

# HISTORY OF IRAN

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**DRAGAN POTOČNIK** was born in Maribor, Slovenia, where he went to school and in 1998 obtained his PhD in cultural history at the Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor, where he now works as an associate professor of history.

Dragan is a Founding member and President of Vagant society, which organises cutting edge talks and discussions on cultural, social and travel related topics. He is widely considered to be the leading expert in Asian History in Slovenia and is Director of the Centre for Intercultural Collaboration with Asian, African and Latin American countries at the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor. In that role, he has organised and participated in a number of international conferences and symposia on the topic of intercultural dialogue.

Dragan's interest in both academic and applied history and philosophy of Asian and African cultures led him to extended travels, which he started as a student and has continued with throughout his life. His unique amalgamation of academic knowledge and practical, lived experience is evident in many travel reports, essays and research studies.

In addition to Dragan's extended research and travel writings, he has been a prolific writer of poetry and prose, that are inspired by travels and cultural, personal and political historical events. This has resulted in two published collections of poems, *Sebil* and *Sahrah*, and a collection of short stories with a title *Stories from African and Asian Backyards*.

Some of Dragan's best selling novels are *Poem for Sinin*, *Mountain, sing to me* and *Heavenly rain*.

He is also the author of the following monographs:

*Cultural Life in Maribor in the years 1918 – 1941*;

*Asia between the past and the present*;

*Historical Context of the Activities of General Rudolf Maister in Styria, Carinthia and Prekmurje*;

*History, the Teacher of Life*;

*Sources in the Teaching of History*;

*Students from Primorska at the Classical Grammar School in Maribor*;

*Iran, the Country between Persia and Islam*;

*History of Islamic civilization*;

*The art and science of the Islamic world*.

Dragan Potocnik is a co-author of several history textbooks, such as the textbooks for the second year of secondary schools, and the seventh and eighth years of primary schools.

As an Academic leader Dragan in the field of the history of non-European nations and has written a number of research and review papers on

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Slovenian and non-European history. This highly esteemed academic work resulted in Dragan being the first Slovenian Academic to be

invited as a guest Professor at the University of Esfahan in Iran, and other Universities in Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Uganda and Turkey.

For his scientific work and writing, Dragan has received a wide recognition and a number of awards, including the prestigious Glazer Award, the award for the best travel novel, recognition of the Islamic community in Slovenia.

Maribor, March 2023

## FOREWORD

The idea of the patient stone comes from Persian mythology. This stone absorbs all our worries and woes, patiently accepting everything that lays heavy on our minds, our pain and unfulfilled dreams. However, even the stone cannot endure the weight of problems and sorrows indefinitely. The patient stone occasionally cracks under the weight of the hardships of modern Iran.

During my time spent at the university of Isfahan, I also acted as a patient stone at times. The words of the students brimmed with a longing for the things that we take for granted, sweethearts taking a carefree stroll hand in hand, girls wanting to wear more relaxed clothing, without a veil and wearing a colourful skirt.

However, even despite their demand for changes, the attitude of young people in view of the Islamic requirements is still a positive one. All they want are new opportunities and freedoms. Music, concerts, theatres, dancing, taking a relaxed walk as a couple... Their starved senses mean that the rare events that take place are packed with visitors. There are queues in front of cinemas. Going to see a film is one of the rare forms of public events.

Soon after the revolution, all the previously public events were moved within the four walls of people's homes. There, on the Persian rug, sparkles a water pipe, music rings out, the newest film plays in the background. Cheerful laughter and the sounds of conversation fill the room. The relaxed, witty and refined socialising of girls and boys. Just like anywhere else in the world.

Young people are extremely proud of the rich history of Iran. This country, with more than 2,500 years of tradition, gives them a sense of pride and dignity. This is a place where different cultures meet and intermingle. This is where the ancient Persian identity of Iran was formed. An identity that is a combination of Persian, Islamic and European.

With the 1979 revolution, the integrity of young people showed that they did not want to accept the imposed values of the West, that they were sick

of the double moral standards of the West and its exploitation of Iran's mineral resources. In their idealism, people demanded the demolition of everything old. With the intention of putting an end to the ever-growing influence of the West, they took to the streets. The clergy took advantage of the idealism of the masses as it wanted to restore their previous power. In 1925, when Reza Pahlavi was crowned as the first shah of the Pahlavi dynasty, he circumvented the powerful clergy and began modernising the country. He abandoned old customs and traditions. In 1936, the shah issued a decree that freed women from having to wear the mandatory veil. This act became a symbol of the modernisation of the state and a sign of the limitation of the clergy's powers. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who succeeded his father in 1941, continued developing the country according to Western examples, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. Due to the shah's denigration of religion and the violence of the secret police, the Shia clergy's hatred towards him grew.

After the Islamic revolution in 1979, strict Islamic law and Muslim customs replaced Western practices. Alcohol and Western music was banned, while women had to be covered.

In this new reality, the former great Persian thinkers who were once praised as exemplars of national wisdom were not forgotten. But it should be noted that modern Iran is no longer the hermit nation isolated behind the defensive wall of Islam. The country is quickly opening up to the outside world and changing rapidly. What makes Iran special, what gives it its unique charm, is the remarkable hospitality of its people.

Today, when a traveller walks through the old remnants of this country's mighty past, they are still struck by its beauty. The message from the past of this amazing civilisation is still very much alive.

The crescent moon is still suspended high in the sky and Isfahan is its purest reflection, the most beautiful of Hafez's poems and the most delicate melody. "Isfahan is half the world!" exclaimed travellers and traders, astonished by the beauty of this Persian city. Its beauty was also lauded by poets



and caravan masters who told of its opulence and prosperity. The expression emerged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the city was ruled by Shah Abbas. During the reign of this most important ruler of the Safavid dynasty, a number of outstanding architectural gems were built in Isfahan. Art and crafts flourished. To this day, Iranians still say “Esfahan nesf-e Jahan ast!” The city was praised with the following words: “Its roses blossom in a thousand shades of colour and its grass is made of saffron”. The city, just as other cities in Persia, was renowned for its tolerance. People could discuss various religious dogmas freely. This encounter between reason and religion spread from Isfahan to the far ends of the Islamic world. A mosque, synagogue, Armenian church and Zoroastrian temple all stood in the presence of one another. Non-Muslims could perform their religious rituals undisturbed. Much of this has been preserved to modern times. On my numerous trips to this country, I also experienced it in the same way as many travelers from the past described it.

In addition to my purely research work in the field, I also spent a few months at the university of Isfahan. There I studied the language and Arabic writing, as well as wrote this book. These were, above all, valuable moments that I spent with students both in and outside the classroom.

In the grade that I held lectures for, there were thirty girls and only four boys. And even though the lectures took place in the afternoon, only rarely did anyone miss a class. Iranian students are very hard-working, used to actively working with each other and possess a great deal of knowledge. I was especially surprised to see how the libraries were full of students preparing for their exams. The friendly relationship between professors and students also surprised me, as well as the exceptional level of respect shown towards professors. I went with the students on an excursion where the relaxed attitude of the girls really shone through. Covered with the mandatory veil, some also in a chador, they transformed the bus into an unforgettable party in just a few minutes. Of course, without alcohol.

Besides researching Iranian history and holding occasional lectures, my work at the university included studying Farsi – the language of Iran. Every morning for four hours, I studied the language and writing that they adopted

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from the Arabs. There were two guest professors from Italy, who were, just as I was, surprised by the attitude of students towards their studies, the professors and the orderly state of the university itself.

University in Iran is hard and intended only for the best students. They study a whole year in preparation for the challenging entrance exams. Only the best pass. Even more demanding are the requirements for studying at a master's or doctoral level. Only a few places are available. In addition to the difficult entrance exams and doctoral dissertations, the students must pass exams that encompass all that they have studied so far. Consequently, doctorates are valued highly in Iran.

The unforgettable memories are still fresh in my mind. Fresh and pleasant like Isfahan mornings. Only after staying there for a longer period of time, did I come to realise how warm and friendly the people there are and how immensely rich the ancient Persian culture is. Think back to the poets Hafez, , Rumi. Their messages are timeless and not limited to any place. Their poetry is full of vivid delight, joy and messages of love. And this, to me, is one of the fundamental messages of art.

Today, the only impression many people have of Iran is the one portrayed by the media, one that is limited to the political perspective. Such an Iran may seem grim and even hostile, but this is far from the truth. Those who want to understand Iran must first learn about the rich history and culture of Persia.

It is no coincidence that in ancient Achaemenid Persia, Cyrus II, as its first ruler, ordered a decree to be inscribed on a clay cylinder that is believed to be the first declaration of human rights, in which he states his wish to be benevolent and merciful to all conquered nations and tolerant of the religions of his subordinates. He included a demand for religious and ethnic freedom. He prohibited slavery and all kinds of repression. It was the result of his treatment of those who were defeated and exiled that led to the liberation of the Jews from Babylonian slavery. His attitude toward defeated nations was something entirely new in history and as yet unseen.

This and many other examples illustrate the amazing spirit that reigned in this area. Science and art were able to prosper as humanistic ideals and tolerance reigned. This is another aspect to consider when attempting to understand modern Iran. The values of the West, which have absolutely nothing in common with the traditions of this mighty country, cannot simply be imposed on Iran in the name of egotistical interests. Furthermore, it is a question of imposing a way of life that is shallow and endeavours to predominantly satisfy the interests of the ruling parties. This materialistic attitude towards life is becoming the only right way and one that the West is trying to impose on the entire world. At the same time, it does not know how to, nor wants to, listen to others. Let alone accept any other world view.

It is because of these many years studying Iranian history and everyday life that I made the decision to write a book about this wonderful country. Iran did not impress me only with its immensely rich history and countless cultural and historical monuments. **It was the the people of Iran who impressed me. It is to them that I dedicate this book.**

My goal was not only to present Iran in a multifaceted way, but also contribute to a better understanding of Islam. This is since a great deal of fear and mistrust is connected to Islam. However, in my opinion, the reasons for this are based on a lack of knowledge and understanding of this religion. We tend to forget that it was European colonisation that imposed its rule, as well as its values, upon the mighty Islamic civilisation. In doing so it only marginally considered the messages of this culture and showed little interest in its scientific and artistic achievements, which is still the case today. This is a further reason why I want this book to transcend the image portrayed by the media, which oftentimes offers only a one-sided view of Islam.

We should all be aware that only by understanding other cultures and showing the tolerance to other beliefs and religions that comes from this understanding can we all make life together on this unique and marvellous planet better. None of us needs more conflict and hatred. However, we all need to respect the fundamental human freedoms. My experiences from travelling

have taught me how very important an understanding, respect and the acceptance of our differences are to making living in harmony possible. Only in this way can we stand up to discrimination, prejudice and intolerance.

This is primarily a historical book. Therefore in the first part of the book I have focused on presenting the most important periods in Iranian history with an emphasis on providing an overview of its history, art, science and religion. Additional interesting facts are written in the margins. Following the first part, I have written about Iranian customs and habits, about some of the most important cultural and natural sights of Iran. //

It was only to be expected that in the process of creating this book, many new questions emerged that may be answered in another later work. It is impossible to provide answers to such a large number of questions in relation to such a mighty culture as is the Iranian culture.

To make the book easier to understand, the text is accompanied with footnotes, photographs and interesting facts. At the end there is also a bibliography and index of names.

When writing this book, the way how words are written posed an additional issue to consider. In the case of this book, proper nouns and geographical names are written in an international form, which is predominantly based on English. Where the English and original form differ, I have provided a Romanised version of the original in brackets.

I would like to acknowledge my Iranian friends for motivating the creation of this book. I am sincerely grateful for their help. With their support, I have attempted to lift the veil, behind which Iran so cleverly hides. With their support, I was able to put together a mosaic that, after five years, became the book that is now in front of you.

The interest shown in the history of ancient Persia, as well as my contribution to this intercultural dialogue, resulted in the Iranian cultural department that operates as part of the Iranian embassy in Vienna to invite me as a guest lecturer to the University of Isfahan. During those unforgettable months in autumn and winter of 2008/09 I met outstanding experts from a

variety of scientific fields, made connections with the locals and was a frequent guest of theirs and, as I have already mentioned, I also got to know many Iranian students.

My sincere thanks goes to my Iranian friends who showed me the mysteries of Iranian life. Thank you Hossein Bordbar, Ali Bordbar and his wife Delara, Meysan Jelalij, the Rostami family, my students Muhammad and Marzieh Sharbaf, as well as many others.