

A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind

Michael Axworthy

New York: Basic Books, 2008. 249 pages.

This survey of the history of Iranian civilization from ancient times to the present is intended for general audiences with little knowledge of Iranian history. The book's nine chapters consist largely of chronological presentations of political history, but occasionally make room for sections on religious movements, society, and the arts. The first two chapters briskly cover the ancient period through the Sassanids. The third runs from the Islamic conquests through the fifteenth century and contains a long section on the evolution of Persian verse tradition. The fourth and fifth chapters cover the Safavids' rise and fall, the development of early modern Twelver Shi'ism, and the tumultuous period leading up to the Qajars. The sixth surveys the late Qajar period and the constitutional revolution, while the last three chapters detail the events of the twentieth century with an emphasis on the 1979 Islamic revolution and what has happened since. As nearly a third of the book deals with the twentieth century, the treatment of the ancient periods and the first millennium of the Islamic era are comparatively spare.

Axworthy's main project is to trace the history of a sense of "Iranianness" or "Iranian identity" that he claims to have identified in ancient sources and uses to justify composing what he calls "a history of Iran." Although he does not provide an explicit and comprehensive definition of this "Iranian identity," he states clearly that he is not describing a sense of nation (pp. xv-xvi and 117). Rather, he implies that this identity is a loose sense of affiliation based on the idea of a common land, language, and shared memory. But when he speaks, for example, of an "Iranian revival" in the second century or an "Iranian reconquest" in the fourteenth, he uses the very nation-centered paradigm of history that he seeks to avoid, even if he refrains from invoking a "national" sensibility.

Iran, he tells us, has always been an “empire of the mind” (pp. xvi and 294) with a “distinctively Iranian structure of ideas” (p. 20), and thus its history must be studied as such. But in composing his history, his methodology is teleological and absolutely nationalistic in approach: he starts with a modern notion of an Iranian identity and then finds circumstantial evidence in ancient sources that suggest the existence of such a sensibility in premodern times. This Iranian identity then becomes the key device through which he interprets later history (e.g., pp. 19-20, 45, 86-88, and 117). Occasionally we find tidy, almost aphoristic observations about how ancient events prefigure those of later periods. A typical example is his characterization of Gaumata’s revolt, which ended Cambyses’ reign (the Achaemenid era): “An Iranian revolution, led by a charismatic cleric, seizing power from an oppressive monarch, asserting religious orthodoxy, attacking false believers, and drawing support from economic grievances – how modern that sounds” (p. 17).

Although the author points out the defects of nationalistic history, his methodology is based upon some of the same problematic assumptions. The book is a composite of twentieth-century English-language scholarship on Iran and its history. Axworthy demonstrates little knowledge of the basic primary sources and therefore gives the reader little confidence in his ability to judge the worth of the secondary literature he uses to compose his narrative or interpret the data that they present. Moreover, his sources sometimes remain undisclosed; passages occasionally pass with no documentation (e.g., pp. 36-37). In fact, the book’s endnotes section is small even for a “general” work – only eighteen pages for nearly three hundred pages of text.

There are also important omissions in the secondary literature that he did use. For example, he rarely considers Persian-language scholarship and sometimes misses recent key works in English (on Shi`ism, Sufism, the Safavids, Shu`ubiyah, and the *Shahnama*). Occasionally this results in inaccuracies. For example, his presentation of the Akhbari-USuli split in Shi`ism oversimplifies both positions, making the Akhbaris seem as though they were opposed to “extended scholarly training” (p. 172). His presentation would have been more nuanced had he referred to the most appropriate and current scholarship on this crucial subject, namely, the works of Devin Stewart and Andrew Newman.

Aside from such conceptual and methodological problems, there are factual errors. A conspicuous one appears in his explanation of Khomeini’s theory of *velayat-i faqih*, which he translates as “regency of the jurist.” A closer

translation is “authority” or “governance” of the jurist. Moreover, in this discussion he further confuses the word *vali*, the root of *velayat*, with *vakil* (regent) and states that *vali* was the same title that Karim Khan Zand took for himself, a connection that he implies points to the roots of Khomeini’s notion of regency as lying in the eighteenth century (p. 253). Curiously, the author himself correctly mentions earlier that Karim Khan’s title was *vakil*, not *vali* (p. 168). In any case, these errors result in a mishandling of an important concept in contemporary Shi`ism.

In places Axworthy makes inappropriate value judgments. For example, his treatment of Prophet Mani and Manichaeism is vitriolic. He refers to his beliefs and practices as “life-hating mumbo jumbo” (p. 50) that were “useful ... to those wishing to elaborate metaphysically upon misogynistic impulses” (p. 51). After stating that Mani had opened a “Pandora’s box of malignity” (p. 51), he goes on to indict Roman Catholicism for having been blighted by the teachings of St. Augustine, a former Manichaean (p. 52). He further observes that the Church’s acceptance of St. Augustine’s ideas about Original Sin was “perhaps the most damaging decision ever made by the Christian church” (p. 52).

In sum, non-specialists are better off reading selected articles in the *Cambridge History of Iran* or general histories that deal with more circumscribed periods of time. While this book does offer an adequate review of some secondary literature on the twentieth century, its many defects make it unsuitable even for general readers. Mottahedeh’s *The Mantle of the Prophet* (1985) offers a far more compelling introduction to the roots of modern Iranian religion and politics in premodern history.

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