Berossus, Polybius, Plutarch, Arrian, Quintus Curtius, Strabo and others in this period (Drews 1973:104). Furthermore, the conquest of Babylonia by Cyrus the Great who permitted the Jews to return to their homeland and even gave them *carte blanche* authorization for funds from the imperial treasury (Ezra 6:8), and the support Jews received from other Persian Kings during this period led to direct references in the Bible to the Achaemenid Kings (Yamauchi 1990: 89-92).

The account of Achaemenid history by those ancient historians and direct reference of Biblical text to a number of Achaemenid rulers where the name of Cyrus the Great, Darius, Xerxes and Artaxerxes is mentioned, provided a sources for European historians and writers continue to study those kings, in particular Cyrus the Great and accordingly the Achaemenid history at least from fifteen century onward (Achroyd 1990: 1-17; Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1990: 31-53). The study of Persian Empire in context of the Athenian history as well as Greek and Persian war as it is narrated by Herodotus and other Greek Historians continued in Europe, in particular in England during 18th century (Brosius 1990:77-89; Tuplin 1990:17-31).

1- It worth remind here that a number of Greek historians and geographers have described Pasargadae, the Cyrus Capital (Strabo, Geography XV; Arrian, Anabasis VI, 29., VII ; Plutarch, Artaxerxes, iii. I.; Quintus Curtius, Hist. Alex. V. 6. 10) but except Diodorus who describe the citadel of Darius's capital, none of Greek sources give hard fact on Persepolis (David Stronch 1978: 24-26 and 282; Imanpour 2008: 1-12; Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1991: 3).

It seems, as it has been pointed out by Turner this development was clearly influenced by changing of political circumstance in Europe following the American Revolution and radical movement for reform in Europe which had awakened a new interest in the Athenian experience as well as to Cyrus the Great as a wise and enlightened monarch as he had introduced in Greek sources, in Particular Cyropaedia (Turner 1981: 192; Brosius 1990: 87; Harmanny 1990: 53).

The description of Persia by Greek historians and Geographers who visited Persia or those like Herodotus who wrote Persian history without visiting Persian heartland; and the Europeans knowledge about Persian Kings through the Biblical texts, made Persia, in particular Persian heartland, Parsa (modern Fars), an attractive destination for the Western travellers at least from 15th and 16th century. By the beginning of seventeenth century and development of diplomatic and trade relationship between some of the European countries and Persia during the rule of Safavid dynasty in Iran (1501-1736 AD) and following transition of Safavid Capital from Qzvin to Isfahan north of Fars province in 1598, the number of visitors to Iran increased and traffic around Persepolis, located in main road between Persian Gulf coast to Isfahan, intensified (Matthee 1999; Allen 2007: 321).

Reading parts of ancient texts, classical histories and the Bible, the European travellers to Iran on their arrival to Persia were looking for Persian capitals, Persepolis and Pasargadae (Sancisi-Weerdenburg and Jan Willem Dreijvers 1991 ; Stronach 1978: 24-26 and 282; Allen 2007: 313-342; Simpson 2007: 343-356). Thus, most of the early travellers who arrived into the Plain of Marvdasht were well prepared by reading of those ancient texts and often observed the remnants of Persia's most ancient civilization, Persepolis and Pasargadae (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1991: 3 ; Curzon, 1892; Gebriel, 1952).¹

By the early seventeenth century, however, the identification of those sites was established and the story of exploration of Persepolis became an interesting chapter of European research on oriental world (Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1991: 1-35; Curzon,



1892). During 18th century and by the beginning of nineteenth century, because of growing political and commercial interest of British in Persia, the number of British and French travellers increased considerably and Persepolis, Pasargadae and then Susa, continued to be visited frequently during this century (Abdi, 2001: 53; Sarkhosh (Curtis) 2005: 254; Larsen, 1996; Simpson 2007: 357).

There is a dramatic increase in the number of graffiti throughout the nineteenth century which most of them occurred on the side of Gate of All Nations, on the window frames and inner walls of palace of Darius, (tachara) (Simpson, 2007: 345) indicating that Persepolis has always been a great attraction for foreign travellers, historians and archaeologists as well as Iranians who visited the site after its destruction by Alexander of Macedon (Shahbazi 1980: 197-207; Sarkhosh (Curtis) 2005; Allen 2007: 316-318). However, those developments and the rise in number of archaeological travellers led to some archaeological excavations by French and British archaeological travellers in those sites during nineteenth century, providing more evidence for later studies (Abdi 2001: 54; Mousavi 1992: 13-19; Curtis, 1993).

Travellers visited Iran and their writing also provided earlier generation of European scholars interested in ancient history of Near East with essential documentations. That earlier information, moreover, helped to construct part of present-day knowledge of early Iranian history, including the Achaemenids, by scholars of ancient history. It was following those developments and much under influence of Azar Kayvani's book, *Dabestān-al-Mazāheb*, that Sir John Malcolm published *The History of Persia* in 1815 (Nemati 2010: 30). This earlier information and drawing of ancient monuments and cuneiform inscriptions finally led to the decipherment of Old Persian, and then, Elamite and Babylonian in early 19th century. This was a huge development for the study of Ancient Near East and Achaemenid history. Shortly after publication of deciphered Behistun Inscription by Henry Rawlinson, his brother George Rawlinson, based on the translation of those cuneiforms and classical texts, published the first three volumes of ancient Iran history in 1867, *The five Great*

Monarchies of the Ancient World, *The Sixth Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World* and later seventh *Seven Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World*, in which the fifth monarchy was Achaemenid, the sixth the Parthians and seventh Sasanians (Rawlinson 1871, Rawlinson 1885; Abdi 1992: 38; Abdi 2001, 53). It was one of the first occasions in which together with the well known Greek sources, evidences from Iran itself taken into account, not only the recently translated royal inscriptions, but also archaeological evidences as well. (Sansici-Weerdenburg 1987: 128).

Later in 1915 Sir Percy Sykes also in describing his mission to Persia wrote *History of Persia* in two volumes which paid special attention to history of Achaemenid and Sasanian eras using previous information and discoveries (Sykes 1915; cf. www.achaemenet.com, on-line books).

The recognition and gradual revelation of Persepolis and Pasargadae by European travellers by this time and the exploration of Achaemenid history which Iranians had little knowledge about it was a great development in Iranian history. Of course by using the Arabic translation of Khoday-Nāmak, the official Sasanian history which had been preserved in Pahlavi and later by Ferdowsi in *Shahnameh* in Persian, the historians of early Islamic period knew well about Sasanian history, but not so much about Cyrus the Great and Darius as well as Pasargadae and Persepolis: the first one was linked with King Solomon of Old Testament and Quran and second one was associated with mythological figures like Jamshid and was called *Takht-e Jamshid*, *chihilmanar*, *Sadseton* (Sarkhosh (Curtis) 2005: 252; Allen 2007: 313-342).

The Growth of Nationalist feelings Iran

The above mentioned developments, i.e. exploration of Achaemenid history, provoked archaism, an interest in ancient Persia, and subsequently nationalism among Iranian nationalists. As it has been pointed out by John Breuilly (1985:1), the most commonly held assumption about nationalism is that it arises ultimately from some sort of national identity or search for such an identity. Re-establishment of Achaemenid history



in nineteenth century, in fact, provided ground for such identity, and accordingly, paved the road for nationalism.

In this period several ideas about pre-Islamic Iran have become important in the trend of Iranian nationalism that began under the Qajars and became dominant under Pahlavi Shahs (Keddie 1999: 6). Under the Qajars, Iranian nationalism was mainly the province of radical intellectuals who wanted to institute a major modern government and return to ideas of pre-Islamic period and ignore the Islamic period values (Keddie 1999: 83; Ādamiyat 1978:149-211; Ādamiyat 1970:120-126; Bigdeloo 2001:40-68; Nemati 2011:55-95; cf. Motavali-Haqiqi, 2002/1381). Interest in ancient Persia also was grown among Qajar rulers, originally Turkish tribes from north-western Iran in such a way that as Achaemenid motives were imitated in the stone and plaster decoration of grand houses, particularly in Shiraz. Many Qajar kings including Agha Mohammad Khan and Fath-Ali Shah also enjoyed reading Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* and they liked to identify themselves with the legendary heroes of ancient history (Sarkhosh (Curtis) 2005: 254-255; Abdi 2001:53). Drawing on glories of the Persian mythical and dynastic past, the Qajar Shahs were acclaimed by court chronicles and in official records as "world conquerors" and possessors of Jamshid's glory and of Khusraw's splendour (Amanat 1997: 10). In other word, the Persian monarchical model, a legacy of the Sasanian period (244-640) and before, persisted for centuries in the Islamic world (Amanat 1997: 7). The interest in ancient Iran and its monuments which following re-establishment of Achaemenid history had been grown during 19 century, continued to flourish and led to publication of a number of books including the *Nāmeḥ-ye-Khosravān* (1868, 1870, 1871) in three volumes by Jalāl al-Din Mirzā Qajar; *Nāmeḥ-ye-Bāstan* and *Aeneh-ye-Sekandari* by Mirzā Aqa Khan Kermani; *Dora al-tijān fi tāriḥ bani Aškān* (1890) by Etemad-al Saltana; *Maktobāt-e Kamāl-e al-Doleh* by Mirzā Fath-Ali Akhonzadeh and *Asar-e Ajam* by Mirzā Forsta Shirazi etc (Sarkhosh (Curtis), 2005: 256; Bigdeloo 2001:52-68; Nemati 2010: 55-95).

In century and a half that constituted the Qajar period (1786-1925), writing of history evolved from production of annalistic court chronicles

and other traditional genres which dominated the historiography of previous dynasties like Mongol, Timurid, Safavid and Asfharid into the earliest experimentations in modern historiography (Quinn 2004; Tucker 2004 and Amanat 2004). To fashion a new historical identity, Qajar historiography under the influence of new discoveries and re-establishment of Achaemenid history fuelled archaism, payed special attention to the pre-Islamic memory with Iran's dynastic history (Amanat 2004). The period in question also witnessed greater simplicity and innovation in style that was distinct from the ornate style of earlier generations. Yet there were glaring shortcomings in Qajar historical scholarship, most notably due to the absence of organized and accessible archival sources and lack of an academic environment conducive to critical researches. (Amanat 2004; Tavakoli-Targhi 2001)

Iran, however, under Qajar dynasty and during Russian-Iran wars lost part of its territories in Caucasia, Central Asia and Afghanistan in nineteenth century. Constitutional Revolution of 1906, Anglo-Russian agreement in 1907 (dividing Iran into British and Russian spheres of influence with a neutral buffer zone in the middle) and Anglo-Persian treaty 1919, raised nationalist feelings among Iranians (Hambly 1991:213-244). These developments finally led to the Coup d'état of Reza Khan and Seyed Zia Tabatabae in 1921 and the fall of the Qajar dynasty and the foundation of the Pahlavi monarchy in 1925 (Hambly 1991:213-244). These political changes in Iran in the first quarter of twentieth century brought a deep development in study of ancient history of Iran, in particular Achaemenid history, and provided the condition for growth of nationalism (Bigdeloo 2001: 86-104). This political development once again resulted in the dissemination of archaism and nationalist feelings among Iranians; in particular when we remember that whenever politics provide a fertile environment, historical nationalism is swift to advocate its agendas. Furthermore, nationalism should be understood as a form of politics, and that form of politics makes sense only in terms of the particular political context and objectives. Central to an understanding of that context and those objectives is the modern state. The modern state both shapes nationalist politics and provide



that politics with its major objectives; namely the possession of the state (Breuille 1993: 366). Taking into account the new political, social and economic situation in Iran at turn of century and necessity of having modern state which was one of Reza Shah's main goals (Keddie 1999: 88.), it seems all these developments provided more ground for the growth of historical nationalism and new historiographical method in Iran; in particular when we remember these events coincidence with the rise of academic historiography and various schools of history in the academic institutions such as universities in the west (Spalding and Parker 2007:8-28).

However, the rise of Reza Khan, a secular, nationalist, indifferent to religion, with strong patriotic feeling toward Iran's past to power, first as prime minister and then as king supported all kinds of archaeological activities and historical studies provided the ground for more archaeological excavation and historical studies in Iran during his rule. Looking for the unification of Iran, Reza Shah tried to reawaken the memory of Iran's ancient history, especially the Achaemenid and Sassanid empires and to glorify Zoroastrianism as the original religion of Iran. To understand Reza Shah's feeling about ancient civilization of Iran it is worth here to cite part of his speech that he addressed after returning from Persepolis in an assembly of officials: " History tells us about the splendour of ancient Iran. In the magnificent ruins of Persepolis one can witness this splendour without historians' bias, the ruins speak for themselves and tell you the glory of ancient Iranian monarchs"(Quoted in Abdi, 2001:60; cf. Bigdeloo 2001:280-286).

Reza Shah as a nationalist was strong supporter of archaeological excavations in particular at Persepolis (Abdi 2001: 60). During Reza Shah and under auspices of Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, a few seasons of excavation were carried out at Persepolis first by Herzfeld (1931-1934), an active figure in Iranian archaeology who in addition to excavation at Persepolis conducted extensive surveys and excavation in Iran, including Pasargadae, and then Schmidt from 1935 to 1939 (Schmidt 1953; Schmidt 1957; Schmidt 1970).

Excavation at Persepolis then continued under

direction of Iranian Archaeologists like Isa Behnam, Mahmoud Rad, Ali Sami and Akbar Tajvidi (Abdi 2001:60; Mousavi 1990: 12). All these activities provided more grounds for Iranian nationalists to concentrate on pre-Islamic values. Archaism grew up dramatically and simultaneously along with nationalism during Reza Shah. The development of archaeological activities and new political situation led to growth of nationalist feelings among Iranians. One year after the coup, a group of the nationalist elite founded the Society for National Heritage (Anjoman-e asar-e Meli) in Tehran to preserve antiquities and handicrafts and ancient techniques (Abdi 2001: 56).

Hassan Pirniya's Historiographical method

Among the founding members of the society were three prominent intelligentsia with political background and strong nationalist sentiments; Hassan Pirniya, Moshir al-Dowleh a prominent member of the Qajar educated elite was one of them. Pirniya was a dedicate patriot and one of the most influential politicians of the late Qajar period (Abdi 2001:56). He received his doctorate in law from Moscow University in 1898 and served as first prime minister after Constitutional Revolution of 1906. He reoccupied this position four times until 1925, the fall of Qajar dynasty. He after his mandatory retirement by Reza Shah, devoted his time to cultural activities and spent most of his time in writing ancient history of Iran (Abdi 2001:56). In 1927 he published *Ancient History of Iran: from ancient times to end of Sasanids* in one volume which was a general surveyed of pre-Islamic Iran up to end of Sassanid era on the bases of Greek and Roman sources, but in his *Dāstānhā-ye Irān-e qadim* (*The Story of Ancient Iran*) (Tehran, 1928) attempted to trace back the historical evidence of the western sources in the *Šāh-nāma* and other traditional Persian accounts (Amanat 2004:378). This two works were encapsulated a year later in a single volume entitled *Irān-e qadim* (*Ancient Iran*) (Tehran, 1929), which for many years remained the standard school text. He then wrote a more comprehensive *Ancient history of Iran* in three volumes in 1931-1933 which was a logical outgrowth of his pioneering work (Pirniya 1927/1306; Pirniya



1933/1311). The first two published volumes started with a thorough discussion of Iran and its neighbouring civilization and continued to cover the Elamite, Median, and mostly Achaemenid Empire, up to 3rd century (books I and II). The third volume was about Parthians. As Pirniya has claimed in his short introduction of this book he has tried to refer and rely on ancient Greek and Roman texts in modern European translations as well as on Persian, Arabic, Armenian, Ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Greek Byzantine sources (Pirniya, 1933/1311; Amanat 2004: 378). He also widely benefited from French, German, Russian, and English Scholarship of his time as well as deciphered inscriptions, clay tablets and other textual, archaeological, and numismatic evidence available at his time. Pirniya's descriptive narrative was framed on a linear, dynastic chronology and relied heavily on comparative source criticism in an effort to demonstrate inconsistencies (Amanat 2004: 378). In other words, Pirniya's History is a serious piece of scholarship in which he consulted many sources in European languages as well as ancient and modern Near Eastern texts. He corresponded with many scholars investigating ancient Iran, especially E. Herzfeld. Interestingly, despite Pirniya's strong patriotic feeling, the book of Ancient History of Iran is generally clear from prejudiced interpretations that mostly characterize other nationalist writings like those of Zabih Behroz, Mohammad Mogahdam, Mohammad Sadegh-e Kia and some of Kasravi's writings in this period (Abdi 2001:56; Bigdeloo 2001:217). His scientific approach to ancient history of Iran was then followed by other historians in Iran. After Pirniya many topics (books and articles) were written about ancient Iran by Iranian scholars like Ali Sami, Saeed Nafisi 1953/1332 and Javad Mashkour but for many years Pirniya's book dominated the Iranian scholarly circles and was a textbook in Iranian universities (Mousavi 1990:189-193). Pirniya's scientific approach to Ancient history of Iran, in fact, was the result of a method of historiography that had evolved from annalistic court chronicles and other traditional genres, prevalent pre-Qajar historiography, into the earliest experimentations in modern historiography (for the historiography of Iran in Safavid period see: Quinn 2004; for Afsharid and Zand period see: Tucker 2004).

Conclusion

To sum up, Qajar era was an epoch of major changes in the history of Iran and of the world. In these years social, commercial and educational intercourses between Iran and the western world increased exceedingly; and new phenomena and horizons appeared among people. This development is relatively contemporaneous with re-establishment of Achaemenid history which provoked archaism and nationalism in Iran. These experiences brought a revolution in the method of historiography among some Iranian nationalist historiographers (Amanat 2004; Tavakoli-Targhi, 2001).

Due to these changes some new historical books including Pirniya's Ancient history of Iran written in Iran that followed a new method and a new order in respect of other historian compositions. Two of the main features of their method were: paying attention to Persian language using Old Persian words and writing in a simple method for historiography; giving notice to the ancient Iran in different ways, such as opening history with the Iranian mythic or historic kings, instead of the prophets; emphasizing Iran rather than Islam; overstating the pre-Islamic Iran and understating the history of Islamic era and writing independent research works on dynasties before Islam. These efforts and changes in writing historical reports was part of Iranian modernist endeavours in the last two centuries for recognition of their historical and national identities (Nemati 2010:132-134).

However, the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, Anglo-Russian agreement in 1907 (dividing Iran into British and Russian sphere of influence with a neutral buffer zone in the middle) and Anglo-Persian treaty of 1919 all raised nationalist feelings among Iranians once again. Reza Khan, a nationalist and an indifferent toward religion, who was looking for unification of country, came to power by relying on glory of ancient history of Iran in 1925. These political changes in Iran in the first quarter of twentieth century brought a deep development in study and writing of ancient history of Iran and growth of archaism and historical nationalism. Pirniya was one of those nationalist historians who after his mandatory retirement by Reza Shah, devoted his time to writing ancient history of



Iran. Pirniya's History is a hard-working piece of scholarship in which he consulted many sources in European languages as well as ancient and modern Near Eastern texts. He corresponded with many scholars investigating ancient Iran. Despite the lack of an academic environment encouraging the critical research and despite Pirniya's strong patriotic feeling, the book of Ancient History of Iran is exonerated from prejudiced interpretation that mostly characterizes other nationalists during Qajar and Pahlavi. These has made Pirniya's books most valued and widely read works. This scientific approach to history of Ancient Iran opened new chapter in historiography of Iran that we can call it as a new trend in historiography of Iran in twentieth century.



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