Навуковы Артыкул

Пераасэнсаванне персідскай адукацыйнай думкі праз гістарыцысцкую прызму: філасофія, ідэнтычнасць і ўладныя дынамікі

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Анатацыя. Гэта якаснае даследаванне выкарыстоўвае гістарыцысцкую перспектыву, каб вывучыць, як персідскія інтэлектуальныя традыцыі былі зацямнёныя ў межах сучаснай навуковай думкі. Абапіраючыся на матэрыялы з грэчаскіх гістарычных тэкстаў, араба-ісламскіх аповедаў і другасных аналітычных прац пра персідскую цывілізацыю, даследаванне праводзіць тэматычнае асэнсаванне ўладных структур, убудаваных у дамінантныя грэчаскія і араба-ісламскія дыскурсы, якія гістарычна адціснулі персідскія ўнёскі на перыферыю. Праз прасочванне гэтых наратыўных узораў даследаванне выяўляе і класіфікуе тры фундаментальныя вымярэнні персідскага інтэлектуальнага жыцця, акцэнтуючы рэлігійна-моўную талерантнасць, уплыў элітных дзеячаў і канцэпт боскай Хварэны (Khvarenah), а таксама цывілізацыйную ідэю Іраншахра (Iranshahr). Гістарыцысцкі падыход выступае арганізацыйнай лінзай, паказваючы, як старажытныя персы канцэптуалізавалі Херад (Kherad) форму спадчыннай, продкаўскай мудрасці як кіруючы прынцып дзяржаўнага кіравання, культурнай устойлівасці і перадачы ведаў наступным традыцыям, у тым ліку эліністычнай і араба-ісламскай. У межах гэтага падыходу аналіз падкрэслівае эврыстычную каштоўнасць гістарыцысцкай перспектывы для перачытання ўнаследаваных наратываў і прапануе канцэптуальны каркас для абноўленага вывучэння персідскай філасофіі адукацыі і шырэйшых сацыякультурных традыцый.

Ключавыя словы: персідская інтэлектуальная спадчына; традыцыя Іраншахра; гістарыцысцкая інтэрпрэтацыя; культурная апропрыяцыя; рэлігійна-моўная талерантнасць; уладныя структуры; недастаткова прадстаўленыя філасофіі

Research Article

Reframing Persian Educational Thought Through a Historicist Lens: Philosophy, Identity, and Power Dynamics

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Abstract. This qualitative research applies a Historicist perspective to investigate how Persian intellectual traditions have been obscured within modern scholarship. Using materials drawn from Greek historical writings, Arab-Islamic accounts, and secondary analyses on Persian civilization, the study conducts a thematic exploration of the power structures embedded in dominant Greek and Arab-Islamic thought that have historically overshadowed Persian contributions. By tracing these narrative patterns, the study identifies and categorizes three foundational dimensions of Persian intellectual life, emphasizing religio-linguistic tolerance, the influence of elite figures and the concept of divine Khvarenah, and the civilizational idea of Iranshahr. Historicism serves as the organizing lens, demonstrating how ancient Persians conceptualized Kherad a form of ancestral wisdom as a guiding principle for governance, cultural endurance, and the transmission of knowledge to successive traditions, including those of the Hellenistic and Arab-Islamic worlds. Through this approach, the analysis underscores the utility of Historicism for reinterpreting inherited narratives and introduces a conceptual scaffold for renewed inquiry into Persian educational philosophy and broader socio-cultural traditions.

Keywords: Persian intellectual heritage; Iranshahr tradition; historicist interpretation; cultural appropriation; religio-linguistic tolerance; power structures; underrepresented philosophies

Introduction

This article advances three interconnected conceptual pillars intended to outline the philosophical underpinnings of Persian intellectual tradition. Although ancient Persians exerted substantial political, cultural, and intellectual influence across a vast region extending from Egypt to the Indus River, scholarly engagement with their educational philosophy remains strikingly limited. Existing historical narratives often portray Persians as administrators of a powerful empire that lasted for over a millennium, yet little attention has been granted to how their worldview shaped learning, governance, and cultural formation (Arasteh, 1962; Hegel, 1975). Religion played a central part in this worldview: numerous royal inscriptions record Persian rulers attributing their authority and military success to Ahura Mazda, the Zoroastrian Lord of Wisdom (Brosius, 2021; Daryaee, 2017; Davaran, 2010; Reeves, 2013).

Persian thought also shaped other civilizational and religious traditions through sustained political, cultural, and religious exchanges. Zoroastrian, Mithraic, Manichaean, and Avestan ideas contributed theological concepts to

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Zhurnal Belorusskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta. Istoriya

Культура і адукацыя
Culture and Education

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, influencing notions of eschatology, ritual, morality, and cosmology (Katouzian, 2010; Reeves, 2013; Nasr, 2013). Persian institutions further preserved Greek philosophical heritage when displaced Greek scholars took refuge in Persia after 529 A.D. and collaborated with Persian elites in translating scientific and philosophical texts into Pahlavi (Nakosteen, 1965; Savran, 2018; Davaran, 2010).

These developments demonstrate that Persians conceptualized Kherad ancient wisdom as a foundation for knowledge transmission, governance, and intercultural intellectual exchange. Even after the rise of Islam, Persian scholars remained central in shaping Arab-Islamic sciences, contributing extensively to the intellectual achievements of the Islamic Golden Age. Key figures such as Avicenna and Suhrawardy enriched Islamic thought while drawing on earlier Persian philosophies, including notions of illumination and Farreh Izadi (Nasr, 2013). Yet, despite this long-standing intellectual engagement, major works in philosophy of education from Mead (2016) to Mintz (2021), Noddings (2018), and O'Connor (2016) have overwhelmingly centered on Greek traditions, leaving Persian perspectives marginalized and underrepresented.

This scholarly gap highlights a broader challenge: Persian intellectual contributions have often been subsumed under Greek or Arab-Islamic frameworks, shaped largely by historical narratives produced by those dominant traditions (Llewellyn-Jones, 2022; Davaran, 2010). Many depictions by Greek historians reduced Persians to stereotypes such as "barbarians," while later Arab-Islamic accounts classified them as ajam or non-Arabs, influencing how Persian identity and thought were framed and transmitted (Zarinkoob, 1957; Nakosteen, 1965). Such portrayals have complicated efforts to analyze Persian educational philosophy on its own terms.

Drawing on this context, the present study adopts a Historicist approach (D'Amico, 1989; Popper, 2002), which emphasizes that interpretations of history must be situated within their cultural and temporal contexts. Applying Historicism allows for a reevaluation of Greek and Arab-Islamic narratives about Persians, enabling scholars to recognize how these perspectives both informed and constrained the representation of Persian thought. Through this lens, the study identifies three thematic principles religio-linguistic tolerance, the civilizational vision of Iranshahr, and the role of elite figures and divine Khvarenah as foundational elements that can support the development of a conceptual framework for understanding Persian educational philosophy. By revisiting historical interpretations and unpacking the dynamics that marginalized Persian thought, this article aims to promote a more inclusive intellectual history and encourage further exploration of Persian contributions to educational and philosophical traditions.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a Historicist analytical framework to reinterpret historical narratives concerning Persian intellectual and educational traditions. Historicism, as articulated by Burian (1977) and D'Amico (1989), rejects the notion of universal and timeless epistemic standards, emphasizing instead that human knowledge emerges within specific cultural and historical conditions. Accordingly, this study adopts a methodology that situates Persian thought within the contexts in which related texts, interpretations, and political structures were produced.

Data for the analysis consisted of three primary bodies of sources: (1) Greek historiographical accounts describing Persian governance, religion, and society; (2) Arab-Islamic historical narratives addressing the Persian role in early Islamic intellectual development; and (3) modern literature examining Persia's cultural, philosophical, and educational legacies. These materials were systematically reviewed with attention to both explicit descriptions and implicit ideological assumptions that shaped perceptions of Persian identity and thought.

Following Reynolds (1999) and Hamilton (2003), the study proceeded from the premise that ideas cannot be separated from the cultural milieus that inform them. The selected texts were therefore examined using a thematic coding approach. Passages were first identified and grouped based on recurring conceptual patterns such as depictions

of religious tolerance, linguistic and cultural interaction, political authority, and cross-civilizational knowledge transfer. Themes were then refined and classified to reveal underlying philosophical constructs embedded in Persian intellectual life.

This methodological process allowed the study to reconstruct three core principles that can serve as the basis of a conceptual framework for Persian educational thought: the policy of tolerance, the civilizational ethos of Iranshahr, and the function of elite figures and Khvarenah in legitimizing knowledge and governance. The approach also made it possible to highlight how subsequent Greek and Arab-Islamic narratives reshaped or obscured these principles over time. By integrating Historicist reasoning with thematic analysis, the study not only revisits Persian intellectual traditions from a context-sensitive perspective but also demonstrates how narrative power dynamics contributed to their historical marginalization. This method further enables contemporary scholars to reassess long-held assumptions regarding the origins, development, and transmission of educational ideas across Persian, Hellenistic, and Arab-Islamic spheres.

Results

The application of a Historicist perspective produced several interconnected findings that clarify why Persian intellectual and educational traditions have remained comparatively underexplored within academic discourse. The examination of Greek historiography revealed that early representations of Persians were shaped by exaggeration and negative stereotyping. Narratives describing rulers such as Cambyses II as emotionally unstable, or depicting the Achaemenid administration as despotic and culturally inferior, created interpretive frameworks that influenced later perceptions. These recurrent portrayals established long-lasting stereotypes that became embedded both in scholarly works and in modern cultural media. In addition to Greek narratives, the study identified the transformative effects of Arab-Islamic expansion on Persian intellectual identity. After the Sassanian defeat, Persians were frequently categorized using terms such as ajam and mawali, labels that signified cultural and political inferiority within the emerging Arab-Islamic order. The dominance of Arabic as the principal language of scholarship contributed further to the diminishing visibility of Persian contributions. Major intellectual figures such as Avicenna, Al-Razi, Al-Farabi, and Al-Khwarizmi were increasingly grouped into an "Arab-Islamic" intellectual category, despite their Persian origins and deep engagement with Persian traditions.

The analysis also highlighted the impact of the Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement. Texts initially translated into Pahlavi and later into Arabic became foundational sources for medieval European scholarship. However, because they circulated in Arabic, many of these works were later attributed solely to Arab-Islamic tradition. As a result, the Persian role in safeguarding and transmitting Greek and Indian scientific knowledge was obscured across centuries of historiography.

Table 1. The impact of the Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement

Barriers	Impacts	Consequences
Young field of education	Limits rigorous study	Under-development of other
Greek narratives	Dominant western educational	thought systems; Exclusivity vs.
Persian oral culture	frameworks.	Inclusivity.
Arab Conquest & power dynamics	Misrepresentation of Persians as	Enduring stereotypes & modern
Arabic language	barbarises.	media representations.
Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement	Reduces diverse traditions to a	Overshadowing Persian cultural
	singular Muslim identity.	distinctiveness.

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Zhurnal Belorusskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta. Istoriya

Культура і адукацыя
Culture and Education

Barriers	Impacts	Consequences
	Imposition of Islamic concepts (Ummah). Calling Persians mawali & ajam. Arabic as religious and scholarly lingua franca. Persian scholars writing in Arabic; Translating Arabic texts into Latin.	Cultural, philosophical, and linguistic marginalization of Persian thought. Subsuming Persian/other intellectual traditions as Arab-Islamic; labeling Persian Muslim scholars as Arab Muslims. Misattributing Persian scholars' contributions; European Enlightenment; Marginalization of Persian thought.

Despite these barriers, the thematic coding of sources consistently revealed three philosophical elements that form the structural core of Persian educational thought. The first is the Persian policy of tolerance, which allowed various religions, languages, and cultural practices to coexist within the empire as long as subjects-maintained loyalty to the central authority. This environment of pluralism facilitated extensive intellectual exchange across diverse communities.

The second theme concerns the civilizational concept of Iranshahr, which linked territorial identity, governance, cultural memory, and educational values. Iranshahr functioned as a unifying framework through which Persians conceptualized their role within a broader historical and cosmological landscape. It provided continuity not only across dynasties but also throughout periods of foreign domination, enabling Persians to maintain a distinct cultural and intellectual identity. The third theme centers on the pivotal role of elite figures whose authority was understood to derive from Khvarenah, the divine glory granted by Ahura Mazda. Kings, priests, administrators, and scholars played central roles in shaping institutions, preserving philosophical teachings, and transmitting knowledge across generations. Their influence reflects the intertwining of political legitimacy and intellectual leadership within the Persian tradition.

Table 2. The Civilizational Concept of Iranshahr

Era	Educational Focus	Practices
Pre-Alexandrian Era	Moral & physical training, Reading & Writing, Hunting, Swimming.	Four-stage educational system.
Post-Alexandrian Era	Integration with Greek thought, academies of higher education.	Translation of Greek sciences into Pahlavi. Establishment of Academies of Higher Education.
Islamic Period	Persian scholars shaping Islamic sciences, Cultural resilience, revival of Persian intellectual traditions.	Avicenna, Al-Razi, Shuūbiyya Movement, House of Wisdom, Resistance to Arabization, Revival of Persian language.

These three overarching principles tolerance, Iranshahr, and elite authority collectively illuminate the foundations of Persian educational philosophy. They illustrate how intellectual life was sustained through a balance of religious worldview, political structure, and cultural resilience. When assessed together, these themes offer insight into how Persians conceptualized Kherad (ancient wisdom) as a guiding principle for governance, ethical conduct, and the preservation of knowledge. The synthesis of these findings is reflected in the classification of core constructs that underpin Persian educational thought. This classification demonstrates how Persian intellectual life evolved through interaction with Greeks, Arabs, and other cultural groups while maintaining its own philosophical coherence.

Table 3. The Synthesis of These Findings

Persian Education Principles	Philosophical Foundation	Example
Policy of Tolerance	Religious, Linguistic, Political	Cyrus the Great allowing Jews to rebuild their Second Temple & respecting Babylonians' Marduk. Multilingual record-keeping at Persepolis.
Iranshahr	Civilizational Identity, Paideia, Cultural Ethos, Religion	Integration of Zoroastrianism into education and governance.
Persian Elite Figures & Khvarenah	Divine wisdom legitimizing rule	Emperor Darius's administrative reforms & helping Jews rebuild their temples. Persian cuneiform. Emperor Shapour's Academy of Gundi-Shapour.

Overall, the results affirm that Persian educational philosophy can be reconstructed through a contextual reading of historical narratives. Although external power structures shaped much of how Persian intellectual traditions were framed, these traditions possessed distinctive principles that influenced neighboring civilizations and contributed meaningfully to broader intellectual history.

Discussion

This study sought to reassess the position of Persian thought within the broader landscape of intellectual history by applying a Historicist framework. The findings demonstrate that the limited scholarly attention to Persian educational philosophy is not the result of an absence of intellectual activity within Persia, but rather a consequence of how historical narratives were shaped by dominant Greek and Arab-Islamic power structures. By analyzing these narratives within their cultural and temporal contexts, it becomes evident that Persian contributions were repeatedly reframed, minimized, or attributed to other traditions, ultimately obscuring their philosophical and educational significance.

Greek sources, which formed the earliest external narratives about Persia, were instrumental in creating interpretive biases. Their depictions were shaped by political rivalry and cultural competition, producing stereotypical portrayals that influenced later Western scholarship. Similarly, Arab-Islamic narratives that emerged after the conquest introduced new layers of marginalization. These accounts positioned Persians as secondary actors within the Islamic world, and the dominance of Arabic as the scholarly language allowed Persian intellectual output to be

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Zhurnal Belorusskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta. Istoriya

Культура і адукацыя
Culture and Education

absorbed into what became known as the Arab-Islamic tradition. Through these mechanisms, Persian thinkers were frequently recategorized, and their works were assigned identities that aligned more closely with the prevailing power structures of the time.

The use of Historicism in this study underscores the importance of contextualizing these portrayals rather than accepting them as neutral historical records. As Historicism argues that no text or thinker exists independently of its historical moment (D'Amico, 1989; Reynolds, 1999), reevaluating these narratives allows for the recovery of suppressed or overlooked perspectives. In the case of Persian thought, such reevaluation reveals a long-standing intellectual tradition characterized by distinct philosophical elements, including religio-linguistic tolerance, the civilizational ethos of Iranshahr, and the central role of elite figures legitimized through Khvarenah. These principles highlight the structural coherence of Persian educational philosophy and demonstrate its significant influence on Hellenistic, Arab-Islamic, and later European intellectual developments.

The findings also align with scholars such as Nakosteen (1965), Corbin (2014), and Nasr (2013), who have emphasized that Persia served as a crucial bridge for the preservation and transmission of ancient scientific and philosophical knowledge. Persian academies, translation networks, and elite governance structures enabled the circulation of Greek, Indian, and indigenous Persian ideas across civilizations. However, as the Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement transmitted these texts into Arabic and subsequently into Latin, many of these contributions were realigned under Arab identity. This historical process illustrates how intellectual genealogies can be reshaped by linguistic and political dynamics, reinforcing the need for methods that critically interrogate inherited narratives.

The implications of this study extend beyond historical clarification. By reconstructing the conceptual foundations of Persian educational thought, the analysis provides a framework that future scholars can use to explore neglected dimensions of Persian intellectual history. This includes opportunities to examine how Persian models of tolerance, cultural governance, and ethical leadership may contribute to contemporary debates in philosophy of education, intercultural learning, and comparative intellectual history. Additionally, the study suggests that reassessing the cultural and epistemic assumptions underlying dominant historical narratives can support more inclusive and balanced accounts of global intellectual development.

Although the present study offers new insights, it also highlights the need for further research. Much of Persian philosophical writing is intertextual and symbolic, requiring interpretive approaches that extend beyond conventional Western analytical methods. Moreover, the long-term impact of Persian thought on Islamic and European intellectual traditions remains an open field for deeper systematic investigation. By incorporating broader textual sources, archaeological evidence, and comparative linguistic analysis, future work can continue to refine and expand understandings of Persian intellectual heritage.

Conclusions

This study emphasized the importance of reexamining the educational and intellectual traditions of the Persianate world, which have long remained overshadowed within mainstream historical and philosophical scholarship. Although Persians played a central role in shaping ancient political, cultural, and religious landscapes, the philosophical foundations of their educational thought have not developed in the same visible trajectories as those of Greek or Western traditions. By employing a Historicist framework, this research identified several interconnected barriers that contributed to this underrepresentation, including the relatively young status of education as a formal field of study, the oral nature of early Persian culture, and the influence of Greek, Arab-Islamic, and later European power structures on the transmission and interpretation of Persian narratives.

Through the contextual reassessment of historical sources, the study highlighted how Persian intellectual contributions were reframed, absorbed, or misattributed across different eras. The analysis demonstrated that Persian thought did not emerge in isolation but evolved through interactions with Greek, Mesopotamian, Indian, and Arab traditions, while maintaining its own distinct philosophical identity. Building on this reinterpretation, the study introduced three core conceptual elements the policy of tolerance, the civilizational vision of Iranshahr, and the legitimizing authority of elite figures guided by Khvarenah as foundational components for reconstructing Persian educational philosophy.

These principles illustrate that Persian intellectual life was grounded in a coherent worldview that integrated governance, ethics, cultural preservation, and the pursuit of wisdom. They also reveal how Persian institutions played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting knowledge to later civilizations, including the Hellenistic and Arab-Islamic worlds, and ultimately to Europe. However, the misclassification of renowned Persian scholars as exclusively Arab and the dominance of Arabic-language scholarship contributed to the long-term marginalization of Persian contributions. The findings underscore the need for further research that interrogates inherited historical assumptions and examines Persian thought on its own terms. Such scholarship has the potential not only to restore visibility to a significant intellectual tradition but also to expand contemporary understandings of educational philosophy, cultural identity formation, and cross-civilizational knowledge exchange. In this way, the study contributes to a broader effort to build a more inclusive and historically accurate account of global intellectual history.

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