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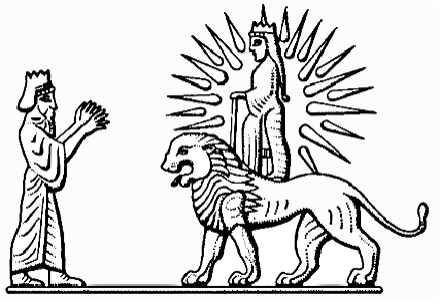

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Truth and Lies in Ancient Iranian History

Some archaeologists claim that the word impressionistic is a synonym for superficial, since they deal with the hard facts of material culture, while historians are shallow because they study causes and effects which frequently are intangible. In the ancient Near East and Central Asia, however, to try to understand the past the paucity of all sources forces one to resort to analogies, comparisons and logic, or just simple common sense. Unfortunately sometimes the last is forgotten in trying to explain enigmas. For example, it is well known, but at times overlooked, that both writing and oral memories were limited to a few people. One might say that until the spread of Arabic in the Middle Ages, in the Near East writing was restricted to priests (or other religious figures) and professional scribes. The former were interested in preserving religious texts, while the latter primarily in keeping accounts.

Oral history was preserved by professional story tellers, called *gōsān* in Parthian times, while common folk frequently mis-remembered or forgot past events. Those with prodigious memories were respected and honoured as folk 'historians,' but additions and losses were the normal practices of those reporting past events.

All of the above does not take into account deliberate falsification of information for political or other reasons. Consequently one must be sceptical of much information from the ancient world and consider motives and reasons for the records which are preserved. One should always ask why a priest or scribe recorded a text, or why a ruler ordered a text to be written. Even more questions need to be applied to information handed down orally and then recorded in writing. Finally the historian of the ancient Near East must be on guard not to import contemporary views or biases into an interpretation of the past. All very simple and understood but sometimes neglected.

What follows is speculative and impressionistic, but it concerns an important historical question: how can we assess and believe records from the past? Anyone who tries to recover memories from his own past, or remembers the Japanese film *Rashomon*, will sympathize with any attempt to set up guidelines, trying to establish what Leopold von Ranke said about history – to report was *eigentlich geschehen ist.*

As a general rule one should ask, does the information support or promote a position or point of view, or is it neutral in not contributing to any argument which is advanced by the text or inscription? In a somewhat simple or crude example, in Suetonius' Life of Caesar (22), when he has the consul say that the Amazons had controlled a large part of Asia, this remark really has to do with a contemporary joke, and cannot be deemed true or historical. The Classical writers are full of 'historical information' which is meant to edify or teach their readers some lesson, and consequently must be regarded with caution. On the other hand, if a remark is simply recorded as an interesting

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piece of information, without any didactic or glorification purpose, then the chances of being true are enhanced. In other words, the purpose of a statement should be determined before moving to the next step, which is a comparison of similar statements or situations, to determine the reasonableness or logic of the information. It is this second step which is tricky but frequently necessary for the ancient world, where sources are few, or mere copies of one original source. In this vein let us turn to ancient Iran and examine the long standing argument about Darius and his Behistun inscription.

Previously I had upheld the veracity of Darius' remarks, considering the fact that witnesses undoubtedly existed who would know about the events he describes. Yet there was one instance where he might have escaped detection, and that was the murder of the person he claimed was the usurper Gaumāta rather than Bardiya, brother of Cambyses. The Gaumāta episode has been discussed *ad nauseam*, and here I wish to concentrate only on the question of legitimacy.

If we cosider who was legitimate or not in previous history, the case of the neo-Assyrian king Sargon (722-705 B.C.), who was a usurper, might come to mind. He had asserted legitimacy by claiming descent from ancient kings of Babylonia, and had great success in not only maintaining power, but also expanding the Assyrian realm. Could the story of Darius be a parallel to that of Sargon, or even better to more ancient rulers who exhibited similar claims? In a recent trip to Pasargadae I again examined the inscriptions with the name Cyrus there. All were similar and simple, saying "I am Cyrus the Achaemenid." This seemed strange, since it is now generally accepted that Darius introduced the Old Persian cuneiform script, and most probably it was he who ordered these inscriptions to be engraved on the buildings in the city of Cyrus. Why would Darius order such a simple text engraved there? Obviously he wanted everyone to know that Cyrus was an Achaemenid like himself, and therefore Darius had legitimacy to rule. However, what does Cyrus say in his Babylonian inscriptions?

Cyrus never mentions Achaemenes as his ancestor in proclaiming his genealogy in cuneiform texts.[1] The common name which attaches the descent of Darius to that of Cyrus is Teispis (OP Čišpiš), but is it the same person? It would be easy to assert that it was one and the same ancestor, but just as the matter of Sargon, the intention was to prove legitimacy, which was very important in the ancient world. If we may question Sargon's ancestors, why not also those of Darius? Why did Darius insist that both he and Cyrus were descended from Achaemenes, and not be content with Teispis as their common ancestor, since after the latter the two branches of the family diverged? We may consider several reasons for Darius' insistence on exalting Achaemenes, which in every inscription of all the successors of Darius is emphasized. All proclaim that they are Achaemenids. The Greeks accepted the Persian version of the descent of their rulers, and the name Achaemenid came down in history everywhere except in Iran. The usual explanation for this phenomenon is the loss of memory after Alexander, but why was

[1] Cf. Weidener, E.F., "Die älteste Nachricht über das persische Konigshaus," *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 7 (1930), pp. 1-7. The Old Persian inscriptions may be found in Kent, R., *Old Persian Grammar, Text, Lexicon*, (AOS, New Haven, Conn., 1953).

the Assyrian Empire and its kings remembered even in Islamic times in Iran and not the Achaemenids? The great savant al-Bīrūnī knew about the kings of Assyria but not the Achaemenids under that name. It is fascinating that even though he did not know the name 'Achaemenid' he did have the correct sequence of their rulers (Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius, etc.), but they are listed under the sobriquet of the kings of the Chaldaeans.[2] Later, when he gives a list of the Persian kings, according to Classical authors, in a curious fashion he repeats the Chaldaean list, with the additions of Tiglath Pileser, Salmanassar and a form of Esarhadon.[3] I am at a loss to know where al-Bīrūnī found these lists, but with his wide use of different sources, one would expect the name Achaemenid to appear somewhere in some form, even with the mixture of lists. One would have expected the Assyrians to have been forgotten after the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C., while the inscriptions of Darius and his successors attest to their desire to preserve memory of the Achaemenids. This requires an explanation.

It seems there are two possible answers to the loss of memory of the name Achaemenids in Iran. The generally accepted explanation is that the Seleucid, and especially the Parthians, were the primary agents of forgetfulness. The latter, who came from Central Asia, it is asserted, substituted their mythic and epic version of the ancient history of Iran for the true history of the Achaemenids. It is surprising, however, that in western Iran, home of the Medes and Persians, memory of the Achaemenids was completely lost. Forms of the names of the Achaemenid kings (Darius, Artaxerxes) do appear on coins of the Frataraka rulers of Persis or Fārs, homeland of the Achaemenids, but again no trace of the name Achaemenid. Is it possible that the people in western Iran did not want, or care, to remember a dynasty which was not beloved, or may even have been considered illegitimate, in the eyes of many? This may seem farfetched, but the disappearance of the Achaemenids in the one land where they should have been remembered is puzzling.

Another, and I suggest more plausible, explanation of the loss of memory of the name Achaemenid is that it was not forgotten, but a substitution was made which was codified in Sasanian times. What do I mean? The 'Parthian' epic account of the past was based in part on names and events in the Avesta, which may give us a clue, if we remember what was stated above that primarily it was the priests of the Zoroastrian religion who wrote down what little has been preserved. I propose that the priests, together with popular story tellers, constructed an account of Iran's past parallel to the history which we know today. But why would the Sasanians accept this account as their 'official' version of the past in place of the 'real' history? I suggest that the Classical account was first considered propaganda of their Roman/Byzantine enemies. Second, and more important, the priests became greatly concerned about the spread of Christianity, the religion of the enemies of the Sasanians, especially in the fifth century and later when Christianity was the official religion of their enemies. I have proposed that it was this fear of the progress of Christianity in Iran which caused the

[2] al-Bīrūnī, *Athār al bāqiya* (*The Chronology of Ancient Nations*), trans. E. Sachau (London, 1879), text p. 89, trans. p. 111.

[3] Ibid., text p. 101, trans. p. 115.

Zoroastrian priests to persuade the Sasanian kings to accept and proclaim the popular and religious account of the past of Iran instead of the pernicious 'Western' history.[4] Later Islamic authors were confused about this manipulation of the past by Iranians, and the above explanation should be considered when studying Islamic versions of the past.

The third century is a turning point in world history when universal, intolerant and competing religions replaced former allegiances. No longer was it a privilege to become a Roman citizen, rather one identified himself as a Christian, Jew, Zoroastrian, Manichaean or other. Christians did not tolerate pagans and Zoroastrians also adopted the intolerant attitude of their enemies. Religion became the prime player in everyone's life and this is reflected in the history of the Near East as well as the West. The above suggests that we must be very cautious in accepting accounts of the past, without careful questioning of the motives of the recorder of those events. The repetition of patterns or motifs in the past, such as the tale of 'baby Moses in the bulrushes,' found also in ancient Mesopotamia, and elsewhere with variations, points to an unconscious, or even possibly intended, desire to conform to well-known and popularly accepted paradigms of behaviour. Another recurring pattern in the history of Iran is that of the founder of a new dynasty, who is connected by blood with the previous dynasty, but for some reason has to flee from court and hide among the common folk, who raise him until the time of his revolt and success arrives. This is the account of the childhood of Cyrus, repeated for Ardašīr, founder of the Sasanian dynasty, and with similar events even in Islamic times, witness the rise of Ismail, founder of the Safavid dynasty. Are we dealing with mythic or epic elements of history; how much can one believe?

To take another general but seemingly comparable instance, how is one to understand the recurring pattern of revolutions, with a violent uprising and struggle, followed by a regime of terror and then foreign invasion? The French, Russian and Iranian revolutions are almost eerily similar, as though participants in each follow a law of revolutions, again either unconsciously or by design, having determined the paths all revolutions must follow. Sheep or shrewd readers of history? Many are the puzzles of the past.

Truth and falsehood are indeed difficult to distinguish in history, but we should not go to one extreme, which has history a 'pack of lies agreed upon.' Rather one should examine the past with objectivity, logic, and with all the resources available, to reconstruct what really happened in the past. Then perhaps we can approach the dictum of Ranke rather than an account of what should have happened.

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[4] Cf. Frye, R.N., "Founder Myths in Iranian History," *Nāme-ye Irān-e Bāstān*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Tehran, 2003), pp. 19-21, where reference is to an important article by A.S. Shahbazi, "Early Sasanians' Claim to Achaemenid Heritage," in the first issue of the same journal (2001), pp. 61-73.