



# DURHAM MIDDLE EAST PAPERS

WHY HISTORIOGRAPHY MATTERS  
IRAN AND THE MONGOL ERA –  
EIGHT HUNDRED YEARS AFTER

Professor Anja Pistor-Hatam

*Ann Lambton Memorial Lecture*  
**Durham Middle East Paper No. 105**

---

# DURHAM MIDDLE EAST PAPERS

---

INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EASTERN AND ISLAMIC STUDIES

WHY HISTORIOGRAPHY MATTERS

IRAN AND THE MONGOL ERA –

EIGHT HUNDRED YEARS AFTER

Professor Anja Pistor-Hatam

**Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies**

**Durham University**

**Al-Qasimi Building**

**Elvet Hill Road**

**Durham**

**DH1 3TU**

**Tel: +44 (0)191 3345680**

**Ann Lambton Memorial Lecture**

**Durham Middle East Papers No. 105**

**ISSN 1476-4830**

**March 2021**

The Durham Middle East Papers series covers all aspects of the economy, politics, social science, history, literature and languages of the Middle East. Authors are invited to submit papers to the Editorial Board for consideration for publication.

The views expressed in this paper are the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher or IMEIS. All Rights Reserved. This paper cannot be photocopied or reproduced without prior permission.

---

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

---

The Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (IMEIS), within the School of Government & International Affairs, is a Social Science-focused academic institute of excellence, research-led in ethos, with a track-record of internationally acclaimed research outputs across all sub-areas of its activity. Success in this respect obtains largely from the interdisciplinary nature of the Institute's activities and the fruitful interaction of political economists, political scientists, historians and Islamicists, as well as with colleagues from Anthropology, Arabic, Archaeology, Geography, Business – all linked together by their collective focus on the study of the Middle East and the Muslim world in the widest sense.

---

## ABOUT THE PAPERS

---

Established in the early 1970s the multidisciplinary series includes topics on all aspects of the social sciences and arts in the Middle East, written by leading and emerging scholars in their respective fields.

---

## EDITORIAL BOARD

---

**Professor Anoush Ehteshami**

*Exofficio member*

Professor of International Relations  
in the School of Government and  
International Affairs

**Professor Clive Jones**

Professor of Regional Security in  
the School of Government and  
International Affairs, Durham  
University

**Dr Rory McCarthy**

Assistant Professor in Politics and  
Islam in the School of Government  
and International Affairs

**Dr Colin Turner**

Reader in Islamic Thought in  
the School of Government and  
International Affairs

**Dr Carly Beckerman**

*Art editor*

Assistant Professor in the  
International Relations of the Middle  
East in the School of Government and  
International Affairs

---

## ADVISORY BOARD

---

**Professor Rory Miller**

Georgetown University, Doha

**Professor Beverly Milton-Edwards**

Queen's University, Belfast

**Mr Richard Muir, CMG**

Chair, Luce Committee

**Professor James Piscatori**

Australian National University

**Sir Harold Walker, KCMG**

Member, Luce Foundation

Anja Pistor-Hatam is Professor of Islamic Studies (Middle Eastern Studies) at Kiel University and served as vice-president at her university for more than six years. She is also a member of the Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Hamburg. Her research interests focus on the intellectual history of Iran and include Twelver Shi'ite Islam, 19th to early 20th century reform movements in Iran and the Ottoman Empire, modern Iranian historiography, 'religious minorities' as well as human rights and human dignity in Iran.

Her latest publications include *Geschichtsschreibung und Sinngeschichte in Iran. Historische Erzählungen von mongolischer Eroberung und Herrschaft, 1933–2011* (Historiography and the History of Meaning in Iran: Historical Narratives on Mongol Invasion and Rule, 1933–2011), Brill: Leiden 2014; "Non-understanding and Minority Formation in Iran", in *Iran* 55 (2017), pp. 87–98, and "Religious Minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the 'Right to have Rights'," in *Iranian Studies* 3.4 (2019), pp. 4–25. Professor Pistor-Hatam is currently preparing a volume on human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Historiography matters, because we deal with the past using the tools established by the science of history. Like any other science, historiography must always remain open to criticism and new insights. Research cannot do without the critical questioning of its results and facts in search of alternative interpretations and new insights.

Historical narratives on the Mongol period written in Iran in a time span of nearly 80 years, including the Pahlavi era as well as the Islamic Republic, are an interesting case study. The more so since this period had been neglected in Iran for quite a while. Due to the establishment of an Iranian national history in the 1930s, the Mongol era had to be given attention and it had to be integrated into a new historical narrative. Using two Iranian authors of different periods – Abbas Eqbâl (1897-1956) and Rasûl Dja'fariyân (born 1964) – this paper will analyse how historiography on the Mongol period began under Reza Shah and how its narrative strands continue well into the period of Islamic Republic.

# I INTRODUCTION: WHY HISTORIOGRAPHY?

In 2018, the late Michael Axworthy gave a lecture entitled “Why History Matters – Reflections on the Origins and Significance of the Iranian Revolution of 1979” – one of his last public speeches.<sup>1</sup> Now, you may wonder why my lecture has a similar title, except that I will not talk about the importance of *history* but will focus instead on the importance of *historiography*. You may also wonder why it is important to talk about the importance of *historiography* at all. Isn’t this a self-explanatory question? Of course, historiography matters! How else should we deal with the past if not with the methods established

“...WHERE DO  
PEOPLE LEARN  
THIS SCIENCE AND  
WHAT ARE ITS  
PARAMETERS?”

by historical science. Yet, where do people learn this science and what are its parameters? Does there exist only one kind of historiography and does it apply regardless of time and place? How are different strands of writing history interrelated? And are only those who have studied historical sciences at universities capable of researching history?

conclusions, how can we do this? And finally, what do these considerations have to do with Iran and the Mongols?

If we want to defend historiography as a science against those who do not accept scientifically founded conclusions, how can we do this? And finally, what do these considerations have to do with Iran and the Mongols?

In my lecture I will try to answer some of these questions. First, I will turn to theories of historiography in order to disclose my own “way of historical thinking”.<sup>2</sup> I am convinced that science, in the German sense of “Wissenschaft”, can provide knowledge, but not objective truth; that it uncovers connections and provides orientation, but not meaning; and that it conveys knowledge, but not wisdom.<sup>3</sup> Also, I am persuaded that “science may be considered as without alternative in coping with complex realities. However, its findings,

results and strategies are never without alternative, but must always remain open to criticism and new insights.”<sup>4</sup> Research cannot do “without the critical questioning of its results and facts in search of alternative interpretations and new insights [...] and science generally functions only in the conflict of theories and in the interpretation of data guided by them. [...] science needs criticism and it lives from openness to new insights.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, these insights unconditionally have to rely on scientific methods. Ideologies or invented truths have nothing to do with these scientific methods, of course.

Second, I will take a look at the way historians of the Mongol period and their narratives are perceived by modern Iranian authors. Third, I will show you who these authors were who wrote the history of the Mongols in Iran and what their education or profession was. Historical narratives on the Mongol period written in Iran in a time span of nearly 80 years, including the Pahlavi era as well as the Islamic Republic, are an interesting case study. The more so, since this period had previously been neglected. In the 1930s, the Mongol era had to be given attention and it had to be integrated into the idea of an Iranian national history.

In my final analysis I will compare the historical narratives of two Iranian writers against the backdrop of their respective cultural and political environment. I will show that neither Eqbâl nor Ja’fariyân thought about their individual “way of historical thinking”. It will become clear that both their historical narratives must be read as part of the socio-political paradigm of their respective age. Equally their particular assessments of the Mongol period must be regarded as part of their situatedness.

## II. Theories of historiography

If it is true that “science generally functions only in the conflict of theories and in the interpretation of data guided by them”,<sup>6</sup> then, as a researcher, I must rely

“I WILL COMPARE THE  
HISTORICAL NARRATIVES  
OF TWO IRANIAN  
WRITERS AGAINST THE  
BACKDROP OF THEIR  
RESPECTIVE CULTURAL  
AND POLITICAL  
ENVIRONMENT...”



on theories and disclose them at the same time. Thus, I will now explain some theoretical considerations regarding historiography. Although the American historian Hayden White (1928–2018) allegedly uncovered the narrative structure of historiography, he was not the first to draw a connection between historiography and the telling of stories. Already in the 19th century, German scholars had described historiography as a “literary event”. Only through the creative act of writing did empirical findings from the past take on the form of a meaningful story.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, even if the translation of source information about a past into a story “served as a connection of meaning between present and past human action”, this research achievement has to follow standards of rationality.<sup>8</sup> Generally, historiography is based on several assumptions. One of these assumptions is that historians are able to use their methods to gather factual knowledge about the past.<sup>9</sup> Since their historical narratives are reconstructions based on factual statements, they claim to be adequate to reality.<sup>10</sup> Every argument or presentation put forward by historians stands in an argumentative context, so that the respective research results can be discussed and may be recognised by other researchers as realistic representations. Historical treatises must be frank regarding their respective topic, the essential evidence and the methodological rules. These enable the necessary traceability and rationality of

historiography.<sup>11</sup> Since historians work within certain value horizons, they must reflect their own points of view.<sup>12</sup> Putting pen to paper and giving significance to their sources, their thinking, explaining, and interpreting is a single process. Consequently, historians are no “innocent bystanders”<sup>13</sup> and their way of interpreting reality must be observed.<sup>14</sup>

Taking these remarks into consideration, how do we deal with the historiography having come down to us from the Mongol era? European scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries who studied the Persian historiography of the Mongol period often criticised the ornamental style of these writings.<sup>15</sup> They considered this style an obstacle denying them direct access to the “facts” they were looking for in the works of Rashīd od-Dīn Fazlollāh, Atā Malek Joveinī or, especially, Vassāf. These European scholars simply overlooked the fact that some of the authors themselves announced that their main aim was to write in magnificent style. The historical events they told only formed the material that was then artistically decorated with the ornaments of their rhetoric.<sup>16</sup> Historians of the Mongol era were aware that their treatises were always subjected to critical scrutiny by other writers, including their own superiors as well as unfavourable peers and enemies at court. Accordingly, their texts were regarded as artistic testimonies to linguistic skill and virtuosity, which were used as vouchers in the

**“...ONE MUST  
ASK WHAT  
FUNCTION A PRE-  
MODERN HISTORIAN  
HAD TO FULFIL,  
WHAT EFFECT  
HE WANTED TO  
ACCOMPLISH AND  
HOW HE ACHIEVED  
HIS GOALS.”**

barter system of the ruling elites.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, for historians of the Iranian Middle Period, the focus was less on capturing so called facts than on writing a meaningful narrative.<sup>18</sup> In order to convey the meaning of their narratives, they had to process their “raw material” and give it a narrative framework. In this respect, the essence of this historiography lies in the way in which each historian presented the past in its meaning for his own present.<sup>19</sup>

It is therefore important to note that such historical texts are of a narrative nature and must be placed in the political and historical context of their authors. Hence, the contents of these texts cannot simply be regarded as facts or the reflection of a supposed reality. Therefore, they should not be used by modern historians as excavates from which they cut out what can be used in the sense of their own questions.<sup>20</sup> Instead, when reading and analysing such historical narratives, one must ask what function a pre-modern historian had to fulfil, what effect he wanted to accomplish and how he achieved his goals. In addition, knowledge of the respective social, political and not least religious context is part of the understanding of a historical narrative. Especially, because pre-modern Muslim historians often hid their true assessments and personal convictions in order not to annoy their respective rulers on

the one hand and not to disappoint their readers' expectations on the other. Literary style and other predetermined patterns of historical narrative thus often contradicted the "historical reality" they sought to represent.<sup>21</sup>

To give you an example, let us take a look at Atâ Malek Joveinî's *Târikh-e Jahângoshâ* ("History of the World Conqueror"). As Poliakova has shown, in his work Joveinî subordinated the narrative to literary rules. This means that an assumed historic reality was portrayed according to the given contemporary patterns. Also, these literary rules determined the selection of events by the historian, their interpretation and his characterisation of the historical figures. In the case of Jengîz Khân, he chose the type of the tyrannical demon king from mythology.<sup>22</sup> Since Joveinî was a courtly official and historian in the service of the Mongols, he could not present Jengîz Khân as a simple tyrant and opposite of the ideal ruler.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Joveinî's purpose was not to provide a detailed description of actual events, but to express his view on the destruction of a civilisation. Those who read the text drew their own conclusions about the extent and consequences of the destruction as well as the role that Jengîz Khân played in it.<sup>24</sup>

To put it briefly, the subjectivity of the Persian-language sources on the Mongol era is of great significance, for their authors decided as to which events they wanted to pass on to posterity or were able to present to their respective rulers. Accordingly, these texts are traditions or reconstructions creating reality<sup>25</sup> and as such require decoding with regard to their function and meaning.

When reading modern historiographical texts published in Iran on the Mongol period, however, it becomes clear that these findings have not yet been accepted. In these historical narratives, the works written during the Mongol period are used as sources that provide detailed and truthful information about this period. In addition, the assessments of important historians such as Alâ od-Dîn Atâ Malek Joveinî or Rashîd od-Dîn Fazlollâh are trusted and their observation theories are consequently not discussed.

### III. Iranian Authors and their Historical Narratives

#### a) Iranian authors

Having said this, let us now turn to the Iranian authors whose historical narratives deal with the Mongol era. First, though, we need to determine when modern historiography was instituted in Iran. During the reign of Rezâ Shâh Pahlavî (gov. 1925–41) who mainly wanted to document Iran's "national identity" historically, modern historiography was established.<sup>26</sup>

Three of the founders of modern Iranian historiography, Abbâs Eqbâl Âshtiyânî, Hasan Pîrniyâ, and Seyyed Hasan Taqîzâde, immediately agreed to write a complete history of Iran. Soon after, in 1928, a committee in the Ministry of Education initiated the writing and publication of historical texts, including an overview of Iran's history since the Achaemenids (558–330 BC). Leading scholars of the country were invited to write Iranian national history as it was imagined at the time. They were to write textbooks for schools and higher education. The previously neglected Mongol period also had to be given attention and had to be integrated into the idea of an Iranian national history.<sup>27</sup> As a result, in 1933 Abbâs Eqbâl (1897–1956) published two volumes entitled *Târikh-e mofassal-e Îrân az estîlâ-ye moghûl tâ e'lân-e mashrûtiyat* ("Comprehensive history of Iran from the Mongolian conquest to the declaration of the constitution").

With his first volume, Eqbâl thus set the beginning of modern Iranian historical writing on the Mongol era. Others were to follow, among them such distinguished scholars as Zabîhollâh Safâ (1911–1999), Abd ol-Hosein Zarrînkûb (1923–1999), Manûchehr Mortazavî (1929–2010), Shîrîn Bayânî (b. 1938) or Rasûl Ja'fariyân (b. 1964). Only eleven of the 30 authors whose historical narratives on the Mongol era I considered for my study,<sup>28</sup> can be said with certainty to have been trained as

historians. The literary scholar Eqbâl was appointed to a chair of history at Tehran University. Safâ was professor of literary history, Zarrînkûb taught literature, philosophy and mysticism, Mortazavî lectured Persian language and literature, and Ja'fariyân had an education in religious scholarship and has been teaching Islamic Studies and history at the universities of Isfahan and Tehran. Among the others are judges, poets, printers, secondary school teachers, press workers, and educational researchers. Bayânî, who was a professor of history at Tehran University, is the only studied historian.

So, most of the historical narratives on the Mongol era were written by enthusiasts or hobby historians. Does that mean their work is worthless or not to be taken seriously? No, of course not. However, it does mean that it is even more important to position these authors in their respective socio-political contexts, involving their relations with the ruling elite, their education and competence. Additionally, we must consider the significance of historiography for the legitimisation or delegitimisation of the respective rulers or governments as well as the value attached to it by the populace.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, it is of particular importance that we consider the Iranian authors' own "way of historical thinking".<sup>30</sup>

Apparently, most historians in the Islamic Republic do not proceed methodically or analytically in their

# “...DUE TO THE ABSENCE OF POLITICAL FREEDOM THERE WAS AND STILL IS A SCARCITY OF CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES.”

work. Historiography continues to be performed primarily by enthusiasts who see their occupation as a pastime or as an “ideological tool”.<sup>31</sup> Historical research takes place in a climate that at least severely restricts critical thinking about society and history. In this climate a lack of respect and understanding for history as an academic discipline is clearly visible. Also, due to the absence of political freedom there was and still is a scarcity of critical engagement with controversial issues. Even more recent approaches such as postcolonial studies have not connected the majority of Iranian historians to international research.<sup>32</sup>

Regarding their integration into the international research landscape, it likewise is of interest whether the Iranian authors of historical narratives on the Mongol era had any international experience as students or lecturers. Not surprisingly, it is the older scholars who did have this kind of experience. The younger ones completed their respective training in the Islamic Republic and may have had fewer opportunities to gain relevant skills abroad.

Due to his rank as one of the first modern professional historians in Iran – albeit without appropriate training – we will take a closer look at Abbâs Eqbâl (1897–1956). He did indeed pursue his studies abroad,

namely in Paris, Berkeley and Princeton. If one asks about his position in the ruling system and his value horizon, one can certainly say of Eqbâl that he was part of the system insofar as he was commissioned by the government of Rezâ Shâh to write Iranian national history. With the help of this survey, which was intended to (re)construct Iranian history from “the beginnings to the present”, and other publications, a distinct “Iran-time” [Tavakoli-Targhi] was created, which in turn served to legitimise the rule of the Pahlavis. Like many of his contemporaries, Eqbâl was attached to the myth of eternal Iranianism or a “spirit of the Iranian nation” and the idea that Shiism was a “Persian version of Islam”.<sup>33</sup> Although concerned about the national unity of his country, Eqbâl was a critical observer of Rezâ Shâh’s reforms, nevertheless.<sup>34</sup>

A kind of counterpart to Eqbâl in many ways is Rasûl Ja’farîyân (b. 1964). At the *houze-ye ‘elmîye* in Qom, he became a student of Âyatollâh Mesbâh Yazdî, one of the most influential clerics in the Islamic Republic, in 1979. Ja’farîyân has been teaching Islamic Studies and history at the universities of Isfahan and Tehran since 1980. He currently serves as head of the Special Library of Islamic and Iranian History and as director of the Central Library of Tehran University.<sup>35</sup> As regards his situatedness in the socio-political context, Ja’farîyân is not only a disciple of Mesbâh Yazdî but is also considered to be one of the official historians of the Islamic Republic.<sup>36</sup> His extensive list of publications includes editions of manuscripts from the Qajar era, works on Shiite Islam as well as treatises on Mongol and Safavid history like his *Az yûresh-e moghûlân tâ zavâl-e torkâmânân* (“From the Mongol attack to the decline of the Turkmens”).<sup>37</sup>

## **b) Historical narratives**

Now that I have familiarised you with two of the authors and their situatedness in their respective – and quite different – socio-political contexts, let us turn to their narratives. In the following I will summarise a kind of overview and an estimation of the consequences of the Mongolian conquests for the affected regions, as they are given by Eqbâl and Ja’farîyân. Since Eqbâl was the first scholar to write about the Mongol era as part of a postulated Iranian national history, his work may be considered the point of departure for later writers. It is therefore not surprising that we also encounter his assessments in later authors. Yet, his successors do sometimes contradict him and interpret the events described / in the light of their own time.

As both authors state, the Mongol conquests had negative and positive consequences. As regards the negative effects, EQBÂL says that these conquests were so ruthless that they resembled a heavenly rather than a historical event. Without the accounts of contemporary historians, it would be hard to



believe that such devastating damages could ever have afflicted the region.<sup>38</sup> Worse than murder, looting, and the destruction of entire countries were the damage and humiliation inflicted on the Islamic civilisation and on the Arabic and Persian sciences, EQBÂL continues.<sup>39</sup> Only sometime after the killing of thousands of scholars, poets, and literary men, the burning of libraries, the destruction of madrasas and other places of learning did it become clear that no one survived who could have acquired science and literature, and that there were no books left to learn from. Henceforth, ignorance dominated and weakened the previously cultivated countries.<sup>40</sup> According to EQBÂL, it was therefore areas outside the Mongolian realm, like southern Iran, parts of Anatolia and West India, that became centres of the Persian language and places of refuge for those who escaped the general slaughter.<sup>41</sup>

Regarding positive consequences of the Mongol era, EQBÂL concedes that the Mongols successfully united their conquered lands under a central administration, ensuring the security of the routes, promoting trade relations, establishing political ties between Asia and Europe, exchanging scholars of different origins, beliefs and languages, disseminating the Persian language as well as Islam in East Asia, and deploying Iranian viziers and advisors in non-Islamic areas as well as in the Chinese administration.<sup>42</sup> The most important result of the close ties between the Eastern and Western parts of the Mongol empire was the integration of two ancient civilisations, namely Iran and China. United under Mongolian rule, the peoples of these two previously flourishing civilisations were able to share much of their respective knowledge. In this way, EQBÂL continues, the penetration of Iran and other Islamic lands with Chinese civilisation on the one hand, and the penetration of China with Islamic civilisation on the other began.<sup>43</sup> Although the Mongols had destroyed many populated regions in East and West Asia, killed a vast number of scholars and destroyed millions of books and valuable manuscripts through their conquests, they failed to eradicate the two ancient civilisations of Iran and China. Instead, says EQBÂL, after a short time the passion of Iranian and Chinese nationalities rose and spread Islam and Buddhism as well as Persian and Chinese literature.<sup>44</sup>

As stated by EQBÂL, in the aftermath of the Mongol invasions and despite the terrible destruction they caused, there evolved one of the most important epochs of Iranian scholarship, philosophy and literature. Among the grandees of the time EQBÂL mentions Rûmî, Sa'dî, Hâfez, and Joveinî. Finally, he has to admit that the Ilkhânids (1256–1335) promoted the writing of historiography.<sup>45</sup> As they did not understand the subtleties of the Persian language and poetry, the market for poetry, apart from mystical poetry, fell apart, whereas historiography received a great boost. Inspired by this art, the Mongol rulers

were interested in preserving the traditions and memories of their own ancestors.<sup>46</sup> So much for Eqbâl, one of the founders of Iranian national history.

And how does an official historian of the Islamic Republic assess the Mongol conquests and their rule? Regarding the negative aspects of the conquests, JA'FARÎYÂN's assessment is similar to Eqbâl's: Due to the destructions of the Mongols, especially in Transoxania and Khorasan, the irrigation systems were ruined, books were destroyed, many scholars fled to the West, and the religious sciences disappeared from the East. The collapse of the economy further weakened scholarly existence.<sup>47</sup> Just like Eqbâl, he notes that many scholars found refuge outside the Mongolian realm where they regained the necessary peace to devote themselves to their literary work. And even in Iran itself, a new generation of scholars returned actively to the stage under the Ilkhânids and created important cultural work.<sup>48</sup>

As far as religious beliefs are concerned, JA'FARÎYÂN bemoans the increasing importance of Sufism after the Mongol invasions. People sought refuge from the Mongols in the dervish convents. There they wanted to escape death and find spiritual support. However, this strong turn to mysticism led to flight from the world, renunciation, abstinence and piety, which stood in contrast to

social responsibility. Additionally, JA'FARÎYÂN states, the fatalism widespread among Sufis weakened the assumption of social responsibility even further. Moreover, since Sufis only recognised their own way in search of truth and concentrated on the hidden, they considered studies at the madrasa to be mistaken. For this reason, the dervish convents replaced the madrasas, and instead of sermons and ritual prayers, meetings were held with singing, talking, and the recital of poems.<sup>49</sup>

According to JA'FARÎYÂN the one hundred years from the invasion of Iran to the end of Mongolian rule represented a period of historical interruption between pre-Mongol and post-Mongol Islamic Iran. He emphasizes the cultural and religious steadfastness of the Islamic world at that time which, as he sees it, was much stronger than its political persistence. Consequently, cultural and religious steadfastness was the most important tool to align the people of these two epochs. Despite the hardships that hit the Islamic world particularly in the East, the cultural relations of the time before and after the Mongols were not completely separated from each other.<sup>50</sup> JA'FARÎYÂN further declares that a *Muslim* Iranian should be acquainted with these social and cultural achievements with an eye to their historical dimensions. He or she should take them as an example for the persistence of Islam.<sup>51</sup>

In his book JA'FARĪYÂN accentuates that the term *Îrân* or rather *Îrânzamîn* was revived during the Mongol era and once again used in official documents.<sup>52</sup> For the first time since the end of the Sasanians (224–651 AD) *Îrân* was chosen for the domain of the Ilkhânids with its capital Tabrîz, needing its own name. Of course, JA'FARĪYÂN says, the name *Îrân* had appeared in the *Shâhnâme* and some geographical works, but only as the idea of a territory stretched from Arab Iraq to Herat and from Gilan to the Persian Gulf that in ancient times was ruled by the Sasanians. During the first centuries of the Islamic epoch, there was no country called *Îrân*. According to JA'FARĪYÂN, one can therefore conclude that for the first time since the end of the Sasanian reign, Iran's independence as a political entity again took shape under the Mongolian Ilkhânids – an inheritance later to be taken over by the Safavids (1501–1722).<sup>53</sup>

Another major consequence of the Mongol invasions was the emigration of numerous Muslims to Western China and Mongolia. Although this emigration was prompted by the Mongols' attacks, it was a good thing that emigrants spread Islam in East Asia.<sup>54</sup> Like Eqbâl, JA'FARĪYÂN emphasizes the importance of historiographical literature under Mongol rule. Since Mongol rulers wanted their own as well as their ancestors' deeds preserved, they maintained the best historians-cum-literati in their entourage.<sup>55</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

To conclude, I will first compare Eqbâl's general statements about the invasions and rule of the Mongols with Ja'fariyân's evaluation. In doing so, we will have to keep in mind that the latter author of course stood on the shoulders of the further. Yet, although he was surely influenced by Eqbâl's – and other authors' – writings of Iranian history, Ja'fariyân also must be regarded as a child of his own time. Ultimately, I will get back to the questions asked in the introduction and provide some answers.

Let us now take a look at the two authors' statements: In connection with the devastating damages brought about by the Mongol invasions, Eqbâl speaks of a humiliation inflicted on the Islamic civilisation. Ignoring the subjectivity of the sources and relying on the narratives of Joveinî and others, his focus is on the claimed interruption of this civilisation. Eqbâl declares that this interruption was responsible for the end of sciences in the Arabic and Persian languages and a resulting ignorance. Then again, the Mongols successfully united their conquered lands under a central administration. Furthermore, they disseminated the Persian language and Islam in East Asia. Eqbâl was one of the founders of a nationalist Iranian historiography in Pahlavi times. He also was a trained literary scholar, not a historian. If we contextualise his estimations, we can read them as part of the politico-nationalist paradigm of his time and

place. In short, there is apparently only one Iranian civilisation – hence the project to write a national history from the Achaemenids to the present. And the most important characteristic of this civilisation is language and literature. Consequently, to kill or force out scholars and literati is to put an end to a nation and its civilisation. However, Eqbâl states that ancient civilisations like Iran and China could not be eradicated. Besides, the Persian language as well as Islam were disseminated in the East. Eqbâl's emphasis on political and territorial unity might also be read as part of his situatedness because it was of the utmost importance in the Pahlavi nation state.

Writing as an official historian of the Islamic Republic, Ja'fariyân for his part needs to point to the cultural and, more importantly, the religious steadfastness of the Islamic world. He is convinced that there existed an unyielding Islamic cultural-religious bond between the people in the affected areas through the Mongol era. This impression is reinforced by the fact that Ja'fariyân asks *Muslim* Iranians to take these presumed achievements as an example. Also, his specific interest in the religious circumstances – at least as far as Islam is concerned – is further confirmed by the quoted part on Sufism. As a representative of the ruling Iranian Shiite cleric and official historian of the Islamic Republic, Ja'fariyân clearly is not inclined to Sufism. In contrast, he bemoans the increasing importance of Sufism after the Mongol invasions and its supposed negative influence on the populace and the avoidance of traditional Islamic scholarship and rituals. Obviously, Ja'fariyân does not believe in the nationalist paradigm of an Iran existing from the Achaemenids to the present day. Instead, he shares today's international *majority* scholarly opinion that the term *Îrân* was only revived under the Ilkhânid rulers of Iran, long after the end of the Sasanian empire – because it fits his political standpoint and his “way of historical thinking”.

Our two authors evidently present us with deviating assessments and prioritisations regarding the Mongol invasions and rule. These divergences are not solely because we are dealing with two dissimilar personalities. They clearly point to the differences that exist between the epochs, political systems and scientific paradigms defining the context and situatedness of the two authors presented here. Both authors were and are under the direct influence of the ideological demands laid down by the states of their respective times. Furthermore, scholars are usually part of a national and international community. Whereas Eqbâl spent some time abroad during his formative years, Ja'fariyân did not pursue his studies outside Iran. Yet, works of international scholars on Iran in general and the Mongol period were and are available in Iran, many of them having been translated into Persian. Unfortunately, though, this holds true only for publications before 1979. Most

of the research published afterwards has not been recognised in Iran.<sup>56</sup> Despite this, both our authors did indeed recognise international research findings of their respective epochs. And both were influenced by those findings or chose those of them that fitted well into their own “way of historical thinking”. For this reason, they come to different conclusions as far as the concept of *Îrân* is concerned. Whereas Ja’fariyân obviously adheres to the more recent majority scholarly opinion, Eqbâl clearly is a pendant of the idea of an “immortal Iran”.

This idea of an Iranian nation, a mythical, timeless unity evolved during the second half of the 19th century. It was influenced on the one hand by mythical stories and legends such as Firdausi’s *Shâhnâme*, and on the other by the influence of European models of nation and state. An identity for the emerging Iranian nation was created at the latest during the time of the constitutional revolution, when its ‘ethnic core’ was defined with the help of Twelver Shiism, the Persian language, and the territorial state. Iranian nationalism refers decisively to ‘culture’ or ‘cultural heritage’ as part of this foundation. ‘Culture’ is thereby understood exclusively in the sense of ‘high culture’, that is above all the written texts available in the Persian language. European scholars provided their basic ideas of nationalism or historiography and some of them even went beyond that. With their historical, archaeological

or philological research results and their evaluations they contributed directly to the idea of an ‘immortal Iran’ that was interwoven with the nationalistic considerations of Iranian thought leaders.<sup>57</sup>

As we have seen, there are many ways to write historical narratives. The essence of historiography of the Mongol era lies in the way in which each historian presented the past in its meaning for his own present.<sup>58</sup> Such historical texts are of a narrative nature and have to be placed in the political and historical context of their authors.<sup>59</sup> When reading and analysing such historical narratives, one must ask what function the historian had to fulfil, what effect he wanted to achieve and how he accomplished his goals. In addition, knowledge of the respective social, political and not least religious context is part of the understanding of a historical narrative.<sup>60</sup>

As regards today’s theoretical premises, we expect historians to reflect their own “way of historical thinking”. Since they give significance to their sources, their way of interpreting reality must be perceived. However, in order to do justice to our authors, we should not measure them against standards that are obviously alien to them in terms of their “way of historical thinking” and regarding their self-conception.<sup>61</sup> When Eqbâl’s volume on the Mongol period in Iran was published in 1933, these standards had either

## “AFTER ALL THAT HAS BEEN SAID, WHY DOES HISTORIOGRAPHY MATTER?”

not yet been formulated or were simply ignored. Ideologies like nationalism, fascism or national-socialism were predominant in Europe and elsewhere. Today we should definitely regard Eqbâl in his socio-political and academic context and read his historical narratives accordingly.

As regards Ja’fariyân, he should fulfill the mentioned standards of today’s theories of historiography if he wants to be part of an international scholarly community. Yet, since he serves as official historian of the Islamic Republic, he seemingly does not reflect his own “way of historical thinking”.

After all that has been said, why does historiography matter? Historians tell stories, whether in the 13th or the 21st century. They tell us about the past while reflecting the present. This means, historical narrative is constructed by historians whose point of view affects their narrative.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, historiography is characterised by the “narrative structure of historical statements”.<sup>63</sup>

Every argument or presentation put forward by historians stands in an argumentative context, so that the respective research results can be discussed and may be recognised by other researchers as realistic representations. Historical treatises must be frank regarding their respective topic, the essential

evidence and the methodological rules. These enable the necessary traceability and rationality of historiography.<sup>64</sup>

Hence, if we take historiography as a science seriously, modern historians should be aware of the conflict of theories and the interpretation of data guided by them.<sup>65</sup> Only then can historiography as a science withstand the attacks and counter them with methodologically sound findings. If historians stick to these fundamentals, it does not matter whether they are trained university professors, enthusiasts or amateur historians. In the final analysis, this is what distinguishes scholarship from ideology.

## END NOTES

---

- 1 Axworthy, Michael. "Reflections on the Origins of the Revolution of 1979 in Iran: Why History matters", in *Durham Middle East Papers* No. 99. October 2019, p. 19.
- 2 Rüsen, Jörn. "Theoretische Zugänge zum interkulturellen Vergleich historischen Denkens", in Rüsen, Jörn et al (eds.). *Die Vielfalt der Kulturen. Erinnerung, Geschichte, Identität*, Frankfurt a. M. 1988, pp. 37–73, see here pp. 40–41. My translation.
- 3 Estel, Bernd. *Soziale Vorurteile und soziale Urteile*, Opladen 1983, p. 276.
- 4 Borck, Cornelius. "Wahrheit, Wirklichkeit und die Medien der Aufklärung", in *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* 9 (2018), pp. 161–183, see here p. 166. My translation.
- 5 Borck *ibid.*, p. 167.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Rüsen, Jörn. "Geschichtsschreibung als Theorieproblem der Geschichtswissenschaft. Skizze zum historischen Hintergrund der gegenwärtigen Diskussion", in Reinhard Koselleck et al (eds.). *Formen der Geschichtsschreibung*, München 1982, pp. 14–36, see here pp. 17–18.
- 8 Rüsen *ibid.*, pp. 19–20.
- 9 Lorenz, Chris. *Konstruktion der Vergangenheit. Eine Einführung in die Geschichtstheorie*, Köln 1997, p. 180.
- 10 *Ibid.* p. 181.
- 11 *Ibid.* p. 186.
- 12 *Ibid.* p. 370.
- 13 Stock, Brian. *Listening for the Text: On the Usage of the Past*, Baltimore 1990, pp. 82–83.
- 14 *Ibid.* p. 88.
- 15 Luther, Allin K. "Islamic Rhetoric and the Persian Historians, 1000–1300 A.D.", in James A. Bellamy (ed.) *Studies in Near Eastern Culture and History in Memory of Ernest T. Abdel-Massih*, Ann Arbor 1990, pp. 90–98, see here p. 90.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.* p. 94.

- 18 Scott Meisami, Julie. *Persian Historiography to the End of the Twelfth Century*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p. 3.
- 19 Ibid. p. 12; see also Meisami, Julie. "History as Literature", in Charles Melville (ed.), *Persian Historiography. A Study of Persian Literature X* (ed. Ehsan Yarshater), London - New York 2012, pp. 1–55, see here p. 53.
- 20 Waldman, Marilyn Robinson. *Toward a Theory of Historical Narrative: A Case Study in Perso-Islamicate Historiography*, Columbus/Ohio 1980, p. 4.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 I. e. Zāhhāk from the *Shāhnāme*.
- 23 Poliakova, E. A. "The Development of a Literary Canon in Medieval Persian Chronicle: The Triumph of the Eti-quette", in *Iranian Studies* 17 (1984), pp. 237–56, see here pp. 244–45.
- 24 Ibid. p. 246.
- 25 "Interpretamente" in German. Wolfgang Kaschuba. "Vom Verschwinden des Sozialen im gesellschaftlichen Diskurs", in Wolfgang Kaschuba (ed.). *Kulturen – Identitäten – Diskurse. Perspektiven Europäischer Ethnologie*, Berlin 1995, pp. 11–30, see here p. 19.
- 26 Abbas Amanat. "Historiography ix. Pahlavi Period (1 [1925–1941])", *Iranica online* 2012. Last accessed 22.10.2020.
- 27 Linda Andisheh. 'Abbas Iqbal Ashtiyani (1897–1956): A Study in Modern Iranian Intellectual History, Salt Lake City 1982 (unpubl. PhD), pp. 131–38, see here p. 142.
- 28 Cf. Pistor-Hatam, Anja. *Geschichtsschreibung und Sinngeschichte in Iran: Historische Erzählungen von mongo-lischer Eroberung und Herrschaft, 1933–2011*, Leiden 2014.
- 29 Cf. Rüsen (1988). p. 57.
- 30 Cf. ibid. pp. 40–41. My translation.
- 31 Amanat, Abbas. "The Study of History in Post-Revolutionary Iran: Nostalgia, Illusion, or Historical Awareness?", in *Iranian Studies* 22 (1989), pp. 3–18, see here p. 12.
- 32 Azimi, Fakhreddin. "Historiography in the Pahlavi Era", in Melville, Charles (ed.). *Persian Historiography. A Study of Persian Literature X* (ed. Ehsan Yarshater), London /New York 2012, pp. 367–435, see here p. 429.
- 33 Andisheh (1982). p. 124.
- 34 Azimi (2012). pp. 381–82.
- 35 <http://wikinoor.ir/لوسر، نایرفعج>. Last accessed 16.10.2020.
- 36 Atabaki, Touraj. "Iranian History in Transition: Recasting the Symbolic Identity of Babak Khorramdin", in Abbas Amanat & Farzin Vejdani (eds.). *Iran Facing Others: Identity Boundaries in a Historical Perspective*, New York 2012, pp. 63–76, see here p. 69.
- 37 <http://wikinoor.ir/لوسر، نایرفعج>. Last accessed 16.10.2020.
- 38 'Abbās Eqbāl. *Tārīkh-e moghūl va avāyel-e ayyām-e tīmūrī* ["A History of the Mongols and the dawn of the Ti-murids"], 2 vols., Tehran 1376sh/1997,

- vol. 1, p. 100.
- 39 Ibid. vol. 1, pp. 100, 108, 129–30.
- 40 Ibid. pp. 106–7.
- 41 Ibid. pp. 107–8.
- 42 Ibid. p. 109.
- 43 Ibid. vol. 2, p. 554.
- 44 Ibid. vol. 1, pp. 81–82.
- 45 Ibid. vol. 2, p. 496.
- 46 Ibid. pp. 514–15.
- 47 Rasūl Ja'fariyān, *Az yūreš-e moghūlān tā zavāl-e torkāmānān (qarn-e haftom tā nohom-e hejrī)*, Tehran 61387sh/2008, pp. 48–50.
- 48 Ibid. p. 67.
- 49 Ibid. pp. 131–33.
- 50 Ibid. p. 15.
- 51 Ibid. p. 16.
- 52 Ibid. p. 11.
- 53 Ibid. p. 124.
- 54 Ibid. pp. 137–38.
- 55 Ibid. p. 143.
- 56 See Pistor-Hatam (2014).
- 57 See Kashani-Sabet, Firoozeh. "Cultures of Iranianess: The Evolving Polemic of Iranian Nationalism", in Nikki Keddie and Rudi Matthee (eds.). *Iran and the Surrounding World. Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics*, Seattle - London 2002, pp. 162–81, see here p. 164; Vaziri, Mostafa. *Iran as Imagined Nation. The Construction of National Identity*, New York 1993, pp. 99, 113, 151–52.
- 58 Scott Meisami (1999). p. 12; see also Meisami (2012). p. 53.
- 59 Waldman (1980). p. 4.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Cf. Rüsen, Jörn. *Zerbrechende Zeit: Über den Sinn der Geschichte*, Köln etc. 2001, p. 265. I am referring here to his hermeneutical rule ("hermeneutische Regel").
- 62 Cf. Lorenz (1997). pp. 132–34.
- 63 Carr, David. *Time, Narrative and History*, Bloomington 21991, p. 46.
- 64 Lorenz (1997). p. 186.
- 65 Borck (2018). p. 167.



