

The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History. Touraj Daryaee. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. ISBN: 9780199762159

This volume, part of an expanding line of subject handbooks by Oxford University Press, presents itself as a convenient overview of the history of the Iranian people, from prehistory through the early years of the twenty-first century. The temptation for instructors of world history will be to deploy this book as a more objective perspective on the Iranian world than those of Herodotus and James Morier. The tidy packaging of “Iranian history,” however, lends a deceptive sense of continuity to a highly heterogeneous body of material. This volume provides several useful chapters about history as it unfolded in the region of what is now Iran. It also sheds light on several of the significant moments that came to define the Iranian cultural tradition. By assuming that these two things – Iranian geo-political integrity and Iranian cultural identity – can be linked across several millennia of history, the volume provides an overly simplistic vision of history.

The history of Iran presents a particularly thorny example of the methodological difficulties facing any national history project. The Iranian language, in its Avestan, Pahlavi, Persian, Farsi, and numerous other guises, has survived and regularly revived in the region stretching from the Euphrates to the Amu Darya (Oxus) River, despite the fact of conquest by foreigners speaking Greek, Arabic, Turkic, and Mongol tongues. Over the course of these periodic linguistic revivals, the territory centered on the Iranian plateau has become increasingly identified with the culture of its most durable language group. Meanwhile, the region of Pars (also called Persis or Fars) has given its name both to the most prominent of Iranian languages and to the imperial and cultural worlds identified with that language. As a result, “Iranian” and “Persian” have gradually merged into a single geo-cultural identity, even though Iranian languages appeared in the region only in the discernable (if very distant) past and Persian culture has been intractably shaped by contact with and domination by the cultures of other peoples. *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History* does not address the methodological difficulties that these processes create in trying to write a history that is somehow distinctly and consistently Iranian. As a result, it presents through its various chapters many competing approaches to Iranian history but little guidance on how to reconcile those approaches.

Touraj Daryaee’s introduction provides a survey of the cultural highlights of Iranian history and reveals the dilemma haunting any book about the nature of “Iranian history.” The first sentence declares quite emphatically, “Iran is a nation-state that until the early twentieth century was known to the world as Persia,” but later the introduction promises that the book will “provide a comprehensive study of the Iranian world (Oxus to Euphrates) and its history, going beyond the borders of the modern nation-state.” The dilemma between Iranian history as the story of Iranian-speaking peoples and that of people living within the borders of modern Iran is never resolved; in the end, the volume seems to draw on both, presenting a history that reaches beyond Iranian geographic and cultural space in order to reinforce the idea of that space.

The early chapters of the volume show the very catholic approach that Daryaei has taken to identifying “Iranian history.” The first two are largely archaeological chapters, covering the Iranian plateau in general and the Elamite society of what is now southwestern Iran in particular. These chapters demonstrate the difficulties facing the volume: their inclusion seems to be justified more by the modern political boundaries of Iran than by any cultural continuity between the peoples and states they describe and that of the Iranian settlers who came to dominate the region in later millennia. Their role in the book, it seems, is to provide more information than is strictly necessary about the imperial and physical geography across which the ancient Persian empire of the Achaemenids later spread.

Chapter Three is the longest of the volume, a thorough 63-page survey of Avestan theology and society by the preeminent expert of the subject, Prods Oktor Skærvø. Here we are on unimpeachably Iranian cultural and linguistic ground, as the Avestan scriptural heritage laid the philosophical and literary groundwork for much of what happened in subsequent centuries, when Iranian-speaking people carried the Avestan worldview across the Middle East. This treatise on what even many scholars of Persian studies find to be an arcane and difficult subject probably could have been published as a stand-alone introduction to the Avesta. It is of great potential value to graduate students in any field of Middle Eastern studies, but of limited use to readers without some background in Iranian studies. Its approach is heavily anthropological and philological, thereby largely avoiding the dilemma of defining Iranian either from a geographic or a cultural perspective.

With Chapter Four, the volume embarks on a survey that is both historical by discipline and recognizably Iranian in content. Thirteen chapters bring the reader from the ancient Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BCE) to the thirty years following the Islamic Revolution of 1979. These chapters vary widely in their approach. Some offer significant discussions of the relevant scholarship and even extensive bibliographies; others are spare narratives of political history with little or no annotation or bibliographical assistance. In addition, they demonstrate stark differences in the cultural backgrounds of their authors. As a result, the book becomes a demonstration of the methodological diversity of Iranian studies as a field, though without any explicit acknowledgement and discussion of that fact.

Chapters Four and Seven treat the Achaemenid and Sasanian Persian empires from the perspective of Iranian scholars with strong familiarity with the Persian literary and historiographical tradition. These chapters emphasize the continuity of the Iranian cultural heritage, reaching beyond the national boundaries in order to reinforce the idea of unbroken Iranian cultural continuity. By contrast, Chapters Five and Six, written by Western scholars about the Seleucid and Parthian periods, rely exclusively on Greek and Latin sources, with no consideration of how later Iranian writers integrated these periods into the emerging narrative of Persian history. To a degree, these contrasting approaches are shaped by the nature of the sources for the respective periods. However, the sharply different perspectives that these sources bring to bear on the Iranian cultural world demand, but do not receive, explicit comment anywhere in the volume.

This sort of unacknowledged methodological inconsistency carries throughout the volume. Neguin Yavari's chapter on Medieval Iran provides the densest and most thorough meditation on the relationship between the Iranian past and subsequent historiographical representations of it. Rather than simply reiterate the dominant narrative of the tenth through twelfth centuries as a period of revival for a long submerged Iranian identity, Yavari turns our attention to how Iranian thought and historical legacy had been cultivated within Islamic society in the preceding period. As a result, she successfully argues, the very idea of an "Iranian" identity emerged precisely in contrast to the idea of Islamic civilization during these turbulent centuries. In many ways, Yavari's meditations on these matters provide an effective critique of the idea that there is such a thing as "Iranian history" reaching back several millennia. As such, this chapter should perhaps be read before or alongside Daryae's introduction.

Immediately following Yavari's methodological *caveat*, George Lane acknowledges that previous surveys of the period of Mongol rule have overplayed the graphic nature of the initial conquest. However, he himself spends five full pages relating the horrors of Genghis Khan's campaigns and then gives only two paragraphs to narrating a half-century of imperial rule, thereby perpetuating the very historiographical tendency that he seems to mean to critique.

In short, this book offers a useful overview of several periods of Iranian history. Individual chapters, notably Chapters Four ("The Achaemenid Persian Empire"), Six ("The Arsacid Empire"), Eight ("Iran in the early Islamic period"), Twelve ("The Safavids in Iranian History"), and Fifteen ("The Pahlavi Era") could make valuable contributions to world and trans-regional history courses, while others are too narrowly focused on political history or else fall into too many disciplinary pitfalls to serve as reliable introductions to their respective periods and topics. Chapters Three ("Avestan Society") and Nine ("Medieval Iran") could hold their own in graduate seminars as introductions to the topic of Avestan society or to the methodological considerations of Iranian studies, respectively.

Without underappreciating the difficulty that all editors of collected volumes face, we might have asked for greater editorial direction here, in order to impose some continuity in the treatment of cultural, social, and material history and the inclusion of methodological and bibliographical overviews for the reader approaching the subject for the first time. Similarly, some degree of repetition has found its way into the book, which more intensive editing might have either eliminated or used as an opportunity to craft a more efficient and effective volume. Chapter Four reviews those aspects of Elamite history pertinent to the rise of the Achaemenid Empire, thereby rendering the first two chapters largely irrelevant. Chapter Fifteen opens with an effective summary of the Constitutional Revolution of the early twentieth century that explains it within its social and political context, which Chapter Fourteen had failed to do. On the whole, the book has something to offer to most readers, but few if any will find it consistently applicable to their needs. Instructors of world history are advised to approach the volume in the same way that a careful student of Persian history approaches her subject: not as a

tidy summation of an uninterrupted cultural continuity, but as a collection of perspectives which do not all even agree on what it means for history to be Iranian.

Stefan Kamola
Princeton University