

The Theory of “Living Time” in Periodization of Iranian Architectural History

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ABSTRACT: The writing of Iranian architectural history has, from its start, followed the principles of western historiography. Portions of this history are well expected to be neglected or unattended when writing of it takes place outside its intellectual framework that essentially reflects the Iranian thought world. To have a truly Iranian architectural historiography, one has to find the theoretical principles which are deeply rooted in the Iranian Islamic culture. Although pre-modern Iranian historians never wrote a history of architecture, they were exponents of historiography during a millennium of cultural flourishing and vigor. Since any sort of historiography, as well as literature, usually is based on principles and ideological views about history and time, Persian historic texts can be considered as worthy sources regarding theoretical bases on which we can build the Iranian philosophy of architectural history. Persian prose of the early centuries of Islam is among these sources. One of the common, prominent themes in these texts is the nature of time or history. It is presented as a sensible, living being whose states relate to human events and phenomena across time. A new theory of periodization of Iranian architectural history can be drawn based upon this theory.

Keywords: *Living time, Iranian Architecture, History, Dahr.*

INTRODUCTION

Seeking Principles of an Iranian Philosophy of Architectural History

As in all non-modern cultures, architectural history was not attended to Iranian culture since architecture was not considered as a matter that could be written. Writing of architectural history is essential in order to understand both the Iranian architecture. No version of architectural history has ever been written without having theoretical principles, which although unmentioned as they may be, exist but are not directly related to or may have even been simply looked over. The viewpoint from which a historian sees humans, society, culture, history, and the world is inevitably embedded in the history s/he writes.

Many scholars have attempted to write portions or aspects of Iranian architectural history. Yet, all of these histories are based on western theoretical principles since architectural historiography originated from the West. Should they be based otherwise, the historian shall have to intentionally engage in finding alternative principles. No one has yet attempted so- to find principles other than those of the western tradition. The works of the pioneers of Iranian historiography as ‘Iranian history of Iranian architecture’ is totally absurd. The architectural

historiography would be truly ‘Iranian’ or ‘Islamic’ only when its philosophy is rooted in the culture and religion of the peoples of Iran.

Where from can obtain theoretical principles for Iranian architectural historiography? As we are now living outside our true ethnic/religious atmosphere, tens or hundreds of years of striving would be expected from us before we find such a theoretical system that is truly contextual and culturally-oriented. It is evident that by the time, the remaining current that still links us today to this culture would fade out, and none of its traces would be left for us to rediscover or revive. Our ancestors, though, lived in and were nurtured through this culture during hundreds of years that served them to form religious and ethnic interpretations. It seems as if using this legacy and trying to re-establish it in a framework understandable to ones outside the aforementioned atmosphere is the only way to institute the Iranian historiography for Iranian architecture on the basis of culturally-originated principles.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Architectural history is an approach or a genre of history writing. Therefore, its general theoretical principles are the same. Although Iranian historians never wrote a history of architecture, they were exponents of historiography and were among the prolific writers in

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the past eras. The theoretical principles of historiography can be derived by investigating their works, and can be tested to verify whether they apply to Iranian architectural history as well.

Man and his standings are materialized in history. Even the spiritual and non-physical aspects of human existence, as long as existing in this world, have an historical materialization. Furthermore, man always resides in place, and so as to continue living has to shape and build it accordingly. In other words, where man lives, there is a work of architecture. He creates an architecture that is correspondent to his life, and to his spiritual and material needs. Therefore, architecture is the manifestation of human needs, ideas, and viewpoints. Man is materialized in history, and architecture is the stage of this materialization. In other words, the historical materialization of man is in fact, an architectural manifestation. Then, architectural history means the history of humanity and its life inside this world. Human history is thus akin to architectural history, and vice versa. Architectural history and history are related in two ways; first, architectural history is a genre of history; and second, human history is not detached from architecture in that architecture is an indispensable facet of human life. Talking of theories of architectural history would be somewhat the same as talking of theories of history then. Specific architectural historical theories can be observed in more detailed discussions, however.

The objective of this paper is to investigate from texts written in the early centuries of Islam a theme that could be regarded as a theoretical basis for one of the most important questions of historiography, the general evolutionary process of history and the pattern of this evolution for classification and periodization means. Texts quoted here are similar to Hegelian legacy in the philosophy of history. However, the objective is not to revive the former legacy in architectural historiography, but to derive and deduct from inside the Iranian culture a set of principles on whose account one can interpret and write about the history of Iranian culture. In this paper, the Hegelian ideas and interpretations are overlooked in favor of establishing the ingrained ideas in Persian prose with due regard to the cultural ground that produced such texts. It has also been intended to keep the interpretations from mixing with ideas from other cultures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

History or Time (*zamâna*)

The meaning of the term *târikh* (literally, history) in contemporary Persian language has been modified from the original. In the past, *târikh* (derived from Arabic *ta'rikh*) referred to an account of the past, or of contemporary events since they would, at a time, become the past. In Bayhaqî's words, "I dare to fully recount this *târikh*, with all its surroundings so that nothing would be unnoticed," (Bayhaqî, 2002, 10) *târikh* is the narrative whose subject is an account of past events

and conditions. In other words, *târikh* was not applied to the subject, but rather to the form of writing—which was "an account of past events and conditions". The subject referred to the account of personalities of religious or of the ruling order, or to the events in a place or a town, and was accordingly called *hâl*, *khavar*, *hadîth*, *wâqi'ah*, *athar*, *ma'thar*, *sîrah*, *tadhkirah*, *hikâyah*. Today, though, under the influence of European languages, the knowledge, the account, the text, and the subject of the narrative are all called *târikh*. It is for this reason that, to avoid confusion, some contemporary researchers use the term *târikh-nâma* for what was termed *târikh* in the past. Also, some use 'the primary *târikh*' to mean 'what happened with men' (history as events), and 'secondary *tarik*' to mean 'an account of it' (history as account). This distinction is important so as to avoid fallacy once talking of architectural history (Qayyoomi, 2006).

The first notion, '*târikh* as events', can be conceptualized in various forms. It can be thought of as a series of events randomly followed by one another. Or they can be regarded as a set of events that succeed each other upon special, unknown 'trend's. Also, the events and phenomena and their succession may be thought to be based upon orders and laws that are either unrecognizable by man (since un-repeating), or recognizable—only via a source beyond the limits of human perception (Popper, 1979). In another sense, one can think of history as a subjective being whose existence is not real, but rather an abstract creation of man of the sequence of events in society through the course of time. Also, one may think of it as a not-living object that is insensible like all other such beings. Conversely though, one may regard it as a being, which whether living or not-living, is of intelligence.

Writers of Persian prose who dealt with history in the early centuries of Islam believed, firstly, that history is dominated by certain laws and a general design lies behind its processes; secondly, that history is a real being, not a subjective one; and thirdly, that because of its objective reality, history has its due share of life and sensibility. History is a sensible, living being governed by certain laws and functioning under the Divine will, or the Divine decree and ordinance (*qadhâ'*) which, at times, is revealed to, or concealed from human eyes. Like all other beings in this world, history is a manifestation of God, and thus possesses life and sensibility. Yet, it is a worldly being; hence, displaying such qualities as partiality, transformability, rise and decline, health and illness, enthusiasm and indolence. It has a childhood and an adolescence, health and illness, power and weakness. The important matter is that this being was not called as *târikh*, but denoted as '*zamâna*' or '*dahr*' in Persian writings of the early centuries of Islam—and also other pre-modern Persian texts.

The Design of History in *Târikh-i Bayhaqî*

It is appropriate now to quote some evidence from

Bayhaqî's history and investigate some underlying notions in his precise descriptions concerning the aforementioned philosophy.

Bayhaqî's history is among the best sources to research theoretical principles of history. This may seem improbable to one who has read it only once, as the author does not apparently enter the realm of theory in his book, and only relates a precise account of historical events regarding the political life of the Ghaznavids, especially of Mas'oud I. This very characteristic of the book, that is, being a difficult source to interpret the theories of history, makes it, on the other hand, an exclusive example to the effect that no history is ever written from without a theoretical standpoint. It fits our purpose because, unlike other chronicles as *Bal'amî's history*, it is totally worldly and realistic. Bayhaqî is an example of a fair, truthful historian. Therefore, it can be said that theoretical principles underlying or implied by his work may be considered more useful as to be employed for writing of architectural history. Worldly histories lies on basic principles—largely epitomized in the words: Divine decree (*qadhâ'*), remembrance of God (*dhikr*), and remembrance of death (Qayyoomi Bidhendi, 2011). Bayhaqî's belief in the governing Divine Orders (*sunan-o-llâh*) over the *zamâna* (history/ time) can be witnessed in many cases. For instance, where he speaks of Mahmoud Ghaznavi's changing temper, he brings forth a Divine Order, "...and the habit of the *zamâna* is that it not always be on the same track, but that change comes about everything" (Bayhaqî, 2002, 182). He expresses his surprise of the unexpected happenings, "How wonderful is this world, its transformations and changing states" (Ibid, 1115). And he asserts that attachment to such an erratic, unstable world is unmindful (Ibid, 284).

This temperamental Time is cyclic. Difficulty and ease, scarcity and variety, fury and forbearance recur one after another. It sometimes turns with precession (*iqbâl*), and sometimes with recession (*idbâr*), both of which are ephemeral states and replace one another. Recession of the *zamâna* can be predicted according to some occurrences—being the time to seek refuge in God¹. Hence, one shall not be attached to such "a beguiling world that is graciously giving on one hand, and fatally killing on the other," and that, "fondness of worldly blessings is unrealizable" (Ibid, 512). This world takes back what it offers sooner or later—through whose course the wise are recognizable from the unwise (Ibid, 284). "Foolish is one who is attached to this beguiling universe, and not counts on its blessings, eminence, and governance" (Ibid, 49). Indeed, one shall not be attached to this world, but there is one binding law that one cannot remove from, as it is the Divine Order. "One shall reflect on histories to prove that similar times have always been and under all rulerships" (Ibid, 1118). From Bayhaqî's point of view, all of history can be discerned in the framework of the Divine decree (*qadhâ'*). The Divine decree is the design of God for the evolution of

all creatures, especially of mankind. The free will of humans only makes sense in this general framework. The Divine decree lays out a network of paths, through which men can choose, by their free will, which to tread on—a path whose course and final destination is also predetermined in the Divine decree. Thus, in Bayhaqî's view, the Divine decree is an affair of God (*sha'n*), and so is of sensibility and life. The image of the Divine decree in Bayhaqî's works reflects a living, sensible being that lives beyond this world and watches the affairs of people. It sometimes derides them and then sits aside to observe the end of the story. Consequently, the story of all Time can be denoted as "the story of the Divine decree and free will", in which history is the setting or the incidents of this struggle- a struggle whose general victory is always known to be the Divine decree, but through whose instances it is undecided. At end of the story, the observer understands what had been pre-destined. All happenings comply with the Divine decree since it is definite and always victorious². The wise can recognize the *qadhâ'* - that is invincible to all power- empirically (Ibid, 986). They can sense it by way of studying annals of previous men, and so they know when to retreat from defiance (Ibid, 1098).

The historian and his readers know that every person struggling such and so will eventually die after a while. Beside them and above them all, there is another being which also knows all about, and in fact, governs the struggle. It observes it either with pity or with a sarcastic smile, not uttering a word, "...and *qadhâ'* was smiling at him,³ knowing that in two days, the past will become."⁴ But the Wisdom of God (*hikmah*) makes it so that the *qadhâ'* corresponds to people's intentions (*niyyah*), deeds, and dispositions. It is thus that one can choose among paths from within the definite design of Allah which upon being chosen, will eventually disclose their definite destiny towards good or evil (Ibid, 913). Therefore, the *zamâna* is a sensible, willing, living being that, like any other creature, is guided by God under His Will (*mashiyyah*) and ultimately determined by the *qadhâ'* (Qayyoomi, 2006).

The States of the Zamâna

In the eyes of scholars whose works are among the references of this paper, the *zamâna* goes through rise and decline or strength and weakness—patterns of transition which can be applied at two scales: first, at the scale of the universal history; and second, at the smaller scale of segments of that history, ethnohistory, history of lands, etc. At the first scale, the *zamâna* is believed to go down a general route from strength to weakness, along which upon reaching its lowest state, a prophet or a saint (*walî*) emerges and elevates it. The general path of the *zamâna* has been declining ever since the time of Prophet Muhammad- the last of prophets. Yet along this falling path, there are the Initiated (*awliya' Allah*) who keep it up and strengthen it. The *zamâna* is aging old, infirm, and weak, but then there are the *awliya'*

who breathe life into and revive it. Those who are aware of God's Order and of the *zamâna*'s strong and weak states, act up accordingly, knowing that getting more and more distanced from the light that once glinted in the *zamâna* (Prophet Muhammad), Time gets old and frail. And that is why that in all segments of the *zamâna*, as compared to the advent of Islam, the knowledge of reality and seeking the truth are rather impaired and exhausted. And it is also due to the same reason that, in the words of Abu-l-Hassan Hojvîrî (d. circa 1100 AD), realization of that reality is turned unachievable in such a time as this.

You shall know that at such a time as ours the knowledge of Reality is impaired, especially of the dwellers of this land who have yielded to sensuality, and deviated from the path of God. Even all of 'ulamâ and those who claim to be one have formed a misinterpretation of that path. Hence, no dweller of the *zamâna* is to accomplish the task- since trapped in it—that are able to do the elite (*khawâs*) of the Real God. The discipleship (*irâdat*) is dissociated from its master; and the mystical knowledge (*ma'rifah*) drawn out of existence from all its seekers. Folks attempt to no further than its mere utterance [of the *ma'rifah*], and heartily believe in its absence (*hijab*). Imitation (*taqlîd*) has replaced realization (*tahqîq*) of the Reality, and thus realization has been concealed in their *zamâna*. (Abul-Hassan Hojvîrî, eleventh AD) (Hojvîrî, 2004, 10).

It is true that the weak-kneed and the ill-minded cause malady and corruption in the *zamâna*. But as the *zamâna* corrupts, it affects people's hearts, "Depravity of hearts relates to the corruption of the *zamâna* and its dwellers." And this cycle goes on only to devour the turned-away hearts down into the *zamâna* to the deepest declivity and descending stages of the universe.

Yet this remark was made as a consequence of the *zamâna* being plagued and infected with indolence. The Exalted God has concealed his friends among members of a nation, and thus has obscured and secluded that nation among mankind. O, how splendid is this saying of the master of masters, the light of disciples, 'Ali ibn Bondâr as-Sayrafi, *rahmatullâh 'alayh*), "Depravity of hearts relates to the corruption of the *zamâna* and its dwellers." (Ibid, 2004, 25).

Time is the vehicle of the *zamâna*, which is comprised of days and nights. But the *zamâna*, or *târîkh* as it is called today, also has day and night. The age of infirmity, decadence and indolence of the *zamâna* reveals at its nighttime, when darkness and the withheld light of reality make ground for inauspicious times,

When the good servants inherited the earth, time was auspicious and it was 'daytime'. And when good servants of God, among the benevolent, inherit the earth again, time will be auspicious, and it will be 'daytime'. Now, no good servants have inherited the earth, so all is inauspicious, being the 'nighttime', and all this is a cycle. The light of day lasts from the first glitter to the time determined by the Wisdom (*hikmah*)

of God. Comes blindness after farness, and farness after blindness; likewise, night after day and day after night (Muhammad ibn Surkh Nayshâburî, eleventh AD) (Surkh Nayshâburî, 1955, 48).

And the sign of this illumination and fortune is that the world be led by good servants of God. The *zamâna* is not solely composed of time, but a combination of time and place. In other words, the vehicle of the *zamâna* is time and place. It flies by with two wings, one of which is time, and the other place. It dominates the communities by and through time and place. That is why that when it is powerful, whatever that is born through time and place to develop is powerful and plentiful; and when it is weak and frail, the vice versa,

Beings are born into time and place. Their places are different, as are their times. When the time and place are powerful, [eminent] human beings flourish; and when weak, they subside (Sagzî, 1988, 67).

The powerful *zamâna* nurtures powerful men, while the weak *zamâna* nurtures weak-kneeds. Therefore, one of the signs of the propitious and elevated *zamâna* is that works produced during that era are plenty and prominent. Another of its signs is that good servants of God flourish in it. And the third sign is that during a healthy *zamâna*, the sovereign has a pleasing presence, and his viziers and viceroys are noble and benevolent,

whilst good times reveal and illness of the *zamâna* heals, a sign of it would be that a pleasing-presence sovereign would come, the immoral decrease in number, his decisions would be sound, his viziers and viceroys noble and benevolent (Tûsî, 2006, 216).

The Reverberation of the Living Zamâna

The concept of the *zamâna* having life can be commonly traced in the writings of Iranian thinkers through the first to the fifth centuries of Islam. A concept that both the Isma'îlî sages believed in (Surkh and Sagzî), and their adversaries (Tûsî) alike; and also Bayhaqî (the historian) and Hojvîrî (the Sufî master). It can be speculated that numerous instances of evidence for it could also be found in verse compositions of the early as well as prose and poem of later centuries.

The reverberations of this concept appear in the poetry of Hâfiz (the great Persian Poet of the fourteenth century AD)- in which he finds the nature of time abject during his lifetime- and also in the contemporary poetry of Parvîn E'tesâmî, in which she declares the *zamâna* an honorable critic who would take in the work of the poet, appreciate it, and take care of it,

"I leave this in the hands of *zamâna*,

Which is a shrewd critic and goldsmith,

Through the furnace of Time, copper and Zinc turn black,
 But the fine gold will be kept aside." (Etesami, 2006, 38)

The notion of Time as a living being has permeated all throughout our history, and it may well be rooted in the holy *hadith* which says, "Do not offend the *zamâna* with words, as God is the *zamâna*".⁵ Upon this, the *zamâna* is a disclosure and a manifestation of God, carrying

the track of affairs under His Will.

CONCLUSION

Theorizing a Philosophy for Architectural History

Presented discussions led us to a general design for history (*zamâna*), upon which it is assumed a living being. It may fall ill or be healthy, be of elevated spirits or turn infirm and indolent. There are signs which upon recognition can determine the state of the *zamâna*. From the previously-quoted material, we can conjure up a scheme to theorize a philosophy of history, and of architectural history, with the following statements: History is a real being, not a subjective one.

There is a general design to which history conforms⁶. Conformity with this design means one can offer explanations for historical events, and even predict some.

History (*zamâna*) goes through states and moods like human beings- it has a spirit, it breathes, falls ill, gets well, is elevated or down, and is sometimes generative and sometimes barren.

According to these humanly traits, the states of history are cyclic, that is, there may be recurring periods during which the *zamâna* is of a benevolent and elevated spirit. The general mood of history is much the same at these periods, so as can be described with the same qualities. These periods are recognizable both in the large and the small scale.

The "state" of each period of history can be recognized by means of signs. Upon this recognition, other qualities can also be speculated.

In light of this speculation, the sheathed, dark phases of history can be recognized; and qualities of contemporary and future periods predicted.

This set of statements meets the criteria of an historical theory⁷. This kind of theory can be applied to any approach or genre of historiography, namely architectural historiography. In this case, a different system of periodization may apply to the history of Iranian architecture. The advantage of this theory is the system it introduces that sheds light on and explains the ambiguous phases of the Iranian architectural history. For instance, the simultaneity of the listless, barren cultural ground and architectural manifestations of the Qajar period can be explained along with the dazzling generative force that created glorious works such as the Sayyid Mosque of Isfahân and Âqâ-Buzurg Mosque of Kashân. It may also have coherent and plausible answers to explain some questions about the architectural history of Iran. Questions such as the reason behind the disharmony of the facades of the courtyard in the Friay Mosque of Isfahan, the contrast of the stunningly majestic stature of the mosques of the Ilkhanid period with the fine ornamentation of their prayer niches (*mihrab*), the reason of continuity of architectural forms through the Timurid and Safavid periods, or the cause that led to the creation of the masterpiece of Safavid architecture (Chahâr-bâgh

Madrasa) towards the end of that period. It can be concluded then, that why after a century of dormancy following the Mongol invasion, a glorious epoch of architecture and urbanism rose under the Ilkhanids. It may provide us with more precise and more convincing facts as to constitute the relation of philosophy and architecture of Iran under the Safavids. It may lead us to hundreds of unanswered questions across the architectural history of Iran, and also pave the way towards a plethora of new, meaningful inquiries.

Some may assert that this theory relies on a logic converse, in the way that the state of the *zamâna* is determined by way of recognition of signs and symptoms, the state is determined by symptoms, and further symptoms are speculated by knowing the state— and this is a logic converse. The answer is that such a superficial converse is inherent in any theory and it is, in fact, not converse. The *zamâna* resembles a human being. One can diagnose its symptoms, and then explain or speculate other of its symptoms. That is the basic task of a theory.

It is clear that this theory must be tested to see if it corresponds to the methods of architectural historiography. The validity of an historical theory does not lie in the method of structuring it; hence, it cannot be disregarded simply because it is not based on empirical support (especially that support from past experience is an impossible fact). A theory of historiography can only be disregarded when its application in explaining or predicting of historical events fails.

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ENDNOTES

1. For example, see Bayhaqî, A.F. (2002). Bayhaqî's history, Tehran: Hedayat, 3: 933.
2. For example see Bayhaqî, A.F. (2002). Bayhaqî's history, Tehran: Hedayat, 1: 229; 2: 676 and 711; 3: 950 and 962.
3. Harûn, the son of Khârazm-shâh
4. i.e. "he will die."
5. This hadith, with its various words, seems to be unanimously agreed upon. I found it in Shiite hadith books as Tâjuddîn Shu'ayrî, *Jâmi' ul-akhbâr* (Qom, 1405 AH): 160; Qâdhî Qadhâ'î, *Shihâb ul-akhbâr* (Tehran, 1361 SH): 349; abul-Fath Karâjakî, *Kanz ul-fawâ'id* (Qom, 1410 AH) 1: 49; abul-Qâsim Pâyanda, *Nahj ul-fasâhah* (Tehran, 1382 SH): 669; and also in a hadith website (www.hadith.ac.ir) cited from Sunnite hadith books as Muntakhab-o musnad-i 'Abd ibn Hamîd: 97; as-Sunan ul-kubrâ, 6: 457; al-Mu'jam ul-awsat, 1: 200.
6. Obviously we cannot realize such a design through experience; we rather can grasp it through Divine revelation in the Holy Quran and the Prophet's traditions.
7. See Qayyoomi.M. (2011). Essays on theory and history of architecture and art; Ilmî-u Farhangi, (Tehran).

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