

Another New Agenda for Persian Studies?

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Besides the sheer magnificence and monumentalism of the unfolding 45-volume Encyclopaedia Iranica (EI), probably the largest published single encompassment of a particular culture zone in the world, my occasional attempts to formulate Agendas for Persian Studies¹ look too personal and ad hoc. But I take heart that my ponderings have not been so hapless as to draw no attention from the founding editor of the whole enterprise. Indeed, were it not for the late Professor Ehsan Yarshater's endorsements and encouragements, I would not presume to formulate anything more. Allow me to comment, then, on a number of 'growing points' in Persian Studies that have drawn my attention, especially those of cultural and religious interest, that link to my work as an historian of ideas.

First and foremost the prehistory and deeper antiquity of Persia have their own new excitements at the dawn of the third millennium, these

¹Garry W. Trompf, "An Agenda for Persian Studies," in *Mehregan in Sydney: Proceedings of the Seminar in Persian Studies, Sydney, Australia, 28 October-6 November 1994*, ed. Garry Trompf and Morteza Honari (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1998), 1–6; and "A New Agenda for Persian Studies?" *Iran and the Caucasus* 12, no. 2 (2008): 385–95.

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as much from within what is now territorially Iran as across regions that we usually conceive to be highly Persianate, straddling at least from Mesopotamia and the Caucasus (the latter basically Armenia and Georgia), north in Bactria (along the Oxus River and Fergana Valley in Central Asia, mainly now Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), and southeastward to Afghanistan. Up until the end of the twentieth century, the archaeology of most of these areas was dominated by investigators² working within what was then a vast Soviet empire; but after 2000 a less ideological breed of Russian researchers emerged (such as Vladimir Ionesov) who published in the West,³ followed by scholars of increasing national diversity. Traditional areas of prehistoric interest have been proto-Bactrian Bronze Age sites and the Elamite and Median empires (1500-550 BCE and 600-550 respectively), and whereas knowledge has been very fragmentary during the last century and again dominated by Russian scholars,⁴ we are fortunate to have new studies that help put more and more pieces together to gauge these prevenient cultural influences on the emergent Achaemenian dynasty (during the 550s BCE). American Daniel Potts, for over twenty years Professor of Middle Eastern Archaeology at the University of Sydney, has raised new questions about the multi-ethnic character of so-called Elam,⁵ and of interest is the retention of the ‘leading’ language Anshanite and other Elamite features in the early Achaemenid administration,⁶ linguistically called “Achaemenid Elamite.”⁷ As for Media, recent

²Akhmadali Askarov and Aleksei P. Okladnikov, for example.

³Garry W. Trompf, “Commendatory Preface,” for Vladimir I. Ionesov, *The Struggle between Life and Death in Proto-Bactrian Culture: Ritual and Conflict* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2002), xv–xvi.

⁴See especially Igor Diakonoff, “Elam,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 2: *The Median and Achaemenian Periods*, ed. Ilya Gershevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1–24; and Diakonoff, “Media,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 2, 36–148.

⁵Dan Potts, *The Archaeology of Elam: Formation and Transformation of an Ancient Iranian State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and “The Elamites,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History*, ed. Touraj Daryaee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 43–44.

⁶See, by way of comparison, Wouter F.M. Henkelman, “Elamite Administrative and Religious Heritage in the Persian Heartland,” in *The Elamite World*, eds. Javier Álvarez-Mon, Gian Petro Basello and Yasmina Wicks (New York: Routledge, 2018), 803–28.

⁷Juan E. Briceño-Villalobos, “Achaemenid Elamite and Persian Indefinites: A Comparative View,” in *Ancient Indo-European Languages between Linguistics and Philology: Contact*,

archaeological studies show that its empire was never quite as consolidated as conventionally held, and though its widespread segments were united enough to bring down the Assyrian empire,⁸ it seriously dispersed under the Achaemenids. Ongoing researches raise more questions than those already apparently answered.

Unexpectedly, in 2001, there came to light a distinct Bronze Age culture in southeastern Iran called Jiroft (sometimes Halilrud), evinced most clearly at the exposed flooded site of Konar Sandal (near Jiroft, a regional capital of the Iranian province of Kerman), and touted by its leading excavator Iranian Yusef Majidzadeh (1938-) as “the cradle of civilization,”⁹ or “the earliest Oriental Civilization,”¹⁰ being pre-Sumerian, with its inscriptions in the oldest (still mostly indecipherable) script known,¹¹ and, as distinct from Mesopotamian Sumer, its cultural connections being eastward, to the Bronze Age Helmand civilization of west Afghanistan (2500-1900 BC),¹² and to that of the Indus Valley. Most of the details are not published, and claims of a whole new civilization have caught scholars by surprise.¹³ Questions of

Variation, and Reconstruction, ed. Michele Bianconi, Marta Capano, Domenica Romagno and Francesco Rovai (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 48–87.

⁸Karen Radner, “Assyria and the Medes,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, ed. Daniel Potts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 442–56.

⁹From Roberto Ajello, “Armenian,” in *The Indo-European Languages*, eds. Paolo Ramat (New York: Routledge, 1998 [2005]), 197–227, to Robin Meyer, “Alignment Change and Changing Alignments: Armenian Syntax and the First ‘Death’ of Parthian,” in *Ancient Indo-European Languages between Linguistics and Philology: Contact, Variation, and Reconstruction*, eds. Michele Bianconi, Marta Capano, Domenica Romagno and Francesco Rovai (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 211–33.

¹⁰From Roberto Ajello, “Armenian,” in *The Indo-European Languages*, eds. Paolo Ramat (New York: Routledge, 1998 [2005]), 197–227, to Robin Meyer, “Alignment Change and Changing Alignments: Armenian Syntax and the First ‘Death’ of Parthian,” in *Ancient Indo-European Languages between Linguistics and Philology: Contact, Variation, and Reconstruction*, ed. Michele Bianconi, Marta Capano, Domenica Romagno and Francesco Rovai (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 211–33.

¹¹See, by way of comparison, Khosro Khazai, *Naissance et évolution de l’écriture* (Brussels: Société générale de banque, 1985), 92–99.

¹²See, by way of comparison, Maurizio Tosi, *Iran: l’alba della civiltà* (Milan: Provinciali Spotorno, 1972).

¹³Andrew Lawler, “Jiroft Discovery Stuns Archaeologists,” *Science* 302, no. 5647 (2003): 973–75.

how extraordinary Jiroft art (bronze-ware hair-styles, images of ‘competing’ dragons and serpents, etc.) fit into the history of Iranian art are highly contested,¹⁴ and there is now a crying need for more detailed archaeological information. Artificial Intelligence (AI) may be useful in the decipherment of the Jiroft script and the working out of linguistic relationships with Sumerian, Elamite, and the language of the still not-fully-disentangled Indus Valley pictograms.¹⁵

The ‘classic Persian’ (Achaemenid to Sasanian) materials seem to have reached a stabilizing point, and EI, together with the new two-volumed Blackwell’s *Companion to the Achaemenid Persian Empire* edited by the German scholars Bruno Jacobs and Robert Rollinger,¹⁶ have registered them very effectively.¹⁷ Most new discussions concern the edges of the ‘Persian zone.’ After much debating, for a start, it is now firmly settled that Armenian is an Indo-European language.¹⁸ In archaeology, new work has been done on acculturation or iconographic adoption during Persia’s effort to control Egypt,¹⁹ on interpreting the marks of Persian presence in northern Anatolia,²⁰ and on Cyprus,²¹

¹⁴Oscar Muscarella, “Jiroft and ‘Jiroft-Aratta’: A Review Article of *Jiroft: The Earliest Oriental Civilization*,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 15 (2001): 173–198; see, by way, of comparison, Niels von Holst, et al., *7000 Jahre Kunst in Iran* (Essen-Bredene: Villa Hügel, 1962), 53–93.

¹⁵For example, Alison George, “Cracking the Code,” *New Scientist* 255, no. 3398 (2022): 40–44.

¹⁶*A Companion to the Achaemenid Persian Empire*, 2 vols., ed. Bruno Jacobs and Robert Rollinger (Hoboken: Wiley, 2021).

¹⁷See also, Maria Brosius, *A History of Ancient Persia: The Achaemenid Empire* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2021).

¹⁸From Roberto Ajello, “Armenian,” in *The Indo-European Languages*, ed. Paolo Ramat (New York: Routledge, 1998 [2005]), 197–227, to Robin Meyer, “Alignment Change and Changing Alignments: Armenian Syntax and the First ‘Death’ of Parthian,” in *Ancient Indo-European Languages between Linguistics and Philology: Contact, Variation, and Reconstruction*, ed. Michele Bianconi, Marta Capano, Domenica Romagno and Francesco Rovai (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 211–33.

¹⁹Chana Algarvio, “Egyptian Acculturation in Achaemenid Persia: The Iconographic Evidence,” *Academeia Letters* (March 2021): 1–17.

²⁰Şevket Dönmez and Mona Saba, “Oluz Höyük: Persian (Achaemenid) Settlement in North-Central Anatolia,” in *Identity, Diversity & Contact: From the Southern Balkans to Xinjiang, from the Upper Palaeolithic to Alexander*, ed. Marc Lebeau (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 275–96.

²¹Antigoni Zoumatzi, *Persian Rule in Cyprus: Sources, Problems, Perspectives* (Athens: Diffusion de Bocard, 2005).

and on how generous the Persians really were in giving the Jews back their land.²² Most spectacular is the discovery of a ritual complex for the king in ancient Chorasmia (at Akchankhan-kala, Karalpakstan, the autonomous Republic of Uzbekistan, south of the Aral Sea), traditionally a very strong Zoroastrian region, perhaps even to the bronze age (if we accept the re-dating of Zarathustra and the Old Avesta back beyond 1000 BCE to the time of the Indian Vedas). During the fourth century BCE, Chorasmia gained independence from the Achaemenid rulers onwards, and the recently uncovered hall from Parthian times strikingly confirms a separate kingdom. The Karakalpak-Australian Expedition uncovered a royal throne amid large depictions of protective deities (apparently *yazatas*) on pillars surrounding it, set in a covered paradisiacal garden, revealing a significantly more polytheistic Zoroastrianism (50 BCE-50 CE) than reflected in mainline dynastic Persian texts. Indeed, Ahura Mazda is not iconically present, no fire temples have been found, and what can be discerned is that the form of Zoroastrianism at Akchankhan-kala (with its special concern for Srao'sa, *inter alia* god at the 'gate' of the dead) clearly links back to ancient religious roots on the Eurasian steppes.²³ The findings raise more questions than can as yet be answered, especially about regional varieties of the Zoroastrian tradition.

Considering centralities *vis-à-vis* margins, it is worth mentioning here that although their origins go back in Iran as far as 3000 BCE, one archaeological mark of Persia's 'classic unification' under the Achaemenids lay with the *qanats*, an extraordinary system of trapping groundwater and diverting it into subterranean aqueducts running downslope and linking cities in a dry landscape. With Iran's current ecological crisis worsening through neglect of this astounding achievement, it is worth reflecting on the passing (in 2023) of well-known Iranologist Morteza Honari, who wrote the first

²²Robin Derricourt, *Creating God: The Birth and Growth of Major Religions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 146–187.

²³Using especially Alison Betts, "Of Lost Gods and Gardens: Zoroastrian Echoes at the Royal City of Akchakhan-kala, Karalpakstan" (Edwin Cuthbert Hall Annual Lecture, Chau Chak Wing Museum, University of Sydney, November 15, 2023).

ever dissertation on Human Ecology (at the University of Edinburgh) on *qanats* in general and two case studies of their history.²⁴ We can suppose, with current climate crises, long-term environmental issues will become ‘the order of the day’ in research on Iran. Already, for example, a journal titled *Caspian* has suddenly appeared, directed by Shahin Ayramanesh (2024) at Tehran’s Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, and although starting with archaeology, religion and culture (as generally speaking EI did), it is patently interdisciplinary and open to a key region (or complex of regions) being studied as an ecosystem. Finding the most appropriate methods for the study of ‘humanity-in-nature’ in the Persianate world should be firmly on our agenda.

Returning to developments in Zoroastrianism, much of the recent research has been concentrated on the tail end of Antiquity and on the Roman/Persian interface.²⁵ Considering the decimations of texts under Alexander (“the Terrible”), the post-Seleucid royal cults had a bad time of it maintaining an authoritatively secure religious tradition. The issue has recently been raised that strictures against heresy under Sasanian rulers Shapur I, Bahram I and Shapur II from the 260 to 330 were part of a process to create a Zoroastrian ‘religious establishment’ (we now usually call Mazdaeism) basically preceding (and perhaps even ‘pressurizing’) the Roman Emperor Constantine I’s convoking of the 325 Council of Nicaea for Christian orthodoxy.²⁶ After long toil, especially by high priest (or Magus) Kartir Hangirpe, belief and practice were to be in conformity with the teachings of the “canonical Avesta,” leading to the condemnation of resurgent Zurvanists (who held Zurvan, god of Time, as primary, having produced the two cosmic twins of the faith, Ahura Mazda [Orhmazd] and Angra Mainyu (Ahriman]) and Mani, who can be considered an “Iranian prophet” and serious influencer

²⁴Morteza Honari, “Qanats and Human Ecosystems in Iran: With Case Studies in a City, Ardakan, and a Town, Xur (Khoor),” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1979).

²⁵See, for example, *Sasanian Iran in the Context of Late Antiquity: The Bahari Lecture Series at the University of Oxford*, ed. Touraj Daryaee (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

²⁶Garry W. Trompf and Milad Milani, “From ‘Zurvanism’ to Mazdak,” in *The Gnostic World*, ed. Garry W. Trompf, Gunner Mikkelsen and Jay Johnston (New York: Routledge, 2018), 253–5.

at the royal court in the 240s (and who chose the name Zurvan for the Supreme Father of Light).²⁷ Debates will go on as to whether Zurvanism was more accommodated than often thought, but the important issue here is the late dating of the major Zoroastrians' written texts as we have them. The dating issue affects the question, for one example, of how successfully we can recover the antiquity of their ideas when seeking to gauge their long-term presence and influence across cultures (such as the idea of an eschatological end to time as I have discussed in the last Agenda paper), or working out the contexts of uncomprehending reactions by outsiders, for another, to Persian men marrying daughters in the special *xwēdōdah* relationship.²⁸

While there are new discussions being had about the incursions of the apocalyptically-charged traditions of Judaism and Christianity into the Persianate world in the context of a new quest for conformity among Zoroastrians,²⁹ of more significance are teachings about great Ages and Hellenistico-Gnostic threads that link Persia's religious *milieu* to the coming of Islam. Among Gnostic groups, Manichaeans taught the doctrine of a line of prophets through time,³⁰ and Mandaeans (the Sabians), as well speculating about four great Ages of time (independent of the four-to-twelve-period Zoroastrian framework) developed a repertory of personal ritual ablutions anticipating Muslim practice. In new research, indications are that Mani was born into a Mandaean family, though the most important text on this (as well as revealing that Mandaeans looked after Mani's funerary arrangements), the *Diwan*

²⁷See, by way of comparison, R.C. Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955); especially, 23–24; 40–47; 267; and Iain Gardner, Jason BeDuhn, and Paul Dilley, *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings: Studies on the Chester Beatty Kephalaia Codex* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

²⁸Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina, "A Father, A Daughter, and a Son-in-Law in Zoroastrian Hermeneutics," in *Sasanian Iran in the Context of Late Antiquity: The Bahari Lecture Series at the University of Oxford*, ed. Touraj Daryaei (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 121–147; especially 135.

²⁹For example, Michael Stone and Aram Topchyan, *Jews in Ancient and Medieval Armenia: First Century BCE - Fourteenth Century CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Mar Awa III (Patriarch), "The Establishment of the Primatial Seat of Seleucia-Ctesiphon" (Public Lecture, University of Western Sydney, May 28, 2022).

³⁰John C. Reeves, "Questions of Gnostic Influence on Early Islam," in *The Gnostic World*, ed. Garry W. Trompf, Gunner Mikkelsen and Jay Johnston (New York: Routledge, 2018), 307–320.

Razia Book of Mysteries, has as yet to be found with solid colophonetic corroboration of its antiquity.³¹ In the development of Shi'a Islam, which has various strands in Persian history, we find speculation about great spans of time before the End as a characteristic of "Gnostic Islam," sometimes with obvious indications of Zoroastrian influence.³² A new project, by David Hollenberg and Musegh Asatryan involves translating much of the fundamental esoteric Nusayri Arabic text by Muhammad bin 'Isa al-Kayulakh, *The Way of Knowledge and Clarification and the Bliss of Hearing and Seeing* (eleventh century, early Shi'ite) with a solid exposition of its purport.³³ We could do well to have in English key Gnostic works that give helpful background to the development and consolidation of Twelver or Imāmiyya Shi'ism down to its present forms, and especially its presentation in the revolutionary government of present-day Iran.

There is, of course, much of interest in the modern history of the Shi'a in Persia, especially the rationale for its adoption and enforcement of the Twelver version in Persianate lands by the Safavid dynasty (under Ismail I) at the turn into the sixteenth century, and the popular success of the Twelvers both during politically quietist times and hyper-active ones after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. A brilliant work on modern Iran by Abbas Amanat³⁴ does much to satisfy. Interestingly, he is a Baha'i scholar. I seem to remember, when Professor Yarshater relinquished his active role with EI, it was rumoured that a top-heavy Baha'i contingent replaced him: if Amanat is anyone to go by, we should not be over-anxious about Baha'i scholarship. But there are plenty of

³¹Brikha H.S. Nasoraia, "Probing the Relationships Between Mandaeans (the Followers of John the Baptist), Early Christians, and Manichaeans," *Religions* 16, no. 14 (2025): 1–37.

³²Especially Garry W. Trompf, "Gnostics and Temporality: From Myth to Macrohistory," in *The Gnostic World*, ed. Garry W. Trompf, Gunner Mikkelsen and Jay Johnston (New York: Routledge, 2018), 50–51; and "Gnostic Islam: Transformations of Classic Gnostic Speculation in Muslim Thought," in *Modern Thinking in Islam*, ed. Milad Milani and Vassalios Adrahtas, special issue of *Journal of the Academic Study of Religion* 33, no. 2 (2020): 119–133.

³³See by way of introduction, Musheh Asatryan, "An Agenda for the Study of Early Shi'a Cosmologies," in *The Gnostic World*, ed. Garry W. Trompf, Gunner Mikkelsen and Jay Johnston (New York: Routledge, 2018), 321–7.

³⁴Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

special issues left on the agenda for further scrutiny. Modern messianic ideas always have their interest. Recently we lost a venerable scholar of Babism in Denis MacEoin (1949–2022), but not before he penned his masterwork on *The Messiah of Shiraz* (the Bab).³⁵ But there is plenty to scrutinize of relevance in latter-day Shi'a thought. Ten years ago, when at the new national library on the edges of Tehran, I was invited to inspect the so-called Prophecy Room: the first thing I noticed was the prominence of works by or about Nostradamus, a man presaging Islam's threat to overtake Europe. We also need to assess the authorities cited by Shi'a theologians to project hope in the coming Director (al-Mahdi), imposer of peace and redeemer of Islam at the end of time. Hadith are more important for corroborating his Coming than the Qur'an, yet Twelvers follow a very inflexible corpus of material focusing heavily on Four Books about Muhammad's chosen Companions³⁶ and what is alluded to about the Mahdi is so vague that it lends itself to obscurantism, to say the least.³⁷ I end with the End, and with the floating of internationally-open periodicals in cultural and theological studies from Qom, I hope earnestly that here will be a new beginning in the appearance of solid distantiated work on what the Shi'a tradition and its representations of Iran have to offer to the world.

³⁵Dennis MacEoin, *The Messiah of Shiraz: Studies in Early and Middle Babism* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

³⁶See Ali Hammoud, "The Emergence and Development of the Shi'ite Hadith Canon" (Research Masters diss., Western Sydney University, 2018).

³⁷Ponder the struggles of Mohammad Hussein Al-Ansari, *The End of Recognition of Imam Mahdi*, trans. Zaid Al-Salami (Ayatollah Sheikh Mohammad Hussein Al-Ansari, 2019).