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## Review

# Iran's inheritance and contribution to the civilization and culture of manhood over 2500 years

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With a long-standing and proud civilization, Persian culture is among the richest in the world. Two and a half millennia of inspiring literature, thousands of poets and writers, magnificent and impressive architecture, live customs dating back to Zoroastrians over 3000 years ago, and other unique characteristics of the nation are rivaled by only a few countries. Throughout the history, this grand treasure of Persia was gradually transferred to eastern and western nations. Iran's significant contribution into the world civilization in many respects is indispensable. Many ceremonies of the ancient Persians are the basis of western celebrations. Today's civilization is the product of the genius and contributions of many nations. Some nations lived for a span of time, contributed to the world and vanished completely from the face of the earth. Others stopped making any new offerings after a period of time, while some started very early and still continue contributing to the modern civilization. Iran is one of the few ancient civilizations that have survived the onslaught of time and circumstance. Owing to its vitality, Iran that had started earlier than many contributing continuously to the enrichment of civilization, still continues to survive and keeps adding to the modern civilization in new ways. It is only appropriate that Iran be properly introduced to the West, and its magnificent and prodigious contributions to the present world civilization be recognized. This paper tries to show several aspects of this crossroad civilization and culture as a really influential and dominant culture on the world of ancient and now days.

**Keywords:** Persian civilization, Cultural inheriting, traditional values, Literature and Language.

## INTRODUCTION

Persia first grabbed the attention of the historic world in the sixth century B.C. with the exploits and conquests of the near-legendary Cyrus the Great, conqueror of the Medes, and of his successors Darius and Xerxes, so strikingly described in the renowned fifth-century B.C. classical Greek works of the historians Herodotus and Xenophon. Powerful rulers dominated the Iranian world and influenced the great ancient cultures that surrounded it, until the native dynasties succumbed to the unrelenting push of Islam in the early seventh century A.D. Persian culture and society were then fundamentally altered, yet

the interplay between the older era and the Islamic era yielded a new, uniquely Iranian amalgamation.

Without the virtuosity of Iran the culture of manhood would have been exceedingly impoverished. (Hillman; 1990: p. 132) Between 546 and 331 B.C. the great Achaemenid Empire, built by Cyrus and consolidated by Darius (521-486 B.C.), continued and perfected, on a far larger scale than had ever been known, the ordering and interchanges of an Imperial state whose beginnings had been traced by the Babylonians and Assyrians. Once the latter had been conquered by the Iranians, the "law of the

Medes and Persians" which changed sheltered the development of civilization from the Aegean Sea to the Indian Ocean. Significantly, the Achaemenids supplied their own word for "law", data which passed into Armenian, Hebrew and Akkadian, to signify what it meant by its root meaning, "to arrange" or "put in order". The ancient languages, which adopted this word, indicate the Achaemenid Empire's dominance over an area, which included the Caucasus and Armenia, Israel on the Mediterranean seaboard, and the Tigris-Euphrates Basin. It also stretched into Central Asia in the northeast and Asia Minor in the west.

From the crossroads the Medes and then the men of Persis, Cyrus and Darius, marched along routes, which quartered the compass, to create the model of the universal, cosmopolitan state. (Benjamin; 1964: p. 43) During the reign of Artaxerxes I (466-424 B.C.) Greek historians and men of science travelled in the Empire to acquire the learning of the East. Had Democritus (d. 361 B.C.) not met Babylonian scholars and mathematicians under the aegis of the Achaemenid Empire, he would probably not have worked out his atomic theory. His father had entertained the Emperor Xerxes when the Iranian "Great King" had been in Thrace in about 460 B.C. (Olmstead; 1948: p. 51) Leaving those ancient eras when Iran set the style for uniting nations, the more recent Islamic culture can be cited as a phenomenon which would not have existed without contributions made in cities such as Baghdad, Bukhara, Herat, Ray, Esfahan, Shiraz and Tabriz from the 8th to the 17th centuries A.D. There the poetry, faience, architecture, metalwork, miniature painting and calligraphy which are the characteristic adornments of Moslem culture were perfected.

The ethos of all these cities was Iranian, so extensive had former Persian empires been. Baghdad, from 750 to 1258 the seat of the Caliphs of Islam, who were Islam's religious and juridical heads, is near the site of Ctesiphon on the Tigris, and Ctesiphon's great arch still stands as the memorial of the splendour of the winter capital of the Persian Sasanid Empire (224-651 A.D.). Bukhara and Herat were jewels in northeastern Iran, where Achaemenid and Sasanid influence reached the Oxus and Hindu Kush, and the Persian language prevails to this day. (Del Guidice; 2008: p. 67)

Islam was the faith revealed in the seventh century to the Arabian Prophet Mohammed. Shortly after his death the Arabs' expansion at Iran's and Byzantium's expense made Islam inheritor of an Iranian civilization whose beginnings are traceable to 4000 B.C. Then a pottery existed on the Iranian Plateau with designs which reveal that the leap from realism into abstract stylization had already been made; made first of all by prehistoric Iranian potters. From this discovery it is evident how in the clear atmosphere characteristic of Iran, man's genius was early diverted from observation and imitation of natural objects to transmuting observation into the ordering of abstract

design. Objects seen - animals poised to spring, birds in flight - were transformed into universal concepts by the ingenuity of prehistoric Iranians, and Iranians have maintained this capacity to universalize the particular in their arts ever since, thus displaying the highest mark of civilization.

The art of those first potters can be seen again in the bounding gazelles and partridges on the wing that decorate the pages of sixteenth century manuscripts as motifs incidentally to more fully developed scenes, of princes carousing or embattled against backgrounds of landscapes which are in a Chinese style and include tents from the Steppes of Central Asia; or of philosophers such as Avicenna (Ibn Sina), discoursing to pupils on themes preserved from defunct Greek schools but taught in medieval Iranian college courtyards. "The clarity of the Iranian climate is in great part the key to this type of achievement in the visual arts, as later it will be seen to have been to the development of religious attitudes. It is a special quality of Iranian conditions, by which all comers are captivated and mentally and spiritually enhanced." (Frye; 1975: p.25-26) To be added the abrasive quality of rugged mountain topography and parched plains dramatically relieved by the luxuriance of gardens and coppices in places where carefully husbanded, sparse water supplies meet cultivable soil. Wine and genius may be said to be natural to Iran, whose middle position between eastern and western continents has always ensured that its genius had much to feed on, much to transmute into something vital and new.

From Herodotus onwards, Iranian adaptability and quickness to borrow from others have frequently been commented on. But rarely has this been done with enough emphasis on the original genius and absolute and unchanging characteristics distinctly Iranian, to make "borrowing" fresh, hitherto unthought-of development, mere imitation being out of the question. The record can be corrected when it is recognized that the toughness of Iranian conditions, combined with the possibilities of achieving great refinement of living, art and intellect, have forged a human resilience and presence of mind to which others have invariably succumbed, never succeeding in erasing the influence and effects of Iranian talent, however calamitously they may have assaulted the Iranian land.

Thus, to a greater extent than a rival Greek might have seen fit to report, Iranians have received less than they have exported, or given to their not always invited guests. Invaders have been of inferior culture, attracted by Iran's superior civilization and quickly conquered by it. From Arabs out of the desert and nomads from the Asiatic steppes Iran could hope to receive little but an influx of fresh vitality and the arduous challenge of refining it into the Iranian way of life. This is to speak as if Iran had always been, and that not successfully, on the defensive. On the offensive against the ancient Greeks, Iran came into Europe and in its turn provided the challenge which

broadened the Hellenes' horizon and, for example, in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, gave the world a Greek philosophical tale, based on the examples furnished by Iranian monarchy, and, interestingly enough, written in a strikingly Persian style of exemplary political polemic.

Iranians brought Europe Lucerne, the fodder of their famous cavalry, and also the domestic fowl, the white dove, and the peacock. Darius had fruit trees from his eastern provinces transplanted to regions west of the Euphrates. The pistachio was taken to Syria, rice to Mesopotamia, and sesame to Egypt, all within the confines of ancient Iranian empires. The Shahanshah's favourite wines, however, failed to flourish in Damascus. (Daniel; 2000: p.231) Salted fish from the Persian Gulf was eaten in Asia Minor and part of Egypt's tribute to Iran was paid in revenue from the Mediterranean and Nile fisheries; the statecraft of the Achaemenid King of Kings accomplished and maintained in balance the first and one of the vastest of amalgams of human resources. Iranian initiative has repeatedly revived this dream of the universal state. Alexander the Great himself, to win his subordinates' approval, after they had reproached him for having become too Iranian in outlook, destroyed the Achaemenid's cosmopolitan amalgamation in 331 B.C. Long afterwards, when through Iranian intrepidity and that of Iranized Arabs the Moslem Caliphate of Baghdad rose in 750 A.D., the stage was set for another far-reaching amalgamation of human forces and global resources: the Perso-Moslem unity. (Frye; 1975: p. 55) Geography has endowed the occupants of the Iranian uplands with a very wide theatre in which to spread the operations and influence of their genius. They overlook the Oxus basin and plains of Asia in the north-east, the Tigris-Euphrates valley and Arabian Desert in the south-west, the Hindu-Kush and Indian Sub-Continent in the east and south-east. The Caucasus rises in the north and the Persian Gulf girdles the southern shores of what is a many-doored caravanserai, the middle realm between Europe and Asia, Africa and Siberia. Through Iran came the silk and paper of China, the Indies' gold and spices, the horses and hides of Central Asia, to reach the Roman Sea. When an Iranian empire of old expanded, it followed the ancient world's primary arteries of trade between east and west. It supplemented its wealth by tolls on merchandise, upon whose raw materials it placed the stamp of Iranian craftsmanship. It touched the goods passing through its hands with the quickening luminosity of the Iranian mind; with that art which the early potters on the Persian plateau had practiced. (Titely; 1983: p. 123) Not only were designs and images passed on, so that patterns were spread on, cloth or woven into carpets, to speak the world over of how an Iranian weaver sees flowers, the delicate poplar, the bird on the bough, the very colours of Iranian soil and Iranian contrasts of red, deep blue and green. Religious ideas were also exported, to lie deep in Judaism, Christianity, and profoundly to shape the Islamic faith Iran took as its own. Darius's

vines transplanted to Damascene soil may not have taken there, but aspects of the ritual of Iran's ancient Zoroastrian religion have their place in the wine of the Christian Eucharist. The heavenly galaxies nightly shine more brightly on a land most of which is over four thousand feet above sea level, than they do on mistier, more low-lying regions. There is never a day without the light of the sun in the country whose mythical king Hushang discovered how to produce fire, his son Jamshid making the festival of Nowruz, the New Year, mark the vernal equinox. (Ferdosi; 1965: p.450)

Iran's brightness is reflected in the enamel-like brilliance both of its visual arts and the imagery of its exquisite poetry. The sense of Heaven being almost within reach has developed the Iranian spiritual genius to a degree which makes the Persian people naturally religious, so that their literature and art seem always unavoidably communicative of the Grace of God. Their spirituality confers on them both their innate and abiding yearning for a greater perfection than the world immediately offers and their peculiar power to lend luster to whatever they handle. It offers them the hope of grace, but also engenders pessimism and skepticism about the mortal state. Nevertheless, in Iran spirituality and pragmatism are so balanced that to its poetry the world may turn for enlightenment and consolation when other sources of inspiration fail to assuage human despair. Asia and Europe are fortunate to be bridged by a land whose brightness could supplant the Mongols' clouded superstition by vision, so that as an Iranian ruler, even a descendant of Chingiz Khan, Ghazan (1295-1304), became a polymath and, while dismissing the vanities of alchemy, kept its processes, aware of the scientific value of experiment. It was the Iranian brightness which taught Mohammed the Prophet's successors that they were not only the keepers of Moslem law. Theirs also to keep was a revelation which answered man's most exalted spiritual aspirations. The Iranian Sufi mystics have kept clear for mankind the concept which the example of Mohammed, God's Chosen Apostle, conveyed: that men's hearts when purified may become the mirror of God's unblemished light. The bridging role has, however, brought vicissitudes. The Iranian spirit's strength and resilience have often been severely tried. It is well for the world that they have emerged from these trials as keen, flexible and unbreakable as well-tempered steel, for the world can still derive a great deal from Iran that is beneficial in the cultural and political spheres. A crossroads is a vantage point from which to observe the ways of men in their different regions and contexts. It is also the place in which a people possessed, through a long and eventful history, of an almost unparalleled experience of human affairs can set up the signposts commonly to be found at crossroads. At the Iranian junction of history, cultures and indigenous aptitude, Europe can be explained to Asia and Asia can teach Europe. Iran's windows are like the faces of Janus. Iran is

a sharp-eyed, keenly observant Janus. Modern Iran now possesses resources and has regained the self-confidence lost in the thralldom and period of foreign domination and exploitation which began in 1722 when the Safavid dynasty lost power.

Now Iran again commands international respect. It both can and does play a positive role in world affairs. As a member of the United Nations it sets the pace for other developing countries, and has become the obvious milieu for international conventions for the discussion of such topics as nutrition, agricultural development, illiteracy, and the rights of women. It is thus once more the center where ideas and techniques may be pooled; to meet the problems of the less technologically advanced Orient with the experience and skills of the more technologically advanced Occident, Iran acting as the catalyst. Seekers of solutions to the world's problems could have no more generous and perfect hosts than the Iranians, whose courtesy is rightly proverbial and has been almost since time began; but whose long experience as the guardians of civilization against the encroachment of desert sands, of rapacious enemies, of chaos and disorderliness makes them more than gracious hosts. The slightest realization of what Iran has achieved in improving its own domestic well-being since 1960, and this measured against the former drain of its old resources, and its incapacity for over a century during modern times to act independently, will demonstrate that the potentiality alluded to here is not exaggerated.

A wider ranging study of Iran's history, and a proper understanding of its geographical position in a world in which the East is stirring into new life, will amply reinforce the argument that confidence in Iran's capacity for showing initiative and vitality, and willingness to accord it the respect it deserves, could procure for the world the contribution of a stabilizing force that a region which might easily become greatly disturbed urgently requires.

### Contributions to humanity

From the humble brick, to the windmill, Persians have mixed creativity with art and offered the world numerous contributions. What follows is a list of just a few examples of the cultural contributions of Greater Persia.

- An ancient ice house, called a yakhchal, built in ancient times for storing ice during summer.
- (521 BC) - The game Polo.
- (3000 BC) - The ziggurat. The Sialk ziggurat, according to the Cultural Heritage Organization of Iran, predates that of Ur or any other of Mesopotamia's 34 ziggurats.
  - (400 BC) - Yakhchals, ancient refrigerators.
  - (400 BC) - Ice cream. (Daniel; 2000: p. 90)
  - (250 BC) - According to archaeological digs, the Parthians created the world's first batteries. Their original

use is still uncertain, though it is suspected that they were used for electroplating. (Hill; 1994: p. 53)

- (250 BC) Original excavation of a Suez Canal.
- (271 AD) - The teaching hospital
- (700 AD) - The cookie.
- (700 AD) - The windmill.
- (864 AD-930 AD) - First systematic use of alcohol in Medicine.
  - (1000 AD) - Introduction of paper to the west.
  - (935 - 1020) - Ferdowsi writes the Shahnama (Book of Kings) that resulted in the revival of Iranian culture and the expansion of the Iranian cultural sphere. (Ferdosi; 1965: p. 23)
    - (980 - 1037) - Avicenna, a physician, writes The Canon of Medicine one of the foundational manuals in the history of modern medicine.
    - (5000 BC) - Invention of Wine. Discovery made by University of Pennsylvania excavations at Hajji Firuz Tepe in northwestern Iran. (Daniel; 2000: p.62)
      - (5000 BC) - Invention of the Tar (lute), which led to the development of the guitar.
      - (2500 BC) - First Banking System of the World, at the time of the Achaemenid, establishment of Governmental Banks to help farmers at the time of drought, floods, and other natural disasters in form of loans and forgiveness loans to restart their farms and husbandries. These Governmental Banks were effective in different forms until the end of Sassanian Empire before invasion of Arabs to Persia. (Olmstead; 1948: p.61)
        - (10,000 BC) - Earliest known domestication of the goat.
        - (6000 BC) - The modern brick. Some of the oldest bricks found to date are Persian, from c. 6000 BC. (Hill; 1994: p. 32)
          - (2500 BC) - The word Check has a Persian root in old Persian language. The use of this document as a check was in use from Achaemenid time to the end of Sassanian Empire. The word of [Bonchaq, or Bonchagh] in modern Persian language is new version of old Avestan and Pahlavi language "Check". In Persian it means a document which resembles money value for gold, silver and property. By law people were able to buy and sell these documents or exchange them.(Frye; 1975: p. 23)
            - (500 BC) - World's oldest Staple (fastener).
            - (500 BC) - The first Taxation system under the Achaemenid Empire. (Hill; 1994: p. 73)
            - (500 BC) - The first courier post. Also called the "Royal Road".
              - (500 BC) - Source for introduction of the domesticated chicken into Europe.
              - (500 BC) - First cultivation of spinach.
              - (2000 BC) - Peaches are a fruit of Iranian origin, as indicated by their Latin scientific name, Prunus persica

from which (by way of the French) we have the English word "peach." (Hill; 1994: p. 91)

- Tulips were first cultivated in ancient Persia.
- (1400 BC) - The game of Backgammon appears in the east of Iran. (Hill; 1994: p. 56)
- (1400 BC to 600 BC) - Zoroastrianism: where the first prophet of a monotheistic faith arose according to some scholars, claiming Zoroastrianism as being "the oldest of the revealed credal religions, which has probably had more influence on mankind directly or indirectly, more than any other faith". (Van Gorde; 2010: p. 22)
- (576 BC to 529 BC) - Under the rule of Cyrus II the Great, the Cyrus Cylinder was issued. It was discovered in 1879 in Babylon and today is kept in the British Museum.
- (576 BC to 529 BC) - Under the rule of Cyrus II the Great, Cyrus frees the Jews from Babylonian captivity.
- (1207 AD - 1273 AD) - Rumi writes poetry and in 1997, the translations were best-sellers in the United States.
- Algebra and Trigonometry: Numerous Iranians were directly responsible for the establishment of Algebra, the advancement of Medicine and Chemistry, and the discovery of Trigonometry. (George Gherarghese; 2000: p. 50)
- Wind catchers, ancient air residential conditioning.
- "Virtually all European scholars claim Arabic music has Persian origins". (Michael; 1990: p. 12)
- Qanat, subterranean aqueducts.

## CONCLUSION

Today's civilization is the product of the genius and contributions of many nations. Some nations lived for a

span of time, contributed to the world and vanished completely from the face of the earth. Others stopped making any new offerings after a period of time, while some started very early and still continue contributing to the modern civilization. Iran is one of the few ancient civilizations that have survived the onslaught of time and circumstance. Owing to its vitality, Iran that had started earlier than many contributing continuously to the enrichment of civilization, still continues to survive and keeps adding to the modern civilization in new ways. It is only appropriate that Iran be properly introduced to the West, and its magnificent and prodigious contributions to the present world civilization be recognized.

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