REFASHIONING IRAN
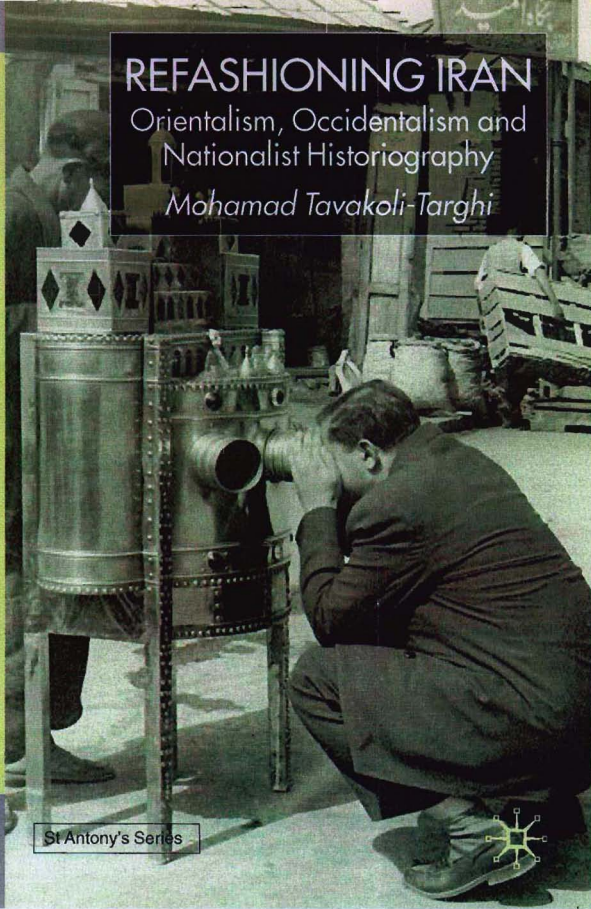## Orientalism, Occidentalism and Nationalist Historiography

Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi

REFASHIONING IRAN

Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi

Refashioning Iran

Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography

Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi

Associate Professor of Historiography and Middle Eastern History
Illinois State University
Normal, Illinois

palgrave

Contents

5
Contested Memories

Narrative emplotment[1]

The historical accounts of pre-Islamic Iran have contested allegorical meanings that are essential to the configuration of Iranian identity. These meanings are embedded in narrative structures that terminate in the Muslim conquest of Iran and the death of Yazdigird III (d. 31/651 or 652), the last Sasanian king. In early "Islamicate" historiography the accounts of ancient Iran served as an allegory of the Persian (differentially identified as *Furs*, *'Ajam*, and *Majus*)[2] submission to Islam. The narrative termination of Persian sovereignty (*saltanat*) coincided with the commencement of Islam and with the closure of the cycle of prophecy inaugurated by Adam. The co-termination of the Sasanian dynastic rule and the cycle of prophecy mark the transition to a new and "superior" moral and political order – divinely sanctioned to last until "the end of time" (*akhar-i zaman*).

The allegorical meaning of pre-Islamic Iran was altered radically by the pioneers of a late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century exilic movement. Known as Azari, Kayvani, or Dasatiri, this movement was led by Azar Kayvan (939 or 940–1027/1533–1618) and his disciples, who migrated to India in response to the repressive religious policies of the Safavids (1501–1722). Responding to the threat of physical elimination, the architects of this neo-Mazdean intellectual movement wrote themselves back into history by projecting an Iran-centered universal historical narrative that subordinated the Biblico-Qur'anic "mythistory" to its own all-encompassing framework.[3] In the generative texts of *Dasatir*, *Sharistan-i Danish va Gulistan-i Binish*, and *Dabistan-i Mazahib* human history begins not with Adam, but with the pre-Adamite Mahabad. Linking the history of Iran to pre-Adamite times, the Azaris reframed the inaugural, medial, and terminal events of Islamicate historiography

imposed by early Muslim historians on the accounts of pre-Islamic Iran. This enabled the Azaris to reconfigure the textual terraces of Iran's ancient past that had been subordinated to the narrative motifs of Islamicate prophetography (*tarikh-i anbiya'*). By extending and ethnicizing history, the non-biblical framework of these texts inspired the proto-scientific endeavors of early Orientalists,[4] Zoroastian Khushnumists,[5] and Iranian Baba'is and nationalists.[6] This framework enabled Sir William Jones (1746–94) and other Orientalists to construct new theories on the origins of languages and races.[7] It incited the nineteenth-century Iranian nationalists to reconfigure the pre-Islamic past as a "golden age" coming to a "tragic end" with the Muslim conquest.

The first part of this chapter offers an outline of the Islamicate patterns of encoding the ancient history of Iran. It explains how the claims of Kayumars and Adam as progenitors of humankind were resolved by the imposition of a Qur'anic framework, which supplied the inaugural, medial, and terminal events of the ancient history. It then explores how Azar Kayvan and his disciples recentered Iran and altered the allegorical meaning of its pre-Islamic history.

Islamicating history

Historical accounts of the pre-Islamic past often appear in chronicles, which encompass the emergence and proliferation of Islam and end with the chroniclers' own time. In their overarching structures as "chronicles," these narratives abruptly terminate in *medias res*, without a conclusion that endows the chain of events with a meaningful closure. Unlike the accounts of the Islamic period that lack the formal cohesion of a "well-made story," the narratives of pre-Islamic history come to full closure and are endowed with a "moral meaning."[8] As accounts of a putatively vanished world displaced by Islamdom, the pre-Islamic Persian histories have an autonomous narrative structure that clearly demarcates them from Islamic history. Islamic authority and its containment of counter-narratives often prefigures into the plot structures of pre-Islamic histories.[9]

In their narration of Biblico-Qur'anic and Persian mythistories, Early Muslim historians were concerned with coordinating the claims of origin of the two traditions. The Islamic encodement of the historical field was most apparent in the attempts to subordinate Persian historical narratives to the inaugural, medial, and terminal events of Muslim prophetography: Adam's creation, Noah's Flood, and Muhammad's prophecy. Reconciling the originary claim of Adam and Kayumars

proved the most challenging aspect of historical synchronization.[10] Its solution determined the chronological ordering of subsequent events. The resolution of these two irreconcilable claims necessitated the alteration of Kayumars's genealogy. The reconfiguration of Kayumars, as the ancestor of Iranians, was also coordinated with the claim that Noah's flood covered the entire earth. As inaugural and medial motifs of Islamic prophetography, the stories of Adam and Noah overdetermined the chronological reordering of Persian historical narratives.

Kayumars (Avestan *Gayō maretan*; Pahlavi *Gayūmart*, meaning "mortal life") was a problematic alternative figure for Muslim historians writing on the beginning of human history. According to Mazdean sources, Kayumars, an androgyne, appeared in *Iran-vij* (Iran-land) and upon death a seed from her/his back impregnated the earth with rhubarb plants (*ribas*), which grew into the first human couple, Mahryag and Mahryanag (also known as Mashya and Mashyani or Mashi and Mashynah).[11] The androgynous identity of Kayumars and the perception of her/him as the progenitor of humankind was irreconcilable with the Biblico-Qur'anic view of Adam as the primal man.[12] Early Arab historians such as Dinawari (d. 281/897), Mas'udi (d. 345/956), Baladhuri (d. 279/892), and Tabari (d. 310/923) recounted diverse and often conflicting reports about Kayumars. Views on Kayumars were so diversified that Tabari claimed "[i]t would make this book of ours too long to mention them all."[13] The multiplication of reports on the lineage of Kayumars offered Muslim historians a wide range of options in their attempts to reconcile the Persian and Biblico-Qur'anic mythistories. The Mazdean perception of Kayumars as the androgynous progenitor was irreconcilable with the Qur'anic creation story and was consequently viewed as unreliable, absurd, and irrational.[14]

For Muslim historians the synchronization of biblical and pre-Islamic Persian historical narratives had to correspond with the beginning and ending motifs provided by Islamic prophetography: a chain of divine appointments beginning with Adam and terminating with Muhammad. This framework fashioned the historical field and determined the credibility of non-Qur'anic historical accounts. Events irreconcilable with the Qur'anic historical imagination were considered suspect and even offensive. For instance, Ya'qubi argued that "Persians make many claims for their kings which cannot be accepted."[15] Finding them to be "jesting and make-believe," he decided to "set [them] aside because our principle is to excise offensive reports."[16]

In his attempt to reconcile different narrative traditions and construct a sequential account of pre-Islamic history, Tabari recognized the

significance of relying on each people's account of their own history: "Every people is more familiar than others with their own forefathers, pedigrees, and accomplishments. With respect to every complex matter, one must have reference to those who were [directly] involved." After recounting the views of "Persian scholars" on Kayumars, Tabari apologetically remarked:

> I mention this information about Jayumart [Kayumars] in this place only because none of the scholars of the [various] nations disputes that Jayumart is the father of the non-Arab Persians. They differ with respect to him only as to whether he is Adam, the father of mankind, as stated by those mentioned by us, or somebody else.

For Tabari and other early Muslim historians who were interested in constructing a narrative account of ancient peoples culminating in the victory of Islam, Persian historical accounts were of paramount importance. Explaining the significance of these narratives, Tabari notes:

> [I refer to Jaumars] because his rule and that of his children continued in the East and the mountains there uninterrupted in an orderly fashion, until Yazdjard b. Shahriyar [d. 31/651 or 652], one of his descendants – May God curse him! – was killed in Marw in the days of 'Uthman b. 'Affan. The history (or chronology) of the world's bygone years is more easily explained and more clearly seen based upon the lives of the Persian kings than upon those of the kings of any other nation. For no nation but theirs among those leading their pedigree back to Adam is known whose realm lasted and whose rule was continuous. . . . Thus, a history based upon the lives of the Persian kings has the soundest sources and the best and clearest data.[17]

The continuous annals of Persian kings enabled Muslim historians to construct a richly textured account of the pre-Islamic world. In such narratives, the Qur'anic historical imagination or prophetography provided the principle of selection and "colligation."[18] The Creation of Adam constituted the inaugural motif, the universal deluge during Noah's time the transitional motif, and Muhammad's prophecy the terminal motif toward which the pre-Islamic history unfolded. As fully enclosed narratives terminating in the commencement of Islam, the stories of pre-Islamic Persian kings were allegories of the moral and political eminence of Islam. The moral superiority of Islam was signaled not only by the outcome of that history but also by the evidentiary use

of the Qur'an in altering the sequence of historical events and the establishment of its truth.

Encoded with the inaugural and the terminal frame of Islamic mythistory, Persian kings and historical events were endowed with a new genealogy and chronological order of occurrence. Kayumars was transformed from an androgyne to a man, and quite a virile one for that matter, since, as Tabari reported, he "married thirty women who gave him many children. His son Mari and daughter Mariyanah were among those born at the end of his life."[19]

The "son" and "daughter" of Kayumars were the first human couple of the Mazdean tradition. In that tradition they were believed to have emerged from the contemporaneous metamorphoses of "a one-stemmed rivas-plant" after the death of Kayumars.[20] Concerning the first human couples, Abu Rayhan Biruni (362–440/973–after 442/1048) recounted that as Kayumars neared death,

> two drops of sperma fell down on the earth. And out of these drops grew two Rîbâs bushes (Rheum ribes), from among which Mêshâ and Mêshâna sprang up, i.e. the Persian Adam and Eve. They are also called Malhâ and Malhayâna, and the Zoroastrians of Khwârizm call them Mard and Mardâna.[21]

Recounting another tradition, Biruni reported that Kayumars, after living in Paradise 3,000 years and on the earth for another three millennia, at last desired to die, "whereupon God killed him."

> At the same moment two drops of sperma fell down out of his loins on the mountain Dâmdâdh in Istakhr, and out of them grew two Rîbâs-bushes, on which at the beginning of the ninth month the limbs (of two human bodies) began to appear, which by the end of that month had become complete and assumed human shape. These two are Mêshâ and Mêshyâna.[22]

Once the identity of Kayumars, Mashi, and Mashyana were transformed, Tabari had a basis for reconciling the differences between the Biblico-Qur'anic and Persian accounts of the two claimants of primordiality. In his discussion of the ancestry of Hushang, Tabari entertained the possibility that Adam and Kayumars might be identical.[23] But when no reconciliation seemed possible, as in the case of the universal deluge, the Qur'an established the basis for "telling the truth about history."

In providing a new beginning for human history, the story of Noah constituted another essential component of the Qur'anic account of the ancient world. This new beginning reintegrated all histories into a single homogenized universal narrative. But the convergence of different narratives into a universally experienced flood required a radical rearrangement of the chronological order of Persian accounts. This rearrangement was necessary since the Persians, along with Indians and Chinese, had not recounted the occurrence of a universal flood. Tabari, like Abu Rayhan Biruni, reported that,

> The Magians have no knowledge of the flood. They say: Our rule continued uninterrupted since the age of Jayumart – who they say is identical with Adam. It was inherited by consecutive rulers to the time of Feroz b. Shahriyar. They [also] say: If [the story of the Flood] were sound, the pedigrees of the people would have been disrupted and their rule dissolved. Some of them acknowledge the Flood and assume that it took place in the clime of Babil and nearby regions, whereas the descendants of Jayumart had their dwellings in the East, and the Flood did not reach them.[24]

Tabari, responding to the discrepancies between the "Magians" and the Qur'anic accounts, boldly expressed his own position: "Abu Ja'far [al-Tabari] says: The information given by God concerning the Flood contradicts their statement, and what He says is the Truth: 'Noah called upon Us – and surely, good are those who respond! We delivered him and his family from the great distress and made his offspring the survivors.'[25] God thus indicated that Noah's offsprings are the survivors, and nobody else."[26] In response to this exclusivist view of the historical truth many Muslim historians found it more pragmatic to represent Kayumars as a descendant of Noah rather than as identical with Adam. Ibn Athir (d. 630/1232), recounting Tabari's version, argued that Kayumars was really Ham, son of Japhet, son of Noah.[27] Tabari reported that some scholars regarded Kayumars as Gomer b. Japhet b. Noah.[28] After recounting the Persian explanation of the deluge, Biruni remarked,

> These discrepancies in their reports inspire doubts in the student, and make him inclined to believe what is related in some books, viz. that Gayômarth was not the first man, but that he was Gomer ben Yaphet ben Noah, that he was a prince to whom a long life was given, that he settled on the Mount Dunbâwand, where he founded

an empire, and that finally his power became very great, whilst mankind was still living in [elementary] conditions, similar to those at the time of the creation, and of the first stage of the development of the world.[29]

Biruni also recounted another opinion that "Gayômarth was Emîm ben Lûd ben Arám ben Sem ben Noah." While early Muslim historians subordinated the Persian mythistorical tradition to the Islamicate historical discourse, the Arab–Persian rivalries of the Shu'ubiyah movement contributed to diversifying the ancient Persians' genealogical connection to biblical personages.[30] The reconfiguration of the identity of Kayumars also necessitated the linguistic designation of his name as Syriac rather than Persian.[31] This misidentification was not accidental, for such a designation served as further evidence of "his" biblical pedigree.

Instead of concocting a postdiluvian genesis for the Persian historical development, Abu Hamid Muhammad Ghazzali (450–505/1058 or 1059–1111), a leading medieval religious thinker, found a pragmatic solution to the political problem of synchronization. Conveying the "disintegration of the caliphal empire" and the rise of autonomous sultanates in eleventh- and twelfth-century Islamdom,[32] Ghazzali fashioned a divinely sanctioned bifurcated history with similar beginnings and conclusions. According to Ghazzali, human history began with Adam and was divinely ordained into two separate ecclesiastic and royal histories, each with its own distinct function:

> You should understand that God on High selected two classes of the Sons of Adam and endowed these two classes with superiority over the rest: one being prophets, blessing and peace be upon them, and the other kings. To guide His slaves to Him, He sent prophets; and to preserve them from one another, He sent kings, to whom He conferred his rank.

After establishing that "kingship and divine effulgence [*farr-i izadi*] have been granted to them [kings] by God," Ghazzali offered a truncated account of the genealogies and characters of the pre-Islamic Persian kings. To endow the Persian kings with "divine effulgence" and the Qur'anic inaugural motif, he reported:

> It is related in the (Persian) traditions that Adam, on whom be peace, had many sons. From their number he chose two, Seth and

Kayumarth, to whom he gave forty of the Great Books, by which they were to work. Then he charged Seth with the preservation of religion and (affairs of) the next world, and Kayumarth with the affairs of this world and the kingship. (Kayumarth) was the first of the kings of the world, and his reign lasted 30 years.[33]

Thus Ghazzali invented physical embodiments for the metaphorical view of the state (*dawlat*) and religion (*din*) as twin brothers.[34] In his enumeration of the kings of Pishdadian, Kayanian, Ashkanian, and Sasanian dynasties, Ghazzali identified Yazdigird b. Shahriyar as "the last of the kings of the Persians." In conclusion, he remarked: "After him there was no other king of their community; the Muslims were victorious and took the kingship out of their hands. The power and dominion passed to the Muslims, through the benediction of the Prophet [Muhammad], God bless him." As a fully enclosed narrative, Ghazzali's version of the pre-Islamic Persian kings began with Adam and terminated with the victory of Islam.

While configured within an Islamic framework, the history of ancient Persians had its own autonomous logic of continuity and rupture: "the development or desolation of this universe depends upon kings; if the king is just, the universe is prosperous and the subjects are secure, as was the case in the times of Ardishir, Firidun, Bahram Gur, Kisra, and other kings like them; whereas when the king is tyrannical, the universe becomes desolate, as was in the times of Øahhak, Afrasiyab, and others like them."[35] Outlining the political wisdom that guided the historically recounted actions of kings, Ghazzali explained:

> They would not tolerate any [infraction] small or great, because they knew beyond all doubt that where injustice and oppression are present, the people have no foothold; the cities and localities go to ruin, the inhabitants flee and move to other territories, the cultivated lands are abandoned, the kingdom falls into decay, the revenues diminish, the treasury becomes empty, and happiness fades among the people. The subjects do not love the unjust king, but always pray that evil may befall him.

Expounding the significance of justice (*'adl*) in the maintenance and preservation of state power, Ghazzali outlined the syllogism that prefigured into the narrative accounts of the cycles of rise and fall of dynasties: "The religion depends on the monarchy, the monarchy on the army, the army on supplies, supplies on prosperity, and prosperity on

justice [*'adl*]."[36] This "circle of justice" (*dayirah-'i 'adalat*),[37] as a universal law of causal relations, provided the metahistorical presuppositions that operated in most mediaeval Persian historical writings.

Unlike the ethnographic histories that were regulated by "the circle of justice," the ecclesiastical narratives were grounded in "the Qur'anic paradigm of repeated prophetic challenge, followed either by rejection and punishment or (more rarely) by acceptance and prosperity."[38] Whereas the repeated cycle of dynasties served as warnings to tyrannical kings, the cycle of prophets served as warnings to transgressing nations. As moralizing narratives, the ecclesiastic history invited the people to submit to God and the ethnographic history invited kings to the practice of justice.

The pedagogical value of the pre-Islamic history gave rise to a bifurcated narrative structure best exemplified in medieval Persianate historical writings. Instead of reconciling the pre-Islamic with the Biblico-Qur'anic and Persian mythistorical accounts, most Persianate historians and chroniclers framed their work into two autonomous ecclesiastic and ethnographic narratives with similar points of inauguration and termination. One chapter would recount the history of prophets from the Creation of Adam to the messengership of Muhammad. The succeeding chapter would narrate the annals of pre-Islamic Persian kings from Kayumars – often viewed as a descendent of Noah – to the conquest of Persia by the Muslim armies. The termination of both narratives signaled Islam's moral and political superiority. This bifurcated narrative structure was embedded in Nasir al-Din 'Abd Allah Bayzavi's *Nizam al-Tawarikh*, Hamd Allah Qazvini's *Tarikh-i Guzidah*, Mir Khwand's *Rawzat al-Safa*, and Khwand Mir's *Habib al-Siyar* (930/1523).

Nizam al-Tawarikh (completed in 674/1275) begins with a chapter on "prophets, testators, and philosophers," followed by a chapter on Persian kings (*muluk-i furs*), which included the non-Persian rulers Zahhak, Afrasiyab, and Istihan. Although he knew of the Mazdean [Mughan] view of Kayumars, Bayzavi found it more plausible to construe Kayumars as a descendant of Shem ben Noah.[39] He concluded the narrative on Persian kings with the death of Yazdigird, with whom "the sovereignty of Persian kings was discontinued completely and became a trustee of Muslims (*Musalmanan ra musallam gasht*)."[40] Hamd Allah Qazvini's *Tarikh-i Guzidah* (730/1329), also adhered to the same narrative structure. The first chapter recounts the story of biblical and Qur'anic messengers and prophets. The chapter on pre-Islamic kings begins with Kayumars and ends with Yazdigird. The latter is identified as "the last of the Persian kings" (*akhar-i muluk-i 'Ajam*).[41]

Following the same narrative convention, Mir Khwand (838–902/ 1433–98) devoted more than half of the first part of his *Rawzat al-Safa* (completed in 899/1493) to prophetography and follows this with annals of the Persian kings (*muluk-i 'Ajam*) from Kayumars to Yazdigird, whose assassination led to the "lowering of the flags of infidelity [*kufr*] and the rising of the banners of Islam."[42] Mir Khwand, like other historians, recounted different stories of Kayumars. He explained, "The Magi assert that Kaiomars [Kayumars] is synonymous with Adam, the progenitor of the human race: they also style him Gilshah, or Earth-king, because in his time scarcely anything had been called into existence, over which his authority could extend, except water and clay."[43] Narrating diverse Muslim traditions, including Ghazzali's, Mir Khwand asserted: "Amidst such a diversity of traditions, the chief historians however agree, that Kaiomars [Kayumars] was the first sovereign who placed the yoke of obedience and submission on the necks of refractory, and spread the carpet of justice [*basat-i ma'dilat*] over the habitable world."[44] In this, as in other Persian historical texts, kings were entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining justice and preserving the moral and political order of the world.[45] This divinely sanctioned responsibility of kings, mediated through the principle of "divine effulgence" (*farr-i izadi*), was often projected as the realization of the following Qur'anic verse: "Say: 'Lord, Sovereignty of all sovereignty, You bestow sovereignty on whom You will and take it away from whom you please'."[46] Appearing in the preamble of Ghazzali's account of pre-Islamic Persian kings, this and another Qur'anic verse were utilized to infuse history with the moral and political principles of Islam.[47] Because of their pedagogical value, the anecdotes of various Persian kings figured into the manuals of statecraft and mirrors for princes which were authored for the education of Muslim rulers and administrators.[48] By bringing the theories and practices of ancient Persian kings into the service of Islamicate political culture, the notions of *farr-i izadi* (divine effulgence) and *Zill Allah fil arz* (the shadow of God on Earth) became atemporal expressions of divine authority.

Recentering Iran

Three-quarters of a century after the Safavids' establishment of Shi'ism as the state religion of Iran, a neo-Mazdean renaissance, led by Azar Kayvan (939 or 940–1027/1533–1618) and his disciples, set out to recover the memories of the pre-Islamic past and to alter the allegorical meaning of Iran's ancient history and culture.[49] The disciples of Azar Kayvan

included Zoroastrians, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus. Fath Allah Shirazi (d. 997/1588), a close advisor of Emperor Akbar, was among his most influential students.[50] Abu al-Fazl 'Allami was also considered a "total believer" in Azar Kayvan.[51] Well grounded in Islamic philosophical traditions, Azar Kayvan and his cohorts, collectively known as Azaryan (Azaris) or Kayvanyan (Kayvanis), attempted to highlight the circular relationship and reciprocal influences between Mazdaism and Islam. Combining erudition and imagination, they tried to recover the suppressed memories and marginalized views of ancient Persians. They constructed a narrative framework that extended back to pre-Adamite times, and subsumed Islamic prophetography by reassembling and re-encoding scattered fragments of Islamic and Mazdean textual traces. *Dasatir*,[52] *Dabistan-i Mazahib*,[53] *Sharistan-i Danish va Gulistan-i Binish* (popularly known as *Sharistan-i Chahar Chaman*),[54] and *A'in-i Hushang*,[55] all known as *dasatiri* texts, were the exemplary products of their creative intellectual efforts. The publication and dissemination of these Iran-centered neo-Mazdean texts provided a master-narrative well suited to the needs of nineteenth-century nationalists. Compiled, composed, or "translated" by Azar Kayvan and his disciples, these texts provided a mythistorical narrative inaugurated by the pre-Adamite Mahabad, who claimed to have initiated the great cycle of human existence well before Adam.

Azar Kayvan, a Zoroastrian philosopher, emigrated from the religiously intolerant Safavid Iran in the 1570s and settled in Patna, India, where he died at the age of 85.[56] The religious policies of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (963–1014/1556–1605) provided a suitable intellectual environment in India for an active reconstruction of Mazdaism,[57] which had suffered from centuries of Islamic political hegemony in Iran. By incorporating Illuminationist philosophy (*Hikmat-i Ishraq*) into a Mazdean cosmology,[58] Azar Kayvan and his cohorts constructed a world-view characterized as "Zoroastrian Ishraqi."[59] Whereas Mazdaism provided the latent content of a manifestly Islamic Illuminationist philosophy, Azar Kayvan and his followers incorporated the terminology of Islamic Illuminationism into a manifestly Mazdean perspective, identified with 16 pre-Islamic Persian sages (*vakhshuran/vakhshwaran*): Mahabad, Ji-Afram, Shay-Kaliv, Yasan, Gil-Shah (Kayumars), Siyamak, Hushang, Tahmuris, Jamshid, Faraydun, Manuchihr, Kay-Khusraw, Zartusht (Zoroaster), Sikandar (Alexander), Sasan-i Nukhust (Sasan I), and Sasan-i Panjum (Sasan V).[60] The presumed epistles of these sages,[61] collected in the *Dasatir*, constituted the foundational canon of the neo-Mazdean renaissance. These epistles, according to Azaris, were originally written in a "celestial

language" (*zaban-i asmani*) but were translated into Persian with added commentary by the Fifth Sasan, who was considered a contemporary of Muhammad (d. 632 CE) and the Sasanian ruler Khusraw Parviz (r. 590–628 CE). Dating the commentary to a period immediately preceding the Musim conquest of Iran was intended to serve as evidence for the unique and exemplary prose of the *Dasatir*, which was devoid of Arabic terms and concepts and included many "obsolete" Persian terminologies.[62] The *dasatiri* terminologies were incorporated in *Burhan-i Qati'*, an influential Persian dictionary compiled by Muhammad Husayn Khalaf Tabrizi in 1062/1651, and widely circulated and used by poets and writers in India and Iran. On account of its lack of Arabic words, *Dasatir* became an inspiring text for generations of Persian purists from Abu al-Fazl 'Allami (958–1011/1055–1602) to Ahmd Kasravi (1890 or 1891–1946) who sought to purge from Persian any "alien" Arabic lexicons.

A historiographically significant aspect of *Dasatir* was the attribution of the first four epistles to sages who were anterior to Kayumars, the progenitor of humankind in the Mazdean tradition. This newly fashioned framework was designed to challenge the hegemonic Islamic historical imagination that marginalized and distorted the Persian mythistory. In this scenario, Kayumars is preceded by four sages who were respectively the founders of the eras of Abadiyan, Jayan, Sha'iyan, and Yasa'iyan.[63] According to the system of reckoning introduced in *Dabistan-i Mazahib*, a text arguably written by Azar Kayvan's son Kaykhusraw Isfandyar,[64] these astronomical eras were measured in Saturnian years – with a sidereal revolution equal to 29.46 years – as follows: Abadiyan for 100 *zad* or 60^{12} years; Jayan for 1 *aspar* or one billion years; Sha'iyan for 1 *shumar* or 10 million years, and Yasa'iyan for 99 *salam* or 9,900,000 years.[65] This involved a revolutionary expansion of time, a temporal expansion that was seriously considered in Europe only with the 1830 publication of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*.[66]

These *dasatiri* cosmic ages were followed by the eras of Gilsha'yan, founded by Gilshah (the Earth-King) or Kayumars. As recounted in most Arabic and Persian classical and medieval historical texts, the Gilsha'yan era was divided into the periods of Pishdadiyan, Kayaniyan, Ashkaniyan, and Sasaniyan. The sovereignty of Gilsha'yan that began with Kayumars was brought to an end with the death of Yazdigird (d. 31/651 or 652). According to *dabistan*, this period was equal to 6024 years and five months.[67] It is significant to note that this number was calculated by adding the "Greek Christian" (Antiochian era) reckoning of 5,992 years from the "Creation of Adam" to the Hijrah of Muhammad, as cited by Tabari, to the 31 years from the Hijrah of Muhammad to the

Muslim conquest of Iran, with an additional 17 months to account for the fraction of years. This calculation was based the *dasatiri* assumption that Adam was the alias for Kayumars.

In a dialogic relation with Islamicate texts, Bahram ibn Farhad, the author of *Sharistan*, sought to "remove the mistakes and quibbling" (*raf'-i ishtibahat va i'tirazat*)[68] that hindered the appreciation of ancient Iranian accomplishments: "People do not view favorably the history and the deeds of Persians (*Parsiyan*); and the annals of their accomplishments are buried under the obscurity of words; and men of affairs, utilizing the authority of pen, have fastened them with locks."[69] To unlock that past, he questioned the validity of hegemonic views concerning the genesis of humankind and the universality of the flood of Noah. He also challenged the excellence of Arabs over Persians and the eloquence of Arabic language in comparison with Persian.

Bahram ibn Farhad, like the author of *Dabistan*, contended that "on philosophical ground human existence has no temporal genesis."[70] His view of time corresponds with the Mazdean notion of "shore-less time" (*zurvan akanarak*)[71] and the writings of Ibn Sina (370–428/980–1037) and Suhrawardi (549–87/1153–91).[72] Bahram connected the emergence of human beings to a double process of "reproduction" (*tavallud*) and "generation" (*tavalud*). He argued that unlike *tavallud*, which is reproduction of the same species, *tavalud* leads to the generation or the birthing of a new species. According to Bahram ibn Farhad's proto-evolutionary scheme, "a series of ruptures" – beginning with the mixture of earth, water, and fire – caused the birth and growth of vegetation, animals, and humankind. This non-creationist explanation assumed that "Adam the father of humanity" (*Abu al-Bashar Adam*) had a "father" of his own and could have raised the religiously inspired question of "why was the father of Adam not named in the Qur'an." Anticipating such a question, Bahram asserted that, like the case of Christ, this implied not the absence of a biological father but a father from whom Adam could have inherited and received an education. After establishing that "the world is eternal" (*giti qadim ast*) and that there is no "temporal genesis for mankind," he introduced Mahabad as the First Sage (*avval-i vakhshuran*).[73] The author of *Dabistan*, elaborating on Bahram's postulation, reported that Mahabad initiated human settlements, farming, industry, and the division of people into four distinct classes, a view at odds with orthodox Zoroastrianism.[74]

The imaginary view of Mahabad as the originator of urbanity and civility enabled Bahman ibn Farhad to resolve "the dispute of Arabs and Persians in regard to the precedency of Adam and Kayumars." He took

as indisputable the claim that "none other than Kayumars was the father of Persians" (*pidar-i 'Ajam Kayumars ast la ghayr*). According to *Sharistan*, "a difficulty was posed by the Arabs' insistence that Noah's flood was universal and the claim that after the settling of the wind none of his contemporaries survived." He argued that "Persians [*ahl-i Furs*] repudiate this claim and assert that the flood did not occur in Persia [*zamin-i Furs*]." The historical continuity of Iran was cited as evidence for this claim. Anticipating a historically fashionable objection, he argued: "But if they say that this was anterior to Kayumars and their history began after him, we say their history dates from the time of his Majesty Abad the Great [Mahabad] hundreds of thousands of years earlier."[75] Bahram ibn Farhad established that no mention of a flood was made in that known period of history by citing the authority of Tabari who had reported that "Noah lived in the time of Bewarasb...who is called Zahhak"[76] and the general agreement that Zahhak had revolted at the time of Jamshid. He argued that the flood was limited to Babylon. Citing the Qur'anic verse, "We had sent forth Noah to his people,"[77] he averred that the flood was a punishment inflicted upon the people who had revolted against Noah. Having argued that the flood was a local rather than a universal phenomenon, he offered a metaphorical reading of the flood associated with the identity of King Jamshid and Solomon.

To appreciate the significance of this shift, it is important to recall the earlier traditions concerning the similarity of these two powerful kings of Persian and Judeo-Christian traditions. The attempts to subordinate ancient Persian historical traditions to the Qur'anic prophetography created a reciprocal movement for the identification of Judeo-Christian patriarchs as Persian kings. This mutual transferential effect also led to the intertextualization of the two narrative traditions and consequent similar biographical information concerning certain Persian kings and Qur'anic prophets. Citing a report by Ibn Muqaffa', Dinawari reports the Persian claim that King Solomon was the same person as King Jamshid: "Ignorant Persians, and such as have no science, suppose that King Jam[shid] was Solomon the son of David, but this is an error, for between Solomon and Jam was an interval of more than 3,000 years."[78] Writing about the reign of Jamshid, Mir Khwand also reported that, "Many of the Persians reckon him as a prophet; and also state, that he was the thirtieth in the order of mission." Recounting the report attributed to Ibn Muqaffa', Mir Khwand additionally notes: "Some ignorant Persians [*juhhal-i Furs*] suppose him to be the same as Sulimán; but this opinion is absurd in every respect, as between the age of Jemsheed and that of Sulimán (on whom be salvation!) more than two thousand years

intervenes."[79] Mir Khwand discredits this claim by citing the authority of the Qur'an: "Jemsheed apostatized in the end of his reign; whereas the Almighty himself expressly declares, 'Truly Sulimán committed no infidelity'."[80] Comparing the portrayals of Jamshid and Solomon, he concluded, "all writers agree that the All-powerful Creator never permitted an enemy to prevail over Sulimán; whereas Zahák completely subdued Jemsheed."[81] This point is in accord with the portrayal of Jamshid in the *Avesta* and the *Shahnamah* of Firdawsi.[82] According to the *Avesta*, the illustrious reign of Jamshid came to an abrupt end with his claim of divinity.[83] Jamshid's "untruthful" utterances led to the Divine withdrawal of "Kiyani effulgence" (*farr-i kiyani*) and his consequent defeat by Zahhak.[84]

Bahram ibn Farhad challenged the validity of such reports, contending that Jamshid remained pious to the end of his life and that Zahhak had been sent by God as a punishment to the "rebellious people" who had broken the covenant with Jamshid.[85] In asserting the piety of Jamshid, he also established a Persian origin for the Arabs by arguing that Zahhak was a descendent of Siyamak, a son of Kayumars.[86] He rejected the oneness of Firaydun and Namrud – "that famous infidel king of the lands of the East and the West"[87] – as reported in *Rawzat al-Safa*,[88] and maintained that Noah was in fact the Persian king Faraydun who brought to an end the tyrannical rule of Zahhak.

By reconciling the accounts of Jamshid and Faraydun with Solomon and Noah, Bahram ibn Farhad provided the basis for a metaphorical interpretation of the flood: "It is apparent that Noah was sent to Zahhak. The flood of Noah, then, is a metaphor for the extremity of Zahhak's oppression including the punishment for the people who broke the covenant [*ahd*] with Jamshid. The ship is the approval of Faraydun." He argued, by expanding the parallelism between Noah and Faraydun, that the three sons of Noah were no other than the three sons of Faraydun (Salm, Tur, and Iraj) who inherited the inhabited parts of the earth. In similar fashion Bahram ibn Farhad asserted that Seth was an alias for Siyamak, Idrish for Hushang, Lughman for Tahmuris, Soloman for Jamshid, and Noah for Faraydun, Abraham for Zoroaster, and Khizr and Alyas for Kaykhusraw.[89] These supposed similarities were based on earlier reports often dismissed as unreliable by Muslim historians.[90] By recontextualizing these reports and integrating them into a well-connected narrative on the excellence of Persian sage-kings, Bahram ibn Farhad successfully sought to reverse the Islamication of pre-Islamic Persian historical memory and to fashion a glorified Iran-centered past. This reversal was, however, as conjectural as the attempt of Muslim

historians who refashioned the Persian historical accounts by placing them in the all-encompassing frame of Biblico-Qur'anic historical imagination. One sought to Islamicate ancient history and the other to Persicate Islamic prophetography. At different levels of intensity, this reciprocal relationship has been a permanent factor in (trans)forming Perso-Islamic culture.

Arab–Persian ethnic and linguistic rivalries were significant components of tensions embedded in the narrative structure of *Sharistan*. This latent tension surfaced in a discussion of the nobility of the Arabs and the eloquence of Arabic in comparison with Persians and their language. The Islamicate privileging of Arabs and Arabic was grounded in their rhetorical association with the Prophet and the Qur'an, the embodiments of the Islamic *Sunnah* and the *Shari'ah*. The subversion of such discursive associations was significant to the followers of Azar Kayvan. It was the subject of the following debate, which was reported in detail in *Sharistan*.

An Indian scholar inquired about Azar Kayvan's opinion of a statement on "the people of Persia" (*mardum-i Pars*) appearing in *Farhang-i Jahangiri* (1017/1608), an authoritative Persian dictionary compiled by Mir Jamal al-Din Husayn Inju Shirazi (d. *c*.1626), which states, "Beside Arabs, no people is as excellent as the people of Persia; and after Arabic no language is as eloquent and better than Persian."[91] This description was not satisfactory to the Pers-centric cohorts of Azar Kayvan who claimed that "According to the Persians and those residents of Iran [*sikanah-'i Iran*] who have remained on the same ancient path [*tariq-i qadim*], descendants of Persia [*abna-yi Pars*] are the noblest of created beings [*afzal-i makhluqat'and*]." As approvingly reported in *Sharistan*, Mubad Hush – a close companion of Azar Kayvan – argued that the divine appointment of Muhammad could not account for the nobility of Arabs over Persians. He contended that the Prophet Muhammad was "an intermediary between God and people and he had nothing to do with the Arabs." Contrasting Persians who were credited with the worldwide "dissemination of philosophy" (*intishar-i hikmat*) with the Arabs to whom the Prophet Muhammad was sent, Mubad Hush argued that prophets were sent to "the wretched" (*ashqiya*) and "the sinning nations" (*firqah-'i 'usat*) so that they could be led to the right path. Accusing the Arabs of extremism, including insatiable sexual desire, he concluded that Iranians "are more eloquent and intelligent than Arabs" (*az A'rab afsah va a'qal'and*).[92]

Mubad Hush, comparing the Arabic and Persian languages, further argued that the eloquence of the Qur'an, as a revealed text, was not

attributable to the Arabic language. In an Arabophobic argument he asserted that the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic because, unlike other peoples, Arabs could not get accustomed to the use of foreign languages. To demonstrate the eloquence of Persian over Arabic he contended that "Arabic is excessive" (*'Arabi tavil ast*) whereas "Persian is minimal in letters and maximal in meanings" *(Parsi qalil al-lafz va kasir al-ma'ni'ast)*. He argued that there are many Arabic verses and reports concerning "the people of Persian descent and the excellence of their language." To support this claim he cited the Qur'anic verse 4: 59, "Obey God and obey the Apostle and those in authority among you,"[93] a verse frequently used by Muslim political theorists to assert the believers' obligation to support the ruling sovereigns.[94] Recoding this verse as a sign of Persian excellence, he proudly asserted that, "by consensus, the prevalence and the credibility of royalty [*saltanat*] and the persistence of government [*hukumat*] is accredited to Persian kings [*muluk-i 'Ajam*]." Bahram ibn Farhad concluded his report of the debate between the entourage of Azar Kayvan and Indian scholars by declaring, "it was proved by reason and tradition that with the exception of sages/philosophers [*navamis*], Persians [*Parsiyan*] are the most righteous of all people [*a'dal-i anva'*] and excel over all other nations [*jamahir-i aqvam*]."[95] Such assertions of ethnic and linguistic superiority in the early seventeenth century anticipated a nationalist discourse that became hegemonic three centuries later.

Dabistan-i Mazahib, supplementing the historical claims of *Sharistan*, elaborated the religious views of the followers of Azar Kayvan. Among the historiographically significant assertions in this text was the view that the Muslim shrines of Mecca, Jerusalem, Medina, Najaf, Karbala, and Mashhad were all built upon Mazdean fire temples. The names of Islamic cities according to this report were Arabized forms of originally Persian names: Mecca was *Mah-gah* (Moon-place), Medina was *Mah-Dinah* (Moon of the Religion), Najaf a variation of *Na-akfat* (no-injury), Karbala an alteration of *Kar-i Bala* (sublime agency). It was further asserted that Buddhist holy places such as Gaya and Mathura were both alterations of Persian names *Gah-i Kayvan* (Abode of Saturn) and *Mihtara* (Resort of the eminent).[96] Retelling the views of the disciples of Azar Kayvan (*Abadiyan*) concerning the relation of Mazdean fire-places to Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist shrines, Kaykhusraw Isfandyar wrote: "When the Abadiyan come to such places, they visit them with the accustomed reverence, as, according to them, holy places are never liable to abomination or pollution, as they still remain places of worship and adoration: both friends and foes regarding them as

a *Qibla*, and sinners, notwithstanding all their perverseness, pray in those sacred edifices."[97] This view gained currency among the Persianate literati. For instance Azar Bigdili (fl. 1134–95/1721–81) opened his famous biographical anthology of approximately 850 poets, *Atashkadah-'i Azar*, with the following verse, "I saw a child-prodigy circumventing the Shrine and uttering, 'Such a nice plac must have been a fire-place.'" The speculations concerning the hidden Persian meanings of non-Persian words also gave rise to an etymological mania that gained momentum in the nineteenth century, best exemplified by the effort of Mirza Aqa Khan Kirmani.[98]

Another text which contributed to the emergence of a new historiographical consciousness was *A'in-i Hushang*, compiled and edited by Darvish Fani Manekji Limji Hatara, an Indian–Persian who had traveled to Iran in the nineteenth century.[99] This collection was originally published in the 1830s and reprinted in 1879, and includes four books: *Khishtab*,[100] *Zar-i Dastafshar*,[101] *Zayandah Rud*,[102] and *Zawrah-'i Bastani*.[103] It was claimed that these books were written during the reign of Khusraw Parviz (590–628 CE) and translated into Persian by disciples of Azar Kayvan. These texts were used by the authors of *Dabistan* and *Sharistan*.

A historiographically significant aspect of this collection is Fani's introduction and postscript. Clearly influenced by the germinal texts of *Dasatir*, *Dabistan*, and *Sharistan*, Fani used a particular rhetoric which became the pervasive trope of historical discourse in the nineteenth century. He depicted the Muslim conquest of Iran as the "winter of Arab oppression and repression" (*zimistan-i zulm va sitam-i A'rab*) and the Qajar dynasty as the beginning of a new season of justice and fairness (*maratib-i 'adl va insaf va payah-'i ma'dilat va makrimat*). As an Indian Parsi, Fani argued that, like birds who leave their home with the arrival of winter, the winter of Arab oppression and tyranny in Iran resulted in the dispersion of Iranians from their homeland (*vatan*). With the beginning of a new season of Qajar rule, Iranian expatriates, like birds, begun to return to their ancestral home.[104] Like Fani, most nineteenth-century Iranian historians viewed the pre-Islamic era as a glorious ancient period that came to a tragic end with the Arab–Muslim conquest.

The nationalist "emplotment" of Iran's ancient history as a tragedy was based on the comprehension of the Muslim conquest as a force engendering "the reverse progress of Iran" (*taraqqi-i ma'kus-i Iran*).[105] Linking the end of the "enlightened" pre-Islamic times to origins identified with Iran through Mahabad or Kayumars, a new memory, identity, and political reality was fashioned. By inducing the desire and the will to recover "lost glories" of the past, the nationalist struggle for a new social order

became intrinsically connected to the politics of cultural memory and its de-Arabizing projects of history and language. Juxtaposing Iran and Islam, these projects prompted the emergence of a schizochronic view of history and the formation of schizophrenic social subjects who were conscious of their belonging to two diverse and often antagonistic times and cultural heritages.[106] During Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1905–9, these autonomous "Iranian" identities prefigured into the line-up of political forces to antagonistic "Constitutionalist" (*Mashru-tahkhwah*) and "Shari'atist" (*Mashru'ahkhwah*) camps. The shift in the 1970s from a regime glorifying Iran's ancient civilization to a revolutionary regime extolling Islamic heritage is only the most recent example of the creative possibilities and insoluble dilemmas engendered by the contested memories of pre-Islamic Iran.

6
Crafting National Identity

Envisaging history

The formation of a modern Iranian national identity was linked intimately to the configuration of its national history and restyling of the Persian language. Informed by *dasatiri* texts and inspired by the *Shahnamah* of Firdawsi, modern historical writings harnessed the Iranian homeland (*vatan*) to an immemorial past beginning with Mahabad and Kayumars and pointing toward a future unison with Europe. Iran's pre-Islamic past was celebrated as a glorious and industrious age, and its integration into the Arab–Islamic world was shunned as a cause of its "reverse progress" (*tarraqi-i ma'kus*). To catch up with the "civilized world," the architects of Iranian nationalism sought to "reawaken" the nation to self-consciousness by reactivating and inventing memories of the country's pre-Islamic past. The simplification and purification of Persian were corollaries of this project of national reawakening. Like the glorification of the pre-Islamic past, these language-based movements helped to dissociate Iran from Islam and to craft a distinct national identity and sodality.

In an increasing number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Persian historical texts, "Iran" was constituted as the shifter and organizer of chains of narration and emplotment. For instance, *Rustam al-Tawarikh*, completed in 1800, referred to Karim Khan Zand (d. 1779) as "the architect of the ruined Iran" (*mi'mar-i Iran-i viran*) and "the kind father of all residents of Iran" (*pidar-i mihraban-i hamah-'i ahl-i Iran*). Among other compound constructions with Iran that were politically significant, Rustam al-Hukama, the author of this text, used *Iranmadar* (Iran-protector), *dawlat-i Iran* (government of Iran), *farmanrava'i-i Iran* (governing of Iran), *ahl-i Iran* (the people/residents of Iran), and territorial

96