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17 August 2021

Tomb in paradise: The preservation of the Tomb of Cyrus the Great during the Islamic Revolution

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran saw the destruction of many monuments to previous regimes. Despite the close alignment of the previous regime to the Tomb of Cyrus the Great and calls from Chief Justice Sadeq Khalkhali to raze Cyrus's tomb, the tomb remained intact as a historical site. Why was Cyrus's tomb preserved when other pre-Revolution monuments were razed? I answer this question through the analysis of secondary sources about Cyrus's tomb, architecture, and nationalism. I combine this approach with the examination of primary photographic and documentary footage of the tomb. The tomb was preserved because it is a palimpsest, representing many facets of Iranian culture and heritage - from tomb to mosque to monument. Nationalists in Iran succeeded in attributing modernity and patriotism to Cyrus, both of which are gendered masculine. The combination of Islam and nationalism into religious nationalism allowed not only for the preservation of Cyrus's tomb, but also his later rehabilitation. Additionally, the tomb is about 800 km south of the capital city which allowed for the silencing of the tomb without necessitating its destruction. The iconoclasm of revolution often results in the destruction of important historical monuments and architecture, but the preservation of this particular monument is an important case study for how oppositional new regimes can preserve the monuments of previous ones while still bolstering their own legitimacy.

Introduction

If one is to approach the Tomb of Cyrus the Great today, it would be from the back. One must drive into the town of Madar e Soleiman¹, pay an entrance fee of about 5 USD, and walk through the gate guarding the Pasargadae World Heritage Site. Once past the gate, a wide walking path paved in slabs of grey stone greets the viewer. On either side of the path are two large flagpoles bearing the standards of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These flags frame the tomb; from this angle nothing else stands out from the dry brown land of the Morghab² Plain (Fig 1). The tomb is a light sandy colour that contrasts with the blue grey of the gravel surrounding it. It is set atop six large steps and shaped like a small house with four thick

¹ Madar e Soleiman: Literally 'Mother of Solomon' in Persian.

² Morghab: Literally 'Waterbird' in Persian.

limestone walls and a sloping triangular roof. The barrier around the tomb is waist high and transparent, giving one the illusion of accessibility. After circling the tomb, one can see the tiny rectangular door, although all are barred from entry (Fig 2). Today its interior is empty, save for a carved mihrab³ on the southwest wall. However, upon the completion of the tomb of Cyrus the Great in 530 BC, the body of Cyrus was encased in a golden coffin and placed atop a golden bench (Zournatzi 1993, Strabo 14: 133).

Why has the Tomb of Cyrus the Great survived two-and-one-half millennia, and how should its survival be interpreted? This paper focuses on the tomb as a palimpsest⁴. Over the millennia, Iranians have applied very different interpretations to the tomb, and its significance has changed. First, the tomb was in a paradise that emphasised the power of the Achaemenid state. Following the conquest of Alexander the Great, the tomb lost its significance as a place of power because of the neglect of the park surrounding the tomb; yet the attribution to Cyrus remained. After the Arab conquest and conversion of the majority of the population to Islam, the tomb was instead attributed as the Tomb of the Mother of Solomon and became a women's pilgrimage location. As a component of nationalism⁵ - a secularising and masculine ideology in Iran - the tomb was reattributed to Cyrus the Great who recalled the former glories of the Iranian homeland in contrast with Iranians' current emasculation by the West. During the Islamic Revolution of 1979, certain ideologues such as Sadeq Khalkhali called for the tomb's destruction as it represented an artefact of jahiliya – the pre-Islamic age of ignorance. However, the Tomb

³ Mihrab: An Islamic prayer niche.

⁴ Palimpsest: A palimpsest is something, here a monument, that has many levels of meaning that build on each other (Cambridge Dictionary 2021b).

⁵ Nationalism: The attitude that members of a nation have when they focus on their national identity as defined by common origin, ethnicity, and cultural ties (Miscevic 2001).

of Cyrus the Great was preserved during the Revolution. I argue that the reason for its preservation is because its location, about 800 km south of the capital, made the cessation of state depictions of the tomb possible, and therefore kept the tomb out of sight from most of the population. Additionally, the predominance of religious nationalism - which continued to be a masculine ideology - not only ascribed supremacy to Shi'a⁶ Islam but also importance to preceding manifestations of Iranian civilisation. This allowed the tomb to be preserved, and it even rehabilitated as a popular tourist location at the end of the 20th century.

Cyrus the Great

In order to fully appreciate the tomb, a brief introduction to Cyrus II (the Great), and the royal Achaemenid family he was born into, are necessary (Fig 3). What is known about Cyrus today stems from the histories of the Greeks and Hebrews and is supplemented by later Western archaeological discoveries⁷. During the first millennium BC, pastoral-nomadic⁸ Iranians settled in the Fars region of Iran which was already occupied by the autochthonous⁹ Elamites (Frye 2004; Hansman 1985). Teispes, the great-grandfather of Cyrus II, captured the Elamite city of Anshan in the 7th century BC, and the city became the Achaemenid capital (Schmitt 1991). The name Achaemenid was that of Teispes's father, Achaemenes (Dandamayev 1983). Teispes beget Cyrus I, who beget Cambyses I, who beget Cyrus II (Shahbazi 1993). Cyrus II was born into the royal Achaemenid family of Fars around 600 BC (Dandamayev 1983). He succeeded his father

⁶ Shi'a: A branch of Islam which accepts that Muhammad designated his cousin Ali as his spiritual and temporal successor. Shi'a are a minority globally but the vast majority in Iran.

⁷ Archaeological discoveries such as those by HC Rawlinson (Behistun Inscriptions); F Stoles & FC Andreas (site photography of Fars Province); M Dieulafoy (excavation of Susa); & E Herzfeld (excavation of Pasargadae) (Stronach 1986).

⁸ Pastoral nomadism: Dependence on animal husbandry and migration along established routes between grazing areas (Ehlers 2011).

⁹ Autochthonous: A people whose ancestors all came from that same location; indigenous (OED 2021).

in 559 BC and established his residence at Pasargadae to the southeast of Anshan (Dandamayev 1993). Cyrus's maternal line was Median, an Iranian people who dominated the Hamadan Plain to the northwest of Fars. At the time of Cyrus's birth, the Medes were the most powerful people in Iran (Dandamayev & Medvedskaya 2006). In 550 BC, Cyrus conquered the Median kingdom from his maternal grandfather. This conquest was followed by the conquest of Lydia in Asia Minor¹⁰ in 547 BC and Babylonia¹¹ in 539 BC (see Fig 4); (Frye 1998). The latter is especially important for the Hebrews because Cyrus the Great allowed the Hebrews to return to Jerusalem and granted them permission and funds to rebuild their temple (Ezra 1:2-4). Cyrus is even referred to as messiah in the Bible (Isaiah 45:1). Cyrus died in 530 BC and was buried in Pasargadae (Dandamayev 1993). Darius the Great¹² continued work at Pasargadae - including carving reliefs and constructing walls - but embarked on no grand projects of his own at Pasargadae (Boucharlat 2014:40).

The Tomb of Cyrus the Great

The creation of Cyrus's tomb, its construction and original layout, represent the foundational layer of the tomb as a palimpsest from which the others were built. It is therefore essential to describe the building as it stood when it was first built. The best classical description of the Tomb of Cyrus the Great is from Strabo, who based his account of Pasargadae on the travels of Aristobulus - a companion of Alexander the Great (Falconer 1889:XVI). According to Strabo, when the tomb was built, it was part of a sprawling palatial garden complex of the king and was concealed within a thicket of trees (Strabo 14:133). Later archaeological investigation

¹⁰ Asia Minor: In modern Turkey.

¹¹ Babylonia: In modern Iraq.

¹² Darius the Great: Ruled the Achaemenid Empire from 522-486 BC (Shahbazi 1994).

has proved this assessment correct with David Stronach arguing in his paper, ‘Parterres¹³ and stone watercourses at Pasargadae’ that the tomb and other palatial buildings formed the hub of the quartered garden. The Morghab Plain, when irrigated, is fertile. Canals were dredged for the construction of the park surrounding Cyrus’s tomb, and some of these channels are on view today at the Pasargadae site (Fig 5). The garden was approximately 46,000 metres square. This type of garden ‘chahar bagh’¹⁴ is a recurring motif in formal Persian gardens to this day. As a royal park, the garden carried with it another name: paradise (Stronach 1994: 3-4). The word paradise, in Farsi ‘pardis’, originally denoted a walled garden, but with the word’s westward spread and utilisation in Greek, eventually it resulted in the modern English meaning (Fakour 2000). In addition to being imported into Greek, paradise was also adopted into Arabic as ‘ferdows’ to describe Heaven, which is portrayed as a garden in the Quran. The word ‘ferdows’ is used twice in the Quran (Suras 18:107 & 23:11). A garden such as the one at Pasargadae is similar to the description of Heaven in the Quran, as well as the garden in which Adam and Eve lived (Sura 2:25-35).

During his conquest of Iran, Alexander the Great and his companions visited the tomb of Cyrus around 330 BC (Briant 1985). Aristobolus describes the tomb as being intact during this first visit. However, by the time Aristobolus visited the tomb for a second time a couple of years later, the body and the valuables had been robbed. A guard of magi¹⁵ remained to protect the tomb, although after the conquest of Alexander the Great, most parts of the site were not reoccupied (Boucharlat 2014:40; Strabo 14:133). Following Alexander’s death in 323 BC, the

¹³ Parterre: A flat area in a garden with a formal arrangement of plants (Cambridge Dictionary 2021 c).

¹⁴ Chahar bagh: Literally ‘four gardens’ in Persian.

¹⁵ Magi: Zoroastrian priests.

Seleucid Empire controlled Fars until 129 BC when the Arsacid Empire conquered the region (Shahbazi 1986). Following the Arsacid Empire was the Sassanian Empire which ruled from 224 AD until the Arab conquest and end of the Sassanian Dynasty in 651 AD (EI 2021).

As the Tomb of the Mother of Solomon

The tomb's continued existence was called into question following the Arab conquest, but instead of destruction, another layer of the palimpsest was formed. The shift in attribution of the tomb from Cyrus to the Mother of Solomon is representative of the way gender can play a role in a site's preservation and popularity following political and social upheaval. Until the Arab conquest in 642 AD, Fars was a bastion of Zoroastrianism¹⁶ (Morony 1986; Daryae 2003:193). Following the conquest, there was a gradual shift that took place over hundreds of years in the general population from practising Zoroastrianism to practising Islam. By 950 AD, 80 percent of Iranians had become Muslims (Daniel 1993). The tomb's attribution changed from that of Cyrus to the mother of Solomon (Zournatzi 1993). The mother in question was either Bathsheba, the mother of the Biblical King Solomon, or Wallada bint al Abbas bint Djaz, the mother of Caliph¹⁷ Sulayman¹⁸ ibn Abd al Malik (Valpy 1819:353-354; Eisener 2012). The Arabian conquerors of Iran destroyed fortifications, city centres, villages, and temples (Morony 1986). According to the residents of Madar e Soleiman, the tomb was ascribed to the Mother of Solomon in order to protect it from destruction, an intentional obfuscation (Shahshahani 2014:139). Another theory is that those who lived by the tomb gradually forgot about who the tomb had once contained and chose instead to ascribe the site to a more relevant figure

¹⁶ Zoroastrianism: A polytheistic Iranian religion that was founded by the prophet Zoroaster (Malandra 2005).

¹⁷ Caliph: Here an Arab Muslim ruler.

¹⁸ Sulayman: Arabic transliteration of Solomon.

pertaining to their new Islamic beliefs (Mozaffari 2014:2). A third possibility is that Wallada bint al Abbas was indeed laid to rest in Cyrus's tomb, and the attribution of the tomb to the more recent occupant took precedent. The reuse of tombs has a long tradition (Hoernes 2018:261). However, no body aside from Cyrus's was ever documented as being entombed here. A mosque was constructed around the tomb with spolia¹⁹ from the nearby palaces by Sa'd ibn Zangi of the Salghurid Dynasty in 1223 (Mozaffari 2014:10; Zournatzi 1993). The mihrab, for the mosque inside of the tomb, was carved (Baldissoni 2014:132).

Once the tomb was ascribed to the mother of Solomon, it became a women's pilgrimage destination. Only women were allowed through the narrow opening and into the chamber itself where they would bring small metallic amulets as offerings, affixing them to a string inside the tomb. The interior was lit by lamps, and a Quran was kept inside the tomb where women would pray for domestic happiness (Morier 1812:144-145; Crawshay Williams 1907:230-232). Ceremonies, such as the Shi'a Ashura²⁰ procession, were held around the tomb, with attendees numbering up to 300, until the site was fenced off (Shashahani 2014:140). Through the attribution of the tomb to the mother of Solomon, and its utilisation as a mosque, 'the site was decisively Islamised and its memory as a sacred Islamic place would linger until the present' (Mozaffari 2014:10). This photograph, taken by The American Colony²¹ Photo Department, shows the tomb surrounded by the ruins of the Salghurid mosque as it appeared in 1900 (Fig 6; Library of Congress 2021). Of particular import in the photograph are the pillar stumps, spolia,

¹⁹ Spolia: Material taken from one architectural site to be reused in another (Hoosein 2019).

²⁰ Ashura: For Shi'a, a day dedicated to mourning the martyrdom of Hossein, Ali's son, who was defeated by the Caliph Yazid in the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD (Ayoub 1987).

²¹ American Colony: The American Colony was a Christian utopian project based in Jerusalem (Library of Congress 2021).

and the barren landscape surrounding the tomb - any gardens or lush landscaping was long destroyed. By the 20th century the exterior mosque, as demonstrated by the stumps of pillars arrayed around the tomb, had fallen into ruin. However, the interior mosque continued to be used by women worshipers (Crawshay Williams 1907:230-232).

As a Monument to the Nation

The inhabitants of Fars Province may have continued to attribute the tomb to the Mother of Solomon during this period, but farther north nationalists²² were already reattributing the tomb to Cyrus. This was not only because of scholarly consensus of the location as the former residence of Cyrus, but also because Cyrus represented the former strength, glory, and virility of the Iranian nation –terms that are heavily coded as masculine. The Pahlavi Dynasty²³ utilised this nationalism to their advantage and reproduced images of the tomb as part of the aggrandisement of their own regime representing a secularising and modernising nation. Their country's past always held great importance for dynasties of Iran; however, it was not until the archaeological excavations and Orientalist²⁴ scholarship in the 19th century that Achaemenid history was utilised by nationalists (Aghaie 2014:206). Cyrus, as the 'father of the nation', was considered by the new nationalist histories as the progenitor of the Iranian people (Ansari 2021:407). Nationalism in Iran at the turn of the 20th century was considered masculine, and it was persuasively argued that acting in support of nationalist causes prevented the emasculation of Iranian men (Balslev 2017:68). Therefore, reasserting that Cyrus was the original occupant of the Pasargadae tomb, and not the mother of Solomon, thus reimposed a masculine identity upon

²² Nationalist: A person who believes their country is better than any other (Cambridge Dictionary 2021a).

²³ Pahlavi Dynasty: Comprising of the rules Reza Shah (r 1925-1941) and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (r 1941-1979).

²⁴ Orientalist: A Westerner who studies the languages and cultures of Asia.

the tomb that buttressed the new ideas about nationalism in Iran. Nationalists in Iran were primarily men, and they chose to recentre Cyrus as the occupant instead of a woman. This reaffirmed the former greatness of Iran as part of the new secular masculine identity by removing the women pilgrims from their role in their religious celebration of the tomb. Nationalists proceeded to give that role to scientific men - men who used the evidence provided by archaeologists and historians instead of relying on womanly religious superstition and the acceptance of miracles.

Instead of overwriting the Mother of Solomon layer of the palimpsest, nationalists desired to remove it altogether. One physical manifestation of this new ideology was the construction of a platform and a wall in 1955 to protect the tomb, ‘from injury and depredation at the hands of the inhabitants of local villages’ as stated Ali Sami, the director of the Pasargadae site. He considered the locals ‘foolish’ and ‘mischievous’ in a similar manner to how the British traveller Eliot Crawshay Williams described the local women as ‘superstitious’ and ‘love-sick’ (Mozaffari 2014:10; London Gazette 1902:4617; Crawshay Williams 1907:VIII-231). What is implied here is that the local men were effeminate and not patriotic. As written in a 1907 article in the paper *Habl al Matin*²⁵, ‘Gradually we became separate from their [ancient Iranians’] masculine character and a woman-like manner appeared amongst us that brought Iran and Iranians to this black day’ (Balslev 2017:70-71). It can be interpreted that the erection of a platform and barrier around Cyrus’s tomb protected the tomb not only from physical degradation, but also from the effeminacy of the locals in their attribution of the tomb to the mother of Solomon.

²⁵ *Habl al Matin*: Literally ‘The Strong Rope’ in Arabic. *Habl al Matin* was a Persian language newspaper published in Calcutta, India.

This masculine nationalism was reinforced by the Shah²⁶, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (r 1941-1979), who closely associated himself with Cyrus the Great. The Shah considered Cyrus to be the model of an enlightened despot, as he himself hoped to become (Steele 2021:181). Like his father Reza Shah Pahlavi (r 1925-1941), Mohammad Reza Pahlavi also minted banknotes that displayed the Tomb of Cyrus the Great (Figs 7&8). In preparation for the 1971 Celebrations for the 2500th Anniversary of Persian Kingship - kingship which started with Cyrus - the ruins of the 11th century mosque surrounding the tomb were dismantled and the spolia was returned to its approximate palatial location, thus erasing an important stratum of the tomb's palimpsest nature (Mozaffari 2014:11). The first major stop on the Shah's elaborate programme was to visit the tomb and pay homage to Cyrus (Figs 9&10). He was accompanied by an array of diplomats, monarchs, and domestic and foreign press. Of the celebration, the British Ambassador wrote that Iran, 'for a brief forty-eight hours became the centre of world interest' (Hemmati 2015:23-37).

As an Anathema during the Revolution

The tomb could have been destroyed because of Revolutionary iconoclasm²⁷ that was directed at sites closely associated with the Pahlavi Dynasty. In the years preceding the Revolution, both Leftists²⁸ and Islamists²⁹ wrote critically about Cyrus and what he symbolised

²⁶ Shah: The title for any king of Iran. When capitalised as 'the Shah' I'm referring to Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

²⁷ Iconoclasm: 'Image-breaking' or opposition to the religious use of images (Sahas 2002:473-475). Generally, Islam prohibits the production of human figures. Here I use the term more broadly to refer to the destruction of monuments for both secular and religious reasons during the Revolution.

²⁸ Leftists: In Iran the political Left was primarily formed by Western-educated, urban intelligentsia and was generally aligned with the Soviet Union, in opposition to both the Shah and Islamism (Halliday 2004:20).

²⁹ Islamists: Islamists generally believe that Islam is an encompassing ideology that can provide both answers and structure for any modern difficulty, including that of how to govern a state (Ünal 2016:37). Iranian Islamists landed on the policy of 'wilayat al faqih' or 'government of jurists' headed by a single 'mujtahid' - a religious scholar qualified to independently interpret the divine law.

for the Pahlavi Dynasty (Molavi 2002:14). It was this combination of Leftists and Islamists that managed to depose the Shah in 1979 (Ashraf 2007). The 1979 Revolution resulted in the Shah's dethronement and the establishment of an Islamic Republic headed by Ayatollah³⁰ Ruhollah Khomeini (Yavari 2012:297). Those who opposed the Shah, therefore, tended to reject Cyrus the Great as a model. Monuments associated with the Achaemenids were so closely identified with the Shah that following the Revolution, condemnation was the only condoned response (Ansari 2021:407). One example of this new anti-Cyrus sentiment was the government's prohibition of naming children after him. Additionally, the Chief Judge of the Revolutionary Courts, Ayatollah Sadeq Khalkhali, wrote a book titled *The Liar and Despot Cyrus* in 1979 and advocated for the destruction of the tomb (Molavi 2002:14). This book followed and expanded upon his 1971 booklet *The False Cyrus* which was written in opposition to the Celebrations. In it, Khalkhali argued that Cyrus was a deceitful and lustful king who engaged in quid pro quo with the Jews so as to receive a positive review from them in the Bible. He depicts Cyrus as a conqueror raping the land of Iran (Merhavy 2015:941-942). This sentiment of rape of the homeland was also utilised by nationalists to spur Iranian men into action earlier in the century, and thus represents a continuity of strident Iranian nationalism through Khalkhali.

In addition to razing the tomb, Khalkhali advocated for the destruction of the later Achaemenid capital of Persepolis (Molavi 2002:14). Ayatollah Majdeddin Mahallati of Shiraz protected the property and people of the region during the unrest and period of lawlessness following the Shah's dethronement. In an interview with the *New York Times* reporter Elaine Sciolino, he said that, 'Some people wanted to destroy historical places. We had to stop them. I

³⁰ Ayatollah: A Shi'a Islamic term that began to be used in the 1930s to denote the highest rank of Islamic scholar (Algar 1987:133; Brunner 2010). There are many contemporaneous ayatollahs.

heard the news that Sadegh Khalkhali wanted to set fire to Persepolis. So people went after him with stones...[there were] stones thrown at him and shouts for him to go away' which indeed he did (Sciolino 2005:166-168). Khalkhali did manage to raze the Mausoleum of Reza Shah in 1980. Reza Shah was entombed in an elaborate mausoleum built in the southern Tehran³¹ suburb of Rey by his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The mausoleum overshadowed the holy shrine of Abd al Azim al Hasani³² and people on their way to the shrine would stop at Reza Shah's mausoleum and pray for him. In order to prevent Reza Shah from occupying any visual space that could be Abd al Azim's, and to prevent spiritual acknowledgement from the people, Reza Shah's tomb was razed (Shirvani 2018:56-62). The destruction of monuments constructed by previous dynasties has been common from antiquity to modernity (Simpson 2021:1-2). The Pahlavi Dynasty itself destroyed the tombs of earlier historical figures. During the Revolution, citizens destroyed the statues and portraits of the Pahlavis, and the Republic subsequently enacted a policy of active neglect with regards to the remaining Pahlavi and pre-Islamic monuments (Grigor 2014:233-239).

Pre-Islamic Arabia is characterised by Muslim historiographers as 'jahiliya' or 'the age of ignorance', and this term was later applied to pre-Islamic Iran as well. In the 20th century jahiliya was rethought of by Islamists as non-Muslim states and ostensibly Muslim states that adopted the practices of non-Muslims (Faizer 2016:547-575). The Pahlavi era, with its secularising modernisation, was then considered also to be jahiliya, and, 'both historical and modern edifices were (re)read as reminders of royal excess and class oppression' (Grigor 2014:239). Unlike the previous era in which images of Cyrus's tomb were widely reproduced

³¹ Tehran: The capital city of Iran since 1786 (Amanat 1997:12).

³²Abd al Azim al Hasani: (b 815 AD) was a Shi'a ascetic and holy man.

through banknotes, stamps, photographs, and documentary footage, the Revolution resulted in a cessation of these materials, which acted effectively as a way to silence the tomb and its legacy. This, however, was not the only reason that the tomb remained standing during the Revolution. Unlike Reza Shah's mausoleum, which was located in the capital, Pasargadae's location 800 km away in a sparsely occupied plain, allowed for the tomb, without its reproduction, to remain out of sight from the majority of the population and thus out of mind.

As an Element of Religious Nationalism

Although some scholars view nationalism and Islamism as two contrasting principles (Mozaffari 2014:2), I argue that the tomb also was saved because of the religious nationalism which eventually dominated the state. As defined by Kamran Aghaie in his article 'Islamic-Iranian nationalism and its implications', religious nationalism constructs the nation, its culture, and its citizenry through Islamic symbols and concepts as the core constitutive elements (Aghaie 2014:182). During the Revolution, the important sites of national heritage remained mostly intact with Khomeini maintaining a policy of protection for these sites (Grigor 2014:237). Although official Iranian discourse often seeks to remove itself from nationalism, nationalism itself is not the problem: Iran being placed over Islam in rhetoric is. For example, there was outcry over President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's³³ Chief of Staff, Esfandiyar Masha'i³⁴, referring in a 2010 speech to 'Iranian doctrine' instead of 'Islamic doctrine'. However, Islamism within Iran runs inside of a nationalist framework which not only seeks the aggrandisement of Islam, but increasingly that of the pre-Islamic Iranian past as well (Aghaie 2014:181-200). The

³³ President Mahmud Ahmadinejad: A conservative populist who was president from 2005-2013.

³⁴ Esfandiyar Masha'i: Ahmadinejad's Chief of Staff from 2009-2012.

Tomb of Cyrus the Great was transformed from a royal Pahlavi dynastic symbol to a national symbol because its silencing during the Revolution spared it from destruction.

Because the tomb functioned as a palimpsest and mosque, multiple religious meanings were attached to it. However, to return to an exclusively Islamic interpretation of the tomb would necessitate feminising it once more. Although the religious traditions of Iranians following the Revolution were not considered superstitious or effeminate in and of themselves, to reattribute it to the mother of Solomon would be. Cyrus, as the conqueror and creator of the largest empire up to that point in history, represented virility and strength in his aggrandisement of his Iranian homeland. This is reflected by the statistics of visitors to the site today: 63 percent of the 320,000 tourists who visit the tomb every year are male, and 99 percent of all visitors are Iranian (Jones & Talebian 2014:159-160). Ahmadinejad said in a 2010 speech that, ‘Iran means justice, worship of God, freedom, and the road to freedom. Therefore, if we were to remove Iran from history and geography, nothing would remain of human civilisation. And I dare say that the only civilisation that rests on Godly and humanistic principles is in Iran’ (Aghaie 2014:182-193). This implies that Iran’s ancient history is also part of its greatness and the greatness of humanity as a whole. Pasargadae was declared a World Heritage Site in 2004, so this view of Iranian civilisation aligns well with UNESCO’s³⁵ declaration of heritage status (UNESCO 2004). Ahmadinejad also sought to align himself with Cyrus the Great, thus rehabilitating Cyrus within official discourse (Ansari 2021:414). His speech is similar to one that Leila Sa’idi Shirvani, the leader of Madar e Soleiman, gave in the town to politicians and dignitaries. She argued that, ‘Pasargadae holds a special place in God’s vision: it has to be liberated, not

³⁵ UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation.

possessed'. The emphasis here on liberation keeps with the Revolutionary spirit that the government of Iran tries to maintain, but it also reflects a nationalist reading of the homeland as feminine, and she later even refers to the site as the most beautiful lullaby from Mother Earth (Balslev 2017:68; Shashahani 2014:147-154).

The interpretation of Cyrus as an orthodox Iranian monarch, albeit Zoroastrian³⁶, also spared the tomb from destruction. 'The Pahlavis, as something altogether alien to Iranian culture (essentially Western implants), were not monarchs in the traditional sense and, therefore, remained beyond the pale' (Ansari 2021:410). Farzin Vejdani in his article 'The place of Islam in interwar Iranian nationalist historiography' argues that Pahlavi nationalist historians did not consider Islam to be the source of all ills in Iran. Textbook authors directed attention to the Abbasid Caliphate³⁷ and how Iranian Muslims made important contributions in the service of the state. Orthodoxy was emphasised, be it Zoroastrian or Shi'a orthodoxy. Loyalty to the Iranian state was paramount (Vejdani 2014:205-215). As usurpers, the Islamic Republic then had to justify its takeover by arguing that the Pahlavis were not truly Iranian and were instead Western imports. Therefore, the Islamic Republic emphasised the illegitimate status of the Pahlavi Dynasty's origins. They especially focused on the secularised military where Reza Shah, a petty officer, received Western support and backing which enabled him to end the Qajar Dynasty³⁸ and establish his own (Steele 2021:179; Shambayati 1993). The Islamic Republic appropriated the idea of Cyrus as 'father of the nation' from earlier nationalists, despite Khalkhali's insistence

³⁶ It's debated by scholars if Cyrus the Great was a Zoroastrian, or if he practiced the preceding Indo-Iranian religion (Malandra 2005).

³⁷ Abbasid Caliphate: An Arab dynasty which ruled Iran from 750-934 AD.

³⁸ Qajar Dynasty: A Turkmen dynasty which ruled Iran from 1794-1925 (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2021).

that Cyrus was a conqueror of the Iranian homeland. Religious nationalism, therefore, made it possible for the orthodoxy of Cyrus's rule as a truly Iranian king, to take precedence.

Conclusion

The concept of a monument as a palimpsest can be applied outside of the context of this particular tomb, especially when considering ancient artefacts and monuments that have remained within the public consciousness over the millennia. This concept, for example, could also be applied to the nearby ancient ruins of Persepolis³⁹, which today are a national symbol in their own right. Persepolis, like the Tomb of Cyrus, eventually lost its original attribution to the Achaemenid Dynasty, and instead was attributed to the mythological figure of Jamshid⁴⁰ similar to how Cyrus's tomb was later attributed to the Mother of Solomon. Today, the premier football team in Tehran is called Persepolis⁴¹, and replicas of its reliefs adorned the walkway President Ahmadinejad used to escort President Putin to a diplomatic conference in 2007 (Chehabi 1999; Ansari 2021:407-408). Out of a population of 80 million, 52 million Iranians travel yearly to national heritage sites (Statistical Centre of Iran 2016:2; Jones & Talebian 2014:157). As the state imposed harsh restrictions on popular culture following the Revolution, activities that would be considered 'highbrow' in the West such as theatre, poetry recitation, and heritage tourism, are all popular activities for Iranians. As such, the religious nationalism of the state combines with popular leisure activities to inform popular perceptions of the Iranian nation as a place of pre-Islamic glory.

³⁹ Persepolis: Founded by Darius the Great in 518 BC, Persepolis remained an important royal city until its destruction by Alexander the Great in 330 BC (Shahbazi 2009).

⁴⁰ Jamshid: A legendary king who ruled the world. He is identified both with King Solomon and with Queen Hodaya (Shahbazi 2009).

⁴¹ Following the Revolution there was an attempt to change the team's name to Piruzi, meaning 'Victory', but the new name failed to catch on (Chehabi 1999).

The most popular time of the year to visit the Tomb of Cyrus the Great is Nowruz, the Iranian New Year marked by the spring equinox, and half of all visits to the tomb occur in the first month of the Iranian calendar (Jones & Talebian 2014:159). Nowruz is not only a national holiday in Iran, but through travel and celebration at Cyrus's tomb, a nationalist one. Men and women crowd around the tomb to celebrate, carrying and displaying traditional signs of spring such as wheatgrass, flowers, and painted eggs as well as flying the Iranian flag (Figs 11&12). Like Cyrus the Great, Nowruz is a part of the pre-Islamic heritage of Iran that is today embraced by the nation. Neither Cyrus nor Nowruz are Islamic, but neither are they Western. Instead, they both represent a uniquely Iranian heritage which the Islamic Republic managed to incorporate and utilise as part of its religious nationalist programme. Globally, interpreting monuments as palimpsests may be important for understanding their value, preservation, and importance to regimes with vastly different ideologies.



Figure 1 The Tomb of Cyrus the Great (Saeed Zanganeh 2020).



Figure 2 The Tomb of Cyrus the Great (Saeed Zanganeh 2020).

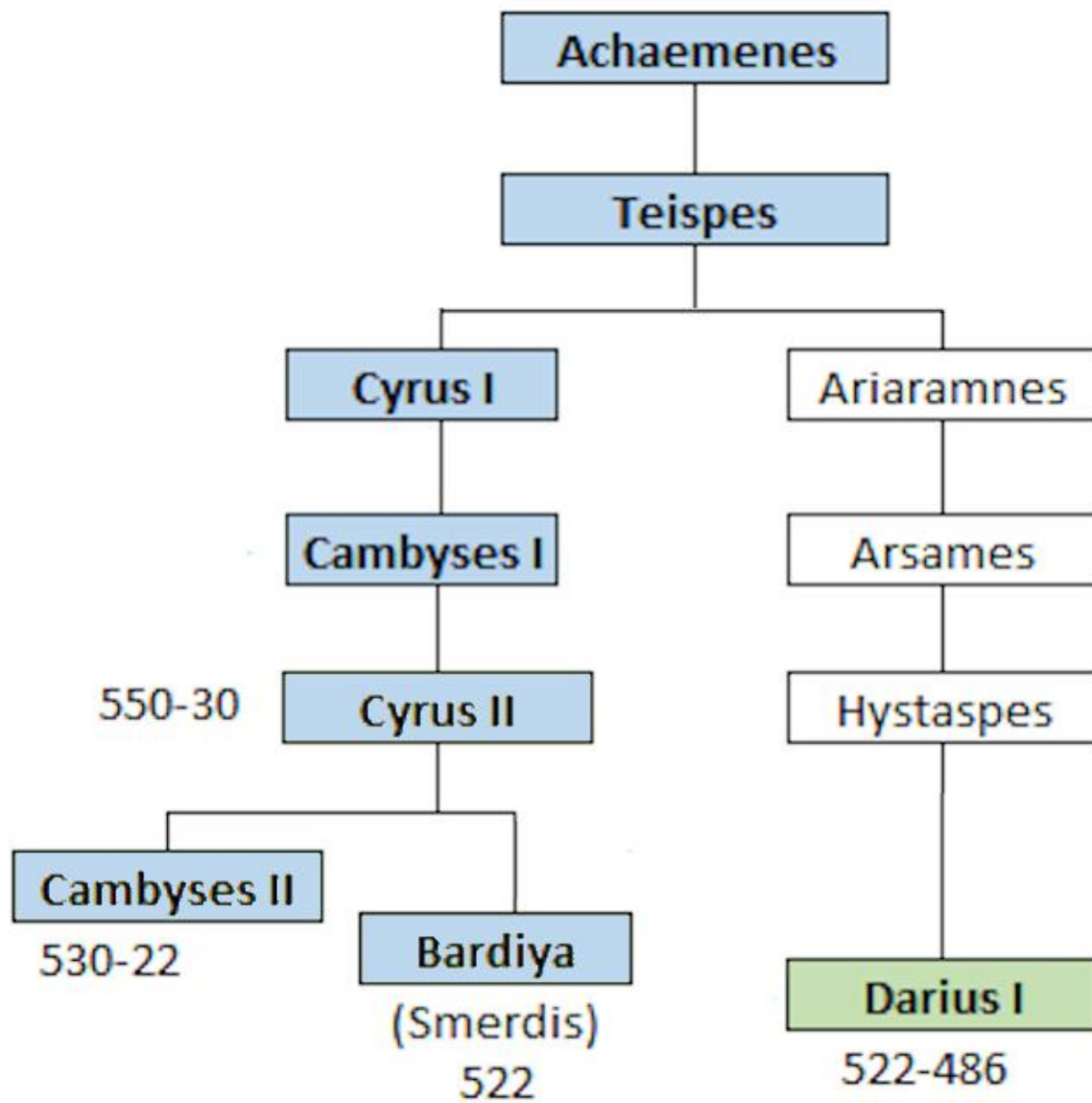


Figure 3 Family tree of Cyrus II (Ekvcpa 2019).

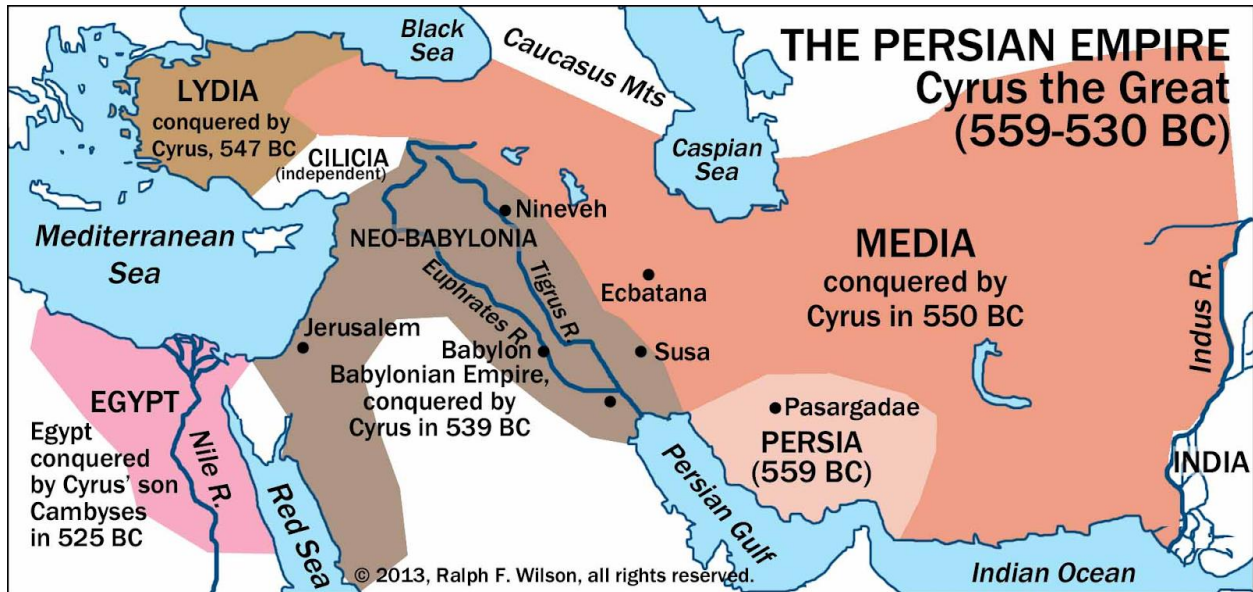


Figure 4 The Persian Empire (Ralph Wilson 2013).



Figure 5 Excavated water channel at Pasargadae (Gun Kim 2016).



Figure 6 The Tomb of Cyrus the Great with remains of surrounding mosque (The American Colony Photo Department 1900).



Figure 7 Banknote of Reza Shah featuring the Tomb of Cyrus the Great (Túrelío 2011).



Figure 8 Banknote of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of 1944 (Alborzagros 2015).



Figure 9 Mohammad Reza Pahlavi at the Tomb of Cyrus the Great in 1971 (Tarikh dar Tasvir 2014).



Figure 10 Commemorative stamp of the Celebrations in 1971 (Colnect 2021).



Figure 11 Nowruz celebrants at the Tomb of Cyrus the Great in 2014 (Akas Khana 2015).



Figure 12 Nowruz celebrants at the Tomb of Cyrus the Great in 2016 (Saeed Zanganeh 2016).

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