
Mīrkhwānd and Persian Historiography

ALI M. ANSARI

Abstract

Pre-modern historians of the Persianate world have primarily been used by modern historians as sources of factual information and rarely to gain insight into the means, methods and world-views of the historians themselves. The 15th C Persian historian Mīrkhwānd is a case in point despite the fact that his extensive discussion on the utility of history lends itself well to an historiographical assessment. While his understanding of the purpose of history may differ in some aspects for the modern discipline, his concerns and application were not as distinctive as we might like to think.

Historiography – the context, whys and wherefores of historical writing – has gradually been accepted as a staple and established part of historical studies in the Western tradition. Following Butterfield’s strident deconstruction of *The Whig Interpretation of History* in 1931, it has become increasingly important to contextualise historical writing. Although progress and acceptance has been slow and at times erratic, there now exists a wider appreciation of the necessity to understand and dissect the intellectual (even ideological) underpinnings and philosophy of histories and historical writing, with rival schools now being categorised and classified according to ‘political’ or indeed ‘national’ leanings.¹ One striking latecomer to this field has been Persian historical writing, despite its comparative richness and the extensive nature of the writing, from the annalistic to the poetic, from the relatively simple narrative to the most obtuse prose.

This relative neglect can in part be put down to a Western ‘Orientalist’ tradition that was highly philological in approach – it was more about the technical aspects of language and literature than history and narrative – and the tendency to come to Persian histories via a Muslim (i.e. Arabic lens).² Moreover, when history as opposed to language was

¹For an essential guide to the range of writing on historiography, see M. Bentley (ed.), *Companion to Historiography* (London, 1997), p. 997. Bentley’s introduction provides a useful if wry look at the development of the field. For a broad survey of various ‘national’ schools, see A. Schneider and D. Woolf, *The Oxford History of Historical Writing, V: Historical Writing since 1945* (Oxford, 2011), p. 718. Although the latter contains no chapter on Iranian or Persian historical writing, the former thankfully does, under the broader rubric of ‘Asian’ traditions, by one David Morgan. Morgan was among the earliest to advocate a stronger appreciation of Persian historians, most obviously Rashīd al Dīn Faḡlallāh, the Ilkhanid wazīr, and arguably the author of the first truly global history. See the relevant entry in J. Cannon, R.H.C. Davis, W. Doyle and J.P. Greene (eds.), *The Blackwell Dictionary of Historians* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 351–352.

²Among the notable exceptions to this neglect are the valuable studies by J.S. Meisami, *Persian Historiography to the end of the Twelfth Century* (Edinburgh, 1999) and Andrew Peacock, *Mediaeval Islamic Historiography and Political*

the focus of attention, texts were largely approached with a view to extracting as much ‘factual’ information as might be useful. In the words of one historian: “In the field of Islamic history, where scholars have tended to use historical narratives almost exclusively as unstructured, un-interpretive mines of factual information, the handling of sources has been particularly problematic . . . the scholar . . . has usually been content to ask what information the source provides that can be useful in solving his own problems”.³

This positivist bias reinforced the neglect by ensuring that any mythical or legendary histories were swiftly marginalised and dismissed as worthless expressions of the degradation of the historian’s craft. It is only with the subsequent criticism of positivism and the rehabilitation of narratives in historical writing – while, in a post-Butterfield world, remaining acutely aware of the limitations of narrative constructions – that attempts have been made to address the damage born of such contempt. Julie Meisami is surely correct when she points out that the pre-modern “medieval historian’s primary interest lay less in recording the ‘facts’ of history than in the construction of a meaningful narrative”.⁴ One might, however, add for good measure that the construction of “meaningful narratives” are as much the preoccupation of modern as medieval historians. Indeed, historians have always struggled to demarcate the boundary between literature and history, and some, it may be added, have struggled with less enthusiasm than others.⁵

The criticism of pre-modern historians, who have not benefited from the new discipline and methods of research, is that they make no adequate distinction between the two forms of representation. Consequently, the narratives they construct are of little value to the historian who seeks to relate the past ‘as it really was’. As a result it was far better to use annalistic histories that told you the facts in a simple and straightforward manner. However, the evidence shows that these historians did seek to justify their craft and distinguish their sources, albeit according to the standards, facilities and linguistic usage of their time.⁶ The Persian bureaucrats who wrote the histories would have no doubt agreed with Aristotle’s preference for poetry over history, insofar as he argued that one told you what had happened, but the other (the poet) would tell you what *would* happen: “For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars”.⁷ It is not a distinction between verse and prose but of general utility, an ability to get beyond the facts to the essence of history. Here perhaps those Persian historians who sought to write meaningful narratives were closer to Ranke’s original intentions.⁸

A good example of these processes and prejudices at work is the historical writing and reflections of Muḥammad bin Khawāndshāh bin Maḥmūd (hereafter Mīrkhwānd), whose multivolume history from the creation to his own day in late Timurid Iran – known by the

Legitimacy: Bal‘amī’s Tarikhnama, (London, 2007), along with the collections by T. Atabaki (ed.), *Iran in the 20th Century: Historiography and Political Culture* (London, 2009), and C. Melville (ed.), *Persian Historiography* (London, 2012).

³M. Waldman, quoted in Meisami, *Persian Historiography*, pp. 2–3.

⁴Meisami, *Persian Historiography*, p. 3; see also Melville (ed.), *Persian Historiography*, p. xxvii.

⁵See in this regard the excellent article by Robert Irwin, “Saladin and the Third Crusade: A case study in historiography and the historical novel”, in Bentley (ed.), *Companion to Historiography*, pp. 139–152.

⁶Meisami, *Persian Historiography*, pp. 6–9.

⁷Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated M. Heath (London, 1996), p. 178.

⁸On the mistranslation of Ranke’s famous dictum, see M. Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction* (London, 1999), p. 39.

shortened title of *Tārīkh-i Rawḍat al-ṣafā* [The history of the garden of purity] – remains among the most celebrated historical works in the Persian language.⁹ This is in part due to the comprehensiveness of the text and its value for Timurid history in particular but also no doubt for the relative simplicity of the language and Mīrkhwānd's attentiveness to aspects of specifically Iranian history – his inclusion of material on the mythical history of Iran (the 'kings' of the extended title) extracted from texts no longer available and/or not generally known. His extended passage on the 'Khuṭba of Manūchihr' is an important case in point that will be discussed later. He was also one of the few medieval historians to attest to the figure of Cyrus, confirming that, contrary to popular opinion, this important figure (and icon of modern Iranian nationalists) had not entirely vanished from Iranian historical consciousness – though as we shall see, Mīrkhwānd's depiction of 'Cyrus' departs in interesting ways from the historical record.

What we know of the author himself is characteristically limited. We have some knowledge of his dates and his location – in Herat – and that the first six volumes (out of ten) of the history were written by Mīrkhwānd himself at some point between 1468 and 1497.¹⁰ We do know that he was a bureaucrat and as such was part of a distinct professional and intellectual tradition that is well attested in Mīrkhwānd's introduction to the work,¹¹ particularly in the debts he owed. He explains the purpose of the work and the function of history: to serve as an ethical and political guide – essentially a mirror for princes. This bureaucratic tradition was an important distinction, not only in the intellectual continuity it aspired to but also in the political, practical and secular character of the works. That is not to suggest that as universal histories they did not contain an important religious dimension, but the distinction between the religious and the secular was perhaps not as clear as it might have been in the West, where a distinct clerical class served to write histories with an obvious religious purpose. The ethical purpose of the work is explicit, but this is not necessarily bound to an Islamic narrative or agenda.

Mīrkhwānd provides an outline of his means and methods in his introduction, where he notes his intellectual tradition, his sources and details and his justification and purpose for the historians' craft. Largely ignored by modern historians anxious to 'mine' the information on the Timurids, the introduction remains one of the most important sections of the work, inasmuch as it provides some insight into Mīrkhwānd's motives and appreciation of his purpose. Significantly, it was not ignored by the earliest British orientalists whose translation of the introduction served to show the importance Mīrkhwānd gave to the "dignity of History, and the qualification required in the Historian".¹² Indeed, in the introduction

⁹Mīrkhwānd, *Tārīkh-Rawḍat aṣ-ṣafā' fī sīrat al-anbiyā' wa l-mulūk wa l-khulafā'* [The history of the gardens of purity in the biography of the prophets, kings and caliphs], (ed.) and corrected by J. Kiyanfar (Tehran, 1380/2001), I, p. xxiv. The editor helpfully provides the summary views of Iranian and European scholars (including, among others, Browne and Petrushevsky) on the value of the work: see pp. xxvii–xxxvi.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. xxxix

¹¹On the professional environment and significance, see C. Melville, "The historian at work", in Melville (ed.), *Persian Historiography*, pp. 56–100.

¹²Mīrkhwānd, *History of the Early Kings of Persia: From Kaiomars, the First of the Pishdadian Dynasty to the Conquest of Iran by Alexander the Great*, translated D. Shea (London, 1832), p. iii.

Mīrkhwānd specifically outlines ten functions or utilities of the ‘science’ (*‘ilm*) or discipline of history.¹³

The first is simply a function of time and the brevity of human life rendering the study of history important and essential if we are to learn the lessons of experience. In sum, the study of the ‘present’ is somewhat limited and limiting. The second benefit is one of enjoyment. The therapeutic value of history to the senses might strike the modern reader as a somewhat superficial function and one that diminishes the ‘seriousness’ of scholarship, but one need only look at the ever-expanding market for popular histories and biographies (to say nothing of the historical novel) to suspect that Mīrkhwānd may have a point. This is no doubt closely connected to the third advantage, which relates to the relative ease of its study and comprehension, in part because, Mīrkhwānd suggests, it is founded on memory. Here one might surmise that what Mīrkhwānd is alluding to is not the ease of the discipline itself – which, as he goes on to argue, requires certain skills to practise – but the facility of study. The tools that one requires to practise the craft – as many members of a Faculty of Humanities competing for resources with colleagues in the modern sciences might agree – are comparatively slight.

Indeed, as he goes on to say (fourth benefit), in recognising the advantage of some sources against others, “he thus acquires the faculty of discriminating, in all cases, between truth and falsehood”.¹⁴ Or, to put it another way, the study of history hones transferable skills valuable to other activities. The fifth advantage suggests that the study of history allows for the accumulation of experience and, by extension, wisdom. This is one of the most important consequences, and Mīrkhwānd gives comparatively more space to the benefits of refining reason and acquiring wisdom. The study of history (sixth point) allows the student to engage in discussion with the sages of the past: to consult the collected wisdom of mankind so that problems may be solved without the need to experience the adversity personally. The refinement of wisdom, explored in the subsequent two points, culminates in the ninth advantage, that of the cultivation of character. Historians, through the development of reason and wisdom, cultivate in themselves that most dignified of characteristics (or to borrow the Enlightenment conception of ‘manners’), patience. This patience and ability to contextualise events within a timeframe is of vital importance to the Prince, whose government not only benefits from the knowledge that all things pass but who can also learn and emulate the great rulers and heroes of history.

So far so good, and perhaps not entirely surprising. Yet Mīrkhwānd ends this preliminary section with a somewhat irritated riposte against those who clearly think all history is bunk.

If, however, some foolish opponent, taking into account some repetitions and amplifications which sometimes occur in the noble proofs and eloquent style of this science, should assert that History, for the most part, consists of fictions, contradictions, and ancient romances, and is therefore unworthy of attention; besides, that discrimination becomes almost impossible when truth and falsehood, rubbish and pearls, right and wrong are mixed up together, so

¹³Although *‘ilm* is usually translated as ‘science’ (the term used by Shea), the meaning is more similar to its usage in French, rather than English, where the term is increasingly identified with the natural sciences. Consequently a better translation in this context might be ‘discipline’.

¹⁴Shea (trans), *History of the Early Kings of Persia*, p. 25.

that consequently no advantage can be connected with the study; such doubts may be removed in the following manner. The venerable writers of ancient times, and their illustrious successors, laid the foundations of this science [ilm] in sincerity and truth . . . ¹⁵

In sum, in the absence of archives, as we might understand them, the historian is dependent on earlier histories written by historians much like himself, and if Mīrkhwānd's defence of his 'profession' seems all too dependent on straightforward trust – we are all to some extent reliant on the basic honesty of the scribe, historian and archivist – he does at least acknowledge the problem. In a final, intriguing, flourish, he concedes that 'truths' are not always revealed by the facts:

It must be confessed, that certain narratives which come under the head of inventions are replete with advantages, and deservedly esteemed; such as Kalila and Dimna, and many others; which although confessedly works of invention and imagination, yet the authors and readers, although none of the stories recorded ever occurred, firmly believe them to be pregnant with incalculable benefits and advantages. God only knows the truth!¹⁶

The next section, which deals with the qualities required to be a historian, is redolent of anxieties that might be familiar among the profession today. His predecessor, Atā Malik Juwaynī, in one of his more celebrated passages, laments the poor standards of what amounts for education in the Ilkhanate with the implication that good scholarship is clearly no longer fully appreciated.¹⁷ Mīrkhwānd goes a step further, highlighting the real dangers of historical writing, not least because powerful men and princes like to familiarise themselves with these histories¹⁸ but perhaps even worse, "tradesmen and artisans, who, although unable to distinguish black from white, or the rue from the scented willow, feel a strong inclination both to peruse and to listen to books in this science: hence the unhappy author, according to this saying, '*He who stands up in the ranks becomes a butt for the archer*', for some trifling error serves as a mark for the arrow of censure from all sorts of men and every class of the sons of Adam."¹⁹ It is difficult to come away from this passage not feeling any empathy for Mīrkhwānd or indeed sensing that his problems (though one must hasten to add, not their possible consequences) were not a world away from those of modern historians.

His solution to the hazards of criticism is to hone one's skills for analysis, balance and judgement. One must above all secure a reputation for honesty and professional integrity, defined by Mīrkhwānd in distinctly religious terms but nonetheless the implications are the same; and further along in the same section he divests himself of religious language to make the same point. Furthermore, the historian must look at the subject matter in its totality, seeking context and objectivity: "that is, as he, in their due order, describes the merits, noble deeds, justice and benefits which distinguished the great and eminent men of past times, he must, in like manner, specify their worthless or reprehensible deeds, instead of keeping

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁷ Juwaynī, *Tārīkh-i Jahān-gushā*, I, p. 4; translated J.A. Boyle, *Juwaynī, The History of the World-Conqueror* (Manchester, 1958; reprint Cambridge, MA, 1997), p. 7.

¹⁸ As Melville ("The historian at work", p. 73), notes, 'civilian casualties' were common among the vizierate

¹⁹ Shea (trans.), *History of the Early Kings of Persia*, p. 36.

them concealed”.²⁰ Interestingly and arguably an ingredient in his own success as a writer, Mīrkhwānd is adamant that exaggeration and literary flourish should be avoided. Moderation is counselled and in a modest criticism of his own profession, where literary excess was never far from the page, Mīrkhwānd stresses that the historian “must also choose a simple and pure style, easily comprehended, and quickly understood: let him studiously avoid the use of feeble language, low expressions, vulgar idioms, and antiquated phrases; so that every class of readers, high and low, although differing in point of understanding and conception may receive abundant delight and solid instruction: and the work itself become so approved and admired, that no critic can either reject or censure it”.²¹ Again, a contemporary relevance should be immediately apparent!

Finally, Mīrkhwānd turns to the bureaucratic historical profession to which he is indebted, and in a remarkable passage he lists the historians whose works, in his view, have lasted precisely because they have approached their craft with diligence, moderation and integrity. The list is divided into Arabic and Persian writers, classified as such on the basis of the language they used even if Mīrkhwānd alludes to a geographic distinction.²² So Ṭabarī is listed among the Arabic historians. What is perhaps more striking however is the long list of Persian historians he provides, headed by Firdawsī, who is described as the *malik al kalām* (‘the king/master of discourse’). There are a total of twenty authors, which is by no means exhaustive, but there is one striking exclusion, that of Abū ‘Alī Bal‘amī, who wrote his history in the tenth century. The omission is striking because at least one section of Mīrkhwānd’s own history appears to be lifted almost verbatim from this earlier history: the Oration (or *Khuṭba*) of Manūchihr, an important excursus on the nature of government that does not appear in the *Shāhnāma* but was considered of sufficient value in understanding the nature of government in the Persianate world that it was specifically highlighted in the 1832 translation by Shea.²³

The *Khuṭba* of Manūchihr

The *Khuṭba* of Manūchihr is among the most remarkable passages in Mīrkhwānd’s history and arguably one of the most interesting to emerge from the mythological history of Iran. Even as an ‘invented passage’, to paraphrase Mīrkhwānd (though he would have considered it historical), it is ‘replete with advantages’. It is, as Shea points out, an extremely useful summary of the ‘political economy’ of the oriental world and it provides one of the earliest examples of a ‘social contract’ between a king and his people, specifically detailing what rights and expectations each can have of the other. As a ‘mirror for princes’, it completely contradicts the popular understanding of ‘oriental despotism’. That concept was popularised in post-Enlightenment Europe, to define and quarantine the particular type of ‘despotism’

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²² In this section, Mīrkhwānd uses the terms *fārsī* and *tāzī* to indicate the language and ‘Arab’ and ‘Ajam’ to suggest the territory. See Mīrkhwānd, (ed.) Kiyāfar, I, pp. 19–20. Ḍaḥḥāk is later given the epithet *tāzī*, which suggests that the term might also be used to denote ethnicity.

²³ Shea (trans.), *History of the Early Kings of Persia*, p. ii.

one could expect to find in Asia,²⁴ and one would be hard pressed to find any reference to it in any Western study of ‘oriental’ government, despite the importance ascribed to it by Shea. At the same time it is also notable that the passage does not make it into Firdawsī’s compilation of the *Shāhnāma*, and that Mīrkhwānd’s source was an earlier history – in all probability, Bal’amī.²⁵ The passages are so similar in fact, that it seems likely that Mīrkhwānd simply lifted it. Plagiarism was not, it seems, considered a particularly serious offence (if an offence at all), and indeed Mīrkhwānd himself appears to have been subjected to casual borrowing by subsequent writers,²⁶ but Mīrkhwānd’s protestations about the integrity and honesty of the historian make Bal’amī’s omission, at the very least, odd.

Be that as it may, let us not unduly ‘censure’ Mīrkhwānd for what he may have no doubt considered a ‘trifling error’. The inclusion of this important section goes some way to making amends and there is little doubt that the message it contains is significant and one that merits the description of *khuṭba*, a clear attempt by Mīrkhwānd to give an Islamic veneer of legitimacy to what is essentially a pre-Islamic, Zoroastrian text. The context is the continuing war between Iran and Turan, and Manūchīhr has gathered his people together to outline their responsibilities to each other.²⁷ What is especially striking from our perspective is the use of the word ‘rights’ (*ḥuqūq/haqq*) and the centrality of the idea of happiness for the people, a notion that has clear Zoroastrian echoes. Thus:

it is incumbent on the truly wise, neither to desist a moment . . . from the attainment of happiness, nor to have their attention engrossed by whatever has the stamp of novelty. That monarch is the most fortunate who, agreeably to this saying, ‘He is the happiest shepherd who renders his flock most happy’, devotes every time and season to the care of his subjects, and never thinks it lawful to relax in the acquittal of their claims upon him; but directs all his knowledge to the curbing or punishing of oppression.

Moreover the king should never demand more than is established and should not innovate new means of extracting wealth which normally cost more than the revenue raised. But above all, “You should well note, that as the king (*pādīshāh*) has rights (*ḥuqūq*) over the military and the husbandmen (*ra‘āyā*),²⁸ they in return, have certain rights (*haqq-hā*) over the king”.²⁹ This last statement is extraordinary and very clearly stated in the Persian, where there can be no doubt that a reciprocal arrangement is being outlined and agreed. The division between the military and the husbandmen effectively is the distinction between the military and the civil. With respect to the military, the king can expect obedience, loyalty and a willingness to defend the realm against all enemies. The king in return must “supply their maintenance without delay or evasion”.

²⁴On the history of this idea, see F. Venturi, “Oriental despotism”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* XXIV 1 (1963), pp. 133–142.

²⁵See Bal’amī, *Tārīkh-nāma-yi Ṭabarī*, I (Tehran 1380/2001), pp. 258–263.

²⁶See for example, S. Quinn and C. Melville, “Safavid historiography”, in Melville (ed.), *Persian Historiography*, p. 244.

²⁷The Persian text can be found in Kiyanfar’s edition, II, pp. 642–646. The passages quoted above are, unless otherwise noted, from Shea’s translation, *History of the Early Kings of Persia*, pp. 177–185. Differences in the translation of key words are noted with the Persian equivalent in brackets drawn from the Kiyanfar edition. Thus, for example, Shea uses ‘Oration’ rather than ‘*Khuṭba*’, which is the word used in the Persian.

²⁸An alternative translation might be peasants or farmers.

²⁹Shea (trans.), *History of the Early Kings of Persia*, p. 179.

With respect to the ‘civilians’, they should work hard to cultivate the land, pay their taxes and remain obedient to their sovereign. “In return, the husbandmen have the following claims (*ḥaqq*) on the king: he is to dispense impartial justice in all their concerns; to levy the necessary imposts with lenity: he is not to place tyrannical governors over them; nor permit any intolerable vexations”, taking care to provide exemptions from tax in the case of drought or a poor harvest. A good king possesses three qualities: he must always speak the truth and not lie (*durūgh*); he must be generous, since there is nothing worse than stinginess in a monarch; and “he must be clement, and not prone to anger: as the people are subject to him, and he can do whatever he pleases, he should not therefore give way to anger as evil results invariably proceed”. There then follows a remarkably relevant, and daresay enlightened, injunction to the monarch:

In addition to this, a king should never debar his subjects from the use of certain meats or modes of dress; nor say to them, ‘You are on no account to eat of such a meat, or drink of such a beverage, or wear such a garment, as they are solely appropriated to my use’. It is also meet that pardon and indulgence should preponderate in the king’s mind, and that he should rarely have recourse to punishment: it is far better to commit an error on the side of clemency, than of severity: for if at any time he has erred by pardoning, instead of inflicting capital punishment, this may be repaired.³⁰

The king must also be mindful of his officials should they act unjustly, and take measures to recompense anyone who has been ill-treated or oppressed by a royal official who must be duly punished. Moreover, if an official is found guilty of unjustly putting someone to death that official must be delivered to the family of the victim who can decide whether to put the official to death or to take blood money, but “the king is not of himself to inflict punishment”. Where accusations are made against individuals for disobedience a proper investigation must be conducted before guilt can be ascertained and punishment accorded. With respect to governors:

I charge you to do justice, and refrain from oppressing the cultivators; for to them, both you and I are indebted for whatever we eat and drink. If you are just, you make thereby the husbandman all over the world in a flourishing state; but if you are unjust, there is an end to improvement, and the world remains uncultivated; a deficiency ensues in the receipts of the public treasury and the funds for the maintenance of the soldiery: therefore take heed to act with justice towards the husbandmen . . . exhibit towards them, on all occasions, uniform mildness; for when they are in a flourishing condition, the royal revenues are increased; they, in truth, form the sovereign’s treasury.³¹

Within the context of its time (the earliest recorded account is in Bal‘amī’s tenth-century history, but the provenance is surely earlier), this is a remarkably enlightened and humanistic guide to government, and while the king must surely be obeyed and there is no provision for his overthrow should he oppress his people, the mythological tradition is not short of kings who were overthrown on account of their tyranny, not least Ḍaḥḥāk (Zahhak). So what

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 184–185; this last section is of course a variation on the theme of the ‘circle of justice’ attributed to Ardashīr I.

Mīrkhwānd is reiterating in outline a political and social contract between a monarch and his people by which it is stated quite clearly that the people have rights and the king has no right to tell them what to wear or what to eat – this latter injunction being especially pertinent to the Islamic world in which he operated. Given the legalistic nature of orthodox Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Islam, one could see this as a distinctly secular injunction. It cannot have escaped one's attention that the advice remains applicable today, and the question arises why more has not been made of this particular mirror for princes, especially when one sees the high regard with which it was viewed among early orientalists.

One of the reasons, as noted above, is simple neglect; it occupied a part of Mīrkhwānd's History that modern scholars were less interested in, and as theses of oriental despotism gathered space, it seemed increasingly incongruous.

But perhaps more peculiar is the apparent lack of attention from Iranian historians, especially those seeking to construct a modern nationalist narrative founded on an Enlightenment template of political emancipation. European nationalisms developed from the nineteenth century sought to locate their national narratives around a theme of 'freedom', of which perhaps the 'Whig' interpretation was the most prominent and popular, but historical records were mined as far as possible into the past with the roots of national emancipation earnestly sought out. In the English case, for example, Magna Carta provided an important early signpost, but in a European context the roots extended much further into Ancient Greece, with the battles of Marathon and Salamis being elevated into foundation myths of 'Western' liberty.³² It did not escape Iranians that the villains of the piece in this particular narrative were their own ancestors, the Persians, and in an effort to rebalance the narrative they ironically turned to the Europeans to provide them with a suitably illustrious figure, that of Cyrus the Great, generally held to have been lost to the Iranian historical imagination. Yet here again, more attention to Mīrkhwānd would have furnished them with some interesting detail.

Cyrus

Mīrkhwānd, like other pre-modern Iranian historians, anchored his history of the Iranian kings within the eastern Iranian narrative mythology that has generally – though not exclusively – come down to us in the *Shāhnāma*. He clearly embellished this narrative from other sources as noted above, but he also appears to have absorbed some biblical influences or, more likely, Judeo-Persian narratives. The attempt to merge conflicting narratives was common among Iranian historians who sought to reconcile Kayūmarth with Adam. More often than not parallel histories emerged, reflected in the title of these histories which were often subtitled the history of kings (i.e. the Iranian narrative) and Prophets (Muslim). The history of the kings begins with the Pishdadians and follows through to the Kayanids and their offshoot the Sasanians. The figure of Dārā is generally considered to signify some allusion to the Achaemenids, although as Arjomand has argued it is quite likely that the figure of

³²For the Anglo-British context, see C. Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British identity, 1689–c. 1830* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 205–216. One of the key figures in the 'Western' narrative was of course Hegel in *The Philosophy of History* (New York, 1956). I have discussed this in detail in my *Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (Cambridge, 2012).

Bahman also represents some memory of the historical Artaxerxes II.³³ In Mīrkhwānd this connection is clearly alluded to when he notes that the other name for Bahman was Ardashīr (the Middle Persian form of Artaxerxes), who he adds was also known as the ‘Liberal’.³⁴

In light of what Bahman is meant to have done in his reign, this epithet also suggests a further conflation with the historical Cyrus. While the chronology is confused, the tale is immediately familiar:

In the course of his reign, Bahman deposed Bakhtnasar’s son from the government of Babylon; which he committed to one of Lohrasp’s sons, named Koresh, whose mother was descended from the Children of Israel: he likewise commanded him to send back the captives of the Children of Israel to the territory of the Holy Temple (*bayt al-muqaddas*), and to appoint as their governor whomsoever they themselves should select: Koresh therefore assembled the Children of Israel, and appointed Daniel to the government. It is related in some Histories (*katb-i mastūr*),³⁵ that Lohrasp having deposed Bakhtnasar from the government of Babylon, permitted the Israelite[s] captives to return in order that the kingdom of Sham (Syria)³⁶ should be cultivated: they conformed to these orders, and in the days of Bahman had brought the territory of the Holy Temple to the highest state of cultivation.³⁷

Subsequently the Israelites prove disloyal and kill the ambassadors, after which Bakhtnasar was brought out of retirement and told to lay waste to Sham again and bring some 100,000 Israelite children (*kūdak-i nārasāda*)³⁸ back into captivity. For all the confusion, the basic narrative of the biblical Cyrus is clear to see, albeit in a somewhat reduced role, and the Judaic debt is evident in the use of the Hebrew name for Cyrus (Persian, Korosh; Hebrew, Koresh). Another possible source would have been the Ardashīrnāma of the Judeo-Persian poet Shahin, in which Koresh is the son of Esther and Ahasuerus (Ardashīr) and therefore, as Mīrkhwānd notes, born of a Jewish mother. Mīrkhwānd has clearly sought to weave together a number of different and conflicting narratives, but what is perhaps most interesting is the implication that he sought information from what may be considered non-traditional sources, in other words from biblical and specifically Judaic sources.

Quite apart from these interesting details – he also includes a further chapter on the Greek philosophers – Mīrkhwānd’s introduction to the values of history and perils of historical writing are not so far or as alien from the concerns and anxieties of contemporary historians. There is obviously not the depth one might expect from a modern historiographical essay, and the language is at times florid and replete with a religious imagery that may appear awkward to the secular mind. But strip this away and contextualise the piece: his concerns over the veracity or otherwise of his sources, the political perils facing any historian (although the consequences then were on the whole – though not necessarily always – of a different order) and, perhaps most poignantly, his anxiety and irritation over pedantic ‘tradesmen’!

³³S. Arjomand, “Artaxerxes, Ardashīr, and Bahman”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118:2 (1998), pp. 245–248.

³⁴Shea (trans.), *History of the Early Kings of Persia*, p. 338. The translation by Shea also includes a clumsy etymology for the name Ardashir which does not appear in the Persian edition by Kīyanfar

³⁵This term suggests that Mīrkhwānd does not consider these histories to be without contention.

³⁶Shām basically correlates to a Greater Syria that would have covered much of the Western Levant.

³⁷Adapted from Shea (trans.), *History of the Early Kings of Persia*, p. 341.

³⁸The Persian text suggests very young children, perhaps babies: Kīyanfar’s edition, p. 732.

The intrusions of commerce into the academy seem to have been just as keenly felt then as they are now.

As his reflections indicate, historians in the Persianate world regarded their craft as having more purpose and meaning than a simple narration of events as they understood it. Chronicles and annals of events might be useful to some extent, but for history to be useful it had to educate, and the principal target of that education must be those who governed and wielded power over others. ‘History’, whether *mythological* or *factual* – and all narratives contain an element of embellishment – they must serve as a means of improvement, and the deeds of past kings and heroes should serve as lessons to be learnt: in sum, history as a mirror for princes for the purpose of improving manners. In this, Mīrkhwānd and the bureaucratic tradition he represented presaged and arguably influenced the emergence of modern historical writing in Enlightenment Europe. Voltaire’s biographies of Peter the Great and Louis XIV can be seen as an extension of this tradition; and, what is more, despite his neglect by generations of modern historians, Mīrkhwānd and his *History* appear to have been considerably more popular in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe. Intriguingly, the father of modern historical writing in the West, Edward Gibbon, possessed in his library not one but three copies of Mīrkhwānd’s early history: *Historia regum Persarum* (Vienna 1782), *The History of Persia*, trans. J. Stevens (London, 1715) and *Relaciones de Pedro Teixeira del origen, descendencia y sucession des los reyes de Persia* (Amberes, 1610).³⁹ Not uncharacteristically, the insular conceit of the present is undermined by the cosmopolitanism of the past. In Gibbon’s eyes at least Mīrkhwānd was far from unimportant.⁴⁰ <Aa51@st-andrews.ac.uk>

ALI M. ANSARI
University of St Andrews

³⁹See the Biographica of E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, (ed.) and abridged by David Wormsley (London, 2000), p. 1526. On the extensive size of Gibbon’s library, see D. Morgan, “Edward Gibbon and the East”, *Iran XXXIII* (1995), p. 87.

⁴⁰For Gibbon’s interest in the Persians, see J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion: Barbarians, Savages and Empires*, IV (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 17–36