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Persia: Place and Idea

Persia/Persians and Iran/Iranians

“Persia” is not easily located with any geographic specificity, nor can its people, the Persians, be easily categorized. In the end Persia and the Persians are as much metaphysical notions as a place or a people. Should it be Iran and the Iranians? Briefly, “Persia/Persians” is seldom used today, except in the United Kingdom or when referring to ancient Iran/Iranians – c. sixth century BC to the third century AD. Riza Shah (1926–1941) decreed in 1935 that Iran be used exclusively in official and diplomatic correspondence. Iran was the term commonly used in Iran and by Iranians, except from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries. Following the Second World War, oil nationalization, the Musaddiq crisis, and subsequent greater sensitivity to Iranian nationalism, the designation Iran/Iranian became widely used in the west. Until recently the use of Persia/Persians was often rejected among Iranians themselves. Iran/Iranian also had its own hegemonic dimension, especially from the experience of some of Iran’s multi-ethnic population. The usage of Persia/Persian, however, was revived by Iranian expatriates in the post-1979 era of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This common usage among them represents an attempt on their part to be spared the opprobrium of “Iran” and its recent association with revolution, “terrorism,” hostages, and “fundamentalism,” while Persia/Persian suggested to them an ancient glory and culture – a less threatening contemporary political identity. Nevertheless, the political ramifications of either Persia or Iran cannot be escaped. Above all, the history of Persia/Iran is the history of the interaction between place and the peoples who have lived and who currently live there.

Place

Usage of Persia or Iran and its geographical location depends not only upon context, but also upon historiographical traditions and their underlying assumptions. Where is Persia/Iran? In the beginnings of recorded Persian history, Persia was the home region of the Achaemenian dynasty (c.550–331 BC), located in the southwestern part of the Zagros mountains and Iranian plateau. Persia was derived from Pars, or in Old Persian *Parsua*, or today's Fars province. (The Sasanian dynasty, c.224–641 AD, the fourth of the ancient Persian dynasties, came to power from their home in Fars, too.) The use of Persia, or the Greek *Persis* for the larger region of what we know as Iran was a Greek concept that becomes reified in the west. Interestingly, the Achaemenians appear not to have had a general designation for the whole of their empire, but utilized existing regional names for specific parts of it. The designation "Iran," was used by the Greek historian, Erasthotes (third century BC) and derives from the Old Persian word *ariya* (Aryan). The Sasanians, however, called the core of their empire Iranshahr (the empire of the Iranians) or Iranzamin (the land of Iran). Subsequent and modern usage derives from this Sasanian precedent. The boundaries of these ancient empires fluctuated and reflected the ability of their dynasts to defend or expand them. The greatest territory of any Persian empire was that established by the Achaemenians and extended from the Mediterranean to Central Asia, while the Sasanian empire, the next largest in extent, stretched from Mesopotamia to Central Asia.

Geography

Political history compounds the problem of locating Iran. In terms of geography, there is the specific place of the Iranian plateau that extends from Mesopotamian lowlands to the Amu Darya (Oxus river) and south to the Indian Ocean. The western border is defined by that great mountain chain known as the Zagros, some 2,000 kilometers in length, that separates the Iranian plateau from the lowlands of Mesopotamia. The Zagros chain meets the Caucasus mountains in the north with the Alburz mountains to the north and east. The northern border of the Iranian plateau continues from the Zagros and the Alborz, across the Syr Darya to the Amu Darya, Transoxiana and to the Hindu Kush, where it turns south to the Indus Valley to the Indian Ocean, Gulf of Oman, and Persian Gulf. Although the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and plains are not encompassed by the Iranian plateau, they were vital to it, as were Central

Asia and the Indus Valley. Like so much of the history of such a vast, strategic region, geographic designations relate to political factors and to historic patterns of hegemony. At the start of the twenty-first century, this extensive region – some 2,300,000 square kilometers! – comprises the modern states of Iran, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, southern Turkmenistan, and the western half of Pakistan. The ancient empires of the Achaemenians, Seleucids, Parthians, and Sasanians centered on the plateau and often extended far beyond it to the west and to the east.

Topography, too, defines the Iranian plateau, with its extremes of temperature, elevation, and precipitation, giving the region a unity. The plateau is characterized by eroded high deserts and steppes roughly 3,000 meters above sea level, far higher mountain ranges, and great salt basins and lakes formed largely by seasonal rivers that disappear into them. There are great and often stark topographical variations that change dramatically according to the light and by season. Temperatures are extreme, very hot in summer and cold in winter, bitterly so at higher elevations. Similarly, precipitation ranges from 10 centimeters to 250 centimeters (in the lowlands just to the south of the Caspian Sea) per annum. The Iranian plateau is quite barren, often starkly so, and this barrenness is the result of both climatic and cultural conditions. For most of the region, precipitation is sparse and falls mainly in late autumn, winter, and early spring. Precipitation is affected by altitude, and falls as snow at higher elevations. Its slow melt there during the relatively cool summer months provides runoff for agriculture and pastoralism. Perhaps 10 percent of the region is arable and another 15 percent is suitable for pastoral nomadism. Pastoral nomadism, with the constant problem of over-grazing by sheep and goats, and political instability, are probably the prime factors, in addition to climactic limitations, for the region's barrenness. Agriculture without irrigation is possible at higher elevations, though for a shorter season of growth, and in those regions where there is more certain rainfall, especially in the provinces of Azerbaijan, Gilan, Mazanderan, and northern Khorasan. In such places, too, and along rivers, open parkland forest is still to be found. Where there is water, produce is abundant.

Economic and Social Adaptation

Regardless of where Iran as a place is located, love of the land long predates modern nationalism, indeed begins with the Achaemenians. The land with its expanse, variety, and beauty is never far from thought.

The topographical and climatic conditions of the Iranian plateau have shaped its economy and have helped to define its history. The western edge of the plateau, the foothills and lower elevations of the Zagros mountains, were areas where the domestication of cereal grains such as wheat and barley and of sheep and goats – still critical to the whole region in the twenty-first century – first began to occur some 20,000 years ago. Archaeological sites in western Iran, northern Iraq, and south-western Turkey provide the evidence for this critical process. The material culture – shards, flints, obsidian, bones, architecture – from these sites also reveal trade in objects and ideas over great distances. From the beginnings of this process of domestication of plants and animals and with continuing technological and social changes throughout the Middle East, important economic, demographic, social, and cultural developments resulted in larger-scale agriculture in Mesopotamia. Complex communities developed there. In these complex communities, cities emerged along with administrative organizations, social and cultural distinctions, religion and ideas, and writing. In addition to Mesopotamia, Central Asia, that vast area to the east, was also important in shaping Iranian history. According to recent archaeological excavations and analysis complex communities developed there also.

The most important long-term factor in Persian history was human adaptation to the Iranian plateau with the development of agriculture, pastoralism, pastoral nomadism, and urban communities. Agriculture was – and continued to be – focused on production of cereal grains and then fibers, initially wool and flax. The raising of sheep and goats paralleled the domestication of wheat and barley. And there is early evidence for transhumance, that is, seasonal movement from lowlands to upland pastures, where snow melt provided water and grass throughout the summer for sheep and goats. Transhumance, and longer-range pastoral nomadism, represented further specialization and dependence on flocks. Cereal production, however, was part of the pastoral economy. Pastoralists probably represented more of a difference in emphasis from agriculturists, who were more dependent on fields than pastures. Presumably, differences in social organization and culture between agriculturists and pastoral nomads emerged, although both probably shared a kin basis for production and organization.

Pastoral nomads played and continued to play a significant role in Persian history beyond their critical economic one in the form of social–political federations tied to the pastoral economy of access to and protection of pasture and water. Federations formed into confederations for military purposes and for the achievement of political and economic

goals that required greater numbers than a federation; typically, confederations were of short duration, for tension would develop between the short-term needs of the pastoral economy and the longer-term political and military ones of the confederation. In pre-Achaemenian history, confederations from the Iranian plateau, the Zagros in particular, challenged Mesopotamian hegemony, and sources suggest that small kingdoms, for example the Medes, emerged from them. Such confederations possessed leadership, necessary skills and organization, weapons, and an economy and culture that could mount a defense as well as an offense to maintain autonomy in the Zagros. Pastoral nomadic culture required care and defense of flocks and pastures that entailed certain organizational and military skills that were reinforced by hunting skills. While the agriculturists, pastoral nomads, and urban dwellers complemented each other in the larger economy and society, pastoral nomadism required a degree of autonomy.

For pastoral nomadism to be viable, the pastoralists had to be responsive to their flocks' particular short-term needs in terms of pasture and water, and that responsiveness was paramount in making social and political decisions as well. Such autonomy made pastoral nomads unreliable in terms of larger and persisting social and political organizations, and pastoral nomadic leaders who overcame the reluctance to form larger groups did so because they possessed extraordinary political and military ability, family or dynastic base, and, perhaps, charisma. There have been dramatic historical instances when pastoral nomads have combined to mount long-term campaigns of conquest and domination. The emergence of the Achaemenians – and preceding them, the closely related Medes or the Scythes – represent this process.

Ethnic Complexity

Ethnic complexity has also helped to define the history of the Iranian plateau. Such complexity is seen in the economy, settlement patterns, and movements of peoples to and across the plateau region. Language, as a significant ethnic indicator, becomes even more important for historical analysis and differentiation after writing emerged. By the eighth century BC, the Iranian plateau and its adjacent environs included Semitic speakers of Assyrian, Hebrew, and Aramaic; Dravidian peoples, for example the Elamites; Indo-Europeans speakers of Scythian, Armenian, Persian, and a number of dialects; and Turkic speakers toward and in Central Asia. Religion, too, served as an important factor in ethnic and cultural

complexity. Local deities, shamanism, and animism predominated in the Iranian plateau and adjacent regions. However, proto-monotheism – perhaps monotheism itself – was to be found in the teachings of the ancient Persian prophet, Zoroaster (now accepted as having lived well before the Achaemenians,¹ probably, c.1300–1000 BC), and among the Hebrews. Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam would all play important roles in Iran’s subsequent history.

Sources and Historiography

Unfortunately for historians, the ancient Zoroastrian tradition was an oral one, and our knowledge of it is greatly limited; its earliest written sources date only from the period of early Islamic history. However, we know something of ancient Persia, its people, its culture, and even the names of some of the actors in its history, because some of the tradition, especially dynastic politics, was transmitted through written sources. The familiarity of the names of Cyrus the Great, Darius, Xerxes, and Alexander the Great even constitute a part of western culture. Our knowledge and understanding of the ancient world is based not only on primary and secondary sources, but also upon historians’ use of those sources, and their own conceptions and perceptions that they bring to those sources from the culture within which they live. Reconstructing the past involves us, then, in understanding the historiographical tradition.

Granting for the moment that Persian history begins with the Achaemenians (c.550–331 BC), there are earlier references to what becomes known as Persia in Assyrian sources. Then there are extant if limited Achaemenian sources of various sorts, including monumental inscriptions and administrative records, and finally a larger number of Greek sources and biblical references. And, of course, there is the archaeological record. Achaemenian sources have only been available to us since their rediscovery and transcription in the nineteenth century; consequently, the far earlier and pervasive classical and biblical studies have shaped our views of them. In the mid-nineteenth century, Rawlinson and Grotefend independently deciphered the trilingual texts in Old Persian, Median, and Babylonian of Darius’s monumental Bisitun inscription, thus making it possible to read Achaemenian inscriptions there and throughout the Middle East for the first time. The chancery records – the Treasury and Fortification tablets – at Persepolis, however, were not discovered until the archaeological excavations of the 1930s; moreover, these cover only a very short period of time.

Long before Rawlinson and Grotefend, however, a historical tradition of looking at the Achaemenians through a Greek perspective had been well established: Achaemenian history was seen as an extension of Greek history at best or as a counterpoint or a debased version of it. Only seldom was Achaemenian history seen in its own terms. Even in much of twentieth-century scholarship, attitudes toward the Persians were not unlike those of Herodotus in the fifth century BC who found them fascinating, exotic, and “Oriental.” Given the number and detail of Greek sources and the corresponding paucity of Achaemenian ones, Greek histories are understandably seductive. The Greeks defined themselves against the Achaemenians, and viewed them with both awe and condescension. The Persians were clearly non-Greek, the Other, in every category, especially politics, society, and art and architecture. This is history written by rivals if not enemies. Moreover, that subsequent historians well into the twentieth century adopted the Greek view of the Persians is also understandable given political and cultural attitudes, the dearth of Achaemenian sources, and the nature of their own classical education.

The Greek-dominated perception of ancient Middle Eastern history is still common and is reinforced by romantic notions of the unchanging, timeless nature of Oriental or, in our case, Persian history. For example, descriptions by Herodotus have been seen as applicable for all periods of Achaemenian and Persian history with the assumption that little or nothing had changed. Or no discrimination was made between the sixth and third centuries BC; nineteenth-century nomads were likened to biblical “forebears.” Third century BC autocracy and despotism explained seventeenth-century politics. In addition, Greek sources were accepted as primary and contemporary when many were more often secondary, at best, and well after the fact. Not until the 1960s, when a new generation of archaeologists began excavating in both Iran and Central Asia, and with the emergence of a comparable new generation of historians, were accepted Greek-dominated views of the ancient Persians challenged.

So in the 1970s and 1980s attitudes toward Persian/Iranian history of whatever period, ancient to modern, began to change among specialists. A new cohort of Achaemenian specialists, for example, have had a major impact in the reassessment of that history either through new evidence or through the new questions they raised. Especially important was the formation of study groups such as the Achaemenid History Workshops. Certain fields of Iranian studies, in addition to archaeology and history, have experienced a renaissance. One notable area has been the development of Zoroastrian studies. Iranian scholars, also, are now playing a role in this process. In art and architectural history, too, there have been

recent attempts to understand the Achaemenians on their own terms. There has been a similar transformation in Safavid studies with significant new scholarship and publication across disciplines.

Romanticism and idealization of the western cultural tradition, especially regarding the roots of democracy, which have been seen as springing solely from Greek origins, has been slower to change. Use of the past can also be seen in Iranian nationalism, in which nineteenth-century Iranian intellectuals and then the Pahlavis (1926–1979) glorified Iran's pre-Islamic era at the expense of the more recent Islamic past to legitimize their rule. But Pahlavi rulership affected how both Iranian and western scholars have looked at the ancient past, and the study of kingship, because it has now been linked with the Pahlavis, has itself become something of anathema. Far earlier, from Darius (522–486 BC) and then during the time of the Greek historians, rulership was inextricably bound up with Persia and what it was to be Persian. Central for the Greeks in defining Persian "Otherness" was Achaemenian autocracy and decadence. In the same way modern westerners continue to define their idea of Persia in terms of themselves against both the Pahlavis and the Islamic Republic.

Another aspect of our idea of Iran and its historiography has been to view the past through another lens of very recent history and to project on the past assumptions derived from "the state." The state was not established until the Pahlavis centralized rule in the 1920s, when Iran's political culture was radically transformed. In addition, the very use of dynastic names such as the Achaemenian or Sasanian or Safavid (1501–1722) or Qajar (1796–1926) implies a unity, control, or even centralization that was not to be found before the twentieth century. The category "state" is freely adopted from common usage, when in fact the pre-twentieth-century empires represent at best loose confederations with central government institutions. The common use of "state," knowingly or not, relies on Weber's definition: "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."² No Iranian government until the Pahlavis had a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force, and key institutions associated with the Weberian state including a bureaucracy and a military were not the sole prerogative of Iranian governments. And to deal with an additional Weberian factor, that of "a given territory," while there were notions of sovereignty over territory and regions, there were no delineated boundaries of Iran until 1914. Furthermore, the power of government hardly extended beyond capitals and cities in frontier regions, or beyond fortified trading centers along the great trade routes.

Political Culture: Overview

Iran's historic political culture was shaped by its geography, society, and historical interaction with Mesopotamian culture to the west and Central Asian culture to the east. The interaction of agriculture, pastoralism, and urban centers of government and trade persisted until the Pahlavis in the twentieth century; change took place within that framework. Characterizing Iran's political culture over some 2,500 years of history necessitates both lumping and the development of broad generalizations. From Cyrus the Great (c.558–530 BC) until the Pahlavis (AD 1926–1979), Iran's political culture was hierarchically conceptualized within a Zoroastrian and then in an Islamic context: sovereignty, all authority, belonged to God, who selected the ruler, who then reigned on his behalf as vicegerent. Critical ideas included: one God, one universe, one ruler, and one law that included acceptance of alternative religious traditions so long as primacy was granted to the ruler and the dominant socio-political group. The ruler was attended and supported by specific institutions, symbols, and a favored core group of the population with whom he identified. Administration of the population as a whole was based on recognition of autonomy – tribal, regional, ethnic (and Iran's population was multi-ethnic and represented a rich complexity of peoples) – within an essentially religious framework; consequently, there was also tension between toleration and inclusiveness versus exclusiveness and intolerance, regardless of historical period, whether in Zoroastrianism or Islam, or for that matter Pahlavi nationalism during the mid-twentieth century when the political culture was dramatically transformed.

Beginning with the Achaemenians, there was the concept of an empire composed of regions and confederations with their independent bureaucracies and armies and identities within, of course, the encompassing imperial bureaucracy and military structure. Moreover, the empire was headed by a king, as were some of the regions or even confederations. During the reign of Darius (522–486 BC), the paramount king becomes the king of kings – not so much first among equals, but in the sense of being a worthy addition to the ancient Near Eastern kingship tradition. Before becoming kings, or king of kings, the Achaemenians were federation leaders who built a confederation in their home region of Pars/Fars, or Persis/Persia, where they were identified and identified themselves as kings. Certainly from the time of the Sasanians – and probably earlier – until the twentieth century, Iran's bureaucracy, although institutionalized and in service to the ruler and his administration, appears to

have been both public and private, central and regional. The ulema (legal scholars) in the Islamic period, and the Zoroastrian clergy certainly in the earlier Sasanian period and possibly even in the Achaemenian period, performed bureaucratic functions and were independent of the government, although they were often co-opted by and functioned as an adjunct of it. The Afshars and Qajars in the eighteenth century, and confederations such as the Bakhtiyari, which in the nineteenth century were clearly not “states,” also had their “bureaucrats,” patronized ulema, and governed territories. No government before Riza Shah’s in the 1920s had a monopoly on the use of force; notables and federation leaders all had their own armies. Maintenance of order was largely decentralized.

Government in Iran historically was extractive but inefficient, expecting little from and performing few services for the population. Government inefficiency in extracting surpluses related to, and reinforced, local and regional autonomy. Government held power through force, but was legitimized in a moral framework and accepted society as it was, including the tension between the center and its component parts. And for more recent historical periods – possibly earlier as well – there was widespread cynicism for centralized government despite an idealized and moral worldview that made it seem necessary.

Iranian government, again until well into the twentieth century, interacted with a society whose economy was essentially based on agricultural and pastoral production with local and regional trade that was essentially self-sufficient and autonomous in production and distribution. Government administrative policies beginning with the Achaemenians recognized and institutionalized the essential federation or decentralized system to reinforce local autonomy. One example would be the assignment of land by the government to holders who performed military and bureaucratic functions from the usufruct.

A primary purpose of government, and a critical role for its military, was defense of frontiers and control of pastoral nomadic peoples. Migration of peoples, in itself, was another recurring feature of the Iranian plateau’s history, which contributed to local or regional autonomy and weak centers, and complicated concentration of power in a center. Confederations, or petty kingdoms, in the central Zagros in the eighth century BC faced off against Assyria, and it was from this region that the Medes and then the Achaemenians were to emerge. The eleventh-century AD Saljuq and subsequent Turkic-Mongol invasions signaled the arrival of a new people with flocks and culture. Turkic languages and culture added to the mix of peoples that had pre-existed in Iran, and their

appearance reinforced pre-existing social and political processes and established policies and institutions. While sedentary agricultural society dominated Iran even before the Achaemenians, Iran may well have had a majority nomadic population. The Turkic-Mongol arrival resulted in increased pastoralism, first, in terms of the numbers of pastoralists and their animals at the expense of agriculture. Second, in response to that impact Iran's agricultural society, facing competition for land and water from the newly arriving nomads, emphasized the pastoral component of its economy and adapted it for the Zagros. For example, in Luristan, part of ancient Elam, or in Fars itself at Anshan, there is archaeological evidence to indicate increased pastoralism with the advent of new pastoral peoples.

The truism that all governments of pre-twentieth-century Iran – save for the Selucids – came to power from confederations of pastoral nomads, even in those instances where dynasts were not themselves pastoral nomads, emphasizes the importance of pastoral nomads. Some of these confederations were indigenous to Iran, the Achaemenians, Sasanians, the Safavids, the Qajars to name only a few, and others moved into Iran from Central Asia – the Saljuqs and the Ilkhans, for example. The historical cycle of the overthrow of government by pastoral nomads and the migration of pastoral nomadic peoples, including through conquest, is an essential pattern in Iranian history. Pastoral nomadism and confederation building characterized Iran's political culture until the mid-twentieth century, when that political culture was permanently changed.

Iran's political culture and history resulted in a characteristic rulership that survived even the seventh-century Arab destruction of Sasanian Iran and subsequent gradual Islamization. On Iran's other great divide, Central Asia, its traditions of rulership reinforced the Iranian tradition. There, too, the fragmented polity that so typified ancient Iranian history existed. Central Asia, however, unlike Iran, was dominated by far larger confederations of pastoral nomads. That political culture, society and economy profoundly affected Iran when Central Asian nomads, through conquest or emigration, reinforced existing regional and local autonomy, both socially and politically, to shape Iran's history down to the twentieth century.

Rulership

Rulership expressed itself within Iran's political culture through interactions of the ruler, his government, and his institutions with constituent

groups and within a framework of shared values, culture, and economy. Here representation of the ruler to the ruled was a matter of legitimacy, or multiple legitimacies,³ or what Crossley refers to as simultaneous rulership.⁴ Most successful rulers of Iran have also sought to legitimize their rule in relation to preceding rulers, and have seen themselves as the rightful heir of a tradition of rulership even in the face of – or especially because of – the discontinuity that has so characterized Iranian history. Legitimacy is not just the representation of the ruler to the ruled, or the interaction between them, but about the relation between the ruler and tradition, his relation to history.

Iranian rulership represented a form of imperial expression in which the ruler transcended the realm's, or, more typically, the empire's, parts to create a historical reality and congruent images and symbols. Moreover, the ruler created, or could destroy, constituencies, which existed as expressions of his rulership. Simultaneous rulership – or, in our instance, Iranian rulership – describes multiple ruling personae within one political individual, and functioned in the context of a hierarchical cosmology and political culture: God (in both Zoroastrianism and Islam), the ruler, and the ruled, and then the cosmos, the realm, and the region or locality. Especially important, the simultaneous ruler mediated between God (*tengri* in Central Asian contexts) and his subjects, and consequently both dominated them and transcended particular cultures. Moreover, the ruler ruled over an ethnically and geographically complex society.

On the one hand, “Iran” and its peoples are the product of its rulership; the ideological product of imperial centralization. On the other, rulership is shaped by its interaction with the society and economy of the ruled. Through rulership, the ruler represented and institutionalized himself and his lineage and descent group, those closest to him. The ruler headed but was, in addition, a member of a variety of constituencies (historical identities – satrapies, for example, under the Achaemenians) that might have only a loose connection with ethnographically verifiable groups that ranged from his own family and lineage to the broadest categories under his dominion, and represented them in the full range of his religious, political, administrative, military, and cultural capacities. These groups existed as expressions of his rulership and were symbolized through trilingual inscriptions – an essential marker for Crossley as a representation of simultaneous rulership. Moreover, he mediated between them in the present as well as in the future and in the past. In particular, certain ideas and symbols are seen by the simultaneous ruler's subjects as embodying these universal, all-encompassing qualities that go beyond one's particular group. In one sense, simultaneous rulership

allowed the ruler's subjects to project on to him their worldviews, but at the same time he transcended them. Yet simultaneous rulership is more, and expressed itself in institutions of government and religion, in values and culture, and concretely through patronage politically and culturally in material representation. Too typically, dynastic history tends to be both mechanistic and simplistic in assigning causation to the will and consciousness of the ruler rather than the interplay of ideological, political, economic, social, and cultural factors. Consequently, there is an objective and historical reality to Iranian rulership, through which the rulers operated within a political culture and yet responded to a complex of dynamic relationships.

Iranian Political Culture: Historical Bases of Rulership

On the historical level, notions of rulership had a basis in society and its political culture. Centers of government were characteristically weak, despite being powerful military machines for conquest, while regionally based political and economic groups were accorded autonomy and a defined place in the imperial structure. Indeed, imperial structures started with tribes or tribal-like organization. The pre-modern Iranian economy itself was based on agriculture, pastoralism, craft-production to a degree, and trade. A shaping force in Iranian history has been the society and economy that evolved on the Iranian plateau. Especially important, the Achaemenians – indeed, the Medes and Scythians before them, as well as subsequent Iranian dynasties – emerged as leaders of federations of pastoralists, typically nomadic, and of agriculturists. Pastoral nomadism, whether of the Central Asian steppe or of mountain type, is especially well suited to simultaneous rulership, particularly in its confederation- and empire-building forms.

Pastoralism, and especially pastoral nomadism, requires flexibility in response to geographic and both macro- and micro-climatic changes in competition for pastures and water. On the one hand, such flexibility has resulted in corresponding fluid and ephemeral social and political organization. On the other, such fluidity and emphasis on small groups, typically nuclear or extended families owning their own flocks and pastures, has meant that such groups are absent from historical sources – with some exceptions – until relatively recent times and then mainly when they are linked to dynastic leadership.

Without avoiding the charge of being anachronistic and extrapolating from one period to another and assuming a fixed meaning of “tribe,”⁵

it is useful to remember Albert Hourani's elegant and uncomplicated definition for seventh-century Arabia: "The [nomadic peoples] were not controlled by a stable power of coercion, but were led by chiefs belonging to families around which there gathered more or less lasting groups of supporters, expressing their cohesion and loyalty in the idiom of common ancestry; such groups are usually called tribes."⁶

The problem of tribe for many Middle Eastern and Central Asian analysts starts with unexamined assumptions. All Iranian specialists use the term "tribe," but what is meant by "tribe"? For most, it means the political organization of pastoral nomads. The use of the term is highly contextual and varied; yet many historians assume that it has a fixed meaning and therefore assumed social form.⁷ I suspect that most historians don't even think about it, but when historians do use "tribe," they assume several qualities of social organization that will be discussed below.

The single term "tribe" fits into itself a range of potential economic, political, social, and cultural activities and organization, from small family-centered herding units to empire. Historians commonly see tribes negatively in terms of urban society and government, in other words from the viewpoint of sources that themselves are usually anti-tribal. Again, historians' assumptions about the twentieth-century Iranian nation-state – its need to control and centralize – affect interpretations of pre-modern Iran. Economic roles are assumed and generally undocumented save for those which involve conflict with settled society. What is not articulated by historians is the notion that what sets tribes apart is their autonomy – that they are difficult to control from the perspective of settled society, that tribes are unreliable and follow their own self-interest. The principle of autonomy prevailed also within the tribe itself, and it is this fact that made federation and then confederation building so difficult.

Autonomy should not be confused with freedom or equality. What is the basis for the idea that Iranian tribespeople upheld the values of equality or egalitarianism? While egalitarianism may be an Islamic ideal, its expression was difficult.⁸ (In Safavid studies, one encounters the generalization that Sufis – Islamic mystics and their institutions – were egalitarian, but the basis for this claim is elusive, too.) While access to tribal pastures, water, and migration routes was essential for all tribespeople, pastoral nomadic society was far from egalitarian.⁹ One can generalize from historical sources that tribespeople's worldviews were hierarchical, that they were organized socially, economically, and politically hierarchically. Even though tribal groups may have enjoyed autonomy and independence, they were interdependent within the tribe, federations, or

confederations and within the larger contexts of agricultural, settled, and urban society. Pastoral nomadic tribes' autonomy relates to their economy and associated social and political organizations.

Tribal autonomy was self-sustained, given that typically pastoral nomads were mounted and armed. Of course, they entered the historical picture through raiding – also an aspect of their economy – and as warriors, both defensive and offensive, for themselves or for government. Hunting, itself a part of pastoral nomadic culture, reinforced that role and self-image. Trade was also critical for the pastoral economy, probably more so in Central Asia, for both transport and exchange. It is important to remember that pastoral nomads interacted with agriculturalists around them, and shared many of the same skills in an overlapping of pastoral and agricultural economies; however, husbandry was primary for pastoralists, and secondary for agriculturalists. Agriculturalists probably did not play equally significant military roles. Certainly in western Iran there was considerable movement between the two economies. In eastern Iran and Central Asia, however, nomads and agriculturalists were more clearly set apart. Pastoral nomadism expanded and waned; though it appeared to have increased within the indigenous population with the arrival of the Saljuqs and then the Mongols.¹⁰

Again, historians assume too often that tribes constitute distinct ethnic and lineage groups – some exceptions would be Crone, Lindner, and Tapper.¹¹ Better to conceive of them as political constituencies that idealize and justify their social and political organization and culture in kinship and, often, descent terms. As with simultaneous rulers, tribal leaders gave definition to tribes. As political constituencies the political skills of leaders were paramount – probably more important than kinship and lineage, although descent in the dominant lineage carried its own authority – in forming larger and more complicated organizations and coalitions.

Tribal leaders formed federations, some leaders of pastoral nomadic federations built confederations. It is important to remember that a confederation is a weakly linked body whose members have a great deal of autonomy, with some notable exceptions such as serving under Chingiz Khan. Some confederations became governments and even empires, which are distinguished by institutions of administration and dynastic rulership. Dynastic names, however, obscure the fact that even when these empires were formed and then persisted, they were not highly centralized. There were many centers of power within these empires and even within their many regions. It should be noted, too, that autonomy was not limited to tribally organized people; whole provinces could be

autonomous under hereditary governors. Furthermore, there were significant interactions and tensions within and between federations and confederations and other constituencies, both urban and rural, that resulted in autonomy at each level. Federation and confederation building that allowed for autonomy of groups and regions has characterized Iran's history down to the twentieth century, when a centralized nation-state developed under the Pahlavis.

The federations/confederations were "descent" federations, because central leadership was typically vested in a dominant family and its descendants – the Achaemenian, Seleucid, Parthian, Sasanian, Saljuq, Chingizid and Ilkhanid, Timurid, Safavid (even though their origins were non-tribal), or Qajar families, for example – within which legitimacy was based and from which authority was derived. Such families were seen as having kin ties to the whole federation or confederation. These families experienced intense competition for rule among those eligible for leadership. The vague criteria for rulership included: membership of a particular family, in which all males were potentially eligible, and a process of selection that involved some level of competition to determine the one "best-suited" for leadership.

Historical Overview and the Dynamic of Rulership

Already at the beginning of the first millennium BC, when the first Persians began to arrive on the Iranian plateau and move into the Zagros from Central Asia, the population consisted of agriculturalists and pastoralists representing a variety of ethnic groups. At the end of the first millennium AD this same complexity of peoples and economies was reinforced in both its agricultural and nomadic sectors by the arrival of a Turkic population also from Central Asia. The first Persians probably appeared as a gradual infiltration of mounted and armed pastoral nomads.¹² The arrival of the Saljuqs in the eleventh century was more abrupt; they first made their presence known militarily. Subsequently large numbers of nomads with their flocks arrived. Lastly, the introduction of Saljuq administration and institutions had its effect on subsequent Iranian history. The Saljuq impact was then compounded when Iran became part of the Mongol empire of Chingiz Khan (d. 1227), and especially during the administration of Hulegu, his grandson (d. 1265), and under his successors, the Ilkhans. Once more Iran was to be affected by Central Asian government, especially military organization, administration, and ideology.

Another point that relates to Achaemenian and later periods, including the Arab-Muslim invasions of the seventh century and the later Turkic-Mongol ones, is the role of nomads as cultural transmitters. Crossley has pointed out that Central Asian nomads were important transmitters of culture, especially religion, across Asia:

The [Central Asian] steppe, however, remained a mix of religious affiliations, in which it was not unique to find a single lineage group including members professing Buddhism, Manichaenism, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, any of which were likely to be crossed with the traditional shamanism.

This plurality of religious practice among the Central Asian nomads was partly related to the fact that ideas about rulership were *not* [my emphasis] always associated with ideas about established religion. Since very early times, Central Asian societies had been permeated by an ideal of world rulership, in the ruler, or “khan,” [who] speaks to an ultimate god, represented in Central Asia as Heaven, or the Sky. By his role as the enunciator of Heaven this universal ruler transcends particular cultures, and dominates them all. This is an extremely old idea in the region, and may have originally derived from Iranian influences.

Crossley continues that these ideas were merged with Islamic ones through the Saljuqs – and later through the Ottomans and Nadir Shah. “This ideal was also extremely important in the rise of the Mongols. It entitled them to appeal to any and all religious systems to legitimate their rule. It permitted them to patronize and gain the favor of any religious establishment. And it demonstrated the ability of the Great Khan to claim superiority over all religious leaders.”¹³

It is possible that the role of nomads as religious transmitters developed long before the Achaemenians with the ideas and teaching of Zoroaster. Leaving aside for now whether or not the Achaemenians were Zoroastrian, or how Zoroastrian they were, the ideas of Zoroaster – especially ones of a dominant, all-encompassing deity, a cosmic, dualistic struggle between good and evil, and highly developed ethics – stand as one of the critical legacies of the Achaemenian period. The role of nomads as religious transmitters also emphasizes their taken-for-granted importance in Iranian history.

The role and titles of federation leaders, often themselves pastoral nomads, suggest a variety of parallels between ancient, medieval, and early modern Iran. The Safavids, in particular, revive usage of earlier Iranian titles – again going back to the Achaemenians – of self-affirming/self-authenticating emperorship: king, king of kings/shahanshah by the

Achaemenians and Sasanians; padishah by Ghazan Khan Ilkhan; and shah/shahanshah again by the Safavids, Qajars, and Pahlavis. Interestingly, whereas khan, a sufficient title for Chingiz, and subsequently khaqan for his Mongol successors, implied universal or cosmic rule, khan certainly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is used for those who exercise power, such as sultan, in the Saljuq era, although in the twentieth century khan was used as a general male honorific. Khaqan and shah then imply universal power. In addition, cosmic notions of universal rulership in Iran not only incorporated indigenous notions, but Islamic ones as well: khaqan/khan, padishah (protecting lord, emperor)/shahanshah (king of kings), and Zill Allah (shadow of God), among others. It should be noted, too, that self-affirming and self-authenticating titles were used not only by imperial leaders but also by federation leaders.

The dichotomy between title and function, an ideal and reality, and religious/cultural values and power is generally regarded as part of Saljuq/Central Asian/Mongol legacy, which it was. However, Turkic-Mongol practice reinforced the already existing parallel practice in the political culture of Iran and continued well into the twentieth century. An aspect of the idea of rulership, especially its legitimation, was the shaping of identity and the interaction between the ruler and the ruled, between elite culture and popular culture, and between inclusiveness – especially in periods such as the Achaemenian one and then Central Asian – and the more exclusive claims that occurred periodically in Sasanian and Islamic Iran. The Achaemenians, probably, and the Sasanians supported an official Zoroastrianism, and periodically tried to suppress heterodox movements. The Buyids – the first “Iranian” government after the 641 Sasanian collapse – were themselves Shi‘i Muslims, while Iran for the most part was Sunni, and then the Saljuqs and Ghazan Ilkhan became Sunni Muslims. Other rulers sought religious change: Oljeitu, Shi‘a; Shah Isma‘il and the Safavids, Shi‘a, and it is under Safavid rule Iran became Shi‘i; Nadir Shah espoused a more inclusive Islam; Riza Shah advanced nationalism as a new ideology; and even Khomeini’s Islamic primacy fits into this pattern. Perhaps the most important point was this interaction between inclusiveness and exclusiveness, not only in terms of rulership and religion, legitimacy, and identity, but the reciprocal interaction between the center of power and the larger society itself, with weak centers and regional autonomy. There were limits placed on authority and power by the hierarchical nature of society – both in terms of worldview and in practice. For authority to be upheld and for power to function, a general consensus of groups had to be recognized – this was essential for Iran’s political culture.

The Arab-Muslim conquest of the mid-seventh century introduced a new element to Iran's political culture, the idea of egalitarianism. Interestingly, there is an element of egalitarianism within pastoral nomadism in terms of access to pastures and water and in political organization. In the end, however, pastoral nomadism embodies a hierarchical structure and worldview. Islamic egalitarianism was not to be realized in Iran. Importantly in the mid-eighth century, with the 'Abbasid victory over the Umayyads, the Sasanian imperial tradition was re-established with the 'Abbasid caliphate centered in Baghdad.

Islam and then at the time of the Safavids its Imami (or Twelver) Shi'i form came to be identified inexorably with Iran and its rulership. However, the earlier, pre-Islamic and pre-Safavid patterns of government, the relationship of the ruler to the ruled, titles, a weak center in face of the autonomous regions and groups of Iran, and the hierarchical nature of society, continued. Even the reigns of Safavid rulers, regarded as centralizers, make the point of continuity. Shah 'Abbas, despite his attempts to centralize power, ruled very much in the mold of his Iranian and Central Asian predecessors. This can be seen in his commercial and patronage interests; in administration and ulema/Sufi roles; in the nature of society including its multi-ethnic composition and identities; in the agricultural and pastoral economy, and the autonomy of its units; and in military decentralization. One significant change that confronted the Safavids, and would prove to be beyond their control, was the emergence of an expanding west, particular its military and economic power.

Iranian responses to the western impact profoundly changed Iran's political culture and historical patterns. The experiment in constitutionalism and liberalism failed in the first two decades of the twentieth century from the lack of a broad social basis, from ulema and monarchical opposition, from the failure to develop institutional support, and from continued European imperial interference. In the second and third decades of the twentieth century the Qajar dynasty was ousted, and the newly elected and then crowned shah, Riza Pahlavi, ruled as autocrat but carried out that liberal agenda save for the development of liberal political institutions. He centralized his rule at the expense of the historic autonomy of regions, tribes, and groups; he established the nation-state and a nationalism based on Iran's pre-Islamic past; he modernized the military, economy, and administration; and he westernized and secularized education, law, and culture. These changes have not been reversed and continued to evolve at the end of the last century. Iranians now look at themselves and their relationship to government in quite different ways.

The Pahlavi state became centralized under a bureaucracy and a standing army, and a new active role for the state involved it directly in the economic, political, legal, social, and cultural life of the people. The autonomy of groups and regions was subordinated to the center; their leaders acquiesced or were co-opted or executed. Centralization of government and modern technology gave Riza Shah the means to rule as an autocrat and, as it continued, would cut his son, Muhammad Riza Shah, off from that reciprocal relationship with the population. His rule ended in the 1978–9 revolution. Although Riza Shah appropriated the traditional titles and symbols of rule, especially the pre-Islamic ones, he also utilized western ideas and technologies. His ideology of nationalism focused on Iran's pre-Islamic and imperial past and a western, urban, industrial, and secular future, with Iran restored as a west Asian power.

As a critical component of its centralization and westernization policies, Pahlavi Iran demanded a single identity and did not tolerate competing ones and loyalties; the new identity was to be Irano-Persian-Pahlavi. Existing inclusive notions of identity gave way to an exclusive one. Layers of identity did persist, however, and were tolerated if they were subsumed under the Pahlavi ones. All groups making up Iran were expected to adapt to the dominant identity. Finally, the Pahlavis' radical notions of society and its representation were to persist even after the Islamic Revolution.

The revolution of 1978–9 and the formation of the Islamic Republic changed the ideology and symbols of the state but not its form. The Islamic Republic replaced the Pahlavi national-civic-religious identity with an Islamic one, but Iranian identity reasserted itself at the beginning of the Iran–Iraq war. Aspects of westernization, especially cultural and legal ones, have been superseded within the governing ideology in favor of Islam; the direct link between government and religion was re-established. Until it faced challenges from the Kurds, Turkmen, Baluch, and then the Qashqa'i and Arabs – all of whom were attempting to reassert autonomy – it appeared that the Islamic Republic might tolerate groups or regions and be more inclusive rather than exclusive in organizing society. However, a single-minded autocracy was established, and identity has been made even more exclusive, especially through carefully monitored public morality and behavior, controlled education, and government subsidies.

Significantly, however, in 1979 a constitution with liberal political institutions was adopted, although control was vested in the hands of selected ulema. The Islamic Republic rejected not only those who are secularized or westernized but also those whom the ulema regard as only

nominally Muslim. In face of increasing economic problems and overwhelming cynicism, it remains to be seen whether or not religious rule will in the end succeed or persist. However, the Iran of the future, despite its unchanging geography, will be decidedly urban, and the modern centralized state will continue to affect all aspects of the lives of its citizens directly. Most significantly, as the twenty-first century began, Iranians increasingly expected political roles for themselves as citizens, which challenges the very basis for clerical rule.