

Continuity in Iranian Identity

Resilience of a cultural heritage

Fereshteh Davaran



Iranian Studies

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Despite changes in sovereignty and in religious thought, certain aspects of Iranian culture and identity have persisted since antiquity. Drawing on an exploration of history, religion and literature to define Iranian cultural identity and link the Persian past with more recent cultural and political phenomena, this book examines the history of Iran from its ancient roots to the Islamic period, paying particular attention to pre-Islamic Persian religions and their influence upon later Muslim practices and precepts in Iran.

Accessible English translations of the pre-Islamic Andarz (Advice) literature and of the Adab (Counsel) genre of the Islamic era illustrate the convergence of religion and literature in Iranian culture and how the mostly religious Adab texts were very much influenced and shaped by the Andarz sources. Within the context of this historical material, and in particular the pre-Islamic religious material, the author highlights its literary and ethical implications on post-Islamic Iranian identity.

Exploring the link between a consistent pre-Islamic Iranian identity and a unique post-Islamic one, this book will be of interest to students of Iranian studies, Middle Eastern studies and Religious studies, as well as anyone wishing to learn more about Persian history and culture.

Fereshteh Davaran teaches Persian language courses in the San Francisco Bay area, most recently at the University of California, Berkeley, and at De Anza and Diablo Valley Colleges. She has translated three classic works of English literature into Persian and has published many literary reviews in both languages.

Iranian Studies

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For Ardavan:

As our mother used to say, when Imam Ali was asked which is better to have, a brother or a friend, he replied, “A brother who is also a friend.”

To my son Hamid and my nephews Bobak, Ashkon and Ardi, and to all their significant others:

You are the future of our increasingly small clan.

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All translations are mine unless stated otherwise. For those English translations by others that are not in the public domain, I have made every effort to secure permission to cite them extensively. In only two cases – that is, those of R. Levy's 1951 translation of 'Unsur al-Ma'ali's *Mirror for Princes* and of G.M. Wickens' 1964 translation of Nasir al-Din Tusi's *The Nasirean Ethics* – was I unable to contact the current rights holders despite my best efforts, and I cite those texts below in good faith. I thank Durham University for permission to cite F.R.C. Bagley's 1964 translation of Ghazali Tusi's *Book of Counsel for Kings*; Bibliotheca Persica Press for permission to cite S. Shaked's 1979 translation of A. Emetan's *Wisdom of the Sasanian Sages: Dēnkard VI*; the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters for permission to cite A.V. Williams' 1990 translation of *The Pahlavi Rivayat Accompanying the Dadestan-i Denig*; and Taylor & Francis Books UK for permission to cite H. Darke's 1978 translation of Nizam al-Mulk Tusi's *The Book of Government; or, Rules for Kings*.

Throughout this book, I use the standard Library of Congress transliterations of Persian and Arabic into Latin script; one may find slightly different transliterations of the same words elsewhere, as with the surname of the late Professor Ahmad Tafazzuli, frequently rendered as Tafazzoli by others. Whenever authors have published in English, I follow their own transliterations of their names. I also normalize the spellings of proper nouns and other foreign words in direct quotations in order to avoid confusion. For some words that go through changes in different stages of Iranian history, alternative forms are at times mentioned in parentheses, and subsequently only one form is used.

Preface

“Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.”

J.-B. A. Karr

Way back in my twenties and before the Islamic revolution, I used to describe myself as a “modern Persian woman” and one who suffered from no apparent identity crisis. Since I belonged to a thoroughly secular circle of friends and relatives, the question of Islam did not preoccupy me. Many people I knew identified as Muslim, but their practice of Islam was not incompatible with associating with the rest of us; most of my Muslim relatives did not shy from drinking alcohol or dressing in Western styles. It seemed to me that Islam, or any other religion, was something that people would shed sooner or later as they came to their senses. Most of the people in my circle were secular intellectuals and dissidents who opposed the Shah, wanting more freedom and democracy for their country.

When the people of Iran started to voice their discontent with the Shah’s regime, my circle of friends was with them and contributed in the toppling of his dictatorship. But, on our path to freedom, we realized that many of the young revolutionaries were passionate Muslims, who considered us to be more a part of the problem than of the solution, and very soon we realized that they would be our enemies more than the Shah ever was.

When Islamic forces gained the upper hand in our country, we felt betrayed and robbed. We felt that the fundamentalists (as we called them) had taken away from us what was rightfully ours. As a secular woman living in Iran for the first eight years of the revolution, my encounters with members of the revolutionary guard and police strengthened this notion. Beyond their harsh words and ways, I always detected a sense of illegitimacy, as if they knew themselves that they had no right to rule us. By now we were keenly aware of Islam; and as much as I was hostile to it, still it did not threaten my identity. It seemed to me that the old wounds that had reopened in the name of Islam should be healed by the Islamicists and not by us.

It was only in the United States that I encountered a real identity crisis: here, Iran had become synonymous with Islam, and the subtleties of our

dilemma were lost to the outer world. I entered a PhD program at the University of California, Berkeley, mainly to strengthen my roots; but my exile and my course of study made me aware of the hidden half of me, which I had kept a secret – the other identity that I had denied. Ironically, it was here in Berkeley where I learned to claim not only my Iranian identity, but my Islamic heritage also.

My acknowledgement of Islam, however, posed new and challenging questions. The Persian or “ethnically Iranian” part of my identity, which I previously had taken for granted, was coming under attack as I adapted to American culture and simultaneously resisted others’ assumptions that Islamic culture is monolithic.

When we say we are “Persians” or “Iranians,” I asked in my research, what is so uniquely Persian or Iranian about us, and how much of what we are is Islamic and/or Iranian? What customs, beliefs, habits, and symbols have been kept from the old times, and in which ways have we changed? In fact, at first it seemed to me that Iran and Islam were so much intertwined that it might be futile to try to distinguish their roots. I have to admit that, even though I am a patriotic Iranian, I knew very little about pre-Islamic Iran.

Even during the time of the Shah, our pre-Islamic history was taught in a vacuum, as though there had been a solitary bright, idyllic moment in the distant past, when things were as they should have been. Unfortunately, that moment, according to our school books, was very brief, only a cheerful introduction to the bleak main text of our history: that is, the Islamic conquest, the Persian defeat, and a hard, heartbreaking path often marked by foreign invasions and home-grown tyrants, leading to our troublesome present.

But my study of the pre-Islamic history of Iran at Berkeley delivered a pleasant surprise: we are Iranians; and our history, literature and culture, pre-Islamic and post-Islamic, is long, interesting, and ongoing. This is the subject of my work.

Introduction

Make a statement, Hafiz, since on the [blank] page of the world,
only the stroke of a pen will be left as the souvenir of your life.

–Hafiz

Only the voice remains.

–Furugh Farrukhzad

The field of history as a whole has been increasingly scrutinized by a number of theorists in recent years: in the apt phrasing of H.V. White,

Continental European thinkers—from Valéry and Heidegger to Sartre, Lévi-Strauss, and Michel Foucault—have cast serious doubts on the value of a specifically ‘historical’ consciousness, stressed the fictive character of historical reconstructions, and challenged history’s claims to a place among the sciences.¹

But histories cannot be evaluated if they do not exist. For the time being, Iranians should perhaps put aside these criticisms and attempt to write their own history from their own point of view, before they begin to doubt its “epistemological status.”² As E. Said has said, “on the whole it is better to explore history than to repress or deny it.”³

A recent trend in Iranian discourse, as in the works of Ashuri, Milani, Riza Quli, Ziba Kalam, etc., has been to argue that Iranians as a people should both stop complaining and blaming others for their adversities and accept responsibility for their situation.⁴ While I have nothing against accepting responsibility, it seems to me that there is some legitimacy to the claim of those – for example, I. Pur Davud, M. Muhammadi, Z.A. Safa, and even some Western scholars, such as J. Wiesehöfer and M. Brosius⁵ – who believe that Iranians have been depicted unfairly in world historiography. According to the latter scholars, Iranians have been the object of misunderstanding, misjudgment, misrepresentation and mistreatment in both the Western and Islamic traditions, and their

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contributions have been purposefully belittled and/or denied. In my study, I come up with instances in which this misrepresentation is self-inflicted as well as external.

This failure in reporting Iranian history is exemplified by three well-known instances. First, most reporters and historians of the so-called “Persian Wars,” that is, the wars between the Achaemenid Empire and the Greeks, were either Greek or Greek sympathizers; thus the story has been told almost exclusively from a Greek point of view. Until the twentieth century CE, Achaemenid inscriptions and the Persepolis Tablets remained undeciphered; conversely, the Greek and later Roman writers and historians were very articulate, and a great number of them (e.g., Herodotus, Xenophon, Arrian, Strabo and Plutarch) left their records for future generations. Other Greek writers who were not strictly historians, such as Aeschylus, Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates, Ctesias and Dinon, also passed down various accounts regarding the Persians, whereas no Persian ever wrote anything about the Greeks. M. Brosius explains that the Greek bias simply reflects a misunderstanding of other people: “[w]hen deeds, actions, customs and behaviour of foreign cultures need to be evaluated, they are often compared with and judged against one’s own cultural standard.”⁶ Although the administration of the Achaemenid Empire was powerful enough to win wars and to control a territory of unprecedented proportions, it was not sufficiently concerned with historiography to record its own victories and achievements. Therefore, despite its frequent success on the battlefield, the Persian state lost the ideological war.

The historical Hellenization of the “Persian Wars” is only one symptom of a more general Old Iranian neglect of historiography. Representations of Iranians in history first appear in the works of other peoples, such as the Elamites, Babylonians, Assyrians, Lydians, Egyptians, Greeks and Israelites.⁷ Because the Medes left no written documentation, Iranians did not have a literate culture until the Achaemenid period. Darius originated the use of Old Persian cuneiform only for royal inscriptions, and his successors down to Artaxerxes followed suit. For other court documents, Darius and his successors employed Elamite scribes who wrote in their own language. Gradually, Aramaeans replaced Elamites in this capacity, and Aramaic was used throughout the empire, as far east as present-day Afghanistan. Persians, Parthians, Khwarazmians and Sogdians used Aramaic script and wrote Iranian terms logographically. Other Iranian narratives were preserved orally: even Zoroaster’s sophisticated *Gathas* and the rest of the *Avesta* were preserved almost intact for millennia in the rich oral tradition of Iran. While Sumerians, Egyptians, Elamites, Babylonians, Assyrians and other ancient nations recorded their own accounts of their culture and history, Iranians documented only political and bureaucratic matters until the adulthood of their civilization.

At the time of the Islamic conquest Iranians were misrepresented by the historical record for a second distinct time. Many scholars now believe that

Iranians played more than a major part in the floruit of Islamic civilization, and this part will be addressed in Chapter 5; but for centuries, most Muslim historical sources, including the Iranian ones, credited others for those achievements. Thus the Iranian voice was drowned out by an Islamic chorus. It was not until the twentieth century, with the emergence of nationalism among nation-states, that Iranians acknowledged the voice of their great poets and thinkers and scientists as their own and celebrated Tabari, Biruni, Avicenna, Razi, Maulavi (Rumi), Hafiz and Sa'di as the best representatives of Iranian culture and history.

Upon losing their religion to Islam, Iranians lost their literary language as well for a time: for at least the first two centuries of Islamic rule, almost all of the oral narratives and existing texts of Iran were rendered in Arabic. When Iranians finally regained their language they adapted Arabic script, and to this day the Persian script is the Arabic alphabet only slightly modified. This predominance of the Arabic language in the early Islamic era, together with the gradual loss of the Pahlavi script, ensured that Arabic would remain the principal cultural language of Iran for more than two centuries. Therefore, when most Iranian scholars came to write historical, scientific, philosophical and other texts in the Arabic language, their contributions were subsumed within a pan-Islamic literate culture and were divorced from their native context.

A third and final example of the under-representation of Iranian viewpoints may be found in the modern era, in which the scientifically superior West has contributed methods and knowledge necessary for the study of the past, but has also shaped and informed Iranian ancient history according to its own values, purposes and prejudices. Iranian scholars today (myself included!) have to play by the rules of the Western academy – and rely upon its scholarship – before they can write anything about their own past. That Western scholars generally (and rightfully) are best qualified to inform Iranians of their own cultural heritage is thus an example of what E. Said calls “Orientalism.”⁸

Since the main body of scholarly research in the field of Iranian studies is done in European languages, it is imperative for all Iranian scholars to master at least one of these languages before they are able to take part in the international intellectual discourse. For this reason, it is now quite possible for a Western scholar to contribute to Iranian studies without knowing the Persian language, whereas an Iranian scholar who does not know any European language will feel quite at a loss in the same field. Thus, many important discourses regarding Iranian history and literature are taking place without any involvement by Iranians themselves, apart from a few exceptional established scholars such as E. Yarshater, D. Khaleghi Motlagh and A. Tafazzuli. One hopes simply that, as the second generation comes of age, more Iranians will find the patience and the interest to become engaged in scholarly research and debate. This project tries to read Iranian history from a Persian perspective and to identify a certain thread of

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continuity in Iranian identity, in all its social, cultural, political, religious and economic aspects. The continuity of mores and beliefs will be demonstrated by a close examination of the pre- and post-Islamic literary genres of Andarz and Adab.

This book comprises the following chapters:

Chapter 1, “Old Iranians,” will provide a brief summary of the history of Iran, from the earliest period attested archaeologically to the conquest of Persia by Alexander of Macedonia. In order to investigate the roots of Iranian culture and identity, I shall examine the foundation of Iranian society and undertake a chronological survey of the peoples who populated Iran before and during the Achaemenid period. I will also discuss contemporary archaeological remains, and in particular the rich epigraphic and archaeological heritage of the Achaemenid kings Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes. This emphasis reflects the significance of their political and cultural legacy; and I will read particularly closely the ethically relevant elements of the proclamations of Darius I that anticipate the later moral texts of the Andarz and Adab literary genres. The chapter will conclude with an assessment of the challenges facing the historian of ancient Iran, including the inherent biases of Greek and Roman histories of Persia and the scarcity of written sources produced by ancient Iranians themselves.

Chapter 2, “Middle Iranians,” will detail the political events of Iran from the time of the fall of the Achaemenids to the end of the Sasanian Empire. I will examine the Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian dynasties, with particular attention to their political leaders as well as to the sources for the study of their history, such as texts, numismatics, and archaeological sites and monuments. I will also touch on the subject of religion and will try to counteract the relative lack of attention typically paid to the longest ruling dynasty in Iran, the Parthians. The ultimate aim of this chapter is to demonstrate continuity in Iranian political, social and artistic foundations from 330 BCE to 630 CE. Notwithstanding the Hellenistic influence introduced by Alexander, Iranians themselves maintained their own core beliefs, which by this period had become a *mélange* of older Indo-Iranian ideas and subsequent Zoroastrian reforms. Iranians also succeeded in achieving political hegemony, first by defeating the Seleucids and then by establishing their own Parthian and Sasanian dynasties, each of which governed for almost half a millennium.

Chapter 3 will address pre-Islamic “Iranian religion,” and in particular the texts, tenets and gods of pre-Zoroastrian Old Iranian religion, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and Mazdakism. Connecting each of these religious traditions are beliefs that reflect Iranian culture, and especially important to Iranian identity is Zoroastrianism, certain characteristics of which have survived to the present day in modern Iranian culture. Any study of pre-Islamic Iranian religions must begin with the origins of their followers; thus, I will adduce the idea that comparative theory posits a parallel compilation of religious oral traditions, including that of a shared

Indo-Iranian pantheon. In addition, I will analyze migration patterns that evinced a split in the hypothesized Indo-Iranian peoples. Such an analysis will contribute to a more general portrait of both the earliest settlers of Iran and their pantheon, which changed with their societies. By the time of Zoroaster, social changes had taken place with respect to settlement patterns and geographical locations, setting the stage for his revelations. I will also examine the ways in which Mani and Mazdak departed from Zoroastrianism.

Chapter 4 is a study of Middle Persian literature in general and of Andarz texts in particular. I will begin with a summary of the extant Middle Persian literature, its nature and its variety; and I will follow with a detailed examination of Andarz, which is arguably the most important Middle Persian genre. Andarz texts were dominated by oral tradition, and thus they were constructed at times from extremely rhythmic, short sentences. This genre exerted ethical influence upon Iranian society by providing moral guidance that extended beyond religious belief to include pragmatic everyday conduct. Throughout Chapter 4, I will engage in close readings of several Andarz and non-Andarz texts, including Book VI of the *Dēnkard*, the *Pahlavi Rivayat*, *Shayist Ne-Shayist*, *Dadistan i Denīg*, *Arda Wiraz Namag* and *Menog i Khrad*. In order to illuminate the moral and behavioural expectations of pre-Islamic Iran, I will distinguish the central themes of these texts and elaborate upon each theme individually. This detailed examination of Andarz literature will provide a foundation for the coming chapters, in which I will argue that the influence of Andarz upon post-Islamic Adab texts ensured the survival of some earlier Iranian cultural elements in the Islamic period.

Chapter 5, “The Iranian Islamic era,” will investigate the cultural implications of the Islamic conquest of Iran. Most Zoroastrians lost their religion, primarily by force, and some Iranians resisted their conquerors through armed struggle; but we shall see that the majority of Iranian converts to Islam chose to claim their pre-Islamic heritage and to revive their culture and language. Iranian writers initially translated Middle Persian texts into Arabic in order to preserve them, and these works were eventually incorporated into the newly developed Modern Persian literature, whose hybrid nature reflected both Islamic and Iranian traditions. I will also establish that Iranian intellectual, political and administrative norms were incorporated into the new Islamic Empire, and that Muslim Iranians played a significant role in shaping Islamic civilization and administration on the model of pre-Islamic Iranian institutions.

Chapter 6 will round out this work with an assessment of Persian literature in the early Islamic era, and of the Adab advice genre in particular. Six significant compilations of advice will be analyzed in an effort to illustrate the persistent features of Iranian culture as they appear firstly in the Andarz genre, and then in the Adab genre, which derived much of its inspiration from ancient Iran. Marked differences between the genres will

also be noted, although they are not the primary focus of this investigation. Whereas *Andarz* was founded exclusively on Iranian morality, the *Adab* genre has a dual identity representing both the Iranian and the Islamic traditions. Whatever their differences, the close relationship between the *Andarz* and *Adab* genres ultimately allowed the preservation of at least some of the pre-Islamic ethical codes.

Finally, I will conclude by summing up the most significant implications of this study and by considering the prospects for future progress in the field of ancient Iranian studies. My ultimate objective throughout this book will be to give a new reading – an *Iranian* reading – of old material that has been debated most frequently by scholars of other cultural backgrounds.

1 Old Iranians¹

Soft countries ... breed soft men. It is not the property of any one soil to produce fine fruits and good soldiers too.

—Cyrus the Great, as quoted by Herodotus²

This chapter will provide a brief summary of the history of Iran, from its earliest archaeological remains to the conquest of Persia by Alexander the Macedonian. My purpose is to investigate the roots of Iranian culture and identity by studying the foundation of Iranian society as far back into the past as known history permits. I will therefore undertake a chronological survey of the peoples who populated Iran before and during the Achaemenid period, as well as some discussion of contemporary archaeological remains. The rich textual and archaeological heritage of the Achaemenids will be treated in detail, with a focus on the Achaemenid kings Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes. The particular emphasis on the Achaemenids reflects the significance of their political and cultural legacy and social institutions, as evidenced by their longevity. This chapter will conclude with an assessment of the limitations of Iranian historiography. I will argue that these limitations derive from several conditions, such as the inherent biases of Greek and Roman histories of Persia and the scarcity of written sources produced by ancient Iranians themselves.

Iran's early history: evidence of migration, settlement and cultural flowering

The land of Iran is one of the oldest cradles of *Homo sapiens*. Paleolithic people lived in many parts of Iran, ranging from Lake Riziahyah to the southeast of the Caspian Sea and from Shiraz to Khurasan. In general, there is very little Upper Paleolithic skeletal material from western Asia, but some of the important finds in the area are in Iran.

Vestiges of both Middle Paleolithic human remains and Neanderthal hominids have been found in Iran. At most of the archaeological sites, there is considerable evidence of a Middle Paleolithic flint industry. Towards the

end of the last glacial period, people living in the region now occupied by Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan had already become Mesolithic hunters and remained so until a Neolithic agrarian society emerged in about 8500 BCE. Some areas, such as the Caspian shore of Iran, may well have been significant routes of human migration during the era of Mesolithic hunters; certainly, by Neolithic times, humans occupied the whole of present-day Iran and its neighbours.³

Although the Persian king Cyrus reportedly claimed that Iran was relatively barren, and therefore not “soft,”⁴ the archaeological evidence suggests otherwise: thousands of years earlier, the natural resources of the region already were supporting a sizeable population of skilled, even sophisticated, workers.⁵ As W.B. Fisher puts it, “material and intellectual culture and complex social institutions can only develop from some surplus in material productivity, and Iran has emerged as one significant area where there has been scope for such efflorescence.”⁶

The tenth and ninth millennia BCE had witnessed the onset of the “Neolithic Revolution” in the Near East, associated with the incipient domestication of crops and animals and with the establishment of permanent village settlements. In Iran, this transformation occurred first in the Zagros Mountains and subsequently spread throughout a region that later came to be known as Susiana.⁷ A village culture soon developed, and by the beginning of the sixth millennium BCE painted pottery became its most common artistic expression. By 4000 BCE the inhabitants of central Iran and of the Kerman region had developed metallurgical industries based upon local copper resources.⁸ We can therefore see that people populated and laboured in different parts of Iran at a very early period.

From the historical record: Elamites and Iranians (Medes and Persians)

The Elamites

The first historically recorded people thriving in Iran were the Elamites. Together with the Sumerians, they were one of the earliest civilizations to employ writing. The Elamites lived in Susa, today’s Khusistan, and in Fars for a few millennia; thus they were neighbours first of the Sumerians, and later of the Akkadians, Babylonians and Assyrians. The Elamites survived for thousands of years, though they were not untouched by intermarriage, conquest and expansion. Some historians have divided their kingdom into three periods. First is the Proto-Elamite Susa I period, starting from before the founding of Susa in c.4200 BCE and ending in the third millennium BCE. In this earliest stage, the Elamite civilization was attached to the Iranian plateau and was distinct from the Mesopotamians, but in the Middle-Elamite Susa II period, from the third millennium BCE to c.1200 BCE, the Sumerian

influence is noticeable. The final, Neo-Elamite, period ends with the fall of Susa to Ashurbanipal of Assyria in 647 BCE.

According to D.T. Potts, “we cannot in all honesty speak of Elam before 2600–2500 BCE.”⁹ Susa was, however, occupied for at least 1600 years before this time (what Potts terms the Proto-Elamite period); and clay tablets with Proto-Elamite script from Susa go back to 3500 BCE. These clay tablets were associated with the keeping of records and with the calculation of accounts. Anshan and Susa were the two important centres during the flourish of Elamite civilization, although the kingdom and its influence were much more widespread. From Gilan (Sialk) to Kirman, different sites and archaeological remains now confirm the Elamites’ influence in industry, art and architecture throughout a vast region encompassing Iran and even parts of India and Central Asia. Although the Elamite system of governance probably originated in a Sumerian-type “priest-king” monarchy, the Elamites eventually established many royal dynasties.¹⁰

Even after the kingship of Elam fell in 647 BCE, the Elamite people and language survived and became an important part of the Achaemenid Empire. Indeed, scholars such as Potts now believe that “Elam’s absorption into the Achaemenid Empire and its legacy in the Achaemenid period in no way mark the phase at which one can legitimately conclude an assessment of Elam’s history and archaeology.”¹¹ We will again consider the absorption of the Elamites into the Persian Empire later in this chapter.

The Iranians

Iranian identity is contingent upon two key elements: the first is a shared use of different Iranian languages, and the second is the practice of a common religion, as it is represented in the *Avesta*. Aspects of Old Iranian history, excluding Zoroaster and the *Avesta*, will be dealt with at this point; and these topics will be addressed in detail with respect to Iranian religions in Chapter 3.

The language of the people considered to be Iranians belongs to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family of languages. The original Indo-European people, or Proto-Indo-Europeans, were unlike any ancient people we are likely to encounter. As the linguistic ancestors of nearly half this planet’s population, they are one of the most important entities in the prehistoric record – and yet they are one of the most elusive. No Proto-Indo-European text exists; their physical remains and material culture cannot be identified without extensive argument; and their geographical location has been the subject of a century and a half of intense yet inconclusive debate.¹²

Although it is not known for certain where the Proto-Indo-Europeans originated or how they spread, the Indo-Aryan and Iranian languages are very closely related; thus, scholars generally agree that from a hypothetical Proto-Indo-European language grew an Indo-Iranian language that later

divided into Indic and Iranian branches.¹³ By 3000 BCE, Indo-Iranian languages had evolved over a wide area bordered by the Volga to the west and modern-day Kazakhstan in the east,¹⁴ and the formerly unified group began to split.¹⁵ It is generally accepted that one group left its original central Asian homeland to migrate into north-central India around the mid-second millennium BCE, while the Iranians stayed in Central Asia, whence some tribes moved westwards towards present-day Iran late in the second millennium.

The terms “Iran” and “Iranian” are derived from the Old Iranian ethnic adjective *Aryānā*, based upon the Proto-Indo-European root word **ar-yo-*, whose essential connotation of “goodness,” “honour” gave rise to the ancient Greek words *arete* and *aristos* as well. The Indo-Iranian group that came to settle in north-central India is now known as “Indo-Aryan,”¹⁶ and it lent its original ethnic name to the region called *Aryavarta* or “land of the Aryans” in certain Sanskrit texts. That the Indo-Aryans and Iranians were once the same people is demonstrated primarily by the thematic and linguistic kinship between the *Rig Veda* of India and the *Avesta* of Iran. In these two ancient collections of religious compositions we find many linguistic similarities and a number of shared gods; we will examine these similarities further in Chapter 3. Thus, it can be said that both the ancient Iranians and the ancient Indians descended from a common Proto-Indo-Iranian ancestry.

By the end of the second millennium BCE the Iranian people had spread into the vast plateau of Iran, and their religion was practised in different corners of the land. Most of the population of Central Asia appears to have been eastern Iranian in the mid-first millennium; members of this group were further identified according to the lands they inhabited: Sogdians, Bactrians, Chorasmians and so on. Ancient Greek historians tell us that, from the end of the seventh through the sixth centuries BCE, complex states began to form in Central Asia. Herodotus describes “tribes that lived around the Akas River ... foremost among whom were Chorasmians,” as well as a “federation unifying many of the eastern Iranian peoples.”¹⁷ Ctesias reports fictive campaigns of the Assyrians in Bactria, referring to the capital of the latter territory as “the strongly fortified capital of Bactria (modern Balkh),” while Strabo corroborates accounts of the grandeur of the ancient Bactrian kingdom.¹⁸ Both Bactria and the Sogdian capital Maracanda (present-day Samarqand) had citadels and were called “royal.”¹⁹ All these texts indicate the existence of advanced societies during the first half of the first millennium BCE in eastern Iran.

Other textual information regarding eastern Iranians comes from the *Avesta*. M. Schwartz calls our attention to the first *Karde* of *Videvdat* in the *Avesta*, wherein is presented a list of sixteen good lands created by Ahura Mazda, beginning with the mythological Aryana Vaejah:

Here we have a series of purely eastern locations ... including Sogdiana, Margiana, Bactria, Herat, Gandhara, Arachosia, the Helmand River,

the River Buner and finally the ‘Seven Streams’ (*Hapta Hendu* = *Hindu*, [that is,] the Indus and its tributaries).²⁰

Since the *Avesta* originated in eastern Iran, and the first two Iranian dynasties, the Median and the Achaemenid, came from the west of Iran, there is a disparity between the information given in the *Avesta* and that provided in Achaemenid Persian inscriptions; archaeological remains, however, point to a general sense of cultural kinship within Iran’s wide boundaries in the early to mid-first millennium BCE.²¹ The *Avesta*, like the Bible, was composed over a long period of time, and although part of the *Avesta* was compiled either before or during the Median and the Achaemenid periods, it fails to mention either the Medes or the Achaemenid Persians. It is rather the case that “the place names mentioned, apart from mythological geography, are all in eastern Iran.”²² Indeed, though it remains controversial, some scholars assert a linguistic connection between the “Airyas,” the people of eastern Iran mentioned in the *Avesta*, and the Aryas of western Iran.²³ In any event, the Medes and the Persians certainly identified themselves as Iranian, and the Achaemenid kings often attested their Iranian identity in their inscriptions.

The Medes

Notably, the Medes may have been the first western Iranians to have formed their own government. The evidence for this supposition is admittedly scarce, since Medes unfortunately did not leave behind any records of their own; thus, the scholars who attempt to reconstruct Median history face a formidable task. The paucity of material notwithstanding, scholars studying Media are engaged in a debate on the existence, scope and nature of the Median Empire that divides roughly into two camps: while some researchers claim that there is enough evidence to prove the existence of a Median empire,²⁴ others argue against it. H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, for example, contends that “no art signifies no state”²⁵ and recommends that scholars suspend arguments for the existence of a Median state until further evidence – either written or material – comes to light. O. Muscarella and M. Roaf, on the other hand, believe that the excavated Median sites already provide sufficient evidence for “a distinctive architectural style”²⁶ and that

the lack, or better, the limitation of sources – for which we have no explanation – cannot be used against the available sources (the Babylonian chronicle, DB [the inscription of Darius I at Behistun], Herodotus) that do support a modern perception that a Median state existed at least between 615 to 550 BC.²⁷

It is a great pity that no written text in any of the Iranian languages survives from this long historical period.²⁸ J. Wiesehöfer claims that in the “absence

of any written traditions of their own ... the territorial, political, social and cultural profile of the 'empire' of the Medes as yet remains unclear."²⁹ Archaeological remnants of this era have hitherto been scant as well, and, as J. Curtis puts it, the reconstruction of this period of Iranian history is "frustrating."³⁰

Judging from Assyrian sources, some scholars conclude that the loosely associated Median tribes suffered a number of Assyrian campaigns from the ninth to the mid-seventh centuries BCE, although the Median territory certainly was populated for many centuries before the Assyrian references. The Medes ultimately retaliated when they joined the Babylonians in order to conquer the Assyrians in 612 BCE, and they went on to extend their influence – if not an "empire" in the truest sense – westwards as far as the Halys River in north-central Anatolia (present-day Turkey), challenging the Scythians, the Mannaeans, and the Lydians along the way.³¹ A. Farkas puts the presence of Medes and Persians in Iran at about 1100 BCE, noting that they had lived there for perhaps half a millennium before the Median coalition defeated Assyria.³² Greek historians such as Herodotus, Ctesias and Xenophon mentioned the Medes as well. According to Herodotus, the Medes were divided into six tribes,³³ including the Magi, who conducted religious rituals in ancient Iran and from whose ranks came the astrologers who visited the Christ child, according to the Biblical New Testament. We find the first mention of the Magi in the Behistun inscription, in which the infamous traitor Gaumata is identified as a Magian.

The Medes are said (by the Greek historian Herodotus) to have been Assyrian subjects for 500 years before defeating their masters in 612 BCE, setting an impressive example for other ancient observers. A century and a half later, Herodotus wrote that the Medes "took arms in the cause of liberty and fought with such gallantry that they shook off the Assyrian yoke and became a free people. Their lead was followed by other nations."³⁴ The Medes replaced the Assyrians in some parts of western Asia, forming a powerful new kingdom and building their own capital by the name of Hagmatana, "a place of meeting," known to the Greeks as Ecbatana and now called Hamadan. According to Herodotus, Ecbatana was a beautiful capital built on a hill with seven circles, the inner one housing the king and the court. The circle of the outer wall is "much the same in extent as at Athens."³⁵

Whether or not they controlled an empire, it is a pity that so little remains of the Medes; and because no Iranian scholar is involved in this academic dispute, Iranian perspectives are absent from our study of this important chapter in Near Eastern history.

The Persians

Although the Elamites were defeated by the Assyrians, they retained a cohesive ethnic identity within the Assyrian empire, mixing with new

Indo-European peoples who had begun to enter Fars (Persia) and the region southeast of the Zagros Mountains around 1000 BCE. An independent Persian polity was established in Fars sometime after 646 BCE, and at this time the Elamite and Persian populations appear to have undergone a process of ethnic amalgamation.

This theory of amalgamation, suggesting continuity rather than discontinuity during the transition from the Elamite to the Persian cultures in the mid-first millennium BCE, was first suggested by P. de Miroschedji in the 1980s and has been supported by scholars such as W.M. Sumner, who concurs with Miroschedji's assertion that "contemporaneous stylistic diversity within a restricted geographical region is a reliable proxy for ethnic diversity,"³⁶ and P. Amiet, who proposes that the Persians took over the monarchy of Anshan while the indigenous Elamites rapidly adopted Persian culture. Amiet goes on to argue that the new Persian state expressed a desire not to "subjugate" but to "integrate."³⁷ If this reasoning is correct, then it appears not to have been a coincidence that Susa became a "strategic intercultural centre and a royal seat of both Elamite and Persian Achaemenid kings."³⁸ Once again, Iranian scholars unfortunately have not made recognized contributions to this important debate.

The Achaemenids

Material remains, Persepolis tablets, royal inscriptions

In 1933, during his excavation of the ceremonial citadel of Darius I at Persepolis, E. Herzfeld found an administrative archive of nearly 30,000 clay tablets. Six thousand of them are more or less well preserved, but only around 2,000 of these have so far been formally published.³⁹ Dated within the period from 509 to 458 BCE, the two types of tablets have become known as the Persepolis Treasury Tablets (PTT), which concern payment to workers in silver, and the Persepolis Fortification Tablets (PFT), which concern the supply, transfer and distribution of natural produce and distribution of daily or monthly rations. The texts were often trilingual, written in three different cuneiform scripts: Elamite, Akkadian (Babylonian) and Old Persian. Egyptian and Greek were added when appropriate, and Aramaic is found on the tomb of Darius I.

The Persepolis tablets have been a wonderful source for the study of everyday life and religion in Achaemenid Iran.⁴⁰ These sources reveal the existence of an official religion and demonstrate that sacrifices were offered for the god Ahura Mazda. Rations from these sacrifices were also distributed to those who chose to worship other gods – both indigenous and non-Iranian – thus implying a certain degree of religious tolerance.

Whether the Achaemenids were followers of the prophet Zoroaster (Persian: Zarathustra) is disputed: he is not mentioned by name in Achaemenid material and textual remains, including 110 or more royal

inscriptions scattered throughout Persia and elsewhere. More than half of these inscriptions belong to the time of Darius I and his son Xerxes, and during those reigns only Ahura Mazda, the god given the highest authority and praise by Zoroaster, is mentioned. After the time of Xerxes, however, other inscriptions do mention other deities. Although the state distributed offerings for all the Iranian gods as well as for Elamite or Babylonian gods, certain basic principles had to be observed: H. Koch reasons that only grain or flour, wine or beer and fruits were dispensed, since blood sacrifice was forbidden by Zoroaster and animal offerings do not appear in these tablets.⁴¹

The fortuitous discovery of tablets at Persepolis made an ancient Iranian voice more voluble in Achaemenid historiography. As the tablets are deciphered, they become the focus of increasing, if gradual, scholarship: since Elamite is “a language with no close kin,”⁴² the task of reading them is slow and difficult.

Aspects of Achaemenid daily life as recorded in the Persepolis tablets

The tablets relate the payments made to sculptors, stonemasons, road builders, winemakers, beer brewers and other workers at Persepolis. E. Yamauchi reports that “about 30,000 workers from over 100 localities were employed at Persepolis. Of these 37.5 percent were men, 39.8 percent women, 12.7 percent boys and 10 percent girls.”⁴³ The status of these workers (*kurtash*) is disputed among scholars. Some (e.g., I.M. Diakonoff)⁴⁴ believe them to be slaves, others (e.g., G. Cameron)⁴⁵ view them as free workers, and still other scholars argue that “the Kurtash were a mixed category, including a significant number of slaves who were prisoners of war [and] a certain number of free people who voluntarily worked for wages.”⁴⁶

Workers received payment in money as well as in kind. Not only were the numbers of male and female workers almost equal, but “male and female workers received equal rations.”⁴⁷ Female workers would be appointed as headworkers and “received equal payment as skilled labourers;” “distinctions were made within professions, presumably based on different levels of expertise and skills.”⁴⁸ Although Achaemenid Persia was a patriarchal society, women had the right to own property and Achaemenid royal women were estate owners.⁴⁹ Even if slaves were employed in the Achaemenid Empire, considering its scale “there were relatively few slaves (when compared with free individuals), while free people remained the basic workers both in agriculture and in the crafts.”⁵⁰

The economic boost

With the creation of the Achaemenid Empire, “the world entered [into] a period of great economic prosperity.”⁵¹ Commercial relations were

introduced and developed between countries – such as Greece and Babylonia – that had not previously traded directly with one another. Industry began to develop in order to supply consumer goods, including vessels of gold, silver and bronze, for both rich and ordinary people. “Among the leading industries were the manufacturing of clothing, tunics, trousers and shoes ... [and] women adorned themselves with jewellery and all kinds of cosmetics.”⁵² Luxury goods from all over the world were abundant in Iranian markets.

The agrarian economy of Persia in the first millennium BCE depended largely upon free labour, and the Achaemenid state collected tax on land and on income.⁵³ The tax on land was commensurate with the size of the land in question, which was measured precisely; tax could be paid with money or in kind. It is estimated that the Achaemenids collected the equivalent of 20 million *darics* (gold coins weighing approximately 8.5 grams a piece) a year in taxes. But we know from Babylonian, Egyptian, Persian and Israelite sources that while the early Achaemenid kings Cyrus and Cambyses had taxed income and land at 20 percent, by the end of the fifth century BCE the state-imposed tax had risen sharply to 40–50 percent. This excise inflation caused many inhabitants of the land either to mortgage their fields and orchards or, in dire cases, to sell their children into slavery. Some Egyptian peasants who escaped to the cities were arrested and brought back by force.⁵⁴ Some scholars believe that economic pressures were caused partially by a famine at the end of Xerxes’ reign, which caused major inflation and emptied the royal storehouses.⁵⁵

The Achaemenid army

The existence of the Achaemenid Empire depended to a great extent on its army, which was arrayed in military garrisons. The roads were also of great concern to the Achaemenid kings and they used their treasury to maintain the old and to build new ones. The troops consisted of cavalry and infantry: the former were chosen from among the nobility, and the latter were recruited from among the farmers. The exact size of the Achaemenid army is not known, because it has been exaggerated ever since the time of Herodotus.⁵⁶ We do know, however, that a special royal guard of 10,000 was called the “Immortals,” because if ever one of its number were obliged to withdraw from service, or were to perish, another soldier always was ready to step into his place.

The role of cavalry was imperative in the Achaemenid world, and its importance is reflected by the epitaph of Darius I at Naqsh-e Rostam (DNb): “As a horseman I am a good horseman. As a bowman I am a good bowman both afoot and on horseback. As a spearman I am a good spearman both afoot and on horseback.”⁵⁷ The Persians appear to have pioneered the broad deployment of cavalry in the early first millennium BCE, finding early success against Assyrian chariots.⁵⁸ But it was mainly their “readiness to adapt to

different military behaviour”⁵⁹ that aided the Achaemenids in their military victories.

Achaemenid eclectic art

The same adaptability evinced in the armed forces was also brought to bear in Achaemenid art and architecture. As a result, scholars argue about its originality and historical significance. Herodotus reports that the Persians are quick learners: “no race is so ready to adopt the foreign ways as the Persian. ... Pleasures, too, of all sorts they are quick to indulge in when they get to know about them.”⁶⁰ Darius I himself boasted about the multiethnic construction of his palace, which in turn both implies the reach of his empire and explains its eclectic style. On an inscription in Susa, Darius lists the names of the contributing artists and the materials they used:

From afar its ornamentation was brought. ... The cedar timber ... was brought from a mountain in Lebanon. ... The gold was brought from Sardis. ... The silver and ebony were brought from Egypt. ... The ornamentation with which the wall was adorned, that from Ionia was brought, the ivory which was wrought here, was brought from Ethiopia, and from Sind and from Arachosia. ... The stone cutters who wrought the stone, those were Ionians and Sardians. ... The goldsmiths who wrought the gold, those were Medes and Egyptians.⁶¹

Not only the building of the palace but the court itself was under the influence of other monarchies: the Achaemenid court modelled its court structure on the practices of Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and most probably Neo-Elamite courts.⁶²

J. Curtis observes that at Pasargadae, on a stone relief in Cyrus’s early Achaemenid palace, the Egyptian crown and the Ionian-inspired ashlar masonry “already show the eclectic nature of Achaemenid art and architecture.”⁶³ Some (e.g., A. Farkas, J. Boardman) attribute the eclectic qualities of the Achaemenid style to a lack of originality, but others (e.g., T.C. Young, A.U. Pope) see them as unique and as indicative of the multicultural diversity of the empire.⁶⁴ Boardman criticises Persian rulers for creating “an individual style, in which its dominant design was due to no single source [... they learned] sculptural style from one, architectural from another, leaving the details to immigrant practitioners.”⁶⁵

P. Amiet’s view of Achaemenid eclecticism is most convincing of all: he views the architecture as an “Iranian tradition developed in Media” with column decoration incorporating “elements of its most admired arts of the people of the empire.” Hence, Amiet contends that “the eclectic art of Persians signalled the advent of a new age.”⁶⁶ T.C. Young expresses a similar view when he states that “the Achaemenids combined the art of others before them with traditions of their own. In doing so they produced

an art which, like their empire, marked the end of the ancient world and the beginning of something new.”⁶⁷

In its essence as well as in its form, Persian art heralded a new era. Although traditional horned lions and griffins, ibexes and bulls still decorated the walls and column heads, it is the Royal Guard of the Immortals, depicted naturalistically, that protects the Apadana stairways at Persepolis. The old motif of the “Master of the Animals” also appears in the decoration; but the procession of the gift bearers – representatives of the different nations of the empire – suggests scenes of banquet and celebration instead of the earlier Neo-Assyrian themes of battles and hunts. Persian and Median nobles are shown conversing with each other, and the envoys of 23 subject peoples are depicted in their distinctive national costumes. The gifts of the delegations are either intrinsically valuable and exotic objects or items typical of their region of origin: jewellery, textiles, bowls and animals, including lions. These are not

scenes of warfare of the king’s conquest, or of enemies defeated, but contented subject peoples paying homage to their ruler ... [T]he king in the center is not an individual; he is not Darius or Xerxes, but the image of *khvarnas*. The reliefs are a sculptured statement of the philosophy behind the tolerance of Persian imperial rule, the perfect *Pax Persica*.⁶⁸

Alas, present-day Iranian narratives are once again absent from any discussion on the question of originality in Achaemenid visual representation.

Cyrus the Great

The Achaemenids claimed descent from a legendary ancestor known as Achaemenes, the eponym of an Iranian tribe from the region of Fars. Achaemenes (Hakhamanish) was thought by ancient historians to have led the Persians, as Romulus led the Romans and Moses the Israelites, on a path that ended in Persia.⁶⁹ Cyrus II, Achaemenes’ great-great-grandson, was the driving force that transformed the kingdom to an empire. Now known as Cyrus the Great, he claimed an Elamite ancestry (as King of Anshan) and was said by Herodotus to have had a royal Median lineage as well. The reputation of his ancestry would seem to establish that Cyrus was well positioned to rule a kingdom of many peoples and to build upon his inheritance; in J.M. Cook’s apt words, “the Persians did not have to carve out an empire for themselves from scratch. Cyrus the Great took over one ready-made from the Medes.”⁷⁰

Although archaeological excavations reveal that no ancient Iranian dynasty left behind the quantity of art and relics produced by the Achaemenids, not many written sources survive from the time of Cyrus. Thus, Cyrus the Great, one of the most praised rulers in history, ironically

appears more often in Greek than in Iranian texts. Indeed, only two relevant sources of information on Cyrus have been found in Iran itself: one of them is an inscription on a pillar at Pasargadae attributed to Cyrus but no longer extant, and the other is the famous “Cyrus cylinder.”

The Pasargadae inscription declares, in Elamite, Babylonian and Old Persian, “I, Cyrus, the King, an Achaemenian.”⁷¹ In 1820 the text was still intact, and it fortunately was copied by Sir Robert Ker Porter. Two other archaeologists, Flandén and Coste, also made recordings of it 20 years later.⁷² The inscription was placed above a still extant relief of Cyrus, depicted as an Assyrian winged figure, dressed in an Elamite robe with an Egyptian crown. This image, coupled with the fact that the name Cyrus (Kourush) is an Elamite name, nicely demonstrates the amalgamation of Persian and Elamite cultures mentioned above. In fact, in the only written document left by Cyrus, that is, his cylinder in Babylonian cuneiform (see below), Cyrus calls himself “King of Anshan.”⁷³ While little can be concluded from a single lost sentence, Pasargadae itself is a testimony to the beginning of a new era in Iranian history, one in which Iran would be a major player.

The second significant piece of evidence regarding Cyrus, namely the barrel-shaped clay “Cyrus cylinder” discovered in the late nineteenth century in the Temple of Marduk at Babylon, is now kept in the British Museum.⁷⁴ The cuneiform inscription records the capture of Babylon. Because Cyrus was now “master of an area stretching from the Mediterranean to eastern Iran and from the Black Sea to the borders of Arabia,” the cylinder names him, “with some justification,”⁷⁵ the ruler of the world. Apart from one line on the Pasargadae inscription copied by Ker Porter, the cylinder is the only instance in which Cyrus speaks in the first-person singular:

I did not allow anybody to terrorize [any place] of the country [of Sumer] and Akkad. I strove for peace in Babylon and in all this [other] sacred cities. As to the inhabitants of Babylon ... I abolished forced labor ... from Nineveh, Assur, and Susa, Akkad, Eshnunna, Zamban, Me-Turnu and Der until the region of Gutium, I returned to these sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been ruins for a long time, the images which [used] to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I [also] gathered all their [former] inhabitants and returned [to them] their habitations.⁷⁶

The Jews are not mentioned by name but clearly are to be included among the repatriated peoples mentioned by Cyrus.⁷⁷ It should be noted that by the time of the cylinder’s discovery Cyrus’s good reputation had long been established; thanks to the cylinder, however, Cyrus now enjoys the specific distinction of having been the first person to declare universal human rights.⁷⁸

The scarcity of ancient Iranian material on Cyrus the Great is compensated by a wealth of foreign appraisals of the man de Gobineau claimed “without fear of contradiction to rank amongst the five or six greatest leaders of humanity,”⁷⁹ and a king whom noted Orientalist Claudius James Rich, upon visiting the tomb of Cyrus in 1812, called “the best, the illustrious and the most interesting of Oriental Sovereigns.”⁸⁰

Apart from the Babylonian cylinder and other short references, the bulk of our information regarding Cyrus comes from Ancient Greek history and from the Hebrew Bible (henceforth referred to as the Old Testament). The Israelite texts attributed to the prophet Isaiah portray Cyrus in a glorious light as the one responsible for the Israelites’ return to Jerusalem from Babylon. “Thus says the Lord your redeemer ... who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose.’”⁸¹ Further, “The Lord loves him [i.e., Cyrus]; he [Cyrus] shall perform his purpose on Babylon, and his arm shall be against the Chaldeans. I, even I, have spoken and called him, I have brought him, and he will prosper in this way.”⁸² It is after such a declaration that Yahweh is said to tell Israel, “Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, ... [and] say, ‘The Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob,’”⁸³ as though Cyrus’s decree had preceded Yahweh’s command to the Israelites. Cyrus’s importance is underscored by the legitimacy attributed to him as God’s anointed one: “thus says the Lord to his anointed, Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him ... I will go before you ... so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name ... though you do not know me.”⁸⁴ It is said to be through Cyrus that the Lord commanded Israel to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple.⁸⁵

Even though Cyrus is not a member of the house of Israel, he nevertheless is chosen to be the anointed (messiah) of God; and this is the only instance in which a Gentile is given such authority in the Old Testament. Scholars debate the extent to which the Old Testament provides a strictly chronological and “accurate” account of Israelite history:

Old Testament exegesis has shown that the texts are not to be considered as strictly ‘historical’ records, but as writings promising or describing a ‘theological’ turning point ... for Israel. Cyrus appears as the instrument of Yahweh’s historical action ... ending the period of exile and leading to a new beginning. Scholars even debate whether the order to build the temple, the restoration of the cult in Jerusalem and the repatriation of the deported Jews can in fact be traced back to Cyrus or whether we are rather to assume a (theological) ‘back-projection,’ attributing deeds to this hoped-for savior that were only to be authorized at a later period.⁸⁶

Indeed, the book of Isaiah marks a turning point in Israel’s history: a migration back to the Promised Land, evoking an even earlier historical and theological event, namely the Israelite Exodus from Egypt. That Cyrus

is associated with the homecoming of the Israelites distinguishes him as a key player in Jewish history. Whatever his actual role, the reputation of Cyrus has derived great benefit from this powerful story of the Israelites' release from captivity in Babylon.

Greek historians and writers also treat Cyrus favourably and as having an exceptional character that distinguishes him from the rest of the Achaemenid kings. Herodotus, for example, remarks that

the Persians have a saying that Darius was a tradesman, Cambyses a tyrant, and Cyrus a father: the first being out for profit whenever he could get it, the second harsh and careless of his subjects' interests, and the third, Cyrus, in the kindness of his heart always occupied with plans for their well-being.⁸⁷

In his biography of the king, the *Cyropaedia*, Xenophon speaks of Cyrus in glowing terms: "Cyrus's empire was the greatest and most glorious of all the kingdoms in Asia."⁸⁸ Perhaps Cyrus's good reputation with the Greeks stems from the fact that, unlike his successors, he did not invade Greek lands. The consistency of Cyrus's image in these different sources suggests that he may well have possessed the qualities that were attributed to him. D. Stronach underscores the significance of Cyrus's style of rule as a positive mark in the history of governance: "by the time of his death in 530 BCE, Cyrus had changed the face of the civilized world[, and] his judicious treatment of the many different people under his rule ... introduced a new, more benevolent concept of human government."⁸⁹

Cambyses II

Cyrus's son Cambyses succeeded his father to the throne, and one of his greatest achievements was the conquest of Egypt. Herodotus portrays Cambyses as a vicious tyrant, even a madman, committing atrocities such as killing Apis, the sacred bull of the ancient Egyptians, and assassinating his own brother Bardiya to protect his throne.⁹⁰ E. Yamauchi has argued convincingly, however, that there was no such killing of the Apis Bull during Cambyses' occupation of Egypt.⁹¹ Unlike Cyrus, there are no biblical references to Cambyses.⁹²

Other sources – Iranian, Babylonian and Egyptian – suggest that Cambyses' methods in Egypt did not depart significantly from those of his father Cyrus: he appears to have respected Egyptian gods, to have been recognized as Pharaoh at Memphis, and to have adopted the Pharaoh's traditional garb. Herodotus and other Greek historians who followed him characterize Cambyses' campaign in Egypt as a failure and an embarrassment, forgetting both that he was the first Iranian king to have conquered Egypt (establishing the 27th Dynasty, which lasted 120 years) and that Egypt remained under Achaemenid rule until Alexander defeated the Persians.

Darius I

In Herodotus's account, while Cambyses was absent from Persia, a *magus* called Gaumata claimed to be Bardiya and usurped power. Upon hearing the news, Cambyses rushed back to his homeland but was killed accidentally before his return. In the formal Persian Court inscription at Behistun documenting Darius's rise to power, the imposter Gaumata is said to have ruled briefly until Darius and seven other conspirators abducted him and appointed Darius in his place.

The Herodotean account of Darius's ascent to power very closely agrees with the formal Persian Court version, and for centuries this coincidence was taken as a sign of its truthfulness. Only recently have some archaeologists come to suspect Darius's version and Herodotus's credulity. Although heated debate runs on both sides of the argument, Iranian scholars once again have not played an active part in the discourse.⁹³

Darius's famous rock relief at Behisun, near Kirmanshah, is accompanied by cuneiform inscriptions written in Old Persian, Babylonian (Akkadian) and Elamite. These inscriptions not only set a trend for all subsequent Achaemenid inscriptions, which were written down in trilingual fashion, but the former remained the most detailed. Perhaps most significantly, this is where the Old Persian cuneiform script was born. On this monument, according to J. Cook,

Darius did two excellent things which merit eternal gratitude. One, he had the surrounds of the panel at Behistun dressed smooth so that no later ruler could reach and deface it. The other is that ... , when the copies of trilingual Achaemenid inscriptions came to the attention of European scholars, the script that was [Darius's] own was seen to be the one that could be deciphered, and from the beginning of the nineteenth century ... a key was thus provided for Elamite and Akkadian [scripts], which would otherwise have remained unintelligible.⁹⁴

Darius's administrative innovations

Indeed, Darius's memorable accomplishments were many: it was during his reign that the Achaemenid Empire achieved its greatest size, extending from Libya to the Indus River.⁹⁵ Having created the empire, Darius also became its main architect and administrator. Since the reign of Cyrus the Great, the political organization of the land had functioned more as a confederation than an empire; but Darius created the system of regional satrapies so well known from Greek literature, permitting him to overlay an administrative infrastructure upon existing systems of government and law, which he left largely intact. In J.A. de Gobineau's nice turn of phrase, Darius "merely insured that in every country there was a strong military arm ... under the control of persons he could trust: these were the Satraps."⁹⁶

In an innovative new tax code, each satrapy was assessed with a fixed annual amount. Darius also is credited with instituting a Pony Express-style station-to-station mail system and with extending it throughout the whole empire, increasing its efficiency by building and maintaining a network of royal roads. De Gobineau reminds us that “by this method news arrived at its destination as rapidly as it ever did ... before the railways were built.”⁹⁷

Another innovation of Darius was the minting of royal coinage:

In the sixth century [BCE], Lydians [in western Anatolia] and Greeks had become quite accustomed to gold and silver coins whose metal values – that is to say both quality and weight – were guaranteed by the stamp of the ruler or civic authority that issued them. ... But surprisingly, even in Mesopotamia, nothing indigenous had come to light that could be spoken of as genuine coinage. ... It would probably have been about 512 [BCE] when ... Darius first recognized the advantage of issuing his own stamped coinage.⁹⁸

Thus Darius appears to have struck the first blow against the traditional standard-weight monetary system that had existed for millennia.

No Iranian dynasty left behind as many beautiful monuments as did the Achaemenids, and no Achaemenid king did more for art and architecture than did Darius. The Achaemenid art initiated by Cyrus in Pasargadae flourished and matured in Darius's hands. His Behistun monument manifests, from the outset, Darius's concern that his achievements should not be forgotten.⁹⁹ His style reflects a continuation of monarchistic practice known from the Neo-Babylonians and Neo-Assyrians.¹⁰⁰ Because Darius, in the beginning of his reign, had to fight so many rebels and wars to establish his legitimacy, it seems that he considered the Persian Empire to be his own creation; A. Farkas has noted the irony that his “almost ruthlessly personal” sculptural image should have come to “represent an ideal figure of royalty to later Persian kings.”¹⁰¹

Darius is mentioned several times in the Old Testament. It was during his reign, likely on 12 March 515 BCE, that the Second Temple in Jerusalem was completed, just over 70 years after the destruction of the First Temple: as the book of Ezra reports,

King Darius then issued an order, and they searched in the archives stored in the treasury at Babylon. A scroll was found in the citadel of Ecbatana in the province of Media and on it was written: “Memorandum: In the first year of king Cyrus, the king issued a decree concerning the temple of god in Jerusalem: ‘let the temple be rebuilt as a place to present sacrifices and let its foundation be laid. ... The costs are to be paid by the royal treasury.’”¹⁰²

Although Darius is portrayed favourably in the Old Testament, he does not enjoy the same degree of reverence enjoyed by Cyrus the Great, whose own

reputation appears to have been greater among the Israelites than that of any other non-Jewish figure.

Darius initiated the use of Old Persian cuneiform, and approximately one-third (i.e., 33) of all extant Achaemenid inscriptions date from his time. He is the first person whose words are recorded in Persian, and his terms reveal both a highly personal relationship with Ahura Mazda and an exclusive devotion to that god, bordering on monotheism.¹⁰³

Darius repeatedly credits all his successes and all his possessions to Ahura Mazda. At Behistun he states:

By the favor of Ahuramazda I am King; Ahuramazda bestowed the kingdom upon me; Ahuramazda bore me aid until I got possession of this kingdom; by the favor of Ahuramazda I hold this kingdom.¹⁰⁴

Likewise, at Naqsh-i Rostam, he praises Ahura Mazda thus:

A great God is Ahura Mazda, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, who created happiness for man, who made Darius king, one king of many, one lord of many.¹⁰⁵

In his public inscriptions, Darius attaches great importance to truth and claims to abhor falsehood. His enemies are frequently referred to as liars: "These are the provinces which became rebellious. The Lie made them rebellious so that these men deceived the people."¹⁰⁶ Darius advises his descendants to follow his example:

Thou who shalt be king hereafter, protect thyself vigorously from the Lie; the man who shall be a Lie-follower, him do thou punish well, if thus thou shalt think, 'May my country be secure!'¹⁰⁷

The later Andarz literature of the Sasanian era, which is the primary focus of Chapter 4, is very much reminiscent of a moral stance put forth by Darius in the same inscription at Behistun:

Ahura Mazda bore aid ... because I was not hostile, I was not a Lie-follower, I was not a doer of wrong—neither I nor my family. According to righteousness I conducted myself. Neither to the weak nor to the powerful did I do wrong.¹⁰⁸

In yet another inscription at Naqsh-i Rostam, Darius's praise of good men, good horses, and Persian people sounds much akin to the Zoroastrian epitome of "good thoughts, good words and good deeds:"

This country Persia which Ahuramazda bestowed upon me, good, possessed of good horses, possessed of good men—by the favor of Ahuramazda and of me, Darius the King, does not feel fear of [any]

other. ... May Ahuramazda protect this country from a [hostile] army, from famine, from the Lie!¹⁰⁹

Once again, Darius's comments on everyday behaviour resemble the sentiments of the Andarz genre. Darius goes on to thank Ahura Mazda for bestowing wisdom and happiness on man and himself, and he then describes himself as follows:

By the favor of Ahuramazda I am of such a sort that I am a friend to right, I am not a friend to wrong. It is not my desire that the weak man should have wrong done to him by the mighty; nor is that my desire, that the mighty man should have wrong done to him by the weak. ... What is right, that is my desire. I am not a friend to the man who is the Lie-follower. I am not hot-tempered. What things develop in my anger, I hold firmly under control by my thinking power. I am firmly ruling over my own [impulses].¹¹⁰

Thus, Darius anticipated the later Andarz literature of the Iranian pre-Islamic era that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Darius died at Persepolis in November, 486 BCE. He was 64 years of age and had reigned for 36 years. His tomb had already been prepared earlier and it stands, still today, at Naqsh-e Rostam along with the tombs of three other Achaemenid kings. After Darius, the Persian Empire dominated the world for another 135 years; but following Xerxes' defeat at Marathon, most Greek historians – Xenophon notwithstanding – expressed relatively little interest in, and even less praise for, the Persians. During their reign, Achaemenids still controlled the most powerful empire on earth, administering vast territories more or less as before, but they kept fewer records than ever. Xerxes I was the last Achaemenid king to concern himself with history, but he could not compete with the abundance of Greek material and with the magnitude of the Old Testament, particularly when the latter became an inseparable part of a worldwide religious canon.

Xerxes and beyond

Xerxes I, son of Darius and of Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus the Great, was the next king in the Achaemenid dynasty. Xerxes was assassinated in 465 BCE and was succeeded by Artaxerxes, who occupied the throne for 41 years. Unfortunately, later kings left behind few inscriptions for posterity. It seems that the later Achaemenid kings were not expansionists; rather, they focused on diplomacy to maintain their power and influence. Having a vested interest in the weakening of Greece, Persia assisted first Sparta and then Athens during the Peloponnesian War.¹¹¹ Indeed, according to T.C. Young, Persia “continually intervened, to her advantage, with diplomacy and bribery in the internecine war in Greece.”¹¹² it is said to

have signed a treaty with Athens in 449 BCE, claiming Asia Minor for itself but giving the Aegean entirely over to the Delian League; and by the turn of the fourth century Persia was at war with Sparta and actively aiding that city's enemies. Finally Artaxerxes II appeared to have engineered a "King's peace" between all the infighting Greeks in 387 BCE that reaffirmed his control over Asia Minor.

The administration of later Achaemenids remained consistent, and the innovations of Cyrus and Darius were not substantially altered. In order to rule over such diverse peoples as Egyptians, Assyrians, Elamites, Anatolians and Phoenicians, as well as the Massagetai and people of other tribes, the Persians devised a system of governance based on an unprecedented combination of a centralized state and a network of relatively independent satrapies. According to M. Dandamaev and V. Lukonin, the Achaemenids were much more successful in their rule over far-flung cultures than their predecessors, including the Neo-Assyrians and Neo-Babylonians, largely because "the Achaemenid kings attributed to their conquests the nature of a personal union with the people of these countries, crowned themselves according to local custom[... and tried] to create normal conditions in conquered countries."¹¹³ Even though the Achaemenid Empire was scorned by the Greeks as undemocratic, religious permissiveness and cultural autonomy were in fact key policies of the empire: T.C. Young nicely concludes that "tolerance was built into the Persian concept of how the world was organized."¹¹⁴

Greek historiography and Old Testament narratives

Before the Greeks, other civilizations kept records and wrote annals and chronologies, but their records lacked the investigative and narrative style of the Greeks. Beginning in the sixth century BCE, the Greeks developed "prose writing as a literary medium in a way that no other ancient people had thought of doing, and one of the branches of literary activity that they made their own was the writing of history."¹¹⁵ To this day, Western historiography relies upon a tradition that started with the Greeks. A post-modern critique of narrative discourse and historical representation might question the accuracy of narrative history, claiming it to be more fictional than factual; but even post-modernism, according to H. White, acknowledges the scope of influence of the classical Greeks on the world's historiography:

Since its invention by Herodotus, traditional historiography has featured predominantly in the belief that history itself consists of congeries of lived stories, individual and collective, and that the principal task of historians is to ... inhere solely in certain stylistic embellishments that rendered the account vivid and interesting to the reader, ... [as with] the writer of fictional narratives.¹¹⁶

In spite of the constant flow of modern texts on the Achaemenid period, the works of Greek authors remain the most important historical accounts of this era, as I noted above in the Introduction. In fact, as M. Dandamaev and V. Lukonin remind us,

the first history of Persia was written not by the Persians, but by the Greeks, [who], as a rule, were hostile to the Persians, who had conquered the Greek cities of Asia Minor and [who] had tried to conquer the Greek mainland [and] as a result, naturally, were not always objective in their evaluations of their opponent. ... Many books on the history of Iran are traditionally still written from a philhellenistic point of view.¹¹⁷

The Greeks looked upon their victories over Darius at Marathon and over Xerxes at Salamis as great feats of national pride, and, beginning with Herodotus, Athenian authors essentially reduced the history of the encounter between the two peoples to the narratives of just these battles. As it happened, at the same time that the Athenians reached the peak of their golden literary epoch, the Persians were the dominant world force and were engaged in expanding their empire westwards. The battles of Marathon and Salamis were not as significant to the Persians, however; and, moreover, the results were not as one-sided as the Greek historians suggested. Scholars such as E. Yamauchi have recognized that the Persian expedition to Greece “was not a total loss,” insofar as “the Persians gained a foothold in Europe with the submission of Thrace and Macedonia.”¹¹⁸

When Herodotus was writing his history almost a century after Cyrus’s death, his account, though pro-Greek, was not contemptuous of the Persians. As A.R. Burn points out, to be born at Halicarnassus at the time of Herodotus “was to be born under the great and, when opposed, ruthless but not ignoble, Persian Empire ... and may have helped to foster the breadth of vision with which [Herodotus] surveys the great conflict from both sides.”¹¹⁹ In fact, the historian’s relative fairness infuriated some Greco-Roman historians, provoking the Roman writer Plutarch to call him a “barbarophile” in an essay entitled “On the Malice of Herodotus.”¹²⁰

For various reasons, including this one, Herodotus’s relatively favourable view of the Persians was discounted by many scholars, both in antiquity and in later periods.

Perhaps no other ruler has suffered more disparagement at the hands of history and of historians than has Xerxes: his misfortune in one of the battles for Greece is the focal point of the final four of the nine books of Herodotus’s *Histories*, and the Old Testament story of Esther relates a symbolic victory of the Israelites over the Persians under Xerxes that is still celebrated by Jews today during the festival of Purim. In a chapter entitled “The Good King and the Bad,” J. Wiesehöfer examines and compares two modern encyclopedia entries in which Cyrus is depicted as a king with “tolerance and mercy for others,” while Xerxes is blamed for “lacking the tolerance towards other

religions typical of Cyrus and Darius.” With the help of Persian, Egyptian and Babylonian sources, Wiesehöfer illustrates the similarities between the policies of Cyrus and Xerxes, concluding that the divergent reputations of such demonstrably similar kings must have been inspired by a Greek distortion of historiography.¹²¹

Herodotus’s version of Xerxes is rather mixed: he is good-looking and tall, with a number of typically human flaws. But in later Greek works, Xerxes becomes demonised. In Aeschylus’ play *The Persians*, the character of Xerxes is responsible for the miseries of both Persians and Greeks; as “in the work of other Greek authors, Xerxes is depicted as being surrounded by stupid eunuchs.”¹²² From Ctesias onwards, Greek historiography made a villain of Herodotus’s nuanced king. The same is true of Xerxes’ character in the Jewish tradition. The Biblical account of Achaemenid Iran is far from accurate, and indeed it should be treated as partly fictional:

The whole Achaemenid period is allotted 52 years instead of 228 years, and the succession of kings contains much confusion. Thus, according to this [biblical] tradition, Darius was a Mede, the son of Xerxes, and attained the throne at the age of 62, and Cyrus followed him.¹²³

King Ahasuerus of the book of Esther is generally taken to be this Xerxes, though some scholars have argued that he is meant to be Artaxerxes – as he is identified in the Greek Septuagint – instead. Even though the Persian king of the Bible ultimately takes sides with his Jewish wife Esther and massacres the enemies of the Jews, history has increasingly represented Xerxes as a gullible king who would have killed the Jews but for Esther.

To the Achaemenid Empire “with its huge extent and enormous resources,” on the other hand, Xerxes’ defeat to the Greek navy at Salamis merely “had the character of a minor setback along the periphery of its realm. ... Official Persian sources, however, depict Xerxes as a wise statesman and a tried warrior.”¹²⁴ Therefore, although the two extreme versions seem to be tendentious and subjective, it is the Greek version that held sway in Western culture and, for that matter, even in later Iranian historiography. In a well-known modern history written by H. Pirnia for Iranian schools, the two Achaemenid kings Cyrus and Xerxes are portrayed not as they were in the native Persian accounts of antiquity, but rather along the lines of the Greek tradition; that is, respectively, as “good” versus “bad” or, in Pirnia’s words, “godsent” and “extraordinary” versus “weak” and “impulsive.”¹²⁵

The history of the later Achaemenids was depicted by the Greeks as one marked by a steady imperial decline after the abortive campaign of Xerxes’ forces at Salamis and Plataea. Greek authors of the fourth century BCE such as Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates and Dinon had only a very limited first-hand knowledge of their subject; and they presented their readers “with their verdict about certain characteristics of the ‘barbarians,’ ”¹²⁶ as J. Wiesehöfer puts it – a verdict that forever affected the intellectual discourse of the world.

M.A. Dandamaev reminds us that, despite the perennial propaganda of the Greeks, “the Persians did not strive to annihilate the Greeks, or to destroy their culture,” and that Greek sanctuaries, “especially that of Delphi, were of great and loyal support to Persia.”¹²⁷ As for the Jews, it was only with the assistance of the Persian kings that “the laws of the Pentateuch were established, not only in Judah, but also among the Jews of the diaspora.”¹²⁸

As Greek discourse became dominant in the Western world, the term “barbarian” itself underwent historical changes. While *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines the word barbarian as “originally a foreigner; especially, one not Greek or Roman,” P.J. Geary reminds us that “the concept of ‘barbarian’ was an invention of the Greco-Roman world, projected onto a whole spectrum of peoples living beyond the frontier of the empire. [That is, e]xcept for the Persians, whose cultural and political equality the Roman world begrudgingly recognized.”¹²⁹

In the final section of his *Histories*, Herodotus writes that “God has given the empire to the Persians.”¹³⁰ Far from being barbarians, the Persians in his *Histories* are depicted, critically at times and enviously at others, as the people in charge and therefore as people whose mistakes loom particularly large. When Herodotus depicts Darius and others conspiring to dethrone the false ruler Smerdis, for example, he has them debate the merits and faults of democracy, oligarchy and monarchy as they consider the future form of the Persian government.¹³¹ (Not surprisingly, the argument for monarchy carries the day, though it is ironic that the Greek Herodotus should depict a rational debate in which democracy is found to be inherently unstable.) Most later historians, disregarding Herodotus’s own caveat that these speeches were indeed made by the Persians, have viewed the discussion as entirely Greek in nature; but the dialogue serves to demonstrate that Herodotus considered the Achaemenid Persians to be the intellectual peers of the Greeks.

The polarization of the Greeks and Persians and the “barbarization” of the latter proceeded slowly but steadily, starting with various Greek writers and continuing in later Western schools of thought. J. Wiesehöfer reminds us that Athenian authors of the fourth century BCE, such as Plato, had no first-hand experience of the Persians to inform their discussions of the contrast between the Greeks and “barbarians.”¹³² After the Renaissance, when the West came to view itself as directly descended from the Greeks, the rift grew exaggerated to such a degree that the campaign of Marathon was regarded by some scholars as a turning point in the history of Western civilization. John Stuart Mill wrote that “the battle of Marathon, even as an event of English history, is more important than the Battle of Hastings.”¹³³ Only in recent times, following the discoveries of testimonies concealed within Iran itself, could Achaemenid history be revisited from an Iranian perspective.

But the task of reconstructing Achaemenid history still remains extremely burdensome, given the fact that the territory of the Achaemenid Empire was so vast that it had many capitals and centres. The Achaemenids situated themselves at Susa and later at Babylon, as well as at the royal cities of Persia. Thus, there was no specific centre of power, and court documents were written in many different ancient languages, including Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian, Akkadian, Egyptian, Bactrian and Aramaic. This profusion of languages constitutes a major obstacle to the advancement of Iranian studies; P. Briant, for example, has expressed his regret that the Achaemenids, unlike all the rest of the world's imperial powers, did not standardize their written accounts, since no single scholar can be expected to master all the relevant languages.¹³⁴

The scarcity of Iranian narrative weakens the Iranian historical voice and point of view. Until recently, the work of even specialists dealing with ancient Persia, such as R. Ghirshman, took Greek material quite literally. Fortunately, of late, a number of Western scholars have both drawn upon the recently discovered Persepolis tablets and reappraised the biases of Greek sources in order to construct a more accurate historical account of the Achaemenids. In so doing, they have introduced some "Persocentricity" to a field where before only "Hellenocentric" views had prevailed. The new information has allowed scholars such as P. Briant, M. Brosius, M. Dandamaev, V. Lukonin, H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, J. Wieshofer and T.C. Young to "combine the Greek and Persian evidence"¹³⁵ towards new insights.

In spite of these efforts, however, many Western writers still rely on Greek evidence as their main sources of scholarship: F.W. Walbank, author of *The Hellenistic World*, for example, frequently uses the term "barbarian" to describe all non-Hellenistic people of antiquity.¹³⁶ The history of the Persian Empire, as rendered by Greek authors and in the Old Testament, has been part of world culture for centuries. These narratives and misrepresentations, though they may (rarely) be favourable to Iranians, will be overcome only with substantial scholarship and advocacy.

2 Middle Iranians¹

Chapter 2 will detail the political and cultural events in Iran from the time of the fall of the Achaemenids to the end of the Sasanian Empire in order to demonstrate continuity in Iranian political, social and artistic institutions from 330 BCE to 630 CE, during and after a period of Hellenistic influence. This is the era dominated by the Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian dynasties, and we shall pay particular attention to their political leaders as well as to the relevant sources for the study of history and religion, including texts and inscriptions, numismatics, and archaeological sites and monuments.

Alexander and the fall of the Achaemenids

The reign of the last Achaemenid king, Darius III, came to an end in 330 BCE when Alexander III “the Great” of Macedonia conquered vast tracts of land in the East. Alexander became king at age 19 and died at 32; yet the young man managed to conquer the entire Achaemenid Empire in that time, reinstating the boundaries set by Darius I. Instead of making sweeping changes following his conquest, Alexander maintained the existing satrapies, the overall governmental structure, and the administrative style of the Achaemenids. Alexander also followed the Achaemenid policy of religious tolerance, shrewdly taking into consideration the diversity of religious cults and practices throughout his extensive empire.² In addition, many Hellenistic cities were built upon Achaemenid cities.³ Alexander envisioned an empire ruled by both Macedonians and Iranians, and, to facilitate this arrangement, he married a Bactrian princess named Roxana in the spring of 327 BCE. At a later ceremony at Susa during the year 324 BCE, described vividly by P. Briant, “Alexander and ninety-one of his companions took Iranian noblewomen as wives in a single sumptuous ceremony designed to strike people’s imaginations.”⁴

In antiquity, those who wrote about Alexander’s campaigns were divided into two camps: there were the participants, such as Aristobulus and Ptolemy, who wrote memoirs of their experiences during the campaigns; and then there were the later historians who created an extensive body of

literature on the subject. In the late second century CE, for example, the Greek writer Arrian of Nicomedia sought in his work *The Campaigns of Alexander* to distinguish between historical fact and later embellishment.⁵ According to Arrian, despite all the obscurity surrounding Alexander, one thing is certain: the Macedonian was extremely dedicated to a policy of fusion, holding that Macedonians and Persians should live together in harmony and rule the empire jointly.⁶ Historians report that Alexander adopted Iranian traditions of kingship to some degree after capturing Persia, and, in Arrian's words, "his growing admiration [of Iranian culture was] expressed also by the change in his dress and in the general etiquette of his court, of Median and Persian extravagance."⁷ Despite this admiration, Alexander followed the familiar pattern of imperial conquest in the eastern Mediterranean world: first destroying and plundering cities, and then expecting inhabitants to look to him as their sovereign. The latter expectation exacted an additional price, for Alexander knew he must adopt certain Iranian customs in order to claim legitimacy to the Persian throne.

Even as Alexander attempted to garner Iranian support of his rule, he treated Persepolis differently from the other cities he had conquered. Although he had plundered Susa and other Persian centres, Alexander is said deliberately to have set fire to Persepolis in 330 BCE in order to avenge Xerxes' capture of Athens in 480 BCE. Ancient writers illustrate, from varying perspectives, the sense of grandeur and gravity of this event; Diodorus, for example, focuses upon the riches of Persepolis and of Alexander's loathing of the city:

Persepolis was the capital of the Persian kingdom. Alexander described it to the Macedonians as the most hateful of all cities of Asia, and gave it over to his soldiers to plunder, all but the palaces. It was the richest city under the sun and the private houses had been furnished with every sort of wealth.⁸

Likewise, Plutarch claims that a "caravan of 10,000 mules and 5,000 camels was needed to haul the booty away."⁹ On the other hand, Pahlavi accounts of Alexander¹⁰ portray him as wicked, not only because he burned the city and committed other atrocities, but also because he burned the only complete copy of the *Avesta* extant at the time, one written on animal skin.

Interestingly, it was the advent of Islam that brought a more sympathetic portrait of Alexander to the East. In Surah 18:83 ff. of the Qur'an, a passage known as "The Cave," the figure Dhu al-Qarnain (the "Double-horned One") may refer to Alexander.¹¹ Dhu al-Qarnain is portrayed in a favourable light; and this representation seems to have improved Alexander's reputation in subsequent Persian literature and historiography. In fact, Iranian poets have made much of this "fusion theory" and have been inspired to compose

many *Iskandarnamahs*, or “Tales of Alexander,” the most renowned of which is that of the thirteenth-century poet Nizami. I shall return to this topic in Chapter 5.

The Seleucids

In 323 BCE, Alexander died at Babylon, leaving no heir. Infighting erupted for the next 22 years – with a brief respite in the year 311 – among his generals, known as the *diadochoi*; some of these men sought to unify Alexander’s territories under their own control, and others wanted separate sovereignty over their satrapies. By 301 BCE, with the defeat of Antigonus at Ipsus, the divisions of Hellenistic territories were roughly established, though by no means permanently settled. Ptolemy retained Egypt, while Lysimachus took central Asia Minor and Seleucus the eastern satrapies. Seleucus came to rule over an area that stretched from Syria and Anatolia to Afghanistan and to southern Russia.

In order to impose foreign rule over this vast territory, Seleucus continued Alexander’s policy of founding cities “organized on Greek lines by Greek settlers – islands of Hellenism in a barbarian sea,”¹² as G. Herrmann puts it. Plutarch mentions 70 of these “Alexandrias,” 13 of which were in Iranian territories. The foundation of a chain of new Greek cities extending eastwards to Bactria has been called “the most striking accomplishment of the Seleucid dynasty;”¹³ most of these cities, replete with gymnasiums and theaters, became important regional capitals, sometimes even taking the place of other, previously established towns.¹⁴ The word “Hellenistic” originates from a Greek word that implies use of the Greek language, and in these Seleucid oases “Greek was in fact the *lingua franca*.”¹⁵

Even though Seleucus was among those Greek generals who had married Persian noblewomen in the aforementioned mass ceremony at Susa, and his own son and heir was half-Persian, he himself did not follow Alexander’s policy of fusion. Seleucus replaced power-wielding Persians with Greeks and Macedonians “to bring cohesion to his heterogeneous dominions.”¹⁶ He transferred the seat of power from Seleucia on the Tigris to Antioch on the Orontes and “regarded the Iranian satrapies as border territories;”¹⁷ in his eastern campaigns to restore order, he reinstated some of Alexander’s eponymous cities and built new Antiochs. Seleucus’s decision to move the centre of power from Mesopotamia to Antioch in Syria, however, reduced his ability to control the eastern territories and thus had tremendous consequences in the long term.¹⁸

Notwithstanding this fact, the Seleucid Empire maintained its political power over the entire hereditary region until 261 BCE, when the reign of Seleucus’s son Antiochus came to an end. From the middle of the third-century BCE, and during the reign of Seleucus II, the Syrian wars diverted attention from Iran and created an opportunity for the Parthians to expand their power there.¹⁹ The first person to take advantage of the king’s

absence from eastern Iran, however, was not an Iranian but a Macedonian: the Seleucid satrap Diodorus of Bactria. His secession established what ultimately became a long-lived Greco-Bactrian kingdom.²⁰ The Greek kings of Bactria defended their territory against indigenous nomads for 130 years and gradually expanded their control southwards, occupying the Kabul valley, the Peshawar region and Taxila in the Punjab.²¹

Another great blow to the Seleucids in the East came most likely in the mid-third century BCE, when an Iranian people, the Parni of the Dahae tribe, invaded the former Achaemenid satrapy of Parthava. These newcomers came to be called Parthians.²² Their movement coincided with a general weakening of the Seleucids due to the Syrian wars, causing the Seleucids huge losses in their Iranian territories. It took only a short while, from approximately 250 to 235 BCE,²³ for the Parthians to establish themselves in eastern Iran.

Antiochus III attempted to regain former Seleucid territory, and waged a successful campaign against Bactria and Parthia by defeating Egypt and acquiring Palestine and Phoenicia in 200 BCE. The western part of his empire, however, was soon lost during hostilities against the Romans in 189 BCE, and the eastern territories were lost once again to the Parthians shortly thereafter. The Parthians conquered Media in 148 BCE and Babylonia in 141 BCE; and so, by the time of Antioch VII's death in 129 BCE, the Seleucid Empire had ceased to be a major power.

With respect to governance, according to F.W. Walbank, the Seleucids "showed a profound indifference to the Iranians, which may have contributed to the ease with which the Parthians annexed all Iran up to the Euphrates before the end of the second century."²⁴ The Seleucid dynasty granted land to the Macedonians and Greeks, thus encouraging the creation of new cities among local peoples who had very different social traditions and economic systems; by importing Hellenic culture wholesale in this way, the Seleucids chose to distinguish themselves from their Achaemenid predecessors, who had made a much greater effort to incorporate native cultures whenever they expanded the imperial infrastructure.²⁵ The Greek settlers in Iran wanted to remain Greek, and, according to Diodorus, they demanded "a Greek education with a Greek way of life."²⁶ This "salutary neglect" of the local Iranians eliminated the potential for a great source of friction and allowed the Iranians virtually to ignore the Seleucids' culture and religion.²⁷ But, as E. Yarshater reminds us, the Greek dynasties in the east and the Greek colonies in the Alexandrias and Antiochs "remained an instrument of Hellenization long after the Seleucids' sovereignty had been eclipsed in Iran."²⁸

Although they were ethnically Macedonian, the Seleucids had no base of power in Macedonia itself, nor did they represent all expatriate Macedonians. Thus the Seleucid dynasty did not constitute a true colonial power in itself, nor were its rulers the regional instruments – as the Achaemenid satraps had been – of a greater colonial power. As the Seleucids

saw it, they had been granted power not by the grace of the gods, but rather by the right of the spear. Indeed, Seleucid rulers seem to have trusted only a very few generals and ministers and were in turn trusted by few others. While the administrative organization of their realm was simple in principle, it was complex and archaic in practice: the Seleucids preserved the Achaemenid tradition of dividing the empire into satrapies, and Achaemenid titles were not immediately Hellenized. The full details of the financial organization of Seleucid Iran remain largely unknown, yet evidence shows that the Seleucids generally encouraged agriculture and trade, as their unified system of silver coinage facilitated trade in their region.²⁹

A network of Greek military settlements and cities covered Iran from the present-day Syr Darya (ancient Jaxartes) River in central Asia to the Persian Gulf. The specifics of the internal organization of these Greek cities in Iran, however, remain obscure. As E. Bickerman puts it:

We hear of traditional magistrates ... but we do not know whether, for instance, there was a native quarter, or whether artisans of the same craft worked on the same street, as, it seems, was the case in some Greek cities under Parthian rule.³⁰

The countryside of Seleucid Iran was left to native Iranians, and its role and character remain virtually unknown. We do know, however, that the great landlords in the Arsacid (Parthian) period had become the royal governors and masters of their respective fiefs. What remains obscure is the role played by these landlords under the Seleucids. Did they live in manors, or did they prefer the towns? The Seleucids did, of course, exploit the land and those who cultivated it. At Ai Khanum, a small city on the Oxus in present-day Afghanistan, there were buildings of a size unheard of in Greece at that time. It seems that the Seleucids remained uninvolved in local concerns as long they received their levied dues and perceived no disturbances of the peace.³¹

The view expressed above, that the Seleucids were indifferent to local Iranian affairs, has, however, been challenged by J. Wiesehöfer, who suggests that because people of different cultural and ethnic origins had lived side by side in almost all parts of the empire since Achaemenid times, their relationships should be conceived as more diverse than had hitherto been thought.³² Wiesehöfer stresses that, while the Macedonians might not have upheld the policy of fusion in some parts of Iran, they did promulgate it in other regions, and especially in Media:

Today we know that the Seleucids followed Alexander's policies in this area [i.e., the east:] they adopted Persian (and Mesopotamian) models in their choice of residences, their administrative and infrastructural institutions, their patterns of personal relations, in the court art relating to the king, and above all in the royal ideology.³³

The site of Ai-Khanum in Bactria provides evidence of this sort of demographic fusion in eastern Iran. There can be no doubt that Seleucid rule over Iran did affect Iranian culture and language, especially in places where the Seleucids and Iranians had extensive contact with one another. As Plutarch tells us, “children of the ‘barbarians’ in Gedrosia [i.e., Baluchistan] learned to read Homer.”³⁴ Even in the succeeding Parthian period, Iran remained “Hellenized” to some degree: we are told that local rulers such as Mithridates I of Parthia, the self-proclaimed philhellene, continued to rely upon Greek-educated administrators.³⁵ Nevertheless, native Iranians were better able to preserve their identity under the Seleucid rule than were either their Mesopotamian neighbours or the Egyptians under the Ptolemies.³⁶ While the extent of the Seleucid policy of amalgamation is of great concern to historians, modern Iranian scholars once again have not weighed in on the subject.

The Parthians: history

Of all the dynasties in Iranian history, none ruled longer than that of the Parthians. Yet the Parthians left relatively few monuments for posterity, especially when compared to the Achaemenids and Sasanians. This meagre legacy is perhaps a reflection of the empire they created, one lacking unity and centralization. Parthian rule was initially contemporaneous with Seleucid rule and extended only as far as the territory of Parthia; over time, however, the Parthians usurped Seleucid power and became the only significant rival to the mighty Roman Empire.

The name Parthava (Parthia) is mentioned in 521 BCE as one of the satrapies in Darius’ Behistun inscription, yet the borders of its territory, which fluctuated over time, are difficult to identify.³⁷ The Daha nomads (Latin: *Dahae*), who are named as a Scythian group in the list of peoples on Xerxes’ Daeva inscription, lived around the delta of the Jaxartes, or modern Syr Darya, river. The Parni were the most prominent among the Dahae peoples, and from their roots would come the branches of the Arsacid dynasty;³⁸ also known as the Aparni, they had probably entered the territory from the north at some point before their first mention in sources of the third century BCE and had assimilated with its native inhabitants.³⁹

The Arsacids of Parthia

In approximately 250 BCE the Parni under Arsaces’ leadership penetrated the Atrek valley. Shortly thereafter, in 247 BCE, Arsaces was granted kingship at Asaak, a site which archaeologists have yet to discover. In about 245 BCE Andragoras, the Seleucid satrap in the province of Parthia, asserted his independence. The Parni then exploited the defection of both Andragoras and Diodotus of Bactria when they invaded Parthia in 238 BCE, and, as a result of the invasion, Andragoras fell.⁴⁰

As with the earlier Cyrus of the Achaemenids and the later eponymous Sasan, there were many legends surrounding the founder of the Parthian Arsacid dynasty. All these legends share three common motifs: a modest background, a blood link to a glorified former dynasty, and a career in highway robbery.⁴¹ According to the Roman author Justinus,

Arsaces became no less memorable among the Parthians than Cyrus was among the Persians, Alexander among the Macedonians, and Romulus among the Romans. ... [The] Parthians honoured his memory by thenceforth calling all their kings Arsaces.⁴²

The recurring use of the same throne-name in successive Arsacid generations presents archaeologists and numismatists with a number of puzzles and creates even more confusion in a field of already fragmentary and extraneous sources. Here again, the central narrative of this Iranian dynasty comes down to us by way of its Seleucid and Roman enemies and in histories composed in Greek and Latin.⁴³ After the initial triumph of the Parthians over the Seleucids, Seleucus II tried to retaliate sometime between 231 and 227 BCE, but Arsaces successfully repelled the attack and retained his rule over Parthia. Seleucus II eventually was succeeded by his brother Tiridates, who in turn was succeeded by his own son and grandson, as their greatly diminished kingdom consolidated its position on the shores of the Caspian Sea.

In c.171 BCE Mithridates I ascended the throne of Parthia, ushering in a great epoch in the history of his people, during which time Parthia became a major power in the East. After recapturing several eastern territories, Mithridates I turned his attention to the west and conquered Media and Mesopotamia during the years 149 to 141 BCE. By 141 BCE, cities as far afield as Uruk in central Mesopotamia had acknowledged Mithridates' rule, and he probably was officially crowned that same year at Seleucia on the Tigris; he died in 137 BCE after a reign of 43 years. Between the years 133 to 129 BCE, the Yueh-chih nomads overran the Greco-Bactrian kingdom and founded the Kushan Empire that was to last for centuries. Antiochus VII died in 129 BCE, and his death marked the end of what little Seleucid power remained. In the same year, the successor of Mithridates I died in a battle against the Scythians. Five years later, the Parthian King Artabanus I lost a large part of Mesopotamia – together with his life – in a battle against nomads in the east.⁴⁴

The second great king of Parthia, Mithridates II, came to power in 124 BCE and ruled for the next 37 years, a period that saw the zenith of Parthian power. The reign of this Mithridates began with the annexation of Babylonia, which recently had become part of a state called Characene at the head of the Persian Gulf. After this success, Mithridates II turned north towards Armenia and annexed large tracts of this territory in 113 BCE. Not only did he expand the Arsacid Empire, but he executed his office with a great

deal of political savvy. In 115 BCE, a representative of the Chinese emperor Wu-Ti visited him, and the two rulers reached an agreement to open a trade route that would later become known as the Silk Road. It was also during the rule of Mithridates II, in 96 BCE, that Parthia and Rome established the Euphrates River as the unofficial border between their respective spheres of influence. According to Babylonian cuneiform tablets, Mithridates II revived the title of “King of Kings” in c. 109 BCE, although he continued to imprint the term “Philhellene” upon his coins.⁴⁵ The end of his reign coincided with a phenomenon that would severely weaken the empire: the practice of having many “little kings.” This practice was the result of rivalry among Parthian nobility; a few powerful families frequently opposed the kings who rose to power after the death of Mithridates II. These rival kings and contenders for the throne were the cause of a great many murders in the Parthian courts, and, during this time, assassination became the foremost cause of death among the Arsacid kings.⁴⁶

The conquest of Armenia

Armenia had enjoyed peace and prosperity under the later Achaemenid kings, but had suffered a bitter defeat at the hands of Alexander when it had sided with Darius III. After several centuries of Greek influence and of Armenian Hellenization, the Parthians began considering the conquest of Armenia.⁴⁷ Armenia thus became the focal point of tension between the Parthian and Roman empires; however, I share D.M. Lang’s sentiment that a general overview such as this cannot provide sufficient detail “to chronicle the vicissitudes of the wars between Rome and Parthia, and later between Byzantium and Sasanian Iran, over Armenia’s largely defenseless territory.”⁴⁸ It will suffice to say that the second and third dynasties of Armenia were those of the Artaxiads and the Arsacids. The Artaxiads were named for their founder, Artaxias, who was apparently both a descendant of the Achaemenids and a relative of the Parthian kings. The important trade routes that connected China, India and Central Asia with the Mediterranean world passed through Armenia, giving rise to great cities in which foreign merchants lived and to which Greek culture was disseminated. According to Plutarch, some of the Armenian kings were “so well versed in Greek literature ... [that they composed plays in] Greek which were enacted at the Armenian court.”⁴⁹ Such were the hybrid manners and culture of an Armenia that was divided between Greek and Roman influences in the west and the kinship and dominance of the Persians and the Parthians in the east.⁵⁰

Conflicts with the Romans

The Parthian conflict with the Romans began over Armenia. After the death of Mithridates II (the Great) in 87 BCE, the Armenians seized the

opportunity to reconquer some of the lands that had been lost during the initial Parthian conquests. The Romans had no reason to seek out conflict in Armenia; but in 69 BCE, the Roman general Lucullus attacked the Armenian territory, after Mithridates III, a “little king,” had taken refuge there with his son-in-law. The Parthian king, Phraates III, initially refused to help his kinsmen, but Roman political intrigues (between the triumvirs Pompey, Caesar and Crassus) and chaos in Parthia and Armenia resulted in the Carrhae campaign of 58–57 BCE. In this conflict, Surenas of Carrhae completely defeated the Roman force and killed the general Crassus. A.D.H. Bivar neatly sums up the impact of this event thus: “the upshot of the debacle was to win unquestionable recognition for Parthia as a world power equal, if not superior, to Rome.”⁵¹ Plutarch describes the Parthian general Surenas as “no ordinary person; but in fortune, family, and honor the first after the king; and in point of courage and capacity, as well as size and beauty, superior to the Parthians of his time.”⁵² Surenas’s victory probably cost him his life, however; king Orodes II executed Surenas, perhaps out of fear for his throne. This was the first in a series of triumphs that the Parthians failed to exploit in attempting to shift the balance of power.

Fighting continued with the Romans, mostly to the advantage of the Parthians. The Parthian lack of political vision, however, prevented their acquiring the political hegemony that one might have expected. Another war took place between Mark Antony and Phraates in the southeast region of Lake Urmia in 36 BCE: the Romans suffered the disproportionate loss of 24,000 men, but the Parthians were once again incapable of capitalizing on their victory.⁵³ Several years later, the Roman Emperor Augustus asked for the captives and standards taken from Crassus and Mark Antony in their battles, and he celebrated their return as a military victory: the Roman poet Horace sang, “Who fears the Parthian ... while Augustus lives?”⁵⁴ This celebration appears to have been effected primarily in the spirit of an informal peace treaty, which both empires needed by this point.

In 12 CE, after years of internal conflict, the Parthians finally found a king in Artabanus I who would provide 26 years of steady rule; the strengthened central authority that existed during his sovereignty and the widespread distribution of his coins attest to the prosperity of his reign.⁵⁵ Parthia would once again challenge a very competent Roman general during the reign of Vologases I. Armenia had fallen into the Roman sphere of influence, but the king who was crowned by Emperor Nero in Rome was a brother of Vologases I. Justinus says the following of the Iranians:

Being assailed by the Romans, also, in three wars, under the conduct of the greatest generals, and at the most flourishing of the Republic, they alone, of all nations, were not only a match for them, but came off victorious.⁵⁶

The essential fact remains that the Parthians were among the only true peers of the Romans in late antiquity *vis-à-vis* military prowess.

The Parthian economy

The years of greatest prosperity for the Parthian Empire began with the reign of Mithridates II and extended to the end of the first century CE, after which Parthia's economy ran aground, partly because of the rise of the Kushans in the East. Numismatic evidence suggests that, after the reign of Vologases I came to a close, a growing conflict among the ruling families resulted in the establishment of parallel kings.

From the little information we have about the eastern reaches of the empire, it can be concluded that considerable areas of Parthian territory were lost to the Kushans, another Iranian tribe that had established a flourishing empire in northwest India and Afghanistan. In the north, the nomadic Alani had streamed over the Caucasus and had sacked Media and Armenia in 72 CE. For the Iranians, the second century CE was politically "disastrous," in the words of G. Hermann, who notes that "there were frequent squabbles over the succession on an increasingly shaky throne, and ... Parthia [was] forced into the defensive."⁵⁷ Perhaps the best evidence for the latter claim is the three-time plundering of the secondary Parthian capital at Ctesiphon on the Tigris River. Another sign of these difficult times was the depreciation of Parthian coinage, both in metal value and in craftsmanship. Much of the east-west trade, which was Parthia's primary source of prosperity, was lost to the Kushans; and both Roman and Chinese records testify to a disastrous plague epidemic in the second half of the century. Despite this social and political turmoil, however, the artistic and architectural renaissance that had begun in the previous century continued with new construction at such cities as Assur and Hatra.⁵⁸

The demise of the Parthians

Several events contributed to the eventual collapse of the Parthian Empire: the disastrous plague described by the Romans and Chinese; the Roman campaigns in Mesopotamia; and the loss of Silk Road trade to the Kushans. The fatal blow, however, was dealt by an enemy from within, namely Ardashir the Sasanian, a vassal king of Persia known to the Romans as Artaxerxes. According to the brief account of Cassius Dio, this king fought a total of three battles against the Parthians and was victorious in each instance.⁵⁹

Classical sources reveal neither the place nor the date of the final battle, but some scholars believe that the celebrated battle of Hormazdagan took place northwest of Isfahan in the vicinity of present-day Golpayegan. The battle was probably fought on 28 April 224 CE, and Artabanus IV (rather than Artabanus V) was killed during the action. It seems that some Parthian

princes initiated short-lived rebellions, and Armenia did remain in the hands of the Arsacids for a while. The death of Artabanus, however, is considered to mark the the Arsacids' loss of their Iranian territories.⁶⁰

Parthian historiographic remains

Textual documentation

I noted above that, despite the fact that Parthian rule lasted 474 years, longer than any other dynasty in Iranian history, the Parthians left little in the way of archaeological evidence. They created art and cultivated the land, but their written records were minimal; they left fewer rock carvings and inscriptions than either the Achaemenids or the Sasanians. Indeed, the paucity of original Parthian material stands in stark contradistinction to the relative abundance of information available from contemporary Seleucid (Greek), Roman, Babylonian, Armenian and even Chinese sources.

Merely two kinds of documentation from the Parthian era have been found in any quantity: aside from coins located throughout the region, some 2,758 Parthian texts written on 2,000 clay shards (*ostraca*) were discovered by Russian archaeologists at Nisa in Turkmenistan. Most of these documents provide details about the delivery of wine to the palace, suggesting that the Parthians retained the use of writing primarily for administrative purposes, rather than for the recording of literary and historical narratives.⁶¹

Several Greek inscriptions, including one from Behistun in the present-day province of Kermanshah and one from Susa, refer to the affairs of the Parthian kingdom. There are also a number of lapidary inscriptions in Parthian and Aramaic at Sar-i Pul-i Zuhab and elsewhere. One statue of the Greek god Hercules, which was captured by the Parthian king Vologeses IV, bears inscriptions in both Parthian and Greek. Three bilingual Greek and Parthian sales documents from the Arsacid era found in Uraman, Kermanshah, now reside in the British Museum; and an epitaph in Susa from the time of the last Arsacid king, Artabanus IV, also was written in the Parthian language and script.⁶² Though they are scant, R. Frye rightly observes that “the few Parthian language remains that we have remind us that the heritage of writing in the Achaemenid Empire, which ruled the east, was still very much alive.”⁶³ Because the inscriptions employed by the Parthians demonstrate stylistic similarities with those of the Achaemenids, cultural continuity can be surmised from the fact that the Parthians followed the Achaemenid example.

Oral preservation

As in the Achaemenid era, the vastness of the land, the multiplicity of cultures and languages, and changes in the official language and script were a source of strength for the kingdom during its lifetime; but they

were ultimately detrimental to Parthian historiography in the long run. Oral tradition remained the primary method for maintaining and transmitting culture, religion and history. According to one interpretation of a passage found in both the *Vendidad* and the *Dēnkard*, the Parthian ruler Vologases I may have been an early compiler of the texts that later developed into the *Avesta*. Most scholars, however, have rejected the view that a written, rather than an orally transmitted, text of the *Avesta* existed during the Parthian era.

Not only were the *Avesta* and other religious texts preserved orally by the *mowbeds*, but love stories, myths and historical material were also kept alive through the oral traditions of singers and minstrels. Parthian poets, known as *gusans*, preserved many facets of Iranian historical heritage and folklore; these would later become the source for the Sasanian *Khuday Namag* and for the later *Shahnamah* of Islamic Iran. In addition to preserving the past heritage, these minstrels, who were popular with both the people and the court, incorporated praise of the Arsacid princes and kings into the epic tradition. Among the survivors of such poetry are the narratives of *Rustam va Gudarz*, which prevail in the *Kai Kavus* section of the *Shahnamah*, and the romantic poem *Vis va Ramin*, which contains many Arsacid details.⁶⁴

Numismatics

E. Porada states that “the coins issued by the Arsacid kings provide the only unbroken sequence in a pictorial medium of the Parthian period.”⁶⁵ The inception of Arsacid minting may be placed in the middle of the third century BCE, and the practice continued until the Sasanians seized power in 224 CE. The principal metal used in the coins was silver for drachms (the official currency) and copper for *chalkoi*, which were used as petty cash in local markets. There were no gold coins. The drachms were of the Attic standard (four grams) and were primarily minted in Ecbatana; the rarer tetradrachms were primarily minted in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Regular annual minting does not seem to have been practised. The coins were predominantly Hellenistic in design, but they exhibited various distinctive traits of the Iranian numismatic tradition. On the obverse side of drachms, the head of the king was usually shown in profile, facing left. These depictions initially showed the king wearing the typical cap of a nomad warrior, but later coins paired the king with either the Hellenistic diadem or the Iranian royal tiara. Frontal depictions were quite rare. The reverse sides of copper coins, however, bore a rich and varied range of designs – for example, an eagle with a wreath, a ram, or the wreath of investiture by itself. The legends were in Greek and mentioned the king’s epithet and dynastic name, but rarely his personal name. During and after the reign of Vologases I, however, an additional legend in Parthian was introduced to these coins.⁶⁶

Numismatic evidence shows that some vassal kings minted their own coins, and the indigenous dynasties of Persis, Elymais and Characene replaced the Arsacid currency with their own. Coins from six different rulers were created in the twenty-year interval between 77 and 96 CE, and scholars have drawn two conclusions from the numismatic evidence: firstly, that the Parthians were philhellenic not only in word, but also in their actual use of Greek language, art and religious symbolism; and secondly, that more than one central authority existed at any given time.⁶⁷ Both these points are well demonstrated by the extant Parthian artistic and architectural corpus. As mentioned above, when the Parthians first secured their independence *circa* 240 BCE, they were surrounded by Hellenistic powers. The Seleucids lay to the west and the Greco-Bactrians to the east. Thus, it is not surprising that when the Parthians first began to express themselves, they adopted strongly Hellenistic traits.⁶⁸

On the other hand, the Iranian heritage of Zoroastrian fire temples, Parthian language, Achaemenid reliefs and rock-cut tombs gradually replaced Hellenistic language and images:

The Parthians were able to assimilate much of Hellenism, and yet they also maintained Iranian traditions. While one might characterize early Parthian times as Philhellenic and later periods as an Iranian reaction, we have no real evidence for a 'reaction,' but rather a transition from a world in which Greece was dominant to a new world in which Hellenism was swallowed up by the Orient, but not at one instant.⁶⁹

R. Frye's use of the term "transition" is key to understanding the gradual nature of the shift from Hellenistic to Iranian expressions in art and governance in Parthian times.

Architectural monuments and artifacts

The earliest Parthian site that has been found is that of Nisa, or Parthanissa, near the modern town of Ashkabad in Turkmenistan. It consists of a walled tower, a town and a citadel called Mithradatkert. According to a Parthian tablet, it was built by Mithridates I (c.171–139 BCE) and was lavishly decorated with sculptures and other luxurious artifacts.

The remains of this architecture display a strongly Hellenistic influence, but retain a distinctively Parthian nature:

The architects of Nisa were clearly experimenting with many different forms of buildings. In the Square house they returned to the typical [Iranian] columned courtyard buildings with long columned rooms on all four sides. There is no sign yet of what became the most characteristic Parthian architectural innovation and legacy, the *iwān*, or open hall roofed with high barrel vault.⁷⁰

The second-oldest Parthian monument was found at Shahr-i Qumis near Damghan, identified by J. Hansman as the lost Seleucid/Parthian city of Hecatompylos. The Parthian buildings at Shahr-i Qumis date to the early Parthian period, for the site fell out of use as a capital during the first century BCE, most likely having been replaced by a western capital such as Ctesiphon. Three systems of vaulting were used in the buildings of Shahr-i Qumis, one of which is the same as that method used during the Achaemenian period at Persepolis and at the Median site of Tepe Nush-i Jan near Hamadan.⁷¹

While it is not clear whether the Qumis buildings were mausolea, a number of buildings that are known to be tombs have been found in the Zagros Mountains. These tombs consist of chambers cut into the cliff, and they bring to mind the rock-cut tombs of Achaemenid kings at Naqsh-e Rostam. One of the most ornate tombs is located in Qizapan, Iraqi Kurdistan, with three interconnecting chambers and a bas-relief showing two men in Median clothes and a fire altar. For a long time, scholars believed this to be a Median site, but the use of Hellenistic architectural elements dates it to a later period. The Parthian rock-cut tombs and square-house plan resemble those of the Achaemenids and demonstrate an affinity between the two cultures.

Other important monuments include two poorly preserved rock sculptures at Behistun, near the inscriptions of Darius. These show four people standing before a king, and the accompanying Greek inscription names the king as "The Great King Mithridates," that is, Mithridates II. One of the four figures is believed to be Gotarzes, son of Gev, who, according to Babylonian records, exercised a practically independent rule around 80 CE; according to the inscription, however, Gotarzes was a vassal monarch.⁷² This relief has been taken as proof of the existence of powerful satraps and of their desire to establish independence. Although historians differ as to whether it is legitimate to talk of a feudal system at this stage of Parthian history, K. Schippmann articulates the majority view that the "Parthian nobility, represented by a few great families, were ... in a position to oppose monarchs frequently."⁷³

Several other Parthian monuments have also been identified. At Shami, in the Zagros Mountains, a headless statue of a Parthian man and the marble head of a bodiless statue of a prince were found. From the time of Mithridates I and the Parthian conquest of Mesopotamia, large Hellenistic cities such as Seleucia on the Tigris, Susa and Dura-Europos fell under Parthian control. Excavations at Seleucia have distinguished three levels in the gradual Parthianization of the city; level II of the excavation dates to the Parthian era and contains the characteristic Parthian *iwans*, or open halls. During the first century CE, the palace at Labbana was built on the bank of the Tigris atop the ruins of Assur, the Assyrian capital. Soon thereafter, however, it was sacked and destroyed by the Romans. Excavations of the palace have revealed a central rectangular courtyard with a great *ivan*

dominating all four sides. The Parthian level at Hatra, only 50 kilometres away, combined Parthian, Hellenistic and Roman-Syrian characteristics. The princes of Hatra were recently settled Arabs who became loyal Parthian vassals. The well-preserved remains at Hatra show that many architectural elements were of western origin, although Parthian features, such as the *iwan*, prevailed in many of the buildings.⁷⁴

Stylistic characteristics of Parthian material culture

The breadth and extent of the Achaemenid Empire was such that it is impossible to characterize it in any general way. In the case of the Parthians, the difficulty of generalization is even more pronounced. The Parthians ruled for twice as long as the Achaemenids, and their territory was almost as vast. The archaeological evidence shows that most of the artworks commonly described as Parthian actually came from the periphery of the empire, from areas such as Elymias, Mesopotamia, Hatra and from even the distant regions of Dura and Palmyra. The art of Iranian and Parthian sites such as Nisa and Behistun reveals a high degree of Greco-Hellenistic influence.

Yet the term “Parthian” is broadly applied to all these artistic examples, even though they were created in an area that stretches from Syria to Central Asia, and during a period extending from the third century BCE to the third century CE. Nevertheless, certain stylistic characteristics of this widespread art may warrant its being described as Parthian: among these characteristics are frontal representation, Parthian attire and jewellery, and a great degree of attention to detail. In Masjid-i Sulaiman, Hatra, Elymias and Dura Europos, many reliefs and statues show worshipping figures portrayed frontally and wearing the distinctive Parthian tunic and trousers. This Parthian taste for frontal representation in both sculpture and decorative fresco⁷⁵ was a departure from the older Achaemenid style, which had depicted bodies more or less straight on but heads in profile. According to D. Schlumberger, “‘Greco-Iranian’ art is absorbed into Indian art through its conversion to Buddhism”⁷⁶ in the eastern Iranian regions (i.e., those between the Oxus and the Indus).

At the site of Nisa, near Ashkhabad in Turkmenistan, many Parthian artifacts were unearthed in 1948, at the time of the catastrophic earthquake in that region. The fragments of more than 50 ivory rhyta (beautifully sculptured drinking vessels) were excavated in the Parthian-era “Square building” mentioned above, and the rejoined pieces now can be seen in the major Turkmen and Russian museums; they have been called “masterpieces of Parthian art.”⁷⁷ Again, despite the considerable variation in the art of Parthia throughout western and eastern Iran, common cultural and historical elements unite the period under the Parthian aegis.

Parthian agriculture/trade/warfare

We know very little about Parthian agriculture, military life or craft production. More is known about the trade routes and trafficking of goods, although this knowledge is derived entirely from non-Iranian (e.g., Chinese, Armenian and Greek) sources. An inscription found in Palmyra that dates to the year 137 CE, for example, provides us with information regarding tax structure and the merchandise that was traded in the Parthian heartland.⁷⁸

Archaeological investigations in Susiana have provided evidence that Parthian settlements greatly increased in number and in size over time, suggesting a general improvement in farming techniques and the cultivation of rice under the Arsacids.⁷⁹ The scant information we have about the Parthian army comes from ancient authors, the archaeological discovery of weapons and equipment, and illustrations of Parthian warriors in Parthian art. The highly equipped cavalry were apparently the most important part of the army: they were heavily armed with bows and arrows and were well protected by coats of mail and plates of armour. The demographic composition of the army is unknown, and Roman historians have given contradictory accounts of it.⁸⁰ B. Shaw, in his article entitled “War and Violence” in the *Encyclopedia of Late Antiquity*, makes the following interesting observation:

The dominant social, economic and geographical forces in which warfare was embedded conduced to a basic continuity in the conduct of war itself, even during momentous social and political transitions. The Parthian and Sasanian states did develop a type of warfare that was very well adapted to the ecological constraints of their world – a state-organized type of war that emphasized large numbers of heavy cavalry, mobility over large open spaces, and the use of long-range strike archery, whereas classic Mediterranean warfare was based on massed heavy infantry formations. The repeated confrontation of these two war cultures naturally produced a degree of adaptation on the part of either side to the techniques of the other.⁸¹

I tend to agree with Shaw that war in ancient times, as today, constituted a form of social contact and hence of cultural exchange. The Roman wars, though the cause of a great deal of loss and misery, nevertheless probably did contribute to the economic and cultural development of both societies.

Historical characterization of the Parthians

Historians differ in their judgement as to whether it is legitimate to identify the Parthians as feudal. Both the tenth-century CE writers Biruni and

Firdausi agree that the Parthians were *muluk al tavayefi*, or feudalistic.⁸² In the *Shahnamah*, Firdausi writes that the brave descendants of the mythical hero Arash spread throughout the country, each ruling a corner of the land in a feudal manner for 200 years, “as though there were no king on earth.”⁸³

We know that both Firdausi and Biruni, and for that matter all the major Islamic historians (e.g., Tabari, Mas’udi, Muqaddasi), were informed by Sasanian sources and therefore were biased against the Arsacids. In modern times, G. Widengren, W. Haase, E. Herzfeld and others have shared the view that such a feudal system existed. On the other hand, Soviet-Russian historians, who define the concept of feudalism by the predominant mode of production, usually have seen the Parthian system as a slave-owner state. The fact remains, however, that we know very little about Parthian history, and what we do know is generally biased in some way. On the basis of numismatic evidence, historians believe that the Parthian nobility held substantial power; and although some Arsacids took the title “King of Kings,” not all the kings enjoyed such absolute power in practice, and the king probably was often a *primus inter pares*. According to K. Schippmann, one reason for the ultimate downfall of the Arsacid dynasty was “the latent antagonism between the monarch and the nobility or even, as was frequently the case, the dependence of the ruler on this group.”⁸⁴

Because the Parthians did not leave any complete account of their history, other non-Parthian accounts have been adduced in their historiography. As the primary foes of the Roman Empire, Parthians were often depicted by the Seleucids and Romans as “barbarians” or as “princes on horseback” for whom conquering Iran and Mesopotamia meant “nothing more than new grazing grounds or feudal tenure and who unlike the Achaemenids and Sasanians, had no great political aim in mind.”⁸⁵ Yet, by examining the sources and at times by reading between the lines, one can discover some more favourable judgments. Justinus, for example, provides the glowing account of Parthian prowess in the face of Roman enemies that was cited above.⁸⁶

In his *Annals*, the Roman writer Tacitus claims that Artabanus II wished to restore the Achaemenid boundaries of Persia.⁸⁷ On the strength of such evidence, some modern historians have asserted that the Arsacids had conceived the abstract of “Iran as a national concept.”⁸⁸ Moreover, in his *Idea of Iran*, G. Gnoli criticizes the “simplistic” opinion that the “Parthian period is ... considered as a kind of interruption in a linear and abstract process which is the national history of Iran,” as though it were “a time of cultural syncretism dominated by Hellenism.” Gnoli goes on to claim that the “Parthians must be placed by right, like the Achaemenians and Sasanians, within the history of Iranism, although, of course, with their own characteristics.”⁸⁹ The fact that the Parthians believed that they were in a position to demand what once had belonged to the Achaemenids confirms that they perceived themselves to be the true descendants of the great Persian dynasty.

Zoroastrian/Iranian identity

Modern archaeological excavations provide evidence for the theory that the Parthians gradually reasserted their Iranian identity and came to see themselves both as Zoroastrians and as the heirs of the Achaemenids. This trend is manifested in a number of ways: in names that are purely Iranian and at times Zoroastrian (e.g., Mithridates, Ohrmazdik, Artabanus, Artavahishtak); in the use of the Zoroastrian calendar, which is attested at Susa, Avroman and Nisa; in the depictions of fire altars on Parthian coins and sculptures; in the numismatic figure of the Achaemenid seated archer with a bow; and finally in the revival of the Achaemenid title “King of Kings.” Together, these elements suggest the gradual emergence of an Iranian identity in Parthian self-consciousness.⁹⁰

I will discuss the religion of the Parthians in greater detail in the next chapter; and so it will suffice to say here that while the Parthians were religiously tolerant and were at times considered to be syncretic, Zoroastrianism remained the predominant religion of the people and of the empire. A.S. Shahbazi reminds us that next-of-kin marriage, exposure of the dead and the construction of fire altars to honour deities and kings were consistently practised during the Parthian era:

Upon mounting the throne, each Iranian king founded a royal fire, counting his regal year from that moment. ... Arsaces, too, founded his royal fire ... when he was crowned, but his fire was kept burning throughout centuries, thereby providing the means for an uninterrupted dynastic era.⁹¹

The use of the calendar with Zoroastrian months, documented at Nisa, goes back to at least 100 BCE; and the first-century historian Isidore of Charax mentions the Parthian city of Asaak, where Arsaces was initially proclaimed king and where an eternal fire was kept burning.⁹² Again, the subject of Iranian religions will be addressed further below.

The Sasanians: history

The last pre-Islamic dynasty in Iran was the Sasanian dynasty, which ruled for 427 years and which revived the imperial nature of the earlier Achaemenid Persian dynasty. The name of the first Sasanian king was Ardashir. There are many accounts of his birth and genealogy, as is not the case with the founders of the Achaemenids and Parthians, although some of the Ardashir tales are certainly fictional. A Middle Persian historical romance, *Kar Namag-i Ardashir-i Pabagan* (The Deeds of Ardashir Pabagan), is dedicated to his birth, ascendancy and rule; and the story is not unlike the legends of Cyrus the Great. In his *Shahnamah*, Firdausi bases his story on this Middle Persian document, but there are other versions of Ardashir's early days: according to

the ninth-century CE historian Tabari, Ardashir was the son of Papak, who in turn was the son of Sasan, who in turn was the custodian at the Anahid Fire temple in Istakhr. In his inscription on *Ka'ba-yi Zardosht*, Shapur mentions Sasan, he does not clarify whether Sasan is Ardashir's father or grandfather. In *Kar Namag-i Ardashir*, Sasan is the maternal ancestor of Ardashir, and Papak is the descendant of the fallen Achaemenid king Dara (Darius III). In either case, Papak is the father of Ardashir, and Sasan was most probably the ancestor and patronym of the dynasty. The Sasanian era began in 224 CE when troops of the last Arsacid monarch, Artabanus (Ardawan), failed to crush a rebellion that had broken out in Persia (Fars). Ardawan was killed on the plain of Hormazgan in Media on the 28th of April that same year, and Ardashir, after extending his rule over Persis, Elymais and Kirman, "had a sacred fire lit at Ctesiphon to commemorate his investiture as the first king of kings in the Sasanian dynasty."⁹³

Ardashir, Shapur and religious tolerance

Ardashir and Shapur, the first two Sasanian kings, ruled for almost 50 years combined. They defeated the Roman emperors Gordian III, Philip the Arab and Valerian on several occasions, bringing the eastern Iranian provinces of Kirman, Sistan, Makran and Khurasan under their control. Shapur incorporated Bahrain and Oman into the Sasanian Empire, and by the end of his reign that realm had reached its greatest geographical extent. The Sasanians restructured the administration of the state and introduced new offices in the courts and churches: they maintained the Achaemenid institution of satraps and appointed sons of the Sasanian kings to these posts, and they introduced the position of margrave or *marzban* (frontier governor), as well as that of a Zoroastrian chief magus (*mowbedan mowbed*) who was attached to the royal court. Moreover, the Sasanians standardized the coinage of gold (*denar*), silver (*drahm*) and copper/bronze (*pashiz*) in a variety of denominations. New capitals were built at Ctesiphon and at several other cities as well, including Ardasir Khurrah, Bishapur and Gundeshapur. Shapur I, in particular, demonstrated intellectual curiosity and a great capacity for religious tolerance. Many works of Greek literature were translated during his reign, and Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, enjoyed his royal patronage.⁹⁴

Kartir, the Zoroastrian "Grand Inquisitor"

The open-minded climate of the first two Sasanian courts came to an abrupt end with the rule of Bahram I and with the rise of the great *mowbed* Kartir. Kartir was probably the driving force behind the imprisonment and death of Mani in 276 CE. He clearly dominated the religious environment during the reigns of Hormazd and the two Bahrams; and he promoted the rise to power of Bahram II over Narseh, because the former was more amenable

to the wishes of the conservative Zoroastrian priesthood. Kartir left four inscriptions that detail his own rise to power and his psychic travels.⁹⁵

Both the rising popularity of Manichaeism and the elevation of Zoroastrianism as the official state religion of Iran were responses to Christian proselytizing in the Persian Empire. The Romans had not yet officially adopted Christianity, although they would do so within several decades. The idea that the Sasanians grew only increasingly intolerant towards other religions, which is often cited as one of the main reasons that the later Sasanians fell to the Muslims, is historically unsound: Kartir, the most extreme symbol of prejudice and religious intolerance, lived at the very beginning of the long Sasanian era, and the Sasanian kings revived religious tolerance after him. Yet Kartir's figure overshadowed all other *mowbeds* and gave rise to the Sasanians' later reputation for religious intolerance, for many Manichaeans and Christians had perished under Kartir during the reign of Bahram II.⁹⁶

Zoroastrians and the expansion of Christianity

Bahram III ruled for only a few months, until he was deposed by his uncle Narseh. There is little information from the period during which Narseh and his son Hormazd II ruled, but there is enough evidence to posit that they altered the religious policies of the Bahrams. Towards the end of Narseh's reign the king of Armenia converted to Christianity, followed soon thereafter by the Roman emperor Constantine in 312 CE. With Armenia and Rome united as religious allies against Zoroastrianism and against Manichaeism in particular, the Sasanians began to seek the support of Manichaeans in these newly Christianized countries. There is no evidence of Christian martyrdom or of the persecution of Jews during this time; as R. Frye notes, "That Narseh was not such an ardent supporter of orthodox Zoroastrianism is indicated by a notice in al-Tha'alibi that he did not visit the fire temples."⁹⁷ After the reign of Hormazd II, Shapur II acceded to the throne *in utero* – the ninth-century CE historian Tabari claims that the throne was placed on the mother's expectant belly – and his mother acted as regent for the first sixteen years of his life.

Shapur II and the Avesta in writing

Shapur II reigned for 70 years, longer than any other Sasanian king, and under his control the Sasanian Empire regained its former geographical extent. His main adversaries were Constantine I and II, and the main point of contention between them once again was Armenia. The resulting wars ended in 377 CE with an official division of Armenia. Part of Armenia, Georgia and Albania became Sasanian territories. While Shapur II was thus preoccupied, however, the Hephthalites, or "White Huns," in the east began to rise as a threatening power, as did the Arabs in the south.

The king reorganized the *magi* into a rigid hierarchy and maintained a strict interpretation of Zoroastrianism. It was during this era that the *mowbed* Adhurbad, the son of Mahrspand, is supposed to have endured the ordeal of having molten metal poured on his chest. The fact that he survived unscathed was offered as evidence that faith in the good religion of Zoroastrianism was superior to other faiths.⁹⁸

The next two Sasanian kings, Ardashir II and Shapur III, ruled for less than a decade in total. By this point, the Sasanians already had been exposed to a potent enemy from Central Asia in the east: the Hephthalites. Their first attack on Iran occurred in 427 CE, during the reign of Yazdgird I, who had been dubbed “The Sinner” by the Zoroastrian priesthood because of his propensity for religious tolerance. In the year 410, also during the reign of Yazdgird I, the Christians of the Sasanian Empire convened a council in the city of Seleucia. After they had set fire to a Zoroastrian fire temple in Fars, however, the religious tolerance of Yazdgird began to wane. The successor of Yazdgird, Bahram V, was surnamed Gur (or “Wild Ass”) because of his skill in hunting these creatures. He was also known for his love of polo and music and for bringing early gypsies (*lulis*) to Iran.⁹⁹ He appointed a Persian *marzban* in place of the Arsacid king of Armenia, an act that was to inspire many revolts in later years.

Bahram’s son Yazdgird II (r. 439–57 CE) attempted to convert the Armenians back to Zoroastrianism. According to Armenian accounts, this effort was instigated by Mihr Narseh, the famous prime minister of the first two Yazdgirds and of Bahram Gur. Disastrous wars in the east, however, forced the Sasanians to grant concessions of religious freedom to Armenia. Meanwhile, Peroz (r. 457–84 CE), who had risen to power with the help of the Hephthalites, turned against his erstwhile supporters, only to lose his life in the resulting struggle with them. His son Kavad was taken captive and grew up among the Hephthalites, who forced the Sasanians to pay them an annual tribute as well.¹⁰⁰

Mazdak and the Nestorians

Two important events occurred during the reigns of Peroz and Kavad. First, in the spring of 484 CE, near the end of the reign of Peroz, Nestorianism became the dominant form of Christianity in the empire, in effect creating a Persian church. Second, during the reign of Kavad, Mazdak, who advocated an early form of communism, rebelled against the establishment. Like Mani, Mazdak initially enjoyed the king’s support, but he was later betrayed and executed by Kavad’s son Khusraw I.

Despite the fact that Kavad still was nominally in power when Mazdak and his followers were being persecuted, the real authority had shifted to Kavad’s powerful son, who was known as Anushiravan (i.e., “immortal soul”). Very little is known about the life of Mazdak, aside from the likelihood that he was a Zoroastrian priest, possibly with Manichaean sympathies.

To what degree, or for what reason, king Kavad observed or favoured Mazdakism is not known, but scholars have conjectured that he might simply have been seeking to counter the power of the aristocracy.¹⁰¹ Mazdakism will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 in the context of Iranian religions.

Anushiravan and the revitalization of the empire

Khusraw I is perhaps the most famous and illustrious Sasanian king. His epithet Anushiravan is followed by another name: *dadgar* (or *adel* in Arabic, meaning “just” in English). There are a great number of stories in both Arabic and Persian literature that describe his wise rule and the judicious nature of his conduct. Especially abundant are the *andarz* (advice sayings), which as a genre are referred to as “mirrors for princes,” and which are attributed both to Khusraw I and to his wise vizier Buzurgmihr-i Bukhtagan. The legends surrounding these two figures become so fantastic at times that some modern historians, such as F. Justi and A. Christensen, have grown to doubt the existence of the vizier altogether; but D. Khaleghi-Motlagh, in an article entitled “Bozorgmehr e Boktagan,” refutes their reasoning and supports the historicity of Buzurgmihr.¹⁰² As R. Frye puts it,

There are so many practices and sayings attributed to Khusraw that it is highly probable our monarch has become the receptacle of all novelty and change in Sasanian history, making a determination of which stories are real and which fanciful extremely difficult.¹⁰³

Khusraw I revitalized the Sasanian Empire. We are far better informed about imperial administration in the later Sasanian period, because of the extremely valuable information provided by the contemporary Syriac Acts of martyrs and Nestorian synod reports and by the legends on seals and bullae (stamped sealings used to prevent tampering of containers). One cannot underestimate the importance of Khusraw’s administrative genius, for his reforms became a part of the administrative heritage that the Arab and Islamic world inherited from Iran and continued to employ for many centuries; elements of this system are still in use. One of the main reforms concerned taxes, as the ninth-century CE historian Tabari writes:

Before the reign of Khusraw Anushiravan, the kings of Persia used to levy one-third of the revenue from their districts, and from some districts one-fourth, one-fifth or one-sixth depending on the irrigation and cultivation in the district, and a certain sum as poll-tax. Now Kavad, ... had ordered that the land ... whether plain or mountain be surveyed so that the land tax might be rightly determined, [...] but when his son Khusraw acceded, he had the survey completed and had the date palms and olive trees as well as heads counted.¹⁰⁴

Tax reform was then instituted, and all land was divided into specific tax brackets based on average annual productivity. The revenues that formerly had gone directly to the nobles were now channelled into a central treasury. Taxes on earnings and land were collected in three installments per year.¹⁰⁵

Professional tax collectors and scribes became the new elite, replacing the old nobility. The basis of the great wealth of the empire was land and agriculture: the new tax system brought in additional revenues, which in turn facilitated the building and repair of dams and irrigation channels, which in turn resulted in a great increase of agricultural productivity:

Archaeological surveys in Khuzistan, and of the Diyala river basin ... have revealed a great expansion of irrigation and of the amount of land under cultivation during the Sasanian period ... [and] there was also an unprecedented investment of state funds in extending the area of cultivation. Khusraw I developed complex plans for the digging of tunnels and canals all over the empire, such that never before or since has there been so much land brought under cultivation in this part of the world.¹⁰⁶

Just as important as these tax and agricultural reforms were Khusraw's military reforms: the army previously had been in the service of the nobility and had supplied its own equipment; now, however, the army was made up of paid soldiers. With the increased tax revenue, the feudal regiments were dismantled and a conscripted army was created. Commanders of each unit were granted landholdings by the state as part of their salary.

This system, which endured into Islamic times, was known as *iqta'e* and was especially favoured by the later Turkic rulers. This period also witnessed the flowering of the *dihqan* class, which was an important factor in the preservation of Iranian culture after the Islamic era.¹⁰⁷ I will further examine both the subjects of *dihqan* and of *iqta'e* in Chapter 5, in the context of the persistence of Iranian culture after the advent of Islam.

With domestic affairs under control, Khusraw turned his attention to Byzantium. He invaded Syria in 540 CE and sacked Antioch; and on his way back to Iran, he built a new city near his capital called Weh Antiok Khusraw, meaning in essence, "Khusraw [built this city to be] better than Antioch." The Byzantine Emperor Justinian accepted defeat and signed a peace treaty. Khusraw next invaded the rebellious Armenia and brought it back under Sasanian political control. He then drove the Hephtalites out of Iranian territory in 557 CE, and between 575 and 598 the Sasanian navy became entrenched in Yemen, installing an Iranian viceroy in San'a.¹⁰⁸

Sasanians became active in the maritime trade of the Persian Gulf, but the main route of commerce remained to the east: from Ctesiphon to Hamadan, then to Rayy, on to Nishapur and Merv, Balkh, Kashgar, and

eventually to China. There were routes to the south (Arabia), to the west (Damascus and Jerusalem), and to other places as well. In the apt phrasing of J.K. Choksy:

So although often disrupted by warfare, trade linked the people of Sasanian Iran with the Roman, Byzantine, Indian, and Chinese societies—forming ties that withstood the fiercest of conflicts in the name of profit. These trade routes also facilitated the transfer of another vital commodity—knowledge, via scholars and texts.¹⁰⁹

Not surprisingly, given his cosmopolitanism, Khusraw was a religiously tolerant monarch, and we hear of no systematic persecutions during his reign. In contrast, Justinian dealt with heretics and pagans in a particularly harsh manner; so when he closed the academy at Athens in 529 CE some philosophers took refuge at the court of Khusraw. There were Greek physicians and thinkers in his court, and he maintained a medical school, based on Greek theories, in Gundeshapur; this medical school lasted well into the Islamic era. Khusraw became the model of an exemplary ruler in later Arabic and Persian sources, to such an extent that his name inspired the Arabic term *Kisra*, a common title for the pre-Islamic Sasanian kings.¹¹⁰

Bahram Chubin and Khusraw Parviz

The reign of Khusraw's son, Hormazd IV (579–90 CE), is overshadowed by the figure of Bahram Chubin, a Parthian knight from the family of Mihran. Bahram defeated the Turks and brought home a considerable quantity of loot. Hormazd then sent him to fight the Byzantine army in present-day Georgia, where Bahram was once again victorious. When he suffered his first defeat, Hormazd, according to some Byzantine historians, seized the opportunity to oust Bahram. Meanwhile, the king himself had been deposed by the nobility in a palace revolt. Bahram took advantage of the chaos, came to Ctesiphon, and claimed the throne for himself. Khusraw II, the son of Hormazd and grandson of Anushiravan, fled the country and took refuge in Constantinople, marrying Maria, the daughter of Emperor Maurice. Although both Bahram and Hormazd were asking for his support, Maurice decided to help Khusraw II, known as Khusraw Parviz, "The Victorious," instead. With the help of Armenian and Byzantine allies, Khusraw II defeated Bahram, who then fled to the Turks but was assassinated a year later, probably at the instigation of Khusraw. The story of Bahram Chubin became the subject of a Middle Persian romance that has passed into both Persian and Arabic literature, although the protagonist is sometimes confused with Bahram Gur in the later sources. Firdausi gives a very sympathetic account of Bahram Chubin's life and deeds in the *Shahnamah*.¹¹¹

Following his tumultuous rise to power, Khusraw Parviz ruled for almost 30 years. After the defeat of Bahram Chubin, and ostensibly to avenge the death of his ally Maurice at the hands of the new Byzantine emperor, Parviz invaded the Byzantine territories, ultimately conquering Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt. In 615 CE, Iranian forces invaded Jerusalem and took the ostensibly True Cross of Jesus to Khusraw's Christian wife Shirin in Ctesiphon. The Persian victory in Egypt in 619 recalled past Achaemenid achievements and was a credit to Shahrbaraz and Shahrin, the two Sasanian generals, who were considered almost invincible; they were stopped only by Heraclius, the new emperor of Byzantium, in 622 CE; and from this point onwards, the Sasanians were on the defensive. Indeed, by 627 CE, they had lost all their conquered territories.

Khusraw blamed the two popular generals and ordered the execution of Shahrbaraz, but a court revolt broke out and Khusraw himself was imprisoned and murdered in February 628 CE. There are conflicting accounts of Khusraw's rule: he is admired by both Arabic and Persian sources, but modern historiography blames him for the weak state of the empire at the advent of Islam, calling him, among other things, arrogant, corrupt, brutal and lustful.¹¹² His love of Shirin, his Armenian queen, has been recounted in many classical books, including the *Shahnamah*, *Khusraw va Shirin* by Nizami, and *Siyar al Muluk*, even though Tabari wrote that Khusraw had 3,000 wives. Second only to Anushiravan, Khusraw occupies more pages than any other king in the *Shahnamah*. The splendour of his court was unprecedented. He built extensive palaces, and the rock carving of Taq-i Bustan near Kirmanshah recalls his excessive hunting parties. We know that Khusraw loved music, because he kept a number of both male and female musicians in his court; two of these, Nakisa and Barbad, achieved some degree of fame in their own right.

The end of Sasanian rule

Over the course of the next two years, more than five monarchs, among them two queens, ruled over the Sasanian Empire. Internal strife, the long-standing Byzantine wars and an epidemic of bubonic plague had left the empire extremely vulnerable. In 632 CE Yazdgird III came to power, but an Arab/Muslim army already had begun to invade Iran. In 636 CE, despite the bravery of its commander Rustam Farrukhzad, the Iranian army was defeated in Qadisiyah, and Rustam was killed. Some of the most moving lines in the *Shahnamah* involve his lamentation before the war, in which he predicts his own, as well as Iran's, bleak future. That same year the Muslim army captured Ctesiphon, and Yazdgird fled eastwards.

In 642 CE, Muslims defeated Iran in Nehavand; and in 652 CE, Yazdgird was slain by a miller in Merv, an act that brought an official end to the Sasanian dynasty. This was the fiercest blow ever struck against the Iranian national identity. Iranians lost their religion and their script, but in other

respects their language and culture have essentially survived. Over the next few centuries, Iranians remained dedicated to their national heritage, even though they would modify their existing sense of Iranian identity in order to accommodate the mores and beliefs of Islam. Ultimately, the Sasanians represent the final chapter in the official history of Zoroastrian Iran.

Sasanian historiographic remains

In contrast to the Achaemenids and the Parthians, the Sasanians left behind a veritable abundance of documents. Nevertheless, many consider that this abundance is not commensurate with what one might expect from so powerful a dynasty as the Sasanians, and it is to be contrasted with the paucity of historiography. We know that the Sasanians were a historically self-conscious dynasty, and the evidence suggests that Sasanian authors compiled well-researched histories that have not survived to the present day, in addition to the now-familiar compilations of legend.¹¹³ Although some of this literature has survived in Arabic and Persian translation, J.P. De Menasce has noted that the absence of the original corpus

obscure[s] its width, variety and richness. ... The originals were destroyed partly during the Arab conquest and some subsequent foreign invasions, notably the Mongol onslaught, and partly through religious fanaticism in Iran itself, down to recent times.¹¹⁴

Therefore, despite the attempts of the Iranian intelligentsia to preserve pre-Islamic secular literature, much of it has unfortunately vanished. Secular narratives and poetry were transmitted less faithfully than religious texts; while the Zoroastrian priests maintained the authenticity of the sacred passages, there was a certain allowable margin of error when it came to the other ones. Indeed, it appears that Zoroastrian priests were specially trained to preserve the sacred tradition in “living books.”¹¹⁵

Numismatics and seals

One invaluable and unusually reliable source for studying original material on the history, economy, culture and life of the Sasanian Empire is numismatics: thousands of coins survive from the 300-year period beginning with the reign of Shapur II.¹¹⁶ The Sasanians did not adhere exactly to the Arsacid numismatic tradition, but neither did they completely break with it. Instead, according to R. Gobl, they

adopted the denomination and weight standard used by their predecessors, and like the Arsacids they kept the obverse for the ruler's effigy and the reverse for the imperial insignia. ... The changes as compared with earlier practice are seen in the iconography of each side of the

coin, and in their various combinations, in the development of fresh elements ... and lastly in technique and style.¹¹⁷

Sasanian coins are inscribed with the name of the king in Pahlavi, thus permitting scholars to date them with a great deal of accuracy. Sasanian kings can also be distinguished by their personal crowns. In some cases, the coins carefully represented individual portraits of the rulers, but the script and certain epigraphical elements became progressively canonized. Fire altars and flames are shown on the reverse of these coins; at times these elements are depicted by themselves, but sometimes they are seen with two flanking figures. The script on the coins is lapidary but changes to cursive after the reign of Khusraw I.¹¹⁸

The art of cutting seal-stones flourished, like most other arts during the Sasanian period. The standard Parthian shape remained in use, with some skillful, if relatively minor, Sasanian innovations.¹¹⁹ There is a great variety of decoration on Sasanian stamp seals: from male busts and female figures holding blossoms to floral motifs, fire altars, winged horses, bulls and rams. Thousands of these seals and bullae from the Sasanian era are still extant, mostly in European museums and collections. The primary significance of the Sasanian seals and coins, however, resides in their survival into the Islamic era. Sasanian coins were used in the Islamic empire throughout the seventh century, and in Tabaristan they remained in use until 794 CE.¹²⁰ R. Gobl further informs us that

with the striking of the first true thin-flan coins in history, the influence of the Sasanians on coinage and currency technology extends through the Arabs to Byzantium, and—via the technologically derivative *denars*, *deniers* and pennies minted in medieval Europe—far into the modern period.¹²¹

Indeed, the Sasanian influence on coinage can be traced to countries as far east as China and Japan. The seals, on the other hand, were taken over by the Arabs as part of the famous Persian postal system, in which documents sealed by rings were delivered by couriers known as the *parvanak* (Arabic *farwaniq*).¹²² Sasanian coins and seals, themselves a continuation of the traditions of previous dynasties, in turn became a model for future Islamic administrations.

Textual documentation and inscriptions

The Sasanians have also left us many rock reliefs and inscriptions. Like the Achaemenids Darius and Xerxes, the early Sasanian kings evidently intended to create both written and pictorial expressions of their ambitions and aspirations for posterity in the forms of inscriptions, reliefs, coins, palaces and fire temples. Nearly all of the approximately 30 surviving

Sasanian rock reliefs appear in the province of Fars and were carved in the dynasty's two earliest centuries.¹²³

These remains are even more historically significant than the balance of Middle Persian literature recorded during the later Islamic era, because the early sources yield more accurate linguistic, historical, social and religious information. The primary Sasanian-era sources – as opposed to the secondary and tertiary sources of the Greco-Latin, Armenian or Syriac historical literature, or even of the Arab-Persian authors of the Islamic era – include trilingual, bilingual and monolingual inscriptions in Middle Persian, Parthian and Greek, the most significant of which are those of Ardashir, Shapur I, and his *Mowbedan Mowbed* Kartir at Naqsh-i Rostam in the vicinity of Istakhr.¹²⁴ Ardashir also left several reliefs in Firuzabad depicting his war against Ardawan V and his investiture in Naqsh-i Rostam. “Few as they are,” observes P. Gignoux, “these documents constitute a remarkable inheritance; they represent the only strictly Iranian source of Sasanian history.”¹²⁵

Shapur commemorated his victories against Rome in four discrete inscriptions, and Bahram II rendered his family portrait in relief on a mountain in Sar Mashhad. In this particular relief, the latter king is depicted as protecting his queen Shapurdukhtat from attack by a lion. He is also the only Sasanian king to have minted some coins depicting himself with his queen. In addition to their historical importance, these reliefs are significant sources of information about the dress, jewellery, hairstyles and sport of the court. To make more than one copy of the same relief or inscription, as Kartir did, is a typical Sasanian precaution and a sign of historical self-consciousness.¹²⁶

Certain inscriptions, such as the long inscription in Middle Persian, Parthian and Greek associated with the depiction of one of Shapur's Roman campaigns at Naqsh-i Rostam, constitute the major historical documents from the Sasanian period.¹²⁷ Four inscriptions of Kartir, the great *mowbed*, are among the most important of the early Sasanian era. Each of Kartir's inscriptions, which were in the first person singular voice, was erected in a different part of Iran. One of them, which is concerned with a psychic report of a vision of Kartir's heavenly favour, is the earliest document of its kind in Pahlavi literature; it offers a “vision of the Beyond” that is reminiscent of *Arda Wiraz Namag*, or of later accounts of the Mi'raj (Ascent) of the Prophet Muhammad.¹²⁸

An archaeological monument in Paikuli that dates to the time of Narseh, a tower that is now in ruins, carried a long inscription listing Narseh's supporters in his campaign against Bahram III. An inscription by Mehr Narseh, a Sasanian vizier of the fifth century CE, has also been discovered. In addition to those found in Persia, Sasanian royal or court inscriptions have been found in Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Iraqi Kurdistan; there are also many Sasanian-era Middle Persian personal and/or funerary inscriptions in India and in Uzbekistan, but these sorts of texts are mostly found in Persia.

Some old inscriptions in Dura Europa are in cursive and prove, in the view of P. Gignoux, that this form of script “was not simply produced by evolution from the lapidary [or unconnected] script.”¹²⁹

Not many inscriptions remain from the Middle Sasanian era, although there are numerous reliefs and monuments from the time of the two Khusraws. In Taq-i Bustan near Kirmanshah, rock reliefs depict the two Khusraws in different scenes from royal life, ranging from boar hunting and investiture to fighting off enemy forces. In the latter scenes, the king becomes a menacing figure, fully armoured, revealing only his eyes. These reliefs, all carved in the same *iwān*, are the most aesthetically remarkable Sasanian reliefs, but they are not accompanied by inscriptions. Perhaps by the time the rock reliefs were created the Sasanian court preferred other methods of historiography. In any event, these reliefs are accompanied by finely executed wall paintings and stucco works that suggest many contacts between the Sasanians and the outside world, according to E. Porada:

In [the] trees [flanking the *iwān* entrance] the Greco-Roman acanthus leaf is combined with natural and imaginary blossoms to form a marvelous tree design in which perhaps even elements of Indian plant decoration can be found. Such fantastic tree designs must have influenced those of the early Islamic mosaics of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. ... The relations here mentioned with works of art of distant countries illustrate the far reaching influence of late Sasanian art.¹³⁰

Rosettes, wing-palmettes, acanthus leaves, battlements and grapevines of Sasanian stucco not only appeared later in the Islamic artistic tradition, but remain familiar motifs in Iranian carpet weaving and painting to this day.

Court documents/Ostraca/Silverware

Unfortunately, Sasanian court documents did not survive the Islamic conquest, but numerous Middle Persian papyri dating from the Persian occupation of Egypt in 619 CE can be found throughout libraries in Europe and America.¹³¹ These Middle Persian documents, primarily comprising the communications of various Sasanian officials, reveal the style of correspondence during the Sasanian era and provide an invaluable source of personal and geographical names.¹³²

In addition, E. Herzfeld discovered Sasanian-era *ostraca*, or inscribed potsherds, near Ray; these were acquired by the British Museum and were published by J. de Menasce. Some other *ostraca* are in Tehran, and some are in New York. Most of these *ostraca* are written in cursive Middle Persian and contain financial accounts of agricultural products and animal husbandry. Finally, there are some pieces of inscribed silverware from the late Sasanian era that bear only the name of the owner and an assessment of the piece's weight. The celebrated golden cup of Khusraw, now in the Cabinet des

Medailles in Paris, is among these items. In all, over 100 Sasanian dining pieces in precious metal are known, including a partly-gilded silver plate in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.¹³³ The sophisticated metalwork of all this tableware indicates the high quality of workmanship that the Sasanians were able to achieve, and negates the theory that the Zoroastrian abhorrence of the defiling of fire deterred Sasanian artisans from working with metal.

Architecture

The Sasanian kings were great builders of cities and palaces: Ardashir, Shapur and Narseh founded Vahardashir, Bishapur, Paikuli and Sarvestan, and the two Khusraws constructed Taq-i Bustan, Qasr-i Shirin and Iwan-i Kasra. Excavations at the sites of Kish (a Sumerian site in Babylonia), at Tepe Hissar in Damghan and at Takht-i Sulaiman near lake Urmia, all of which were founded before the Sasanian period, uncovered Sasanian villas and palaces in their later levels. The plan of the first Sasanian city, Vahardashir, was circular, as were those of some Parthian towns. Architectural innovations of the Parthians, such as *iwans*, barrel-vaulted chambers surrounded by corridors, and possible fire sanctuaries consisting of round domes in solid masonry over square chambers, continued to appear.¹³⁴

Later Sasanian palaces show variations of the basic form employed in the palace of Ardashir. In palaces, the use of piers allowed the internal spaces to be opened up, giving them a Roman look; but indigenous building techniques continued. According to E. Porada, the Sasanian palace and city building “tradition conveys something of the political significance which pertained to builders and buildings of this period.”¹³⁵ Indeed, late Sasanian architecture reveals the full glory of the Persian monarchy in its final century: Ctesiphon, for example, was the largest of seven cities called al-Mada’in (i.e., “the cities”) by the Semitic inhabitants of Mesopotamia. Sasanian kings referred to modern Iraq as “the heart of Iranshar.” Al-Mada’in was located on the east shore of the Tigris River and included Seleucia, Vah Ardashir and Runaghan. In the Islamic era, Khusraw’s court was known as *Aivan-i kisra* or “the Arch of Khusraw,” now known as the Taq-i Kisra. When the Muslims conquered Iran, they built a capital city near the ruins of Ctesiphon, using as *spolia* the stones and bricks of the ruined palaces and cities. They called their new capital Baghdad, which is an Iranian word meaning “that which is God-given.” The imposing architecture must surely have impressed the Arabs greatly, considering that Arab geographers such as Ibn Khurdadbeh, Ibn Rusta, Istakhri and others describe the Sasanian constructions in glowing terms, even long after the conquests.¹³⁶ According to G. Herrmann,

The geographer Ibn Khurdadbeh (c. 864) described Khusraw’s palace as the most beautiful ever built of brick and plaster, while others found its enormous size so impressive that they could hardly believe that it was

work of men not of genies. Other writers including Tabari (838–922), have recorded details of the throne hall and described the elaborate ritual surrounding an audience with the Great King.¹³⁷

Part of Taq-i Kisra still stands today. The complete façade was preserved until as late as 1888 CE, when the northern part of it collapsed during a disastrous flood. The southern part stills stands, as does the great central arch, though cultural heritage groups in Iran have recently expressed concerns about cracks forming in the remaining structures.¹³⁸ The monument rises almost 30 metres in height and extends 400 metres in length and 300 in width. Many poets, both Persian and Arab, such as Bahtari and Khaqani, were moved to compose elegies by the sight of the imposing ruins.¹³⁹

Sasanian agriculture and army

Mas‘ud, the early Islamic historian, writes that the Sasanian administration acted from the base upwards to the king himself, in an interrelated fashion, starting with the taxes (*harag*) paid by the farmer which funded the fighting capacity of the army:

The kingdom relies on the army, and the army on money, and money on the *harag* and the *harag* on farming, and farming on justice, and justice on the integrity of officials, and the integrity of officials on the loyalty of the viziers, and at the top of it all is the watchfulness of the king regarding his own inclinations and his capacity to guide these so that he will control them and they will not control him.¹⁴⁰

Agriculture, handicrafts, trade and warfare were the main occupations of the Sasanian era; agriculture in particular was responsible for the wealth of the empire, because the rural taxes far exceeded those collected in urban areas. Wheat, barley, rice, alfalfa, date palms, grapevines and olive trees were cultivated by farmers, while dams and irrigation were provided by the king and by landlords. Weavers, embroiderers, textile dyers, blacksmiths, stonemasons, brick makers, potters, builders, locksmiths, goldsmiths, silversmiths and pewter artisans were among the labour forces of the Sasanian Empire, and some of these craftsmen were free to organize themselves into guilds. Sasanian merchants were known to be less interested in marketing their own goods than in transporting foreign products from the west to the east and back. Trade in goods from China and India, as well as from eastern Iran and Armenia – for example, raw silk and silk products, jewelry, spices, scents, hides, eunuch slaves and wild animals – brought the Sasanians significant revenues until the end of the third century CE. The Romans became dependent on the trade routes of the Sasanians, just as they had relied upon the Parthians in the previous period.¹⁴¹

To the eastern Romans, the Sasanians were more significant as military opponents than as trade partners. Once again, we have to rely on Roman writers, such as Marcellinus, Malalas and Procopius, for more detailed accounts, because these texts have endured while important Persian sources have not survived. In the year 363 CE, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Julian, for example, Ammianus Marcellinus wrote the following regarding the formidable Sasanian army under Merena:

All the companies were clad in iron, and all parts of their bodies were covered with thick plates, so fitted that the stiff joints conformed with those of their limbs; and the forms of human faces were so skillfully fitted to their heads, that, since their entire bodies were fitted with plates with metal, arrows that fell upon them could lodge only where they could see a little through tiny openings fitted to the circle of the eye ... the archers (for that nation has especially trusted in this art from the very cradle) were bending their flexible bows ... [behind] the gleaming elephants.¹⁴²

The Sasanian kings often would head their armies, and had themselves represented as warriors on their reliefs and silver bowls.

Adminstration/Diwan

One aspect of Sasanian administration extensively praised by Islamic writers such as Jahiz, Ibn Khaldun and Abu al-Fada was its skilled bureaucracy. Indeed, the Middle Persian word *diwan* came to be used throughout the Islamic world to mean “office” or “ministry.” We have more information about the later Sasanian era (sixth / seventh century CE) *diwan* than about its beginning, since the seals, bullae and legends for this later period are more abundant and contain valuable material.¹⁴³ It is noteworthy that in addition to the many bureaucratic positions of the Sasanian court and government – such as *mowbed*; *mugh'* (Magus); *dadvar* (judge); *gilgard* (head of state prisons); *argbed* (commander of a fortress); *salar-i dariqan* (commander of the special guard); *paristagbed* (head servant); *dibirbed* (head of the scribes); and *ganzvar* (treasurer) – there also existed an *andarzbed* (advice-giver or adviser), who both served at court and performed pedagogic and advisory functions. We also come across Magi (*mughan*) who served as *mughan-andarzbedan*.¹⁴⁴

The flourishing of the bureaucrats at the close of the Sasanian Empire made it possible for them to retain their status during the early Islamic era; in the words of R. Frye,

With the fall of the Sasanian Empire, and with the consequent loss in importance of the nobility and the Zoroastrian religion, the scribes were exalted even more than previously. This was primarily the class to whom

the Arabs turned to find qualified people to administer the conquered territories.¹⁴⁵

The role of the scribes and of the Diwanian class in the maintenance of Iranian culture will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Religious tolerance

It would be a mistake to contrast too sharply the religious tolerance of the Achaemenids with Sasanian policy, despite the fact that the Sasanians designated Zoroastrianism as the official state religion. Religion in the Sasanian era more generally will be discussed further below, but several points about religious freedom may be noted here. Scholars have often assumed the Sasanians to have been relatively intolerant; in his brief assessment of the Sasanian era, for example, E.M. Yamauchi claims too categorically that the Sasanians as a rule “persecuted Christians, Jews, Manichaeans, Mandaean, Buddhists and Brahmins, as indicated by the important inscriptions of Kartir.”¹⁴⁶ Unfortunately, this view is elaborated by others, such as R.W. Ferrier:

The Sasanians ... suffered from a recurrent series of crises throughout their history. In 272 CE the prophet and reformer, Mani, was executed in reaffirmation of strict religious orthodoxy. This intolerance of the majority of Sasanian monarchs towards faiths and peoples other than their own was an unfortunate aspect of the Sasanian character.¹⁴⁷

As I noted above, however, Mani lived at the beginning of the Sasanian era, during the reigns of Ardashir and Shapur, and was very close to the royal court at that time. It was only during the sovereignty of the three Bahrams, which lasted less than a quarter of a century, and following the ascendancy of the grand *mowbed* Kartir, that Mani was persecuted. We also know that, to varying degrees, many Sasanians returned to an outlook of religious tolerance after the three Bahrams, and that this outlook prevailed for the next 350 years.

Some excavations in southern Mesopotamia and southwest Iran have provided compelling evidence for the existence of religious pluralism during the Sasanian era. Pottery incantation bowls with inscriptions in Judeo-Aramaic, Syriac, Pahlavi or Mandaic, dating between the fourth and seventh centuries CE and representing a variety of religious practices, were meant to catch or deter evil spirits.¹⁴⁸ It is possible that the Buddha statues in Afghanistan that were recently destroyed by the Taliban date from the period when the Bamiyan region was under Sasanian control (i.e., from the mid-third to the fifth centuries CE), and that the Buddhists of the area practised their religion freely during that time. Finally, S. Bayani reminds us

that many churches, temples and religious schools existed in Sasanian Iran, especially in Ctesiphon.¹⁴⁹

The existence of a caste system within the Zoroastrianism of the Sasanian era should not be mistaken for intolerance towards other religions. Non-Zoroastrians were made to pay tax, but this policy had nothing to do with a difference in religious beliefs: Zoroastrian peasants also paid tax, as did the rest of the population, save a few aristocrats and *mowbeds*. Neither should it be forgotten that at the time of the second Khusraw, which was towards the end of the Sasanian era, “peace was reaffirmed and declaration of continued friendship was so strong that some Armenian writers believed that Khusraw had been converted to Christianity.”¹⁵⁰ We already have had occasion to mention Khusraw’s Christian wife Shirin.

Like their predecessors, the Achaemenids and the Parthians, the Sasanians reigned over a multi-national, multi-cultural and multi-religious domain, and they likewise exercised a certain degree of tolerance. Sasanian religion and religious tolerance will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

3 Iranian religions

This chapter will address “Old Iranian religion,” as well as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and Mazdakism, in terms of their texts, tenets and leaders. I will argue that, despite historical changes in the religion of pre-Islamic Iran, there are continuous patterns that can be referred to as uniquely Iranian, some of which persist to the present. Any study of pre-Islamic Iranian religions will be enriched by considering the cultural heritage of the peoples of Iran. In order to shed light upon the development of ancient Iranian religions, I will revisit the idea that the shared Indo-Iranian pantheon points to an early compilation of oral religious traditions in Persia paralleling that of contemporary India. In addition, I will analyze migration patterns that evinced a split in the hypothesized Indo-Iranian peoples. Such an analysis will contribute to a more general portrait of both the earliest settlers of Iran and their changing pantheon. By the time of Zoroaster, social changes setting the stage for his revelations had taken place with respect to settlement patterns and geographical locations. I will also examine the ways in which Mani and Mazdak departed from Zoroastrianism.

Chapter 1 presented the familial ancestry of Indo-Aryans and Iranians and observed that their relationship resembled that of siblings. The main source of evidence for this common ancestry comes from the religious compilations of ancient India and Iran – the *Rig Veda* and the *Avesta*, respectively – whose thematic and linguistic kinship is easily discerned: the Indo-Aryans who composed the *Rig Veda* and the Iranians who composed the *Avesta* used similar languages to worship a similar pantheon of gods. As M. Boyce has observed, “the beliefs and observances of the Old Iranian and Vedic religions were evidently shaped by the physical and social background shared by the Indo-Iranian peoples.”¹ Understanding the geographical origins of these religions, then, entails more than simply knowing where these people come from. For Boyce, this understanding also reveals how environmental stimuli informed spiritual traditions.

As we noted in Chapter 1, scholars generally agree that Indo-Aryans migrated into northern India and the Iranian plateau around the beginning of the second millennium BCE.² By the end of that millennium, the Iranian people had spread with their religion across the vast Iranian plateau.

Eventually the Indo-Aryan and Iranian groups became culturally distinct, but this split did not occur overnight; the migration of various tribes into greater Iran was gradual, and its flow of migration therefore produced a complexity of related cultures and customs.³ Several centuries later, the vast group of proto-Indo-Aryans had splintered entirely and had come to consider themselves simply “Indians” or “Iranians.”

Old Iranian religion and its pantheon

In describing the religion of the earliest Iranians, some scholars have used no single term in particular. Old Iranian religion, as a designation, has been used interchangeably with Mazdaism and with Zoroastrianism,⁴ though the latter really should designate Zoroaster’s own unique inflection of the older Iranian religion and the subsequent traditions about him developed by his followers. It is my opinion that the term “Iranianism” – like the familiar terms Judaism or Hinduism – would be the most useful term to convey the concept of a continuous, though changing, Iranian religion. In the absence of such an expression, “Old Iranian religion” may be used to describe the religion of Iran before Zoroaster, and this term will be used for the purposes of this study. In the words of W.W. Malandra:

Old Iranian Religion, defined separately, encompasses a religion that goes back well into the third millennium B.C., to a time when the related Indo-Aryans and Iranians still comprised a single group. This Indo-Iranian religion is a hypothetical reconstruction, based primarily on the texts of the Iranian *Avesta* and the Indian *Rigveda*.⁵

The *Avesta*, which was orally transmitted for centuries up to the time of the Sasanians, reveals, among other things, that Old Iranian religion comprised the following: a pantheon of deities, known as *yazatas* and *bagas*; prayers and ritual practices or *Yasnas* and hymns; and *Yashts*. The contents of the *Avesta* will be discussed further below.

The Indo-Iranian pantheon included a variety of deities, some of whom corresponded to various forces or aspects of nature. These gods and goddesses controlled both natural events, such as astronomical bodies and the elements, and human destiny. One of the most important such divinities was the goddess Aredvi Sura Anahita, “The Moist, Mighty, Immaculate One,” who was goddess of rivers and of water in general and was sovereign over fertility.⁶ The pantheon also included gods that personified abstract ethical concepts, reflecting both the values of these early peoples and their social and ethical development. Mithra, the god of contracts and other social relationships, is depicted as a warrior deity who enforces righteousness on earth, most likely with the intention to influence human behaviour: “Mithra rising on Mount Hara ... rides across the sky in his chariot and follows the sun, surveying the entire land, punishing deceit and upholding justice.”⁷

There were also local gods within their pantheon; but, as M. Boyce has argued, Indo-Iranians were inspired, by the open skies and land and by the passage from one land to the next, to imagine a world of spirits corresponding to abstract ideals. These steppe dwellers' myths reveal their technological advancements, allowing us to determine their approximate dates. One such determinate element is the horse-drawn chariot, and the major gods are depicted as charioteers, even – in the case of Mithra – brandishing a bronze mace;⁸ this detail indicates a date after 1700 BCE, when, it is believed, the Indo-Iranian groups began to work in bronze.

Another characteristic of the pastoral-nomadic Indo-Iranian social structure was that there were no shrines, apart from fire temples which protected fire from the elements. People prayed out in the open and worshippers would sing hymns of praise as they made sacrifices and food offerings. The lack of cult images may perhaps be related to the abstract, metaphysical nature of much of Iranian religious thought, most evident in the *Gathas*.⁹

A very important religious symbol that had a vital ritualistic function was a hallucinogenic plant called *haoma*, which will be discussed further below in this chapter; the “Indo-Iranian origin [of the word *haoma*] is assured by the Indic *Soma*.”¹⁰ The juice of this plant was pressed during an important ceremony associated with the *Yasna*, so that it could be consecrated, offered to the gods, and finally drunk ritually by worshippers.¹¹

Ultimately, Old Iranian Religion may be viewed as the first stage of the eclectic religion that later came to be known broadly as Zoroastrianism.

Zoroastrianism

Like the term “Old Iranian religion,” the term “Zoroastrianism” requires clarification. Zoroaster is a Greek-derived name for Zarathustra. In reference to Zoroaster's ideas and concepts, scholars exclusively employ the word “Zarathustrianism.” The term “Zoroastrianism,” on the other hand, has come to mean an eclectic religion that evolved in Iran after Zoroaster's reforms of Old Iranian religion, embracing aspects of both Old Iranian religion and Zarathustrianism.

Like that of any other prophet, the life of Zoroaster is surrounded by religious myths. Different Zoroastrian sources give us beautiful mythological accounts of his birth, life and time. It may be deduced, from these intertwined sources, that he belonged to the Spitama family and that he was born to a father by the name of Pourushaspa and to a mother named Dughdhova. In one of his *Gathas*, Zoroaster calls himself a *zaotar*, which denotes a person who has been trained to become a religious teacher. The first person to believe in his teachings was Maidyoimanha, who was probably a cousin.

Some scholars, following Greek tradition and Iranian (Magian) chronology, have placed Zoroaster in the seventh or the sixth century BCE.¹² M. Boyce, on the other hand, situates his life within a 200-year time period,

that is, 1400 to 1200 BCE; the *Gathas* suggest, she argues, that Zoroaster lived at a time “when Bronze Age developments were adversely affecting his own people, while they themselves, it seems, still kept to a largely pastoral economy.”¹³

The practices of Old Iranian religion seem to have been radically challenged by the works of Zoroaster, who, “like the Buddha, Christ, and Muhammad, [all of whom] came after him ... had the vision of transforming his inherited religion into a new faith,”¹⁴ in M. Boyce’s nice turn of phrase. Thus the contributions of Zoroaster both break with tradition, creating discontinuity, and reinterpret tradition, assuring its continued influence. As both a priest (*zaotar*) and a reformer of the Old Iranian religion, Zoroaster embodied both change and tradition. His *Gathas* were composed in a traditional style and metre which resembled one of those employed in the ancient Indian *Vedas*; his way of thinking, however, was considerably dissimilar.¹⁵

For Zoroaster, Ahura Mazda, the divine embodiment of wisdom, established a physical and moral order by means of his Holy Spirit and in cooperation with a number of abstract aspects of his godhead. Part of this establishment consisted of eschatological rewards and punishments, respectively, for following the divine precepts, as transmitted by Zoroaster, or for evil precepts, represented by the ancient pantheon and its priesthood, which are due to the workings of Ahriman, the Wicked Spirit, the polar opposite of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶

Free will and the celebration of life

Many scholars believe that Zoroaster was the first thinker to emphasize the concepts of human freedom and moral choice. His stress on the factor of human choice had not only a personal impact on the individual but it also carried a universal weight, casting human will as the ultimate battle ground for right and wrong, for good and evil. The post-Gathic formulation “good thoughts, good words and good deeds” came to be expected of every Zoroastrian. In this tradition, Man’s purpose is not only to glorify God, but also to assist Him in His battle against Evil; Ahura Mazda needs people as much as people need Him. Human beings have free will to do good or evil, and, as Duchesne-Guillemin says, “at the origin of Zoroaster’s universe there is not a fall, there is a choice.”¹⁷

Hunger, impotence and sadness are creatures of Ahriman; and therefore fasting, celibacy and excessive mourning are prohibited in Zoroastrianism. Festivals and celebrations are a central feature of Zoroastrianism, which is “a faith [that] enjoins on man the pleasant duty of being happy.”¹⁸ Working, and thus increasing the Good Creation, is seen as highly virtuous. In Zoroastrian liturgies, worshippers pray, confess and repent. Feasting, music, and eating and drinking in moderation are all elements of Mazda Yasna (worshipping Ahura Mazda).

Opposition to Zoroaster's teachings

Zoroaster's teachings were not welcomed by the clergy of his own land: during Zoroaster's early career, according to *Yasht* 46.2, he had "few men and few flocks."¹⁹ The teachings and reforms of Zoroaster seem initially to have generated great opposition. Indeed, in one of his *Gathas* (46.1) Zoroaster wonders where best to go when he is shunned by his community. The community leaders most opposed to Zoroaster were men whom he identified as *Kavis* and *Karapans*: the latter term may mean "one who mumbles," while the exact meaning of *Kavis* is disputed. It probably means "princeling, warlord," and generally refers to the patrons of the *Karapans*, with the exception of Kavi Vishtaspa.²⁰ Each term most likely refers to some sect of priests, and priestly opposition in general to Zoroaster's innovations arose in the face of the threat to the deities on whom they based their devotions and livelihood. In the end, the belief in Ahura Mazda as the highest god displaced all the other deities. For a time, many of the old gods (e.g., Mithra) were dethroned, and some (like Sraosha, Ashi and Aramati) were modified, in accordance with Zoroaster's teachings. Zoroaster, experiencing opposition in his homeland, migrated to a neighbouring land. There, legend has it, the local ruler's wife first converted to his religion, and afterwards Zoroaster also made a convert of the king Vishtaspa, who became a major patron.²¹

The Avesta

The *Avesta*, the Zoroastrian sacred compilation, contains Zoroaster's *Gathas* as well as non-Gathic material from both before and after the time of the prophet. It comprises both Old Avestan (also known as Gathic, an Eastern Iranian language found only in these texts) and Younger Avestan material; the former includes the *Gathas*, *Yasna Haptanhaiti*, and some short prayers.²² The *Gathas* were later included among the heterogeneous texts forming the *Yasna* liturgy. The *Yashts* are addressed to older gods in the Old Iranian pantheon and some Zoroastrian gods. The *Vendidad* (or *Videvdad*) is a collection of various prose texts in Younger Avestan composed after the Achaemenid era, likely in Parthian times,²³ and primarily dealing with purity laws.

The *Yasna* liturgy

The Avestan word *yasna* is etymologically identical to the Sanskrit *yajna*; both terms mean an act of worship and come from the shared root *yaz*, "to worship." While *yasht* has come to mean praising a certain divinity, *yasna* is a more general term for liturgy and prayer. The *yasna* liturgy was extended over the centuries and finally grew to have 72 sections (*haiti*), but Zoroaster's

five prosodically organized *Gathas*, comprising 17 *haitis* (individual poems), form the heart of the *Yasnas*.²⁴

Early Avestan oral traditions

As I mentioned previously, Indo-Iranians were not familiar with any script and their culture was completely oral. "The first uses of writing in both India and Iran were in the areas of commerce and government. The priesthood and literati especially had nothing but scorn for the written word."²⁵ Several Middle Persian texts, which were transcribed from oral accounts in the ninth century, claim that the *Avesta* had been written on ox hides and in gold at Istakhr during the time of the Achaemenids, and that Alexander burned them. This story is almost certainly apocryphal, and no evidence of that supposed *Avesta* has ever been found.

The Gathas

The *Gathas* comprise a body of complex poetry and, as J.R. Hinnells states, "although they are exceedingly difficult to translate, the profundity of their teachings makes them rank among the most precious gems of the world's religious literature."²⁶ In his *Gathas*, Zoroaster referred to many of the gods of the old pantheon as demons (*daevas*) and attributed the creation of the universe to Mazda Ahura (or Ahura Mazda, also sometimes rendered in translation as Ohrmazd), the Wise Lord (or Lord Wisdom). The existence of evil in the world was attributed to Angra Mainyu, the Evil Spirit (or Ahriman in Pahlavi). According to Zoroaster, forces of good and righteousness were locked in constant battle with forces of evil and wrong; and while good would prevail in the end, it could not be without human assistance. Zoroaster stressed that human beings, by choosing good over evil, would help Ahura Mazda defeat Angra Mainyu. The *Gathas* were the first Iranian compositions to emphasize moral choice and the necessity of the participation of humankind in the divine plan for the victory of good over evil; thus, they have been described as "the oldest surviving product of Iranian literature and easily its most important contribution to world-thought."²⁷

Dualism versus monotheism

Because of Zoroaster's focus on the dual nature of creation, his religious philosophy has been labelled "dualistic," a term that distinguishes Zoroastrianism from both polytheism and monotheism. Today, most Zoroastrians consider their religion monotheistic and Ahura Mazda their one and only God, even though they maintain the separate existence of Ahriman as the personification and source of evil.

W.B. Henning considers Zoroaster's dualism a "logical answer" to the dilemma raised by monotheism on the existence of evil in the world, and he claims that "dualism of this kind [could] have been built only on a pre-existing monotheism, on the belief that one God, a Good God, was responsible for the world."²⁸ Although one might not entirely agree with Henning on this point, he is right to observe that attacks by Muslims and by Christian missionaries eventually motivated the Parsee theologians to insist that their religion was monotheistic.

The historicity of the Gathas

As mentioned above, seventeen *Gathas* are preserved in the *Avesta*. In six of the *Gathas* the poet uses the first person singular in his compositions.²⁹ Such usage makes Zoroaster one of the few historical individuals known to us from the ancient religions. The *Gathas*, as well as the rest of the *Avesta*, were preserved verbatim for centuries both because of the respect paid to them by the priesthood and because of the strength of the oral tradition in ancient Iran.

In Middle Persian literature we often come across *mowbeds* (chief priests) who knew the entire books of the *Avesta* and the *Zand* (the translation of the *Avesta* into Middle Persian) by heart.³⁰ In pre-Islamic Iran, it was not common practice to write down religious compilations. These works were transmitted orally for centuries and were considered too sacred to be written down. Only governmental, political or business documents (such as royal inscriptions, administrative documents, court vouchers etc.) were considered suitable for inscription.

Only with the advent of Christianity and other religions of the Book did the Zoroastrians see the advantage of writing down their own holy compilation. Their concerns were further fuelled after the defeat of Iran at the hands of the Arabs. Facing the spread of Islam and the danger of annihilation, the Zoroastrians recorded their holy texts (although, unfortunately, not many of their literary ones) more extensively than before.³¹

The legacy of the Avesta

The word *Avesta* is not used in the *Avesta* itself, and some have suggested that the term might mean "worship."³² Today, only one-fourth of the original *Avesta* exists.³³ During the time of the Arsacids the corpus was rescued from oblivion, and under the Sasanians a selective canon was established. However, the recording of the text in a special *Avestan* alphabet – with 49 letters, including 14 vowels – invented for this purpose likely took place only in the sixth century CE.³⁴

With the advent of Islam, only a small Iranian minority remained Zoroastrian. The Zoroastrians focused their efforts upon preserving only the most religious components of the *Avesta*; it was these parts that were translated into Middle Persian and written down. Thus the surviving

portions of the text lack substantial historical information. As J.R. Hinnells observes,

ritual texts, particularly hymns, whichever religion they belong to, rarely try to give a thorough explanation of belief. They hint or allude to teachings or myths the worshiper knows well. They move his heart rather than exercise his brain.³⁵

So it is with the surviving quarter of the original *Avesta*. The three quarters lost to history must have contained much more literary and historical information.

Since we have no ancient name for this compilation, the language of the *Avesta* is simply called “Avestan” by scholars.³⁶ It is a “dead church language” that few priests and scholars understand. But because the words were revered as sacred, “every jot and tittle is preserved.”³⁷ The Avestan language is similar to the languages of the ancient eastern Iranians, for example, the Bactrians, the Sogdians and the Khwarazmians; thus Zoroaster and the *Avesta* can be placed in the eastern regions of ancient Iran, present-day central Asia.³⁸ The prophet’s great antiquity means that no authentic information survives concerning his exact place of birth, and many Zoroastrian communities therefore claimed him as their own native son. Various eastern Iranian peoples, such as the Bactrians and Sogdians, created legends asserting that he had been born in their territories.³⁹

The Zoroastrian calendar as an example of eclecticism

It was said earlier that Zoroastrianism has come to mean an eclectic religion that embraces aspects of both Old Iranian religion and Zarathustrianism. One good example of this eclecticism can be seen in the Achaemenid Later Avestan calendar. This solar calendar met the practical needs of early agricultural civilizations. It facilitated the mathematical association between month and year, identifying significant dates for sowing and reaping, for the benefit of an advanced agricultural society that practised Zoroastrianism. This Zoroastrian calendar, one of many, had 12 months of 30 days each. When it was reformed in the third century CE, five extra days were added at the end of the 360-day year and were named for the five groups of Zoroaster’s hymns; as in many other societies, the calendar was explicitly linked with the religion.⁴⁰ It is noteworthy that this particular Achaemenid calendar shows a change of policy in Artaxerxes’ court in 441 BCE: the Old Iranian gods, such as Mithra and Anahita, came to be honored together with the *Gathic* gods.

The Sasanian *Avesta*

The extant version of the *Avesta* was written in the Avestan language using an adaptation of the Pahlavi alphabet designed for this purpose.

The compilation was most likely a synthesis of oral tradition with whatever written materials existed at the time. The Sasanian *Avesta* was a canonized version of Zoroastrianism that contained, in addition to all the above-mentioned texts, accounts of the prophet's life and legends, books of law and cosmogony, and apocalyptic works, comprising 21 *nasks* (books). Unfortunately, the copies of this compilation that must have been kept in the major fire temples were destroyed, along with the temples, by successive invaders (e.g., the Arabs, Turks and Mongols);⁴¹ and so the content of the Sasanian *Avesta* is known to us only thanks to a detailed summary of it in the *Dēnkard*, a Middle Persian rendition of the ninth century CE. As we noted above, the existing *Avesta* amounts to only a quarter of the original or "Great" *Avesta*; the parts of it that have come down to us include the *Hadhokht Nask*, *Nirangistan* and *Herbadistan*.

Zand

Zand is a Middle Persian term for the exegesis, commentary and translation of Avestan texts into Middle Persian, using the Pahlavi script. The latter script was a difficult one, using "fossilized Aramaic ideograms."⁴² Almost all of the existing Avestan texts, except the *Yashts*, have their own accompanying *Zand*, and M. Boyce reminds us that

the two were often spoken of in one phrase, as *Zand-Avesta*, so that at first Western scholars took *Zand* to be a synonym for *Avesta*, or to refer to the language in which the holy texts are written.⁴³

Some important Middle Persian books consist largely, or in part, of the *Zand* associated with lost Avestan *nasks*. Among these are *Bundahishn* (Creation), which, like the book of Genesis, deals with creation and eschatology. There are also *Zand* selections by the *mowbed* Zadspram of the ninth century CE, and the *Dēnkard* (Acts of the Religion) is a massive compilation of diverse materials, including an account of the prophet's life.

Middle Persian literature in the Islamic era

There are several tracts of Pahlavi literature that date to the Islamic period. These are usually concerned with religious materials and were composed either by known copyists or by anonymous redactors. The content of these texts ranges from very ancient to contemporary matters of the ninth century CE. After the tenth century, even Zoroastrians, who were by now a poor and isolated minority in Iran, only rarely used Middle Persian. They adopted New Persian written in the Arabic script for their texts, which consisted mainly of re-renderings of older materials.

Pazand

Put succinctly, *Pazand* is a Middle and New Early Persian language in Avestan script. It came about through a migration in the ninth century CE, when a band of Zoroastrians left Iran to find religious freedom in Gujarat, Western India. These people became known as Parsees (or Persians): they began to speak Gujarati and translated the *Avesta* and related *Zand* from Middle Persian into Sanskrit and Old Gujarati using the Avestan alphabet. According to M. Boyce, “the latter process ... was known as ‘pa-zand.’ *Pazand* texts, transcribed phonetically, [largely] represent a late and often corrupt Middle Persian pronunciation.”⁴⁴ Despite their difficulties, these Pazand texts provide in some cases the only extant copies of some ancient literature.

The birthplace of the *Avesta*

The origin of the first speakers of Avestan is disputed. When Avestan writers mention the country *Aryana Vaejah* as a fine land, it is at least partly identifiable as the region known as Khwarizam. This eastern Iranian state included the provinces of Merv and Herat.⁴⁵ According to the first *Karde* of the *Vendidad*, the list of sixteen good lands created by Ahura Mazda consists entirely of eastern Iranian locations,

beginning with the mythological *Ariana Vaejah* ... and moving south in a path including Sogdiana, Margiana, Bactria, Herat, Gandhara, Arachosia, the Helmand river, the river Buner and finally the ‘Seven Streams’ (*Hapta Handu* = *Hindu*, the Indus and its tributaries).⁴⁶

The same eastern Iranian provinces are said to be inhabited by Iranians (*Airīianam*) in the *Mithra Yasht* as well.⁴⁷ The fact that these eastern lands are mentioned in the *Vendidad* supports the view that eastern Iran is the birthplace of the *Avesta*.

The *Bundahishn*/creation myth

Ancient Iranians divided existence into two realms: *gaithya* (Middle Persian *gētīg*) and *manyava* (Middle Persian *mēnog*). As M. Schwartz helpfully explains:

These terms are commonly translated [as] ‘physical’ and ‘spiritual,’ but they refer more precisely to the realms of the tangible and the intangible ... thus in Zoroastrian theology the world was first created by Ahura Mazda in ‘ideal’ form (Pahlavi *mēnog*) and then in actual form (*gētīg*). The demons exist in *manyava* form, but the divine sphere has its

gētig as well as [its] *mēnog* state ... A different dichotomy is found in the distinction between *asa* and *drug*.⁴⁸

According to the *Bundahishn*, the entirety of the universe was created in seven stages. The sky, *asman*, is the first thing to be created. In Avestan, *asman* means “stone;” and in this creation myth, the sky is duly conceived as a round, hard vault that encloses seven continents, oceans, and a firmament with sun, moon, planets and stars.

The second creation is water. Water fills the lower part of the sphere of the sky and passes beneath the earth. All water is thought to have a common source, ascending from below the earth to the peak of Mount Hara, and then pouring down to the mythical lake Vourukasha. At the foot of Mount Hara, Vourukasha (Middle Persian *Varkash*) occupies one-third of the earth. The river Aredvi Sura flows to the sea from the peak of Hara and is larger than the rest of the rivers in the world combined. Two rivers, the Vanhvi Daitya (meaning Good River; Middle Persian *Veh daiti* and Persian *Veh rud*), and the Ranha (Arang), flow out of Vourukasha.

Next, the earth is created, resting on the water like a great flat dish. Mountains grow up from the flat earth in order to strengthen it, but torrential rain causes the land to split into seven continents or regions, the *karshvars*, which are to be reunited at the end of time. The first mountain is Hara Berezaiti, “the lofty one,” identifiable in name with present-day Mount Alburz.

The peak of Hara is located in the very centre of the world, right in the middle of the central *Karshvar*, which is surrounded by seven other circular *Karshvars*. The central continent is thought to be the largest, equal in size to all the other regions put together, and the only one inhabited by humans. It is called “the splendid region of *Khvaniratha*,” and these seven continents are separated from each other by water, forest and mountains.⁴⁹

The creation of plant life

After the creation of sky, water and earth, other earthly elements are produced: plants, animals, human beings, and finally fire. Airyanam Vaejah (Middle Persian *Iran Vej*), the land of the Iranians, is the epicentre of all major phenomenon and events in the world. The river Vanhvi Daitya (Middle Persian *Veh Daiti*) flows through Airyanam Vaejah, where the first androgynous human being, *Gayomaretan* (mortal life), the primordial bull, and the first plant are created. The peak of Mount Hara, Hukairya, is a place of perfectly ideal conditions with no inclement weather, no disease, no pollution and no darkness.

Above this peak is Mithra’s abode, from which point the souls of the righteous are believed to ascend to heaven. One end of the Chinvat, or

Judgement, Bridge is above the peak, and hell lies below it. The Tree of Life is also located in *Vourukasha*. According to the *Vendidad*, this tree, on which grows the seeds of plants of all kinds by the hundreds, thousands, and myriads, is also the tree containing all medications and therapies. In the tree lives the giant bird Saena, who scatters the seeds of the tree by beating its wings; this bird recurs in classical Persian texts as the figure Simurgh.⁵⁰ Another tree, possibly a variant of the last, known as the Gaokarena, is the source of the white *haoma* that can prevent physical death. M. Schwartz argues that “the possible Indo-Iranian origin of these motifs of mythological trees is indicated by the Indic Jambu-tree ... linked to soma, medicine and immortality.”⁵¹

The creation of animal life

The fifth creation of animal life comes from the Primal Uniquely-created Bull (Avestan *Gav aevo.data*; Middle Persian *Gav-i evdad*), which is brought to life in the middle of the earth (*Eran Vej*) on the bank of the river Veh Daiti. This Primordial Bovine is described in the *Bundahishn* as “white bright as the moon, with the height of three measured reeds,” and requires 75 days to create, longer than any other creation. The slaughter of the Primal Bull gives rise to plant and animal life. Indeed, the bovine is considered “the representative of animal life in Old Iranian thought.”⁵² In a number of Avestan passages the term *gav*, “bovine,” is used to connote “animal” in general, as in “the fivefold *gav*” or five standard categories of non-human beasts;⁵³ this association certainly demonstrates the importance of cattle in archaic Iranian society.

The creation of humanity

The primordial human in Avestan is denoted as *Gayomaretan*, or “mortal life.” According to M. Schwartz, the term is apparently “a direct descendant of an Old Persian *Gayah marta*. Like the Vedic ancestor of humanity, Martanda, with which he has been compared, Gayomart was as wide as he was tall.”⁵⁴ According to the *Bundahishn*, Gayomart was “bright as the sun, and four measured rods in height,” making him one rod taller than the primal bull. Ahura Mazda also creates Gayomart in the centre of the world, “upon the left side,” while the Bull is upon the right.⁵⁵ In Indo-Iranian mythology, the first king is the shining Yima,

in whose kingdom there was neither cold nor heat, neither old age, nor death, nor demon-created sickness, before he lied. ... Then when he brought the lying untrue word into his mind, *Khvarenah* (Divine Grace) was seen to depart from him in the shape of a bird. ... This [is the] *Khvarenah* [whom] Mithra of wide pastures, with listening ears and a thousand perceptions, laid hold of.⁵⁶

In the *Shahnamah*, however, Gayomart is depicted as the first king and culture hero who is credited with discovering the use of food and clothing. Firdausi relates that King Jamshid of the Pishdadian, although not the first mythical king, still loses his *Khvarenah* because of conceit.

The creation of fire

The seventh creation is Fire, but, as E. Yarshater observes, “the position of fire in the scheme of things is manifestly ambiguous.”⁵⁷ On some occasions Fire is treated as the source of all strength and warmth in the Universe, but on others it is not. It is presumed that fire derived its brightness from the Endless Light, which is the abode of Ahura Mazda; and as the seeds of both human beings and animals were made of fire, Fire itself must have preceded the rest of creation.⁵⁸ Perhaps the best explanation for this view is provided by M. Boyce: “this element first passed into the being of the six creations proper when these became animated, forming, as it were, their life force.”⁵⁹ The *Bundahishn* holds that Ahura Mazda commanded Fire to serve human beings by “preparing food and overcoming cold.”⁶⁰

Gētīg and Mēnog

As previously mentioned, Zoroastrianism divides the world into two categories, that of *gētīg* (tangible) and that of *mēnog* (intangible). These two categories are not seen in opposition to each other, or ranked relative to one another, as they were by the Hellenistic Greeks. Rather, as J.R. Hinnells puts it, “the Zoroastrians did not compare matter unfavourably with spirit; they held that both should be in perfect harmony for the ideal existence.”⁶¹ Moreover, the entire world is perceived to be the creation of Ahura Mazda, and human beings are the centre of Good Creation. The material world of Good Creation is the handiwork of God, specially fashioned as a tool in the battle against the Evil One: it serves as a “trap” to ambush Ahriman.⁶² Humans must choose evil, and it is not forced on them by nature; thus, “true to the Aryan heritage, Zoroastrianism has always been a life-affirming religion.”⁶³

Ahriman

Before the creation of the *gētīg*, everything had stood immobile and unchanging. Ahura Mazda had been “on high in omniscience and goodness ... for boundless time ... in Endless Light and had no contact with Ahriman in his deepest darkness.”⁶⁴ Ahura Mazda, the wise one, becomes aware of Ahriman’s existence and foresees both his enemy’s assault and their period of struggle. He also realizes that in the end the victory will be his if he has the right tools: “he created in the spirit state the creatures he would need as those tools. For 3,000 years the creation stayed in the spirit state.”⁶⁵

Throughout this period there is no animation, and time is fixed at noon. Then Ahriman moves against Ahura Mazda; but when he sees the light and harmony of Ahura Mazda's world, he crawls back into his darkness to create demons, or *de'vs*, to help him accomplish his mischief.

When Ohrmazd [i.e., Ahura Mazda] saw the creatures of the Evil Spirit, they appeared to him frightful and putrid and evil; and He desired them not. When the Evil Spirit saw the creatures of Ohrmazd they appeared to him most profound and fully informed. And he desired the creatures and creation of Ohrmazd.⁶⁶

Ahura Mazda, in spite of his foreknowledge of ultimate victory, approaches Ahriman with an offer of peace and a request for his help. Ahriman is to acknowledge and to praise Ahura Mazda's Good Creation, but Ahriman takes Ahura Mazda's peace offer as a sign of weakness and refuses. Ahura Mazda realizes that he would place himself at a disadvantage if he did not fix a time limit for their contest; and so he suggests 9,000 years to be the length of their battle, and Ahriman agrees. Ahura Mazda then recites the *Ahuna Vairyo* prayer, the power of which strikes Ahriman motionless for three millennia. It is during these millennia that Ahura Mazda creates the *gētīg* (visible world) in the seven stages described above.⁶⁷

The second tri-millennial period

The beginning of the second 3,000-year period marks the start of a mixed state of history, wherein Ahura Mazda and Ahriman both have spheres of influence and their respective creations are in constant strife. Each of the three millennia has a distinct association: the first millennium coincides with the rule of the Pishdadians, who are the legendary Iranian kings of the world; the second millennium is dominated by the evil Dahak; and the third millennium is the era of the Kayanians and their wars with the Turanians. Yima is the first king of this era, and it is during this time that all events recorded in Iranian mythology and ancient epics are said to take place.

The third tri-millennial period

The third and final 3,000-year period is again divided into three distinct epochs: Zoroaster is born in the first millennium; the second witnesses the birth of Zoroaster's son Hoshidar; and the third is the era of the last Messiah, Soshyant (or "Saviour"), who also is a son of Zoroaster. These sons "are to be born of the seed of the prophet, which is preserved in Lake Frazdan, in Sistan, and watched over by a large number of the *fravashis* (heavenly spirits) of righteous men."⁶⁸ It is noteworthy that the idea of Soshyant or Saviour reappears in Shi'ite Islamic Iran in the figure of Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam.

The year 6000

In the year 6000 of the Zoroastrian calendar, Ahriman attacks Ahura Mazda's creation with the help of his *devs*. Angra Mainyu (Evil Mind) is the malevolent counterpart of Spenta Mainyu (Good Spirit); Asha (Truth) is the opposite of Drug (Lie).⁶⁹ Aeshma is the most important demon after Angra Mainyu. Other evil creatures acting as Ahriman's co-conspirators are enumerated in Middle Persian sources: Bushyansta (Sloth), Araska (Envy; Persian *Rashk*) and Azi (Greed; Persian *Az*).⁷⁰ At one point some of Ahriman's evil creatures attempt to wrest him from a stupor and urge him to action; "but only Jeh, the arch-whore, succeed[s]." ⁷¹ The various assistants of Ahura Mazda and Ahriman will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

The primordial attack

The universe had been in an ideal state before Ahriman's attack. The tree had had no bark or thorn, the ox had been white and shining like the moon and the archetypal human being, Gayomart, had shone like the sun. Jeh or Jahi, the personification of all female impurity, had promised Ahriman to afflict the man and the ox with so much suffering that life would not seem worth living. She had also announced her intention to attack water, earth, tree and fire. In exchange for her efforts, Ahriman had offered to grant her wish of being desired by men.

Ahriman then attacks the world with all his demons. At noon on the first day of the first month (day Ohrmazd of the month Farvardin), Ahriman makes the sky as dark as night. He then spoils the taste of water, releases noxious creatures upon the earth, withers the plant, and attacks both the Ox and Gayomart with greed, want, pain, hunger, illness, vice and lethargy. He also mingles smoke with fire, and thus is responsible for having "defiled the whole creation. Hell was in the middle of earth where the Evil Spirit had bored through the earth and rushed in through it. So the things of the material world appeared in duality, turning opposites."⁷² After 90 days, aided by the Spirit of the Sky, the *Fravashis* (humanity's heavenly self, or the righteous spirit of men), and by other *Yazatas*, Ahura Mazda defeats the demons and sends them all back to hell. His creation, however, has been changed and disfigured, and will remain so until the coming of the Soshyant. There is some disagreement about what will become of Ahriman at the end of time. The *Mēnōg ī Khrad* asserts that he will be rendered powerless, while the *Dēnkard* holds that he will be annihilated altogether; in the *Bundahishn*, however, he is said to return to the world, whereupon he is decapitated.⁷³

After the Primordial attack, life on earth continues. Sirius produces the rains that wash the vile creatures away, and animals and plants arise from the body of the dying Bull. As the Ox dies, "fifty-five species of corn and

twelve species of medicinal herbs [grow] from its limbs and its seeds [pass] to the moon where it [is] purified, giving rise to the different species of animals.”⁷⁴ The world now enters the era of dualities after Ahriman’s assault, and for every Ahuran creature and creation there is also now an Ahrimanian counterpart:

Thus Ahriman is against Ohrmazd, Akoman against Vahman. ... Falsehood and deceit are against Truthfulness, the sorcerer’s spell against the holy mantra, bad thought, word and deed are against good ... idleness against diligence, sloth against needful sleep, vengefulness against peace, pain against pleasure ... pollution against purification. ... Likewise among the physical creations, hell is against sky, drought against water, ... wicked apostates are against just men, the whore against women.⁷⁵

The first couple

Humanity is born from the body of the dying androgyne, Gayomart:

When in passing away Gayomard emitted seed ... it remained for forty years in the earth. And after forty years Mashya and Mashyanag grew out of the earth in the form of a rivas plant with a single stem and fifteen leaves, in such a way that their hands were resting on their shoulders, and one was joined to the other, and they were from the same height and shape.⁷⁶

A spirit rises up from between Mashya and Mashyanag. The resulting triad is so equal in stature and appearance that it is difficult to recognize which element is feminine, which is masculine, and which is the spirit. For nine months they maintain the shape of the rhubarb tree. When Mashya and Mashyanag finally assume human form, the spirit enters them, and Ahura Mazda speaks:

You are the seed of man, you are the parents of the people of the world, you have been given the most exalted sound reason, think good thoughts, speak good words, do good deeds and do not worship the demons.⁷⁷

Ahriman, however, attacks their thoughts, and when they declare that the Evil Spirit was their creator, they tell their first lie. According to the *Bundahishn*, Mashya and Mashyanag spend the next 50 years in a state of celibacy, which is a serious disadvantage in Zoroastrianism because it interferes with the intentions of Good Creation. Although they perform the Zoroastrian virtue of work by digging wells, by smelting iron and by making wooden tools, still they cannot create harmony and peace for themselves.

After this period they finally are allowed to fulfil their function as a couple and to become parents of the entire human race:

From them were born six pairs of twins, male and female, all brothers and the sisters whom they married. ... [From one] of those six pairs ... were born a pair of whom the man was named Fravag and the woman, Fravagen. From them fifteen pairs of twins were born, of which every pair became a race; and from them was the full populating of the world.⁷⁸

Thus, the first couple is created together, not one after another, nor one from an element of the other's body, as in the Genesis narratives. Both share responsibility for their condition, and original sin is not considered to have been instigated by one more than the other.

Influential elements of Zoroastrian practice

Fire and Zoroastrians

Archaeological remains show that Iranians have conducted religious services at fire altars at least since the time of the Medes: according to M. Boyce,

The cult of the hearth fire was common to the Indo-Iranians and probably to the Indo-Europeans, i.e., it dates to remote prehistory. Traditionally, Zoroastrians have maintained ever-burning hearth fires. ... For Iranians fire was linked with justice and hence with 'Asha,' and Zarathustra enjoined praying in its presence. ... The daily prayers regularly include the Atash Nyayesh, which begins with Yasht 33.⁷⁹

Fire is the symbol of Ahura Mazda and the centre of the three daily rites. There are also three classes of ritual fires in Zoroastrianism: J.R. Hinnells identifies the Bahram fire as "the victorious king of fires ... the fire is enthroned rather than installed and the wood is set out in the pattern of the throne[, whereas t]he Adaran and Dadgah fires are much less grand affairs."⁸⁰ As I have noted, Zoroastrians do not worship fire itself: it is a symbol, just as the cross is symbolic for Christians.

Haoma/Esfand

Haoma (Vedic *soma*) is an element which, like fire, was integral to Indo-Iranian religious practice; we have seen above a description of its ritual use. The noun is derived from the root meaning "to press or extract juice from something;" it was therefore the substance itself which subsequently gave its name to the plant, not vice versa. W.W. Malandra notes that

“neither the *Vedas* nor the *Avesta* ... offer much in the way of botanical description of the plant. Whatever the identity of the *soma/haoma* plant may have been, it is certain that only its stems or stalks were used.”⁸¹ Although the sacred juice or *haoma* was hallucinogenic, much controversy surrounds Zoroaster’s attitude towards the drink. In a *Gatha*, Zoroaster condemns “the piss of this drunkenness,” but W.W. Malandra argues that this passage cannot possibly refer to *haoma*, for “how could ... the followers of Zarathustra’s teachings unashamedly ... espouse a practice that their prophet so roundly condemned?”⁸² In their book *Haoma and Harmaline*, however, D.S. Flattery and M. Schwartz prove that even though the substance was a hallucinogen, taken from the harmaline (harmel, wild rue) or ephedra plant, the Zoroastrians did make use of it. *Haoma* was used by Arda Wiraz and by Zoroastrian priests as a symbol of their exclusive claim to the priesthood; today, Zoroastrians no longer use intoxicating forms of *haoma*.⁸³

During the Islamic era, the qualities of the Avestan *haoma* were assigned to the plant species *Peganum harmala* (*esfand* in Persian). Not only is *esfand* directly endorsed by God and used by the Prophet Muhammad, but it is also thought to instill courage, to expel demons and diseases, and to repel the evil eye. Aphrodisiacal properties have also been associated with the plant. The practice of burning *esfand* seeds to avert the evil eye occurs time and again in early classical Persian literature, as for example, in Firdausi’s *Shahnamah* and in Shi’ite Islamic *Hadith*, like those collected by Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, that are attributed to the Prophet Muhammad.⁸⁴ Iranians still burn *esfand* to ward off unwelcome spirits.

Magi: an Old Iranian term surviving into the Islamic period

Although Zoroastrianism was an eastern Iranian religion, by the time of the Medes and Persians it had apparently reached as far as western Iran. The Magi were a priestly tribe among the Medes who performed pre-Zoroastrian religious duties for them, and they continued to do so after the Achaemenids replaced the Medes as the established power in Western Iran. In Islamic Iran the Arabic version of this word, that is, *majus*, came to be applied to all infidels in general and to Zoroastrians in particular. However, the words *Mugh* and *Mughanah*, *Kharabat-i Mughan* and *Pir-i-Mughan* are used favourably in New Persian literature. Hafiz, the beloved Persian poet, uses these words to suggest endless wisdom and inner peace. These words are all derived from the Old Persian *Magu* (Avestan *Moghu*, Greek *Magos*), which Herodotus names as one of the six tribes of Media; and, as E. Benveniste has shown, the word originally meant “tribe.”⁸⁵

I. Gershevitch proposes that it was the Magian influence that facilitated the return of the Old Iranian gods to Zoroastrian religion.⁸⁶ As previously noted, the Greek world was already well acquainted with the Magi by the time of Herodotus; but Hellenistic literature and the culture of late antiquity used

the term more broadly to describe foreign performers of strange rituals, holders of esoteric knowledge, and clergy of an exotic priesthood. At certain times this term was applied to legendary sages and gurus and at others to dream interpreters and sorcerers.⁸⁷

Kustig/Zunnar

Another element of the pre-Islamic era that survived well into the Islamic period is the *zunnar*. In Islamic literature, *zunnar* denoted the belt that an infidel – for example, Zoroastrian, Jew or Christian – might wear under Islamic robes, coming to symbolize those who claimed to be Muslims but were not. The Pahlavi name for this belt is *kustig*, and every Zoroastrian is supposed to wear it from the time of his initiation. A *kustig* is made of 72 threads that are said to symbolize the 72 chapters of the *Yasna*. A Zoroastrian should pray five times a day, at the commencement of each division of the day (*gah*). The sacred cord has to be untied and retied, accompanying the recitation of prayers, at the beginning of each *gah*. The *kustig* is a symbol for obedience to God, and J. Wiesehöfer points out that the word *band*, which means “belt,” is related to the word *bandah*, which is a word for someone who is obedient either to God or to a worldly master.⁸⁸

Purity and pollution

The concepts of purity and pollution play key roles in the daily life of a Zoroastrian. Most Zoroastrian religious rituals aim to protect the individual and his or her community from becoming contaminated by pollution. Most of the 22 prose chapters of the Avestan *Vendidad*, or “Law against the Demons,” address the issues of purity and pollution, so that this text – together with its Pahlavi *zand* commentary – is essential for our understanding of these fundamental concepts.⁸⁹

It should be noted that when we speak of purity and pollution in a Zoroastrian context, those notions do not necessarily correspond with modern ideas of hygiene. Zoroastrianism inherited a complex system of rules governing purity and pollution from its Indo-Iranian past, and these rules steadily gained importance until they reached obsessive heights during the Sasanian era. The two most severe kinds of pollution in Zoroastrianism arise from contact with corpses and with menstruating women. Thus, Zoroastrians did not defile their earth or fire by burying or cremating their dead; rather, corpses were left exposed for wild animals to eat as food. Following a similar line of thought, Zoroastrians isolated menstruating women and made it a crime for men to have sexual contact with them.⁹⁰ The subjects of purity and pollution, as well as their application to women, will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.

Zoroastrian eschatology

Many elements of Zoroastrian theology have impacted other religions, but foremost among influential Zoroastrian beliefs is eschatological doctrine. As S. Shaked puts it, “faith in the events beyond life on this earth is attested in the Zoroastrian scriptures from the very first, from the *Gathas*.”⁹¹ The resurrection of the dead, the allotment of reward or punishment through a verdict reached by divine judges, the eternal suffering of sinners and the endless bliss of the righteous in the next world, all are key features of Zoroastrian theology. By contrast, before the Second Temple period there was no Jewish doctrine of eschatology in the Hebrew Bible: there was no notion of heaven and hell, of individual or universal judgement or of resurrection of the dead until the last two centuries BCE, following an extended Persian domination in Palestine.⁹²

So, too, Islam and Zoroastrianism share many elements in addition to the general ideas of resurrection and a final day of judgement. The eschatological bridge, or *chinvat paratu* (*chinwad pol*), over which every deceased soul has to pass, becomes the Islamic *al-Sirat*. The soul’s meeting with a maiden who appears to be beautiful and perfumed to the virtuous, but hideous and foul-smelling to the impious, is also maintained in Islamic eschatology – but with the exception that the maiden, according to most commentators, now becomes a male youth. The *misvan gatu* of the *Avesta*, the intermediary state for those who deserve neither heaven nor hell because their good and evil deeds balance each other out, becomes the Qur’anic *al-A’raf*. Religious scholars have cited many more instances of Zoroastrian influence on Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the sphere of eschatology.⁹³

Zurvan: a heretical legacy?

Some apocalyptic prophecies regarding the end of time have also been handed down by a Zurvanistic offshoot of Zoroastrianism to both Christianity and Islam. Zurvanite ideas, which are generally recognized by modern scholars as the only Zoroastrian heresy, existed in Iran from the Achaemenid era until the early Islamic period. Yet it is unclear whether Zurvanism was a monistic movement within Zoroastrianism or an independent religion.

Zurvan, a divinity representing time and fate, is mentioned as a minor god in Zoroastrianism; but in Zurvanite mythology he is the father of the twin spirits Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu. It has been said that Zurvanism was probably created by the Magi in the late fifth century BCE. R. Zaehner, however, speculates that the emergence of Zurvanism might be understood as a reaction to dualism, “since the history of religion proves that the nature of man seems to demand a unified godhead.”⁹⁴ Ancient cultures historically adopted polytheistic practices, and monotheism is a relatively recent theological development; but in any event, one can imagine that,

in a region in which Judaism had deep roots and in which Christianity was fast spreading, monotheism was winning the theological battle against polytheism and dualism.

Because the Zurvanites viewed Ahura Mazda as the creator of all the good things, they were able to worship together with orthodox Zoroastrians, using the same liturgies and rituals; and this compatibility seems to have prevented a great schism in the faith. According to the Greek historian Theopompus, the Zurvanite sect was primarily concerned with a special version of the “world year.” This popular Babylonian notion of a “great year,” though first introduced by the Zurvanites, was later incorporated in orthodox Zoroastrianism. No purely Zurvanite texts survive, so the mythology of Zurvanism must be reconstructed from the occasional accounts by outsiders or by reference to Zoroastrian polemics. Zurvanism disappeared after the tenth century CE.⁹⁵

Other prophets: Mani and Mazdak

In addition to Zoroaster, whose date and place of birth remain unknown, there are two other prominent Iranian prophets: both Mani and Mazdak lived during the Middle Iranian period. Of these two, Mani came first and was the most influential. Born an Arsacid prince in the Babylonian district of Nahr Kutha in 216 CE, he was eight years old when Ardashir Papakan of the Sassanids defeated Ardavan V, the last king of the Parthian dynasty. Ethnically Parthian, Mani was a native speaker of Aramaic, the language spoken in Babylonia at that time.

The recent discovery of a Greek papyrus, a composite text, part of which is a collection of Mani’s autobiographical sayings, provides evidence that Mani initially belonged to the Judeo-Christian Baptist Elkesite sect. According to the *Fihrist* of Ibn Nadim, at the age of twelve Mani received a revelation from a celestial being, the “Twin,” who commanded him to “leave this congregation. ... The keeping aloof from impurity, the abandonment of passion are thy task. Yet because of thy youth, the time is not come to appear in public.”⁹⁶ According to the Manichaean Greek papyrus, Mani had many visions and revelations beginning at the age of 12; at 24, Mani was again visited by the heavenly Twin, whereupon he was appointed as the Lord’s apostle.⁹⁷

In his autobiography, Mani writes that he set out to preach at the close of King Ardashir’s years, sailing out to the so-called “land of the Indians,” but he likely went only as far as Makran in eastern Iran and the Kushan kingdom. He returned to Iran when Ardashir died and was succeeded by his son Shapur. Mani presented Shapur with his first book, *Shāburagān*, which he had written in Middle Persian. Mani then became a member of Shapur’s inner circle and accompanied him in his war against the Romans. Zoroastrianism was not an exclusive state religion at this time, and Shapur permitted Mani to preach his doctrines freely throughout the empire. After some time, Mani decided

to present his doctrines as a “world religion” both inside and outside of the Sasanian Empire.⁹⁸

Mani's life and universal religions

By Mani's time, there had been a general spread of universal religions; Indian Hinduism already had generated Buddhism, and Judaism had given rise to Christianity. According to J. Gager, the nature of urban life everywhere had

brought home to us the universality of the ‘need to belong’ ... among the rootless inhabitants of great cities. ... For people in this situation, membership in a Christian community [or that of another universal religion] might be the only way of maintaining self respect and giving their life some semblance of meaning.⁹⁹

Instead of belonging to the land, family and tribe, believers were now members of a larger, religiously defined community. Mani came from Babylonia, which was the most urbanized centre of Iran, and was raised in a multiethnic and multilingual society. He acknowledged the Buddha in India, Jesus in the West, and especially Zoroaster, whom he considered to have taught the one true faith. Mani's own gospel was now designed to restore Zoroastrianism to its original uncorrupted state.¹⁰⁰

From Veh Ardashir, Mani planned missionary ventures to both the East and the West; but because his primary concern was Iran, he sent missionaries into Central Asia, making Khurasan the stronghold of Manichaeism. Shapur ruled for more than 30 years, during the entirety of which Mani enjoyed royal support. After the death of Shapur, Hormazd ruled for only one year, after which came the reign of Bahram and the ascendancy of Kartir, the infamous grand *mowbed*. Sensing opposition in Iran, Mani decided to go to Kushan, but the king prohibited his trip.

When Mani met with Bahram, the king told him he was not welcome and proceeded to criticize Mani's pacifistic views and his followers' aversion to war. Ibn Nadim reports the king's words: “this man has come to invite people to destroy this world, so we should destroy him before he ruins the world.”¹⁰¹ Mani was arrested in the court and was sent to prison for 26 days. He died in prison in February, 276 CE, at the age of 60. During his short time in prison, Mani's friends visited him daily, and he provided instructions that were then transmitted to the Manichaean community.¹⁰²

Manichaean written texts

In contrast to the Zoroastrian tradition of oral transmission, Mani trusted in the reliability of the written word and did not wish to fall victim to what he perceived as the mistakes of Zoroaster, of Jesus, and of the Buddha, who had not written down their own words, and whose messages consequently

suffered corruption through oral promulgation. Mani and his followers, therefore, had his writings recorded and translated into the vernacular of every region to which his teachings extended. According to M. Boyce,

For the Iranian versions of his scriptures, the clear, elegant Aramaic script was retained which Mani himself had used, and which could be adapted as readily for these languages as the Chancellery Aramaic script of earlier days. (Only in Sogdia the Manichaeans sometimes also used their own difficult and distinctive alphabet, itself descended from this Chancellery Aramaic.)¹⁰³

We also have Coptic, Chinese and Tocharian texts in the Manichaean script.

Manichaean writings were first discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century in the ruins of the Turfan basin monasteries in Chinese Turkestan. These manuscripts comprised a variety of materials, such as bound books, scrolls of silk, leather or excellent paper, written in fine ink, and often beautifully illuminated. All of these were largely reduced to fragments, however, probably by Muslim conquerors and by the passage of time. The Turfan discoveries include Manichaean texts in three Middle Iranian languages: Middle Persian, Parthian and Sogdian. There is also one small fragment in Bactrian. Some texts in New Persian were also found in Turfan.

Most of the Manichaean manuscripts from Turfan were discovered by German expeditions, and as a result they are currently located in Germany. Other fragments discovered by Russian archaeologists are now in St Petersburg; there are still more fragments in Paris, some half dozen in the British Museum, and some in China. Ironically, several European collections, designed to save the manuscripts from any harm that they might have suffered had they remained *in situ*, were themselves damaged in Europe during the Second World War.¹⁰⁴

As mentioned above, the only work by Mani that was originally composed in Middle Persian was his *Shaburagan*. The rest of his *oeuvre* consists of seven canonical books, including his Gospel and Diwan. The newly excavated texts in Turfan, written in Middle Persian, provide an excellent insight into Mani's gnosticism. The list of his seven great scriptures is regularly accompanied by a mention of some sort of elaborate picture called *Ardahang* (*Artang*, *Arzhang*) that Mani himself had painted in order to illustrate his cosmology. Mani can thus be seen as the mythical and spiritual father of Persian painting.¹⁰⁵

The spread of Manichaeism

After his death, Mani's disciples continued to spread his message. By the end of the third century CE his teachings had reached North Africa, Asia Minor and Italy, while his writings had been translated into Greek and Coptic;

over time, other editions appeared as well in Latin, Tocharian, Chinese, Arabic, other Middle Iranian languages, and finally New Persian. In Iran, the proliferation of the new religion did not occur according to Mani's wishes: even the written word could not save his religion and writings from the perils of history. Many state churches and Islamic soldiers seem deliberately to have destroyed, torn or burned Manichaean writings that were found in libraries and homes. Nevertheless, the few extant remnants of Manichaean manuscripts do provide useful material for the study of Middle Iranian languages such as Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian and Bactrian, as well as other languages in which such manuscripts are found.¹⁰⁶

Mani proclaimed that his religion transcended geography; a Middle Persian text records his own assessment of this universality:

The religion that I have chosen is in ten things much better than the other earlier religions. First: the earlier religions restricted themselves only to one country and one language. But my religion is known in all countries and in all languages and is taught in the most faraway countries. ... Secondly: As long as there were pure leaders in the earlier religion, it was in order. But once the leader had died, the religion became confused, and they became slack in words and deeds. ... [But my religion] will remain until the end [by means of] vital [books], teachers, bishops, chosen people and hearers and through wisdom and works. ... Thirdly: The previous souls that have not completed their work in their own religion come to my religion. ... Fourthly: this revelation of mine of the two principles and my vital writings, my wisdom and my knowledge are much better than those of the earlier religions. ... Fifthly: All writings, wisdom and parables of the earlier religions [have been added to this religion of mine.]¹⁰⁷

Mani spread his doctrine to Buddhism in the East, to Mandaeanism in Mesopotamia and Southwestern Iran, and to Mithraism and Christianity in the West, in an apparent attempt to demonstrate commonalities with each. According to M. Schwartz, it may be more accurate to say that Mani and his followers tried to corrupt Christianity, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism by using their terminology to promote his views, which he cannily represented as precisely what these religions originally stood for.¹⁰⁸

According to some Parthian texts, Mani himself converted Turanshah, a Buddhist ruler in Baluchistan, and was referred to as the Buddha of Light in some Manichaean texts.¹⁰⁹ In Mesopotamia, Manichaeism presented beliefs similar to those practised by the Mandaeans, a Gnostic sect, likely of Jewish origin, that had fled Palestine in the face of persecution by more orthodox Jews. Mandaeans, like Manichaeans, believed in a dualistic system of good and evil, embodied, respectively, by light or spirit and darkness or matter.¹¹⁰ Whereas Mani used the phrase "Apostle of Jesus Aryaman" in Middle Persian texts to refer to a saviour figure in Zurvanism, he identified himself as the

“Apostle of Jesus Christ” in predominately Christian areas. To the Christians, Mani presented his religion as an esoteric, spiritual interpretation of Christianity.

Manichaeen cosmogony

Cosmogony plays a crucial role in Manichaeen doctrine. In accordance with his Iranian and Gnostic background, Mani espoused a strictly dualistic view of the universe. When it was aimed at an Iranian audience, his cosmogony borrowed a great deal from Zoroastrian and Zurvanite, and at times Mandaean, mythologies. Mani believed that two principles originally existed at the beginning of time: one good, and one evil. Thus, both good and evil exist in the world; and at the end of time, evil will be eliminated from the world. But unlike Zoroastrians, who did not associate good with spirit and evil with matter, Manichaeans held that *mēnog*, or spirit, was associated with good, while *gētig*, or matter, was associated with evil. In Manichaeism, only a small ray of light exists in human beings, and this light is imprisoned and surrounded by darkness. The intermingling of darkness and light in the universe is a cursed state of affairs, and the universe must at some point return to a state in which lightness and darkness are unmixed.

What human beings must do is to free the ray of light from within themselves through piety and righteous behaviour. Moreover, the task of disentangling the intermingled states applies both to human beings and to the universe generally. The Iranian correspondence of macrocosmos and microcosmos is itself a manifestation of Manichaeen beliefs. The human soul can thus be seen as an element of divine Light that is held captive by the flesh. In the final analysis, human beings – the microcosmos – and the world – the macrocosmos – will be saved, and the entirety of that which is light will return to its original purity.

Elects and hearers

Manichaeism discerns two types of people: elects and hearers. The elect were divided into four categories. There were twelve teachers (Middle Persian *hamozag*, New Persian *amuzgar*), like the twelve apostles of Jesus. Subordinate to the teachers were 72 *mahistag* who were like bishops or the 72 disciples of Jesus. They were followed by 360 presbyters, *mansalar* or *mansardar*, who represented the number of the days in a single year, and this grouping shows evidence of Zurvanite influence and symbolism. Mani's successor and the director of the Manichaeen church, the *salar* or *sardar*, was at the head of the elect. The elect and the hearers followed two distinct ways of life. The elect were to observe three kinds of seals (*muhr*), on their mouths, hands and bosoms. The first *muhr* applied to speaking and eating: the elect were supposed to refrain from impure words and from eating meat. In Zurvanism, meat was seen as an evil product that promoted lust. The elect

were forbidden either to uproot plants or to kill animals. They were expected to be celibate and to abstain completely from procreation. Fruit was the ideal food for the elect. On the other hand, the hearers were allowed to do many things that were forbidden for the elect: they could have children and eat meat as they chose, though not on Sunday, which was a day of fasting for Manichaeans. The elect also continued to fast on the following day. Both groups observed one entire month of fasting prior to the Bema festival.¹¹¹

The fate of Manichaeism

We have already seen that Manichaeism in Iran suffered at the hands of the Zoroastrian church. The fatal blow, however, was not dealt until the advent of Islam, at which time the derogatory term *zindiq* was primarily applied to the Manichaeans, though it later came to mean intellectuals and immoral persons generally, not necessarily pagans or atheists. With the coming of Islam, Manichaeans, like the Zoroastrians, fled to the eastern parts of Iran and thence to Turkistan and China, where the emperor was friendly to the Sasanian dynasty. The relative freedom of Manichaeans in the east did not last long. In 732 CE China issued an imperial edict against the Manichaeans; in 760 the Turkish Uigur tribe adopted Manichaenism and attempted to establish a foothold for that religion in China, enjoying some success with their endeavour between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. The Manichaeans of Central Asia and China, however, had become extremely syncretistic, and therefore the history of Manichaeism reached a definite endpoint during the fifteenth century CE.

Although Manichaeism had become exceedingly syncretistic in nature – indeed, some have even called it parasitic – Mani himself must be regarded one of the truly outstanding personalities in the history of religion. It is true that Mani's ideas were influenced by many different religious traditions, but he in turn influenced a wide variety of religions, from Zoroastrianism to Zurvanism and from Buddhism to Christianity. As R. Zaehner maintains, Manichaeism was “particularly suitable as a doctrinal basis for every form of asceticism and many forms of mysticism. It profoundly affected Islamic mysticism, and through Saint Augustine has left traces in Christianity itself.”¹¹² In his book *Nivishtaha-yi Mani va Manavian* (*The Writings of Mani and of the Manichaeans*), I. Vamaqi demonstrates the influence of Manichaeism on Sufism through a close study of the relationship between Manichaean and Sufi doctrines and imagery.¹¹³

The life of Mazdak

The other pre-Islamic prophet of Iran was Mazdak, but none of his original sayings is known to us. The time and place of his birth, unlike that of Mani, is a matter of some dispute. His name is not mentioned in any

texts, not even in Greek or Syriac works, until more than four centuries after his death. Oblique references to his movement are made in several Greek and Syriac texts, but not until 75 years after his death and not without a generally venomous tenor. The almost complete absence of historical references probably stems from a deep aversion to Mazdak, held both by Khusraw Anushirvan and by the Zoroastrian church, that caused the deliberate suppression of Mazdak's name from all court records and Sasanian literature. As a result of this severe persecution, nothing at all survives from the original Mazdakite writings, and almost all the information we possess is derived from hostile accounts.¹¹⁴

Mazdak himself lived in the fifth century CE, though some of the ideas attributed to him appear to have circulated as early as the third.¹¹⁵ Mazdak is said by Tabari to have been a native of Madharyia in Western Iran, and the Sasanian King Kavad appears to have been supportive of Mazdak and his ideas. Because no scriptural evidence of his doctrines remains, Mazdakism must be reconstructed from Iranian, Syriac, Arabic and Greek records: thus, some scholars have regarded Mazdakism as an offshoot of Manichaeism, while others have thought it to be a Zoroastrian heresy.¹¹⁶ This is yet another example in Iranian history of a voice that has been lost to us due to the rarity of original sources and to the consequent reinterpretation of others.

Textual sources for the study of Mazdakism

Lacking direct evidence from pre-Islamic Iran, scholars must turn to early Islamic writings when citing sources for Mazdakian studies. We know that Ibn Muqaffa and other Iranian translators in the first and second centuries of the Islamic era decided to translate as many Middle Persian texts as possible into Arabic in order to preserve them from extinction. This decision was quite fortunate, as a considerable amount of pre-Islamic literature has survived, not in its original Middle Persian, but in Arabic, which was later translated into New Persian. One such book, which is no longer extant but which survived in Arabic for the first few centuries of the Islamic era, was entitled *Mazdak Namah* ("Tales of Mazdak"). Scholars such as E. Yarshater have assumed in the past that this book served as the primary source for later Persian writers who wrote about Mazdak; but more recent scholarship has rejected this notion, demonstrating convincingly that the *Mazdak Namah* refers to a *different* Mazdak, perhaps a Zoroastrian *mowbed*, and that this text was probably a book of *andarz*.¹¹⁷ Therefore, the only sources available for reconstructing Mazdak's ideas and life are found in Sasanian court histories and in Islamic sources.

Mazdakite theology and social doctrines

Mazdak's theology and cosmology were drawn from traditional Iranian dualist beliefs, with a touch of gnosticism. Shahrastani, an Islamic historian

of the twelfth century, cites Al-Warraq and other sources claiming that Mazdakites believed in two primordial principles: Light and Darkness. Whereas Darkness is blind and ignorant, Light is endowed with knowledge and kindness. The mingling of the two entities had produced the material world. Mazdakism held that light has three elements, which are earth, water and fire, and that its four powers are discernment, joy, understanding and preservation or memory. So once again the material world, as in Zoroastrianism, is seen to be the creation of Light, and not the work of Evil as in Manichaeism. In Mazdakism, Light will ultimately prevail, because of its capacity for awareness.

As in Zoroastrianism, human beings were perceived to be the microcosmos that reflected the macrocosmos of the universe.¹¹⁸ It is likely that Mazdak's social doctrine, which I will discuss in further detail below, generated both a harsh retribution from the ruling classes and mass support from the general populace. In the translation of E. Yarshater,

Tha'alibi of Nishapur, the fifth century Islamic historian (11th CE), writes that

Mazdak declared that God placed the means of subsistence on earth so that people divide them among themselves equally, in a manner that no one of them could have more than his share; but people wronged one another and sought domination over one another; the strong defeated the weak and took exclusive possession of livelihood and property. It is absolutely necessary that one take from the rich for giving to the poor, so that all become equal in wealth. Whoever possesses an excess of property, women or goods he has no more right to it than another.¹¹⁹

In the previous chapter I noted that while King Kavad supported Mazdak, most likely in order to use him as leverage against the Sasanian aristocrats, his powerful son Khusraw convinced him that the movement was a true threat to the throne. As a result, so the tenth-century historian Tabari tells us, a banquet was held to which the unsuspecting Mazdakites were invited, only to be massacred. After the initial onslaught, Khusraw Anushirvan confiscated Mazdakite property and distributed it among the poor.

Khusraw Anushirvan later returned the property confiscated by Mazdakites, including wives (if they had been taken by force). In cases where they had not previously been married, he allowed the women to decide whether they preferred to remain married or to return to their fathers' houses. He took charge of the children of noble families who had lost their fathers in the crackdown on the Mazdakites. A child whose descent was disputed would be attached to the family with whom he or she currently lived.¹²⁰

The Dēnkard and other critiques of the Mazdakites

In a passage from the seventh book of the *Dēnkard*, a Zoroastrian religious encyclopedia of the ninth century CE, a commentary on a book of the *Avesta* offers a revealing description of the Mazdakites as

those who in some way have been more refractory than [others] in this earthly existence and the intangible one. ... [They believe] inborn justice is the most excellent of existing things. ... Among the families they distribute the allocations. ... They give a share to their own [people]. Food they consider as an agreement, that is they say food should be in the proportion of hunger. And of descendants, they say that kinship is through the mother. Their procreation follows the course of lust. As the wolf cub [runs] behind its mother, so they determine kinship after mothers.¹²¹

A matrilineal descent that might result in uncertain paternity was probably quite threatening to the Sasanian patriarchal society.

Although Mazdak's social doctrine has been criticized for its alleged inclination towards the sharing of women, it was most likely opposed to harems, and it may have called men to release additional wives so that every person could have a spouse. Mazdak would likely have approved of people marrying outside their class but not of the Sasanian rule under which widows who married for a second time were lesser wives whose offspring were not fully legitimate children.

According to O. Klima, because Iranians sometimes married their next-of-kin relatives, the Greeks and the Christians tended to view Iranian marriage laws as immoral; and they were therefore quick to conclude that Mazdak, as an Iranian, would probably not have been averse to sharing women along with other property.¹²² In a travel account entitled *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*, an anonymous Roman author in 360 CE described Sasanian Iran as a land of plenty and of strange moral values: "they seem to be skilled in trade and brave in wars ... [and] they seem to have everything in abundance ... [but] since they know of no natural dignity and are like animals without understanding, they sleep with their mothers and sisters."¹²³ Pre-Islamic marriage laws in Iran will figure in subsequent chapters, but it should be noted at this point that Sasanian Iran was far from a promiscuous society.

Mazdakites under Islam

It is somewhat ironic that Mazdakism became much more important on the Iranian political scene after the advent of Islam: Mazdakites who had gone underground after Khusraw's persecution came forth in practically all parts of Iran during the early centuries of Islamic rule.

Their presence is documented in Jibal, Azarbaijan, Isfahan, Ahvaz, Gurgan, Tabaristan, Khurasan and Sogdiana. They still were unable to practise their religion openly, however, so they hid behind different Shi'ite sects while continuing to preach their own beliefs. The characteristic beliefs of this variety of Shi'ism are incarnation (*hulul*); divinity of the prophets or imams; reincarnation (*tanasukh*); occultation (*ghaiba*); and the return (*raj'a*) of an imam. They also believe in hidden (*batin*) meaning, as opposed to the outward appearance (*zahir*) of religion. Summing up extremist Shi'ite beliefs, the twelfth-century historian Shahrastani notes that they were referred to differently in different places. In Isfahan they are called *Khurramiyyah* and *Kudakiyyah*; in Rayy, *Mazdakiyyah* and *Sumbadiyyah*; in Azarbaijan, *Muhammirah*; and in Transoxiana, *Mubayyidah*.¹²⁴

From Mukhtar and his *Mawali* movement to Abu Muslim and Sunbad, and from Al-Muqanna', the veiled prophet of Khurasan, to Babak Khurramdin of Azarbaijan, all Iranian-identified movements of the early Islamic era are attributed to and connected with Mazdak. E. Yarshater argues that many ideas of the Isma'ilites (or Batinis) and of some moderate Shi'ite sects, no doubt with changes dictated by new circumstances, were also inspired by Mazdakism. By presenting a doctrine which espoused equality of the divine light in all men, Mazdak introduced a tradition of revolution in Iran; and though it began during the Sasanian era, this tradition has continued to thrive in Islamic Iran. Even so, in the words of J. Choksy, "orthodox Muslims, like the Zoroastrians before them, regarded Mazdakites as heretics (Arabic *zindig* (*zindiq*) from Middle Persian *Zandiq*, 'one who distorts exegesis')." ¹²⁵

Women in pre-Islamic Iran

The great historical distance between pre-Islamic and modern times, coupled with the relative paucity of evidence from pre-Islamic Iran, renders it difficult to paint a clear portrait of women in the Zoroastrian era. Yet the subject of women is too important, in both sociological and literary terms, to be neglected. In this section, therefore, I will attempt to summarize what can be known or reasonably surmised about pre-Islamic Iranian women. Notwithstanding the relative dearth of material specific to these women, Andarz literature is filled with sayings about them; the next chapter will investigate the Andarz references in greater detail, but the most relevant ones will be introduced here.

With respect to religious myths, the feminine in Old Iranian Religion is represented in the divine. Typically, the Indo-Iranian pantheon included many powerful goddesses, such as Ashi and Aredvi Sura Anahita. The latter was the goddess of water and fertility who, it is said, "purifies the waters, the semen of all males, the wombs of all women for birth, provides women with easy childbirth, and produces the milk of women at the proper time."¹²⁶ As noted above, the *Bundahishn* (creation myth) contains the story of the first Iranian couple, Mashya and Mashyana, who were equal in height,

shape and wisdom. According to legend, when Iraj, the ancestor of the Iranians, was murdered by his two brothers, Salm and Tur, his children were massacred alongside him. Only one of Iraj's daughters survived, and Iranians are said to be the offspring of that girl.¹²⁷

In Zoroaster's *Gathas*, human beings, female and male, are promised paradise in return for supporting Zoroaster. Likewise, in the *Mēnōg ī Khrad*, this basic equality is promised for the next world, where the *yazad* of the heavens will seat the pious man and woman on the "all-bejewelled throne," on which they remain in glory forever.¹²⁸ Zoroaster's mother, wife and daughters are described as tall, beautiful and wise,¹²⁹ and Zoroaster's first follower was a woman. When Zoroaster advises his younger daughter to obey good thought and truth, and to take counsel with her intellect,¹³⁰ he affirms a belief that a woman is capable of and responsible for reasoned thought and right conduct.¹³¹ The Zoroastrian initiation rite of wearing *Kusti* at the age of fifteen is compulsory for both boys and girls, and it may be differentiated from rites of passage to adulthood in other societies, in which either the rituals differ for each sex or one of the sexes is subject to no ritual at all. These are but a few examples that suggest a basic evenhandedness, if not equality, in the treatment of women within Iranian mythology and religion.

Lest it appear that Zoroastrianism was perfectly fair with respect to considerations of gender, it must be noted that, as in many cultures, menstruation was considered taboo by Zoroastrians. In fact, there existed a mean-spirited attitude against women in menses, which probably arose from the myth that menstruation was the creature of Ahriman and that the menstruating woman's body was temporarily the abode of Ahriman and therefore was unclean. Like all bodily fluids, including semen, menstrual blood was considered an agent of pollution. Therefore, men were supposed to atone even for involuntary nocturnal emissions, and menstruating women were kept in segregation. The same belief was held for the sick, who were similarly quarantined, and for corpses. Even so, the fact that Zoroastrians considered a menstruating woman to be an Ahriman-infested source of pollution remains significant. Indeed, the *Vendidad* reports Ahura Mazda's own advice regarding this issue:

O righteous Creator of the material world! How should the Mazdeans act when, in the hose of a Mazdean, there sits a woman who has her menstrual period, her menstruation, her blood? Then Ahura Mazda said: In this case the Mazdean should pick out an area without plants or shrubs (which can be used as) fuel. He should deposit dry dust as a place (for her to stay) ... fifteen paces from the fire, fifteen paces from the water, fifteen paces from the strewn baresman [*baresma*], three paces from the righteous men. ... He who brings food [and beer] to the woman who has her menstrual period ... should stand three paces away.¹³²

Both the prescribed distance from and the special treatment of a menstruating woman reflect fear of the menstrual cycle and help to explain the celebration of pregnancy. Pregnancy is celebrated not only because it brings the promise of heirs, fertility, honour to the family, and, more practically, an extra set of hands – of great value to people living in an agricultural society – but also because it ends menstruation for a time.

Turning to historical rather than to literary sources, M. Brosius offers an interesting picture of wealthy and royal women of the Achaemenid period based upon new research into the Persepolis texts: “there is no truth in suggestions that [royal] women lived in seclusion and were confined to the Palace.”¹³³ In her study, Brosius examines the property records of a number of royal women listed in the Persepolis Treasury Texts and concludes that their economic wealth and estate ownership was most remarkable, because it was, “by all accounts, considerable in size and geographical extent. [They] clearly controlled [their own] estates as well as villages and towns across the empire.”¹³⁴ The same tablets show that women and girls were hired in the workplace in large numbers, and when it came to their wages, “distinctions were made within professions, presumably based on different levels of expertise and skills. These texts also reveal that men and women were represented in identical professions and that they received equal payment as skilled labourers.”¹³⁵

Women’s stature did not diminish during the Seleucid and Parthian periods. If anything, Hellenistic influence and the rule of “little kings” boosted individual freedoms. We may deduce from literature that there was a certain favour given to women’s freedom and agency. In Parthian literature, romantic passion and infidelity made for popular stories; J. Khaleghi-Motlagh suggests that the majority of the bold, strong women of the mythological section of the *Shahnamah* were from the Parthian era, and therefore that there was a certain pre-Islamic tolerance, in society and literature, for feminine infidelity.¹³⁶ He links the heroic (Pahlavani) genre with the Parthian feudal historical background. He shows how female figures such as Rudabah, Tahminah, Gurdafarid and Manizhah were brave in both love and fighting, and at times they engaged in out-of-wedlock affairs without being punished.

In Gorgani’s tenth-century work *Vis and Ramin*, Vis, the boldest of all pre-Islamic female literary characters, is a Parthian married to a great *mowbed*. Vis has a passionate love affair with Ramin, and upon their parting, she laments the separation so openly in the *mowbed*’s presence that the latter angrily divorces her. It is interesting in this context to note that in Zoroastrian law adultery was an offence punishable not by death but by remuneration (300 *astir* to a woman’s husband or father), and that husbands could either divorce their adulterous wives or receive a payment from the offender instead. Adultery could be *margarzan* (punishable by death), however, if a man took someone else’s wife for a period of more than a year without

confessing or paying dues.¹³⁷ Disturbing a corpse, learning sorcery, highway robbery, as well as murder and false testimony and a few other sins, could be *margarzan*; but not adultery. The legal definition of adultery in Sasanian Iran may be contrasted with that of other societies, such as Babylonia, in which women were held to a completely different sexual standard to men.¹³⁸ Since both sexes were held to a single standard under Zoroastrian law, the attitude towards adultery by women was probably relatively relaxed.

In Sasanian times, Iranian society and religion were threatened by the spread of universal religions such as Christianity, Manichaeism and Buddhism. M. Boyce notes that the Zoroastrian church changed its prayers and liturgies and that “the *Yasna* service was lengthened to increase its impressiveness.”¹³⁹ Both Manichaeism and Mazdakism preached asceticism, passiveness and sexual restraint; celibacy, vegetarianism and the renunciation of worldly things were encouraged by these religions. Zoroastrianism thus was influenced by surrounding cultures. The Zoroastrians had practised endogamous marriage as a means of keeping the property and the land intact and undivided, but this practice was abandoned by the followers of Mani and Mazdak, who devised harsher punishments for sexual sins.

Because Zoroastrianism was the religion of a largely agricultural society, Zoroastrian marriage was closely linked to the system of succession. A Zoroastrian man or woman belonged to an agnatic group headed by a male member of the family (*kadkhuda*). This agnatic group would share the ownership of their property, which was managed by that *kadkhuda*. Members of an agnatic group – mostly women and children – could not sell their share of the property, and all the property acquired by them belonged to the husband and father.¹⁴⁰ The most important reason to have a (preferably male) successor, however, was to ensure the maintenance of the family fires and of the prayers for ancestral spirits. Hence, if a man or a woman did not have any children, provisions were made for them to adopt the children of their close relatives so that those successors would legally belong to the new parents and not their natural ones. Sasanian family and property law is therefore very complicated.

For these reasons, Pahlavi law codes confer only meagre property rights upon women. As M. Boyce nicely puts it, “despite Zoroastrian teachings about spiritual equality, in Sasanian law women were indeed held to belong to their nearest male relative—father, husband, brother or son.”¹⁴¹ C. Bartholomae, however, observes a progressive trend *vis-à-vis* women’s rights in Sasanian law in particular and in the whole empire in general: based on the only Pahlavi book of law, *Madayan i Hazar Dadestan*, Bartholomae claims that there is “no doubt [that] in the Sasanian empire, the condition of women, children, and even slaves was changing for the better.”¹⁴² Citing many instances in which a woman went to court to defend her property and/or other civil rights, he demonstrates a trend of growing awareness among women and the leniency of the courts. Bartholomae concludes

that “women in the Sasanian empire were evolving and aiming for legal independence, and they had achieved a great deal already, but the Arab victory and the fall of the Sasanian empire caused these successes to go to waste overnight.”¹⁴³ Perhaps the best indication of the evolution in women’s stature is the fact that among the last Sasanian rulers, two of them – Puran and Azarmigdukht – were queens.

The idea of equality between men and women is a modern one. We cannot judge an ancient society’s values by our present standards. Most historical societies have been patriarchal, and no ancient culture ever affirmed the equality of men and women.¹⁴⁴ So, too, Iran was patriarchal; but unlike many other cultures, it was not misogynistic. Sasanian Iran appears not to have required the wearing of the veil; statues, reliefs, coins, seals and other archaeological artifacts depict many bare heads, shoulders and arms in the representations of both Sasanian queens and ordinary women such as musicians.¹⁴⁵

Zoroaster and Mazdaism

This chapter on Iranian religions will conclude by returning to Zoroaster and Mazdaism, because of Zoroaster’s significance in Iranian and world religion. Zoroaster’s dualism contributed to the dualist ideas of the Gnostics and neo-Platonists and, for centuries, it exerted an influence on the religious and philosophical life of all middle and western Asia.¹⁴⁶ Many Zoroastrian precepts were adopted by other religions and, in the apt words of M. Boyce, “are readily comprehensible by those familiar with the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim faiths, all of which owe great debts to the Iranian religion.”¹⁴⁷

Before the advent of Islam, Iranians conceived of themselves as being engaged, alongside Ahura Mazda, in a long, arduous struggle against Evil. The Iranian national (as opposed to religious) heroes of today, from Gayomart onwards, have all been champions of this battle. The annihilation of Gayomart would be followed with the Renovation of the “Mixed World,” which would accompany a complete cycle of history, ending with the resurrection of all. The feature of dualism in Iranian religion not only clarified the general comprehension of natural, social and political events, but also provided a straightforward framework for moral judgement. Ahriman was the source of all calamity, whereas heretics and criminals were thought to have made the wrong moral choice. The coexistence of contamination and disease with health and happiness was a direct result of the world’s so-called “mixed” state. Soshyant offered the hope of ultimate salvation.¹⁴⁸

From the vantage point of religious history, the chronological position of Zoroastrianism in both philosophical and theological trajectories establishes it as one of the more important religions of the world. From a comparative point of view, as A. Bausani has put it, “Zoroastrianism has supplied the material for the construction of the eschatological legends of all the great

religions of the civilized world: Islam, late Judaism and—through mysterious channels—medieval Christianity,”¹⁴⁹ thus influencing even temporally and geographically remote traditions such as Norse mythological sagas. Although the advent of Islam brought an end to the primacy of indigenous Iranian religions, the latter were not entirely lost; Zoroastrians still survive in Iran and in other countries, and concepts of their religion, along with remnants of Manichaeism and even Mazdakism, continue to exert influence on different world religions and ideologies. Shi’ite Iran, which absorbed to some degree the legacy of the Iranian religions, may demonstrate the greatest degree of continuity with its pre-Islamic past.

4 Middle Persian literature

Andarz

This chapter constitutes a study of Middle Persian literature in general and of Andarz literature in particular. It will begin with a summary of the extant Middle Persian literature, its nature and its variety, and follow with a detailed examination of what is arguably the most important Middle Persian literary genre: Andarz. I will adduce a few texts that contain advice regarding different aspects of spiritual as well as practical issues; and, in order to illuminate the moral and behavioural expectations of pre-Islamic Iran, I will distinguish various themes in the genre and elaborate upon each one individually. The two subsequent chapters will demonstrate further that Andarz literature provided a foundation for the post-Islamic Adab texts, thus helping to preserve earlier Iranian cultural elements during the Islamic period.

Of the extant pre-Islamic corpus, very little could be considered “pure” literature.¹ Only a few literary manuscripts, such as *Kalilah va Dimnah* and *Sindbad Namag*, survive, having been rendered into Arabic and Persian and having sustained a number of redactions. A greater number of texts live through Persian recensions and adaptations. Most of the extant Pahlavi literature has a religious character, and of the more secular works, only small passages survive. With the advent of Islam in Iran, these literary works were either deliberately destroyed by Arab or Turkic armies or neglected and disused by Muslim Iranians themselves. Still, after several centuries, the New Persian literature and language that sustained many of the norms and traditions of the Sasanian period emerged to meet the literary needs of the people.² Thus, although Islam heralded a new religion and introduced a new script, Iran’s language and culture persisted through an evolution-like process of adaptation to changing realities.

Secular Middle Persian poetry

Evidence from the Sasanian and later periods suggests that, both before and after the advent of Islam, most Iranian literary works were rendered into secular poetry. This poetry included different genres, such as the heroic

and romantic forms. I have mentioned in Chapter 2 that heroic poetry and its reciters in Iran were popular as early as the Parthian period. Although its transmission continued to be oral for the most part, heroic poetry had been included in the semi-official national history, the *Khwadāy Namag*, by the end of the Sasanian period.³ There appears to be sufficient evidence to conclude that romantic poetry existed in Iran as early as the Achaemenid period: the *ruba'i* (quatrain) and the *mathnavi* appear to be indigenous Persian forms of verse that originated in Sasanian times.⁴

This poetry was cultivated by highly professional minstrels who played important roles in Parthian and in Sasanian society. They entertained kings and commoners alike, playing at feasts as well as at gravesites. Indeed, the king's minstrel was one of the four chief men of his court. The popularity of music and song in Persia is further demonstrated by the fact that kings, ladies of the court, children, and even theologians made music as well. According to the *Karnamag i Ardashir*, King Ardashir i Babakan himself used to sing while playing the *win*, a kind of lute. It also was not uncommon for women and boys of rank to cultivate poetry for entertainment. The prophet Mani assiduously incorporated music into his services.

Sasanian (i.e., Middle Persian) poetry, however, did not survive in its original language and form. With the change of language and script, the old *hija* meter, which had been based on stress, gave way to a new metrical system, the '*aruz*', which was governed by the quantity and rhyme schemes of Arabic poetry. If it is true that *ruba'i* and *mathnavi* are indigenous to pre-Islamic Iran, then it follows that '*aruz*' prosody incorporated rather than introduced them. With Islam's prohibitions on music, court music and minstrels' songs were gradually forgotten.⁵ Afarin, Khusrawani, Madharastani, the harpist Sakisa (Nakisa) and the legendary Barbad are a few of many Sasanian minstrels whose names are preserved.

Although the Islamic period saw a decline in the popularity of music and song, these Sasanian arts were time and again revived in literature. A story about Rudaki, who employs music and poetry to persuade the tenth-century Samanid amir to return to Bukhara, exemplifies such a revival.⁶ E. Browne underscores how Rudaki's action echoes the story of Barbad of the court of King Khusraw Parviz:

Of the ten men reckoned by the Persians incomparable each in his own way, he was one; and herein lay his special virtue and merit, that when aught must be made known to King Khusraw Parviz which none other dared utter ... Barbad would weave it dexterously into a song and sing it before the king. ... So when Shabdiz [beloved horse of the king] died, the Master of the house Horse prayed Bahlabad [i.e., Barbad] to make it known to the king in a song.⁷

And so, the story goes, he did.

Middle Persian religious literature

While the Sasanian period became legendary in Islamic times for its music and poetry, it also generated a large corpus of texts with a religious character. Zoroastrians took care to preserve these texts even as the more secular pieces were neglected or destroyed. Sasanian religious texts are significant not only because they convey Zoroastrian knowledge, but because they provide us with important insights for studying the culture and history of pre-Islamic Iran. Zoroastrian writings retained many thematic and formalistic characteristics of secular literature, and, since they derived from an oral tradition, some of them preserved material of considerable antiquity. The extant Pahlavi writings are the products of the Zoroastrian religious ideas and institutions tenaciously maintained by a dwindling class of priestly copyists over the course of two centuries of declining fortune, poverty and persecution. The Pahlavi corpus also consists of the original writings of Zoroastrian *mowbeds* who defended a diminishing religion by arguing against those who meant to destroy it.⁸

The written composition of the Avesta

Although both the *Dēnkard* and the *Arda Wiraz Namag* assert that the *Avesta* was written down as early as the Achaemenid era, the *Avesta* was most likely put into writing during the Sasanian period. However, the inadequacy of the Middle Persian script, which did not contain characters for all the sounds in the *Avesta*, necessitated the invention of an Avestan alphabet with 49 letters, each letter corresponding to one discrete sound. We have seen in the previous chapter that the *Avesta* originally comprised 21 *nasks* and was a huge compilation. The names and the contents of all these *nasks* were recorded in Book VIII of the Pahlavi *Dēnkard*. The *Avesta* had consisted of texts encompassing many different subjects, from cosmogony and astronomy to law and medicine, and from myth and epic to history and the life of the prophet. It also contained liturgical texts, which comprise the majority of the material now extant. In fact, only one-fourth of the original *Avesta* now survives, including the *Gathas*, *Wisperad* and *Vendidad*.⁹

Zand

As I noted in the previous chapter, the entire *Avesta* was also translated word for word from Avestan into Middle Persian during the Sasanian period. Because this translation was largely faithful to Avestan syntax, it was considered to be obscure and difficult to comprehend by those who lacked a strong understanding of Avestan. The Middle Persian translation was accompanied by exegetical passages on the *Avesta*, which are discursive

commentaries written by *mowbeds*. Over the years, these scholarly commentaries, combined with the *Avesta*, produced a book with immense authority. The Middle Persian rendering of the *Avesta*, together with its interpretive glosses, is called *Zand*. It is probable that *Zand* means “elucidation” or “understanding.” For the later *mowbeds*, *Zand* was as holy as the *Avesta* itself and was held to be divinely inspired. We have already had occasion to note the stories of learned *mowbeds* who could recite both the *Avesta* and *Zand* in their entirety. This is why, starting with the Middle Persian texts, *Zand* and *Avesta* have been erroneously used interchangeably. The extant versions of the *Zand* include the *Gathas*, the *Yasna*, a few *Yashts*, the *Vendidad*, the *Wisperad*, and the *Herbadistan* and *Nirangistan*.¹⁰

Pazand

As we saw in the previous chapter, Zoroastrian *mowbeds* wrote *Pazand* texts in Pahlavi and in early New Persian using the Avestan script, as the advent of Islam eventually rendered the Middle Persian script obsolete. These *mowbeds* rendered a great service to Iranian culture because today many pre-Islamic texts, such as *Shkand Gumanig Wizar* and *Ayadgar i Jamaspi*, are mainly accessible in their Pazand versions. Pazand is also a great source of comparative study for the writings that survive in Pahlavi.¹¹ Pazand was used between the first and sixth centuries of the Islamic era, that is, from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries CE. Some Pahlavi texts in India were translated into Sanskrit and Gujarati by the Parsees.¹²

The Dēnkard

One of the most important religious texts in Pahlavi is the *Dēnkard*. This consists of nine numbered books, the first two of which have disappeared, and it is an encyclopedia of Zoroastrian knowledge. Its present form goes back to the ninth or tenth century CE. The defence against Islam in Book III of the *Dēnkard* is an original contribution, while Book IV considers the theological problems of the Sasanian era and Book V refers to controversies of the time of al-Ma'mun's caliphate. Scholars refer to these three books as “apologetic,” because they answer questions about Zoroastrianism in response to attacks by Muslims. Books VI to IX, on the other hand, provide knowledge and instruction for the faithful, and they are more Sasanian in content. Book VI is an anthology of wise sayings and moral precepts known as *andarz*. Books VII and VIII comprise detailed tables of contents of the 21 original Avestan *nasks* and of their divisions. The ninth and final book deals with three *Gahanic nasks*, or *nasks* of the prophet, in detail. Thus, the *Dēnkard* is a compilation whose final, redacted form is attributed to two tenth-century *mowbeds*.¹³

The Bundahishn

The *Bundahishn* (“Original Creation”) is another important Middle Persian religious text. This work, which was not published in a modern edition until 1908 and is also known as *Zand agahih*, is a great source for studying the post-Avestan development of the myth of the Ahriman’s struggle against Ohrmazd. The book has 36 chapters, comprising three main themes: creation; the nature of earthly creatures; and the mythical Kayanian dynasty. The compiler does not mention the names of individual authors but draws on ancient sources, and the work reveals an encyclopedic knowledge of *Zand*. Even though the *Bundahishn* was written down during the Islamic era, it is not influenced by Islam. The text sets out to capture the *gētīg* (material world) from the beginning to the eschatological end. The cosmogonical myths of the *Bundahishn* have been quoted extensively in the previous chapter.¹⁴

The Shayist Ne-Shayist

In Sasanian Persia, as in other ancient societies, religion and law were closely interrelated. During the Sasanian era, the *mowbeds* were the judges and lawyers, and civil law was regulated under Zoroastrian jurisprudence. The terms *shayist* (proper conduct) and *ne-shayist* (improper conduct) were combined to form the title of a compilation of books and treatises containing details of religious rites and legal matters. Thus the resulting *Shayist Ne-Shayist*, like many other Middle Persian texts, lacks a single author. This work mentions the three branches of Zoroastrian law interpretation (exegesis) and their main commentators and advocates. It was written after the seventh century CE, but it appears to be a true Sasanian product: it contains no mention of Islam, and polemics against other religious practices are aimed at Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism. The book deals with the laws of purification, atonement and punishment, and it adopts the tone of a dominant religion.¹⁵

Authorship in ninth-century writings

The original religious writings of the ninth century CE have the distinction of having an individual writer or commentator. It is true that Sasanian redactors also mentioned the names of commentators, but those compilers largely conformed to the anonymous “authorities have taught ...” formula. The ninth century *mowbeds* and redactors, however, recorded their own genealogies and the names of some of their contemporaries. Therefore, the colophons of *Wizidagiha i Zadspram* (“Zadspram’s Selections”) and of *Namagiha i Manuchihr* (“Manuchihr’s Letters”) list the names of their authors or collectors and show the mark of a single hand. These two works

provide an intelligent summary of some of the legends and beliefs of the Sasanian era for the benefit of the beleaguered ninth-century Zoroastrian community.

The Dadistan i Dēnig* / *The Pahlavi Rivayat

The *Dadistan i Dēnig* (“Religious Judgment”) is another work intended to convince the sceptical reader. This book consists of Manuchihr’s answers to 92 questions put to him by the laity on subjects ranging from doctrine to cosmology, ethics and social and legal problems. Like many other Pahlavi texts, the *Dadistan i Dēnig* is presented as a series of questions and answers, in a form common to oral compositions of Middle Persian literature. This work is usually accompanied by another Middle Persian religious text, the *Pahlavi Rivayat*.¹⁶ The *Rivayat* constitutes a special compilation of miscellaneous religious treatises or letters that were later sent by the Iranian Zoroastrians to their fellow Indian Zoroastrians, the Parsees, in order to advise them on religious and disciplinary matters. These treatises were, at times, also called *Pursishniha* (“Questions”) or *Wizarkard i Dēnig* (the Islamic fatwa or encyclical). The two expressions became proper names for some of these texts, whose primary areas of focus are Zoroastrian law, the Zoroastrians’ new status under Islamic rulers, and their relationship with their Muslim neighbours.¹⁷

Middle Persian genres

Although Middle Persian texts have, by and large, a religious context, they still encompass different genres and can address different questions. In order to study these texts more effectively, scholars such as O. Klima, M. Boyce and I. Tafazzuli have categorized them into different classes and strata such as secular, religious, philosophical, historical, etc. But at times, scholars may not agree on the classification of a single text; while one might call a text secular, another might assign it to the religious category, and the same work might end up on different shelves devoted to different scholars. This confusion stems not only from the diverse perceptions of scholars themselves, but also from the fact that each text contains many different subjects, and so scholars might legitimately disagree regarding the most central and important themes. In this part of my study, I have tried to retain the most popular categorizations, but changes in classification would not alter my argument in any event. So far I have mentioned only the religious literature; below, I will mention some important “secular” texts as well.

Eschatological texts: Arda Wiraz Namag

One aspect of Zoroastrianism that had a great impact on other religions and cultures, as I noted above, was its eschatological and apocalyptic nature. It is

therefore natural to find quite a few Pahlavi texts in this genre. The divinity Wahman is linked to wisdom and prophecy; tradition holds that Zoroaster himself had mantic powers; and Jamasp, Zoroaster's first convert, is said to have been imparted with the gift of divination. Visionary texts thus include *Zand i Wahman Yasht*, *Jamasp Namag*, *Ayadgar i Jamaspig* and a text predicting the coming of Wahram i Warjavand. But the most important and famous of these works, and indeed of all Zoroastrian works, is *Arda Wiraz Namag*, which was translated into verse and prose in Persian, Sanskrit and Gujarati. It is also the first Zoroastrian work to have been translated into European languages by way of Persian.¹⁸

This text, which has often been both compared to and posited as an ultimate source of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, relates the story of a man's trip to the supernatural world. The introduction of the text (I.1–12) claims that, three centuries after the advent of Zoroastrianism, the evil spirit had caused the "accursed" Alexander to wage war on Iran and to destroy its empire and king. In the process, Alexander is said to have burned the extant animal-skin copies of the *Avesta* and *Zand* and to have killed *mowbeds* and other wise men, thereby sowing the seeds of political confusion and religious doubt.¹⁹ The Zoroastrian *mowbeds* then seek new means of testing the truth of their religion and of re-establishing it on a firm base, evidently at the request of Ardashir Papakan, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty.²⁰

The text goes on to describe how the priest Wiraz is elected by a group of seven Magi, on account of his moral and religious integrity, to act as a messenger of the mortals to other kingdoms and to bring back the true story of heaven and hell. His journey is a visionary one; and while the body of Arda Wiraz stays motionless in a fire temple in Pars, his soul travels for seven days. The journey takes place with the help of wine and a powerful narcotic, and the *mowbeds* and his seven sisters/wives remain praying and singing liturgies at the bedside of the priest. Upon his return, Wiraz relates his visions while a scribe writes them down.²¹

Arda Wiraz Namag has 101 chapters: only fifteen of them describe the pleasures of heaven, and the rest deal with the horrors of hell. Although the work has a very old kernel in the *Avesta*, according to J. Duchesne-Guillemin, it is primarily a Sasanian product designed to ensure the efficacy of the religion and its rituals, following the relative laxity of the Parthian period.²² Some scholars believe it to be aimed against some kind of fatalism, perhaps Zurvanite or Manichaean, in which the belief in choice and responsibility, and therefore in retribution, had been weakened. *Arda Wiraz Namag* conveys a great deal of information about customs, relationships, duties and values in Zoroastrian society; and in particular, it informs us of Zoroastrian views regarding the relationship between one's conduct in this world and one's experience in the hereafter. While some of the grave sins of the time (e.g., murder, theft, adultery, sodomy, sorcery, apostasy, heresy and avarice) still stand as sins in most religions, some other offences are characteristically Zoroastrian (e.g., talking or walking

while eating, wearing only one shoe, urinating while standing, and wearing a wig).²³

Zoroastrian philosophical literature

While Iranian philosophy may not have been as secularly distinct as that of ancient Greece, for example, wisdom and reason are the most admired qualities in Zoroastrian religion – the name Ahura Mazda literally means “Wise Lord” or “Lord Wisdom” – and Pahlavi texts use logic and philosophical terms in order to convince the reader. In a section of his book devoted to “philosophical texts,” A. Tafazzuli argues that Sasanians were familiar with philosophy: Khusraw Anushirvan retained philosophers in his court, and the Athenian Agathias relates both that the king had Greek philosophical works translated into Middle Persian and that he enjoyed the company of seven Greek Monophysites who, persecuted by the Roman emperor, had taken refuge in his court.²⁴ According to the *Dēnkard*, Khusraw Anushirvan declared, “Those who say it is possible to understand being through the revelations of the Religion and also by analogy, are to be deemed researchers [into truth].”²⁵

Middle Persian writings demonstrate a familiarity with philosophical terms, and Tafazzuli categorizes any polemical work that is based on reason as philosophical. Two of the books branded as philosophical by Tafazzuli, and as polemical by Klima,²⁶ are *Shkand Gumanig Wizar* (“The Doubt-Destroying Exposition”) and *Madayan i Guzastag Abalish* (“The Story of Abalish, the Accursed”). These are apologetic texts, asserting the supremacy of Zoroastrianism over Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Manichaeism by means of abstract intellectual reasoning.²⁷ The story of Abalish relates a philosophical and religious debate that is said to have taken place before the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mun in 825 CE. Abalish, an ex-Zoroastrian, invites Adurfarnbag to an intellectual debate regarding the tenets of Zoroastrianism, but the latter man answers all the questions put to him. Satisfied with Adurfarnbag’s replies, Ma’mun declares him the winner and drives away Abalish from his court. Some scholars believe that Ma’mun was acquainted with the ways of Khusraw Anushirvan and therefore intended to imitate him by surrounding himself with thinkers and debaters. Although the episode of Abalish is not reported in any Islamic source, similar anecdotes, with completely different results (e.g., the victory of Islamic doctrine), survive from the era of Ma’mun.²⁸

Middle Persian legal texts

There are a few law codes and legal treatises among Middle Persian texts. Most of these texts (the *Rivayats* of *Emed i Ashawahishtan*, of *Adurbadfarnbag Farrukhzadan*, etc.) belong to the Islamic era and deal with the difficulties encountered by Zoroastrians who lived in an Islamic society by explaining

the Zoroastrians' code of behaviour. One of these texts, however, comes down from the Sasanian era and is the only source that gives us a true idea of social relations in Sasanian society. This is a collection of laws and decrees, without any definition or explanation, by the name of *Madayan i Hazar Dadistan* ("Book of a Thousand Judgments"). The author gives his name, Farrokhmard i Wahraman, in a very poorly preserved preface. Although penal and agrarian laws are not included in the collection, civil, family and contractual laws are discussed. As the title implies, the text is intended to be an actual or an imaginary case history rather than a systematic legal code, showing that legal procedure was sometimes based on precedent rather than on written laws. Also, some Syriac papyri of legal codices prove the existence of juridical writings at the time of the Sasanians.²⁹

Political works in Middle Persian

Quite a few political letters and treatises, largely translated into Arabic or into Persian in the early Islamic era, remain from the Sasanian period. They include *Ayen Namag* ("Book of Regulations") and *Taj Namag* ("Book of the Crown"), both of which consist of treatises, royal documents, ordinances and edicts that were translated by Ibn al-Muqaffa' into Arabic, as well as *Gah Namag*, which is a syllabus of state dignitaries representing about 600 ranks. Two famous treatises come down from the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, Ardashir, but they were probably the products of Khusraw Anushirvan's era instead. One of them, in Arabic, is entitled '*Ahd i Ardashir*' ("Testament of Ardashir"): in this text, Ardashir advises his descendants to name their own successors, but not to divulge their choices. Instead, the king in question should write the name of his successor on four pieces of paper, and after signing and sealing them, he should give them to four dignitaries of the land. Upon the king's death the four copies would be opened and the name of the true heir would be revealed. The other treatise, in Persian, is known as the "Letter of Tansar." This letter was written by the *mowbed* Tansar (Tosar) to the king of Tabaristan, encouraging him to obey Ardashir, in exchange for the king's continuance on the throne. This letter was translated into Persian by Ibn Isfandiari from an Arabic translation of Ibn al-Muqaffa' and was preserved in *Ibn Isfandiari's Tarikh-i Tabaristan* ("History of Tabaristan"). Unfortunately, both the Middle Persian and Arabic translations are lost. Tansar's letter contains heated arguments in defence of Zoroastrianism and Sasanian society in general.³⁰

Historical works in Middle Persian

It has been said that Iranians did not write history as such. It is true that, in oral cultures, a great deal of creative talent is spent on memorization, as well as on invention. But, with the spread of writing, Sasanians eventually recorded many of their oral traditions in more permanent form. Indeed, the

Sasanian court commissioned the writing of many historical materials: accounts of battles, disasters, festivals, customs; atlases of geographical names; genealogies; brief chronicles; and even a history of the world, including legends about the Iranians and the Sasanians. No historical works have survived the Sasanian era, although we know that comprehensive written histories did exist. Of this epical historiography, only two small books in Middle Persian are available to us today: one is *Kar Namag i Ardashir i Papakan* ("Book of the Deeds of Ardashir, Son of Papak"), and the other is *Ayadgar i Zareran* ("The Book of the Heroic Deeds of Zarer"). Both of these works are, to a great extent, preserved in Firdausi's *Shahnamah*, albeit without many of their original Zoroastrian elements. The *Kar Namag i Ardashir* relates the foundation myth of the Sasanians in a long narrative that contains some historical details but is in general romantic and fictional, repeating some of the elements of the legend of Cyrus the Great. The *Deeds of Zarer* is about the religious war of King Wishtasp against the Turanian Arjasp in the time of Zoroaster, in which Zarer, the brother of the king, is styled as the Iranian hero.³¹ More will be said about this text below.

There are no extant copies of the *Khwaday Namag* ("Book of Kings") in Middle Persian, but we learn of it from Muslim histories such as Ibn al-Nadim's *al-Fihrist*, Tha'alibi's *Ghurur akhbar muluk al-furs* and other Arabic derivatives. We know that Ibn al-Muqaffa' was one of those who translated the *Khwaday Namag* into Arabic. All direct Arabic or Persian redactions of the *Khwaday Namag*, however, have been lost. Still, we can find portions of the book in the works of Tabari, as for instance in his *Tarikh al-rusul wa'l muluk* ("History of Prophets and Kings"), and in Bal'ami's *History*. The *Khwaday Namag* apparently did not mention Achaemenids and Arsacids, but it identified the Pishdadyans and Kayanians, two mythical dynasties, as the ancestors of the Sasanians.

Firdausi's *Shahnamah* is primarily based on a Persian prose work compiled under Abu Mansur Tusi. This book itself was a composite, derived from the Sasanian sources including the *Khwaday Namag*. The *Shahnamah* of Abu Mansur included myth, history, historical fictions and popular tales and legends. Fortunately, Firdausi included all these elements in his version of the *Shahnamah*, making it an enduring and entertaining text, if somewhat more fictional than historical. Despite this lack of precision, however, the *Shahnamah* remains one of the most important sources for the history of pre-Islamic Iran.³²

Other Pahlavi works

Excluding the *Avesta*, I. Tafazzuli discusses 82 extant texts from the Sasanian era; as I noted above, these texts belong to different genres and address different subjects. In addition to the ones mentioned already, a few works among them merit some mention: the *Shahristanha i Eranshahr* ("Cities of Iran"), for example, is a catalogue classified according to the four regions

that comprised the country, with mythical or historical information about the founders of primary Iranian settlements and sometimes about the circumstances of their foundation. A similar geographic work is the *Abdih ud Sahigih i Sagistan* ("Wonders and Remarkable Features of Seistan"), which recounts the natural features and traditions that make Seistan prominent.³³

Two of these miscellaneous works are entirely Sasanian in spirit: one is Khusraw va Redag ("Khusraw and the Page"), an account of a cultured conversation between the king and a young lad who wants to be hired by the court. Khusraw endeavours to find out the extent of the boy's knowledge of diverse aspects of luxurious living: food, wines, music, perfumes, flowers, women, horses, jesters and other sensual delights. The other such text is the *Wizarishn i Chatrang* or the *Chatrang Namag* ("Explanation of the Game of Chess"), which describes in an entertaining and informative manner how the game of chess was sent from India to Khusraw Anushirvan in order to test Iranian wits, and how the wise Wuzurgmihr not only solved the game but invented as a counter-challenge the game of New-Ardashir, *nard* (backgammon).³⁴

There are some dictionaries and glossaries of Avestan and Pahlavi words in Middle Persian. Like Manichaean texts, some of the Middle Persian works were also in verse, e.g., *Ayadgar i Zareran* and *Drakht i Asurig* ("The Assyrian Tree"). Originally written in Parthian, the Middle Persian *Drakht i Asurig* and the *Ayadgar i Zareran* retain many Parthian words, phrases and grammatical patterns scattered throughout the texts. The *Drakht i Asurig* relates a verbal dispute between a goat and a palm tree, each of whom recounts his own merits and declares himself to be superior to the other. The story is an occasion for the light-hearted display of wit and erudition in more or less the same spirit of the riddle contest between the sorcerer *Axt* and the Zoroastrian *Yoišt i Fryan* in the work entitled *Madayan i Yoišt i Fryan*.³⁵

The Middle Persian literary style

The style of Middle Persian literature was didactic and antiquarian. Having existed for centuries as a purely oral phenomenon, it retained many characteristics of oral types of composition; indeed, much of Pahlavi literature, from the *Avesta* to the *Arda Wiraz Namag*, may be categorized as catechistic in form (i.e., a kind of instruction by means of questions and answers). Riddles and contests frequently appear, and myths and stories are mostly alluded to rather than explicitly retold, under the assumption that hearers and readers were already familiar with them. Pahlavi literary works, typical of the oral traditions whence they originated, share a number of stylistic characteristics, one of which is extensive repetition. Reflecting another element of oral tradition, most Pahlavi texts omit authorial attribution. Not until the time of Khusraw Anushirvan, in the last century

of the Sasanian period, did authors' names begin to appear in the Middle Persian literature; in contrast, works written in the Islamic era have a distinct author, and their tone, unlike that of Sasanian works, is deferential and apologetic.³⁶ More will be said about this point below.

Andarz

Andarz, the focus of the present chapter on literature, is a kind of moralizing and ethical wisdom literature that constituted the most important and widespread literary genre of the Sasanian era. Andarz emulates the moralistic choice of good over evil in Zoroastrianism; as I mentioned in Chapter 1, the inscriptions of Darius I could also be considered sources of this tradition, insofar as they emphasize truth and falsehood, right and wrong, reason and anger. Andarz was a compilation of forms, including gnomes, maxims, precepts, advice and injunctions, attributed either to mythical sages (e.g., Oshnar the wise, Kay Kavus's counsellor, or Jamshid, the Avestan Yima) or to Sasanian kings and wise men. These remarks, at times framed as a testament for surviving sons or courtiers, were meant to be heard by all, so that they might provide instruction regarding proper and moral behaviour in matters of religion, state and daily life. Thus, Andarz was both typical of and suited to the oral tradition of Iranian culture, though it does not truly belong to any single, cohesive narrative genre. Individual works of Andarz (hereafter referred to as *andarz*, in order to distinguish them from the genre as a whole) often are accompanied by fairly short preambles that briefly identify the people involved (i.e., the giver and the recipient of advice) and the occasion and reason behind the questions and answers. In addition to preambles, *andarz* occasionally contain short moral anecdotes.³⁷

Characteristics of the Andarz genre

Individual *andarz* are characterized by brevity and lucidity. Some of the sayings assume the form of riddles, while others are phrased as paradoxes; the fact that some have a poetic quality suggests that the older Iranian gnomic literature, such as *Barish Nask*, was in verse. *Andarz* use the stylistic devices, necessary in oral tradition, of homilies and sermons. Many sayings contain wordplay, popular etymologies and the like, though they are relatively free from conscious artistic embellishments. The fundamental unit of meaning is the sentence, and although there is no real order, at times individual sayings are grouped by content. Modern scholars have also tried to categorize Andarz literature by its content. I. Tafazzuli, for one, distinguishes only between religious and practical *andarz*, while M. Boyce prefers to see three distinct classes: first, the gnome of observation (e.g., "there is no cure for age"); second, the gnome of prudence and advisability (e.g., "make a friend of the man who will be most useful to you"); and third,

the gnome of morality (e.g., “the best protector is one’s duty”). All scholars agree, however, that any kind of thematic dividing line is problematic and cannot be considered absolute. This is especially the case vis-à-vis the distinction between secular and religious themes because of the widespread religiosity of most texts, even those dealing with everyday life.³⁸

Extant Andarz literature

Unfortunately, most of the Andarz literature of the Sasanian era is lost, but a substantial number of translations in Arabic and Persian remain. The sixth book of the *Dēnkard* constitutes the largest collection of gnomic sayings to have survived in Pahlavi; it purports to recount the sayings of *poryotkeshan* (holders of the faith of ancients) as well as some of the Sasanian sages such as Aturpat i Mahrspandan and Bakhtafriid. As opposed to other Andarz texts that are directed at a popular audience, Book VI of the *Dēnkard* is evidently addressed to a more sophisticated audience, with its sayings based on literary associations and allusions. Although the *Dēnkard* was compiled in the ninth century CE, much of the material of the sixth book goes back to Sasanian and still earlier literary documents. All the anonymous sayings in the first section start with the formula “They held this too thus,” which is a sign of their oral transmission.³⁹

The themes of Andarz

Wisdom

Khrad (wisdom) is constantly praised in the Andarz texts. This wisdom is not so much the wisdom of prophecy and divinity, as it is the wisdom of observation and reflection. Wisdom, knowledge (*danish*, *danagih*), sagacity (*frazanagih*) and associated terms figure predominantly in Andarz literature. In some Pahlavi texts the concept of wisdom is extolled to the extent that it has become an independent divinity equal to or even superior to the Amahraspands. In the *Mēnog i Khrad* (“The Spirit of Wisdom”) it is said to be worshipped above all other entities. Two other poetic compositions, “A Poem in Praise of Wisdom” and “A Hymn to Wisdom,” have the same spirit. The wisdom praised in these texts is manifested in pragmatic maxims for achieving success in life. Book VI of the *Dēnkard* is also filled with praise of wisdom, but in this book wisdom is a part of a complete religious system.⁴⁰

According to the *Bundahishn*, Ahura Mazda creates the first mythical human couple, Mashya and Mashyanah, and greets them as follows: “You are human beings. You are the parents of all the people. I created you with the most exalted, sound wisdom.”⁴¹ Knowledge is therefore a prerequisite of Zoroastrianism: it is the desire of Ahura Mazda to be known, while Ahriman’s wish is not to be known. In the *Mēnog i Khrad*, it is said that

“of all the good things that are given to people, wisdom is the best.”⁴² In Book VI of the *Dēnkard*, the word *Khrad* and its components are mentioned dozens of times. The *Bundahishn* goes on to say that Ahura Mazda “created these creatures through character, he holds them with wisdom, and takes them back to himself by religion.”⁴³

A section in the Pahlavi *Pand Namag* enumerates what is required of a man to know when he reaches the age of fifteen:

Who am I? Whose am I? From whence did I come? Whither shall I return? Of what lineage and seed am I? What is my duty to this world? What is the reward of the other world? ... Do I belong to Ohrmazd or to Ahriman? ... Do I belong to the good or to the wicked? Am I a man or a demon? How many ways are there? Which religion is mine? What is my benefit and what is my harm? Who is my friend and who is my enemy? Is there one principle or two? From whom is there goodness and from whom evil? From whom is there light and from whom darkness? From whom is there fragrance and from whom stench? From whom is there lawfulness and from whom lack of law? From whom is there forgiveness and from whom lack of compassion?⁴⁴

A Zoroastrian’s optimistic answer to these questions would be based on his knowledge of belonging to the Good Creation of Ahura Mazda in both body and soul:⁴⁵

I have come from the unseen world, nor was I (always) of this world. I was created and have not (always) been. I belong to Ohrmazd, not to Ahriman. I belong to the gods, not to the demons, to the good, not to the wicked. I am a man, not a demon, a creature of Ohrmazd, not of Ahriman. My stock and lineage is from Gayomart. My mother is Spandarmat (the Earth), and my father is Ohrmazd. My humanity is from Mahre and Mahran who were the first seed and offspring of Gayomart.⁴⁶

In addition to praising wisdom and knowledge, Zoroastrians placed great emphasis on *khud shinasī* (knowing oneself). They also believed strongly that one should honestly admit that which one does not know, and that knowledge and wisdom should be geared towards action. In fact, quite often in Andarz literature wisdom is praised in a pragmatic sense: “The best thing for men is wisdom. For if, heaven forbid, wealth is gone, or the cattle die, wisdom shall remain.”⁴⁷

There are practical ways to obtain wisdom. Education (*frahang*), discipleship (*hawishtih*) and consulting wise, good people (*hampursagih i danagan*, *hampursagih i wehan*) are highly recommended. Two Andarz texts in Pazand address the education of the young directly: in *Khweskarīh i redakan* (“The Duty of Children”), the importance of education is stressed; and

in *Andarz i weh kunem asma kodakan* ("I Am Giving You Children Good Advice"), the correct behaviour of children in school and in society is elucidated. In their search for the right education, people are urged to frequent the *erbadestan* or *dibestan* (school, place of learning) and the *mani i atakhshan* (fire temple). The responsibility for educating one's wife, children and slaves lies with the head of the family, who ought to treat his dependants well. In one Pahlavi text, people are encouraged to send their children to the *dibiristan* (place of writing) because "writing is happiness."⁴⁸

Discipleship, on the other hand, is largely restricted to those who want to become priests. The best education is by personal example, for which the simile of a mirror is used: "A person who cleanses his character, is like a bright mirror, causing others to see themselves more clearly in order to correct themselves."⁴⁹ People are also likened to the wind, good company to good fragrance, and bad company to foul odour. If a Zoroastrian wishes to spread a sweet smell, he or she should mingle with the good: "One who is here with the good will be there with the gods."⁵⁰

Human destiny

Like other Pahlavi literature, the *Andarz* texts grant fate an important role in human destiny. The importance of fate and astrology in Pahlavi literature has led some scholars to conclude that it is related more closely to Zurvanite than to Zoroastrian theology. On the other hand, fatalism is typical of all gnomic genres. S. Shaked has argued that, even if Zurvanism existed as an organized body of faith and practice, it was not necessarily the origin of a negative and fatalistic attitude in Zoroastrianism. We saw how Zoroastrianism originally did not look upon the material world as an antithesis of the spiritual one. In Pahlavi *Andarz* texts a man still has to find the right balance between the two worlds: while "wealth is like a bird which never stops in one place," still "that man is most fortunate who mixes the transient things of this world with that which is intransient."⁵¹ In Pahlavi literature, the relation between human action and fate, or between freedom and predestination, is a balanced relationship with limits dictated by prudence and by *khرداد*. In the *Letter of Tansar*, it is said that

Destiny and striving are like two bales of traveler's luggage upon a beast's back. If one of the two is heavier and the other lighter, the luggage will fall to the ground. ... [If] both bales are equal, the traveler will not be harassed ... and [the bales] will reach their destination.⁵²

The virtues of moderation

Prudence and moderation are universally recommended in the world's gnomic and advice literature. But the Iranians were very specifically keen on the philosophy of the mean and on maintaining the middle ground: in the

words of M. Boyce, “to deplore excess is characteristically Zoroastrian.”⁵³ Therefore, even though vices and virtues were distinguished quite clearly from one another, a virtue in excess could become a vice. This idea of a relationship to an ideal mean is demonstrated by the *bradarod* in Pahlavi, which may be translated as “false brothers.” For example, generosity is a virtue, but wastefulness that resembles generosity is a vice. This doctrine of the mean also includes the Zoroastrian premise of “worldly” and “other-worldly” matters. Men should not give up one to obtain the other, but should find the right balance between the two worlds; “one should not embellish the things of the material world in excess of the measure, for a man who embellishes the material world in excess of the measure becomes a destroyer of the spiritual world.”⁵⁴ In the *Pahlavi Rivayat*, however, Adurbad, son of Mahrspand, claims to have been taught by Mihr Ohrmazd, among other things, that there exist a few pursuits which merit excessive measures: “moderation is he who plans everything according to the (right) measure, ... for the (right) measure (is) the completeness of everything, except those things which there is no need for moderation: knowledge and love and good deeds.”⁵⁵

Andarz literature and women

The previous chapter introduced the subject of women in pre-Islamic Iran; we find a number of sayings in Andarz literature that stipulate how a good wife should behave, what she should avoid, and the nature of her family duties. Men are given the following advice: “the best company is a good woman;”⁵⁶ “unhappy is the man who does not have a wife;”⁵⁷ and finally,

one should not marry a woman who does not obey the husband, and does not consider her husband’s profit and loss and sadness and happiness as her own, and does not share a husband’s profit and loss, since she would be worse than any enemy.⁵⁸

Given these sayings, what kind of a woman should a man marry? “A woman who is a respectful housewife, loved by her husband is best;”⁵⁹ and “one’s wife is this; one who shares his desires in every righteous thing.”⁶⁰

A lengthy passage from the *Dēnkard* describes proper and improper behaviour for women:

A woman in whom these several marks are found is a (proper) female: adorning the husband, adorning the table, guarding the gate (of the house), dressing (as appropriate to) herself, keeping the body and place in cleanliness. A woman in whom these several marks are found is a whore: sorcery, divination, idol worship, gloomy talk, prostitution, dressing strangely, not keeping her body and place in cleanliness.⁶¹

It should be noted that many of the above mentioned signs of impropriety are equally proscribed for men.

Since procreation is the goal of sex, a man who has sex with the “wrong” woman is represented as “wasting the seed.”⁶² Because the extended family was organized agnatically, as we saw in the previous chapter, and so the *kadkhuda* or male head was responsible for the wellbeing of everyone in the family, especially women and children; and since a man could be legally related to his wife in more than one way (e.g., in a next-of-kin marriage) women had to be provided for and protected by law. Although adolescence for both girls and boys was marked by the wearing of the *Kusti* at the age of 15 years, some Pahlavi texts suggest that girls could be legally married at nine years of age, with consummation at the age of 15. A man could divorce his wife if she “gave herself in copulation” to another man or if she had “concealed menstruation,” but the man could divorce his wife only if he could

provide a guardian for her. [If] it is not possible to provide a guardian for her, he himself (is) not allowed to copulate (with her), and he must maintain her as a guardian according to the law. If he divorces her when to divorce (her is) not authorized (by law), the sin (is) grave. There was an authority who said that (such an offence was) *margarzan* [punishable by death].⁶³

Like many other religious and moral traditions, Pahlavi Andarz literature has its own share of contradictory sayings. One text asserts that “women possess no wisdom,”⁶⁴ but another considers women to represent innate wisdom:

There are many kinds of masculinity and femininity. Masculinity and femininity are even this: innate wisdom and acquired wisdom. Acquired wisdom occupies the place of masculine, and innate wisdom occupies the place of the feminine. ... Innate wisdom without acquired wisdom is like a female without a male, who does not conceive and does not bear fruit. A man who possesses [acquired] wisdom, but whose innate wisdom is not perfect, is like a female who is not receptive to a male.⁶⁵

An aphorism regarding sex has been repeated a number of times almost verbatim in Andarz literature:

When a woman and a man come together in an uninhabited place, and having eaten they are merry, and have much desire for each other, and if they fulfilled their desire no one would know, yet solely for the sake of the soul that man does not unite with that woman.⁶⁶

By this action (or inaction), the couple show character worthy of paradise.

According to another source, *Mēnog i Khrad*, the best woman is “a young, strong woman with a good essence and a good name, well meaning, house adorning, shy and considerate who loves her father, ancestor, husband and *kadkhuda*, and is beautiful.”⁶⁷ And the *Pahlavi Rivayat* puts it this way:

the wife of *Padikhshay* (status) should consult her husband three times every day saying: ‘what do you require when I think and speak and act, for I do not know what is required when I think and speak and act, tell (me), so that I will think and speak and act as you require?’ Then she must do everything that the righteous husband tells her, and she should refrain from tormenting and afflicting her husband.⁶⁸

The key word here, however, is “righteous,” because a woman does not have to obey a husband if he orders her to sin. In fact, women and even slaves, as well as the person who supervises them, are accountable for their sins even if they were committed under duress. Thus, “the man (who performs it) is, for his own part, under guilt.”⁶⁹

Ultimately, it is the religious as well as the moral duty of a righteous man to discourage his wife from sinning. When Arda Wiraz travels to the underworld, he sees a dead couple:

the husband went to heaven, the wife to hell for having practised idol worship; she reproached him that he did not guide her to heaven; her only punishment in hell is to be in darkness and stench, whilst he sits in heaven full of shame.⁷⁰

In contrast to a bad or indifferent husband, a good, righteous husband is the ultimate source of pleasure for a woman. Gosht i Frayano contradicts the sorcerer Akht by saying

for it is thus thou thinkest, that the great pleasure of women is from various kinds of dress and seemly housewifery, when they have them. However, it is not so; the great pleasure of women is from being with their own husbands.⁷¹

Family in Andarz literature

Children were the responsibility of both parents. Infanticide, not giving milk to a baby and not acknowledging one's children are among the *margarzan* sins (i.e., those punishable by death). Time and again, Arda Wiraz meets sinners in hell who had neglected their children. In one instance he sees the soul of a man at whose feet several children fall screaming; then demons, like dogs, attack the man and tear him apart: “this is the soul of that wicked man who, in the world, did not acknowledge his own children.”⁷² And the soul of the wicked woman who destroyed her own infant will have “dug

into a hill with her own breasts, and ever held on her head, a mill stone like a cap."⁷³ Sasanian parents ultimately were responsible for providing for their children and for sending them to *dibiristan* (school). Many scholars think that the treatise of *Xusrāw ud Redak* epitomizes Sasanian views on the rearing of children and youth, and that what Anushirvan asks of the boy is what was expected of young aristocratic men in general. But whether or not he is an aristocrat, a man should love his wife and children "without being excessively passionate, and [he should] avoid constantly mentioning to them their faults, obviously in order not to discourage them."⁷⁴ According to the *Pahlavi Rivayat*,

If a child dies before the age of seven, then its soul stands in the sun station; and if the father is righteous (it goes) with the father to Paradise; and if the father (is) wicked, if the mother (is) righteous, it goes with the mother to Paradise; if its father and mother (are) both wicked it goes with the father and mother to Hell. Unless the parents assemble a name-fire for the child and kill a noxious creature, then its soul becomes separate from the mother and father; it does not go to Hell.⁷⁵

A man is expected to protect his family even if it makes him commit an atonable sin, but "when the need arises, for the sake of religion, wife, children, righteous preceptors and other good people ... one should not commit an unatonable sin."⁷⁶ Children, in return, are supposed to respect and obey both of their parents. Thus, in the Book of Arda Wiraz, those who "in the world, distressed their father and mother; and [who] asked no absolution and forgiveness from their father and mother"⁷⁷ in the next world are punished by being plunged in mud and stench.

As we have already seen, the Sasanian family was an extended one, and a child belonged to an entire family as well as to its parents. According to A. Perikhanian,

The collective character of family property and the unity of its inheritance found expression in the latent right enjoyed by all the successors to inherit from each other. ... The regime of family property and its inheritance which I have described was common to all strata of Iranian society. It applied in the king's family no less than in others.⁷⁸

The significance of an extended family was relevant not only to the present generation, but to those of the past and the future too, extending to both ancestors and descendants. When a misfortune befalls Adurbad, son of Mahrspand, he counts among his blessings the fact that "every evil or misfortune done comes either to oneself or to one's descendants; it has come to me and will not come to my descendant."⁷⁹ Another *andarz* offers advice to give one's daughter regarding marriage to a wise man: "consult and be a friend to a man of noble extraction, skillful, intelligent

and good character.”⁸⁰ Thus, the Andarz literature encompasses the entire life cycle, from marriage to family to marrying off one’s progeny.

Manners

In addition to marrying a good wife or husband and to raising good children, keeping good company in general was recommended in Andarz literature. *Wehan* (good people) often are mentioned side by side with the *yazatan* (gods). One should surrender oneself to the gods and surround oneself with good people so that goodness can prevail in one’s life. The *Dēnkard* asserts that

A man who is here with the good will be there with the gods; a man who is here with the wicked will be there with the devils. ... [With] whomsoever one is associated in thought, speech and deed, one is the same (as that person).⁸¹

Indeed, socializing with good people is considered a religious duty in Zoroastrianism:

One ought to strive much towards meeting good people and eating with them. For if a person knew how salutary it is to meet good people and to eat with them, if there was nothing available that he could give to the good, he would take his own bread, go to good people and eat with them.⁸²

The knowledge of fruits, wine, drinking water, flowers and perfumes was part of the upbringing of a refined Sasanian youth.⁸³ An *andarz* states that “one should eat a hearty meal, eat clean food, prepare a dainty meal, eat in a worthy manner, eat with pleasure, eat perfectly, eat with the gods, and not fear anyone;” to say “he ate with gods” means this: to eat with good people.”⁸⁴ The emphasis on sharing a meal with good people is more meaningful if we recall that Zoroastrians were not allowed to talk during meals; D. Khaleghi-Motlagh notes that “according to them, a deity stands at the sides of each guest, and if the guests talk while eating, the deity departs and a demon takes his place.”⁸⁵ Talking with a full mouth, *darianjush*, is one of the worst sins in Zoroastrian doctrine: “Do not speak while eating so that you do not commit a grave sin against Amurdad and Khurdad, the Ameshaspands.”⁸⁶

A man should not only keep quiet and shut his mouth during the meal, but he should also exercise great caution even while simply thinking at the table. “He who has eaten the meat of a sheep and has not (yet) digested it, and (if) he is thinking a sin or doing (one) and the sheep has committed a *margarzan* sin, then it goes to his account.”⁸⁷ In other words, the bad aura of animals may be transferred to human beings through impure thought while dining. Thus, a meal is usually accompanied by prayers and invocations. Other Zoroastrian

texts suggest that non-human animals can be guilty of even capital sins, as when a mad dog who bites a sheep or human without warning (i.e., without barking) is expected to pay for the injury as though it constituted “willful murder.”⁸⁸

The treatment of animals as conscious participants in the combat between good and evil is reminiscent of Indian traditions in which human beings sit only one step higher than animals on the ladder of the reincarnated world. The association between animals and wrongdoing is also found in the Hindu law of karma. But the similarities end here: as we know, Zoroastrians did not believe in reincarnation. Rather, they believed that the souls of *both* humans *and* animals would go either to heaven or to hell after death.

Generosity

This frequently praised merit is manifested in both hospitality and in benefaction: in the words of the *Dēnkard*,

it is necessary to keep the door open to people. For when a man does not keep the door open to people, people do not come to his house. When people do not come to someone's house, the gods do not come to his house. When the gods do not come to someone's house, no fortune adheres to him. For people are after bread, gods are after people, and fortune follows the gods.⁸⁹

Adurbad, son of Mahrspand, cites his teacher Mihr Ohrmazd, who defined the “best generosity” as the following:

First, he who is not asked but gives, second, he who is asked (and) gives immediately, third, he who is asked and fixes a time and does (his giving) on time. He (is) best, who, when he gives, entertains no hope as regards that (receiver of his generosity, thinking): ‘he will give it back to me’; he does not give for the sake of acquiring trade, nor for the sake of covetousness.⁹⁰

Gift-giving can involve certain risks, one of which is that the giver's approach may embarrass or humiliate the recipient. Thus, the rules of generosity are finely honed so that “the giver ... does not hurt the recipient's feelings; this is why it is taught that the giver should be grateful to the recipient.”⁹¹

Zoroastrians were taught that giving to the poor is a religious duty. They also believed that one should give only to good people, and not to evil ones, as the *Pahlavi Rivāyat* stipulates:

The charitable who (are) in their charity, who (give to) very bad and undutiful men, thieves and robbers come to (their houses). From that house (comes) affliction for Ohrmazd and the other *yazads*, the evil

which those wicked ones think and speak and do in that house will be just as though the charitable man who (is) sinful shall have performed it with his own hands.⁹²

Because of the Zoroastrian belief that the world is the battleground between good and evil forces, an act of charity towards a person who is considered evil may well be seen as helping the cause of Ahriman. Indeed, Zoroastrians are admonished to be wise, not foolish, in their giving in general:

This also (is) revealed in the religion, that Ohrmazd said to Zoroaster: 'He who performs charity knowingly and discriminately (is) like me, I who am Ohrmazd. And he who performs charity ignorantly and without understanding and indiscriminately (is like) Ahriman.'⁹³

Thus, we see that Ahriman benefits from unawareness and from carelessness in giving, as in all other instances of thoughtlessness.

Obligations

Keeping promises and upholding one's obligations is another important ethical precept for Zoroastrians. The *Pahlavi Rivayat* warns that

(If) someone makes an agreement in friendship verbally with a man and (then) breaks that covenant, every one of the descendants of that man (will) all (live in) fear for 300 years, and (the punishment for) that breaking of covenant will come upon them.⁹⁴

In the *Dēnkard*, breaking one's promise is said to result in the breaking of families, which are the most valuable Zoroastrian institutions: "the dissolution of a family sometimes comes about through adversity and sometimes by the breaking of oaths."⁹⁵ Furthermore, Mithra, the god of contract and covenant, is second only to Ahura Mazda in the Old Iranian pantheon. Mithra retained his prominence even after Zoroaster's reforms; and Zoroastrian literature suggests that Mithra, together with Sraosha and Rashn, will preside over the Day of Judgement. Finally, the importance of contract and promise is reflected in the standards for sound arbitration and fair adjudication: "And a judge who makes correct judgments and who does not take bribes, has been considered as revered as Ohrmazd and Amesha Spenta, and the judge who makes false judgment, is as low as Ahriman and Daevas."⁹⁶

Humility

One important *andarz* of Mihr Ohrmazd that is repeated in many Pahlavi texts defines humility and its significance: "Humility is he who considers

his inferior as his peer, and his peer as his superior, and his superior as a lord.”⁹⁷ In the *Dēnkard*, humility is praised in more poetic language:

People should make themselves not mountain tops, but cavities. For in the cavity all the rain that falls upon it is preserved, and that too which falls on the mountaintop comes to it (by) a slope; while the water that falls on the mountaintop does not stay there, and that which falls on other places does not come to it. The cavity is this: humility, friendship of good people.⁹⁸

Alternatively, the lack of humility is associated with one of the most despised qualities in Zoroastrianism: greed. As the *Dēnkard* teaches, “from greediness a man becomes armed and disobedient; from being armed and disobedient there comes about lack of humility; from lack of humility there comes about considering oneself as more, and another person as less (than he is).”⁹⁹ The *Dēnkard* continues in this vein as follows:

Understandably, a humble person should not blame and reproach other people:

There is more need for these three firm words than for the whole of the *Avesta* and Zand: one, [not] to reproach a sinner for his sins; one, not to praise a deceitful man for the sake of authority and wealth, and one, to seek the reward of good deeds from the spirits, not from the material world.¹⁰⁰

Since Ahriman is the creator of all evil, a sinner who is responsible for his own actions is nevertheless also a victim of Ahriman’s deceit.

No one should be an enemy and a wisher of evil to any person who commits a sin, one should be merciful of a sin which has been committed, and think thus, ‘it is indeed oppression when (that man) is deceived and misled in this manner by Ahriman.’¹⁰¹

De Fouchecour comments in his article on “Ethics” that “Persian moral behaviour was an art;”¹⁰² and although advice literature abounds in moralizing examples, “maxims are not judgments.”¹⁰³ As I noted above, early Zoroastrians walked the fine line between display and altruism whenever they chose to be charitable.

Social classes

Social classes were always narrowly defined in pre-Islamic Iran. In Chapter 1 I examined the theory of tripartition according to which the early Indo-Europeans divided “society into three classes: priests, warriors and herder-cultivators.”¹⁰⁴ The same held true in Iran throughout the pre-Islamic era.

In response to the question of what constitutes “the duties of the priests, the warriors and the cultivators,”¹⁰⁵ the *Mēnog i Khrad* gives a lengthy answer. It explains each profession’s duties and then immediately adds the duties of the artisans. The latter probably had been conflated with the cultivators in order to preserve the original tripartite social division. When Arda Wiraz travels to the other world, he meets the souls of the *Yasna* ceremony performers, followed by those who have memorized the scriptures, those who created the rituals, and those who conducted worship and who “were seated above the other souls.”¹⁰⁶ He then sees the souls of warriors, who sit together with kings; then “those who killed many noxious creatures in the world; [thereby increasing] the prosperity of the waters and sacred fires, and fires in general,”¹⁰⁷ and finally the souls of agriculturists, followed by those of artisans.

But there is no mention of a rigid social order in the Achaemenid period, in which movement from one profession to another is prohibited in both Achaemenid and Greek sources. “On the other hand,” notes A. Perikhanian, “there can have been no special social-estate administration, nor did this exist in the society reflected in the *Avesta*.”¹⁰⁸ We know that the strict social order (or estates) existed neither during the Seleucid nor the Arsacid periods. In Tansar’s letter, which was written in the (probably later) Sasanian era, this lack of social structure is frowned upon as a deviation from the good order, which the Sasanian Ardashir is said to restore:

When corruption became rife and men ceased to submit to Religion, Reason and State, and all sense of values disappeared, it was only through bloodshed that honour could be restored to such a realm ... [since] chastity and modesty and contentment, the observance of friendship, true judgment and the maintenance of blood ties, all depend upon freedom from greed.¹⁰⁹

Tansar goes on to explain why greed brings about this social evil, a chaotic stage in which servants wish to be served, followers wish to be followed, and friends become foes. “The populace, like demons set at large, abandoned their tasks and were scattered through the cities in theft and riot, roguery and evil pursuits.”¹¹⁰ Even slaves stop obeying their masters and wives attempt to command their husbands. In the Sasanian era, according to Tansar, the good order was restored; and by this time, four hereditary strict social estates had been established. “Assuredly there shall be no passing from one to another.”¹¹¹ But once again, Perikhanian reminds us, there is “no evidence that such a division existed in the first half of the Sasanian period.”¹¹²

Still, we know from the Pahlavi, Byzantine, Arab and Persian sources that this division of social estates existed in the subsequent period (from the fifth century CE onward).¹¹³ As times changed, the tripartite Iranian social and legal structures became much more complex. Like most ancient states,

Sasanian Iran was an agricultural society in which the majority of people lived in the countryside and cultivated the land. In order to run such a large territory, the Sasanians required an efficient central administration; and the Sasanians, like the Achaemenids, were great administrators. The many essential scribes formed an elite class that managed the business of the empire, from running the court and local offices to collecting taxes. Even so, the royal treasury was bolstered primarily by rural (rather than urban) levies, and the army depended upon rural recruits.¹¹⁴ Alongside agricultural production, many workshops and industrial manufacturers recruited workers among Roman war captives and other skilled deportees. Throughout Iran there existed as well the textile industry of Khuzistan, dyers, stonemasons, brick makers, blacksmiths and locksmiths. Bridges, dams and other works that comprised the sophisticated irrigation system known in New Persian as *qanat* were provided by the state.¹¹⁵

Therefore, although the later Sasanians recognized the existence of the four estates as the ideal form of social structure, the complexity and variety of the Iranian social scene in that period transcended this classification. Even Tansar himself, in describing the four estates, includes many substrata that do not seem appropriate. For example, Tansar's third estate, that of the scribes, is not monolithic: it comprises writers of official communications, accountants, recorders of verdicts, historians (writers of chronicles), physicians, poets and astronomers.¹¹⁶ A. Perikhanian succinctly describes the variety of Sasanian social classes as follows:

Besides the members of the king's family, the vassal rulers, courtiers and high officials of state, all of whom were persons of considerable wealth, there were the middle and petty service nobility (who received from the treasury, in payment for their service, both rations and allotments of land in hereditary conditional possession), a priesthood, urban middle strata made up of merchants and craftsmen, a mass of country people living in village communities, and also slaves. Finally, there was a quite numerous nomadic population, who still retained gentile-tribal forms of organization and a primitive patriarchal economy.¹¹⁷

In short, although the social scene at the end of the Sasanian era seems to have been varied and complex, it appears that the rigidity of class structure restricted movement between classes.

Fire

Fire and the ways to protect it occupy a good portion of Andarz literature. "To bring carrion to water and fire; ... [and] to extinguish the Victorious Fire"¹¹⁸ are *margarzan*, that is, very grave sins. I have noted above that fire was not the object of Zoroastrian worship, but rather its symbol; according

to the *Dēnkard*, Ahura Mazda created Fire, but it was the Kayanid Tahmuras who for the first time tended a fire to safeguard the world.¹¹⁹ Each profession had its own special fire and was enjoined to maintain and protect it from pollution. To extinguish or to defile fire, on the other hand, was a great sin, especially if it were a sacred fire. The *Shayist Ne-Shayist* stipulates that “whoever kills (extinguishes) a fire, should tend ten fires, and pay tribute ten times, and kill ten bugs, and give gifts to the Bahram fire.”¹²⁰ If the extinguisher or the polluter of the fire does not pay his penalty in this world, his punishment in the next will be much more severe. A few of the sins that are punishable in hell have to do with the disrespect of fire: e.g., “touching water or fire, ... pollution of water or fire by washing in standing, throwing impure matter into it, ... intentional extinction of fire in general, and that of the most sacred fire in particular.”¹²¹

While earth and water are also sacred in Zoroastrianism, fire has a greater symbolic significance; and it is associated not only with Ahura Mazda but with worldly kingdoms as well. According to Iranian tradition, each king would light a fire to last throughout his governing years, and the kindling of the fire would initiate his special era and calendar. In his letter, Tansar thus responds to the accusation that Ardashir had extinguished the fires of the Arsacid kings:

Know that the case is not so grievous, but has been wrongly reported to you. The truth is that after Darius each of the “kings of the people” built his own temple. This was pure innovation, introduced by them without the authority of kings of old. The king of kings has razed the temples; and confiscated the endowments; and has the fire carried back to the places of origin.¹²²

This is the reason that the Zoroastrian calendar begins not with Zoroaster’s birth or with Ahura Mazda’s creation, but with the first year of the Sasanian Yazdgird. Since he was the last legitimate Iranian king, the fire of Yazdgird is still burning.

Ahriman and his vicious creation in Andarz

In Andarz literature, Ahriman gives birth to all the demons through an act of sodomy.¹²³ According to the Zoroastrian dualistic world view, just as Ahriman is set in opposition to Ahura Mazda, Angra Mainyu (the Evil Spirit) is contrasted with Spenta Mainyu (the Good Spirit). The progenitor of all evil, Ahriman – with the aid of the other demonic creatures at his service – is therefore responsible for the existence of wickedness and all other sins in the world, but human beings are still responsible for their own choices. That the existence of demons is central to Zoroastrian thought is illustrated by the intense preoccupation with them in *Yasna* 12, the confession of faith also known as the *Fravarane*.¹²⁴

Human free will and admonitions against vice

If human choices help to determine the outcome of the cosmic fight between Good and Evil, they have universal consequence and significance. Andarz literature is filled with admonitions not to aid evil and demonic forces, as well as reminders that the personal choice to side with Ahura Mazda and the good deities has cosmic implications. Demons are visualized in different forms: as insects, as animals, as serpentine monsters and dragons, and particularly as deformed human bodies.¹²⁵ A. Emetan helpfully reminds us in this context that “notions like *Kheshm* [anger, wrath], *Khrad* [wisdom] and *Den* [religion] are always ambiguous in Zoroastrianism, and it may be true to say that both the subjective and the cosmic interpretations are in many cases valid.”¹²⁶ I have already mentioned some important virtues to be observed in Zoroastrianism, and below I shall examine a few of the Ahrimanic vices that a good Zoroastrian should avoid.

Greed

Az (Greed), one of the main devils or demons in Zoroastrianism, heads the list of Ahrimanic creations; and Zoroastrian eschatological myths contend that at the end of the time, Az first devours other demons such as *Kheshm* (Wrath) and is then itself defeated by Sraosha.¹²⁷ Even though Manichaeans seem to have been the most eager to identify greed as the source of all evil,¹²⁸ both Zoroastrian and Andarz literature contain ample warning against both the entity and the attribution of this demon. As I noted above, Zoroastrianism, unlike Manichaeism, does not encourage asceticism. Since Zoroastrians were advised to adhere to moderation in every aspect of life, texts such as the *Dēnkard* taught that “the fiercest of demons, Az, is best overcome by the simplest of food and drink ... and there is no suggestion that the enjoyment of ease and luxury is bad in itself, only the warning that excess of good things brings about greed.”¹²⁹ As in many societies, hard work and contentment (*Khursandi*) were considered by Zoroastrians to be the diametric opposite of greed. The *Dēnkard* offers a few anecdotal stories in which famous high *mowbeds* such as Adur-Ohrmazd, Wehdad, Adur-Narseh and Adur-Mihr are praised for doing manual work and for producing their own food.

One *andarz* that advises people to be on guard against greed appears in *Mēnog i Khrad*: “Don’t be inclined to Greed, so that the demon of Az would not be able to deceive you and make the worldly and tangible (*gētīg*) insipid to you, and the intangible and ephemeral (*mēnog*) spoiled.”¹³⁰ The *Dēnkard* further praises contentment in the following way:

They say [that] Khusraw of Immortal Soul said, ‘It is necessary that lords, rulers and men in high authority as well as other people should know each one of these three sayings and should carry them out without fail.

One is to know transience; one is humility; one is contentment. ... Through contentment, when misfortune befalls a man in such a manner that it is impossible to seek remedy, he is content with it willingly and does not produce twofold evil, (namely,) one, that which derives from the misfortune which has befallen him, and one, that which derives from discontent.¹³¹

Only in a single instance should one not show contentedness: i.e., “for those things from which there can be spiritual increase.”¹³² Bokht Afrid said “No one is richer than me, except the one who is more content.”¹³³

Anger

Kheshm, or wrath, is another important demon in Zoroastrianism; and like *Az*, it has both *gētīg* (tangible, of this world) and *mēnog* (intangible, of the other world) embodiments. As one *andarz* says,

Don't show wrath. Because when a man is angry he forgets to do good deeds, prayers, and incantations. And all sorts of sins and misdemeanors would enter his thoughts, and as long as *Xeshm* (wrath) is not subsided, he is an equal to Ahriman.¹³⁴

In another instance, it is said that Ahriman most frequently socializes with the wrathful.¹³⁵ Moreover, many of the *Andarz* sayings consider it a great virtue to control one's anger and wrath: “It has been said, ‘The digestion of food is best for the body and the digestion of wrath for the soul.’”¹³⁶ Holding on to a personal or to a family spite, or to vindictiveness, is also reprimanded time and again. “Spite remains after marriage, and at times lasts as long as eternity itself ... and even the Turks' and the Romans' hostility towards Iran started as a family feud”¹³⁷ Another Pahlavi work holds that three sins are the most unpardonable: “One to close your eyes on truth, the other to close your ear to truth, and the third is spite and an inability to forgive. ... The last sin is the heaviest of all and whoever commits it – until the Judgment Day – will remain in the possession of, and a family member to, Ahriman.”¹³⁸

The antithesis to *Kheshm* is pleasantness. According to one of the 22 counsels of Mihr Ohrmazd,

Pleasantness is he who does not offend anyone in his presence; if someone goes to strike him, then he meets him gently and pleasantly; he knows how to accommodate himself to all the creature of Ohrmazd, so that every person regards him thus, ‘[He is] very pleasant with me.’¹³⁹

Guftar i nēk (good speech) and *Kirdar i nēk* (good conduct) are therefore the two antidotes to wrath. Good speech is described in detail in Pahlavi and *Andarz* literature: “Self adulation, boasting, cursing, swearing oaths,

belittling others, contradicting oneself in speech, idle chatter, criticizing people in their absence, [and] threatening and menacing talk, should all be avoided." One should be more eager to listen than to talk; one should speak "sedately and eloquently;" and "docked-tailed" or "long-tailed" speeches should be avoided. One should not ridicule other lands or names, lest somebody from that land or with that name might be present: "Joking and teasing should be avoided unless mild and inoffensive."¹⁴⁰

Laziness

Bushyansta, the demon of laziness, sloth or procrastination in the Younger *Avesta*, is depicted as a "long-armed" female being.¹⁴¹ Laziness is one of the major sins in the Book of Arda Wiraz; in one chapter, for example, Arda Wiraz sees a man in hell whose whole body, except for his right foot, is being gnawed by a noxious creature. Arda Wiraz is told, "This is the soul of the lazy Davanos who, when he was in the world, never did any good work; but with his right foot, a bundle of grass was cast before a ploughing ox."¹⁴² It is also said that a lazy man is the most undeserving sort of person and that Ahura Mazda has not created grain for the lazy, as in the *Mēnog i Khrad*: "the lazy should not be given alms, and should not be invited and fed as guests."¹⁴³ Although even hard work might not bring about what is not destined in this world, it definitely is rewarded in the next.¹⁴⁴ Too much sleep is considered laziness also: "Do not sleep more than is needed, so that you can do the good things you are supposed to do."¹⁴⁵

Envy

Areshk, or *Araska* in the Younger *Avesta*, is "Envy," another of the "demons embodying and causing moral imperfection"¹⁴⁶ in the world. This demon is also mentioned alongside jealousy in Pahlavi literature and in Andarz literature. Although the demon is mentioned only once in the *Bundahishn*, and once in passing in the *Arda Wiraz Namag*, it is adduced often in the *Dēnkard*, along with other demons: "this possession of virtue is best; one who makes battle against the non-material demons, whatever they may be, and in particular does not let these five demons into his body, greed, envy, lust, wrath and shame."¹⁴⁷ The *Dēnkard* also recommends taking pleasure in other people's achievements:

One should regard the good things of the good as one's own and rejoice in them, for people always suspect him of envy and hostility to the good who does not regard the good things of the good as his own and does not rejoice in them.¹⁴⁸

Moreover, "one should not act in vehemence and jealousy, for he is regarded as irascible in the world, and by himself he is lonely."¹⁴⁹ The *Mēnog i Khrad*

also warns against this demon: "Don't be a person with ugly envy, so that your life will be joyless."¹⁵⁰

False witness

Spazga in the Younger *Avesta*, or *spazg* in *Pahlavi* literature, is admonished time and again as the demon of slander and of gossip. The *Arda Wiraz Namag* thrice identifies slander as the cause of much suffering in hell:

I also saw the soul of a man whose tongue hung on the outside of his jaw, and was ever gnawed by noxious creatures. And I asked thus, 'what sin was committed by this body, whose soul suffers such a punishment?' Srosh the pious, and Atar the angel, said thus: 'this is the soul of that man who, in the world, committed slander, and embroiled people one with the other, and his soul, in the end, fled to hell.'¹⁵¹

Gossip was associated with women; one *andarz* says, "One should not tell a secret to gossips and women, for the secret will become public, and the man will come to regret it who tells a secret to gossips and women."¹⁵²

False accusation is considered to be among the worst sins. "False accusation is worse than sorcery ... and in hell every demon moves forward except for the demon of false accusation who, because of its great sins, moves backwards."¹⁵³ In one *andarz* it is said, "One should not speak scoffingly or backbitingly of any person, for that man is suspected of misanthropy, and he himself seeks an enemy against himself, who speaks scoffingly or backbitingly against any person."¹⁵⁴

The injunction "not to reproach a sinner" is emphasized quite a few times in Book VI of the *Dēnkard*:

They held this too. No one should be an enemy and a wisher of evil to any person who commits a sin, one should be merciful of a sin which has been committed and think thus, 'it is indeed oppression when (that man) is deceived and misled in this manner by Ahriman.'¹⁵⁵

Another *andarz* advises the reader "to be hard on oneself and beneficent to another person; to keep one's faults outside and one's advantages inside; [and] to see the fault of oneself and the advantage of the other person."¹⁵⁶ One of the twenty-two counsels of Mihr Ohrmazd is the following: "Benevolence is he who considers the faults and virtues of other people only after he strives to correct his own faults ..., not aggressively but lovingly."¹⁵⁷ But self-criticism does not extend to taking stupid people into one's confidence:

One should not tell a foolish and self-loving man the faults which he has, for (that man) does not discipline (these) faults, and he incites an

enemy (against himself) who tells a foolish and self-loving man of his faults.¹⁵⁸

On the other hand, heeding good advice is a sign of maturity and good religion:

Confession of faith is one who makes a friend of good character, who is pure and a good man, a master over himself, and says (to him): 'tell me the faults that you know, so that I may correct them.' When that man speaks to him, he listens and obeys.¹⁵⁹

But as much as good counsel is encouraged, still the responsibility of making a decision remains with the individual decision-maker; and to blame another for one's own mistakes or for giving bad advice is equally discouraged. Likewise, Zoroastrians were enjoined not to admonish those who ignored good advice and who suffered as a consequence.¹⁶⁰ *Drug* (lie, deceit) is the counter to *Asha* (truth) in the *Gathas*, but in the Younger *Avesta* the same term appears in the plural, i.e., *Drugs* (disorder, harmfulness or destructiveness), and is opposed to *Asha/Rta* (order, harmony).¹⁶¹ In Pahlavi literature and *Andarz* texts, however, *Drug* is abhorred in all those senses, and especially in the original one. Both self-deceit and the deceit of others are religious and moral stigmas. According to one *andarz*, "the reason why the gods are eternal is that they benefit each other, and the reason why the demons will be destroyed is that they deceive each other."¹⁶² Indeed, deceit is paired with heresy. "There are three kinds of heretics: a deceiver, a deceived one, and a self lover."¹⁶³ Not lying to oneself is considered a greater virtue than not lying to others: "'character' [describes] one who does not deceive anyone. 'Wisdom' is one who does not deceive himself. 'Religion' is one who does that which he knows to be a good deed."¹⁶⁴

Even though the Zoroastrians believed that "the best thing is truthfulness, [and that] the worst thing is a lie,"¹⁶⁵ their morality was not black and white. It acknowledged the relativity of different circumstances: "There is a man who speaks the truth and who becomes wicked by that; and there is a man who tells a lie and becomes righteous by it."¹⁶⁶ Still, false testimony, false teaching and repudiation can be considered *margarzan*.¹⁶⁷ When Zoroaster asks Ahura Mazda what is the best virtue for humankind, the latter answers: "Truthful speech (is) best, because in truthful speech [there is] good repute in the world and good life and salvation in Paradise."¹⁶⁸ Even one's family and progeny will benefit from one's truthfulness. When one man deceives another, the act reflects very badly upon its subject, but it sheds an unfavourable light on its object as well: "This is character: a man who by himself does not tell a lie to anyone. This is wisdom: a man to whom no one can tell a lie."¹⁶⁹

Joy and sadness

Sadness and distress are to be resisted and fought, according to Zoroastrian moral convention; for unlike the joyous body, which is the dwelling of Wahman, a sad body could become the abode of demons, and especially of Akoman, an auxiliary of Angra Mainyu.

It is necessary to keep one's body in joy ... for a man whose body is in joy, Wahman dwells in his body and when Wahman dwells in the body it is difficult to commit sins. It is necessary much to beware of distress, because when a man lets distress penetrate his body, Akoman penetrates it, and when Akoman penetrates it, it is difficult to perform righteous actions.¹⁷⁰

Sorrow, lamentation and complaint are discouraged strongly in Zoroastrianism, which M. Boyce has memorably described as "a faith which enjoins on man the pleasant duty of being happy"¹⁷¹ rather than the unpleasant duties of asceticism and fasting. Sadness and hunger are creations of Ahriman, and so those people who fast and who cry excessively are said to assist Ahriman's fight against the "Good Creation." "Don't be sorrowful," exhorts the *Mēnog i Khrad*, "because being sad destroys the blessings of *gētīg* (tangible), and *mēnog* (intangible) worlds, and diminishes body and soul."¹⁷²

At one point during his travels to paradise and to hell, Arda Wiraz comes to a "great river which was gloomy as dreadful hell; on which river were many souls and guardian angels; and some of them were not able to cross, and some crossed only with great difficulty, and some crossed easily."¹⁷³ He asks Sraosha, "What river is this?" and receives the following reply: "This river is the many tears which men shed from the eyes, as they make lamentation and weeping for the departed ..., and those who are not able to cross, are those for whom, after their departure, much lamentation and weeping were made."¹⁷⁴ Thus, a good Zoroastrian facilitates the departure of his beloved by praying to gods in a fire temple, and by cooking and by inviting gods and people to a feast in celebration of the crossing of the soul over the Chinvat bridge. When the wise one asks the *Mēnog i Khrad* which is the least happy among the lands, the latter counts ten of those qualities that make a land tormented; one of these lands is described as one "in which its people cry and wail."¹⁷⁵ Needless to say, human beings should not seek joy if it results in pain. "The happiness which is followed by great bitterness, is not considered happiness at all."¹⁷⁶

Human relationships to animals and plants

As I noted above, in the *Avesta* and in Zoroastrian mythology, animal and plant life are said to originate with the death of the Primal Bull; and this beast was created, along with the Primal Human, by Ahura Mazda. Animals are

divided into five categories, all of which are presented as subspecies of the bull.¹⁷⁷ The pasturing of cattle was foremost in the economic life of Iranian society, and Zoroastrians therefore considered it a grave sin to mistreat cattle. Arda Wiraz tells the story of a man in the next world “whose limbs they ever break and separate, one from the other;” and when he asks why, he is told, “This is the soul of that wicked man who made unlawfully much slaughter of cattle and sheep and other quadrupeds.”¹⁷⁸ Arda Wiraz also relates the horror of the punishment of those who muzzled the mouths of beasts and ploughing cattle, denying them water and food, and of those who “had beasts in the world, and appointed them hard work, and made the burden unlawfully heavy, ... and when sores ensued, they were not kept back from work.”¹⁷⁹

It was a grave sin to kill some animals, such as horses or dogs. Ahura was credited with creating the animals that had little shoes (i.e., hooves), while Ahriman was said to have created the animals that had claws.¹⁸⁰ I have already mentioned the significance of the horse to the Indo-European people in general, and to Iranians in particular. Horses are praised in the Avesta and in other Iranian sources. In his inscription in Susa, Darius I boasts of his good fortune, for “great is Ahura Mazda. ... [He] made Darius king, he bestowed upon him the kingdom, possessed of good chariots, good horses, good men;”¹⁸¹ I noted in Chapter 1 that this tripartite blessing echoes the three-fold Zoroastrian ideal of “good thoughts, good words and good deeds.”

Other animals revered by the Zoroastrians typically included those animals that were useful for agriculture, for shepherding and for animal husbandry; but some were considered sacrosanct for mythological reasons. According to M. Schwartz, Zoroastrians believed that

the soul of a dead dog passed into ‘the spring of the waters’ and ... from every thousand male dogs and thousand female dogs are born a pair of ‘water otters,’ a male and a female. The death of an otter was thought to bring drought.¹⁸²

Some of these animals were so respected that they were believed to have purifying effects (*nasush* ran) that could counteract the effect of *khrafstars* (noxious animals). Dogs, hedgehogs, weasels, foxes, otters, beavers, starlings, black crows, ravens and vultures were among these animals that could purge *nasush*, the demon of decay and pollution, which invades the dead body at the time of dying. For this reason, it was considered a grave sin to neglect, to beat or to kill a dog. To kill or to mistreat an otter was many times worse. Once again Arda Wiraz relates to us the story of a woman and a man who were fed excrement in the next world: “These are the souls of that wicked man and woman, who, in the world, devoured dead refuse through sinfulness, and killed the water-otter in the water, and smote and slew other creatures of Ahuramazd.”¹⁸³

Some animals created by Ahura could legitimately be killed, on the other hand; but their parts were to be distributed according to the Zoroastrian law, and their meat was to be prepared and eaten after proper prayers and rituals. I mentioned above that some animals were considered responsible for their actions, and therefore one should avoid consuming any meat that might be contaminated by the sins of the slaughtered animal. Interestingly, this seems to have been a two-way street: in the *Avesta*, animals complain to Ahura Mazda regarding their ill-treatment at the hands of wicked men.¹⁸⁴

Intoxication

Zoroastrianism permitted the intoxication and drinking of wine. I described above the role of *haoma*, an intoxicating plant and drink, in religious mythology and in its rites of worship. Arda Wiraz himself makes his trip after he is fed three cups filled with a narcotic called *mang*. Wine is also praised in Pahlavi texts, as in the following *andarz*:

People have three things that are very good. These are drinking *haoma*, drinking wine and wearing the sacred girdle. Drinking *haoma* is this: when a man stands by mind. Drinking wine is this: when he stands by peace. Wearing the sacred girdle is this: when he sets himself apart from the wicked.¹⁸⁵

Wine is credited with

helping to digest food; to increase the fire (energy) of the body; to increase intelligence, memory, blood and semen in the body; to decrease pain and suffering; to improve the color of the cheeks; to bring the forgotten back to memory; to put good thought in one's mind; to increase the powers of sight, hearing, and speech; to facilitate sleeping and getting up lightly; and to increase good fame and spirituality; and it is praised by good people.¹⁸⁶

But for the person who drinks too much, wine might have exactly the opposite effect, for example, a diminished quality of semen, eyesight and so forth.

As in so many other subjects, moderation is essential in the drinking of wine. When the wise one asks Mēnōg ī Khrad about the worst and the best of foods and drinks, the latter identifies dates and grapes as the best fruit, and he mentions their wines as well, praising wine as a test of character:

When a good natured man drinks wine, he is like a gold or silver bowl, who would shine and luster by polish, and become better in thought, speech and deed, and nicer and sweeter and friendlier to

his wife, children and friends. ... And when a bad natured man drinks wine, he will be more arrogant, and fight with his friends and sneer at them, and humiliate good people and torment his wife, children, servants and slaves, and will disturb good people's parties, and will replace *ashti* (amicability) with *qahr* (rancour).¹⁸⁷

One *andarz* in the *Dēnkard* phrases a similar sentiment in the following way:

A man who drinks wine, and of whom these five things become manifest, this is the mark of his righteousness: humility, kindliness, love of people, generosity and peacefulness. But a man in whom these five things become manifest, this is the mark of his wickedness: arrogance, lack of peace, hostility to people, irascibility and avarice.¹⁸⁸

Although *Andarz* texts are uniform insofar as they are authentic and are clearly applicable, they are not of an absolutist character; rather, they often reflect a relativistic attitude consistent with the complexity of a multicultural, multilinguistic, multicentred civilization. To demonstrate my point I cite a few *andarz* below:

It ought to be known that ugliness and beauty are primarily not in the selfness but in the effect of seemingness, belief and habit of the person. There are many ugly children who in the thought of their parents are exceedingly beautiful, and many of beautiful shape who, in the thought of strangers are exceedingly ugly.¹⁸⁹

The following passage demonstrates the delicacy of the logic:

People are of four kinds: two should be tested and two need not be tested. The two kinds which should be tested are: one, a man who, being with the good, is good, and one who, being with the wicked, is wicked. For it is possible and it occurs that the man who has been with the good will become wicked when he associates with wicked people, and the one who has been with the wicked will become good when he associates with good people. The two kinds which need not be tested are; one, a man who has been with good people and is still bad; and one, a man who has been with wicked people and is still good.¹⁹⁰

Different *Andarz* texts frequently advise readers not to obey a ruler who gives bad and wicked orders.

Unlike some religious people of today, Zoroastrians did not believe that paradise was reserved only for them. In the Pahlavi *Book of Arda Wiraz*, "there are only four heavens mentioned, the first three being the abode of those good and pious souls who had not professed the Zoroastrian religion, whereas the fourth, the *Garodman*, is reserved for the Zoroastrians."¹⁹¹

According to the same text, most sins, such as cheating and breaking one's promise, were equally grave, whether they were committed against Zoroastrians or against others.

Conclusion: Andarz on other faiths

One *andarz* in the *Dēnkard* says that to believe in other religions does not make a person evil: "A Jew is not wicked merely on account of his Jewish faith, and followers of other bad religions are (likewise) not wicked merely on account of their bad religion."¹⁹² This is not to say that no Zoroastrian king or subject ever engaged in the act of persecuting other religions; but persecutions always had a political reason and nature. In *Mēnōg ī Khrad*, Gashtasp is praised for setting fire to Jerusalem and dispersing the Jews.¹⁹³ This incident, however, is not historically corroborated, and the account is probably inaccurate. As I argued above, Zoroastrianism was a local religion, not a universal one, and thus it was not proselytizing.

Although Zoroastrians did not believe in forcing their faith on others, still they considered their faith, their prophet, their land and their people to be the best. In this respect, they were just like many people of other faiths. Their pride is clearly expressed in the following passages from the Letter of Tansar:

This land which is called Persia, ... from the river Balkh up to the furthestmost borders of the land of Azarbaigan and of Persarmenia, and from the Euphrates and the land of the Arabs up to Omran and Makran and thence to Kabul and Tokharistan, ... is the chosen stretch of earth, and bears to other lands the relation of head, and navel, hump and belly.¹⁹⁴

Our people are the most noble and illustrious of beings. The horsemanship of the Turk, the intellect of India, and the craftsmanship and art of Greece, God ... has bestowed our people with all these, more richly than they are found in the other nations separately. ... And He made our appearance and our colouring and our hair according to a just mean, without the blackness prevailing or yellowness or ruddiness; and the hair of our beards and heads neither too curly like the negro's, nor quite straight like the Turk's.¹⁹⁵

Of course, like all ancient nationalism, this praise of motherland had both mythological and moral rationales:

And it is obvious that Ahura Mazda created Iran Vej to be better than other places and countries, and the good thing about it is that its people live for 300 years, and the cattle 150, and pain and suffering is very little, and they don't lie, and they don't wail and moan, and the demon Az, is less prevalent there.¹⁹⁶

Or, as another Pahlavi text puts it, more logically:

Iran has always praised the measure and criticized excess and deficiency. In Byzantium the philosophers have been mostly praised, in India the knowers, in other places the cognizant have been mostly praised, those from whom skill of speech is manifest. The Kingdom of Iran has approved of people with insight.¹⁹⁷

Just as Darius I claimed to belong to Ahura Mazda in an inscription at Susa – “Ahura Mazda is mine, I am Ahura Mazda’s”¹⁹⁸ – so Zoroastrianism and Iran belonged to each other in a way that was never to be repeated in Iranian history. Although Iranians made Islam their own, adhering first to the Sunni and later to the Shi’ite branches of Islam, their Zoroastrian past informs them to this day.

5 Iranian persistence in the Islamic era

This chapter will consider the Iranian response to the advent of Islam. Most Zoroastrians lost their traditional religion at that time, and some Iranians resisted their conquerors through armed struggle; but we shall see that many Iranian converts to Islam chose to claim their pre-Islamic heritage and to revive their culture and language. Indeed, Muslim Iranians played a significant role in shaping Islamic civilization and administration on the model of pre-Islamic Iranian dynasties. Ultimately, this chapter will document the multiple ways in which Iranians managed to preserve their national culture.

Academics frequently pinpoint the Battle of Qadisiyyah as a significant break in Iranian history, as though it divides accounts of the Persian past as neatly as a honed knife halves a melon. The *Shahnamah* of Firdausi, which begins with the mythical Iranian past, ends with the defeat of the Sasanians at the hands of the Arabs, suggesting that this downfall somehow marks the end of all Iranian history. Another negative account of this battle is expressed by the *Bundahishn*, which claims that it heralds the triumph of Bad Religion and Bad Intention over Good Religion and Good Intention. Alternatively, Islamic history celebrates the Iranian defeat as a glorious victory of true believers over infidels; in recent times this perspective seems once again to have animated the reaction of the Islamic Revolution against the Iranian nationalism of the Pahlavi dynasty. To this day, Iranians have been known to endorse both viewpoints and others in between. My own view is that while the Battle of Qadisiyyah was indeed a significant moment in Iranian history, it did not bring about a complete break with the past.

The fact that Iranians of the Sasanian era were predominantly Zoroastrian is attested in both local and foreign sources in a variety of contemporary languages.¹ But between the seventh and thirteenth centuries CE, political and social pressures resulted in the ascendancy of Iranian Muslims at the expense of Zoroastrians. As J.K. Choksy argues,

This societal change was clearly the result of a binary relationship through which the Arab Muslim colonizers and Iranians who allied themselves politically, religiously, and culturally with the colonizers

proved capable of dominating other Iranians, chiefly some Zoroastrians, who chose not to affiliate themselves with the emergent ruling class.²

While it is true that, due to the Arab conquest, Iranians gradually lost their predominant religion, C. Cahen reminds us that “their conquest does not appear to have resulted in any major disturbance of the distribution of the Iranian peoples. Iran therefore has always been populated predominantly by Persians in the strict sense.”³ Since a mass colonization of Iran was never attempted by the Arabs, ethnic Persians thus were able to maintain their language and culture to a large extent.

If this is the case, why do historians distinguish so sharply between the two eras before and after the advent of Islam? One reason for the existence of this stark dichotomy in Persian studies and in Iranian historiography lies in the difficulty of studying the history of Iran as a single unit. Divisions are therefore made for practical reasons, and boundaries are often drawn according to linguistic changes. As Cahen notes,

the spoken and written language [of Iran] changed several times over the years, with the practical consequence for modern learning that few scholars are able to study the history of the country continuously from one linguistic period to the others; there are few experts who have a good knowledge of both pre-Islamic and Islamic Iran.⁴

Another rationale for the abrupt division in Iranian history lies in the very nature of Islam as a religion that permeates culture with its detailed precepts for human behaviour and correct action. As with Zoroastrianism, but unlike Christianity, Islam has many practical teachings. When they converted to Islam, Iranians changed much more than just their religion: they also had to adopt “new manners, customs and laws and assum[e] a new way of life ... [since] Islam legislates for every detail of life,”⁵ in the words of A. Zarrinkub. The incoming religion also established Arabic as the new *lingua franca*, and Arabic script replaced the Pahlavi alphabet. Once Islam and the Arabic language were in place, there was little likelihood of any reversion to older standards, due to the fact that there is no acceptable rejection of Islam by its adherents: the conversion of an established Muslim to another religion is punishable by death.

In my study of the continuity and disruption of Iranian identity I have relied to a great extent upon the research of M. Muhammadi and others;⁶ but these authors explore both disruption and continuity, whereas my focus here is only upon the latter. It seems to me that the Islamic invasion constituted an obvious breach with the past because it induced Iranians to relinquish their age-old Zoroastrian religion. That such a momentous event would cause a disruption in the nature of Iranian identity can hardly be repudiated. The arguments put forward by Muhammadi et al. thus seem to

hinge on whether the continuity of such a broken identity was perceptible or not. The following chapter will therefore focus on how Iranians preserved a specific Iranian identity in the face of the Islamic conquest and the influences of Arab culture. As R. Frye states:

The concept of a land of Iran continued through the Arab conquests down to the sixteenth century where the national state of the Safavids upheld by the Shiite state religion re-created, in many aspects, the Sasanian state of pre-Islamic Iran. The continuity of ancient Iranian traditions down to the present is impressive. For example, the main day of celebration of the Persians today is not an Islamic holiday, but rather the ancient *Noruz*.⁷

How the Iranians converted to Islam, and pertinent scholarly theories

I noted in Chapter 3 that the last eight kings of the Sasanian dynasty reigned within a period of fewer than five years. By this time, the once-great heir to the Persian Empire had been exhausted by internal strife, by conflict with Byzantium, and by an epidemic of bubonic plague. As a result, the Sasanians lost the Battle of Qadisiyyah after Rostam Farrukhzad, the head of the Persian forces, was killed in 636 CE; it was then just a matter of time before Iranians lost the overall war with the Arabs and consequently their entire empire.⁸ In the same year, the Muslim army under Sa'd Ibn abi Waqqas laid siege to Ctesiphon on the Tigris and captured it after a substantial campaign. The wealth of this Sasanian capital astonished the invading Bedouin soldiers, who carried away a great deal of booty. In the wake of the Arab victory, Yazdgird, the last Sasanian king, fled eastwards; and in 642 CE the Arab Muslims defeated Iran at Nihavand, an event to which Arab historians refer as the *Victory of Victories*.⁹ The Sasanian dynasty officially ended a decade later, when Yazdgird finally was slain by a miller in Merv.

Regardless of whether the defeated Iranians converted to Islam after the Arab conquest, their lot was not much improved. As tradition dictated, one-fifth of all booty was issued first to the caliph, while the rest was divided up among the soldiers. According to A. Zarrinkub, captives would be distributed among the Muslim warriors as slaves:

The condition of these slaves especially in Iraq and the Hijaz was not at all pleasant, although the majority of them by becoming Muslim gained their freedom. It was a qualified freedom, for they became *mawali* (clients) of the Arabs, freed slaves but still dependants who, as second class citizens, could be exposed to ill-treatment and contumely of the Arab Muslims.¹⁰

Even those Iranians who did not belong to an Arab master or household lived on the fringe of society and found that they must submit to one of the Muslim victors for protection, regardless of their social status.¹¹ The Iranian *mawali*, who were generally better educated than their Arab masters, played an important role in early Islamic administration.¹²

Since historical accounts of these conquests were written either by Arabs or by Persian converts to Islam, little objective textual evidence exists regarding the atrocities and excesses of the Arab victors. According to C. Cahen, "the history of the Sasanian period is often presented with Islamic bias. ... The same is true of the accounts which they give of the period of the conquests."¹³ M. Muhammadi suggests that Arabs had not yet cultivated a respect for art and knowledge by the time of their early conquests, and thus they chose to destroy buildings, to burn books and to decimate artwork. According to this view, the Arabs eventually regretted their tactics, and revised or simply eliminated those chapters in their chronicles that revealed their original outlook and behaviour.¹⁴

Muhammadi quotes the author of *Kashfal-Zunun*, Haji Khalifa, who wrote of Caliph Omar's order that Abi Waqqas should destroy all Persian books either by burning them or by washing them in water. This particular incident is mentioned as well by Ibn Khaldun.¹⁵ Biruni further describes Qutaibah Ibn Muslim's aggressions against the Khwarazmian people and in particular his massacre of Zoroastrian priests and destruction of Persian books:

Ever since this incident [i.e., the invasion], the people of Khwarazm were overtaken by ignorance; and whatever they now know about religion and science, was learned by heart and was preserved orally. ... He [Qutaibah] killed anyone who could write in Khwarazmian, and ... therefore their history was obscured and there is no hope of retrieving it after the advent of Islam.¹⁶

Like Persian, Khwarazmian came to be written in Arabic script, as in the theological work *Qunyat al-Munya*. Al-Zamakhshari wrote the *Muqaddimat al-Adab*, for example, as an Arabic-Khwarazmian dictionary to aid converts in learning Arabic.¹⁷

The conversion of the entire Iranian territory to Islam was not an overnight occurrence, however. Initially most Iranians opted to pay a special tax, known as the *jizya*, imposed on non-Arabs only, because the Umayyads distinguished between Arabs and non-Arabs rather than between Arab Muslims and Muslim converts. According to R. Lim, "the Umayyad caliphs, who combined religious and political authority, had no reason to desire mass conversion because it could result in a loss of revenue; taxes raised from conquered populations served as the financial basis of the state."¹⁸ The situation changed drastically when the caliphate passed from the Umayyads to the 'Abbasids, who had a keen interest in Islamic

theology and who treated non-Arab converts more favourably than they did non-Muslim populations (*dhimmi*). Thus the 'Abbasids created a major incentive for Iranian conversion to Islam, particularly in urban areas where those who practised Zoroastrianism were more conspicuous. In rural and mountainous areas, on the other hand, resistance to Islam carried on for centuries; the old Sasanian state religion of Zoroastrianism remained strong in the more inaccessible regions of Persia such as Fars, Azerbaijan and Khorasan, where the geographers of the fourth century AH/tenth century CE mention contemporary fire temples, and it was in the third and fourth centuries AH that the Zoroastrian communities produced a final burst of intellectual activity.¹⁹

In an effort to define the conversion of Iran to Islam, modern historians frequently subscribe to a view that may have been initiated by T.W. Arnold's 1896 book *The Preaching of Islam*, which proposes that the Persians converted to Islam as a result of an overall dissatisfaction with Zoroastrianism. Arnold appears to perceive the latter religion as an oppressive extension of the Sasanian state, concluding that

it is surely impossible to attribute the decay of Zoroastrianism to violent conversions made by the Muslim conquerors. The number of Persians who embraced Islam in the early days of the Arab rule was probably very large ... but conversions in the course of successive centuries render it probable that the acceptance of Islam was both peaceful and voluntary.²⁰

Respected scholars such as A. Zarrinkub and A. Bausani have reiterated this analysis,²¹ although the latter contradicts himself by enumerating the ways in which Arabs coerced the local population.²² Following Arnold, S.H. Nasr argues that "the conquerors introduced a religion, as well as a language which was its most obvious vehicle, but they did not force them upon the country."²³ P. Chelkowski concurs, saying that "with the advent of Islam in the seventh century, the Persians progressively began to abandon their ancient religion, which was in decline, and to accept Islam,"²⁴ as though the choice between Islam and Zoroastrianism had been offered to the Persians on a silver platter.

Myths regarding the fall of Zoroastrianism

It may be argued that when one people is invaded by another, is defeated on numerous battlefields over an extended period and is subjected to decades of extermination, discrimination, humiliation and heavy taxation, the subjugated eventually will become receptive to the victors' religious ideology. It would not be far-fetched to conclude that coercion directed towards a people under lengthy duress – that is, "heavy taxation and the whip"²⁵ in the words of D. Khaleghi-Motlagh – is bound to

deliver the desired outcome. Khaleghi-Motlagh is not alone in his opinion; M. Muhammadi, C.E. Bosworth and G. Gnoli all seem inclined to agree with J. Duchesne-Guillemin that “conversions were doubtless more often effected by violence than our Muslim sources are prepared to admit.”²⁶

Yet another misconception of the Arab conquest of Iran holds that, whereas the Achaemenid and Parthian dynasties demonstrated religious tolerance and leniency, the Sasanians did not. This notion was refuted in Chapter 3 in the context of Iranian religion. According to the Arab point of view, the *mowbed* Kerdir was the architect of the Sasanian state religion; but, as I noted above, Kerdir was influential for only two decades or so at the beginning of the Sasanian period. G. Gnoli, citing P. Gignoux, corrects this myth in his book *The Idea of Iran*:

the political and religious power of the Eranshahr [i.e., the Sasanian Empire] was never a monolithic and unchanging interlocutor for the other religious faiths; the court, in particular, often assumed different positions from the hierarchy of the *Mowbeds*[...] To tell the truth, episodes of conflict, even quite hostile ones, between Church and State are certainly not lacking in the Sasanian period.²⁷

After adducing many instances of differences between court and state, Gnoli concludes that the Zoroastrian faith did not in fact hold much sway over the king or when it came to worldly matters. Gnoli attributes the origin of this myth to the theory of government expressed in the *Letter of Tansar* and in the *Testament of Ardashir*, both of which texts were written in the Islamic period and reflect, at best, the mentality of the late Sasanian period. He also argues that the canonization of the *Avesta* most likely occurred in response to the challenges presented by faiths such as Judaism, Christianity, and sects such as Manichaeism, whose traditions were accompanied by and encoded in scripture.²⁸ R. Lim likewise refutes the notion of a monolithic Sasanian intolerance:

Kings of kings, from Yazdgird (339–420) onward, normally acknowledged the Christians’ right to exist, supporting their synods and confirming the bishop of the Seleucia-Ctesiphon as their *Katholikos* and spokesman. The later success of Nestorians in converting Iranians away from Zoroastrianism and their ill-advised destruction of fire temples provoked repressive measures. Periodically persecuted, Nestorians and Monophysite communities, as sizable subject minorities like the established Jewish population in Mesopotamia, nonetheless found in the Sasanians reasonably tolerant masters.²⁹

Sasanians, then, appear to have upheld rather than rejected the relatively ecumenical policies of their predecessors the Achaemenids and the Parthians.

It has also been argued that Zoroastrianism is the religion of agricultural labourers and peasants and is therefore a rural religion, while Islam is a more urban (and thus urbane) religion of artisans. This hypothesis, promulgated for example by T.W. Arnold, holds that Zoroastrian craftsmen preferred Islam to their own religion because of the Zoroastrian prohibition against the pollution of fire or water.³⁰ The actual artifacts of the era, however, prove that Zoroastrian doctrine did not interfere with the Sasanian production of exquisite metalwork and weaponry, ceramics, ivories, gems and jewellery whose production required the use of fire and water. Sasanian masons and architects also created some of the most beautiful monuments and engravings in all of Iran. Sasanian literary evidence records two words for blacksmiths: *ahanpaykar*, for the person who moulded and cast iron, and *polawad-paykar*, for the person who worked with steel; according to V.C. Pigott, such a distinction suggests that smiths were relatively sophisticated and specialized in their work. Although the production of steel required special advanced techniques, it appears frequently in Partho-Sasanian times.³¹ The archaeological remains, therefore, dispute Arnold's theory that Sasanian anti-industrial attitudes and rurality paved the way for the Islamic conquest.

Having examined and refuted a number of theories that advocate a fairly harmonious Iranian conversion to Islam from Zoroastrianism, I would conclude that the Iranian Zoroastrians would not have deserted their religion in large numbers because of a few theological problems. On the contrary, like the adherents to other religions that tend to reform themselves and to change with new conditions, Iranian Zoroastrians might have evolved in much the same way as did the Parsees of India, who have proved to be much more urbanized than their Muslim brethren in Iran. Indeed, Iranians had no need to look to their Arab conquerors for a model of urbanization, because the nomad Arabs were much less urban than the Persians. "It must be admitted," writes P. Chelkowski, "that the process of urbanization, which in places dated back to the distant past, was accelerated and intensified by the Sasanians."³²

That Zoroastrianism was willingly disavowed by the majority of the Iranian population seems unlikely. Chelkowski points instead to a more convincing explanation: "the Arabs quickly established themselves as masters uniting all conquered countries by giving them a universal religion, Islam, and an official language, Arabic."³³ S. Shafa blames the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad for Islamic expansionism: whereas the prophet may have intended that Islam should be a local religion, later Arab armies declared it to be a universal one that could be disseminated by forceful proselytizing.³⁴ It was not the tension between urban and rural that won Iran over to Islam; it was rather the universal quality of Islam, I think, as opposed to the local character of Zoroastrianism, that carried the day. A more thorough discussion of local versus universal religions may be found above in Chapter 3.

Continuity and linguistic change

While it is true that in the first two centuries following the Islamic conquest Iranian intellectuals adopted Arabic as a *lingua franca*, most Iranians did not strive to learn Arabic. The Persian language persisted and was also adopted by the Arab settlers. V. Danner observes that

the conquerors of Iran soon succumbed not only to the culture of the land but also its speech. They were, after all, but a small minority in a land the culture of which was still intact. ... They passed on to the Persians the new Semitic religion they had brought with the conquest and were in turn the recipients of Persian culture.³⁵

At the time of the Sasanian defeat, many languages and dialects were spoken in Iran; and although they were mostly Iranian languages, such as Middle Persian (Parsi) and New Persian (Dari), there were some non-Iranian languages, such as Aramaic and Greek, in use as well.³⁶ During the first two Islamic centuries Dari replaced Middle Persian, and the Pahlavi script was gradually replaced with the Arabic alphabet. Phonetically and grammatically, according to G. Lazard, the

degree of evolution from Old Persian to Middle Persian is considerable, the differences being comparable with the differences between Latin and French for example. On the other hand New Persian remains in many respects quite close to Middle Persian.³⁷

Grammatical change was manifested particularly in the disappearance of the ergative past tense of transitive verbs.³⁸

Two major changes in New Persian vocabulary also occurred at this time. The first was the introduction of many terms from other non-Persian Iranian dialects, and the second was the absorption of a considerable number of Arabic words. The diversity of New Persian vocabulary might well have been a main factor in making New Persian “the common language of the Iranian countries and, over the centuries, the main literary and cultural language of the eastern Muslim world,” in Lazard’s words.³⁹

Iranian cultural continuity in the face of Islam

Like other modern historians before him, M. Muhammadi observes that “of all the people around the Arabian Peninsula who converted to Islam and adopted Arabic language, Iranians were the only nation who retained their language and culture.”⁴⁰ They employed many methods, ranging from armed resistance to feigned collaboration, to uphold their culture and history. Muhammadi lists a variety of agents who transmitted and upheld Iranian culture during the first two Islamic centuries, which he denotes a

transitional period. The list consists of a complex of religious and ethnic groups and institutions, and includes *mowbeds*, lay Zoroastrians, aristocrats and *dihqans* (small landlords). Fire temples, scribes, Persian writers and translators, the Persian language itself, and many more institutions, individuals and classes together contributed to an entire Iranian identity.⁴¹ Indeed, during the early Islamic period some local Iranian rulers still issued coinage bearing Pahlavi inscriptions. The different ways in which Iranians maintained their identity will be examined in detail below.

Iranian resistance

There were many political and military struggles against new rule in the first few centuries of the Islamic era. Such uprisings would be eventually defeated; and, more often than not, they were repressed even by Iranian generals and Amirs, such as Abu Muslim and Afshin, whose deeds will be related below. Many accounts of insurgency from the second Islamic century and onwards appear in early Islamic historical texts, such as *Tarikh-i Sistan* ("History of Sistan"), *Tarikh-i Bukhara* ("History of Bukhara"), and in the works of historians such as Tabari, Bal'ami, Ya'qubi, Maqdisi, Gardizi and Ibn al-Athir.

Despite the fact that Iranians put up prolonged resistance in the early Islamic period, relatively little information survives from this chapter of history: contemporary Islamic historiography was in a fledgling state, and the strong religious beliefs held by Islamic historians did not leave room for objectivity. B.S. Amoretti writes,

There is no evidence of any reaction to the Arab conquest in the guise of popular rebellion, but we do know of many local uprisings in response to each new Arab campaign, organized and directed by the ancient landowning class, such as the short-lived Nishapur and Balkh rebellion of 32/653 led by Qarin, a certain Sasanian nobleman.⁴²

Aside from the reticence of Islamic historiography to record revolts against its own leadership, it might also have been the case that, during the initial stages of Iranian defeat and occupation, there was little specifically Iranian leadership and agreement within the resistance. Unable to unite under one banner, various peoples throughout Iran stood up against the Arab attacks one by one and were overwhelmed in turn. "Among the former provinces of the Sasanian Empire," according to W. Madelung, "the coastal regions along the southern shore of the Caspian Sea resisted the penetration of the Arabs and Islam most tenaciously."⁴³ The dynasty of the Ispahbads maintained a truce with other Iranian Muslims for a time, after heeding Abu Muslim's call; but after the latter's death, the Ispahbads reverted to their own ways until their final defeat in 168 AH/784 CE by the 'Abbasid caliph al-Mahdi.

Bihafarid and the revolts against the Umayyads

Naturally, the revolts were concentrated in regions furthest from the central power of the caliphate, namely in northern and eastern Iran. At the time of the conquest, the Arab invaders made alliances among some of the merchant classes who stood to benefit from providing the conquering armies with food and provisions. "In the eastern areas of Iran economic power was shared between the Arab conquerors and local merchants."⁴⁴ For the local people, however, two important factors helped to shape the anti-Umayyad nature of the first revolts:

On the one hand conservation of the existing administrative order (the *dihqans* and *marzbans* being entrusted with the task of tax gathering); on the other hand the speedy participation of the Arabs in local politics led them [Iranians and Khurasanians] to an anti-Umayyad role.⁴⁵

The first such movement was Bihafarid's revolt of 129–31 AH/746–48 CE. Bihafarid was from Khwaf, near Nishapur, and claimed to be a Zoroastrian prophet. He put his ideas forth in a book written in Persian; this work allegedly represented such a departure from the mainstream religious tradition that Zoroastrian *mowbeds*, as well as other authorities, rose against him. Ironically, his revolt was put to an end by the Iranian general Abu Muslim, near Badghis, where Bihafarid and many of his followers were put to death.

Abu Muslim Khurasani

Abu Muslim, who was instrumental in defeating the Umayyads and in bringing the 'Abbasids to power, was invited to Baghdad and was murdered treacherously by the 'Abbasid caliph Ja'far in 137 AH/755 CE; his body was thrown into the Tigris.⁴⁶ This murder instigated the most intense upheaval of the Islamic era: as B.S. Amoretti writes, "Abu Muslim's name cannot be omitted from any typological analysis of the Iranian, or more particularly Khurasanian rebellions of the first centuries of the caliphate."⁴⁷ Some historians speculate that Abu Muslim may have harboured a bond with Zoroastrianism; and they point out that it was to him that the *mowbeds* appealed in their struggle to crush the Zoroastrian heretic Bihafarid. Ghulam Husayn Yusufi, on the other hand, believes that Abu Muslim was indeed a devout Muslim throughout his life, though one cannot predict how his views might have changed had he survived his visit to Baghdad. Whether or not he might have turned against the 'Abbasids, the life of Abu Muslim has been called "a prelude to the rise of the local (Iranian) dynasties."⁴⁸

Sinbadh/Anti-'Abbasid revolts

Within two months of Abu Muslim's death, the first revolt against the 'Abbasids occurred. Sinbadh the Mugh from Nishapur raised the banner

of revolt in Abu Muslim's name. Sinbadh had been promoted to rank of general by Abu Muslim, and his soldiers, numbering as many as 100,000, were Zoroastrians, Muslims and followers of other sects; they were also the people of Ray, of Tabaristan, and of greater Khurasan (i.e., modern-day Afghanistan and environs). Sinbadh and his followers made the destruction of the Ka'ba their password. This insurrection was put to an end by Juhar b. Marrar in 138 AH/756 CE, but Sinbadh's followers, like those of Bihafarid and of Abu Muslim, continued to organize and to inspire revolts.⁴⁹

Ustadsis

Within a few years of the establishment of the 'Abbasid caliphate, there were reports of insurgencies in the Iranian countryside, particularly in the eastern areas. C.E. Bosworth argues that "all these anti-'Abbasid outbreaks expressed a continued, nationalistic (if we may anticipate the modern usage of this term) Persian resentment of Arab-'Abbasid social and economic dominance ... [expressing] messianic religious feelings."⁵⁰ A decade after Sinbadh, a rebel by the name of Ustadsis incited a revolt on the eastern fringes of Khurasan and Sistan. Ustadsis claimed to be a prophet and, according to E.L. Daniel, "may also have posed as one of the saviors predicted by Zoroastrian legend."⁵¹ After he was killed in battle, his head was sent to Caliph al-Mansur in Baghdad. It is reported that 70,000 of his followers in Khurasan were put to death along with him.

Muqanna'

Almost a decade after Ustadsis, another self-proclaimed prophet from Balkh appeared in Transoxiana and Khurasan and enjoyed both urban and rural support. His name was Muqanna', though he was also known as Mah-i Nakhashb (i.e., the Moon of Nakhashb) because he was reputedly able to, bring a moon out of a well in Nakhashb and to command it to hover on the horizon for a prolonged period. The name Muqanna' means "the Veiled One." He was invariably seen wearing a mask, which some say he wore to hide facial disfigurement. Muqanna' originally hailed from Marv, where he had attracted many discontented locals; these included metempsychosists and Mazdakites, aside from the *Abu Muslimiyya*, and the followers of Muqanna' came to be known as the "Wearers of White" (Arabic *al-Mubayyida*, Persian *Safid-Jamegan*).⁵² The defeat of Muqanna' came in 162 AH/778 CE, when he and his family members threw themselves into a bonfire rather than surrender to the forces of the caliph.⁵³

Babak Khurramdin

The suppression of Iranian revolts left a legacy of wounded Iranian pride. Sympathizers and former followers were hence exceedingly susceptible to

any new messianic leader. Although eastern Iran was typically the home of many Persian revolts in the first few centuries of the Islamic era, the most prolonged and serious threat to the stability of 'Abbasid rule arose in western Persia and in the regions bordering on the heartland of modern-day Iraq.⁵⁴ Babak Khurramdin and his "Wearers of Red" (*Muhammira*), sometimes referred to as "those with red banners" (*Surkh-'Alaman*), fought from 201 AH/816–17 CE to 222 AH/837 CE. According to C.E. Bosworth,

Babak stirred up existing socio-religious discontent and heterodoxy in Arran and Azerbaijan, regions already mentioned in the sources as infested with *mohammera* sectaries, into a full-scale rising against all 'Abbasid control in northwest Persia ... with Mazdakite adherents and a certain emphasis on the part of women. ... It was certainly an anti-Islamic movement, and it engaged the attention of a succession of caliphal armies until it was put down in 222/837.⁵⁵

Notably, it was at the hands of another Iranian warrior that Babak finally was captured and put to death. The 'Abbasid caliph al-Mu'tasim appealed to Afshin, a Transoxianan prince, for assistance in the defeat of Babak. This task was ultimately accomplished by an act of betrayal: Babak was deceived by an Armenian prince whom he believed to be his ally and was handed over to Afshin. The latter then sent Babak to Samarra in the area of modern Iraq, where he was tortured to death in 223 AH/837 CE.

The Persian term *khurramdin* ("joyful religion"), by which Babak and his followers were known, is reminiscent of *bihdin* ("good religion"), another appellation for Zoroastrianism. Thus, *Khurramdin* was used at times by opponents both to brand the movement as licentious and to link it with Mazdakism, which was in turn considered too ethically lenient. This term, however, was occasionally attributed to Babak's wife Khurram, who was thought to have given her name to Babak's followers after Babak's death.⁵⁶ Whether this sect was named after Babak's wife is unverifiable; according to all relevant historical texts, however, she had been originally married to Babak's mentor and was thought to have engineered the transfer of political and spiritual power from her late husband to Babak. Ultimately, the followers of Babak and of his immediate successors maintained until the fifth century AH/eleventh century CE the belief that he would return.⁵⁷

Mazyar, Prince of Tabaristan, and Afshin

Immediately following Babak's execution in Baghdad, one of his allies, Mazyar, Prince of Tabaristan, rebelled; and Mazyar also was betrayed, in this case by his own brother Kuhyar. Mazyar was put to death in front of Babak's very gallows one year after the latter's death. Followers of Mazyar became known as Mazyariyyah and continued to contribute to the political and spiritual life of Mazandaran for many centuries to come.

Afshin's fate was not much better than that of Mazyar and Babak: believed to have been in league with Mazyar, Afshin was brought to trial in the year 225 AH/839 CE, and the two main accusations levied against him were that he had not been circumcised and that he had simply pretended to be a Muslim while secretly remaining a Zoroastrian. Tabari quotes Harun b. 'Isa, who was a witness in Afshin's trial, as saying that among the many charges Afshin also was accused of keeping atheistic books in his house. In his own defence, Afshin told the Muslims who were present at his trial that the fact that he had inherited a book on the Iranian wisdom literature from his father was not a sign of his religious persuasion, since "you also have the book of *Kalilah va Dimnah* and Mardak in your own homes."⁵⁸

Whereas scholars such as C.E. Bosworth and E. Yarshater believe that the above-mentioned Mardak was actually the Sasanian prophet Mazdak, A. Tafazzuli cites Hamzah-yi Isfahani to illustrate that the *Mazdaknamah* or *Mardaknamah* was in fact a Parthian advice book, popular even after the advent of Islam.⁵⁹ Afshin was found guilty at his trial and was condemned to death by starvation. Caliph al-Mu'atasim celebrated his victory by marrying the enslaved daughters of Babak and of Mazyar on the same day. B.S. Amoretti does, however, find it "noteworthy that the sources ideologically and religiously equate these three figures – Babak, Mazyar and Afshin – as upholders of some vague Iranian restoration and defenders of the *white religion* against the *black religion of Islam*."⁶⁰

The Muslim rebels of Iran

Centuries passed before the Muslims were able to conquer all corners of Iran and extinguish local and regional revolts. According to C.E. Bosworth, there were numerous local uprisings under the leadership of men who were elevated to the status of prophets among their followers. These rebellions continued "until the period of the Saljuqs ... [when] the land of Persia was completely Islamized and sectarianism largely channeled into messianic Shi'ism and Isma'ilism, with their clear socio-religious content, or else into participation in Sufi orders and their activities."⁶¹

While we have so far mentioned only anti-Islamic rebellions, it should be noted that, after the Ghaznavid and Saljuq dynasties and the dogmatism of the newly converted Turks, rebellious ideas and feelings that could not be expressed in a Zoroastrian context could be articulated in Islamic terms. "Iran's insurrectional landscape,"⁶² in the memorable phrase of B.S. Amoretti, encompasses the revolts of the Kharijites and Zaidites against the 'Abbasid Empire as well as the growing number of Mu'tazilites, who were dismissed with condescension by the orthodox Muslims as the *Majus*, or Zoroastrians, of Islam (see further below).⁶³

Iranian rebels in Islamic and Persian historiography

Although Persian intellectuals and scribes could rescue certain parts of their pre-Islamic culture and history, namely mythical figures and historical kings, they could not defend or uphold the status of pre-Islamic religions or of Persians who had struggled for independence. From Qaren to Babak, and from Ustadhsis to Mazyar, Iranian symbols of resistance are treated with Islamic bias in Muslim historiography. Persian historians such as Tabari, Bal'ami and Shahrastani reveal a bias shared with Ibn al-Athir, Ibn al-Nadim, Yaqut and many other Arab historians when they treat famed resistance fighters with contempt as frauds whose only motivations were to deceive the innocent, kill Muslims and fill their own pockets. By the end of the third century of the Islamic era a number of Muslim theologians had even made subservience an explicit religious duty.⁶⁴ For this reason, when the Iranian writer Bal'ami, vizier of the Khurasanian Samanids, translates the work of his fellow countryman Tabari of Tabaristan, Bal'ami follows Tabari in calling the insurgents of Tabaristan *kuffar*, or "infidels," in a matter-of-fact way. An example of this attitude may be found in Bal'ami's description of warring between his own countrymen and the caliph's army: "At times the victory went to the Muslims, at times to the *kuffar*."⁶⁵

On the other hand, the same Bal'ami made Persian the official language of the Samanids; and the same Tabari, along with Ibn al-Muqaffa', is highly praised by J. Wiesehöfer for having translated "Middle Persian works, including the *Khwaday Namag*, into Arabic[, thus securing] ancient Iran its fitting place in historiography."⁶⁶ What I mean to suggest is that neither of these historians lacked an affinity for Iran. It may simply have been the case that the early Islamic *Zeitgeist* discouraged any display of affection for individuals who were affiliated with non-Islamic religious minorities.

The Islamic view of these figures has trickled down through history as the default one, and to this day modern Arab historians such as Zaidan, himself a Christian, reiterate the official stories, simply because they are the only existing narratives. The respected Iranian encyclopedia *Lughatnamah-yi Dihkhuda* passes on the same clearly prejudiced version of the story by quoting Zaidan as a modern source on Afshin, when Zaidan in turn must rely on existing Islamic histories, whether they are rendered by a Persian such as Baihaqi, by an Arab such as Ibn al-Athir, or by a Turk such as the author of *Tarikh al-A'lam-i Turki*.⁶⁷ Indeed, this circumstance exemplifies the popular adage that history is written by the victor. That present-day Iranians on the whole might nevertheless identify with characters outside the scope of Islam is indicated by the massive popularity of the names Babak, Afshin and Mazyar in present-day Iran. The appeal of heroic figures who pitted themselves against the Islamic onslaught was made particularly evident during the decades of unilateral

Pahlavi rule, when considerable admiration was shown towards national heroes of old who had always remained dear to the Iranian collective consciousness.

The 'Abbasids and Iranian influence

On the whole, most Iranians did not resort to political revolts; instead, they embraced Islam while simultaneously preserving and propagating their own native culture. Iranians in the political sphere, and especially the Khurasanians, sided with the 'Abbasids against the Umayyads and were instrumental in overthrowing the Umayyad dynasty. In Abu'l Abbas's inaugural speech of October 749 CE, the first 'Abbasid caliph said that "God has given us as our party (*shi'a*) the people of Khurasan."⁶⁸ The first several 'Abbasid caliphs were so excessively dependent on the Khurasanians in general, and on Abu Muslim in particular, that Caliph Ja'far became wary of him. On a pretext Abu Muslim was invited to Baghdad and killed there (see above), but Iranian influence did not diminish with his murder. R. Mottahadeh informs us that

when the first 'Abbasids had moved the capital from Syria to Iraq, they had made the Islamic empire less of a *ghazi* state, centered on former Byzantine territory near the new Byzantine borders, and more of a Mesopotamian (or Iraqi) state. To be a Mesopotamian state meant to be constantly compared with a Sasanian imperial tradition.⁶⁹

Iranian influence was most potent in the administrative and cultural spheres. In Sasanian Iran the class of *mowbeds*, or clergymen, was completely distinct from the scribal class; and thus the scribes "survived to serve new Arab Muslim masters ... [whereas] the priests, of course, had to retire from any position of influence," in the words of R.N. Frye.⁷⁰

The same scribes played a crucial role both in preserving pre-Islamic administrative and cultural heritage in Middle Persian and in translating the Middle Persian texts into Arabic. V. Danner describes their significance in the following way:

A group of generally silent but highly purposeful men had spent most of the Umayyad period carrying out the burden of administrative duties in Iran. These were the Persian scribes. They were to be found outside Iran likewise, and everywhere their impact in those early times was quiet but decisive.⁷¹

From the *mowbeds* to the *dihqans* (small landowners), and from *atashkada* (fire temples) to the *divans* (chanceries), Pahlavi and Persian books were kept and read by many Persians and even by some Persianized Arabs, who referred to these texts in their own writings. According to Frye, there is much

evidence of the Persian assimilation of Arabs by the end of the Umayyad caliphate: many Arabs came to speak Persian, to wear Persian-style clothing and to adopt Persian customs and manners.⁷² V. Danner relates one such story that appears in the *al-Bayan* of Jahiz:

A famous Arab poet of the day, Ibn Mufarrigh, is a case in point. He had spent some time in Khurasan and, like many other Arabs there, if not all of them, knew Persian. Shortly before his death in Kirman (69/689) he composed the earliest Persian verse recorded in Arabic literature, one which contained both Arabic and Persian words.⁷³

The Arabic language also borrowed many Persian words associated with those earlier Iranian elements that were embraced by Islamic civilization in, for example, the realms of government, law, art, music and popular culture, but not those of religion or philosophy.⁷⁴

Iranian administrators and scribes

Even if some Arab writers remained ignorant of the Persian language and failed to admire Iranian culture, the majority of them were at least adequately informed to mention it in their writings. M. Minovi identifies more than two dozen poets and writers who incorporated Persian history, mythology and Andarz literature into Arabic literature during the first few centuries of the Islamic era; among them were Abu Nuwwas, Abu Tammam, Buhtari, Ibn al-Muqaffa', Ibn al-Butriq, Ibn Qutaibah, Tha'alibi, Abu 'Ali Miskawaih, Amiri, Mubashshir Ibn Fatah, Masudi and Tabari.⁷⁵

The resulting literature could not endorse every aspect of pre-Islamic Iran. Thus the new writers retained historical and mythical elements and ignored Zoroastrian features that were considered to be at odds with Islam. Tabari's vision of history is so well captured by J. Wiesehöfer that it is worth quoting the latter scholar at length:

Like the prophetic function to the Israelites, kingship fell to the share of the Persians as a gift of god. The prophetic function and kingship converge in the caliphate appointed by God. The history of Israelites and Persians is presented synchronously; at Adam's side stands the mythical original man and first man Gay'Umarth [Gayomart]; Solomon's story is followed by passages about the Persian kings until Ardashir; the description of the history of the Sasanians links up with that of Jesus and the Byzantines and leads directly to the life of Muhammad, the target of the history. The main part of the work consists of annals from the Hijra to the year 303/915, which are essentially limited to Islam and its realm, the new centre of the world.⁷⁶

Alongside many of the Iranian aristocratic families, numerous scribes helped to build and govern the 'Abbasid empire. Ibn al-Nadim names Ibn al-Muqaffa', 'Abd-al-Hamid and the Sahl, Naubakhtis and Barmakid families among the early 'Abbasid bureaucrats that were instrumental in integrating Persian culture and policies with those of the 'Abbasids.⁷⁷

The Barmakids and Tahirids

Many Persians occupied positions of power in the early 'Abbasid era; but of all the viziers and governors, the Barmakids were the most celebrated, passing power from one generation to the next under the first four 'Abbasid caliphs.⁷⁸ During the first century of the 'Abbasid dynasty and until the death of al-Wathiq, the Golden Age of the caliphate was characterized by an increase in the Persian influence of the Barmakids, that is, descendants of Barmak, the first vizier of the family.⁷⁹ Yahya the Barmakid was the last grand vizier, and his two sons were in charge of governing both Khurasan and other parts of Iran. Unfortunately, the family suffered a sudden reversal of fortune at the hands of Harun al-Rashid, who accused them of treason, killed the father, and imprisoned the sons and grandsons.

During the first 70 years of the 'Abbasid period, caliphs were able to maintain a reasonably firm degree of control over the region because Persia remained under the administration of governors sent out from the 'Abbasid capital. With the appointment of Tahir b. Hosayn Du'l-yaminayn in 205 AH/821 CE as governor in all the caliphal lands east of Iraq, however, certain families were able to establish hereditary lines of governors that were less under the dominion of the caliph.⁸⁰ The increase of power among the Iranian governors caused the caliphate to weaken its hold. Many of the caliph's governors, such as the Tahirids of Khurasan, and other governors of Transoxiana, Azerbaijan and Armenia, seized the opportunity to withhold tribute. Gradually, local Khurasanians, Persians, Kurds and Dailamites came into power and had little regard for the caliph in Baghdad. These newly established dynasties paid only lip service, according to C.E. Bosworth, to what was now in essence a fictional power centred in Baghdad:

Indeed from the time of the first eruption of the Saffarids outside Sistan at some date before 252/866, all the caliphs had been able to do in the disaffected provinces had been to sow discord between rival claimants to power in Persia by the dispatch of investiture patents for the governorship of the provinces concerned.⁸¹

Thus the extent of the 'Abbasids' territorial control continued to erode until the Saljuqs limited their dynastic power to the immediate environs of Baghdad in the twelfth century CE. The caliphate's official extinction in the following century marked the formal end of the Islamic Golden Age, though

Baghdad had long since ceased to be the most important political centre of the region.

Iranian dynasties

The Saffarids and the Buyids

In 254 AH/868 CE Yaqub-i Laith of Sistan overthrew the Tahirids in Nishapur and was the first post-Islamic Iranian ruler to declare himself an independent king and take up arms against the caliphate. He spoke no Arabic, however; and so, when a panegyrist poet of his court praised him highly in that language, he contemptuously discounted the flattery, asking why he should be impressed by words in a tongue he could not understand.⁸² Yaqub-i Laith is the first Amir to be credited with patronizing New Persian poets such as Sagazi and Abu Salik Gurgani at his court.

One of the first historical accounts written in New Persian by an anonymous Sistanian in the mid-fifth century AH, entitled *Tarikh-i Sistan*, recorded many stories and sayings of the Saffarid dynasty.⁸³ This work portrays Yaqub-i Laith as voicing his opinion of the 'Abbasids in the following way: "Have you not seen what they did to Abu Salama, Abu Muslim, the Barmakis, and Fazl b. Sahl, despite everything which these men had done on the dynasty's behalf? Let no one ever trust them."⁸⁴ The demise of the Saffarids did not occur at the hands of the caliphate, however, but rather at the hands of another eastern Iranian family, the Samanids of Bukhara, in 290 AH/903 CE.

The Samanids and the Buyids

All Iranian families who ruled the various regions of Iran over the next several centuries followed in the footsteps of the Samanids, who took care both to translate the *Divan* and other bureaucratic documents back into Persian and to uphold Persian culture and rituals. The fact that some 'Abbasid caliphs celebrated Nowruz, Mihrigan and other Persian festivals left them open to criticism by other Arabs. With the advent of Iranian dynasties, from the Samanids (290–390 AH) to the Buyids (320–448 AH), all Iranians celebrated their heritage. R.N. Frye reminds us that, like the Buyids, "the Samanids also felt themselves heirs of the Sasanians and at the same time they were staunch Muslims. They found a satisfactory compromise in the New Persian language."⁸⁵ While the Samanids showed respect for the 'Abbasid caliphate, they attacked Baghdad in 334 AH; and likewise, while they did not depose the caliph, the Buyids became the real power behind the caliphate. According to C.E. Bosworth,

the Shi'ite Buyids, perhaps recognizing that Shi'ism was as yet the creed of only a small minority in Persia and Iraq, found it expedient to leave

the 'Abbasids in Baghdad as spiritual heads of the Islamic world, and even protected their claims against the 'Abbasid rivals in Egypt ... the Fatimids.⁸⁶

This difference of attitude between the Buyids and the Samanids is taken by Frye to indicate the two different orientations of these dynasties: the Buyids drew on the past, he argues, while the Samanids looked towards the future. The Buyids attempted to keep not only Pahlavi and Arabic, but also Zoroastrianism and Islam, on an equal footing. Evidence of this approach can be found on medals, in art and on tomb towers of the Buyids. "In the tenth century," however, notes Frye, this attitude "was to be swept aside by the real 'Iranian renaissance' or more properly the 'naissance' of New Persian Islamic culture, which was a fusion of new and old but in an Islamic frame" hailing from the east.⁸⁷

Many have considered the Samanids the quintessential Iranian Islamic dynasty, and their model certainly became the standard for all the following Iranian or later Turkish dynasties. Their administrative organization and court etiquette combined traces of central Asian tradition with elements borrowed from the 'Abbasids, who in turn had imitated the Samanids. While the Samanids clearly employed Arabic in certain settings, their official language appears to have been Persian.⁸⁸ The Samanids eventually were weakened by the Buyids to the north, and were then overthrown by the Ghaznavids, who arrived from the southeast in 380 AH/990 CE.

Persian literature under the Samanid dynasty

The Transoxianan centre of Samanid power lay in Bukhara and in Samarqand, which became centres of Islamic civilization and culture. The dynasty revived the observance of Persian holidays and the Iranian solar calendar in its courts. Viziers were selected from among leading scholars and scientists, and each of the three most famous Samanid ministers – Bal'ami, Jayhani and Atabi – was himself an important writer and supporter of the Iranian intelligentsia. The Samanid court was the first Persian Islamic centre to support poets, historians and writers in great numbers. Rudaki of Samarqand, one of the foremost poets of Iran, lived in Samanid times, and in Nizami 'Aruzi's *Chahar Maqalah* he is credited with convincing Amir Nasr to return to Bukhara by the compelling force of his poetry and music.⁸⁹

Although some scholars, such as R. Safa, remain sceptical of this account,⁹⁰ the story emphasizes the significance of Rudaki, whose literary importance cannot be exaggerated. Safa cites many ancient writers and classical poets who looked up to Rudaki, and Minuvi calls Rudaki "the most important pillar in the New Persian literature."⁹¹ Unfortunately, very little is left of the prolific poet's work, the original body of which is estimated to have been more than 100,000 lines. Another significant

contribution of Rudaki to Persian literature that has also been lost to us was his rendition into Persian poetry of *Kalilah va Dimnah*, of *Sindbad Namah*, and probably of *Baluhar va Būdasaf*. Even though the original versions of these works have since perished, they survived long enough to form a basis for the work of other writers.⁹² The existing *Kalilah va Dimnah*, for example, is a prose version of Rudaki's work that was recreated in the sixth century AH.

Apart from Rudaki, who is also known as "the father of Persian poetry,"⁹³ Samanid courts were filled with such prominent poets as Shahid Balkhi, Daqiqi, Abu Shakur Balkhi, Kasaii Marvazi and Masu'di Marvazi, among others. New Persian prose emerged in full splendour during this era. The works of Bal'ami, of Abu al-Mu'ayyad-i Balkhi, and particularly the *Shahnamah* of Abu Mansur Abd al-Razzaq are prime examples of new Persian prose using little Arabic or ornamentation. Furthermore, two substantial works by the Iranian Tabari, who wrote in Arabic, were translated by Bal'ami with the aid of other Samanid literati. The books *Tarikh-i al-Muluk va al-Rasul* and *Tafsir al-Quran* were tremendously detailed, and both became foundational pillars of Arabic writing. Unfortunately, Tabari was accused of apostasy, allegedly by Ahmad Hanbal, and therefore was buried not with Muslim rites but furtively by night in the year 310 AH.

The reputation of the Samanid dynasty as the last Iranian authority in central Asia and as the saviour of the Iranian legacy long outlived the dynasty itself. R.N. Frye explains the basis on which the Samanids resembled their Sasanian predecessors: "The union of diverse elements in Transoxiana by the Samanids into one state seemed to many almost miraculous, as though the unity of Iran and its culture had been accomplished in Central Asia and not in Iran."⁹⁴ The Samanid formula appears to have been a combination of several different components: the institution of kingship was combined with the observation of Iranian pre-Islamic history, of New Persian language, and of Iranian culture and rituals, but in accordance with Islamic rather than with Zoroastrian practice. The resulting conventions were upheld not only by Iranian but also by Turkish dynasties in Iran until the twentieth-century CE Islamic revolution. The bureaucracy of the Samanid court, which was inspired by the 'Abbasids and thus ultimately by the Sasanians, was also the blueprint for all later courts.

Caucasia, Azerbaijan, Dailman, the Ziyarids and the Buyids

The remaining regions of Iran had yet to follow the example of Khurasan and eastern Iran and acquire their independence. The Buyids were the first Iranian dynasty to free southern and western Iran from the yoke of the 'Abbasids: in the formulation of H. Busse, "the formation of native states, which had already been in progress for some time in eastern Iran, now began to take place in western Iran."⁹⁵ The Buyids ruled from 320 to 448 AH, conquering Baghdad in 334 AH and making Caliph Mustakfi their protégé.

The Buyids were Dailamites and, unlike the 'Abbasids or the Samanids, their soldiers were drawn from amongst their own people rather than from various Turkic tribes. Even though eastern Caucasia and Azerbaijan offered little resistance at the beginning of the Arab invasion, the people of Dailman and the Khazars in other provinces south of the Caspian neither converted to Islam nor lost political power for a considerable length of time. W. Madelung estimates that the success of the resistance was due to the fact that "the variety of the population, as well as the mountainous fragmentation of the region, favoured the survival of numerous petty principalities, some of which had been established by the Sasanians with the aim of strengthening the border defense."⁹⁶

During the third century AH, following a long period of Khurramite resistance, the Sajids of Ghazvin and Zaidite of Tabaristan finally took over Azerbaijan and the south Caspian provinces; even so, they continued to face occasional challenges from the Samanids. The Buyids rose to prominence as a result of the ongoing conflict. They were markedly different from the other local dynasties in the sense that they were Dailamites from the mountainous area north of Qazvin. They had already acquired a long tradition of military endeavours dating back to pre-Christian times, when they had campaigned against Georgia as allies of the Sasanians. "Like the Turks," observes H. Busse, "they already had been playing an important role as mercenaries in the period which preceded the emergence of the Buyids, and they had been active in Iran, Mesopotamia and even further westward."⁹⁷ The Buyids ruled over Iraq and over central and southern Iran from 316 to 434 AH, while, almost concurrently, the Ziyarids ruled in Tabaristan and occasionally in Isfahan and Hamadan. The latter dynasty included the noted eleventh-century CE ruler/author Qabus, whose descendant Kai-Ka'us wrote the seminal *Qabusnamah*, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter in the context of Adab literature.

The Buyids were the first Iranian dynasty to have a court historian as prominent as Miskawaih, but they did not adopt New Persian as their official language. Instead, they used Arabic as their *lingua franca*, and at times Middle Persian (Pahlavi) as a secondary court language. Middle Persian was now replaced by New Persian as the popular language; and thus the writings of historians, scientists and theologians of the Buyid court, which were in either Middle Persian or Arabic, were accessible to the vast majority of Iranians only after translation. It was recorded that the three brothers who founded the Buyid dynasty, Ali, Ahmad and Hasan, were the sons of an illiterate fisherman, and as a result they may not have been particularly educated themselves. All the same, two of the brothers had been put to work in the Mardavij court and hence had acquired skill in governance. They gradually acquired a taste for royal behaviour, although they were never very keen on being eulogized by panegyrist poets. It is noteworthy that their father Buyah, son of Fana-Khusraw, gave his sons the Arabic names of Ali, Ahmad and Hasan, as any new convert might. The second Buyah

generation, on the other hand, reverted to Iranian names such as Kamrava, Marzuban, Bahram and Khusraw, establishing a more obvious connection to their Iranian past.

Seeking legitimacy through pre-Islamic lineages

The Ziyarids and the Buyids were the first post-Islamic dynasties to use the pre-Islamic title *Shahanshah*, meaning “king of kings.” According to Ibn-Miskawaih, an Iranian court historian writing in Arabic, the Buyids imitated the Ziyarid king Mardavij in referring to themselves in this way. Specifically, Miskawaih says that it was under the auspices of Ibn al-Amid-Rukn al-Daula’s vizier, whose father incidentally was once Mardavij’s own vizier, that the Buyids made use of the title.⁹⁸

In any case, by the third and fourth centuries AH, all the ruling Iranian families sought either to establish or to invent a connection to the pre-Islamic history of Iran as a testament to their legitimacy. Yaqub-i Laith claimed descent from the Sasanians, while the Samanids traced their pedigree back to Bahram-i Chubin and from him to the mythical Pishdadian kings. Ahmad Ibn-Sahl boasted of being a descendant of Yazdgird, while Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Razzaq traced his ancestors to the epical heroes Giv and Gudarz, and hence even farther back to other mythical kings such as Manuchihr, Firidun and Jamshid. Even the three sons of Buyah made a point of claiming descent from Bahram-i Gur, the Sasanian king. A genealogical tie to ancient Iranian ancestry was so vital for the political image of these dynasties that even later Turkish dynasties were enticed to forge such connections. The Ghaznavids, for instance, traced their ancestry back to the Sasanian Yazdgird, while the Saljuqis claimed to be sons of Afrasiyab of the *Shahnamah*.⁹⁹

The ascendancy of the Turks

The heyday of Iranian nationalism did not last long. Both the Buyids and the Samanids were defeated by the Ghaznavids, whose kings were descended from two Turkish slaves, Alp-Tegin and Sebuk-Tegin, who had worked as soldiers for Samanid kings; this circumstance was commonplace at the time, and the slave-soldiers received compensation in salaries and land appropriation by their Arab and Persian masters. During the third and fourth centuries AH there was a steady rise in the power of Turkish soldiers within the eastern and central parts of the Islamic world. Many ambitious and capable soldiers of low rank gradually were promoted to the rank of general. Each general in turn owned his own army of Turkish slaves, and many of them were therefore able to step into positions of power whenever they were vacated. C.E. Bosworth argues that “numerically, these Turks in the Iranian world did not add up to a great influx—not until Saljuq, Mongol and Timurid times did mass immigrations occur which changed the ethnic complexion of certain regions.”¹⁰⁰

The Ghaznavids

Although the Ghaznavid dynasty was descended from the aforementioned Turkish slaves, the dynasty is identified as Iranian since Alp-Tegin and Sebuk-Tegin had been raised in the Samanid court, and both had been promoted to the position of commander-in-chief to the Samanid king. They overthrew their masters but retained many court traditions, injecting them with more Islamic fervour. The Ghaznavids were the first Iranian dynasty to adopt the Arab title of Sultan, which was favoured by the Turks; and the title of *Shahanshah*, popular with Iranians, receded in importance with the advent of the Turks.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Alp-Tegin and Sebuk-Tegin ruled from Ghaznah, in modern Afghanistan, rather than from Bukhara.

Although the flowering of the Ghaznavid dynasty represents the ultimate ascendance of Turkish power, we must remember that by this time Turks already had been migrating peacefully for several centuries into the Iranian lands of Transoxiana, Farghana and Khwarazm, and across the Dihistan steppe known as the Qara Qum desert toward the Caspian coastlands.¹⁰² All the same, it was the Ghaznavids who served as a model for all later Turkish dynasties, such as the Saljuqs, the Qarakhanids and even the Mongols, who conquered Iran but who were then absorbed by its civilization and culture. Mahmud the Ghaznavid became the prototypical commanding and judicious post-Islamic king in Persian literature in general, and in the Adab genre in particular; for the latter, see Chapter 6.

The courts of Mahmud and Mas'ud

The courts of the Ghaznavids, and especially those of Mahmud and Mas'ud, flourished due to the presence of prestigious viziers, poets, scientists, historians and scribes. Nizami's *Chahar Maqalah* contains the tale of how Sultan Mahmud, having heard about the merit of Khwarazmshah's courtiers, sent a messenger to request that the latter send five of his court's foremost scholars and scientists. Among them were Biruni and Ibn Sina. Two of the five, Ibn Sina and Abu Sahl Masihi, refused to go to the Sultan, however, fearing the restrictions that would be imposed on their freedom of expression. They preferred to flee from Khwarazm, even though they faced certain hardship and danger. Ibn Sina escaped, but Abu Sahl perished in a sandstorm. The other three scholars abided by the order and joined Mahmud in Balkh.¹⁰³

Despite this account, Mahmud is generally reputed to have been a generous patron of both scientists and artists. As the first Islamic conqueror to exploit the riches of the subcontinent, he was well able to reward those with whom he was pleased. Mahmud's wars were fought in the name of Sunni Islam, and poets and historians of his court were expected to sing his praises and to glorify his victory over the infidels. Mahmud's court

was staffed with so many poets that he created the new court office of Malik-al-Shua'ra (King of Poets) in order to organize them into various ranks. He rewarded his court poets 'Unsuri, Asjadi, Manuchihri, Farrukhi and Sistani handsomely but refused to compensate Firdausi for rendering the *Shahnamah* into poetry. This disparity may have arisen because the *Shahnamah* celebrated pre-Islamic Zoroastrian Iran, a subject that was not dear to the king.

Mahmud and Mas'ud were keen to have the foremost Iranian scientists and jurists in their courts for the sake of prestige. In addition to Biruni, the court enjoyed the services of Abu Nasr-i Mushkan and Abu al-Fazl Baihaqi, who were quintessential elite scribes, and whose works survive to the present day. Baihaqi wrote his monumental work entitled *Tarikh-i Baihaqi* at the court of a later Ghaznavid king a few years after Sultan Masud's defeat at the hands of the Saljuqs. Unfortunately, a significant portion of *Tarikh-i Baihaqi* has been lost, but the substantial portion that has survived provides a helpful chronicle of daily life in the Ghaznavid period. The record indicates that the Ghaznavid court enjoyed Persian literature, observed Persian culture and customs, and celebrated pre-Islamic festivities such as Sadah, Nowruz and Mihrgan.¹⁰⁴

Though they were of Turkish origin, the Ghaznavids ran a Persian court with Iranian courtiers. Having overthrown the indigenous Iranian powers, the Ghaznavids built up a mighty empire of their own, setting the pattern for Turkish political domination over much of the Islamic world for centuries to come.¹⁰⁵ The Turks maintained the political, social and cultural structures of the Iranian dynasties, and revered the most important legacy of Persian influence, which was the blending of Islam with Iranian national identity. Thus they resisted the pressure of Arabization.

A breach within Iranian identity: the "Dark Ages"

After the fall of the Iranian dynasties and the ascendance of the newly converted Turkish sultans, all forms of opposition to mainstream Islam were channelled into various Islamic offshoots. Iran had been weakened by the constant raids conducted by different tribes of Turkish nomads from the steppes, such as the Ghuzz, Qarakhanids, Qarluqs, Saljuqs and Tartars, but most devastatingly by the non-Turkic Mongols. These factors resulted in a period of decline for the continuity of Iranian identity and a departure from the previous multicultural state of affairs. C. Cahen makes the excellent point that

the Arab invasion is sometimes represented as *ipso facto* a penetration by nomads and thus *ipso facto* negative in its results and harmful to agriculture. Such a view may perhaps be partially true of the later invasions of the Turks and, even more, of the Mongols.¹⁰⁶

Although the Turkish nomads introduced neither a new religion nor a distinct culture and impacted language only in Central Asia and Azerbaijan, their relative unfamiliarity with the cultures of their settled neighbours encouraged them to embrace Islam with such fervour that religious prejudice escalated at the expense of science and philosophy. Familiarity with Iranian history faded so much in this era that dictionaries even confused Zoroaster with Abraham, and the mausoleum of Pasargadae was mistaken for the tomb of Solomon's mother. This is the period to which J.S. Tabatabai'i refers as "the era of oblivion and fundamental obscurity."¹⁰⁷

The Saljuq era is considered to be a mixed era in Iranian history: on the one hand, the Iranian influence in the fields of poetry, religious science and administration produces figures as brilliant as Khayyam, Nizam al-Mulk and Ghazali; but on the other hand, this period marks the beginning of Turkish ascendancy, ending in the holocaust of the Mongol invasion. The Saljuq era is therefore beyond the scope of the present study, which focuses only on the continuity of Iranian culture through the beginning of the Islamic period. As R. N. Frye so eloquently puts it, "with the Saljuqs our story ends, since after them the pattern of orthodox Sunni Islam is frozen and the heritage of the Samanids and Ghaznavids is spread by the Saljuqs all over the Islamic world."¹⁰⁸

Iranian contributions to Islam and Islamic theology

Scholars might not agree on the voluntary nature of Iranian conversion to Islam, but they do agree that, once they converted, Iranians contributed to all aspects of Islamic religion and culture. S.H. Nasr believes that the Persian intelligentsia aspired to join the truly international society of a worldwide civilization and showed its enthusiasm by participating in all the facets of this society. These included Qur'anic commentary and reflection on religious jurisprudence. In Nasr's own words,

Without a clear understanding of the role of Iranian scholars in the cultivation of the basic Islamic sciences, such as Quranic commentary (*tafsir*), tradition (*hadith*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and its principals (*usul al fiqh*) and theology (*kalam*), the meaning of the Islamization of Iran on the one hand and Iran's role in the elaboration of Islam and its civilization on the other can never be fully understood.¹⁰⁹

Among the numerous examples of Iranian contributions in this period is one of the earliest and most important commentaries on the Qur'an, namely the *Tafsir-i Tabari*, written by the same Tabari who, as mentioned above, was deprived a proper Islamic burial because authorities doubted the intensity of his religious devotion. Furthermore, two of the four schools of Sunni Islam were created by, and named for, Iranians: Abu Hanifah Dinavari

founded the Hanafi school, and Ahmad b. Hanbal of Marv established the Hanbali school.

The Iranians Ghazali, Tha'alibi and Zamakhshari are popularly considered among the most important Islamic theologians of all time. Islamic schools of thought that represented a departure from Sunnism, such as Mu'tazilism, Isma'ilism and Shi'ism, were also enormously popular among Iranians. Mu'atazilites, whom I shall discuss in depth further below, were derisively labelled the "Majus," or Zoroastrians, of Islam.¹¹⁰

Iranian contributions to science and philosophy

The Golden Age of Islam owed much of its intellectual flowering to translations of scholarship from other civilizations. As Ibn-Khaldun reportedly said,

It is a remarkable fact that, with few exceptions, most Muslim scholars both in the religious and intellectual sciences have been non-Arabs. ... Thus the founders of [Arabic] grammar were Sibawaih and, after him, al-Farisi and az-Zajjaj. All of them were of Persian descent.¹¹¹

Translating scientific texts was a major priority for the 'Abbasids, who commissioned Arabic translations from Greek, Syriac, Pahlavi and Sanskrit scientific sources. This work was carried out by Christians, by Harranians and by Persian translators. Aside from royalty, Persian families such as the above-mentioned Barmakids and the Naubakhts patronized the new scientific movement.

But Iranians were not content simply to translate Pahlavi texts: the ranks of prominent Islamic scientists are disproportionately weighted with brilliant Iranian scientists such as Zakariya Razi, Biruni, Ibn Sina, Ishaq Kandi and 'Umar Khayyam; the family of Persian scribes known as the Banu-Naubakht also contributed broadly to all the intellectual fields mentioned above.¹¹² In medicine, as in all life sciences, Persian work determined not only the course of the first few centuries of Islamic study in general, but the very nature of the field and its future course as well.¹¹³

So, too, to study the history of philosophy and cosmology in Persia from the rise of Islam to the Saljuq period is virtually to study the first phases in the development of Islamic philosophy and cosmology as a whole. Once again, the list of important Islamic philosophers includes many distinguished Iranians such as Abu Nasr Farabi, Ibn Muskawaih Razi, Zakaria Razi, Ibn Sina and Khayyam, followed a few centuries later by Sheikh al-Ishraq Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra. According to S.H. Nasr, the most important intellectual centres of the first four Islamic centuries were either in Persia itself or in close proximity to it: "During this period only a few centres outside of these areas, such as those of Fatimid Egypt, were of any significance for

the development of Islamic philosophy, and even there Persian elements were far from being absent.”¹¹⁴

The Islamic courts also were very interested in soliciting both astronomical and astrological observations. Khayyam, one of the astronomer-mathematicians of Malikshah Saljuk’s court, created the famous Jalali solar calendar, which is still considered to be among the most accurate of preindustrial times. To be an astronomer, one also had to be a mathematician: the term *‘ilm-al-nujum* (science of astronomy) covered both sciences, and the two were not clearly separated until the tenth century CE.¹¹⁵ Indeed, the modern division of sciences had not yet taken place in the golden age of Islam. For example, geographers studied mathematics in order to calculate the latitude and longitude of cities, mountains and seas. Khwarazmi, Mahani, Buzjani, Biruni and Khayyam were among the most outstanding Iranian mathematicians who were also geographers. As a result, Iranian scientists were true Renaissance men. The best exemplar of their scholarly breadth was Biruni, the mathematician, astronomer and philosopher, who accompanied Mahmud of Ghazna on his campaigns to India. He is said by E.S. Kennedy to have developed an

interest in Hindu culture and in the Sanskrit language. His studies culminated in the fascinating *India*, for many centuries the only full description of Indian folklore, religions, philosophy, mythology and superstitions existing outside the subcontinent.¹¹⁶

This record, along with the other works of Biruni, remains an invaluable source to the present day, as are the books of Khwarazmi and Ibn-Sina, which were used as textbooks all over Europe until the Western Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.

The cultural impact of Iran on Islam/Farrah

Although the Arabs conquered Iran, they “were in turn conquered, culturally speaking, by the Persians,” in V. Danner’s memorable phrase.¹¹⁷ This conquest took several forms, including an influence on the Islamic religion itself. It would be difficult to mention every pre-Islamic Iranian tradition or belief that was introduced into Islam, but a few examples can be adduced here.

The concept of “grace” or “glorious fortune” (Old Persian *farnah*, Middle Persian *farrah* or *farr*), for example, is considered to be a fundamentally Iranian notion that informs political, governmental and religious doctrines. The ideal of a blessed kingdom ruled by a righteous king has resonated throughout Iranian history, ever since the time of the Achaemenid Empire. The latter reputedly blessed state, “with its adaptability, its tolerance and its universal [laws,] gave the Persians a model to follow ever afterwards.”¹¹⁸ So, too, the idea of rightful kingship, or of legitimate succession in general,

became critical to claims of legitimacy by many Muslims and by non-Muslim rebels such as Babak, Abu Muslim and so forth. The concept of *farrah* (glorious fortune) figures very strongly in the ideology of Iranian Ismail'ism in particular; J.P. de Menasce argues that the Iranian people under Islam "continued to live on their nostalgia for the charisma of royalty."¹¹⁹

Farrah is also significant for Twelvers and for all the Shi'ite sects that believe Imam Ali to be the rightful successor to the Prophet, according to A. Zarrinkub:

At the bottom of the Shi'i reverence for the imam—the prophet's successor—and the conception that the leadership of the community was a divine and extraordinary office, lay the Iranians' belief that *farrah izadi*, the divine power or aura, should be an essential attribute of the exercise of sovereignty.¹²⁰

The marriage of the third Imam, Husayn, to Shahrbanu, the daughter of the Sasanian King Yazdgird, had the effect of combining both the house of the Prophet with that of the Sasanian kings. The succeeding Imams were hence descendants of both the Prophet Muhammad and the house of Sasan. Whether the marriage of Imam Husayn and Shahrbanu was an actual historical event, or whether it is an invention of Shi'ite mythology, Bibi Shahrbanu is undeniably a respected and beloved figure among Persians; a mountain near Tehran is named in her honour. In modern times she appears as a heroine in the evocative passion-plays (*ta'ziyas*) that are enacted annually. E.G. Browne vividly describes how crowds of spectators are moved to tears by the popular drama *The Passing of Shahrbanu*, wherein the title character sings, "Born of the race of Yazdigird the king/From Nushirwan my origin I trace."¹²¹

Parallels between Zoroastrianism and Islam

In his seminal work *Religion of Ancient Iran*, J. Duchesne-Guillemin identifies the following major Iranian traits in the Qur'an and in Islam:

the episode of men's primordial choice (Qur'an 7.172) is comparable to the choice of the *fravashis* and to the episode in the *Abiyatkar i Zamaspik* ... and where the Amahraspands proclaim the excellence of Ohrmazd. ... The entities Haurvatat and Amaratat became the angels Harut and Marut, whose story also recalls the myth of the Nasatyas.¹²²

Scholars find that Zoroastrianism and Islam are most similar with respect to eschatology. For example, the blessed of both religions enjoy perfumed breezes in heaven while sinners suffer an odiferous hell. In addition, *al-A'raf*, an intermediary stage for those who have committed equal acts of good and

evil during their lifetimes, corresponds to the *Misvan Gatu* of the *Avesta*. Some wonder how it is possible for God to raise the dead in the afterlife, and this inquiry inspires a parallel response in both the *Mēnog i Khrad* and the Qu'ran, in that both sources agree that it is an easier feat for the Lord to raise the dead than it is for Him to create life from that which is inanimate.

Two of the greatest collectors of *hadith* were Isma'il Bukhari of Bukhara and Muslim Qushairi of Nishapur, and the *hadith* that have survived to the present day contain clear parallels to native Iranian ideas. In Zoroastrianism, virtuous people are welcomed to paradise by a beautiful maiden (the Dēn), who personifies their good deeds, while the wicked are confronted by a hideous, foul-smelling old woman. Similarly, in Islam, the departed soul also meets either an attractive or revolting figure upon arriving in the next world, with the only difference that the Islamic figure is male. So, too, the bridge of *Chinvat* in Zoroastrianism corresponds to the Islamic *al-Sirat*, and in both religions it is to be thrown over hell on the day of the Last Judgement. In both cases, the bridge is perceived as being narrower than the width of a hair for the wicked, but comfortably broad for the righteous. Restrictions against wearing silk and against urinating while standing are attested in Zoroastrianism long before their appearance in Islam.¹²³ The practices of reading the Qur'an after the death of a family member and of praying five times a day also have been compared to identical Zoroastrian conventions.

Shi'ite Messianic ideas also were first found in Zoroastrianism. By the time of Islam, both Jews and Christians anticipated the return of a Messiah (or Saviour) after a long absence. As I pointed out in Chapter 3, some scholars believe that these Messianic ideas originated in the Zoroastrian belief that Soshyant, Zoroaster's son, would come at the end of time. In Twelver Shi'ite Islam, the Messiah or Soshyant is replaced by Mahdi, the twelfth Imam, who is expected to appear on Judgement Day.

In his article "Sects and Heresies," B.S. Amoretti makes a good case that, apart from those Islamic elements that obviously were borrowed from Zoroastrianism, many additional symbolic and esoteric devices were used by different Iranian Islamic minorities to remain close to their original pre-Islamic religious tradition. In his opinion, white acquires significance not only because it is the colour of Zoroastrian *mowbed* robes but because it has acquired Islamic historical relevance: white is the colour of the dove into which Abu Muslim was transformed; and moreover, it is the anticipated colour of the horse upon which Mahdi will appear on the Day of Judgement.¹²⁴

Shu'ubiyah and Mu'tazilites

Both the Shu'ubiyah and Mu'tazilite sects attempted to preserve their Iranian identity within its new Islamic context. We have previously seen that

the former group achieved this aim primarily by translating Pahlavi texts into Arabic; ironically, however, they wrote only in Arabic, even when they attacked the Arabs. Alternatively, the latter group comprised theologians and philosophers who tried to reform Islam by replacing the concept of pre-determined destiny with the traditionally Zoroastrian idea of reason and free will.

In Islam, God is omniscient, and His absolute justice, providence and wisdom are the pillars of Truth. The Mu'tazilites, combining Zoroastrian ethics with Greek philosophical rationalism, believed that God delegated human behaviour, and its ensuing responsibility, to mankind. They presented a famous paradox: how is it possible for God to punish a sinner, if He Himself had willed the man to sin? The fatalistic orthodox Islamic view, on the other hand, was inevitably that the Mu'tazilites irreverently took liberties in determining the role of God in the actions of man, and thus deserved to be called the *majus* of Islam.¹²⁵

The Influence of pre-Islamic Iranian culture and visual arts on those of the Islamic era

New Persian literature draws heavily on stories and concepts from ancient Iran. In addition to the *Shahnamah*, the texts *Kalilah va Dimnah*, *Khusrow va Shirin*, *Vis u Ramin*, *Iskandar Namah*, *Sindbad Namah* and many other popular stories were based upon pre-Islamic antecedents. In addition, many concepts and traditions in New Persian literature trace their origins to ancient Iranian history. In his article "The Iranian Bazm in Early Persian Sources," for example, A.S. Melikian-Chirvani demonstrates that the popular *Bazm* (banquet party) motif of early Islamic literature is closely linked to pre-Islamic royal feasts and Zoroastrian celebrations in the works of Firdausi, Manuchihri, Daqiqi, 'Unsuri, Gardizi, Baihaqi and Khaqani. The rites and ceremonies of Mihragan, Nowruz and Sadah, for example, with their essential components of Magian masters, musicians, cupbearers, masters of the table, backgammon playing and wine-drinking, overseen by the figure of an enthroned king in full regalia, were fundamental elements of ancient Persian custom. In Melikian-Chirvani's words, "Given all we begin to understand about Iranian cultural continuity, the likelihood is that the banquet as a form of public court life likewise followed an ancient tradition."¹²⁶

Visual arts

A.U. Pope observes that Persians of all ancient periods did not necessarily distinguish between utilitarian and decorative objects: "considerations of practical utility and invocational symbolism were supplemented and controlled by the Persian love of beauty in all forms."¹²⁷ In Islamic times an evolution occurred in the visual arts, as in literature, but it was largely

an elaboration of established norms “conforming to canons which at times stretched far back into antiquity,” as R.N. Frye puts it.¹²⁸ Any individual item, such as a mosque, a clay pot, a seal, a carpet, a miniature, a calligraphic text or a beautiful shawl, was simultaneously a practical useful object and a beautiful artistic creation. In the absence of distinct Zoroastrian art and architecture, Islamic Iran looked to the imperial architecture and art of cities, palaces, royal tombs, gardens and temples for inspiration. Pope reminds us that Persian architecture has had “a continuous history of more than 6000 years, ... with characteristic examples distributed over a vast area from Syria to North India and borders of China, from the Caucasus to Zanzibar,” and that “throughout [this] long history the characteristic feature has been simple and noble forms richly embellished.”¹²⁹ Indeed, Iranian visual arts and architecture are renowned for their abundance of light, simplicity, rationality and precision.

Rituals and conventions

Many rituals and conventions of pre-Islamic Iran were practised in modified form in Islamic times. We know that the major Iranian feasts, that is, *Jashns* or *Eids*, were of Zoroastrian origin, but they are celebrated without mention of Ahura Mazda or Zoroaster to this day. The celebration of Chaharshanbah-Suri, for example, has its roots in the Zoroastrian feast-day of Hamaspathmaedaya, which was changed in name, and partially in nature, to fit the new norms. Once observed six days before Nowruz, the celebration was moved to the last *Chaharshanbah* (Wednesday) of the year, in accordance with the Arabic belief that Wednesdays were unlucky.¹³⁰

At present Charshanba-Suri is commemorated all over Iran, from Ardabil and Urumiyah to Isfahan and Kirman. People celebrate the day by jumping over small burning bushes, by firing guns, or by setting off firecrackers. Nuts and fruits are distributed as part of the festivities. Although Islam generally frowns on music, the nineteenth-century Iranian theologian Aqa Jamal Khansar “prescribed playing a musical instrument to ward off the bad luck of this day.”¹³¹ This action restored the original merriment to the occasion. After the Islamic revolution of 1979 the Islamic Republic of Iran banned the festivities of Chaharshanba-Suri as pagan and anti-Islamic, but the Iranian people paid no heed and continued to celebrate as they had in the previous centuries. A complete reversal occurred a quarter-century later, when the Islamic government of Iran decided in 2003 to condone the celebration, rechristening it a national feast day.

Traditions and myths have their own way of surviving as they are transmitted from one culture to another. M.A. Islami-Nadushan suggests that the idea of immortality and infallibility, expressed in the Indo-European myths, was transfigured in Islamic times. The desire to acquire physical invulnerability, or Persian *ruin-tani*, like that of legendary figures such as Achilles, Siegfried and Isfandiar, was attributed to Khizr and to Iskandar

(or Alexander) in Islamic times. Ironically, most of those who aspire to become immortal die young:

Though all these heroes sought to drink from the Spring of Life, this ambition was realized only by Khizr. In Sufi literature, Khizr is the antithesis of Iskandar: he seeks spiritual gains though worldly conquest. In the case of Isfandiar, *ruin-tani* is related to spiritual *Farrah* as well.¹³²

Zoroastrian diaspora/Parsees and Yazd

The tenth century CE proved to be a crucial turning point for Zoroastrians and their religion. Initially their fortunes seemed to brighten under the protection of Iranian dynasties and the growth of nationalistic movements. A renaissance of sorts seemed imminent, as fire temples were revived and principal Zoroastrian books were reproduced, not only in Middle Persian but also in other languages. A mid-tenth-century traveller named Istakhri wrote that there was hardly a town or district in Persia in which a fire temple was absent.¹³³

This brief flowering was cut short, however, by the backlash of the 'Abbasid caliphs and the suppression by the Turkish Ghaznavids and Saljuqs. These champions of Sunni Islam imposed new restrictions upon Zoroastrians and inflicted considerable persecution. The resulting state of affairs caused some Zoroastrian communities to migrate, first to the Persian Gulf and thence to Gujarat in India, where they founded what would become a Parsee community. Within Iran itself, there was also an internal migration to Yazd. According to N. Green,

It is against this background that Yazd entered the centre stage of history, when the chief prelate, the Dastur Dasturan, and what may have been the sacred fires of Adur Farnbag and Istakhr from temples in Fars were moved to the village of Sharifabad on the plain of Yazd, probably at some point before the eleventh century.¹³⁴

The villages near Yazd were preferred for their inaccessibility: they were geographically protected from Iranian central power by two principal deserts. The Zoroastrian diaspora community remained isolated in both locations; and it was not until the fifteenth century CE that Zoroastrians of Iran came into sporadic contact with the Parsee community of India. A more steady relationship was established between the two communities only after the Parsees became prosperous under British rule in India.

There is no specific study regarding the Islamic-era Zoroastrian communities of Iran. A case study by J. Pirnazar of a small population of Jews in Mashhad, however, illustrates the pressures on an infidel community set in the midst of Muslim neighbours. But Jews had the benefit of being

considered a “People of the Book,” while Zoroastrians were not consistently perceived as such. As a result, one can imagine that Zoroastrians received even worse treatment.¹³⁵

Iranians against Iranians

Although most Iranians attempted to safeguard their cultural identity, some opted to do the opposite: for a myriad of reasons, ranging from religious conviction to sheer opportunism, many turned their backs on their native religion, culture and countrymen. R.N. Frye points out that Arabs relied heavily on the western Iranians, whether Muslim or not, in their further conquests of other Iranian principalities of central Asia. He cites Tabari’s report that, in the year 77 AH/696 CE, the Arab governor of Khurasan

wished to make a raid in Transoxiana, but ... had to gather horses and weapons to equip his troops and there was no money available for this. So he had to raise a loan from Sogdian merchants, who were willing to invest in a profitable raid.¹³⁶

Economic gain, always an important incentive in human behaviour, certainly played a significant role in this cultural transition.

But belief in the new Islamic faith was also a strong factor in the rift between Iranians, creating a national dilemma that continues into the present: some Iranians put their religious identity as Muslims first and foremost, while others prioritize their Persian national and cultural identity. The Tahirids serve as an early example of the former group, since various sources report that they destroyed Pahlavi texts that might compete with the Qur’an for popular attention.¹³⁷ As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Herodotus believed that Persians were apt to take new inventions and ideas and adopt them as their own;¹³⁸ this process of adaptation has happened repeatedly in Persian history, as in the case of Islam. But Persians of the latter group nevertheless have persevered in maintaining their Iranian identity in the face of great pain and affliction. Frye rightly reflects the challenges faced by this group even as he confirms their ultimate success:

Of all the lands of the Middle East, Iran is perhaps both the most conservative and at the same time the most innovative. Whereas Egypt and Syria, for example, underwent great changes in the course of two millennia of history, Iran seems to have preserved much more of its ancient heritage.¹³⁹

It is true that the tension between the “Muslim-Persian” and “Perso-Muslim” elements in Iranian society lessened somewhat over time, as the hostility towards the Zoroastrian religion exhibited by some newly converted Muslims eventually faded to indifference and to a general ignorance of the

old religion. Even so, Iranians have maintained an essential awareness of their heritage, even if this awareness is rather more disjointed than complete and uninterrupted.

“It is important to note that there never was a *monolithic* even before the Muslim conquest, since the vastness of the land gave rise to significant differences in language and culture between the tribes that constituted different dynasties over time. This fact was critical to all the subsequent losses that Iranians suffered at the hands of Arab, and later Turkish, invaders.” A. Zarrinkub best articulates this view by providing an extraordinary summary of the four centuries from the end of the Sasanian era to the fall of the Buyids, during which time

whatever remained of ancient [Iranian] heritage never regained its unity in a thorough manner and never reclaimed its true identity. In those years, Khurasan fought Tabaristan and Gilan; Dailam attacked Fars and Jibal, Sistan brought misery to Kirman and Ahwaz; Kurds and Dailams tried to destroy Azarbaijan and Jibal. In those times Isphahan was looted by Khurasan, Kirman by Shiraz, Khwarazm at the hands of Ghaznah and Jurjan by Nishabur. The local progenies which had grown in different parts of Iran by attacking each other's territories brought the people of Iran misery and uncertainty. The decline of the power of the caliphate, in addition to the Caliphs' fear of a united central power east of Baghdad, and the struggle for power within this displaced element, were the main reasons for this shattered identity and broken unity.¹⁴⁰

R. Frye and A. Zarrinkub, like many historians before and after them, reveal different but equally important consequences of the Islamic invasion of Iran: while the former scholar stresses the resilience of Iranians, the latter emphasizes their occasional short-sightedness. I would argue that the Iranians of this period employed a creative nationalism that bordered at times on conformism, in order to retain what they could from their past history and identity even as they embraced the new faith and Shi'ism in particular. With one foot in Islam and the other in their traditional culture, Iranians have acquired a fully dual identity rather than the shattered one posited by Zarrinkub.

6 Islamic-era Persian literature

Adab

This chapter will assess Persian literature in the Islamic era in general and the Adab advice genre in particular. I will analyse six significant Adab texts in order to identify persistent features of Iranian culture in this genre, which derived its source material, content, form and inspiration from pre-Islamic Iran. Although they are not the primary focus of this investigation, several marked differences between the Andarz and Adab genres will also be noted: whereas Andarz was founded exclusively upon Iranian morality, the Adab genre has a dual identity representing both the Iranian and the Islamic traditions. Ultimately, however, the close relationship between the Andarz and Adab genres facilitated the preservation of at least some of the pre-Islamic ethical codes.

The previous chapter discussed the ways in which pre-Islamic Iranian identity was modified to suit new Islamic moulds. As I demonstrated, the rise of New Persian language and literature was a primary point of agreement among all Iranians. The widely admired formal sophistication of early New Persian poetry poses a problem regarding its pedigree: some attribute its refinement to its Middle Persian heritage, while others point to its borrowed Arabic metres. In the words of G. Lazard,

From its beginning or very nearly so, Persian poetry was in full possession of its techniques, verse-forms, rhetorical devices, genres and subjects. It emerged like Minerva from the head of Jupiter, fully equipped from the shadows of history.¹

Indeed, Persian literature was the nucleus of Iranian intellectual activity in the Islamic period. From its onset, New Persian poetry and literary prose abounded with philosophical, religious, moral and historic references. Although Iranians composed philosophical and scientific texts primarily in Arabic for the first few centuries AH, C.H. de Fouchécour believes that Persian literature “proceeded in a totally different fashion, turning to the rhetorical and poetic aspects of discourse and relying on the special power of language to exhort and persuade.”²

Persian mythical, epical, historical and lyrical literature was filled with didactic counsels and wise sayings to an unusual degree. While many other cultures have produced great works in the genre of wisdom literature – Hesiod’s *Works and Days* comes readily to mind, as does the Biblical book of Proverbs – this genre was so ubiquitous in classical Persian works that many individual subcategories were distinguished by name: *andarz* (hereditary precepts), *mow’eza* (entreaties), *nasihat* (admonitions), *pand* (counsels), *wasaya* (lessons), *wasiyat* (testaments) and *hikma* (lit. “wisdom,” proverbs).³

The Zoroastrian origin of Adab

The ethical-didactic genre of Persian wisdom literature known as *Andarz* gave rise to the *Adab* genre of the Islamic era, albeit with some modifications. In Chapter 4 we saw that *Andarz* literature, which had its origin in the *Avesta*, was the most important genre in Middle Persian literature. In pre-Islamic Iran, the authors of *Andarz* literature provided both general and specific directives regarding the best moral life in society; they also offered specific advice for daily living, ranging from ordinary activity – for example, eating, sleeping and horse-riding – to conduct in elevated pursuits such as royal service and even kingship.⁴

Adab

The term *adab* can be variously translated as graciousness, as proper demeanour, or as any special work designed to provide “instruction on correct and successful behaviour in any given situation,”⁵ and is frequently employed in all these senses. For the purposes of this study, the term *Adab* will be applied specifically as an equivalent to the word *Andarz*, that is, to refer to a whole genre of literature. Some scholars, such as D. Khaleghi-Motlagh, have used *adab* interchangeably with *andarz* in all periods, though most scholars prefer a distinction between pre-Islamic and Islamic terms. We have already noted in Chapters 3 and 4 that much of the extant Middle Persian and *Andarz* literature was saved by the work of the Iranian translators and scribes who rendered the texts first into Arabic and then into New Persian. O. Klima notes with irony that

the majority of cultured Islamic Persians were clandestinely true to the old faith or Manichaeism, and from time to time persecution from the fanatical caliphs was directed against them. But it was these very men who had taken upon themselves the task of translating the most mature and important of the Middle Persian literary creations into Arabic.⁶

I already have mentioned Ibn-al Muqaffa’, Ibn al-Hamid, Tabari, Tha’alibi and others who translated sayings of pre-Islamic sages and kings into Arabic.

In early Arabic translations, individual sayings are attributed consistently to certain sages and kings; while this happenstance does not prove textual authorship, it demonstrates at the very least that the early Arabic translators – unlike their later Arab counterparts – took great care to associate particular texts with traditional figures.⁷

Those people who remained clandestine Zoroastrians or Manichaeans not only preserved Middle Persian literature in its original or translated form but also established a new literary genre written in both Arabic and Persian and known as Adab. The Iranian intelligentsia performed the threefold task of preserving Middle Persian literature, translating it into Arabic, and creating a new genre based upon, and inspired by, the Andarz literature. In Chapter 4, I noted that sources of Andarz literature and pre-Islamic counsels included the *Avesta*, Zoroaster's *Gathas*, Sasanian sages and *mowbeds*, as well as mythical, epical and historical kings and heroes. The Islamic-era elimination of the *Avesta*, Zoroaster and the Sasanian *mowbeds* from the Adab genre, however, left mostly secular personalities such as kings, heroes and statesmen to be adduced as the original sources of didactic literature.

Ardashir, Anushirvan and Buzurgmihr, all of whom had appeared in Andarz literature, went on to become the most frequently cited figures in the Islamic-era Adab works.⁸ The genre of Adab borrowed from Middle Persian as well as from other Middle Iranian languages and their affiliates; we must remember that Andarz literature was written in Parthian and Sogdian as well as Middle Persian, and its survival on multiple fronts increased its visibility, and thus the extent of its influence, during the creation of the early Islamic Adab literature.⁹

Authors of Adab: Ibn al-Muqaffa', 'Abd al-Hamid and Jahiz

The first extant works of the Adab genre are attributed to Ibn al-Muqaffa', who, as previously mentioned, lived in the early second Islamic century and was executed in c.143 AH/759 CE at the age of 36. F. Gabrielli memorably credits the creation of the whole genre of Adab to

the Iranian genius Ibn al-Muqaffa', who can be described as the true creator of this enlarged conception of Adab, with his versions of foreign, historical, and literary works (*Khwadaynamah* and *Kalilah va Dimnah*) and his original and ethical and didactic tracts (*al-Adab al-kabir* and *al-saghir*).¹⁰

Most of the original works by Ibn al-Muqaffa' have been lost, although larger parts of his works have been preserved through later translations such as *Kalilah va Dimnah* and the *Namah-i Tansar* ("Letter of Tansar"). Some original Arabic texts also survive in long citations of Ibn Qutaibah, Ibn Miskawayh and Abu Hasan Amiri. The texts of *Adab al-Kabir* and *al-Saghir*,

by Ibn al-Muqaffa', survived in Arabic but are clearly influenced by the moral tenets of the *Avesta*.¹¹

'Abd al-Hamid was another great Iranian writer and transmitter of the second century AH who authored the book of *Epistles* and who has been called "the pioneer of Arabic epistolography;"¹² in the view of C. Pellat, some of his work "attempts to blend Islamic teachings with Iranian traditions on court etiquette, which is a notable feature of early Adab literature."¹³ What was begun by Ibn al-Muqaffa' and by 'Abd al-Hamid was continued by many other Arab and Persian writers who continued to write in Arabic and who brought the Adab genre to its zenith. By the third century AH the Islamic world was rapidly developing an international dimension. As a result, the subjects of Arabic and Adab literature extended beyond old Arabic poetry and prose and Iranian epic, fables and gnomes to include the Indian world of fables as well as Greek philosophy, ethics and economics.

The most prominent representative of the third-century Arabic Adab genre was Jahiz the Mu'tazilite, who is credited by F. Gabrielli for having "extended the heritage bequeathed to Muslim society in the previous century by Ibn al-Muqaffa'."¹⁴ Unlike Ibn al-Muqaffa', however, Jahiz was critical of the patriotism of the Persian secretaries (*dabirs*), because, as he saw it,

as soon as a secretary has learned Bozorgmeh's maxims, Ardashir's testament, 'Abd-al-Hamid's epistles, and Ibn al-Muqaffa's *adab*, as soon as he has made of the 'Book of Mazdak' the source of his knowledge and of *Kalilah va Dimnah* the secret treasure of his wisdom, he fancies he is the great Faruq (the caliph 'Omar) on administrative affairs.¹⁵

Although the third-century AH Adab literature departed in content from the original second-century Adab, which had focused primarily on Iranian themes, it remained faithful to its original model in form. What Jahiz and others protested against was not the form of Adab literature and/or the influence of the secretaries *per se*, but rather the existence of an Iranian resistance that was in full bloom by this time. Jahiz rejects as Iranian intelligentsia the secretaries who regard an Iranian heritage as more significant than an Islamic one, alleging that

they defame the Qur'an by calling it self-contradictory, describe the traditions as lies, and deny the superiority of the Prophet Muhammad's companions. They regard Sha'bi as stupid, Ibn Jubayr as ignorant, and Nakha'ii as unimportant. At the end of every gathering, they cite Ardashir's sayings on administration and Anushirvan's on statecraft as proof of every point. None of these *dabirs* has bothered to learn the Qur'an and study exegesis, theology and precedent, or if they have bothered they show no interest.¹⁶

Jahiz calls Ibn al-Muqaffa' and several other secretaries by the derogatory term *zindiq* (heretic; apostate), which was used generally to refer to Manichaeans, Zoroastrians and Shu'ubites.

Didactic Persian poetry

The floruit of New Persian literature, and of the new genre of poetry in particular, also dates to the third century AH. Whether or not the foundations of Persian poetry were laid before this time, the earliest extant Persian poetry, by such authors as Hanzala Badghisi and Bu Salik Gurgani, belongs to this third-century era, and it is filled with moral and practical advice; thus we can see that moralizing instruction was not the exclusive domain of the Adab genre. Moreover, this new literary form continued to thrive in, for example, the works of Rudaki, who evidently committed the animal fables of *Kalilah va Dimnah* (or Sanskrit *Panchatantra*) to *mathnavi* verse, though his rendition unfortunately has not survived to the present day.¹⁷

Fourth-century AH Persian literature maintains the traditions of wisdom literature and panegyric poetry. Shahid Balkhi, Abu al-Fath Busti, Abu Tahir Khusravani and Daqiqi all addressed issues of morality and etiquette; Z. Safa reminds us that the *Afarinnamah* of Shakur Balkhi, which seems to have become a model for future verse *mathnavis*,

touch[ed] on social and moral matters, rules of conduct, man's duty to control his instincts and improve his mind through knowledge and understanding, reveal[ing] an outlook similar to that which we find in the Pahlavi *andarz* books.¹⁸

The main characteristic of Persian poetry, however, was the full blooming of the epic genre, as exemplified by Firdausi's undisputed masterpiece, the *Shahnamah*. In the words of G. Lazard, "this genre, unknown in Arabic, is completely Iranian and illustrates in the clearest fashion the continuity between pre-Islamic literature and that of Muslim Iran."¹⁹ Firdausi, born in c. 325 AH, based his *Shahnamah* on a variety of Persian sources, ranging from Middle Persian texts to the work of later Iranian artists such as Abu Mansuri and Daqiqi. The epic comprises more than 50,000 lines (or couplets) and is considered to be second only to the *Avesta* among the most important Iranian texts ever written.

The epic genre, like other varieties of Persian poetry, is replete with counsel and with pre-Islamic narratives. Encouraged by the *Shahnamah*, the epic poets of this era included many ancient Iranian *andarz* in their poetry. The later epics of Iran, such as Abu Shakur's *Faramarznamah*, Asadi Tusi's *Garshasbnamah*, Nizami's *Iskandarnamah* and Badai'i Balkhi's *Pandnamah*, were all rich in advice. So, too, the Persian epic literature underscores higher ethical principles; and indeed, of all the different versions of

Persian poetry, the epic genre is the most vocal with respect to moral values.

The content of the Adab genre

In the period leading up to the early years of the fifth century AH, when pre-Islamic Iranian culture was still dominant, works of counsel were composed in several ways: they were translated from Pahlavi, rendered from original adaptations written in Arabic, or taken from the advice given in Persian poetry. Z. Safa concludes that the reader was urged to learn the conventions of social life and to make himself acceptable to society by acquiring

good manners and good speech, working hard and guarding against laziness, shunning falsehood and injustice, and always being truthful and honest, and generally [adorning] himself with virtue, knowledge and skill. Significantly little or nothing is said about devotions and spiritual or bodily asceticism, let alone fasting and vigil-keeping, as means to divine favor and celestial reward. In other words, negative ideas about life do not enter into their concept of piety.²⁰

One characteristic of Adab literature was that, though it sometimes addressed the concerns of commoners, more often than not its counsel was directed towards kings and princes. Another characteristic was that Adab texts were organized according to themes, as opposed to stories. C.H. de Fouchécour identifies three devices that predominate Adab literature:

the maxim, expressed sonorously and poetically in order that it might remain in memory; the anecdote (*hikaya*), often specifically illustrating such an elevated pronouncement; and verse exploiting the full potential of language. Indeed, even systematic moral thought, when first expressed in Persian, was presented with emphasis on rhetoric and poetics: the chronological evolution of Persian moral thought can thus be witnessed in the development of elevated locutions.²¹

Breaking with the past/Sufism

The advent of Turkish rule and the concomitant weakening of Zoroastrianism and of Iranian political power were accompanied by the rise of Sufi literature and poetry. The Sufi influence is maintained to the present day, and Sufi literature is undeniably a most acclaimed and beloved component of Persian literature. It also has been called “the most universal part of Persian literature[, ...] destined to play a crucial role for many centuries in the spiritual and religious life of numerous nations of Asia, near and far.”²² On the other hand, more secular scholars such as A. Kasravi, S.J. Tabatabai'i and R. Davari²³ fault Sufism both for its renunciation of the world and

worldly success and for its advocacy of what is perceived by critics to be a passive and an uncreative life.

Sufi thought and literature, which enjoyed prominence in the fifth- and sixth-century AH writings of Abu al-Sa'id Abi al-Khayr, Sanaii and Attar, received an additional boost after the Mongol holocaust of 617–19 AH. Sufism and its poetry spread in the seventh century AH as it became increasingly popular: some scholars link its pre-eminence to the Mongol invasion of Iranian lands, arguing that Sufism provided emotional comfort and justified complacency for those who had survived the catastrophe. Although this scholarly theory may have a measure of truth to it, H. Katouzian reminds us that the “claim that Sufism is simply born of and sustained by wretchedness, rather like Nietzsche’s claim that Christianity is ‘slave morality,’ totally ignores the fact that Sufism is part of the long tradition of mysticism that has existed on four continents since history began.”²⁴

In support of Katouzian’s point, I demonstrated in Chapter 3 that Mani’s teachings were very close to later Sufi poetry both in metaphor and in content. Esoteric and Gnostic ideas that were later manifested in Sufism could be found in abundance in Mesopotamia, in both Judaism and Christianity as well as in other regional religions. These religions in turn influenced those of Iran before the advent of Islam; and while conventional Zoroastrianism could not absorb Esoteric and Gnostic tenets, they did find a place in Manichaeism and among Zurvanite heretics (see Chapter 3).

By the fifth and sixth centuries AH Islam provided a fertile soil for all the Esoteric and Gnostic schools, including the Iranian ones. S.H. Nasr points out that, while Sunni Islam had both exoteric and esoteric dimensions, Shi’ite Islam was structured around just the latter.²⁵ In other words, while Sufism was the Gnostic school of Sunni Islam, Shi’ism was itself a Gnostic school.

Iranian culture under the Turks

In Chapter 5, I discussed the impact of Turkish rule on Iranian identity, citing the views of several scholars who view this impact as largely debilitating. In contrast to this view, other historians believe that the majority of Turkish rulers were guided by their Iranian viziers towards an appreciation of Iranian culture: for example, Persian became the literary language of the Turkish courts.²⁶ These historians point to evidence that Iranian court customs and literature upheld the *Khudaynamah*, whether in its Arabic or its Persian translation. Many Persian scholars were patronized by Turkish sultans who wished to have collections of ancient traditions translated, not only for their own enjoyment but also as a means of establishing legitimacy for themselves: in the vivid words of O. Klima,

many an Amir, Shah, and Sultan of Turkish origin learnt then to his surprise and satisfaction that he was a direct descendant of Jamshid,

Manuchihr, Isfandiyr or some other figure of ancient mythology, or, at the very worst, at least of the Sasanians.²⁷

The Ottoman rulers also traced their origins to Jamshid and to other mythical Iranian kings.²⁸

Turkish pro-Persian sentiment is suggested by the first work of Turkish literature known to us, written in 1069 CE in the genre sometimes called “The Mirror for Princes”; its date situates it within Adab literature.²⁹ On this basis, scholars such as Z. Safa and R. Frye have tended to blame the Shi’ism of the Safavid period, and not the Turks, for the fact that the Islamic-era Iranian royal courts distanced themselves from their native Iranian heritage. Z. Safa observes that, up to the end of the ninth century AH/fifteenth century CE, despite the constantly growing influence of Islamic teachings and Sufi literature, Iranian counsel still was valued and placed on a par with Arabic counsel; this was not the case, however, in subsequent centuries:

The Shi’ism of Safavid times fell under the sway of the scholars of Arab descent from Jibal, A’mel, Bahrain, etc., whom the Safavid kings invited to Iran to direct the training of Shi’ite ‘*olama* [or schools of religious thought]. These scholars naturally took no interest in Iranian counsels, their concerns being to propagate Shi’ism and Arab culture. Thus Buzurgmihr is replaced by Loqman, and even then, the maxims are usually accompanied by corroborative reports of words or deeds of the Shi’ite imams.³⁰

It appears that both continuity and change in Iranian society, literature and ethos over time can be attributed not to a single cause, but rather to a seemingly unlimited number of factors. Two important aspects relevant to the subject of this study help to explain how Iranians succeeded in preserving some of their cultural heritage: first, the very reinvention of the New Persian language enabled Iranians to resist the onslaught of Arabic language and literature; and second, by choosing Shi’ite Islam, Iranians again opted to belong to a minority rather than to be absorbed into the mainstream of Sunni Islam. H. Eneyat defines the ethos of Shi’ism as “an attitude of mind which refuses to admit that majority opinion is necessarily true or right ... [and having] the inherent virtue of belonging to a militant minority.”³¹ In an effort to maintain their sense of identity, Iranians chose to march to this beat, the beat of a different drummer.

The Adab genre

In order to examine the Adab genre I will analyse Islamic-era counsels in Persian literature in general and from the following books in particular: ‘Unsur al-Ma’ali Ibn Iskandar’s fifth-century AH *Qabusnamah* (“Mirror for Princes”) and both the *Kimiya-yi Sa’adat* (“Alchemy of Happiness”) and the

late fifth-century AH *Nasihat al-Muluk* ("Book of Counsel for Kings") of Imam Muhammad Ghazali. I will also refer to Nizam al-Mulk Tusi's sixth-century *Siyasatnamah* ("Book of Government") and the seventh-century *Akhlaq-i Nasiri* ("Nasirean Ethics") of the Shi'ite philosopher Nasir al-Din Tusi.

Another work that will appear in this study is an early Shi'ite theological book of *hadith* by the name of *Usul-i Kafi*, composed in the fourth century AH by Kulaini; while this work is not part of the Adab genre, it is of utmost importance for this study because, in the words of 'A. Tabatabai'i, it "contains 16,199 *hadiths* [and] is the most trustworthy and celebrated work of *hadith* known in the Shi'ite world."³² Kulaini and Ghazali are the two most religious writers of this group: the former was a Shi'ite theologian, and the latter a Sunni scholar. 'Unsur al-Ma'ali, Nizam al-Mulk and Nasir al-Din, on the other hand, were statesmen with broad interests. Nasir al-Din in particular was both a philosopher and a scientist. These books continue to be popular in present-day Iran and are widely read by both laymen and academics. With the exception of Kulaini, whose book is not a work of Adab *per se*, these authors extensively draw on pre-Islamic Iranian sources.

It is worth mentioning that many non-Adab Persian books belonging to different genres, such as the *Shahnamah* and the *Tarikh-i Baihaqi*, took it upon themselves to repeat and thus to preserve the counsels of the pre-Islamic Andarz genre. *Kalilah va Dimnah* and *Gulistan* have not been included among advice texts for the purposes of this study, even though they contain compelling moral lessons and ethical advice, because they are formally categorized in the story genre. While Adab books are primarily inspired by Iranian literature and by the Andarz genre in particular, they also have roots in Greek and Islamic texts.

The themes of Adab

Wisdom or faith, free will or fate?

Attitudes of the Islamic-era Adab genre can be compared with those of Andarz literature. The most recognizable virtues in pre-Islamic *andarz* were *khirad* (wisdom), *danish* (knowledge) and *farzanigi* (sagacity). In *Usul-i Kafi*, the Shi'ite book of *hadith*, Kulaini cites the Fifth Imam Baqir as saying that when God created Wisdom at the creation of the world, He proclaimed, "I swear to My majesty and dignity that I have not created any creature dearer to Me than you, and I bestow you fully on the people I love the best."³³ This Shi'ite *hadith* echoes the *Menog i Khrad*, mentioned in Chapter 4, in professing that of all the good things given to people, wisdom is the best. Again, the Sixth Imam, Ja'far-i Sadiq, is quoted by Kulaini as saying, "the Prophet said God has not granted anything better than reason to his creatures, since the sleeping of a wise man is better than the waking of a fool."³⁴

At the end of the fifth century AH, the importance of wisdom is still strongly emphasized in Adab texts. Ghazali, arguably the single most prominent Sunni theologian and legal scholar, tries in his book *Kimiya-yi Sa'adat* ("The Alchemy of Happiness") to maintain a balance between wisdom, logic and knowledge of the mind on one hand, and knowledge of God and religion on the other. In another of his renowned books, entitled *Tahafut al-Falasifa* ("The Incoherence of the Philosophers"), reason and logic are tools used to demonstrate the shortcomings and errors of philosophers. We can detect an inherent contradiction in his words, however, because he disparages as ignorant those who oppose science and philosophy in the name of Islam.

The man who is loyal to Islam but ignorant ... thinks that religion must be defended by rejecting every science connected with the philosophers, and so rejects all their sciences and accuses them of ignorance. ... A grievous crime indeed against religion has been committed by the man who imagines that Islam is defended by the denial of the mathematical sciences.³⁵

It is remarkable that Ghazali celebrates the Soul as King of the Body in his allegorical Adab works, while Reason is demoted to vizier status.³⁶ By Ghazali's time, there was a general consensus among all Muslims – Sunnis, Shi'ites, 'Abbasids and Fatimids – that a charismatic leader of the house of the Prophet should rule the entire Muslim world. Invoking the kingdom as a metaphor for the body was very much in tune with political realities of the time; in fact, Ghazali wrote several books specifically in the genre sometimes called "The Mirror for Princes." Although most of his works were written in Arabic, he turned to Persian for his treatise on kingship, the *Nasihāt al-Muluk* ("Counsel for Kings").³⁷

I noted above that the *Nasihāt al-Muluk* is one of the Adab works upon which this study will focus; however, discrepancies between the tone and content of this and other works of Ghazali has caused its Persian editor, J. Humaii, to doubt the authenticity of certain sections of this text and to suggest that the text might actually have been composed by Ghazali's famous brother, the Sufi poet Ahmad.³⁸ While Humaii himself admits that such a view cannot be corroborated without further evidence based on scholarly research, the relevant discrepancies nevertheless will be noted as we proceed.

One instance in which the *Nasihāt al-Muluk* resembles Persian *andarz* more than Islamic theology is when it considers the value of human intelligence:

It is reported in the Traditions that God on High created intelligence in the best (possible) form, and said to it 'Go' and it went. Again he said to

it 'Come' and it came. Then He said: 'In (all) the Universe I have created nothing better and finer than you.'³⁹

Again, a few lines later, the text cites Sa'id Ibn Jubayr as having said: "I never saw a finer garment on any person than intelligence. If a man is broken, it mends him."⁴⁰ Ghazali agrees that "the first thing that intelligent men need is knowledge coupled with intelligence."⁴¹

The *Qabusnamah* of 'Unsur al-Ma'ali, the ruling prince of Tabaristan, is the earliest of the Adab books addressed in this study, and it also is closer in spirit to the Andarz genre than the other such texts. Aside from Ghazali and Kulaini, the three remaining Adab writers whose works are studied here were state officials; indeed, both Nizam al-Mulk Tusi and Nasir al-Din Tusi were viziers, the former being Grand Vizier in the Saljuq court for three decades, from 455 to 485 AH. Nasir al-Din Tusi was an astronomer and mathematician who is said to have accepted the position of Grand Vizier for the Mongol Hulaku in order to save as many books, buildings and observatories as he could from the flames of Mongolian raids. Although all the five writers of the Adab texts mentioned above claimed to be, and probably were, devout Muslims, we can observe a difference in tone and emphasis on religiosity among them which makes the statesmen's writings, at times, seem more secular and pragmatic.

On the subject of wisdom and intelligence, 'Unsur al-Ma'ali addresses his son at the end of his work, saying:

Consider, my son, that I have in this book composed forty-four chapters, each upon some topic of which I had knowledge. ... The one exception is the subject of wisdom, for I can in no fashion tell you that you are under an obligation to be intelligent and wise. One cannot become intelligent by compulsion.⁴²

'Unsur al-Ma'ali goes on to distinguish between innate and acquired intelligence, and while the former is the gift of God and cannot be learned, acquired intelligence could, and should, be enhanced. He advises an aspiring "man of wisdom" to "acquire philosophy:" "As Aristotle said ... 'Every man's strength is derived from his food, and the food of wisdom is derived from philosophy.'⁴³ Nasir al-Din also praises philosophy thus:

The term *philosophy*, as commonly used by the learned, signifies knowing things as they are and fulfilling functions as one should, within the measure of ability, so that the human soul may arrive at the perfection to which it is directed. ... This being so, philosophy is divided into two, Theory and Practice. ... In whomsoever these two concepts are realized, such is a perfect philosopher and a man of excellence, his rank being the highest among human kind.⁴⁴

Those Iranian thinkers who believe that Sufism holds material achievement in contempt (i.e., A. Kasravi, R. Davari and S.J. Tabatabai'i;⁴⁵ see further above) argue that Islamic theology and philosophy more generally value faith over reason. The study of early Adab literature shows, however, that intelligence and wisdom continued to be praised as God's finest gifts to mankind for the first few centuries after the advent of Islam. Intelligence and wisdom were means by which one could know God and were therefore indispensable.

Moreover, a few lines on self-knowledge in Ghazali's *Alchemy of Happiness* are reminiscent of the Pahlavi *Pandnamah*, cited in Chapter 4, wherein self-inquiry was deemed to be obligatory for a Zoroastrian. Ghazali echoes the phraseology of Pahlavi texts in stressing the importance of self-knowledge:

Knowledge consists in knowing the following things: What art thou in thyself and from whence hast thou come? Whither art thou going, and for what purpose hast thou come to tarry here awhile, and in what does thy real happiness and misery consist? Some of thy attributes are those of animals, some of devils, and some of angels, and thou hast to find out which of these attributes are accidental and which essential.⁴⁶

"The Golden Age of Islam" is a popular designation for the first centuries of the new religion. Iranian philosophers and scientists such as Farabi, Ibn-Sina and Biruni are frequently seen as major contributors to all realms of thought; and so what J. Matini calls "the decline of rationality" was gradual and came later. Matini argues that, while in Zoroastrianism

human beings are the main players in the fight between good and evil, responsible for their own actions, ... in Islam ... the polemics between the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites reached such a state that ... Ash'arites totally rejected the principle of 'causality' which is the basis of logical analogy.⁴⁷

Ash'arites argued that the consequential relationship between fire and burning had nothing to do with cause and effect, but it was rather God's will in practice that fire burned.⁴⁸ In the words of 'Allamah al-Hilli,

The Ash'arites say that there is nothing in reason which can guide to (a knowledge of) good and evil in this third sense, but law (must be the guide), and whatever it calls good is good, and whatever it calls evil is evil. And Mu'tazilites and Imamites say that there *is* that in reason which can guide to it, and that good is good in itself, and evil is evil in itself, whether the lawgiver pronounces it so or not.⁴⁹

'A. Tabatabai'i points out that reason, logic and philosophy, though frowned upon by Ash'arites and Sunnis, were alive and thriving among the Shi'ites.

While philosophy disappeared in the Sunni world after Ibn Rushd, it continued to live in Shi'ism: celebrated philosophers such as Khwajah Nasir al-Din Tusi, Mir Damad and Sadr al-Din Shirazi studied, developed and expounded philosophical thought one after another.⁵⁰

As I have noted, even though Gnostic tendencies and the criticism of reason and philosophy in Mesopotamia were not Islamic innovations, it was only after the arrival of Islam that these tendencies became widespread in Iran. In any case, the most important influence on Adab literature up to the end of the fifth century AH was the pre-Islamic Iranian culture. Furthermore, even in the seventh century AH, one can still find favourable opinions of logic and knowledge in works of non-Sufi thinkers such as the philosopher Nasir al-Din Tusi:

One must practice close adherence to the laws of logic, scrutinizing premises and investigating the syllogistic form with an extreme degree of curiosity and a full measure of circumspection. ... The true case of ignorance is that the soul is devoid of the virtue of knowledge, without being contaminated by the conviction that it has acquired knowledge.⁵¹

Love versus reason and fate versus free will

The polarization of reason and love occurred later, as Sufi metaphors and terminology swept through Persian literature. This schism manifested itself particularly clearly in poetry. In his article "Reason and Love," Shafi'i Kadkani notes that

long before the first Persian poetry, this confrontation existed not in Arabic or Persian literature but in the polemics of Islamic dialectic theologians (Mutakallams), especially between the Ash'arites and Mu'tazilites ... which in the initial stages was not 'love' but 'faith' or 'guidance.'⁵²

Perhaps it was the combined attacks of the Jurists and of the anti-intellectual, ascetic mystical movement of Sufism that dealt reason a death blow in Persian literature after the sixth century AH/twelfth-thirteenth centuries CE.⁵³

In Chapter 4, I noted that a balanced approach had been established in pre-Islamic Andarz literature between fate on the one hand and human action and will on the other. Deliberation on ethical choices and moral behaviour implied a belief in free will, but no-one could deny the importance of fate in human destiny. Thus, in the oldest Persian advice literature, effort (*kushesh*) was constantly opposed to fate (*bakht*).

Man must be confronted with a certain array of choices; if everything is fated or predestined, he has no need for morality. ... The debate

over human free will and its limits, which has occupied theologians and philosophers through the centuries, found few echoes in Persian moral thought, which is based on exhortation to effort.⁵⁴

God's omnipotence is unassailable in both Shi'ism and Sunnism. Kulaini records, for example, the following oath of Imam Ja'far-i Sadiq:

I swear to God that if all the inhabitants of the skies and the earth come together to save a human whom God has willed to be misled, they cannot; and if all the inhabitants of the skies and the earth come together to mislead a human whom God wants saved, they cannot.⁵⁵

In Sunni theology we find the same view of God's supremacy expressed by Ghazali:

He has power over everything and his might is complete. The eight heavens, the seven earths, the throne, the stool, and all existing things are in the grip of His power and in no other hand but His. If all the humans, jinns, devils, and angels in the universe joined (in an attempt) to move, fix, diminish, or increase a single molecule of the universe, they would be too weak to be able to do so unless He so willed. ... Everything that is, was, or will be has been predestined and planned by him.⁵⁶

At the heart of the debate is the question of God's justice, which is in turn focused on how God can punish what He Himself has willed. E.G. Browne has identified an issue that was especially problematic for the Iranian world view: that is,

the old dilemma that the Creator, if He could have prevented the appearance of Evil in the universe, and did not do so, cannot be all-Good, while if He wished to prevent it, but could not, He cannot be all-Powerful.⁵⁷

Islamic theologians have established a novel position in an attempt to avoid the belief in either fatalism or free will. The famous Arabic saying *La jabr wa la ikhtiar, bal amr-i bayn al-amrayn* may be translated as "There is no free will or fatalism, but the station in between." The Shi'ites teach that those who think human beings are the source of good and evil are wrong, and that those who say our bad actions are God's will are also incorrect. In the Shi'ite denomination, it is virtually impossible to explain the nature of this middle road. Imam Ja'far Sadiq asserts that "It is neither fate, nor choice, but a place where God dwells. No one knows the place, except the learned person, or one whom the learned has taught."⁵⁸

Scholars argue that the balance between fate and human action, which was characteristic of pre-Islamic Iran, was lost in Islamic times. Even the

Shahnamah, perhaps in response either to Islamic ideology or to the defeat of the Sasanians and of Zoroastrianism, contains many references to a destiny that is determined by the stars; H. Muntazam counts forty-five instances in which the word *budaniha*, only one of the many equivalents for “fate,” has been used by Firdausi.⁵⁹ On the other hand, some scholars, such as C.H. de Fouchécour, deny that Firdausi originated the fatalistic tendencies of the last millennium of Persian literature, noting that fate was not divine in pre-Islamic Iranian moral thought and that there is no evidence in Firdausi’s work that destiny is ordained by God. These scholars focus on Sufism instead: under its influence, a divine scheme for the universe was fundamental to the idea of God’s Perfection.⁶⁰

As in the *Andarz* genre, practicality is an invaluable attribute in Islamic Adab. R. Levy’s appraisal of the *Qabusnamah* applies equally to the *Siyasat-namah* and to other secular Adab works:

With expediency always his first consideration, [the author’s] words cannot be regarded as containing the ideals or ideas of all Persians, still less of all Muslims. Indeed, they no more reflect official Islamic doctrine and ethical theory than Machiavelli’s Prince or Lord Chesterfield’s Letters those of Christianity.⁶¹

Hafiz sums up the contradiction between belief in Fate and human endeavour in the phrase *Garchi visalash nah bih kushish dahend, har qadar ay dil kih tavani bekush*, which may be translated “although union with God is not granted through endeavour, nevertheless, O heart, endeavour with all your might.”⁶²

‘Ilm or knowledge

There are hundreds of Qur’anic verses and *hadiths* in both the Sunni and Shi’ite denominations of Islam that support the concept of ‘*ilm*, meaning science or knowledge. In both traditions, however, the term almost exclusively pertains to religious learning. A famous Arabic *hadith* recorded by Kulaini is attributed to Imam Ja’far-i Sadiq: *Al-ulama Varasath al-Anbia*, meaning that the holders of ‘*ilm* are the inheritors of the prophets.⁶³ Kulaini follows this *hadith* immediately with one of the Prophet’s, claiming that the only true ‘*ilm* is in knowing the Qur’anic tradition, and that religious orders and the like are *fazl*, that is, “excess.” Ghazali also writes that people exist in this world only to acquire knowledge for the next:

This world is a stage or market-place passed by pilgrims on their way to the next. It is here that they provide themselves with provisions for the way, or to put it plainly, man acquires here, by the use of his bodily senses, some knowledge of the works of God, and through them, of God Himself. ... It is for the acquirement of this knowledge

that the spirit of man has descended into this world of water and clay.⁶⁴

Education

Although the canonical view does not evince much enthusiasm for education beyond religious learning, secular Adab texts still manage to pay tribute to worldly knowledge. 'Unsur al-Ma'ali states that "in view of this knowledge, you must acquire skill in the arts."⁶⁵ He adds:

As long as a man lacks accomplishments he remains without value (then resembling the Arabian thorn tree, which, though possessing a trunk, casts no shade) and is of use neither to himself or others.⁶⁶

Nasir al-Din reminds us that rearing a child means preparing him for the difficulties that lie ahead in life:

It was a practice among the kings of Persia not to have their children reared among retainers and servants, but to send them away with trustworthy persons, so that they should grow up used to hard living and to rough fare and clothing, and averse to luxury. ... In Islamic times, the rulers of Dailam have had the very same custom.⁶⁷

The *Qabusnamah* emphasizes a parent's duty to teach "children" all they need, but a few lines later, the term "children" becomes "sons." This type of education encompassed everything a man needed to survive. Of course, different classes of people needed to teach their sons different things:

Do not withhold your own portion from him; the sons of men of quality can have no better heritage than accomplishments and skill in the arts, while for the sons of the common people there is nothing better than craftsmanship and learning.⁶⁸

Nasir al-Din also thinks highly of secular education and believes it should be taught in five spheres and in the following order:

First, the science of the Correction of Dispositions; second the science of Logic, third the science of Mathematics; fourth, Natural Sciences; and fifth, Divine Sciences. We mean by this that instruction must be given in this sequence, so that the benefit thereof may speedily occur in both worlds.⁶⁹

Nizam Al-Mulk's *Siyasatnamah* is a pragmatic treatise dealing with practical problems of governing, and is not a work of Adab *per se*. It emphasizes the

importance of appointing competent officials and therefore promotes the evaluation of professional experience and education.

Today, there are men, utterly incapable, who hold ten posts, and if another appointment were to turn up, they would apply for it, giving bribes if necessary ... [regardless of] whether they have any ability, whether they understand secretaryship, administration, and business dealings ... and all the time there are capable, earnest, deserving, trustworthy and experienced men left unemployed, sitting idle in their homes; and no one has the imagination or discernment to inquire why one unknown, incapable, base-born, ignorant fellow should occupy so many appointments, while there are well known noble and trusted men who have no work at all.⁷⁰

A relatively unusual chapter in Ghazali's *Counsel for Kings* is entitled "On the Art of the Pen and the Function of Secretaries." In this chapter, Ghazali lists the characteristics of a good secretary, of good penmanship, of a good pen, and even of a good pen-carver. His theological respect for penmanship surpasses his practical concerns:

Scholars have said that there is nothing so fine as the pen, because through it all past events may be reconstituted. Among the fine points of the pen, one is that God on High has sworn oaths by it: in the words of His book (Q. ixviii.i), ... 'By the pen and what they inscribe', and in another place (Q. xcvi.3-4), 'Recite And your Lord is the Most Generous, Who taught by the pen' (Moreover) God's apostle, blessing upon him, stated: 'The first thing that God created was the pen,' meaning (in Persian), 'When God on High created the first thing, He created the pen.' With it He determines that which will occur until the Resurrection (day).⁷¹

Thus, although the Adab genre is keener on *'ilm* as religious knowledge, it still pays tribute to secular and practical knowledge and education.

Prudence and moderation

In Chapter 4, I demonstrated that prudence and moderation were fundamental virtues in advice literature and in aphorisms, not only in Persia but throughout the world. The Adab genre follows the same tradition. A famous Arabic *hadith* records the Prophet as saying *Khair al-Umur Awsatiha*, meaning that the best of things is the middle of them. Even worshipping God should be done with temperance. Kulaini quotes the Prophet as likening the body to a horse, and the worshipper to a rider: "Don't be the miserable rider who, after exhausting the horse, cannot reach

the destination.”⁷² Imam Ja‘far-i Sadiq is quoted as saying, “Don’t make worshipping unpleasant and abominable.”⁷³ Ghazali also asserts that

Worship and constant remembrance of God implies a certain degree of austerity and curbing of bodily appetites. Not that a man is intended altogether to abolish these, for then the human race would perish.⁷⁴

In discussing the *Andarz* genre in Chapter 4, I noted that the doctrine of the Mean (or the “False Brothers”) was an important part of Zoroastrian belief. Virtue in excess could be considered a vice. Disproportionate generosity, for example, could become extravagance. In *Adab* literature there is a reasonable amount of advice regarding caution and moderation, but one has to read between the lines of the *Qabusnamah* and the *Siyasatnamah* carefully to find relevant counsel. The former text warns:

Be circumspect; where an undertaking can succeed only with the exercise of circumspection, embark upon it only circumspectly. ... If a king fails to keep the eye of discrimination and wisdom open, the way of truth and falsehood will not be revealed to him.⁷⁵

In the latter text, Nizam al-Mulk similarly advises the king not to drink too much:

Let him not be constantly jocular, nor altogether austere. If occasionally he occupies himself with entertainment, hunting and drinking, let him also sometimes devote himself to thanksgiving, almsgiving, nocturnal prayer, fasting and charitable works. ... In all things he should take the middle course, for The Prophet ... said, ‘the best of things is the middle of them’ ... for it wins the most approbation.⁷⁶

Although the *Adab* genre has its share of praise of moderation, it is completely silent on the subject of the Zoroastrian doctrine of the Mean; see the discussion of the Pahlavi term *bradarod* (“false brothers”) in Chapter 4.

Women in Adab texts

Compared with pre-Islamic Iran, there is a relative abundance of material regarding the status of women in the Islamic era. Many intrepid secular and Islamic scholars, such as N. el-Sa’dawi, H. Ashravi, F. Mernissi, F. el-Guindi, H. Moghissi, S. ‘Ibadi and N. Tohidi, are working on new interpretations of the Qur’an and of the Islamic Shari‘a from the perspective of modern feminism. The entirety of recent scholarship on the subject of Muslim women is beyond the scope of this study, which is confined to only a few works of the *Adab* genre.

Because the Prophet Muhammad and other Imams and saints lived long after the founders of Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity, there are many more extant historical records regarding the Muslim figures, including the many women of significance, both Sunni and Shi'ite. 'Aisha, the Prophet's favourite wife, is the most revered woman in Sunni tradition, while Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, is venerated by both Shi'ites and Sunnis. In fact, the Twelver Shi'ites consider Fatima to be one of the fourteen immaculate saints of Islam, the other thirteen being the Prophet himself and the twelve Imams. Fatima was the wife of Ali, the first Imam; and as mother of Hasan and Husain, the second and third Imams respectively, she is ancestor to the succeeding Imams. Indeed, the Fatimid Shi'ite rulers of Egypt named their group in her honour. Fatima is praised for her spirituality and closeness to the Prophet and, according to Kulaini, lived only 75 days after her father's death, dying at the age of 18. In his words, "Fatima ... was very honest and saintly, and a martyr; and daughters of the Prophet do not menstruate."⁷⁷

We know the Prophet said of himself, "I have loved three things in the world: perfumes, and women, and refreshment in prayer."⁷⁸ Despite its brevity regarding the topics of wisdom and logic, the religious Adab genre has a great deal to say about women and how they should be treated. Ghazali cites two related sayings in which the Prophet and Caliph 'Umar gave different, and almost contradictory, advice regarding women:

The Apostle [Muhammad] ... stated that the best and most blessed women are those who are most prolific in child-bearing, fairest in countenance, and least costly in dowry. He also stated, 'In so far as you are able, seek a free woman in marriage; they are the purest.' The Prince of the Believers 'Umar ... said, 'Take refuge in God from the evils caused by women, and beware (even) of the most pious of them.' This means, let not (even) your own wife receive praise.⁷⁹

Celibacy is not encouraged in Islam. Ghazali typically recounts the religious advantages of marriage:

Seeing that God, as the Qur'an says, 'only created men and genii for the purpose of worship,' the first and obvious advantage of marriage is that the worshippers of God may increase in number. Theologians have therefore laid it down as a maxim that it is better to be engaged in matrimonial duties than in supererogatory devotions. ... Another advantage of marriage is that, as the Prophet said, the prayers of children profit their parents.⁸⁰

Frequently there are, of course, practical reasons for marriage in addition to the theological ones; Ghazali goes on to say:

A further advantage of marriage is that there should be someone to take care of the house, cook the food, wash the dishes, sweep the floor,

and so on. If a man is busy in such work he cannot acquire learning or carry on his business, or engage in his devotions properly.⁸¹

Women clearly were required to cover their faces, to silence their voices and to lead segregated lives in the time of the Prophet, but these rules were intensified in later centuries. Some modern scholars, such as F. Mernissi, believe that women had more freedom at the time of the pre-Islamic *Jahiliyya*, based for example upon the fact that "among the 360 gods of the *Ka'ba*, the most powerful were goddesses."⁸² But the Muslim theologians disagree and point out that the Prophet banned infanticide of daughters and the killing of young girls: "In the time of the *Jahiliyya* they would kill their daughters, fearing the girls might become prisoners of war and give birth to children of another tribe."⁸³

In Islamic tradition, greetings are recommended and appropriate responses are obligatory. Kulaini writes:

The Prophet would greet women, and the women would answer; but Ali Amir al-Mu'minin avoided greeting young women, claiming he was afraid he would like the sound of it too much and would commit more sins than virtues to his credit.⁸⁴

Whether pre-Islamic Arab women had more freedom than Islamic Arab women is not the concern of this study; however, the gradual decline of women's status after the time of the Prophet Muhammad cannot be disputed. Whatever social stature and respect was initially enjoyed by the wives and daughters of the Prophet was lost to the women of later generations, whose husbands essentially became their masters. Ghazali, for example, counsels his audience as follows:

One cannot be too careful not to let one's wife look at, or to be looked at by a stranger, for the beginning of all mischief is in the eye. As far as possible she should not be allowed out of the house, nor to go on the roof, nor to stand at the door. ... In the time of the Prophet women had permission to go to the mosques and stand in the last row of the worshippers, but this was subsequently forbidden.⁸⁵

In Chapter 4, I examined the Zoroastrian creation story regarding the first man and woman, *Mashya* and *Mashyana*, who are two identical branches of a single rhubarb tree, and both of whom are equal parts of *Ahura Mazda's* Good Creation. During menstruation, however, a woman's body was considered to be controlled by *Ahriman*. Zoroastrians therefore encouraged constant pregnancies as a means of defeating *Ahriman*, and menstruating women were segregated until the end of their periods, at which time they became ritually pure again. The myth of creation in Islam is different from the Zoroastrian account, but it is very similar to that of the Old Testament, in which *Havva* (Eve) is responsible for the fall from

paradise. Ghazali lists the punishments that God imposes on women and sums up the case against them:

When Eve (disobeyed Almighty God and) ate the fruit which He had forbidden to her from the tree in Paradise, the Lord, be He praised, punished women with eighteen things: (i) menstruation; (ii) childbirth; (iii) separation from mother and father and marriage to a stranger; (iv) pregnancy; (v) not having control over her own person; (vi) having a lesser share in inheritance; (vii) her liability to be divorced and inability to divorce; (viii) its being lawful for men to have four wives, but for a woman to have (only) one husband; (ix) the fact that she must stay secluded in the house; (x) the fact that she must keep her head covered in the house; (xi) the fact that two women's testimony (has to be) set against the testimony of one man; (xii) the fact that she must not go out of the house unless accompanied by a near relative; (xiii) the fact that men take part in Friday and Feast Day prayers and funerals while women do not; (xiv) disqualification for rulership and judgeship; (xv) the fact that merit has one thousand components, (only) one of which is (attributable) to women, while nine hundred and ninety-nine are (attributable) to men; (xvi) the fact that if women are profligate they will be given (only) half as much torment as (the rest of) the (Muslim) community at the Resurrection Day; (xvii) the fact that if their husbands die they must observe a waiting period of four months and ten days (before remarrying); (xviii) the fact that if their husbands divorce them they must observe a waiting period of three months or three menstruations (before remarrying).⁸⁶

Indeed, the trials of Adam are frequently cited as evidence of women's failings. Nizam al-Mulk writes, for example,

The first man who suffered loss and underwent pain and tribulation for obeying a woman was Adam (upon him be peace) who did the bidding of Eve and ate the wheat with the result that he was expelled from paradise, and wept for two hundred years until God had mercy on him and accepted his repentance.⁸⁷

A few pages after the passage cited above, Ghazali condescendingly adds a few reasons to have pity on one's wife:

She is afraid of you while you are not afraid of her; ... she is content with a cheerful look and a kind word from you, while you are not content with any actions of hers; ... she is taken away from her mother, father and kinsfolk (for your sake), while you are not separated from any person unless you so wish; ... you may buy concubines and prefer them to her, while she has to endure this; ... she kills

herself (with worry) when you are sick, while you do not worry when she dies.⁸⁸

Unfortunately, the same kind of condescension and contempt is demonstrated by secular Adab writers too. One famous *hadith* of the Prophet, to which all the texts cited in this study refer, says, "Consult with women, but whatever they say, do the opposite."⁸⁹

Choosing a wife/Educating one's daughter and marrying her off

The rite of marriage is an important practical matter for both princes and common people, and it is a subject upon which the Adab genre dwells. Chastity and pedigree rank among the most highly desired qualities in a bride. Nizam al-Mulk warns that

the king's underling must not be allowed to assume power. ... This particularly applies to women, for they are wearers of the veil and have not complete intelligence. Their purpose is the continuation of the lineage of the race, so the more noble their blood the better, and the more chaste and abstemious their bearing the more admirable and acceptable they are.⁹⁰

In a kinder tone, 'Unsur al-Ma'ali advises his son to treat his wife with the utmost consideration, admonishing him to

marry a virgin so that there shall be no room in her heart for love of anyone but you. ... Marry a woman of honorable family, because men marry in order to have a lady for the house and not to indulge in sexual pleasure; to satisfy your desire you can buy slaves.⁹¹

However chaste their women, men are still warned against trusting them. Nizam al-Mulk also cautions: "You must realize that a woman cannot steadfastly resist a man, however old or ugly he may be; so admit no male slave into the women's apartments, even though he is black, old and ugly."⁹² Taking the logic of generalization to an extreme, Ghazali explains that

the race of women consists of ten species, and the character of each (of these) corresponds and is related to the distinctive quality of one of the animals. One (species) resembles the pig, another, the ape, another the dog, another the snake, another the mule, another the scorpion, another the mouse, another the pigeon, another the fox, and another the sheep.⁹³

According to Ghazali, snakes deceive, pigs make messes, scorpions gossip, and dogs bark and bicker; but only the woman who has the peculiarities of the sheep is blessed by being useful in every respect.

Muslim girls were supposed to learn domestic skills and the laws of *Shari'a*, but they were not to become literate. Ibn Iskandar advises his son, the crown prince, as follows:

If you have a daughter, entrust her to kindly nurses and give her good nurture. When she grows up, entrust her to a preceptor so that she shall learn the provisions of the sacred law and the essential religious duties. But do not teach her to read and write; that is a great calamity.⁹⁴

And Ghazali writes, "A teacher was teaching girls how to write. A sage passed by and said, 'This teacher is teaching wickedness to the wicked.'"⁹⁵ The last of our Adab authors, Nasir al-Din, repeats the same view of girls in the seventh century AH:

They should be brought up to keep close to the house and live in seclusion, cultivating gravity, continence, modesty and the other qualities we have enumerated in the chapter on wives. They should be prevented from learning to read or write.⁹⁶

The birth of a daughter was considered to be a misfortune that could be remedied only when she was married off. In the *Qabusnameh*, daughters are called "the captives of their parents," and the reader is exhorted to

make such provisions for [your daughter] as you are able and contrive matters properly for her; fasten her about someone's neck so as to escape from anxiety for her. If the girl is a virgin, seek for a son-in-law who shall be a virgin also.⁹⁷

Ghazali reminds the Seljuk sultan to put religiosity first when marrying off daughters, for the following reasons: "The unbelievers [i.e., Zoroastrians] demand nobility of birth, the Jews and Christians look for beauty of countenance. In the time of our Prophet, blessing upon him, (men) looked for religion, and today they demand worldly (wealth)."⁹⁸ 'Unsur al-Ma'ali, on the other hand, sounds wiser and kinder on the subject of finding a husband for one's daughter:

As for your son-in-law, he must be of handsome appearance; a beautiful girl will never give her heart to an ugly husband. If she does, the possibility of a scandal is created, for the girl may take herself a lover who is handsome, and thus evil report may arise. Your son-in-law, therefore, must be of clean appearance and sound faith, of pure and honorable lineage and a member of a family of notables. Yet he must hold lower rank than yourself, so that his boast may be concerning you, not yours of him, and your daughter will live at ease and splendor. ... Never sell your daughter.⁹⁹

Though women may not have been respected in their roles as wives, sisters or daughters in Adab literature, as mothers they enjoyed an exceptionally privileged status. Every Muslim is expected to respect, obey, and provide for his or her parents. The aspect of obedience to one's parents is so critical that there are conflicting views on whether this deference should take priority over submission to the faith of Islam itself. Kulaini reports that these differing views are based on seemingly contradictory *hadith* that respond to questions posed to the Prophet. Different *hadith* record different answers that appear to support either position.¹⁰⁰ 'Unsur al-Ma'ali draws the following parallel: "A man may be compared to the fruit and his parents to the tree; the greater the care you give to the tree, the better will be the fruit."¹⁰¹ The Qur'anic phrase "Paradise is located under the mothers' feet" is one of the most frequently cited in Islamic popular culture. The *hadith* most supportive to mothers cited by Kulaini is the following:

Imam Sadiq says a man came to the Prophet and asked: 'Whom should I serve?' The Prophet replied: 'Your mother.' He asked again: 'and after my mother?' The Prophet replied: 'Your mother.' He asked: 'And then?' The Prophet stated: 'Your mother.' He asked 'And then?' The Prophet replied: 'Your father.'¹⁰²

The Social duties of women/The status of love

Aside from a woman's social contribution of motherhood, she could also assist her community by performing manual labour, as long as it did not interfere with the segregation of the genders. There is a *hadith* of the Prophet wherein he tells one of his wives what a woman can do in place of Friday prayers:

Whenever a woman who fulfils God's requirements and is obedient to her husband takes hold of a spinning-wheel and turns it, this is as if she were reciting God's epithets, joining in congregational prayer, and fighting against infidels.¹⁰³

A woman's contribution to society did not, however, earn her the right to take part in the public aspects of it; the fact that women in pre-Islamic Iran had been involved in administrative matters was cited as confirmation of their incompetence.

Buzurjmihir was asked, 'Why was it that the empire of the house of Sasan fell to ruin while you were their counselor, for today you have no equal in the world for prudence and policy and wisdom and learning?' He said, 'There were two reasons: ... I had to deal with women and boys.'¹⁰⁴

Not much emphasis is placed in the Adab genre on the joys of a loving relationship between man and a woman. The blessing of having a good wife is much underrated. Ghazali quotes in succession two contradictory sayings of different ostensibly wise men without distinguishing or choosing between them:

Ahnaf ibn Qays has said: 'If you want women to like you, satisfy them sexually and treat them tenderly.' ... 'Umar (ibn al-Khattab), peace be upon him, has said: 'Do not speak to women of love, because their hearts will be corrupted. For women are like meat left in a desert; God's (help) is needed to preserve them.'¹⁰⁵

'Unsur al-Ma'ali advises his son not to love too passionately. Nevertheless, if a man were in love, 'Unsur al-Ma'ali would advise him as follows:

Once you have married a wife, being greatly in love with her, even though you may be infatuated with her, do not spend every night in her society ... so that if on occasion you have reason for excusing yourself or wish to go on a journey, your wife will be forbearing toward you.¹⁰⁶

The Qur'an allows a Muslim man to have up to four wives (Sura 4:3), but only if he is in the position to treat them equally. Having as many concubines as one wishes is also permitted, though not recommended by Ghazali: "As for keeping numerous concubines, this is not commendable, except in so far as justice can be done to them."¹⁰⁷

There is controversy over the origin of female circumcision. Some Islamic feminists attribute the practice to pre-Islamic nomadic customs, but others lay the blame on Islam for continuing to uphold the tradition. Once again, although I am not an expert on the subject, I will confine myself to quoting what has been said on the topic in the Adab genre. Of all the books in this study, only Ghazali has remarked directly on the issue, saying, "Circumcision is for both men and women."¹⁰⁸

Almost all love stories in New Persian Literature are rooted in pre-Islamic Iran, which produced works such as *Khusrow va Shirin*, *Vis va Ramin*, *Bizhan va Manizhah* and many other romances immortalized in New Persian poetry. The only celebrated Islamic love story is that of *Laila va Majnun*, which was of Arabic origin and which was absorbed into Persian literature. The only true Persian love story of the Islamic era is the mystical tale of Shaikh-i San'an and a heathen girl, which is part of Attar's book *Mantiq al-Tayr* ("Language of the Birds"). This symbolic story is about the love of a Sufi Shaikh for an earthly being. It is interesting to note that in order to make the story plausible the author had to present the girl as heathen, because it was thought that a Muslim girl would not allow herself to be the object of a stranger's desire. Indeed, within an Islamic context, it would be difficult to conceive of a situation wherein a Muslim man could meet, converse with, and then come

to desire a Muslim woman. In any case, the story ends with the Shaikh's renunciation of worldly love and his return to God's love.

Mystic love/Love of boys

Notwithstanding the paucity of romantic stories, Persian poetry created some of the richest lyrical *ghazal* verses of all time between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries CE. Hafiz, Sa'di, Rumi and Attar all wrote in this style, which was the most important form in Persian poetry and which comprised poems of seven to twelve lines. This love poetry was addressed to God, to women, and at times even to young men; but due to the brevity of its form, the subject matter was usually devoted to praise rather than to narrative.

It is worth mentioning that when it comes to romantic love, the difference in attitude between advice books and lyrical poetry is not limited to Iranian culture. In his eighteenth-century CE book *Advice to Young Men*, the English writer William Cobbett is as suspicious of romantic love as any writer of advice books in other cultures. Regarding lovers, he says: "Few people are entitled to more compassion than young men thus affected; it is a species of insanity that assails them."¹⁰⁹

Sodomy, the gravest sin in Zoroastrianism, was prohibited by Islam as well, but it was tolerated privately by Muslims. Secular Adab books address the etiquette of both wine drinking, which was likewise prohibited by Islam but was tolerated at royal feasts and at taverns, and, to a much lesser extent, paedophilia. Court life would have been unimaginable without wine, eunuchs and handsome youths. In fact, the most famous love story of Islamic Iran is based on the relationship between two historical male figures, the Ghaznavid king Mahmud and Ayaz; the latter was a slave boy who was courted by Mahmud and who was eventually promoted to the high rank of general. Their love has been the subject of all the lyrical poets mentioned above, just as in the stories of *Vis va Ramin* and *Bizhan va Manizhah*. The section "On Love and Youth" of Sa'di's *Gulistan* begins with a story about Mahmud and Ayaz.¹¹⁰

Although Persian poetry is filled with love lyrics directed towards young boys, Adab literature is more discreet on the subject. Among the Adab books of this study, only the *Qabusnamah* openly discusses this subject. "As between women and youths, do not confine your inclinations to either sex; thus you may find enjoyment from both kinds without either of the two becoming inimical to you."¹¹¹ It is interesting to note that having sex with young boys was not a sign of homosexuality in the modern sense but rather an expression of manly conduct, as in classical Greece.¹¹² When a boy outgrew his adolescence and beauty, he was no longer an object of desire. Once again, Sa'di tells a story about himself and a young boy whose attractiveness in Sa'di's eyes was lost when the boy sprouted a beard; in the poet's words, "there were ants grown on the moon of his face."¹¹³ 'Unsur al-Ma'ali expresses a novel view of women and boys as seasonal: "During the

summer let your desires incline toward youths and during the winter toward women. But on this topic it is requisite that one's discourse should be brief, lest it engender appetite."¹¹⁴

Conclusions regarding women and gender

Some accuse Islam of being misogynistic, but, as I mentioned above in Chapter 3 with respect to Andarz, feminism is a relatively new concept and must be applied to past cultures with discretion. We know that all major religions were, and to some extent still are, patriarchal; the Islamic world is now engaging in the debate regarding the role of women that has already taken place in many other religions.

In the Adab genre, the subject of women evokes a myriad of responses; and, like most other themes in advice literature, it is addressed by the issuance of incongruous edicts. As a result, people from all walks of life are able to determine a course of action that best suits their personal agenda. Two such contradictory sayings about women by Ghazali demonstrate how the Adab genre can serve the purpose of expediency. In the first he writes, "The author of this book declares that the prosperity and peopling of the world depend on women," but a few lines below he declares, "It is a fact that all the trials, misfortunes, and woes which befall men come from women."¹¹⁵ The inherent contradiction seems to faze neither the writer nor his readers.

I would like to conclude my discussion of women in Adab literature with another of Ghazali's sayings, which reveals an attitude like that of both pre-Islamic Andarz and Sufi ethics:

A sage said, 'You should look at [three things] with three eyes; (i) at poor men with the eye of humility, not with the eye of arrogance; (ii) at rich men [with the eye of counsel], not with the eye of envy; (iii) at women with the eye of compassion, not with the eye of desire.'¹¹⁶

Honesty and falsehood

Islam, like Zoroastrianism, frowns upon lying, but Muslims are not adamant about its prohibition. Kulaini cites Imam Ja'far-i Sadiq on the subject:

Do not be deceived by a man's prayers and fasting. Many people get so used to praying and fasting as a matter of habit they perform [these duties] out of fear. Look at people's truthfulness and honesty.¹¹⁷

According to Kulaini, the Imam goes on to say that there are four occasions on which lying is permissible:

Firstly when a danger threatens your life, property or good name; secondly when you want to create a truce between two Muslim men or

societies; thirdly when you are in war; and fourthly when you promise your wife or children to do something when you don't really mean it.¹¹⁸

According to Kulaini, lying for the sake of self-preservation is the basis for the concept of *Taqiyyah* in Shi'ite Islam.

Taqiyyah refers to the concealment of one's true faith in order to save one's life, fortune, or reputation, though there are cases in which it is not allowed. A *hadith* of Imam Ja'far-i Sadiq, for example, states that even *Taqiyyah* does not permit one to drink alcohol or to commit murder; but the Imam issues a contradictory statement to the effect that *Taqiyyah* is justified even in the case of drinking.¹¹⁹

In his notes on the *Nasirean Ethics*, G.M. Wickens points out that Nasir al-Din Tusi found himself in just such an ambiguous situation: to prove his belief in the Sunni faith, Tusi excused his association with the Isma'ilites by invoking the Shi'ite practice of *Taqiyyah*, saying that he wanted only to save his life and name, but *Taqiyyah* was ordinarily unacceptable to Sunnis. Tusi therefore reasons that his reader should "humour them while you remain in their house; And placate them while you are in their land[; ...]with whatsoever a man protects himself and his honour, it shall be recorded to him as a favour."¹²⁰ The other Sunni Adab texts mentioned in this study, however, are silent on the subject of *Taqiyyah*.

'Unsur al-Ma'ali advises his son, "Never tell lies and do not gain the reputation of being a liar."¹²¹ He even adopts and elaborates upon the Zoroastrian aversion to truths that are so implausible they seem to be lies:

Whatever you say must be the truth, but never utter a truth which has the appearance of a lie, for a lie which has the air of truth is preferable to an accurate statement which seems to be false.¹²²

In an apparent contradiction, however, Nasir al-Din rejects lying altogether:

Man is distinguished from other animals by speech; that the purpose of manifesting the virtue of speech is to inform others of something of which they are unaware. But falsehood runs contrary to this purpose; therefore, falsehood nullifies the property of the species.¹²³

Thus, Nasir al-Din seems to take greater issue with the practical repercussions of lying than with the fact of it.

Generosity

In my discussion of Andarz literature in Chapter 4, I noted that Zoroastrianism mandated giving to good people, since generosity towards evil

people was thought to strengthen the forces of the army of Ahriman. Islam, on the other hand, encourages concentric circles of kindness and generosity, radiating firstly towards one's family members, secondly towards one's community, and lastly towards other Muslims. In fact, *silah-i rahm*, or *arham* in the plural, specifically refers to kindness and generosity towards family members and is a religious obligation. Kulaini, the Shi'ite theologian, devotes several pages to this subject by quoting one *hadith* after the other:

The Prophet was asked, "My family has attacked me, insulted me, and forsaken me; shall I desert them?" The Prophet answered: 'If you do, God will desert you all.' He then was asked; 'What shall I do instead?' The Prophet said: 'Unite with whomsoever departs, give to whomsoever takes from you, and forgive whomsoever wrongs you, and then God will help you, along with them.'¹²⁴

The fifth Shi'ite Imam Baqir said, "*Silah-i rahm* purifies action, increases fortune, diverts catastrophe, facilitates conduct and defers death."¹²⁵ The Sunni scholar Ghazali also extols *silah-i rahm* in more modest terms: "The best charity is to give to a relative who is hostile toward you."¹²⁶ It is interesting to note that our secular Adab books, *Qabusnamah*, *Siyasatnamah* and *Akhlaq-i Nasiri*, like their Iranian ancestors, are silent on the subject of *silah-i rahm*.

Generosity is admired in the Adab genre, but whereas the more religious authors such as Ghazali and Kulaini stress that charitable and generous acts should benefit only other Muslims, more secular authors are either more open-minded or less specific. Kulaini quotes the Prophet as having said: "A person who is not helping other Muslims is not a Muslim."¹²⁷ Ghazali cites another *hadith* in which the Prophet says, "If men open their hands to give generously [to other Muslims], their faces will shine luminously."¹²⁸ The more secular 'Unsur al-Ma'ali devotes a chapter of the *Qabusnamah* exclusively to the Andarz sayings of the Sasanian Khusrow Anushirvan, including the following one: "There is no meaner person in the world than he to whom appeal is made for help and though able to grant it refuses."¹²⁹ And elsewhere: "Do good and cast upon the waters, for some day it will yield fruit."¹³⁰

Generosity to the deserving is emphasized in advice given to princes and kings, but it should take the form of charity and justice rather than overt favouritism. Nizam al-Mulk writes,

I heard that in the time of King Qubad [Anushirvan's father] there was famine in the world for seven years. ... He ordered the tax-collectors to sell all the grain which they had, and even to give some of it away as charity. All over the kingdom the poor were assisted by gifts from the central treasury and [local] treasuries, with the result that not one person died of hunger in those seven years.¹³¹

We observe that the less-religious Adab genre not only advocates a more impartial type of generosity but often quotes ancient Iranian sources by way of illustration. Previously, in the Andarz texts, the Zoroastrian armies of Good and Evil had justified giving only to good people; but in the Islamic period the secular Persian literature retained a strong Iranian identity that resisted an exclusive association with Islam, in this case by declining to tithe only according to the principle of *silah-i rahm*. In keeping with this attitude, the writers of the Adab texts examined in this study preferred to be more inclusive and to praise generosity in general. Still, even in these texts, generosity is considered to be truly altruistic only if it is dispensed wisely. According to Nasir Tusi in the *Nasirean Ethics*:

So we say that the courses of various sorts of creation are, taking a simple view, three, just as the ends of their acts are of three kinds. First the Course of Pleasure, which is the end of the acts of the concupiscible soul; secondly, the Course of Generosity, which is the end of the acts of the irascible soul; and thirdly, the Course of Wisdom, which is the end of the acts of the intelligent soul. The Course of Wisdom is the noblest and most complete of the three, including within itself both Generosity and Pleasure; but an essential not an accidental, Generosity and Pleasure, in contradiction of the other two courses themselves.¹³²

In both the Andarz and Adab genres the etiquette of giving is imperative. I noted in Chapter 4 that, in Andarz literature, it was the giver who was to thank the receiver and to be mindful of the recipient's feelings; in the Adab genre, alternatively, the finest philanthropic gestures were made anonymously. Islamic literature is filled with the tales of important caliphs and kings who performed acts of charity incognito. The Adab genre has its own share of related anecdotes, such as a story about Caliph 'Umar related by Nizam al-Mulk. According to this story, when Caliph 'Umar realized that an underprivileged woman and her orphaned children were living in a state of hunger and distress, he brought them food and other provisions and cooked for them without disclosing his name. He finally revealed his identity, only to assure them that he would continue to provide contributions and that they were in the care of a powerful patron.¹³³

Hospitality

Diverse approaches to hospitality are advised by various authors. In the Shi'ite *hadiths* related by Kulaini, only other Shi'ites should be offered hospitality, regardless of their economic circumstances. "Whomsoever feeds one of the faithful, though he may be rich, his reward is equal to rescuing one of Ishmael's children from beheading; and whomsoever feeds one of the faithful who is poor, his reward is equal to rescuing three of those children."¹³⁴ Ghazali's *Kimiya-yi Sa'adat* has an entire chapter

devoted to “The Virtues of Eating with One’s Brothers and Comrades in Religion.”¹³⁵

When more secular authors advise rulers on the importance of court feasts and the king’s hospitality, the question of hospitality takes on an added, political dimension. Nizam al-Mulk advises the mighty Malik Shah as follows:

A man’s magnanimity and generosity can be measured by his household management. [For] the sultan, ... it is necessary that his housekeeping, his magnanimity and generosity, his table and his largesse accord with his state. ... Providing abundant bread and food for the creatures of God increases the duration of a king’s life, his reign and good fortune.¹³⁶

On the same subject, ‘Unsur al-Ma‘ali considers quality superior to quantity. To the crown prince of a small state, he recommends giving priority to the quality of feasts rather than to their frequency:

Do not offer hospitality to strangers every day, for you cannot constantly provide it in worthy fashion. Observe on how many occasions each month you have guests at your table, then reduce them from five to one expending on that one occasion what previously you have spent on five. Thereby your table will be freed from defects and the tongues of cavillers will be stilled.¹³⁷

Again, Nizam al-Mulk sums up his chapter on hospitality by saying that it was praised by both Zoroastrians and Muslims and that it is therefore essential. “In all ages in paganism and Islam there has never been any quality more esteemed than hospitality.”¹³⁸

Dining etiquette

As I noted in Chapter 4, ancient Iranians considered eating to be a spiritual ritual in which active parts were played not only by those consuming the food but by the animals that had been prepared as well. The Zoroastrian was expected to eat in the company of others, but even so, talking during the meal was not permissible. The Adab genre, by comparison, is less concerned with the spiritual dimension of eating than with the actual pragmatic rules. Religious authors refer to the eating habits of the Prophet and Imams, while the more secular writers concern themselves with the prevalent etiquette of their own times. We know that to this day most Muslims eat on the floor, on a linen cloth. Pre-Islamic Persian kings used trays, but Ghazali tells us that

food should be served on linen cloth and not trays, since the Prophet did so ... and eating should be to strengthen the body, and not for

carnal desire ... and one should eat little, since eating too much will be a hindrance to worship and prayer.¹³⁹

For Muslims, being joined by company for a meal is preferable to eating alone, and the most senior person present should initiate the eating. Silence is not observed; rather, “one should not keep quiet at the time of eating, since this is an *‘Ajām* [a condescending term for Persian] habit.”¹⁴⁰

‘Unsur al-Ma‘ali, author of *A Mirror for Princes*, was neither a dogmatic Muslim nor a Zoroastrian; accordingly, he had more pragmatic advice for his son, which he expressed in class-conscious terms:

You know that men occupied in the bazaar have the habit of eating at night. It is conducive to great harm and they constantly suffer from dyspepsia. As for soldiers, their practice is to disregard fixed times and to eat a meal whenever there is one to hand. This is the way of animals. ... Men of quality, however, eat no more than once [meaning one meal] a day. ... Then let them not eat hurriedly, but let them be deliberate. It is fitting to converse over the food, for that is the rule in Islam.¹⁴¹

Obviously, the Zoroastrian practice of silence while eating has been completely overridden by an Islamic one. In any case, however, both Ghazali and ‘Unsur al-Ma‘ali are adamant that one should not complain about the flavour of the prepared food.

Friends and associates

As I mentioned in Chapter 4, Zoroastrians emphasized that socializing, marrying and eating should be undertaken only with “good people,” due to their belief in the armies of Ahura Mazda and Ahriman. In Islamic times, of course, “good people” were thought primarily to be other Muslims. For the Shi‘ite Kulaini, as early as the third Islamic century, mystical seclusion and indifference to worldly pleasures were attractive alternatives to the desire for good company.¹⁴² Since the *Adab* genre is born of two traditions that value friendship – Islamic thought and Persian morality – the subject of friends receives special treatment:

Understand my son, that as long as men are alive, friends are indispensable to them; they were better, indeed, bereft of brothers than of friends. When a certain sage was asked whether it was better to have a friend or a brother, he replied, ‘it is better for the brother to be also a friend.’¹⁴³

As advisor to the king, Nizam al-Mulk has this advice regarding both the eligibility of royal companions and the qualities with which they should be endowed:

A boon companion should be well bred, accomplished and of cheerful face. He should have pure faith, be able to keep secrets, and wear good clothes. He must possess an ample fund of stories and strange tales both amusing and serious, and be able to tell them well. ... He should know how to play backgammon and chess, and if he can play a harp and other musical instruments, so much the better.¹⁴⁴

By this time, the Sufi outlook was very influential in Islamic literature and in the Islamic world more generally. Sufis advocated seclusion; thus, Ghazali cites a Sufi Sheikh on the subject of friendship: "Fuzail said: 'I would be indebted to the one who does not greet me when passing me by and does not come to visit me when I am sick.'"¹⁴⁵ Even so, Ghazali considers seclusion to be a practice intended for few, and he does not recommend it for everybody.

Another of the Adab books, the *Nasirean Ethics*, was written in the seventh century AH at the zenith of Sufi influence; but it is still largely unsympathetic to Sufism and to all other brands of Gnosticism:

Since men are naturally city-dwellers, with the completion of their felicity lying among their friends and their other associates in the species; and ... cannot become perfect in solitude; so the perfect and felicitous man is the one who spares no pains to win friends.¹⁴⁶

A point of agreement between the Islamic Adab writer Ghazali and the more secular 'Unsur al-Ma'ali is an aversion to foolish friends. Ghazali places wisdom and good judgment at the top of his list of the desirable qualities in a friend.¹⁴⁷ 'Unsur al-Ma'ali advises his son: "Never seek a friendship of fools; a foolish friend in his un wisdom can do [such harm] to you as a clever enemy could not."¹⁴⁸ The phrase "wise friend" echoes the Zoroastrian phrase "wise, good people."

Honouring one's word and preserving a friend's trust

Chapter 4 established that Andarz literature attaches great importance to honouring one's word, as evidenced in the significance of Mythra, the god of contracts. Adab literature, on the other hand, places a greater emphasis upon the importance of returning anything with which one has been entrusted. Indeed, Persian Adab literature is filled with stories about both the demise of those who betray other people's trust and the virtues of those who uphold it, even at great cost to themselves.

By way of example, 'Unsur-al-Ma'ali relates the story of a man who, in the darkness, mistook a pickpocket for a friend; this man is said to have entrusted

the pickpocket with a hundred *dinars* while the man went to the public bath. When the man returned, the pickpocket was still waiting for him. When the man realized that he had entrusted his money to a pickpocket, he asked the thief why he had not yet absconded with the money. The pickpocket is said to have replied that it “would not have been honourable for me to be dishonest with you when you came to me on a matter of confidence.”¹⁴⁹

Humility

Zoroastrian Andarz literature recommended humility with respect to others, and Islam regards human beings as so inferior to God that they could not possibly pride themselves in any respect. Kulaini categorizes three kinds of arrogance: the worst is directed towards God, the second-worst towards the Prophet and Imams, and the third towards other people.¹⁵⁰ Humility is praised in Ghazali’s most secular work, *Nasihat al-Muluk* (“Book of Counsel for Kings”), in the context of a story about Buzurgmihr. The latter was asked, “‘What things, even if true, ought not to be told, because (telling them) would be vile?’ ‘Things in praise of one’s self,’ he answered.”¹⁵¹ ‘Unsur al-Ma’ali echoes the Sasanian vizier’s advice when he tells his son: “However moral and pious you may be, do not praise yourself, for no one will listen to your evidence in your own favor.”¹⁵²

The *Siyasatnamah*, written for the benefit of kings, emphasizes not the merits of humility but rather those of justice. The philosopher Nasir al-Din, writing for the common people, has quite a few things to say on the subject: “Arrogance comes close to conceit; the difference is that the conceited man lies to his own soul in the opinion he has of it, while the arrogant man lies to others.”¹⁵³ Indeed, Nasir al-Din retains the “eye for an eye” philosophy in dealing with arrogance, despite his usual admonitions to avoid it: “Arrogance toward the arrogant man is an act of charity; humility toward such people only brings on scorn and contempt.”¹⁵⁴ When it comes to humility, arrogance and conceit, Adab literature proves to be the hybrid child of Islamic asceticism and Iranian social etiquette.

Reproach versus advice

We have seen in Chapter 4 that Andarz literature disapproves of reproaching sinners. In Adab texts, on the other hand, there is conflicting advice on the subject. Firstly, Ghazali dedicates a chapter on the Islamic decree “*Amr-i bih Ma’ruf va Nahi az Munkar*,” or “Impose Good and forbid Evil,” in *Kimiya-yi Sa’adat*. He explains that religious principles may be enforced by four incremental measures, each more serious than the last: initially, one may make hints or simply advise that a certain activity is imprudent. If that proves too subtle, one may admonish the ill-doer, or assault him or her verbally. Financial penalties are the third resort, and, if they do not prove to be sufficient deterrents, then corporal punishment could be

an appropriate remedy.¹⁵⁵ The enforcement of religion is not considered inherently to constitute a reproach by religious authors, and therefore Kulaini does not risk contradiction when he cites the Sixth Imam as having said, “whosoever reproaches a faithful Muslim for committing a sin will not die before committing the same sin himself.”¹⁵⁶

There is a distinction, however, between giving advice and being critical: Kulaini reports that the Sixth Imam also said, “whosoever asks an Islamic brother for good advice, [if the latter man] does not give him his sincere, true opinion, God will take away his wisdom.”¹⁵⁷ The secular prince, ‘Unsur al-Ma’ali, advises his son to “give no one advice unless he desires it.”¹⁵⁸ Nasir al-Din reveals his distaste for meddling in other people’s business with the following words: “Happy is the man whose concern is with his own fault rather than the faults of men.”¹⁵⁹ All the same, he makes allowances for occasions when a friend needs direction:

When a fault is perceived in a friend, one should make accord with him, albeit a subtle accord, in which lie both guidance and admonition of him, for the master-physician treats with alimentary regimen the pain which the non-master attacks by surgery.¹⁶⁰

However different the authors’ attitudes towards advice and reproach, most secular Adab literature conforms well in this case to the famous saying of the Imam Ali – that is, “Advice given in public is a reproach.” In ‘Unsur al-Ma’ali’s words, “exhortation given before all men is a reproach.”¹⁶¹

Social classes and social mobility

We already have had occasion to observe that social classes were more or less rigidly defined in pre-Islamic Iran and in Andarz literature. Even though no rigid caste system was in place throughout most of the pre-Islamic history of Iran, Iranians preferred both to maintain class distinctions from birth and to discourage unwarranted greed. In Islamic times, this situation changed: although class divisions were recognized, they were extremely tenuous and easily transgressed. Islam’s promise of egalitarianism in the famous Qur’anic verse *Inna Akramakom ‘Indallahi Atqaakom*, or “the dearest of you to God is the most virtuous,”¹⁶² made it possible for individuals to move between classes, motivated by individual talent, ambition or, at times, even by opportunism.

In the introduction to his translation of the *Qabusnamah*, R. Levy helpfully describes implicit (as well as explicit) social mobility throughout the Iranian social system:

Indeed the social circumstances revealed in the book [*Qabusnamah*] do not greatly differ from those described in James Morier’s *Adventures of Haji Baba of Isfahan*, where a man might by his efforts raise himself

from slavery to Princedom and be cast by his evil star from the height of prosperity into the depths of penury and ignominy, and where all things are possible.¹⁶³

In my close reading of Kulaini, I have not as yet identified a specific discussion of social divisions. Ghazali, however, addresses in depth the topics of profession and class order, first by professing his view of man as comprising body and soul: the latter is the realm of God, of religion, theology, philosophy, and of other abstract knowledge, while the former attends to the practical needs of food, clothing and shelter. Ghazali then divides the material world into the categories of animal, vegetable and mineral; these give rise to “three principal occupations, those of the weaver, the builder, and the worker in metal. These, again, have many subordinate branches, such as tailors, masons, smiths, etc.”¹⁶⁴

‘Unsur al-Ma’ali, on the other hand, suggests many professions his son could learn in the event that a reversal of fortune should strip him of his throne. His list includes professions in a number of disciplines, such as commerce, medicine, astrology, poetry, music, boon companionship, secretaryship, vizierate, religious sciences, agriculture and craftsmanship.¹⁶⁵ Another important work of this era, the *Chahar Maqalah*, or *Four Articles*, is not among the Adab texts that are the focus of the present chapter; but it resembles the Adab genre quite closely in its assessment of four professions, namely secretaryship, poetry, medicine and astrology. Although Islam offered opportunities for social mobility, neither this work nor the other Adab books mentioned thus far actively *encourage* individuals to change professions. This professional conservatism was mainly for the sake of efficiency, because it was thought that the best ways to learn a trade were devotion from an early age and the tutelage of a knowledgeable parent.

The popular wisdom of the early Islamic era held that people should concern themselves with only the jobs they had been trained to do; employers were advised to offer jobs to people on the bases of merit and good faith. In the *Siyasatnamah*, Nizam al-Mulk addresses hiring in a chapter with the lengthy title “On not giving two appointments to one man; on giving posts to unemployed and not leaving them destitute; on giving appointments to men of orthodox faith and good birth; and not employing men of perverse sects and evil doctrines; keeping the latter at a distance.”¹⁶⁶ Nasir al-Din also offers practical and rational advice regarding employment:

When the servant is successfully acquired, he should be employed at the craft for which he is designated as fitted, and his wants attended to. ... Let him not be transferred from one sort of work to another and from craft to craft, but let him rather be made content with that to which his nature inclines, and for which the equipment is available to him, for every nature has a particularity for a particular craft.¹⁶⁷

Even though the egalitarian approach of Islam allowed a certain mobility between classes, as I noted above, the absence of traditional institutions and of inherited political legitimacy facilitated the rise of military power – at the expense of the pre-Islamic notion of *Farr* (Divine Grace) – as an imperative component in assuming political power.

Nature

As opposed to Zoroastrianism, which had been a nature-oriented religion centred on animal husbandry and agriculture, Islam at its inception had a tribal Bedouin background with no particular reverence for natural elements such as fire, water or earth. Although Islam has at times invoked the natural world as overwhelming proof of God's existence and omnipotence, nature is largely portrayed as an ugly sorceress who appears beautiful in the eyes of the infidels:

The prophet has said that on the Judgment Day the world will appear [in its true shape] in the form of a hideous witch with green eyes and projecting teeth. Men, beholding her, will say, 'Mercy on us! Who is this?' The angels will answer, 'This is the world for whose sake you quarreled and fought and embittered one another's lives.'¹⁶⁸

The more secular Adab writers, who were influenced by two different sets of values, reveal both contempt for and awe of natural phenomenon. The genre of lyrical Persian poetry is suffused with praise for nature, and especially with admiration for the spring season and its consequent renewal. In the more secular Adab genre, common sense and practicality dominate the observations regarding nature. Still, the following statement of 'Unsur al-Ma'ali could be mistaken for a pre-Islamic *andarz* saying:

The parallel to the man who seeks after God is fire, which strives to ever greater height and volume the more it is suppressed; whereas the man from whom the path of God (and of obedience to Him) is remote is like water, which, however high you may carry it, seeks ever to run downwards.¹⁶⁹

Ahriman versus Shaytan

I noted in Chapter 4 that, in the dualistic worldview of the Zoroastrians, every virtue created by Ahura Mazda and the good deities was diametrically opposed by a vice created by Ahriman and his demons. The antithesis of the demon Aeshma, or Wrath and Violence, for example, was the deity Sraosha, or Obedience and Discipline. Ahriman, progenitor of all evil, was responsible for the existence of all wickedness and was assisted by the other demonic creatures at his service. The demons were visualized as insects,

reptiles, wild animals or deformed human beings, and they were thought to be the cause of much mischief.

Even though vices as well as virtues were created by God in the monistic view of Islam, Shaytan (Satan) is blamed for perpetuating many vices, and *Malaik* (angels) are credited for encouraging many virtues. Algar writes that in the Qur'an, "al-Shaytan (Satan) ... is used to designate the devil in the context of his maleficent plots against man. ... Shaytan remains fixed as the designation for a being of pure evil."¹⁷⁰

The fallen angel Iblis is another one of the demonic entities; and while he is rarely mentioned in the Qur'an, he remains a very important symbol of rebellion in Sufi literature. Iblis plays a much less significant role than that of Shaytan in the Adab genre.

Ghazali believes that every human possesses both angelic and devilish qualities. He says that "It is as though underneath every person's skin there are four things: a wolf, a pig, a devil and an angel."¹⁷¹ He goes on to explain how the wolf brings out the beast in humans, who express themselves with war and violence, while the pig gives rise to our brute instincts (e.g., eating, labour etc.). The devil urges deceit, greed and gossip, whereas the angel promotes wisdom and goodness. Kulaini quotes the Sixth Imam as having said, "there is no heart which does not have two ears. At one ear there is a guiding angel, and at the other, a seditious devil. The devil orders sin, but the angel prevents it."¹⁷²

The Islamic perception of the human choice between good and evil, a choice that is aided by angels and confounded by Shaytan, according to the Shi'ite Kulaini, bears close resemblance to the Zoroastrian belief that humans choose to serve either Ahura Mazda or Ahriman. Although the Islamic Adab genre does not adhere to Zoroastrian demonology, the term *Div*, or demon, persisted in Persian speech, folklore and literature as a personification of vices. *Div-i Az* (Demon of Greed) and *Div-i Kheshm* (Demon of Wrath), whose names echo those of Zoroastrian archdemons, are two of the many such figures who are frequently referred to in New Persian literature. Whereas Islam does not view vices and virtues as twin manifestations of good and evil, the Adab text known as the *Nasirean Ethics* succinctly classifies vices and virtues in a very dualistic way indeed: "Widespread goods are: security, tranquility, mutual affection, justice, continence, graciousness and loyalty, and the like. General evils are: fear, disturbance, strife, tyranny, greed, severity, deceit and treachery, tomfoolery and detraction, and the like."¹⁷³

Greed or Az

We already have seen that in Andarz literature Zoroastrians considered the demon Az (greed) to be the progenitor of men and to be women's worst defect; but while Zoroastrians advocated hard work and contentment, they did not promote asceticism as the antidote to Az, as did Manichaeans.

Avarice and greed are disdained in Adab literature as well; but, like the Zoroastrians before them, the mainstream Islamic authors take a much less ascetic view of the matter than might their Sufi contemporaries. Indeed, Kulaini's approach is very close to that of the Zoroastrians:

It should be known that the World and love of it is not to be rejected in itself, but rather loving it to the degree that stops one from accomplishments for the eternal world, this is rejected. ... The world is the place where angels of mercy have descended, and prophets have made their home. It is the trading territory of the saints.¹⁷⁴

The same moderate attitude towards greed and contentment is seen in all Adab works, regardless of the religiosity of the texts. Ghazali recounts: "A sage was asked, 'What is wealth?' 'Contentment,' he answered."¹⁷⁵ Kulaini quotes a metaphor used by Imam Ja'far: "The greedy person is like a silkworm, the more he covers himself with silk, the less of an escape route he leaves for himself."¹⁷⁶ 'Unsur al-Ma'ali warns his son not to be avaricious,¹⁷⁷ and Nasir al-Din contemplates how greed can give rise to other vices:

The vice of Anger can also arise from the vice of Greed, which is its opposite; for when a greedy man is restrained from the object of his appetite, he flies into rage, venting ill-humour on those singled out as responsible for such matters, such as women and servants, and so on. Likewise, the miser, when he loses some part of his belongings, behaves in just the same way toward his friends and associates, and casts suspicion upon trustworthy persons.¹⁷⁸

Kheshm and pleasantry

Chapter 4 examined the Zoroastrian antithetical pair of *Kheshm* (wrath) and *Guftar-i Nik* (good speech). Adab literature is also consistent in its aversion to wrath and ill-temper; whereas the more religious Adab authors advocate that Muslims should direct their good temper primarily towards other Muslims, their instruction still has a universal ring. Kulaini quotes the Sixth Imam as having said, "bad temper ruins deeds the way vinegar ruins honey."¹⁷⁹ He also quotes the following *hadith* of the Prophet: "Whosoever curses regularly is either a child of adultery, or *shaytan*; the devil."¹⁸⁰ Ghazali believes good temper is the second most important quality in a companion, after wisdom: "One enjoys no security with an ill-tempered person; when ill-temper rises it tramples your rights with no fear of the consequences."¹⁸¹

Both the *Qabusnamah* and the *Siyasatnamah* draw a connection between wrath and punishment. Nizam al-Mulk advises Malikshah not to humiliate people in public by showing anger towards them: a first reprimand should always be delivered in private, and "it is the perfection of wisdom for a man not to be angry at all; but if he does, his intelligence should prevail over his

wrath, not his wrath over his intelligence.”¹⁸² Nizam al-Mulk cites the words of Imam Ali, the fourth caliph, regarding ill-temper:

They asked The Commander of the Faithful ‘Ali (peace be upon him), ‘who is the bravest of heroes?’ He said, ‘He who can control himself in time of anger and does no action which he will regret afterwards when he has calmed down and [when] regret is of no avail.’¹⁸³

‘Unsur al-Ma‘ali cautions his son not only against anger, but against imposing harsh punishments as well:

Inflict no punishment for a triviality, for fear that you may yourself be made liable to penalties even when innocent; and let nothing rouse you to anger. Where there is cause for wrath, make it a habit to swallow down your vexation, and when you are petitioned for forgiveness of a transgression, forgive; and, deem forgiveness your duty, even though the fault committed be a grievous one.¹⁸⁴

Since, however, there are times when guilty parties clearly must not be allowed to get away with their injustice, ‘Unsur al-Ma‘ali recommends to his son the following conduct: “If you must punish ... then contrive it for a *dirham*’s worth of crime to inflict only half a *dirham* worth of punishment; thus you will be numbered among men capable both of generosity and of exercising discipline.”¹⁸⁵ Nasir al-Din philosophically tells us that there are ten causes of anger: “Conceit, Pride, Contention and Quarrelsomeness, Jestings, Arrogance, Scorn, Treachery, Unfairness, and the Quest of Precious Things.”¹⁸⁶ He warns us against anger by quoting Plato: “Be loving to every man and slow to rage, for anger (easily) becomes customary to you.”¹⁸⁷ In another instance, he also cites Isocrates as having said that there was more hope for the safety of a ship driven by fierce winds in a turbulent sea and headed toward cruel rocks than for the safety of an inflammatory and irascible man; in the case of the ship, sailors will do their best to save it, while no nurse will still the man’s anger, once it is ablaze.¹⁸⁸

The references to Plato and Isocrates once again demonstrate the multinationality of the Adab genre. As previously mentioned, both the Adab genre in particular and Islamic literature in general relied upon Islamic/Persian translations of Greek philosophical and scientific treatises, in addition to Iranian sources. Ibn Sina’s account and interpretation of Greek philosophers were of particular importance.

Laziness and sloth

In Zoroastrianism, the demon Bushiyasp was responsible for the evil of sloth. Since Ahura Mazda’s creation was a Good Creation, people were expected to amplify it with good work. Laziness therefore was a sin and

was admonished severely. In Islam, on the other hand, one's occupation in this world was only an opportunity to prepare for the next, and so one's conduct could be considered to be preparation for the journey to the next world. Praying, fasting and preaching were considered the best provisions for a blessed afterlife, and the two most religious of the Adab authors emphasized the merit of these actions. Kulaini cites the Sixth Imam as saying that

the Prophet Jesus said that you work for this world, while in this world your sustenance is provided without working; and don't work for the next world, while in there you will only reap what you have sown here.¹⁸⁹

In another instance, Ghazali makes a condescending remark about people who engage in potentially dangerous jobs, whether working in land irrigation or catching snakes:

A sage said, 'Five men hold money dearer than their own selves and souls: mercenary fighters, diggers of wells and irrigation tunnels, men who voyage by sea to do trade, and snake-charmers who catch snakes with their hands and [those who] eat the poison for bets.'¹⁹⁰

But the more secular Adab authors sound more akin to the Zoroastrian Andarz writers. Nasir al-Din reminds us that

No vice in matters temporal and spiritual is more reprehensible than idleness and sloth, for such states cut men off from all goods and virtues, expelling them from the wearing of human garb. As we have said, the farthest of men from virtue are those who depart from civilized life and sociability and incline to solitude and loneliness.¹⁹¹

And 'Unsur al-Ma'ali tells his son:

To refrain from striving after merit is a proof that one is satisfied with ignorance and inferiority ... [for] sloth is the body's ruin. If your body will not obey you, you cannot prosper, and it is only through your slothfulness and love of ease that it will not obey you.¹⁹²

Over-sleeping and over-eating do not sit well with either Muslims or Sufis. Ghazali quotes Wahb ibn Munabbih as saying:

In the Torah I read that three things are mothers of sins, namely arrogance, greed, and envy, and the five others are their children, namely over-eating, over-sleeping, bodily comfort, love of the world, and praise of mankind.¹⁹³

Envy and jealousy

Envy and jealousy are considered to be equally serious vices in the Andarz literature, but they are distinguished from one another in Islamic times. Imam Sadiq is cited by Kulaini as repeating a Shi'ite *hadith* that a good Muslim will envy and not be jealous, but a hypocrite will be jealous and not envious. Kulaini adds that the difference between jealousy and envy is the following: in the case of envy, you want to have what your brother has, but in the case of jealousy, you want your brother not to have it at all.¹⁹⁴

Ghazali found jealousy justifiable at times, especially when wives or daughters were involved. He advised that a man should not let the women of his household look at a man, even if that man were blind:

A man ought to be eager (to uphold his respectability), for religious merit is (associated) with such eagerness and with extreme jealousy. (A man's earnestness) should reach a point that he will insist the noise of pounding with the pestle by his womenfolk shall not be heard by strange men. If a man comes to the door of the house, it is improper for the women to answer him smoothly and gently. ... [If] a woman does have to answer him, she ought to put her finger to her mouth.¹⁹⁵

Once again, there is a disparity between the opinions of the staunch theologians and those of the more secular Adab writers. 'Unsur al-Ma'ali's rational pragmatism evokes Zoroastrian morals: "If you desire to remain free of unhappiness, be not envious."¹⁹⁶ The philosopher Nasir al-Din rephrases this precept in a more sophisticated way:

Kindi describes envy as the most abominable of diseases and the most odious of evils. This is the reason why the philosophers have said that whoever loves to have an evil befall his enemy is a lover of evil, and a lover of evil is (himself) evil. More evil, again, than he is the person who wishes that an evil may befall someone not his enemy.¹⁹⁷

In the same passage, Nasir al-Din distinguishes emulation from envy in exactly the same way that Kulaini differentiates between envy and jealousy.

Slander, gossip, backbiting and tale-bearing

In Andarz literature, the Demon of Slander was considered to be a great danger to the world. In Adab literature, (false) slander is distinguished from (potentially true) gossip, but both are forbidden nonetheless. Kulaini quotes the Sixth Imam, who in turn relates the words of the Prophet: "Gossip ruins a Muslim sooner than leprosy."¹⁹⁸ Once again, however, Kulaini makes it clear that gossip and/or slander against non-Muslims is not particularly sinful.¹⁹⁹

In a similar vein, Ghazali advises the king not to listen to slander against a vizier, since an honest, competent minister is likely to have more enemies than friends.²⁰⁰ In another section, the author quotes a sage as having included “slandering people behind their backs” among the four sins punishable severely in both this world and the next: “there is a saying, ‘backbiting is a rider who is soon overtaken.’”²⁰¹ The *Qabusnamah* reiterates the advice of Anushiravan the Just to his son: “If you desire men to speak well of you, then do you speak well of your fellow-men.”²⁰² ‘Unsur al-Ma’ali reserves his worst judgement, on the other hand, for those who spread news of gossip to the victim of it, rather than for the gossiping parties themselves. “Regard him that speaks ill of you, when you are innocent, more worthy of forgiveness than him who carried the report of it to you.”²⁰³ Likewise, Imam Ali claims that “the worst among you are the tale-bearers who disrupt friendships, and those who would slander honest people.”²⁰⁴ Thus we see that whether the sources of Adab literature are Buzurgmihr and Anushiravan or the Prophet and Imams, the above-mentioned deeds are uniformly prohibited, even if Muslim behaviour towards infidels was occasionally exempted from this rule.

Sadness, grief and weeping

Zoroastrians frowned upon weeping and mourning and considered both to be creations of Ahriman. Islam takes an opposite view: according to Kulaini, tears inspired by fear and reverence for God are the best guarantee of an afterlife in paradise, even if the tears are forced. “If one person among a people is tearful (i.e. weeping), all the people will be absolved on account of the one.”²⁰⁵ Ghazali cites a *hadith* of the Prophet on the subject: “The prophet says: ‘Recite Qur’an and cry; if crying does not come naturally, bring it about artificially. ... Qur’an has been sent to invoke sadness.’”²⁰⁶

Again, the views of and sources regarding sorrow and sadness in more secular Adab texts send mixed messages. ‘Unsur al-Ma’ali, in accordance with Iranian ethics, praises self-control and self-possession in the face of either sorrow or happiness in life:

When either joy or sorrow befalls you, speak of it [only] to him who has some concern for your joy or sorrow; do not reveal your pains and sorrows, your grief or joys to every one. Do not permit yourself to be completely overwhelmed by joy or sorrow at any and every piece of good or ill, for such is the behaviour of children, but so conduct yourself as not to lose self-possession at every trivial occurrence.²⁰⁷

Nasir al-Din notes the transitory nature of life and thinks it unwise to grieve over the inevitable:

Grief is a physical pain arising from the loss of a loved one or failure to attain a desired object. ... Such a state befalls the person who

deems it possible for sensibles to endure and for pleasures to be constant.²⁰⁸

Interestingly, he goes on to quote Socrates to support his point: "Socrates was asked the reason for his abundant cheerfulness and absence of grief. He replied; 'It is because I set my heart on nothing so as to become grief-stricken when it is lost.'"²⁰⁹

Laughter, pleasure and jesting

Feasting, merriment and laughter are encouraged in Zoroastrian Andarz texts; but whereas Islamic sources encourage a good disposition and good humour, they frown upon gregarious bursts of laughter. "Imam Sadiq said: 'the laughter of the faithful is a smile.'"²¹⁰ Kulaini then adds: "*Qahqahah* (boisterous laughter) is of Satan."²¹¹ One's humor should not demean anyone either. Kulaini cites Imam Sadiq as saying, "There is no faithful Muslim who does not have a sense of humour ... [but] a sense of humour should not be mixed with insults or cursing."²¹² In Ghazali's words,

Pleasurable things are not *haram* (forbidden) simply because they contain pleasure, but they are forbidden because they carry some harm or defect with them. Therefore, the singing of birds, the beauty of a stream, and a flowering bud are not forbidden although they are pleasurable.²¹³

The more secular texts in the Adab genre agree with Islamic advice when it comes to teasing:

In the case of jesting: If it be employed in measure of equilibrium, it is praiseworthy. The apostle of God ... used to jest, but not to play the fool. The Prince of Believers Ali, was given to jesting to a point where people held it against him ... Salman the Persian once said to him: 'This (habit of yours) held you back to fourth place (when the Caliph was being chosen).'²¹⁴

The pragmatic 'Unsur al-Ma'ali has this to say on this issue:

Understand, my son, that there is an Arabic saying that jesting is the forerunner of mischief. As far as lies in your power, refrain from jesting and particularly from tasteless jesting. If you indulge in jesting, let it not be while you are in your cups, because it is most often then that mischief is created.²¹⁵

Remembering, however, that he is addressing a youth, 'Unsur al-Ma'ali adopts an approach that is more understanding than judgemental, and he

adds the following practical advice to the previous injunction: “wine drinking and jesting are the occupations of young men. If you observe due limits, they can be enjoyed in the pleasantest way; but it is also possible to abstain, if you obey the dictates of wisdom.”²¹⁶

Animal life

As I noted in Chapter 4, Zoroastrians divided animals into two categories: Ahuran and Ahrimanian creatures. The Ahrimanian creatures, *Kharafstars*, were considered evil, and the Ahurans were good. While insects, reptiles and characteristically ferocious animals were of Ahriman’s domain, domesticated and herbivorous animals were Ahura’s creatures. Some animals, such as otters, dogs and black crows, were divine for mythical reasons. In Islamic tradition, all creatures were created by God; but while some of them, such as falcons, horses and camels, were considered auspicious, dogs and pigs were *najis*, or unclean. Islam therefore distinguishes between *halal* animals whose meat it is permissible to eat, such as cattle and certain poultry, and *haram* or inedible animals like pigs and ravens.

According to Kulaini, eating *haram* meat could be one of the *kabirah* or cardinal sins.²¹⁷ In Islamic times, dogs were reduced to the lowest rank of Zoroastrian *kharafstars*, and Ghazali claims that the

soul which allows its lower faculties to determine the higher is as one who should hand over an angel to the power of a dog or a Muslim to the tyranny of an unbeliever. The cultivation of demonic, animal or angelic qualities results in the production of corresponding characters, which in the Day of Judgement will be manifested in visible shapes, the sensual appearing as swine, the ferocious as dogs and wolves, and the pure as angels.²¹⁸

‘Unsur al-Ma‘ali similarly likens dogs to the wicked: “Now in this present world virtuous men are imbued with the spirit of lions, whereas wicked men have the spirit of dogs, for while the dog consumes his prey where he seizes it, the lion takes it elsewhere.”²¹⁹

Whereas most animals were stripped of their mythological significance in the Islamic era, Adab literature still recommended that they be treated with mercy and respect. Nizam al-Mulk relates two separate stories in which individuals are spiritually redeemed due to the care they happen to show to animals in need: in the one entitled “Moses and the Lost Sheep,” Moses becomes a prophet by returning a lost sheep to its flock, while “Mayor Hajji and the Mangy Dog” recounts how the Mayor is granted entrance to paradise for having nursed a sick dog back to health.²²⁰ Nasir al-Din praises those animals who can be trained to do

things they would not ordinarily do as being animals with a degree of consciousness:

The noblest of the [animal] species is that one whose sagacity and perception is such that it accepts discipline and instruction: thus there accrues to it the perfection not originally created in it. Such are the schooled horse and the trained falcon.²²¹

Both writers sound quite Iranian in their approach to animals, for cruelty to Ahuran animals was a great sin in Zoroastrianism, and trained falcons and horses were an integral part of the imperial Persian court.

The drinking of wine

Wine played a part in Zoroastrian religious rituals; while it was credited with many merits, people were advised to enjoy it in moderation, and drunkenness was disdained. In Islam, with the exception of some minority sects that never achieved significant influence in Iran, wine was prohibited in both the Sunni and the Shi'ite tradition. Kulaini, quoting the Sixth Imam, rates the drinking of wine as the sixteenth of the nineteen cardinal (*Kabirah*) sins.²²² In his theological works Ghazali is likewise clear about the sin attached to imbibing alcohol; yet when he writes in the *Adab* genre he tones down his aversion to an expression of mild warning. In one instance, he tells the story of a wise man who enjoyed the admiration of Ma'mun. When Ma'mun offered the wise man wine at a drinking party, the latter replied:

It was the Prince of the Believers himself who elevated me to this illustrious position, out of regard for a small stock of intelligence bestowed on me by Almighty God. ... If I were to drink wine, the intelligence would quit me and discourtesy might issue from me.²²³

Another *hadith* asserts that the Prophet would not eat even a date unless he was certain it had been correctly grown and honourably obtained. Thus Ghazali writes, "These free-lives will swallow gallons of wine and claim (I shudder as I write) to be superior to the Prophet."²²⁴ In spite of the Islamic prohibition, both Persian literature in general and *Adab* works in particular praise wine and freely relate the etiquette of wine drinking.

Secular Adab texts and the drinking of wine

'Unsur al-Ma'ali advises his son regarding wine as follows: "I neither urge you to drink wine nor can I tell you not to drink, since young men never

refrain from action at anyone's bidding."²²⁵ After he allocates just a few lines to the merits of abstinence, he then proceeds to devote a few pages to the proper manner of drinking. He writes that wine is

poison if you do not know how it should be drunk whereas it is a physic against poison if you do know. ... Begin your drinking after your recitation of the afternoon prayers, so that by the time that you are intoxicated, the night will have fallen and nobody will perceive your drunken condition.²²⁶

So too, Nizam al-Mulk devotes an entire chapter, entitled "Concerning the Rules and Arrangements for Drinking Parties," to the drinking of wine.²²⁷ The type of advice he offers the Sultan is exemplified by the following passage:

It is intolerable that anyone should bring his own flagon and cup-bearer; such a custom has never existed before and is extremely reprehensible; for in all ages people have taken away eatables, sweetmeats and wines from kings' palaces to their homes, not from their homes to royal parties, because the sultan is the paterfamilias [or household head] of the world, and all the human race are his children and slaves.²²⁸

In the spirit of Zoroastrian moderation, Nizam-al Mulk writes that the king "should not drink wine for the sake of intoxication. Let him not be constantly jocular, nor altogether austere."²²⁹

Nasir al-Din does not even attempt to recommend abstinence; but rather, having reminded the reader that drinking is not for women or children²³⁰ and that drunkenness is not acceptable, he issues practical advice in a chapter on "The Manner of Wine-Drinking":

When wine is brought on at a gathering, one should sit next to the most virtuous of one's fellow men, taking care not to sit beside anyone noted for inconsiderate behaviour ... [and] the party should be kept agreeable with witty anecdotes and attractive poems. ... If a musician be present, one should not embark upon the telling of stories. ... One should not eat too much fruit, sweet-herbs and sweetmeats.²³¹

We find the same ambivalent attitude towards the partaking of wine both in other famous Persian prose texts such as *Gulistan* and *Tarikh-i Baihaqi* and in Persian poetry. Islamic judges punished with the whip those who continued the habit of drinking, but it evidently continued all the same. Indeed, the *Adab* genre often advises Muslim men how to avoid getting into trouble for drinking surreptitiously.

Admittance to heaven

In Chapter 4, I observed that Zoroastrianism was a non-proselytizing local religion. No claim was ever made that it was a universal religion, and therefore adherents of other faiths were left to their own devices and were even proffered one of the four categories of heaven (paradises) appointed to the worthy people of other religions. Islam, on the other hand, claimed to be universal; and so not only did it proselytize, but it urged believers furthermore to engage in *jihad* (religious war) against infidels. While those who were *Ahl-i Kitab* or People of the Book (i.e., Jews, Christians and, at times, Zoroastrians) were not to be subjected to *jihad*, they nonetheless were not deemed fit for heaven. According to both the Sunnis and the Shi'ites, all seven levels of *Adan*, or heaven, were intended for Muslims. In the Islamic view, a virtuous infidel could aspire only to the least severe level of the seven stages of hell. It should be noted that some Shi'ite theologians do not consider even Sunnis to be eligible to go to heaven.²³²

The Sunni writer Ghazali claims that on the day of judgement "all infidels will be thrown in hell, without any chance of redemption, while the obedient Muslims will be sent to heaven."²³³ Ghazali also quotes the Prophet as having said that every infant has a natural inclination towards Islam that is thwarted in youth: "Every child is born with a predisposition toward Islam; then his parents make a Jew, or a Christian, or a star-worshiper of him."²³⁴ Kulaini, a Shi'ite, condemns to hell all Sunnis who do not believe in the twelve Imams: he quotes Imam Sadiq as saying that "no sin is too harmful if there is faith [in us,] and no pious conduct is useful without the faith."²³⁵ The other less-religious Adab texts completely ignore the subject of heaven and its occupancy, perhaps because of the sensitive nature of the topic.

'Ajams versus Arabs and other ethnic groups

Like other universal religions, Islam has a great appeal in that it addresses all people. The fact that the Prophet was of Arab origin, however, combined with the fact that the Qur'an was revealed in the Arabic language, provided grist for pride and nationalistic sentiment among the Arabs; and this Arab sentiment in turn became the cause of resentment among some non-Arab Muslims, particularly in Iran. On the other hand, one advantage of the situation was that their integration into a foreign empire made Iranians more aware of international matters. Even so, this awareness was somewhat limited; the more secular authors of the Adab genre merely feign interest, for example, in the practices of other nationalities with respect to buying slaves or to delegating tasks to labourers and staff.

The views of these Adab writers inevitably contain generalizations, prejudices, and a natural inclination towards their own fellow countrymen. In his chapter entitled "The Purchase of Slaves," 'Unsur al-Ma'ali claims that

"Turks are not all of one race and each [race] has its own nature and essential character,"²³⁶ stipulating that the Ghuzz and the Qipchaqs are "the most ill-tempered" and that the Khutanese, the Khallukhis and the Tibetans are "the best-tempered and most willing."²³⁷ Other peoples are more complex, in his view: the Byzantines "are foul-tongued, evil-hearted, cowardly, [and] indolent, ... but they are cautious, affectionate ... [and] successful in their undertakings," while Armenians "are mischievous, foul-mouthed, thieving, but ... quick of understanding."²³⁸

For his part, Nizam al-Mulk praises the Dailamites, Khurasanis, Gurjistanis and the people of Shabankara in Pars for their excellent military qualities; but he asserts that an army comprising a variety of races will not be likely to conspire against its king:

It was the custom of Sultan Mahmud to have troops of various races such as Turks, Khurasanis, Arabs, Hindus, men of Ghur and Dailam. ... [For] fear of one another no group dared to move from their places, ... [and] on the day of battle, each race strove to preserve its name and honour, and fought all the more zealously lest anyone should say that such-and-such race showed slackness in battle. Thus all races endeavoured to surpass one another.²³⁹

Even the philosopher Nasir al-Din would not go beyond the popular prejudices and perceptions of his time:

Among the classes of nations, the Arabs are distinguished for their speech, their eloquence and their ingenuity, but they are also noted for [their] harsh nature and powerful appetite. The Persians, on the other hand, are distinguished by intelligence, quickness, cleanliness and sagacity, albeit noted for cunning and greed. The Byzantines are distinguished for loyalty, trustworthiness, affection and competence, but noted for stinginess and meanness. Indians are distinguished for strength of feeling, and of intuition and understanding, but noted for conceit, malevolence, guile and a tendency to fabrication. The Turks are distinguished by courage, worthy service and fine appearance, but noted for treachery, hardness of heart and indelicacy.²⁴⁰

While Sunni Adab writers could not claim supremacy over the Arabs, the Shi'ite Kulaini finds a way to do so. Declaring that Shi'ite Islam is the true faith, he quotes a *hadith* from the eighth Imam Riza: "God has foreordained this religion [i.e., Shi'ite Islam] in the care of 'Ajam children."²⁴¹ In other words, Kulaini suggests that the Prophet's own people had been bypassed in favour of the Iranians. Majlisi, in his exposition on Kulaini, writes:

This *hadith* shows that 'Ajam is superior to Arab with respect to faith. And I have explained in my *Bahar* [the name of Majlisi's famous book,

Bahar al-Anvar] a *hadith* of Imam Sadiq, that ‘if Qur’an had been handed down to the ‘Ajams, the Arabs would not have believed in it, but it was handed down to the Arabs, and the ‘Ajams believed in it.’²⁴²

In order to establish an ethnic dimension to this sense of religious superiority, Iranians show great reverence for Princess Shahrbanu, daughter of Yazdgird. Kulaini says that Imam Ali called his grandson Ibn al-Khayratin, or “son of two distinguished parents,” and he recites a poem by Abu al-Aswad that states, “a boy whose ancestors on one side descend from the Bani Hashim [the Prophet’s tribe] and on the other side from King Kasra [Khusraw] is the dearest son, ever wearing the armlet.”²⁴³ Corbin thinks that the marriage evokes not only imperial Iran but also Mazdaism or Zoroastrianism: “According to the Iranian legend, Princess Shahrbanu, daughter of the last Sasanian kings, married Husain ibn Ali, the third Imam. Thus, the Mazdaean Iran, and the Shi’ite Iran ... were attached.”²⁴⁴ It appears that Iranians found a way to maintain their identity at the same time that they endorsed Islam, both when they first converted to Shi’ism in large numbers, and finally when they made it their state religion a few centuries later.

Conclusion of chapter 6

In conclusion, the literary Adab genre, which in form and content is the offspring of Andarz, is also a departure from it. While the latter was purely descended from pre-Islamic ancient Iranians, Adab is a hybrid of two or more cultures. In further support of this point, I have counted the instances of the names most frequently mentioned in two of these Adab texts. Firstly, Ghazali’s *Nasihat al-Muluk* mentions the Prophet Muhammad more than 200 times, ‘Umar is mentioned 50 times, while Anushirvan is referred to 45 times. Aristotle, Plato and Alexander are mentioned frequently as well. In Nizam al-Mulk’s *Siyasatnamah*, Mahmud-i Ghaznavid is mentioned more than 20 times, second only to the Prophet Muhammad, who is cited more than 30 times. ‘Umar is referred to 11 times in the book, while Anushirvan comes up in seven instances. We hear of Alexander three times and Aristotle once. Zoroaster, Mani and particularly Mazdak are generally spoken of in negative terms.

In summary, the Andarz genre had a homogeneous, consistent and coherent source and message, while the Adab genre appears at times to be conflicted, since it comes from diverse and occasionally incongruous sources. While the message of Andarz morality is systematic for the most part, New Persian and Adab literature bear witness to a dual identity and to a divided loyalty that created the contradictory and invariably complex morality of the Iranians.

Conclusion

Although it is often said that history is written by the victors, the ancient history of Iran was largely recorded by others, even when Iranians themselves were victorious. We have seen that Iran and Persia were mentioned in the texts of other civilizations long before Iranians wrote about themselves. Among the peoples who shaped Iranian historiography were Babylonians, Assyrians, Jews, Greeks, Chinese, Romans, Armenians, Arabs and Turks, as well as other Muslims and, later, Europeans. Whereas Iran contributed a great deal to the history of world civilization throughout the period encompassed by this book, historiography – in all but a few centuries of the early Islamic era – did not follow suit. To this day, Iran enjoys only a few prominent historians of its own, and most scholars in the field of ancient Iranian studies have been non-Iranians.

Notwithstanding the relative shortage – and shortcomings – of native Iranian historiography, this book attempts to represent how Iranians have maintained their cultural identity through other means. Despite its relative deficit of philosophy and historiography, Iran has never lacked sages, poets, myths, literary products or wise administrators; and Iranians were gifted at an early stage with the unique poetry and inspirations of Zoroaster and with the competence of the Achaemenid court, both of which left legacies that can be traced even to the present.

In the early Islamic era, many significant books of history were written by Iranians, including Tabari, Narshakhi, Miskawayh, Bal'ami and Baihaqi, in both Arabic and Persian. But Iranians did not forgo other forms of expression such as poetry and literature. Despite political defeats, they tried to maintain their cultural heritage, as I have described it above, in whatever ways they could. Their methods ranged from the conscious incorporation of the pre-Islamic history of Iran into the mythical past of the entire Islamic world, to the unintentional preservation of even small symbolic details, such as the use of *haoma/esfand* (see Chapter 3). This study focuses on the relationship between Andarz and Adab as one of the many reflections of the continuity of Iranian culture. I cannot help but regret, however, the discontinuity of Iranian historiography in recent centuries.

History does not fade with time. On the contrary, what we know about the past today is much more varied and accurate than what was known 100 years ago, as a result of advances in the science of archaeology and the discipline of historiography. Modern excavations in Iran began as late as 1931 with the initial works of G. Contenau and R. Ghirshman at the pre-Achaemenid site of Tepe Giyan. Indeed, the ancient history of Iran is just beginning to emerge, and not without difficulties. R. Frye reminds us that

in the field of ancient Iran the paucity of written sources is so great that all the items of information, from the realms of art, archaeology, religion, and others, must be utilized to understand and to reconstruct the past. Because of the lack of sources in this area speculation is rife, and if two specialists on ancient Iran agree it is a rare occurrence.¹

The difficulty of finding historical documentation is compounded by the fact that the relatively sparse textual corpus encompasses numerous scripts and languages. As J. Duchesne-Guillemin has observed, the study of all the relevant ancient languages, religions and artifacts “demands such hard apprenticeship that no Iranist may boast of having set himself to study them all.”²

O.W. Muscarella describes yet another serious obstacle to our study of ancient Iran:

While by the late nineteenth century active plundering of ancient sites and marketing of the finds began in most areas of the Near East ... in Iran it increased in the late 1920s when Western collectors and museums discovered the exotic art of Luristan. Plundering and concomitant destruction of every area of the Near East [continues] to the present day ... but no culture has been so subject to modern forgery-manufacture as ancient Iran.³

One need only look to the recent destruction of cultural heritage in Iraq to find support for Muscarella's troubling words.⁴ The abundance of forgery obviously results in the devaluation of the original historical relics of ancient Iran by casting doubt on their authenticity and by rendering them unreliable.

Still, in the words of J. Wiesehöfer, “ancient Iran has not yielded all its secrets, and there is still many a surprise concealed in Iranian (or Afghan) soil, in museums and art collections, and much new ground to be broken by scholars.”⁵ R.K. Harrison writes that it is time to rectify “the neglect shown to Persian history over the last few decades”⁶ – and, one may add, over the last few millennia.

Unlike past history, historiography is always in the making, and, hopefully, evolving. Even if we assume that all historical texts are subjective, the

subjectivity of Iranians should take its place alongside and in dialogue with other subjectivities. In any case, the subjective nature of historiography does not render all works of history equally false and/or self-serving. Some – among them many young Iranians whom I have encountered over the years – might argue that basking in past historical glory is absurd and counter-productive. I too believe that one's cultural history should not be the source of any particular pride or shame; but, as the science of genetics has demonstrated, it is always better to know the hand one has been dealt in life. Those who want to have a share in the future must study their past, particularly when that past resonates as strongly in the present as it does in Iran.

Notes

Introduction

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3 Iranian religions

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