

# Epilogue

## *The Persianate Millennium*

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### THE PROBLEM

Persian, the national language of modern Iran, has played a unique role in world history. In the ninth century, less than two hundred years after the Arab-Islamic conquest, it became the standard language for all public affairs—government, administration, commerce, literature, even religious commentary—spreading beyond its home territory throughout the eastern part of the Islamic world, from Iraq to China, from the Central Asian steppe to southern India. This development resulted not from any property of the language itself, but from the cultural merging of a number of historical factors in the wake of the Arab conquest. Persian continued in this role for a thousand years. No other language before the adoption of printing, not even the Greek koine of the Hellenistic world, ever acquired a similar status, as the common language, over such a large area for so long. Finally, in the nineteenth century, as a result of intrusions from outside the Islamic world, the ecumene it had formed was broken up into separate bounded territories, and lost its integrity.<sup>1</sup> The Persian koine was largely replaced by vernaculars. But although Persian is now known only as a national language, the heritage of its medieval millennium underlies the historical shaping of the modern world and today's currents of globalizing urbanization.

Persian had made its first appearance over a thousand years earlier in the Achaemenian Empire (the largest empire up to that time), in the form of Old Persian, a highly inflected language written in cuneiform on clay tablets. When the Achaemenians were overcame by Alexander the Great in the late fourth century BCE, Persian was displaced by the Greek koine. But it reemerged under the Parthians, the second Persian empire, in the second half of the third century BCE, as Middle Persian, written on papyrus in a simplified form of the Aramaic script, having lost most of its inflections (as had Greek also by that time). Middle Persian continued to be used for administration and religious writing under the third Persian empire, the Sasanian, which succeeded the Parthians in 224 CE. The most important contribution of the Persian empires to later history was the professionalization of a literate administrative class and the culture of the royal court, both of which were elaborations of what had gone before.

Following another brief eclipse, after the Arabs conquered the Sasanians in the middle of the seventh century, Persian reemerged a second time, as New Persian, strengthened by adoption of the more cursive Arabic script and a new source of vocabulary in the language of Islam's scripture. As the Arabs established the new Islamic empire, the switch from horse to camel (which traveled at an average of no more than two miles an hour for some twelve hours a day) had reduced the speed of communication, but the new arrival of paper from China greatly facilitated the production and distribution of written materials. As the empire grew, it drew as much on the imperial heritage of the Persian empires for its organization and administration as on Islam and the language and culture of the Arabs. Persian was well placed to become the koine of the eastern half of the Islamic world.

As the Islamic world continued to expand, its center in Baghdad, the caliphate, became more symbolic than imperial, and the old cities of the earlier empires reemerged as centers of power. Their model was the Sasanian royal court, and their language was Persian, which was known not as the language of a particular community or people (like Hellenika, Turki, or English), but as Dari, "the language of the court," or Farsi (Arabicized from Parsi), the language of Pars (from which our English word "Persian," through the Greek of Herodotus), in the south of the Iranian Plateau, which had been a central location in the Persian empires. Adapted to the new Islamic environment, Persian easily outgrew the boundaries of its earlier use. There were no political boundaries, and as the power of one urban government after another rose and fell over the following centuries Persian provided the cultural glue. At its greatest extent it reached from its pre-Islamic homeland on the Iranian Plateau to the Balkans in southeastern Europe (under the Ottoman Empire), to central China (under the Mongol Yuan Dynasty), and to south-central India (under the regional sultanates and, later, the Mughal Empire), creating an historical ecumene of unprecedented geographical and demographic proportions, and a new Persian identity. Despite the diplomatic efforts of Riza Shah in 1935 to replace "Persia" with "Iran" in international usage, the Iranian identity of the Achaemenians down to the Islamic Republic of Iran is traceable not by blood but by language, which (except for the recent nationalistic name changes—back to Dari in Afghanistan and to Tajiki in Tajikistan) continues to be known as Farsi.

All of these developments are easier to understand by starting from earlier history and looking forward, than from the present looking back. Greek was not the first koine, in the sense of a language adopted in its written form as the language of administration of an empire that then became the standard for speech as well as writing far beyond the community in which its spoken form had developed. The first, Akkadian, which had emerged in the early cities of Mesopotamia (now Iraq), had been followed by Aramaic in the eighth century BCE, which continued to be an important language to the west of the Iranian Plateau until the modern period. A koine possesses a vocabulary and a repertoire of closely related speech habits and writing protocols, which generate an accompanying cultural standard. The culture that

accompanied the Persian koine was known as *adab* (from Arabic). Over the course of the Persianate millennium, *adab* was the public culture of the Persianate ecumene.

The formation of this ecumene was an early but major step in the long-term historical process of globalization. Despite the political and economic changes of the next thousand years, nothing happened to break it up until the nineteenth century, although the glue that held it together had begun to be weakened by vernacularization. First, the Ottomans replaced Persian with Osmanlica (Ottoman Turkish), a highly Persianized form of Turkish, for their imperial administration. Then Urdu, a highly Persianized form of the main North Indian language, began to spread in India, and was finally used by the British to replace Persian for their administration, as a partner to English. The written forms of Pashto, Sindhi, and Uzbek also began to gain ground in the seventeenth century. But the process was gradual. What finally brought the Persianate millennium to an end was the expansion of the British, Chinese, and Russian empires, followed by the conversion of the British and Russian colonial territories into “nation”-states on the Western model, beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century and reaching completion in the second half of the twentieth.

Before then, in its heyday, Persian had been the informal equivalent of an official language for a larger part of the world and a larger contiguous population than any other language in world history. The historical questions it raises are not linguistic, but social, cultural, and political. However, they have linguistic implications, and they raise other interesting questions—about the role of language in general, and especially of literacy, in world history. The most interesting and productive human achievements have always come from the largest arenas of social interaction, where the largest number of minds were working together. The spread of Persian in the Persianate millennium created the largest arena before the modern period. The purpose of this Epilogue is to set the historical role of Persian in a larger context, relating, not only to world history, but also to the cultural background of the modern world.

#### CITIES, TRADE, TRIBES, AND WRITING

Late antiquity was a period of accelerating social change. No society has ever been without change. Culture is the order that enables us to know what to expect in our social lives, which we negotiate over time. But the people we interact with have staggered life cycles, and our relationships are always changing. Our communities grow and decline. If the change is not too fast, we can accommodate it. But accelerating change and fundamental change resulting from an invasive factor are disruptive, changing the social landscape, putting vested interests on the defensive, and shattering the cultural order. Disruption can open a new age. The greater the disruption, the further we need to look back in time to understand all the factors that surface as the new age develops.

Although Islam began in Arabia, and one of the five pillars (*arkan*) of Islam, the pilgrimage (*hajj*), requires Muslims to visit its place of origin, Mecca, once in their lifetime, Arabia has not been the center of Islamic history. After the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632 CE, Islam spread north to Syria and Mesopotamia, and west to Egypt, but also east through Central Asia, the middle of the world's largest landmass. Within eighty years, the new Islamic order had reached Spain in the west, China in the east, and India in the south. Unlike earlier empires, Islam had expanded along trade routes, following the network that had developed from city to city since the beginning of civilization.

This was where history had begun. Ten to fifteen thousand years ago, as the glaciers receded at the end of the last Ice Age, the resulting profusion of vegetation in Mesopotamia made it no longer necessary to be continually on the move to find food. People settled. Settled life favored larger families. Fertility rates rose, and population growth increased. Food collectors became food producers, increasing the carrying capacity of the land. Settlements became villages. When farmers could produce more food than they needed for themselves, some provided services for others. Villages became towns. The number of people living and working together increased. Property accumulated, and society became more complex—in terms of the diversity of livelihoods and relative wealth, power, and social status.

The climate continued to change. As it became more arid, people moved down to the rivers, in order to irrigate. Towns became cities. More minds working together, each with different life experience, increased collective learning, the ability to organize, the rate of innovation, and the adoption of new technologies.<sup>2</sup> A larger proportion of each community became free to develop new skills for the production of commodities. Cities looked for trade with other cities, and long-distance trade developed from city to city through the arid zone of the Northern Hemisphere.

But change was uneven. Unlike most of Europe, in the temperate zone, where there was sufficient soil and rainfall for people eventually to settle and farm almost anywhere, in the arid zone, where civilization began, farming required irrigation, and irrigation required organized labor and investment. As population continued to grow, some were always left out of the urban economies, continuing to survive on the unimproved land, without the increased food supply that that would allow the organization of labor, without investment. They remained nomadic, exploiting any resource they could find, including raiding trade caravans and even cities. After what Andrew Sherratt calls the “secondary products revolution” in the fourth millennium, they adopted pastoralism as their main resource, and supplied meat and milk to the urban economies.<sup>3</sup> But since they could not accumulate property, they remained tribal, recognizing each other not in urban terms of comparative wealth, occupation, and social class, but rather in terms only of the information carried in their genealogies: descent, affinity (marriage connections), and relative seniority.

To begin with, rivers and occasional springs had been the only source of water for irrigation. But the Achaemenians were able to promote investment in a new technology that made it possible to increase the area under irrigation by tapping groundwater. The *kariz* (recently added to UNESCO's World Heritage List under the more common Arabic term *qanat*) was an excavated underground channel that brought water by gravity flow from the underground water table at the head of a valley out on to cultivable soil lower down in the plain, often tens of kilometers away.<sup>4</sup> Investment in *qanat* construction spread east and west from the Iranian Plateau, enabling each city to greatly expand its agricultural hinterland and include a larger percentage of the population in the agricultural economy. But some were always left out, and nomadic tribal communities have been an important factor in Islamic and Persianate history down to the present.

The society that became Islamic and Persianate in the arid zone was therefore very different from the society that became Christian in the temperate zone, or Buddhist in the tropics, because it was divided between an urban majority based on the organization of labor, investment and interurban trade, and the tribal minority that controlled the territory between the cities through which their trade had to pass. When the urban economies boomed, they were a source of extra labor. When they bust, multiresource nomadism remained an alternative.<sup>5</sup>

The development of the interurban trade network, from the cities on the Euphrates and Tigris to the Nile and further west in North Africa, and east to the Helmand, Oxus, and Jaxartes, and so on to the Yellow River, and then on smaller rivers, with the intermediary territory controlled by nomadic tribes, was the final stage of prehistory. History began toward the end of the fourth millennium, when writing was adopted to facilitate trade by recording transactions and contracts. The Asian trade network generated interaction among larger numbers of people over a larger geographical area than any other part of the world from then until the development of maritime trade toward the end of the mediaeval period and the beginning of transatlantic trade a little later. It became the historically most important route for the movement of cultigens as well as commodities, and everything else conveyed by human interaction, such as language (Persian) and culture (*adab*), between China and the Mediterranean—the beginning of what in the nineteenth century was named the Silk Route.<sup>6</sup> However, although the association with silk (which was not a major commodity until much later) gave it a brand, it was a distraction from the route's real historical significance. More important than any particular commodity was the adoption of writing, which (despite low rates of literacy) expanded the arenas of social interaction.

From 3000 BCE until the fifteenth century, writing by hand was the only means of communication, organization, or control beyond the face-to-face community, and written language continues to be essential in the digital world of the twenty-first century. Since it was a tool of government, it became a qualification for an elite social class. In the third millennium, writers provided the bureaucracies that

enabled city-states to become empires, and empires to expand. The historical role of Persian and the thousand-year stability of the Persianate ecumene were rooted in Persian in its written form. Persian was adopted as a koine not only because it was the language of the Sasanian model of government, but because it was the tool of the writing class that was left over from the previous empires, and for which the Arabs had no replacement. Without both writing and the writing class, there would have been no koine, no ecumene, and no Persianate millennium. That this degree of linguistic and cultural homogenization should have developed here before in other parts of the world is not surprising, since apart from being where settlement and civilization, long-distance trade, and writing had all begun, bringing more people in contact with each other and producing a greater rate of collective learning than anywhere else, it was the center of the global ecumene.

The Persians had created the last three in the historical succession of empires, each larger than the one before, that had grown out of Mesopotamia starting in the third millennium BCE as a result of the new ability of city-states to exercise remote control by means of writing. The bureaucracy for each new empire was recruited from the one before. The Achaemenians had recruited from the Elamites. But within a generation or two, the writers had switched from Elamite to Persian. The third Achaemenian shah, Darius the Great (r. 522–486 BCE), expanded the use of writing further by establishing the Royal Road, on which relays of couriers on horseback provided rapid communication with written missives throughout the empire.

The association of writing with power suggested that any important message must be written. How could that not apply to a prophet's revelation? By the end of the Axial Age (800–200 BCE), when the related processes of population growth, urbanization, trade, and the adoption of writing had generated a new stage of social complexity and human capability, the teachings of Zoroaster, Confucius, the Buddha, Socrates, and the Torah had all taken written form.<sup>7</sup> The age of scripture had begun, and when the final revelation was delivered to Muhammad half a millennium later, the original was assumed to have been written, which as the word of God was eventually rationalized as being “uncreated.”

From 821 CE, when the Tahirid dynasty broke away from the 'Abbasid Caliphate to claim political independence in Nishapur, to the early sixteenth century, when Islamic civilization became divided into the three large polities of the Mughals, Ottomans, and Safavids (which Hodgson called the “Gunpowder Empires”), the political organization of the Islamic world was in continuous flux.<sup>8</sup> Each power center had a function, formally recognized by the Shari'a, to provide the security that would allow people to carry out their religious duties as Muslims, but no specific legitimacy. The political flux inhibited the formation of boundaries, helping to maintain the cultural unity of the ecumene.

As a result, in 1326, at the age of twenty-two, Muhammad ibn Battuta was able to make his way from Mecca across Arabia to Najaf, Isfahan, Shiraz, Tabriz,

Mardin, and Sinjar. Later, after a trip to Yemen, Somalia, and the East African coast, he travelled via Oman and Hormuz to Delhi. Then, after a trip into Ottoman territory—Crimea, Astrakhan, and (Christian) Constantinople—he went east to Bukhara and Samarqand, then south over the Hindu Kush and across the Indus to Delhi. From Delhi he went back to Sindh, and Gujarat, down to Calicut and southern India, crossing the Indian Ocean to the Maldives, Sri Lanka, up to Chittagong and Assam, and down again to Sumatra, Malacca, Vietnam, and finally through China up to Beijing before returning in 1346 by a similar route. This type of networked travel was much easier during the Persianate millennium than at any other time in world history. It was made possible by urbanization, trade, and the cultural standardization of a widespread *written* language, which (under the informal control of a writing class) carried the urban culture of literature, cuisine, and architectural and textile design that had grown out of the Persian empires, and is now the cultural heritage of Iran. Yet it would not have spread over such a large area without the contribution of the Arabs.

#### ISLAM AND THE ARABS

The urbanization that began in Mesopotamia in the seventh and sixth millennia BCE and expanded under the Persian empires in the first millennium, continued to expand in the seventh century CE under Islam through the eastern Islamicate world of the Asian arid zone. The citted society of what was to become the Persianate ecumene was a trading network of urban investment centers, which had raised the carrying capacity of the steppe and accelerated population growth.<sup>9</sup> The Arab-Islamic conquest of the Sasanian Empire made two contributions to this situation that facilitated the conversion of the cultural heritage of the Persian empires into the Islamicate empire of the Persianate millennium. The first was the legal formulation of a social template for the whole community, the Islamic *umma*, that was independent of political models and favored trade. The second was the Arabian version of the tribal paradigm.

Islam's Prophet had been socialized in a mercantile family on the Hijaz trade route from Yemen to Syria. But the larger context of his career was neither urban nor mercantile. The population in the arid country outside the Hijaz was mostly tribal, with the typical tribal dependence on a mixed economy with a pastoral emphasis. The social differences between urban and tribal populations generate different expectations with regard to power and authority. Initial support for the Prophet's mission came mainly from the trading communities of the Hijaz towns, which though not large were socially complex enough to appreciate some form of exogenous legitimization of authority, such as a single god with a revealed law. In the more egalitarian tribal communities outside the towns, where political decision making was managed by negotiation and consensus building, people were naturally suspicious of absolute authority, and were less welcoming to proselytizers.

The record of Muhammad's life and his revelation reflect this social conditioning. It is perhaps not surprising that his teaching favored trade but opposed what he saw as the divisive loyalties of tribal life.

When Muhammad died, he left no clear provision for the future of the community he had created and managed. His Companions (those closely associated with him during his lifetime) had to work out a way to manage, not only the preservation of his record, but the continuation of his composite role as (a) leader of an expanding community, and (b) interpreter of his divine revelation in the changing social conditions. Not only the history of Islamic civilization, but the Persianate millennium, were products of the solutions to these problems developed over the next two centuries.

In the tribal leadership model, the Companions, who were senior members of the leading lineages, met together and agreed on which one of them should take on the role of consensus builder. The person thus chosen became the caliph (successor or steward) for the day-to-day management of the *umma*, but without either the religious legitimacy or the political authority of the Prophet. The form of Islam that spread north out of the Arabian Peninsula in the following decades, later known as Sunni or orthodox Islam, was organized according to this Arab model. To begin with, it was centered in the city of Medina (in the Hijaz) where the Prophet had spent the last ten years of his life, till 656, when the fourth orthodox caliph, 'Ali, moved it to Kufa in Mesopotamia (now southern Iraq).

The urban populations of the Persian empires in Syria and Mesopotamia had different expectations of authority. They were stratified according to occupation and relative wealth. Authority could not be negotiated. They needed the security of absolute authority with some sort of legitimation, such as they had known under the Persian shahs, who had ruled by Zoroastrian Divine Right, a concept that had already influenced the Roman emperors and through them would influence the Christian Church and the medieval European monarchies. At the beginning of the seventh century, the Sasanian shah had been the absolute authority, from his center in Istakhr (now in southern Iran) east into Central Asia, west as far as Egypt, and south around the Arabian Peninsula to Oman and Yemen. His rule was continuing to expand to the northwest at the expense of the Byzantine Empire. When the Umayyads took over the caliphate in 661, moved it to Damascus, and established a dynasty, they were satisfying these expectations in a way that resembled the Roman model: absolute authority based on the qualifications of the founder, in this case the record of Mu'awiya's as a Companion of the Prophet, and brother of the second orthodox caliph. The same model was continued by their successor dynasty, the 'Abbasids, who moved the caliphate to Baghdad a century later.

But besides a political model more suitable for a citted society, in order to function in a larger urban society, the caliphate needed a more sophisticated administrative apparatus. Unlike all the previous empires since the second millennium, the caliphate had no professional scribes that could provide a bureaucracy to

administer its enormous empire. In its efforts to develop an Islamic bureaucracy, it had no option but to turn to the Sasanian professional class it had displaced. Although the Umayyads attempted to convert them to Arabic, and they did change their script, and contributed to the development of written Arabic, the language they used for administration continued to be Persian.

The use of Arabic barely expanded beyond the needs of the religion. A standard version of the Prophet's revelation was compiled and accepted as the Quran (Recitation) within just twenty years of the Prophet's demise—the first item of Islamic scripture, conserved according to the models of the Judaic Torah (Instruction) and the Christian Bible (Book), of which it was considered to be the replacement. Standard versions of supporting items, the hadith (what was remembered of the Prophet's interpretative teaching, both explicit and implicit) and the Sunna (the model of his life), which together with the Quran were the basic sources for the formulation of the Shari'a (Islamic Law), took longer.

The major emphases of the Law were, first, the organization of society, especially gender relations, family life, and the relationship between private and public life, for which marriage and the family are not only central but constitute the only legitimate form of social grouping. All other forms of organization are considered divisive, and therefore a distraction from the basic principle that distinguishes Islam from other religions: *tawhid*, the focus on God's oneness. This emphasis inhibited the development of political boundaries within the Islamic world. The second emphasis was contract, which promoted trade. Although the sources came from the Arabian Peninsula, the Law was formulated in the citted society of the pre-Islamic empires, where the earliest version of the law from which it was descended had been codified under Hammurabi in the first Babylonian dynasty two and a half millennia earlier. It was a template that facilitated the acceptance and expansion of Islam east and west through the established interurban trading networks, and provided the social order that was necessary for the further development of trade. The Law has been Islam's major strength, distinguishing it from its rivals, Judaism and Christianity (and Buddhism).

Starting at the end of the Axial Age, when religions began to be rooted in scripture, and to spread beyond local communities, religious identity became more important than local or ethnic identity. Buddhism began to spread out of India in Pali in the second century BCE; Christianity from the Levant in the first century CE, first in Greek, then Latin; and Islam in Arabic from the Hijaz in the seventh century. Religion with a basis in written language continued to be an important factor of identity throughout the mediaeval period into the early modern period, when the rise in literacy that came with the adoption of printing in the Christian world after the Reformation led finally to the adoption of national identities rooted in national languages.<sup>10</sup> But despite the idea of nationhood as common descent and the introduction a century ago of the concept of subnational "ethnic" identities, language in its written form has continued to be an important factor in identity

down to the current digital age. In the Islamic world, the Law is an additional factor in social identity and the culture of the Persianate ecumene.

The tribal models the Prophet had disapproved of did not disappear. Despite the failure of the caliphate to survive down to the present in its original “orthodox” form (or even its later dynastic form), the Arab tribal model of consensus building continued to underlie the formal interpretation of the scripture by religious scholars in the majority Sunni version of Islam, which was similar to the Judaic model of a synod of scholars.<sup>11</sup> The urban movement to establish an absolute authority in the line of descent through ‘Ali, as the Prophet’s supreme successor, was successful only in the religious role—until the Islamic revolution of 1979. The division between the Arab (tribal, Sunni) and Persian (urban, Shi‘i) heritage over the problem of authority has divided Islam to varying degrees from the death of the Prophet down to the current twenty-first century sectarianism between Sunni and Shi’a, and the modern political crisis between Arabia and Iran (though ironically the former is now a kingdom and the latter an Islamic Republic). In Islam, unlike its predecessors, the leadership problem was not how to maintain the distinction between “church” and state, but how to maintain their unity.

#### THE OPENING AND CLOSING OF THE MILLENNIUM

The Arab-Islamic expansion in the seventh century caused not only a massive disruption of the vested interests that had shaped society over the past thousand years; it was also a revolution, designed to establish an entirely new sway of life as well as a new religion. Revolutions are followed by periods of routinization as people accommodate to a new order. The spread of Persian, beginning in the ninth century, completed the process of routinization. Comparative examples abound in world history, and provide useful context. The Arab conquest of the Sasanian Empire followed on the heels of the collapse of the western Roman Empire in the face of Germanic invaders, which was followed by the rise and spread of Western Christianity in the form that characterized medieval Europe in the following millennium. Why should two such similar cultural and political shifts have occurred so close to each other in space and in time, with no discernable connection? But there are similarities. In both cases the established civilization was exhausted from long periods of warfare, and in both cases the exhaustion was exacerbated by an outbreak of plague, the first pandemic of *Yersinia pestis*, which spread from Egypt through the Mediterranean and into southwest Asia in the late sixth century, and continued to recur till the mid-eighth century.

The European routinization began in the fifth century, with the language and religion of the Romans, and the social forms of the Germans, and took over three centuries till the beginning of the ninth. The Persianate process began in the seventh century, and was completed later in the ninth, with the language and culture of the conquered, the Persians, and the legal template of the invaders. Half

a millennium later European society underwent another period of revolutionary change, of similar duration, in which the same plague, this time known as the Black Death, was the primary factor. Starting in the mid-fourteenth century, killing the rich as well as the poor, it removed the vested interests of mediaeval society and opened up land and other opportunities for the survivors. The result was the Reformation, the adoption of printing and the beginning of modern science, as well as eventual political reform and the opening of the modern world.

The Chinese political system, however, which began with the Xia Dynasty in the third millennium BCE, evolved with gradually increasing complexity but no disruptive change of its social and political structure, into the twentieth century. Neither the Chinese establishment of the Republic in 1912, nor the establishment of the People's Republic after the revolution in 1949, disrupted the age-old structure of Chinese society. Only Mao's Cultural Revolution in 1966 finally removed the vested interests of centuries, making possible the fundamental reorganization of Chinese society in the second half of the twentieth century, and the entry of China into the industrialized world.

The Islamic empire had expanded according to a different dynamic from its predecessors, following trade routes, rather than commandeering resources. In addition to melding the cultural heritage of the Persian empires and the Arabian tribes, it formalized and intensified the interaction between the civilizations of east and west in a vast empire with no political center, based on interurban trade that financed urban investment. Its integrity was symbolized by Islam and the Shari'a, but managed by a Persian bureaucratic class operating out of each major city, in the service of competing Sasanian-style royal courts in selected cities. Each of these courts sought to expand their area of control, but with no expectation that the whole of Islamic society should be under one authority, or that there should not be freedom of movement between the territories of different cities.

The trade network provided paths for the spread of Islam's major strength, the Law. The cultural framework of the Law strengthened the trade network. Persian followed it from urban court to urban court, strengthening the cultural glue that formed its identity. Persian returned as the language, not only of administration, but of eulogizing poetry in each of the royal courts. As discussed in the introduction to this volume, these included the Tahirids in Nishapur (821–91), who were followed by the Saffarids in Zaranj (861–1003), the Samanids in Bukhara (875–999), the Ziyarids in Isfahan (931–1090), and the Buyids in Shiraz (934–1062). When the Turks arrived later in the tenth century, they followed the same model: the Ghaznavids in Ghazni (975–1186), and so on down to the Saljuqs (1040–). In the fourteenth century, as the Persianate ecumene continued to expand, the pattern began to change to a threefold subdivision between the Turkic Ottomans (1299–1922), the Safavids (1501–1736), who were of ethnically mixed extraction, and the Turko-Mongol Mughals (1526–1857), establishing the political and cultural basis for the modern division between Sunni Turkey, Shi'i Iran, and the importance of Sunni Islam in South Asia.

Why should Persian, the language of the conquered empire, have become the standard language of more than half of Islamic civilization, rather than Arabic, the language of the conquerors, and of the new religion and the Law, or Turkish, which in one or another of its forms (mostly mutually intelligible), was soon to become the most widely *spoken* language throughout the region? The reason that Arabic did not become the koine of the whole Islamic world is that neither the Quran nor the hadith included any political models or a political philosophy for the enforcement of the Islamic law in the absence of the Prophet himself, and there was no professional class of Arabic writers with the vocabulary for it. The reason Turkish did not supersede Persian is different. By the eleventh century, Turkish had begun to be heard in most places where Persian was heard, and even beyond. Was Turkish a rival koine? The comparison is interesting and useful. As a koine, Persian was rooted in its *written* form. Since the written form was used for remote interaction, by the writing class and the royal courts, its standard form was protected by professional interests. The development of Persian literature was also a factor, related not only to the pomp and circumstance of the court culture in political centers, but to the rise and spread of Sufism. Turkish could not become a koine in that sense, since it was not rooted in a written form. It was, however, a lingua franca, a language in common use throughout the ecumene for local oral interaction between people with different vernacular backgrounds. This use of “Turki” was still expanding in Iran in the mid-twentieth century. Apart from the Qashqai in Fars, it could be heard from Azerbaijan to Qazvin and through the villages of the Alborz mountains to the boundaries of Semnan Province, in northern Khorasan, in Mashhad, and among the staff of the national railway system. But before the Islamic revolution, it was never used in print except for a column in street Turki in the satirical weekly *Tawfiq* (which was discontinued in 1974). Unlike Persian, Turkish was never a source of models for correct speech or correct behavior. It provided no path for social advancement, but simply a medium of communication between individuals with different vernaculars, whatever their place in society, in informal, and intimate, but not public, and formal situations.

The Persianate millennium finally ended in the way it had begun, as a result of severe social disruption. Nothing similar to the Arab-Islamic invasion had happened for over a thousand years—not the arrival of the Turks, beginning in the tenth century, not even the Mongol cataclysm in the thirteenth century. The Turks had assimilated to the Persianate structure. Even the Mongols, despite the destruction and carnage they perpetrated, did not change the structure, language or culture of Persianate society, but effectively strengthened it by imposing the Pax Mongolica. The gradual shift from written Persian to the writing of vernacular languages that began with Ottoman Turkish in the fifteenth century and continued with Urdu, Sindhi, and Pashto was not disruptive. But eventually, at a time when the ecumene was in economic decline because the development of maritime trade between the Persian Gulf, India, and China had eliminated its trading

advantage, three external empires, one of which (the British) was based on the new maritime trading network, began to encroach on it. First, in the eighteenth century, the Chinese created Xinjiang (the “New Frontier”) in the Tarim Basin and Dzungaria, establishing their border with the Russian Empire, which had been moving east since Russia expelled the Mongols in 1480. But more significantly, in the nineteenth century, the British began moving north from India to protect their northwest frontier, in response to the Russians moving south into Central Asia. The competition between the British and the Russians, known as the Great Game, caused the final eclipse of the Persianate millennium, breaking up the ecumene into colonial territories that eventually became nation-states on the Western model. The socioeconomic dynamism that had created the paths for the spread of Islam and the Persian language had lost its driving force, and its cultural unity was divided by political boundaries.

Once the boundaries were drawn, the standards in each country began to diverge. The process was slowest in Iran, which apart from being the largest country with the least outside interference was also the country where identity was most closely linked to the Persian language. When the Islamic revolution in 1979 finally reshaped what had remained of Iran’s premodern social structure under the final Pahlavi dynasty, the century-long half-life of the Persianate millennium was over, and the rate of social change accelerated.

#### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Within a century after the Arab-Islamic conquest, Persian reemerged in the Arabic script with Arabic vocabulary. Islam spread along the interurban trade networks, but Arabic spread with Islam only as the language of Islamic scripture, not as that of empire. Gradually in the course of the next century and a half, the Sasanian heritage filled the gaps that appeared in the new system as it grew from its small-town and tribal origins in Arabia to the complex urban society of the earlier empires. The Persianate millennium was the product of the convergence of three major historical components: the legal system that favored trade, the governmental model and administrative class inherited from the Persian empire, and the interurban trade network. Its stability depended equally on each component. The Law could not be changed because it was based on the eternal word of the Quran. The correctness of written Persian was protected by the professional class, and its association with power and privilege made it the unchanging source of standard cultural models. But the trade networks were beyond the control of any internal factors. Their decline began with the development of maritime trade toward the end of the medieval period, which facilitated the further spread of Islam from Arabia and the Persian Gulf to southeast Asia. Later the growth of maritime trade from the West, with its associated political interests, finally closed the millennium in the nineteenth century. It had already been weakened by vernacularization,

as the Ottomans became more interested in Europe than Central Asia, though Osmanlıca continued to rely on the vocabulary and idiomatic usage of the Persian koine. Similarly, the British switch from Persian to Urdu (because the maritime trade they controlled was more important to them than the land routes beyond their control to the north) did not cut off their relationship with Persian. But the creation of new “national” boundaries broke up the ecumene and put an end to the ability of the professional class of writers to maintain the standardization of Persian throughout the ecumene.

Nevertheless, Persianate *adab* still lingers in the twenty-first century. The everyday life of the modern countries of Asia south of Russia (Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Armenia, Bosnia, Georgia, Iraq, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, much of India, and even to some extent China, even beyond Xinjiang, and some parts of the Arab world—approaching a quarter of the global population, distributed around the geographical center of the global ecumene) all to varying degrees carry the Persianate cultural heritage.

Writing had changed the scale of history. It had been a dominant factor in social change since its adoption began some five thousand years ago, but it had not been seriously studied. Attention turned to it finally in the middle of the last century, when Claude Lévi-Strauss argued (briefly, but with interesting examples) that its importance is not so much as a reliable extension of memory, or a deepening of our awareness and understanding of the past, as is commonly claimed, but rather as a vehicle of social differentiation and organization. He wrote:

Writing is a strange thing. . . . The one phenomenon which has invariably accompanied [writing] is the formation of cities and empires: the integration into a political system . . . of a considerable number of individuals, and the distribution of those individuals into a hierarchy of castes and classes. Such is, at any rate, the type of development which we find, from Egypt right across to China, at the moment when writing makes its debuts; it seems to favor rather the exploitation than the enlightenment of mankind.<sup>12</sup>

The ensuing discussion, which intensified in the following decades, missed these social points: that the most significant function of literacy had been to open new ways to expand the arenas of social life and to organize society. Writing has shaped history, not so much by increasing knowledge, but by making it possible to organize access to it. Literacy rates were managed. Since most people not only had no one to teach them, but were not aware of anything they needed to read, literacy produced social stratification and subordination. The Persianate case is perhaps the most interesting historical example, because it was associated, not with an ethnic or dynastic empire, but with trade networks that were governed impersonally by a religiously ordained legal system.

Literacy rates in the Persianate world began to change when the vested interests of the writing classes were disrupted—by the Soviet regime in the “-stans,” starting in the late 1920s, and in Iran by the “white revolution” of 1963, and more so

since the Islamic revolution of 1979. The change was slower in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which had not achieved the same degree of national integration. But the relationship between written and spoken language is now changing everywhere.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, the study of language was philology, which focused on the history of written language, as an academic extension of the study of Latin and ancient Greek. Speech was implicitly regarded as a representation of the written language, that might be careless and incorrect. Linguistics (which had grown out of the anthropological study of the spoken languages of nonliterate communities outside the world's historical civilizations, beginning in the late nineteenth century) gradually replaced philology in the curriculum in the 1950s. The tables were turned. Where the study of written languages had focused on the history of Rome, Greece, the Levant, India, and China, the study of spoken languages was (like anthropology) global in orientation, focusing on the language of each community, irrespective of writing. Gradually, written language came to be regarded simply as a derivative of the spoken. Any attempt to explain the differences tended to fall under the heading of the newly introduced term "diglossia," coined by a linguist, apparently unaware of the five-thousand-year evolving relationship between spoken and written language, for a much more limited type of distinction.<sup>13</sup>

As with Greek and Latin, what was written in Persian in the past continues today to play an important role in the culture of a much larger arena than that of its current usage. But Latin is no longer spoken, and modern Greek is very different now from its classical form. Despite the historical significance of ancient Greek, Greeks today have problems with their language similar to those of the English, who can mostly read Shakespeare without too much difficulty, but Chaucer? Modern Persians, on the other hand, can read their literature from a thousand years ago.

## CONCLUSIONS

The development of Persian as a koine, its spread through the ecumene, and its standardization and stability for a full millennium would not have been possible without the social history of its use as a written language, expanding the domains of what Nile Green has called "Persographia." Even though it is no longer recognized, Persian is one of the five or so most important modern languages, not only in terms of its place in world history, but in the culture of today's globalizing world. Apart from continuing as the official language of two modern countries, Iran and Tajikistan, and one of two official languages in another, Afghanistan, Persian continues to be spoken by local communities in several others, and serves as a classical language throughout the region. No other language, not Greek or Latin, not Chinese, can compete with this record. Although Chinese and Greek also have unbroken records in writing as well as speech from the ancient world down to the modern period, the case of Persian covers a larger area, is more international, without being

related to any single particular center. Awareness of its past significance faded in the nineteenth-century late Qajar period, but it has been reemerging with the rise of postcolonial nationalism in modern Iran, and is likely to continue to play a role in the future. As a result of its past, it now has a quality of its own, in terms of vocabulary, structure, expressiveness, and textual and literary repertoire. Unfortunately, however, unlike Greek (which continues to hold a central place in the Western curriculum), premodern Persian is known in the West only through the writing of Herodotus (484–425 BCE) and Xenophon (430–354 BCE), and to a lesser extent the poets such as ‘Umar Khayyam (1048–1131) with whom British colonial officials became conversant while working with the elite of Mughal India. It holds a place in the curriculum now only as a modern national language. However, even when the ecumene lost its internal integrity everything that encroached upon it became a vehicle for spreading its cultural influence. We in the West wear “pyjamas,” sit on “verandahs” and “balconies,” hoping for “serendipity” and eating “candy,” and the French term for the customs checkpoint we pass through when we fly to Paris is *la douane*—all words that came to us in various ways through Persian, mostly (if not entirely) via colonial India.

## NOTES

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